

Lost in Translation

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

A debate sparked by geneticist David Reich in The New York Times, by an article titled „How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of ‚Race‘“, published on the 23rd of March, has been commented upon in German speaking media by several authors. Whereas in the US Reich's argument had garnered criticism as well as endorsements, in Germany Reich has mainly been celebrated as a taboo breaker, as someone who has induced a debate on “Rasse”. But is this really what Reich intended: to open a debate on what Germans call “Rasse”? Is the German word “Rasse” really equivalent to “race” – can these two terms be translated into each other?

Before we discuss what “Rasse” refers to in Germany, we wish to ask how it became possible for German authors to interpret Reich in a certain way – in a way, we believe, that might perhaps not be in accordance with Reich's intention.

Reich writes about a widely disseminated opinion, which he calls “orthodoxy”. Supposedly, it postulates that the average genetic differences among people grouped according to “today's racial terms” concerning biologically relevant traits are so minimal that these differences can be ignored. According to Reich, this doctrine goes even further: It warns against any research on genetic differences. In this Reich thinks to recognize worries that any research about genetic differences could lead to “pseudoscientific arguments about biological difference” that have been used in the past to justify crimes, e.g. in Nazi Germany. “But”, Reich goes on, “as a geneticist I also know that it is simply no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences among ‚races.‘” It remains ambiguous what he means with “races”: self-assigned, like the ones used in the US census, or externally assigned, mostly based on external characteristics; or perhaps he meant to imply a biological concept of race? Also ambiguously, he placed the word ‘race’ in quotes in some, but not all, passages in the text.

Since then a discussion started how Reich's use of the term should be understood, and how one should deal with his making use of quotation marks. Quite a number of commentators seem to think that Reich has formulated a concept of biological, genetically determined differences between races. Some welcome this, others reject it as deterministic, biologicistic, essentialistic and even as racist. However, probably both evaluations are based on a misunderstanding. Reading more of Reich's texts shows 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 be loosely worded as: It is no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences correlating with the "racial terms" or ("ethnicities") that are used today in the US census by each citizen for self-assignment by governmental assessments, census or surveys. But such a correlation does not equal causal relationships between genetic variants and external characteristics. In his article, Reich repeatedly warns against the misuse of genetic research to justify racism.

Scientists of diverse disciplines have argued that Reich's claims appear deceptive and undifferentiated in the light of the differentiated discussions on the topic that 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 too, but here, a remarkable shift is taking place: The English word "race" is simply translated into the German word "Rasse": Reich, one commentator writes, has sparked a "'Rassen' debate (Axel Meyer, FAZ), or an argument about "Erbgut und Rasse" (Markus Schär, NZZ). However, in our eyes, this is a questionable translation, and we doubt that Reich would agree to it.

Although these authors do not represent Reich's controversial core message to directly confirm the idea of genetically determined differences between "Rassen", they do so ex negativo. According to Axel Mayer, 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", says Mayer, are "not a purely social construct", "they reflect measurable 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" in a direct quote: "There are no large enough differences between human populations to support a concept of 'biological races'"). The examples listed by Schär are meant to highlight differences between "biological races". Counter examples, differentiations, careful evaluations are missing in these articles. Finally, some may conclude, we are allowed to talk about what everyone can see on the street anyways: "Rassen" simply exist, and a biologically founded classification of humans into "Rassen" is feasible.

But "race" and "Rasse" do not mean the same. 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.

Firstly, 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 did by no means run in parallel, and different connotations were attributed to them. In the US, with its history of slavery and ongoing immigration, race as a term has come to be deeply entwined with struggles against social injustice and racist discrimination. The problematic aspects of the term are recognized and discussed in the US. There has been considerable social resistance against racial categories that were 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 used to reporting their race or ethnicity, understood as an expression for their belonging to a community (or even several 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, neither by the state nor by other institution, neither in the census nor anywhere else. German citizens have no experience with self assignment, and hence 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: It is a biological term and can only be used to describe biological variation. In German, it does not allow for any social constructivist interpretation. And paradoxically, even though Germany is widely perceived as having struggled with its past successfully, the problem of ethnic or racial stereotyping, for example in state authorities, is not systematically addressed.

