

Student groups defend freedom of expression at Berlin's Humboldt University

Christoph Dreier
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The student representatives of three departments at Humboldt University in Berlin—History, Education, and Gender Studies—have published a joint statement defending students and criticising attacks by the media. These groups function as rank-and-file bodies of students in specific faculties.

The statement is directed against an article that appeared May 17 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* attacking and defaming students. The author, Friederike Haupt, painted an absurd picture of intimidated professors who live in constant fear of their students. She went so far as to associate well-argued criticism of political ideas with “bomb threats and calls for murder.”

This attack was aimed at a variety of student initiatives voicing criticisms of professors—in particular, “Münkler-Watch” and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

The blog “Münkler-Watch,” founded by political science students at the beginning of the year, regularly documents and criticises the lectures of political science professor Herfried Münkler. The IYSSE has consistently opposed war propaganda at the university and criticised Münkler and eastern Europe historian Jörg Baberowski for downplaying the historic crimes of German militarism.

The student groups “decisively reject” Haupt’s “sweeping representation of student criticism,” the joint statement declares. They defend “criticism on the university campus” and emphasise that this includes “criticism ‘from below,’ that is, of teachers by their students.” They reject attacks on the form of free expression exercised by students and demand instead that the focus be placed on “core content.”

They also specifically defend the right of students to voice their criticism anonymously. “Münkler-Watch” has repeatedly come under scathing attack because the authors have published their criticisms anonymously on the

Internet.

“The accusation that the critics are anonymous is untenable when examined more closely,” write the student groups. “On the one hand, because there is a long tradition of anonymous reviews in university practice.... On the other hand, not all the groups mentioned by Haupt are acting in complete anonymity.” They cite the example of the group “Knowledge Against Ignorance,” which in part intervened publicly against an education teacher.

With regard to the IYSSE, the statement says: “The critics of the historian Jörg Baberowski are also members of a group, namely the youth organisation of the PSG (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit), which stands in the Trotskyist tradition. Those responsible are therefore not unknown. Their spokespersons are students who are known by name and whoever looks for them can find them regularly distributing fliers on campus. In addition, a representative was voted into Student Parliament in the spring. Therefore, there can be no talk of anonymity here; quite the contrary: the group seeks public debate and discussion with Jörg Baberowski.”

Baberowski has never answered the criticisms made by the IYSSE. Instead, he appealed to the university administration to censor them. The head of the History Department and the president of the university have called for action against the students. A member of the IYSSE was taken to task by a professor and faces the threat of academic work no longer being objectively assessed.

It is significant that the faculty student representatives explicitly refer to the “dependency relationship” of students to their teachers and say that professors evaluate students and are thus able to wield considerable power over them.

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The statement ends with a call for a more critical university. It states: “The university thrives on a variety

of perspectives. ‘Learning to think’ means not only agreeing with different opinions, but also coming into conflict with them, testing out oppositional positions, questioning traditions and conventions and, if appropriate, breaking with them. One is supposed to be educated at universities and education is unthinkable without its critical reflective component.”

The statement is of crucial importance because it opposes a smear campaign that is not limited to the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*. In the last few weeks, articles have appeared in all the major newspapers sharply attacking “Münkler-Watch” and the IYSSE and seeking to deny students the right to criticise their professors.

Münkler himself has compared his critics to the Nazis. Baberowski has referred to students as “nut cases” and called for them to be banned from university premises and for charges to be brought against them. University President Jan-Hendrik Olbertz published two statements in which he supported the professors and defamed the students.

The intention of this campaign is to silence anyone who dares criticise the right-wing and militarist positions of professors. The joint statement makes clear that students are not prepared to accept this. While its authors say they do not want to pass judgment on the different positions of the student groups, they courageously defend democratic rights at the university.

The student groups published their statement three days before the next session of Humboldt University’s student parliament. The defence of freedom of expression has already been placed on the agenda. The IYSSE has introduced a resolution that defends “Münkler-Watch” and demands the retraction of the statement by the university administration. The IYSSE calls on all students to take part in the planned public meeting and support this resolution.



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