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From 'Xenophobia' to Structural Racism, and Back? Epistemic Obstacles, Conceptual Struggles, and the Role of Critical Theory[1]

[DRAFT; PLEASE DO NOT SHARE; COMMENTS WELCOME!]

In recent years, the concept of structural racism has become an object of epistemic and semantic struggles that appear as increasingly central to the political and ideological conflicts of our time. This holds not only in the United States, where books and courses identified as belonging to the largely constructed and imaginary category of Critical Race Theory have been banned by state legislatures and school boards, but also in European countries such as France and Germany. To many in the German-speaking context, including not only fringe figures but also mainstream journalists and politicians, the very concept of structural racism appears as irredeemably vague, unscientific, ideological – a mere cover for advancing particularistic interests by bypassing democratic and scientific procedures. Indeed, articles in prominent magazines and newspapers like *Der Spiegel* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and publications by conservative political think tanks regularly echo the likes of Florida Governor and former Republican presidential hopeful Ron de Santis and his 'Stop Woke Act'[2] in suggesting that talk of structural racism is part of an attack on the very fundaments of the open and liberal society we presumably live in.[3] No doubt, these attacks are, at least in substantial part, moves in a broader ideological and political war right-wing forces and their intellectual allies are waging as part of a backlash against Black Lives Matter and other anti-racist movements. However, the skepticism and hostility vis-à-vis the concept of structural racism in the German debate

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[1] I presented earlier versions of this paper at the conference Critical Theory at 100 at Harvard University, the Workshop in Social and Political Theory at MIT, the Seminario di Teoria Critica at the University of Pisa and the workshop Epistemic Injustice & Recognition at HU Berlin and I am grateful to the audiences for helpful comments. I owe special thanks to Sally Haslanger, Manuela Bojadžijev, Serhat Karakayalı, César Cabezas and Daniel James for many helpful conversations.

[2] When asked what the 'woke' in the 'Stop Woke Act' refers to, DeSantis's general counsel reportedly said the term referred to "the belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them" (see Bump 2022).

[3] For some prominent examples from the German-speaking context, see Pfister 2021, 2022; Kostner 2020; Reitzenstein/Rusinek 2022; for a US-focused critical analysis of the general attack on Critical Race Theory, see Goldberg 2023.

also has deeper roots that point to epistemic obstacles and defense mechanisms. These are variations of a 'will not to know' that has been shaping German mainstream discourses on racism over the past decades and that has prevented a broader uptake of the critical knowledge produced about racism by both anti-racist movements and marginalized scholarly approaches.

Against this background, in this article, I first reconstruct the epistemic obstacles to talking about structural racism in German society and the difficulties of moving the debate beyond a focus on prejudice and 'xenophobia'. I then argue that these obstacles have, in part, also shaped how racism was thematized, or rather: remained largely unthematized, in one of the internationally most visible German intellectual traditions, namely the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory. Subsequently, I sketch the outlines of an account of the structural nature of racism that is informed by earlier work in that same tradition as well as contemporary social-theoretical approaches. To illustrate the diagnostic usefulness and critical force of such an account, I conclude by discussing a recent example of the contested thematization of racist violence that underlines how structural racism shapes interactions, practices, institutions, meanings and public discourses in the German context.

While this article will remain largely programmatic, the argument aims at establishing the overall claim that structural racism is indeed a central concept for a critical theory of our times and that Frankfurt School critical theory, despite its almost total silence on racism, has a significant social-theoretical contribution to make in the debate on structural racism (see also Outlaw 2005, Collins 2019, 57-65). On both a substantial and a methodological level a social-theoretical approach inspired by this tradition, in conversation with contemporary anti-racist struggles and theorizing, can help avoid some of the pitfalls of alternative accounts of racism. Due to their lack of a comparable social-theoretical focus, such accounts risk falling back into an individualizing, psychologizing and moralizing perspective. If the pushback against the very concept of structural racism has any merit, it is that responding to this backlash forces us to recognize that this concept remains undertheorized. While there can be no doubt that anti-racist movements and struggles have generated sophisticated conceptualizations and critiques of racism, in particular their contemporary iterations have at times also operated with a simplified understanding of racism that risks falling into the traps of individualizing, psychologizing and moralizing a structural phenomenon. There are, then, both theoretical and

political reasons for avoiding approaches that fall short in confrontation with a social-structural phenomenon that should be understood and criticized as such.

1. Epistemic Obstacles to Talking about Structural Racism (in Germany)

Sifting through the public discourse problematizing the notion of structural racism, one can distinguish three main complaints:

1) The *epistemological* complaint: The notion of structural racism stretches the concept of racism beyond recognition. While racism used to denote a clearly circumscribed and observable phenomenon, say, individual racist acts motivated by clearly expressed racist beliefs, it is now vaguely extended towards elusive structures that are not directly observable. This is said to put the scientific validity of the concept into question and suggests its irreducibly political, even ideological character.

2) The *moral* complaint: Speaking of structural racism is not merely epistemologically or methodologically but morally problematic as it trivializes 'true racism' – the kind associated with racist acts following from racist beliefs that identifiably cause serious harm. It lets 'real racists' off the hook as suggesting that our actions are entangled in the reproduction of racist structures seems to imply that we are all racists. As one public commentator puts it, pointing to what he takes to be the paradigm case for a notion of racism that allows us to assign moral blame: "The original meaning of racism was psychological: One is a racist if one devalues others based on their ethnic origin or skin color." (Hübl 2021).

3) The *political* complaint: Speaking of structural racism is politically problematic and counterproductive as it risks alienating the non-racist majority by suggesting that we are all somehow part of and responsible for a kind of racism that permeates all of society rather than inviting that majority to join hands against a clearly identifiable group of more or less self-declared and open racists.

