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# Historical Theory(ies) and Critical Whiteness Studies

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# Historical Theory(ies) and Critical Whiteness Studies

This paper explores the argument that whiteness is inscribed as an invisible hegemonic norm in European theories of history, particularly in historicism as the still contextually relevant theoretical basis of nation-state history, and that this norm continues to the detriment of people of color to this day.

## Blind Spots I – The Present of Historicism

Is historicism as a theory of history itself historical, and therefore of present interest only in its historizable manifestations? The mere fact that debates about the mutability and topicality of this theoretical concept continue to this day may be an indication that we are indeed dealing with a present of historicism.<sup>1</sup> However, the view of past events has both changed and expanded. If we no longer assume that an inner context is waiting to be “discovered” in history itself, we concede to historians that they are able to narratively provide the past with an inner context.<sup>2</sup> Historians therefore generate historical meaning, and do so by referring to historicity Metahistory as the reflexive theoretical basis of historical science. Jörn Rüsen has observed that historicism is contextually embedded in the concept of historicity Metahistory as an original conception.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, historicism offers a conceptual background to the current theoretical field of historiography, and hence to the disciplinary matrix. History is thereby perceived as a directed context of temporal change in humanity. Origin and future move apart, human practices can only be culturally oriented through concepts of time. Change and transformation are thematized, and the need for orientation corresponds to interest in knowledge. When no longer considered tradition, “[...] change itself makes sense.” Change becomes the guarantor of the future (genetic formation of meaning). Intersubjective verifiability is ensured by methodically regulated procedures, the master narrative appears as an epoch-typical form of representation, especially of the history of the nation-state. Historiography’s function of orientation is “primarily politically oriented, [it] legitimizes the nation-state with its focus on the creative spirit in the fields of politics and culture”, and “brings national identity to the fore as the dominant form of collective belonging”.<sup>4</sup>

## *Blind spots II – Germans are Black.*<sup>5</sup>

Being German and Black have not been mutually exclusive since the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Germany was also involved in the transatlantic slave trade, as Black people were brought to European and German courts as lackeys and objects of prestige.<sup>7</sup> People stayed, started families, practiced their professions, and made careers. The Black German philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo,<sup>8</sup> who came to the Wolfenbüttel court as a child and later received a teaching qualification for philosophy as a trained scientist, is one example from this history.<sup>9</sup> Black people are therefore part of German history and culture; Germans have been not only *white* but also Black for centuries, but this is not reflected in German history or its culture of memory.

Critical whiteness researchers in Germany have been drawing attention to this blind spot for some time and historicizing the phenomenon, with the Enlightenment coming into particular focus. Critical whiteness research has identified the Enlightenment as the origin of the “hegemonic normativity of white positions”.<sup>10</sup> Whiteness appears as a “construct of racism”, not in the sense of an ontologization of skin color, but as a social position. Against this background, whiteness is to be understood as a form of historical and cultural self-empowerment, through which “collective patterns of perception, knowledge and action are constituted.” This social positioning is accompanied by power and privilege, which also manifest themselves “independently of self-perceptions and beyond official institutions, both individually and collectively.” Similarly, Blackness is also understood as “a social and political position historically produced by racism”.<sup>11</sup> Because Critical Whiteness Studies deal with whiteness as a social positioning in a historical perspective, it also becomes interesting for theories of history. The question arises regarding the knowledge that can be gained from applying Critical Whiteness Studies to theories of history. Since whiteness as a self-concept is usually not conscious, it “enjoys” a “structural invisibility”.<sup>12</sup>

The aim of this paper is to suggest that there might be a present discourse of whiteness as a hegemonic norm in historical scholarship, one that has its starting point in the Enlightenment. Specifically, the discussion explores whether the concept of reason and rationality underlying theories of history—especially historicism and hence historiography—is not universal but bound to whiteness in the sense of social positioning. This would explain why being Black and German seem to be mutually exclusive. At the same time, this exclusion could then be deconstructed as a racist construction in the sense of a symbolic order.

