

Introduction to Otto Neurath’s “Bourgeois Marxism” (1930) and “Worldview and Marxism” (1931)

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Abstract

We are publishing two short pieces by Otto Neurath, a key figure in the Vienna Circle of logical empiricists, but also a social scientist close to the milieu of Austro-Marxism: “Bourgeois Marxism. A Review Essay on Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie*” (*Der Kampf*, 1930) and “Worldview and Marxism” (*Der Kampf*, 1931). The translations are preceded by the editor’s/translator’s introduction. Neither piece seems to have been previously translated. The critique of Mannheim will be of particular interest to sociologists as it represents a trenchant response to *Ideology and Utopia*. For Neurath, Mannheim appropriates Marxist ideas for “bourgeois sociology” and metaphysics. The second piece presents a brief non-technical account of the logical empiricist interpretation of Marxism from which Neurath’s critique is launched.

Keywords: Austro-Marxism; Karl Mannheim; logical empiricism; Marxist vs. bourgeois sociology; Otto Neurath.

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1 Otto Neurath

Otto Neurath (born Vienna, 1882; died Oxford, 1945) was a polymath best-known as a member, and key organizer, of the Vienna Circle. More specifically, "as the most effective political character among the Viennese philosophers of Logical Empiricism" (Sandner, 2019, p. 67), he was the central figure in what Thomas Uebel (2005) has called the "left Vienna Circle." It was this combination of intellectual and political engagement that led the American historian Anson Rabinbach to characterize Neurath as "in every respect a paradigmatic figure as he embodied both sides of Red Vienna: the scientific — as a member of the Vienna Circle, and the political — as a social democrat" (Rabinbach, in Gruber et al., 1996, p. 10). Thus, his life and work continue to be the subject of considerable scholarship in the history and philosophy of science,¹ and among historians of interwar Austrian social democracy and Austro-Marxism, and of so-called "Red Vienna," the period, between 1919 and 1934, of municipal socialism under the SDAP (Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party).

But Neurath was also a social scientist whose work crossed philosophy, economics, sociology, and statistics (he was a pioneer of the "isotype," the now ubiquitous system for the pictorial representation of statistical data).² With the support of both Alfred and Max Weber, he was awarded a *Habilitation* in political economy at the University of Heidelberg for his work on the war economy (see Schäfers, 2017, p. 139). After decades of neglect, Neurath's economic work on socialization and on socialist and in-kind calculation has been receiving growing attention as part of a revival of interest in debates between the Austrian School of Economics and their left critics, such as (Karl) Polanyi and Neurath.³ But despite his sociological work and his (often close) links to and knowledge of the work of such key figures as Tönnies, Simmel, Schmoller, and the Weber brothers, there are scant signs, and probably little prospect, of a revival of interest in Neurath among sociologists and social theorists. The likely reason is not difficult to discern: the discipline has come to define itself in opposition to exactly the stance Neurath adopted.

Under the influence of Critical Theory, and given additional impetus by the "spirit of '68," positivism has come to be widely viewed as the instrument of technocratic domination. Indeed, the link to Neurath may here be very direct. For Max Horkheimer, Neurath played the role of the paradigmatic positivist standing for all that the Institut für Sozialforschung came to oppose under Horkheimer's direction (see O'Neill & Uebel, 2004). As is clear from the two texts translated here, Neurath offers precisely the opposite diagnosis to that of the critical theorists: metaphysics — by which he means everything that is not logical-empirical science — is reactionary and it is science that is progressive — technically, socially, and politically.

But if Critical Theory has branded Neurath a supporter of technocratic politics and scientism,⁴ he is no less at odds with a later strand of thought that has shaped the sensibilities of contemporary sociologists and social theorists: the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment. In line with the common view within Austro-Marxism, which was in other respects quite heterogeneous, Neurath saw his scientific, political, and educational work as a contribution to

1. See, e.g., the important recent collection edited by Cat & Tuboly, 2019.

2. For a very useful account of the connections between these diverse areas of intellectual endeavour, see Nemeth (2011).

3. See, e.g., Nemeth, Schmitz, & Uebel, 2007; Nemeth, 2011; Turk, 2016; Uebel, 2018; O'Neill, 2019.

4. O'Neill & Uebel (2004, pp. 95–97) argue that neither of these accusations are justified. They went on to argue that Neurath's position is both compatible with (some aspects of) Critical Theory and provides a critique of the latter's limitations and tendency towards "political quietism" (O'Neill & Uebel, 2018).

what Friedrich Stadler (1981) has called *Spätaufklärung* (late Enlightenment) (the isotype being one contribution to this *spätaufklärerische Aufgabe*). Neurath's logical empiricism and the relevance of knowledge for socially and politically progressive and enlightened causes come together in his understanding of the task of sociology as the provision of knowledge — understood as empirically testable predictions and grounded in physicalist principles — relevant to planning and with the aim of facilitating a *glückliche Gesellschaft* ("fortunate society") (Schäfers, 2017, p. 141).

