

Obituary for Professor Dr. Berndt Ostendorf (1940-2024)

Berndt Ostendorf died on October 18, 2024 after a long illness at the age of 84. From 1981 until his retirement in 2004, he held the Chair of North American Cultural History at the Amerika-Institut of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. The news of his death is very painful, especially for his wife Jutta and the Ostendorf family, but also for all those who valued Berndt as a friend and scholar.

Berndt Heinrich Ostendorf was born in Langförden on April 8, 1940, to Franz Anton and Maria Elisabeth Ostendorf (née Arlinghaus). As the youngest of nine siblings who grew up in a small community in rural Lower Saxony, Berndt was not born with an interest in the United States of America. But when he first heard the "Jazz Hour" presented by Willis Conover on *the Voice of America* radio station in the 1950s, featuring this rousing, originally American music, he was immediately captivated by it - and its country of origin. His love for jazz, which he described as the "key to America" and "the USA's most important contribution to world culture", never waned, nor did his enthusiasm for researching American cultural history.

Berndt Ostendorf studied history, English and philosophy at the University of Glasgow, the University of Pennsylvania and at the University of Freiburg, where he completed his doctorate in 1969 with the dissertation *Der Mythos in der neuen Welt: Eine Untersuchung zum amerikanischen Myth Criticism*. The work, which was published by Frankfurter Thesenverlag in 1971 and uses literary and philosophical approaches to examine the history of the development of myth in aesthetics and the applicability of the relevant theories to North American literature, already demonstrates the author's admirable interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary knowledge. Berndt Ostendorf's next important work was the groundbreaking essay "Black Poetry, Blues, and Folklore: Double Consciousness in Afro-American Folklore". It first appeared in 1975 in *Amerikastudien / American Studies* (vol. 20, 209-259) and was published in 1982 together with five other of his essays on similar topics under the title *Black Literature in White America* in Brighton (Harvester Press). This volume, along with eleven other anthologies and over 150 published essays, book chapters, newspaper articles and reviews, the majority of which deal with black authors, black folklore, minstrelsy, blues and jazz as well as *race relations*, contributed significantly to the establishment of African American Studies in Germany and Europe. It is impossible to even begin to adequately acknowledge the wealth of

Ostendorf's publications here, but it is at least worth briefly mentioning the impressive innovativeness and analytical acuity of his questions, his wonderfully polished writing style, often spiced with subtle irony, and the great thematic breadth of his writings. In addition to African-American cultural history, his main areas of research included multiculturalism, immigration and civil society, photography and advertising, music and religious history, politics, popular culture and transatlantic relations. He also had a special love for the city of New Orleans, about whose culture and music he wrote numerous great texts. New Orleans and jazz also play a prominent role in his latest book publication, *Musik der USA: Kultur- und musikgeschichtliche Streifzüge*, written together with Wolfgang Rathert and published by Wolke Verlag in 2018.

Not only through his writings, but also through his work as a university lecturer and his participation in numerous commissions, research institutions and professional associations, Berndt Ostendorf has rendered outstanding services to the development, institutional anchoring, modernization and international networking of American Studies in Germany and Europe. He joined the German Association for American Studies (DGFA) in 1969 and played a key role in its development as a member of the Advisory Board (1973-1981), as Vice President (1987-1990) and as Executive Director (1990-1993). He was also one of the founders of the Bayerische Amerika Akademie (BAA) in 1997 and was an active member of the German Research Foundation (DFG), the European Association of American Studies (EAAS), the European Cluster of American Studies (ECAS) and the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) for many years. He has been a visiting professor in various countries in Europe and the USA, including the University of Massachusetts, Harvard University and Venice International University. At the beginning of the 21st century, he was also appointed to the Council for Migration (RfM) e.V., of which he was a member until his death.

Above all, however, Berndt Ostendorf shaped the Amerika-Institut at LMU Munich for almost a quarter of a century (1981-2004) as holder of the Chair of North American Cultural History. He expanded the thematic focus of the Institute and established interdisciplinary research and teaching in the fields of cultural history, philosophy, religion and politics, also through direct collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines. In addition, he was highly committed to promoting international academic exchange at all levels: He participated intensively in the EU-Erasmus program and, as a founding member of ECAS, promoted the establishment of an international "Master in American Studies with European Modules"; he helped dozens of students to study abroad in the USA with the support of the DAAD, the German Marshall Fund, or Fulbright; and he brought more than twenty American visiting scholars to

the Institute - including renowned personalities such as George McGovern, Margaret Atwood, David Blight, James and Lois Horton, Michael Kimmage and John David Smith. Students and teaching staff have benefited greatly from their presence, courses and lectures, and many of the contacts and connections made back then have endured to this day.

As an academic teacher, Berndt Ostendorf impressed his students with his comprehensive education and professional expertise. He was always ready to respond to all kinds of questions and interests, encouraging critical examination of established academic positions and research into new, even unusual topics. As a research assistant and habilitation candidate, I appreciated him as a generous boss and supervisor who gave me a lot of freedom and supported me even in difficult times (for example, when the university administration was of the opinion that a woman with three children could not possibly habilitate and therefore could not hold an assistant position). Berndt was a role model, mentor and friend who always encouraged me on my path and on whose advice and advocacy I could always rely.

Colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic who knew him speak of him with the highest esteem. Berndt Ostendorf was not only a great scientist, but also a life-oriented, positive-thinking, kind and humorous person. All those who had the privilege of working with him and who were his friends will always remember him with affection and gratitude.

Farewell, dear Berndt - we will miss you very much!

Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson