

Lost in Translation

Why the US American concept of “race” is not to be translated using the German term “Rasse”

On 23rd March, geneticist David Reich sparked an international debate with his New York Times article, “How Genetics is Changing Our Understanding of “Race”. While in the US Reich’s argument has garnered both criticism and endorsements, most German commentators have celebrated Reich as a taboo-breaker who has provoked a debate concerning the term “Rasse”. But was this really Reich’s intention: to open a debate on what Germans call “Rasse”? Is the German word “Rasse” really equivalent to “race” – are these terms accurate translations of one another?

Before we discuss what “Rasse” refers to in Germany, we wish to question how it became possible for German authors to interpret Reich in a certain way – in a way, we believe, which may perhaps not correspond to Reich’s intention.

Reich discusses a widely held opinion he labels an „orthodoxy“. According to Reich, this orthodoxy postulates that the average genetic differences among people grouped according to “today’s racial terms”, specifically concerning biologically relevant traits, are so minimal that they can be ignored. It also, he argues, goes even further: It warns against any research on genetic differences. Following this, Reich recognises existing concerns that any research on genetic differences could lead to “pseudoscientific arguments about biological difference” that have been used in the past to justify crimes, for instance in National Socialist Germany. “But”, Reich continues, “as a geneticist I also know that it is simply no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences among ‘races.’” His definition of the term “races”, however, remains ambiguous. Does he consider race as something self-assigned, similar to how it is employed in the US census, or as something externally assigned, based primarily on external characteristics? Or is he perhaps implying a biological concept of race? Adding to the ambiguity of the term, Reich chooses to place the word “race” in quotation marks in some, but not all, passages of his text.

Reich’s article has since triggered a discussion concerning how his use of the term “race” should be understood and how one should understand his use of quotation marks. Quite a number of commentators seem to think that Reich has formulated a new concept of biological, genetically determined differences between races. While some have welcomed this new formulation, others have rejected it as being deterministic, biologicistic, essentialistic, or even racist. It is very probable, however, that both evaluations are based on a misun-

derstanding. A more thorough reading of Reich's texts indicate that he is likely aware of the diverse problems of the term race as a social category. Based on a differentiated understanding of race, Reich's message could perhaps be loosely worded as: It is no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences which correlate with the "racial terms" (or "ethnicities") that are used today in the US census, by each citizen for self-assignment found in governmental assessments, censuses, or surveys. To be sure, such a correlation does not equate to causal relationships between genetic variants and external characteristics. In his article, Reich repeatedly warns against the misuse of genetic research in order to justify racism.

Scientists of diverse disciplines have argued that Reich's claims appear deceptive and undifferentiated in light of the diverse discussions of race which have been taking place for decades. According to his critics, Reich ignored this current state of discussion in order to portray himself as a taboo-buster.

In German-speaking countries the debate has been picked up upon too, but here, a remarkable shift is taking place: The English word "race" is simply being translated into the German word "Rasse". Reich, according to one commentator, has sparked a "Rassen" debate (Axel Meyer, FAZ), or an argument about "Erbgut und Rasse" (Markus Schär, NZZ). In our eyes, however, this is a questionable translation and something we doubt Reich would agree with.

Notably, these authors do not represent Reich's controversial core message as directly confirming the idea of genetically determined differences between "Rassen"; rather they do so *ex negativo*. According to Axel Meyer, Reich has argued against the prevailing "orthodox opinion" (...) "that 'Rasse' is only a social construct and has no biological reality". Reich has "dared" to voice the "inconvenient truth" that "social constructed racial ascriptions often match genetic differences". "Rassen", states Meyer in his summary of Reich's argument, are "not purely a social construct", "they reflect measurable genetic differences that are possibly responsible for physiological and cognitive differences".

According to Markus Schär in NZZ, Reich speaks against the "dogma" that the concept of "biological races" is untenable (Schär translates Reich's phrasing of the "dogma" as follows: "There are no large enough differences between human populations to support a concept of 'biological races'"). Schär list examples intended to highlight differences between "biological races". Counter examples, differentiations, and careful evaluations are missing from these articles. After having read them, some may conclude that we simply all have the right to state what is clearly visible – "Rassen" simply exist, and a biologically founded classification of humans into "Rassen" is feasible.

