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Counting racism: quantitative methods and the challenges of structural analysis in Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges and potentials of integrating critical theories of racism with quantitative methods in the German context, where the term "racism" has only recently gained broader acceptance in social and political discourse. The paper examines how recent quantitative studies, including survey-based approaches and field experiments have contributed to understanding racism while highlighting the limitations of focusing on attitudes and overt behaviour. Drawing on critical race theory and materialist perspectives, the paper argues that quantitative methods can align with structural approaches when conceptualised as tools to reveal the relational and institutional dimensions of racism. Examples include the rationality embedded in discriminatory practices or the heuristic use of group identities in decision-making. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a methodological synthesis that leverages the strengths of both critical and empirical traditions. It concludes by proposing a framework for using quantitative research to address the institutional and structural dimensions of racism.

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Introduction

At a recent academic conference in a small university town in Southern Germany, panellists were tasked to debate the ups – and downsides of quantitative research on racism, a theme that pervades the entire conference. Almost all participants conduct such research, i.e. employ quantitative methods of analysis, and use the term racism as a general framework of analysis. Some participants, however, dismiss the entire endeavour, referring to the well-known criticisms about how claims of objectivity and neutrality serve to mask power asymmetries in academia and society at large. These asymmetries, they argue, are not external to science as a system. Consider how migrant or female scholars are often seen as unfit to study subjects that involve their group identity. Moreover, the collection of data itself, as Foucault pointed out in his work on biopolitics (2007), is embedded in modes of governance. Science is not entirely independent from the realm of power relations, but does that mean empirical research about such issues is pointless because science is nothing but a weapon of Whiteness?

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In the following chapters, I will argue that the answer is more complicated and involves inconsistencies in the usage of concepts summoned under the roof of the term racism, the historical condemnation of racism and its resulting latency and ultimately, the methodological challenge to capture what critical scholars of racism used to call "structural racism".

Germany's distaste for the R-word

Racism as a word was not unknown to the public in Germany; neither was it banned entirely from scholarship. Rather, the scope of application was drawn narrowly: racism was used primarily when the concept of race was explicitly employed, such as in systems of racial segregation or within genocidal policies. However, during the 1980s, scholars at the margins of the academic system began advocating for a broader and more structural interpretation of the concept, influenced by British and French theorists such as Stuart Hall and Étienne Balibar. In this view, racism is understood as a particular (social) function rather than merely the outcomes of its variables. Racism is neither speech acts nor wage differentials but an "articulation" (Hall 1980) of sociopolitical relations of power.

Twenty years later, Albert Scherr noted that despite the efforts to introduce and broaden its usage, "anyone who used the term racism had to reckon with not being taken seriously by the social science mainstream" (Scherr 2009, 6, own translation). To include acts of discrimination or violence, in which terminologies other than "race" were used (e.g. "culture") or which addressed groups along other categories than "race" (e.g. "foreigners," "migrants," "refugees" or "Muslims"), was seen as inflationary (Scherr 2009, 10). Others deemed its usage "an ideological endeavour," aiming at the "realisation of a Marxism-inspired society" (Diefenbach 2017, 842, own translation). While such hyperbolic assessments remain outliers, the general tendency was to suspect that such references to structures and society were driven by (radical, i.e. anti-democratic) political beliefs (Scherr 2009, 3).

This dynamic has been reinforced by the narrative of a clean break with National Socialism, which

> is paradoxically closely linked to the basic anti-racist consensus of the Nazi successor states. References to concepts of racism became taboo, first because they were dismissed as trivialising Nazi atrocities and secondly because they would have counteracted the narrative of a fundamental break between the Nazi regime and the liberal state. (Horvath 2019, 3)

When Kalpaka and Räthzel introduced the concept to the German debate, they were not only motivated by academic concerns (or a plea for a "Marxism-inspired society"). Interactions and encounters with migrant groups in the 1980s in Germany made them recognise the emancipatory and organisational dimension of the concept (Kalpaka and Räthzel 2017). It allowed such groups to address issues of (racist) discrimination differently: not as collateral damage caused by other outsiders, but as institutional; not as exceptional to the social norm (such as psycho-pathology and/or ideological extremism) but as an integral part of society.

Considering these obstacles to the usage of the term "racism" in social sciences and politics, terms like "Ausländerfeindlichkeit" ("hostility towards foreigners") or "Fremdenfeindlichkeit" ("hostility towards strangers") prevailed.