While theorists of structural racism have provided answers to these various complaints, showing that for the most part they rest on misinterpretations, and at times on strategic misrepresentations (see James 2021, Hübl/James 2021, Goldberg 2023, Haslanger 2023, Cabezas 2024), these complaints regularly gain an air of plausibility. They can do so, because especially in popular discourses on racism, in media articles, popular books, and even social movements, the concept of structural racism is at times indeed used in vague and

undertheorized ways, in a register of moral obviousness rather than analytical clarity and social-theoretical elaboration. However, the epistemic and political stakes of the struggle about structural racism are too high to remain complacent about the vagueness with which the term is at times used.

Furthermore, there is one worry about the invocation of structural racism that might be seen as posing a more genuine challenge, one that one should not merely aim to dispel but take seriously and respond to on a theoretical level. This is the worry that emphasizing the structural nature of racism risks disempowering its victims, denying the agency of the oppressed and minimizing the real achievements and prospects of antiracist struggles. That this is not merely an abstract worry can be seen from the polemical debates that have accompanied the emergence of Afropessimism as a prominent theoretical position, primarily associated with the author Frank Wilderson, in the discussion about racism and, more specifically, anti-Blackness. This position has been criticized for its anti-political abstraction from history and its denial of agency (e.g., Mitchell 2020) as well as for its no less anti-political absolutization of a US-centric perspective (Wekker 2021, Okoth 2023).

Taking these critiques seriously implies two constraints on any plausible account of structural racism: Such an account needs to spell out not only *why* the concept is needed to grasp the nature and functioning of racism above and beyond individual actions and beliefs, but also *how* the structural character of racism can be theorized without ontologizing it, i.e. without abstracting from its historically dynamic nature that is at least in part due to the impact of antiracist struggles and movements. This challenge is related to a more general worry about the relation between structural forms of domination and the agency of the dominated that Henry Louis Gates (1991), in a discussion of Fanon and colonialism, identifies as a dilemma. The dilemma consists in either theoretically empowering the dominated in ways that give rise to the charge of downplaying the violence of oppression, or insisting on the absolute nature of domination at the risk of negating the agency of its victims and thus repeating the violence of oppression. As I will argue, any critical theory of society faces this dilemma and needs to navigate it rather than trying to resolve it by embracing one of its poles. Both in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and in critical theories in a broader sense, including anti-racist critical theorizing, there are theoretical resources for addressing this dilemma. Furthermore, in the case of structural racism, the dilemma takes on a specific form because it is precisely thanks to antiracist struggles and the epistemic agency developed and exercised in the course

of these struggles that this concept has entered the political debate in the first place. Shifting our focus from the individual and its prejudices to structures and relations thus appears as a more or less direct outcome of the epistemic and political agency of those who are forced to live under structural forms of oppression and domination.

Before addressing these questions in further detail, it is worth looking into the broader reasons for why there is, in the German public sphere, so much resistance, not only to the notion of structural racism but to the concept of racism more generally, even beyond the obviously politically motivated attacks mentioned above.

For a long time, racism was a non-topic in German mainstream discourse, both in the broader public and mass media and in academic circles. This situation has been criticized for an equally long time by anti-racist academics and activists who, however, remained marginalized and had little public impact. In the wake of the uncovering of the terror group National Socialist Underground (NSU, in 2011),[4] the right-wing terror attacks in Halle (October 2019) and Hanau (February 2020), and the spread of the Black Lives Matter protests in Germany (June 2020), the situation has started to shift. However, the hegemonic entrenchment of the mainstream dethematization of racism has remained relatively stable, especially in its resistance to recognizing the systemic and structural dimension of racism. This is not that surprising given that this dethematization has historically deep roots and that it has been overdetermined by a range of factors, some of which are specific to the German context, while others can also be found in other European countries (see Möschel 2014, Rommelspacher 2009). In a simplified way, these factors can be summarized as follows (see also the introduction to this special issue):

1) In the mainstream public, racism was for a long time equated with its most extreme and egregious manifestations, such as Jim Crow in the US, National Socialism in Germany, and Apartheid in South Africa. In comparison, every other manifestation that fell short of state-organized or -sanctioned oppression or elimination appeared as a lesser bad that did not merit the label of racism. In other words, racism was both temporally and geographically 'othered'.

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[4] Before it was uncovered in 2011, the NSU had committed at least ten murders between 2001 and 2010. The fact that the group was not uncovered and stopped earlier, that several of the murders were blamed on migrant communities, and that many questions remain unanswered about the security services' involvement in, or at least knowledge of, the group's activities points to a structural failure of the state and its judicial and security apparatus, but also of mainstream media, that sent shock waves through the public and provoked a series of counter-investigations and tribunals by civil society initiatives; see Karakayali et al. 2017, Sauer 2022.

It was seen as something that existed in a past now securely left behind (in the imaginary break of the 'Zero hour' of 1945), or as a problem of other places. It used to exist here, but not anymore; or it was/is there (South Africa, the US), but not here. At times, this historical and geographic 'othering' – the confinement of racism to one specific historical past – was tied to the (historically inaccurate) assumption that Germany had no relevant colonial history, and thus, in contrast to France and the UK, no relevant migration from its former colonies, and thus no significant Black presence. The result was two-fold: the long-standing presence of Black people in Germany was invisibilized or treated as an anomaly,[5] and 'guest workers' from Turkey and other countries were taken to not fully qualify as victims of racism. As their 'otherness' was ethnically and culturally coded, it seemed to be a category mistake to speak of racism. This misrecognition was upheld even as it became increasingly difficult to ignore that they were both the victims of racist violence and discrimination and of discursive and societal structures of exclusion, exploitation and marginalization, and even as they collectively organized against these complex forms of violence (see Bojadžijev 2012, Kourabas 2021).[6]

2) Beyond this temporal and spatial othering, racism was also socio-politically and internally 'othered' in the face of racist acts of violence, and especially when openly racist violence surged, as in the immediate aftermath of reunification in the early 1990s, and could no longer be ignored by the broader public. Again, this type of othering has taken many forms, from the outsourcing of racism to the 'lunatic fringe' of right-wing extremists ('It might be here, but it's not us') to the individualizing and pathologizing discourse of supposedly confused individuals and 'lone perpetrators' who are driven by a pathological 'hatred of foreigners' ('Ausländerhass') or are the naïve victims of simplistic pseudo-explanations offered by right-wing extremism.

