

FORSCHUNGSCOLLEGIUM

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TOWARDS THEORIZING CIVIL SOCIETY

I. RATIONALE & BACKGROUND

The FORSCHUNGSCOLLEGIUM (FC), a permanent research college, was founded in 1999 by the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society (MI), Berlin.

Why?

- Only very few scientists grappled with the issue of civil society
- Students often struggled to find competent supervisors
- Students increasingly asked the MI about literature, references and recommendations

The scientific community is now closer meshed in the area and quality generally enhanced. However, there are challenges that justify to continue the college.

III. METHODOLOGY

Individual research projects are the foundation upon which the FC is built. While the students are working on their Master and PhD theses, they are offered the chance of an interdisciplinary, non-hierarchical, and professional exchange. This helps balancing knowledge and filling research gaps in a fruitful way.

How it works:

- We are establishing an ongoing exchange among graduate students researching aspects of civil society with individual support from senior academics
- with participants based all over Germany and from a broad variety of disciplines (e.g. law, politics, history, communication, economics, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, regional studies).
- Small groups (8-12 people) meet four times a year for full-day facilitated sessions.
- Students bring their work up for discussion at least twice in the course of their membership.
- The sessions are moderated in turn by the proven experts in the field (at present: Frank Adloff, Ansgar Klein, Rainer Sprengel, Rupert Graf Strachwitz).

Today...

...the need to deal with different disciplines and perspectives is strong in civil society research, ..the demand for long term high-specialized exchange is still on going.

So far, compared to other scientific disciplines there is still little evidence-based theoretical insight into civil society and citizen engagement, while phenomena like Occupy or the Arab Spring call for a new conceptualization of civil society.

To enable sustainable existence and guarantee independence, first members of the college founded a sponsor organization (FVZf).



II. AIMS & OBJECTIVES

In addition to improving the support situation of students, the FC deals with another object: supporting the formation of standards within the research field.

This longterm research project argues that a phenomenon with such a vast spectrum of meaning can best be understood from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Thus the aim is to foster...

- ...a substantial academic debate
- ...over disciplinary boundaries
- ...and institutional borders.

In particular, this approach of up-to-date theorizing civil society works towards...

- ...openness to different schools of thought,
- ...creating and spreading a hermeneutical structure and linguistic frame upon which
- interdisciplinary understanding is made possible
- synergy effects can arise and
- mutual understanding across various disciplines is possible.

IV. RESULTS & FINDINGS

More than 130 academics have been members of the FC to date. They have been working on topics of civil society in its different manifestations. Traditionally the focus of research has been Germany and Western Europe, however, research projects cover a wide regional and topical range from the environmental movement in Japan and charity in Saudi Arabia to cultural foundations in Poland and welfare associations in Sweden.

Continuous fruitful discussion and extensive publications from within the FC have shown that the comparative perspective of the Forschungscollegium allows for fresh theorizing and the development of a new approach towards civil society theory.

Thereby research results from 15 years of exchange within the FC suggest that only combined efforts enable the conceptualization and understanding of the phenomenon in its entirety.

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