

Toward an International History of Lynching

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Conveners: Manfred Berg, Heidelberg Center for American Studies/Department of History,
Heidelberg University; Bernd Greiner, Hamburg Institute for Social Research; Simon Wendt,
Transcultural Studies Program, Heidelberg University

Conference Report by Sophie Lorenz und Andreas Riffel, Department of History, Heidelberg
University

Email: sophie.lorenz@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de bzw. andreas.riffel@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de

The conference "Toward an International History of Lynching" was co-sponsored by the Curt Engelhorn Chair in American History, the Transcultural Studies Research Group "Radical Nationalism and Gender in the United States, Germany and Japan", both at Heidelberg University, and the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. It brought together scholars from nine countries and various academic fields, including history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and criminology. The goal of the conference was to move beyond the notion of lynching as a "negative American exceptionalism" and to place the study of lynching in a comparative and transnational perspective. Two key questions took center stage: (1) What cultural, political, and social factors have influenced the rise and fall of lynching? (2) What has been the historical relationship between lynching and the modern state, especially the emergence of a modern system of criminal justice?

The first session of the conference considered conceptual frameworks for the study of lynching. In his opening address Manfred BERG (Heidelberg University) emphasized that the

conference was only a first step toward mapping the international scholarly landscape on lynching. Berg proposed to define lynching as extralegal punishment perpetrated by mobs claiming to represent the will of the larger community, thereby distinguishing lynching from other forms of collective violence. To speak of lynching as extralegal punishment, he argued, presumes the existence of the modern state, which theoretically holds a monopoly of legitimate violence. According to Berg, the ability of the state to enforce its claim to a monopoly of violence and the popular acceptance of this claim are key variables that can explain the occurrence of lynching and provide scholars with a comparative framework.

Robert THURSTON (Miami University, Ohio) undertook a broad comparison of the American South, Indonesia, South Africa, and Guatemala. The common denominator of these case studies, Thurston pointed out, was that lynching resulted from the decline of political stability and social legitimacy. In South Africa, Guatemala as well as Indonesia, the deterioration of political stability, albeit one based on state repression, produced a social climate of fear and insecurity, and gave rise to lynching. A similar situation existed in the American South after the Civil War. In the antebellum South social and political stability had depended on slavery. Emancipation and the civil and political empowerment of blacks destroyed this stability and triggered a massive violent backlash from white Southerners. Lynching declined after the white South had established a new racial order based on racial segregation and political disfranchisement of African Americans.

Christopher WALDREP (San Francisco State University) discussed the question as to why lynching came to be seen as an example of American exceptionalism. Focusing on the battles over the definition of lynching, he argued, could provide part of the answer. African-American anti-lynching activists emphasized racism as the key motivation of lynchers. They also insisted that the barbaric practice of lynching made America exceptional among the so-called civilized nations. According to Waldrep, these rhetorical strategies not only reinforced notions of lynching as a peculiar American crime but also diminished black agency. Only

broadening the definition of lynching, he argued, would enable scholars to take black agency into account and to recover the full spectrum of black responses to white mob violence. The distinction between lynching and so-called race riots, for example, should be discarded since the latter often resulted from blacks fighting back lynch mobs.

The second session explored lynching in the United States from a transnational and transcultural perspective. Michael PFEIFER (City University of New York) traced lynching in North America back to traditions of collective retribution and violence in Great Britain and Ireland. Immigrants from the British Isles revived and transformed these traditions in America. Irish immigrants brought with them a localistic legal culture that reflected opposition to British laws. Confronted with a nativist environment in the United States, they did not trust the American criminal justice system and often fell back on traditions of communal punishment, especially in cases when African Americans had allegedly perpetrated crimes against fellow Irishmen.

Brittney COOPER (University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa) talked about Ida B. Wells' international anti-lynching campaigns in 1893-1894 and their repercussions. The black journalist's successful lecture tours in Great Britain and her cooperation with various British religious and humanitarian groups, Cooper suggested, had a major impact on the decline of lynching rates in the United States. Moreover, Wells was a pioneer in exposing the racist myth that lynching was a legitimate response to the rape of white women by black men.

