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Author	Schlembach, Christopher Grenz, Tilo() Pfadenhauer, Michaela()
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Abstract	<p>Modern social theory and methodology is deeply influenced central European social thought at the turn of the 20th century. Next to Heidelberg, Berlin and Cologne, Vienna was one of the most vibrant intellectual centers of that time. In Vienna, scholars had to deal with unique structural problems, the most important of which are the dense concentration of scientists caused by the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the growing political tension between conservative and liberal wings, and the systematic academic marginalization of Jewish intellectuals as well as women at the University. Discussion circles that flourished outside or at the margins of the University grew significantly in importance. Making him a prototypic figure of that time, Alfred Schütz joined different circles in parallel. Schütz participated actively in the "private seminar" of political economist Ludwig von Mises, and also attended the "Geistkreis" founded by Herbert Furth and Friedrich August von Hayek as well as the "private seminar" of the legal philosopher Hans Kelsen. Written in 1932, his book "Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt" provided a theoretical argumentation that combined philosophical and social sciences positions that were deemed to be incompatible by then.</p> <p>However, this influential work by no means only results from Schütz' remarkable creativeness. Rather, its conception is rooted in 'thought style' (Flek 1979) or knowledge culture that was shaped by the discussions within the above-mentioned circles. Outside of the university a space for discussion emerged in which political economy, legal sciences, philosophy, psychology, and history got into an intensive exchange and were related in different or even unorthodox ways.</p>
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Autobiographical Perspectives on the Role of Some Viennese Circles for the Genesis of the Sociology of Alfred Schütz

*Christopher Schlembach, Tilo Grenz and Michaela Pfadenhauer**

Modern social theory and methodology is deeply influenced central European social thought at the turn of the 20th century. Next to Heidelberg, Berlin and Cologne, Vienna was one of the most vibrant intellectual centers of that time. In Vienna, scholars had to deal with unique structural problems, the most important of which are the dense concentration of scientists caused by the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the growing political tension between conservative and liberal wings, and the systematic academic marginalization of Jewish intellectuals as well as women at the University. Discussion circles that flourished outside or at the margins of the University grew significantly in importance. Making him a prototypic figure of that time, Alfred Schütz joined different circles in parallel. Schütz participated actively in the “private seminar” of political economist Ludwig von Mises, and also attended the “Geistkreis” founded by Herbert Furth and Friedrich August von Hayek as well as the “private seminar” of the legal philosopher Hans Kelsen. Written in 1932, his book “Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt” provided a theoretical argumentation that combined philosophical and social sciences positions that were deemed to be incompatible by then.

However, this influential work by no means only results from Schütz’ remarkable creativeness. Rather, its conception is rooted in ‘thought style’ (Flek 1979) or knowledge culture that was shaped by the discussions within the above-mentioned circles. Outside of the university a space for discussion emerged in which political economy, legal sciences, philosophy, psychology, and history got into an intensive exchange and were related in different or even unorthodox ways.

Key words : Interpretive Sociology, History of Sociology, knowledge culture, Alfred Schütz, Vienna Circles

Introduction

In 1938 Alfred Schutz and his family left Europe to evade prosecution by the Nazi regime. Two years later, on August 2, 1940, he was at the pier in New Jersey to welcome Ludwig von Mises whose private

* University of Vienna

seminar was an intellectual haven for Schütz until 1934 when Mises went to Geneva. In this moment of bitterness and uncertainty, Mises wrote an autobiographical account on his intellectual development, embedded in the evolution of economics and the political circumstances that made him “the historian of decline” (Mises, 1978, p. 80) of Austrian interwar society. “Characterless simpletons,” (ibid., p. 72), he complains, confused the social sciences with *zeitgeist* while ideologies corrupted politics and made it blind to understand historical reality.

The corruption of science and politics by romanticist or utopian ideologies can be considered as one broad context in which Schütz (1967 [1932]) wrote his seminal book *Der Sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (transl. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*). Schütz claimed that objective and value free social sciences are based in systematic *Verstehen* by ideal types and defined the object of sociology in terms of mutual action orientation in everyday life. His approach supplied sociology with a solid philosophical foundation and gave it a place in the system of the sciences of human action.

