

**EXTENDED  
UNTIL  
2.9.2023**

**BLIND SPOTS  
ZÜRICH AND  
COLONIALISM**

**CITY HALL EXHIBITION  
20.1. TO 15.7.2023**

**ACCOMPANYING  
PROGRAMME**



**Stadt Zürich  
Kultur**

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# FOREWORD

## Foreword by the Curatorial Team

### The Persistent Legacy of Racism

Twenty, even ten years ago, many people in my social environment still used the term “M\*s head” to describe the tasty chocolate-coated marshmallows (for M\*, see glossary), occasionally some would even use the N-word. A degree of teenage rebelliousness was involved, because they certainly were aware of the issues surrounding these phrases. Yet the general tenor was that racist structures could not be changed by debates about symbols. Racism was largely something that happened a long way away: in the United States, on the far right of society, or in Congolese mines. There was no question that they themselves might have been even slightly racist. The racist word they uttered was in some way proof that they had no fear of being associated with it. I do not exclude myself here: my generation grew up surrounded by many racist ideas and images.

A number of things have changed in the past ten years, especially since the Black Lives Matter movement started to make its voice heard on the streets of Switzerland. The issue of racism is now far more present in the media and in public discourse. Nevertheless, a lot of ignorance persists. As the Swiss state had no colonies of its own, there is little awareness of how Swiss society is implicated in colonialism. Racism is viewed as something foreign, while Swiss history is subject to little critical interrogation. Our exhibition titled *Blind Spots – Zurich and Colonialism* sought to plug this gap and join the dots between the city’s colonial history and the city’s history of racism.

I myself have learned a thing or two about the history of the M-term and now have a better understanding of the campaign that has in its sights on buildings in the city that are still named in this derogatory way. I hope that many other *white* men and women from Zurich feel the same, because by changing our thinking and removing racist symbols we can help ensure recognition of Black and other People of Colour in society and do our bit towards dismantling racist structures.

**Andreas Zangger, historian**

### The Process of Reappraising the Past

Colonialism and Zurich: how did this issue affect its residents in the past and how does it continue to do so? With the breadth of the subject hard to grasp, the difficulties involved in realizing the exhibition were correspondingly many and varied. When the team of curators got in touch with me a year before the exhibition opened, I happened to be in Ghana. After speaking to them, I looked out over the ocean and wondered if this wasn’t too big an undertaking. Could my input do justice to the history and the people? Could I even afford to get involved with the resources at my disposal? I was conscious of our inability to do justice either to the history or the people who lived through it. We can only try to do our bit to work through a chapter in history that is too often forgotten. It will take many years of careful reflection and research to come close to grasping the complexity of colonialism, but this exhibition was another step in the right direction. The fact that it was among the exhibitions with the highest number of visitors in the history of Zurich’s Stadthaus is indicative of the widespread interest in the subject.

Reappraising the past is a process; almost two years after the project started, we would probably do some things differently now. For one thing, I would take my misgivings about the exhibition’s title – *Blind Spots* – more seriously. Even though the Swiss Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted (SBV) deemed the title not to be discriminatory, today I know that many of those affected think it is. I wish to apologize here for our choice of title.

This may be the first exhibition on the subject, but efforts to shed light on Zurich’s “colonial entanglements” do have a long history. For years, many individuals and organizations have tried to bring the issue to the attention of the general public. They have often been overlooked and not given a hearing.

This is why it is important here to point out again that, while the exhibition seeks to be informative, above all it seeks to be inspiring. Visitors are



Left to right: Andreas Zangger, Manda Beck, Anja Glover, Marilyn Umurungi  
(photograph: Yasmin Müller)

encouraged to make connections with the present and their own lives because the issue of racism does not simply affect certain parts of the world or a particular era; it touches us all directly in a variety of ways. The surprise or even feelings of guilt that reading the exhibition texts might prompt should not give rise to a sense of helplessness; rather, these texts should prompt us to take responsibility. My heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in making this exhibition happen and those who show interest in it.

**Anja Glover, sociologist and anti-racism coach**

### Confronting It Is Painful

*Blind Spots – Zurich and Colonialism* was an exhibition that I have visited countless times over the past six months. Every time, it was a joy to see all kinds of people reading, writing, listening, or affixing stickers to the oversized whiteboard. Around ten thousand visitors passed through the doors of the Stadthaus. Some took time over the exhibition after concluding their business with one of the government offices, others visited specifically to see the exhibition, and in the case of some school pupils, teachers no doubt provided the impetus behind their visit.

The colonial era helped to shape the traditions of Swiss society and the way it viewed the world, and had a profound influence on its understanding of itself. Many people react defensively when their traditions are shown to be problematic. Not infrequently, I heard comments along the lines of “Am I now supposed to feel bad because I dressed up as an ‘Red Indian’ ten or fifty years ago during carnival?” Events associated with happy childhood memories are suddenly being questioned. At the end of a guided tour of the exhibition, some people would look at me with a bewildered expression and ask what they were meant to do with so much information. Although this testified to their willing-

ness to challenge themselves, you could feel it was asking a lot of them. Our aim with the exhibition was neither to provide answers to questions nor to provide a blueprint for future thinking and action; it was intended more to prompt introspection.

Marilyn Umurungi and I co-curated the exhibition's programme of events. Its range shows that the issue has caught on. Many organizations responded to our appeal for information – either because the exhibition encouraged them to address the issue or because they had already started down this road themselves. For our programme of events, the curators of Zurich's collection of succulents, for instance, developed a tour on the subject of succulents and colonialism. What started with an idea for a tour ended up becoming a critical examination of the institution's self-understanding. Gratifyingly, organizations and the public generally showed much interest in the subject, and we hope that greater and lasting awareness of the city of Zurich's colonial past can now emerge.

**Manda Beck, historian**

### A Word About the Exhibition's Title

Blind people do not have blind spots; sighted people do. They are located in both eyes where the optic nerve leaves the eye, just where there are no receptors. Figuratively speaking, if someone has a blind spot, it means he or she cannot see something (or do not want to), although the means to do so exist. Blind spots are the exclusive problem of those with sight – not of those who lack it. As a rule, sighted people are unaware of their blind spots. To question whether a blind spot exists prompts a search for the causes of the inability to see or the unwillingness to see. In the context of the history of racism in Switzerland, the phrase expresses something that is highly apposite.

At the same time, however, we heard from various quarters that the phrase is discriminatory towards those persons who really are blind. We discussed this question as a team beforehand, and asked the Swiss Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted (SBV) if anything could be said against the use of the phrase. On receiving a negative reply, we chose to stick with the title. Sensitivities can change, however – and meanings with them. It may be that some day this title will bother me. With language being a reflection of changes in society, what matters is talking to those concerned.

**Andreas Zangger**

# Introduction

What has Zurich got to do with colonialism? How were the people of Zurich involved in it? What impact did it have on the colonized peoples and what did it change here in the city? Last but not least: What does it have to do with us today?

These are just some of the questions the exhibition *Blind Spots* seeks to answer. We speak of “blind spots” because many of the things we address have been known to the scholarly world for many years, but never made it into general awareness.

The exhibition seeks to raise awareness of Zurich's colonial entanglements. At the same time, it wishes to highlight the issue's enduring impact and the topicality of the subject. It concerns all the people of Zurich, albeit in different ways.

The exhibition addresses many issues and leaves out others. In our role as curators, we have discovered many new links and contexts. But much still lies hidden.

## Questions

As in the exhibition, we have included in the publication a number of questions that are directed at the readers personally. Take your time to think about them. By joining chapters from the past with your personal present, we invite you to reflect on the matter. The issue of colonialism affects us all, so learning about it should start at our own doorstep.

## Trigger warning

At this point, a word of caution about possible triggers (painful memories, experiences, flashbacks, etc.). Please read the publication with care. It contains images of violence. Certain images are pixelated, the same as in the exhibition where some of the pictures can only be viewed fully by using a special transparency. In our view, dealing with sensitive images with caution is very important, since they go deeper than written texts and become fixed in memory in a different way.

# GLOSSARY

Here we explain a number of terms which are important for appreciating the exhibition. For this, we draw on anti-racist literature as listed at the end of the overview. We consciously omit racist terms or at least do not write them out in full. The glossary is by no means exhaustive.

Blind spot: Blind spots are located in both eyes where the optic nerve meets the retina. There are no light receptors there, which means the eye is blind at that spot. Every eye has a blind spot. In the exhibition, we use the term metaphorically: even if we think we are aware of all facets of colonialism and racism, a few blind spots still remain.

Colonial: The term “colonial” includes four aspects: First of all, it refers to the military takeover and occupation of a territory. Secondly, it means the settlement of the area in question and the displacement of the local population; thirdly, it includes the exploitation of people, raw materials as well as cultural assets. Fourthly, it involves the proliferation of racist ideas such as Europe's goal of "civilizing" the world. Zurich citizens were involved in all four aspects.

Maafa (Swahili term for calamity or disaster): The term describes the history of atrocities inflicted upon African men and woman by non-Africans, particularly through the slave trade, colonialism, and oppression that continues to this day.

Race: The German term Rasse (race) traces back to the scientifically refuted idea that there are biologically founded differences between groups of people and that these differences are also clearly discernible. The term was used to justify colonialism, enslavement, and dehumanization. In English, the term “race” denotes a social construct and therefore has different connotations than the German term.

Racism: The definition of racism is undergoing constant change. According to the Federal Service for Combating Racism, racism, narrowly defined, refers to an ideology that classifies and hierarchizes people on the basis of their physiognomy and/or their actual or ascribed ethnic, national or religious affiliation. People are not treated as individuals, but as members of pseudo-natural groups (races) to which are ascribed collective, immutable and inferior moral, cultural or intellectual characteristics. In racism, prejudice against the individual goes hand in hand with institutional, structural, and his-

torical discrimination. Racism shapes relationships among people and in institutions, creating objective inequalities. In the end, *white* people appear to benefit, albeit to varying degrees (see “*white privilege*”). Racism often blends with other forms of social discrimination, for example, regarding social background or gender.

Black People and People of Colour are self-designations of persons and groups who themselves tend to be at the receiving end of racism. They emerged from the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. In the exhibition, the term “Black” is capitalized to emphasize that we’re not talking about the colour of skin, but about political and social ascriptions.

Being *white* comes with the privilege of not having to concern oneself with racism, an issue that is often met with denial or disapproval. *White* people – simply for being *white* – enjoy easier access to jobs, the housing market, health care along with political participation than People of Colour or Black people. Being *white* becomes the norm, but it is never addressed. This is not just about skin colour, it involves political concepts that hold the key to political power. Being *white* does not mean that life always treats you well; discrimination comes in many shapes and forms and can also affect *white* people.

White privilege: the term refers to the uncontested advantages, entitlements, and opportunities that people enjoy simply because they are *white*. *White* people generally take advantage of these privileges without realizing it. This does not mean that *white* people might not experience other forms of discrimination, for example, on account of their educational background or gender. .

M\*: The term traces back to the Latin word “maurus” meaning “black” or “dark” as well as the Greek term “moros” meaning “stupid” or “simple-minded”. M\* as a label for Black people has been used pejoratively in the context of "race" theories at least since the time of the Atlantic slave trade, and is definitely both discriminatory and derogatory.

**N\*:** The Portuguese used the term “negro” (black) for captured African men and women which were sold to Brazil. Thus, the designation for Black people has its roots in the slave trade. Via Spain and France, it found its way into the German language where, over time, it became a general term for people with dark skin. Black people, however, reject the term. The word is racist, for one because of its origin, for the other because it is used as an exonym.

**Exoticization:** Things are not intrinsically exotic, they are made exotic. In colonial times, European travellers described foreign countries, people, nature, and things as exotic. Their motives also included the aspects of marketing and demarcation. The “exotic” is presented as something distinctly “other” and not compatible with one’s “own” culture.

# ZURICH'S INVOLVEMENT

The Swiss state never owned colonies. Still, Swiss society was involved in colonialism. Thus, we encounter Swiss merchants, scholars, mercenaries as well as missionaries in the most distant corners of the world – mark you, long before globalization as we know it today set in. They could move and act freely in the territories of the European colonial empires, not having to worry about their safety. Without this easy access to the colonial world, Zurich's economy and academia could never have flourished as it did. With the help of a few examples, the map below reveals where and how Zurich men and women were involved in the colonial venture.

This glossary is based on the following sources:

**Netzwerk Bla\*Sh: Sprachmächtig:** Glossar gegen Rassismus, compiled by Jovita dos Santos Pinto and Rahel El-Maawi, Zurich 2019.

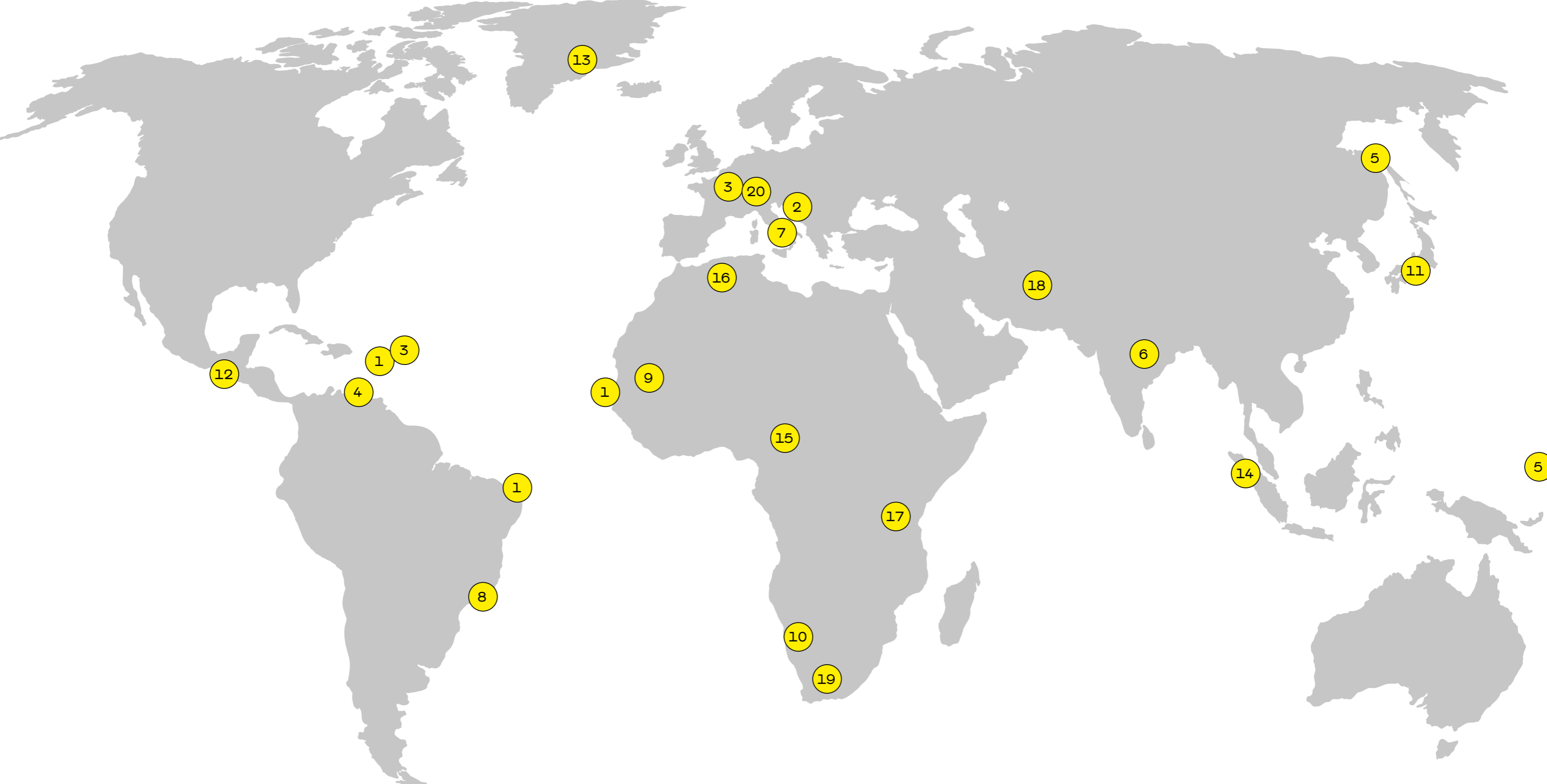
**Susan Arndt, Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard:** Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache, Münster 2019.

**Tupoka Ogette:** exit RACISM, Münster 2020.  
Jürgen Osterhammel: Kolonialismus: Geschichte – Formen – Folgen, 9th edition, Munich 2021.

**The definition of the term *white* was taken from** Rahel El-Maawi, Mani Owzar, Tilo Bur: No to Racism, Bern 2022.

What have I got to do with colonialism?

# Zurich in the World





**1**  
**EARLY INVOLVEMENT OF MEN FROM ZURICH**  
**1595–1597**

In 1595, two sons of Zurich, Hans Felix Escher and an anonymous diarist, made their way to the French port of Dieppe where they signed on as soldiers on a ship bound for the west coast of Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Wherever they were, they sought out any opportunity to get rich quick. In Dakar, they bought 34 Senegalese men and women and abducted them across the Atlantic. They sold these people in Brazil and the Caribbean, and loaded pelts. The two failed to locate Spanish vessels that they hoped to seize; their ship had been at sea for just under two years when it put in at Dieppe again.

The years referred to on pages 16–31 are not biographical dates, but mark the period in which the events described took place.

