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Klaus von Beyme and his impact on German political science

An essay

Wolfgang Merkel

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Klaus von Beyme is gone. He died on 6 December 2021 at the age of 87. He died as he lived: self-determined, self-confident, without complaint. Who was the political scientist Klaus von Beyme (1934–2021), what shaped him, distinguished him, what did he mean for political science?

He was born into a family of landowners in Silesia. Their most important ancestor was Carl Friedrich von Beyme (1765–1838), Prussian Cabinet Councillor, Real Privy Minister of State, Member of the Council of State and Grand Chancellor. In the turbulent times of the French Revolution, the “Real Privy Minister of State” played an important role as a reformer of an enlightened Prussia even before the Stein-Hardenberg reforms. Troubled times also accompanied Klaus von Beyme when his family had to flee Silesia in 1945, and then sought to make a new beginning, largely penniless, first in the Harz Mountains (East) and then in Northern Germany (West).

After graduating from high school, Klaus von Beyme completed an apprenticeship as a bookseller in Braunschweig. Only then did he enrol for multiple studies of jurisprudence and “philosophical-historical subjects”, including sociology, at the University of Heidelberg. There he listened to an illustrious circle of Heidelberg scholars of the time: Alfred Weber (sociology), Hans-Georg Gadamer, Karl Löwith and Dieter Henrich (philosophy), Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (history) and Carl Joachim Friedrich (political science). Friedrich, to whom Klaus von Beyme (1963–1967) would later become an assistant, divided his teaching time between Heidelberg and Harvard at the time. However, Klaus von Beyme kept his distance from Dolf Sternberger, who went on to establish the Institute for Political Science at the University of Heidelberg together with Carl Joachim Friedrich in the 1950s,

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throughout his life (von Beyme 2016a, p. 127). The latter's normative Aristotelianism and his Anglophilia for British parliamentarism were just as unconvincing to him as Sternberger's upper-class mannerism. His years as a student and as an assistant in Heidelberg created deep academic roots. "To the living spirit" is written above the entrance to the "New University". It was this combination of living spirit and scholars' republic that made Heidelberg his place for a lifetime. Klaus von Beyme's intellectual horizon, however, always reached far beyond. This is already shown by his various places of study.

Klaus von Beyme studied in Bonn, Munich (E. Voegelin), Paris (R. Aron, M. Duverger), Harvard (T. Parsons, K. W. Deutsch, V. O. Key, H. Lasswell) and Moscow. Voegelin's religiously impregnated philosophy of history remained alien to him. Parsons' structural-functionalism, on the other hand, had a lasting influence on his view of the functional equivalents of different structures and different contexts. This was particularly true of "comparative government (Vergleichende Regierungslehre)", which became "comparative politics" in Germany, mainly through his writings. But the exchange program in Moscow also left deep traces. Not in theory or methodology, but as a subject and theme. Without any ideological affinities, the Soviet Union and Russia repeatedly became the subject of the political scientist's research. In 1965, for example, Klaus von Beyme wrote his doctoral thesis on the topic of "Political Sociology in Tsarist Russia", which seems exotic today, and in 2016 he even wrote a book on the "Russia Controversy" (2016b), in which he—typical of him—sought a neutral third way between "Russia-understanders" and "Russia-critics".

While still working on his habilitation in Heidelberg, Klaus von Beyme received a call for a full professorship in Tübingen in 1967. There, despite academic and political differences, he established a collegial coexistence with the liberal-conservative *Ordinarius* Theodor Eschenburg and led the institute through the turbulence of the student movement. This was a movement that had students and assistants inspired by the neo-Marxist-inspired left pitted against the right-wing conservative counter-mobilisation of the "Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaften". As a matter of fact, von Beyme was rector of the University of Tübingen for one week, but got caught between the fronts there and resigned after a few days.