As Director of the *Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum* (Museum of Society and Economy), which he founded, in his educational work, and in his engagement in matters of housing and habitation (notably with the *Siedlerbewegung* (Settler Movement) in 1920s Vienna), Neurath might be taken as the archetype of the "public intellectual" for whom knowledge was to serve eminently practical ends by addressing the life conditions of the mass of society. But the standpoint he adopted — with its faith in progress and in the role of planning (albeit participative rather than holistic), its commitment to an Enlightenment ideal, and its logical-empiricist understanding of science — could hardly be further removed from the sensibilities and inclinations of sociology and social theory as these have subsequently developed, and currently stand.

2 "Bourgeois Marxism" (1930)⁵

Despite the existence of excellent collections on the sociology of knowledge that include translations of many of the key German texts⁶ and collections of translations of Austro-Marxist writings,⁷ as far as I have been able to ascertain there is no English translation of Neurath's "Bourgeois Marxism," his highly polemical critique of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*. This translation rectifies this. But perhaps the rationale for a translation of an extended book review from 1930 may not be immediately obvious. Here I shall briefly set out that rationale.

There are two extrinsic reasons why this text is still of interest. First, it has remained a significant reference among those familiar with German debates on the sociology of knowledge.⁸ Second, Otto Neurath is — as noted above — a major thinker in his own right. *Ideology and Utopia* is the *locus classicus* of the early sociology of knowledge, and here we find a response to it by one of Mannheim's most important contemporaries. All this might account for its continued relevance for Anglophone specialists in the sociology of knowledge or in the history and the philosophy of science, but not yet why the piece may be of intrinsic interest to a wider community.

In a broader context, the review exemplifies, very dramatically, the fraught relationship between Marxist and non-Marxist sociology. As David Frisby has noted, after Neurath's critique, "bourgeois Marxism" became "an epithet subsequently applied to many other writers and sociology itself" (2013/1992, p. 222). What Frisby seems to be suggesting here is that Neurath's review may be a (perhaps *the*) source of the polemical distinction between Marxism and "bourgeois sociology," which was, for a long time, central to Marxist discourse. That would be difficult to substantiate, but it is certainly the case that this text turns on that distinction.

Neurath's aim is not to offer a balanced review of Mannheim's book (as we might now expect from a piece that calls itself a "review essay"). Rather, he seeks to rebut not just the argu-

5. See Neurath (2020a).

6. Notably, Meja & Stehr (Eds.) (1990; 1999).

7. Most recently Blum & Smaldone (Eds.) (2016 & 2017).

8. See, for example, Meja & Stehr, 1990; Frisby, 2013/1992; Uebel, 2000; Seidel, 2016; Tuboly, 2019.

ments of *Ideology and Utopia*, but everything the book stands for: the appropriation of Marxism by a bourgeois thinker with the aim of disarming it as a weapon of the "proletarian front." His concern is that Mannheim's true intention is to subvert Marxism by translating its basic ideas and concepts into the language of bourgeois sociology, and that this may go unnoticed by "young Marxists." For Neurath, *Ideology and Utopia* is a dangerous — because potentially seductive — work of co-optation, and thus must be countered, by fair means or foul. The foul means include ridicule, irony, and a liberal sprinkling of exclamation marks. But if the review is a polemic, then it is at least a virtuosic one. When it comes, Neurath's *coup de grâce* (2020a, p. 237) against the "synthesist" (Mannheim) who believes that it is possible, from a "higher vantage point," to unite all partial perspectives is a deadly effective intellectual ambush.⁹ Beyond the polemic, Neurath's substantive critique of Mannheim is that he remains caught within the metaphysical stance from which bourgeois thought cannot fully escape. Bourgeois thought (and Neurath includes here interpretive and phenomenological sociology) remains bound to metaphysics because it demands a normative discipline that can only be grounded in metaphysical notions such as *Volksgeist* ("the spirit of the people").

Neurath's highly idiosyncratic Marxism¹⁰ may, however, put off more contemporary readers than it attracts. Who would now wish to defend the view that Marxism is the only logical-empirical sociology seeking correlations in order to arrive at verifiable predictions, or indeed shares this as an ideal for sociology generally?¹¹ And the term "bourgeois sociology" is now mostly used ironically. Furthermore, the contemporary emphasis upon the intersectional nature of inequality may make Neurath's dualistic talk of the bourgeois versus the proletarian "front" seem, at best, quaint. But here we must remember the context: the highly class-polarized conditions of interwar Austria (and elsewhere), in which both fronts (socialists and Christian Socials) controlled paramilitaries, leading up to the dissolution of parliament (1933), the instillation of an Austro-fascist dictatorship, the establishment of the *Ständestaat* (corporatist state), and a brief, but decisive, civil war (1934).¹² Nor was Neurath exaggerating when he complained of the conservative stranglehold on the universities and on research institutes, which drove others (including Neurath himself) to the margins of tertiary

9. Neurath may, however, have been misrepresenting Mannheim's views on the nature of synthesis here, perhaps willfully (see Tuboly, 2019, p. 103). Seidel indeed argues that "there is a sense in which Mannheim's idea of neutralization by sociologically investigating all points of view is remarkably similar to Neurath's view" (2016, p. 123). Tuboly reports a subsequent softening of Neurath's views on Mannheim and a rapprochement between them after 1939 in English exile when "something changed" (2019, p. 105). He suggests that "the case of Neurath and Mannheim, diverging between accusations of metaphysics, negative criticism and helping each other by various invitations, exemplifies nicely how Neurath's brand-building project worked. Acting together for the greater good overcomes the theoretical differences" (Tuboly, 2019, p. 108).

