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The Persistent Challenge of Essentialism for Theory and Practice

Abstract

Essentialist assumptions about human beings persist in scientific theory and practice, despite their erroneous logic. Essentialism manifests itself in a diversity of forms, yet it is always potentially dangerous — even when it is mobilised strategically, for purposes of overcoming oppressive structures. Drawing from own ethnographic research, this talk will examine the problematic logic of social essentialism. It firstly considers the example of “provenance research” upon, and restitutions of, mortal human remains held in European institutions. Such research and restitutions reproduce essentialism with the political aim of atoning for the injustices of colonial and historical “race science”, which lead to the systemic collecting of human bodies. The talk further considers an example of essentialism being mobilised in a case of radicalisation towards violent extremism, exploring the psychological and inter-social role of such a logic. These very diverse examples allow not only to remark on essentialism’s latency to be used for pernicious ends, but also examine its existential and political appeal, thus aiding our understanding of the reasons for its persistence and prevalence. Concluding, the talk will remark on the persistence of essentialism in several contemporary socio-scientific theoretical trends, pointing out the necessity for continuous vigilance of the axioms which underpin scholarly practice.

Oberseminar