

Report

(out)Rage in America (and elsewhere) –

Structural Racism, Resistance and Responsibilities: The Situation in the US and Germany

June 24

Organized by the American Studies section of the Department of English and American Studies,
Humboldt University in Berlin

Community agreements:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1H3iBqHUE2MESmSPboBIUYd-T2K19BZWJ9inEV1snEAU/edit>

Aim of the meeting:

- address racist structures at the university
- implement anti-racist strategies at university and in everyday life
- emphasize that racism is often wrongly seen as a U.S. problem, while it is a global problem
- concentrate on situations in Germany

Participants:

- students
- faculty
- guests
- ⇒ binding community agreements available to all participants

Input by participants

Many participants voiced the inequality within academia and in the German educational system they have been and are experiencing. Students and other stakeholders raised questions about the influence of lecturers, professors, teachers, and staff. Many students addressed the necessity of current (as well as future) faculty members and instructors taking part in anti-racist teacher trainings (including education on language use, terminologies, concepts, didactics, and implementation of anti-racist curricula). These trainings need to be implemented continuously and on a regular basis. Several students mentioned that they had to intervene when racist language was used in classroom discussions because instructors didn't speak up. Many classes address primarily white students, "explaining" white privilege and racism to white students, instead of focusing on perspectives of Students of Color. Participants mentioned the underrepresentation of Students of Color at HU. Students mentioned several reasons for this

underrepresentation, which included on the one hand, the particular obstacles that international Students of Color face, and on the other hand, the challenges of Students of Color within the German school system.

The presence of a lecturer affiliated with the AfD is harmful and unsafe for all students of the department. One of them shared the experience of feeling unsafe due to the security outside the classroom, which was provided to protect the professor. Secondly, one student shared her experience of being Chinese and being treated as a representative of China - explaining politics and history - as well as knowing exactly what communism is about. Students did criticize the underrepresentation of BPoc (Black and People of Color) on staff level in general but also alluded specifically to American Studies, African Studies and Asian Studies.

Students spoke of the necessity to hire more lecturers and administrative staff who are People of Color. Participants asked about hiring practices at the department, whether supporting underrepresented groups within the university is an important factor, and whether there is anti-racist training for lecturers and other staff.

Faculty response to the last questions:

The faculty has been grappling with trying to implement more strategies to increase opportunities for students and faculty marginalized by racism and other structural inequalities for a long time, for example in hiring decisions, and is very aware of the structural inequality the participants have mentioned. When it comes to hiring it depends on what position has to be filled. If it is a PhD position, professors have more of a leeway in deciding who they want to hire. When hiring a professor, a whole committee makes the decision. Both follow different procedures.

There have been a few anti-racist trainings for faculty members in the past, but more need to follow in the future.

Aside from activities catered to faculty, the “Orientierungskurs” is mentioned as a method to introduce new students of American Studies to such essential issues as structural racism, intersecting social hierarchies, and privileges.

Different groups have different options and different ways of organizing; horizontal organizing is mentioned as being effective.

Input

1. Policing in the U.S. and Demands to Defund, Reform, and Abolish the Police Force (Kristina Graaff)

- U.S. police introduced by the 1830s as an entity that represents the state, armed almost from very beginning
- law enforcement in the U.S. has been militarized: military style hierarchies; SWAT teams introduced during Civil Rights movements in the 1960s to counter urban rebellions
- since the emergence of the prison system, the incarceration rate for Black Americans has been disproportionately high
- 77% of all police officers are white
- police is funded by taxpayers and fees and fines (many extracted from Communities of Color), additional funds by corporate donors such Amazon, Starbucks, Google
 - requirements to become a police officer: highschool/GED, background check & police academy training (between 3 to 5 months)
 - there has been almost no police accountability: Since 2015, 15,000 people have been killed by police officers, but fewer than 150 have actually been charged with murder; officers protected by “qualified immunity”
 - police departments are overfunded; at times funds are more than half of the municipal’s total spending
 - common problem: officers work in communities they don’t live in
 - policing extends to the homes of people; “no-knock search warrants” (the shooting of Breonna Taylor was a consequence of that law)
 - police unions have massive share in protecting officers from prosecution
 - contracts ensure job security and other privileges while being under investigation; prosecutors are sometimes members of unions