10. Idiosyncratic, for example, in brushing aside the Marxist theory of ideology (despite his knowledge of Marx's and Engels's writings on the subject), in conveniently ignoring the fact that the notion of "totality" is shared between Marxism (particularly in the work of Mannheim's compatriot and friend Georg Lukács) and "bourgeois sociology," and, above all, in his equation of Marxism with logical empiricism. Neurath's ignoring of Lukács in particular led Frisby (2013/1992, p. 222) to doubt his grasp of Marxism. Because he ascribes a metaphysical (or at least, half-metaphysical/half-scientific) stance to bourgeois thought, and uses this to differentiate it from the Marxist scientific stance, Neurath must turn a blind eye to idealist influences on, or elements in, Marxism.

11. Both texts published here are his highly political works. For a more elaborate and nuanced account of his views on the social sciences and on Marxism, see Neurath (1973, ch. 8 & 10).

12. For a sociological account, see Mann (2004, ch. 6). For an informative historical overview of the political role of intellectuals (both left and right) in Vienna, see Wasserman (2014).

education (e.g. into the *Volkshochschulen* — adult education) and/or into posts abroad.¹³ The review is thus also a historical document; a product of Red Vienna. It embodies the spirit of Austro-Marxism and vividly captures the highly charged atmosphere in which ideas were seen as weapons and everything — even engaging with a work of sociology — became a political act of some urgency.¹⁴ But it is more than a historical document.

One can strip away Neurath's Marxism and that which is (to borrow Mannheim's term) "bound" to time and place, and read the piece as a powerful plea for an empirically oriented sociology against the over-complexity — against the "metaphysical-soulful language" and "twists and turns, and fluid meanings" (Neurath, 2020a, p. 236) — of grander social theory. One need neither be a Marxist nor a logical empiricist to appreciate the occasional contemporary resonance of Neurath's ire against academic pretention grounded in metaphysical soulfulness.

3 Worldview and Marxism (1931)¹⁵

We are also publishing "Worldview and Marxism" — which likewise seems not to have been previously translated — as a piece that complements Neurath's critique of Mannheim by setting out in brief and non-technical terms his version of logical empiricism — i.e. the position from which his Mannheim critique was launched. The original context of the piece was a debate between the Austro-Marxists Max Adler and Edgar Zilsel on materialism, the mind-body problem, and on whether Marxism was (or was not) compatible with religion, which, like the Neurath's article, had been published in *Der Kampf* (see Cartwright et al., 1996, pp. 235–236). But it serves well here as a companion piece by making explicit Neurath's grounds for opposing Mannheim's reduction of Marxism to one among other worldviews. Marxism is *not* a worldview — nor a religion, nor a philosophy. It is the only *empirical sociology* — i.e. the only one that conforms to the strictures of logical-empirical science by discarding all metaphysics. It thus contrasts with *Geisteswissenschaft*, which denies the unity of science by drawing the metaphysical distinction between the natural and the human, and with *verstehende Soziologie*, which accepts that metaphysical (and, for Neurath, ultimately religious) division.¹⁶ Like behaviourism in psychology, Marxist materialism is committed to physicalism, and physicalism, for Neurath, is the underlying principle of the unified science.

Neurath's reading of Marxism is, as noted, highly selective, but then again so is that of Critical Theory and — in a very different way — of structuralist Marxism. Neurath's Marxism is materialism (reinterpreted as physicalism) plus the base-super-structure distinction. Thus, any ethical-philosophical aspect of a capitalist critique is anathema to Marxism as empirical sociology, and the labour theory of value a dispensable element. In brief, Marxism is empirical *science*, not half-scientific/half-metaphysical *critique*. The piece also makes clear the close inter-

13. The deteriorating political conditions, the victory of Austro-fascism, and eventually the *Anschluss* were soon to drive left-wing and liberal intellectuals — i.e., much of Austria's (surviving) intelligentsia — into exile. See Stadler (Ed.) (1988).

14. The review appeared in *Der Kampf*, the theoretical journal of the SDAP (the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party), which was published between 1907 and 1934, when the SDAP was banned. Illegal publication continued in Czechoslovakia until 1938, after which it was published in Paris under the title *Der sozialistische Kampf — La lutte socialiste*.

15. See Neurath (2020b).

16. Given the revival of debates in sociology, social theory, and STS on the distinction between the natural and the social, and the denial of this distinction by Actor Network Theory (ANT), this is perhaps the one area in which a revival of interest in Neurath within those discipline might yet be possible.

weaving of Neurath's intellectual and his political project: metaphysics and idealist philosophy "often serve (...) as tools of anti-proletarian powers" and may thus have to be "combatted in the interest of proletarian advancement" (Neurath, 2020b, p. 247).

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