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## America and European Self-Understanding About Clas Offe, *Reflections on America: Tocqueville, Weber & Adorno in the United States* (Cambridge, England, Polity Press, 2005).

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### Article by an MPIfG researcher

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THIS IS a truly exciting book, and indeed one of the author's best. "Reflections on America" is a slightly expanded version of Offe's 2003 Adorno Lectures at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt, masterfully translated by Patrick Camiller. While the book recounts the impressions of three European social theorists traveling at different times in the United States – Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, Theodor W. Adorno – it is of interest not just to readers specializing in social theory or in American studies. Its German title: "Selbstbetrachtung aus der Ferne" (literally translated, "self-inspection from afar") indicates that the book is as much about Europe as it is about the United States. Reading it one understands that since its beginnings in the 18th century modern European social theory and the way European societies regard themselves have evolved in keen and often puzzled awareness of this new, simultaneously strange and familiar, rising society beyond the Atlantic.

What did, according to Offe, the three travelers see in the United States, and what were they looking for? The chapters devoted to Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno, respectively, show how the main theme of the authors' fascination with America was not America but Europe or, for this matter, Western civilization as a whole. America was the place where Europeans could learn about their own destiny and explore their own moral status. In fact today more than ever, most if not all comparative social science and comparative social-philosophical reflection has as its subject the fundamental question of convergence or nonconvergence of the societies outside the United States on the model of the United States. Even a debate as apparently technical as that on the "varieties of capitalism" comes down to this essential issue.

As Offe points out in a short and precise introduction, Europeans considering the United States have wavered between two alternative expectations, the Europeanization of America and the Americanization of Europe. Both prospects could be regarded either with fear or with hope. As it happens Tocqueville, the first of the three visitors, stands for the hope that becoming like America would make Europe a better place. Weber, in turn, expected America to become like Europe, and he thought that this would finally seal the decline of European civilization in the course of its rationalization. Adorno, finally, writing in the 1940s and 1950s, believed that in America, and especially in what he called the American "culture industry", he had seen the future of Europe, and it looked ugly enough to him. Offe's interpretations are careful and sympathetic, and he mostly abstains from taking sides – knowing well, as he says several times, that it may be exactly an

\* About Clas OFFE, *Reflections on America: States* (Cambridge, England, Polity Press, *Tocqueville, Weber & Adorno in the United* 2005).

irresolvable ambivalence of hope and fear that is at the core of the European experience in and with America. Still, Tocqueville comes out as the most farsighted and intellectually adventurous of the three observers, and Adorno clearly as the one who seems to have least understood the country on which he was rendering his usually devastating judgment. (Of course it must not be forgotten that while he spent much more time in the United States than the two others – over a decade in fact – he had arrived there as a refugee, and as a stranger especially to the American kind of social science in which he was forced to make a living.) As to Weber, it is interesting to see, and Offe makes this abundantly clear, how indebted he was to his precursor, Tocqueville, making it seem all the more strange that he never gives tribute to him although he was obviously deeply familiar with his writings. (On the other hand, he afforded exactly the same treatment to another giant of the 19th century who has constantly on his mind, Karl Marx.)

Offe manages to integrate a wide variety of observations and arguments into a short, essay-like book that remains highly readable even for the non-specialist. There is no way of doing justice to the complexity of the connections and comparative perspectives he finds in and develops out of his material. One fascinating parallel between the three European travelers, not only between Tocqueville the aristocrat and Weber the bourgeois liberal, but also between the two and Adorno the “critical theorist”, was a deep fear of the egalitarianism of American culture and society, combined with a fundamental concern that its possible spread across the Atlantic might eliminate “liberty” (Tocqueville), the “bourgeois individual” (Weber) and “individual autonomy” (Adorno). While Adorno lived at a time when American social science was producing studies like Riesman’s “Lonely Crowd”, accompanied by intense debates on America turning into a “mass society”, nothing documents as clearly as this commonality the origin of “critical theory” in a profoundly European bourgeois “high culture” that had no sense for the democratic egalitarianism, not just of the American tradition, but also of the European labor movement.

