

# “Racism in History and Context”

## A Virtual Panel Series on the Historical Relationship between Crisis and Racism

Frank Kell | Nov. 30, 2020

*The clearest connection between historical trajectories of racism and present events is that racism makes structural vulnerability appear as fate. There is always a naturalization of race and of the racial hierarchies. That naturalization becomes more apparent in times of crisis: “You’re shaping your own fate, and this is fate. Deserved.” The racialized are always associated with infection. But the discourse is larger: association with infection, lack of civilization, closeness to nature. It is contradictory.*

– Manuela Boatcă



The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for existing areas of societal conflict. Open or hidden inequalities, which are often the result of long-term historical processes, are becoming much more visible under the conditions of the pandemic – as if in a crucible. The topic of racism forms one of the central aspects of discussions since the pandemic broke out in the spring of 2020 in the US and Europe. The virtual panel series “Racism in History and Context,” held in the English language in the fall of 2020 with a total of more than 500 participants via Zoom, took up these debates as a central challenge for our societies. The series elaborated historical and sociological perspectives on the various contexts and pasts of the present crisis.

The pandemic crisis has been accompanied by a broad debate about racist inequalities and discrimination in the societies on both sides of the Atlantic. Spurred by the death of US citizen George Floyd at the hands of police officers in early June, people around the world have taken to the streets to protest racism and police brutality. In the US, movements like *Black Lives Matter* have been strengthened. In addition, the US African American population continues to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. In Europe, too, and beyond, anti-racist protests have prompted a critical engagement with the remnants of colonial and slavery traditions. In Germany, the issue of addressing the country’s colonial past from a historical-political perspective has gained momentum, crystallizing, for example, in a sometimes fiercely polarized debate about renaming streets and public squares and buildings or about the no less disputed question of just how widely and deeply racist attitudes are anchored in the majority society or concretely within police departments. In many contexts, the crisis has uncovered modern racism, which has specific causes and can be traced to various historical contexts in each society where it finds its own expression.

The Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschland (VHD), the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI) and its regional office in Berkeley, as well as the Institute of European Studies at UC

Berkeley took this transatlantic diagnosis of the times as an occasion to illuminate present societal forms of racism from a historical perspective. The participating institutions invited sociologists and historians from North America and Europe to join the panel.

## Memory and Knowledge

The first panel “Rethinking Memory and Knowledge during Times of Crisis” dealt with the questions of how the memory of and knowledge about racism, racist inequality, and racist violence have changed since the end of World War II, and which actors have played a role in knowledge production in each case. Ana Lucia Araujo (Howard University Washington DC), Manuela Bauche (FU Berlin), Norbert Frei (Universität Jena), and Michael Rothberg (UC Los Angeles) were the panelists. The moderators were Francisco Bethencourt (King’s College London) and Akasemi Newsome (UC Berkeley).



Ana Lucia Araujo, Manuela Bauche, Michael Rothberg, Norbert Frei, Akasemi Newsome, Francisco Bethencourt (u.l.t.l.r.)

