The Politics of White Identity

During an interview in Holland in the early 1970s, the essayist and novelist James Baldwin said, “As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.” It became one of his most famous lines, and many commentators still quote it today, including best-selling author Ta-Nehisi Coates and scholars in critical race studies who call for “abolishing whiteness.” Meanwhile, right-wing populists claim to speak for “the people,” but they often mean people socially defined as white, especially those who see themselves as victims of immigration, demographic change, and egalitarian social policies. In this respect, right-wing populism amounts to a form of “white identity politics.” Many liberals respond by advocating color-blind policies that ignore the social reality of race and racism. This presentation locates a more promising (but also problematic) response in the recent growth of white antiracist activism. For a growing number of white activists, abolishing whiteness, and race itself, is a worthy long-term goal. But they also recognize that they inevitably benefit from being socially defined as white. Therefore, they seek to take responsibility for the history and effects of racism, not simply as individuals or as human beings, but as white people. In contrast to those who assume a fixed and homogenous conception of whiteness, these activists seek to politicize white identity. Rather than abolish white identity, they want to reconstruct it. This presentation will examine different kinds of white identity politics, focusing on the critical assessment of emerging forms of white antiracist activism.