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Phenomenological and Interpretive-Structural Approaches to Economics and Sociology: Schutzian Themes in Adolph Lowe's Political Economics*

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Abstract. Lowe's "interpretive-structural" approach to economics has important areas of contact with Schutzian social inquiry. Elaboration of Lowe's approach may thus play a role in the development of a phenomenological economics, while the work of Schutz and his followers can contribute to the elaboration of Lowe's interpretive-structural approach. A key issue to be worked out will be the relative importance of structural factors, or what we have here called transsubjective structures, and their relation to human motivations and behaviors.

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> "Academic research in the social sciences and the practical application of their results are suffering to-day from a general defect for which even the greatest achievements within the special branches cannot compensate. An excessive division of labour, a lack of synthetic co-operation between the various sections of social research more and more restrict the truth of any partial knowledge, the efficiency of any concrete action (Lowe 1935:19)."

Adolph Lowe's "plea for cooperation in the social sciences" in his greatly overlooked and under-examined *Economics and Sociology* remained an important theme of his lifework for the next sixty years. Even prior to its publication, Lowe was immersed in such a tradition. He held the chair in Economic Theory and Sociology at Kiel University in the late twenties and early thirties. His mentor, Franz Oppenheimer, held the chair in Sociology at Frankfurt, then Germany's sole full professorship in the discipline (Simonds 1978:5). Lowe would still claim as late as 1965 that Oppenheimer's was "the most comprehensive *system der soziologie* ever written" (Lowe 1965:133). At a time when the historical school still dominated the discipline (and especially the academy), Lowe identified Oppenheimer as one of the few scholars in Germany with whom "one could study [economic] theory in the classical and neo-classical meaning of the term (Lowe 1959:60). Oppenheimer and Lowe were later founding members of the editorial board of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. The *Journal* continues to take Lowe's (1935) call for cooperation and constructive synthesis as its mission.

Following Oppenheimer's tenure at Frankfurt, the same Chair in Sociology was held by Lowe's close friend and associate, Karl Mannheim. Lowe himself had moved from Kiel

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to Frankfurt in 1931. It was, in fact, to Oppenheimer and Mannheim that *Economics and Sociology* was formally dedicated. Lowe's reference in the dedication to those years in which the chair was occupied by Oppenheimer and Mannheim, 1919–39, as "a period of constructive synthesis in the social sciences" (1935: 5) recalls the fact that his influences, experiences, and intellectual environment were steeped in such collaboration. Joint seminars were offered by Lowe and Mannheim, and their collaboration continued in exile after 1933, first in Switzerland, and then in England (Kettler et al. 1984:71–72, 81–82, Gansmann: 1998). Lowe's work did not go unnoticed among sociologists. No less a figure than Talcott Parsons's wrote in his review of *Economics and Sociology*:

> Lowe successfully transcends the old dilemma which has plagued so much of the methodological discussion of these problems between, on the one hand, the dogmatic 'reification' of a system of individualistic, competitive economic theory on the classical model and, on the other hand, the tendency to repudiate theory altogether, which has been typical of the German historical and American institutionalist schools. (Parsons 1937:477)

That the influence on Lowe of these collaborative efforts was not limited to this period is evidenced in the Preface to *On Economic Knowledge*, published in 1965, thirty years after *Economics and Sociology*. After stating that his influences are too numerous to mention, Lowe names four individuals to whom he owes "an intellectual debt which a lifetime is too short to pay"(1977[1965]:ix). In addition to Oppenheimer and Mannheim, a third sociologist is identified in this exclusive list: Lowe's colleague at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research during the forties and fifties, Alfred Schutz, the father of phenomenological sociology.

Interestingly, the contributions of Alfred Schutz and Schutzian phenomenological sociology to economics have received some considerable attention, but not with regard to Lowe. Rather the connections between Schutz and his work with the Austrian tradition have been fairly widely discussed and documented (see, e.g., Prendergast 1986). A recent (1996) article by Pietrykowski argues that Schutz's work is of relevance—and should be of interest—to economists outside of the Austrian tradition as well, but no mention is made of Lowe. In addition, with a single recent exception (Forstater 1997; see also Forstater 2000), there is no mention of the Schutz–Lowe connection in the literature exploring the (independent) relation of Lowe and the Austrian tradition (Hagemann 1994, Ruhl 1994). Nor can one find Schutz's name in the secondary literature on Lowe.

