



INTERDISCIPLINARY SYMPOSIUM

**INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES:
RACE, GENDER, AND CAPITALISM IN THE U.S.
WELFARE STATE**

January 27, 2024

University of Passau, Nikolakloster (NK) 211 & 212 (Dilab)

Program

Research Project, 'Welfare Queens' and 'Losers': a Critical Race and Intersectional Perspective on the U.S. American Welfare State

Professorship for American Studies /Cultural and Media Studies

Program

10:00 **Welcome & Opening**

Karsten Fitz (American Studies)

10:05 **Introduction**

Intersecting Inequalities: Race, Gender,
and Capitalism in the U.S. Welfare State
Grit Grigoleit-Richter (American Studies)

10:30-12:30 **Panel I: The Road to Welfare Retrenchment:
Neoliberal Agency**

Chair: Marian Ofori-Amofo (American Studies, Passau)

Carceral Consequences for Sexual Minority Youth,
1976-1996
Syndey Ramirez (History, Kassel)

The Health Security Act under President Clinton
– universal only for some?
Fabienne Müller (History, Bremen)

Undermining the Social State:
The Role of Conservative Media
in Fueling Support for the Neoliberal Economic
Practices in the United States
Dmitry Timofeev (American Studies, Vienna)

12:30-13:15 **Lunch Break**

13:15-13:45 **Critical Reflections on Race and
Welfare are just the Ticket: A Critical Race
Theory Counterstory à la Martinez**
Vanessa Vollman (American Studies, Passau)

14:00-16:00 **Panel II: The Battle for Welfare:
Local Advocacy & Responses**

Chair: Anna-Lisa Müller (Anthropogeography, Passau)

Welfare as Civil Right: Race, Gender and Civil Rights
Activism during the Newburgh, New York Controversy
Tamara Boussac (American Studies, Paris)

Expanding Frontiers of Property and Real Estate Capital:
Public Housing Renewal in New York City
Sneha Sumanth
(Geography and Environmental Studies, Ottawa)

Apologists for Austerity? Mutual Aid and
Welfare State Retrenchment
Peer Illner (Cultural Studies, Berlin)

16:00-16:30 **Coffee Break**

16:30-18:00 **Book Launch**

Living on Credit: People, Power, and Debt in the
United States from the End of Slavery to the Present
Felix Krämer (History, Erfurt)

18:00 **Closing**

Welcome

American Studies, University of Passau

The steady increase in socioeconomic and structural inequalities in the U.S. between the white majority and racialized minorities, resulting in severe racial disparities in wealth, income, housing, health, education, and almost every other aspect of life, was the starting point for our BMBF-funded research project on the U.S. welfare state. Our symposium on *Intersecting Inequalities: Race, Gender, and Capitalism in the U.S. Welfare State* thereby marks the formal closure of the research project but aims to provide a platform to foster collaboration and initiate a broader discussion and exploration of how race and gender intersect, structure, and shape the welfare state under a capitalist regime.

In our research, we have built on the premises of Critical Race Studies, which posits race as a social construct that is a fundamental organizing principle that hierarchizes U.S. society and its institutions. This framework provides a powerful lens also at the symposium through which to examine the intersections of race, gender, and capitalism to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes of inequality and marginalization. Individual presentations will thereby examine how the welfare state both reflects and reinforces existing social inequalities and thus contribute to our collective understanding of the dynamics at play. Furthermore, the final lecture explores the origins and evolution of debt as a mechanism of social control and exploitation. By examining the historical context of debt, we gain insights into the ongoing struggles for economic justice and liberation.

An engaging day of exploring, learning, and sharing awaits us with stimulating discussions, new insights, and new perspectives.

Welcome to this symposium!

Grit Grigoleit-Richter

PI: ‘Welfare Queens’ and ‘Losers’: a Critical Race and Intersectional Perspective on the U.S. American Welfare State

Panel I: 10:30 – 12:30

The Road to Welfare Retrenchment: Neoliberal Agency

Chair: Marian Ofori-Amofo (American Studies, Passau)

Carceral Consequences for Sexual Minority Youth, 1976-1996

Sydney Ramirez (History, Kassel)

I propose a contribution for the “Intersecting Inequalities: Race, Gender, and Capitalism in the U.S. Welfare State” symposium based on my doctoral research project which historicizes the politics around sexual minority youth in the United States from the 1970s on. My research addresses how minors in the U.S., subject to exclusion from welfare provisions based on the family wage model, faced criminalization and incarceration through their attempts to live independently. Through case studies of queer youth advocacy projects in several major U.S. cities from the 1970s and 1980s, I examine how services available to queer youth evolved and changed in response to federal and municipal social service budget cuts.

