

In memoriam – Charles Beat Blankart

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What can economics contribute to the explanation of political decisions or the actions of public administrations? And to what extent are these politico-economic phenomena dependent on the constitution of a democracy and the institutional framework that prevails in an economy? Answers to these kind of questions are provided by the political economy branch of economics – as we all know and we call it public choice. We try to help understanding political decisions more systematically as the result of the competition of interests.

Charles Beat Blankart was one of the founding fathers of the European Public Choice Society and served as its president from 1984 to 1986. The public choice school in its early days revolutionized economics in many European universities from the 1970s onwards.

Influenced by the work of future Nobel Laureate James Buchanan and his research colleagues such as Gordon Tullock in the 1960s, the innovative ideas spilled over to Europe in the 1970s and inspired a new generation of young economists - including Bruno S. Frey and his team, from which the later professors Beat Blankart, Werner Pommerehne, Friedrich Schneider, Gebhard Kirchgässner and Hannelore Weck-Hannemann emerged.

They had all grown up in an academic environment dedicated to the increased mathematical penetration of micro- and macroeconomic issues without any explicit reference to real politics. The government and its functioning were either completely ignored or viewed as if it would gratefully accept the economists' suggestions and implement them directly.

Public Choice scholars like Beat Blankart criticized such an unrealistic assumption. They analyzed in depth how political decisions are made, which decision-making calculations need to be taken into account and how the institutional framework systematically influences the political process. Supported by a productive environment, Public Choice scholars throughout Europe succeeded in bringing economics much closer to reality.

Today, political economy is firmly anchored in economics, and any serious consideration of policy recommendations cannot do without an in-depth analysis of Public Choice.

Beat Blankart, who came from a family of bankers in Lucerne (Switzerland), made a decisive contribution to the dissemination of the ideas of Public Choice. He already came into contact with the new ideas during his dissertation period at the University of Basel. He then moved to Constance for his habilitation and was soon offered professorships at the Free University in Berlin, the Bundeswehr University in Munich, the Technical University in Berlin and finally, in 1992, to the Humboldt University in Berlin. He was a member of the independent Scientific Advisory Board of Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs in Germany. The German debt brake is, not least, a result of his advocacy.

Many generations of students will remember him above all for his textbook: "Öffentliche Finanzen in der Demokratie". With nine editions, it is not only one of the most successful textbooks on public finance focusing on political economy, but also one of the few textbooks to deal explicitly with the situation in German-speaking countries. For decades, he was an integral part of the EPCS Conference. Beat Blankart met his colleagues with a friendly smile and open ears. And so the latest insights from this conference quickly found their way into the next edition of his textbook.

Beat Blankart was an innovative and straightforward researcher who was not afraid to take uncomfortable positions. He analyzed and warned about the consequences of creeping centralization in federalism. He argued strongly in favor of granting the principle of fiscal equivalence in the intergovernmental relations within Germany as well as within the EU and he opposed to more fiscal capacities at the EU level.

On Sunday morning (29 October), Charles Beat Blankart passed away in Berlin in the presence of his wife Michaela after a long, patiently endured illness. The Public Choice family will honour his memory for his great services to economics and our society which has lost a founding father and a great friend of us.