

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 1/7

## Who's afraid of anti-racism?

Racism has been a contentious topic within anthropology. Broadly speaking, the discipline has had a long history of engagement with—whether critical against, conniving at, or even productive of—racializing theories and methods. While *Anthropologie* (commonly translated as physical anthropology) decisively took a racist turn in early twentieth-century Germany, (West-)German *Völkerkunde* was suggested to have followed its own intellectual journey, relatively undisturbed by the deeply scientific racist context around it. In addition, while the eugenicist physical and biological anthropology à la Eugen Fischer flourished during the National Socialist regime, the intellectual movement pushed by Franz Boas in his nascent impulse to his school of cultural anthropology is celebrated as an anti-racist milestone in the history of the discipline.

However, more or less recent critical historical reassessments have complicated such disciplinary tales. The separation between the two “sister disciplines” of *Rassen- und Völkerkunde* in Germany might not have been as pristine as self-cleansing acts of celebratory disciplinary historicism would have wanted them to be (Gaisenhainer 2014). The West-German shifting political landscape after 1968 engendered research into the discipline’s history that revealed the disturbing entanglement of leading ethnologists with the Nazi regime, some of whom have been leading figures in the ethnological academic discipline in West-Germany after World War II, like Wilhelm E. Mühlmann in Heidelberg (e.g. Fischer 1990; Hauschild 1995; Mende 2011; Streck 2000). In East Germany, *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde* merged into *Ethnographie*. Research into the pathways of Ethnology in East Germany after WWII focused mostly on actors and institutes (Kreide-Damani et al. 2024). Questions of constructions of difference and orientalist gazes, or if and how East German ethnologists theoretically processed the discipline’s history of racialising theories,

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 2/7

still wait to be explored. Furthermore, the shortcomings of the Boasian liberal anti-racism have also been addressed (Anderson 2019; Baker 2021). At the same time, debates on the colonial past of anthropology and its racializing remnants continue to generate controversial debate in the discipline worldwide, not unsurprisingly also in Germany. More recent research has highlighted the importance of Germany's colonial ethnology for the ways scientific thinking about race unfolded under the Nazi Regime (e.g. Barbosa 2025).

The DGSKA has held an important stage for discussions on racism and anti-racism within anthropology. While the late 2010s discussion on the renaming of the association has been haunted by the histories of racism outlined above, the 2023 meeting discussion on the creation of an anti-racism Arbeitskreis has shown that German anthropology's stance on anti-racism is far from obvious. While findings about the discipline's racist past are widely acknowledged, discussions about anthropology's contemporary approaches to racism are far less so. The heated plenary discussion in that 2023 meeting collected several arguments against the creation of this Arbeitskreis, which included tropes from "we are all anti-racist anyway" to terms like "Gesinnungsgestapo". It was even suggested that "antiracism" might act as a dogwhistle for antisemitism in Germany. As concerning as such comments may be, it seems worth unpacking them further and examining the fear and the Germany-specific memory culture expressed in them: the hauntingly present past of Nazism and the GDR's Stasi.

The idea of our roundtable "Who is afraid of anti-racism?" was born in reaction to this disciplinary moment and in response to the broader contemporary political context. Quo vadis anti-racism? We believe this is a crucial moment for Germany-based anthropologists to assess this question.

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 3/7

Persistent matters of concern in our discipline include the issue of essentializing conceptualizations of difference, Eurocentric biases, the colonial imprint in our methodology, white fragility in the classroom, and the lack of diversity among scientific staff, as well as a lack of mentoring and opportunities for minoritized staff members—all of which touch on questions of (anti-)racism. Furthermore, the current global political context calls for an increased analytical attention to racism, as fascist and authoritarian tendencies abound worldwide and political circles promote a concerted backlash against scholarship deemed as post-colonial or anti-racist. Especially (though not only) in Germany, the political mainstreaming of anti-migration discourses as well as the continuous rise of anti-Muslim racism and its affectively loaded interlocking with anti-semitism demand serious anthropological engagement (see Hage 2015; Atshan & Galor 2020; Attia et al. 2021) – if anthropology is to be response-able vis-à-vis political and societal concerns. In this roundtable, we, thus, ask: How did/does/can or should anthropology respond to racism? How can we anthropologists build a more inclusive community of practice and anchor our discipline in an anti-racist path? Can intersectional justice be an orientation towards that goal?

So, *who is afraid of anti-racism?* Beyond its provocative (and hopefully invitational) resonance, the question that ignites our roundtable intends to open a frank conversation. Why does the call to tackle racism trigger reticence, suspicion, resistance—or even repulsion and abhorrence—amongst our peers? How can we better understand such affectively loaded reactions and their corresponding arguments?