**2**  
**ORPHAN FOR SALE**  
**1642–1683**

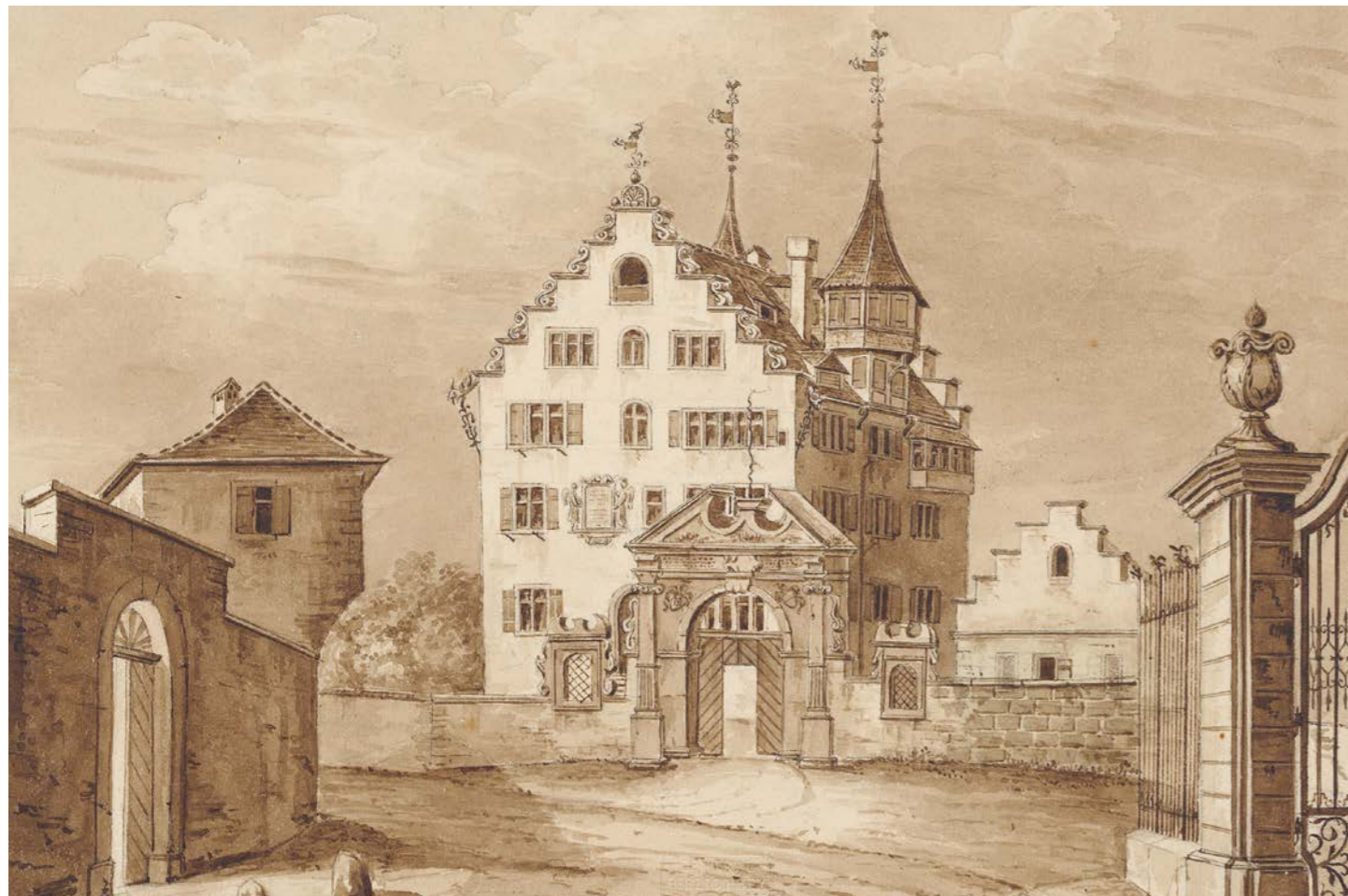
A Muslim girl from a distinguished family, Julia Kasic was orphaned in the war between the Turks and the Venetians. Johann Rudolf Werdmüller, a mercenary in the rank of colonel, bought her in Croatia. While he portrayed his purchase as an act of compassion, he certainly hoped to gain prestige from it. We do not know what Julia Kasic thought; unfortunately, nothing written by her has survived. She arrived in Zurich in the company of two other Dalmatian war orphans. The city authorities were uncertain about how to deal with these Muslim serfs and insisted they be baptized. Julia Kasic subsequently worked as an overseer in the “Seidenhof” until her death in 1683.



An early map of the Brazilian coastline near Recife  
 (Photo: gallica.bnf.fr / BnF)



Portrait of Julia Kasic  
 (Photo from Leo Weisz: Die Werdmüller)



Julia Kasic was a resident of Zurich's "Seidenhof" for many years  
(Photo: Zentralbibliothek Zürich)

**3 FUNDS FOR THE SLAVE TRADE 1784-1841**

Several businessmen from Zurich financed slave ships, a prominent example being Baron Jean Conrad Hottinguer who had emigrated to Paris. He invested both in the trade of enslaved people and in cotton and sugar, products of slave labour. He also functioned as a conduit between Switzerland and the colonies, opened doors for Swiss merchants there, and helped the colonial powers to access Swiss capital.



The banker Hans Konrad Hottinger  
(Photo: Wikimedia)

**4 PLANTATION FUNDED BY A ZURICH LOAN 1788-1828**

Although Johann Konrad Winz was not a native of Zurich, the city is key to his story. In 1786 he rebelled against the city authorities and was banished to the Caribbean. He found work as an overseer on a plantation owned by a man from St. Gallen on the Berbice River in present-day Guyana. Some years later, the City of Zurich provided him with funds for the purchase of 80 enslaved people who farmed sugar cane for him. On the plantation, Winz wrote, he had to function as doctor, surveyor, planter, judge, and enforcer in one. The enslaved men and women working under him were entirely at his mercy.



Plantations on the Rio Berbice  
(Photo: World Digital Library)



Colonel Johann Rudolf Werdmüller  
(Photo: Kantonsbibliothek St. Gallen)



**5 SURVEYOR TO THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE 1803-1806**

To strengthen its influence in the northern Pacific, Russia organized an expedition to Japan, Sakhalin, and Alaska. The expedition had three objectives: to improve understanding of the region's geography, to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, and to expand the trade in furs from Alaska. The astronomer Johann Kaspar Horner, a native of Zurich, served the expedition well in his function both as a surveyor and a navigator who determined the ship's position.

Nuku Hiva islanders collecting water for the Russian expedition  
(Photo: Nationalarchiv Estland)

## UNEQUAL CHANCES 1802–1846

Following the bankruptcy of his company in Zurich, Leonhard Ziegler made the decision to leave for India. He found work, initially as a soldier, then as the overseer on an indigo plantation. At the time, there was huge demand within Europe's textiles industry for indigo dye. The only people to profit from that demand were the plantation owners, however. Indian growers were exploited with such force that criticism was voiced even back then. Ziegler wrote that wielding a riding crop was one of his unpleasant duties when workers needed to be punished for carelessness. After some years, he was able to buy his own plantation, and through it he amassed a fortune: he came to be known as the "Soldier Millionaire of Calcutta". His indigo was used in Zurich's weaving mills that produced so-called indiennes, coloured printed cottons for export.



Indigo factory in Bengal. Lithograph by William Simpson  
(Photo: Collection Dr.Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai)



Melchior Esslinger's indienne weaving mill on the river Limmat  
(Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)



Printed fabric from Switzerland ca 1780  
(Photo: Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum)



Leonhard Ziegler and his wife  
(Photo: Zürcher Taschenbuch)

## "PLUSH" COLONIALISM 1829–1841

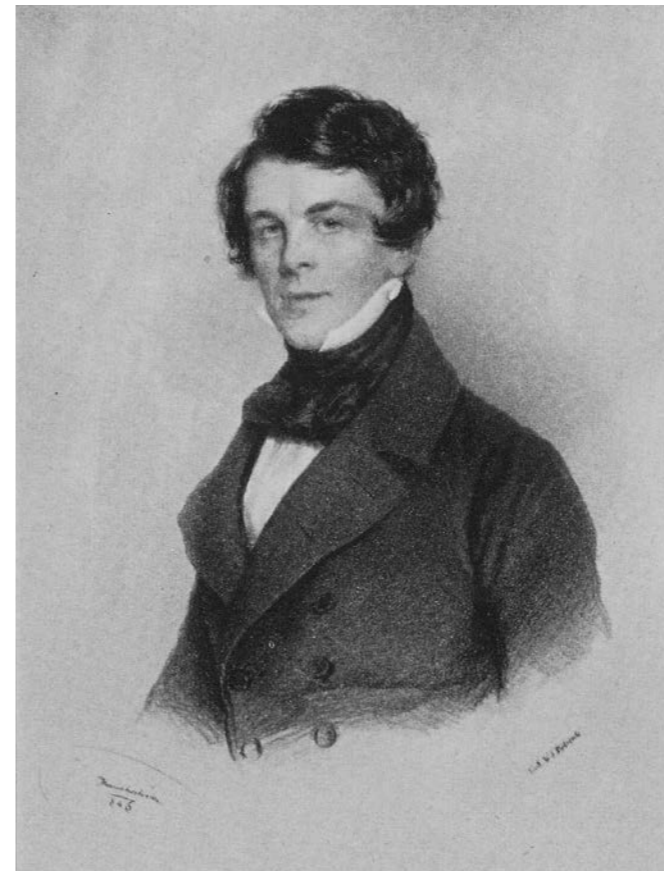
Albert Escher owned a spinning mill, as did his father who founded the Escher-Wyss company in Zurich; Albert opened a mill in Salerno outside Naples. The textile business in the Kingdom of Naples was firmly in Swiss hands: the owners, managers, and mechanical engineers were Zurich and St. Gallen men; local men and women made up the workforce. The machinery came from Escher-Wyss in Zurich. The Swiss Protestants in fact formed a self-contained elite within the Kingdom of Naples. They had their own church, school, and socialized very little with the locals. An Italian historian refers to "plush colonialism" in an allusion to the cotton that these Swiss expatriates had to thank for their wealth.



The Escher & Züblin spinning mill outside Salerno  
(Photo: Poliorama Pittresco)



The former Escher-Wyss spinning mill on the river Limmat  
(Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)



Portrait of Albert Escher (Photo: Staatsarchiv St. Gallen)



Swiss kindergarten in Salerno, ca 1880  
(Photo: Staatsarchiv St. Gallen)

8

### ODE TO A HOUSEHOLD SLAVE 1836–1852

A merchant's wife in Rio de Janeiro, Cécile Däniker-Haller led a life of affluence, even if it was a dull one. For diversion, she organized concerts at home, undertook excursions, and read books. She could do little in the way of domestic chores that were the responsibility of her enslaved servants. Cécile Däniker-Haller took it for granted that she owned enslaved people. For her manservant Antonio, she penned an ode in which she lamented his fate.



Illustration by Jean-Baptiste Debret of a wealthy lady with enslaved servants, 1823 (Photo: Wikimedia)

9

### "DEVELOPING" AFRICA 1880–1896

Fritz Rieter was an influential Zurich businessman and economic politician. He was greatly interested in Africa's economic potential and shared his knowledge with other businessmen in Zurich. Even then, Rieter wrote about the devastating effects of the slave trade on the population of West Africa. He concluded that it was Europe's duty to develop Africa and avidly supported German colonial ventures in Cameroon and Togo. He worked on plans for a Swiss trade mission in West Africa, but nothing came of them. He died while en route to Cairo.



Fritz Rieter supported Zurich's Ethnographic Museum on many occasions, and donated a collection of West African artefacts to it. (Photo: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich)

10

### A BOTANIST AS AN ADVOCATE OF COLONIALISM 1884–1893

While still a young academic, Hans Schinz had the chance to explore areas that were claimed by the German Reich in present-day Namibia. On behalf of a German businessman, he crossed the region several times, collecting artefacts and writing reports about possible uses of the land. He championed German colonial rule in South-West Africa that had dire consequences for the local population, however: following Nama and Herero resistance to being displaced, German Army Command decided to annihilate them or to banish them to the desert where tens of thousands of them were either killed or died from thirst and hunger. Schinz, in contrast, profited from his expedition: back in Zurich he was awarded a university professorship and became director of the Botanic Garden. The published results of his research on South-West Africa certainly helped him.



Zurich's Old Botanic Garden  
(Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)



The botanist Hans Schinz dressed in expedition garb  
(Photo: ETH Bildarchiv)



Herero women and children imprisoned in Swakopmund (present-day Namibia) (Photo: Deutsches Bundesarchiv/Kurt Streitwolf)

**11**  
**SILK FOR ZURICH**  
**1862–1905**

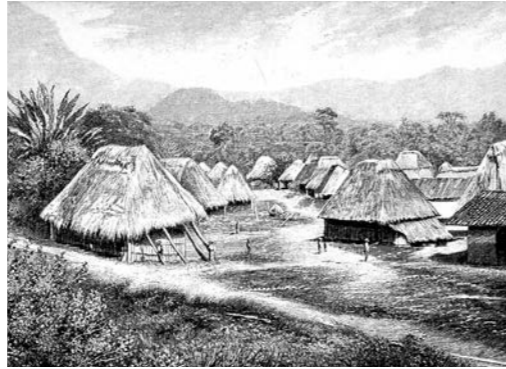
While Japan was never colonized, the United States and Great Britain forced the country to open up to trade with the West. As Zurich and Basel needed raw silk for their expanding silk industry, Swiss traders benefited in particular. They quickly came to be the dominant force in Yokohama's silk market. One of the traders was Hans Spörry whose photograph shows him wearing a kimono in his leisure time



The silk trader Hans Spörry clad in a kimono during leisure time (Photo: ETH Bildarchiv)

**12**  
**COFFEE ON INDIGENOUS LAND**  
**1860–1900**

Guatemala may have been an independent republic, but economic conditions there bore the stamp of colonialism. The country's liberal government was generous in its offers of indigenous land to foreign investors on whose plantations the Mayan locals were forced to work. Otto Bleuler and Rudolf Hagmann were among the big landowners who grew coffee on the best land.



Workers' huts on a Guatemalan coffee plantation (Photo: archive.org)

**13**  
**SWISS POLAR FRENZY**  
**1909–1912**

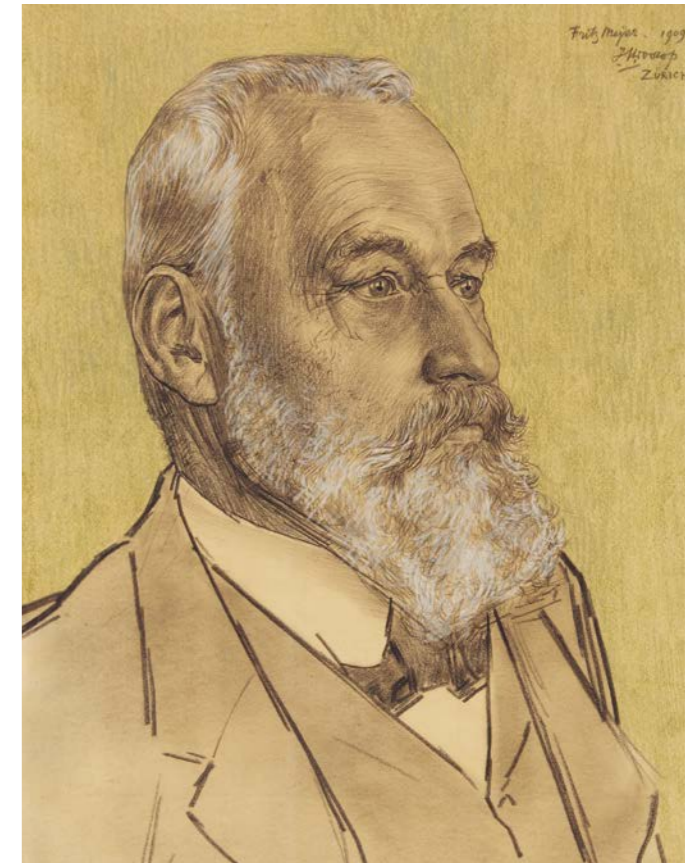
The Bernese geographer and ETH professor Alfred de Quervain undertook two expeditions to Greenland, the first in 1909, the second in 1912. Polar research was of great interest at the time: for Europe the polar regions represented the last unexplored regions on Earth. De Quervain's expeditions were closely followed by the Swiss press and accordingly celebrated. De Quervain drew on the patriotic frenzy surrounding his expeditions by naming a mountain group on Greenland "Schweizerland".



Alfred de Quervain in Greenland (Photo: ETH Bildarchiv)

**14**  
**COLONIALISM AND ART**  
**1876–1917**

Working as a textile merchant in a company in Penang (present-day Malaysia), Fritz Meyer realized in 1876 how favourable the prospects were for the tobacco trade on Sumatra. He purchased several plots of land there – albeit against the opposition of local people. Land was very cheap. Chinese and Javanese labourers were poorly paid and worked under harsh conditions. Over the next 30 years, Meyer-Fierz amassed a considerable fortune. With it he assembled one of the first notable modern art collections in Zurich. He was the first Swiss to buy a Van Gogh, but above all he is remembered for his financial support of the artist Ferdinand Hodler. Today a part of Meyer's collection is displayed in the Kunsthaus Zürich



Fritz Meyer-Fierz (1848–1917), portrait by Jan Toorop (Photo: rdk.nl)



Large tracts of Sumatran rainforest were cleared for the establishment of plantations (Photo: Museum voor Wereldculturen)

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER MISSIONARY 1911–1930

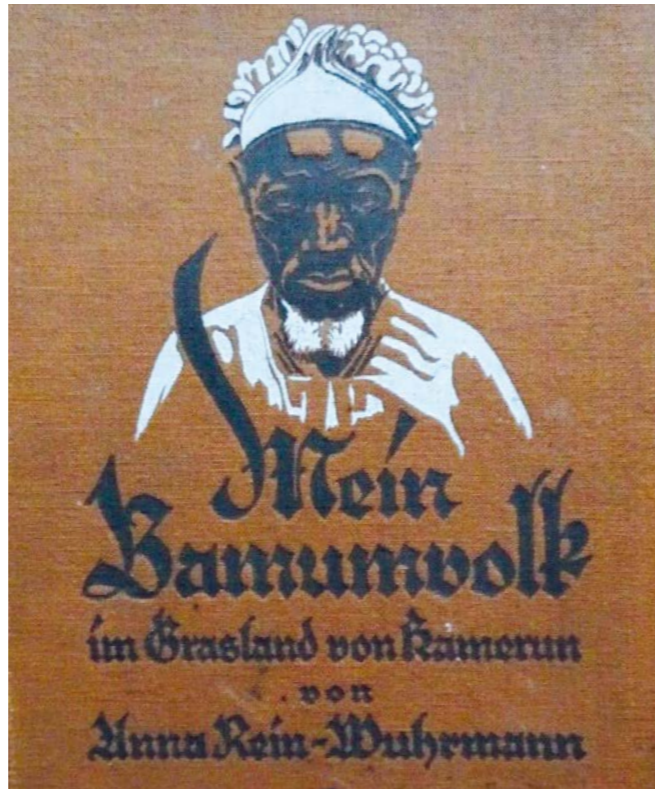
Aged 30, Anna Wuhmann went to Cameroon to take charge of the Mission school for girls at Fumban. She studied the language and culture of the Bamum closely, and made a photographic record of the people. In her work as a missionary, Wuhmann did not take a fanatical approach and allowed those she was seeking to convert the space needed to observe their own traditions. By doing so, she gained trust and respect, including that of the king. Her books nevertheless entrenched common prejudices about African men and women. She saw it as her duty to protect the Bamum from the malign influences of “civilization” and to help them retain their “naturalness”. Her books sold in large numbers across Europe.