Demands voiced during the protests right now: defund, reform, and abolish police

DEFUND: invest funds in other areas: neighborhood support; community-based organizations with no ties to police

REFORM: restructure police; offer more trainings; demand accountability; require officers to exhaust all means instead of using weaponry

ABOLISH: system is not broken, but working exactly the way it is intended to do, namely as a tool of white supremacy; step-by-step abolishment of force – defund police, end policing in communities and schools; add and expand other necessary services: public transit system, community food banks, affordable housing and healthcare; comprehensive community mental health treatment; change scope and size of police departments; end policing ideologies of ‘surveillance, control and punishment’

2. Presentation and discussion of many different anti-racist protests worldwide (Nisren Habib)

- presentation:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MEZynlK8NtmCAHhkMyOCSnVvb_MGIVUg/view?pli=1
 - video from *The Telegraph*:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/01/george-floyd-protests-trump-black-lives-matter-minneapolis-usa/>
 - It was mentioned that people who experience racism and have been doing anti-racist work for years are afraid that the current uprise of media coverage of racism is just another trend and that serious anti-racist work will not happen.
3. Presentation *Diversity Roundtable* of German Association of American Studies (Helen Gibson)
- presenter voices outrage at hesitation of German academia to declare solidarity
 - self-reflexivity is necessary, but what is the next step?
 - outrage at academia holding on to structures that perpetuate white supremacy
 - this is a moment of reckoning for white academics who have profited from the invisibility of Academics of Color, of white privilege
 - *Diversity Roundtable* foregrounds intersectionalities and intersectional structures of oppressions
<https://lists.fu-berlin.de/pipermail/jfki-news/2020-March/pdf1e1CilQrX8.pdf>
4. Presentation *Talking American Studies Academic Podcast* (Verena Adamik and Yasmin Künze)
- placed at the intersection of academia and activism
 - addresses academics, but accessible and available for all
 - engages with structural problems: tied to capitalism for example
 - podcast aims at strengthening entry into academia; make academia more open and offer glimpses into its structures
 - On the other hand: need to be careful how we present academia, and ourselves, on social media
 - topics: Black History in the US; white supremacy; Native American Futurisms; ...
 - criticized patriotic notions of some academics with regard to the US – the declaration of disbelief at what is happening in the US (ahistorical ignorance)
- Link to podcast: <https://talkingamericanstudies.buzzsprout.com>
5. Faculty input

Elahe Haschemi Yekani

- important to consider that POC colleagues and scholars (many without tenure, on qualifying positions) are often overburdened; they spend a lot of time and energy on activism; this takes away from time to acquire necessary academic merits
- professorships have a high cultural capital in Germany, very difficult to recruit POCs for those positions given the required entry qualifications; we need to start as early as possible and on all levels of people's academic careers to level the playing field
- many candidates who are Scholars of Color are hindered by structural obstacles (e.g. racism, sexism and transphobia, and/or ableism) that make it more challenging for them to fulfill requirements for hire in a university position
- HU has implemented many programs and resources (cf. resources list), these need to be expanded, and the existing ones need more visibility
- not only POC faculty can tackle racism and teach about anti-racist tactics

Anne Potjans

- important to consider POC and Black people who do not speak up right now
- silence doesn't mean non-engagement; grieving and hurting and dealing can take various forms
- call to action has existed before; we need to continue the momentum of this moment and not expect of POC and Black people to react immediately to the current situation
- we need to act even when Black and POC suffering is not constantly broadcasted, we have to listen and act way beyond the current moment
- more critical knowledge at university is necessary
- institutionalization of fields that deal with that: Black Studies, Ethnic Studies
- for Black people and People of Color it is ok to be overwhelmed, sad and silent.

