

Defending Freedom of Science and Speech at the University of Hamburg!

Call for support for the conference “We want our World back!”

Unprecedented attack on academic freedom: The administration of the University of Hamburg has announced the withdrawal of the rooms for the conference “We want our World back”, which is taking place on campus from April 7 to 9, at such short notice and for political reasons. University President Prof. Dr. Hauke Heekeren only took office last year - does he really want to use his tenure to serve political censorship? As representatives of over 40,000 students, we will not accept this decision!

The conference, which more than 1300 people and world-famous academics and public intellectuals like John Holloway and María de Jesús Patricio Martínez will attend, is part of the series "Challenging Capitalist Modernity". It was hosted at the University of Hamburg three times already, most recently in 2017, and is organized by the AStA of the University of Hamburg in cooperation with the Network for an Alternative Quest. Participants from academia, social movements, and the Hamburg student body will discuss pressing issues of our time such as the climate crisis, alternatives to capitalism, and patriarchal violence together in workshops and panel events. To enable international participation, the conference will be simultaneously translated into Arabic, German, English, Italian, Kurdish, Spanish, and Turkish. This convergence space for science and civil society, as well as the truly international character of the conference are unique.

However, the university president Prof. Dr. Hauke Heekeren does not seem to appreciate this pluralism. On March 28, he prohibited the use of the rooms that had been granted well in advance. The reason given has been a message from the “Verfassungsschutz” (German intelligence service) attesting “extremism” to the conference. While there is still no committee of inquiry in Hamburg investigating the involvement between the intelligence service and the far-right terrorist group NSU, the same intelligence agency assumes authority to portray critical discussion events as terroristic. It is an unparalleled scandal that the university president does not defend the sovereignty of the university but lets the intelligence service dictate who is allowed to engage in academic debate in the rooms of the university. We are appalled by this attack on student self-governance, the autonomy of academia, and freedom of speech. The new university president Prof. Dr. Heekeren is mistaken in thinking that he can restrict scientific discourse on campus without consequences.

In its latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns, "The time bomb is ticking." The goal of limiting global warming to below 1.5 degrees set in the Paris Agreement is likely to be missed in a few years from now. The IPCC identifies fossil capitalism as the main driver of the climate crisis. The University of Hamburg is now preventing one of the largest international conferences on this existential crisis - while boasting about its Cluster of Excellence "Climate, Climatic Change, and Society". It is particularly unfortunate that Kurdish speakers, who are suffering from immense repression in Turkey, are also participating in the conference. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has always been defaming political opponents as "terrorists". From the university president Prof. Dr. Hauke Heekeren however, we had expected a commitment to freedom of speech.

All attempts on our part to hold talks with the university chair in order to reach an amicable solution have been rejected or ignored. This scandalous action has enormous implications as a precedent: Nothing less than the freedom of science is at stake. Will it be possible to host critical scientific events challenging the status quo at the University of Hamburg in the future? Is only research and teaching that accepts the social status quo still desirable? We will not accept that intelligence agencies can have decisive influence on the content of an international scientific conference. It is up to us to defend academic freedom.

We urge the university administration to provide the conference with the rooms that were promised long ago. We cannot let this unprecedented attack on academic freedom go unanswered.

We want our world back! And our university!

AStA Universität Hamburg | Network for an Alternative Quest



Contact us still if you support our call:

SozialeBewegung@asta.uni-hamburg.de

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