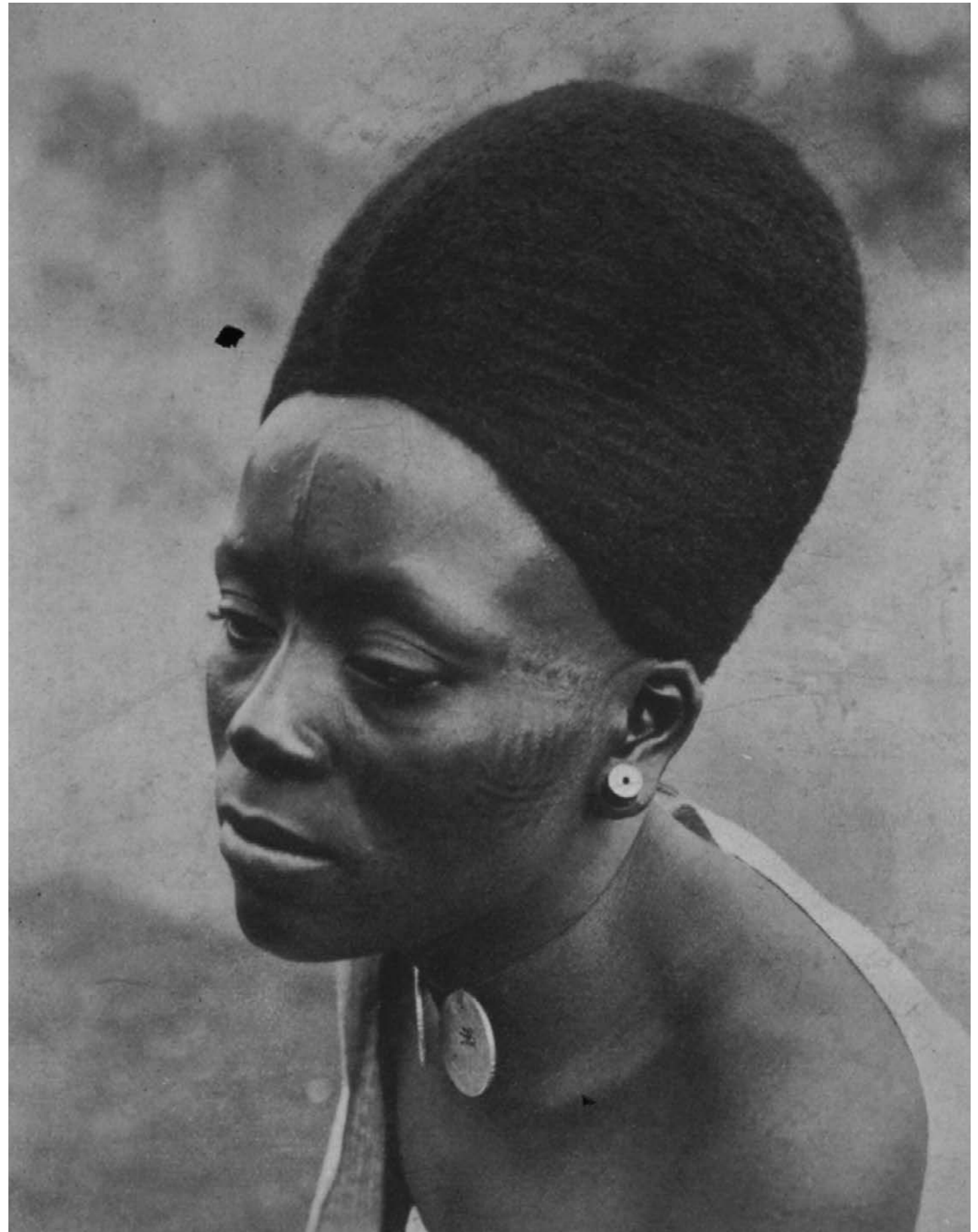
Portrait of Anna Wuhmann, who usually dressed in white  
(Photo: Archiv der Basler Mission)



Anna Wuhmann with one of her pupils in Cameroon  
(Photo: Archiv der Basler Mission)



One of Anna Wuhmann's books with rather a pompous title  
(Photo: Curatorial team of the exhibition)



Anna Wuhmann's portrait photograph of Lydia Mangwelune became famous after its publication in the Mission newsletter  
(Photo: Archiv der Basler Mission)

## "DIRTY WORK" FOR THE COLONIAL POWERS 1927–1942

Many young men from Zurich signed up to serve in colonial armies, often out of financial necessity, but also from a spirit of adventure. Jakob Aeberli is one such example: he twice joined the French Foreign Legion, for the first time at the age of 17. He served in Indochina (present-day Vietnam), and enjoyed doing so, according to his own account. He signed up again in 1937 because he was unable to find work on his return to Switzerland, and could not get by on unemployment benefit. His second tour of duty lasting five years saw him serve in Algeria and Morocco. In these postings, however, he had health issues and often spent time in the garrison infirmary. .

## COLONIALISM... SIMPLY BECAUSE IT IS POSSIBLE... 1929–1942

The Sihlporte was created in the 1920s and 1930s to connect Zurich's Old Town and the Aussersihl district. A main driving force behind its creation was the builder-owner Alwin Schmid. His Sihlporte department store and Schmidhof office block – floodlit overnight and connected by a pneumatic tube system to banks and the post office – introduced a hint of contemporary America to Zurich. Around the same time, he purchased a large plot of land in British East Africa (in present-day Tanzania) that he acquired from some Germans at a cheap rate. At the foot of Mount Meru he established what, by his own account, was the largest coffee plantation in Africa. He marketed his coffee aggressively in Switzerland under the brand name of Narok. Colonial motifs still decorate the main entrance to the Sihlporte office building to this day.



The entrance to the Sihlporte office building with colonial motifs  
(Photo: Curatorial team of the exhibition)

## IN PRAISE OF SIMPLICITY 1932–1941

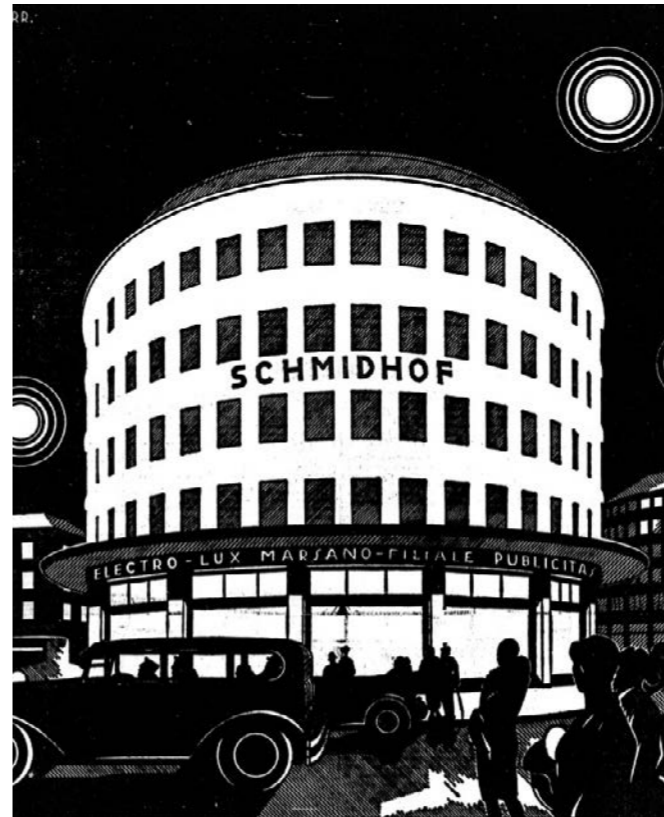
Annemarie Schwarzenbach travelled by car from Geneva to Afghanistan together with her girlfriend Ella Maillart. For Annemarie Schwarzenbach, the adventure represented an escape from her drug habit and, as she said, from "the rules of our civilization". They financed the trip by filing regular reports to magazines and newspapers. Schwarzenbach romanticized her portrayal of Afghanistan as a primal world still little tainted by modern civilization. At the time, such accounts helped to entrench views of Europe as somewhere modern and the "Other" as something primitive.



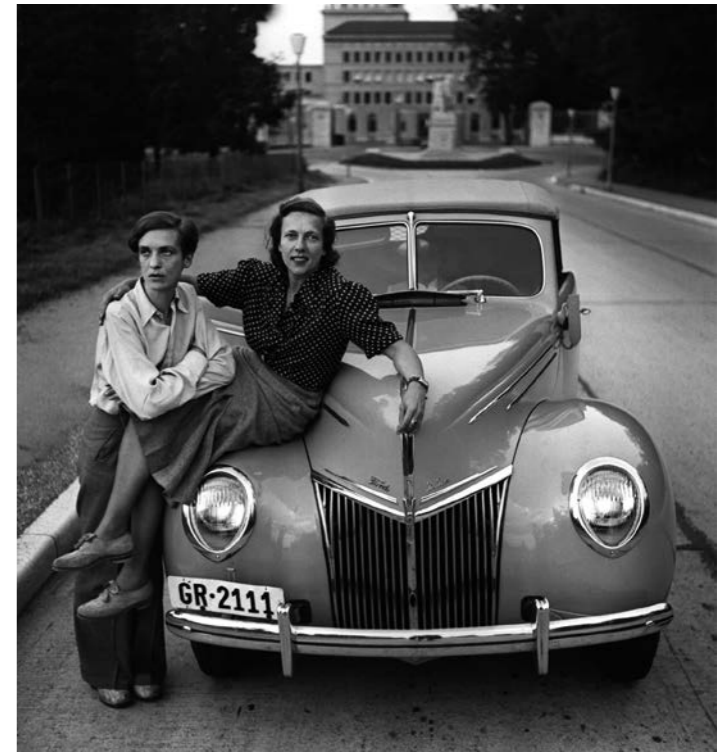
Members of the French Foreign Legion breaking stones in North Africa. "Dirty work" is not so much a reference to drudgery like this as it is to military operations against liberation movements seeking independence from France. (Photo: Keystone/akg-images)



Clearing land for a coffee plantation on Mount Meru  
(Photo: Bundesarchiv)



The height of modernity: the office building at Sihlporte  
(Photo: Neue Zürcher Zeitung)



Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Ella Maillart about to set off from Geneva (Photo: Keystone)

## BANKERS PROPPING UP APARTHEID 1955–1994

Bruno Max Saager and Niklaus Senn, leading figures in the largest Swiss bank (today's UBS), also invested privately in businesses. They included Swiss-based plantation companies that were established in the colonial era with interests in Indonesia and Tanzania. Much more far-reaching, however, was their involvement with the *white* South African regime that long after the end of the colonial era continued to deny political and human rights to Black South Africans and other Peoples of Colour. While internal opposition within South Africa was accompanied by an international boycott that increasingly isolated the South African regime from the 1970s onwards, Swiss bankers continued to take delivery of its gold and to provide it with urgently needed loans. In doing so, they contributed to the regime's survival for another two decades.



Street theatre in Zurich protesting business links between the city's banks and the Apartheid regime, 1988 (Photo: Keystone)

## A "MAN FROM OVERSEAS" ESTABLISHES A TAX HAVEN 1920–1941

Eugen Keller-Huguenin referred to himself as a "man from overseas". Born in Brazil, he was but a boy when he arrived in Zurich where he mixed with other "foreigners". Later he worked as an accountant for international businesses. He resented the fact that Swiss tax had to be paid on profits generated abroad. Seeing no chance of reform under the Social Democrats in charge of Zurich, he raised the possibility of new tax laws in the Canton of Zug. They formed the basis for the trading hub that it is today.

The years referred to on pages 16–31 are not biographical dates, but mark the period in which the events described took place.

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The 1976 Soweto riots against the Apartheid regime claimed hundreds of lives, including those of many school children (Photo: Alamy/Keystone)



Niklaus Senn with other directors of major Swiss banks, 1986 (Photo: Ringier Bildarchiv)



# ZURICH IS ENTANGLED

Zurich's colonial connections were certainly not limited to the sons and daughters of the city who had moved abroad. Individuals, companies, and institutions – universities and museums, for instance – were likewise involved in the colonial project and benefited directly or indirectly from colonies. Industry placed its hopes on the availability of cheap colonial materials and distant markets in which to sell its goods; the banks expanded their range of services, and some university institutes increasingly focused their research on colonies.

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## **The merchant Fritz Rieter:**

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## **The botanist Hans Schinz:**

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## **The missionary Anna Wuhrmann:**

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## **Bankers and South Africa:**

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The world as a golden opportunity: mural by Augusto Giacometti in Zurich's Alte Börse  
(Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

## THE GLOBAL THREADS OF INDUSTRY

The process of industrialization began with the cheap cotton that was shipped to Europe from the colonies. Dye-houses and textile printing works were established early on in Zurich for the manufacture of printed cottons known as *indiennes*, textiles inspired by the designs of South Asia. They were exported and partly used as items of exchange in the slave trade. Cotton soon vanished from Zurich, however, and the city became a hub of the silk industry in whose context colonies played a lesser role. Other industries evolved that, on the contrary, did make use of cheap colonial goods: Lindt & Sprüngli, for instance, processed cacao; Steinfels processed palm oil; and for Gummi-Maag, it was natural rubber. These businesses with their colonial connections were not the exception, but more the rule in an economy that to a large extent was globalized even before the First World War.

## FINANCIAL CENTRE

Even 200 years ago, banking operations were of greater importance to Zurich than the cotton industry. The city was the hub for eastern Switzerland's textile industry that exported its products around the world. Among other things, this led to the foundation of the short-lived Swiss Export Company ("Schweizerische Exportgesellschaft") with offices in present-day Syria, Iraq, Iran, India, China, Brazil, and Chile. The range of services the financial sector of the city provided kept growing, as did its expertise – be it in trade, the transfer of money, questions of insurance, investment in faraway countries, the setting up of multinationals, legal safeguards for investments, tax optimization or how to move large private fortunes to Switzerland et cetera. For Zurich's role as a financial centre, the end of colonialism (1945–1975) played a negligible role; if anything, decolonization opened up new markets in Africa and Asia. The continuation of colonial patterns of trade after formal colonial rule comes to an end is often referred to as "neo-colonialism".



Helvetia, the personification of Switzerland, carries the world in her right hand; Mercury, the Roman god who presides over trade, dances atop it. Statue in the foyer of the former Swiss Bank Corporation building in Zurich.  
(Photo Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

# UNIVERSITIES

The University of Zurich and the ETH also responded to colonialism: new subjects such as physical anthropology and ethnology evolved; curricula were adapted, and new fields of research grew in importance. Research trips to the colonies helped to launch careers, particularly in the field of biology, but also in other subjects such as medicine, geography, geology, ethnology and language studies. Prime examples are the many petroleum geologists who set off from the ETH to work on every continent, as are the biologists who conducted research within the plantation economy, or the doctors specializing in tropical medicine, or “development aid” specialists.



Four Madagascans carrying the botanist Conrad Keller, who seems to have liked the image: he had it reproduced in a number of his publications. (Photo: MDZ / Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)

“To the admirers of the noble beverage that is coffee, we wish to make public the extremely welcome news that at Berbice, at which locale the Dutchmen possess a splendid plantation of coffee, sugar, and cacao, in excess of 18,060 coffee shrubs have been planted by slaves within 18 months. If the Dutchmen proceed thus in the following 4 or 5 years, it may be expected that the expense associated with this noble beverage will decline appreciably.”

Zürcher Donnerstags-Nachrichten No. 24, 1735



Colonial goods also changed consumer habits in Zurich. Seen next to the Helmhaus is the warehouse where colonial goods arrived and were stored; also shown is the Laterne coffeehouse where locals drank coffee and cocoa. (Photo: Zentralbibliothek Zürich)

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# COLONIALISM IS VIOLENCE

From the 15th into the 20th century, Europe conquered large parts of the world. Colonial expansion was a violent process that was accompanied not only by military subjugation and economic exploitation, but also by ethnic and cultural humiliation. This was the era that entrenched the structural racism that persists to this day. Slavery in particular has left deep scars.

Through the Bank Leu, a public-private partnership, the City of Zurich invested in slavery and benefited financially from the enslavement of tens of thousands of people. The city's economy also profited from colonial structures: cheap raw materials and investment opportunities in distant markets ensured growth and profits.

# CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

The transatlantic slave trade and the practice of slavery in the Americas are among the gravest known crimes against humanity. From the 16th into the 19th century, slave traders – mostly Europeans aided and abetted by local leaders – abducted over 12 million African men, women and children across the Atlantic. After being seized, millions of them died while still in Africa; some 20 per cent are estimated to have died at sea. In the Caribbean and in North and South America, enslaved individuals were exploited on plantations, at the mercy of their enslavers and overseers. Physical and sexual violence against the enslaved was a key feature of the system, and its traumatic effects persist to this day.

## Zurich Invested in the Slave Trade

Vast sums of money could be earned in the slave trade. The City of Zurich also profited from the practice. The city and wealthy individuals in business invested their money in companies actively involved in the slave trade and the plantation economy, and made hefty profits. A survey by the University of Zurich estimates that the City of Zurich was co-responsible for the enslavement of 36,494 individuals, while private investors were responsible for the abduction and exploitation of a further 1,078 individuals.

### Zurich Citizens Involved in the Plantation Economy

A number of wealthy individuals from Zurich either owned plantations themselves or were employed by them as overseers. The Escher family is one such prominent example. Heinrich Escher, the father of the renowned Zurich politician Alfred Escher, purchased a plot of land in Cuba for use as a coffee plantation. For over 25 years, two of Alfred Escher's uncles ran the business that had 87 enslaved people on its books. Following the death of his uncle Fritz, Alfred Escher helped to sell off the plantation and its people. He did so with the utmost discretion: in democratic Switzerland, plantation ownership and slaveholding were viewed with contempt even back then. During the American Civil War, Zurich's Liberals – under Escher's leadership – took a neutral stance that in fact was more useful to the southern states, or even wholly rallied behind the pro-slavery position of the Confederates. Adopting such a stance on slavery may have been economically opportune, but politically it was controversial. Incidentally, it meant Escher's opponents received a boost that resulted in curbs on his political power in the years that followed.



Entrance to the former Cafetal Angerona plantation in Cuba. It belonged to the son of a distant female relative of Alfred Escher. His father Heinrich Escher owned the adjoining plantation. (Photo: Dreamstime)

## Slavery: Controversial from the Start

From the very beginning, enslaved African men and women offered resistance in America. Many of them fled, some set up free communities and lived in the sparsely populated hinterland of colonies; others rebelled against their owners. In Cuba alone there were 14 major uprisings. In Haiti, a series of freedom revolts led to the country's independence in 1804; revolts on Barbados in 1816 eventually culminated in the abolition of slavery across the British Empire. Such acts of resistance spurred on the anti-slavery campaign in Europe.