Explicit evidence of the Schutz–Lowe connection is thus limited to several instances. First, there is the above-mentioned dedication by Lowe in the Preface to *On Economic Knowledge*. *On Economic Knowledge* also contains an important footnote citing approvingly Schutz's notion of common-sense knowledge. Lowe again cites Schutz in the same regard in a symposium on Lowe's book (Heilbroner 1969). The symposium included participation by Fritz Machlup and Aron Gurwitsch, the former perhaps the pre-eminent "Schutzian" economist and the latter one of Schutz's most faithful disciples in the field of philosophy. Lowe also contributed a chapter to Natanson's (1970) edited Schutz memorial volume. There is a two-page discussion of the Schutz–Lowe connection in Helmut Wagner's intellectual biography of Schutz (1983). There Wagner reports on the intense

Schutz–Lowe correspondence in the mid-fifties. Finally, one letter from Schutz to Lowe has been published in Volume Four of Schutz's *Collected Works*. Of course, Schutz and Lowe arrived at the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research around the same time and were colleagues there for the remainder of Schutz's life.

The remainder of the paper will be devoted to a preliminary sketch of some areas where Lowe and Schutz appear to share interests, ask similar questions, or express complementary views. It is an exercise intended to outline possible further areas of investigation of this interesting relationship between two important figures in 20th century Economics and Sociology. Areas where Schutz and Lowe differed will also be considered, and a blending of phenomenological and interpretive-structural approaches will be examined and proposed.

Methodology, the Lifeworld, and Structural Change

Much work on methodology and rhetoric has been conducted at a meta-methodological level (Pietrykowski 1994). Until recently, for example, McCloskey has focused almost exclusively on the rhetoric of *economics* and *economists*, with little attention given to the rhetoric of the *economy* and *economic agents*, a focus also characteristic of most of the others who have joined in, following McCloskey's lead.[1] More recently, interest has turned to taking "the notion of a rhetoric of economics from methodological critique to a method of studying the economy—'interpretive economics'" (Milberg 1993:275). Milberg notes correctly that such an "interpretive approach would no doubt seem rudimentary to the anthropologist or sociologist" while its employment in economics would "constitute . . . a drastic change in analytical scope and method" (1993:275). Though the interpretive social sciences have a rich, deep, and well-recognized history, the application of such approaches to economics has been much more rare.

The hermeneutic Austrian tradition, deeply influenced by the work of Schutz, is of course one of the important exceptions. Schutz and Lowe were both interested in methodology, and neither could avoid dealing with methodological questions, but they both were primarily interested in the lifeworld of social and economic actors themselves. This was obviously a major concern of Schutz's life work, but is characteristic of Lowe as well. In his examination of the laws of supply and demand, Lowe makes it clear that he intends to:

> focus attention on the "order of the world" to which these so-called laws refer, rather than the scientific procedure by which they are formulated. Not the methods of economic inquiry but the process of bargaining and exchange itself, *especially as reflected in the minds and actions of the participants*, will be the main field of our investigation (Lowe 1942:433, emphasis added).

This is also indicative of an important subjectivist aspect of Lowe's project. Lowe, following Schutz and even employing some of his conceptual categories and terminology, refused to treat economic agents as we treat the units of analysis in the physical sciences, that is, as "insensitive particles moving blindly though lawfully to blind stimuli" (1977 [1965]:61).

Rather, in the social sphere we deal with "purposeful actors who 'move' only after they have interpreted their field of action in terms of their goals and their common-sense knowledge" (1997 [1965]). But, argues Lowe, it is this very approach considering the "commonsense interpretation of the ultimate 'facts'—buyers' and sellers' behavior—by the actors themselves that so greatly encumbers the work of the economist"(1969:5–6).