The third session dealt with lynching and international relations, focusing on the tensions between the United States and Mexico in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. William CARRIGAN (Rowan University, New Jersey) presented the findings from a joint research project he conducted with Clive WEBB (University of Sussex), who was unable to attend. Carrigan and Webb first explored the complex ways in which Mexicans reacted to anti-Mexican mob violence in the United States in the decades after the Mexican-American War. Reactions included political protest, retaliatory violence, and the glorification of

Mexican outlaws who resisted Anglo domination. Yet Mexicans also resorted to lynch law themselves and sometimes even joined Anglo mobs. The second part of Carrigan and Webb's presentation detailed the efforts of Mexican diplomatic officials to secure compensation and protection for Mexican citizens in the United States. The ability of Mexicans to draw on the support of a foreign government, Carrigan and Webb argued, gave them far greater political leverage in their struggle against lynch law than was the case with African Americans.

The fourth panel focused on micro-historical case studies as a methodological approach. Lee Ann FUJII (George Washington University, Washington, D.C.) used the 1933 lynching of George Armwood on Maryland's eastern shore to probe questions of popular participation in spectacle lynchings, including the formation of mobs and the disfigurement of the victim's body. Fujii situated the Armwood case in a local lynching culture and cautioned against the exclusive use of local newspapers as sources for studying lynchings, because these newspaper reports often mirrored the local lynching culture, especially the presumption that the lynch victim must have been guilty of a heinous crime.

Ebru AYKUT (Boğaziçi University/Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) presented a case study from the Late Ottoman Empire, where hostility against the Armenian population had intensified since the war with Russia in 1877-1878. In 1893, a Muslim mob lynched an Armenian tailor named Ohanes in the small Anatolian town of Uşak for allegedly raping a small Muslim girl. According to Aykut, the rape charges do not fully explain why Ohanes was lynched. His alleged crime, she contended, provided the dominant Muslim group with a welcome pretext to crack down on the town's Armenian population in the wake of mounting ethnic and religious tensions. The lynching of Ohanes, Aykut concluded, reflected a deep-seated distrust of Armenians as potential traitors, a line of thinking that was gaining wide currency throughout the Ottoman Empire. The case of Ohanes thus exemplifies the link between local anxieties and international conflict.

The fifth session raised questions about how lynching has affected indigenous populations. Thomas BROWN and Leah SIMS (Alamo Colleges, Northeast Lakeview College, Texas) presented a paper on “legal imperialism” and lynching among American Indian nations. Because Indian concepts of crime and punishment often clashed and competed with British and U.S. laws, respectively, the lines between legal and extralegal executions became constantly blurred. Presenting three case studies from three centuries, Brown and Sims demonstrated how the modern Anglo-American colonial state expanded its jurisdictions over Indian nations.

Victoria GRIEVES (University of Sydney) argued that Australian Aboriginal people suffered from racist oppression and violence similar to the Jim Crow system in the Southern United States. White settlers in Australia shared the universal white supremacist anxieties about interracial sexual unions, especially between black men and white women, and tried to make Aboriginal men subservient by violence. Grieves discussed several case studies of white violence against Aboriginal men, including police violence, in order to demonstrate the extent to which lynchings and other forms of extralegal violence have been instrumental in preserving white supremacy in Australia.

The sixth session provided insights into the relation between lynching and class conflict. Joël MICHEL (French National Assembly, Paris) linked French ideals of popular justice to the legacy of the French Revolution and to working-class ideals of social justice. Michel used two case studies, one from 1886 and the other from 1972, as evidence for the practice and rhetoric of working-class militancy vis-à-vis “bourgeois” perpetrators of crimes against the people. Voiced by leftist intellectuals, such as Michel Foucault and Jean Paul Sartre, calls for popular justice have often articulated distrust in bourgeois democracy and its criminal justice system at large.

