

PRESS OFFER

Interview with Prof. Dr. Stefan Ouma and Dr. Christine Vogt-William on the topic of racism

Bayreuth, 06.07.2020. *Weeks after the death of the Black American George Floyd at the hands of the police there are still mass protests in the USA. His death ignited discussions around the world. An interview with Dr. Christine Vogt-William, Director of the Office for Gender and Diversity at the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, and Prof. Dr. Stefan Ouma, Professor of Economic Geography at the University of Bayreuth, and Member of the Cluster of Excellence.*

Why do you think the case of George Floyd ended up being ‘the last straw’?

CVW: In my opinion, a lot of factors came together. Societal discrimination against People of Color in the USA has been omnipresent and sustained, e.g. in health care, whereby the Corona-crisis has demonstrated the disparity of access for these populations in the weeks and months before the killing of George Floyd. Additionally, the police in the USA are known for structural racism against Black people. The historical component also plays a large role: After the end of slavery in the USA, Black people were still criminalized, and even today the numbers of People of Color in American prisons are disproportionately high. And last but not least, the anti-Black stance of the American government has been acquiring increasingly untenable dimensions. Non-white Americans are no longer ready to accept hate and structural inequality and are vehemently protesting systemic oppression and the indifference of the white majority.

SO: I think, too, that the current political climate in the USA is greatly responsible. Unfortunately, it is to be expected that, even if Trump loses this year’s election, the system of white supremacy which he so blatantly advocates, will nonetheless remain intact. By that, I mean a system in which political and economic structures are constructed in such ways that white people’s grasp of power, representation, resources, privileges, and ultimately their security remains ensured – while those read as ‘Other’ are excluded. This system also includes people who explicitly designate themselves non-racist or see themselves on the ‘good side’, even as supportive of support Blacks and other discriminated groups.

You spoke of a ‘system of white supremacy’, and ‘systemic racism’ is also a phrase that comes up in connection with the American protests -- what do these phrases mean exactly?

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SO: The phrase circulates, even in academic circles, but it's actually an oxymoron. Because all white majority societies are characterized by racist structures or have at other points – as a consequence of colonialism – left such structures in place. Racism is thus a power system, which, on the basis of attributions, allocates power, privilege, resources, and opportunities. We can differentiate between structural, institutional, and everyday racism, although structural and systemic racism are often used synonymously. When speaking of institutional racism, we mean discriminatory attitudes or practices anchored in laws or state institutions which disadvantage non-white people and, at the same time, render this discrimination invisible. Everyday racism refers to daily experiences of discrimination – from monkey noises on the soccer field to strange looks on the bus to discrimination when apartment hunting.

CVW: It would be wrong to think that these three fields exist separately from each other; in fact, they are interwoven. Racism is patently a daily reality for People of Color: on the street, in neighborhoods, in societal institutions like churches, sports clubs, as well as in political and educational institutions.

Can you draw any parallels to the USA in Germany, are those three forms of racism also found here? Or is everyday racism in Germany perhaps more subtle?

CVW: All three forms of racism are evident here, but in another caliber. That's true even if many white Germans don't want to acknowledge it. Structural and everyday racism are often ignored by white Germans, because they have no experience with it. Their attitude is often, "If I haven't experienced racism as a white German, then there can't be racism." This interpretational prerogative over the reality of Black people is a form of 'white-washing'. In Germany, there is a basic understanding of 'German-ness', for the most part, as white, European, and Christian. The white majority therefore tends to see Black people and People of Color as 'not German' and 'different'.

SO: This is despite Germany having colonies in Africa and in other parts of the world. There was lively intellectual exchange among advocates of scientific racism in Germany and the USA in the 19th century. Where the USA, despite its deeply racist history and the structural violence done to Blacks and indigenous populations, has differentiated itself positively in comparison to Germany, is in its attitude toward immigrants. Until the beginning of the 2000s, Germany simply disputed that it was multi-cultural and even today uses phrases like 'national culture' (*Leitkultur*) and 'ethnic Germans' (*Volksdeutsche*). The idea of Germany as a pluralistic society has still to find acceptance. Integration is seen as a one-way street. Even when racism in the USA seems more violent and more blatant than it does here, they are making progress in ways that we in Germany are still far from. That includes for example certain laws - e.g. against 'hate crimes'—as well as better representations of Black people in certain professions and in the political process.

You are both on the 'Racism' committee within the Bayreuth Cluster of Excellence. Tell us about it.

SO: It's not a committee strictly speaking. In my opinion, there shouldn't even be a committee on the subject, since everyone should be working on transforming racist structures, whether they're on a committee or not. But at the same time, as I said before, racism has systemic dimensions and the community, the job, the school, the university, etc., are all part of this system. And it's not a given that all these structures can be simply transformed from the inside. This can only be accomplished by recognition, acknowledgement, and the will to change, and this concerns the relinquishing of privilege, including a sense of entitlement. And the question of who is actually doing the transforming is important: Should it exclusively be the marginalized who have to repeatedly explain to the white majority the problem of racism, even though people can easily inform themselves? Am I

someone, as part of a 'white Happyland', who is even ready to learn? Do I sit down and confront the topic on my own, or wait for explanations from the people affected by it?

What concrete goals do you hope to achieve?

CVW: The group's main goal is to render the topic visible in the Cluster of Excellence, since, as we said, racism affects everybody, and everyone should be involved. This current political moment offers the opportunity to bring this problem into social focus. The group started meeting last November, in order to talk about racism at the university as well as in the greater German sociopolitical framework. Among other things, we discussed racism in the German academic landscape, as well as in the Bayreuth cityscape. The mixed reactions to these initial efforts led us to meet more often in the following months, in order to talk about real-life examples of racism, and to develop strategies and measures. The topic has acquired even greater currency with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. As members of the Africa Multiple Cluster, we cannot afford to remain inactive.

What can we do to fight against racism in general?

SO: Your immediate surroundings are always a good place to begin – the kindergarten, the school, the university, the city. Bayreuth, for example, has a few problematic issues. The city council and other urban stakeholders should, along with the university, initiate some necessary changes and ask themselves, "Can a city with a university that is the European research center for African Studies, where, over decades, thousands of Black people have lived and worked, afford to champion clubs, drinks, and businesses using racist terminology?" Let me cite Germany's President, who recently said, "It's not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist. Racism is learned, but it can also be unlearned. But to achieve this we must be willing to change our point of view." This fight must also be carried over to the institutional level. Proposals to change Article 3 of the constitution (*Grundgesetze*) and to substitute the term 'racial discrimination' for 'race', as well as the new anti-discrimination laws are steps moving in the right direction. The University of Bayreuth has also taken some important steps here; for example, the introduction of a Diversity Agenda and making psychological counseling available for employees affected by racism. The university should, however, deal with the problem more systematically, as it is often a bone of contention between the city and the university.

CVW: The truth is, there's no 'one size fits all' solution, and a singular strategy alone cannot and will not be easily found. Everyone should realize that structural racism is nothing new in Germany – even if the government and society seem to be caught off guard by this reality at the moment. White people should consider exploring their own prejudices – that would be a good place to start. I recommend that white people listen to People of Color in their communities, and not just brush off our worries and experiences just because these don't conform to the white experience of reality. If white people are tired of hearing about People of Color's experiences of racism, and the push for structural change, I would point out the importance of recognizing that marginalized groups are just as tired of experiencing racist violence daily, either as micro- or macroaggressions.

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