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 4/7

While one of us convenors (Thiago) thought about this roundtable's question-title already in 2023, coincidentally a similar question formed the title of Judith Butler's latest book. In their *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024), Butler examines how right-wing political actors bundle different social fears and anxieties „into an inflammatory syntax“ of anti-gender, weaponizing a “fearsome phantasm of ‘gender’” (Butler 2024, 12, 7). In this psychosocial phenomenon, the parallel between “gender” and “anti-racism” is in fact not coincidental. As Butler puts it, „terms such as ‚gender,‘ ‚gender theory,‘ ‚systemic racism,‘ or ‚critical race theory‘ are blamed for the very disorienting fears that many people across the world now feel about the future of their ways of life“ (Butler 2024, 5). While the factors that condition a social fear of destruction are many (climate change, neoliberal capitalism, rampant inequality and austerity), such fear about the future is displaced and politically mobilized in a movement that targets “gender” and “critical race theory” “as the causes of destruction” (Butler 2024, 247–8). Targeting gender and anti-racist scholarship is not random: In a context in which fear of migrants often collides with insecurities regarding the preservation of national and (patriarchal) family structures, “gender and race intertwine as a phantasm that threatens national identity“ (Butler 2024, 254). Butler's pointed analysis also relates to the German context, where emerging parties such as the AfD and a growing list of more mainstream political actors have systematically targeted critical scholarship under the banner of “post-colonial studies” precisely in response to their potentially transformative affordance in relation to migration, racism, and national identity. Therefore, to paraphrase Butler (2024, 24), “[i]n asking who is afraid of [anti-racism], [we are] also asking who is afraid of what, precisely, and how best to understand the resulting fear and its political effects” as well as its reverberations in our discipline.

In this light, our panel will convene anthropologists in different career stages to discuss their approaches to anti-racism—both in research and practical

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 5/7

interventions. The first session includes Armanç Yildiz's (HU Berlin) presentation on the study of whiteness as an anti-racist strategy, Danielle Isler's (University of Bayreuth) reflection "Doing research on (anti-)racism as an affected person", and Franziska Fay's (Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz) interrogation about the anti-racism potential of working with German colonial records at the Tanzania National Archives. The second session includes Antony Pattathu's (University of Tübingen) "Anti-racism, intersectional justice, and emotional labor in anthropology" and Elisa Lanari's (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity) reflection about the "Blind spots of liberal anti-racism". Built in a dialogical mode, the roundtable will also be joined by Sultan Doughan (Goldsmiths, University of London), Katharina Schramm (University of Bayreuth), and Judith Albrecht (HU Berlin).

## References:

Anderson, Mark. 2019. *From Boas to Black Power: Racism, Liberalism, and American Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Atshan, Sa'ed, and Katharina Galor. 2020. *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Attia, Iman, Ozan Zakariya Keskinliç, and Büsra Okcu. 2021. *Muslimischsein im Sicherheitsdiskurs: Eine rekonstruktive Studie über den Umgang mit dem Bedrohungsszenario*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Barbosa, Thiago P. 2025. *Racializing Caste: Anthropology between Germany and India and the Legacy of Irawati Karve (1905-1970)*. De Gruyter.

Baker, Lee D. 2021. "The Racist Anti-Racism of American Anthropology."

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

18/09/25 page 6/7

*Transforming Anthropology* 29 (2): 127–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12191>.

Butler, Judith. 2024. *Who's Afraid of Gender?* London: Penguin.

Fischer, Hans. 1990. *Völkerkunde im Nationalsozialismus: Aspekte der Anpassung, Affinität und Behauptung einer wissenschaftlichen Disziplin*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

Geisenhainer, Katja. 2014. "Physische Anthropologie und Völkerkunde: Zwei ungleiche Schwestern." In *Gefangene Bilder: Wissenschaft und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg. Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung im Historischen Museum Frankfurt*, 11. September 2014 bis 15. Februar 2015, edited by Benedikt Burkard, 84–93. Petersberg: Michael Imhof.

Hage, Ghassan. 2015. *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.

Hauschild, Thomas, ed. 1995. *Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht: Ethnologie im Dritten Reich*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Kreide-Damani, Ingrid, Sabine Imeri, Karoline Noack, and Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz, eds. 2024. *Ethnologie als Ethnographie: Interdisziplinarität, Transnationalität und Netzwerke der Disziplin in der DDR*. Münster: Waxmann. Reviewed in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 119 (3): 125–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/olzg-2024-0044>.

Mende, Janne. 2011. "Kultur, Volk und Rasse: Die deutsche Ethnologie im Nationalsozialismus und ihre Aufarbeitung." *Anthropos* 106 (2): 529–45. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0257-9774-2011-2-529>.

Streck, Bernhard, ed. 2000. *Ethnologie und Nationalsozialismus*. Gehen: Verlag Dr. Reinhard Escher.

Mihir Sharma

Thiago P. Barbosa

Sina Emde

Catherine Whittaker

### **Bio notes on the contributors:**

**Thiago Pinto Barbosa** is a postdoctoral staff member of the Institute of Anthropology at Leipzig University. His academic work includes the book „*Racializing Caste*“ (2025) and examines the relationship between science and power, particularly in relation to racism and ecological issues.

**Sina Emde** works as lecturer at the Institute of Anthropology at Leipzig University and is Honorary Senior Lecturer at the School of History, Culture and Language at the Australian National University. Her academic work is in the fields of gender, political anthropology, memory studies, peace and conflict.

**Mihir Sharma** (he/him) works as a researcher for critical diversity and anti-racism at the University of Bremen, and has worked with anti-racism projects in Germany and the United States.

**Catherine Whittaker** is head of department and assistant professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University Frankfurt, and a member of the editorial board of the journal *Feminist Anthropology*.