

Herfried Münkler's interview in *Die Zeit*: State-imposed conformism like 1933

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The latest edition of the German newspaper *Die Zeit* represents a new low point in the current campaign against students at Humboldt University in Berlin who criticize the militarist lectures of Professor Herfried Münkler each week on the blog “Münkler-Watch.”

In an extensive interview under the headline “Resentments as in 1933,” Münkler accuses the students of Nazism and anti-Semitism. He also charges his critics with “asymmetrical warfare,” a term associated above all with terrorism. Later he explains, “The discourse of resentment which they foster reminds me rather of political life at universities in 1933: He has a lot of money, but we are poor. He has influence, we do not. That is a pattern that was also used by anti-Semites.”

Münkler's comparison of student anti-militarists with the Nazis is a baseless slander which stands the entire affair on its head. What happened at the universities in 1933? After the Nazis came to power, the universities were compelled to conform and oriented to the extreme right-wing and militarist line of the Hitler regime. On the basis of this state-supervised conformism, termed *Gleichschaltung* by the Nazis, freedom of expression was abolished; Jewish, pacifist and left-wing students were persecuted; and academic and research work was directed to serve the military aims of the regime.

Humboldt University, then known as Friedrich Wilhelm University, played a central role in this process. In 1926, the National Socialist German Students League was founded there. The university was also the site of the notorious book burning of May 10, 1933. In addition to Jewish and Marxist works, pacifist books were also burned. With the words “Down with the literary betrayal of the soldiers of the world war! For the education of the people in the spirit of valour!” Erich Maria Remarque's famous anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* was thrown into the flames.

The barbarism of the Nazis had already been prepared in the Weimar Republic through the suppression and imprisonment of anti-militarists. The tragic fate of Carl von Ossietzky is well known. He had already been sentenced to 18 months in prison at the end of 1931 for his exposure in *Weltbühne* of the illegal building up of the German army, the Wehrmacht. On the orders of the Nazis, Ossietzky was imprisoned again in February 1933 as a committed pacifist and democrat. He died in 1938, the

result of brutal prison conditions.

If one wants to draw parallels to “political life at universities in 1933,” they are the exact opposite of Münkler's characterization. Münkler is the one who stands for dictatorship and militarism and wants to suppress every criticism, not the students. They are attacked and defamed because, among other things, they question the militarist positions of their professor.

In 1933, it was professors like Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger who interpreted law according to the Nazis or philosophically justified the “Führer state.” Today it is professors like Münkler who abuse their positions as academics to integrate the universities into German foreign policy and the drive to war.

Münkler claims he is not a militarist. This is not true. His advocacy for war and militarism is so notorious that even *Die Zeit* cannot avoid mentioning his “militarism,” his “high-level network” and his “close links to political operations.” In fact, there is hardly any other academic who appears more often on talk shows, in radio interviews, in newspaper articles and panel discussions to promote the end of foreign policy restraint heralded by the government.

His latest book, *Macht in der Mitte* [Power in the Center], is one long appeal for the return to German great power politics. He writes that he wants Germany to again make itself the “disciplinarian of Europe” and establish itself as “hegemon.” Germany has “become the central power of Europe,” writes Münkler, and must “play the corresponding role.”

Münkler's propaganda for military build-up and war is infamous. Among other things, he is an avowed proponent of combat drones. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) in April, he termed the killer machines “humane” weapons. He went so far as to draw a parallel between them and the poison gas used during the First World War, which he also called “a more humane” weapon, i.e., compared to shells, tanks and machine guns.

The authors of “Münkler-Watch” founded their blog, above all, on the question of militarism. “We want to show what it means for students when a blatant militarist extremist of the centre is responsible for the education of young people,” they write. They say they intend to “show what's going on here, including more than just in the case of Münkler.”

In the latest blog entry on Münkler's lecture of May 10, 2014, I write under the subheading, "Speaking through Machiavelli," that it is striking "how much Münkler speaks, at this point, through that which he presents as the thoughts of Machiavelli."