2020: The German government adopts the term racism

Not long ago, to many, this chapter's headline would have sounded like a parody, referencing science-fiction movie titles. Still, the term's inclusion in federal cabinet resolutions came gradually and began with the new century, largely due to Germany's participation in the UN conference on racism in Durban in 2001. The resulting National Action Plan addressed "racism" by adding the word next to "Fremdenfeindlichkeit" and antisemitism in its title (Bundesministerium des Innern 2008). The document listed measures previously implemented under the title of combating right-wing extremism (Follmar-Otto and Cremer 2009, 6). Moreover, by including measures for migrant integration, the plan also seemed to assume "actual or assumed deficits of migrants as one of the main causes of racism and racist discrimination" (Gemeinsame Erklärung n.d.), as many civil society organisations criticised.

When the plan was re-issued a decade later in 2018 (Bundesministerium des Innern 2018), its title focused solely on racism. Within the report, it served as a descriptive category under the broader framework of "Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit" – a concept developed by the influential social scientist Wilhelm Heitmeyer (2005). As the suffix "-feindlichkeit" suggests, the concept's primary focus lay on attitudes, allowing for well-established survey methods providing scientific and political discourse with empirical evidence (Heitmeyer 2002).

Since 2011, the year the fascist terror group *National Socialist Underground* was exposed, and later, with the terrorist attacks in Halle and Hanau, the German government has faced increasing pressure to address this violence as acts of racism. In response, a committee was formed, leading to a 2021 action plan that recognised racism as distinct from right-wing extremism. It included mainstreaming anti-racist concepts in governmental bodies, funding support structures for victims of racism and some research projects (Bundesregierung 2020).

The circumstances surrounding these measures, but particularly the partial adoption of terminologies and demands from migrant and anti-racist groups, opened a precarious window of opportunity. Yet, the current "breakthrough" emerged as a response to the social movements and public opinion at that time (see Bojadžijev, Celikates, and Mecheril 2025) and not, e.g. as a counterhegemonic project. Given the circumstances, some of the unresolved conceptual issues might even be weaponised against research on racism altogether, which already becomes apparent in the way racism and antisemitism are pitted against each other (Bojadžijev et al. 2025).

An emergent field of research

The new recognition of the term brought scholars of different paradigms, methodologies, and traditions not yet together but close enough to engage in debates. Social scientists, who've been using other theoretical frameworks, seemed to continue their work under the new label, while scholars from the tradition of critical theories of racism routine scepticism towards quantitative methods became urgent.

An example of a conventional and narrower framework of analysis is studies using data on hate crimes. Researchers have focused, e.g. on the connection between hate crimes and socioeconomic variables like unemployment, economic deprivation, and education.

Jäckle and König (2017) conducted a multivariate analysis using data from the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and statistical agencies, showing that regions with higher unemployment and lower education levels experience more "xenophobic violence". A 10% increase in unemployment was linked to a 5% rise in hate crimes, suggesting a causal relation between economic insecurity and racist attitudes.

Such approaches are not new. The general idea goes back to the very first scholars of racism (Du Bois [1935) 2017] 1935) 2017) and includes different disciplines and varying frameworks, from Myrdal (1944) to Blumer (1958) and Crane and Jackmann (1986), to name a few. In the German context, Heitmeyer's long-term study on the relationship between socioeconomic factors and hostile attitudes towards ethnic, sexual, or other minorities was most influential (see Heitmeyer 2005). Because such hostile attitudes were observed to be inter-correlated, researchers called it – in analogy to the use in the language of the medical system – a "syndrome," i.e. a set of phenomena which tend to appear together, indicating a common or interrelated cause. The study was triggered by the wave of racist violence in Germany in the early 1990s and attributed to the socio-economic upheavals following reunification. The socialised and individually internalised predispositions for such violence become collective action under stress, as Heitmeyer's group argued, evidenced through participants' accounts of upheavals in their lives. In Heitmeyer's conceptualisation, it is not the economic structures per se that generate such hostility but their malfunction. Racism is seen as a byproduct of the crisis within an economy that otherwise provides the pillars for an assumed social centre, which is also seen as the foundation of democracy (Hamade and Sorg 2023, 255).

Another group of studies focus on associations within the discursive realm (i.e. text, speech acts, images). Müller and Schwarz, e.g. link hate crime data with online activities, investigating the role of Facebook in facilitating hate crimes against refugees. Employing a difference-in-differences (DiD) method to analyse the relationship between social media usage and the occurrence of anti-refugee violence across German municipalities, the authors found that 30% of the variation in hate crimes can be attributed to the level of exposure to Facebook content, highlighting how social media, i.e. the interpersonal normative environment, acted as a vector for the mobilisation of anti-immigrant sentiments (Müller and Schwarz 2020).