## From the Enlightenment to Historicism

Jörn Rüsen has noted that there is a temporal and causal connection between the Enlightenment and historicism in the sense of a development:

“The rational potential of historical thinking determines its ability to reach a consensus. [...] The development of historical thinking from the Enlightenment to Historicism entails a ‘rationalization’ of this capacity for consensus. [...] ‘Rationalization’ means that the visualization of the past through historical memory is bound to regular procedures that systematically increase the justifiability of historical statements.”<sup>13</sup>

What is important for us is the continuity between the Enlightenment and historicism in this quotation. The Enlightenment’s conception of reason and historicism as a methodically regulated, rational approach to temporal change have been joined together as structural features of historical memory ever since. To this day, they form the standards that constitute modern historical scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

### A search for traces

My argument in this circumstantial exploration is that the Enlightenment discourses of reason, understanding (rationality), history, and *race* were so subtly inscribed in the emerging discipline of history and its theoretical foundations that they remained invisible, and allowed for a notion of universality that we now know was idealized during the Enlightenment but did not yet apply to all people.<sup>15</sup> One could thus also assume that the concept of rationality underlying historicism (possibly other European theories of history as well) precisely reflects this early contradiction. Essentially based on the *Handbook of the European Enlightenment*,<sup>16</sup> I now look for evidence that whiteness is invisibly inscribed as a hegemonic norm in the theoretical foundations of modern historical science. As a result, the considerations presented here should be understood as a self-reflection that is centrally inscribed in the idea of the Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup>

### Indicator No. 1: Reason is subject to a developmental proviso

Reason, and “the idea of a general human reason” in particular, are considered the guiding ideas of the Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> The focus was on humans “as deficient beings” who must first be made reasonable.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that the Enlightenment

began as an elite project, with an increasingly self-confident bourgeoisie “as its privileged bearer.”<sup>20</sup> From this group, in turn, individuals decisively shaped discourses as avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> Hettling refers to the change in meaning that the concept of citizen underwent in the context of the Enlightenment. The focus is no longer on class itself, but on its “social formation” in the context of a specific way of life and cultural orientation.<sup>22</sup> Since the eighteenth century, a common culture and way of life have been central to the self-image of class, which is distinctly heterogeneous.<sup>23</sup> This heterogeneity is socially formed by the common “reference to a symbolic order”.<sup>24</sup> And this identity-creating symbolic order, as the argument goes, is based among other things on whiteness in the sense of hegemonic positioning.

## Indicator No. 2: Eurocentrism dominates the philosophies of history in Europe

In the mid-eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder juxtaposed the universalism of the Enlightenment with an anthropologically based philosophy of history “that emphasizes the place- and time-specificity of culture.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, “cultural comparisons and criticism of civilization” became possible with far-reaching consequences.<sup>26</sup> A special role was played by the theory of climate, via Montesquieu and Herder,

“which sought to explain political forms of rule, civil institutions, religious cults, the so-called ‘national character’ and even the peculiarity of national literature and painting from the conditions of the climate. [...] Climate is defined [...] not as a meteorological average, but as man’s place in a world whose nature gives him certain specifications. [...] The basic idea of the climatic theories of the eighteenth century is that man and the forms of his culture cannot be meaningfully grasped outside of this local situatedness. The differences between peoples and civilizations should therefore be explained by the differences in their places of settlement.”<sup>27</sup>

Montesquieu in particular used this theory to justify the supremacy of European peoples and “the ‘colonial subjugation and exploitation of non-European peoples’”, thereby introducing a Eurocentric perspective into the universalism of the Enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> Montesquieu’s Eurocentrism subsequently dominated natural history, anthropology, and the philosophy of history in France, “and therefore in the whole of Europe” (!).

“Each people receives a firmly determined place according to the spatial distance that separates it from the fixed common center: the civilized European, who of all people is at the same time the >most beautiful and most shapely<; who most perfectly embodies the prototype appropriate to the species and against whom all other varieties simply appear as more or less degenerate deviations’.”<sup>29</sup>

Here it is clear that a hegemonic concept of norms is embedded in the enlightened discourse right up to the philosophy of history, which is oriented to the appearance of the European human being, who is elevated to the ideal of beauty.<sup>30</sup> Based on this observation, one can reasonably assume that the Eurocentrism inscribed in the French philosophy of history also forms the basis of the theories of history that build on this philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

