

Comments to Claus Offe:

What, if anything, might we mean by “progressive” politics today?

Let me first say that I feel honoured by the opportunity to comment on this thoughtful and thought-provoking keynote lecture. I share many of Claus Offe’s views and critical concerns, but for the sake of discussion, I would like to highlight some points where I arrive at somewhat different conclusions than he does. And I will try to point to some of the implications his theoretical ideas may have for the business of social reporting and monitoring.

I.

To begin with, I share the actor-centred view that “progress” should be understood as “the outcome of collective intentional efforts” and “*not* the evolutionary outcome of the blind forces of change” (p. 1) and hence almost always “involves social conflicts” (p. 2). But I don’t see that this necessarily involves state action and has to result in legislation (p. 1). Can progress not be brought about by collective actors, for instance, by social movements or associations of civil society who share a common vision of a good (or better) society and who succeed in changing societal conditions towards that vision – irrespective of whether these efforts are institutionalized in social rights and legislation or not? I agree that the very idea of progress has the normative connotation of a “desired goal of action”, but I don’t see why these goals of action need to be formulated as political or social rights.

I also agree very much with the idea that “progressive change is essentially contested” (p. 2). For me, this implies that it is by no means self-evident what constitutes “progressive politics”. While it may be historically true that “progressive politics” has been associated with the political left, first with the Liberals (e.g. in 19th century Britain), later with Socialists of different varieties, it cannot be taken for granted that there is an *a priori* consensus about the contents of “progressive politics”. Rather, reasons have to be given for certain *goals*, and it has to be argued that these goals can be achieved by certain political *strategies* and actions. And, I would like to add, **evidence has to be provided that the actual outcome of such political actions is in fact “progressive”, that is, leads to progress towards the desired goals.**

I also find the idea very useful to think about society in terms of a “difference between conditions as they *are* and conditions as they *should* and *can* become (through transformative political efforts)” (p. 1, see also p. 3). For this comparison relates the *empirical*

reality of society to a *normative* vision of a good (or better) society (Soll-Ist-Vergleich). Doing this almost by necessity leads to a critical stance on (the *status quo* of) society.

In my view, this idea bears great resemblance to a basic methodological principle of social indicator research: namely, to evaluate actual living conditions in terms of some normative standards, or to put it a bit differently: to measure to which degree certainly commonly agreed social (or societal) goals are in fact realized or not. This procedure involves two related tasks:

- a normative one: to specify the (system of) goals and to provide reasons for their selection, and
- an empirical one: to take the measure of existing conditions (in various dimensions) and to monitor *changes* in these conditions.

II.

With regard to societal goals, Offe criticizes in particular the overemphasis on measures of economic growth (as conventionally measured in terms of GDP p.c.) and related measures of economic performance (such as productivity, efficiency, technological progress, etc.) as misplaced because “allegedly beneficial economic growth...does not automatically lead to enhanced *well-being* and... it does not lead to *sustainable* well-being” (p. 5).

While I largely agree with this criticism, however, these arguments are not altogether new. Similar arguments have been put forward by the social indicators movement since the 1960's, and they have been on the research agenda since then. In the following decades, these arguments have given rise to the development of much more comprehensive conceptualizations of 'welfare', 'well-being' and 'quality of life'. Indeed, it seems to me that it is the merit of the empirical research guided by such concepts that it has generated the knowledge on which such critical assessments like the one quoted above are built. Likewise, much broader accounting systems have been developed which attempt to take into account also the costs and negative externalities of unconstrained economic growth.

The point I want to make here is that **in the field of social science, in particular social indicator research, the methodological tools and instruments for conceptualizing and measuring 'progress' at the individual as well as the societal level are already available – although there is certainly no consensus.** It rather seems to me that in the present discourse this research has not adequately been taken into account, or perhaps has been forgotten and only re-discovered recently.

In this vein, the criticism has to be directed towards policy-makers (rather than to social scientists!) that *their* political attention is too narrowly focused on economic performance and constrained by short-term considerations related to the political business cycle.

But as social scientists, we should also ask ourselves why we have not been able to bring our concepts and research results to the attention of policy-makers and to have an impact on the political process. These quests concern the public role and responsibility of social scientists. Economists have been far more successful in this respect. The predominance of economic thinking and expertise in the political process has probably a lot to do with the *institutionalized influence* of economic advisors in advisory boards and councils.

