



*From slavery
to Barack Obama*

Simon Wendt, Professor of American Studies,
on the multifaceted significance of Africa for Black America

Forschung Frankfurt: Professor Wendt, a large percentage of the 40 million African American citizens of the United States today can trace their origins back to people who were trafficked from Africa as slaves.

Simon Wendt: These people were brought not only to the territory that later became the United States but also to the Caribbean and Brazil. In fact, “only” about 600,000 were brought to the USA. While in countries such as Brazil several hundred slaves often worked on very labour-intensive sugar plantations and did not have a high life expectancy due to the extreme conditions, it was rare that more than 50 enslaved people lived on American cotton plantations. The better living conditions and the fact that American slaveholders regarded these people as valuable property contributed to the life expectancy and birth rate of the African American population being significantly higher than in South America or the Caribbean.

What perspective did these people have on the origin of their ancestors?

At the time when slavery was drawing to an end, there were some (mostly men) who were saying: “We must return to Africa.” They were also encouraged to leave before the Civil War by white citizens who had founded the American Colonization Society (ACS) with racist intent. Liberated slaves or free African Americans should be sent back to Africa, as many white people feared the growth of the free Black population. As a result of these efforts, a colony was founded on the west coast, which later became the African nation Liberia. This initiative was led by white slaveholders, who were strongly criticised by anti-slavery activists before the Civil War because of their racist motivation for supporting African American emigration.

And how did the free African Americans themselves see this in the further course of events?

Since the 19th century, even Black nationalists have repeatedly called for going “back”, although this was by all means also a topic of controversial discussion. In the early 20th century, a Black Jamaican nationalist named

Marcus Garvey founded an organisation, the *Universal Negro Improvement Association*, in the United States, which grew rapidly to several million members. He said: We African Americans have our roots in Africa, so we also want to establish a state there, similar to Liberia. Garvey said that with the help of African Americans, Africa could once again become a great and strong continent. But it is important to bear in mind here that some of the white majority society’s myths about Africa, for example the continent’s alleged backwardness, were certainly believed by African Americans.

“Back to Africa always was and still is a response to white racism in the United States.”

In addition to those who called for a return to Africa, were there any other voices among the African Americans?

Ultimately, the slogan “Back to Africa” was mostly symbolic because most African Americans could not have afforded to return. Back to Africa always was and still is a response to white racism in the United States. Living in the racist South of the United States before 1910 meant, above all, surviving. Black people were subjected to racial segregation, were not allowed to vote and had little chance of advancement. In addition, numerous southern African Americans were lynched in the South (but also in the North). They were only second-class citizens, but for many of them Africa

A slave ship with steerage that was installed to transport as many people as possible. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, ten to twelve million African people were trafficked to the Caribbean as well as to North and South America on such ships.
Photograph: picture alliance/akg-images

nevertheless played no role as a point of reference.

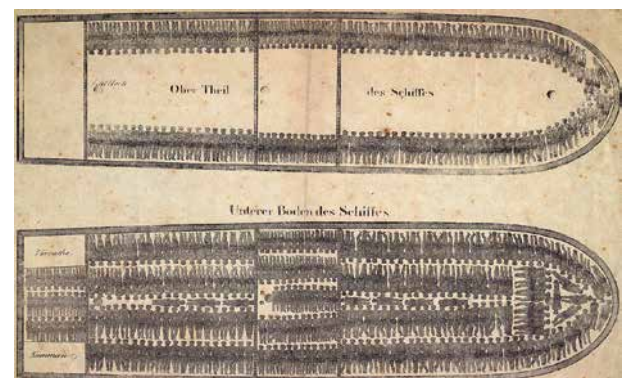
In the 1960s, Malcolm X shaped the discourse of Black thinkers and Black nationalists.

Malcolm X is one of the most important figures not only for the African American freedom struggle but also for Black America’s relationship with Africa. He was interested not only in founding a nation in Africa but also in the cultural struggle for a Black nation in the USA. A Black Power organisation, the Republic of New Africa, referred explicitly to Malcolm X and called for five Black states in the South as the territorial base of an African American state within the United States. For Malcolm X, Black nationalism also meant focusing exclusively on the African American population. For example, he proposed the founding of Black companies that stood for economic nationalism. The famous slogan “Black is beautiful” is mainly attributed to Malcolm X. During his lifetime, Malcolm X also tried to forge ties with African leaders, whom he regarded as important allies in the fight against racist oppression.

“Without Africa, the history of the USA would be unthinkable.”

How has this view evolved to this day?

In the 1980s and 1990s, an African American holiday was even established: this holiday, called “Kwanzaa”, is also about the Black population returning to





The African American activist Malcolm X was one of the most influential Black nationalists in the 1960s. He tried to forge closer ties between Black America and Africa.

its African roots. Many Black Power activists believed that Swahili was the *lingua franca* of Africa and that people must learn it. Some people started to wear traditional African apparel. This devotion to Africa can also be found today among Black celebrities from pop and film culture. For example, they visit former slave stations on the west coast of Africa, where African men, women and children were forced onto ships that would bring them to North and South America and the Caribbean. Such a visit is experienced as a very emotional moment. These people realise that their roots are in Africa and that their connec-

tion to this continent is based on a history of trafficking, violence and dehumanisation. Africa is today seen as a very important continent, without which the history of the USA would be unthinkable.

Many Black people pinned great hopes on Barack Obama – not only in the USA but worldwide.