Schütz defines the place of sociology vis à vis Mises but also Hans Kelsen, when he reframes their theoretical discussions of human action and shows that they “make use of ideal-typical constructs (in our sense) in order to delimit their subject areas and establish an objective context of meaning” (Schütz 1967, p. 248). Criticizing Mises and Kelsen, he argues that sociology is neither a general social science of which economics would be a specification as von Mises thought. Nor is the meaning of social action identical with its juridical meaning while the genuine object of sociology belongs to the realm of nature which was the interpretation of Kelsen (1922; 1993 [1925]).

The seminars of Mises and Kelsen

The criticism of Mises and Kelsen deserves attention if we take the fact into account that Schütz was a member of the private seminars of these two distinguished scholars. These seminars and their institutionalized cultures of scientific discussion, we venture to argue, were seedbeds in which Schütz could develop his thought, *even though* or perhaps *because* he did not agree with Mises and Kelsen concerning the position and the specific character of sociology as a science. As Helling (1984) emphasized in her research on Schütz and Kaufmann, the discussions are not just a biographical background. Rather, they are deeply intertwined with and systematically related to the development of the structure of Schütz's arguments.

This insight has methodological consequences when we use autobiographical accounts as a source in the history of the social sciences. The interpretation of autobiographical material does not deliver some sort of ‘background information’. Rather, we assume that they express the *cultures of knowledge* of these seminars in the *mode of retrospective remembrance* in which the experience and the narration of life stories intersect (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal, 1997, p. 138). As such they allow us to understand the relationship between the private seminars which Schütz attended and his sociology. To theorize this relationship, we use the concept of *complementarity*. The concept of complementarity was developed in quantum mechanics by Niels Bohr (1928) and denotes the systematic relatedness of different but mutually dependent interpretations of the *same* phenomenon based on a previous interpretation from

which they are differentiated. For our purpose we propose a slightly modified form of this concept which implies that the *same reality is reconstructed in different but mutually related forms*, for example in autobiographical accounts and in sociological theory.

In this paper, we use the biographical accounts of Ludwig von Mises, Eric Voegelin and Herbert Fürth to show what complementary between Schütz's sociology and the ways in which discussions in the seminars were remembered might mean.

Using these three biographical accounts is interesting for three reasons: (1) They describe the private seminars from the perspectives of two different roles: Mises was a seminar leader, while Voegelin and Fürth took a participant role. (2) Mises represents a generation of scholars that was socialized and gained intellectual maturity before the Habsburg Empire broke down. Voegelin and Fürth started their studies at the University of Vienna after the breakdown of the Monarchy and developed an independent intellectual perspective by the end of the 1920s, in the crisis of Austrian democracy. (3) They contrast these seminars with other settings of academic exchange, inside and outside of the University.

Mises about the Mises Circle

Mises wrote his autobiographical account in the 1940s after his emigration to the United States in a time of worldwide catastrophe and personal crisis. Pessimistic overtones, therefore, prevail which are the background for a rather idealized characterisation of his own seminar. When describing his own seminar, Mises emulates the seminars of Carl Menger and Eugen Böhm-Bawerk and emphasizes two elements: (1) In Mises' eyes, science is the creation of individuals and the purpose of a seminar is, therefore, to foster individual and autonomous development of scientific thinking. This purpose sharply contrasts with the intention of forming a school and establishing a dogmatic doctrine. (2) Every proposition must be allowed to run free and full course. If it is wrong it will destroy itself because "[t]ruth will prevail its own force if man has the ability to perceive it" (Mises, 1978, p. 25).

Mises expresses his understanding of the role of seminar leader by a characterization of Böhm-Bawerk: "He did not think of himself as a teacher, but as a chairman who occasionally also participated in the discussion" (ibid., p. 27). This description echoes Mises' own role about which he says: "Here I was neither teacher nor director of seminar. I was merely *primus inter pares* (first among peers) who himself benefited more than he gave" (ibid., p. 67).