### **Indicator No. 3: Regarding Immanuel Kant’s race theories, the rational mind becomes white**

Immanuel Kant also considered the theory of climate suitable for explaining the different manifestations of people on earth. In his 1775 paper *Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen* (“On the Different Races of Man”)<sup>32</sup> he declared that all people belong to one species because they can produce fertile children together. Black people and *white* people had a shared humanity, but belonged to different “races”.<sup>33</sup> Kant believed that due to the climate, iron particles formed in the blood of Black people in such abundance that everyone with Black skin “stinks”.<sup>34</sup> Kant compares them to animals living in a climate especially suitable for them, one that makes their bodies strong but their nature “lazy, soft and dallying”.<sup>35</sup> Kant continues: “In the sex of the whites, however, this iron dissolved in the juices, and would not precipitate at all, thereby proving at the same time the perfect mixture of the juices and strength of this human race before the others”.<sup>36</sup> Kant concedes that Black people have emotional inclinations, but not intellectual abilities.<sup>37</sup> He takes up Hume’s demand to “cite a single example” where a black man has shown talent in any field, and Hume’s assertion that

“among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are seduced from their countries elsewhere, although a great many of them are also set at liberty, yet not a single one has ever been found who has presented anything either in art or science, or any other praiseworthy quality, although among

the whites some are constantly rising from the lowest rabble, and acquiring a reputation in the world by excellent gifts.”<sup>38</sup>

In a concluding argument, Kant turns skin color into a mark of reason: “[...] in short, this fellow was black from his head to his feet, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.”<sup>39</sup> The notion of Black people as “stupid and cultureless” expressed in these formulations – while *white* people become the subjects of history—is captured by Hegel in the image of a history-less African continent. In sum, these statements seem suitable to add the “whiteness of the spirit” as an additional aspect of the hegemonic norm regarding the appearance of European people.<sup>40</sup>

## Taking the Enlightenment seriously from its universal side: Further developing the capacity for critical self-reflection

“Kant’s reflections on anthropology”, says Oehler-Klein,

“ultimately show a linking of biological and cultural-historical argumentation by ascribing certain abilities and characteristics to races. For Kant, only Europeans seemed to be historically powerful bearers of culture; only the race of whites possessed the capacity to reach the highest stage of man’s self-emergence as a being of reason.”<sup>41</sup>

Peggy Piesche has observed that Kant “draws such a differentiated picture of European whiteness that it takes the normative place in opposition to race [...]”.<sup>42</sup> *White* and *able* citizens, who were exclusively male at the time, settled into this hegemonic normative place (social positioning), and could even imagine themselves as being outside of “race” discourses.<sup>43</sup> Seen from the hegemonic *white* position, only others are racist. The privileges associated with this hegemonic positioning can subsequently no longer be easily recognized and reflected upon.

Around 1800, the view of history gradually “moves from enlightenment to understanding, and at the same time becomes part of nation building.”<sup>44</sup>

Enlightened thinking with all of its implications – including “the hegemonic normativity of white positions” – was thus incorporated into the self-image of emerging European nation-states, including Germany. This may be one reason why being *white* and German seems “normal”, while being Black and German seems like an oxymoron. A nation that imagines itself as a cultural nation is hardly willing to perceive as equals people characterized as “lacking history and culture.” That this discriminatory view of Black people shows continuities from the

Enlightenment to the present can be demonstrated by the representation of African history and Black people in textbooks.<sup>45</sup>

*Translated by Arby Gharibian*

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**Tags:** critical whiteness studies / hegemonic norm / racism

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<sup>1</sup> See Gunter Scholtz (ed.), *Historismus am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine internationale Debatte*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See Georg G. Iggers, "Historismus – Geschichte und Bedeutung eines Begriffs. Eine kritische Übersicht der neuesten Literatur," in *Historismus*, ed. Scholz, 102–126, here 125.

<sup>3</sup> See Jörn Rüsen, *Historik. Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 2013, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte im Kulturprozess*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 2002, 54–57. All quotations *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> In this text, the skin color designation "Black" is capitalized throughout to mark its constructed nature beyond discriminatory attributions. The color "white", on the other hand, is written in lowercase and italics, because as an analytical category it refers to whiteness as a fundamental norm in white perception associated with privilege. See Noah Sow, "weiß," in *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard. Münster: Unrast, 2015, 190–191.

<sup>6</sup> See Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov, *Schwarze Europäer im Alten Reich. Handel, Migration, Hof*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Zeuske, *Sklaverei. Eine Menschheitsgeschichte von der Steinzeit bis heute*. Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018, 96. Zeuske speaks of slavery "without institution".

<sup>8</sup> See Jacob Emmanuel Mabe, *Anton Wilhelm Amo interkulturell gelesen. Verbesserte und aktualisierte Version*. Berlin: Traugott Bautz, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Although Amo returned to Africa due to racist hostility.

