

Should students be free to savage their professors using online anonymity?

Jonathan Raspe explores the case of the Münkler Watch blog, which relentlessly criticised Herfried Münkler, professor of political theory at Humboldt University.



Back in my undergraduate days in Berlin, I remember coming across something puzzling in the library. I had spent the last weeks writing my bachelor's thesis and had become slightly out of touch with life outside of my books. When I made my way to the toilet I couldn't help but wonder at the leaflet hanging inside of my cubicle. Advertising a radical students' reading circle, it said in English "Chuy [sic] reads banned books because he knows the Empire doesn't want him to read them" and showed a giant, hairy creature clutching a copy of Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto against its chest. It took me a couple of hours and several more visits to the toilet to identify the brave, undaunted reader on the leaflet as Chewbacca, Han Solo's loyal sidekick in the Star Wars movies.

The case of good ol' Chuy is helpful to understand a debate that took place at the same time and

which shocked German academia. In the spring term of 2015, a group of anonymous students published online reviews to a weekly lecture series delivered by Professor Herfried Münkler, chair of Political Theory at Humboldt University. In their blog, Münkler Watch, the students accused their professor of pretty much everything: racism; sexism; militarism; eurocentrism, and of assisting the German government in laying the ideological ground for an allegedly aggressive foreign policy.

Münkler was no stranger among left-wing intellectuals; for years, he had been known for his conservative views. A welcome participant in public panel discussions and frequent guest contributor to political sections of newspapers, he considered global refugee flows one of the most serious challenges to Europe, regularly called for a more prominent German role in world politics, and favoured the military use of drones. He was also perceived to be closely connected to political decision makers, not least through his role as an adviser to the Federal Academy for Security Policy.

The blog however went way beyond a critical review of Münkler's political positions. The anonymous authors analysed his weekly lectures in search of evidence for what they saw as an 'extremism of the centre': group-focused enmity, including racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, hostility towards refugees, the homeless, and more generally the socially disadvantaged, that they located in the German middle classes and alleged to be spreading across mainstream society.

For the bloggers, Münkler was a prototypical representative of this alarming development. They cited examples from his lectures, for example alleging that he had belittled legal discrimination of women in post-war Germany and what he saw as modern day indignation about it. When questioned regarding the lack of non-white and non-European authors on the syllabus, he had ironically emphasised that there were 'no Africans' on the reading list. On several occasions, he had excessively used gender-neutral language in order to reduce it to absurdity; at other points, the authors wrote, he had heavily drawn on militarist vocabulary. Münkler had suggested a scenario to deport unemployed people across the Mediterranean Sea to the African continent, thereby reversing the usual trend of misery. In a lecture section on the relationship between state and power, he had given undue attention to questionable thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and the so-called "crown jurist of the Third Reich", Carl Schmitt.

There is nothing new in students being upset about their teachers. After all, questioning established views is one of the main purposes of studying, and this can often mean criticising the people who defend such opinions. Twenty years ago, Münkler's angry students would have had to distribute leaflets to passers-by at the entrance to the dining hall, with a rather negligible impact. In the digital age, however, they could share their concerns with a global audience in just a few clicks. They did not even have to reveal their true identities; instead, the bloggers used a generic name as a collective pseudonym to, as they said themselves, protect their future careers and 'bourgeois' dreams of a house and kids. In theory, anybody could have been behind that new blog that was suddenly trending on campus.

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Münkler felt compelled to react. During his lecture, he complained about the “unbearable situation” of teaching under conditions of constant threat of denunciation. He also questioned whether the bloggers were actually students of his and called them “pathetic cowards” for their refusal to join him for a public discussion when they claimed to be no match for his rhetorical skills. Münkler Watch hung over him like the Sword of Damocles, even if he tried to ignore it. Münkler continued to refer to it throughout the following weeks, mostly in the form of ironic self-censorship when broaching issues he “had better not talk about”.

The debate over the Münkler Watch blog centres around civil liberties. Both sides considered themselves champions of freedom: one claimed the right to speak out and to choose what they were to study and the other defended his manner of teaching by pointing to academic freedom. The media were eager to pick up on the conflict: within two weeks, the issue gained nationwide coverage and made it to the review sections of most newspapers; some even drew parallels to the student revolts of 1968.

