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Whistleblower Edward Snowden – Dishonorable "honorary doctorate" farce at German University of Rostock

YES: Right Livelihood Award

By Dietrich Schulze

Not all honors bestowed upon people are what their title suggests. The "Nobel Peace Prize" of 2009, for example, was awarded to a warmonger: U.S. President Barack Obama. After a mass murder of innocent civilians by means of remote-controlled combat drones, contrary to international law, he is now "pacifying" Syria by bombing. These bombs are, however, targeted on Syrian infrastructure, not - as is stated in public - on the "Islamic State" murderers, who had previously been built up as "freedom fighters" and who are in Kobanê just committing a mass murder of tens of thousands of Kurdish Syrians, Muslims, Jews, Christians and Yazidi in the autonomous region of Rojava.

We have good reasons for solidarity - not for despair. There are some positive developments even in "big politics". A week ago, Edward Snowden, the brave and courageous symbol of resistance against the madness of surveillance, was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, which is often referred to as "Alternative Nobel Prize" in Germany. He absolutely deserves that honor. Before that, he had received the Whistleblower Award, the Stuttgart Peace Prize and the Fritz Bauer Prize of the German human rights organisation "Humanist Union". For several months, the University of Rostock was also in headlines for its idea of bestowing an honorary doctorate upon Mr Snowden. Only a "Critical University" group drew attention to the fact that this was really a publicity stunt, organised by the university government. And the result, to put it briefly: Edward Snowden can consider himself fortunate for not becoming an "honorary doctor" of that suspicious university.

The Right Livelihood Award was the appropriate answer to the not very honorable "honorary doctorate" farce. Please listen to and watch the "Guardian" video [\[1\]](#), in which Edward Snowden says he accepts the award on behalf of those who risked their lives to help "resist unlawful and disproportionate mass surveillance". He says the award serves as a "vindication" for such efforts.



Edward Snowden source: crashonline.de

Mr Snowden has also been proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize. As a person prosecuted in the United States for "high treason", he would undoubtedly benefit in terms of personal safety, and indirectly the Nobel Prize Committee would correct its own decision to have given the Nobel Peace Award to Barack Obama not for that he really did but what for what was hoped at that time (in vain) that he would do by changing U.S. war policy.

Does the University of Rostock really do what Snowden stands for?

Is it correct to brand the University of Rostock as a "suspicious" university? Let us have a look at the facts. The "Critical University of Rostock" group [\[2\]](#) had examined the above question and referred to panel discussion in January 2014 with the political scientist Claus Leggewie (from Giessen) and the Green member of the German Federal Parliament Christian Ströbele, who both supported the idea of an honorary doctorate for Mr Snowden. At the same time, they reminded the University: "If you honor Mr Snowden, you have to live the content of what Snowden stands for", Professor Leggewie said at that time. Mr Ströbele also expressed the view that by taking the initiative for such honors, the University was demanding high standards of itself. "Critical inquiry into the content of science (...) should always be possible and welcome at universities" [\[3\]](#). Is this admonition being followed? Read the facts for yourself.

University of Rostock involved in secret agency software cooperation

In August 2014, the German newspaper "tageszeitung" (taz) [4] published the allegation that the University of Rostock was involved in the creation of new software for spying. The article said that according to the German Federal Ministry of the Interior (replying to a parliamentary interpellation of the Left Party) such software had been supplied, among others, by the "Institute for Graphical Knowledge Representation (Grawis) at the University of Rostock". A university spokesperson had denied an involvement in plans for spying; what the Ministry of the Interior had said was "not correct". Grawis had been set up by students of the University in 2011, but was today "totally independent" in what it did.

According to an Open Letter by the "Critical University of Rostock" [2], Stefan Pforte, one of the people responsible for Grawis, had admitted joint applications with the University for funding and negotiations with the Bundeswehr, the German Armed Forces, on cooperation. This was no "institutional link", Pforte says, and denies that his program is designed for surveillance. It was only concerned with "visualization of data". The newspaper points out that this view is not shared by the authors of the Open Letter. "This is no deal with the Salvation Army. The purpose of the program is intelligence collection."

The "Critical University of Rostock" explains what the problem is: "According to a newspaper report with the title »German Federal Intelligence Service wants to gather live information from social networks« [5], the Agency claims that the methods of similar institutions in other countries were far superior to those in Germany. ... This shameless distortion of the lessons of Snowden's revelations shows clearly that secret agencies are a permanent structural threat to civil liberties."