This position is a clear, anti-positivist statement firmly in the interpretivist tradition from Dilthey onward, and represents the issue at the heart of the important difference in the object of inquiry in the natural and social sciences. This difference is key to the position shared by Schutz and Lowe that the method of the natural sciences is not appropriate for the social sciences: "It is the nature of its subject matter, Mannheim makes very clear, which necessitates social science be conceived of as a hermeneutic and self-reflective discipline" (Simonds 1978:107). Mannheim's approach is significant not only because, as was noted above, he was a close friend and colleague of Lowe's, but because he combines the interpretive concern with human intentionality with the insistence that meaning can only be grasped if we combine this investigation with an analysis of socio-historical context (Simonds 1978:65, 107). Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge, however, may be seen as his attempt to address and resolve the issues of the *methodenstreit*. In many respects, an important part of the interpretivist tradition has been one of seeking a reconciliation between these two sides, i.e., how to take into account the complexities of social life but at the same time preserve the 'rigor' of the scientific method. Schutz, following Weber, was squarely in this tradition, certainly for the bulk of his career (Gorman 1977:5, 33–34): "the corpus of Schutz's methodological writings is directed at creating a scientific method which does not subjugate the meaning-endowed actor to objective impersonal laws" (Gorman 1977:36).

Critical Realists such as Bloor and Bhaskar base their critique of Mannheim and others on the fact that these interpretive approaches miss the point that not only the social sciences but the natural sciences too are far from value-free (Bloor 1976, Bhaskar 1979). The critique must be extended to include all inquiry, not just the social sciences. While the object of the natural sciences may escape the difficulties brought on by the recognition of human intersubjectivity, such issues are relevant to the natural scientist, the investigator. The fact that the natural scientist, like the social scientist, is present in the *lebenswelt* (lifeworld) means the perceptions and observation of the natural scientist are also necessarily interpretive. So while the 'double hermeneutic' does present a special problem for the social sciences, this does not mean that the natural sciences have no hermeneutic dimension at all. Hesse (1980) additionally points out that positivism has been demonstrated to be just as inadequate in the natural sciences as the social sciences.

The Realist criticism of Mannheim for not applying his critique to the natural sciences and mathematics is a real contribution. Positivism is not only problematic for the social sciences; but it does not eliminate the difference in the object of inquiry. Furthermore, the twist of the Critical Realists is that they argue for a return to the use of the method of the natural sciences (redefined somewhat) for the social sciences as well (see Hekman 1986:46).

Consideration of another key insight of Lowe's leads to a position that departs from both the conclusion of the Critical Realists and the traditional interpretivist approach to the issue. Human purposiveness and intentionality are only one source of knowledge problems in the social sciences recognized by Lowe. Another issue regards the fact that the object

of inquiry is subject to change. Simply put, for Lowe economic activity transforms the economy and economic actors. He therefore concludes that any approach "with invariable data is defective from the very outset" (1935:138–139). But Lowe believed that economic activity also transforms nature, and so this is not only an issue for the social sciences, but for the natural sciences as well: "the technique of the industrial age has broken through the traditional borders between the social and the natural world and has subjected more and more sections of the organic and inorganic world to human influence" (1935:153). While it is true that the objects of the natural sciences do not display purposive behavior, neither are the problems of investigation constant in the face of large-scale socioeconomic and technical transformation. It is not just the object of the social sciences that changes; economic activity creates, destroys, shapes, and otherwise transforms the natural environment, resulting in crises confronting the natural sciences, too, with serious knowledge problems (see, e.g., Funtowicz and Ravetz 1990).[2]

Structure, Behavior, Motivation, and Subjectivities

Lowe carefully distinguished between motivation and behavior, pointing out that the conventional approach in economics conflates the two or, what amounts to the same thing, proposes a one-to-one correspondence between them. Rather, Lowe recognized that "the understanding of motives does not by itself constitute a safe basis for postulating any specific course of action as necessary, that is, causally exclusive" (1942:436). At the same time, Lowe argued that the same behavior may reflect very different motivations. This may be regarded as a fundamental insight of phenomenological sociology (see, e.g., Aron 1964).

For Lowe, motivational complexes are partly rooted in cognitive forms that are the "result of fragmentary experience and information, of speculation and hunches, and . . . of *communication with others*" (Lowe 1977[1965]:16–17). Thus Lowe explicity recognized the intersubjectivity of human experience of the lifeworld.

Lowe returned again and again throughout the course of his life to what he referred to as the great "riddle": "how is freedom of choices compatible with integral order?" (1942:445). This dilemma of liberal society is a major organizing theme of Lowe's lifework, the fundamental issue which directly and indirectly preoccupied his attention. Schutz, of course, also refused to "assume away" the problem of freedom and order, or the coordination problem.