3) Correspondingly, reframing racism in terms of 'xenophobia' and other redescriptions such as hatred of or hostility towards foreigners and immigrants ('Fremdenhass', 'Ausländerfeindlichkeit') might even involve a recognition of the broader social scope of the problem. While this recognition would undermine any attempt to consign the relevant attitudes to the 'lunatic fringe', the underlying framing maintains the powerful tendencies to

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[5] For an early challenge to this invisibilization and its racist structure, inspired by Audre Lorde's visit to Berlin in 1984, see Ayim et al. 1986.

[6] For the case of `contract workers' in the GDR, see Warda and Poutrus 2023.

individualize, psychologize, pathologize racism (as 'phobia', hatred etc.) that have also been driving the forms of othering discussed under 2).

4) Finally, even some academics studying the history and present of racism suggested that the term itself is problematic as they thought it presupposes the existence of race, or even 'races', as something on the basis of which one could then be discriminated, dominated or excluded (see Terkessidis 2004, ch. 3.1). As the assumption that race, or even 'races', exist is treated as a non-starter in light of Nazi history and the scientific debunking of this assumption, this might be seen as a sensible argument. However, giving up on the notion of racism for this reason forecloses the option of a constructivist understanding of race on which that concept designates the outcome of a process of racialization rather than anything that should be taken as given or prior to social processes of group and subject constitution. In any case, skepticism with regard to the methodological and/or political merits of the notion of 'race' should in no way be taken to provide any grounds for denying the reality of racism and its usefulness as a concept (see Gilroy 2000; Fields and Fields 2012). Relatedly, restrictions on collecting racially or ethnically indexed data in Germany, even if understandable and potentially justified in light of the risk of abuse, have led to a significant 'data gap' in assessing the objective social reality of racism and its disparate impact on racialized minorities. For this reason, most quantitative and qualitative social research on racism has built on self-reported experiences of racism that necessarily provide a highly selective representation of a complex social reality through the lens of individual discrimination (DeZIM 2023; Karakayali, this issue).

The overall outcome of these converging historical tendencies and constellations is that racism, if it is acknowledged in mainstream discourse at all, has generally been regarded as an individual and primarily psychological problem. It has thus been recognized in a way that misrecognizes, or even more or less completely dethematizes the institutional, systemic and structural dynamics and forms of racism that anti-racist academics and activists have insisted on (see Bojadžijev 2015; Bojadžijev et al. 2018).

It is true that recent shifts in reaction to anti-racist mobilizations and in response to a spate of racist terror attacks, most recently in Halle and Hanau, have led to government ministries and other agencies funding large-scale and often policy-oriented research on racism. Nevertheless, because this rise of interest has not been accompanied by a serious effort to learn from the decades of anti-racist struggles and the knowledge produced in activist and radical academic circles, these programs still largely focus on attitudes (in terms of 'what goes

into' racism) and forms of discriminatory treatment (in terms of 'what comes out of' racism), thus reproducing the earlier limitations on a new level (see Bojadžijev, this issue). In part these limitations are not surprising, given the long-term tendencies noted above that have even informed some of the early leftist and supposedly critical accounts of racism (e.g. Claussen 1994) that problematized the discourse about racism as inflated, moralized, vague, and the unfortunate outcome of anti-racist exaggeration even before it could be established.[7]

Against this background, activist and academic attempts to highlight the structural dimensions of racism – its genesis, reproduction, and logic – are today at the center of epistemic and semantic struggles that have accompanied the emergence of the concept of racism in the German debate and its gradual extension beyond the individual to the institutional, systemic and structural level. As the wholesale denial of racism is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, in the light of its obvious social reality, the mainstream debate frequently turns to dissimulating racism in an individualist and psychologistic or attitudinal register as residing in prejudice, stereotyping or group hatred. This then allows for separating racist acts and ideologies from their structural enabling conditions and the social power relations they help reproduce. What becomes socially dominant is the view that racism is reducible to individuals who think and act in ways that are racist. What becomes invisible is racism as a form of social domination that is shored up by institutional and ideological mechanisms including in the fields of migration control, policing, access to citizenship, education, housing and labor. While this move allows one to still oppose racism on a symbolic level (participate in demonstrations, sign petitions etc.), it also provides a basis for seeing not racism itself but its presumably exaggerated, excessive, inflated thematization as a danger to the society one lives in – a society that is imagined as uniquely open, enlightened and democratic (see, again, Pfister 2022).

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[7] For a critical discussion, see Terkessidis 2004, 76-7; and ibid., 74, for a critical note on a similar argument advanced in the early 1990s by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, a prominent Marxist theorist who played an important role in publishing German translations of key contributions to the international debate on racism, including by Stuart Hall and Etienne Balibar.

2. Moving Beyond 'Xenophobia'

In this context, insisting on the need for a social-theoretical perspective that views racism as a 'total social phenomenon' (Balibar 1991a, 17; Bojadžijev 2020) in which social structures are interlinked with practices, discourses, actions and interactions, and that permeates all areas of society and therefore needs to be analyzed and criticized in its systemic and structural dimension, serves multiple functions. First, and in line with claims advanced in anti-racist and migrant struggles (Bojadžijev 2012, Karakayali 2018, Nobrega et al. 2021), the turn to structural conditions and dynamics rejects the common framing of racialized minorities and migrant populations as 'the problem' that needs to be addressed, e.g. by subjecting them to discourses and policies of integration and disciplinary control. Instead, speaking of structural racism suggests that racism is primarily a problem of the society in which it is structurally embedded and which it shapes. As a result, the focus shifts from individual racist acts to the social structures and conditions in which these are emerging, amplified, normalized, and to the institutions and practices of exclusion, differential inclusion and marginalization that operate in the background and in ways that gain none of the visibility, and subsequent public attention, that spectacular acts of racist terror mobilize.

