

## Reflections on “race” in science and society in Germany

Ulrich Kattmann

Department of Biology and Environmental Sciences, Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, Germany  
e-mail: ulrich.kattmann@uni-oldenburg.de

The purpose of this article is to show how race and racism are treated in Germany in science as well as in the public discourse. It will be demonstrated that these debates are influenced by the history of biological anthropology (on the one hand) and (on the other hand) the history of Germany up to the current political situation there is influenced by the immigration of refugees mainly from Asia Minor and Africa. In the article, I will consider the central questions Alan Goodman put in his survey of the reflections on “race” in the US:

*How is race – both the concept and the word itself – used in science today?*

*Is there a decline in the salience of the term “race” as a proxy for human genetic variation, and if so, in what ways is it evident?*

*How is race used in legal documents and legal proceedings?*

*What are the current political and cultural points of tension, or “hot spots,” with regard to race and racism?*

*Has progress been made in improving the study and understanding of human variation?*

The study will reveal a clear link between racism and culturalism in Germany. In this context, I’ll employ aspects of biological science as well as of cultural sciences and social psychology.

### Race in the public discourse

In Germany, talking about and reflection upon race and racism is seriously ruled by the

history of the National Socialist regime and its crimes. After the end of the Second World War talking about race in a neutral manner was taboo in Germany, in the FRG as well as in the GDR. This influenced the public debates: in politically correct discussions mentioning the term “race” was mostly avoided, cultural differences were stressed instead. Cultural differences have become a widely-used substitute for “race” in nevertheless racially motivated arguments.

These arguments became especially virulent in discussions concerned with so-called “guest-workers” in the 1980s and revived recently in the debates about the integration or the rebuttal of refugees. Genetic arguments which were mingled with cultural ones do not violate political correctness. The cultural imprint of Islamic refugees is considered essence incompatible with European culture. This anti-Islamic position culminates in the claim made by members of a right-winged populist party that Islam is not a religion but a political ideology.

In the shadow of cultural and Islamophobic conceptions even racial geneticist convictions revive. That such conceptions are not restricted to a small minority was manifested in 2010 by Thilo Sarrazin’s book: “Deutschland schafft sich ab” (Germany eliminates itself) which became a huge bestseller. Although Sarrazin, a former politician, has no biological education he uses several genetic arguments against the integration of people of Asia Minor and Africa in addition to economic and cultural claims. Sarrazin repeats the opinion that immigrants will cause a decrease in intelligence in the population, a statement which was already used in 1982 by I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt,

a protagonist of human ethology, against the immigration of Africans. The decline of intelligence (how large the contribution of genes to the variation of intelligence ever may be) is a myth which neglects the distribution of human alleles within populations and also their polygenic and pleiotropic effects.

Narrowly linked with Islamophobic statements and accompanied by the immigration of 850 000 refugees to Germany in 2015, several violent actions emerged against refugee shelters. In some localities and regions, the atmosphere has become increasingly hostile, which however – till now – has not worn off the help and hospitality of the majority of the people.

It is important to mention the fact that the discrimination against outgroups is not a matter of the characteristics of the strangers. Social psychology teaches us that racial prejudices are caused by the self image of the discriminating group. Outgroup images tell us much more about the self-esteem of the ingroup than about the groups of strangers. In order to reduce negative outgroup images, the self-image has to be tackled. As a consequence, people's identification with their own group should not always be denounced as improper nationalism. Instead a self-image of the society has to be developed which is open to integrating the strange instead of segregating it (cf. Kattmann, 1997).

In short: racial arguments are virulent in the public debate, either hidden in cultural ones or increasingly openly outspoken in terms of genes and race. Political correctness increasingly loses its moderating role. Racist attitudes are – at present – not in the majority. Nevertheless racially motivated convictions and racist actions are not negligible.

### Racism and Culturalism

*“Racism is the belief that human populations differ in heritable traits of social values making certain groups superior or inferior to others”* (UNESCO, 1995).

*“Culturalism is the idea that individuals are determined by their culture, that these cultures*

*form closed, organic wholes, and that the individual is unable to leave his or her own culture, but rather can only realise him or herself within it. Culturalism also maintains that cultures have a claim to special rights and protections—even if at the same time they violate individual rights”* (Erikson & Stjernfelt, 2009, p. 1).