A minor interpellation of the Left Party in the German Federal Parliament on "New digital surveillance methods" (Bundestag Drs 18/2613, 18 September 2014) [6] contains the following questions 21 b, c: "Concerning cooperation with the Institute for Graphical Knowledge Representation (Grawis), what are the federal government's conclusions from the University of Rostock's version which contradicts the Ministry of the Interior's letter of 22 July (according to taz of 15 Aug 2014)? What are the joint funding applications of the University of Rostock and Grawis concerned with, according to the government's knowledge?" Little fantasy is needed to anticipate what the government will answer.

State Minister confirms: no "honorary doctorate" for Mr Snowden

The Rector of the University Wolfgang Schareck vetoed against the "honorary doctorate" and since the beginning of September it is clear that he succeeded: the veto is backed by Mr Brodtkorb, Minister of Education and Science in the state of Mecklenburg/ Western Pomerania. The Rector claimed that what Mr Snowden had done was no "originary scientific achievement". Those who favored the idea of bestowing academic honors upon Mr Snowden had collected various significant expert opinions, and certainly the most important one came from Noam Chomsky, a world-famous independent intellectual and peace scientist, who had already opposed the United States' war in Vietnam. Some conservative U.S. media name Chomsky as one of the „most wanted men“ along with Snowden and Manning.

The author was able to attend a lecture delivered by Noam Chomsky on 30 May 2014 at Karlsruhe - ZKM-Video on speech [7a] and discussion [7b]. A report entitled "Peace Meeting with Noam Chomsky" was published online in "Neue Rheinische Zeitung" [8]. Since then, the author has been in a mailing discourse with one of Mr Chomsky's friends on the matter of the Rostock "honorary doctorate". Based on available background information during the Chomsky meeting, it was already



The poster features a portrait of Noam Chomsky, an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a dark sweater over a collared shirt. The text on the poster is as follows:

Noam Chomsky
zu Gast am ZKM

Fr, 30. Mai 2014, 19.00 Uhr
ZKM_Foyer, Eintritt frei

Vortrag des amerikanischen Linguisten,
Gesellschaftskritikers und Friedensaktivisten

zkm karlsruhe

Noam Chomsky

source: German newspaper BNN DER
SONNTAG, May 25, 2014

considered as suspicious.

On 21 August 2014, "tageszeitung" (taz) printed a letter to the editor, dated 21st August [9], by Gesa Mackenthun, one of the initiators of the "honorary doctorate" known through the media, in which she turned down criticism of cooperation with secret agencies with the following words: "Liberal Arts and Humanities are no repair service for the misconduct of secret agencies that have gone wild".

On 19. September, the author took the liberty of replying to Ms Mackenthun in an Open Letter [10a] english [10b], referring to her letter to the editor of taz, and making two alternative proposals:

- A. End the farce of bestowing academic honors upon Mr Snowden, because a lawsuit against the Rector's objection, confirmed by the state Minister, would also be a farce. Try to formulate an acceptable apology, preferably together with the Rector and Minister, to the experts who were consulted, especially Prof. Noam Chomsky.
- B. Rectify your own position and support efforts to end cooperation of this University with secret agencies, all spying on students and other violations against the "civil clause".

It should be noted that the person addressed here is the Pro-Dean for Research of the Philosophical Faculty. Not surprisingly, she wrote back repeating what she had said in her letter to the editor, and I wrote a short comment on what, for heaven's sake, this is all about, with the following text: [11].

Dishonorable "honorary doctorate" farce at the University of Rostock

Looking at the whole story, starting with some publicity from the Rector and Pro-Dean for the idea of an honorary doctorate for Mr Snowden, then a dodgy veto by the Rector hastily confirmed by the State Minister, and a nervous, arrogant response by Ms G.M. (which ignores the "civil clause entirely"), I can now fully understand what the "Critical University" meant with their suspicion that it was all a publicity stunt. The whole thing appears to have been a setup with different actors right from the start. The Pro-Dean appears as the flagship of Academic Liberty, the Rector as the Pragmatist who uses scholastic arguments, and the Minister follows the line of the head of the University - the Rector. Nothing comes out of it in material terms, but a certain positive image will be attached to the university's name in future. The university government does not wish to apply to its own practice what M.P. Hans-Christian Ströbele said in a panel discussion on 20 January in front of 1000 students on the significance of Snowden's revelations for science, democracy and civil liberties. The "civil clause", which has almost the same words as that of the University of Tübingen, is regarded as a posture which may be ignored and violated, as some current examples have demonstrated at both universities. The peace movement, trade unions and the students' union in Rostock should discuss how they can support the "Critical University", without whose activities the swindle cannot be understood,



