

Ethnography and Law: Methods and Challenges in Times of Crisis

Workshop at the University of Hamburg, July 2-3, 2026

In recent years, scholars from anthropology, sociology, law, and related disciplines have increasingly engaged in dialogue about the ethnographic study of law. This interdisciplinary exchange has generated new conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical insights into how law operates across diverse settings and contexts.

Contemporary crises of the rule of law—marked by the erosion of human rights regimes, diminishing trust in liberal legal institutions, and challenges to constitutional law and constitutional courts in Europe, the USA, and worldwide—compel us to critically re-examine how we study law. These global developments reveal the urgency of moving beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about the liberal constitutional state as an unquestioned baseline for legal research.

We argue that ethnography offers distinctive methodological advantages for capturing the multiple directions in which law is developing, for identifying the diverse human and non-human actors shaping legal settings, and for revealing the informal and affective dimensions of legal practice that often escape other forms of analysis. Ethnographic approaches allow us to examine how legal orders are constituted, challenged, and transformed through everyday practices, making visible the boundary-work between formal and informal spheres, between different normative orders, and between law and politics.

Rather than focusing on a single disciplinary tradition or thematic area, this conference centers on methodological questions: **How should ethnographic legal studies be conducted today?** What new approaches, concepts, and analytical frameworks are emerging from ethnographic engagements with official law, legal pluralism, state institutions, and normative orders? How can ethnographic methods illuminate the transformations of law in times of crisis?

We invite paper proposals that:

- Develop innovative ethnographic approaches to studying law in its contemporary forms
- Reflect methodologically on the challenges and opportunities of conducting ethnographic legal research
- Engage with questions of positionality, access, and critique in ethnographic studies of law
- Bridge disciplinary perspectives from legal anthropology, legal sociology, socio-legal studies, jurisprudence, and related fields
- Address how ethnographic methods can capture law's transformation in times of global crisis

We welcome contributions from a variety of empirical fields and theoretical traditions, united by a shared commitment to ethnography as a mode of knowledge production that can illuminate both the micro-practices and larger structural forces shaping contemporary legal orders.

One of the workshop's goals is to connect scholars from research institutions in the German speaking countries irrespective of disciplinary background, thematic and regional focus. Of course, all international colleagues are also very welcome to apply.

Interested colleagues should submit a title and an abstract (300-500 words) via e-mail to ethnography-and-law-conference@uni-hamburg.de **until 31 December 2025**.

Accepted proposals will receive notification before the end of January.

Participants should arrange their own travel and accommodation. We are aware, however, that funding situations vary. Accepted presenters are welcome to contact us to request partial travel support, which we will provide where possible subject to available funds.

The workshop is organized by

- Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg (Jonas Bens)
- Vereinigung für Recht und Gesellschaft (Eva Kocher, Andrea Kretschmann),
- Sektion Rechtssoziologie der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie (Laura Affolter, Francesca Barp),
- Hamburg Institute for Social Research (Research Group Legal Sociology) (Francesca Barp),
- Department 'Law & Anthropology', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale) (Larissa Vetters),
- Research Group 'Transformations in Private Law: Culture, Climate, and Technology', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale) (Mareike Schmidt).