

Laudatio: Being Claus Offe¹

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Today it is my happy task to provide the public rationale for the award of this Association's Lifetime Achievement Award to my esteemed colleague, Claus Offe. While I had no hand in making that decision, I heartily endorse it. Indeed, I celebrate it. This talk aims to explain why I do, and why you should too.

On occasions such as this, it is always tricky to strike exactly the right note. The task is not to write Claus Offe's intellectual obituary. He's not done yet: far from it.

Nor is the job to provide an encyclopedic overview his many contributions. Even just reading out the titles of all of his publications would take far too much time. And besides, it would be far too boring. After all, this is a celebration, not a seminar.

Yet another approach would be to treat this task as akin to that of the best man at a wedding. The main aim there is to embarrass the groom. I promised Claus I would not do that. But then again, some promises really shouldn't be kept – so maybe I will do just a little of that, along the way.

Upon reflection, it occurred to me that the best approach would be as offering advice to a young academic aspiring to achieve similar distinction over the course of his or her career. 'What do I have to do to be Claus Offe?' I envisage the youngster asking. Well, here is what it is going to take.

First of all: If you're over 25 and have not yet published your first book – with its foreword written by the next generation's Habermas – then you're already playing catch-up ball.²

And there will be a lot of catching up to do. German words are notoriously long, and German academics' publication lists are even longer. But even by those hyperbolic standards, Claus Offe's is simply ridiculous. His publication list runs to fully 56 pages – single spaced! It is not merely a matter of quantity, either. Claus Offe's contributions have been genuinely seminal in shaping a great many debates, both academically and politically.

I will say more about some of those contributions shortly. But perhaps this is the place to pause and enter a confession. My account will be very partial, and

1 I am grateful to Hubertus Buchstein and Claus Offe for providing materials on which this talk is based, and to Claus for the career occasioning it.

2 Claus Offe, Uta Gerhardt, Wolfgang Nitsch, Ulrich K. Preuß, *Hochschule in der Demokratie* (Neuwied, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965).

necessarily second-hand in places, because much of Offe's contribution has been made in German, a language that I do not read.

For that reason, my comments on his scholarly contributions will pertain almost exclusively to works that have appeared in English and the academic impact of those works within the Anglophone community. With English becoming the academic *lingua franca*, that captures much. But I know that there is more that I'm simply missing.

Similarly, when commenting on Claus Offe's role as a public intellectual I will be inevitably largely relying on what Germans have told me. In some cases, I will be drawing on yarns that came from Claus himself, over the course of many visits here and there. In other cases, I will be relying on what I have been told by others (especially Hubertus Buchstein who provided very helpful briefing notes).

I.

As I have already said, the first thing you must do if you're aspiring to 'Be Claus Offe' is to publish up a storm, and in that way to have a huge impact on academic audiences. Let me give you a sense of all that, by describing some of the themes Claus has made his own. In doing so, I will be telling the story in my own terms, but I hope that Claus will recognize at least something of himself in the characterization.

We might say that Claus started out as a sort of 'industrial sociologist'. His first 'student' book (to which I've already alluded) was in that genre, after a fashion: it was all about how to democratize the feudal structure of German universities. He followed that up with a PhD (published in English as *Industry and Inequality*³) focusing on the workings of meritocratic reward structures in industrial settings.

Those seemingly narrowly industrial-sociology style enquiries served as the springboard for some much larger ones, however. Claus found that there are competing logics in tension with one another in determining rewards in the workplace. And those prove to be a microcosm of deeper tensions among analogous competing logics – social, political and economic – that play themselves out much more widely.

