Final Symposium of the SoSciBio Research Group

Dates: 27th (10 a.m.) to 28th (~ 12.30 a.m.) of Februar 2024

Place: University of Freiburg, Germany, Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS, Albertstr. 19)

Title: National Identities, Biopolitics and Human Diversity in Contemporary European Life Sciences

Since the end of the 1980s at the latest, the categorization of human diversity into racial groups has been discredited in German and largely also in European popular discourse and life science research (Lipphardt 2009, zur Nieden 2014, Plümecke 2010), not least due to the history of racial hygiene under National Socialism. The public rejection of such racial classifications often goes hand in hand with European societies' self-perception as being non-racial or even post-racial. At the same time, knowledge production about human biological, especially genetic, diversity and classifications in the life sciences continues unabashed, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Due to the persistent societal taboo (Chin 2017), however, this knowledge production is reflected upon to a lesser extent than elsewhere, for example in the United States, where the categorisation of people into racial groups is common practice in both society and science. Here, the societal, political, and scientific co-production of biological and genetic differences between human groups has been studied extensively; multiple studies from sociology and science studies shed light upon the interplay of these fields (authors include Steven Epstein, Jenny Reardon, and Joan Fujimura, among others).

In this context, this conference raises the question of how decent-based human differentiations such as race, ethnicity, ancestry, migration background, etc. are described, managed and (re-)produced in the life sciences in contemporary Europe where the experience of fascism, inscribed in all European countries, is expected to produce nationally-specific categorizations and demarcations. It builds on existing research predominantly conducted in the United States, focusing on the interplay of society, politics and science in the construction and use of classifications of human biological differences. We ask how national ideas of identity and alterity, historically developed forms of human differentiation and biopolitical strategies are engrained in the contemporary life sciences, their discourses, research designs and human classifications.

Several countries worldwide – Morning (2015) mentions 13 – have established their own systems for racial classifications, sometimes standardized by national authorities. These have also been adopted for differentiating between populations in life science research. In the United States, for example, racial and ethnic census categories are mandatory in clinical trials. Moreover, an increasing number of medical journals require their authors to collect and transparently report the race and/or ethnicity of their subjects in publications. This is to ensure the representativeness of study participants, aiming for a form of equality through the broad inclusion of various societal groups (Epstein 2010).

These phenomena can only be understood in the context of diverse socio-historical backgrounds: in the United States, the emancipation of African Americans from slavery and the ongoing struggle against discrimination have led to a proactive policy of including diversity data. Besides socio-cultural reasons for health differences, such as discrimination or different cultural practices, biological factors are also considered. For instance, the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has adopted the classifications set out by the US Census Bureau Office of Management and Budget, acknowledging that these are "socio-political constructs" rather than natural or anthropological entities, all the while mentioning possible genetic differences in metabolic processing between populations due to shared ancestry. In Germany, in contrast, the history of National Socialism has led to caution in using decent-

based human classifications such as ethnicity and especially race. In fact, there is even a debate in several European countries, including in Germany, calling for the removal of the term race from central legal texts. Since life science research is highly internationalized, however, research institutions in Europe also resort to race as a category for classifying human diversity, for example when using US databases or in clinical trials for approval in the USA. Another example are racialised algorithms, corrections for race (for example Black/non-Black) in specific diagnostic technologies such as the spirometer (cf. Braun 2015) that often end up being used internationally.

In the European life sciences, race thus continues to exist as an "absent presence" (M'charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014): it hides in apparatuses and euphemistic translations of race such as 'ethnicity,' 'origin,' or 'migration background,' which has become common in Germany in recent years. In the German micro census, for example, the statistical category 'foreigner' was replaced by 'migration background'. This way, the so-called guest worker generation could still be identified even after they had acquired German citizenship. In this context, discourses on anti-discrimination have evolved in Germany, which is reflected biopolitically in the epidemiological recording of health inequality. Here, too, presumed social or cultural differences are mixed with presumed genetic factors.

As such, the conference seeks contributions from social science and science studies scholars engaging with the classification of human diversity in different European contexts. Contributions will mainly focus on epidemiology, medicine, pharmaceutical research.

Questions adressed may be:

- Which population categories are used in life science research, and how are they co-produced by scientific, social and political orders?

- What is the contemporary (bio)political function of scientific classifications based on race?

- How do scientists deal with the complexity of applying racial and ethnic categorisations adopted from other national contexts?

- What contestations exist of ethno-racial classifications in life science research?