

Oppose enforced political conformism at Humboldt University

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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In the May 27 issue of the *Berliner Zeitung*, the President of Berlin's Humboldt University, Jan-Hendrik Olbertz, sharply attacks the authors of the "Münkler-Watch" blog, members of the IYSSE, and other students at his own university. His column culminates in the assertion that "the suppression of the academic freedom of teaching and opinion is no longer carried out by an authoritarian state, but by students directly in the lecture hall."

This outrageous accusation turns reality on its head. Olbertz confuses exercising the right to free speech with its suppression. As President of the University, he publicly attacks students because they are exercising their democratic right to criticize the lectures of a politically biased professor who regularly advances his positions in the media.

These events expose how threadbare and insubstantial democratic traditions are in Germany. Despite the democratic veneer that they apply to their actions, the authorities, when confronted with criticism, almost instinctively revert to the old Prussian view that democratic freedoms are not inalienable rights, but limited exemptions from state authority. Terms such as the "court of public opinion" or the "marketplace of ideas" have no equivalent in the German language.

This applies even to the relationship between students and faculty. In the United States, students rate their professors online every day; one can google the name of any professor to find assessments and criticisms of him or her. In the Internet age, everyone has the right and the opportunity to make his or her views known. At Humboldt University, however, it is regarded as blasphemy.

The university has unleashed a press campaign against the authors of the "Münkler-Watch" blog that gives the impression that they were planning an armed insurrection. It dwarfs everything seen in Germany since the witch-hunt of the Springer press against the 1968 student revolt. Students are accused of "attitude vigilantism" (*Deutschlandfunk*), associated with "bomb threats and calls for murder" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*), and compared with the far-right anti-immigrant Pegida organisation (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) or even Nazi block wardens and anti-Semites (by Münkler in *Die Zeit*).

Herfried Münkler calls for a more aggressive German foreign policy in lectures, newspaper articles, and books at least once a week. Under the slogan "Power in the Middle" (the title of his recent book), he advocates that Germany assume the role of a "disciplinarian" and "hegemon" in Europe, and, as a trading and export nation, that it orient itself less by its values and more by its interests. Reading his outbursts, one hears the sound of German soldiers goose-stepping through Europe.

When Münkler is criticized by students, however, he moans that the

university has let him down and accuses his critics of "asymmetric warfare", a synonym for terrorism.

Olbertz, who as president of the university has a responsibility to defend students' democratic rights, takes these attacks to new heights in his column. Olbertz studied educational science, obtained a doctorate and qualified as a professor under the Stalinist regime of East Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he served as a minister in the Christian Democrat-led state government of Saxony-Anhalt for eight years, before moving to the top post at Humboldt University in 2010. He sees himself as the agent of an authoritarian state, and not the representative of scholarship.

He behaves as if he were the ruler of a despotic state, abusing his position as university president to suppress fundamental democratic rights. His actions are the complete negation of academic freedom and freedom of expression. They recall the worst days of the McCarthy era and the Cold War, though even then, many courageous professors and students opposed the campaign of intimidation.

It is not only Olbertz and Münkler who attack the students. To date, not a single member of the teaching staff has spoken out against this outrageous violation of democratic principles. This is only possible in a country where there has never been a successful democratic revolution, and where there is no sense of democratic rights among petty-bourgeois intellectuals. In Germany, democracy is viewed as something granted by the state to the people, and not as a right that the people have fought for against the state.

Heinrich Mann and Robert Musil provided a literary memorial to the spineless, submissive German petty bourgeois of another era in their novels *Man of Straw* and *The Man Without Qualities*. These traits, it seems, also constitute the model of education at Humboldt University. In general, professors like to complain about the students' lack of initiative and about "sad sacks" (Münkler) among the underclassmen. But if students dare to criticize a self-important professor, a storm of indignation breaks out around them. Students are to be turned into the sort of docile academic who—like the German professors of 1933—adapts in anticipatory obedience to every new ruler, only to say afterwards that he was a victim and had only obeyed orders.

The aim of the witch-hunt against critical students is to enforce *Gleichschaltung*, political conformity at Humboldt University. It is directed against all those who oppose the transformation of Humboldt University into an ideological centre for war propaganda.

While the ruling elites proclaim the end of military restraint and Germany's return to great power politics, students opposing attempts to subordinate Humboldt University to this policy, as its predecessors were under the German Empire and the Weimar Republic, are denounced.

