

Dare more dictatorship! Professor Münkler praises authoritarian rule

Ulrich Rippert
12 July 2010

The world economic crisis has reawakened the ghosts of Germany's Weimar Republic. Memories run deep. The link between economic crisis, mass unemployment, the dissolution of parliament, emergency decrees and dictatorship is a matter of public knowledge. Recent commentaries in the media have posed the question, "How much inequality can democracy tolerate?" and warn of the political consequences of society's break-up.

Now, however, a professor at Berlin's Humboldt University has urged the public to overcome the ghosts of the past and speak openly about "the need for a Bonapartist solution". Under the heading "Lame duck democracy", professor Herfried Münkler calls for a fresh and less inhibited examination of the relationship between democracy and dictatorship.

Münkler teaches political theory at the Institute for Social Sciences at Humboldt University and is described by *Der Spiegel* magazine as "one of the most sought after political advisors in Germany", who provides "interesting intellectual impulses". His latest "intellectual impulse" appeared in the May/June issue of the magazine *Internationale Politik*, which is published by the renowned German Society for Foreign Policy (DGAP).

In his article, Münkler rejects any strict counterposing of democracy and dictatorship. He writes, "Generally speaking, dictatorship is considered to be the antonym to democracy. But this only applies within limits". Democracy is much more "the constitutional state based on a separation of powers in opposition to dictatorship".

According to Münkler democracy and dictatorship have much in common. The French politician and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, he writes, had good reason in his book "Democracy in America" to write of the "tyranny of the majority". Münkler adds that when Karl Marx wrote of a "dictatorship of the proletariat", he did not mean "a form of rule against the majority of the people, but rather one in their interest, if not directly with their support".

He does not develop this point but implies he differentiates himself from conventional anti-communists, who invoke the undemocratic methods and the terror of Stalinism to justify their anticommunism. For Münkler, however, the problem is not the restriction and abolition of democracy, but rather its realization. This constitutes for him "the tyranny of the majority".

Münkler is obviously disturbed by the notion that democracy actually means the rule of the majority. This is the aim of socialists, who seek to expand democracy to all spheres of

economic and political life in order to implement policies in the interest of the majority. He returns repeatedly to this issue.

So he stresses: "In antiquity one also called democracy the rule of the many and the poor, leading to the translation of the term as 'party dictatorship of the people.... Today, however, we have a very different conception of democracy. Aristotle described it as 'Polite', i.e., 'the rule of the middle classes'. This 'Polite' was characterized by its precautionary measures against a consistent political defence of their interests by the many and the poor'. Today the name given to the leaders of people, demagogues, has a pejorative sense related to everything which has to do with demos in the sense of the people", Münkler continues.

Having informed us that democracy means the rule of the middle classes and is opposed to "the rule of the many and the poor", Münkler proceeds to his next point. Referring to the British sociologist Colin Crouch, Münkler writes of an era "of post democracy". For Münkler this means "not so much the beginning of a new era of dictatorships, but rather a condition of the exhaustion of democratic energy and the erosion of democratic institutions".

Münkler says nothing about the social causes of this "erosion of democratic institutions" – i.e., the arrogance and callousness of a super-rich financial oligarchy that determines policies and thrusts aside democratic rules and parliamentary customs in order to make hundreds of billions in taxpayers' money available to the banks as quickly as possible. For the financial elite, public debates, elections and democratic process are merely an obstacle to shifting the entire burden of the crisis onto the population.

Münkler speaks on behalf of these interests when he praises the positive sides of dictatorship. He writes that unease with democracy is increasing due to the drawn-out nature of its decision-making process, the lack of choice in political personnel, the common inclination of politicians to talk around things because they fear they will be punished for speaking the truth and, finally, the influence of parties and interest groups.

This is what creates the desire for "a little bit of dictatorship". When decision-making is blocked by continuous new appeals, or opposing interests groups are equally strong, meaning that problems remain unresolved, then there is yearning for administrative authority and "Bonapartist solutions".

Nobody is calling for a new "age of the Caesars", but democracy is showing "symptoms of fatigue and of being overwhelmed" and requires "rejuvenation". "Democracy", Münkler writes, "functions

like a fussy old aunty, who knows everything, but misses out on much of what is going on. There is, however, a young, strong nephew, who is ready to help, but every now and then has dictatorial inclinations. Should one make him available to the aunt to help out?...Or has her time run out, but nobody will admit it because she was so nice and friendly to everybody?"