In Switzerland, too, people spoke out against slavery. In its first years after 1780, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published highly critical articles about the horrors of slavery and wanted the slave trade outlawed. Its criticism, however, was restricted to the trade in enslaved individuals. Abolition of slavery was too radical a step for the bourgeois newspaper, which reported in very negative terms about the Haitian uprising. During the American Civil War, it even called for recognition of the Confederate States.

Only many years later and after many setbacks did the abolitionist movement gather speed in Europe and America as a growing number of people came to repudiate slavery. Changing views and appeals in Europe made little difference to the situation of enslaved individuals, however. Only the introduction of laws such as the prohibition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery made a real difference.



The *Cap 110 - Mémoire et Fraternité* monument commemorates the Atlantic slave trade. A tragedy in April 1835 acted as the catalyst for this work of art. Although the Atlantic slave trade had already been banned in 1815, Africans were still being abducted to the Americas by enslavers. One stormy night off Martinique, a ship-

wreck occurred in which many African men and women lost their lives. Looking towards Africa, the monument's figures commemorate the many victims of the Atlantic slave trade and symbolize the heavy burden of their shared fate. (Photo: Dreamstime)

# THE CITY OF ZURICH AND PRIVATE INVES- TORS ARE JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ENSLAVEMENT OF 37,572 INDIVIDUALS

This figure was estimated by a University of Zurich study that the City of Zurich commissioned.

[https://www.media.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:29963073-c0ef-4adf-954f-723b67f327cd/200902\\_Sklaverei\\_Bericht\\_UZH\\_def.pdf](https://www.media.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:29963073-c0ef-4adf-954f-723b67f327cd/200902_Sklaverei_Bericht_UZH_def.pdf)

# COLONIALISM – THE HUBRIS OF EUROPE

Europe's colonial expansion began with sea voyages to India and the Americas in the service of Portugal and Spain. Over the centuries that followed, Europe's colonial powers brought North and South America, most areas in Africa and Asia, as well as Australia and Oceania, under their control. These regions supplied cheap raw materials for the economies of Europe and then served as foreign markets. The systematic exploitation of the labour force continued even after the abolition of slavery. Under the system of contract labour, workers were forced to migrate far. They were advanced money, which made them dependent on their employers. Today's plantation economy and the trade in raw materials can be traced back to the colonial era.

## Colonial Armies and their Wars

The appropriation of colonies almost always involved the use of violence. Colonial armies typically had superior weapons to deploy in their clashes with indigenous peoples, who nonetheless occasionally put up stiff resistance. The conquest of the sultanate of Aceh in the north of the island of Sumatra, for instance, lasted over 40 years and ended only with the use of systematic violence and massacres of the civilian population. Indigenous populations in North and South America as well as in Australia suffered particularly harsh treatment as a result of colonial conquest, and, in some instances, they were exterminated; this was also partly the case in Africa and Asia. Many mercenaries in colonial service were from the Canton of Zurich: in the Dutch army in Indonesia alone, they numbered over 800. Most of them suffered a hard lot: those who were not carried off by disease or war wounds returned home with a minimal pension and no prospect of a good job.

## Economic Exploitation

Colonialism created a twofold global economy in which some countries supplied raw materials and other countries processed them. This caused disparities in income between countries to increase greatly. Around 200 years ago, the wealthiest countries were roughly three times richer than the poorest ones; now that factor has risen to over 100.

Raw materials such as sugar cane, coffee beans, tobacco, cotton, tea, palm oil, natural rubber, among others, were largely grown in colonial monocultures, that is, huge plantations were given over to one crop only. In the medium term, this had devastating ecological consequences for the areas under cultivation. Financially powerful Western businesses bought up vast tracts of land under suspicious circumstances or even had local populations forcibly evicted.

The image shows a dense grid of advertisements from a 1928 newspaper. On the left, a large vertical ad for 'JELMOLI' features an illustration of a building and a table with chairs. To its right are smaller ads for 'IM ORIENT', 'SINEMA', 'Tanz', 'Hotel St. Gotthard', 'Sausser', 'Scala', 'Capitol', 'GARRARBY', 'Autodecken', 'Unverderbliche', 'KEMPF & Co.', and 'MAGADINO'. On the far right, a prominent ad for 'Süster Strehler Söhne & Co.' is circled, with the text 'Kolonial-Gebiet' highlighted. Below it is an advertisement for 'Packard Sedan'.

## Kolonial-Gebiet

Schweizergruppe, welche ein Syndikat zur Verwertung eines großen afrikanischen Kolonialgebietes, das noch nicht ausgebeutet u. sehr reich an verschiedenen Naturprodukten ist, gründen möchte, akzeptiert noch die finanzielle Mitarbeit von einigen Personen. Den Gründern des Unternehmens sind spezielle Vorteile eingeräumt. Ein eingehender Bericht wird jedem seriösen Interessenten zugesandt. Erstklassige Angelegenheit. — Offerten unter Chiffre OF 4764 N an Orell Füßli-Annancen, Zürich. (O 1979)

Advert for an investment opportunity to exploit colonial land, published in the NZZ in 1928 (Photo: Neue Zürcher Zeitung)

## Getting Rich Quick with Tobacco

Fritz Meyer-Fierz (see Zurich in the world) got rich quick by growing tobacco on Sumatra, as did some other men from Zurich. Sumatra's environment and people paid a high price, however, as his plantations increasingly displaced the locals. He and other plantation owners replaced them with labourers from China, Java, and India who, for little reward and under brutal conditions, endured forced labour. Violence was the order of the day. The aftereffects of disputes over land ownership and ethnic conflicts on plantations are still felt today, as are environmental problems caused by slash-and-burn farming methods and the ruthless exploitation of soils.

## "Swiss Coffee" from Tanzania

The volcanic soils of Mount Meru in Tanzania are very fertile and therefore in great demand. German colonists were the first to dispute the right of local people to them by laying out coffee plantations on them. In 1929, Alwin Schmid (see Zurich in the world) was able to buy a plantation that had lain abandoned since World War I. He marketed his product as "Swiss coffee" and also organized hunting safaris. The white plantation owners' thirst for land increasingly deprived the indigenous Meru of their livelihoods. In a sensational case, an alliance of local chiefs arrived at UN headquarters, heralding the start of the struggle for Tanzanian independence.

## Swiss Chocolate

Switzerland is renowned for its chocolate – even though cacao seeds grow and are harvested in the countries of the Global South. The cacao tree is native to Central and South America where it was cultivated long before European colonization. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century – when cocoa became a favourite luxury drink in Europe – was the cacao tree introduced by Europeans to West Africa where it was grown on plantations under inhumane conditions, and partly by an enslaved workforce. From the beginning, Swiss citizens were heavily involved in growing and trading cacao beans. The trading arm of the Basel Mission, for instance, did much to expand cacao cultivation in the British colony of Gold Coast (Ghana post-independence) and later became one of its main exporters. Even today, the majority of cacao farmers still live in great poverty, and child labour, malnutrition and deforestation are not uncommon.

What are the conditions like under which the foodstuffs I consume are produced?



Europeans needed large tracts of land for their plantations on Sumatra, but encountered resistance from local people who were increasingly driven out and began making regular attacks on plantations. This photograph was taken on the plantation run by Fritz Meyer's brother who is seen here making a display of his readiness to put up a fight. (Photo: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich)



In 1936 The Zürcher Illustrierte published a feature about Alwin Schmid's plantation. Schmid posed as a big-game hunter for it. (Photo: E-periodic)



(Photo: Wikimedia)

## Switzerland Joins the Colonial Powers

Caricature by the Chinese editor and revolutionary Tse Tsan-tai titled *The Situation in the Far East* (1904). Tse points out the risk of Chinese partition through the influence of the colonial powers: the Russian bear approaches from the north, the Japanese sun rises in the east, German ambitions are represented by a sausage, while in the south we see the head of a British bulldog on the body of a lion, the frog represents France, and the American eagle sweeps in from the south-east. Other European powers are gathered in the waiting room: Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Switzerland, too, represented by a bull.

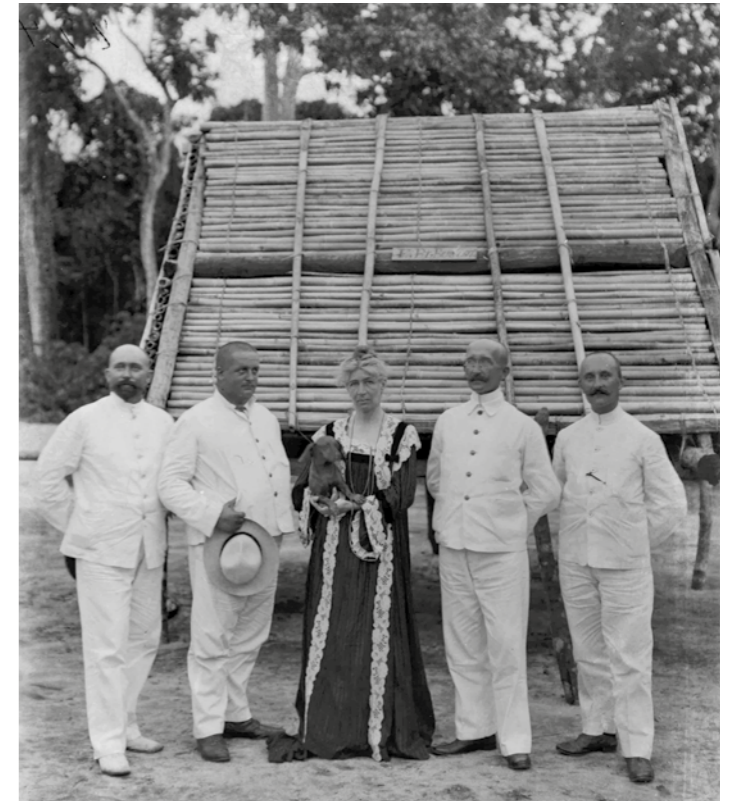


# OTHERING

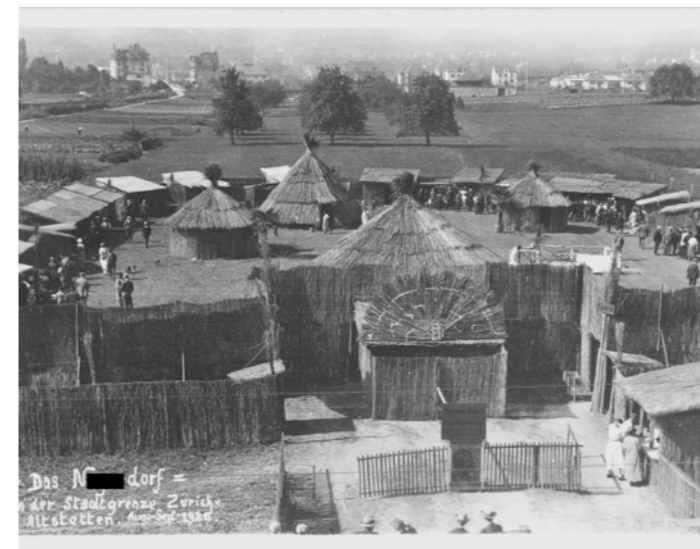
Colonialism did not limit itself to conquest and exploitation, but also took hold in people's minds. Pseudo-scientific theories set out to justify *white* supremacy. Books, journals, advertising, and spectacles were used to propagate racist ideas, and were the means through which the public, not just in Europe's colonial powers, "learned" racism; the Swiss did too.

## The Fears of Auguste Forel

The renowned psychiatrist and director of Burghölzli psychiatric hospital, Auguste Forel, was certainly not the only medical practitioner or biologist at the University of Zurich to propagate racist ideas, but his writings proved to be especially influential. In them, he argued that there were ideal and inferior racial types; that Black People were among the inferior types, and that mixing with them would result in the decline of the peoples of Europe. His successor Eugen Bleuler also expressed his opposition to racial blending, which he used as an argument against Jewish and Italian immigration into Switzerland. Zurich became a centre of race research (Physical Anthropology) with strong global connections. Precisely because Switzerland had no colonies of its own, researchers in Zurich were able to present their work as neutral while profiting from their close collaboration with Europe's colonial powers.



The Zurich anthropologist Otto Schlaginhaufen (at far right) was a member of the 1907–09 German Naval Expedition to German New Guinea (present-day Papua New Guinea). (Photo: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden)



The "human zoo" at Letzigrund attracted over 60,000 visitors in 1925. (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

## "Human Zoo"

During the colonial era, Europe was very curious about races considered to be "exotic" or "primitive". Canny businessmen organized so-called "human zoos" to satisfy the demand. According to organizers, their events would show members of the public how such people "really" lived, when in fact they had to appear before the public as backward or as peculiar as possible. For the individuals who were put on show, such spectacles were a harrowing experience. Some of them were brought to Europe against their will, among them eleven Patagonians, of whom five died in Zurich. Being put on display in a zoo-like compound was degrading. Over a number of decades, more than 500 such groups were exhibited to the public across Switzerland. In 1925 a six-week-long "human zoo" involving 74 Senegalese men and women in the Letzigrund district of Zurich drew over 60,000 visitors; two of the exhibited people died. Circus Knie organized its last ethnographic exhibition as late as 1964.

### Blackfacing for Sechseläuten

Ethnic displays were also popular as part of Zurich's Sechseläuten parade. The inclusion of "foreign peoples" frequently served to promote colonial thinking. During the conquest and division of the African continent, the figure of "the wild n\*\*\*\*\*" was a recurrent theme of the public festival. Congo was the theme of the Sechseläuten in 1885, for instance. Guild members in blackface and grass skirts performed dances that they considered to be African. Events like that had a formative effect on what was viewed as the foundation of the identity of Zurich society by displaying what at the same time was considered completely alien.

### Racism and Consumer Goods

Colonies produced consumer goods that were sold in Europe. Through advertising and travel articles in magazines, colonial images, fantasies, and mindsets were conveyed to the general public. Products were imbued with society's prevailing norms and ideals. The mass consumption inspired by advertising campaigns helped to reinforce existing racist notions and images. Advertising for chocolate and coffee is a prime example: it showed Switzerland to be a country with the riches of the world at its disposal.



The tradition of displaying foreign-looking peoples during Sechseläuten was long lasting, as shown by this photograph of the kids' parade in 1962. (Photo: Photopress/Keystone)



Like many other types of business in the late nineteenth century, chocolate makers often resorted to stereotypical images of foreigners. (Photo: Lindt & Sprüngli)

# THE LASTING EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM

Zurich's long-standing global connections have given rise to a highly diverse society, yet racism and colonial-era stereotypes have lasting effects and continue to exert a profound influence on society. In a country that had no colonies, colonialism scarcely registered with the public. Even after decolonization in the 1960s, there was no wide-ranging examination of the phenomena of colonialism. It took the commitment of various groups and their initiatives over the past two decades to draw public and media attention to them.

How do I feel about refugees?  
Does it make a difference  
where they come from?

## RACISM LIVES ON

### RACIST SPEECH AND IMAGERY

Colonial-era racism is entrenched and perpetuated by European speech and imagery; it occurs in all sections of society. Since decolonization and the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights movement in the United States, Black and other People of Colour have challenged the vestiges of colonialism and racism in speech and imagery. In Switzerland, a country that had no colonies, examination of the colonial past started late. This explains why people who themselves are unaffected by racist discrimination frequently still have little awareness of the hurtful history of racism and colonialism. Those affected, however, often find that a determined effort is necessary when it comes to getting a hearing.



The American author James Baldwin addressed the question of racism in language. In his essay *A Stranger in the Village*, his theme is his status as a Black man in the village of Leukerbad and how local youngsters react to him. (Photo: Radio Télévision Suisse - Pierre Koralnik - 1962)

### INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

People can unconsciously act in a racist way, often with far-reaching consequences: rules and habits have enshrined racism in institutions such as schools, businesses, government offices, the health service, and justice system. When it comes to vocational training, equal opportunities for Black and other People of Colour are not guaranteed, and their chances in the jobs market are poorer. This also applies to curricular content that is often relayed through a Eurocentric perspective. Similarly, they encounter greater hurdles on the housing market, and they are under-represented in local government offices.



It was the Black Panthers who introduced the United States to the term "institutional racism". Seen here is Kathleen Cleaver, a representative of the organization, who visited Zurich in 1972 at the invitation of the Swiss women's liberation movement. (Photo: Keystone)

## RACIAL AND ETHNIC PROFILING

Racial and ethnic profiling refers to all forms of discriminatory identity checks and vehicle spot checks involving individuals whom police officers or border force agents perceive to be “different” in terms of ethnicity or religion. Awareness of the issue has grown in Switzerland over recent years, and it is now a focus of the Zurich Ombudsman’s office. Campaigners, creative artists, scientists, and human rights organizations have joined forces in the Alliance against Racial Profiling and are helping to keep the issue to the fore.

Where do the clothes I’m wearing today come from?

### Further Reading:

#### Institutional Racism:

Stadt Zürich, Stadtentwicklung Zürich, Integrationsförderung: Rassismusbericht der Stadt Zürich 2009. Erster Bericht der interdepartementalen Arbeitsgruppe, Zurich 2009.

Stadt Zürich, Stadtentwicklung, Integrationsförderung: Wie geht die Zürcher Stadtverwaltung mit Rassismus um? Rassismusbericht 2022: Vorfälle, Umsetzungsbeispiele und Empfehlungen, Zurich 2022.

#### Racist Speech and Imagery:

Susan Arndt, Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (eds.): Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache: ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk, Münster 2021.

#### Racial and Ethnic Profiling:

Mohamed Wa Baile, Serena O. Dankwa, Tarek Naguib, Patricia Purtschert, Sarah Schilliger: Racial Profiling: Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand, Bielefeld 2019.

Ombudsstelle der Stadt Zürich (ed.): Jahresbericht 2010, Zürich 2011.

#### Slavery Convention:

Sklavereiabkommen von 1926.

▶ [https://fedlex.data.admin.ch/eli/cc/46/696\\_714\\_724](https://fedlex.data.admin.ch/eli/cc/46/696_714_724)

#### Modern Forms of Slavery

humanrights.ch: Moderne Formen der Sklaverei: ein Überblick.

▶ <https://www.humanrights.ch/de/ipf/menschenrechte/wirtschaft/moderne-formen-sklaverei>

Amnesty International: The Dark Side Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s Construction Sector ahead of the World Cup, 2013.

#### Further reading, published after the opening of the exhibition:

Ashkira Darman, Bernhard C. Schär: Zürcher «Mohren»-Fantasien. Eine bau- und begriffsgeschichtliche Auslegeordnung, ca. 1400–2022, Zurich 2023.

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, Fachstelle für Rassismusbekämpfung: Grundlagenstudie zu strukturellem Rassismus in der Schweiz, Bern 2023.