Writ large, those constitute the contradictions of capitalism, and of the welfare state designed to rescue it, that Claus went on to elaborate during much of his early career.⁴ The problem lies in capitalism's impulse to commodify everything in sight, labour along with all else. An obvious solution (if obviously only a partial one) is to 'decommodify' some areas of life (in Claus's phrase, subsequently popularized by Gøsta Esping-Andersen). The welfare state is one way of doing that. Informal exchange arrangements in the 'grey economy' are another. Yet another

3 London: Edward Arnold, 1976.

4 Many of his seminal papers on those topics are collected in *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, trans. J. Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1984) and *Disorganized Capitalism*, trans. J. Keane (Oxford: Polity, 1985).

would be non-monetarized ‘cooperation circles’ of the sort that Claus once proposed (think of reciprocal babysitting arrangements, for example).⁵

Already we are in a position to infer another key lesson for what it takes to ‘Be Claus Offe’. Start with some grounded empirical research, get to know some specific cases well – and then fearlessly generalize some fairly pretty bold theoretical constructions on the basis of that.

That is precisely how Claus came to develop his ‘Theses on the Theory of the State’, for example. He and coauthor Volker Ronge preface that classic article with an explanation of its genesis. Those theoretical reflections, Offe and Ronge say, grew out of two case studies, neither of which sounds particularly exciting in its own right. One concerned reforms of vocational training in West Germany, the other a new approach to research-and-development policy. They go on to say:

“We believe that such case studies of certain state policies in specific policy areas are necessary to gain both theoretical understanding and political perspectives which cannot be gained either through deductive reasoning or immediate experience.”⁶

It is a pattern that Claus has repeated time and again throughout his career. ‘Being Claus Offe’ requires you to hone your intuitions empirically, and then to let your theoretical imagination soar.

A moment ago I alluded to Claus’s pathbreaking work on the structural sources of the crisis of capitalism and of the welfare state. It is important to add, however, that he has always been careful to carve out an important role for human agency alongside structure. Thus, the subtitle to Claus’s classic article on ‘Democracy Against the Welfare State?’ alluded to ‘*Structural* Foundations of Neoconservative Political Opportunities’. But in that article Claus insisted:

“Structures do not *directly* translate into outcomes [...]; they do so by virtue of the responses, interpretations, memories and expectations, beliefs and preferences of actors who *mediate* the link between structure and outcome.”⁷

That is another lesson in ‘Being Claus Offe’. Avoid methodological straight-jackets and false dichotomies. Use the full range of your theoretical toolkit, as appropriate.

Indeed, Claus has always been something of a ‘mediating actor’ himself. He has constantly traversed the bridge between theory and practice – and in both directions. He has always let his real world political experiences shape his theories, at the same time as his theories inform his politics. One good example of that was his engagement with Green politics. He drew upon his experiences advising the nascent Green Party in order to formulate some of the most compelling

5 Claus Offe and Rolf G. Heinze, *Beyond Employment: Time, Work and the Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

6 *New German Critique*, 6 (1975), 137-47 at p. 139.

7 *Political Theory*, 15 (1987), 501-37 at p. 514.

academic analyses of ‘new social movements’, more generally.⁸ That is another great article that I commend warmly to anyone who does not already know it.

The fall of the Wall presented Claus with a golden opportunity along those lines. His work, academic and practical alike, turned decisively toward ‘transitology’. His initial speculation was that post-communist societies were in the impossible position of facing three challenges at the same time – nation-building, economy-building and polity-building. Claus doubted that all three tasks could be accomplished simultaneously. The problem, as Claus saw it, was that the agents that would be required to carry them out were simply not in place. There was no ‘national bourgeoisie’ with a democratic outlook, there was no democratic working class movement. Put in the form of a characteristically pithy Offe aphorism: you cannot ‘build capitalism without capitalists or democracy without democrats’.⁹

In the end, one of those problems was solved from the outside. Democratization of sorts – of form if not substance – came through conditionalities imposed for accession to the EU. But the problem of nation-building most definitely remained in countries dogged not only by ethnic divisions but also, inevitably, by highly politicized division between the citizenry and the old regime’s elites, beneficiaries, servants, spies and informants.