Similarly, Erhard et al. (2022) examined the impact of media representations on public attitudes toward migrants in Germany by using the concept of "availability heuristics" (Tversky and Kahneman 1973), according to which individuals estimate the likelihood or frequency of an event (e.g. migration and crime) based on how easily examples of it come to mind. Connecting survey data and media content analysis, they demonstrate how negative depictions in media reinforce xenophobic attitudes, claiming a significant influence of media narratives on shaping public perceptions of race and ethnicity.

These few examples show what earlier research on topics of racism in Germany have in common: They look for racism at the margins of society, where economic stress causes deviant attitudes and behaviour. Theoretically, the studies can be divided into two groups. While neither views racism as structurally embedded in modern societies, and all use attitudes or deviant behaviour as units of observation, they look for causes mostly in two types of places: effects of economic exclusion (poverty) and discourse (text and images in media).

A growing body of literature in the German context (Schmaus and Kristen 2022; Thijssen, Coenders, and Lancee 2021; Dräger 2020; Koopmans, Veit, and Yemane 2019) uses an entirely different method to empirically studying racism: Field experiments. The method was developed in the 1960s in response to the anti-discrimination laws enacted in the USA and UK during that period – the Civil Rights Act in the former and the Race Relations Act in the latter. Laws that necessitated the development of reliable, scientific expertise to effectively implement anti-discrimination laws (Verhaeghe 2022). Unlike survey-based methodologies, correspondence tests are field experiments that observe the behaviour of social actors under everyday conditions, and, importantly, they are "able to vary multiple attributes on the resumes randomly and independently" (Guryan and Charles 2013, 426).

In this type of research, fictional applications (for housing, universities, workplaces, and similar areas) are systematically altered along variables such as race, ethnicity, skin colour or religious affiliation and sent to real employers who have advertised a job. The claim that these studies can identify causal relationships is based on the idea that causes can be isolated within distinct entities – such as an active substance in medical studies – that can be manipulated to produce an observable difference in effect. Such "interventionist" designs aim to experimentally simulate alternative, "counterfactual" scenarios (Woodward 2004). Or, as the US National Research Council states in its report *Measuring Racial Discrimination*, "to measure discrimination, researchers must answer the counterfactual question: What would have happened to a non-white individual if she or he had been white?" (NRC 2004, 77).

For example, a study in the German context by Koopmans, Veit, and Yemane (2019) shows that Black and Muslim (fictional) applicants receive fewer job interview invitations than Spanish, Polish, or Japanese candidates regardless of their productivity signals (grades, diplomas, employment history, etc.). This finding, interpreted as inconclusive between "taste-based" and "statistical" racism, suggests that employers assess the difference between German "values" and those of the group in question.[1] Another area of inquiry is housing, where studies consistently show ethnic discrimination against Middle Eastern and African applicants in the German Housing market, e.g. Auspurg, Hinz, and Schmid (2017) found that discrimination lessens in urban, diverse areas and that higher education or employment status can mitigate but not eliminate bias (2019). Mazziotta, Zerr, and Rohmann (2015) show that multiple stigmatised identities (e.g. ethnicity and disability) intensify exclusion in housing. Most of the 24 field experiments on labour market discrimination and 46 on housing between 2000 and 2018 used economic frameworks for analysis and explored subtle, everyday racism under controlled conditions, estimating its effects on affected populations. Later sections will further discuss these methods' potential for integrating critical theories of racism.

Tendencies and potentials within most recent quantitative studies on racism in Germany

Most current research about racism, which uses both the term and references the literature about structural theories of racism, is conducted under the umbrella of the "The National Discrimination and Racism Monitor", launched in 2020 by a group of migration scholars[2] and financed by the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and

