

Humboldt University student parliament defends freedom of speech

Our correspondents
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On Thursday evening, the student parliament of Berlin's Humboldt University adopted a resolution by a large majority defending the fundamental right to freedom of speech at the university and upholding the right of students to criticize their professors.

After a weeks-long campaign of slander and intimidation in the media, supported by the university administration, the elected body representing more than 33,000 students at Humboldt University courageously opposed the censorship drive and affirmed its right to free expression and debate at the university.

The resolution that was adopted explicitly rejects the efforts of the university administration and its History and Social Sciences institutes to suppress criticism by students and student groups concerning the scholarly and political views of their professors.

The resolution begins by saying: "The student parliament of Berlin Humboldt University registers its disapproval of the so-called appeal 'for open and fair dialogue' issued by the university administration on 11/5/2015, the statement of the Institute of History, and the statement by professors of the Institute of Social Sciences issued on 28/05/2015."

These texts are explicit attempts to censor students and university groups that criticise the lectures and political statements of professors. The statement by the Institute of Social Sciences is a direct response to the "Münkler-Watch" blog, on which students document and comment critically on lectures by the political scientist Professor Herfried Münkler.

The statement by the Institute of History, which has been available on the university's official web site since last November, attacks the Socialist Equality Party and its youth and student organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), for criticizing the right-wing political views and historical revisionism of Professor Jörg Baberowski.

The statement says criticism of Baberowski's public statements should no longer be tolerated "in the premises of the University," and calls "for teachers and students... to oppose the campaign against Professor Baberowski."

With the adoption of the resolution by the student parliament, the exact opposite has occurred. The body representing Humboldt students has not only rejected the campaign of Münkler and Baberowski, supported by the university administration, but has indicated support for the political and substantive criticism of the two professors.

The resolution states that the student parliament "makes clear

that, in particular, the most recent statements by Münkler and Baberowski fail to exhibit any fairness, but serve rather to concretise power relations and dynamics at the university."

It continues: "The standpoint that the views of precisely these two teachers can be the only ones to be considered does not correspond to the standard of fearless and free academic exchange allegedly advocated by the university administration."

Specifically, the student parliament calls on students "to express themselves politically, question forms of rule, and oppose tendencies aimed at trivializing Germany's inhuman history, especially in relation to the content of university teaching."

The adopted text is an amended version of the resolution submitted by the IYSSE. The text as amended adheres to the orientation and intention of the IYSSE motion. It defends the right to freedom of speech at Humboldt University and at the same time encourages students to become politically active and to counter the militaristic and historical revisionist positions of Münkler and Baberowski.

The amendment was introduced by the OLKS (Open List of Critical Students) towards the end of a long and intense debate and was passed by a large majority. Thirty student representatives voted for the amended resolution, nine abstained, and only six voted against.

At the start of the highly anticipated debate on the IYSSE resolution, the IYSSE representative in the student parliament, Sven Wurm, stressed the importance of defending the right of students to express criticism. "It concerns a fundamental question," Wurm said in his contribution. "It concerns the right to freedom of speech at Humboldt University and beyond."

He went on to describe the furious campaign in the media against the "Münkler-Watch" blog. One of the most blatant examples was the inflammatory article by Friederike Haupt in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, in which students were "linked with terrorists and bombers." Wurm noted that the student councils for History, Education Studies and Gender Studies had already "sharply rejected" Haupt's attacks in their "statement in defence of the right of students to self expression."

He then quoted statements by Münkler, Baberowski and university President Jan-Hendrik Olbertz and concluded: "We have a situation, therefore, where students who criticize their professors for their militaristic standpoints are termed terrorists and compared to anti-Semites. It is said that they should be expelled from the university and turned over to the police."

To understand these “violent reactions,” he continued, one must “examine what professors Münkler and Baberowski are up to.” There was “a direct link between their work at the university and their political activity,” he explained, pointing to the two professors’ links to the government and military.

