

Students block right-wing think tank on “Dictatorship Research” at Berlin’s Humboldt University

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Humboldt University
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The attempt of far-right professor and Eastern European historian Jörg Baberowski to set up a right-wing think tank on “Dictatorship Research” at Berlin’s Humboldt University has failed. The reversal is the result of massive opposition expressed by students and the campaign of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which in recent months has revealed the true nature of the project and mobilized opposition to it.

On June 18, Humboldt University’s Academic Senate (AS) was to have voted on the financing of the so-called “Interdisciplinary Centre for Comparative Dictatorship Research.” The project was explicitly planned as a think tank to investigate “dictatorships as alternative orders.”

However, at the beginning of the session, Senate members were told that the motion had been withdrawn from the agenda and the dictatorship centre was no longer being established.

This is not only a serious defeat for Baberowski and his colleagues, but also for the university administration under President Sabine Kunst, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The administration and Kunst have vehemently supported and defended right-wing activities at the university. The administration had hoped to quietly establish the dictatorship centre behind the backs of the student body and the public at large.

Now it is outraged that its back-room politics have been dragged into the light of day and thwarted. Two days after the failure of the project, Humboldt University press spokesman Hans-Christoph Keller told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the planned centre had been “widely discussed publicly and in the media in recent months.” He continued: “These were debates that were largely conducted outside the Academic Senate, some of which took on a sharpness, against the background of which the Academic Senate, as the actual decision-making body, could not consider the matter itself.”

The publication and dissemination of information about the centre was “very clearly disapproved and criticized” by the university administration, he said. “In the face of these developments, this application has met such enormous difficulties that it does not make sense to continue the process.”

Keller openly states what sounded the death knell for the dictatorship project: the “enormous difficulties” of a public and critical discussion. The entire direction of the think tank was so clearly right-wing and authoritarian that it should best be kept under lock and key, in the eyes of the university administration.

Baberowski first tabled the motion on the agenda of the AS on 15 January, announcing that dictatorships should be seen as a legitimate and attractive alternative to democracy and investigated “neutrally.” He referred to dictatorships as social “orders that are not based solely on bondage, violence and oppression,” but which “represent configurations of the politically possible” that “must be understood.” In modern times, they had always been alternatives “that under certain circumstances became more attractive.”

The application also stated, “In some countries, citizens could actually benefit from them spiritually or materially, because under precarious conditions, open societies cannot afford what dictatorships succeed in doing under other circumstances.”

The centre was explicitly planned as a think tank that would pursue the goal of “making policies that can be used in everyday decision-making.”

“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 and to militarism and social inequality can be suppressed,” the IYSSE commented in its call for protests.

Baberowski first tried to push through his right-wing project secretly in January. But the application had already encountered widespread criticism—both in the review process, where it was panned by two of four evaluators, and by students. Prior to the January AS meeting, a student representative posted excerpts of the application documents on Twitter and commented on them critically. The IYSSE posted a statement on its homepage titled “Dictatorships as Alternative Orders—Not on our watch!” and made opposition to the project a central theme of its student parliament election campaign. The daily *taz* also took up the topic and published a critical article.

As usual, Baberowski reacted with aggressive verbal attacks

and insults, and was bolstered by several right-wing media outlets such as the magazine *Cicero*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Der Welt*, which had promoted Baberowski several times previously.

Fearing that the broad criticism could bring the project down, the application was initially removed from the agenda of the January AS. Humboldt University President Kunst attacked the student who had published parts of the application documents and suggested that in future, access to AS session papers should be more restricted, thus preventing a public debate from the outset.

The student parliament responded to this authoritarian action on April 25 with a strong resolution condemning the unilateral attacks and rejecting the planned dictatorship centre. "This is not about the scientific exploration of dictatorships, but about the legitimization of authoritarian rule," the resolution stated. It was adopted almost unanimously.

Against the explicit will of the student body, the dictatorship centre application was nevertheless placed back on the agenda of the AS for 18 June. In the preceding weeks, Baberowski received political and media backing.

In an official statement of the Ministry of Education, Science Minister Anja Karliczek, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), backed the right-wing professor in the name of "freedom of expression." Singing from the same hymnal, Peter-André Alt, president of the German Rectors' Conference and former president of Berlin's Free University, portrayed Baberowski in the *Berliner Zeitung* as a victim of "fundamentalist student groups."

The weekly magazine *Cicero* even devoted its cover story to witch-hunting left-wing students and defending the far-right professors Herfried Münkler and Baberowski.

But opposition to the proposed think tank proved stronger than the right-wing propaganda offensive. The IYSSE distributed hundreds of leaflets and posters and called on students to protest against the dictatorship centre. The Humboldt University Student Union informed the press about the vote, pointed to the students' criticism and warned, "Prof. Baberowski is to be given an institute that will accelerate the trivialising of National Socialism [Nazism]."

The consequences of the right-wing ideology and incitement emanating from Baberowski's milieu can be seen in the recent murder of the CDU politician Walter Lübcke, who was the target of hate campaigns after he spoke out for the acceptance of refugees at a public event in the autumn of 2015.

One of the intellectual arsonists who in recent months has fuelled hatred against Lübcke is former CDU politician and President of the Confederation of Expellees, Erika Steinbach. Steinbach, who now leads the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), posted several attacks on Lübcke in the spring and only recently deleted comments from her web site that openly threatened him with murder.

In her campaign of hate, Steinbach relied on the antirefugee tirades of her Facebook "friend" Baberowski. In March of 2016, *Der Welt* noted in an article titled "Steinbach's disturbing anger on Twitter" that she had recommended a comment piece by the Humboldt professor "with the exclamation, very good!" Baberowski's article said, "The chancellor has overruled the constitution, she has deposed parliament, isolated Germany in Europe, and she leaves it to the Turkish autocrat Erdoğan to decide how many immigrants will come to Germany."

This is just one example of Baberowski's right-wing, antirefugee agitation, which has earned him the praise of violent neo-Nazi circles, including the now-defunct US website *The Daily Stormer*. In 2015, Baberowski portrayed right-wing terrorist arson attacks on refugee shelters as a "natural" reaction by concerned citizens.

When asked about the arson attacks on the "Kulturzeit" programme, he said, "Wherever many people come from foreign contexts and the population is not included in the settlement of all these problems, it will of course lead to aggression." He trivialised the Nazi attacks, declaring, "I believe that in view of the problems we have in Germany with the immigration that is taking place right now, that is all rather harmless."

Against the background of such utterances, Keller's statement on behalf of the Humboldt University administration is a scandal. Although the dangerous implications of the radical right-wing machinations surrounding Baberowski are undeniable, the university administration is levelling its fire against the students who uncover and combat them. The necessary conclusions must be drawn from this.

The developments at Humboldt University and the support for Baberowski from the highest authorities and numerous media outlets show how far the ruling class has shifted to the right. To stop the return of dictatorship and fascism, workers and students need above all a clear political perspective directed against the roots of these evils: the capitalist system. The right-wing danger can be fought only on the basis of a socialist programme. We call on all young people and students to join the struggle and become a member of the IYSSE.



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