Different countries found different ways of coping with all the social, political, economic and legal challenges that arose in the transition from state socialism. That provided fertile ground for Claus’s taxonomic imagination in mapping the ‘varieties of transition’.¹⁰ With his long-time friends Jon Elster and Ulrich Preuß, Claus coauthored a pathbreaking book on *Institutional Design in Post-communist Societies*. I still think should have been subtitled ‘The East European Dilemma’ – for it is nothing short of being the equivalent for post-communist societies of Myrdal’s classic analysis of the place of race in *The American Dilemma*.¹¹ Their book is just that important.

II.

Making seminal academic contributions of those sorts, stimulating and intervening in academic debates with telling effects – those are a large part of what it is to ‘Be Claus Offe’. But Claus does not just write and reflect about political events. He also shapes them, through his own political interventions. That is another large part of what it is to ‘Be Claus Offe’.

Claus’s political life is a ‘life of the left’, of course. While still a student at Freie Universität Berlin, Claus was an influential member of the SDS. Claus co-authored a range of memoranda and papers on how to democratize the university,

8 Claus Offe, ‘New social movements: challenging the boundaries of institutional politics’, *Social Research* 52 (1985), 817-868.

9 Claus Offe, ‘Capitalism by democratic design? Democratic theory facing the triple transition in East Central Europe’, *Social Research*, 58 (1991), 865-892.

10 Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

11 Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich Preuß, *Institutional Design in Post-communist societies: Re-building the Ship at Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

culminating in the book that I've already mentioned. In the context of the deeply feudal and authoritarian German university system, calling for full participation by both students and junior academics was pretty radical. Yet that call struck a chord with many. As the protest movement grew over the course of the 1960s, the SDS was intellectually at its centre – in no small part because of Claus's insightful contributions.

It all became too much for many, including eventually Habermas, who severely criticized the student left for its illusionary revolutionary rhetoric. Claus joined other SDS members to pen a collection of essays in reply to the more substantive concerns that Habermas had raised – that despite the fact that Claus was at the time himself working as Habermas' Assistant. (That was a tribute to both of them, I've always thought.)

Claus's own chapter in that collection castigated Habermas for being too fearful of criticizing capitalism head-on. That essay was a political intervention in the first instance – a reply to Habermas' criticism of the SDS. Yet it set Claus on academic course to develop his sustained critique of late capitalism over the course of his many subsequent academic and public contributions on that topic.¹²

Throughout the 1970s, Claus was one of the leading critics of capitalism in German public forums as well as academic ones. Although clearly a leftist, Claus always kept his distance from the German Communist Party (and indeed from Maoists and Trotskyites and everyone else on the looney left). Nonetheless, as one of the main spokesmen on the left, Claus became a lightning rod for public attacks from the right. Claus in turn launched a set of trenchant critiques of the neo-conservative movement that was then on the ascendant, in a plethora of newspaper articles as well as scholarly ones. Thus, Claus was very much at the centre of the 'culture wars' of Germany throughout the 1970s.

Claus also had sharp words for the soft left. With Habermas and others, Claus wrote a devastating critique of the SPD's 1975 ten-year vision, in which Claus and his co-authors insisted on stronger regulation, more taxation of the rich and democratizing the workplace – and, more generally, greater resistance to the way in which capitalists use claims about the 'inevitable workings of market forces in the global economy' to blackmail democratically-elected governments.¹³

As important as all those other political interventions was Claus's influential championing of the right to challenge the legitimacy of democratic majorities. The Peace Movement was on the ascendant in the early 1980s in West Germany, provoked by the Schmidt Government's endorsement of the aggressive stance of NATO under General Haig and President Reagan. Once again, thousands of protestors flocked onto the streets – 400,000 of them at one Bonn rally alone. When conservative politicians questioned their right to protest, Claus wrote a thoughtful article on the limits of majoritarian democracy. Its conclusion was "that the legitimating function of the principle of majority rule in modern capital-

12 Claus Offe, 'Kapitalismus-Analyse als Selbsteinschränkung', *Die Linke antwortet Jürgen Habermas*, ed. O. Negt (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), pp. 106-112.

