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## BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

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**Nico Slate: Colored Cosmopolitanism.  
The shared struggle for freedom in  
the United States and India,  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University  
Press 2012, 321 S.**

Reviewed by  
Maria Framke, Zurich

Nico Slate's book explores the interactional history between the Indian struggle(s) for independence and the African American struggle(s) against racial discrimination commonly known as 'Jim Crow' laws. By examining the interconnectedness of people, ideas and political pressure, the author chalks out the history of colored cosmopolitanism from the late 19th century to the 1960s. The chosen timeframe of the book, thus, covers key global events such as the First and the Second World Wars, the early Cold War and the process of decolonization; each of which provided a special impact to the emergence and nature of transnational encounters covered in this book (pp. 2-3). These encounters between Indians and African Americans took, as Slate convincingly shows, diverse forms ranging from "statements of sympathy to coordinated acts of solidarity".

But they also entailed selective appropriations, misunderstandings and rejections of discourses and practices. The author argues, that in spite of this the common application and shared use of words such as 'freedom' and 'colored' "helped thereby to bridge difference and to achieve transnational solidarities" (p. 3).

Slate begins his story with the emergence of racialized regimes in colonial British India and the United States in the second half of the 19th century (ch. 1). Despite many differences between these regimes – especially in regard to the format of racial hierarchies which in the Indian case were often mixed with the complexities of caste – contemporary Indian and African American reformers and activists, for instance Swami Vivekananda and Booker T. Washington, began to draw analogies between forms of racial injustices. Two major strands of comparison were put forth: one, was based on equating race and caste, thus linking African Americans with low-caste Indians, and two was the parallel drawn between racism and imperialism which served the purpose of equating African Americans with all Indians.

While many of the transnational encounters between Indians and African Americans took place from a distance or during visits, the decades before and after the turn of the century also witnessed an intersec-

tion of Indian and African diasporas in the United States which according to Slate opened opportunities for solidarities and collaboration, but also produced or reinforced boundaries. To gain citizen rights, for instance, some Indian migrants in the United States claimed legal whiteness invoking their racial 'Aryan heritage'. Furthermore, to avoid racist discrimination against 'Blacks' Indians also resorted to distinct markers of differentiation, such as wearing a turban in public (pp. 26-35).

The years from the First World War to the end of the 1930s saw an extension and diversification of the relations and transnational solidarities between African Americans and Indians (chs. 2-4). Activists, politicians, intellectuals and missionaries, such as Lala Lajpat Rai, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mahatma Gandhi, George Washington Carver, B.R. Ambedkar and Cedric Dover, engaged with each other's writings and methods, met in person and built up multidirectional networks of influence, learning and fighting side by side. In doing so, Slate argues, several activists became champions of a colored cosmopolitanism "through which they framed commonalities of struggle between 'colored' peoples fighting for their rights throughout the world." (p. 66). Initiatives for colored unity and solidarity often recognized the intersection of multiple oppressions (economic, political, and gender-based) and aimed to build transnational alliances across different social movements (*ibid.*). Importantly, the author does not fail to elaborate on the limits of colored cosmopolitanism which comprised continuing conceptions of racial superiority, diverse responses to white supremacy and denouncements of colored unity.

Similar to earlier decades, Indian and African American debates from the 1910s to the 1930s also included analogies between race and caste as well as racism and imperialism. Comparisons between the United States and British India were drawn to emphasize unity amongst or to end the oppression of the 'own people', for instance the Dalits (Garvey and Ambedkar), to fight against inequalities in both countries, but also to defend and justify one's own nation, most visible in Indian answers to Katharine Mayo's book *Mother India* that offered a harsh critique of Indian society.

In the last three chapters (chs. 5-7) dedicated to the periods of the Second World War and the Cold War (until the late 1960s) three bigger themes are addressed: one, the idea and applicability of a 'global double victory'; two, the Indian independence and the influence of the nation state on colored cosmopolitanism; and three, the conduct of the civil rights movement and its transnational influences, inspirations and support.

During the Second World War, African Americans such as Walter White, argued that the allied victory against the axis powers had to be linked with a victory against racial oppression in the United States (sometimes extended to a victory against imperialism throughout the world). Only by granting racial equality to all American citizens, the argument ran, Indians would give their support to the allied war effort and would not be lost to Japan. This strategy of 'pressurizing' the American administration was, as Slate shows, employed again after India's independence. Against the background of the Cold War the realization of racial equality was presented as a necessity for a successful American foreign

policy. This presumption did not prove entirely wrong (p. 162). Slate, however, demonstrates that the Indian government's engagement in transnational colored solidarities was subjected at the same time to the demands of the new independent nation state. Therefore, it voiced often only a muted, but still significant opposition to American racism (*ibid.*).

In the course of the civil rights movement the question of the applicability of different Gandhian methods, most prominently non-violence, came to the fore. African American activists like Pauli Murray and Martin Luther King Jr., but also grass-roots organizations reinvented Gandhi's satyagraha rather than adopting it. They accredited Gandhi's legacy with multiple meanings and connected them with Black Nationalism and colored cosmopolitanism.

