

Germany: Humboldt University student parliament supports lawsuit against far-right Professor Baberowski

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On October 17, the student parliament of Humboldt University voted unanimously in favour of a resolution supporting the complaint of two student representatives in the Academic Senate against radical right-wing Professor Jörg Baberowski. On his Facebook page, Baberowski had insulted Bafta Sarbo and Juliane Ziegler as being “unbelievably stupid” and “left-wing extremist fanatics” because they had criticised his plan for the university to establish a Centre for Dictatorship Research.

The student parliament (StuPa) is not only supporting the students, but is also calling on the university Presidium to “initiate measures against Prof. Baberowski’s misconduct.” The resolution continues: “Baberowski has repeatedly attracted attention in the past through his right-wing extremist statements. In order to live up to its historical responsibility, Humboldt University must not shy away from clearly distancing itself from right-wing extremist positions and individuals.”

The Presidium should revise earlier statements of solidarity with Baberowski and examine “to what extent Baberowski’s personality is still acceptable to the university.”

The StuPa resolution and the complaint itself are important steps in defending students’ freedom of expression in the face of an offensive by radical right-wing forces in the academic milieu. In recent months, student representatives have been put under massive pressure at various levels because they have opposed radical right-wing teaching content and the transformation of their university into an incubator for right-wing cadres. With their complaint, the students are defending themselves against this and defending the right of students to criticise their professors.

Baberowski is the best-known radical right-wing academic in Germany. In February 2014, he defended and the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte in the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, and added, “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious.” But his political activity is not limited to this blatant falsification of history. With Baberowski, his “scholarly Oeuvre and statements on daily politics” coalesce “into an amalgam of right-wing extremist criticism that is pervaded by historical

revisionism and nationalist motives,” as Bremen law professor Andreas Fischer-Lescano put it two years ago in a contribution in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

In 2015, Baberowski declared the growing violence against refugees “rather harmless in view of the problems we have in Germany with immigration.” That same year he initiated a clandestine network of new-right ideologues that meets at least twice a year in Berlin. The “Salon Baberowski,” as *Die Zeit* journalists Christian Fuchs and Paul Middelhoff call it in their bestseller *Das Netzwerk der Neuen Rechte* (*The Network of the New Right*), brings together everything that enjoys rank and a name in the scene.

Baberowski verbally attacked Sarbo and Ziegler after the two students explained in a broadcast on Deutschlandfunk why they had spoken out in the Academic Senate against the creation of a Centre for Dictatorship Research under Baberowski’s leadership.

Sarbo explained that it was in part about Baberowski himself, “who had already attracted attention in the past through very concrete political statements—for example, through statements that we would call hostile to refugees. And in this context, we simply don’t see that an institute that is decisively politically shaped by Mr. Baberowski is compatible with the principles that this university has formulated for itself, i.e., anti-discrimination and diversity.”

Her colleague, Ziegler, added that scholarly freedom was more threatened by racist and right-wing positions than by the rejection of a centre that does not clearly distance itself from right-wing populist movements.

In fact, the research centre aimed at the pseudo-scholarly justification of dictatorship and not at scientific research. In the proposal for the project, dictatorships were described as legitimate and even popular alternatives to democratic forms of rule, which should be investigated “value-free.” For this reason, the student parliament had already overwhelmingly spoken out against the centre. After experts also made negative assessments, the law faculty withdrew its support for the project, making the proposal in the Academic Senate irrelevant.

Following this, Baberowski stated on Facebook that the

university “had had to bow to the pressure of left-wing extremist fanatics” and insulted Ziegler and Sarbo as being “unbelievably stupid students calling out unbelievably stupid stuff about ‘diversity’ and ‘refugees’ into the microphone.” His aim was not only to intimidate the student representatives, but also to mobilize his radical right-wing supporters against them.

Sarbo reports numerous racist and threatening messages she received after Baberowski’s post. “Baberowski’s supporters have pretty quickly confirmed our criticism online through racist insults, threats and dubious entries on right-wing websites,” explains Juliane Ziegler. The RefRat (Student Union) even received a package of excrement.

This is not the first time that Baberowski has mobilized his right-wing extremist followers to intimidate political opponents. In November last year, he agitated against the presentation at Humboldt University of the book *Why Are They Back?*, which deals with the rise of the far-right in contemporary Germany. He described the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which organized the event, as “criminal, violent and malicious,” consisting in part of “psychopaths.” As a result of this agitation, two dozen right-wing extremists, including high-ranking representatives of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) youth movement, tried to disrupt the event.

Baberowski had previously described the IYSSE and its members as “filthy” and “disgusting.” Moreover, he has repeatedly demanded that IYSSE members, including those who sit in the student parliament, be kicked out of the university and banned from its premises.

Baberowski has also attacked colleagues who oppose right-wing ideology. When five professors and employees of Humboldt University opposed the anti-refugee “Declaration 2018,” which had been initiated in Baberowski’s salon, Baberowski called them “informers” and threatened, “The humiliated and the excluded will remember who pilloried them.”

With regard to Sarbo and Ziegler, Baberowski held firm to his insults when asked, telling the *Tagesspiegel* that the students not only could be described as stupid and fanatical, but that they should be so described. As evidence, he cited a retweet by Sarbo, which, in her own words, was “an explicitly humorous polemical reaction to a racist article in the *Bildzeitung*” and had nothing to do with the arguments over Baberowski or his research centre.

The right-wing radical professor can behave so aggressively only because he enjoys the support of the university leadership, the grand coalition government of Christian Democrats (Christian Democratic Union—CDU/Christian Social Union—CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), and the SPD-Left Party-Green Party Senate in Berlin. After Baberowski attempted to sue his critics several times, unsuccessfully, mobilized his right-wing supporters against them and insulted

students in his own department, the university leadership solidarized itself with him and declared “media attacks” on Baberowski to be “unacceptable.”

Previously, the president of Humboldt University tried other ways to put pressure on the RefRat. At the request of the AfD parliamentary group in the Berlin House of Representatives, for example, she sued the RefRat, seeking public disclosure of the names of all students active in it over the past 10 years. This legal case was ordered by the Berlin Senate.

Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) also defended the freedom of expression of “Professor Münkler and Professor Baberowski from Berlin,” who were said to be victims of “hostility.”

At the same time, there is growing resistance to the right-wing transformation of the universities. The student parliament at Humboldt University, the Student Unions at the Free University of Berlin, the universities in Potsdam and Bremen and many other student representative bodies have already shown solidarity with the Humboldt RefRat. Professors at Humboldt such as Prof. Dr. Jule Specht have also criticized Baberowski’s “verbally aggressive behaviour.”

In an article dealing with Baberowski and his threats against dissenters, Professor Andreas Fischer-Lescano recently warned against the “ugly grimace of right-wing scholarship, which threatens us, in the truest sense of the word, if we do not resolutely oppose right-wing talk at the universities.” A robust democracy at universities must mean “that we do not permit authoritarian professors to impose their authoritarian ideas of taboos criticism under the guise of defending scholarly freedom,” the professor said.

This underlines how important it is for students to defend themselves against Baberowski’s insults and threats. The legal complaint is an important step, but must be combined with the mobilization of a broad opposition against the shift to the right and the transformation of the universities into incubators for right-wing forces.



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