As the cited statements show, racism and culturalism are sisters in spirit. Culturalism roots primarily in a disruptive view that human cultures are essentially diverse. The diversity of cultures (not the uniqueness of human culture) was the dominant issue of ethnology. Quite similarly, biological anthropology focused on races as essential units and not on the human species as a whole.

In race studies, culture and race were linked together from the beginning. Races were defined not only by traits of the body, but – even dominantly – by psychological and cultural features (cf. Kattmann, 2009, for further references).

The affinity of culturalism to racism should be recognized: In the cited definitions the separation of cultures (like the isolated development of races) and their treatment as essential entities which determine the features of the individual are not shallow parallels, rather, they are the consequences of the historical conception in which race and culture are closely linked together. The idea of isolation and even more the conception of adverse antagonisms remain virulent in both. Against this ideological background it is not a surprise that cultural and racial arguments are interwoven in public discussions.

The ideology of isolated civilizations recently got its most influential expression in the postulated “Clash of Civilisations”, published by Samuel Huntington in 1996, mainly stressing the confrontation of the “Western” with the Islamic world. The book was widely recognized in Germany. It should be acknowledged that its conception of major civilizations which has its predecessor in the “Kulturkreislehre” of the 19th century, is an unsubstantiated ideology which contradicts many empirical facts (paralleling the concept of “major races”). German politicians are used to speaking of the “Christian-Jewish-civilization” separating it

from the Islamic “Kulturkreis” (culture area). One should be aware that this juxtaposition of civilizations neglects the fact, that the three religions which are used to characterize and distinguish the two civilizations stem from the same root in Asia Minor! Furthermore, the Western civilization owes to Islam a huge flow of information from the Middle East and Spain, which originally promoted the European development of science and technology. The flow of information till 900 years ago did not go from Europe to the Middle East but the other way around out of the Middle East where in the Fertile Crescent the Western civilization was born. It is absurd to continue to believe in a cultural chasm between Europe and Asia. Even from China which at times preferred to live in splendid isolation, there was an overall constant stream of ideas to Europe along the Silk Route.

In accord with parting from the race concept (see below), the division of societies into major civilizations should be abandoned in favor of an inclusive view of human culture: human culture is not divided into several isolated or invariably hostile behaving entities, but a common feature of all human populations. History teaches us that cultures at any time were not entirely separated but have always exchanged goods, ideas and knowledge extensively. Civilizations or cultures which were insulating themselves perished. Therefore cultures (in plural) are only facets of the human culture (in singular) which is a species-specific trait of *Homo sapiens*. This is a basic biological view of human culture. Thereby, differences are not denied or overseen, but now valued as a plurality within the fundamental unity of human culture. Commonalities are not longer seen as accidental but as essential. In accord, the differences may lose their separating and sometimes disruptive power but will become starting-points towards designing an enriched co-existence (cf. Kattmann, 2013).

### Development and use of race concepts in anthropology

In Germany, anthropology as an independent biological discipline originated at the end

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Swiss anthropologist Rudolf Martin, one of its founders, who worked in Munich, defined biological anthropology as the “natural history of hominids”. This definition included paleoanthropology and the history of populations. The latter mutated into the studies of human races (“Rassenkunde”). Studies of races were controversial among anthropologists. From the beginning, this part of the discipline was linked with racial prejudices: the typological description of “race” was tightly linked with cultural, behavioral and psychological features which were thought to be racial traits. When the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933, the topic of human races became an obligatory subject of the syllabi in schools, and studies on races were promoted at the universities and research institutes.

Biological anthropologists and also the founder of ethology, the zoologist Konrad Lorenz, professor for psychology in Königsberg (at that time in Germany, nowadays Kaliningrad, Russia), cooperated with the regime in programs examining whether individuals of neighboring populations were racially worthy to become Germans. Even more important, in dubious cases anthropologists decided whether a child would be recognized as a pure-bred German, or a Jew, or a half-breed. This identification was demanded by race laws the regime passed in 1935 (“Nürnberger Rassengesetze”).

