

Venue

Begegnungsstätte Kleine Synagoge
An der Stadtmünze 4
99084 Erfurt

Registration

Please register beforehand due to limited seating via pia.herzan@uni-erfurt.de

COVID-19 Regulations

Due to the rapidly changing nature of COVID-19, we are unable to provide specific guidance on the safety guidelines right now. All participants will be required to follow the official regulations of Landeshauptstadt Erfurt that are in place on June 23 and 24, 2022.

Organizer

This workshop is hosted by the North American History Professorship of the University of Erfurt and organized by the subproject "Voluntariness as Political Practice: The Emerging United States and American Citizenship" of the interdisciplinary Research Unit on "Voluntariness," funded by the German Research Foundation (FOR 2983). Our group of historians, sociologists, and philosophers at the Universities of Erfurt, Jena, and Oldenburg explores the power, significance, and transformations of voluntariness from the Middle Ages to the present.

Voluntariness inspires our research and our empirical projects, organizes them thematically, and guides them methodologically. Voluntariness is more than voluntary civic engagement. Appeals for voluntary self-conduct, compliance, and sacrifice permeate our daily routines. Voluntary practices are performed as acts of freedom, yet are enabled, endorsed, and sometimes demanded by manifold expectations and conditions beyond our reach.

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DFG-Research Unit "Voluntariness"
Voluntariness as Political Practice
www.voluntariness.org

WORKSHOP

BY DFG-RESEARCH UNIT "VOLUNTARINESS"

DIS-COVER FELLOW CITIZENS: Voluntary Civic Engagement in the Early Republic and Antebellum America

June 23-24, 2022

Begegnungsstätte Kleine Synagoge, Erfurt



DIS-COVER FELLOW CITIZENS: Voluntary Civic Engagement in the Early Republic and Antebellum America

The fast-approaching “Semiquincentennial” – the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence – and the heated public as well as scholarly debate about the founding of the United States of America, creates an opportune moment to study the American republic with its constantly changing diverse citizenry and to “dis-cover the American subject” as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg already proposed in 1992.

Many people believe that liberal democracy is in crisis, some even believe we are “living through the twilight of democracy” (Applebaum 2020). Who knows what democracy truly means? What is essential for a functioning liberal democracy? Who are citizens and how do individuals become citizens? In a time in which we are prone to tribalism, polarization, demophobia as well as elitism, it is crucial to take a closer look at what really defines democracy and citizenship.

Liberal democracies demand “active citizens” that voluntarily participate, argue, organize, and commit to public life, and they are exclusionary by denying certain groups of people the recognition of their ability for active citizenship and voluntary participation. The formation of liberal subjects is thus key to a functioning democratic liberal society: “[c]itizens are not born; they are made” (Cruikshank 1999, 3).

The workshop “Dis-Cover Fellow Citizens” of this DFG-research unit’s subproject “Voluntariness as Political Practice: The Emerging United States and American Citizenship” looks beyond the state and focuses instead on sociocultural and -political practices that define American citizenship in its earliest stages. Members of the research group along with invited distinguished scholars will explore how practices of citizenship illustrate the diversity of American subjects and analyze how democracy from the American Revolution to the Antebellum Era is exercised through voluntary civic engagement and political participation.

Sources:

Applebaum, Anne. 2020. *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*. London: Allen Lane.

Cruikshank, Barbara. 1999. *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. 1992. “Dis-Covering the Subject of the “Great Constitutional Discussion,” 1786-1789.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79, No. 3: 841-873.

JUNE 23: CITIZENSHIP – From the Aftermath of the American Revolution to the Struggles in the Early Republic

14:00: Welcome

Pia Herzan and Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt)

14:15: Tocqueville by Way of Turner: The Significance of the Frontier to American Civil Society

Jessica Choppin Roney (Temple University)

For too long studies of the public sphere and civic mobilization in early America have focused on the urban Northeast corridor after American Independence. Guided by Alexis de Tocqueville we have seen something foundational to American political culture in the voluntary associations of these towns and cities focused on reform and self-betterment. This talk will contend, however, that a very different form of popular mobilization was as or perhaps more important to defining American political processes and spatial imaginary: specifically, the legally and extralegally mobilized voluntarism of white settlers moving to the frontier to found new colonies north and west of the original seaboard states. Often embracing separatism, self-interest, and even violence, this form of popular political engagement laid very different roots for and routes to the imagination of national community and construction of American civil society.

Commentator: Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg)

15:45: Coffee break

16:15: First Reconstruction: Black Politics in the Early Republic

Van Gosse (Franklin & Marshall College)

It may be difficult to imagine that a consequential black electoral politics evolved in the United States before the Civil War, for as of 1860, the overwhelming majority of African Americans remained in bondage. Yet free black men, many of them escaped slaves, steadily increased their influence in electoral politics over the course of the early American republic. Despite efforts to disfranchise them, black men voted across much of the North, sometimes in numbers sufficient to swing elections. In this talk, Van Gosse will offer a sweeping reappraisal of the formative era of American democracy, chronicling the rise of an organized, visible black politics focused on the quest for citizenship, the vote, and power within the free states. He traces a First Reconstruction of black political activism following emancipation in the North. From Portland, Maine and New Bedford, Massachusetts to Brooklyn and Cleveland, black men operated as voting blocs, denouncing the notion that skin color could define citizenship.

Commentator: Sebastian Jobs (Freie Universität Berlin)

18:00: Special Excursion

19:00: Dinner

JUNE 24: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – Black Female Influence from the Early Republic to the Antebellum Era

09:00: Welcome Back

09:15: Reshaping Freedom: How Harriet Tubman's Abolitionism Impacted Notions of Citizenship

Deirdre Cooper Owens (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

In this talk, Deirdre Cooper Owens, a historian of slavery and medicine, explores how both freedom and citizenship functioned in the lives of antebellum-era African Americans when most were considered chattel and ineligible for the rights of citizenship. Harriet Tubman, an enslaved woman who lived in a patriarchal and anti-Black America, led over 70 enslaved people to freedom from Eastern Shore Maryland to free states and to Canada. She became a savior of weary laborers as well as a symbol of communal democracy. Harriet Tubman’s freedom dream and fugitive activism demonstrated a version of freedom where Black women were liberators and had a disabled Black woman at its center. Thus, freedom-fighting abolitionist Harriet Tubman complicated and expanded democracy, civic engagement, and citizenship rights for all of the groups to whom she belonged: the disabled, women, enslaved, and African Americans.

Commentator: Nina Mackert (University of Leipzig)

10:45: Coffee break

11:15: Final Discussion Round: Civic Engagement and Voluntariness in the Early Republic and Antebellum America

Jessica Choppin Roney (Temple University)

Deirdre Cooper Owens (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

Van Gosse (Franklin & Marshall College)

Active political participation of citizens in a society is crucial to its performance as well as the citizens’ own standing within it. Liberal democracies demand “active citizens” that voluntarily participate, argue, organize, and commit to the public. Together we discuss what role voluntariness and voluntary political practices played in the Early Republic and Antebellum America. How are members of the newly founded American liberal republic governed by voluntariness? In what form does voluntariness become a prerequisite for recognition as a subject and as a “full-fledged” member of a liberal society? How did the political principle of voluntary self-management and civic engagement contribute in establishing differences between people based on class, gender, and race?

Moderation: Pia Herzan and Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt)

12:15: End of Workshop