Gesa Mackenthun source: Uni Rostock

Rostock's General Students' Committee on the "Snowden Case"

For six years, I have been cooperating closely with student representations on questions of militarization of universities (cf. note on the author), especially at the University of Karlsruhe - today renamed into KIT -, where I studied, in the city where I live. So it was of special interest what the General Students' Committee of the University of Rostock had to say. Here is the sad result [12]:

"The General Students' Committee of the University of Rostock (AStA) is frequently confronted with requests to state a position to the Snowden Case by making a demand. Being a representation of all students, it is difficult for us in the case of such a great topic as the Snowden case to

voice a consistent opinion. Prior to its proceedings, the Philosophical Faculty conducted a ballot among students of that Faculty [13] on whether or not Mr Snowden should receive an honorary doctorate, and the result was that only a very narrow majority of 51 per cent of the Philosophical Faculty's students were in favour. Our interpretation is that there are strongly divergent opinions within the Faculty on the question of Mr Snowden. This is one of the reasons why the General Students' Committee of the University of Rostock reserves the right not to make a more concrete statement on the Snowden case. We represent all students, and their views on this questions range from total support to total rejection, so in our opinion we would no longer represent all of them if we only supported one such view in public."

The idea to conduct a ballot of *all* students might have produced an overwhelming majority in favor - perhaps embarrassing for the university government. And the "civil clause" and its violation by cooperation with secret agencies are not even mentioned.

Brief response by Noam Chomsky

A speedy translation by Lothar Letsche made it possible to send my Open Letter directly to Noam Chomsky in English [10b]. His brief, dry commentary [14]: "Sorry to hear this. Had hoped for better." Yes, Professor Chomsky, your disappointment is understandable, but your expert opinion which you sent to the University of Rostock will be of lasting value to the public all over the world. My position remains: Mr Snowden is fortunate in not having been awarded an "honorary doctorate" from this suspicious university. He deserves better and has received something better.

References / remarks:

- [1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/sep/25/edward-snowden-sweden-alternative-nobel-prize-video>
- [2] <http://kritischeunihro.blogspot.de/2014/08/14/trotz-snowden-uni-rostock-kooperiert-mit-bundeswehr-und-bnd-bei-internet-ueberwachung/>
- [3] <http://www.presseportal.de/pm/59019/2645176/neues-deutschland-snowden-ehrung-leggewie-und-stroebele-mahnen-uni-rostock-zu-mehr-offenheit>
- [4] <http://www.taz.de/!144255/>
- [5] <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/auslandsgeheimdienst-bnd-will-soziale-netzwerke-live-ausforschen-1.1979677>
- [6] <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/026/1802613.pdf>
- [7a] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_Z9bslsANw
- [7b] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av8uFvDTvw4>
- [8] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20140601.pdf>
- [9] <http://kritischeunihro.blogspot.de/2014/08/21/nach-taz-artikel-prof-mackenthum-schreibt-leserinnenbrief/>
- [10a] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20140919.pdf>
- [10b] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20140919en.pdf>
- [11] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20140919gm.pdf>
- [12] <http://www.asta.uni-rostock.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/>
- [13] A "Faculty" in the German sense includes (as members) all students of the relevant disciplines - not just academic staff.
- [14] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20140920.pdf>

On the author: Dr.-Ing. Dietrich Schulze: born in 1940; after 18 years of research in High-Energy Physics, from 1984 until 2005 (his retirement) Chairman of the Works Council of the Karlsruhe Research Center (subsequently merged with the University to form the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology KIT). 2008 he set up in Karlsruhe - with others - the Initiative against Military Research at German Universities (WebDoku www.stattweb.de/files/DokuKITcivil.pdf). Member of the Advisory Board of the Scientists' Initiative for Peace and Sustainability; active in the initiative "Universities for peace - Yes to Civil Clauses" and through publications.

Translation: Lothar Letsche