In 1973, against the initial resistance of the Christian Democratic Minister of Culture, Science and Education Wilhelm Hahn, he was appointed to a full professorship in Heidelberg. The call became a vocation, the university his alma mater, Heidelberg his ontological space. He remained loyal to it until his retirement in 1999 and to in his voluntary teaching and doctoral supervision far beyond. The scholars' republic on the River Neckar thanked him and made him an "institution".

He never aspired to office. However, when he was offered such posts in the profession, such as the chairmanship of the DVPW (1973–1975) or that of the IPSA (International Political Science Association: 1982–1985), he accepted them; not in the sense of an emphatic emphasis on the common good, but in his own prosaic sense of duty. In office itself, he was anything but a decisionist, and instead sought a balance between interests and world views, left and right, East and West. This balancing mode of control did not, however, prevent him from giving the IPSA conferences, which until then had often been flowery, a more analytical profile:

“less events and more science” he proclaimed in his inaugural speech (von Beyme 2016a, p. 183; Panreck 2021, p. 112).

1 The generalist

Klaus von Beyme’s greatest period was the seventies, eighties and part of the nineties of the last century. In the first professional self-observation and reputation study of German political science (Honolka 1986), von Beyme was voted in first place three times by his colleagues: in the category of “most important representative of the discipline”, “political theory” and “comparative political science”. In the self-evaluation by DVPW members that followed ten years later (Klingemann and Falter 1998), Klaus von Beyme was ranked 10th among the world’s most important political scientists of his time. He received first place for being the “most important representative of political science in the Federal Republic of Germany”, and was ranked second by his colleagues in the categories “political theory” and “comparative political science”. One may not be wrong to be sceptical about the value of such reputational beauty contests, but one cannot accuse the members of one’s own profession of lacking expertise.

Something else becomes apparent from these reputation studies. Klaus von Beyme was a generalist who also enjoyed an extraordinary reputation in many sub-disciplines ranging from political theory and comparative studies to domestic politics. In these 25 years, von Beyme was the “generalist” and “solitaire” of German political science. In 50 monographs (all written by himself) he has covered a range of topics that would make some small institutes dizzy. These include: the political systems of Italy, Spain, the USA, the Federal Republic of Germany, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; books on parties, interest groups, parliaments, political elites; on political theories, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism; on architecture, urban planning, art, culture and politics. He even wrote about “Exoticism, Racism and Sexism in European Art” (2008). Some of these books have been published in double-digit editions and translated into several languages. I know from my own experience that he not only wrote the books alone, but also did the research himself without the help of his assistants or auxiliary assistants.

Klaus von Beyme was a generalist without generalising. This is by all means meant critically. Sometimes, when looking through his oeuvre, one gets the impression that he virtually rushed from book to book, from topic to topic. One book was not yet finished while the next was already being started. That came at a cost. Klaus von Beyme had by no means reaped the full scientific harvest that the empirically saturated studies would have allowed him. If he had taken a step back from his historical-empirical ideographs and climbed a rung up the ladder of abstraction, he could have summed up in more general, nomothetic terms. He denied himself this kind of generalising quintessence. He was convinced that the “meso-level” was the place of (comparative) political science. The micro-level alone was too small ascale for him, the macro-level too abstract. Nevertheless, if one does not want to give up the holistic view, the middle level fits in as a link. The meso level was thus both

a missing link and an independent place of political science analysis for Klaus von Beyme.

Without this “renunciation”, he would have stimulated more “debates” and “controversies” in the discipline. But theorems, bold generalisations, general laws or even predictions were far from his mind. His detailed historical knowledge prevented him from doing so. Klaus von Beyme therefore hardly triggered any debates. Not on legitimacy and legitimation, not on governance, not on the state or capitalism, not even on the democratisation or on the crisis of democracy. The controversies against him had mostly been ignited by his writings on “Economics and Politics under Socialism” (1975) or on Putin’s Russia. They were characterised more by the professional envy of Eastern European scholars who were less motivated by theory than by substantive objections to the intrepid interloper from outside the field. The normative mistrust that accused the Russia expert of being close to the old Soviet regime or, later, to Putin’s authoritarianism was completely misguided. Politically, both regimes were alien to him; academically, he deliberately did not allow himself to be normatively defined. If anything, it was the critical rationalism of Popper and Albert that guided him epistemologically.

