

# Suddenly, it's OK to be German and to talk about race

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**For years if you wanted to discuss racism, people looked at you as if you were a Nazi, but now there's a new openness**

When I was growing up there was no racism in [Germany](#). In the 1980s every child learned at school that race was a construct that fascists had used to justify segregating and killing people. So if race didn't exist, it naturally followed that racism didn't exist either. If you wanted to talk about it people looked at you as if you were the Nazi.

All this is changing. It is dizzying to watch my motherland grapple with the concept of race. And, to be honest, to grapple with it myself because when you stop speaking about something you stop thinking about it eventually too. So we're all walking on eggshells; the discussion about racism is on the agenda but we're whispering "race" as if it were a dirty word. Except for members of Alternative für Deutschland, the far-right party, who keep pushing the boundaries of [what you can and can't say](#), and at every opportunity tout their worries about "other races" outbreeding white Germans. Germans of colour, meanwhile, worry about the AfD's success in winning a quarter of the votes in recent state elections in [Saxony and Brandenburg](#).

By the way, the German term for people of colour is: people of colour. We really haven't got a language for it. When my father came from India to Germany in the 1960s he was called a *Gastarbeiter*, which translates as "guest worker". Now, you wouldn't ask your guests to work, and I wouldn't, but the German government did. The idea was that people would come, they would do the jobs Germans didn't want to do, and then they would go home.

In the 1980s these people had been living and working in Germany for decades and it was clear they weren't going anywhere, so they became: foreigners. I became a foreigner, even though I was born in Germany. In the 1990s we became immigrants, even though ... see above. The term immigrant later became shortened to migrant and then lengthened again to: person with a background of migration. For the first time the term made sense. Kind of. My father and my maternal grandparents migrated into Germany. But so did my husband. Yet nobody describes him in such terms because he's a white Englishman.

[Race](#) does play a role in these difficult negotiations. This is exacerbated by the fact that German nationality law was based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* ("the right of blood"), meaning that you had to have German blood – or more specifically a German father – to be German. In 1975 the women's movement won the right for German mothers to transmit their nationality to their children. But it wasn't until 2000 that some children born and raised in Germany got the right to a German passport. Only in 2014 was the right extended to all German-born children.

Immediately the AfD claimed that we might have German passports but we would never be "real" Germans because we lacked that certain German essence – blood? – that would make us part of the

*Heimat*. Sadly, I can't translate *Heimat* as it is the unicorn of political language, (and a difficult term for many because it was used during the Nazi era) combining homeland, nation and identity in a mythical way.

So it was only a question of time before, last year, we got a unicorn ministry: the *Heimatministerium*, or [federal homeland ministry](#). The freshly baked homeland minister, Horst Seehofer, did not belong to the AfD but to the governing CDU/CSU, yet still his first declaration was: "Islam does not belong to Germany." Another way of telling millions of Germans that they didn't belong here.

None of this is new. What is new is that it [doesn't go unchallenged](#) any more. The populist propaganda that crime is being imported wholesale into Germany (especially sexual crime or the dark men raping white women trope) by "others" is now broadly contested on the basis that crime rates are actually falling in Germany. In fact, the people at highest risk of attack are women wearing hijabs. Seehofer was forced to add anti-Muslim hate crimes to the list of crimes his ministry evaluates statistically.

At the beginning of this month, [Angela Merkel](#) urged parliament to stand up against *Fremdenfeindlichkeit*, hatred of foreigners. This is great, only most people on the receiving end of hatred aren't foreigners. They just happen to be brown or black or to have names like Muhammed or Mithu.

The idea that you don't have to acquire German blood vampiristically but can achieve Germanness by ... well, being German, is still new to us. All of us. We don't call ourselves "people with a background of migration" any longer, we call ourselves "German plus" or "new Germans" or sometimes just Germans. And it feels weird. Because all our lives, we have been trained to view ourselves as other.

In response to the creation of the homeland ministry, 14 German Jewish and writers of colour, including myself, put together an anthology (inspired by the British [Good Immigrant](#) project) called *Eure Heimat ist Unser Albtraum* (Your Homeland is our Nightmare), which has kept a constructive debate going. To be fair, racism in Germany isn't, in my experience, as blatant as it is in Britain. But there is also a lot less knowledge of it. When I go to England, sooner or later, somebody will remind me about the British empire. How could I forget? In Germany hardly anybody knows that we were dab hands at colonialism as well. We cling to the idea that we were too late to the game and anyway lost the colonies we supposedly didn't have after the first world war.

But most of all we learn that we have already faced up to our past. That we are *Weltmeister* in *Erinnerungskultur*, world champions in the politics of remembering, because we owned up to the crimes of the Nazis. And this is pretty special compared to other nations, even though it wasn't as voluntary as we like to make out. And it is only part of the story. When we speak about concentration camps we should also know that we built the first concentration camp in 1904, in what is now Namibia, to intern and [kill thousands of Herero and Nama](#) people whose bodies were then sent to Berlin to be examined for racial research.

Last year, some of their [skulls were given back](#) to descendants in a ceremony that wasn't an official apology for the genocide. It was, at least, an unofficial one.

It feels like more books about race have been published in the past two years in Germany than in the past two decades. We even have a sister hashtag to #metoo: #metwo for the experiences of people with more than one Heimat. Reading about all this can create the impression there is more racism than ever in Germany. Actually, the opposite is true. What's happened is we are finally starting to

talk about it.

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## **Mithu Sanyal**

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The Guardian

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