As is well-known, the Schutzian "solution" to the problem of social order is rooted in his ideal-type methodology (Koppl 1994). Though our "knowledge remains incoherent, our propositions occasional, our future uncertain, our general situation unstable" (Schutz 1970[1943]:108), the potential socially disruptive and "disorderly" results of such a state are prevented by the "fortuitous circumstance" that individuals are "born into an ongoing social world already containing structures of *inter*subjective meaning which all in that culture and society share in common"(Ebeling 1986:47). From early in childhood, individuals learn the socially prescribed ideal types and social recipes which enable them to act in the social world. In any situation, there is "an assumption that I may under typically similar circumstances act in a way typically similar to that in which I acted before in order to bring about a typically similar state of affairs"(Schutz 1967[1953]:20).

Socioeconomic order is thus maintained as a result of economic agents' use of these models for rational action, or social recipes based on typifications. Schutz's social recipes play a similar role as Lowe's social codes of conduct in understanding "how society is possible."

There are some strong Schutzian themes in Adolph Lowe's work. Perhaps it might be useful to note some areas of apparent divergence. These may also inform future work in the project of developing a phenomenological economics. First, Lowe did not enthusiastically embrace or employ the ideal-type method. Lowe's own "solution" to the problem of freedom and order was based on his idea of "spontaneous conformity." This is different than the Austrian notion of spontaneous order, although the relation between them should be investigated. It is worth mentioning in this regard that Lowe's notion of spontaneous conformity was developed when he was at the University of Manchester and involved in conversations with his friend and colleague Michael Polanyi.

We might say that Lowe began early on and continued through his life to emphasize factors that contributed to a low degree of anonymity, and therefore made ideal types less reliable guides. As an example, from at least the mid-thirties Lowe expressed the view that personal, racial, religious and other forms of discrimination intervened and disrupted market relationships (1935).

Lowe also put more stress on the impact of social structure on behavior and motivation than Schutz. For Lowe, economic and technological structure sets the context for understanding the meaning of the behavior of other market participants. More recently, a contribution by Milberg and Pietrykowski (1994) revives the attempt at a Schutzian–Marxian synthesis informed by post-structuralism.[3] This work may assist in the elaboration and extension of what might be called Lowe's "interpretive-structural" approach. Milberg and Pietrykowski put forward the notion of "transsubjectivity" as an:

> alternative conception of the subject which is compatible with the traditional Marxian notion of the social construction of the individual but which rejects the absoluteness and objectivity of most Marxian approaches . . . [The] social construction of the subject is a process of mediation between self and the "lifeworld." In this process, the individual is constrained by social institutions, but these institutions and even their meaning are informed by individuals. (1994:86)

In addition to emphasizing the "plurality of identifications" overlooked by the Schutzian use of ideal-typification, the framework considers the crucial influence of the "structure of markets and technology" on identity, behavior and motivation, but in a non-deterministic manner (1994:101). Thus, they avoid the "reductiveness of all schemes that seek to limit and impoverish a complex reality in the name of interpretation" (Sarup 1993[1988]:94). Milberg and Pietrykowski leave the concept of transsubjectivity unexplored, and it may be useful to briefly reflect on the notion, and its relation to other notions of subjectivity.

We may distinguish between three levels of inter-related 'subjectivity': the subjective, the intersubjective, and the transsubjective. The subjective refers primarily to the fact that one's self is distinguishable from others. Every individual has their own personal history derived from their life experience as well as bio-genetic factors, and this is manifested in a relatively unique concatenation of prejudices, values, and tendencies from which an

individual's cognitive and purposive makeup are not independent. At the same time, subjectivity is socially and structurally determined and defined. Thus, there is no "pure" or absolute subjectivity.

Intersubjectivity refers to the necessarily social nature of all understanding. Signs, words, and meanings are socially constructed. Economic actors are social beings whose activities may only be understood within the social context of webs of social relationships. The meaning and implications of economic behavior can only be understood in this social context of such a myriad of social relationships. At the same time, we are able to distinguish one's self from other economic actors, and we can also distinguish between social relations and activities and technical, environmental, and institutional structures within which both individuals and social groups operate.

Transsubjectivity refers to the relation between technical, economic, environmental, and institutional structures and the subjectivities of individuals and social groups. Though these structures are themselves only accessed through individual (inter)subjectivity, they can be distinguished from other individuals or social groups. Transsubjective structures define and are defined by individual (inter)subjectivity. They both produce and are the product of such (inter)subjectivity. Technical organization is itself a social product, but nevertheless is provisionally 'given' for individuals and social groups, even though such transsubjective structures undergo continuous transformation as a result of individual social activities.