After 1945 anthropologists claimed that the Nazi regime abused the knowledge of race, but that the knowledge itself was scientifically correct. This opinion dominated the scientific opinions up to the 1980s. It is the merit of the Austrian anthropologist Horst Seidler, to have reversed this view by publishing two books in which the collaboration with the politics of the Nazi regime of nearly all of the leading anthropologists and their institutes in Germany as well as in Austria is documented. These documents show that anthropologists readily collaborated by preparing race certificates (Rassegutachten). The anthropologists claimed that they are the experts and are unique in being able to identify race by scientific methods. In nearly all the

cases the experts identified the persons as Jews or half-breed (Seidler & Rett, 1982, 1988). Today the methods which were applied are judged as entirely insufficient to identify the parenthood of a person. Sometimes parenthood was determined on the basis of family photographs only. Seidler clarifies that the racial diagnosis of whether a person is a Jew or not is scientifically not justifiable at all. Nevertheless, the judgement of the “experts” was the base for rigid social discrimination and for the transportation of humans into concentration camps, probably to death.

### Substitution of the term “race” in science

As the term “race” is discredited by its use in the Nazi ideology and criminal politics of the regime its history is regarded as a reason to avoid the term and to substitute it. This proposal is intelligible, though insufficient and sometimes even misleading. Some biologists feel justified still to use the term “race” because the abuse does not disqualify the use. It is therefore of highest importance to demonstrate that not only the term is to be discredited, but also the ideology and concepts behind it. If only the term is substituted the concept of race will survive in new clothes. Thus, the authors of a leading textbook on evolutionary biology used the term “ethnos” instead of “race” and motivated this use not on conceptual grounds but with the Nazi misuse of the term and its following discrimination in some societies. Then, the book presented the traditional division into three major races, which was underpinned by the typological description of the predominant morphological traits of the groups. While termed as “ethnos”, the concept of human race was entirely untouched by modern biology (Storch *et al.*, 2001; in the third edition of 2013 this use of terms and typological description of human races were only slightly revised).

In biology “ethnos” or “ethnic group” are inadequate because these terms are labels of socially and culturally defined concepts. “Ethnos” should be restricted to social groups which can be

characterized by a common tradition or history or coherence in social relationships or law. Using it in biology means to perpetuate the mingling of biological and social phenomena which has characterized the concept of race from its beginning. Certainly, biological factors and social ones are linked together in many aspects of human biology, and the interdependence between them has to be acknowledged in biological research as well as in teaching. But this said, it is necessary to emphasize that the two factors must be carefully distinguished. Otherwise interaction and cooperation between them cannot be identified. In the case of “race” the distinction is essential: unrelated to genes the concept of race is meaningless, related to genes it is obsolete.

In short: “Ethnos” is not a substitute for “race” if the biological concept of race is concerned. But a new concept of human variation calls for new terms. Biologically useful terms for the variants of humans are “population” and “geographical” or “local group”.

### The use of the term “race” in public debates and documents

There are efforts in Germany to eliminate the term “race” in official and judicial documents. But, in the public domain it remains important to talk about race because as a social construct, race is real. As such it is adequately mentioned in official documents and laws. The Declaration of Human Rights of 1945 need not be altered. Neither laws nor declarations are scientific documents. They should be interpreted in the social and historical context of their time.

Changing the words is not an essential contribution in the battle against racism: Racists do not need biological reality of races, but they construct races by themselves. Jews or Aryans never were “races” in a biological sense, whatever definition of “race” may be used. The same is true for “blacks” in the US or elsewhere. The determination of races has always been affected by social or political interests of the defining group. Scientific studies on race have been part of it, despite their

claims of being neutral descriptions. As pointed out, research in social psychology demonstrates that the outgroup is characterized in contrast to the ingroup (see above). Therefore, all Europeans had to become “whites” in contrast to “blacks” or “colored” peoples. The contrast works, even though some so-called coloured people or even so-called “blacks” have the same degree of skin pigmentation as southern Europeans. Scientists apply the same mechanisms toward outgroups when classifying races that people in general use.

In conclusion: If “race” is used in a historical or in a social context, it has to be interpreted historically or socially respectively. Thereby, it should be mentioned that the related concept is scientifically obsolete.

### **Perpetuating the concept of “race” in biology**

Until the middle of the 1980s, the concept of “race” was accepted by the majority of German anthropologists. It took till the 1990s that this issue got a place in the debates of the anthropological association (Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, cf. Preuschoft & Kattmann, 1992). Thus, studies on human races in Germany went along traditional paths only admitting ideological and political misuse by the Nazi regime. As shown the Nazi regime did not abuse anthropology, but anthropologists willingly collaborated with the regime.