Youth (BMFSFJ). It is tasked to provide reliable data about the scale, causes, and effects of racism and discrimination in German society (Foroutan et al. 2022, 2). The heart of the monitor project – next to studies of racism in the legal system or the media – is a representative panel survey. The first study based on this data reflects the ambiguity surrounding the concept of racism by posing questions such as "When are situations considered racist?" (Foroutan et al. 2022, 14). What this first study emphasises already in its design is that observing racism through surveys is an epistemic challenge. One of its observations is that half of the survey participants agreed with the statement that "*Rassen*" exist, and a third (33%) believed that natural hierarchies between such groups exist as well (Foroutan et al. 2022, 43f.). Yet, at the same time, 90% of the same survey participants concurred with the statement that there is racism in our society. To explain these perplexing numbers, seemingly a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the concept of race, the authors refer to the connotations associating the German term "*Rasse*" with National Socialism[3]: "This could be one reason why, although the majority may accept the existence of "races' a significant share rejects the use of the term." (Foroutan et al. 2022)

Other projects focus on community-oriented data to include perspectives from those affected by racism. The associated requirement of oversampling relevant respondents has prompted researchers to reassess the constructivist nature of racial identity categories – often assumed as given in census-based practices (e.g. in the US and the UK). While researchers previously viewed this as a disadvantage, younger scholars now explore methods to capture the fluid and relational aspects of such categories (Gahein-Sama 2024). Techniques include offering multiple self-classifications with open response items, expanding classification systems, and reflecting on the categories' role in group formation. Since the US census shifted to self-identification in 1970, the number of racial categories has grown, particularly after 2000, allowing respondents to select more than one race. This diversification aids in studying the link between self-identification and attribution, helping operationalise theories like Wimmer's boundary drawing (2013) or Omi and Winant's racial formation (2020). These examples show that the utility of quantitative methods depends on the theoretical models guiding their design and interpretation.

Structures vs. attitudes? The birth of new racism

The field experiment and its widespread use are related to anti-discrimination legislation implemented in the administration of the new laws – a paradigmatic case for the functional relationship between science and policy.[4] But this only holds for the scope of discrimination in each field, not for the mechanisms or causes. Scholars of critical theories of racism are sceptical of these methodologies, for reasons that are not specific to the experimental design but apply to all quantitative methodologies, namely, to isolate "race" as a variable. According to Kohler-Hausmann (2018), such analytical separation from income, qualifications, or educational titles results in a (wrong) picture in which these factors are not part of the racial group's condition, precluding conceptualisations in which race is constituted by social practices, institutions, norms. Of the methods outlined so far, it seems none are compatible with such requirements. How, then, could methods of causal inference "possibly speak to the complexities of structural racism" (Sablan 2018, 179)[5]? The review literature, especially in the field of racial inequalities in the health sector, suggests that measuring structural racism has been attempted seldomly

(Chantarat, Van Riper, and Hardeman 2021), is at least difficult (Needham et al. 2023), or has been done using quite different concepts of structure (Wien, Miller, and Kramer 2023). A brief review of the literature that shaped modern racism research might help to understand how the later dominant conceptual framework emerged, in which "structures" are related to opinions in a particular pattern. The "why" for the research program that revolves around attitudes is more difficult to determine but is most likely associated with the use of opinion polls in the context of political competition in electoral democracies (Converse 1987). To put it with Habermas, systematically observing attitudes and opinions about race and racism might be understood as a mode of "societal self-communication" (Habermas 1981, 85ff.). Their focus on beliefs and opinions has been criticised long ago for the "idealist view" they share (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 466). In this view, racism is primarily a set of ideas that lead to (prejudicial) attitudes and discriminatory actions. Bonilla-Silva's proposal to resolve this circularity by "grounding racism in social relations among the races" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 469) aims at re-introducing the notion that cognitive acts, beliefs and attitudes are unlikely to exist independent of social (infra)-structures, norms, or institutions. Interestingly, however, both empirical social sciences and critical theories share the same starting point associated with the transition from open to modern, from biological to cultural, and from legal to institutional racism.