13 Claus Offe, S. Skarpelis-Sperk, J. Habermas, P. Kalmbach, 'Ein biedermeierlicher Weg zum Sozialismus?' *Der Spiegel*, 24 Feb. 1975, pp. 44-50.

ist democracies is thoroughly problematic and disputable.”¹⁴ Excerpted widely in newspapers, Claus’s article provided a principled reply to the conservative critique of the protestors and served to bestow legitimacy on the ongoing resistance to the militaristic follies of democratically-elected governments of the day.

So too with the Green movement. Local groupings that eventually formed the basis of the Green Party first began emerging in the late 1970s. Once again, Claus was there from the start as one of their leading theoreticians. He advised in the background, spoke at public meetings, and published commentaries on green issues in the popular press. Claus clearly shared the Greens’ repugnance for traditional mass parties, and his theoretical writings gave them many reasons for thinking they were right in rejecting that model. But Claus nonetheless reiterated the importance of Greens themselves engaging effectively in parliamentary politics, if they are ever to realize their goals. Naturally, however, Claus was never uncritical in support of the Greens, either. Thus, when the SPD-Green coalition shifted toward more neoliberal approaches to the labour market in 2004, Claus was an outspoken critic, reemphasizing the old leftist verities of solidarity, equality and avoiding social exclusion.

Toward that end, Claus has been a longstanding advocate of unconditional basic income, paid as of right to all citizens. The Basic Income European Network (as it then was) was founded in 1986, with Claus as its first Co-chair.¹⁵ And he has vigorously pursued that agenda in a great many forums, public as well as academic, ever since.¹⁶ Claus has also, with various collaborators, engaged in detailed studies of the changing nature of work that has made measures like basic income increasingly urgent. Those studies too, particularly the book *Arbeit 2000*, have fed directly into public debates.¹⁷ The persisting problem of unemployment has made these proposals highly relevant, politically, and Claus’s advice on such matters is often sought by politicians, pundits and many others.

Finally, of course, there are Claus’s many contributions to the debates over what was to come after the fall of the Wall. His many scholarly reflections on those issues, to which I have already alluded, were accompanied by equally many public interventions. In perhaps one of the most prescient, Claus wrote a 1990 article in *Die Zeit* warning against the tactical use of nationalist rhetoric in the course of Unification, for fear that that risked inadvertently whipping up sentiments against minorities and foreigners.¹⁸ Alas, Claus has been proven right, once again.

14 Claus Offe, ‘Political legitimation through majority rule?’ *Social Research*, 50 (4)(1983), 709-756 at p. 715.

15 ‘A short history of BIEN’, available at: <http://www.basicincome.org/bien/aboutbien.html#history>.

16 Claus Offe, ‘A non-productivist design for social politics’, *Arguing for Basic Income*, ed. Philippe Van Parijs (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 61-80.

17 H. Matthies, U. Mückenberger, C. Offe, E. Peter and S. Raasch, *Arbeit 2000* (Hamburg: Rowohlt 1994). See also, for example, Offe’s ‘Time, money, and welfare-state capitalism’, *Civil Society and the State*, ed. J. Keane (London: Verso 1988), p. 221-243 and essays on ‘The Political Economy of the Labour Market’ and ‘The Future of the Labour Market’, in Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, ed. J. Keane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), pp. 10-51 and 52-79 respectively.

18 Claus Offe, ‘On the tactical use value of national sentiments’, *Critical Sociology*, 17 (3): 9-15.

III.

So there you have the formula for how to ‘Be Claus Offe’: be bristling with good ideas and profound insights; write prodigiously, with one eye to grand theory and the other eye to the real world; express yourself with Spartan simplicity that makes the core of your analysis crystal clear, to both academic colleagues and the wider community alike; and don’t hesitate to say your piece in public debates, when something important is at stake.