Soon after 1945 the leading figures of anthropology who had served the Nazi regime as experts continued their work in old or new positions in the universities of the FRG. Some became honorary members of the anthropological association. In a benchmark of evolutionary biology (Evolution der Organismen) of 1959, and a handbook of biology (Handbuch der Biologie) of 1968, authors known to have collaborated in leading positions with the NS-regime contributed articles on human races which contained racist statements concerning “negroes” and the cultural preeminence of the white race. Promoters of the studies on races dominated together with their disciples the scene with hardly modified views.

New insights from the international community were assimilated to the old typological concept. Population genetics was integrated in such a way, that races should represent typical modes of the distribution of alleles (variants of genes). When it became clear that the distribution of alleles is geographically mostly continuous and thus traits are overall clinal, it was claimed that races are the central junctions of several clines. Later the outcomes of molecular biology were interpreted as backing the taxonomy of races (see below).

Amid the mainstream of anthropologists, as a biology educator, I published a book in 1973 on race with the title “Rassen – Bilder vom Menschen” (Races – images of the human being). While arguing against race prejudices and racism, I still adhered to the race concept. Mainly influenced by Theodosius Dobzhansky, who defined races as populations which differ in the frequency of genes, I argued that races could be distinguished by statistical methods and that hence even sub-races were biologically real entities. I needed years – till the 1990s – before I was ready to change my mind.

### **Abandoning the concept of human races**

Again it was Horst Seidler who gave the decisive input for a change into the scientific and public debates in Austria and Germany. In 1995, he organized an international workshop of experts in anthropology, genetics and neighboring sciences which accompanied the UNESCO-Conference on Racism, Violence and Discrimination in Stadtschlaining, Austria. Seidler was able to persuade the Doyen of human population genetics, Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza, to participate in the workshop. The result was the Schlaining Statement on Race:

*“The revolution in our thinking about population genetics and molecular biology has led to an explosion of knowledge about living organisms. Among the ideas that have been profoundly altered are concepts of human variation. The*

*concept of «race» carried over from the past into the 20th century has become entirely obsolete. ... This document asserts that there is no scientifically reliable way to characterise human diversity using the rigid terms of «racial» categories or the traditional «race» concept. There is no scientific reason to continue using the term «race»*” (UNESCO, 1995).

The statement was cited in several textbooks. In 2007, the “Gesellschaft für Anthropologie” (Association for Biological Anthropology) passes a similar resolution at its congress (Niemitz *et al.*, 2006). In accord, the concept of race and the typological division or description of human groups in recently published German biology textbooks for schools and biological or general dictionaries have nearly vanished.

This not equally true for university textbooks (see the case above). Especially zoologists seem to have professional difficulties in accepting the modern view of human variation. Perhaps the reservation originates from evolutionary principles and processes which are thought to be general and indispensable: the taxonomical classification into races is understood as a usual method of the whole of biology.

The concept of race seems necessary for evolutionary biology because races are the results of differentiation of populations and therefore principally pre-stages in the evolution of species.

Humans are not exceptions and thus should be treated like other animals.

As pointed out by several biologists in the world, these arguments do not fit with the empirical data and the results of population genetics, especially not if the populations of *Homo sapiens* are concerned: the lowest essential taxon of biological systematics is the species. The classification of subspecies taxa like races is not obligatory but subject to its feasibility.

The differentiation of populations does not always depend on the genetic separation of populations. It may be caused by assortative migration and – without major barriers – by geographical distance. This process applies to human as well to other animal populations.

Abandoning the concept of race for human populations does not mean to claim an exceptional status for the human species. In fact the parting from race is justified by biological features of human populations:

- higher diversity within, rather than among human populations,
- continuous variation of allele frequencies all over the globe, and
- striking genetic similarity of all humans.

In short: the efforts in perpetuating the race concept and efforts to save it as a scientifically valuable concept, are typological, at least, or, as my friend, the zoologist Gerd von Wahlert (1925-2016) put it: “*Typology is the attempt to nail a pudding to the wall.*”

## Challenges

Some biologists at universities in Germany still make use of the race concept in their teaching. The latest example was a zoologist at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He caused a fierce protest among his students, which were backed by several students of other disciplines. The turmoil led the vice president of the university to claim falsely, that the race concept had a neutral tradition in science and should be scientifically accepted. As a result of the conflict, the students published a readable book on the issue (AG gegen Rassismus, 2009).