Social scientists mark the shift in terms of the decline in openly racist attitudes in post-war US and Europe, which is why "theories arose to explain why racism, racial discrimination, and racial inequality persisted, emerged, or changed form in some places more than others" (Claire and Denis 2015, 858). A multitude of concepts were developed to address the phenomenon, such as "visceral racism" (Thalberg 1972, 45), racism as a "collective pre-conscious" (Morales 1971), "symbolic racism" (Kinder and Sears 1978), "laissez-faire racism" (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997), "aversive racism" (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004), or simply "new racism" (Barker 1981). Some of these concepts suggest that the "new" racisms represent a "distinctive belief system in its own right" (Tarman and Sears 2005), albeit with roots in older forms. Most authors suggest that older forms of racism, i.e. ideas, attitudes, and beliefs, have been replaced by new ones. However, there is surprisingly little discussion about how these new attitudes (of symbolic, aversive, etc. racism) generate the same outcomes (discrimination, racial disparities) as their predecessors. This gap in the literature may stem from the social theoretical foundation underlying the concepts of attitude or belief. This weakness is apparent already in how the formation of "new racisms" is commonly depicted. To summarise, the literature refers to three key observations: First, "new racism" is said to emerge (and biological racism to end) "after 1965 as a result of the civil rights movement" (McConahay, Hardee, and Batts 1981, 564; see also Claire and Denis 2015), which led to Civil Rights legislation and the end of segregationist laws. Secondly, survey-based evidence shows that "Whites' opinions about racial issues have liberalised in many areas" (Sears and Henry 2005, 96), with a "steady and sweeping movement toward general endorsement of the principles of racial equality and integration" (Bobo 2001, 269). Thirdly, the observation that "neither development has ended the substantial disadvantages experienced by African Americans" (Sears and Henry 2005, 96).

The different approaches mentioned above struggle to account for the fact that the two causes they consider relevant either belong to the past (legislation) or have declined to an extent (racial prejudices) that they stand in stark contrast to the persistence of racial

disparity, impelling Dovidio and Gaertner to speak of a "duality" (2004, 4) between them. Somehow, racist attitudes disappeared and remained in place simultaneously. Similarly, critical theories which diagnose a shift to cultural racism (Balibar 2008) or "colourblind racism" (Bonilla-Silva 2013) fail to account for how the difference in the symbolic or discursive relates to the structural or relational dimension of racism. This inconsistency is most evident in the concept of institutional racism, which, since its initial usage within the Black Power movement (Carmichael and Hamilton 1992), has been used to indicate an indefinable latent racism that permeates and shapes society as a whole while being officially condemned (see Baron 1970; Knowles and Prewitt 1969; Wellman 1977). Empirical realities are mostly referred to inductively: If data suggests racially encoded inequalities, "institutional racism" can be derived. The overall tendency was to attribute empirically observable disadvantages within specific areas of life (education, law, housing market, etc.) to the respective institutions (Williams 1985, 9). Instead of a theory explaining how institutions function, the authors provide a normative justification for classifying them as racist, placing the causes ultimately in the realm of ideas and attitudes as "acts of indifference, omission, and refusal to challenge the status quo" (Spears 1978, 29).

How (Ir-)rational is racism?

A shared feature of the literature that shaped modern racism research was that the social or collective dimension of attitudes and opinions was interpreted from the perspective of functionalist sociology according to which individuals adapt to norms (also articulated in the law) and which largely fit with concepts of conformity, aligned with psychological theories of social influence or self-presentation, to explain "social desirability". In this perspective, racist opinions are irrational if the normative environment considers them deviant and, therefore must be censored or suppressed. Yet, the theories can only account for attitudinal changes, which must be conceptualised as externally induced, so the Civil Rights Acts in 1964 represents the "zero hour" for attitudinal theories of racism. If only norms determine opinions, it's hard to see how once deviant opinions can become normative.

An influential critique of such approaches has been voiced by one of the most prominent scholars of critical theories of racism, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who insists on viewing racism as "systemic" (2021) and race as a "social fact", invoking one of the founding figures of European sociology, Émile Durkheim ((1895) 1982). Durkheim's social fact refers to phenomena that exert a coercive influence on individual behaviour as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him" ((1895) 1982, 5). Bonilla-Silva criticises contemporary theories of racism for underestimating the "rational foundation" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 468) of contemporary racism, which can be found in "social relations of subordination" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 473). Racism as an ideology (ideas, beliefs, etc.) is embedded in the "ideological structure of a social system that crystallised racial notions and stereotypes" (474) and provides "rules for perceiving and dealing with the "other" in a racialised society" (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Far from being irrational, racist ideas (attitudes, beliefs, etc.) fulfil a "practical role" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 474) – they have, in other words, a function. This is not the merely epistemological function of older concepts

of ideology as false consciousness (Rosen 2016) but an operative one. According to Thompson (in this volume, 2025), this functional dimension currently revolves around policing surplus populations in what she calls "carceral racism".

A structural understanding of racism in line with Bonilla-Silva's approach would have to conceptualise racist ideas and attitudes as meaningful (and rational) articulations insofar as they correspond to the given racialised relations of power. Bonilla-Silva has not provided any indication, as almost no one in the camp of the critical race theory (CRT), for how this could be translated to the practice of social sciences (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014). This gap is beginning to close as more CRT scholars advocate for the use of quantitative methods in several research fields.

