

Standing up for freedom of expression and making science the standard

At Bielefeld University, we have a few students and doctoral candidates who are known to support conspiracy theories or who are involved in extreme right-wing parties that propagate nationalist and racist sentiments. Such is currently the case at Bielefeld University's Faculty of Sociology, where a debate is taking place about an enrolled doctoral student who is politically active in an extreme right-wing party. For some of the discussants, the question is: should he be allowed to continue his studies and do his doctorate at Bielefeld University without further ado, or should he be excluded from the university's academic life? How do the Faculty of Sociology and the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS), where the doctoral candidate in question is pursuing structured doctoral studies, respond to this question? An interview with Professor Detlef Sack, dean of the Faculty of Sociology (FfS), and Professor Ursula Mense-Petermann, director of the BGHS.

What attitude does the Faculty of Sociology adopt concerning students who publicly take a political stance by making aggressive misanthropic statements?

Detlef Sack: First of all, it is not the task of the Faculty of Sociology to monitor or even police its students and doctoral candidates as political citizens. We (also) hope that our students will demonstrate social commitment, but this must be kept clearly separate from the educational and academic institution. This clear line is crossed though when antipluralistic, misanthropic opinions or humiliating statements interfere with teaching and studying. The faculty and also the rectorate are aware of the few cases that are currently under discussion, partly because of the public debate. These cases are part of a discussion and affirmation of our identity and values in teaching and research. It is both right and necessary for them to remain on the table. The discussion makes it clear once again that we as a faculty defend freedom of expression, even if this may sometimes be uncomfortable. At the same time, we are well aware of and respect the legal boundaries.

Standing up for freedom of expression—what exactly does that mean?

Ursula Mense-Petermann: Members of the BGHS and the Faculty of Sociology should be able to express their opinions freely. At the same time, we are committed to and live by a set of values that embrace universal human rights and diversity. In practice, debate is a core part of research and teaching, especially in the humanities and social sciences. The underlying premise is that rational arguments, i.e. arguments based on the discipline-specific theories and methodologies, are the basis of all discussions. An exchange of arguments must be conducted dispassionately and with mutual respect. In respect of our study programme, this is particularly important for us at the BGHS because we are an interdisciplinary and international institution that pursues diversity as one of its central institutional goals. As a learning community, the BGHS lives from the diversity and multi-perspective involvement of its members. This is the only way we can cultivate a culture of debate that is as controversial as it is constructive, and it is precisely this intensive exchange that enables us to move forward in search for science-based truth. We will certainly recognise when the boundaries of freedom of expression in this sense are overstepped—namely when legal norms of coexistence are blatantly violated. We shall defend these boundaries vigorously.

Detlef Sack: To be absolutely clear: we accept neither the sharing of racist or sexist ideas, nor intimidating speech from faculty members. They have no place in our institution! If such cases occur in teaching and research, then we react as a faculty.

It is a different matter if faculty members make political statements outside the university—they cannot be denied them. What they express there is their personal opinion. What they say or how they express themselves publicly is part of public political debate, but definitely not university debate.

As the Faculty of Sociology, it is also clear that we see our task in the academic discussion of topics that are of public concern. This includes analyses of political mobilisations based on right-wing extremism or conspiracy theories, for example.

How do you deal with academic publications or doctoral projects of faculty members who take a public political stance?

Detlef Sack: Enrolment is not granted on the basis of political conviction, but on the basis of academic qualifications. Anyone who is admitted to a study programme has the right to complete the course or finish their doctorate. As long as no legal or professional boundaries are crossed in the corresponding qualification work, a student cannot be expelled.

Ursula Mense-Petermann: The BGHS is about academic training and further qualification. Anyone who wants to do a doctorate with us must meet academic criteria and especially professional standards. As long as these rules are observed throughout the entire doctoral supervision process—from the research proposal to the finished thesis—the doctorate may be completed. This is also the legal situation. Reviewers will examine and evaluate the submitted thesis first and foremost with regard to academic standards. Only if these are violated and an extreme non-academic political position is demonstrably reflected in the qualification paper can and must academic expulsion be the necessary consequence.