Resembling the decades before the Second World War, Slate's analysis again reveals multiple connections (the experienced segregation of African American soldiers stationed during war time in British India by Indians), personal exchanges (Kamaladevi's visit in the United States and Kings visit in India) and intersected struggles against multiple oppressions in the 1940s, 50s and 1960s.

Slate's book is a well-written account of colored cosmopolitanism and the common struggle against racism and imperialism in British India and the United States. It enriches the increasing historiography of Indian and African American relations and contributes to the transnational histories of both the freedom struggles.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a rich corpus of sources including personal journals, correspondence and newspapers, mainly from American archives, the au-

thor himself is aware that his story deals first and foremost with elite discourses (p. 251), though occasionally Slate succeeds to include subaltern/grass root perspective.

While the chapters contain examples of a wide range of individuals as well as manifold debates published in newspapers and journals, the author follows a few main figures (such as Gandhi and Du Bois) throughout the book. Slate examines the development of their ideas, their interventions in ongoing discourses and their forging of transnational connections and provides in the cases of the key figures an in-depth analysis of their colored cosmopolitanism. At the same time, he also shows the engagement and encounters with them in the 'other', far-away place (either the United States or India). In particular, the African American interest in Mahatma Gandhi and the three movements against British colonial rule, i.e. Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India, are analyzed in great detail. Since the book follows a chronologically progressive chapterization that is linked to a set of themes, these main figures appear again and again. For the readers this structure is not entirely satisfactory as it leads at times to unnecessary repetitions such as the Slate's remarks about Booker T. Washington's influence on Gandhi (pp. 22-25, 94 and 120).

The abundance of actors and print media debates dealt with in the book could have occasionally been subdued in favor of a more contextualized and deeper examination of various 'minor' figures, whose engagement with questions of (racial) discrimination could reveal alternative histories of colored cosmopolitanism. Taraknath Das, for instance, is introduced by Slate as a "veteran of the Ghadar Movement who

taught history at the College of the City of New York” (pp. 135 f.). The reader learns that Das expressed his solidarity with the African Americans during the Second World War by speaking up against them being racially discriminated in the United States. The author does however not provide any further information to illustrate Das’ motivation to support African American demands for equality nor does he elaborate on his understanding of colored transnational solidarities. Das’ motivation was seemingly linked to his own lifelong work for Indian independence from British colonial rule and to his activities in regard to the naturalization and citizenship rights of Indians in the United States. His understanding of colored cosmopolitanism and transnational solidarity exceeded the geographical scope of the United States and India by including Japan.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 See amongst others: V. Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the lost histories of South Asian America*, Cambridge, Mass., 2013; M. R. Desai, *The United States of India. South Asian translations of America, 1905–1974*, unpubl. thesis, University of Michigan, 2011; M. Ramnath, *Haj to utopia. How the Ghadar movement charted global radicalism and attempted to overthrow the British empire*, Berkeley, 2011; H. Fischer-Tiné, ‘Indian nationalism and the ‘world forces’: transnational and diasporic dimensions of the Indian freedom movement on the eve of the First World War, in: *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007) 3, pp. 325–344; M. Jones, ‘‘A Segregated’ Asia? Race, the Bandung Conference, and Pan-Asianist fears in American thought and policy, 1954–55’, in: *Diplomatic History* 29 (2005) 5, pp. 841–868.
- 2 In 1922 Das introduced a Japanese visitor to W.E.B. Du Bois who showed a severe interest in the discrimination of African American people and intended to write about this question, see: Letter from T. Das to W.E.B. Du Bois, May 9, 1922, in: W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

**Thomas Fischer: Die Souveränität der Schwachen. Lateinamerika und der Völkerbund, 1920–1936, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2012, 459 S.**

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Der Völkerbund erfreut sich als Forschungsgegenstand unter Historikern wachsender Beliebtheit. Da die nichtwestliche Perspektive auf die Weltgeschichte ebenfalls zunehmend auf geschichtswissenschaftliches Interesse stößt, kann ein umfangreiches und quellenbasiertes Buch zum Verhältnis zwischen der Genfer Einrichtung und Lateinamerika nur Wohlwollen hervorrufen. Thomas Fischer, Professor in Eichstätt, vermag mit seiner Habilitationsschrift auch erfolgreich sowohl die Nuancen des lateinamerikanischen Einflusses auf den Völkerbund als auch die Bedeutung der Institution für den Subkontinent mitsamt dem wechselhaften Verhältnis zum Panamerikanismus zu behandeln. Das Buch bietet einen ausgesprochen hilfreichen Überblick über die Forschung, der recht differenziert in verschiedene Kategorien eingeteilt ist. Oft wird sich der an komprimierte Darstellungen gewöhnte Leser ein weniger quellenlastiges Herangehen wünschen, wie es im deutschsprachigen Raum vorherrscht. Im Gegensatz zu vermutlich mehr lesefreundlichen angloamerikanischen Werken überwiegt in deutschsprachigen Studien hingegen der nicht selten Überhand nehmende Hang zur Mikroanalyse von Streitigkeiten zu