The rationality of structural inequality

The unequal allocation of individuals to different segments of the labour market based on their racial and ethnic markers was termed "ethnic stratification" in early migration studies (see Castles 1987). This concept is particularly associated with the migration regimes of continental European countries. The assignment of specific types of work to certain nationalities or overarching groups (Asians, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans), often combined with gender, is well-documented in the history of German recruitment agreements. For example, cultural stereotypes of "rebellious" North Africans and "docile" Korean women were influential in negotiations for bilateral recruitment agreements (see Schönwälder 2001).

From the perspective of a materialist approach to migration studies, such racialised forms of labour division are the result of compromises between the collective actors involved (see Karakayali and Tsianos 2002): The hiring of racialised labourers, for instance, went hand in hand with the ascent of native workers to higher positions within the context of the West German migration regime. Due to the distribution of types of labour and social status becoming racialised – primarily through migration regimes in the European and German context – several characteristics in these populations differ from each other and the majority, such as the share of low-skill workers.

This is where the "statistical theory of racism," introduced by Richard Phelps (1972) and Kenneth Arrow (1973), offers a conceptual bridge for re-framing racialised knowledge as "rational," a crucial step towards a structural theory of racism, as demanded by Bonilla-Silva. The theory was proposed to integrate the discriminatory behaviour of market participants, especially employers, into the paradigm of rational choice. Earlier economic theories treated differential treatment as irrational concerning the market. In these "taste-based" discrimination models, introduced by Becker ([1957] 1971), "discrimination results from some sort of animus towards members of an out-group that takes the form of a willingness to pay a price to avoid interaction with members of that group" (Guryan and Charles 2013, 418), according to the new, "statistical theory of racism," an employer is precluded from possessing perfect knowledge of the potential performance of job applicants and draws on skin colour as a cost-effective source of information: "he [the employer] holds some subjective beliefs about the respective probabilities that white and black workers are qualified" (Arrow 1973, 22). In the extensive literature that was developed since then, this is generalised into the notion that "group identity serves as a proxy for unobserved variables that are relevant to economic outcomes" (Fang and

Moro 2010, 3), ultimately, "it is a lack of information that leads the employer to treat individuals as members of groups" (Guryan and Charles 2013, 418). Formal qualifications of the applicants, documented through certificates and diplomas, do not sufficiently inform about "productivity," which is rather expressed in otherwise unobservable informal qualities such as "steadiness, punctuality, responsiveness, and initiative" (Arrow 1973, 21).

In modern discrimination research, both theories, "taste-based" and "statistical discrimination", are used as alternative frameworks for the interpretation of findings of correspondence studies (more than half of such discrimination studies use the two theories; see Bohren et al. 2023, 3). If census data (depending on the particular theoretical model that is tested) shows that applicants from a given minority group on average possess the same or higher "expected utility" (Phelps 1972, 659) as the majority of the workforce in the respective segment, then disparities in the hiring levels between the groups might be interpreted as "taste-based" discrimination, i.e. the racist views of employers cause differential treatment. The new, statistical, discrimination comes into consideration if the findings show a disadvantaged group to be underqualified on average (see, e.g. for the German context Koopmans, Veit, and Yemane 2019). In that case, discrimination is regarded to be resulting from economic reasoning, "because employers rationally attribute them lower expected productivity, after observing they belong to a group with lower productivity" (Fang and Moro 2010, 4) and then found to be statistically "warranted" (Bohren et al. 2023, 4).

The various versions of the theory of statistical discrimination cannot be discussed here (for an overview and discussion, see Fang and Moro 2010), however, what they share is the assumption that employers' (rational) decisions are modulated by the "informativeness of the productivity signal," depending on whether the signal is weak, noisy, clear, or precise, about the average productivity (Fang and Moro 2010, 6). From the point of view of a critical theory of racism, one might ask: Under which condition do such group identities, and not, e.g. hair colour, become surrogate information? It is also unclear how intersecting or overlapping classifications can be treated by social agents as some sort of group membership when an applicant can possess a relevant religious, national, and racial group identity simultaneously.

