

Tuesday morning keynotes: Power Dynamics, Tuesday, Sep 23 2025, 9:30-11:00

Location: Main Hall

Session: **Keynote Lectures**

Chair: Vesna Leskošek

KY-02

Science under siege: Anti-gender mobilizations and the struggle over epistemic power

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In recent years, academic institutions have increasingly come under attack – politically, ideologically, and economically. While concerns over academic freedom are not new, we are now witnessing a global intensification of pressure on science and scholarship, particularly in fields that challenge traditional hierarchies and power relations. Gender appears to be at the center of these attacks, but they also target other issues connected to diversity, minorities, discrimination, and social justice more broadly. These areas of research are routinely dismissed as ideological, subversive, or unscientific. Individual scholars are being harassed, surveilled, or silenced through online campaigns, institutional complaints, or even legal threats. But the deeper issue at stake is not only what is being researched, but who holds the authority to define legitimate knowledge.

Across different contexts, we observe systematic efforts to restrict academic freedom: from presidential decrees in the United States aimed at banning certain terms and concepts in research, to the outright prohibition of gender studies programs in Hungary – and similar pressures exist elsewhere. These are not isolated incidents. Rather, they are rooted in the broader ideological framework of the so-called anti-gender mobilizations. These are not simply reactions to progressive social change; they are proactive and organized efforts to delegitimize academic work that exposes and critiques systems of oppression – whether related to gender, race, sexuality, or other axes of inequality. In this sense anti-gender mobilizations do not represent only political mobilizations, but also struggles not over epistemic power – the authority to determine what counts as knowledge, who is allowed to produce it, and whose perspectives are deemed valid.

This keynote will unpack the genealogy of these mobilizations, tracing their origins, key actors, and discursive strategies. It will also reflect on how universities and research communities can – and should – respond. At stake is not only the protection of academic freedom, but the democratic potential of science itself: its ability to reflect, to question, and to imagine alternatives to existing structures of power. In a time of rising authoritarianism and deepening epistemic polarization, defending this potential has never been more urgent.