

”Dictatorships as alternative political orders?”—We say no!

Student Parliament at Humboldt University condemns Jörg Baberowski’s right-wing think tank

By the IYSSE at the Humboldt University
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On Thursday, April 25, the student parliament (StuPa) at Berlin’s Humboldt University (HU) passed a resolution opposing the financing of a right-wing think tank to conduct research on dictatorship. The initiator and driving force behind the project, which has been prepared over the last five years under the title “Dictatorships as alternative political orders,” is the extreme right-wing professor and Eastern Europe historian at the HU, Jörg Baberowski.

The motion was submitted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and adopted almost unanimously. Only two out of three members of the RCDS, the student organisation of the conservative CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), voted against. The resolution condemns not only Baberowski’s project, but also the efforts of the university administration to suppress broad student opposition to it.

The full text of the resolution reads:

“The student parliament condemns the political and personal attacks made by the university administration, many media outlets and professors against a student member of the Academic Senate (AS). This person had quite legitimately revealed via Twitter sections of the documents that should serve as a basis for discussion in the public sphere of the AS about the setting up of a ‘Centre for comparative dictatorship research.’

The student parliament opposes the use of Humboldt University funds to establish such a centre, which is expressly designed as a ‘think tank’—based on the theories of Carl Schmitt, the ‘crown jurist of the Third Reich,’ and others—to provide policy-makers with possible courses of action. This has nothing to do with

scientific research into dictatorships, but rather aims to legitimise authoritarian forms of rule. The StuPa calls on all members of the Academic Senate to refuse to consent to the establishment of such a centre in future.”

Helmut Wolff, a member of the IYSSE on the StuPa, moved the resolution and explained the background and significance of the dictatorship centre.

Baberowski had submitted the application for the establishment of the centre along with Anna-Bettina Kaiser, a law professor at the HU, who graduated in 2017 on “exceptional constitutional law.” Many other professors are involved in the project. They are demanding that the HU sponsor the project to the tune of €50,000 for the next three years, in addition to finances raised from other sources.

The project explicitly seeks to examine dictatorships as legitimate and even popular alternatives to democratic forms of rule “without making judgements.”

As Wolff quoted in the StuPa meeting, the applicants refer to dictatorships as “orders that are not solely based on absence of freedom, violence and oppression,” but “represent alternative political possibilities,” which “must be understood.” In modern times they have provided alternatives “that under certain circumstances have become increasingly attractive.”

In addition, the application states: “In some countries, citizens could actually benefit from them ideally or materially because, under unstable conditions, open societies cannot achieve what dictatorships are capable of under other circumstances.”

The centre is explicitly planned as a “think tank” with the aim of “offering policies to political circles that can be used in everyday decision-making.” In other words,

Baberowski, notorious for his belittling of the crimes of the Nazis (“Hitler was not vicious”) and his incitement against refugees (“Merkel must close the borders”), wants to advise political decision-makers on how best to suppress the growing opposition to militarism, social inequality and the lurch to the right in official politics.

Specifically, Baberowski and his colleagues base their plans on Carl Schmitt, who had already argued for dictatorial forms of government during the period of the Weimar Republic, and then legitimised Nazi rule after 1933. In October 2016, Baberowski gave the “Carl Schmitt Lecture” held at the invitation of the “Carl Schmitt Society” at the HU, to honour the memory of the Nazis’ most important lawyer.

This reactionary project is to be networked and expanded nationally and internationally through a number of partners. Most recently, Princeton University agreed to provide US\$300,000 for a joint research project with Baberowski titled “From Totalitarian to Authoritarian Rule. Comparing Dictatorships in Transition.”

Baberowski’s attempt to quietly push the application for his Dictatorship Centre through a meeting of the Academic Senate failed, however, on January 15.

As Wolff relayed to the student parliament, the project had already been the subject of considerable criticism—both in the appraisal process, where it was denounced by two out of four peer reviewers, and also from students. Prior to the AS meeting, a student representative had posted excerpts of the project’s documents on Twitter and made critical comments. The IYSSE posted a statement headlined “Dictatorships as alternative political orders?—We say no!” on its homepage. The *taz* daily newspaper also addressed the issue and published an article criticising the project.

There then followed a storm of indignation led by Baberowski personally. Aping the style of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), he attacked his own students on Facebook and Twitter as “criminals” and “left-wing extremists” and denounced the *taz* journalists as a “denunciator.” A number of the right-wing media outlets, which had previously supported Baberowski, including the magazine *Cicero* and the right-wing dailies *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, once again jumped up to support him.

“A hysterical campaign was launched aimed at silencing student criticism,” Wolff emphasised. The project was subsequently dropped from the agenda of the meeting and postponed indefinitely due to the broad opposition. Some of the professors who had evidently

opted in favour of a speedy adoption of the application, reacted with outrage and verbally attacked the student representative for his tweets, Wolff said.

The university president, Sabine Kunst, a Social Democrat, who had already filed a lawsuit against the student council at the behest of the AfD, reacted with authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing the student opposition to Baberowski’s right-wing think tank and the machinations of the HU leadership.

Kunst introduced a motion to amend the procedural rules at the next AS meeting to restrict access to the meeting’s protocols. Although this proposal met with opposition in the committee and has yet to be adopted, it has a clear goal: to suppress all information about the dubious and right-wing think tanks the university plans to finance in future. All and every criticism on the part of students and the media is to be prevented and intimidated from the outset.

These plans will not succeed. The resolution adopted by the student parliament and the public exposure of the dictatorship centre are yet another blow to Baberowski and the right-wing operations of the university administration.

The powerful vote in favour of the IYSSE motion is indicative of the broad opposition among students to the increasing turn to the right by the political establishment in Germany and internationally. The question of political perspective is decisive. In the final analysis, preventing the return of dictatorship and fascism requires a struggle against the source of this development: the capitalist system. The IYSSE therefore calls on all students and young people to join the building of an international socialist movement of the working class.

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