Truth is not only the result of a correct argument but also of contradiction and critique which would not be possible in the setting of a school governed by a restrictive doctrine. However, an institutionalized regulative idea is necessary which gives the process of the quest for scientific truth direction:

"We formed neither school, congregation, nor sect. We helped each other more through contradiction than agreement. But we agreed and were united on one endeavor: to further the sciences of human action" (ibid., p. 67).

Voegelin about various Seminars and the *Geistkreis*

Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections* do not represent an autobiography in the narrow sense. They are the result of a series of interviews, Voegelin gave to a former student, Ellis Sandoz, by the beginning of the 1970s. Sandoz revised and edited the text and published it in 1989 under the title *Autobiographical Reflections*. In this conversation Voegelin looks back to the short 20th century in a way which resembles a private seminar for his former student. Voegelin follows a similar narrative frame concerning the interwar period than von Mises. In a nutshell: Ideological thinking and action disintegrated society and destroyed the sciences of human action. Voegelin addresses five kinds of seminars: (1) The private seminar of Othmar Spann, (2) the seminars of Mises and Kelsen, (3) the *Geistkreis* which represented a seminar of peers without a senior seminar leader, (4) his own seminars for workers at the *Volkshochschule*, and (5) his seminars at the University of Vienna.

Voegelin mentions the Spann-seminar because he got acquainted there with classical Greek philosophy and German Idealism. However, he characterizes the climate of the Spann group by Romanticism and Nationalism and says that "contact with these people faded" (Voegelin, 1989, p. 4) when they got involved in National Socialism or other radical movements.

Spann represented the type of seminar leader who, according to Mises, intended to form a school by establishing a doctrine. Opposed to this seminar are the seminars of Kelsen and Mises where Voegelin made friendship with a number of young scholars. Many of them also constituted the *Geistkreis*. About this group Voegelin says: "It was a group of younger people who met regularly every month, one of them giving a lecture on a subject of his choice and the others tearing him to pieces" (ibid., p. 5).

The other two seminars bring the problem of ideology to the fore which was already a theme in Voegelin's description of the Spann seminar. The seminar at the *Volkshochschule*, a kind of university for workers, was characterized by intense political debates. Even though the conflict between Voegelin's scientific orientation and the radical political attitudes of the workers caused some tensions, the personal relations were on good terms (ibid., p. 86). However, the ideological background of the young radicals implied that these students did not intend to find truth, but to win political victory over Voegelin who represented the class enemy:

"I still remember a scene in the 1930s when, after a wild debate resulting in disagreement, one of these young fellows, not so very much younger than I was myself, with tears in his eyes told me, 'And when we come to power we have to kill you'" (ibid.).

Fürth about the *Geistkreis*

Two core themes in Voegelin's account on the Viennese Circles, intellectual friendship and the tension between ideological and scientific thinking, resonate in Herbert Fürth's autobiographical recollections *Erinnerungen an Wiener Tage*. Like Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections*, this short text was published in the late 20th century. Fürth sees himself, together with Friedrich Hayek, as the founder of

the *Geistkreis*. As in other autobiographical texts, a life-historical and a socio-historical framework are combined to organize the selection of material. This connection is established by the idea of liberal democracy: It goes back to the “Revolution of 1848”, in which his grandfather participated (Fürth, 1989, p. 247),¹⁾ and ranges up to the defence of democracy in the 20th century.

The *Geistkreis* was founded in autumn 1921. Fürth and Hayek took part in Spann’s “Economic Exercises,” in which they criticized Spann’s idea of the corporative state. In a personal conversation, Spann blames them for disloyalty, says Fürth: His two “favourite pupils” had let him down (Fürth, 1989, p. 248). According to Fürth’s account, he and Hayek perceive this accusation as an encroachment on academic freedom of discussion and decide to “gather a small circle of like-minded colleagues from all branches of the social sciences” (Fürth, 1989, p. 248). They adopt Spann’s vision of a universalist approach, but dissolve it into individual sciences, which are represented by the individual members of the circle, while the central figure is omitted.