Moreover, as has been pointed out early on in the German debate, insisting on the structural nature of racism undermines the tendency to interpret and explain racism in terms of 'xenophobia'. The term suggests that it designates an understandable reaction of individuals or groups that feel threatened by actual or imaginary 'foreigners' who disrupt their establishes ways of living (Kalpaka/Räthzel 1986). Such a framing is itself part of the problem as it provides a racist explanation of racism – and thus reproduces racism rather than effectively analyzing and criticizing it. It suggests that 'xenophobia' as a reaction to the presence of 'foreigners' might be exaggerated but at the same time understandable to a certain extent as it responds to a reality that is taken as given: the disruptive presence of (too many, or the wrong kind of) 'foreigners'. In this way, however, the framing itself repeats the act of racist othering whose violence it presumably seeks to denounce – by casting the victims of racism as literally 'foreign' ('xenos'), regardless of their historical, social or legal position or sense of belonging.

In this way, those considered as 'foreign' are othered and excluded one more time from the imaginary community of the nation by marking them as not (or not really) belonging (Alexopoulou 2019). Furthermore, talking of 'xenophobia' dissimulates the fact that not all of

those who are legally 'foreigners' or 'migrants' are treated in the same way, as the presence of some – 'expats' from North America, Scandinavia etc. – is seen as unproblematic, something to be proud of even given the global competition for 'talent', while others are marked as belonging to a different category of 'undesirables' whose mobility needs to be strictly managed and is subject to economic utility calculations (Karakayali 2008). The way in which the figure of 'the migrant' and 'the foreigner' is produced is thus always already racialized. It also masks the fact that racism does not exclusively operate through hostility and hatred, but also through paternalistic and disempowering positive stereotyping, through acts, institutional procedures and discursive and symbolic frames that essentialize and position the other as a helpless victim in need of support, without agency of their own.

In a similar way, the term Islamophobia may well aim at capturing some aspect of anti-Muslim racism but ends up psychologizing, pathologizing and to a certain extent rationalizing it as a reaction to a religion – experienced as 'foreign' – rather than as targeting individuals and groups who belong, or are imagined as belonging to a religious community. Such framings make it harder to understand and criticize the social conditions of the emergence, reproduction and amplification of racism that call for a more social-theoretical analysis that forces us to move beyond a psychologizing and individualizing perspective (see Opratko 2019, Shooman 2014).

3. The (Strange?) Silence of Critical Theory

Against this background it is both surprising and maybe not that surprising that critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition – and thus the dominant form of critical social theory in the German context – has had almost nothing to say about the post-1945 history and persisting social reality of racism in Germany, nor did it engage with anti-racist struggles and anti-racist theorizing, be it in the German context or beyond. The silence is of course not total and as I will argue later, there are important methodological and substantial lessons to be drawn from the discussions of fascism and antisemitism in the first generation (as well as from the rather few and isolated instances in which racism becomes an explicit topic). Early analyses point to prejudice toward Jews and other minority groups as an important part of the authoritarian personality and a key mechanism mediating between broader social relations and ideological orientations that provides "pseudo-orientation in an estranged world" (Adorno et al. 1950,

622). They diagnose a culturalist transformation of earlier biological forms of racism at the center of fascism in post-war Europe that serves to maintain white supremacy and stabilize established self-understandings in times of crisis (Adorno 1955, 148-9). And they identify the phantasmatic dimension of racism and its fictions of homogeneity, purity, and essentialized difference as key mechanisms that establish continuities across historical changes and target groups (Adorno 1967). All these points remain central for any social-theoretically informed analysis and critique of racism today.

Despite these openings there has been no sustained engagement with antiracist struggles and theorizing in the critical theory tradition (Outlaw 2005, Mills 2017b). This missed opportunity is all the more astonishing as an interest in ideologically obfuscated structural forms of domination and in struggles against them would have provided a common ground. Furthermore, an interest in the intersections of class and race and of racism and capitalism has been at the center of theorists who share a Marxist orientation, and even some closeness to the Frankfurt School, most notably Angela Davis – who had studied with Marcuse in the US and with Adorno in Frankfurt, and, following Marcuse, insists on the need to embed the critique of racism as well as of gender-based domination within a critique of capitalism (Davis 1983) – and Stuart Hall, who, building on Marxist and post-Marxist approaches, theorizes racism as a structurally embedded and historically variable response to crisis and as a mechanism that allows capital to divide the working class (Hall 2021).

However, critical theory's silence in matters of race appears as less astonishing once we move beyond the first generation, and its perceptive theoretical analysis of antisemitism, to the second and third generation. This is not only due to its emergence and development in a German context profoundly shaped by the epistemic obstacles and limitations indicated above. Especially the perspective of authors such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth – the most important representatives of what is often referred to as the second and the third generation of the Frankfurt School – is informed by a Eurocentric narrative of progress and modernization (see Allen 2016, Bhambra 2021) and, at least in parts, an underlying methodological nationalism. The latter operates with the assumption of a relatively homogeneous population, or at least of a population for which migration and racialized domination do not pose fundamental challenges beyond taking its own already affirmed commitments to inclusion and democratic equality somewhat more seriously. Animated by the Whiggish assumption that the 'Enlightenment values' presumably at the heart of the

critical and emancipatory project have been, albeit partially, institutionalized in Western societies, they seem to suggest that any remaining deficits of inclusion and equality can be addressed through those same institutions in a process of learning and self-correcting that does not require any fundamental break with the status quo.

