

“Dictatorships as alternative orders”: Not on our watch

Berlin’s Humboldt University plans to finance right-wing think tank

By the International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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Humboldt University's Academic Senate (AS) will decide on Tuesday, 18 June whether to finance a right-wing think tank to conduct research on dictatorships. The initiator and driving force behind this project, which has been prepared for the past five years under the title “Dictatorships as alternative orders,” is the right-wing extremist professor and Eastern European historian Jörg Baberowski. The public part of the session begins at 1 p.m. in the senate hall. Baberowski’s project is due to be rubber-stamped at the end of the session (TOP 26). We call on all students to participate in the sit-in to protest against the plan.

Even the AS's decision to place Baberowski's project on the agenda against the expressed wishes of the student body reveals its utterly anti-democratic character. On April 25, the student parliament voted almost unanimously against the project. Only two of the three deputies from the RCDS, the student organisation of the Christian Democrats, voted against the motion. The student parliament not only condemned Baberowski's project on dictatorships, but also the attempts by university management to suppress student opposition. The full text of the resolution read:

“The student parliament condemns the personal and political attacks on a student member of the AS from university administration, several media outlets, and professors. They legitimately published parts of the document on Twitter that will serve as the basis for the discussion in the public part of the AS on whether a centre for research into comparative dictatorships should be established.

The student parliament opposes the use of Humboldt University funds to create the centre, which is conceived of as a think tank based on the theories of Karl Schmitt, the 'crown jurist of the Third Reich' and aims to advise political decision-makers on options for action. The issue here is not the scholarly examination

of dictatorships, but the legitimization of authoritarian forms of rule. The student parliament calls on the members of the academic senate to continue to oppose the creation of such a centre in the future.”

Baberowski filed the motion in support of creating the centre with Anna-Bettina Kaiser, a law professor who secured her professorship in 2017 on the topic of constitutional law in states of emergency. Several other professors are involved in the project. They are demanding that HU provide €50,000 in funding for the coming three years, with this sum to be topped up with financial support from third parties.

The project will consider dictatorships as a legitimate and attractive alternative to democracies, and examined them with an “impartial” approach. The motion describes dictatorships as “orders that are not only based on a lack of freedom, violence, and repression,” but also “represent configurations of the politically possible that must be understood.” In modern times, they have always been an alternative “which became attractive under certain conditions.”

The motion goes on, “In some countries, citizens were able to profit mentally or materially from them, because open societies cannot afford under precarious conditions what dictatorships can achieve under other circumstances.”

The centre is explicitly conceived of as a think tank that will pursue the goal of “making offers to politicians that could be used in the day-to-day decision-making process.” In other words, Baberowski, who is notorious for his trivialisation of the Nazis (“Hitler was not vicious”), and his agitation against refugees (“Merkel should shut the borders”), wants to advise political decision-makers on how opposition to the shift to the right, militarism, and social inequality can be suppressed.

Baberowski enjoys the German government's explicit

support. In an official statement, which was published on the 70th anniversary of the passage of the Basic Law on the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) gave her backing to the right-wing extremist professor. “In Germany, freedom of scholarship is a guaranteed fundamental right. It goes hand in hand with freedom of opinion,” stated the Education Minister. “This also includes acknowledging other opinions. Opinions like those of [...] Professor Baberowski from Berlin, who was demonized.”

While Baberowski's opinions, which include the trivialisation of Hitler, agitation against refugees and political opponents and the drumming up of support for a return to military violence are deemed by the government to be protected under Germany's Basic Law, criticism of these positions are apparently not. “Controversial discussions must in principle take place everywhere, but especially where pro and con positions are at home, in the universities,” wrote Karliczek. “However, a precondition for this is that the discussions and their participants remain on the basis of the free democratic order.”

This recalls nothing so much as George Orwell's *1984*. If anyone is hiding behind phrases about “freedom and democracy” while operating outside of the free democratic order, it is the anti-democratic conspirators at Baberowski's centre for dictatorships, and their backers in the AS and in government.

It is important to understand the historical and political background to these developments. Confronting the deepest capitalist crisis since the 1930s, the preparation of new wars and the mounting conflicts between the major powers, the ruling class is returning to its old authoritarian and fascist traditions to impose their policies of militarism, the strengthening of state repression at home and the armed forces abroad and social spending cuts.

Baberowski and his colleagues repeatedly cite Karl Schmitt, who was already calling for authoritarian forms of rule in the Weimar Republic and backed the Nazis consolidation of power following 1933. In honour of this Nazi jurist, Baberowski delivered the Karl Schmitt lecture at the university in late 2016 after being invited to do so by the Karl Schmitt Foundation.

Through a number of cooperation agreements, Baberowski's project is to be expanded both nationally and internationally. His department was recently invited to a “dictatorships in transition” workshop at Princeton University, which made available \$300,000 for a joint project.

Baberowski's initial attempt to have the AS quietly pass the motion on January 15 failed.

Prior to the vote, the project met with strong opposition in

the review process, when it was attacked by two out of the four academics, and by the students. Prior to the AS meeting, a student representative posted extracts from the motion on Twitter along with critical comments. The IYSSE posted a statement entitled “‘Dictatorships as alternative orders’: Not on our watch” on its homepage. The TAZ newspaper also took up the issue and published a critical article.

This triggered a storm of outrage, led by Baberowski himself. He denounced his students as criminals and left-wing extremists on Facebook and insulted the TAZ journalist in the style of the far-right Alternative for Germany as a “denunciator.” Several right-wing media outlets that previously backed Baberowski, including *Cicero*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Die Welt* rushed to his defence.

HU president Sabine Kunst, a Social Democrat who had previously taken legal action against the student council at the initiative of the AfD, resorted to authoritarian measures to suppress the opposition among students to Baberowski's right-wing think tank and the manoeuvres of the HU administration.

At the next AS sitting, she introduced a motion to change the order of business and restrict in principle access to the documents of the session. Although this motion was not immediately passed by the senate, it pursues a definite goal: the university's decisions on which dubious, right-wing think tanks to fund should remain private affairs. Any criticism from students or the media is to be blocked from the outset and its authors intimidated.

The university administration's dictatorial actions, supported by their allies in the AS, underscores the extent of the shift to the right within ruling circles*. To prevent the return of dictatorship and fascism, students require above all a political perspective directed against the roots of these evils: the capitalist profit system. The IYSSE therefore calls on students and young people to give voice to their protests against the creation of the centre on dictatorships at the session of the AS. We cannot allow HU to be transformed into a state-directed cadre training camp for right-wing extremist and militarist ideologies, as was the case in previous German history.

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