



These are troubled times for scholarship.

In a world where politics are based on “alternative facts”, where political decisions such as Brexit are influenced by a campaign of wilful misinformation, where vaccines are claimed to cause autism, despite a lack of scientific evidence – our understanding of ourselves as part of an enlightened society is at risk. Now, more than ever, a cool-headed, rational and scientific approach is called for. Now, more than ever, we need sound, fact-based analysis that makes it possible to examine factual claims and reveal lies, political and otherwise, for what they are. Only by doing so, can we lay the groundwork for rational political and social discourse. It’s clear that not everyone is receptive to this sort of discourse. Those who claim that they alone have the right to interpret political issues and who see critical questions as a threat will be as sceptical of academic freedom as they are of freedom of the press. To put it another way, academic freedom is no less essential for a democratic society than a free press.

This makes the many attempts to restrict or even eliminate academic freedom in nearby countries and to besmirch the reputation of scholarship as a whole all the more frightening. As examples, one need look no further than the persecution of academics in Turkey or the Hungarian government’s efforts to put an end to the independence of the renowned Central European University. These are alarming developments that require the academic community to join together in opposition, and indeed, this is already happening. On April 22, marches for science were held all over the globe to protest the anti-scientific worldview. Represented by its Rector and many students and teachers, the University of Freiburg played a central role in the march held in Freiburg. Academic freedom is the lifeblood of FRIAS. Without the free exchange of ideas across national and disciplinary borders there would be no need for an Institute for Advanced Studies, because advanced studies would simply cease to exist.

At FRIAS, our most noble purpose is to promote outstanding scholarship, and the past academic year once again saw true highlights. In 2016/17, FRIAS’s premier research activities, the so-called research foci, centred on epigenetics. In addition, a wide variety of research was performed in the areas of experimental science and engineering, for example the joint projects between Freiburg and Strasbourg on “Bio-based Nano-mechano Responsive Films” and “Deep Brain Stimulation of the Ventral Midline Thalamus to Boost Memory Vividness over Time”, or the collaboration between Freiburg and Nagoya on the project “Multicomponent Supramolecular Catalysts for Sustainable Chemical Synthesis”. The areas of law, economics and politics, history, culture and linguistics also saw a great deal of exceptional research. Here the topics ranged from the role of international statistics in discussions of migration as part of the interwar globalization debate to the analysis of high-tech clusters to contemporary Chinese aesthetics in relation to the environment and environmental degradation, and also included projects such as “Conceptions of Medieval Through” and “Immersion and Distraction in Modern German Culture”. It is impossible to do justice here to the broad variety of research performed at FRIAS. Let me just say this – it was a very

productive year! For more information, please visit: <https://www.frias.uni-freiburg.de/en/research-areas>.

Let us now look ahead to the 2017/18 academic year, which will feature two main research foci. The focus on “Cohomology in Algebraic Geometry and Representation Theory” is based in the field of theoretical mathematics. Cohomology is a set of fundamental ideas which can be used to help define and compute invariants. Today it is an integral part of all geometric disciplines of pure mathematics. This research focus aims to make use of this fact in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas between mathematical disciplines that are concerned with cohomology. The research focus will be led by the Freiburg mathematicians Annette Huber Klawitter, Stefan Kebekus and Wolfgang Soergel.

The focus on “Synchronization in Embodied Interaction” deals with resonance phenomena in the area of research into interactions. Synchronizations – in the form of gestures, facial expressions, glances, posture and language – between two interactants in a communicative situation can be identified and analysed. This research focus will be led by the Freiburg researchers Hermann Herlinghaus, Claas Lahmann, Stefan Pfänder and Carl Eduard Scheidt, and will combine approaches from psychology, linguistics and cultural studies.

Four funded project groups will also have lasting impact on the coming year at FRIAS. One group will focus on self-optimization as a core competence in the 21st century, while a second group working in the area of financial mathematics will look at the use of robust mathematical methods as a way to deal with model risk efficiently in financial models. A third group will analyse migration prompted by environmental and resource conflicts as well as migration-induced conflicts in the receiving countries. The fourth group, titled “Roma, a Genetically Isolated Population?!” will take a constructive critical approach to studies of human population genetics with a focus on the hypothesis that the Roma are an isolated population. Working from an interdisciplinary perspective, the group will examine whether design and the data selected for the studies may have been factors in promoting this thesis.

Starting in October, FRIAS will once again welcome a number of renowned researchers to the institute starting as FRIAS Fellows. Alongside the group-based projects, these individual researchers will also play a pivotal role in the life of the institute. As most of these researchers come from abroad, their stay with us is a consequence of “Mobility Across Borders”, the very timely topic of this issue. On behalf of the entire Board of Directors, I hope you enjoy your reading.



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