

Book Review: Europe Entrapped by Claus Offe

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In this short book, Claus Offe aims to bring into sharp focus the central political problem that lies at the heart of the EU and shackles its ability to deal with the most serious crisis of its short history. Anamaria Dutceac Segesten applauds this provocative but much needed argument calling for more, not less, political debate in the EU today.

Europe Entrapped. Claus Offe. Policy Press. 2015.

Find this book: 

Claus Offe's *Europe Entrapped* is part of a series of shorter texts from Policy Press on the fate of a Europe in crisis. Last year we had [Jan Zielonka's *Is the EU Doomed?*](#), in which the author expressed doubts about the future of the institutionalized EU at the same time as he foresaw a continuous integration driving sub-national actors such as regions and cities closer to each other.

Europe Entrapped shares with Zielonka's text a good dose of pessimism about the EU's chances of overcoming the crisis that reverberates across the continent. However, Offe's analysis has a different focus. The German political sociologist locates the core of the problem in a **crisis of agency**. Even if Europeans could agree about the causes of the crisis and (even less probably) on the measures to be taken to alleviate and correct its effects, there is no one left to implement this strategy of redemption. In his words, the "crisis has largely paralyzed or silenced the forces and sources of constructive remedial agency" (p. 2), and the EU lacks the collective capacity to concretely address the causes and consequences of the crisis (p. 3), with the main EU agents (the ECB, the European Council, the Commission or national governments such as those of Germany and other member states) impotent in front of the tasks at hand.



The book opens by addressing the question of markets in the European Union, only to move quickly to the core of the problem, the diagnosis about the nature of the disease that eats Europe up. Placed in the general context of the global financial crisis originating in the US, the Euro regime suffers from two main flaws: 1) the ECB is forced to make unitary monetary policy for a too diverse array of economies (the 'one size fits *none*' situation, p. 26); and 2) the EU is insufficiently integrated and thus lacks the capacity to make effective decisions in relevant areas such as fiscal, economic and social policies (p. 55). To dream, however, that one could turn back time and return to an era of national currencies is profoundly unrealistic. The Euro is here to stay, as dismantling the mechanisms that support the common currency would be more costly than to correct the imperfect integration from which it suffers. As opposed to Zielonka, Offe believes in the irreversibility of European integration.

Offe makes a clear case against austerity (pp. 29-31), and suggests as solutions the creation of a banking union that would save the states from having to bail out banks (p. 39), or the debt mutualization through Eurobonds (p. 41) that should be administered by an independent and credible supranational authority in charge of wealth redistribution in view of reducing the wide economic disparities that plague the Euro zone currently.

The author returns to the issue of redistribution in the last section of the book, as it is considered the one most likely to engage the European publics and to motivate agents for change. The three main reasons that justify the focus on redistribution are that it provides a concrete pendant to the European ideal of social justice (as enshrined in the legal foundation of the EU; the TFEU), it addresses the concerns of that majority of European citizens negatively affected by the crisis, thus increasing democratic legitimacy of the Union, and finally it provides tangible incentives to boost

employment and reduce tax cheating (p. 122).

In between the description of the origins of the crisis and its potential solution, the core argument of the book is to be found: the need to empower agents for reform. At the heart of the current conglomerate of ills that threaten the EU is a deep tension between the national interests of member states and the common interests of the Europeans, which should have been addressed by the supranational institutions of the Union but which are not because of the inherent faults of the latter's construction.

In his search for a political agency (pp. 56-60), Offe calls for more European integration, rooted in popular support for the European project. He favours the vision of a social Europe where markets are restrained and a more even playing field is created across the continent. In a nutshell, Offe's entire book is a call for action towards the **politicization of European politics**. The crisis can offer the special circumstances needed to go beyond the status quo, an opportunity to address the democratic deficit of the EU by getting rid of the inadequate rule by auto-pilot and its replacement with real politics, "strategic, resourceful and *contested* rather than adaptive" [my emphasis] (p. 57). Leaving contestation as a monopoly of the right-wing populists is to continue to fill the need for a "shared policy or strategic vision" about the solutions to the crisis with the empty "politics of rejection" and blame-placing (p. 58).

Allowing a vigorous debate on EU politics can have a positive effect by giving the European people a sense of a shared project worth defending, and thus the longed-after democratic legitimacy. This public debate may also allow for the deep cleavages that fragment and polarize the EU membership today to be overcome. The altogether pessimistic outlook about the potential realization of this further integration of Europe is underlined by the vivid criticism of Offe's country of birth, Germany, and its hesitation to assume leadership in times of distress (pp. 90-108).

The call for more politics remained for this reviewer the most interesting element of this well-written book that is not afraid to make explicit its left-oriented normative positions in the debate about the future of the Union. One may criticize the solution proposed as key to the way out of the present morass (the redistribution of wealth from the core to the economic periphery of the Union) as embracing an all too clear left orientation. One may also point out that the workings of the EU institutions (the European Council, Commission and Parliament) are too summarily and simplistically described. At the same time however, one must remain thankful to Claus Offe for engaging the reader in a provocative but much needed argument calling for more, not less, political debate in the EU today.

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