Eva Boesenberg

- a letter addressing structural racism at HU has been sent to the president, written by Gökce Yurdakul and Eva Boesenberg, co-signed by Faculty of Color
- demand for the institutionalization of an office that addresses anti-racism (at the intersection other discriminatory structures) at the university
- currently collecting ideas and questions for the president; please send questions and requests you might have

- necessity for a HU ‘diversity plan’ to increase the presence of POC at university; diversity needs to be mentioned in all job offers, and needs to be implemented in hiring guidelines

6. Presentation *Triggerzine*

The Trigger Zine is a student-run zine that tries to address structural racism practices at HU as an institution and the classroom. The idea of the zine came up when there was a racist incident in the classroom and it was not handled appropriately.

List of demands:

- more inclusivity and transparency in application processes for international students
- more BPOC professors with long-term contracts
- reconsideration of dynamics between professors/instructors and students; mutual learning
- guidelines for classroom discussions
- More physical spaces at HU for student discussions and communication/coming together but also more space in the class room for reflection and not only theory and how they connect to the world outside of academia.
- If you want to participate send us an E-Mail to triggerzine@gmail.com

Breakout Sessions

What can students and faculty members do to actively and continuously learn and apply anti-racist practices at the university and beyond? How can ideas be put into action? What are our capacities? How can we support each other? Other thoughts and ideas.

Group 1:

- “Orientierungskurs” also for master students or even whole seminar on regular basis
- Who is teaching for whom? Different instructors (particularly of color) for different topics should be included
- Students of Color should not be forced to explain or share their experiences of discrimination and it would be good when People of Color would teach the Orientierungskurs, too
- Teachers need to step up more to ensure “safety” of the classroom; students of color should not be asked to share experiences of racism or explain racism
- Creation of group for black people and POC to talk about their experience at university - can be isolating/feeling like you have to do more than white students

- Publication of resources on university/faculty website - books for POC, books for white people to educate themselves on white supremacy and their own positioning

Group 2:

- Student self-organizing has been effective
- Student voices are often silenced - students were not even able to be involved in planning this Town Hall Meeting
- Letter to the president - could there be a letter that students co-sign? Perhaps this could put more pressure. Could we even do this Berlin-wide, include other universities?
- Top-Down and Bottom-Up, More support for Students of Color to succeed in an academic career
- Fachschaft - doing work themselves and also boosting the work of other student groups and student organizations
- More meetings need to follow
- Support for the potential initiative that Boesenberg suggested
- Partnerships? Find a way to make horizontal learning in the American Studies section
- Physical space! we need places and spaces to meet and it's difficult to reserve a room
- Academia should itself be activism. Suggestion: Establishing a seminar which brings students from all different departments together to work on topics like those which were discussed in the Town Hall Meeting and issues students credits for their work.

Group 3:

- Staff should use inclusive language
- All instructors should be trained/educated (anti-racist trainings)
- "Orientierungsseminar" should be part of all programs
- Community agreements should be part of the beginning of every class
- First semester students of color to have a chance to meet other people of color
- Instructors should learn the correct pronunciation of students' names

Group 4:

- Question: is there a specific program for immigrants in the teaching program? There is no focus on immigrant children's education, what about teachers?
- Acknowledgment of structural racism in all the levels of the educational system in Germany, e.g. welcome classes in schools for students with immigrant backgrounds collapsing individual needs
- What can we do at HU to support students with a migration history even before applying? Procedures to apply are very hard and expensive
- Mentoring programs student-student during the application process.

- Why is the document of modules in American Studies in German?
- We can start a group for international students to share experiences.
- Lea Coy is a member of a student initiative: fsanglam@hu-berlin.de we can send inquiries and questions.
- Why don't we have sub-studies under American Studies, for example: African American Studies, Asian-American Studies.