But “race” and “Rasse” do not mean the same thing. In order to understand this, it is necessary to consider the different contexts of their use – for each individual country, and perhaps also for different professions or educational fields.¹

First, the core term needs to be examined from an historical perspective. Race and “Rasse” are not translatable into each other: The historical trajectory of their usage by no means run in parallel, and different connotations have been attributed to them throughout time. In the US, with its history of slavery and ongoing immigration, the term race has come to be deeply entwined with struggles against social injustice and racist discrimination. The problematic aspects of the term are recognized and discussed. There has been considerable social resistance against racial categories which have been rejected as incorrect, deterministic, or racist. This has repeatedly triggered revisions of governmental classifications for the assessment of social inequalities. People living in the US are accustomed to reporting their race or ethnicity, understood as an expression of their belonging to a community (possibly even multiple communities).

In contrast, the term “Rasse”, used in the German-speaking reception of Reich, neither reflects the complexity of socially significant and self-defined assignments, nor the struggles for social justice. In Germany, no ethnic data is gathered, not by the state, other institutions nor in the census. German citizens have no experience with self-assignment and thus, most do not understand what the social constructedness of categories could mean. “Rasse” has not been used for decades and is hence still the same term as it was some seventy years ago. In German, by a general audience, this term is nearly exclusively understood as a biological one, as a descriptor for biological differences, and is hardly ever used to convey a social constructivist interpretation. Paradoxically, even though Germany is widely perceived as having successfully struggled with its past, the problem of ethnic or racial stereotyping, for example in state authorities, is not systematically addressed or reported on.

Moreover, if we understand Reich’s “today’s racial terms” as referring to external ascriptions of race, we must address noteworthy differences between the two countries. In the US, there exists at least some debate and awareness that common-sense racial categories, used by people to classify others in everyday life, reflect socially relevant ascriptions rather than “biological realities” and are historically and contextually readily convertible. For example, Irish and Jewish people were for a long time not considered as white. In the upcoming US census, for the first time, many Asian nationalities will be listed as separated “races”.

¹ For a similar argument, see Geulen, Christian: Der Rassenbegriff. Ein kurzer Abriß seiner Geschichte, in: Das Phantom „Rasse“. Zur Geschichte und Wirkungsmacht von Rassismus, Köln 2018, pp. 23-34.

Furthermore, what people think they see in their everyday life depends on what they have learned to see in their sociocultural environment: to some, specific differences seem more significant whereas by others these differences are overlooked or reinterpreted. But as long as there is no moment of confrontation with other sources of information, such everyday ascriptions are rarely contested or corrected. In the US, many citizens have had counterintuitive experiences of external and self-assigned race as they simply have not matched. When external ascriptions are re-evaluated, for example by comparing them to the self-ascription of a person or even by applying some form of genetic categorisation test, perplexing surprises can occur.

In Germany, however, people are hardly aware of the fact that a seemingly natural classification, guided by externally visible characteristics, may be incorrect or questionable. The supposedly obvious “Rassen”, which some think they can clearly recognize, essentially reflects groupings that have been saved in the collective memory as “biological” categories: Europeans, Africans, Asians. Until well into the 1990s, German schoolbooks contained depictions on the subject of “human races” using the terms “Europide”, “Negroide” and “Mongolide”. In addition, people who immigrated to Germany from southern European countries in the last decades, and who still seem “alien” to some Germans, are sometimes considered a biologically homogeneous group. For example, the commonly used term “südländisch” (southern) groups together a vast diversity of people from different regions of origin, many of whom have external characteristics that are perceived as similar.

Respectively, everyday language still contains a number of terms, often used automatically and without discriminative intent, which stem from a historical context where “Rasse” was exclusively used in a biological and racist sense. Of course, not every racist trope can be traced back to the time of the National Socialist regime (some have older and/or more international roots); but during this time, these racisms became engrained in everyday language. In this context, again, it is important to consider that the term “Rasse”, as used by the National Socialist regime, denoted a biological, not a sociological-cultural, meaning. This biologically heavy definition still characterizes its use in Germany today. Until the 1990s, the racial terms which dated back to the National Socialist period could be found in school books, encyclopaedias, and educational literature. It was only later that science educators made an effort to establish a new way of understanding human genetic variation. Starting from Lewontin’s statements, they conveyed that the term “Rasse” was scientifically inadequate as a means of capturing human genetic variation. Whether they were successful in convincing a larger public remains an open question.

Reich has not explained in more detail what or whom he means when he writes about an “orthodoxy”. Just as with his usage of the term “races”, he leaves considerable interpretative

flexibility to his commentators. In the German-speaking reception of his text, the *topos* of a dominating opinion also prevails; according to commentators, it suppresses free speech about “Rasse” (though Reich wrote that the “orthodoxy” suppresses discussion surrounding the research of “average genetic differences”).