## SLAVERY LIVES ON

### THE 1926 SLAVERY CONVENTION

The trading and ownership of enslaved people were legally established rights in many countries. In the second half of the eighteenth century, first the trade, then the legal ownership of enslaved people came to be increasingly questioned, opposed, and eventually prohibited in western European countries and their colonies. Nevertheless, people continued to be abducted over the following century. In 1926, thirty-five members of the League of Nations signed the Slavery Convention. Its signatories undertook to suppress the slave trade and slavery in all its forms.

### MODERN FORMS OF SLAVERY

Compared to the legally recognized and narrowly defined slavery of the past, the meaning of the term today has expanded. humanrights.ch – Menschenrechte Schweiz refers to Modern Slavery “if, for the purpose of economic exploitation, an individual is under the control of another person who resorts to violence and other coercive measures to maintain that control”. Slavery has thus become an umbrella term for various practices that result in individuals finding themselves in a position from which they have no way out through their own efforts alone. Among other things, this includes forced labour, debt bondage, enforced prostitution, forced marriage, and human trafficking.

Today no state legally sanctions the enslavement of people; nevertheless, forms of unlawful and extreme exploitation persist around the world. According to humanrights.ch, today some 40 million people around the world endure slavery and forced labour.



Migrant workers from South Asia constructed the stadiums for the 2022 Men’s World Cup in Qatar. They were treated like forced labour, and appalling working conditions – such as insufficient water and food supplies – led to thousands of deaths among them.

(Photo: Keystone/EPA)

### Racist Art and Phrases in the Public Realm:

Various racist and colonial depictions are found around the City of Zurich: in Niederdorf, for instance, a racist mural and racist names on buildings are to be seen. Traces of the colonial era are also to be found in other parts of the city. The historian Dr Ashkira Darman addresses the issue in the following video.

▶ <https://youtu.be/TmRzoiUWH2Q>

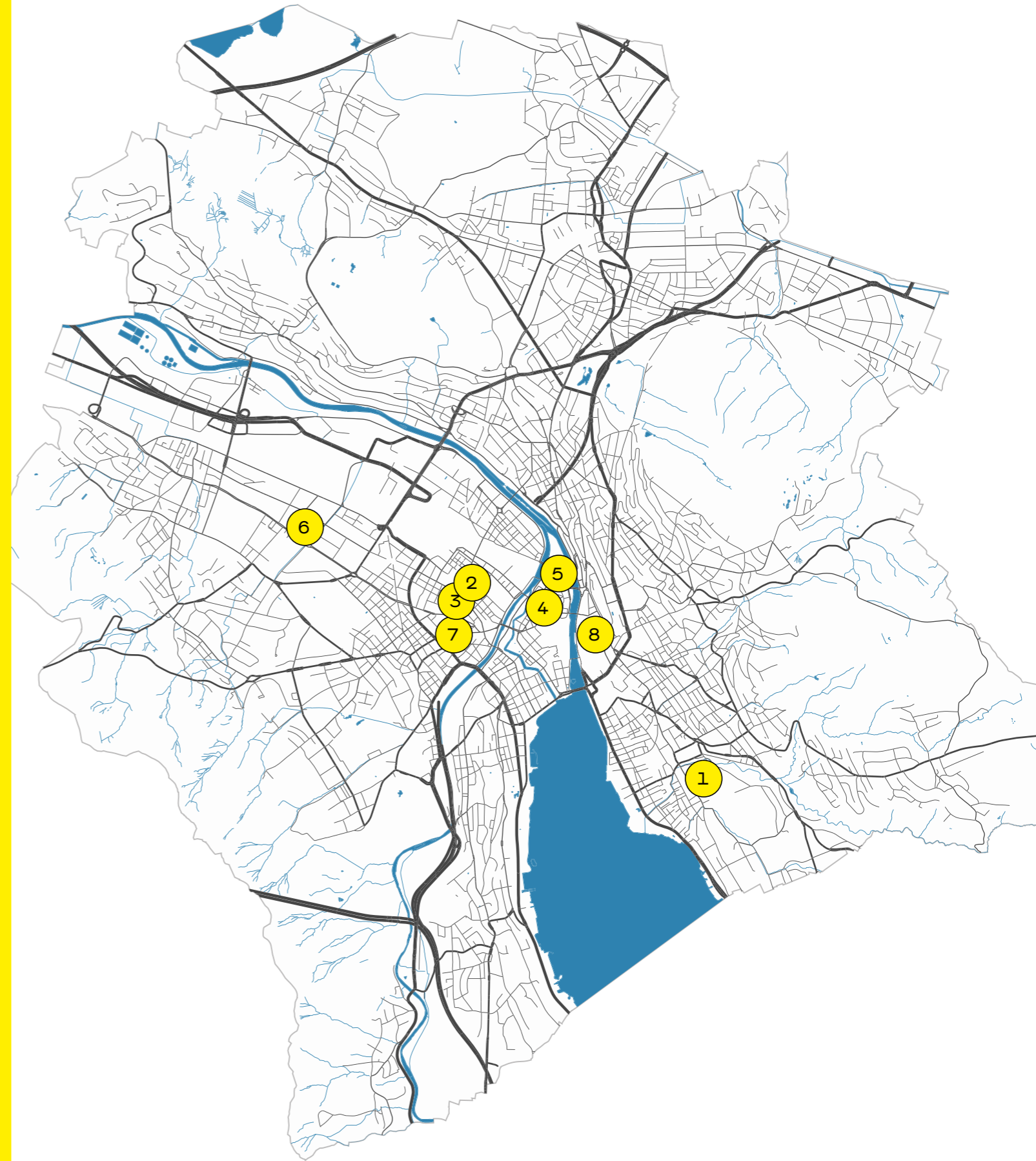
#### For further information, see

Projektgruppe Rassismus im öffentlichen Raum (PG RiöR): Möglichkeiten zum Umgang mit kolonialen Spuren im Stadtraum: Bericht der Projektgruppe RiöR zuhanden des Stadtrats, Zurich 2021.

▶ [https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/content/dam/stzh/prd/Deutsch/Stadtentwicklung/Publikationen\\_und\\_Broschueren/Integrationsfoerderung/themen\\_a-z/Diskriminierungsbekaempfung/M%3%b6glichkeiten\\_zum\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_kolonialen\\_Spuren\\_im\\_Stadtraum\\_Ri%3%b6R\\_3.2021.pdf](https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/content/dam/stzh/prd/Deutsch/Stadtentwicklung/Publikationen_und_Broschueren/Integrationsfoerderung/themen_a-z/Diskriminierungsbekaempfung/M%3%b6glichkeiten_zum_Umgang_mit_kolonialen_Spuren_im_Stadtraum_Ri%3%b6R_3.2021.pdf)

# THE WORLD IN ZURICH

Colonialism not only changed places that were colonized; it also changed the face of Europe – and therefore of Zurich too. Colonialism created an interconnected world, even if the connections are often not immediately apparent, and become so only upon close examination. New products and new consumer habits arrived in Zurich. Its sons and daughters returned from colonies with capital, artefacts and experience – and sometimes a wife, a husband, and children. People migrated to Zurich from colonies, as they continue to do today. They brought ideas, practices, and new habits with them – and they fought for recognition.

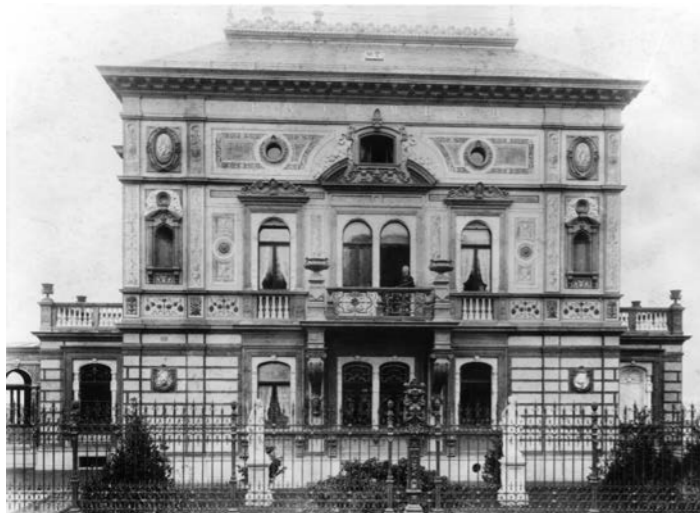




Many of Zurich's returnees from the colonies used to have villas in Zollikerstrasse (Photo: ETH-Bildarchiv/Stiftung Luftbild Schweiz/Walter Mittelholzer)

## 2 NIGHTCLUB "EXOTICISM"

Many stories from the colonies deal with *white* men and their fantasies about the licentious nature of the women they encountered. Such tales still resonate to this day, especially in the world of sex work. In Zurich and other European cities, Asian and African dancers and prostitutes are presented as "exotic", "submissive", or "wild", and thus draw on colonial fantasies. Serious economic disparities make it easy for nightclub owners to hire women from economically disadvantaged nations. In Switzerland between 1995 and 2016, such women were granted work permits as dancers, a situation that forced them to remain in sex work, even if that was not what they wanted. This type of work permit basically made it impossible for them to move into another line of work.



The client on the balcony of his Villa Patumbah (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)



Men watching an "exotic" dancer upstairs in the Odeon Café (Photo: Milou Steiner/Ringier Bildarchiv)

## 1 VILLA PATUMBAH

The Zurich neighbourhoods of Enge and Seefeld are home to many splendid villas whose owners made their fortunes in foreign colonies – though in most cases this fact is discreetly hidden. In the case of the Villa Patumbah, however, its owner Karl Fürchtegott Grob made no secret of his background: a tobacco plantation on Sumatra made the son of a Zurich baker one of the city's wealthiest men within fifteen years – albeit at the expense of local people and the natural environment in Indonesia. Both externally and internally, the villa draws attention to Grob's story in Asia.

## 3 HELVETIAPLATZ

Zurich's Helvetiaplatz does not just represent the struggle of working people to have their rights recognized; it also represents the struggle of migrants to achieve recognition and equality. For many years, Switzerland's policy towards seasonal workers from abroad was inhumane. Swiss businesses invited Italian and, later on, other workers from southern Europe to take up work in the country. They were not allowed to stay long, however: their work permits required them to return home after nine months. This was a policy with roots in the colonial era. Bringing foreign workers in to perform poorly paid jobs, and the fear of mixing with them, are part of the legacy of the colonial era. Some workers did stay on, however, and were joined by family members, and helped to make the city a more diverse place.



Workers' Monument by Karl Geiser on Helvetiaplatz (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)



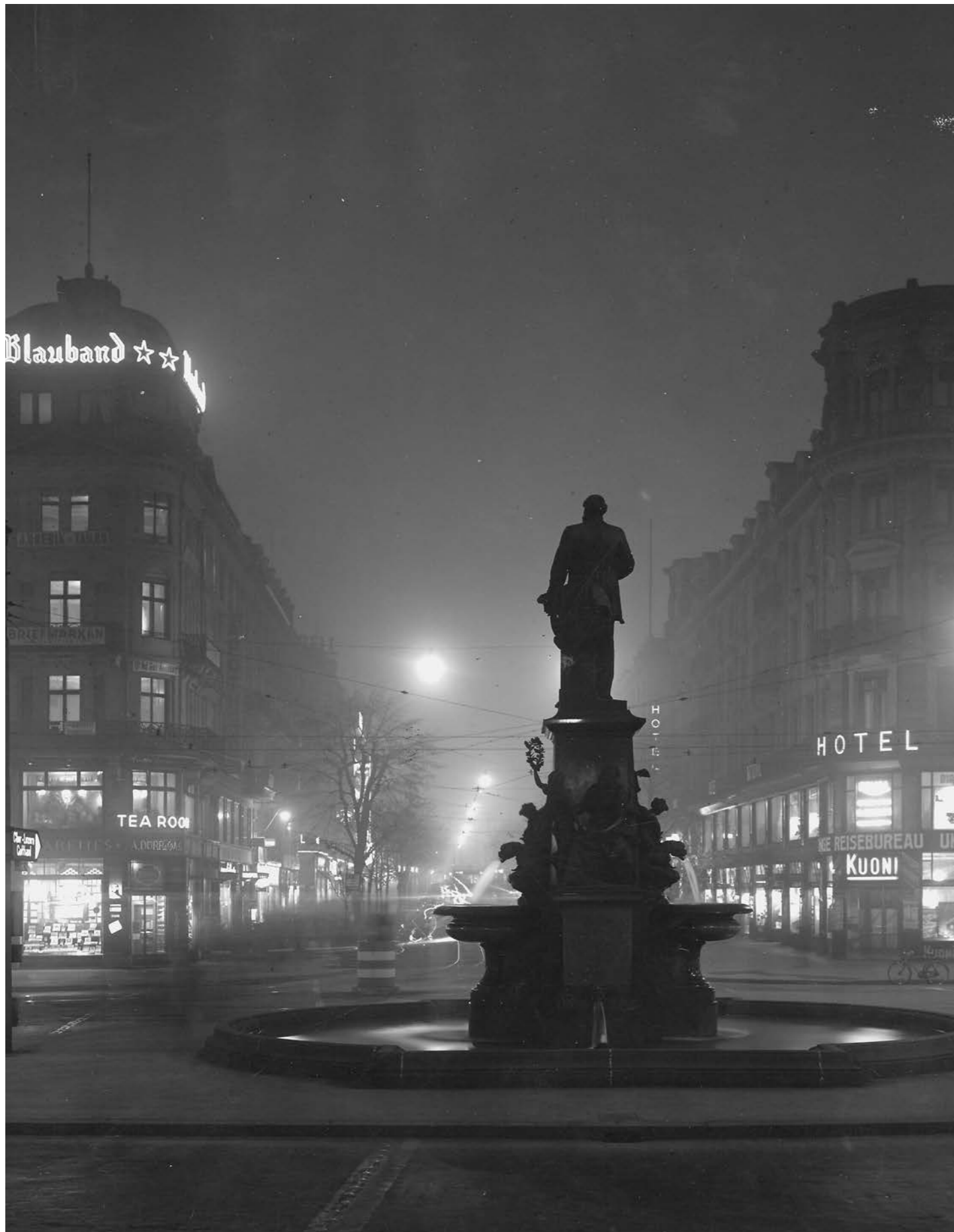
Demonstration on Helvetiaplatz to express solidarity with refugees, 2015 (Photo: Keystone/Dominic Steinmann)

## 4 ALFRED ESCHER MONUMENT

The statue of Alfred Escher in front of Zurich central station honours him as a railway pioneer and educational policymaker. Nevertheless, it is the regular focus of controversy. Escher is not only viewed as a railway pioneer and a representative of a progressive Zurich, but also as an example of how Zurich's capitalists turned a blind eye to the individuals who suffered as a result of their investments. One reason for this is that Alfred Escher's father owned a Cuban plantation with 87 enslaved people, and Escher never condemned the practice of slavery. The many Italian labourers who lost their lives while constructing the Gotthard Tunnel are another reason. The driving force behind its construction was Alfred Escher.



Seasonal workers at Zurich central station, 1962 (Photo: Keystone/Photopress-Archiv/Joe Widmer)



Monument to Alfred Escher on Zurich's Bahnhofplatz (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

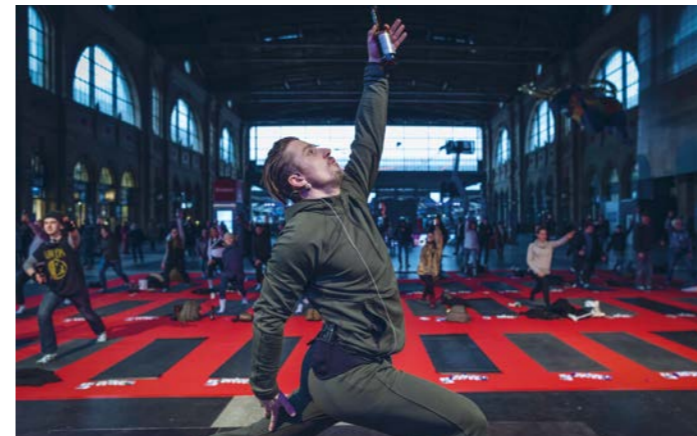
## 5 YOGA AND HOLI-FESTIVAL

Yoga in Zurich has a long history that goes back to the "Life Reform Movement" around 1900, that is, the hippies of their day. Philosophy and Indian religious practices were important elements within the movement, albeit in rather a distorted form: India and Asia more generally were elevated to the status of timeless and mystical places that could be considered the antithesis of the West where everything is judged on its utility or monetary value.

Today in the West, while yoga is a business that generates billions in earnings, its connections with India have largely faded, especially the religious ones. The same is true of the "Holi Festival of Colours" that is held annually in Hüntwangen (Canton of Zurich), among other places. It takes its inspiration from the traditional Hindu spring festival of Holi that is known for its wealth of colour. What westernized yoga and the "Holi Festival of Colours" have in common is the commodification of ancient Indian traditions from which their country of origin gains next to no benefit.



Football clubs use slogans and banners inside stadia to take a stand against racism. (Photo: Keystone)



Bring-a-beer yoga session inside Zurich central station (Photo: Keystone/Melanie Duchene)

## 6 RACISM IN THE FOOTBALL STADIUM

At sports events, racism often emerges undisguised from within the safety of the crowd. Insults directed at Black players are commonly based on stereotypical images that originated in the colonial era, and they reveal how deeply entrenched in society they are: Black players have bananas thrown at them, for instance, or monkey noises are heard when they take possession of the ball. Switzerland still lacks clear rules when it comes to dealing with racist insults in sport..



Holi festivals have been commercialized in recent years and are now popular around the world (Photo: Dreamstime)

**MURAL IN WIEDIKON RAILWAY STATION**

Advertising often serves to peddle and perpetuate colonial clichés: far-away places are portrayed as exotic for marketing purposes; Black people are shown in the role of servants; images of Asian and African women are sexualized. Advertising thus plays an unwitting part in fixing prejudices in our minds.



The mural inside Wiedikon railway station portrays a world of colonial consumption. (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

**Further reading:****General Literature:**

Präsenz des Kolonialen in der Stadt Zürich: Franziska Koch, Lea Pfäffli, Daniel Kurjaković: The air will not deny you: Zürich im Zeichen einer anderen Globalität. Zurich 2016.

**Villas in Seefeld:**

Heimatschutzzentrum: Patumbah liegt auf Sumatra, Zurich 2022.

Andreas Zangger: Eine kleine globale Kartographie des Seefelds, in: Roger M. Buerger, Kathrin Meier-Rust (eds.): Das Jacobs Haus, Zurich 2015. pp. 70–90.

**Appropriation of Indian Culture in Zurich:**

Rohit Jain: Bollywood, Chicken Curry – and IT, in: Harald Fischer-Tiné, Patricia Purtschert (eds.): Colonial Switzerland, Basingstoke 2015. pp. 133–153.

**Sexualization of Black Women:**

Paula Charles: Go, Josephine, go, 2nd ed., Zürich 1993.