Bonilla-Silva's call to frame racist beliefs as rational calls for conceptualising attitudes or patterns of cognition as indicative of structural issues in the sense that they reflect racialised disparities. The "statistical theory" of racism offers a path for this perspective because it frames recruitment decisions of employers as a proxy for productivity and tends to describe decision-making processes in domains which are assumed to possess such patterns of racially unequal distribution, e.g. in the study of racial profiling (see and Knowles and Hernández-Murillo 2004). However, not only is the individual information decision-makers possess incomplete, but also the one they refer to as a surrogate. Assessing the productivity (or likelihood of crime or insolvency) by using group identity is seldomly based on statistical data, it rather means using heuristical procedures associated with stereotypes. Statistical racism implies that stereotypes somehow approximate group characteristics. Sometimes combinations of the two logics of discrimination are at play, as Bohren et al. (2023) suggest in their study on differential hiring of Indian and US workers. When male Indian workers receive significantly higher wage offers, the discrimination is rationally motivated but based on

"inaccurate beliefs" (Bohren et al. 2023, 5) (provided with accurate information, employers adjust their wage offers).

Instead of distinguishing neatly between "racial animus" and reason, what seems more fruitful is to conceptualise the variance in the modes of the employed heuristics. The structural approach contends that prejudice does not lead to discrimination by accident but that it is the cognitive correlate of racialised relations of power. In what way does the processing of information speak to the relational dimension in the different areas of discriminatory interaction?

As mentioned earlier, the unequal distribution of workers in a labour market along group identities emerges not only from the aggregate of individual employers' discriminatory decisions but from factors that are aligned with global wage differentials and migration regimes that work to sustain hierarchies in labour markets. Hiring workers with little legal protection is rational in segments of the labour market, where temporality and low-skill labour are essential, but probably not in high-skilled segments. Thus, economic (and social) actors may attach weights to the relevant segment of information about group identity that effectively motivates the interaction, making, e.g. a worker with a particular ethnic group identity suitable for cooking but not child-care (Tuttas 2015).

There are apparent limitations of the theory (and method), particularly if we aim to address other requirements for empirically investigating structural racism that have been outlined earlier. Correspondence studies may theorise racist discrimination as rational, they analyse the logic of discriminatory action along varieties of interaction modes and thus allow us to understand racialisation as a function of the mode of asymmetry that governs a relationship. Yet, economic theories have little to say about institutional, structural, or normative dimensions of social interaction. From a sociological perspective, individual discriminatory acts resonate with collective patterns only if individual decision-making can rely on institutions that coordinate them.

Structures – according to critical race theory

The last part of this paper is dedicated to re-examining the schism noted by Obasogie "between critical race scholarship and the social sciences" (2013b, 183). This is particularly important because the alternative that has dominated the progressive critical discourse on racism since the late 1960s seems to prioritise the institutional or structural aspects of racism over "overt" racism. Yet, this alternative is rarely based on an in-depth analysis; it rather seems that for many contemporary researchers, the term "structural" is just another word for significant socio-economic disparities within a population (see e.g. Chantarat, Van Riper, and Hardeman 2021; critically, Wien, Miller, and Kramer 2023). One of the most popular schools of thought in the current debates about structural racism provides theoretical instruments that are more suitable for the development of methodological strategies: Critical Race Theory (CRT).

CRT emerged from within the movement of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which critiqued the liberal or "formal conception of law" for largely ignoring the social context and the legal process. In contrast, scholars of this movement approached the law as deeply shaped by societal power structures. However, CLS did not conceive of the state as simply a prolongation of such power relations, i.e. powerful groups utilising the otherwise neutral state apparatuses. Following the materialist theory of the state in the tradition of

Evgeny Paschukanis and Nikos Poulantzas, they suggested to rather look at the form and structure of the state (Hutchinson and Monahan 1984, 222).

A notable example of this is the analysis of the hypodescent rule (Lopez 1994), also known as the "One-Drop Rule," which places the children of mixed marriages in the racial category of their minority parent. This "legal doctrine ensured that children born to enslaved women, even if fathered by free white men, were considered slaves, thereby reinforcing the racial hierarchy and economic system of slavery." (Berlin 1998, 29)

