

Wednesday Seminars

LECTURE SERIES IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

22.04.2026 | 5 p.m. | @ Übungsraum IKSA | NIG, 4th floor

Insa Lee Koch (University of St. Gallen)

When Liberal Anti-Racism Is Not Enough: Thinking from UK's Modern Slavery Laws About Authoritarian Statemaking in the European Metropole



Trained in law and anthropology, **Insa Lee Koch** is a legal anthropologist who works on questions of inequalities, empire, Europe and the law. Prior to taking up the Chair in British Cultures at the University of St Gallen, Switzerland, Insa was Associate Professor in Law and Anthropology at the LSE. Her new monograph, entitled *Race, Drugs and the Politics of Modern Slavery law* (OUP) is a multi-sited ethnography of juridical victimhood as state making in times of racial and neo-liberal crisis in Europe.

In this talk, I plead for an anthropology of law attuned to the analytical and political challenges of an increasingly authoritarian climate in liberal constitutional settings. Drawing on my book, *Drugs, Race, and the Politics of Modern Slavery Law* (OUP, 2026), I examine a new precedent in the making—namely, the application of UK ‘slavery laws’ to manage and punish its marginalised working-class and racialised populations. Originally conceived in the context of debates around international human trafficking, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 became ‘domesticated’ as police and the courts, over the last ten years, have applied it to those at the bottom rung of the street-level drugs economy within the country’s borders. Drawing on ethnography with police, the courts, and crucially the families affected, and situating this within histories of empire and their afterlives, I reflect on how a juridical project in the making has become a political project, as logics of liberal saviourism and the image of ‘slave and ‘slave master’ have been projected onto the bodies of Black working class youth. In what ways has juridical victimhood become a site for the remaking of political statecraft in times of liberal and economic crisis? How do attempts to work against the liberal anti-racist grain become weaponised by unexpected publics, generating backlash from both far-right and liberal audiences? To what extent are my ethnographic observations and their reception indicative of a liberal legal crisis in European metropolises writ large? And what challenges do they pose for the anthropologist of law to reconceive of ethnography not just as analytical work but as a form of political labour?



hybrid event
join online!



universität
wien

Department of Social and
Cultural Anthropology