

Whiteness Made in Germany

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Abstract:

The book's all-encompassing (and title) question, how Germans came to be white, is far from being a mere provocation. Quite the contrary, it delves into the historical process of conceiving of Germans as white, from the period that precedes German national self-consciousness to the present moment. Reflecting on racism's trajectories via the changing role of skin color in scientific and popular discourses *and* representations allows Wulf D. Hund to deconstruct German whiteness in relatively few pages. The author strives to underscore the importance of visual codes for white supremacist oppression in analyses ranging from classical European art and colonial-era iconography to film and commodity culture.

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Wulf D. Hund. *Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden. Kleine (Heimat) Geschichte des Rassismus.* J.B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 2017. 212 Seiten. 19.99 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-476-04499-0.

Abstract:

The book's all-encompassing (and title) question, how Germans came to be white, is far from being a mere provocation. Quite the contrary, it delves into the historical process of conceiving of Germans as white, from the period that precedes German national self-consciousness to the present moment. Reflecting on racism's trajectories via the changing role of skin color in scientific and popular discourses *and* representations allows Wulf D. Hund to deconstruct German whiteness in relatively few pages. The author strives to underscore the importance of visual codes for white supremacist oppression in analyses ranging from classical European art and colonial-era iconography to film and commodity culture.

Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden is organized into two parts, each comprising four chapters. Although they don't follow a strict chronological order, the book links the emergence of racism as a concept strictly based on skin pigmentation to philosophical and scientific discourses of the Enlightenment. In the first four chapters Hund acknowledges that in medieval and early modern history whiteness cannot have been associated with race, since the concept, as well as that of nation, did not exist. In medieval and early modern history, skin color and religion became conflated through sacred art. Color range, where white, red, and yellow dominated, served to distinguish Christians from pagans, Jews, and Muslims. The book's subtitle, "kleine (Heimat) Geschichte des Rassismus" puts forward a notion of homeland (Heimat) as not necessarily identical with whiteness as skin color that characterizes Germans. Regarding religious and social acts of exclusion, admittedly, "Heimat is a place where racism was known well before Germans" (p.10). According to Hund, the arbitrary use of skin color in the acts of exclusion points to a broader definition of racism. Rather than ostracizing non-white ethnic groups, racism "conveyed identity through social death (by insulting the discriminated as undifferentiated amorphous masses, who were considered to be the lowest ranked members of their own society). (p.26). The chain of dehumanization, continues Hund, enabled lower classes to obtain superior status

by comparison with “outsiders”. In pre-Enlightenment discourses on racial differentiation, whiteness had been associated with a general familiarity, religion, moral code, even a carnivalesque reversal, where it would at times liaise with and at other times diverge from blackness in what the author calls a dialectics of color (pp. 46-51).

Hund recalls the instances when Germans were not considered white, for instance in Antiquity where discrimination was based on cultural traits. Romans saw Germanic tribes, not unlike Galls and Celts, as ‘short-witted and uncivilized’, and definitely not as ‘white’ (p.6). The coming of the Enlightenment brought about the integration of older forms of racism into the new national self-representation, in which whiteness came to be a common denominator for all Germans despite class division. Hund examines the writings of Linné, Goethe, Herder, Hegel, and other thinkers and artists who contributed to the new concept of German whiteness.

The modern history of racism in Germany, explored in the second part of the book, bears similarities with racism exercised by other empires, argues Hund, due to shared colonialist politics and capitalist modernization (p. 100). A dissemination of racialized images accelerates throughout the 19th century, due to immensely popular colonial exhibitions, colonial novels, human zoos, and museums of ethnology. Again, propagating color symbolic was a leading strategy to discipline and exclude. A yellow, used for instance in Alexandre Leamlein’s painting *Charité* to depict the Chinese previously deemed as white, will distinguish them from white Germans and thus legitimize economic exploitation (pp. 83-85).

However, underlines Hund, whiteness could hardly dissimulate its inherent ambivalence. Although Germans used racializing terms to depict the enemies within: villains, the homeless, the Roma, Jews and colonial subjects, they themselves were depicted as dark-skinned beasts assaulting white women, like in the 1916 American war propaganda poster *Destroy that Mad Brute* that opens the book (ill.1, p. 2). A constant struggle against “impure” elements within the white race have stopped short of narrowing whiteness to ‘Germanness’ (Deutschtum). The white supremacist exclusion of white ‘traitors’ goes on and although it actually debunks racism (by rendering whiteness ambiguous), it ends up proceeding to complete its most aggressive work: ‘the racist Reich’ (pp. 132-133). In rich and wide-ranging exemplification, Hund demonstrates that “back-and-forth” of racist discourse that deploys social, religious, moral, gender, and phenotypical categories in the futile attempt to fix the inescapably fuzzy German whiteness.

In *Wie die Deutschen Weiss wurden*, Hund’s way beyond polarizing and generalizing owes to the fact that he historicizes whiteness consequently. The author’s own positioning as both an historian of races made in Germany and a theorist of racism enables him to link minute, fetishistic curiosities to

the terrible violence of crusades, pogroms, slavery, colonial exploitation, and 20th-century genocides. Hund's novel contribution consists of coupling epochal texts (such as Goethe's Theory of Colors and Hegel's History of Philosophy) with an examination of familiar racist representations in street fairs, on beer labels, in song texts, film scenes, and in bedtime stories. The strength of the argument is in demonstrating how indissociable these levels of cultural production are in consolidating the narrative of white supremacy, still incredibly powerful despite hard evidence of its lethality.

German Abstract:

Weißsein Made in Germany

Wulf D. Hunds Buch *Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden* aus dem Jahr 2017 ist eine prägnante Synthese der ursprünglichen und multidimensionalen Perspektive des Forschers auf die Rassismusforschung. *Wie die Deutschen Weiß wurden* zeichnet eine Zeitleiste der Bildung von deutschem Weißsein durch eine Geschichte der Aneignung von Farben, Gerüchen, Körpern, vertrauten Bildern und Objekten. Diese Strategie ermöglicht es dem Autor, die Komplexität des Einsatzes von Hautfarbe als Diskriminierungstechnik und die daraus resultierende unerbittliche Entmenschlichung nachzuweisen.

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