In the discussion about ties between Africa and Black America, Barack Obama is a fascinating case because many threads pull together here. At that time, the election campaign was also concerned with the question of how African American he really is. He is from the Black community of Chicago and married an African American woman whose ancestors were slaves. But is that enough? “Is he Black enough?” was a question asked in both Black and white media. Ultimately, he was recognised by the majority of the African American population as one of their own because he was born and partly raised in the USA. That is why he received great support from this side during the election campaign. This was a real turning point not only for the African American population but also for people in Africa, especially in Kenya, where Obama’s father came from: the fact that a Black man can actually become president of the United States. During a visit to the United States in 2009, I experienced for myself what effect this had in the Black community. Young Black men wore T-shirts with portraits of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Obama. He was seen as a symbol of the victories of the civil rights movement in the history of

the Black liberation struggle and became an important model for young Black people.

“Being politically represented is simply not enough.”

“Afropessimism” is the title of the latest book by American writer and philosopher Frank B. Wilderson III, who also recently gave a reading at Goethe University.



Huey P. Newton was one of the two founders of the Black Panther Party (BPP). In the eyes of many Black Power organisations, Africa played a central role in the African American freedom struggle.

Frankfurt. In the post-Obama era, are rather negative expectations dominating the Black community again?

One could say that the Black Lives Matter movement is also a reaction to Obama’s presidency. It is not enough, according to many activists, to have a Black president in the White House. Being politically represented is simply not enough. In other words: systemic racism cannot be suppressed (solely) by individual action. Instead, it is necessary to fight for structural change at all levels. Obama could not have achieved this because he

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Professor Simon Wendt, born in 1975, is Professor of American Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt. Among others, he heads a research group on “The Black Power Movement and the Contested Nature of American Democracy” (2022–2025) funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. Another research project, which is funded by the German Research Foundation, focuses on “Armed Self-Defense in Recent America: Intersectional Perspectives (2018–2023)”.

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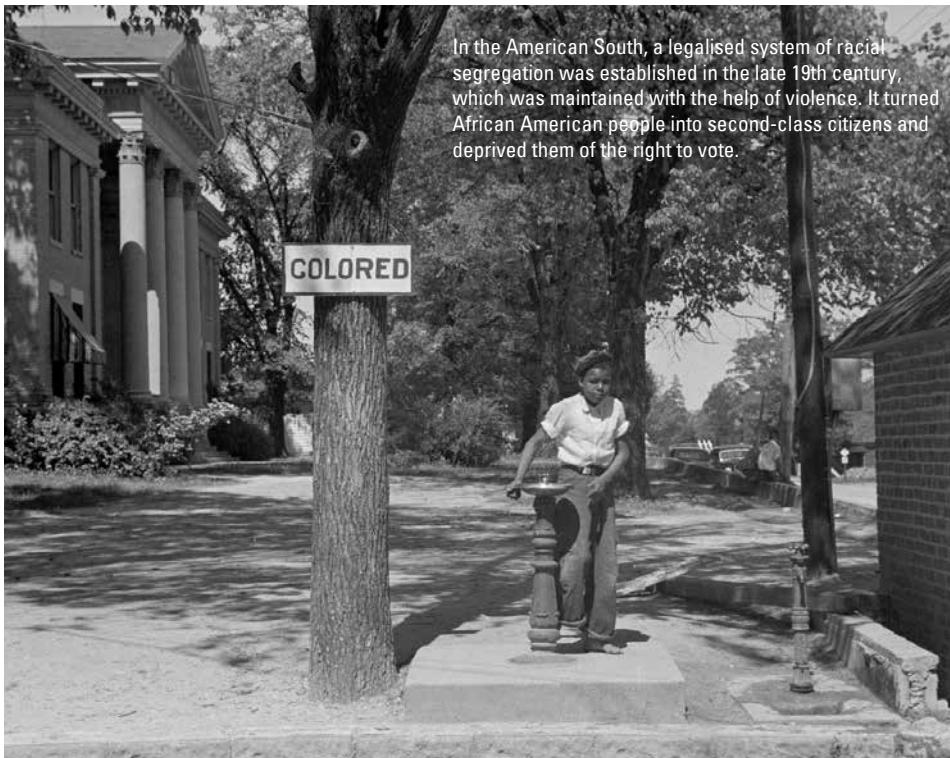
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In the American South, a legalised system of racial segregation was established in the late 19th century, which was maintained with the help of violence. It turned African American people into second-class citizens and deprived them of the right to vote.

tried to position himself as a “post-racial president”. He also needed the votes of white Americans. Saying “I’m particularly interested in the African American population” would have been of little help. The existence of the Black Lives Matter movement shows that the legacy of slavery and the problem of racism have still not been solved.

Today in the USA there are not only descendants of slaves but also migrants from Africa. How do these people experience systemic racism?



The death of an African American citizen named George Floyd, who was murdered by a white policeman during his arrest in May 2020, sparked worldwide protests against racist police violence. Many of these protests were coordinated by the Black Lives Matter movement, which was founded in 2014.

African immigration began with new immigration legislation in 1965 and has been increasing ever since. Certainly, these people are also experiencing new things – even just being treated as “Blacks”, which is hardly an issue in their country of origin – while on the other hand migrants also carry the experience of colonialism with them. Of course, immigrants from Africa had to and must ask themselves: Am I part of African American America? Like many other immigrant groups – Germans, Irish, Italians, Chinese – they have established their own communities, for example Nigerian and Kenyan. Within these groups, they try to preserve their culture. This brings to light differences to the older African American culture. However, it can be assumed that the second and third generation of African immigrants will see themselves both as part of the American nation and as a member of the Black community in the USA. Unfortunately, American racism will continue to play a major role in this identity-building process.



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