

# An Open letter from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to the editors of German daily Tageszeitung

12 March 2018

*The following letter was sent by the IYSSE to the editors of the German daily Tageszeitung (taz), after it published a defence of right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski and defamed his critics.*

Dear TAZ Editors,

Your three-page lead story, “This man should be silenced,” which appeared in your last weekend edition, employs false claims, lies, and journalistic dishonesty to rehabilitate the right-wing extremist Professor Jörg Baberowski and defame our criticism of him. We therefore call upon you to publish this letter in full in your next edition.

The article accuses the IYSSE of wanting to silence Baberowski, carrying out “character assassination,” and endangering “open debate” and “freedom of expression.” In reality, the IYSSE has at no time blocked Baberowski from speaking, writing, or publishing, or disrupted his lectures. Instead, we have publicly criticised his relativisation of Nazi war crimes, agitation against refugees, and glorification of violence.

Seifert adopts the absurd argument constantly employed by the far right: that criticism of their positions represents an attack on freedom of speech. Baberowski’s “analytical view of the world” is being “effectively indexed,” i.e. banned, she claims, without providing a shred of evidence for this outrageous assertion.

Baberowski is notorious for his right-wing positions. The *taz* has itself repeatedly reported critically about them. Nearly all media outlets are open to Baberowski. He regularly expresses his views in a wide range of newspapers, gives interviews, and appears on talk shows. In contrast to the IYSSE, he has suppressed discussions at universities, threatened critics, and targeted them for legal action.

These facts are either passed over in silence by the *taz* article or falsified. For example, the article mentions that

Baberowski filed a lawsuit against students at Bremen University for a leaflet critical of him they produced, but completely misrepresents the outcome of the case. Seifert reports in great detail about the initial ruling by the Cologne District Court, which is well known for its hard-line stance on questions of freedom of expression, but remains silent on what the appeals court decision had to say.

A study of your newspaper’s archive would have sufficed. Johannes Eisenberg, the lawyer and cofounder of the *taz*, who represented the Bremen student committee in court, reported on 3 June, 2017 about the proceedings at the Cologne District Court of Appeals. The court was of the opinion that the student committee had correctly cited the professor and that the evaluations of him as a “right-wing extremist,” “racist,” and “glorifier of violence” were therefore legitimate. Baberowski subsequently withdrew his suit so as to avoid a ruling against him by the court. He was forced to cover all legal costs.

In addition, the Cologne District Court of Appeals made clear that Baberowski was not cited in a way that distorted the meaning of his statements, as Seifert claims, despite knowing better. She reports that we “tore citations out of context,” while not providing a single example.

In another passage, Seifert declares that “Baberowski’s statement that Hitler was not vicious,” is “understandable in context.” The Bremen-based Professor Andreas Fischer-Lescano pointed out last year in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* that there is no conceivable context in which this statement “would not be repugnant.” In the *Tagesspiegel*, Professor Mario Keßler described Baberowski’s statement as a “declaration of hostility towards the principles of humanity.”

In fact, the context of Baberowski’s statement was unmistakable. It appeared in an article in *Der Spiegel* entitled “The past that will not pass,” which appealed for

a revision of the result of the Historians' Dispute of the 1980s. Baberowski defended the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte, who was defeated in the Historians' Dispute. "Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right," Baberowski stated.

He went on to compare Hitler favourably with Joseph Stalin, declaring, "Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn't vicious. He did not want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table." In the same article, he compared alleged shootings during the Russian civil war in 1918 with the Holocaust. "It was essentially the same thing: killing on an industrial scale."

We could point to numerous other instances in which all aspects of the dispute at Humboldt University are falsified to the advantage of the right-wing extremist professor.

To create the false impression that the majority of students would back Baberowski, Seifert interviewed two students who have a dependent academic relationship with him: one of his student assistants and a student whose second reviewer is Baberowski.

She cites both of them making insults and telling untruths about the IYSSE without checking the facts or distancing herself from the comments. Seifert also remains silent about the fact that one of the students is a well-known right-wing activist, who addressed Alternative for Germany (AfD) supporters at an anti-Islam rally, as the *taz* reported on 20 December last year.

While Seifert attempts in this way to conjure up student support for Baberowski, she remains silent on the fact that student parliaments and student unions (Asta) at the three main Berlin universities and many other institutions have spoken out against Baberowski and his right-wing tirades.

On February 2, 2017, the student parliament at the Free University of Berlin sharply criticised in a resolution Baberowski's attempt to "sue students at Bremen University because the Asta denounced his agitation against refugees and his theory of violence. Baberowski's attempt to silence critical students represents a fundamental attack on freedom of expression and the idea of a critical university," stated the resolution.

The student parliament at Humboldt University also protested on 27 April against the public defence of Baberowski by the university management, which the resolution accused of tolerating "right-wing opinion-makers." Prior to this, the Assembly of Departmental Councils and Initiatives spoke out against Baberowski. Their resolution stated, "Professor Jörg Baberowski publicly agitates against refugees and relativises National Socialist [Nazi] crimes in his research."

Then on 4 July, the Asta at the Technical University of Berlin also joined in the criticism, and organised an event on "The case of Baberowski" together with the Bremen Asta and the IYSSE. The event invitation declared, "With the return of German militarism and growing social inequality, a sharp shift to the right is taking place among sections of the academic establishment. A central figure in this process is Jörg Baberowski, who agitates against refugees, drums up support for brutal wars, and downplays the Nazis' crimes."

Similar statements came from the Asta at the University of Hamburg, the Asta at the University of Lüneburg, the Asta at the Halle-Wittenburg University, the Asta at PH Heidelberg, and many other institutions across Germany.

Seifert ignores all of this. In the end, she makes no secret of the fact that she is fascinated by Baberowski's right-wing extremist positions. She describes the right-wing ideologue in the warmest tones, writing, "Left-wing, liberal, or conservative, none of this means anything to him anymore. Is that not true for many people? That political certainties, affiliations dissolve, especially in the face of a morally consolidating New or Identitarian Right?"

Seifert does not explain what is moral about the New Right and why political certainties are dissolving. But she is obviously speaking here on behalf of people who, confronted with the electoral successes of the AfD, are reorienting their political compasses far to the right and throwing their old political convictions overboard.

In this, the *taz* is aligning itself with the most right-wing political tendencies. In 1968, the right-wing Springer press agitated against students who held right-wing professors to account. Fifty years later, the *taz* attacks students who criticise a right-wing extremist professor—and this under conditions where the AfD is in parliament and the grand coalition is embracing its xenophobic refugee policy.

Yours sincerely,  
Sven Wurm, on behalf of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)



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