Imagining Post-War Happiness: Otto Neurath and Britain in 1945

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This paper is about the Austrian sociologist Otto Neurath and the way he imagined a post-war structure of feeling, in particular, his ideas about the way reconstruction in Britain after World War II could become a form of planning for happiness.

Neurath died in Oxford in December 1945. Although he scarcely knew the post-war period, he was instrumental in its imagining. He was involved, for instance, through various internationalist movements that envisaged the post-war period as the moment when a new unity of his nations could replace the old hierarchies of Empire. Several of his friends and correspondents went on after his death to become key figures in UNESCO, the World Health Organization and in the Commonwealth.

He was also involved in the redevelopment of the borough of Bilston, near Wolverhampton. Though not bombed, Bilston hoped to benefit from post-war reconstruction money to improve the terrible living conditions associated with its industrial decline. Neurath, his wife Marie and their team at the Isotype Institute were employed by the borough council to produce statistical charts propagandizing the new developments, and Neurath was also used as a consultant for the developments, since he had been closely involved in modernist social planning in Red Vienna in the 1920s. The town clerk, A.V. Williams wrote,

> "When he came to us in Bilston we had a surfeit of little men embracing big ideas. But in him there was no contempt; he made us feel that the pursuit of beauty and happiness could be achieved by the common man."

Neurath's brief contribution to planning in Britain was to prioritise human happiness and to encourage planners to look at planning from the perspective of the people whose lives it affected. Although he did not live to be Bilston's sociologist of happiness, and the Bilston

redevelopment failed, he brought the idea of happiness to reconstruction.
In 1945 an article in the *News Chronicle* appeared describing the Bilston redevelopment plans and dubbing Neurath a sociologist of happiness. As a result, he received several letters from people looking for work on the Bilston project, including demobbed soldiers wanting to be involved in a project concerned with happiness.

However, his advocacy of social planning was attacked by another Viennese, Friedrich Hayek. Hayek regarded the free market as a guarantor of freedom and in his influential 1945 book *Road to Serfdom* he attacked socialist planning as social engineering rooted in a false belief in the omnipotence of reason, which he inaccurately associated with Neurath. The planned society became associated with enforced social conformism and repressive social orders (as in Soviet socialization projects and the Stalinist Five-Year plans). Yet Neurath believed that planning could potentially enable rather than limit the individual freedom and non-conformism that he regarded as necessary for happiness.
On Hayek he wrote,

> "Professor von Hayek thinks of planning exclusively as something dictatorial.
> I do not know why… planning can be connected with a suppression of individuals
> hardly heard before, but also to enable us to be free to an extent hardly
> heard before, 'free' i.e. a multiplicity of ways of life possible, non-conformism
> supported by planned institutions."

Neurath's reputation today is as a man who epitomizes the "scientism" of modernist thought, as one of the main spokespeople for "logical positivism". But a close examination of his writings suggests that his work is much less positivist and rationalist than it first appears, and his work in planning is emphatically pluralist, as he argued against Hayek.

Neurath's writing is very odd in many ways. It combines a faith in empiricism and science, and in the potential neutrality of statistical data – with a concern for aesthetics in its full sense. Neurath was, as A.V. Williams suggested, concerned very much happiness and beauty, with feeling and in particular with empathy – in German *Einfühlung* – the feeling of being one with others. This combination of scientism and aesthetics can be explained to some extent by an understanding of the intellectual culture in which his ideas developed. Science - or *Wissenschaft*, which has a broader meaning, seemed to Neurath to provide a good basis for

an atheist materialist understanding of the world. German philosophy was in his view still under the sway of religion, idealist metaphysics was basically theology in another guise. Concepts like love, friendship, empathy, happiness and beauty needed to be wrested from a theological framework and based in the actual experience of actual human beings rather than idealised ones.

At the heart of Neurath's writings are two ideas he returned to repeatedly. First, an Epicurean idea of happiness – in which happiness, not virtue or everlasting life, is the goal that people do, and should strive for, in Neurath's view, through rational analysis of their situation and social and economic planning. Second, something he calls the "Auxiliary motive", which is the necessity of making decisions sometimes on the toss of a coin, without the guidance of reason or the surety of faith.

To take the idea of happiness first: like the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, Neurath based his view of happiness on sociability, stability and intellectual and political freedom, not on material wealth or excess. The second concept, of the auxiliary motive, derives from Descartes fable of the "Lost Wanderers". Using this fable, Neurath argued that reason could become like religion or mysticism – used to provide justification for actions, to convince us we are on the right path, when in fact we often have to choose between two paths without any good reason to believe that one is better than the other. "Pseudo-rationalism" as he calls it, places too much face in reason and gives too much authority to science so it simply becomes a substitute for religion. Two paths may be just as good or as bad as each other, but we need nonetheless to arrive at a decision. Neurath suggests that rather than cast about for good reasons to act one way and not another, or appealing to higher authorities, whether they be science or religion, we should accept that to toss a coin is sometimes fine.

