

Umbrella text for the doctoral college “Politics-Power-Language” (PPL)

Politics is, at its very core, the process of organizing society on the basis of collectively binding rules, and the interaction of groups. Politics can either aim at legitimating power and relations of dominance and violence or aim at transforming these relations. Politics can either be about the allocation of scarce or limited resources to (parts of) the society or about problematizing the limitation of resources or the unjust distribution of resources as social movements. Politics does not only take place in (state) institutions but also in multiple social sites, e.g., in social movements or protests. Politics can also be influenced by technology such as algorithms and bots.

Power can either be conceptualized as “power over”, “power to” or “power with”. “Power over” highlights the relational aspect of power where power is a finite resource that can be held by individuals or groups, and where some people or groups have power and others do not. “Power to” grasps power as productive force that can create new social relations or new political structures. “Power with” grasps power as relation, as force that can only exist in collective actions. Furthermore, where to locate power, is also highly contested: in relations, structures, people, or discourses?

Language constitutes the nuts and bolts of politics at local, regional, national, international and global levels. It is through language that actors render matters of public interest and reach binding decisions over them, that they (re-)produce, qualify, obstruct, or destroy formal and informal hierarchies, and that they engage in contention. Overall, the use of language in politics is deeply intertwined with power – the very exercise of power over other actors but also the possession of power dispositions to generate, question or articulate voice in politics for shaping it.

Not only are these three concepts highly contested, but also their relationship: Does politics follow power or vice versa? Is language constituted by power or is language a tool to transform power? How is political representation linked to language and power? What role do gendered, racialized, neo-colonial power structures play in defining what politics is and what voices can be heard and represented in political discourses? When is political power seen as illegitimate? How is political power constructed discursively? Which linguistic and rhetorical patterns are used to re(create) structures of power? What institutions for containing power abuse can help to establish sustainable mechanisms of cooperation? How, when, or why do political actors frame societal conflict to reach consensus for interpreting a normative proposition? Which domestic and external factors contribute to transforming intra-state power conflicts into generally accepted instruments of political governance? What drives variation in levels of voter migration? How do current transformations such as digitalization affect the interplay of power, politics and language?

Given this multifaceted approach to and interconnectedness of politics, power and language, the doctoral college (DC) PPL is a multidisciplinary project that seeks to foster the exchange between different disciplines within and beyond the social sciences and humanities (e.g., computer science, digital humanities, economics, gender studies, history, linguistics, media and communication, philosophy, political science, sociology).

Doctoral college

The new doctoral college PPL addresses these and similar questions. It forms part of the university's research area “Economy, Politics & Society” (EPoS) and offers PhD students the opportunity to work on their dissertation projects in an environment that features theory-led basic research, critical reflection and empirical analysis in an interdisciplinary way. It aims at

preparing PhD students for academic work in their field of doctoral research and promoting early-stage researchers. Moreover, we invite students to pursue their dissertation projects in a mutual, at least transdisciplinary exchange. Our doctoral college is intended as an offer to analyse research questions regarding the (normative) design, (empirical or discursive) description, discursive (re)production, validation, and explanation of political power. We invite members of the DC to explore, discuss and question related phenomena and processes of the generation, justification, dynamics, control, and critique of “power”. Given the variety of the term’s definitions and meanings, the DC will serve as a key platform for deepening knowledge with regard to (a) the corresponding basic belief systems – “Grundverständnisse”, (b) operational functions, instruments, and institutions, (c) actor-specific, institutional or instrumental role profiles and perceptions, and (d) the resulting, intersectional constellations relevant to the social sciences and humanities.

Support for PhD students

In this context, our offer includes support for the dissertation projects beyond the supervision services of the dissertation agreement through annual retreats, regular training workshops and joint research workshops to deepen theoretical, methodological and writing skills, and offers to participate in research and publication projects of the DC. The DC provides the infrastructure (a limited number of workstations (available on a rotation basis), personal websites) for DC students to increase the visibility of their research, by publishing working papers, creating blog posts, podcasts and personal websites, and it supports them in attaining a qualification for university teaching and policy consulting. We expect students to report regularly on their research progress, to organize and conduct scientific workshops for all members of the DC on their own responsibility, to plan and conduct scientific courses, and to be willing to actively participate in the research and publication projects of the DC.