

## "Beauty, Race, and Democracy in the 20th Century"



Thomas Kuehne

The Center was proud to host a public lecture by its own Professor Thomas Kuehne on 6 April 2005. "Beauty, Race, and Democracy in the 20th Century" was Kuehne's first public lecture for the Center since joining the Clark faculty in fall 2004

as the Strassler Family Professor in the Study of Holocaust History. The event carried an air of celebration as the Center community gathered in Clark's Tilton Hall to hear this outstanding scholar.

Kuehne's work and research is concerned with the relation of war, genocide, and society; with the long-term traditions of the political culture of Central Europe; and, above all, with the problem of locating the Holocaust and Nazi Germany in the social and cultural history of the 20th century. Kuehne is especially interested in synthesizing new approaches to the history of mass violence. He has organized conferences and edited several essay collections to advance scholarly discussion on cultural, gender, military, and political history, and he is engaged in establishing



Thomas Kuehne with Debórah Dwork

and improving the institutional and moral frameworks of these fields. His books include the award-winning *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867-1914: Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und Politischem* (1994), and a *Handbuch der Wahlen zum Preussischen Abgeordnetenhaus 1867-1918: Wahlergebnisse, Wahlbuendnisse und Wahlkandidaten* (1994), as well as many edited or co-edited volumes.

Kuehne's lecture connected the concepts of beauty and racism in a review of 20th-century dynamics. The function of beauty as a form of capital in present social interactions was the point of departure for a fascinating mapping of the way in which contemporary perceptions of beauty emerged during the 20th century. Physical beauty was presented as mattering a lot more now than in the past, concerning more people than ever, and defined much more narrowly than before. Kuehne's analysis unfolded in the argument that racism, democracy, and consumerism link tightly. And the present obsession with the perfect, beautiful body in our democratic societies was seen by Kuehne as exactly the result of the blend of modern racism and modern consumerism. He concluded that human beauty is never solely about aesthetic harmony, but more about social distinction, human rivalry, and power struggle. Hence, the idea of beauty reflects the dynamics and the perceived threats of this world.

The audience was fascinated by Kuehne's presentation and his work. Gripped and challenged by his talk, the audience asked many questions and offered a range of comments. □

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