This perspective, however, stands in direct tension with an emphasis on the structural nature of racism. After all, insisting on the structural nature of racism suggests that the social relations institutionalized in Western societies and the forms of freedom and solidarity they realize are not just contingently accompanied by relatively minor exclusions of racialized groups. Assuming that existing forms of exclusion are minor and contingent could indeed suggest that these values had only been insufficiently realized up to now and only need to be extended to those hitherto excluded – by means of inclusion and integration into the existing institutional and social structure. In contrast, the thesis that many anti-racist movements and theorists advance – and that critical theorists in other contexts have of course also endorsed – is that these exclusions have played a constitutive role in the history of these societies and their value systems, continuing to shape them to this day, and that radical emancipation would therefore require developing entirely different visions of living together in freedom and solidarity. From this perspective, which converges with some of the Marxist claims informing the theoretical approach of the first generation, the idea that the law and the state are neutral institutions that secure the rights of all in ways that may not be perfect, yet can be remedied by institutionalized self-reflexivity and self-transformation, is an ideology masking their character as (at least also) instruments of racial (and class) oppression. The persistence of massive inequalities that systematically disadvantage racialized populations both domestically and on a global scale, in central areas of social life, by restricting access to citizenship, education, health, jobs, and housing, suggests that institutionalized democracy holds little promise for those whose political means of effectively challenging and transforming entrenched forms of domination seem rather limited.

Furthermore, the fact that critical theorists, who often take themselves to be committed to taking their cue from the social struggles and movements of their day and to contribute to the emancipatory project these potentially embody, have for the most part ignored the history and presence of migrant and anti-racist struggles, even rather prominent ones, points to the dominance of objectivist and idealizing tendencies that result in a disconnect from 'the struggles and wishes of the age' (Celikates 2019, 2022). This has started to change more

recently, with Nancy Fraser (2022, ch. 2) picking up on both anti-racist struggles and earlier Black Marxist discussions of racial capitalism (prominently in Du Bois 1935) by arguing that capitalism provides a structural basis for racial oppression and thus exhibits an inherent (even if historically variable) tendency to racialize populations in order to more effectively expropriate and exploit them.

In earlier discussions, others have elaborated a relational and materialist understanding of racism that builds on how antisemitism was theorized in the early Frankfurt School, and how racism was rearticulated in a culturalist register in the wake of anticolonial and antiracist struggles (Balibar 1991a, Bojadžijev 2020). What these approaches share, and what might be a distinctive contribution of a critical theory of race and racism, is a commitment to understanding racism as a comprehensive social relation that needs to be understood materialistically in relation to broader (capitalist) social formations, to seeing 'race' as an ideological effect rather than an unquestioned category for social analysis (see also Fields and Fields 2012), and to taking anti-racist struggles as a starting point for critical theorizing about racism in its structural dimensions. It is precisely thanks to these scattered openings that Frankfurt School critical theory, despite the silence at its core, holds important lessons for how to theorize racism today – lessons that underscore the importance of the structural dimension of racism on both a methodological and substantial level.

4. Why *Structural* Racism?

As noted above, the concept of structural racism has itself been developed in reaction to ways of understanding and criticizing racism that rest on a misconception of what racism is and how it is reproduced. From early attempts to conceptualize the structural dimension of racism under the label 'institutional racism' in the work of by Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton (1967) to more recent work by scholars such as Charles Mills (2017a), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2021) and Sally Haslanger (2023), the systemic and structural dimension of racism has been theorized as something that exceeds and underlies its individual and more formal institutional manifestations. In this way, the very notion of structural racism has become a conceptual resource in the struggle against the ideologies and epistemic obstacles that keep racism from being adequately understood and addressed by either denying its existence altogether or by individualizing, psychologizing and depoliticizing it.

The stakes are thus both irreducibly epistemic and political. Insisting on the structural dimension of racism minimally involves the following points: 1) against individualization: racism is not reducible to individual prejudice, bias, ignorance, hatred, discriminatory actions; 2) against psychologization: racism is not reducible to mental states like prejudices, biases, attitudes; 3) against 'othering', pathologization and exceptionalization: racism is not reducible to a mental disorder ('xenophobia', 'Rassenwahn'/racist delusions), nor to a fringe phenomenon ('right-wing extremism') or a few radicalized individuals or 'bad apples' that engage in racist acts; 4) against idealization: racism is not reducible to a (super-structural) set of beliefs/ideas, an ideology or dogma that could be studied independently from its social reality.

Despite these stakes, its increasingly prominent role in anti-racist struggles and theorizing, and the seeming (often implicit) agreement among many of those who use the term about this set of negatively formulated claims, structural racism as a concept remains undertheorized. While a detailed theorization is beyond the scope of this paper, the following three dimensions in which the concept does important work and at the same time needs further spelling out would have to be at the center of such a theorization.

1) In terms of *social ontology and social theory*, the insistence on the structural in 'structural racism' points to the relative permanence, stability, and inertness of its fundamental structural features while at the same time allowing for the historically variable manifestation of those structures in more spatially and historically more localized systems (Haslanger 2023). In addition, speaking of structures indicates a relative independence from individual intentions and actions, especially of those individuals who are 'present here and now'. While structures are not constraining in the form of the direct coercion of some by others, they provide conditions that are both constraining and enabling, structuring the space of possibilities and thereby producing differential access to possibilities and exposition to risk. In these ways, they generate and reproduce non-arbitrary differentials in the kinds and range of options that members of racialized groups have (in terms of access to citizenship, housing, work, public health, education, credit and other important social goods and spheres) and in the control they can exercise over how these entrenched differentials are represented, how they can be challenged, and how they can be changed. Domination in the form of blocking and shaping possibilities can therefore arise and get reproduced in more indirect and cumulative ways. In these ways, racism comes to be a "total social phenomenon" (Balibar 1991a, 17; Bojadžijev

2020) and in that sense structural: historically 'deep' and socially 'broad', as it permeates and is embedded in all areas of social life, its practices, discourses, representations, from law via education and the media to the economic system.

