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Book Review

Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche: Welt im Umbruch

by Herfried Münkler, rowohlt, 2021. 720 pp. \$37.99

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Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche: Welt im Umbruch is thematically integrated into Herfried Münkler's work of the last decade, especially his commentaries on Germany's history and its current political era. After Münkler's comprehensive studies of the First World War (2013) and the Thirty Year's War (2017), his new book turns to the 19th century in Germany following three of its most influential figures: Karl Marx, Richard Wagner, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Aside from his early studies on Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, Münkler's work is not known for its focus on individual thinkers. Münkler excels when drawing big pictures, shedding light on the history of ideas, on the links and relations that connect a vast array of thinkers, ideas, and ideologies over time and place. Although this book's title emphasizes the three individual thinkers, the reader should not expect detailed and original analyses of their works. In the beginning, Münkler clearly states that he does not wish to contribute to the constantly growing and specializing literature on either Marx, Wagner, or Nietzsche (1). He engages with all three as "Beobachter, Kritiker und Zeitgenossen des 19. Jahrhunderts" (Münkler 1); thus, the real protagonist of this book is the 19th century, as seen through the eyes of these three figures.

For Münkler, the 19th century is a time of disruption: traditions play a less significant role in a growing industrial society, religion loses power and meaningfulness, while science promises the mastering of the material world. Concisely put, Münkler portrays the 19th century as an era of extremes causing the erosion of economic, cultural, and political certainties. Thus, according to Münkler, Marx', Wagner's, and Nietzsche's works are equally invested in a search for new certainties (by different means), although

they ultimately arrive at an affirmation of uncertainty and ambiguity. Münkler identifies this final aspect in Marx's continuous revisions of his work, in Wagner's operatic multi-perspectivism, and in the radical affirmation of uncertainty in Nietzsche's own perspectivism. This skeptical conclusion is Münkler's central and most appealing claim in the book.

As expected, Münkler's synthetic and comparative approach, and his accessible writing, make this book an extraordinary resource for the non-academic reader interested in the ideas and movements that shaped the 19th century and us to this day. However, for those who are already familiar with Marx's, Wagner's, or Nietzsche's major works, the book does not offer many new or original aspects concerning these three thinkers. Münkler's book's strengths are its comprehensiveness and accessibility but it also lacks detailed textual analysis, which, to be fair, Münkler acknowledges. Despite its already considerable length of over 700 pages, Marx, Wagner, and Nietzsche offer simply too much material to cover. Nonetheless, Münkler's ability to synthesize the complex lives and works of all three and place them in the midst of the tendencies and problems of their time is an admirable feat.

In the nine chapters of this book, Münkler unfolds the story of Germany in the second half of the 19th century (beginning with 1848) as a time of disruptions of traditions, the emergence of new thoughts and revolutions, and uncertainties towards the future. After discussing Marx's, Wagner's, and Nietzsche's knowledge about each other, their actual biographical relations, Münkler turns to what he calls "ein weitgehend imaginäres Gespräch" (4) between the three; each chapter features one of these dialogues around certain "Knotenpunkte" (4), as Münkler calls them, which refer to events, developments, or discourses that stimulated Marx's, Wagner's, and Nietzsche's thought. Here, political, cultural, social, or biographical analyses dominate. In chapter 3, Münkler discusses Marx's, Wagner's, and Nietzsche's chronic illnesses, their problems

with debts, and their lives as authors. Following this biographical overview, Münkler discusses the impact of the failed 1848 revolution and the successful unification of Germany in 1871 on all three thinkers (ch. 4). Chapters 5 and 6 examine their critique of, or in the case of Wagner, cultivation of religion and literary mythmaking. The last three chapters outline their social commentaries and analyses (ch. 7), their relation to antisemitism (ch. 8), and finally, their attempts to revolutionize society economically/politically, artistically, or philosophically (ch. 9).

The selection of topics that are featured in these chapters show Münkler's own preference for political analysis over aesthetical or philosophical concerns—this gives Marx a slightly stronger presence than Wagner and Nietzsche. This is not surprising considering Münkler's contributions to the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (2020) and his service to the Internationale Marx-Engels Stiftung. Especially fascinating in Münkler's commentary on Marx is his inclusion of Marx's constant self-critical comments to and rewritings of his work. However, chapter 6 offers some intriguing readings of Wagner's operas and the importance of myth for his work (especially *Antigone*). In contrast, Münkler only briefly discusses Nietzsche's writings in each chapter.

Münkler's claim that the parallelization of all three, "die Beleuchtung durch den je anderen" (8), enables us to see them more exactly and clearly raises some questions. First, the book is not so much about Marx, Wagner, and Nietzsche but about their different perspectives on the events and discourses of their times, and Münkler himself acknowledges that; for instance, Nietzsche never engaged with Marx directly, nor did Marx with Nietzsche. Second, it is debatable whether the comparison between their different reactions to and the consequences they drew from the events of their days provides us with a better understanding of their work than an individual study could. At several points in the book, it is not clear how the comparison of Marx's opinions with that of Wagner's, or Nietzsche's, is beneficial. At times, Münkler's chapters feel

stitched together when they turn from one figure to the other, lacking an argumentative line. Thus, to name just one example, it is true that Marx sees the critique of religion per se as the beginning of human freedom, whereas Wagner continues to hold a special place for religion in the modern world (Münkler 209–210). It is also true that Nietzsche’s critique attacks Christianity in particular – but this is nothing we did not already know.

Nonetheless, it is extremely pleasant to read Münkler’s reflections on Marx and Wagner, who, contrary to their usual depictions, appear as subtle and multi-faceted thinkers (for instance, Münkler’s readings of *The Ring*). However, what is fresh and welcoming in Münkler’s portrayal of Marx and Wagner appears dry and antiquated when he turns toward Nietzsche. For his interpretation of Nietzsche, Münkler relies on largely outdated scholarship, with regular references to Sarah Kofman, Bataille, or other French post-structuralist writers. Münkler’s Nietzsche is not particularly wrong but too superficial. He mentions the common topics and talking points: Nietzsche as an anti-systematic thinker, his preference for the aphoristic form (which, in recent years, received some critical attention), his perspectivism, his difficult relation to Judaism, and his so-called theory of the *Übermensch*, which Münkler interprets as a literal call for a selected group of people. Thus, where Münkler does not rely on outdated French interpretations of Nietzsche, he takes Nietzsche at face-value, stopping after a few sketches without acknowledging or allowing Nietzsche’s textual complexity to take form. For instance, Münkler states, in reference to the subtitle of *Zarathustra* (“Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen”), that Nietzsche was interested “seine Überlegungen in einer möglichst für alle verständlichen Weise zu präsentieren.” (291) But would this not contradict Nietzsche’s contempt for the masses and his search for (a few) free spirits, as Münkler notes himself (291)? To write a book potentially for everyone does not mean

to write it as comprehensible as possible – on the contrary, it expresses Nietzsche’s search for a future audience.

In conclusion, Münkler excels, as usual, in showing the 19th century as a complex and ambiguous chapter of German history that should still occupy our thoughts today, while his individual analyses partially lack depth. Although the book’s promise to shed new light on Marx, Wagner, and Nietzsche is not entirely fulfilled, it offers some refreshing perspectives on the former two. It is not a book for experts in the field, but its accessibility and comprehensiveness will appeal to many readers regardless.