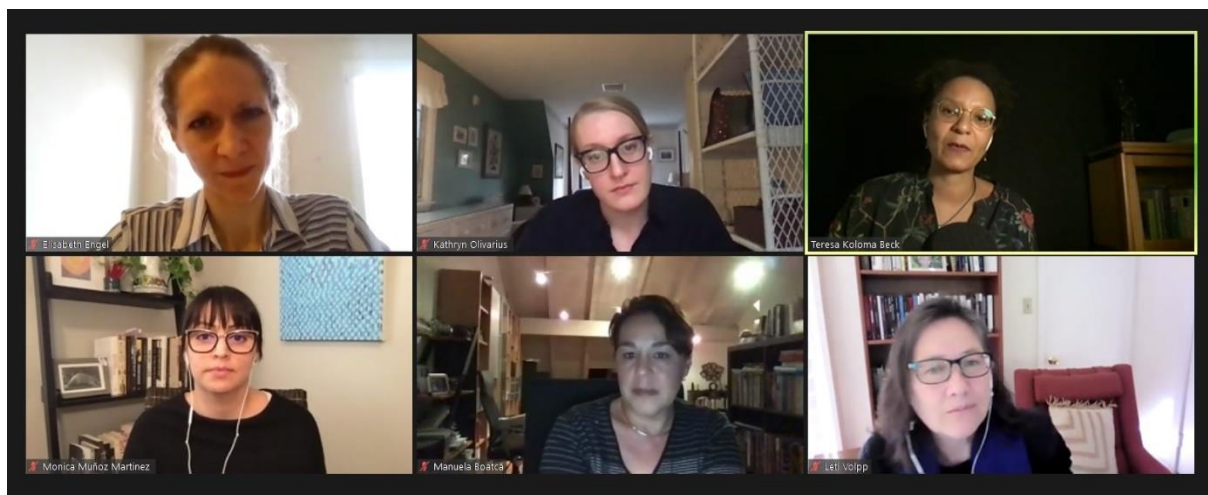
Critical engagement with racist pasts has always been largely determined by political and cultural developments, and it varies from country to country. A comparative view, however, makes transnational patterns and intersectional entanglements apparent, with the memory of the Holocaust and decolonization, especially, playing a central role – the latter understood as a political process that even today is an ongoing cultural (knowledge) process. In the Federal Republic, Norbert Frei and Manuela Bauche averred, the memory of the Holocaust only became a central anchoring point of national self-understanding in the 1980s after decades of repression. And only in the last several years has there been an increasing awareness of critical engagement with racist violence in the colonial era of the German Empire or in the Federal Republic and in the GDR as more than a mere remnant of the Nazi era. In France, by contrast, as Michael Rothberg explained, political decolonization, and particularly the Algerian War of Independence, called for critical engagement with the Holocaust and the occupation period as early as the 1960s. Ana Lucia Araujo pointed out that the memory of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries did not follow a linear development of ever-expanding historical consciousness in the societies that participated in these historical processes. Rather, it was highly dependent on regional contexts: In the US, the civil rights movement played a decisive role in the 1960s; in Latin America, the military dictatorships and, in South Africa, the Apartheid regime long suppressed any critical, memory-culture engagement with these topics. The panelists regarded the late 1980s, and above all the 1990s, shaped as they were by the end of the Cold War, as a turning point because at that juncture, global spaces of memory for the Holocaust and slavery were able to become established.

An overarching pattern in the more recent history of knowledge about racism in the transatlantic world seems to be the perpetual challenge of national narratives of memory “from below.” According to

Norbert Frei, the need to break through the broad collective silence about the Nazi past in the Adenauer era presented an important point of crystallization for the protests of 1968. In the 1980s, the history workshops decisively shaped the memory of the Holocaust above all at the local level and often from a life-world perspective. The memory of slavery, too, Ana Lucia Araujo noted, was (and continues in many cases to be) made more visible by means of identity-forming memory narratives of family history. Similarly, Manuela Bauche pointed out, today numerous postcolonial groups and movements shine a spotlight on the long-forgotten racist violence of the colonial era, thus contributing meaningfully to the recalibration and differentiation of national memory narratives. The point of departure for the second panel of the series was the fact that racism constitutes a reality of the present, as well as of recent history, and has in no way been overcome; it manifests itself not only in intentional acts of violence but also as pragmatic, historical, institutionalized everyday knowledge. As such a phenomenon, it has only come to be more widely discussed in the last few years, at least in Germany.

## Health and Violence

Entitled “Rethinking Health and Power during Times of Crisis,” this second panel explored the historical and present intersections of racism, health, and state power. The panelists were Manuela Boatcă (Universität Freiburg), Teresa Koloma Beck (Bundeswehr Universität München), Monica Muñoz Martinez (UT Austin), and Kathryn Olivarius (Stanford). The panel was moderated by Elisabeth Engel (GHI Washington) and Leti Volpp (UC Berkeley).



Elisabeth Engel, Kathryn Olivarius, Teresa Koloma Beck, Monica Muñoz Martinez, Manuela Boatcă, Leti Volpp (u.l.t.l.r.)

