



University of
Zurich^{UZH}

Mercator Awards

15 Mar 2018

Award-Winning Research by Junior Scholars

The Mercator Awards are handed out to junior researchers at UZH for their innovative research projects. This year's awards recognize the research achievements of immunologist Natalia Arenas-Ramirez, theologian Christoph Heilig, and economist Bruno Caprettini. The awards will be presented at the Annual Event of the Graduate Campus of UZH on 3 July.

Adrian Ritter



Researches improved immunotherapies: Natalia Arenas-Ramirez. (Picture: Hannah Freeman)

Immunotherapy for cancer focuses on strengthening patients' immune system to combat cancer cells. Several drugs and procedures are already on the market. One of the most promising in the field of immunotherapy is artificial proteins that are identical with the body's own proteins. Interleukin-2 is one such protein, which as part of the immune system activates specific white blood cells that support the body's immune response. However, treatment with the relevant drugs – in the case of metastasizing tumors of the skin and kidney, in particular – sometimes comes with severe side effects.

In her doctoral and postdoctoral research at the Department of Immunology of the University Hospital Zurich, Natalia Arenas-Ramirez therefore developed and tested a new antibody called NARA1, which binds to interleukin-2. "This way, the antibody prevents unwelcome side effects while strengthening the effectiveness of interleukin-2 for cancer

immunotherapy,” explains Arenas-Ramirez. Her research has led to a number of publications as well as three patent applications. The junior researcher’s work is now being recognized with the Mercator Award in the field of medicine and sciences.



Investigates the question of whether and how political programs can be criticized using the Bible as a basis: Christoph Heilig. (Picture: Hannah Freeman)

Paul the uncritical apostle?

The Mercator Award in the field of arts and social sciences goes to Christoph Heilig. The doctoral candidate of theology investigated the extent to which the Bible can serve as a source of critical reflection on the power of the state. “Religion is a very important part of political discourse, especially in the US,” says Heilig. Particularly since the presidency of George W. Bush, the question of whether and how political programs can be criticized on the basis of the Bible is being hotly debated in the field of English-language theology.

The New Testament – the central document of Christianity – includes only a single section where the relationship between Christians and Roman state power is discussed: Paul the Apostle calling on Christians to submit to Roman state power and pay their taxes. But why wasn’t Paul more critical of the Roman Empire? Out of fear, or because it wasn’t relevant to him? In his research, Christoph Heilig looked for – and found – political criticism hidden in the writings of Paul. As one of only few to do so at the time, the apostle made critical allusions to a triumphal march of Emperor Claudius and thus to Rome’s imperialist politics. “The New Testament can therefore indeed be considered as a source for critically dealing with political power by Christians,” says Heilig, whose interpretation was published in the two monographs Hidden Criticism and Paul’s Triumph.



Explores the economic transformation from rural to industrial economy: Bruno Caprettini. (Picture: Hannah Freeman)

Agriculture in upheaval

The Mercator Award in the field of law and economics is awarded to economist Bruno Caprettini. The findings of his postdoctoral research at UZH were published in the renowned [American Economic Review](#).

Along with two co-authors, he investigated a key question of economics: How do countries become industrialized? More specifically, his study looked at structural transformation in Brazil. The introduction of genetically modified soy seed in 2001 led to great changes in agricultural productivity: The new seeds were used wherever soil conditions were suitable, which significantly reduced the time and costs required for sowing and harvesting. The researchers compared different regions of Brazil and found that the regions in which genetically modified soy was grown required fewer workers in agriculture. As a consequence, more people went looking for jobs in industry, which in the long term went hand in hand with greater economic added value. "Innovations in agriculture can speed up the transformation from a rural to an industrial economy," says Caprettini.

Mercator Awards

The Mercator Awards of the Mercator Foundation Switzerland are endowed with 5,000 francs each and are presented to doctoral candidates and postdocs at UZH in recognition of innovative research. To be considered for an award, research must be of the highest scientific quality, inter- or transdisciplinary, and relevant to society.

The 2018 Mercator Awards will be presented at the Annual Event of the [Graduate Campus](#) on the topic of *Creativity and Science* on 3 July 2018.

Adrian Ritter, editor UZH News; Translation by Philip Isler, UZH Communications

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