This question is not new and has been posed continually since the era of Greek democracy. That is because constitutional systems age just like humans, the worthy professor tells us. Over the course of time, social systems became "ever more complex and prone to trouble"...like elderly people who are "overwhelmed" by the challenges of life and therefore require a "face lift and rejuvenation".

The "key question" is what methods are permissible for such a rejuvenation: are there are legitimate reserves that can be tapped beyond the legal framework in order to rejuvenate an aging order? Münkler asks.

Some political theoreticians have "occasionally suggested that wars can revitalize the political order", but such proposals "lack any persuasive power today", he continues. Another possibility is "the announcement of an impending catastrophe". This no longer requires a biblical prophet and can be replaced "by reference to nature", and by "ecological objections to a growth economy". Münkler obviously has in mind here the enlightened, educated citizen, who worries about the threat of environmental disaster, the depletion of fossil fuels and energy resources, and regards a powerful intervention by the state as indispensable.

"What happens, however, if the people will not listen?" he asks. He answers his own question: "Then the idea of an eco-dictatorship emerges." Plato had already justified his "anti-democratic justification of the rule by philosophers" by arguing against rule by "unreasonable people who always yearn for the baker and must then be put on a diet by intelligent physicians."

Münkler reviews in detail the question of how "the three sources of European culture—Abrahamic religions, Greek philosophy and the Roman conception of law" can be circumvented to tackle "the regeneration of a political order and the management of emergency situations and extraordinary challenges".

While Münkler sees little to be gained from the biblical prophets and the Greek Tyrannis, he acknowledges that the ancient Roman dictatorship, conceived as a means of "order over disorder" was quite useful. "Over the course of several centuries, Rome was well served with this extra-constitutional institution", he writes. Only in the civil war of the first century BC did the "the reputation of dictatorship as a means for re-establishing order" become discredited.

This means the term can be used "to describe a concentration of power directed against the constitutional system". In 1848, the Spanish conservative Juan Donoso Cortés demanded the establishment of a dictatorship in order to oppose the revolutionary dynamic in Europe, while the German emigrant Karl Marx took the exact opposite path and called for the dictatorship of the proletariat in order to accelerate the progress of history.

It was above all Carl Schmitt, who in the wake of the Russian Revolution and its effects on Germany—Münkler writes: "under the impression of the confusions at the end of the First World

War—tried, in the manner of a lawyer, to bring order to the confused situation of terms and authority". Schmitt differentiated "between the commissarial and the sovereign dictatorship". He defined the first as the attempt to defend the constitution with extra-constitutional means, the latter as an instrument for the creation of a new order, which exists initially only in the conceptual world of the dictator and his followers.

Although Münkler stresses several times that he merely seeks to analyze the past and is himself no advocate of dictatorial measures, his reference to Carl Schmitt leaves no doubt about his intellectual lineage. He makes no attempt to dissociate himself from the man, who, more than any other legal expert, provided the judicial justification for Hitler's dictatorship.

On the contrary, Münkler praises him as the advocate of a moderate commissarial dictatorship. "When today there is occasionally talk of dictatorial powers and measures, then it is mostly in the sense that Schmitt termed commissarial dictatorship."

In his political writings, Carl Schmitt referred to parliamentary democracy as "outdated bourgeois methods of rule", which had lost any justification when compared to the emerging "vital movements"—i.e., above all, Hitler's NSDAP. The "relative" rationality of parliamentarianism confronts irrationalism bound up with a new mobilization of the masses, Schmitt wrote. Irrationalism then seeks to achieve "concrete existence" as a counter to ideological abstraction and the "illusory forms of liberal-bourgeois methods of government". In so doing, it bases itself on the "myth of the vital life", which embodies will and action.

This is the "vital nephew", which professor Münkler seeks to place at the side of "old aunty democracy" as a commissarial dictator.

It is more than four decades since the social democratic chancellor Willy Brandt proclaimed in 1969, "Dare more democracy!" From the lips of Brandt this was merely a hollow cliché, aimed at getting protesting students and striking workers off the streets. His appeal was never realized. Following the complete breakdown of the former policy based on social reforms and an unprecedented social decline, voices are now being raised demanding uninhibitedly: "Dare more dictatorship!"

Münkler's article, which was the lead in a prominent political magazine, should not be dismissed as merely the airy speculations of an agitated historian. Münkler has the closest connections to the highest politician circles, and his remarks—consciously expressed in a haughty academic tone—throw light on the deliberations currently taking place in the face of the present crisis over ways and means to dismantle democratic rights and establish new authoritarian forms of rule.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)