For Lowe, transsubjective structures are as essential as—and inseparable from—intersubjective structures. Furthermore, Lowe believed that economic, technological, and other social developments were leading to an ever-increasing pace of structural change in modern industrial societies. Such structural change is constantly making old social recipes obsolete. Lowe's careful attention to the impact of (historically changing) socioeconomic structure on behavior and motivation, and the changing limits upon and consequences of economic action under different structural and institutional conditions, leads him to see greater instability and disorder in contemporary socioeconomic life. Lowe thus provides the framework for an analysis of the impact of the more recent technologies associated with the information revolution on subjectivity, decision-making, and the degree of uncertainty (see Gergen 1991).

The crucial role of structure in economics can be seen by examining the significance of the relation of data and theory arising from the distinctive method of traditional economic inquiry. For Lowe, traditional economics is a deductive science that has an "original quantitative tendency" (1936:18). Selecting the data requires some initial induction, as must all deduction if it is to have empirical validity, but once these assumptions are set, "deduction is absolutely strict, because it is nothing but the logical arrangement of the 'substantial' data according to [a] formal principle" (1936:19). And the formal principle according to which the data are logically arranged "is the colourless quantitative question of 'more or less'" (1936:19).

Given the strictness of the deductive process and the 'colorless' nature of the principle that regulates it, "all substantial interest is directed towards the *data*":

> Once we disregard errors in logical reasoning, obviously the concrete value of knowledge or the realistic bearing of theoretical deduction, apart from the abstract value of

> logical conclusiveness, simply depends on how accurately the assumptions have been selected ... Under these circumstances, the immense importance of how a theorist handles his data is quite obvious. The value of economics as an empirical science ultimately depends on how accurately the natural and social background of economic activity is depicted in the assumptions of any deductive analysis. (1936:20–21)

While simple deductive coherence does not depend on what assumptions are made concerning the structure of the system, the relevance of the conclusions most certainly does (1936:36).

For Lowe, the strictness of market laws is attributable to the strictness of the deductive procedure. But this will hold only under the particular sociological conditions implied in the initial assumptions. Lowe placed great weight on the 'middle principles' that convey the natural, social, and technical environment of economic activity and shape the motivations and behaviors of economic classes and market participants.

Conclusion

The Lowe–Schutz connection remains underexamined. In particular, thorough and close study of their mid-fifties correspondence needs to be conducted. Some of Lowe's own views changed in some important ways at and just following the time of the correspondence. The impact of the correspondence on Schutz will be more difficult to judge, due to his passing. There is some disagreement as to the direction that Schutz's work may have been taking at the time of his death, differences in interpretation that relate to the posthumous publication of some of his work.

Lowe's "interpretive-structural" approach to economics has important areas of contact with Schutzian social inquiry. Elaboration of Lowe's approach may thus play a role in the development of a phenomenological economics, while the work of Schutz and his followers can contribute to the elaboration of Lowe's interpretive-structural approach. A key issue to be worked out will be the relative importance of structural factors, or what we have here called transsubjective structures.

Notes

1. McCloskey (1994) does include a short (11 page) chapter on "The Economy as a Conversation" late (chapter 25) in the book. Even there, there is little more than mention of the Hayekian notion of prices as information repositories and the role of "persuasion" in advertising and deal-making. A brief mention is finally made of the necessity for *interpretation*, but even then, only with reference to speech (1994:377).
2. As Harding has pointed out, the social scientist must always look at not only human beings and societies, but the physical and natural aspects of the world that they inhabit (1986:44–45). When we add this to a) the recognition of the hermeneutic aspect of natural science (from the standpoint of the investigator), and b) the acknowledgement that human activity transforms human beings, society, and nature, we reach a conclusion quite the opposite of the Critical Realists, namely, "that a critical and self-reflective social science should be the model of all science" (1986:44). The interpretive social sciences have much more experience dealing with the interpretive nature of inquiry and the difficulties with examining a constantly changing object, and the other sciences, especially those informing public policy, may benefit from that experience.
3. Previous attempts to synthesize Schutz and Marx include Sallach (1973) and Smart (1976).

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