Concentrating on lynchings in Peru in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Hinnerk ONKEN (University of Cologne) also emphasized the class-character of

extralegal killings perpetrated by indigenous people, Chinese “coolies,” and agricultural and industrial workers. Onken qualified these acts as subaltern resistance aimed at securing justice for the poor and oppressed, who could not expect redress from the state. Such practices, he pointed out, raise thorny ethical questions about the legitimacy of popular justice.

Lynching and communal punishment have often been closely linked to political terror. Racial violence in the Reconstruction American South is an important case in point, as Michael FELLMAN (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver) demonstrated in his paper on the White Line movement in Mississippi. Lynching and mob violence against the former slaves were part of an organized paramilitary campaign that sought to destroy the interracial Republican Party and to re-establish the political power of Confederate elites. Arguably, the death toll of lynch law and racist violence was much higher during Reconstruction than it was in the 1890s, a fact that is overlooked by many historians of lynching that focus on the late nineteenth century.

Rachel MONAGHAN (University of Ulster, Belfast) elaborated on the extralegal punishment meted out by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. The IRA not only targeted political adversaries but also claimed the powers of policing communities, punishing ordinary crimes, such as burglary, as well as “anti-social” behavior. While the IRA rarely used lethal violence to punish criminal offenders, it frequently did murder “traitors” and “collaborators.”

In his talk on lynching in South Africa during the apartheid era, Christopher SAUNDERS (University of Capetown) questioned the conventional wisdom that American-style lynchings were virtually unknown in South Africa, presenting evidence on both white-on-black and black-on-black lynchings. Still, Saunders conceded that lynching was much less common in South Africa than in the American South. Unlike white Southerners in the United States, white South Africans adhered to a statist tradition and believed in the ability of the apartheid state to punish black crime and subdue rebellion if need be.

The eighth session raised the vexing question as to whether lynching can be regarded as a form of legitimate communal self-defense when the state is unable or unwilling to provide protection against criminals. Considering the situation in Onitsha in Southern Nigeria, where gangs of armed bandits had established a virtual reign of terror in the years between 1978 and 2002, Apex A. APEH (University of Nigeria, Nsukka) made the case that ordinary citizens had no choice but to take the law into their own hands. Because of the widespread collusion between criminals and the official criminal justice system, Apeh reported, extralegal punishment by mobs has become commonplace in Nigeria.

In his paper on Brazil, Timothy CLARK (Strategic Studies Section, U.S. Department of Defense) also pointed out that many poor and ordinary Brazilians have lost faith in the official system of law enforcement and criminal justice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Based on data compiled by the University of São Paulo's Center for the Study of Violence, Clark concluded that popular justice is a widespread phenomenon in the slums of major Brazilian cities. Even though lynching in Brazil lacks the racial characteristics of lynching in the United States after the Civil War, Clark saw certain similarities, among them the lower-class origin of many victims and the interrelationship between lynching and certain notions of masculinity.

The last session focused on lynching and vigilantism in several African societies. Tilo GRÄTZ (University of Halle-Wittenberg/University of Hamburg) presented two case studies from the western African countries of Mali and Benin. In these two countries, lynchings were not so much the result of spontaneous mob action but represented a highly organized form of vigilantism. In fact, vigilante leaders have often assumed the power and legitimacy that the state has been unable to claim. On the other hand, their abuse of power has also created popular resentment.

In the final paper Christy SCHUETZE (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia) and Carolien JACOBS (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) talked about

lynching in Mozambique, where lynch victims are often accused of witchcraft. Schuetze and Jacobs attribute the recent rise in lynchings to a decomposition of the country's social fabric wrought by growing socio-economic inequality, the AIDS crisis, and the breakdown of legal authorities. Thus vigilantism in Mozambique, as in numerous other places, may be seen as popular protest against the disorder of the state.