But there is one more element of the formula that I have not yet remarked upon. That is: ‘Be lucky’. Claus Offe always had a knack for being at the right place at the right time.

He was, on his own account, lucky to find in Jürgen Habermas a mentor and lifelong supporter (even when the two of them disagreed). Offe was indeed lucky to be adopted by Habermas, when he took Claus on as his Assistant in Frankfurt. But remember: it was Offe who first approached Habermas (then a young and still largely unknown professor) to write the foreword to the book that he had written with his undergraduate friends. Claus makes his own luck, that way.

Claus was also, on his own account, lucky to find Niklas Luhmann in the office next to his at Bielefeld, although they disagreed about a great many things. Clearly, intellectual curiosity and openness, as well as plain dumb luck, form a large part of the formula for ‘Being Claus Offe’.

Finding congenial intellectual traveling companions, and figuring out how to make best use of them, is the conventional sort of luck that characterizes any successful academic career, I suppose. But Claus Offe has been lucky in being at the right place at the right time in more world-historical ways as well.

First of all, he was lucky to be born at the right time for him to be at the leading edge of the 1960s student movement. Of course, luck is mostly a matter of what you do with it; and Claus seized the moment and made it his own, in the ways I’ve already described. Still, it was literally an accident of birth that he happened to be a university student at the time all of that came to a head.

Here are a three more examples, illustrating that theme of Claus’s being in ‘right place at the right time’ in world-historical ways.

- After spending their early university years together, Claus Offe and Ulrich Preuß went their separate ways – Claus to try his hand at music in Berlin (and painting the SDS headquarters by night), Ulrich to Paris for further legal training. Ulrich rang to say that he’d met some really interesting people in Paris and that Claus must come for a visit. When Claus did, Ulrich threw a party and asked Claus afterwards whom he liked. “Well”, Claus mused, “that red-haired fellow who is stirring up things out in Nanterre was pretty interesting”. Danny Cohn-Bendit, of course.
- Once when Claus was visiting Canberra he came to a family dinner at my house. Chatting with my teenaged sons, he asked if they were going to see the Rolling Stones when they were in town. The boys said they weren’t going (couldn’t get tickets) but asked Claus in turn if he’d ever seen the Stones. He replied, “Well, I was once at a concert where they were going to play, but I left before they came on stage; I didn’t like the atmosphere [...]” Altamont, of

course – the festival where the Hell’s Angels, who had been hired to provide security, ended up provoking a violent affray killing one spectator and injuring many. That event is generally taken to mark the end of Flower Power, and to herald the beginning of a new and more violent phase of the youth movement.

- Finally, where do you suppose Claus was on September 11th, 2001? New York City, of course, lecturing at Columbia. So Claus was there to experience firsthand the tragedy, to watch the airborne ashes of the World Trade Center settle on the shocked city, and to witness up close the genesis of the distorted mindset that so perverted American (and indeed world) politics for the decade to follow.

So there is a certain ‘Forrest Gump’ element to ‘Being Claus Offe’, in somehow always managing to find yourself physically present at world-historical moments.

Even when Claus did not initially find himself at the centre of the action, he always recognized clearly where the action was very early on, and he managed to get himself there promptly. Thus, when nascent green parties started popping up locally across Germany, Claus stepped up to advise and to assist. When the idea of unconditional basic income was first floated in its current form, Claus stepped up to co-chair the Basic Income European Network promoting it. When the Wall came down, Claus immediately recognized the challenge that the transition would pose and saw clearly the opportunities for a social theorist both to help with and to learn from the experience – from his perch at the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin in 1991-1992 and from his professorial chair at Humboldt from 1995 onwards. And predictably enough Claus is now engaged in a major joint research venture exploring the causes and possible consequences of the Arab Spring. He never stops.

IV.

In short: Claus has traveled the world, dispensing wisdom and good sense, displaying curiosity and conviction in equal measure. He is an international treasure. It is only right that he should be acknowledged, by this Lifetime Achievement Award, as a local hero as well.