2) In terms of *methodology*, talk of structural racism insists on the need for structural explanations in response to the question of why racism is so persistent and how it functions given the relative (and obviously reversible) decline in openly racist attitudes and the legal institutionalization of formal equality. It provides a framework for understanding the persistence of racial inequality that counters ready-made explanations that are individualizing or victim-blaming (lack of work ethic, personal responsibility, …) and thus provides a crucial presupposition for challenging and overcoming structural forms of domination. Some of the ways that structure can be explanatory include the role of structural constraints (e.g. how structural conditions shape the options and incentives of individuals in the housing market), the sociality of meaning (e.g. how teachers react to and interact with students who are racialized as belonging to certain groups) and the ways material conditions and resources such as access to wealth, technology, skills, transportation, and other concrete social goods, are distributed (Haslanger 2015). Differentials among racialized groups in all areas of social life, and especially in the central fields of social reproduction such as health, labor and housing, have been well-documented and go far beyond what is attributable to open legal or individual discrimination. In many settings, including in Germany, these differentials are historically deep and structurally entrenched. The resulting inequalities and asymmetries are then often taken for granted as part of the background in which individualizing forms of anti-racism such as diversity programs or unconscious bias trainings operate – again, with the result that both institutions and individuals can be committed to fighting racism in one form (as discrimination), while leaving it in place and even actively reproducing it in another form (as structural racism).

3) Finally, in terms of *politics*, insisting on the structural nature of racism provides a perspective for change and a horizon of struggle that is itself systemic or structural, rejecting individualist responses to the challenge of racism, such as anti-bias trainings and diversity initiatives that are often uncoupled from any broader and more transformative agenda. Instead, a focus on structural racism goes hand in hand with insisting on a politics of structural change and transformation instead of a politics of integration, inclusion or recognition that

leaves the fundamental parameters of the existing system in place and merely asks how more individuals and collectives can be integrated or included.

In these three dimensions there are clear resonances with the methodological and substantial claims at the core of early Frankfurt School critical theory in general and its analysis of antisemitism and fascism in particular. These revolve around the rejection of psychologizing and individualizing approaches, the insistence that the pathology always lies in the antisemitic or racist subjects and not in their victims, blocking any critical analysis that rationalizes racism as a reaction to its objects, and the emphasis on structural dimensions that include the enabling conditions of individual instances of racism as well as the functional role of racism in the context of the functional and legitimacy crises of capitalism and democracy.

These points have been picked up by later attempts to theorize racism within the Frankfurt School that have, however, remained marginal and were largely ignored within that tradition and that developed within an intellectual and academic context that was still very much shaped by the broader avoidance of racism in favor of other theoretical frames such as 'xenophobia' and ethnocentrism (Institut für Sozialforschung 1992; Bojadžijev, Eckart, Speck 2023). In this context, Alex Demirović (1992) was one of the first to push back against the dominant framework and towards a social-theoretical analysis of racism as a more structural phenomenon that requires going beyond the focus on prejudice and right-wing 'hatred of foreigners'. Building on Horkheimer and Adorno's argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947, 171) that fascist antisemitism had to first construct its own object and can therefore never be understood in terms of a reaction to actually existing Jews, Demirović (1992, 28) insists that the emergence, reproduction and development of racism is relatively independent from any direct experience of and interaction with those subjects that are made into the objects of racism. Racism can therefore not be adequately explained or effectively combatted when it is understood in terms of prejudice. Demirović's analysis also echoes Adorno's earlier warning that abstracting from the structural nature of racism and personalizing and individualizing the problem in the figure of "the 'eternally incorrigible'" or the "lunatic fringe" only leads to "consolatory phrases" that may provide a "certain quietist bourgeois comfort" (Adorno 1967) but fail to be theoretically and politically adequate.

This line of analysis is developed further, after a hiatus of almost a decade, in Alex Demirović and Manuela Bojadžijev's (2002) argument for a social-theoretical and materialist understanding of racism as a comprehensive social relation that is neither grounded in an

almost anthropological tendency of fearing others nor in a concrete and contextual reaction that centers on its victims (as the framework of 'xenophobia' suggests). Seeking to combine a focus on anti-racist struggles as starting points for thinking through the transformations of racism with a social-theoretical analysis of how the specificity of certain conjunctures relates to overarching structures of racism, their approach recalls both Adorno's and Fanon's insistence that racism cannot be regarded as "a super-added element" but is a structural part of "the social constellation, the cultural whole" (Fanon 1956, 36). While this broad outline of the theoretical significance of the shift from 'xenophobia' to a more social-theoretical and structural account of racism certainly stands in need of further development, the next section will, in conclusion, briefly illustrate the analytical and critical purchase of such an approach with regard to an example from the recent history of racism in Germany.

5. Hanau – From "Isolated Case" to "Cesura From Below"?

On the occasion of the first anniversary of the February 19, 2020 racist terror attack in the city of Hanau in which nine people were killed and five others wounded when a gunman targeted two shisha bars before killing his mother and then himself, the commemoration happened on a split-screen. On the one side, politicians and officials gave speeches condemning hate and racism, warning of the danger far-right terrorism poses to 'us'. On the other side, rallies and unofficial memorial services across the country organized by migrant communities and anti-racist organizations denounced the structural racism of German society and the state, questioning the material and political reality of the 'we' symbolically invoked in official discourse.

