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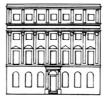

BULLETIN

EDITORIAL

WORDS MATTER: OUR THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE, PSEUDO-SCIENCE, AND 'RACE'

Writers, academics, editors, and translators put words to work in order to convey the arguments they are trying to make. Using the right words often means making a political choice. As historians and editors of an academic journal, we have followed with great interest the discussion among publishers and in newsrooms in the USA as to whether the words 'Black' and 'White' should be capitalized. Debates over language in connection with political discourses about 'race' are not new. A few years ago, similar discussions were held with respect to the right wording for hatred towards Jews. Should it be 'anti-semitism' as opposed to 'anti-Semitism', in order to acknowledge the fact that 'race theory' is pseudo-scientific, and there is no such thing as a 'Semitic race'?[1]

Sitting in a larger context of changing social structures prompted by the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests and current debates about antisemitism in German, British, and US politics, we revisited these older debates to understand their meaning in the context of the present discussion. In both cases, we are confronted with the unresolved and problematic legacies of the idea of 'race science', at a time when these ideas are once again on the rise.[2] So how can we recognize and take a stance against racial inequalities while at the same time undermining the false idea that biological 'races' exist?

These discussions matter considerably for the future of our field. As historians of German, British, and global history, mentioning racial identification and ethnic background in an appropriate way is

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[1] IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial, 'Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism', International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Apr. 2015, online at <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/memo-on-spelling-of-antisemitism_final-1.pdf>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020. The Memo emphasizes that unlike 'Black' as a form of identity, there is no common *social* understanding of 'Semitism' either.

[2] Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston, 2019).

particularly important when we publish research to which these distinctions are relevant. This may include the history of civil rights, the history of slavery, the history of colonialism, the history of race, racism and Jew hatred, and the problems or achievements of people of colour and Jews, to name only a few examples. For us as a bilingual team, translating racial discourse between English and German is also often a challenge, since words such as 'race' do not have the same connotations in both languages. When translators have to opt for a term that might not cover the full range of meanings in the original, translation can become even more of a vehicle of interpretation than it normally is. The German term 'Rasse', for example, has a different meaning from the English 'race', since it carries its own historical charge and is detached from the critical discourse surrounding the term 'race' in the United States. Some therefore choose not to translate 'race' into German at all.[3] As historians, we are aware of the historical trajectories of racial categories, and should therefore show adequate awareness of their constructive nature rather than treating them as neutral, let alone scientific terms.

Our most recent reflections on the right kind of language in relation to racial discourse were also prompted by two submissions to this issue of the *Bulletin*: Eve Rosenhaft's review of Fabian Klose's book *'In the Cause of Humanity'* and Juliane Clegg's review of Almuth Ebke's *Britishness: Die Debatte über nationale Identität in Großbritannien, 1967 bis 2008*,[4] where the terms Black and White are used. Many style guides—including the *New Oxford Style Manual*, on which our own style guide is modelled—stipulate lower case for both, but increasing numbers of publications are moving away from that model, and capital-B 'Black' is now becoming a new standard as a means of highlighting that Blackness 'is not a natural category but a social one—a collective identity—with a particular history'.[5] This follows the con-

[3] Some of these issues are helpfully addressed by the editors and translators of Stuart Hall, *Vertrauter Fremder*, trans. Ronald Gutberlet (Hamburg, 2020), 9–12. In critical Whiteness and race discourses in Germany, 'White' is sometimes written as *weiß* (in lower-case and italics) to point to its constructive nature without signposting it as equal to 'Black'.

[4] See the reviews by Eve Rosenhaft (pp. 73–9) and Juliane Clegg (pp. 101–6) in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*.

[5] Kwame Antony Appiah, 'The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black', *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020, online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/

vention of capitalizing other terms denoting social, cultural, and ethnic identities, such as Afro-Caribbean, Hispanic, Native American, and so on. Like many outlets and publishers, we decided to capitalize the B in Black going forwards when using the term as a cultural or ethnic identifier.[6]

However, the real debate is over what to do with 'White'. Some outlets feel that 'Black' denotes a shared cultural background in a way that 'White' does not, and therefore capitalize 'Black' while leaving 'White' in lower case. Others choose to capitalize both words to reflect the fact that they both refer to artificial, socially constructed categories. There is also concern in some quarters that upper-case 'White' would inadvertently endorse the White-supremacist practice of capitalizing 'White' and leaving 'Black' in lower case, although treating both terms consistently equally ought to avoid that connection. Indeed, some argue, if used with social awareness and critical discourse, might this policy even help make such usage by 'White supremacists' redundant one day?[7]

As scholars and translators of German, British, and global history, we find using upper case for both Black and White appropriate. It sets a symmetry inasmuch as it indicates that White people also have a racial identity. This could therefore mark an important shift: White people will have to deal with the consequences of being categorized by race.[8] Sociologist of race Eve Ewing argues: 'White people . . .

archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[6] See e.g. WashPostPR, 'The Washington Post Announces Writing Style Changes for Racial and Ethnic Identifiers', *Washington Post*, 29 July 2020, online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2020/07/29/washing­ton-post-announces-writing-style-changes-racial-ethnic-identifiers/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[7] For background reading, see Mike Laws, 'Why We Capitalize "Black" (and not "white")', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 16 June 2020, online at <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020; Kwame Antony Appiah, 'The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black'; Post Reports, 'Capital B for Black', *Washington Post*, 31 July 2020, online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcasts/post-reports/capital-b-for-black/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[8] Nell Irvin Painter, 'Why "White" Should be Capitalized, Too', *Washington Post*, 22 July 2020, online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opin-

move through the world without ever considering the fact of their Whiteness. This is an incredible feat, through which White people get to be only normal, neutral, or without any race at all, while the rest of us are saddled with this unpleasant business of being racialized.' Whiteness, in other words, is not actually neutral or 'standard'. 'As long as White people do not ever have to interrogate what Whiteness is, where it comes from, how it operates, or what it does', Ewing writes, 'they can maintain the fiction that race is other people's problem, that they are mere observers in a centuries-long stage play in which they have, in fact, been the producers, directors, and central actors.'[9] Treating White as a neutral adjective, as the Center for the Study of Social Policy points out, allows 'White people to sit out of conversations about race and removes accountability from White people's and White institutions' involvement in racism'.[10] In sum, we feel the upper case provides an opportunity to reflect on how Whiteness operates in our institutions and in society at large.