2 The comparatist

Klaus von Beyme described his method early on as a “functional method”, which places “every social phenomenon in relation to the entire system context” (von Beyme 1966, p. 86). He thus distinguished himself from the “paleoinstitutionalism” (Klaus von Beyme) of the old comparative government, from constitutional law or from the founding generation of German political science, not only from Dolf Sternberger but also from his teacher Carl Joachim Friedrich. Unlike the latter, von Beyme emphasised the interrelationship of the individual system components and their functional performance for the system as a whole. Here von Beyme was influenced by the American system functionalism of Talcott Parsons, Gabriel Almond and David Easton, the first two of whom he himself listened to at Harvard and MIT in the early 1960s. But he was by no means completely taken in by the functionalism of sociological and political systems theory. He neither focused on stable equilibria of systems nor did he forget the formative role of actors in politics (von Beyme 1982b) and within the political system. His books on parties, interest groups, trade unions and the “legislator” bear witness to this.

Later, he approached neo-institutionalism, or better neo-institutionalisms, since they already have substantial differences among themselves (Hall and Taylor 1996). He himself never became a classical neo-institutionalist. Perhaps there is no such thing. The “institutional rational choice approach” to the explanation of “choice actions” and the inclination of model formations was not his cup of tea. The same was true on the other side for culturalising neo-institutionalism. Von Beyme came the closest to “historical (neo)institutionalism”, an approach that developed in conflict with the behaviouralists on the one hand and the rational choice theorist on the other. Historical institutionalism focuses on the contextual genesis of institutions, which, according to the theory, influence the behaviour of interest-driven actors such as

parties and interest groups in their respective concrete forms. This gives rise to path dependencies that influence the behaviour of actors and the production of policies in a long-lasting and tenacious manner.

These are also the classical extensions by means of which Klaus von Beyme had already transferred the outdated static “Regierungslehre” of German political science to modern “comparative politics”. To the formal constitutional structures and procedures he added the actors, interests and conflict structures (politics) as well as the results of conflict politics, the policies (Busch and Merkel 1999, p. 16ff.; Schmidt 2008). This closes the arc of polity, politics and policies.

What is interesting in terms of the history of science is that Klaus von Beyme was already a historical institutionalist before historical institutionalism came into being as a separate explanatory approach in the 1980s. He laid the foundations for this in his “key work” (Kailitz 2007) “The Parliamentary Systems of Government in Europe” (1970). Significantly, the “completely revised new edition” (1999) appeared under the title: “Parliamentary Democracy. Origins and Functioning 1789–1999”. Here the author expresses the two building blocks of his comparative method already in the title: “genesis” and “functioning”. Klaus von Beyme was a functionalist and historical (neo)institutionalist without ever describing himself as a proponent of either. This was typical of him, as he never sought, perhaps even avoided, the explicit labelling of his scientific work.

3 The theorist

Klaus von Beyme wrote numerous books on political theories. They ranged from “Die politischen Theorien der Gegenwart” (1972), “Theorie der Politik im 20. Jahrhundert. Von der Moderne zur Postmoderne” (1991), “Politische(n) Theorien in Russland” (2001) and “Geschichte der politischen Theorien in Deutschland 1300–2009” (2009). This is an enormous corpus of political theories. It spans centuries and also unearths some unknown theories that were previously unknown even to theory experts. The books cited are a treasure trove of the history of political ideas. But was Klaus von Beyme a political theorist for this reason alone, especially considering the fact that his professional colleagues had already placed him at the top of the list of theorists in German political science before his monumental late works? What actually is a political theorist? Someone who puts forward his own theory—or something smaller—someone who revises and synthesises from existing theories and then drafts his “own” theory?