Not surprisingly, discussions throughout the conference largely reflected those issues that have shaped American scholarship on lynching over the past three decades: Should scholars concentrate on quantitative approaches aimed at generating statistical information and establishing structural patterns or should they write "thick descriptions" in order to decipher the cultural meaning of lynchings? Is lynching, in essence, a racial crime that can only be studied legitimately from the perspective of oppressed non-white minorities? Is the state monopoly of legitimate violence the solution to lynch law and mob violence or merely another ideological disguise for different forms of violent repression? Remarkably the case studies on Africa, in particular, raised the disturbing question whether lynching and vigilantism will inevitably result from the absence of efficient government and law enforcement – after all this was the classic justification for lynching on the North American frontier.

Sessions and Papers:

Session 1: Frameworks. Chair: Bernd Greiner (Hamburg Institute for Social Research)

Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University): "Toward an International History of Lynching"

Robert Thurston (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio): “Political Instability and the Rise of Lynching: A Comparison across the American South and Indonesia, South Africa, and Guatemala”

Christopher Waldrep (San Francisco State University): “Lynching ‘Exceptionalism’: Why Lynching is American”

Session 2: The American Case in Transnational and Transcultural Perspective.

Chair: Simon Wendt (Transcultural Studies Program, Heidelberg University)

Michael Pfeifer (City University of New York): “The Bitter Seed of Albion and Eire: Extralegal Violence and Law in the Early Modern British Isles and the Origins of American Lynching”

Brittney Cooper (University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa): “To Make the Protest Loud and Long: Ida B. Wells’ International Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1893-1894”

Session 3: Lynching and International Relations: The Mexican-American Conflict. Chair: Lee Ann Fujii (George Washington University, Washington, D.C.)

William Carrigan (Rowan University, Glasboro, New Jersey): “Mexican Perspectives on Mob Violence in the United States”

[Clive Webb (University of Sussex): “Diplomatic Protests and the Decline of Anti-Mexican Mob Violence in the United States” - paper read by William Carrigan]

Session 4: The Individual Case Study. Chair: Christopher Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

Lee Ann Fujii (George Washington University, Washington, D.C.): “Popular Participation in Spectacle Lynchings: The Case of George Armwood”

Ebru Aykut (Boğaziçi University/Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Turkey): “Lynching Tailor Ohannes: Ethnic Conflicts, Armenian Massacres and Mob Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire”

Session 5: Lynching and Indigenous Populations. Chair: Robert Thurston (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio)

Thomas Brown/Leah Sims (Alamo Colleges, Northeast Lakeview College, Universal City, Texas): “Legal Imperialism and Lynching among American Indian Nations”

Victoria Grieves (University of Sydney): “Haunted by Slavery: Jim Crow in Australia?”

Session 6: Lynching and Class Conflict. Chair: Rachel Monaghan

Joël Michel (French National Assembly, Paris): “Popular Justice, Class Conflict, and Lynching Spirit in France”

Hinnerk Onken (University of Cologne): “Lynching in Peru in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: An Ethical History”

Session 7: Lynching and Political Terror. Chair: Simon Wendt (Transcultural Studies Program, Heidelberg University)

Michael Fellman (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver): “Lynching as Political Terrorism in Reconstruction Mississippi”

Rachel Monaghan (University of Ulster): “Not Quite Lynching: Informal Justice in Northern Ireland”

Christopher Saunders (University of Cape Town): “Lynching in Southern Africa: What can be said?”

Session 8: Lynching and Communal Self-defense. Chair: Victoria Grieves (University of Sydney)

Apex A. Apeh (University of Nigeria, Nsukka): “Justice on Recess: Trader’s and Armed Robbers in Onitsha, Southeastern Nigeria, 1978-2002”

Timothy Clark (Strategic Studies Section, U.S. Department of Defense): “Lynching in Another America: Race, Class, and Gender in Brazil, 1980-2003”

Session 9: Lynching, Vigilantism, and Legitimacy. Chair: Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University)

Tilo Grätz (University of Halle-Wittenberg/University of Hamburg): “Vigilantism in Africa: Case Studies from Mali and Benin”

Christy Schuetze (University of Pennsylvania)/ Carolien Jacobs (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle): “Witchcraft, Poverty, and the State: Lynching Outbreaks in Mozambique in Historical Perspective”