I offer examples of federal and state funded projects in Boston, M.A. and San Francisco, C.A. which experimented with reforms to prevent the cities’ sexual minority youth population from entering the criminal justice system. Having left home, these young people were subject to homophobic and transphobic abuse in the foster care system and in runaway youth housing programs. Gay and lesbian activists organized to provide social services to this population, but with the Reagan administration emphasis on family cohesion for runaway youth and renewed emphasis on incarceration rather than diversion within the juvenile justice system, the core focus of these advocacy organizations shifted away from independent living projects. Adapting to the increasingly privatized non-profit funding landscape of the 1980s, as well as the demands of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, queer youth advocacy organizations changed courses; their clientele shifted, and broader issues of income inequality fell from the queer youth liberation agenda. I argue that attention to these queer youth histories highlights the impact of age as well as race and gender as determining factors for access to welfare.

The Health Security Act under President Clinton – Universal Only for Some?

Fabienne Müller (History, Bremen)

Health care reform had been one of the main topics of Bill Clinton's campaign in the presidential elections of 1992. The influence the Neoliberal turn had on the Democratic Party, observable in keywords and alignment, became evident in the process of drafting the different reform proposals during the first two years of the Clinton administration.

Part of the promises was an overhaul of social policy, especially health policy, which was perceived as being in constant crisis. A centrist-oriented social, economic and financial policy formed the ideological core¹, in conjunction with a left-liberal social policy that corresponded to the optimism characterizing North American and Western European countries at the beginning of the 1990s. Social and labor market policy should have an activating character in the spirit of "Welfare to Work", one of the "key concepts of the Third Way".²

Source material, internal reports, question-and-answer sessions and speeches of Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, shows, in addition to a focus on media effectiveness with catchphrases, the concept of "universal coverage" that the Clinton administration was repeatedly stating as the core principle of the reformed system. Newspaper articles and reports bear witness to the different groups distinguished by social-economic status and gender in most cases and affected by the risk of not being able to afford health care. However, these sources reveal especially by not mentioning and not considering sufficiently certain groups like American Natives that coverage also under the proposed Health Security Act was far from being universal.

It can be argued that the negotiation process of the health care reform draft was already strongly influenced by neoliberal ideas and that ideological points of view, in the broadest sense aiming at reducing costs and maximizing profits, thrust aside a careful consideration of social, gender and racial cleavages, thus ultimately reinforcing an already manifest segregation of society and the US welfare state in the years to come.

¹ Cf. Rasmus, Jack (2019). Crisis and Restoration of Neoliberal Policy in the USA: 2008-2018. *International Critical Thought*: 31–63, p. 32.

² Cf. Béland, Daniel & Waddan, Alex (2014). What Third Way? Clinton, New Democrats and Social Policy Reform. In: Rosanna Perotti & Richard Himelfarb (Eds.), *A True Third Way? Domestic Policy and the Presidency of William Jefferson Clinton* (pp. 101–111). New York.

Undermining the Social State: The Role of Conservative Media in Fueling Support for the Neoliberal Economic Practices in the United States

Dmitry Timofeev (American Studies, Vienna)

Over the past four decades, the American political landscape has been characterized by the predominance of economic neoliberalism, initially introduced during the Reagan administration. This ideological framework has transcended national boundaries, manifesting itself in various Western democracies, even under the governance of ostensibly socially liberal parties, as evidenced by its adoption in the United Kingdom during the Blair era and in Germany under Schroeder. The popularity of neoliberal economic approaches continues within right-wing discourse, with conservative media outlets playing a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining this political and economic orientation.

This study aims to scrutinize the influence exerted by American conservative media in advancing neoliberal economic and political agendas. Despite the passage of decades since the initial implementation of neoliberal policies, this approach continues to enjoy considerable popularity among both American electorate and Republican political figures. Advocates often assert that it epitomizes the quintessence of American capitalism, positioned in contrast to the principles of the social welfare state. Numerous conservative media outlets persist in actively propounding this ideology. This work's thesis is that media's role in shaping the collective public opinion regarding neoliberalism alters public perception regarding this ideology, discredits ideas of the welfare state and creates a foundational framework for the Republican Party.