Münkler was the man of the hour; in interviews, he argued that he had been misquoted. Many journalists adopted his view that the anonymous blog constituted a way of denouncing and oppressing unwelcome opinions in higher education, thereby threatening academic freedom. Editorials in conservative newspapers such as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) and Die Welt called the student authorship of the blog into question. Others argued that anonymous criticism was an important component of the academic world, and that the bloggers had every right to express their concerns. Eventually, several reporters met with and confirmed that they were a group of first-year social science students.

And yet, in spite of all the media stir Münkler Watch caused, hardly anyone in the public debate, certainly nobody among Münkler’s supporters and very few of those who supported the students, seemed to question or even relativise the validity of the blog. The authors’ youthful inexperience led commentators to exonerate them from any charges of maliciousness, but not to reconsider the public attention the blog received. The amateurism of Münkler Watch was clear; the reviews featured a lofty tone, lacked a clear structure, and abounded in stylistic, grammatical and even orthographical errors. At various points the bloggers made misleading statements about political sociology. Some of their objections to Münkler’s lectures were discredited by their own way of writing. One example was that they accused Münkler of ideological proximity to Carl Schmitt because he devoted too much time to his ideas, yet the authors failed to spell Schmitt’s name properly. Does the correct spelling of a Nazi jurist’s name make you a fascist? Errors are excusable of course: after all, the blog was only a first-year students’ project. But the problem of the Münkler Watch affair was that nobody seemed to realise that. Instead, the bloggers’ own pretensions, to oppose allegedly dangerous tendencies in academia, were taken too seriously by everybody else, including the media and Münkler himself. It is the old problem of the new media: anybody can share anything with anybody, but being online does not make anything true by default.

Münkler Watch was neither the first nor the last case of student protest against alleged right-wing tendencies at Humboldt University. In October 2012, then Federal Minister of Defence Thomas de Maizière was prevented from speaking to students by a small group of vocal protesters. In February 2014, police were called to a lecture when students complained of their classmates constantly clapping in order to interrupt the speaker. For years, Jörg Baberowski, Professor of East European History, had been facing a campaign organised by a socialist student group that accused him, among other things, of Holocaust relativism. In early 2017, premises of the Department of Social Sciences were occupied by students protesting against the dismissal of a left-wing lecturer who had concealed personal links to the Stasi. During the occupation, university facilities were vandalised, including floors leading to Münkler's office. All these events seemed to stem from the same social background as Münkler Watch, but none of them were covered to the same extent by the media because they reflected a wider phenomenon German society has long put up with, the discrepancy between the country and its capital city.

Berlin means freedom. Back in the days of the Cold War, capitalist Germany's rebellious youth would move to West Berlin to escape conscription. Today, it is the only German city of global importance. While this may have led to some questionable decisions regarding urban planning and reconstruction, made by politicians anxious to give post-division Germany a worthy representation, it has also confirmed the city's identity as a social and cultural vanguard of the country and a place of seemingly limitless freedom. The city government is all too aware of this unique attraction that stands in stark contrast to the rather unpromising economic and financial perspectives Berlin has to offer, and so are the city's universities.

Both are anxious not to break the bubble that separates the city from the rest of the country. In Münkler's case, the Humboldt University administration confined itself to calling for an open and fair dialogue between both sides. In terms of the streetscape, this policy of *laissez-faire* has led to a different urban appearance that is visible to every German visitor; in terms of higher education, it has created a student body that is, to put it mildly, occasionally ahead of its time. Some students are down-to-earth and confine their liberty as Berliners to Marxist reading circles featuring Star Wars icons; others again use their freedom to demand the abolishment of the university as a repressive institution and call their professor a Nazi.

Anonymous criticism is important to ensure free speech in academia, but it has its limits. When it comes to accusations as serious as this, accountability is more important than anonymity; it should go without saying that in everyone's interest, the university administration needs to interfere with individual freedom where another person's freedom begins. Until this happens—as every local knows, the mills of bureaucracy grind especially slowly in Berlin—this author believes that one may be best advised to ignore occasional excesses of free speech such as Münkler Watch as far as possible, for they do not know what they are doing.

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Published on: April 4, 2017