They reference similar arguments in a text written by Münkler for the German Foreign Office, in which he describes "how, due to the Second World War and prosperity, the Germans lacked the attitude for a decisive policy representing the interests of the German elite." They said that Münkler called for politicians who would "convey to the people that Germany had to consciously champion its legitimate interests in the world" and would "dauntlessly lead the Germans ahead." They said this showed the extent to which "Machiavelli and Münkler are interconnected."

Münkler will not tolerate any criticism of such views in his lectures. One of the reasons "Münkler-Watch" was founded was that Münkler does not allow any questions in his lectures. The vehemence of his attacks on the blog now make it clear that he will accept absolutely no disagreement from students on these issues.

In *Die Zeit*, Münkler indirectly clarifies why this is the case. One should "not underestimate" the fact that, because of "Münkler-Watch," he is now being "confined to speaking cautiously." As a result of their "denunciatory vocabulary," the "intimate working atmosphere between lecturers and participants" is being "disturbed" and "broken apart by external monitoring," he complained.

Münkler made clear what he means by an "intimate working atmosphere" at his presentation of *Macht in der Mitte* at this year's Leipzig Book Fair. He described freshmen as "sad sacks" that nevertheless grow "when required." By that, he meant his own lectures. Finally, through a "selection process," one always finds "politically competent personnel" who "fit into the boots of Mrs. Merkel and Mr. Steinmeier." "The luxury of democracy" is "then to determine which feet belong in which boots."

To put it succinctly, Münkler is reacting wildly because the criticism by students thwarts his project of indoctrinating youth in order to supply the government, the foreign policy think tanks, the armed forces and the intelligence agencies with new recruits. Or as Münkler himself would put it, to educate "sad sacks," to "select" them and afterwards put them in the "boots that fit."

This is the true parallel with 1933. Just as then, militarism is incompatible with the elementary right to freedom of opinion, and Münkler himself demands the suppression of every criticism and enforced conformity of opinion (*Gleichschaltung*) at the university.

At the end of the interview, Münkler threatens the students. According to the assessment of *Die Zeit*, his critics had "achieved a great deal with meagre means;" Münkler responds, "one must analyze it in order to make effective countermeasures possible. I regard this as a tantalizing

prospect." One can only speculate what he means, but in foreign policy conflicts, he has called for the use of combat drones to punish terrorists who engage in "asymmetrical warfare."

At the moment he is (still) confining himself to accusing the university management of leaving professors like him "in the lurch" and saying it has "no capacity for empathy." According to a report in the *Tagesspiegel*, he has approached the legal department of the university, and university spokesperson Hans-Christoph Keller has confirmed that it is "checking the incident within the framework of its possibilities."

On this basis, Münkler is now solidarizing himself with Eastern Europe historian Jörg Baberowski. This defender of the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte, who downplays the war of extermination by the Nazis in the Soviet Union in his own works, blocked critical students and academics from entering a colloquium with the help of security guards.

In his interview with *Die Zeit*, Münkler claims that Baberowski "was, like me, pursued anonymously on the Internet." This is a lie. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have not made their criticisms of Baberowski and Münkler anonymously but publicly at meetings and in open letters and statements.

The consequences were the same as those experienced by "Münkler-Watch." On its official web site, the History Institute called on instructors and students to "oppose" the IYSSE and no longer tolerate criticism of Baberowski "in the premises of Humboldt University." University President Jan-Hendrik Olbertz signed a similar statement that accuses the IYSSE and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit of "libel" and a "character assassination campaign."

The real issue is not anonymity, but the suppression of criticism. This confirms the warnings of the IYSSE. In an open letter to the university leadership, we said back in February 2014, "Baberowski's attack on basic democratic rights and academic freedom serves the aims of those forces who would like to transform the Humboldt University into a center for right-wing and militaristic propaganda."

Since then, the university has positioned itself openly behind this agenda, while increasing numbers of students are expressing their opposition.



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