The most significant intervention came from the families of the victims, their friends and supporters organized in the 'Initiative February 19'. On their website they uploaded the results of their own counter-investigation into the attack and its aftermath. In this report, they point to how the violence of the attack was enabled and perpetuated by the official response and the cultural and institutional preconditions that made this response seem adequate in the first place. As its authors insist, "Much of the behavior of the investigating authorities before, during and after the night of the attack can only be explained by structural racism" (Initiative 19. Februar 2021, 17). Conducting the investigative work authorities and journalists should be expected to do, the members of the initiative painstakingly document what went wrong

before, during and after the attack, showing how what went wrong – including but going well beyond the attack itself – can only be understood as part of a wider set of enabling conditions. Among these enabling conditions is, centrally, a societal and political failure – an inability and/or unwillingness – to understand contemporary forms of racism as what they are.[8] Each individual question the reports asks – Why was the perpetrator able to legally possess weapons despite being known to the authorities and having publicly declared his racist views? Why were the emergency services so slow to react on the night of the attack and why did they treat the victims and their families and friends as suspects? Why did the police treat victims as a potential danger to the father of the perpetrator, who made no secret of his racist views and publicly defamed the victims? – might still suggest the possibility of an answer that points to concrete individual and institutional failures. However, taken together and in combination with the subsequent media and public reaction they underline the need to shift attention to the structural conditions that have both enabled these concrete failures and the more general failure to see these failures as structural.

This more general failure is exemplified in how the political and journalistic mainstream first reacted to the attack by following an already long-established discursive pattern. The attack was framed as an exceptional and isolated incident, as the doing of a 'lone perpetrator' who belonged to a 'radical fringe'. However, for migrant communities and those in solidarity with them, Hanau of course became an entry on a long list of cities associated with deadly racist attacks on migrant and refugee communities, from the racist Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen riots and the arson attacks in Mölln and Solingen in the early 1990s – which remain marginalized, if at all recognized, in German mainstream historical and political consciousness but fundamentally shaped the experience and lived reality of racialized and migrant communities (see Demirtaş et al. 2023) – to the National Socialist Underground murders in the early 2000s. With its investigative work, the initiative questioned the enabling conditions of both the continuity of racist violence in Germany and of this denial in the context of a politics of selective memory and outrage for which each instance of racist violence and

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[8] The initiative has continued to pursue its counterinvestigations together with the artist collective and research agency Forensic Architecture. The results of this collaboration, which also involved the Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh and blended artistic, scientific, technological and legal research methods and techniques, were presented in the exhibition *Three Doors*, first shown in the Frankfurter Kunstverein, then at HKW Berlin, and finally in Hanau. See https://www.fkv.de/en/exhibition/three-doors-forensic-architecture-initiative-19-februar-hanau-initiative-in-gedenken-an-oury-jalloh/.

terror appears as a discrete event coming from out of nowhere, or as at best only loosely connected to other such events.

It is precisely this background denial of the historical and social reality of racism in Germany that enables the intuitive reaction that these attacks are the doings of individual and psychologically unstable loners, the common reversal of the roles of victim and perpetrator, and the maintenance of "white innocence" (Wekker 2016). This innocence is characterized by paradoxical entanglements of passion/aggression and repression/denial/disavowal that accompany renewed assertions of the hegemonic assumption that structural racism does not play any role in the face of racist violence. It also expresses itself in the shallowness of official denunciations of racist attacks on 'all of us' that, at the same time, in the same move, reproduce and deepen the split between 'us' and 'them'.

In the aftermath of Hanau, one could once again see powerful tendencies of exceptionalization, individualization and pathologization at work that the initiative confronted with their insistence on the everyday, institutional and structural forms racism that enable racist violence and at the same time dissimulate it – an insistence that culminates in the Initiative's call for forcing a "cesura from below" (Initiative 19. Februar 2021, 2). Such disrupting "from below" seems necessary in the face of the persisting systematic denial and 'othering' of racism, its outsourcing to the extreme right-wing fringe, its psychologization, individualization and depoliticization that quickly reestablishes a supposed 'normality' after each exceptional burst of racist violence.

The long shadow of the discourse on 'xenophobia' that continues to haunt any public thematization of racism in Germany is part of the structural problem of turning our attention away from the enabling conditions of racist violence that the Initiative has been struggling against. Once racism gets framed in terms of fear and hatred of 'foreigners' that is, in the eyes of most, to be sure, extreme, pathological and irrational, but still grounded in the experience of a social reality shaped by the disruptive presence of those against whom the attack was directed, it is hard not to ascribe some form of 'rationale' or 'rationality' to it. And once this framing is accepted it is therefore only a small step to the frequent call to take those fears that are then expressed in racist discourses and actions seriously, precisely to prevent them spiraling out of control. This move is self-reinforcing, providing a racist justification for racism, as it were (see already Balibar 1991a), as it suggests these fears are well-grounded and should

be taken seriously, thereby recognizing this fear at the cost of misrecognizing and indeed invisibilizing the fear of those who are made into the object of racism.

Despite its inherent methodological, substantial and political shortcomings, the widespread, almost hegemonic vocabulary of 'xenophobia' can also provide a helpful indication when it comes to the driving forces of contemporary racism in the German context and beyond. One of the most prominent driving forces concerns the putative demographic anxieties and fears of replacement that have animated racist and ethnonationalist discourses for decades (and that has more recently been transnationally articulated in the trope of the 'Great Replacement'). Condensed in the notion of 'Überfremdung' (literally 'over-foreignisation'), the putative disfiguration of the German body of the people, imagined as originally homogeneous, through an excessive influx of 'foreigners', it goes back to the post-1945 dynamic in which biologistic notions of race were overwritten (not replaced) by culturalist discourses – a dynamic diagnosed by Adorno (1955, 148-9) at around the same time as by Fanon (1956). This constellation links the infamous 1981 Heidelberg Manifesto, in which a group of far-right university professors, some of whom with a Nazi past, warned about "Überfremdung" and the "infiltration of the German people", to former SPD-politician and best-selling author Tilo Sarrazin's racist theses about the negative impact of migration on the German population and its supposedly higher intelligence and productivity, the cover of *Der Spiegel* (Nr. 16, 1997), which announces the "failure of multicultural society" under the title "Dangerously Foreign" ("Gefährlich Fremd") to the recently unveiled "remigration" plans of the AfD and other right-wing groups such as the Identitarian movement to deport and essentially ethnically cleanse those 'foreigners' who are deemed unable to integrate, to become 'real' Germans even if they managed to obtain German citizenship. In all these cases, the demonization of actually existing and imaginary others as threats to 'our' security and identity serves to delegitimize the claims of racialized minorities and thereby to protect, naturalize and legitimize existing forms of exclusion and marginalization (Castro Varela and Mecheril 2016) that can quickly engender a potential of violent escalation.