Like in other countries, the arguments against the classification of humans into races were challenged in Germany by an article of Anthony W. F. Edwards from 2003, which denounced the denial of the classification into human races as “Lewontin’s fallacy”. Edward’s arguments are correct but they do not deny that the genetic variation between human populations is minor and therefore less important than the variation within populations. But the question is not whether Lewontin was right in all of his arguments or whether human populations can be statistically distinguished by the

contribution of many instead of few alleles (that is trivial). The decisive question is whether the race concept is feasible to comprehend the genetic variation in and between human populations. Even if we take all known alleles in order to discriminate human populations this approach will not justify a classification into races: Such a comparison and discrimination can be done with any population or any group, with the outcome of statistical significant differences. What sorts of – smaller or larger – groups are chosen for a taxonomy of “races” will be completely arbitrary. The results will mirror the large amount of racial taxonomic systems which garnish the history of anthropological efforts to classify humans into anywhere from three up to 200 “races” at will.

In addition, the claims of some anthropologists that the traditional division in geographical major races is congruent with the outcomes of molecular population genetics are fallacious for two main reasons. First, their claim is based on rough interpretations led by prejudice. The disparities of molecular genetics and morphological classification are neglected or overseen by selective perception. A second misunderstanding is caused by the studies themselves. When David Serre and Svante Pääbo from Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, in Leipzig, Germany, revisited a big and influential US-study, they demonstrated that the assignment of the genetic variants to continents and thus the similarity to the division into major races was an artifact of the sampling (Serre & Pääbo, 2004). The distribution of genetic variants exceeds the continents thereby contradicting the traditional classification into geographical races.

In conclusion: although some biologists are not ready to declare the concept of human races obsolete, great progress has been achieved in Germany to abandon the concept. There is no need of a race concept at all. The battle against racism and culturalism remains essential for society, however, and is of central need in the public discourse. Scientists have the task to participate in it intensely. They are not only responsible for their results but also for the thoughts which they

publicly induce by the terms, concepts and conceptions they use.

## References

- AG gegen Rassismus in den Lebenswissenschaften. 2009. *Die gemachte Differenz. Kontinuitäten biologischer “Rasse”-Konzepte* (The constructed difference. Continuities of biological “race”-conceptions). Unrast, Münster.
- Edwards A.W.F. 2003. Human genetic diversity: Lewontin’s fallacy. *BioEssays*, 25: 798-801.
- Erikson J.-M. & Stjernfelt F. 2009. Culturalism: Culture as political Ideology. *Eurozine*, 2009-01-09. (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/page/jens-martin-eriksen/culturalism-culture-as-political-ideology>).
- Kattmann U. 1997. No “We” without discriminating “They”. *Internationale Schulbuchforschung*, 19: 154-156.
- Kattmann U. 2009. Menschenrassen. Rassismus. (Human races. Racism). In R. Sauermost & D. Freudig (eds): *Lexikon der Biologie*, Vol. 9, pp. 170-177; Vol. 11, pp. 423-424. Spektrum, Heidelberg.
- Kattmann U. 2013. Race, genes and culture. In M. Koegeler-Abli & R. Parncutt (eds): *Interculturality: Practice meets research*, pp. 131-148. Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Niemitz C., Kreutz K. & Walter H. 2006. Wider den Rassenbegriff in der Anwendung auf den Menschen (Against the use of the race concept towards humans). *Anthropol. Anz.*, 64: 463–464.
- Preuschhof H. & Kattmann U. (eds) 1992. *Anthropologie im Spannungsfeld zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik*. (Biological anthropology between science and politics). BIS der Universität, Oldenburg.
- Seider H. & Rett A. 1982. *Das Reichssippenamt entscheidet. Rassenbiologie im Nationalsozialismus*. (The “Reichssippenamt” decides. Race biology in National Socialism). Jugend und Volk, Wien.
- Seider H. & Rett A. 1988. *Rassenhygiene – Ein Weg in den Nationalsozialismus*. (Race hygiene a route to National Socialism). Jugend und Volk, Wien.

Serre D. & Pääbo S. 2004. Evidence for gradients of human genetic diversity within and among continents. *Genome Res.*, 14: 1679–1685.

Storch V., Welsch U. & Wink M. 2001. *Evolutionsbiologie*. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.  
UNESCO-workshop. 1995. *Statement on race*.



This work is distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>