Moreover, if we take Reich’s “today’s racial terms” as referring to external ascriptions of race, there are also noteworthy differences between the two countries. In the US, there is 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”.

What people think they see on the street also depends on what they have learned to see in their sociocultural environment: specific differences seem more significant, others are overlooked or reinterpreted. But seldom are such everyday ascriptions contested or corrected if there is no moment of confrontation with other sources of information. In the US, many have made counterintuitive experiences with externally and self-assigned race: sometimes these are just not in accordance. If 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, puzzling surprises can occur in some instances.

Commented [DSC1]: I think this is a bit confusing – while white skinned they were considered inhuman, but you couldn’t look at them and say they were Irish – they were just obviously not American and attributes of laziness, criminality, sticking together etc led them to be considered inhuman until Alien Acts.

In Germany, however, people are hardly aware of the fact that a seemingly natural classification, guided by externally visible characteristics, might 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 in 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 south European countries in the last decades, and who still seem "alien" for 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 without reflection or intent of discrimination, from a historic context where "Rasse" was exclusively used in a biological sense and with a racist intent. Of course not every racist trope can be traced back to the time of the NS regime (some have older and/or more international roots), but during this time, these racisms experienced a major anchoring into everyday language. In this context, again, it is important to consider that the term "Rasse", in the usage of the national socialist regime, only denoted a biological, and no sociological-cultural meaning. This characterizes its use in Germany until today. Until the 1990s, those racial terms, dating back to the NS regime period, could be found in school books, encyclopedias, and educational literature. Only later, 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 to capture 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 "races", this leaves considerable interpretative flexibility to 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 talking about research about "average genetic differences"). But in Germany there are by no means only two opposing views, one claiming that no races exist, the other claiming that they do exist. This is a polarized public image, but it doesn't pay justice to how people make sense out 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 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 constantly and inevitably carried out, e.g. 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 if races exist or not, without retreating to one of the two alleged positions. Others defiantly reject any information offered; for an emotionalized topic such as this, rejection is but one out of several typical reactions.

Yet communication about the topic is not consumed by a dogma or even a taboo, imposed upon everyone by one of the imagined extreme sides, making a differentiated speech about genetic differences impossible. Indeed, in Germany, for historic reasons, country-specific speech conventions about the topic exist, perceived to be rather strict by many (while also for historic reasons, other speech conventions around this topic exist in other countries). There is a desire to avoid being misunderstood and blamed from one side as being “racist”, or being misunderstood and blamed from the other side as being “politically correct”, and those concerns do probably restrict the spectrum of publicly stated opinions quite strongly. But this does not mean that it is a taboo, kept up by only one group, as claimed by Reich’s German interpretators. It means that conversations with the goal of conveying understanding on the topic of “social diversity and genetics” are particularly difficult to have. To assume a suppressed truth, however, is completely inappropriate.

The German-speaking commentators of Reich nevertheless celebrate him as a taboo-buster who confers justice to one of the two opposing positions, namely the allegedly suppressed one. Thereby, they add to a polarization that could have also be observed in the ongoing debate in Germany about 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 her 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 even “cultural milieu”. The message alleging that “race” or “ethnicity” are a “biological reality” identifiable by exterior characteristics, or that it can be “genetically determined” for every person, is unscientific and irresponsible; but in the intersection of the two debates, many in Germany will perceive exactly this message and misunderstand it as the scientific truth of the art.

But much exists between the two extreme positions, more than is probably known to most German readers. Scholars and scientists from all parts of the world, including German-speaking ones, have already taken 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, be an opportunity for a revitalised discussion with common understanding as the goal. Consensus exists also on the notion that people are genetically different and that geographical distances played a role in the formation of some, but not all of these differences. How the differences are best sorted, classified and described, whether and for which approaches this makes sense, and how divisive applications can be prevented – these are questions that will occupy us for a long time to come.

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