General Overview: The History of Black Women in Switzerland: Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Shelley Berlowitz (eds.): Terra incognita?: der Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen in Zürich, Zurich 2013.

**Murals Wiedikon railway station:**

Zürich Kolonial: Bahnhof Wiedikon

[www.zh-kolonial.ch/stationen/bahnhof-wiedikon](http://www.zh-kolonial.ch/stationen/bahnhof-wiedikon)

**Migration and Colonialism:**

Rohit Jain: Der Schwarzenbach-Komplex geht uns alle an!, Neue Wege, 10, 2020, pp. 5–12.



Schwarzenbach's colonial goods store in Zurich (Photo: Baugeschichtliches Archiv)

**SCHWARZENBACH'S COLONIAL GOODS STORE**

The name of this grocer's shop in Niederdorf does not hide its colonial heritage. According to its owners, it emphasizes the long history of this family-run business in central Zurich. They say it makes every effort to ensure producers are fairly paid for their produce. Just how difficult it is to improve production conditions is shown by the example of tea from Assam in northeast India, however. Even to this day, the descendants of the tea pickers who moved there in the days of the Raj are unable to offer their children chances of advancement. Dependencies that have existed since the colonial era have little changed.

# COUNTER-ACTING BLIND SPOTS

The facts relating to Zurich's links with colonialism and slavery have largely long been known. Nevertheless, awareness of the issue among the general public came very late. It took commitment on the part of various groups and their initiatives to raise the issue.

The same with racism: for many years, it was a hard subject to broach because those affected usually met with incomprehension. Just as enslaved individuals did not simply capitulate meekly, those who encountered racism also always offered resistance. Thanks to many years of effort by campaigners and associations, to workshops and artistic interventions in the public realm, and thanks to books and articles, awareness of racism is gradually changing – even if there is a long way to go.





Over 10,000 people attended an anti-racism rally in Zurich in June 2020 (Photo: Yasmin Müller)

#### Counteracting collective amnesia (video)

Zurich is home to many ethnically diverse migrants whose circumstances vary. Many have a shared history of exclusion and face the difficulty of making their voice heard. The “Schwarzenbach-Komplex” has set itself the goal of reviewing and coming to terms with their stories of exclusion. In doing so, it seeks to reinforce a commemorative culture that is critical of racism and marked by a plurality of voices.

▶ <https://vimeo.com/448499959>

#### Art to counteract blind spots

Artists have addressed the issue of racism in Switzerland for several decades now. This exhibition contains a piece by Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo, for instance. Another current example is the performance by the actress Ntando Cele. With *Go Go Othello*, she asks the following question: “If Black actors are not even hired to play Othello, what other booking can they hope to land?” Bullestress by Fatima Moumouni also addresses how affected individuals deal with racism. In the *Kunsthaus Zürich*, Europe’s colonial past was the focus of *Remembering the Future*, an installation by Kader Attia.

An open letter signed in 2020 by 60 Black creative artists from across Switzerland reveals that racism is ever-present in the country’s creative and cultural industries, however. The letter calls on Swiss cultural institutions to dismantle racist structures in the arts and to take a proactive approach in their support for Black cultural practitioners.

#### Review of adoptions from Sri Lanka

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, almost 900 Sri Lankan babies and children were illegally adopted in Switzerland. In February 2020, a review by Zurich’s University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) revealed that Switzerland’s federal government and cantons chose to look the other way. It is the very people affected who are campaigning to have these cases investigated today. To that end, Sarah Ineichen founded an association called “Back to the Roots”. At the time, diplomatic channels informed the Federal Council about the irregularities, but it took no action to end what effectively were instances of human trafficking. Post-colonial circumstances and patterns of thinking still influenced adoption procedures and contributed to the acquiescence of the authorities. In May 2022, the Federal Council awarded compensation to those affected.

#### Film clip from *Je suis Noires* (video)

Determination on the part of organizations and campaigners has brought the issue of racism to public attention; in turn this has allowed a growing number of affected individuals to speak out about the structural racism they have experienced. For many of them, dealing with the issues of racism and colonialism also entails a quest for personal identity. Rachel M’Bon is a Swiss–Congolese journalist who set out in search of her dual identity as a Black Swiss woman. Collaborating with the filmmaker Juliana Fanjul on *Je suis Noires*, she focuses on six women. Each has a background that reveals her path to liberation.

▶ <https://youtu.be/-9sleSkJInY>

#### Movements in Zurich

The fate of George Floyd, who was murdered by an American police officer in 2020, touched people around the world. The Black Lives Matter movement and the events of summer 2020 gave new momentum to the anti-racism struggle of Black and other People of Colour. Yet the beginnings of such resistance go back to the colonial era. Anti-racism movements in Switzerland have been active largely since the 1970s. More recent years have seen the emergence of many new groups committed to campaigning against racism in Zurich.

## List of Associations

Compiled by the curatorial team, the following is an incomplete list of well-known organizations in and around Zurich that are involved in the fight against racism.

### AFMD African Foundation for Migration and Development

An international platform that engages the diaspora in the interests of African development, free enterprise, food security, and cultural dialogue.

### African Diaspora Council of Switzerland

A national platform for all Africans living in Switzerland; its mission is to act as a strong African voice in Swiss public life and politics, while encouraging members of the diaspora to contribute to development work in Africa.

### Allianz gegen Racial Profiling

Coalition of campaigners, creative artists, and scientists of Colour.

### ASAZ – African Students Association of Zurich

Its primary aim is to represent African students at academic institutions of higher education in Zurich.

### Autonome Schule Zürich

A project campaigning against racism and injustice.

### Baba News

Online magazine for Swiss men and women with roots around the world. It reports from inside a multicultural community.

### BIPoC.WoC

This network is active in the fight against racism.

### Bla\*Sh

Network of Black women and non-binary individuals in German-speaking Switzerland.

### Café Social Zürich

Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour engaged in social work have held regular meetings at Café Social in the Zurich area since November 2020.

### Decolonize Zurich

A group of activists that highlights colonial contexts and tests decolonizing strategies – “from postcolonial theory to action”.

### Diversum

An association for individuals affected by everyday, institutional, and other forms of racism based on ethnic ascription.

### Exit Racism Now!

Alliance of organizations and institutions in Switzerland calling for an end to racism in the country.

### INES – Institut Neue Schweiz

A think-and-act tank involving people with a migrant foreground, working at the intersection of knowledge production, public discourse, and social action – for those already here and those still to arrive.

### Kollektiv Vo da.

Various projects serve to call out discrimination and racism in Switzerland. @mirsindvoda.ch is a platform that allows individuals affected by racism to make their voices heard more widely with the aim of promoting empowerment and awareness of racism in society.

### Linke PoC

Swiss association campaigning against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

### MaSaNo

Maison des Savoirs Noirs is an association that seeks to advance, make visible, and disseminate Black knowledge and experience in all sectors from the perspective of dark-skinned Black women.

### Neue Schweizer Medienmacher\*innen

This group campaigns for considered, anti-racist reporting and for more media professionals with a history of migration.

### RAKSA – Rassismuskritische Soziale Arbeit

This network campaigns for social work to be anti-racist in theory and practice.

### Sankofa – Plattform für Menschen

#### afrikanischen Erbes

A platform that supports and promotes Afrocentric projects intended to strengthen dialogue and cultural awareness among people of African heritage. It unites committed Swiss citizens of a wide range of ages who have transcended ideological, religious, cultural and national barriers, and who meet to socialize, discuss, have fun, and advance their shared African heritage.

### Solinetz

This organization brings together volunteers who undertake various projects aimed at improving the living conditions of several hundred refugees in and around Zurich.

### TESORO

Association for coming to terms with the hurt and damage caused by the separation of families on account of parents' status as seasonal workers.


### Zürich Kolonial

Association established by a group of Zurich-based historians. It aims to produce a publicly accessible audio guide to shed light on the city's colonial history.

### **Further reading:**

Sabine Bitter, Annika Bangerter, Nadja Ramsauer: *Adoptionen von Kindern aus Sri Lanka in der Schweiz 1973–1997: zur Praxis der privaten Vermittlungsstellen und der Behörden. Historische Analyse betreffend das Postulat Ruiz 17.4181 im Auftrag des Bundesamts für Justiz, ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften, Zurich 2020.*

Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland.


 [blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org/post/2020/06/09/open-letter/](https://blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org/post/2020/06/09/open-letter/)

Ntando Cele: *Go go Othello*, Manaka Empowerment Prod., 2020.

Rachel M'Bon, Juliana Fanjul: *Je suis noires*, Akka Films und RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, 52 min., 2022.

Fatima Moumouni, Laurin Buser: *Bulletstress*, 2022.

SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen SRF, 2022.

 [srf.ch/news/schweiz/hunderte-betroffene-illegal-adoptierten-aus-sri-lanka-soll-endlich-geholfen-werden](https://srf.ch/news/schweiz/hunderte-betroffene-illegal-adoptierten-aus-sri-lanka-soll-endlich-geholfen-werden)

Verein Archiv & Utopie.

 [schwarzenbach-komplex.ch](https://schwarzenbach-komplex.ch)

## “The most disrespected person...”

The idea for this work of art emerged from a workshop that the team of curators ran with organizations from Zurich's Black community. They discussed possibilities for the community to contribute to the exhibition. The workshop was chaired by Hannan Salamat (ZIID). The artist Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo devised her concept that integrates the voices of community members.

“The most disrespected person... is the Black woman”: the words of Malcolm X are the source of the work's title. This work of art was devised by a group of Afro-Swiss women who were tireless in their efforts to ensure that people of African origin were involved in the exhibition. The stories of Black Women and their experiences in Switzerland and the words that describe them are reproduced in the collage. Visitors to the exhibition can view video clips of the women talking about their experiences. In the light of the large number of stories she hears, Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo plans to update these statements regularly. The ladder symbolizes the fact that Black Women often find themselves placed at the bottom end of the racial hierarchy and are forced to take alternative routes to the top.

1. Visit the following page:

▶ <https://apiyo.ch/kunstaussstellung-blinde-flecken-in-zuerich/>

2. Click on the different buttons beneath the collage to hear various statements by Black Women.



Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo, Collage – mixed media, eco-friendly paint, recyclable fabric and matter  
200 × 77 × 42 cm  
Signed below right: Apiyo Amolo, 2022 Created in 2022  
On loan to Zurich Town Hall

# IT CONCERNS US ALL

For many years, colonialism was a non-issue in Switzerland. The consensus view was that the country had nothing to do with it, and that it's all in the past anyway. Yet Switzerland was complicit in colonialism, and the effects of its involvement continue to be felt in the present. Everyone is affected – albeit in different ways. At the exhibition's six audio stations, visitors can hear what individuals from a variety of backgrounds have to say about the subject.

Can I – must I – accept  
responsibility for things my  
ancestors did? If the answer is  
yes, how do I go about it?

## Life in Zurich

Michelle Akanji, co-director of the Gessnerallee Theatre, describes her experience of working and living in Zurich.

When I say to people I work in the theatre, they often assume I mean on the stage, as a singer or actress. They can't imagine that there's such a thing as a Black theatre director; it's a form of structural racism, in fact.

My name is Michelle Akanji, I'm 33 years old, mum to two children, live in Zurich, and am currently co-director of the Gessnerallee Theatre in the city centre.

I think that almost all People of Colour here have experienced racism; I certainly have. I'm much more affected by structural racism – and more concerned with it. What I mean by that is classic forms of exclusion and underrepresentation, for instance in education or public sector jobs, but also inside national institutions such as the police, where racial profiling is a big issue.

Because People of Colour face barriers when it comes to accessing higher education in Switzerland, at secondary school, and later at university, I was often the only Person of Colour – or one of a few – in my classes, but also in wider social contexts. I didn't see myself reflected in others. On the one hand, I had no role models, and not many schoolmates or fellow students who had experienced similar things as I had in their childhood, youth, and adult life. On the other hand, I had the feeling I always had to get good grades, that I had to keep doing better and outperform others, or that I had to be a trailblazer and show that I didn't match a certain stereotype. That piles a lot of pressure on you, both from outside and from within; I often put a lot of pressure on myself.



Michelle Akanji was both onlooker and participant in *Niemandsland*, an audio piece directed by Dimitri de Perrot at the Gessnerallee Theatre. (Photo: archphot)

Because structural racism exists, I often question my own position, and wonder if it's coincidence or a question of luck that I've ended up where I have? I'm not sure whether it's really because of my own abilities or whether ascriptions of otherness are the reason I now have the role I do. That means a lot of stress for me, and, I think, for many others, too, who experience the same thing. Living up to the role and these expectations creates a lot of pressure.

▶ [Living in Zurich – Michelle Akanji](https://youtu.be/uYC6XYpdwq8)  
<https://youtu.be/uYC6XYpdwq8>

## An Unexpected Great-grandmother

Stefanie Inhelder is a dancer whose family history revealed a great-grandmother in Asia.

Basically we knew nothing about this because my grandfather never mentioned it, and my great-grandfather never discussed it with my father either. So, my dad and I are the first generation that can talk about it. Thanks to historians, we've been able to uncover a lot in hindsight.

I'm Stefanie Inhelder, I grew up near Zurich, and work in the performing arts and film.

A few years ago, my dad went for a genetic test. It revealed that his blood was "a quarter Southeast Asian". He started researching and produced a family tree that he was able to trace back to the thirteenth century.

If you follow my paternal line – from my father to my grandfather to my great-grandfather – you can see they settled around the world, in Asia, Africa, South and North America. My great-grandfather first worked as an assistant plantation manager in Indonesia and my grandfather came to Switzerland to be educated. Afterwards he went to Brazil. What he did there we don't know, and then he was off to South Africa – again I don't know what he did there. My father was born in South Africa, and then he came to Switzerland.

I think the biggest thing about this was that my great-grandfather was in a relationship with a woman who was effectively colonized. She had been bought, which was the norm at the time, but it still gives you a jolt to realize something like that happened in your own family. They had three children, two boys, Bill and my grandfather, and a girl called Margrit. The two boys came to Switzerland to be educated at Trogen cantonal school. After that, the women disappeared from history. We don't know what happened after that or whether we still have blood relatives in Indonesia.



An Lak, Stefanie Inhelder's great-grandmother in front of her house in Sumatra (Photo: family photograph)

What really left its mark on me was the realization of just how much – let's call it colonial thinking – is in me: how I grew up, the beliefs I heard my family express, how important it is from the perspective of privilege or even from the perspective of the perpetrators, to think about the meaning of colonial thinking and how it continues to influence us today. The most formative insight for me was that racism actually only exists in conjunction with colonialism – that the words "racism" and "colonialism" are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. And I began to understand that racism is a part of us and of our society – and that things won't change much until we acknowledge it in ourselves first.

▶ [An unexpected great-grandmother – Stefanie Inhelder](https://youtu.be/g3chuoWLxkA)  
<https://youtu.be/g3chuoWLxkA>

# Tourism and Colonialism

Stephan Roemer, proprietor and managing director of Tourasia, reflects on some colonial aspects of tourism.

My horror scenario is the tourist in his shorts and Hawaiian shirt, camera slung around his neck, standing in the middle of some village, surrounded by a few locals who have no idea what to do with him. That's my horror scenario.

My name is Stephan Roemer. I'm the managing director of Tourasia, a Swiss tour operator specializing in Asia.

For me, no two tourists are the same. Tourists can be very welcome short-stay guests in a country. They bring income into it, and that in turn increases levels of wealth among local people. But tourists can also be short-stay colonialists, and those ones easily cost local people more than they get from them. Each tourist uses around 300 litres of water a day. We take it for granted that we can do that in Switzerland. We have water, almost a surplus of it. We've got clean water, its supply is guaranteed, and our wastewater is treated. In some countries, though, water can be a really precious commodity, and every litre of it counts. Sometimes it has to be fetched from a great distance. Water is probably also much more expensive than we are used to in Switzerland – precisely because it might need to be treated or extracted first.

Cheap package tours are often suspect: how can I expect to head off somewhere for 399 Swiss francs a week? I can only say it's not realistic, and it's certainly not sustainable if we factor in the fuel costs per seat on a one-hour flight plus fees et cetera. It's not at all realistic to think that figures like that can cover an operator's costs – to say nothing of running a hotel. In these cases, the hotel's only concern is to fill a room and hope that its guests will eat and drink in the hotel, and so help the hotel



Images of exotic places that first surfaced during the colonial era entice many tourists to Africa and Asia. They nevertheless show little willingness to modify their behaviour, even although the locals are often part of the fascination for them. (Photo: Dreamstime)

to cover its infrastructure and other costs. But that is simply not sustainable. I'm of no help to locals that way, or the environment.

Another thing that always leads to modern "travel colonialism" is if I use only international hotel chains and spend my tourist dollars there; that only benefits international chains. Or am I prepared to use the services of a local accommodation provider and in that way contribute directly to local people?

▶ **Tourism and Colonialism – Stephan Roemer**  
<https://youtu.be/pQuJ4yBpjBc>

# Commodity Trade

Andreas Missbach, the director of Alliance Sud, explains how little has changed in commodity trading since the colonial era.

This image of a gold-mine shaft plunging down into the black depths illustrates the path we are currently on, and down there are the people we give no thought to – and it's that we need to change.

My name is Andreas Missbach, I'm a social scientist, and director of Alliance Sud, the centre of excellence for Swiss development organizations, international cooperation, and development policy.

I was recently able to trace the route that gold takes. Many African nations produce gold, but I was in Tanzania. Conditions in that country's mines are just horrendous. Mines are unsecured holes in the ground, up to 100 metres deep – excavated by hand. Young men with no safety gear whatsoever and with no equipment to climb down into these holes. For six or so hours, they dig ore that others then heave up to the surface in sacks that are then carried over to the foot of a hill where women crush it by hand. The sand produced by crushing the ore is washed and finally mixed with mercury, a powerful neurotoxin. This produces an amalgam of negligible gold content. This amalgam is heated over an open fire to evaporate the mercury. Mercury vapour in particular is extremely toxic.

This is what happens next with gold. Tanzania has a gold market, typically involving two to three intermediary brokers. The gold is sold to Dubai, where refineries buy it. They refine the gold and increase its value, its gold content. From Dubai it is traded across the globe; it might possibly end up in Switzerland. It is estimated that as much as two thirds of mined gold is smelted in Switzerland. From Swiss refineries the gold can end up in the bank vaults beneath Zurich's Paradeplatz, for instance.

One absolutely crucial thing that Switzerland can and must do is change its tax laws. Switzerland



Kamatanda copper and cobalt mine in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is accessed via a hole between 30 and 40 metres deep. Miners have to clamber down it without the aid of a ladder or a rope. (Photo: Keystone VII Photo)

is a haven for tax dodgers. The country has very low levels of taxation, and attracts companies that pay Swiss tax rates on their foreign earnings, including those from the Global South that by rights should be taxed there to allow those countries to improve their infrastructure, to build schools and hospitals et cetera.