My plea, therefore, is that social indicator research and social reporting can enhance the impact of the social sciences on politics and can, indeed, make a contribution to an evidence-based, more rational approach to policy-making.

III.

This is, of course, not an easy task to accomplish, but requires systematic research and continuous social monitoring, the importance of which is often underestimated.

Just to give an example from the present paper:

When I read: “In Germany, 15 per cent of children grow up under conditions of poverty. About the same percentage of mankind (...) suffers from hunger or severe malnutrition” (p. 6), I ask myself: How do we know about these “bad realities”? These are not simply “observable facts”, but they require

- conceptual clarifications how to operationalize, for instance, “poverty” in a global or national context, in absolute or relative terms, and
- the systematic collection of empirical evidence over time.

It is obvious that in these cases, different normative standards of “poverty” are applied so that the *meaning* of poverty is different in the cases compared. Moreover, for a *political* evaluation, I would like to know whether things have gotten better or worse over time. The mere statement that “the norms and principles that are valid and universally accepted as such do not apply in practical terms” (p. 7) – true as it is – is not sufficient for this purpose.

These considerations are the more true for such complex and multi-faceted concepts like “distributive justice”, “equality of opportunity”, or “sustainability”, which are often invoked in political rhetoric, but seldom given an operational meaning. To make empirically valid statements about “sustainability”, for instance, presupposes

- assumptions (or better: knowledge) about the availability of (yet untapped) resources in the future, and
- assumptions about the likely consequences of certain strategic options and of specific courses of political action (including the behavioral adaptations of citizens).

IV.

The thrust of Claus Offe's argument, as I understand it, is that we should be more modest in our ambitions: "We do not need *more* progress, but we need to cope in better ways with the consequences of the (alleged) progress we have made already" (p. 7). While I feel sympathetic with this more realistic approach politically and share his political criticism, I think the methodological point is somewhat mistaken.

Even the failure to achieve ambitious goals does not invalidate the notion of social progress as such. On the contrary: we need well-defined theoretical concepts in order to assess whether we are making progress or not. We do not need to abandon the goal of achieving progress, but we need to re-conceptualize 'progress' in such a way that it captures all those elements which may have been neglected in the past: solidarity, sustainability, etc..

Such an encompassing re-conceptualization may eventually result – in Offe's words – in a notion of "*net* progress". In this respect, I would like to take sides with him, would even be a bit more ambitious. I think we are *not* left with the need to assess the negative side effects and long term externalities of "gross progress" only in *qualitative* terms. We should make efforts to *quantify* these negative effects and externalities in order to ascertain whether "the logical possibility that a *plus* in "gross progress" involves a *minus* in "net progress" (p. 11) is actually true or not in specific circumstances and with regard to specific problems. And, consequently, we need to redirect political efforts to *influence (or control)* the ongoing processes of social and economic change in order to optimize *net* social progress.

V.

Of course, a distinction can and should be made between concepts of 'welfare', 'well-being' or 'quality of life' which usually refer to the micro-level of living conditions of individuals and households, and concepts like 'political (or social) progress' or 'sustainability' which relate to characteristics of political systems (or even societies) at the macro-level. But despite the analytical distinction, there are also interconnections and interdependencies between the two levels:

On the one hand, social and political progress should be experienced on the individual level, in the living conditions and life chances of ordinary people. On the other hand, individual well-being, including the exercise of political and social rights, often rests on political, economic and social preconditions which are beyond the control of individuals (cf. Sen's "capability approach").

As a sociologist raised in the Weberian tradition, I therefore endorse the view that we should put more emphasis on evaluating the normative and institutional framework of our societies by which actual living conditions and life chances of the citizens are structured, i.e. enabled and/or restrained.

Following this line of thought, I also support the idea that we need *institutional innovations* to cope with the challenges of the 21st century, the unanticipated consequences of political interventions as well as of changing patterns of social behaviour. In my view, social monitoring and social reporting can be regarded as such institutional innovations, namely as instruments of self-monitoring of societies and as feedback mechanisms which can help to improve the responsiveness of the political process.