Where is Offe in all this? If one tried to locate him in the fourfold table he implicitly suggests in his introductory remarks – one that reminds the reader of Albert Hirschman’s ingenious ordering of positive and negative judgments on “market society” – one might expect him, like many other Europeans of his generation, to look forward to, or at least hope for, a specific Europeanization of the United States, not in the pessimistic sense of Weber but in that of a historical return of the “New Deal” version of an American welfare state and of the final acceptance in American foreign policy of the rule of law. But Offe is sober enough to accept that this is no longer a possibility, if ever it was one. In two short and brilliant essayistic pieces, one following on the chapter on Tocqueville (“Excursus on Rules and Decisions,” pp. 34-42) and the other rounding off the book at the end (pp. 93ff.), he argues that there are two insurmountable obstacles to American convergence on a “European model” as understood by European Social

Democrats and Liberals – one rooted in the American construction of the relationship between civil society, religion and the state, and the other inherent in the structure of the world system after the disappearance of Communism.

With regard to the former, Offe argues that the fundamentally limited reach of the American republic into the private lives and beliefs of its citizens, as inherited from a history of society-formation preceding state-formation, stands firmly in the way of the constitution of general rules instituting positive social rights of citizenship. In their stead citizens have successfully demanded and defended extensive opportunities to fight individually for specific decisions benefiting specific individual interests to be won, not through collective political rule-making, but through litigation in courts. Concerning the international context, Offe emphasizes the world-historical reality that today the United States is no longer one state among others but has become the uncontested superpower of the modern world, which enables it to consider its historically rooted idiosyncrasies more than ever as “self-evident” truths and to treat compliance with international rules as a matter of its own decision, conditional on self-interest or “self-evident” religious beliefs. While Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno could still regard the United States as a society separate from and comparable to their own, today, according to Offe, the U.S. is everywhere, deeply inside all other societies, culturally, economically, militarily, which strictly speaking removes it once and for all from comparison. Global interdependence under American dominance has finished the prospect of America becoming like Europe as effectively as it has ended the possibility for Europe ever to become like the United States. Today comparative social science, of the sort founded by scholars like Tocqueville and Weber, can strictly speaking be no more than a futile attempt at comparing the incomparable.

It is an intriguing question what it might be that Americans could learn from Offe’s review of prominent European self-examinations in the face of that enduring sociological mystery, the United States. Of course Americans for their part have always used Europe for the same purposes for which Europeans have used America: better to get to know themselves. In the course of this, European writings on America, notably of course Tocqueville’s, have deeply influenced the way Americans see themselves. Offe’s book reminds us, in turn, how tempting Europeans have found the American concept of American society, and by “self-evident” implication of all societies, as a nexus of voluntary contracts between individuals free to arrange their relations however they pleased. But while Europeans like Tocqueville and Weber might have had reasons to wish that things were in fact so easy, thereby indirectly confirming Americans’ optimistic prejudices about themselves, they always knew that the contractualist reduction of social life was a utopia projected onto the presumably wide and empty spaces, the “tabula rasa”, of their American colonies. Offe quotes Locke’s famous dictum, “In the beginning all the world was America” (p. 4). He also

suggests that the many problems of American domestic and international politics, problems that a growing number of Americans today worry about as much as Europeans or more, may have to do in a complicated way with a profound misunderstanding of the role of institutions and traditions in a democratic republic, and with an early contracted inability to do justice to the weight and the use of historical legacies in a nation that considers itself built and rebuilt “from scratch”. A society, that is to say, that conceives of itself and, by extension, of the world as of a voluntary association – as a result of instantly reversible rational choices – may not have the tools to deal with the burden of historical legacies that one cannot wish away or do away with by a contractual “coalition of the willing”, domestically or internationally. Should Americans not want to have a little more of a republic and a little less of individual liberty and individual choice? And should not social theory be constructed in such a way that it affords credible conceptual space to the possibility of public institutions that enable a reasoned *volonté générale* to be formed and realized, even at the price of subjecting individual citizens to more binding collective obligations, benevolently constraining their rational choices? That which Europeans try to leave behind when they adopt from American “rational choice” a concept of a society in which nothing emerges beyond and above the individual – is this not precisely what Americans concerned about the state of their nation might want to look for?