It's the global inequalities and the fate of people who simply do not have the same opportunities that keep me going: no matter how much they struggle, toil, and fight, they still go to bed hungry. A world in which such huge disparities exist is not one in which I can live at ease.

▶ **Commodity Trade – Andreas Missbach**  
<https://youtu.be/g2feXaMo9LU>

## First-generation Migrant

Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli describes her experiences as a Black woman in Zurich in the 1980s.

I was very visible as a Black woman, someone who always had something to say, someone who stuck her oar in everywhere, who was awkward and mouthy.

My name is Zeedah, I'm from Kenya originally – though I always say I come from Zurich, and am happy to live here. I've lived here longer than I lived in Kenya. I'm a specialist in leadership, women at management level, women's safety, and development issues.

I came to Zurich in the late 1970s, 1979 to be exact. Zurich wasn't such a strange place, but the people were. It was obvious they had a different culture, and that they lived according to different values. I found that a bit of a challenge. I was very young, of course. I made a home here and felt at ease – though things did get a bit tight at times. We had our differences and there were conversations about everyday racism. It was a case of gaining experience and learning lessons. It wasn't all positive experiences, of course, there were negative ones, too, sadly.

I came here without really having experienced racism because I wasn't made to feel Black. I was simply at home. I was a daughter. I had various identities and none of them was the colour of my skin. And then the experience of coming here and realizing that everything I was, everything of value in my life, everything I had held dear, everything I knew – that I was a daughter, that my grandparents loved me as their granddaughter, that I had siblings – all those things were shattered. The only thing that mattered for the people around me here was the colour of my skin. That felt very strange, it also hurt me because I felt diminished. No matter what I said or did, it was always viewed from the perspective of the colour of my skin and was treated accordingly.

I felt really alone in the beginning. I needed Black women around me. I needed women's spaces and the things women talk about. I always knew



Feeling a need for a sense of community, a place in which to exchange ideas and share strength, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli opened the Meeting Point for Black Women in Zurich in the 1990s. Dr. Verozian Mutile is seen at front left. (Photo: Gertrud Vogler/Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv)

that I might need to fight back on any given day. Maybe today's the day an idiot will cross my path. Maybe it'll happen to me. I was always ready for it, always primed.

In Zurich, you see people from different backgrounds, with different colours of skin, people speaking different languages, things that are more noticeable now than in the 1970s. It's a different generation setting the tone now. I think things are changing for the better.

There's an African philosophy called ubuntu. It means something like, "I am, because you are, and without you there is no me." Our worth and our survival depend on one another; we can only get by together.

▶ **First-generation migrant – Zeedah Meierhofer Mangeli**  
<https://youtu.be/le3VPK6aCuo>

## Consumerism

Pascal Herzog, a member of the ViCafé management board, explains the difficulties involved in producing and distributing coffee in a sustainable and socially just manner.

Coffee became a passion of mine while I was a student, not so much because of the drink itself, but because I was studying the market for onions in India and Pakistan, and was so fascinated by how foodstuffs are traded around the world in huge flows of commodities moving in every direction. We understand so little of what goes on in the background.

I'm Pascal Herzog. I'm a member of the Vi-Café management board, and am responsible for buying and roasting coffee.

You can't avoid colonial structures in the coffee industry: it starts with the fact that many coffee plantations have a colonial history. Many of them are still in the hands of the original family owners, though some aren't; some of them have changed hands. The reality on each plantation is different. In most countries of origin, coffee is still harvested by hand, which means a large workforce is needed to do the job.

In our part of the world, coffee is a daily luxury for which people are prepared to pay. Even so, we couldn't just double the price of it and expect people to keep drinking the same amount of it, or at the very least not expect them to fire off an email saying it's awful how coffee has become so expensive. This increases the pressure on costs for coffee plantations. In markets where coffee is very much a commodity, and where efficiency is the be-all and end-all, exploitation can become an issue because the bargaining power of individual workers is really quite limited.

The basic problem in coffee farming is that it remains a highly labour-intensive activity. I think that work contracts are the biggest problem within the coffee industry: the men and women who harvest ripe coffee beans, for instance, are often paid the statutory minimum wage, but that itself is insufficient to take them over the poverty line.



Colonialism fundamentally changed European patterns of consumption. Many foods and luxury goods are produced in countries that used to be colonies. Even today, exploitative structures are a feature of the production and distribution of such goods. (Photo: iStock)

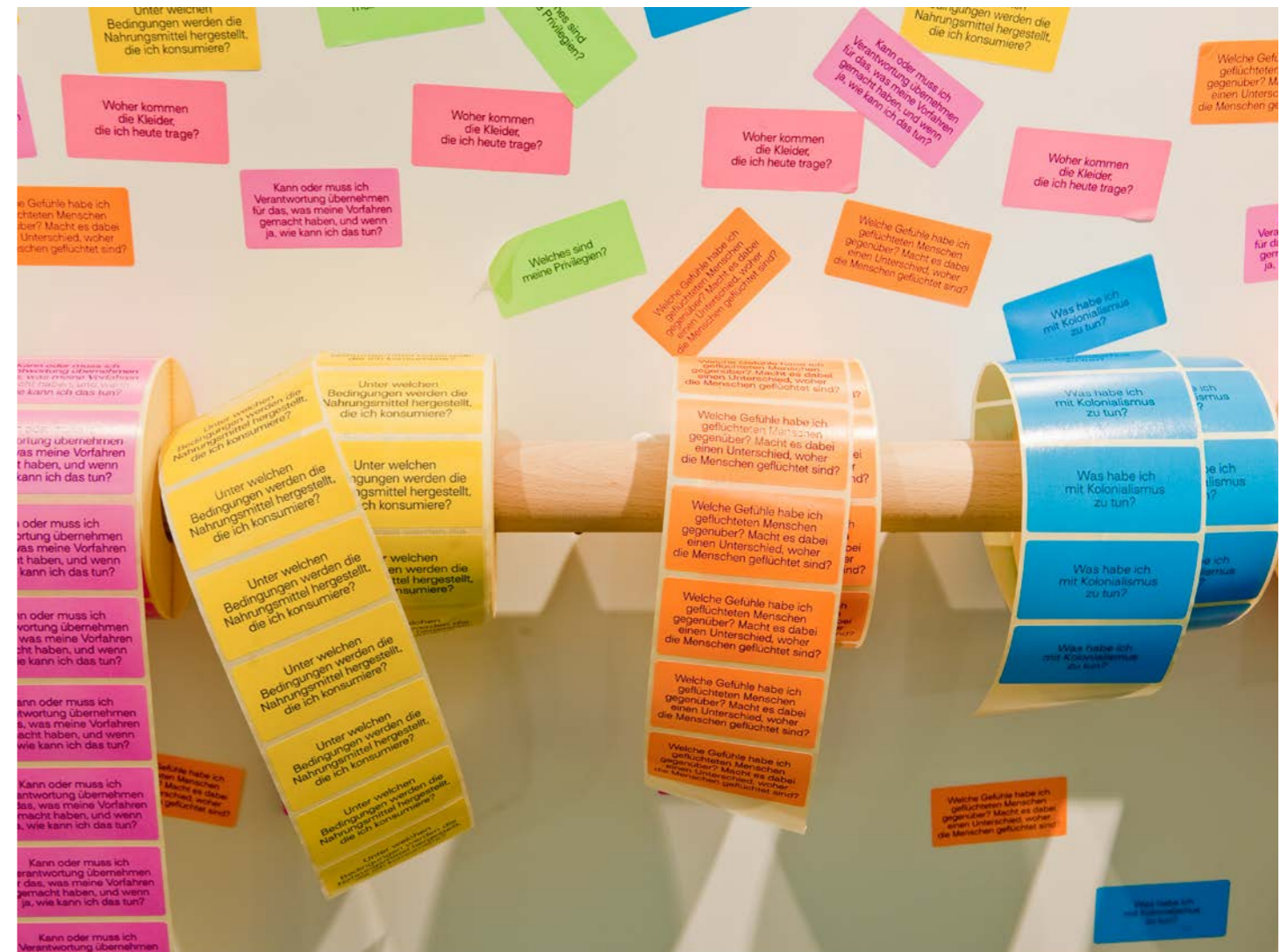
The challenge with coffee is that the value chain is very long. As a consumer, it is really hard to know where your coffee comes from and how the individuals working within its value chain were treated.

The ports, for instance, present an enormous challenge, not just involving the coffee industry, but all goods. As I see things, people always focus on what happens on coffee plantations. Many brands have an image of a beaming farmer on their packaging, rather than the reality behind the product: in the ports of East Africa, for instance, workers are massively exploited. These people have nothing whatsoever to do with the farming life; their job is to get the containers ready that will later be loaded onto a large container ship.

▶ **Consumption – Pascal Herzog**  
<https://youtu.be/GSOrutlMS5E>

# GETTING INVOLVED

Throughout the exhibition, a number of questions – reprinted here – were directed at visitors. Take some time to think about them; they encourage you to reflect and make connections between chapters in history and your personal life today. The issue of colonialism affects us all, and the lessons to be learned about it start with each of us.



(Photo: Michael Richter)

## What question most gave you food for thought?

Visitors were invited to choose the question that occupied them most and to stick it on a whiteboard, and if need be, to talk about it with a friend. These stickers were also used in workshops. Visitors were free to take them home.

## What can you do?

Our experiences as individuals are rooted in our social context. We are not merely observers of the past, but are agents in the present who can influ-

ence the future. Visitors were invited, while facing their reflection, to write down on a mirror what they thought they could do to combat racism and the repercussions of colonialism (exploitative trade relations, adopting a Eurocentric attitude, et cetera).

It was important to us to ensure that the conversation remained respectful. Offensive, racist, or discriminatory comments and those that failed to comply with current law were documented and removed by employees of the City of Zurich. Very few such instances were reported, however.



The exhibition's hands-on elements proved very popular. A colourful and multi-layered patchwork spread across the whiteboard during the exhibition's run. The mirrors were used for discussion threads in which visitors responded to one another; soon filled, the mirrors had to be wiped clean to make space for new thoughts. The following pages offer some impressions of the exhibition, especially also of the yellow tape, which, wrapped around and stretching across

the columns in the atrium, was somewhat reminiscent of a barrier tape. Colonialism was shaped by violence; through racism, it created boundaries and barriers whose influence continues to be felt down to the present day. Yet these lengths of yellow tape also symbolize the fact that Zurich men, women, and municipal institutions were involved in the colonial era; by the same token, they connect points in time and places, history and the present.

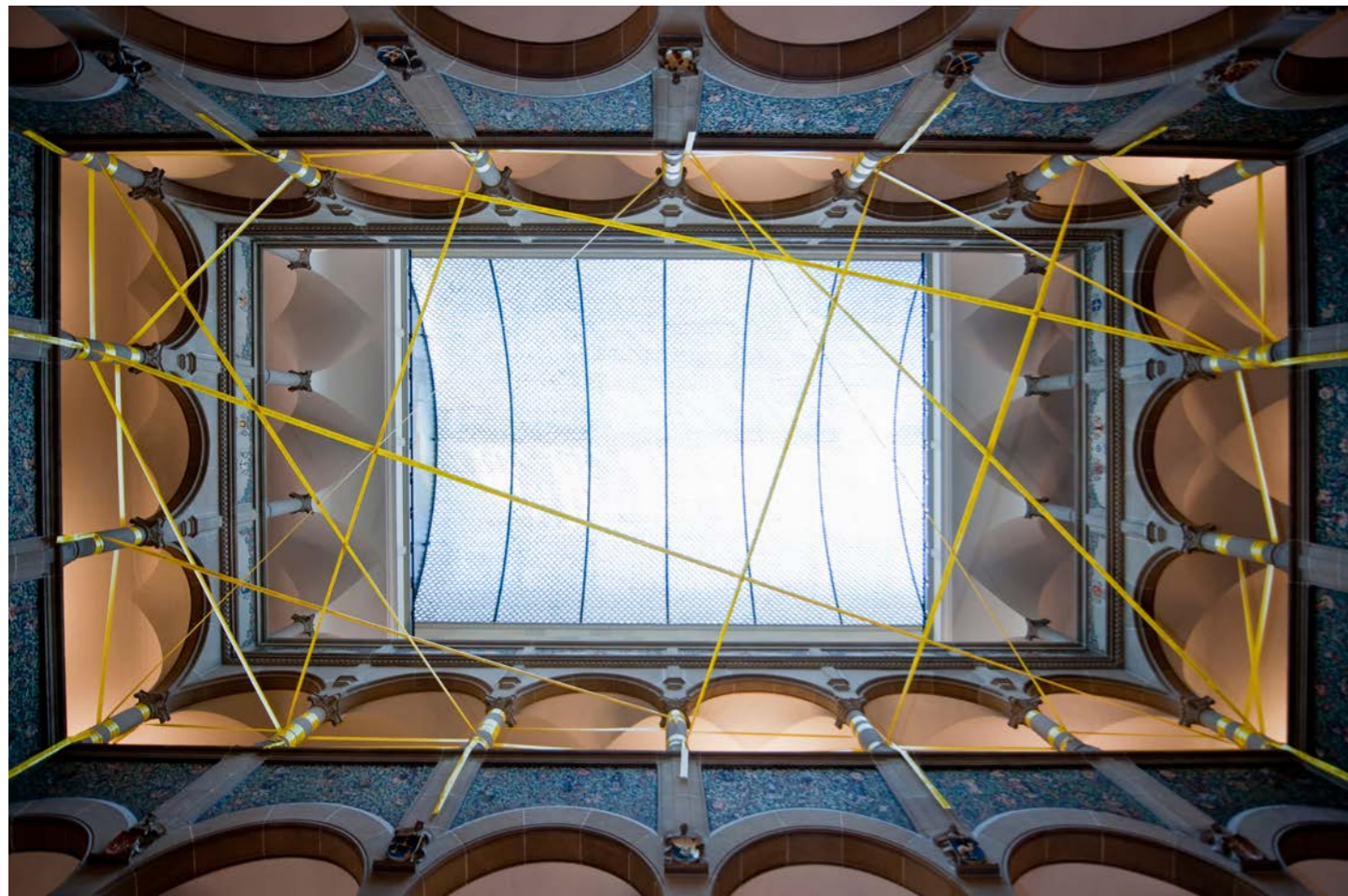




(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)



(Photo: Michael Richter)

# Excerpts from the Visitor's Book

The comments book was much used. Many visitors left comments, some of which went into great detail. The exhibition was much praised and was occasionally faulted. The lack of an English or French translation of the exhibition texts was a particular source of disappointment.

Koloniale Ausbeutung von Ländern und Menschen ist mitunter ein Grund weshalb Menschen aus ihrer Heimat flüchten müssen. Flucht und Migration ist kein Verbrechen, ~~dennoch~~ dennoch werden diese Menschen wie Verbrecher\*innen behandelt. Aber der Staat lässt zu dass Unternehmen weiterhin Menschen und Länder ausbeuten. Das ist das Verbrechen!

Danke für die Ausstellung!  
Da ich selbst auch einen "kolonialen" Hintergrund habe als Auslandschweizerin ist mir das Thema nahe und auch die Hilflosigkeit mit derer ich selbst konfrontiert bin, persönlich auch verächtlich zu sein, meinen rassistischen Vorurteile nicht grundlegend wegzulegen zu können und mich als Teil der Gesellschaft mitschuldig zu fühlen.

Vielen Dank, gute Ausstellung!

Sehr gute Ausstellung!  
Alle Menschen sind gleich die Rechte und Positionen gegeben. 23. März 2023

Sehr eindrückliche Ausstellung, die am Ende Gewissensbisse verursacht. 23. März 23

Es wird meist vermutet (archaische Bildung von damals völlig neuere Erträge) und die aktuelle Arbeitslosigkeit der Arbeitsmarkt. Aber es ist wohl nötig, dass sich auch Tüchtigen ein bisschen einen Vergessenen schenken. 23.3.23

P.S. Sind wir heute viel besser, wenn wir billige T-Shirts von ungeliebten Arbeitern aus Asien kaufen?

Sehr gute und eindrückliche Bilder und Kommentare, Reflexion und Handeln ist zentral und kann das kritische Denken

11.04.  
Tolle informative Ausstellung, gut aufgearbeitet und präsentiert, sehr ansprechend und definitiv interaktiv genug!

11.04  
Hammer!

Dank der Ausstellung weiss ich nun noch besser, was ich in der Schule lernen sollte, sehr beeindruckend. Danke P. (haben wir, aber ich habe es nicht so gut verstanden...)

11.04 d.h.?  
Als eine mixed person finde ich diese Art von Ausstellung super. Die richtigen Fragen und Antworten werden gestellt und vor allem white people müssen sich mit ihrem white privilege auseinandersetzen. Ich selber habe, als schwarze Person, angefangen mich mehr dafür einzusetzen und immer mehr "ungemütliche" Gespräche mit meiner weißen schwarze Familie zu halten.

Jetzt bin ich sogar an dem Punkt gekommen, dass ich ~~an~~ sie ihren rassistischen Danken bewusst gemacht habe und sie jetzt hier mit mir in dieser Ausstellung sehen und dies weiterverbreiten.

9.2.23

Heute waren wir mit der Klasse da. Wir haben sehr viel gelernt über Kolonialismus und Rassismus. Ich versuche etwas zu ändern!  
Liebe Grüsse

Ausstellung sehr kreativ super gemacht!  
Danke viel Mals für die Einladung

Super Ausstellung, gut wird dieses Thema ~~es~~ auch mal angesprochen

Was wir ~~ein~~ eindeutig: Geschichte bringt uns bei, dass und Geschichte nichts lehrt.

Venez de Lecture pour voir cette exposition:  
Bravo! Il faut que les gens, laissent se  
Nécessité de parler et les idées montées!

Please provide English translation! This is a really great and important exhibition. It should be available to more people. Thanks!

Impressionnant regard de Zurich sur elle-même.  
Courageux. Merci et que d'autres villes s'y mettent!

# VOICES

We asked four authors to comment on the exhibition. Asmaa Dehbi and Dina Wyler reflect on the exhibition from a Muslim/Jewish perspective; Paola De Martin does so against the background of her experience as a member of a migrant family. Finally, Rohit Jain addresses the question of the politics of memory, an issue the city of Zurich might well have to give more thought to in the years to come.

## Asmaa Dehbi and Dina Wyler Muslim and Jewish Perspectives on Zurich's Colonial Entanglements

The exhibition *Blind Spots* and the accompanying programme of events contributed to revealing Zurich's colonial entanglements and its ramifications to this day significantly. The following text examines why a multi-perspective approach and the forging of sustainable alliances are not only useful to address this weighty issue but also urgently required to advance comprehensive and sustainable anti-racism efforts.