In this study, content analysis is employed as a methodological approach to systematically scrutinize a spectrum of media content, including news articles, opinion pieces, and editorials, disseminated through American conservative outlets. This analytical framework allows for a comprehensive exploration of the ways in which conservative media outlets contribute to influencing public discourse on topics germane to their ideological orientation. The temporal scope of this analysis encompasses the late 2000s, marking the inception of one of the United States' most notable welfare programs, namely, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), colloquially known as Obamacare.



Dialogue: 13:15 – 13:45

Critical Reflections on Race and Welfare are just the Ticket: A Critical Race Theory Counterstory à la Martinez

Vanessa Vollman (American Studies, Passau)

Anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) rhetoric found a perfect place to thrive during Trump’s presidency and continues to be in alignment with divisive domestic policies and discourses that have become entrenched in contemporaneous US power structures. What had until then been a social justice theory discourse based on critical thinking with the objective of better understanding the origins and ubiquitousness of oppressive power structures had, in this way, been abused and turned into a dog-whistle for alt-right thought and covert societal and socially acceptable racism.

Aja Y. Martinez is one of many scholars who fought back. In her trailblazing 2020 work, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, she expanded the original six CRT tenets from the 1980s by another three tenets. One of them highlights the importance of critical thinking becoming more accessible to lay persons outside of academia. Another centers the experiential knowledge that people of Color themselves have about the racism they experience. It is in this context that she took the CRT tool of counterstorytelling a step further by creating narrative dialogues in which what she calls her “composite characters” reflect Plato’s Phaedrus-Socrates relationship and a fictive mentor and a mentee character engage in a discussion.

In the particular dialogue written for this talk based on her scholarship, my composite characters – my mentee and mentor -- are on the train commute, the Donau-Isar-Express between München and Passau, on the way to the Symposium. They reflect, discuss, and explore the terms “race” and “welfare” in the US context, the power dynamics of oppression and dominance as well as the concepts of privilege and fragility.

Panel II: 14:00 – 16:00

The Battle for Welfare: Local Advocacy & Responses

Chair: Anna-Lisa Müller (Anthropogeography, Passau)

Welfare as Civil Right: Race, Gender and Civil Rights Activism during the Newburgh, New York Controversy

Tamara Boussac (American Studies, Paris)

In the summer of 1961, elected officials in Newburgh, a small city in New York State, passed a stringent new welfare code designed to curb welfare spending and fraud, declaring a war on its poorest residents. Among others, the plan contained work requirements and threatened to take women off the rolls if they gave birth to illegitimate children while receiving welfare. In many ways, the plan was drafted so as to segregate and exclude Newburgh's Black population from public resources. An early case of poverty criminalization in the postwar era, Newburgh's welfare rules soon became the center of a national controversy that foregrounded welfare, work, fraud and race. As historian Lisa Levenstein argued, the controversy triggered "postwar America's first national debate about welfare."³

Most historians who have tackled the Newburgh welfare controversy have noted the plan's racial underpinnings and context, as well as the racialized imagery put forward in mainstream media when reporting welfare stories in 1961. Less attention has been paid to how some of the leading civil rights organizations of the day – the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League, as well as Black media outlets – reacted to the Newburgh plan. This paper aims to show how they organized to protect African American welfare recipients from brutal attacks, denounced the Newburgh plan as a segregationist policy comparable to those of the Jim Crow South and articulated legal arguments based on national citizenship. By doing this, they outlined a legal defense of African Americans' right to both public assistance and cross-state migration. While these organizations placed racial equality at the core of their activism, gender itself, however, remained a blind spot for many, even though Black women receiving Aid to Dependent Children were increasingly under attack. This paper is based on extensive archival research conducted in the papers of the NAACP and the NUL as well as in Newburgh and echoes one of the chapters of my book, *L'Affaire de Newburgh*.

³ Lisa Levenstein, "From Innocent Children to Unwanted Migrants and Unwed Moms: Two Chapters in the Public Discourse on Welfare in the United States, 1960-1961", *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 4, n° 11, 2000, pp. 10-33, p. 17.