But in Germany, the discourse on this topic cannot simply be divided into two camps: one which claims races do not exist and one which claims they do. This is a polarized public image which does not pay justice to how people make sense of a complex issue that is extremely difficult to cover in informational and educational media. In spite of the fact that the term “Rasse” has not undergone a transformation comparable to the US term “race”, and perhaps as a result of the efforts of science educators, many would refrain from giving an answer to the question of whether “Rassen” exist or not. In fact, precisely because of a shared concern of polarization, a rich spectrum of ways of speaking has developed. One need only think of the professional contexts where group allocations are necessary and inevitable, for instance in the medical or legal field, in police work, or in administrative contexts. Many people adopt a sceptical, undecided, curious or thoughtful attitude towards the question of whether races exist or not, without retreating to one of the two alleged positions. Others defiantly reject any information offered; one of the typical reactions to such an emotional topic as this.

Yet communication about the topic is not dominated by a dogma--or even a taboo—that has been imposed upon everyone by one of the imagined extreme sides and makes differentiated speech about genetic differences impossible. In fact, in Germany, for historical reasons, country-specific speech conventions concerning the topic exist, and they are probably perceived to be rather strict by many (while also for historical reasons, other speech conventions around this topic exist in other countries). There is a desire to avoid being misunderstood and accused by one side as being “racist”, or being misunderstood and accused by the other side for being “politically correct”. Such concerns do most likely restrict the spectrum of publicly stated opinions. This does not mean, however, that it is a taboo maintained by only one group, as Reich’s German interpreters have claimed. It simply means that conversations that seek to come to a shared understanding of “social diversity and genetics” are particularly difficult to have. To assume a suppressed truth, however, is altogether inappropriate.

Nevertheless, Reich’s German-speaking commentators celebrate him as a taboo-buster who brings justice to one of the two opposing positions—namely the allegedly suppressed one. In so doing, they add to a polarization which also has been observed in the ongoing debate in Germany concerning the introduction of DNA-phenotyping and biogeographical ancestry analysis in police investigations. Its proponents claim that it is possible to determine the so-

called “continental biogeographical ancestry” of any person from an analysis of their DNA with a 99.9% certainty (although this is not possible for every person). In the public debate, “biogeographical ancestry” is often erroneously equated with “ethnicity”, “race”, or “cultural milieu”, and viewed as an “externally visible characteristic”. The message that “race” or “ethnicity” are “biological realities” which are identifiable by exterior characteristics and can be determined for every individual is unscientific and irresponsible. That being said, through the intersection of these two debates, many in Germany will take away exactly this message and misunderstand it as the scientific state of the art.

Nonetheless, much exists between the two extreme positions, more than is probably known to most German readers. Scholars and scientists from all over the world, including German-speakers, have already made efforts to establish a differentiated, scientifically informed discourse on human genetic variation and are endeavouring to encourage wider discussion in Germany. A broad interdisciplinary consensus exists that average genetic differences between populations sometimes do, and sometimes do not, correlate with externally or self-ascribed group affiliations. The concept of “biogeographical ancestry”, pointing to the geographical origin of a person’s ancestors, also does not correlate reliably with either of these socially constructed racial ascriptions.

It is generally agreed upon that these complexities cannot be reduced to simple assertions. They can, however, provide an opportunity for a revitalised discussion which aims towards establishing a common understanding. Consensus also exists regarding the notion that people are genetically different and that geographical distances have played a role in the formation of some, but not all of these differences. How these differences are best sorted, classified, and described, whether and for which approaches such a sorting makes sense, and how divisive applications can be prevented – these are all questions that will occupy us for a long time to come.

Addendum

The authors would like to make clear two further points.

1. At stake is not only a question of scientific observation and precision, but more importantly scientific and social responsibility. Current developments in various European countries show that people perceived as foreign are once again being met with more and institutionalised mistrust. The most recent example is the initiative of the right-wing populist Italian Ministry of the Interior to have all Sinti and Roma counted and recorded. But there are also examples of institutional and personal prejudices in Germany, for example in the area of criminal prosecution; the "Phantom of Heilbronn" and "Oury Jalloh" are only particularly evocative cases. Whoever

propagates the noticability of genetic differences of „Rassen“ as scientific progress without being aware of how quickly they promote racism is acting irresponsibly.

2. Our goal as authors was not to provide an exegesis of Reich's op ed. The meaning of his words are open to many interpretations. Instead, we felt it important to highlight how these words are being translated into the German-speaking world.

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