

Call for Papers, “Health in American History”

2024 Annual Meeting of the Historians in the DGfA

Friday, May 3 – Sunday, May 5, 2024

Erfurt, Augustinerkloster

Hosted by Nina Mackert (University of Leipzig, nina.mackert@uni-leipzig.de) and Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt, juergen.martschukat@uni-erfurt.de)

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful reminder of the importance of health in the understanding of societies, and it has spurred a new wave of historical research on health in American history. Whether it is the history of health policy, health care, and insurance; the history of particular diseases and changes in the understanding and treatment of the sick; or the history of working and living conditions and environmental health: Questions of health affect politics and power relations at multiple scales, shaping and reflecting in/equality, citizenship, and belonging, while being themselves permeated by race, gender, sex, class, age, and dis/ability. Health inequalities are deeply woven into American history. What Saidiya Hartman (2007) has termed the “afterlife of slavery” functions as a means of exclusion through health in a double sense: “Skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment“ take their toll on the bodies and lives of Black Americans and people of color, while their health status is used to exclude them from citizenship on the grounds of their alleged inability to be/become healthy.

Moreover, exploring the history of health also means to historicize what people have understood as health, as being healthy, and as living a healthy life. Notions of health have changed significantly throughout American history, not just with concepts of social hygiene, bacteriology, or epidemiological transitions, but also with the emergence of the idea that health can be attained through diligent work on body and self. Health thus came to mean much more than the absence of disease, bordering and extending to the practices of wellness and self-optimization of body, mind, and human abilities that became central to 20th-century liberal capitalism.

The conference seeks to address a broad range of issues revolving around the health of individuals and groups in American history from colonial times to the present, including, but not limited to histories of

- health policies and public health interventions, among them those focusing on the health status of “minorities” or the challenges of different kinds of diseases
- the existence, infrastructures, segregation and contestedness of health care, engaging with hospitals and other medical institutions, health insurance, and medical education
- pandemics and various diseases, including venereal diseases, epidemiological transitions and the emergence of “non-communicable diseases” as a modern phenomenon
- mental health, psychology and psychiatry
- un/healthy living conditions and the health hazards of inequality
- drugs and the pharmaceutical industry
- collective and individual prevention practices
- environmental history and environmental racism, pesticides and pollution, planetary health and changing conceptions of the relationship between health and the environment
- changing ideas, knowledge, and norms of health and of healthy lives, of healthy foods, nutrition, movement, etc.

The keynote will be given by Kathryn Olivarius (Stanford).

Please submit your proposal of up to 300 words and a short bio until July 31 via email to the organizers (nina.mackert@uni-leipzig.de and juergen.martschukat@uni-erfurt.de).