While in Germany, as in other actually existing democracies in the Global North, it is commonly assumed that the question of belonging has already been settled, as Achille Mbembe (2019, 63) argues and as the case of Hanau suggests, this is an instance of ideological obfuscation that has politically dangerous implications: "The question of belonging remains unanswered. Who is from here and who is not? Those who should not be here: what are they doing in our

home? How do we get rid of them? But what do 'here' and 'there' mean in a time in which worlds are intertwining (being networked) but also re-Balkanizing? If the desire for apartheid is indeed one of the characteristics of our times, then actual Europe, for its part, will never again be as before – that is, monocolored." In turn, moving beyond the illusion that migration and diversity are only temporary and reversible features of our societies, that solidarity could be secured in the form of communitarian pseudo-solidarity, requires recognizing a simple but fundamental fact: "From now on, the world will be conjugated in the plural. It will be lived in the plural, and absolutely nothing can be done to reverse this new condition, which is as irreversible as it is irrevocable. One of the consequences of this new condition is the reactivation, among many, of the fantasy of annihilation." (Mbembe 2019, 63)

Racialization processes were and are an essential part of the construction of national identities and establish the corresponding identity norm precisely through the identification and demarcation of and defense against those made into foreigners/others (see Balibar 1991b; Mecheril and Natarajan, this issue). As part of this process, foreigners/others are ascribed an identity that is taken to be clearly definable, unchangeable and incompatible with the hegemonic identity (e.g. being German). As a result, those made into 'foreigners' find themselves in the paradoxical situation of being simultaneously considered to be non-integrable and constantly subjected to disciplinary imperatives and programs of integration (see El-Tayeb 2016).

There are countless examples of how the corresponding "structural racism within (public) reason" (Bierria 2023) has shaped German public debate, most recently with regard to so-called 'clan criminality', a clearly racialized form of criminalization that serves to normalize and rationalize 'racial profiling' and repressive policing (Thompson, this issue).[9] The discussion about 'imported antisemitism' provides another example in that it serves as both a cover for anti-migrant and anti-refugee discourses and policies and a crackdown on pro-Palestinian solidarity and as a way of maintaining the self-image of a nation that has learned its lesson and fights antisemitism and racism wherever they appear (Özyürek 2023). Again, these examples are significant not because of the rather obvious racism expressed in the

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[9] Activists and scholars have long pointed out that racial profiling is an example in which individual, everyday, institutional and structural dimensions of racism come together in ways that are historically deep and socially entrenched and go beyond the failure of any set of individuals or even institutions (Wa Baile et al. 2019, Thompson 2020).

corresponding statements, but rather because they point to discursive structures and conditions of the intelligibility and circulation of anti-migrant racism that get activated and allow such speech acts to circulate, to make sense, to indeed become common sense.

As a background condition this logic assumes the homogeneity of German society – a homogeneity, however, that, as a matter of historical fact, is only the relatively recent product of a process of homogenization that imagines de facto multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations as homogeneous, creates this homogeneity by force (in Germany, the industrialized mass murder of the Holocaust, the Romani genocide (Porajmos), and massive 'ethnic cleansing'), and always also produces (legally, socially, culturally and economically consequential) non-belonging. As this pre-history of the fantasy of homogeneity cannot be recognized, in the next step, non-belonging (be it as a "guest worker", "foreigner", "German-Turk", etc.) is attributed to the unwillingness or even the inability to integrate on the part of those who are excluded, or included as nonequals: "In the perception of those who are visible products of the denied history of migration, the dominant discourse of Germany as a traditional `non-immigrant country' and the – often buried – counter-discourses of actual diversity coexist in tension – especially in the regular moments of crisis in which the presence of the cultural/religious/ethnic other is stylized as an unprecedented challenge for a previously homogeneous national (and continental) community." (El-Tayeb 2016, 156)

However, the case of Hanau not only exemplifies a central logic of racism that consists in continually redefining who belongs and who doesn't. It is also instructive in terms of highlighting the political vitality and critical force of migrant and anti-racist counter-discourses and counter-practices of commemorating, investigating, and producing knowledge about racism and its structural dimensions. These counter-discourses and counter-practices transform mourning and anger into forms of political and epistemic agency that allow for an acknowledgment of relationality and vulnerability and thus enable transversal forms of solidarity that fundamentally challenge the identitarian and exclusionary logic of German nationhood and the politics of separation and desolidarization it relies on and exacerbates (Inan 2022).

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To insist on the need to emphasize how racism is embedded in and reproduced by everyday practices and routines as well as social and political institutions and structures is no abstract insight of a social-theoretical perspective on racism – it is an insight that is at the same time generated in antiracist struggles and movements that push back against the inadequacies of mainstream discourses on racism. This genesis and role of the discourse on structural racism underlines the fundamental ambivalence of the phenomenon it seeks to name, analyze and critique in a way that defuses rather than dissolves the dilemma identified by Gates: structural racism is both "a total social phenomenon" and a fragmented totality traversed by (political and epistemic) contradictions and struggles – struggles that have themselves brought structural racism onto an agenda from which it has been displaced for far too long. It is precisely in centering this ambivalence that an analysis of structural racism needs to both build on the social-theoretical perspective of critical theory and can itself inform and instruct this perspective.

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