<sup>10</sup> Peggy Piesche, "Der 'Fortschritt' der Aufklärung – Kants 'Race' und die Zentrierung des weißen Subjekts," in *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, ed. Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche et al.. Münster: Unrast, 2017, 30–39, here 30.

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Arndt, "Rassen' gibt es nicht, wohl aber die symbolische Ordnung von Rasse. Der 'Racial Turn' als Gegennarrativ zur Verleugnung und Hierarchisierung von Rassismus," in *Mythen*, ed. Eggers et al., 340–362. All quotations 343–344.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, quotations 346.

<sup>13</sup> Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, 79 and 81.

<sup>14</sup> See Stefan Jordan, *Theorien und Methoden der Geschichtswissenschaft*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2016, 47.

<sup>15</sup> See Barbara Stollberg-Rielinger, *Die Aufklärung. Europa im 18. Jahrhundert*. Ditzingen: Reclam 2017, 256–284.

<sup>16</sup> Heinz Thoma (ed.), *Handbuch Europäische Aufklärung. Begriffe, Konzepte, Wirkung*. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Rainer Godel, "Aufklärungen. Deutsche Aufklärung," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 86–90, here 88.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver R. Scholz, "Vernunft," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 536–547, here 536. Manfred Hettling stresses that the Enlightenment's empathetic and utopian content represents an egalitarian and universalistic image of mankind. See Manfred Hettling, "Bürger/ Bürgerlichkeit," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 123–131, here 123.

<sup>19</sup> Heinz Thoma, "Aufklärung," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 67–85, here 67. Thoma dates the Enlightenment roughly between 1650–1800.

<sup>20</sup> Godel, "Deutsche Aufklärung," 89.

<sup>21</sup> See Andreas Pecar and Damien Tricoire, *Falsche Freunde. War die Aufklärung wirklich die Geburtsstunde der Moderne?* Frankfurt am Main (u.a.): Campus Verlag, 2015, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Hettling, "Bürger," 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>25</sup> Godel, "Deutsche Aufklärung," 87.

<sup>26</sup> Gerhard Pickerodt, "Exotisch/ Fremd," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 201–210, here 204.

<sup>27</sup> Eva Horn, "Klimatologie um 1800. Zur Genealogie des Anthropozäns," *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 10, no. 1 (2016), 87–102, here 89–90.

<sup>28</sup> Pickerodt, "Exotisch/ Fremd," 204 and 205.

<sup>29</sup> Quotations *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> In Denis Diderot there is a critical counterpart to this concept of a Eurocentric hegemonic norm, although his statements remained in the realm of a "modern early socialist-oriented utopia", *Ibid.*, 207–208.

<sup>31</sup> See Johannes Rohbeck, "Geschichte/ Geschichtsphilosophie," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 242–251.

<sup>32</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen*, edited by Philipp Schröder, Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Piesche, "Fortschritt," 33.

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<sup>38</sup> Kant, *Menschen*, 59. Kant was a contemporary of Amos. It is very unlikely that he did not know him.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> See Arnold Farr, "Wie Weißsein sichtbar wird. Aufklärungsrassismus und die Struktur eines rassifizierten Bewusstseins," in *Mythen*, ed. Eggers et al., 40–55, here 43.

<sup>41</sup> Sigrid Oehler-Klein, "Rasse," in *Europäische Aufklärung*, ed. Thoma, 419–428, here 425.

<sup>42</sup> Piesche, "Fortschritt," 36.

<sup>43</sup> The fact that white women also laid claim to this hegemonic positioning is shown by Annette Dietrich, "Konstruktionen weißer weiblicher Körper im Kontext des deutschen Kolonialismus," in *Mythen*, ed. Eggers et al., 363–376.

<sup>44</sup> Thoma, "Aufklärung," 68.

<sup>45</sup> See Elina Marmer, Papa Sow and Aram Ziai, "Der ‚versteckte‘ Rassismus – ‚Afrika‘ im Schulbuch," in *Wie Rassismus aus Schulbüchern spricht. Kritische Auseinandersetzung mit „Afrika“-Bildern und Schwarz-Weiß-Konstruktionen in der Schule. Ursachen, Auswirkungen und Handlungsansätze für die pädagogische Praxis*, ed. Elina Marmer and Papa Sow. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2015, 110–129.