Characteristically, Olbertz cites an incident as evidence of the alleged suppression of academic freedom by the students. At that time, loud protests prevented Defence Minister Lothar de Maizière from delivering a speech at the university on the topic “Army of unity—the contribution of the Bundeswehr to social cohesion”. Students justified this protest by insisting that representatives of the military and weapons research must be kept away from the universities.

Olbertz personally chaired the meeting with de Maizière. He has never explained what the presence of the Defence Minister at the university has to do with academic freedom. In fact, the opposite is true: a central feature of academic freedom is its independence from the state and its representatives, particularly those in the security apparatus. Military propaganda has no place at universities and schools.

Humboldt University played a leading role in the reorientation of German foreign policy from its very beginning. In 2013, Humboldt University professors participated in the drafting of the statement “New Power—New Responsibility”, outlining the contours of a new German “world policy”. The paper argues amongst other things, that Germany, as a “trading and exporting nation”, must “lead more frequently and decisively” in order to pursue its geostrategic and economic interests worldwide. Herfried Münkler is one of the most zealous propagandists of this strategy.

Because there is widespread opposition to this aggressive imperialist policy, Münkler tries to rewrite history. “It is difficult to conduct a responsible policy in Europe with the notion: We are to blame for everything,” he told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* early last year. For this reason, he has led an intense campaign against the historian Fritz Fischer, whose landmark 1961 work, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, has shaped the understanding of German war guilt in the First World War for decades.

On this question, Münkler agrees with historian Jörg Baberowski, who seeks to revise the history of World War II. Baberowski defends Ernst Nolte, whose trivialization of Nazism in 1986 unleashed the *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Dispute), and who now stands firmly in the neo-Nazi camp.

The IYSSE has not taken Baberowski’s comments on Nolte out of context, as Olbertz claims in the *Berliner Zeitung*. Significantly, the article in *Der Spiegel* that quotes Baberowski as saying, “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right,” and adding, “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious”, bore the title “The transformation of the past”. It presents Münkler and Baberowski as lead witnesses arguing for a “revision” of the history of the First and Second World Wars.

If Baberowski feels misrepresented, he should complain to *Der Spiegel*, which published the article in a print run of 850,000, and still makes it available online in German and English.

Olbertz raises his accusations against the IYSSE and other students against his better knowledge. He is well acquainted with the background. The IYSSE have raised these issues repeatedly in letters to him and asked for his intervention. All these letters have remained unanswered; Olbertz has not even confirmed their receipt. Instead, the university has stepped up its efforts to suppress critical voices.

It puts obstacles in the way of the IYSSE when it holds events on university premises. The History Department has published a statement on its website insisting that criticism of Baberowski’s public statements must not be tolerated “on Humboldt University premises”. It calls for “teachers and students of Humboldt University” to “oppose the campaign against Professor Baberowski”. One IYSSE

member was called to account by a professor and must now fear that ongoing work will no longer be objectively assessed.

When the IYSSE received support, a representative was elected to the student parliament and other students began to criticize Münkler’s lectures, the media unleashed its storm of defamation. The vilest and most extreme accusations have been hurled against the students.

Rather than taking steps against this witch-hunt, Olbertz himself signed a statement accusing the IYSSE of the “worst defamation”, “slander” and of conducting a “smear campaign” against Jörg Baberowski, without providing the slightest evidence.

According to *Der Tagesspiegel*, Baberowski has demanded that “the university ban such ‘nut cases’ from its premises and lodge a legal complaint against them.” At public events he regularly ejects IYSSE supporters and denounces anyone who raises a critical question as “Trotskyite detractors”. “Shut your mouth” is the most polite term he uses.

Baberowski’s longstanding preoccupation with Stalinist violence, which he knows from personal experience during his membership of the Maoist KBW, has obviously left its mark. He seems determined to suppress any criticism of his views by abusing his position.

The IYSSE will not be intimidated, however. Our role models are not those vacillating German professors, who after some initial hesitation adapted to the Hitler regime. And they are certainly not Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger, who justified the Nazi regime legally and philosophically.

Our role models include Carl von Ossietzky, Sophie Scholl and many others who fought for antimilitarist principles under the most adverse conditions. And among our role models is the Trotskyist Abraham Léon, who distributed antifascist propaganda among German soldiers in occupied Belgium, and died in Auschwitz in 1944 as a result.

We are convinced that there are many students who are not prepared to accept the militarization of German foreign policy, the enforced conformism of Humboldt University and a culture of toadyism. We call on students and workers throughout Germany and worldwide to support our fight against this.



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