Neurath, Otto (1882–1945)

MICHELLE HENNING
University of Brighton, UK

The distinctive contribution of Otto Neurath to sociology, philosophy, and a wide range of other fields has been largely obscured since World War II, when his own work was rapidly eclipsed by criticisms and revisions. Hayek, in his *Road to Serfdom* (1944), presented Neurath as a naive advocate of social and economic planning; the Unity of Science movement that Neurath had instigated in 1934 was criticised by Kallen as leaning toward totalitarianism; and Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason targeted both Neurath himself and the Vienna Circle, of which he was a key member. After Neurath's sudden and untimely death, the Unity of Science movement lost sight of Neurath's emphasis on the social and human sciences; the Vienna Circle became increasingly associated with the ideas of Rudolf Carnap, who survived Neurath; and in English-speaking countries Neurath's work was principally remembered through A. J. Ayer's popularization and critique of logical positivism.

During his lifetime Neurath was influential and controversial. After a brief spell teaching political economy, he became a museum director, secretary for the Viennese Settlement and Allotment Garden Association, and heavily involved in civic work in Red Vienna. At the Museum of Society and Economy he developed a method of picture statistics called ISOTYPE (International System of Typographic Picture Education), in collaboration with a team that included the artist Gerd Arntz and Marie Reidemeister (later his third wife). He continued to work with ISOTYPE after his escape from Vienna to the Hague in 1938, and later at the Isotype Institute in Oxford. Author of more than 400 articles and books, Neurath made logical positivist thought – or "logical empiricist," as he preferred to call it – the basis of his social theory. He intended unified science to be, not a total system, but something akin to an orchestra or an encyclopaedia: a means to enable international and cross-disciplinary communication and co-operation. His commitment to social action, to the capacity of people to change their lives for the better, is also key to understanding his writing, since it was in relation to this that he measured both philosophy and science.

The son of a political economist, Neurath studied mathematics in Vienna and afterwards, from 1903, political economy at the University of Berlin. During this period he was influenced by the Russian logician Gregorius Itelson, by Weber's notion of a value-neutral approach to sociology, and by Ferdinand Tönnies's contrast between modern civil society and older forms of community. Nevertheless, Neurath questioned the predominantly negative characterization of modernity in German and Austrian social theory of the period, as well as the dependence of the sociological analysis of modernity on broad, abstract categories and distinctions. Against the tendency of social theorists to describe the economic order in terms of a generalized capitalism, he emphasized local variations and changes brought about by war. He proposed a new discipline, war economics, which attended to wartime changes in production, markets, and living conditions.

Recent writers have sometimes described Neurath as a representative of the politically committed left wing of the Vienna Circle. Neurath had become a socialist after the Great War, joining the German Social Democratic Party in 1918–1919 and establishing an office for central economic planning in the short-lived socialist Republic of Bavaria. For Neurath as for the artistic avant-garde, socialization was more far-reaching than collectivizing or nationalizing production: it also meant the transformation of everyday life. Nevertheless, when the Bavarian Republic was defeated by the "white guards," Neurath narrowly escaped execution by claiming that his role was apolitical. He later commented that he considered socialization to be a social service that does not depend on political constitution.

Neurath tended to describe his work as a purely technical service, distinct from party

The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology. Edited by George Ritzer.
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
DOI: 10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosn031.pub2

politics; and he preferred to work independently of government. Though politically left wing, he adhered to the Weberian concept of value neutrality in his social and economic writings, and his practice and thinking were characterized by a faith in technical social solutions and a preference for independence. Several consistently recurring themes can be identified in his writing: first, a concern with clarity of language and the public communication of sociological knowledge, from which derive his key concepts of "protocol sentences" and "physicalism" as well as the ISOTYPE system of picture statistics; second, a commitment to empiricism and a rejection of theology; third, the goal of increasing human happiness through rational social planning. However, as recent writers have argued, his work is less rigidly rationalistic and scientistic than his reputation suggests. New approaches to his work emphasize the notion of *Ballungen* – clots of indistinct and imprecise concepts that are necessary in everyday speech and in scientific language. Evidence of his engagement with natural sciences and with relativity theory makes his concept of social science more nuanced than it first appears. Recent studies have also drawn attention to his rejection of "pseudo-rationalism" – the belief that all decisions can be arrived at on the basis of reason and certainty – and to his lifelong and humane commitment to social and cultural pluralism.

SEE ALSO: Adorno, Theodor W.; Empiricism; Horkheimer, Max; Museums; Positivism; Scientific Literacy and Public Understandings of Science; Socialism; Statistics; Weber, Max.

Further Readings

Burke, C., Kindel, E., and Walker, S. (2013) *Isotype: Design and Contexts 1925–1971*, Hyphen Press, London.

Cartwright, N., Cat, J., Fleck, L., and Uebel, T. (1996) *Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Nemeth, E. and Stadler, F. (eds) (1996) *Encyclopedia and Utopia: The Life and Work of Otto Neurath, 1882–1945*, Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Neurath, O. (1973) *Empiricism and Sociology,* ed. M. Neurath and R.S. Cohen, Reidel, Dordrecht.

Neurath, O. (1983) *Philosophical Papers, 1913–1946*, ed. M. Neurath and R.S. Cohen, Reidel, Dordrecht.

Reisch, G. (2005) *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science: To the Icy Slopes of Logic*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Uebel, T.E. (ed.) (1991) *Rediscovering the Forgotten Vienna Circle*, Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Vossoughian, N. (2008) *Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis*, NAI, Rotterdam.