Klaus von Beyme did not develop his own theory in the field of political theories. It could not be a normative theory, if only because he always kept a cool distance from normative theories and interpretations in political science. Nor can Klaus von Beyme’s theoretical work easily be assigned to one of the two major theories of social and political science, systems theory or theory of action. Here, too, he could not be categorized. He formulated his willingness to synthesise unequivocally in his book: “Theorie der Politik im 20. Jahrhundert. Von der Moderne zur Postmoderne” (1991, p. 341): “Government theory, however, is bound to that meso-level between macro- and micro-level, and this level is necessarily placed between system- and

action-orientation. This position makes wars of faith between micro- and macro-theory, between action and systems theory, if they are fought out as alternative radicalism, completely unfruitful precisely for governmental theory” (translated by the author). Von Beyme revealed two things with his quotation: on the one hand, he did not want to assign himself a priori to any single or individual theory. On the other hand, even in partial analyses he never obscured the view of the whole, which for him was usually the system as a whole. In doing so, it was particularly important to him to relate the collective actors to each other in terms of systems theory. Despite his affinity for functionalist thinking, this actor-centredness made him keep a clear distance from all autopoiesis variants of systems theory. Von Beyme contrasts the peculiarly apolitical level of abstraction of Luhmann’s autopoiesis with an “empirical theory of politics”.

He refused to take the further step towards his own theory. His immense empirical detailed knowledge domesticated the longing for a theory of one’s own. The price was possibly higher than Klaus von Beyme himself was aware of. His empirically saturated theories achieved at best a medium range. Their empirical components tied them strongly to the present and accelerated their epistemological decay. Klaus von Beyme designed “usable theories” (Rüschemeyer) for his concrete comparative analyses—often more implicit than explicit. If they were ever “medium-range theories” (Merton), the empiricism made them strongly relevant to the present. He was aware of this. He was also aware of the synthetic, if not eclectic, character of this form of theoretical work. However, for him this had already lost its scientific “character assassination capacity” before the times of postmodern theory collages (Busch and Merkel 1999, p. 31). Even though he wrote an article on “Empirical Political Theory” (von Beyme 1996) in the theory section of the renowned “(A)New Handbook of Political Science”, edited by Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, in the overall view of his work he was more of a “theory-interested empiricist” (von Beyme 1997) than an “empirical theorist.”

4 The teacher

Klaus von Beyme saw himself as a university teacher. He embodied the unity of research and teaching in an almost ideal way. The students thanked him for this. His seminars and lecture halls were full, usually overflowing. Listeners of all faculties and generations followed him. They were fascinated by his rhetorical brilliance, the author of this obituary included. The physically rather small professor had great intellectual charisma. Yet his lectures were by no means accessible without preconditions. They were sometimes associatively postmodern rather than embedded in the clear structure of modern thought. Prior knowledge was desirable. Then one benefited from his teaching, was encouraged to turn to other authors and to think beyond pre-drawn masks.

Klaus von Beyme’s spontaneous reactions to massive disruptive manoeuvres from the ranks of Maoist groups (KBW, KPD) or radicalised Spontis were legendary in Tübingen and Heidelberg. They were often funny and never larmoyant. He used the laughs to his advantage. In this way, he defused many conflicts that his conservative

colleagues from the “Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaften” only clumsily exacerbated. The Institute for Political Science at Heidelberg University in the 1970s was a hotbed of these conflicts during the 1970ies.