Expanding Frontiers of Property and Real Estate Capital: Public Housing Renewal in New York City

Sneha Sumanth (Geography and Environmental Studies, Ottawa)

This paper examines the expanding frontiers of property and real estate capital into New York City's public housing, and the everyday struggles of tenants whose dispossession it relies on. It outlines ongoing plans for the urban renewal and revitalization of public housing into private or market-determined housing that introduce novel forms of revenue generation and transform public housing into potentially lucrative assets. I situate these plans with long standing geographies of racialized dispossession, underscoring the need to examine commodified land and housing relations as a central aspect of racial capitalism today. I draw, conceptually and methodologically, on alignments in theories of racial capitalism and feminist social reproduction to highlight dialectical relationships between evidenced pathways of accumulation and tenants' struggles for home and everyday life.

Through detailed documentary analyses and case studies of current multi-governmental plans for public housing renewal, I first examine how homes are framed as simultaneously disposable and profitable, obscuring decades of organized abandonment, and readying these disinvested terrains for cycles of reinvestment. Next, I study the shifting alignments of state and capital, and how the resulting economic restructuring of the New York City Public Housing Authority (NYCHA) infiltrates tenants' homes, everyday lives, and organized movements of resistance. Finally, I look at how these structural shifts introduce modes of capital extraction through rent and tenureship, deepening housing insecurity, and increasing eviction and dispossession. At all avenues in this political-economic analysis, I draw lines of questioning from my involvement in organized public housing tenant movements, many of which are women-led, taking cues from the ways racialized and gendered tenants collectively understand and fight attacks on their daily lives.

Apologists for Austerity? Mutual Aid and Welfare State Retrenchment

Peer Illner (Cultural Studies, Berlin)

Since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, disaster relief has emerged as a new terrain of struggle between the federal state and poor, often racialised communities. As cuts to state spending put significant strain on communities struggling to survive the ongoing climate emergency, radical social movements from Occupy to Black Lives Matter are building autonomous aid networks to counter the systematic neglect by the state. Harking back to the self-organised welfare programmes of the Black Panther Party, mutual aid has gained renewed importance in providing relief when hurricanes, floods and pandemics hit. As governments increasingly retreat from disaster relief, however, mutual aid faces a profound dilemma: Intended to build networks of solidarity, community organisations now increasingly fill in for the federal state's ailing welfare provision.

Drawing on scholarship in social reproduction theory, this paper presents the case of Occupy Sandy; a large, self-organised relief initiative launched by the social movement Occupy Wall Street in response to the 2012 Superstorm Sandy. It firstly discusses Occupy Sandy's presence as the most successful relief provider on the ground, far surpassing the efficacy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA. Secondly, it explores the counter-intuitive political endorsement of the group by the neo-conservative organization Homeland Security. Situating the bizarre proximity between anarchist social movement and conservative mega-institution in the context of the continued withdrawal of the U.S. state from the provision of reproductive services, the paper thirdly questions the critical potential of mutual aid in the age of austerity. As capitalism shifts its centre of gravity from integrating poor, racialised populations into production to increasingly evicting them from labour market participation, mutual aid changes its valence, from viable oppositional practice to a possible apology for welfare state retrenchment.

Book Launch: 16:30 – 18:00

Living on Credit. People, Power, and Debt in the United States from the End of Slavery to the Present

Felix Krämer (History, Erfurt)

Debt shapes the lives of millions of people in the United States. But indebtedness does by no means affect everybody in the same way. Donald Trump juggled horrendous loans in his career, which brought him as far as to the presidency, while other people died of police violence on the streets because of small amounts of debt. This is what the term debts difference used in my work addresses. And the debt economy in the US has a side anchored in racial capitalism since 1865. The debt(s) of slavery were transferred to Black Americans who had to shoulder the costs of whiteness as property in practices of convict leasing, discriminatory effects of segregation, racial covenants, redlining, and criminalization. A closer examination of the precariousness of debt relations reveals that Black Americans in particular, along with women, workers, and migrants, were repeatedly exposed to higher credit risks or unbearable conditions. My forthcoming book demonstrates this through various forms of debts such as the system of sharecropping after the end of slavery, images of loan sharks or real estate debt and traces how student loans and credit card practices brought neoliberalism into people's everyday experiences.

In my talk I will emphasize that debts differences are particularly striking in welfare discourses and practices. Policies for minorities and poor Americans since the New Deal have had the specters of debts behind them. The lecture traces this from real estate loans to student loans to social figures such as the Welfare Queen and so-called Deadbeat Dads in the neoliberalism of the 1970s and 1980s. With its focus on precarization through debt, I focus on a production line of the “wealth gap” in the USA trying to fill a gap in the new history of capitalism.