

“Münkler-Watch” and the reproach of anonymity: A red herring

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The pack of German journalists who are hounding the blog “Münkler-Watch” have sunk their teeth into the bloggers’ anonymity. They are viciously attacking and insulting the students who criticise the weekly lectures of political science professor Herfried Münkler at Berlin’s Humboldt University on the grounds that the students are not revealing their identities.

Münkler himself has called them “miserable cowards” and accused them of “asymmetric warfare”—a term that includes both guerilla warfare and terrorism. The press is performing variations on this theme, in every key.

This is a classic red herring. The question of anonymity is being utilised to divert attention from the real issues.

First of all, “Münkler-Watch” is not really anonymous. It is a publicly accessible web site with a comments section and an e-mail address for contacting the authors. Several of them have met with representatives of the media.

They are not obliged, however, to reveal their names. Anonymous criticism is a fundamental right without which the constitutional principle of freedom of speech would become a dead letter. Wherever the weak confront the strong, or subordinates their superior, they must be able to voice their opinion without exposing their identity.

Münkler and the historian Jörg Baberowski have considerable influence at the university, which enables them to make decisions on the advancement and career prospects of their students. Under these circumstances, honest criticism is hardly possible if the critics must openly reveal their identities.

Wherever someone is in a position to discriminate against another because that person has criticised him, the critic must be able to use the protection of

anonymity. This principle has been affirmed in Supreme Court decisions and is firmly established in the realm of academic, professional and political life.

The anonymous evaluation of teachers and supervisors is customary in many schools and companies. Exams are sometimes anonymously corrected at universities. Elections are secret as a matter of principle, so that no one may be discriminated against because of his or her vote.

All of this is called into question by those who attack the bloggers because of their anonymity. In reality, they are angry because they cannot censor the Internet or take action against the critics. That they plan to do so is beyond doubt.

According to a report in *Der Tagesspiegel*, Baberowski has demanded that “the university ban such ‘crackpots’ from its premises and bring charges against them,” and that it “defend its staff from extremists of all kinds.”

Münkler has accused the university administration of deserting him in the conflict with “Münkler-Watch” and lacking any “capacity for empathy.” According to *Der Tagesspiegel*, he has appealed to the legal department of the university, which, according to a statement by university spokesperson Hans-Christoph Keller, has promised “to review the matter in accordance with its capabilities.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which has voiced its criticisms of Baberowski and Münkler at public meetings and not anonymously, can attest to the consequences of such a course. A member of the IYSSE who wanted to discuss a master’s thesis with the member’s professor was instead asked to account for the IYSSE’s criticisms of Baberowski.

The Department of History, on the university’s

official web site, has called on teachers and students to “oppose” the IYSSE and no longer tolerate its criticisms of Baberowski “on the premises of Humboldt University.” University president Jan-Hendrik Olbertz has signed a similar statement accusing the IYSSE and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of “slander” and “character assassination.”

The real objective is to shield from criticism two influential professors who systematically promote militarism in public or seek to diminish the crimes of the Nazis.

Münkler’s support for militarism is notorious and publicly documented. The student representative at the Department of Social Sciences accused Münkler in a statement last year of “taking on the dual role of political scientist and national military strategist.”

The statement went on to say that Münkler lent “the veneer of academic integrity” to themes that “could be heard for years from the right-wing margins of the political spectrum,” that he poured “oil on the fire of racist discourse about the handling of refugees coming to Europe,” and that he used “his academic reputation to contribute to the brutalisation of foreign policy discourse and increase acceptance of German war missions.”

Baberowski has openly campaigned for the rehabilitation of Ernst Nolte, the apologist for National Socialism who in 1986 ignited the “Historians’ Dispute.” In his books, Baberowski plays down German war crimes on the Eastern Front of the Second World War.

What makes Münkler, Baberowski, and large parts of the press so furious is that the criticism of these reactionary positions is finding a popular response. The return to German great power politics and the “end of military restraint,” proclaimed by the government and backed by their propaganda, is meeting growing resistance.

Their intention is to make an example of “Münkler-Watch” in order to intimidate, suppress and criminalise this opposition.

In the process, they turn reality on its head. Münkler and Baberowski—who have political connections at the highest levels of the state, maintain relationships with the military and security apparatus, and have only to pick up the phone to place favourable articles in the media—are claiming to be persecuted by students who

have nothing more at their command than critical words. It is as though the state were complaining that it is oppressed by the people.



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