The great attraction to his lectures and seminars, however, also had a price. The (socially) liberal university lecturer rarely turned down requests for examinations from among the students. This brought him an average of three to four times as many examinees as the average of his colleagues. From 1967, the beginning of his professorship, until 1999, when he retired, the number was in the thousands. Dozens of students waited outside his office every week. He awarded doctorates to around 100 doctoral candidates. He habilitated sixteen political scientists. Most of them became professors. Klaus von Beyme produced general goods on an assembly line for the university, the profession and the scientific community. He never made a fuss about it. They were duties that had to be done. Prussian roots. He only applied this Prussian work ethics to himself and never to others. Klaus von Beyme’s “Assistenten” (assistant professors) also benefited from this. The professor did not demand services. One did not have to work for him. Only the examination sitting had to be done and there we experienced a mild examiner. He often justified this to us younger, less mild ones with “a mildness that comes from old age”. To us he was neither a buddy nor an “ordinaries”. He kept his distance. The classic paternalism towards his assistants was alien to him. The expert reports he wrote for his post docs were of legendary brevity. Our only career aids on the academic job market were the helpful distinction of having been “his assistants”.

5 The solitaire

Klaus von Beyme wrote his books alone. There were no contributions from third parties. But he also never put his manuscripts up for discussion. He did not “test” his theses and interpretations in his immediate academic environment. He was reticent about that. We usually only found out about his publications when the book was physically in our mailboxes. I have always regretted this. Perhaps both sides would have benefited from a more intensive debate and cooperation. He was brilliantly extroverted with his eloquence in front of hundreds of listeners, yet conspicuously introverted and taciturn in words and cooperation. He was an individualist, also in this respect: “Scribo ergo sum”, all in the first person singular.

The scholar who “produced” so many academic followers refused to found his own school. He did not want to. His normatively abstemious theoretical writings, the detailed comparisons that stopped short of more far-reaching generalisations, offered too little substance and incentives for school formation. There was no Klaus von Beyme school, like a Habermas, Luhmann or Fritz Scharpf school in Germany. Even the “Heidelberg School”, which sometimes appears in self-descriptions of Heidelberg Political Scientists, is a fiction. There were neither sufficient normative, theoretical nor even methodological similarities between the writings of Friedrichs, Sternberger, von Beyme, Nohlen and later Manfred Schmidt. Klaus von Beyme’s multi-layered works and eclectic syntheses were not designed for a school of their own. This also applied to his mentality. If his writings were strongly criticised, he

rarely “shot back” sharply, but looked beyond the criticism for praise and agreement in the reviews, accompanied by subtle and gently irony.

The “Beyme method”, if there was one in the strict sense, was impossible to learn. Even imitation had its limits. These lay in the fact that he was one of the last universal social scientists with an almost inexhaustible knowledge. This allowed him to cross borders from theory to comparison, from West to East, from politics to art, from architecture to the history of habitation, from modernism to postmodernism and back. Who else would dare to do write about such a wide range of topics and subjects? Who had comparable knowledge at their disposal? Comparative politics has long since taken this into account when approaching overarching comparisons only with quantitative methods. Detailed knowledge is no longer required in large-*n* analyses. This is both a gain in knowledge and a loss of knowledge. Isaiah Berlin (1953) once illustrated, borrowing from antiquity, two different forms of knowledge using the animal world: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing”. If Klaus von Beyme is to be measured against this, he may be called a fox.

Klaus von Beyme was the most productive political scientist of the second generation of German political scientists. He influenced generations of students. He left behind an enormous body of literature. He modernised German political science in the 1970s like no other. He was a “trailblazer”. He cleared the way for the outdated “Regierungslehre” (“comparative government”) of the founding generation to develop into modern-day “comparative politics”. This made German political science compatible with the international debate. Exemplary of this are not least his two books “Economics and Politics in Socialist Systems. A Comparative and Developmental Approach” (1982a) and “Political Parties in Western Europe” (1985), both English-language editions of the original German editions, which had already caused a “furor” at home.

Klaus von Beyme did not leave behind an enduring theory of his own, nor a school. His work was not designed for that and he knew it. And yet, after 1949, he was one of the most important political scientists in Germany.

Requiescat in pace.

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