The auxiliary motive is key to understanding Neurath's idea of planning for happiness because it points to the limits of planning, and the burden that having to act can place on us. Neurath felt strongly that while science, research, data, and rational design can provide the material for decision-making, they cannot decide for us, and he recognised of the importance of feelings, comfort, and psychology. These two ideas, perhaps better described as dispositions, sharply distinguish Neurath's thinking about planning and reconstruction from

that of his contemporaries both in 1920s Vienna and 1940s Britain. While Taylorists like his friend Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, inventor of the fitted kitchen, believed rational planning could ease the housewife's labour, Neurath showed a much greater awareness of the comfort-factor of the inefficient. He takes the example of the English fireplace – a waste of calories in scientific terms, and a highly inefficient form of heating – but something that also encourages certain forms of sociability and provides certain kinds of pleasures. Neurath argues that fireplaces are not "happiness- neutral" in the way that a cable-shaft beneath the street might be. He uses a vocabulary to talk about happiness that seems oddly scientistic – he talks of describing "happiness conditions", for instance, but his point is that planning needs to take these into account, while recognizing that what makes one person happy might make another thoroughly miserable. As early as 1919 he argued that planning,

"must pay equal heed to the psychological qualities of men [sic] to their love of novelty, their ambition, attachment to tradition… as does the engineer to the elasticity of iron, to the breaking point of copper."

Feeling must be taken into account in planning. Yet this cannot be done in a straightforward way. In a 1912 essay called *The Problem of the Pleasure Maximum* he had argued that economic institutions should be studied and assessed according to their potential in realizing maximum happiness, while at the same time demonstrating the problems in attempting to quantify happiness. This essay peculiarly obsessed with calculability ends up demonstrating that happiness is not something measurable and calculable. In 1942 he writes,

"All homely comfort relates to certain traditional customs and environments and that joy might sometimes depend solely on the fact that something should not be changed… How much 'discomfort' is liked because it is 'ours'. And yet other people like change and adventure"

So the difficulty for planning is that it has to establish what measures are "efficient in producing happiness" whilst accepting that "happiness-conditions" are variable and not measurable using identical measures, nor are they rationally arrived at. The thing that makes this easier is the separation Neurath advocates between scientific and technical analysis and design, on the one hand, and decision making on the other. Decisions need to be made co-operatively and democratically, since self-determination is itself a happiness-condition. Neurath understands that feeling is central to how we experience ourselves as having a

particular "standard of living" and that it is not reducible to a simple opposition of pleasure and pain, yet he believed that happiness conditions might nonetheless be registered, and compared.

Neurath's faith in empiricism and his recognition of the plurality of "happiness conditions" does not lead him to abandon happiness as unknowable. Instead, he places the emphasis on consultation and self-determination. He strongly fought for the chance to properly consult the people of the Bilston slums, though his attempts seem to have been repeatedly thwarted, presumably by councillors, architects and planners already set on their own designs for the area. In a letter he wrote to AV Williams, he talked of "decentralisation", and enabling, in his words, "the slum-dwellers to continue certain peculiarities of their life", by which he meant things they enjoyed and did not want to abandon. He said,

"I am looking at all these items from a personal point of view, how a single person in your society may look at it, as a father, as a tired person, as a person who would like to read a book."

In other words, as well as using consultation, Neurath appeals to empathy. This is also characteristic: in an early essay he asks rhetorically how can we know the joy of the fishes? "From our own joy in the water." Whereas we cannot translate other people's quality of life entirely into data or statistical analysis, we can deduce it using empathy. Neurath has a reputation for being opposed to the idea of empathy in sociology. But he stresses that it has to begin with the recognition of our common ground, our shared world that make sit possible for us to communicate.[1]

I hope I have given some sense of how Neurath understood planning for happiness. In the last part of the paper I want to look at some of the ways his ideas on happiness and social planning relate to war and particularly the concept of the post-war, and how the balance of feeling and calculation plays out in this. One problem he set himself was how can a society use modern technical capacity and modernist approaches in architecture and aesthetics, to

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plan for happiness. War plays an important role in the form the question takes and the answer Neurath comes up with.

