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About

Undoing Race and Racism: Anthropological Interventions

In Germany today, critiques of racism, practices and forms of racialisation, and their multiple entanglements in anthropology have gained renewed prominence.

On the one hand, in academic discussions an expansive debate around museum practices and colonial collections (in ethnographic as well as natural history museums) has highlighted colonial histories and their connections to the genealogies of racism and notions of national belonging. Anthropology is deeply enmeshed in this history. At the same time, anthropologists are actively participating in the contemporary discussion by addressing the epistemological and institutional foundations of the discipline and reshaping collaboration and intervention with an anti-racist and decolonial perspective. On the other hand, the discursive, institutional, media and violent dimensions of racism are receiving increased political attention. The unequal treatment of migrant workers and refugees during the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the subsequent summer of protests against racist violence in public spaces have once again brought racism to the fore as a problematic issue in Germany's social fabric. Funding initiatives (such as this one from the BMBF) underscore the need to give attention to research on racism and right-wing extremism, which are perceived as threats to democracy.

For anthropologists working on racism and racist formations, this new conjuncture has increased critical engagement with the ongoing effects of institutional, everyday and violent racism. The importance of their scholarly contributions to understanding the intricacies of racism is becoming increasingly clear. However, it is also clear that the hypervisibility of 'our' hitherto largely marginalised research topic is only possible because of the ongoing violence against racialised bodies and persons that results in persistent, including: global injustices. In parallel, there is a long history of

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activist theories and various forms of struggle against racial subjugation.

Awareness of the omnipresence and "everydayness" of racism is very pronounced among people who experience it in their everyday lives. The public perception and critique of racism – and thus an attitude of solidarity that goes beyond event-related moments and is directed towards anti-racist structural change – is repeatedly interrupted by the continuity of racist campaigns. For instance, it became articulated in the political outrage and anti-fascist organising after the right-wing terrorist attacks in Halle (2019) and Hanau (2020). Racism gets scandalised in the face of the complicity of Germany and other European states in the atrocities in the Mediterranean, and it becomes visible whenever the brutal push-back practices of the externalised border regimes of the European Union come into focus. Racism is also recognised in relation to the globalised Black Lives Matter uprisings after the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd and others in 2020. All of these events have opened up, among other things, the possibility of examining racisms in and from Europe. They also provide a window to the messier undercurrents of racism and the troubling space of legal, bureaucratic and political procedures in regard to the state's responses to racist terror. In Dessau, for example, after more than seventeen years, investigators have still not outlined the "exact causes" of Oury Jalloh's death; the files of the NSU underground were officially classified as "secret" and a debate about the deletion of the word "race" from the Basic Law remains uncomfortably unresolved in public.

At the same time, the broad circulation of right-wing populist phrases (e.g. "refugee crisis"), the recent debate around "failed integration" in the light of New Year's Eve in Berlin or the invitation of AfD politicians and professors to lecture at German universities in the name of academic freedom document a lack of in-depth debate about racism, democracy and belonging in the broader public.

Are we witnessing an inability to deal with (the complexity of) racism, and if so, why? On the one hand, liberals often shy away from addressing questions of complicity in

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racist structures or clumsily deny them, as in the debate on the concept of race, on the restitution of art and human remains from colonial contexts, or on refugee and migration policy. On the other hand, a range of right-wing actors increasingly deny their own racism while openly professing a racialised Germanness and resorting to racist taxonomies. In so doing, they present themselves as victims of any critique of racism – the recent debate around the former head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) and member of the Christian Democrates (CDU), Hans-Georg Maaßen is only one case in point. Maaßen had publicly expressed that left-green "race-lessons" have created "an eliminatory racism against whites". This statement is only one of many, so that party expulsion proceedings have now also been initiated against him.

In light of this incomplete sketch of the public sphere, we argue that researching and undoing racism in Germany was and is an urgent methodological, theoretical, and also ethical and political project. Anthropology and anthropologists are well positioned to contribute to this growing research field. This necessarily entails a critical reflection on the ambivalent positioning of our discipline in the historical constitution of "race" and racism, as well as their critical rejection. It is therefore quite appropriate that we have this discussion as part of the boasblogs series, given Franz Boas's significant role in establishing an anti-racist ethos in anthropology, which, while constitutive for US cultural anthropology, was too long ignored in German anthropology. Nevertheless, the current discussions about the ambiguous legacy of anthropology's "racist anti-racism" (Baker 2021) also demand that we pay much closer attention to the critical analysis of contemporary forms of racialisation and racism. We thereby follow Leith Mullings plea for "anthropologically informed and ethnographically sensitive studies (that) can potentially illuminate the ways in which contemporary institutions, policies, and structures reproduce racial inequality without overtly targeting its victims" (Mullings 2005: 679). The contributions to our blog series address some of the most pressing questions about racialisation, racism, anti-racism, anthropological knowledge production and pedagogy. They

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demonstrate that there is a substantial and vivid discussion about these matters in Germany. In some ways, most, if not all, contributions level critiques unto liberal antiracisms and their effects. In so doing, they employ critical ethnographic analyses: sometimes accompanied by sumptuous doses of essayistic, speculative theorizing, but also traversed by careful attention to detail – such nuance remains a pillar and promise of ethnography. In its pursuit, we hope, emerge not just an understanding of racial thinking and racism, but also paths towards undoing the structures which perpetuate them.

We open our conversation with three contributions that critically examine our own academic field and practice. Staying with the troubles of doing antiracism, Nasima Selim's contribution invites us to ruminate upon the fallibility of antiracist pedagogies and the ongoing ethics of un-learning "race" in a racist context. In her reflexive piece extrapolating from encounters with students, she sketches out the difficulties of doing antiracist teaching and learning in anthropology classrooms in Germany. In a similar vein, Sahana Udupa also analyses her engagement with anthropology students and discusses pedagogies that can interrogate the here and now of racism – its globality as well as its troubling proximity to our own homes. In an interview with Katharina Schramm, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni compares his experiences with institutional transformation and the challenges of "decolonising the University" in South Africa and Germany.

In the following weeks, we will learn more about multisensorial ethnographies of racism and anti-racism, about queer perspectives on far-right racism and more.

Note on language:

We invited contributions in German or English. Most authors chose to write in English, which we understand as an indicator for the significance of the topic that transcends the national boundaries of Germany or German academia. We are aware, however, that the omnipresence of the English language is saturated with colonial

and imperial connotations. For most of us, including the editors, English is only one of our languages, and often not the first. More experimentation with the multiplicities of expression are therefore called for (and some of the forthcoming contributions will make an attempt at this).

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Katharina Schramm *holds the Chair for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, where she is also a member of the "Africa Multiple" Cluster of Excellence. She is facilitating the working group "Anthropology of Global Inequalities" which is invested in a critical public anthropology at the interface of STS and political anthropology. Her own work focuses on race as an unruly object in political and scientific practice. During the academic year 2022/23 she is appointed as Theodor-Heuss-Professor at The New School in New York City.*

Mihir Sharma *is a researcher and lecturer with the Epistemologies of the Global South and a member of the "Anthropology of Global Inequalities" working group at the University of Bayreuth. He writes about antiracism, social movements, and political subjectivity, among other interests. He has also written for and spoken in radio interviews with a range of public media and scholarly forums. He tweets @mihirzabaan.*

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Katharina, Manuela, and Mihir have all been co-conveners of the Anthropology of Race and Ethnicity Network as part of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). Whilst Katharina is a founding member of the network, Manuela and Mihir currently serve as its conveners. They all live (at least partially) in Berlin.