

Contested Authority, Trust in Transition

Making Sense of the American Landscape

A conference hosted by the
Graduiertenkolleg Authority and Trust (GKAT) at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA)
Heidelberg University

Date: **May 20–22, 2026**

Location: Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg | Hauptstraße 120, 69117 Heidelberg

Wednesday, May 20

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| 12-1 pm | Registration Desk |
| 1 pm | Words of Welcome |
| 1.30-3.00 pm | <p>Panel 1: Authority, Polarization, and Populist Backlash in Trump America Chair: <i>Richard Lange, Heidelberg University</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy as an Exercise in Judgement: Hannah Arendt and the 21st Century Crisis of American Authority – <i>Justin Cosner, University of Iowa</i> • The Politics of Delusion: Outgroup Hostility and (Mis)Perceptions of the 2020 Election – <i>Thomas Hayes, University of Connecticut</i> • Architectures of this American Landscape: Lyric Conversations in Claudia Rankine’s <i>Just Us</i> (2020) – <i>Mariane Gallet, University of Edinburgh</i> |
| 3.00-3.45 pm | Coffee Break and Registration Desk |
| 3.45-5.15 pm | <p>Panel 2: From Reconstruction to Resilience: Resistance in Moments of Democratic Strain Chair: <i>Anthony Meluso, Heidelberg University</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterrevolution or a Failure of the Democratic Process? The Efforts of white Planters to Maintain the Old South and Black Resistance in Reconstruction Era Louisiana – <i>Julian Windhövel, Universität Erfurt</i> • Bunker Up! Inoculation Narratives and the Erosion of Collective Trust – <i>Andrin Albrecht, Friedrich Schiller University Jena</i> • Resilience, Trust, and Communitarian Epistemic Resistance in an Era of resilience – <i>Carlos Orlando Wilches-Guzmán, University of the Basque Country</i> |
| 5.15-6.15 pm | Break |
| 6.15 pm | <p>Conference Keynote and Q&A Session Goodbye, America? Why We Need to Reassess our Relationship with the US without Letting Emotions Get in the Way <i>Rieke Havertz, International Correspondent, Die ZEIT</i></p> |
| 8 pm | Reception and Dinner at the HCA |

Thursday, May 21

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| 8.30-9 am | Arrival and Coffee |
| 9-11 am | <p>Panel 3: (Dis-)Trust and Contested Authority in the American Alt-Right</p> <p>Chair: <i>Mehdi Sejdiu, Heidelberg University</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pillars of the Community: Shifting Authority Examined on the Example of 20th-Century Comic Book Characters – <i>Niklas Müller, Universität Mainz</i> • A Voice of Distrust and Sovereignty: Michelle Bachman’s Contestation of Authority through Conspiratorial Narratives in Conservative Populism – <i>Sequana Birkel, Goethe University Frankfurt</i> • Eco-Nationalist Agrarianism: A Discourse Analysis of the Populist Legitimization of Rural Politics – <i>Ethan Rauf, Drexel University</i> • The “Sense of Possibility”: A Driver for Trust and Authority – <i>Lennart Bade, Leuphana University Lüneburg</i> |
| 11-11.30 am | Coffee Break |
| 11.30 am-12.30 pm | <p>Panel 4: Authority on Trial: Trust, Accountability, and Institutional Power in the United States</p> <p>Chair: <i>Nele Thomann, Heidelberg University</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Wrongdoing, Justice, and the Rule of Law – <i>Kristina Mickens, New York University</i> • US State Supreme Courts and Salient Equality Cases: How Judges Decide – <i>Charlotte Schmidt, University of Konstanz</i> |
| 12.30-2 pm | Lunch Break |
| 2-4 pm | <p>Panel 5: Contested Authority Beyond Borders: Inter- and Transnational Perspectives</p> <p>Chair: <i>Marcus Dietrich, Heidelberg University</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Role of Transnational Anti-War Activists During the Vietnam War-Era – <i>Emilie Cunning, Emory University</i> • Plutonium Politics: U.S.-Japanese Relations, the IAEA, and Allied Challenges to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime in the 1970s – <i>Widy Susanto, Austrian Institute for International Affairs</i> • Contested Authority, Trust in Transition: India, Pakistan and Divergent Recalibrations of US Power in Global South – <i>Agnieszka Kuszewska-Bohnert, Jagiellonian University Krakow</i> • Parallel Crises of Trust: Conspiratorial Sovereignty Narratives in Russia and the United States – <i>Andrei Prudnikov, University of Lisbon</i> |
| 4-6 pm | Afternoon Program (optional): Guided Walk to Heidelberg Castle Yoga Workshop |
| 7 pm | Conference Dinner |

Friday, May 22

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 8.30-9 am | Arrival and Coffee |
| 9-10.30 am | Panel 6: Fragile Authority: Trust, Knowledge, and the Erosion of Expertise Chair: <i>Anna Köhler, Heidelberg University</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who Can You Trust? The “Irish Slaves” Meme and the Erosion of Historical Authority Online – <i>Robert Johnson, LMU München</i>• Epistemic Reflexivity and Fallibilism: Rethinking Authority and Trust through Philosophical Dialogue – <i>Alexandra Guité, Cégep de Rosemont and Université de Montréal</i>• Censorship and Forbidden Words in the World Language Classroom in the USA – <i>Brian McDermott, Piedmont University</i> |
| 10.30-11 am | Coffee Break |
| 11 am-12.30 pm | Panel 7: Maternal Authority, Distrusting Patriarch: Survival, Kinship, and Domesticity Chair: <i>Franziska Friedl, Heidelberg University</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ‘Vast Solidarity’: Kincentric Relations as Modes of Healing and Resistance in Tanya Tagaq’s <i>Split Tooth</i> – <i>Sissi Möss, Universität Rostock</i>• Negotiating Maternal Authority and Testimonial Freedom in American Memoirs – <i>Zora Safran, University of Warsaw</i>• Unfinished Business: Authority, Abuse and Education in <i>Five Little Indians</i> (2020), <i>A Council of Dolls</i> (2023) and <i>Bad Cree</i> (2023) – <i>Jade Jenkinson, University of Nottingham</i> |
| 12.30-2 pm | Lunch (optional) |