In Fürth’s retrospection we find important elements with which we can describe the communicative knowledge culture of the circle’s ‘spirit’ in the mode of remembrance:

First, the participants mutually influence each other through critique legitimized by two central values: “scientific modesty” and “spiritual discipline”. Fürth describes Hayek as a role model for these values. The members of the *Geistkreis* had learned from Hayek “that God did not bestow upon the social scientists the gift of infallible prophecies” (Fürth, 1989, p. 250). With regard to the culture of knowledge, it is not a question of whether Hayek actually succeeded in clarifying the difference between science and prophecy. Rather he emphasizes the consciousness of differentiation of levels of thought crystallizing in the figure of Hayek.

The forms of influence are described by Fürth with the characterization of other circle participants: As economists, Haberler, Machlup, and Morgenstern exercise professional criticism. Voegelin emphasizes the boundaries of reason and the art historian Johannes Wilde the historicity of reason. Voegelin and Schütz also point to the connection between worldview and science. As methodologists, Felix Kaufmann and Karl Menger contribute “the dangers of unconscious prejudices and premature conclusions” (Fürth, 1989, p. 250).

The second element is openness towards other social science institutions. Fürth is concerned with highlighting the overlapping and networking of circles. According to Fürth, the members of the *Geistkreis* also “formed the core of three other institutions that played a role in the social scientific life of Vienna” (Fürth, 1989, p. 250): the private seminar of Ludwig von Mises, the National Economic Society also dominated by Mises, and “occasional night meals at the restaurant ‘Ancora Verde’ [...]” (Fürth, 1989, p. 252).

The third element is the role structure: the members are described by Fürth not only as representatives of a scientific discipline, but also as personal friends. Against the background of friendship as the carrier of group cohesion, Fürth uses an almost functionalist argument to justify why women were not accepted. For he regarded the “closest friendships” of individual members to women, which were not further defined, as unstable. Should they dissolve, “most embarrassing incidents” would be the con-

sequence and this would destabilize the circle as a whole. On the other hand, the primacy of friendship over professional difference makes it possible to tolerate serious differences of opinion (Fürth, 1989, p. 252). A comparison with another type of data, however, makes clear that biographical representations have to be put into perspective, for the polite treatment of professional differences was not free of tension. However, it was not made a public theme. Oskar Morgenstern's private diaries, in which he gave free rein to his frustration over scientific differences, illustrate this.

Conclusions

To conclude: Mises, Voegelin and Fürth look back at the seminars in Vienna and frame their recollections by the decline of scientific thinking and the disintegration of society by the influence of radical ideologies. In this situation two types of seminars can be identified. One type is characterized by controversy and debate, based on personal friendship and collegiality with the aim to "further the sciences of human action" (Mises, 1978, p. 67). The second type is based on ideological doctrine as well as on insurmountable ideological conflict.

In the former type, Mises stresses the role of the seminar leader as chairman and *primus inter pares* which allows for maximum freedom of unfolding individual and autonomous scholarship. In the second type, the professor wants to form a school to promote his doctrine. Voegelin added the observation that the participants were not able to establish sustainable relations or they enclosed themselves in radical doctrines as described by the case of the *Volkshochschule*.

The *Geistkreis* may be interpreted as closest to the pure ideal type of the first category in which the *primus inter pares* has dissolved into a group of peers. The best approximation to the second type is probably the seminar of Spann who wanted to establish a universalistic doctrine and established a climate of conversation in which deviations from his own opinion were not welcome.

As a representative of the older generation, Mises assumed optimistically that ideology will be dissolved by the force of truth. Voegelin, however, realized that openness towards reality is a condition of the quest for truth and this openness can get lost under the impact of ideological thinking.

Finally, we come back to the problem of complementarity between Schütz work and the autobiographical accounts of the seminars. At this point we can express this complementarity as follows:

Mises, Voegelin and Fürth distinguish between an open knowledge culture which allows for the quest for truth and a closed culture that substitutes this quest for truth by ideology and doctrine. Schütz' early book *The Phenomenology of the Social World* explores and theorizes the conditions of this openness towards social reality in everyday life and in science. The place of Schütz as an individual thinker in Mises' seminar and the *Geistkreis* complements the place of sociology in the book by which he defends its scientific character against Mises and Kelsen.

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Notes

- 1) All translation from Fürth (1989) are made by the authors.

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