

Phenomenology and the Political

Annual conference of the German Association for Phenomenological Research (DGPF)
FernUniversität in Hagen, 13th – 16th September 2017

Outline

The present gains an increasing political awareness: The European crisis, the rise of populism, flight and migration as well as the role of the international finance and governance system have brought political conditions back on the agenda. Classical and post-classical phenomenological approaches have contributed essentially to developing, analyzing and expounding problems in the domain of politics – even though this brings the method of phenomenology to its limits.

Phenomenological approaches are able to provide access to political attitudes, dispositions and affects since they focus on the perspective of experience. In that way they draw attention to the genesis of political institutions and processes. Their analyses of the political sphere points out the specific conditions under which subjects are perceived as actors and are able to raise their voice in the first place. Moreover, their post-foundationalist approach allows to explain and conceptualize political struggles and transformations on a basic level. Finally, phenomenology exposes ethical und practical aporias und paradoxes that inevitably coincide with the constitution of the political realm. The conference discusses these problems with international guest speakers and in eight thematic sections.

Section I: Genealogy – Genesis – Constitution of the Political World

(Chair: Karl Mertens, Würzburg)

According to Hannah Arendt the political is the realm of action. In the context of constitutional phenomenological thoughts this approach leads to the question how the formation of political institutions is possible: How can individual human actions constitute a sphere of supraindividual meaning? Can the spheres of public life, collective practices, institutional organizations and structures be grasped with reference to conscious experience, the first-person-perspective or even the transcendental subjectivity? Is it furthermore possible to understand politics from a third person perspective? Where – if so – are the boundaries of a phenomenology of the political?

Section II: Corporeity – Materiality – Moods

(Chair: Tobias Klass, Wuppertal)

The interweaving of the body with the field of politics starts where the political unity is determined as a „social body“. It continues with political discussions about bioethical questions such as preimplantation diagnostics and stem cell research. It even extends to questions of gender mainstreaming and bodily categories such as race, class or gender. On the basis of the phenomenological distinction between the lived and the material body (Leib/Körper) this section focuses on orders, techniques and disciplines, which underlie the sphere of the political.

Section III: Violence – Pain – Suffering

(Chair: Michael Staudigl, Vienna)

This section asks about the possibilities of phenomenology to explore the wide range of phenomena of violence. Particular attention will be given to the manner in which traditional conceptions of human vulnerability, experiences of suffering and symbolizing pain determine the social sense and the practice of violence. How the inevitable fact of human vulnerability can be dealt with, how it is acted out and articulated sensibly, and how the attribution of meaning effects the political constitution is described and exemplified with reference to selected phenomena of violence.

Section IV: Affects – Feelings – Passions

(Chair: Iris Därmann & Kathrin Busch, Berlin)

Emotions are not a private matter. As binding and dividing forces they bring political orders into turmoil and motion. Hate, disgust, and fear are used politically as intensifying techniques for the exclusion of others. On the other hand, mourning, suffering and powerlessness can prove to be affective resources for political resistance. The focus will lie on the interrelationship between the political and politics from an affect-phenomenological point of view. What are the emotions that govern the political and what are the emotions that define politics? To what extent are feelings (such as love) and their practices constitutive for the political and can at the same time excessively threaten it? Is the ability to be affected by others and other objects a specific mode of political affectivity in the sense of a *vita passiva* which can be regarded as constitutive for the *vita activa*?

Section V: Power – Domination – Oppression

(Chair: Christina Schües, Lübeck)

Structural power and domination, the endurance of oppression as well as the experience of exclusion from society represent challenges that demand for a political phenomenology to be developed. The participation in democracy as well as resistance in non-democratic societies are in need of epistemic resources. However, how can the excluding effects of knowledge practices, the absence of speech, the lack of being heard by others, oppression or structures of power be described from a phenomenological perspective?

Section VI: Culture – Democracy – Civilization

(Chair: Georg Stenger, Vienna)

Culture, democracy and civilization are contested concepts which play a critical role for identificatory or essentialistic attributions. In contrast, a constitutive phenomenological analysis asks how these concepts and their accompanying meanings and attributions come about. Regarding this discussion it seems possible to no longer play off „normativity“ and „genesis“ against each other. Subsequently several questions arise: How do culture, democracy and civilization come into being? Is there a constructive responsivity between these three terms or do they differentiate essentially? Are they eventually connected in a way that loses sight of „the political“?

Section VII: Open – Impossible – Coming Community

(Chair: Matthias Flatscher, Vienna)

New approaches in phenomenology have tried to account for a new concept of community by entering in a productive and critical dialogue with classical phenomenology. This new concept is called either an „unavowable“ (Blanchot), „inoperative“ (Nancy) or „coming“ (Agamben) community to root out every form of essentialism and to accentuate its non-identitarian approach. This section focuses on discourses that try to „establish“ community in such an open and non-foundational way, thereby showing the concrete consequences a revision of the political might have.

Section VIII: Art – Media – Politics

(Chair: Christian Grüny, Witten)

Politics is an important topic for contemporary artistic productions. This section focusses on the question how forms of the political can enter the arts – this being closely connected to the role phenomenology plays in art theory. Phenomenology is most influential where perceptual-based forms of artistic design are at play while in more conceptual and activist approaches phenomenology is less considered. How do artists and theorists of various disciplines appreciate the possibilities and the productivity of a phenomenological approach?

Organization:

Prof. Thomas Bedorf (President)
Dr. Steffen Herrmann (Secretary General)

German Association for Phenomenological Research
Deutsche Gesellschaft für phänomenologische Forschung
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