From the perspective of her research on experiences of violence in wartime societies, Teresa Koloma Beck examined the reorganization of everyday life during times of pandemic, revealing that considerations of security and risk take on a new centrality around which people increasingly orient fundamental rules of behavior. For example, by constructing dangerous situations and characterizing certain persons or groups as risky, one can call up historically developed racialized attributions in the promise of providing orientation in a muddled conflict situation. For instance, the information that COVID-19 first appeared in the Chinese city of Wuhan was translated in practical everyday terms into the rule, built upon existing racist stereotypes, to be “cautious around people who look Asian” – *racial profiling* as a meaning-generating, socially enacted *othering* in everyday life. Another example that Manuela Boatcă highlighted reveals the effectiveness of racist structures and the reservoir of well-established lines of argument available in society for characterizing Eastern European seasonal workers as uncivilized, less domesticated groups that are robust in body and accustomed to illness. This argument allows their labor to

continue to be exploited as usual in the German food industry under pandemic conditions without further concern.

Such forms of practical everyday racialization of groups of people are not new phenomena in the present, nor are they restricted to times of crisis, but rather, they have been documented in the historiography in their function of creating order. Monica Muñoz Martinez demonstrated how actors in Texas and other US states in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to legitimize racist violence and mob law, among other things, by characterizing immigrants from Mexico as a risk to the “nation’s health.” And, as Kathryn Olivarius explained, in the context of yellow fever epidemics in the American South in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of “immunity capital” – built upon the racist hierarchy of slavery – made both the rights and privileges of whites, but also the market value of slaves for their owners, dependent on their “acclimatization” status. Since it was not discovered that mosquitoes transmitted yellow fever, the usual preventive measures largely failed to have any effect. Consequently, immunity by means of natural infection remained the only way one could “acclimatize,” so that having had an infection came to be a sort of entry ticket into the world of the *Cotton Kingdom*. In this way, the white plantation owners’ attempts to generate meaning through these powerful interpretations of the yellow fever epidemics strengthened existing racial inequalities between poor and rich, thus cementing the social and economic order as natural and thus logical and just.

Present considerations to secure economic vitality by achieving “herd immunity” or by issuing “immunity passports” show that the “immunity capital” chapter of history has not yet come to a close. In these approaches, the state once again assumes the role of a central distributor of privileges, largely leaving already marginalized groups out. These groups, moreover, often have no opportunity to avoid the virus. However, the beginning of a transformation of structural inequalities has always taken place within the context of crisis situations, and this insight, too, all the panelists believe, is essential to understanding the entangled dynamics of the pandemic, racism, and state violence in historical perspective.

Video and audio recordings of the panel series can be downloaded online at [L.I.S.A. – Das Wissenschaftsportal der Gerda Henkel Stiftung](#).

#### For further reading:

Araujo, Ana Lucia. *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*. Bloomsbury, 2020.

Bauche, Manuela. *Medizin und Herrschaft. Malariaabekämpfung in Kamerun, Ostafrika und Ostfriesland (1890-1919)*. Frankfurt a.M., 2017.

Beck, Teresa Koloma. “[Staats-]Gewalt und moderne Gesellschaften. Der Mythos vom Verschwinden der Gewalt in der Moderne.” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 4 (2017): 16-21.

Bethencourt, Francisco. *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, 2013.

Boatcă, Manuela. *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism*. New York, 2016.

Engel, Elisabeth, and Nicholas Grant, eds. “Going South: Tracing Race and Region in the Post-Emancipation Black Atlantic.” Special Issue, *Journal of American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2018).

Frei, Norbert, Franka Maubach, Christina Morina, and Maik Tändler. *Zur rechten Zeit. Wider die Rückkehr des Nationalismus*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Berlin, 2019.

Martinez, Monica Muñoz. *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*. New Haven, 2018.

Newsome, Akasemi. *The Color of Solidarity: Explaining the Conditions of Labor Union Support for Immigrants*. Forthcoming.

Olivarius, Kathryn. "Immunity, Capital, and Power in Antebellum New Orleans." *American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (2019): 425-455.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, 2009.

Volpp, Leti. "Protecting the Nation from 'Honor Killings': The Construction of a Problem." *Constitutional Commentary* 133 (2019): 133-169.