### Anti-Muslim Racism in Switzerland

Little to nothing is known about the early days of Muslim life in Switzerland. In the Middle Ages we have isolated references to the presence of so-called Saracens<sup>1</sup> in the area of the Alps where they were often described as "heathens" or "barbarians", and, occasionally, as "dark brown people". The stereotypical depictions tenaciously carried over into later eras: during the age of the Crusades, Muslims were framed as aggressive, threatening and fanatical adversaries. In the Victorian age with its distinct aversion towards anything to do with the body and sexual matters, Muslim mainstream society served as a welcome projection surface for exotic fantasies and salacious fancies. Finally, in the course of colonial expansion, European arts, culture, and science also began fabricating a systematic and racist image of the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> After 9/11, anti-Muslim racism rose sharply, supplanting romanticization and exoticization with security issues and discussions about religious visibility. In Switzerland, too, these issues began to dominate the discourse in the media and in politics, culminating in the national ban on minarets, among other things, in 2009. The same racist narratives shaped the decision taken by the Swiss electorate regarding the ban on veiling in 2021. Anti-Muslim racism is widespread in Switzerland, ranging from verbal violence against Muslim men and women in public to structural discrimination, for example, in terms of employment, housing, or when applying for Swiss citizenship.

### Anti-Semitism in Switzerland

Jewish people, too, were and often still are the victims of systematic discrimination. Back in the Middle Ages, Jewish people had to pay protection money for their safety. They were forbidden to own land and were only allowed to settle in certain areas. When the plague swept through Europe, the Jews were accused of poisoning the drinking wells, resulting in pogroms, torture, and expulsion. The Swiss Constitution of 1848 denied Jews the status of full citizens and thus legal equality. It was only upon pressure from abroad that Jews were granted the right of free residence in 1866. This, in turn, nurtured new resentments against Jewish fellow citizens, ultimately leading to the ban on shechita<sup>3</sup> in 1893 – the first people's initiative of the modern Swiss Confederation, by the way. The campaign leading up to the vote was marked by anti-Semitic sentiment, ultimately not least with the intention of curbing Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Anti-Jewish sentiments reached a new peak in the context of the Swiss refugee policy during the Second World War, insofar as German Jews seeking a safe haven in Switzerland were singled out on the basis of their specially marked passports and refused entry, thus sending them back to their certain death. Anti-Semitic narratives persist in various forms and in various political factions to this day and help to fuel common conspiracy theories.

### Parallels in Religion-based Discrimination

Although anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim experiences of marginalization are increasingly being addressed in specific contexts and different spaces of the Swiss public sphere, these discourses are usually conducted separately from one another, with little to no links being made to their similarities. When seeking parallels between anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism, it is not about equating discriminatory practices and experiences or about establishing a form of competing victimhood between the two groups. Rather, the aim is to identify similar operational modes in the construction of images of otherness and to search for patterns of how non-belonging are established regarding religious minorities. For instance, both discriminatory practices are founded on the narrative of growing influence, creeping foreignization, even the undermining of the social fabric by certain religious communities. They are complemented by stigmatizing notions of "religion" which, in a public that tends to be ever more critical of religion, is portrayed as inherently inhumane, irrational, fanatical, and backward. On top of that, there is the idea that both Muslims and Jews only show loyalty towards members of their own communities. While in the case of anti-Semitism, Jewish people are said to possess excessive power, intelligence, wealth, and therefore influence, anti-Muslim racism points in the other direction: people perceived as Muslim are usually described as uneducated and inferior and thus pose a danger from below. Despite the many parallels between their experiences of discrimination, Muslims and Jews are often perceived as occupying opposite poles, for one thing as far as the ongoing conflict in the Middle East is concerned, but also by externalizing and describing contemporary anti-Semitism in Switzerland as being fuelled exclusively by Muslim immigrants, thus nourishing the image of the "good other" and the "bad other".

### Alliances and the Pluralization of Experience

Experiences of and with anti-Muslim racism and Anti-Semitism provide important starting points for understanding and coming to terms with lasting colonial-racist sentiments today. Yet, often the common perspectives and threads tend to be overlooked. In Switzerland, in particular, there is a lack of generative dialogue spaces that would allow Jewish and Muslim people to look beyond their own predicament and create a solid foundation, thus allowing marginalized people to forge new alliances. For only the joint examination of individual and collective experiences of discrimination is able to unearth the underlying patterns and continuities. It is only by pluralizing these experiences, so the argument, that we will be able to shatter these colonial-racist logics of uniformity and singularity, and create an opportunity to see and understand oneself as either a Jewish or a Muslim person rooted in Switzerland. Such newly created alliances would also allow to mobilize as yet uncommitted partners who have hitherto been arguing and acting from within their respective position. Lived solidarity can only grow if we break open the as yet intra-Muslim and intra-Jewish debates and bring them together in an exchange, for example, by encouraging marginalized persons to champion issues that do not directly affect them.

In order for such alliances to be able to hold their own in the long run in the presently polarizing societal and political discourses, and not lapse into individually vested interests, we need a constructive debating culture capable of enduring ambiguities and not aiming for unanimity. However, to build such negotiation spaces and keep them alive, we need, above all, resources. In this respect, the exhibition on Zurich's involvement in colonialism provides important groundwork. Hopefully it does not mark the end of the debate – but only the beginning.

**Asmaa Dehbi is a PhD student and a research assistant at the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society of the University of Fribourg with a focus on social work in migration society, socio-pedagogical professionalism, and research in anti-Muslim racism.**

**Dina Wyler is a political scientist and, as a member of the board of trustees of the Zurich Institute for Interreligious Dialogue (ZIID), actively involved in promoting a multi-perspective approach to anti-racism work and a pluralistic culture of remembrance in Switzerland.**

- 1 Saracens is an umbrella term for people of Islamic faith who left their strongholds in southern France in the course of the 10th century and ventured as far as present-day Switzerland.
- 2 The ideological appropriation of regions and states, especially in Asia and North Africa, by European colonial powers by assembling specific images about "others", homogenizing them in a process of naturalization and collectivization and then declaring the perceptions as objectively valid knowledge, became known as "Orientalism", a term coined by the literary scholar Edward Said in 1978.
- 3 Shechita is the correct Jewish method of slaughtering permitted animals and poultry for food.

## Paola De Martin

# The Potentials of Similarity

I was asked by the curators of *Blind Spots* to comment on the exhibition from the “outside”, that is, from my migrant perspective. At long last, it is possible to publicly think and talk about these issues. I have been exploring these matters for a while already – in my role as an academic, as the daughter of a migrant working-class family, as a designer, as a performer, and as an activist. My tacit reaction to the request was that my position had little to do with an “outside perspective”. Switzerland’s labour and migration history is so densely interwoven with the issue of colonialism that it would probably be more appropriate to speak of my viewpoint as an intimate internal perspective. Two aspects of this interconnectedness are featured on exhibition panels; this at least, I was pleased to see. For one thing, this concerned the colonial roots of the Swiss seasonal worker status which governed the precarious livelihoods of migrant working families from across southern Europe in Switzerland from 1934 until as late as 2002. Secondly, the exhibition addresses the eugenic reflex of men like Auguste Forell and Eugen Bleuler due to whom Black people as well as Jewish and Italian migrants were seen as alien and as a danger to the “healthy” Swiss social body. This resulted in long-lasting discrimination, given that eugenics enjoyed widespread acceptance in Switzerland. The two examples help to reveal the connections between labour migration and colonialism. The connection between labour migration and colonialism certainly exists, and also pertains to other socially discriminated groups such as the victims of enforced social care, victims of homo- and transphobia, of deep-seated hatred against Travelling people, refugees suffering at the hands of an inhumane and degrading asylum policy, as well as marginalized and threatened Sans Papiers who once fled their country and came to Switzerland in the hope of a better future for their children.

In various constellations, I began to speak with these groups about the discriminations they and I have experienced, but also about our privileges. Time and again, we realized that our experiences had their origins in the colonial past. Despite our migratory head start, as Fatima Moumouni aptly

calls the self-conscious, post-migrant condition, it is not easy to find a language that captures the strangely familiar migrant insider view of one of the most significant blind spots in Swiss history. Of course, we migrant labourers didn’t belong to the colonized peoples. In fact, many migrant families, mine included, came from countries which themselves once had been colonial powers, such as Portugal, Spain or Italy. This has left behind one or the other colonial-racist trace, but it is not a thing one usually talks about. The whole issue is contradictory and highly complex; and yet it is also commonplace and ordinary.

After years of historical research in the archives and countless discussions with migrant workers and descendants of formerly colonized people in Switzerland, I would tentatively and cautiously describe the complex situation as follows: Migrant working families were reflexively “made black” by a deeply entrenched colonial mindset. An extremely racist black mask (foolish, stupid, cocky, libidinous, crooked, dirty, greedy, dangerous) was slapped on their skin. How long the mask stuck to their skin depended on a number of factors, including social status and educational qualification, but also physical appearance (in my own family, the members who suffered most from colonial-racist humiliation were those with dark skin, eyes, and hair) but also to the fact that, at the time, there were no, or only very few Black people in Switzerland who normally serve as the ideal target of racist sentiment. We migrant working families were like living cardboard cut-outs on an invisible firing range where anti-Black racism has survived under the radar. We got to feel the colonial attitude in Switzerland in the form of laws (ANAG, the federal law concerning the residence of foreign nationals in Switzerland from 1934 – 2002), insults (the T-word for Italian migrants often mentioned in combination with the N- and the M-word, often also targeted at non-Italians), mockery (e.g. the popular song “I’m an Italiano” in the style of blackface minstrel shows...), and paternalistic advice telling us pitiful ones how to become more civilized and attain wealth by becoming a little more Swiss in our de-

meanour (integration guidelines). Many resisted, but even more complied obediently. I’m reminded of the ambivalent advertising figure of the interwar years featuring the white N\* who wanted nothing more than to be accepted as one of “them”. Migrant working-class families like mine were originally denied belonging by law (as a new-born baby I was officially expelled from Switzerland by the Foreigner Police), belonging was decreed from above, or should I say, presented to us like a generous gift (we became model foreigners, Switzerland’s favourite migrants), mind you at the cost of People of Colour, that is, migrants as well as Swiss men and women of colour.

Was there resistance? Yes, but our room for manoeuvre was severely restricted, not least due to our own emotional blockage. Our experiences were reminiscent of historical experiences of violence on a much larger scale: it is a fear that sits deep down in the body. The thought of even more excessive violence – which we gratefully managed to escape – is felt down to the marrow of the bone. Harrowing thoughts like this make migrant workers extremely submissive. The echoes of history leave us migrants – myself included – deeply scared but also grateful. Grateful for not having been affected so badly – at least our life was never at risk – grateful for being allowed to work and for not having to address historical dimensions of violence that we are aware of but cannot articulate because we have no common language for it. As long as the colonial legacy of the history of migration is not addressed, this will not change. And as long as Switzerland is allowed to subcutaneously frighten migrants to the bone with inhumane racist laws and attitudes while, at the same time, boasting and celebrating itself with grand gestures of generosity towards us migrants, nothing will change.

The fact that we have begun to think about these predicaments is a good fortune, but comes with obstacles. Complex histories need to be told and remembered collectively; nuanced stories of submission and surprising resistance, quotidian, tangible, pensive, poetic, and theoretically ground-

ed resistance. The ongoing reappraisal and narration of interlocking blind spots of colonial history as the city of Zurich has initiated with this exhibition offers a safe anchorage for such a venture.

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## Flipping the Switch ...

# A Historic Opportunity for a Transformative Politics of Memory in Zurich

I cycled along the Limmatquai through the dark winter's night, finally arriving at the Stadthaus, slightly stressed, I must admit. I saw other people heading for the main entrance. Were we too late? As we stepped through the heavy wooden door, all my worries about being on time evaporated. The main hall of the Stadthaus was jam-packed. People who had failed to find a seat were lining the walls. The galleries on the first and second floors were also filled. I was overwhelmed. The place was reverberating with a kind of festive excitement that soon took hold of me, too, drawing me out of the oblivion of everyday life. Then Mandy Abou Shoak embarked on her opening speech.

*"Whenever one of us steps onto a stage, we notice that people hold their breath. We feel the tension in the room. It is truly physical. And we realize: the people are scared. Scared of our anger. Scared of our grief. Scared of our words."*<sup>1</sup>

And indeed, at that moment, everyone in the room held their breath and the tension was palpable. But this time, there was no sense of fear, anger or grief. On the contrary, I felt a sense of pride, belonging, recognition, even happiness when Mandy Abou Shoak, the Zurich's mayor, and the curatorial team addressed the audience one after the other, and Alina Amuri's powerful soul voice flooded the auditorium. It soon became evident to all: this was an event that mattered. It was clearly more than a normal exhibition opening followed by drinks and snacks. It was a political assembly – even a collective performance of the kind that only reality itself is able to produce.

*But what had happened? Where did this feeling of being part of a truly historical moment come from?*

Over the past few years, the city of Zurich has finally started to assume responsibility for its historical involvement in colonialism and the racism that underpinned it. The exhibition *Blind Spots – Zurich and Colonialism*, the scientific studies on the part that Zurich played in the slave trade, on the significance of public monuments, and recently on the so-called "M-fantasies" as well as all the internal administrative work that such ventures require, indicate the city's genuine willingness to acknowledge its suppressed history and learn from it.

Mind you, the impetus to set these milestones in the politics of memory came to a large extent from those same activists and academic circles that have been dealing with antiracist and post-colonial issues for years, if not even for decades. This kind of postcolonial consciousness did not simply drop from the sky when the Black Lives Matter movement was making the headlines. I myself began roughly ten years ago, together with many others, to raise the issue of Switzerland's colonial past and the topic of structural racism. We organized events, wrote articles, submitted proposals, held meetings, most of it on an honorary basis. In an effort to feel at home here, we fought for the truth that lay hidden not only in the archives and in wider society but actually also in our own life histories. For many years, there were no prizes to be won for this kind of work; instead, merely disinterest, ignorance, frequent resistance along with moments of derision and aggression.

In turn, our own work was informed by a longer history of the polyphonic resistance including, for example, the early antiracist, anti-fascist movement as well as the Meeting Point for Black Women, the migrant campaigns against the failed "Schwarzenbach-Initiative" or against the Seasonal Migrant Statute (Saisonnier-Statut) as well as the solidarity that emerged around the Mitenand-Initiative, the anti-Apartheid movement, and around Switzer-

land's restrictive political asylum system. All these struggles also aimed at representing one's own reality, one's own history and one's own memories as part of lived society.

Regarding this aspect, the Greek-German author Mark Terkessidis wrote: "The surfacing of memories always has something to do with belonging. Articulating one's own memory, bringing it into play, wagering on it, or using it to lodge a complaint can only be done by someone, whose belonging to the community is not contested."<sup>2</sup> Put the other way round, it means that a democratic polity must publicly negotiate the memories of all those whom it recognizes as making up part of the body politic. In other words: a true democracy warrants and grants to all members of the population the right to remember.

On that January evening in 2023, at the opening of the exhibition *Blind Spots – Zurich and Colonialism*, the long-lasting tension of the struggle for recognition suddenly found an outlet. By staging the exhibition, the city of Zurich acknowledged in the most public and effective way to date that the city had a colonial history, that this side to history had been repressed, and that it continues to reverberate to this day in the form of everyday and structural racism. And, what's more, it acknowledged the work along with the memories and the realities of a group of younger and older activists as well as of Zurich people with a migration background and/or of Colour. In the Stadthaus, at the symbolic heart of power, a space suddenly became manifest in which, for a moment, the people affected no longer had to struggle for visibility, indeed, in which they possibly could even feel at home in a way.

The success of the exhibition raises hopes, but it comes with an obligation. Various communities and activist groups were approached during the preparation of the show and the accompanying

programme of events, and, if possible, even included in the exhibition as well as in the project "Racism in Public Space", at least rudimentarily. If this form of inclusion turns out to be merely a superficial gesture, the city runs the danger of quickly losing all gained credibility again. It would be a fatal misunderstanding to regard this review of Zurich's colonial history as a mere intellectual exercise or believe that the job is now accomplished. Rather, this moment could mark the beginning of a democratization of the politics of memory, meaning, a further step in the democratization of democracy itself.

However, such a process calls for courage, namely the courage to imagine. Moreover, it requires an institutional and sustainable framework in which activist collectives and other committed actors from the sectors of education, culture, research, and administration together with the general public can discuss and negotiate what a democratic and reparative transformation of society could look like. What we need is a comprehensive socio-political process which allows addressing the forms of violence that occurred in the past – and often continue to do so today. Together we must look for ways to mend the damaged relationships in society. This is the only way in which people with a migration background, Black and other People of Colour, Muslims, Jews, members of the Sinti, Roma and Yenish communities along with other marginalized groups are given a voice to talk about their histories and memories of exclusion and discrimination in public, but also about resistance and solidarity, and thus gain a sense of being part of the democratic body. Moreover, it is the only way that society as a whole can escape the cycle of repression, guilt, and violence.

A good example of such an institutional framework has been set by the Senate in Berlin with the project "Decolonial Memory Culture in the City" with a runtime of four years.<sup>3</sup> In this project, from

<sup>1</sup> The full speech is published on the website of the city of Zurich: [https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/kultur/de/index/institutionen/ausstellungen\\_stadthaus/Kolonialismus.html](https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/kultur/de/index/institutionen/ausstellungen_stadthaus/Kolonialismus.html)

<sup>2</sup> Terkessidis, Mark. 2019. Wessen Erinnerung zählt? Koloniale Vergangenheit und Rassismus heute. Berlin: Hoffmann und Campe, S. 176.



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2020 to 2024, civil society organizations and cultural institutions conduct research, put on exhibitions and stage events on the topic of colonialism and the postcolonial present, thus creating a foundation for further reparative steps in the hope of paving the way for a new political, economic, and cultural future. A similar framework – adapted to the local conditions and requirements, of course – would provide Zurich with an opportunity to continue the recently begun, collaborative efforts involving government offices, civil society and the respective cultural institutions. As far as reparative measures regarding the past are concerned, this could include official apologies, compensation efforts, research and cultural projects, along with a new type of monuments, and restitutions. At the same time, reparative measures would need to target current structures, institutions as well as public culture in general in such a way that the issues of colonial legacy, racism and discrimination are from now on taken seriously and prevented.

The exhibition *Blind Spots* served as a catalyst to pool existing knowledge, to interlink actors committed to the subject and to reach consensus that coming to terms with Zurich's colonial legacy and structural racism requires a concerted effort. Now it is time to flip the switch: from awareness to action, from sensitization to transformation, from recognition to reparation.

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# IMPRINT

## Imprint exhibition

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