The hypodescent rule enforces racial subordination by implicitly validating white racial purity, making subordination inherent in any act of a white person recognising a Black person's race. Yet legal discourse conceals this subordination by treating racial categories as stable and unchanging. The example illustrates how institutional racism operates through specific mechanisms, such as concepts or categorial systems that provide frameworks for assigning racial identities. Importantly, the hypodescent rule extends beyond the realm of law and influences how society perceives affiliation or membership in a racial group (Mecheril and Natarajan (2025) examine in this issue how such processes operate within the institution of language). In line with this perspective, more recent studies from the social sciences have developed methodologies to capture in their (mainly qualitative) empirical data the institutionality of racism. Not only what people express as opinions or beliefs can be used as proxies for understanding the nature of racism in our societies, but also what they do not speak about but take for granted. In her study of diversity programs in higher education, Ahmed follows a similar line of thought in conceptualising institutions as practices through which "something becomes given by not being the object of perception" (Ahmed 2012, 21). While her phenomenological perspective allows us to identify what is considered normal, other research designs even allow us to distinguish between degrees of institutionality. In Zucker's neo-institutionalist approach, such degrees can be observed as the ability to communicate actions as facts or, when "it is sufficient for one person simply to tell another that this is how things are done" (Zucker 1977, 726). This allusion to varying levels of consolidation can be extended to the context of racism: Which knowledge frameworks are regarded as unquestionable in specific historical and spatial contexts? Which ones are subject to dispute? Foucault's (1984) concept of dispositif deals with precisely with such rules that govern what we can say and how speech acts align with practices and institutions, infrastructures. Another example of empirically investigating the institutionality of racism has been conducted by Obasogie. In this study on blind people's understanding of race (2013a), he sheds light on how racial knowledge is transmitted through language and communication. Both Ahmed and Osabogie are more interested in racism's institutionality as such; their research is designed to show that racism is a social fact (in Durkheim's sense), but to identify degrees of institutionality (and their becoming), we need to look elsewhere.

Specific desiderata for a liaison of critical race theory and empirical research

Institutions not only reflect societal power relations, but they also organise them, as collective social and political subjects relate to each other through the norms and procedures that institutions provide. The role of racial classification systems is just one

example that was discussed earlier. It implies that they can harbour contradictory tendencies (to various degrees) concerning the social power relations they need to govern. The consequences for collective actors and thwarting effects of anti-discrimination policies and regulations on the formation of antiracist collective action are discussed in detail by Bojadžijev in this volume (2025).

The mode of arrangement, the relative significance of different types of knowledge, and the truths that they can take for granted are determined by the dynamics of conflict and the power relations they have set in motion. The resulting compromises of varying durability can manifest as inconsistencies within the discursive realm, organisational structure, or internal distribution of power. Such theoretical frameworks, drawn from the work of Foucault and Poulantzas, allow to study the state (as a specific form of political institution) rather than as an arena in which power relations intersect and, in Poulantzas's terminology, "condense" (Poulantzas 1978, 159; own translation).

Such theoretical considerations can be fruitfully applied, for instance, in correspondence studies by conceptualising the knowledge used to assign racialised labour to specific tasks and segments in various sectors of the economy as socially mediated and dynamic heuristics serving as interfaces between institutions, societal power relations, and discursive formations. As already indicated, however, as a mode of knowledge production, they form an assemblage within the broader institutional setting. Quantitative evidence is entwined with the institutionalisation of a particular mode of anti-racist politics by providing evidence for processing anti-discrimination. Studies might "prove" racial discrimination in an institutional realm, helping groups and individuals to achieve compensation, but they tend to overlook the generative and regulative operations of institutions and the role they play in processing and translating social struggles, tensions, and contradictions. Against this background, developing other uses for quantitative research about racism requires us to think about which types of political goals their findings can align with.

Notes

1. The authors borrow the concept of "value-distance" from Inglehart and Norris (2003), who proposed in their paper about "The true clash of civilizations".
2. NaDiRa was among the research projects that received funding through the new action programme but was established earlier within the ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, a governmental body headed by the Social Democratic Party, the minor partner of the "Great Coalition" with the CDU, which ended in December 2021.
3. This interpretation is supported by another finding: Respondents tended to recognise an act of discrimination more frequently as racist if the victim presented to them in the respective item of the survey was Black or Jewish (Foroutan et al. 2022, 69).
4. The first such experiment dates back 30 years earlier and was conducted by the sociologist LaPiere (1934). He investigated two types of behavioural settings: Over the course of two years, he traveled across the United States with a Chinese couple, visiting 251 hotels and restaurants to observe how they would be treated. Despite the anti-Chinese sentiment prevalent at the time, the couple was denied service at only one location. However, when LaPiere later sent a survey to the same establishments, 92% of them indicated they would refuse service to Chinese customers, highlighting a gap between expressed attitudes and actual

behaviour: People's actions in real-world situations are not always consistent with their stated beliefs.

5. For a detailed discussion of the concept of structural racism see Celikates in this issue (2025).

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