Group 5:

- White awareness training (not academic) and empowerment for BPoC (<https://www.phoenix-ev.org/en/index.html>) - trainings have more or less length of a block-seminar (so maybe could also be included e.g. in the Wahlbereich?)
- Better to make mistakes than stay silent and not do anything at all
- Diversity page of HU Berlin: Was it difficult to convince the university to put the website online? (10 days) Yes - they were afraid to make mistakes, people were saying "BLM is not important in Germany" - this was one of the reasons why it took so long
- comments and recommendations for the diversity website of HU (hu.berlin/diversitaet) can be sent to hu-online@hu-berlin.de
- It's important to keep intersectional discrimination in mind
- Establish online meetings beyond/after Corona to make it barrier-free
- Letter to the president should be supported
- Diversity page: Instagram "takeover" is possible, too.
- Introduce critical reading circles, critical film series, talking about intersectional discrimination, anti-blackness
- establish a contact point/person/group for students who experience racism (help them to support them to document racist encounters at the institute)
- create BiPoc only spaces
- Events should be more accessible to people who have to study plus work more than 80 hours a month or have to do care-work, are chronically ill, etc.

Group 6:

- Speak up during instances of racism in the classroom (not only students should speak up, but also instructors)

Problem of power hierarchies -> Students can be afraid to call out teachers in fear of getting a bad grade -> How can one quickly interact?

- White students need to educate themselves on racism, not rely on others
- Bring academic voices into outside spaces, spread the knowledge
- Engage more with public media (overcome the reluctance by academia) => creation of podcasts, blogs, etc. for the public, promotion of these in academic spaces necessary

- People with academic teaching should break out of the academic bubble
- Teach white students how to react/respond when they are being called out in a racist situation
- “I’m sorry“ and “I didn’t mean it that way“ doesn’t help, but rather increases the damage
- “Orientierungskurs“ in the first semester is a good foundation => continue, make a whole seminar out of it, go into depth
- Critically question seminars and their syllabus, call out instructors if their curriculums are very white or when theories are not credited, things are phrased wrongly
- Make information / websites on where to find help / more accessible

Group 7:

- Planning of anti-racism training for white faculty members and empowerment workshops for Faculty of Color
- What can be done in the admission process to advance the studies of students from underrepresented groups? Maybe a motivation letter? (Will not be in compliance with federal and state laws)
- Black Studies and Asian German Studies have to be implemented at German universities; “Germanistik“ needs to be involved
- What is the current state of mentoring programs at HU? (*MigraMentor 2.0* and *firstgen*)
- Implement programs to open university for high school students, to make the institution more accessible; contact Anne Mihan for cooperation

Resources

American Studies WhatsApp and Discord group (for students)

Contact fbastius@gmail.com

Konfliktberatung HU (conflict counseling; page not available in English)

<https://konfliktberatung.hu-berlin.de/de>

First-generation mentoring program

<https://frauenbeauftragte.hu-berlin.de/de/foerderung/studentinnen/firstgen>

FAMOS Connect (mentoring for international students; page not available in English)

<https://www.international.hu-berlin.de/de/studierende/an-der-hu/mentoring/famos>

Fachschaft AnglAm (possible contact for space to meet; Fachschaftscafé)

<https://fachschaften.hu-berlin.de/de/anglam>

Projekttutorien (courses organized and taught by students; page not available in English)
<https://www.hu-berlin.de/de/studium/reform/projekttutorien>

Q Tutorien (different program aiming at student courses; page not available in English)
<https://bolognalab.hu-berlin.de/de/projekte-des-bologna.labs/q-programm/q-tutorien>

Refugee Law Clinic Berlin
<https://en.rlc-berlin.org>

Diversity at HU Berlin (new homepage)
<https://www.hu-berlin.de/de/pr/diversitaet>

RefRat (HU student council)
<http://www.refrat.de/referat.html>

MigraMentor 2.0 (mentoring for refugee students; page not available in English)
<https://migramentor.hu-berlin.de/de>