Münkler, Wurm noted, sits “on the advisory board of the Federal College for Security Studies” and “quite openly advocates the need to rewrite history to reflect current foreign policy requirements.” Baberowski, he pointed out, has said explicitly that it was “Stalin’s generals who forced the Wehrmacht to conduct a war of annihilation.” Baberowski too works “closely with the Armed Forces.”

In recent months, Wurm said, it “has become increasingly clear that this political line—rewriting history in order to justify a new foreign policy—has failed to resonate with the population and has been increasingly criticised by students.”

Now it was becoming “evident that such militaristic conceptions are incompatible with democratic norms. Therefore, all criticism is to be suppressed.”

At the end of his contribution Wurm said, “This brings us to the central question today, and which we will decide here: should our university remain a seat of scholarship and criticism? It is therefore essential that this resolution be adopted today to make clear we are defending the basic democratic rights of students.”

He called on all student representatives to vote for the resolution and warned that “any negative attitude on such a basic question means denying freedom of expression at Humboldt University and would trigger the next round of attacks on students.” (Wurm’s speech can be read in full here)

Ahead of the meeting, the IYSSE had written to all student representatives and departmental student councils and sought to inform the entire student body about the developments at their own university and the significance of the questions being posed. As a result, many students attended the open meeting of the student parliament. There were nearly one hundred people in the room, double the number of elected representatives.

In the discussion, a representative of the biology department student council submitted a statement supporting the IYSSE resolution. The statement had been unanimously supported within the student council and spoke in the interests of all students in the department, she said.

She went to say that the student council distanced itself from the politics of the groups concerned, but saw its job as representing the interests of students “to the best of its knowledge and belief.” This included the constitutionally protected right to freedom of expression.

Another representative of the biology department student council responded to a contribution that dismissed the IYSSE motion as “devoid of purpose.” He said, “I only want to point out that I think it’s pretty crass that it’s being questioned here in the student parliament whether there is a purpose to the motion.” No matter how you regard “Münkler-Watch,” he continued, “in terms of freedom of expression, it is our right to issue a clear statement that we want to protect our freedom of expression.”

He reported that the previous day he had been “in the plenary assembly of the Thae Institute for Agricultural and Horticultural

Science, where exactly the same issue found the same appeal.” He stressed to the student parliament that if some 4,000 students from two institutes at the university thought the IYSSE resolution was good and supported it, that was “almost ten percent of the students at this university, and that is already nearly more than voted for you.”

Sarah, a representative of the anti-racism list, stated that persecution and police threats against students had a long history at Humboldt University. She reported, based on her work in anti-discrimination consultation, that the attacks on “Münkler-Watch” and the IYSSE were “just the tip of the iceberg.” She concluded that it was “very important to send the signal that we are against further attacks by the university or the media.”

Ricarda, a representative of the “green” group known as Grünboldt, spoke in detail on the issues in an emotional contribution. “Although much that is real and important has been said here,” she told the meeting, “the political dimension of this debate is a bit missing for me, because it is not just a matter of freedom of expression, but also a question of political attitudes.” The fact that the statements of the professors were covered by freedom of expression did not alter the fact “that we can find them wrong as a student parliament.”

She continued: “We as a student parliament can say: Yes, we express our solidarity with people who uncover the historical revisionism and the racist statements made by professors, and we oppose people who make precisely these historical distortions and these racist statements.” In her opinion, this was first and foremost a political decision. It was “the decision we must make today.” The student parliament should be “in solidarity with people who uncover such historical revisionism and right-wing political statements.”

By adopting the resolution, the student parliament has sent an important and courageous signal. Despite the witch-hunt in the media and efforts at intimidation on the part of the university, students have made it clear that they are unwilling to passively accept the attacks on freedom of expression and the misuse of their university to falsify history and promote war propaganda.

The resolution is an expression of growing political resistance among broader sections of the population to the efforts of the ruling elites to make Germany the “disciplinarian” of Europe (Münkler), and, after the terrible crimes committed in two world wars, return to an aggressive foreign policy and great power politics.



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