War is, for Neurath, a springboard for a social planning based around happiness. This notion is expressed in an early essay published in Dresden during in 1917 and titled *The Converse Taylor System*, which proposed a revised or inverted version of Taylorist social planning. Here he proposed that the post-war moment would be an ideal time to introduce this kind of social planning since the war had changed the priorities by which the economy is organized, away from a free-trade or free-market model and toward a technically administered economy.

It has been argued that "The experiences of the First World War cured Neurath of the illusion that war might increase the prosperity of a population" However he did not substantially modify his idea that war mobilisation could provide a model for peacetime organization. The same idea is present, modified, in his writings and correspondence of the late '30s and early '40s. Neurath believed that war clears the way for new ways of living. It does this in several ways: in wartime, he argues, a capitalist free-market economy driven by entrepreneurship and oriented toward maximizing profit converts itself to a system driven by the war effort. This is characterized by a strong emphasis on the application of technical solutions, and the use of planning and administration to make full use of the capabilities or capacity in the society and the economy.

In 1919, he wrote that war makes it possible to recognize that life can be,

"shaped in a goal-directed manner, and in particular that consumption and production… can be determined and regulated"

War demonstrates that a planned society could work and

"for the sake of annihilation it was shown what human energy can achieve".

In the late '30s in his book *Modern Man in the Making*, he wrote about war as the misdirected use of resources and technical capacity:

"On the battlefield victories are won by the most highly developed war equipment. Whatever the social order may be, a knowledge of war technology is the common possession

of all nations today. Cheap armaments and badly fed soldiers do not win battles. Mankind disposes of better equipment, planning and better methods for killing and tormenting fellow-beings than for making life and living conditions secure."

Neurath continued to argue that the organizational and technical capacities mobilized in wartime show us what societies are capable of, and could do in peacetime: that the very means for human destruction could be converted to the means of human happiness. In 1942, in an essay called *International Planning for Freedom*, he again argued that the pattern of organization used in wartime, particularly the control of production and consumption internationally, could be used in peacetime too. He addresses himself to contemporary concerns – mentioning the Atlantic Charter (the joint declaration made by Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941) as a commitment to improvement in the standard of living. This interpretation of the Atlantic Charter is probably a willful one, but it shows how Neurath is picturing the post-war moment as a chance to put into practice ideas about social and economic planning for happiness.

As I have suggested these ideas are longstanding ones in Neurath's work. But they take on a new twist in Britain, where an Epicurean idea of happiness seems almost palpable – not despite the privations and traumas of war but because of the way in which the British appear to deal with them. Neurath writes in his broken English:

"It is impressive to listen to plain people here, how they avoid boasting and overstatement in daily matters. I collect 'expressions' e.g. fire guard leaders speaking seriously used e.g. once the terms 'happiness' explaining who should get a feeling [of being] sheltered by neighbours, etc. and then explaining what is needed, to act 'quickly', to be 'calm, and to have the 'usual common sense'. I like this kind of habit much more that the continental one with 'highest duty', 'national community', 'self-sacrifice', 'obedience', 'subordination' etc. 'eternal ideals' wherever you give [someone] a chance to open [his] mouth . . . "

Habitual understatement, an emphasis on calm and capacity for compromise seem promising ingredients for planning for happiness, in Neurath's view, particularly in the light of Nazi atrocities. Judging from some of the responses Neurath got to the publicity about his role in Bilston, perhaps the promise of happiness as a post-war state seemed more real or achievable in the immediate post-war than it would subsequently. Yet the interest in the promise of happiness in reconstruction, which he was seen to represent, did not translate

into the actual putting into practice of the happiness measures he advocated. What Neurath did not see, or was too polite to mention, was the connection between the practices of compromising and understating characteristic of his host country, and the lack of any real practical attempt by planners to engage people democratically in the transformation of their own communities.

Neurath's advisory role in the Bilston redevelopment became publicly known because of the newspaper coverage. Afterwards, Neurath wrote to R.L. Kirk at Birmingham University, the man who had originally invited him to Bilston:

"I feel that people sometimes overestimate my activities and particularly, what we shall try in Bilston. That is the only reason, why the articles make me somewhat shy…"

Now, this shyness stemmed partly from his recognition that his role was ambiguous. It was not entirely clear if the council and the architects were prepared to take his advice seriously or merely use him as a figurehead, while pursuing their own (less consultative, less pluralist) agenda. Just before his death he expressed concern that a sociologist of happiness ought to be a real role and not merely propaganda for the redevelopment, the ambitions of which, he rightly suspected, would in any case be limited by government and funding. In the end, as I mentioned earlier, the Bilston redevelopment did not happen, and the overcrowded and polluted slums remained well into the 1960s. It appears that the promise of post-war happiness, at least for Bilston's slums, died with Neurath.