That said, there will always remain unresolved issues and ambiguities. 'Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change.'[11] What about texts whose authors give good reasons to keep the word White in lower case?[12]

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ions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[9] Eve Ewing, 'I'm a Black Scholar Who Studies Race: Here's Why I Capitalize "White"', *Zora Medium*, 2 July 2020, online at <https://zora.medium.com/ im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[10] Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton, 'Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize "Black" and "White"', Center for the Study of Social Policy, 23 Mar. 2020, online at <https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[11] Ewing, 'I'm a Black Scholar Who Studies Race'.

[12] For a different position against capitalizing 'W' as an act of decolonization, see e.g. this social media discussion by Jenn Jackson (@JennMJacksonPhD), 'I talked to @eveewingabout this but I disagree with this ethos wholesale. . . ', *Twitter*, 2 Aug. 2020, online at <https://twitter.com/JennMJacksonPhD/status/1289887251179200512>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020. Jackson argues: 'Capitalizing the "w" is only a performative act for white people. The rest of us are

By adopting new coinages as standard, might we one day become complicit in constructing categories and thus falling into the trap of imposing racial categories where we are supposed to critique them?[13]

As we continue to listen to the wider discourse, we recognize our policy needs to be adaptable, and that these regulations cannot be fixed rules. We acknowledge that some authors might be uncomfortable with the idea of capitalizing 'White' when discussing White supremacism. Some might express fear of inadvertently lending weight to racist ideology and 'White concerns', instead of decentring them. We will always give authors the opportunity to discuss their concerns with the editors, or to be more specific in order to acknowledge the different shades of Whiteness.

What about 'antisemitism'? Many major style guides mandate it to be spelt with a hyphen and a capital-S 'anti-Semitism'. But we need to remember that the term was originally coined in 1879 by the German journalist Wilhelm Marr, who sought to establish a (pseudo-) scientific basis for longstanding anti-Jewish sentiments in order to make these more widely acceptable.[14] In accordance with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, we will therefore favour the un-hyphenated spelling 'in order to dispel the idea that there is an entity "Semitism" which "anti-Semitism" opposes'.[15] This echoes the

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already aware that whiteness is *not* invisible. Not capitalizing the "w" in white is a systemic disruption which decenters whiteness with respect to other groups. That should be the purpose of capitalization.' See also Laws, 'Why We Capitalize "Black" (and not "white")'.

[13] We are, for instance, aware of the need to reflect on the question of how far to go in naming colour categories, while at the same time asking whether there are compelling editorial and scholarly reasons to impose further categories. The recent coinage 'Brown' is increasingly cited as both a racial category and a form of identity, for example. While it might offer some scholars a useful contemporary way of thinking about the past, we would argue that it cannot be related back to historical contexts to the same extent as Black or White. See e.g. Silva Kumarini, 'Brown: From Identity to Identification', *Cultural Studies*, 24/2 (2010), 167–82.

[14] Stephen Smith, 'Since we're Debating Labels, Stop Calling it anti-Semitism: It's Jew Hatred', *Forward*, 7 July 2020, online at <https://forward.com/opinion/450209/since-were-debating-labels-stop-calling-it-anti-semitism-its-jew-hatred/, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

[15] IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial, 'Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism.'

IHRA's concern that 'the hyphenated spelling allows for the possibility of something called "Semitism", which not only legitimizes a form of pseudo-scientific racial classification that was thoroughly discredited by association with Nazi ideology, but also divides the term, stripping it from its meaning of opposition and hatred toward Jews'.[16]

We consider these two policies as going hand in hand. All racial categories are a construct. As such, we must not let these categories 'disguise themselves as common nouns and adjectives'. Instead, we should, as Kwame Anthony Appiah proposes, 'call them out by their names'.[17] In other words, the concept of race is the result of racism, 'not its prerequisite', as the Jena Declaration stated in 2019 in recognition of the University of Jena's historical responsibilities in the establishment of pseudo-scientific racial theories.[18]

While 'race' does not exist, racism still does. From the under-representation of ethnic minority authors in journals and academic presses to the lack of diversity in historical institutions and the absence of Black History from the curricula of German and British schools and universities, we are aware that academic publishing, and the field of history itself, stand within, not outside, institutional structures that reproduce inequalities.[19] The use of appropriate language is a small but important signal for the kinds of histories we want to write, publish, and promote.

The Editors

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Appiah, 'The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black'.

[18] Martin S. Fischer, Uwe Hoßfeld, Johannes Krause, and Stefan Richter, 'Jena Declaration: The Concept of Race is the Result of Racism, not its Prerequisite', Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, online at <https://www.uni-jena.de/en/190910_JenaerErklaerung_EN>, accessed 5 Oct. 2020.

[19] Royal Historical Society, 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality Report' (London, 2018), online at <https://royalhistsoc.org/racereport/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2020.