

Economy, Ideology and Culture: Otto Neurath's Approach to a Precarious Relationship

Günther Sandner

1 Culture and Austro-Marxism

The concept of base and superstructure has been one of the hotly debated issues in Marxist theory. Otto Neurath, who considered Marxism to be decisive for empirical sociology, accepted the significance of economic conditions as a driving force in the historical process. In contrast to Max Weber and Werner Sombart, he put the importance of ideas and the “capitalist spirit” into perspective. However, he also generally rejected the idea of economic determinism that was then very common among Marxists. In assuming a “coherence” of social structure, mode of production, way of life and (political) ideology, Neurath's approach enabled even an extensive understanding of cultural phenomena. Although he never elaborated a cultural theory (and was sceptical of then-contemporary concepts), his assumptions on this subject are worth considering.

In the preface to one of the most influential books of socialist theory, Karl Marx's “Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859), a frequently quoted phrase was established. “In the social production of their life,” Marx put it, “men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis, from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. “That means that”(t)he mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally. It is not the consciousness of men that specifies their being, but on the contrary their social being that specifies their consciousness.”¹

In the following decades or even the following century, the base-superstructure conception became an important problem in Marxist theory. On one hand, it has been very popular because of its focus on material life conditions, its radicalism and its anti-idealism as well; on the other hand, it raised some important and even

¹ Karl Marx, Preface of the Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy, in: Terrell Carver (ed.), *Karl Marx: Later Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 159–160.

crucial questions with respect to political strategy. If the mode of production of material life conditions consciousness and even intellectuality, what could be the relevance of socialist and Marxist activities in the educational or even cultural field? Does it make sense to organize a socialist cultural life within the capitalist society – as many of the socialist parties did – if it is predominantly the social being that determines people’s consciousness? Or is it a waste of political energy to focus on culture and education instead of on economy and societal order? It is well known that a number of socialist intellectuals gave sophisticated answers to such questions. Among the most culturalist ones were those brought forth by the Austro-Marxists. In a way, Austro-Marxist theory was a heterogeneous conception that was represented by a number of different socialist intellectuals. Nevertheless, they had some common ground and characteristic traits. Austro-Marxism was one of the socialist-oriented concepts in political theory that opposed a determinist base-superstructure conception; rather, in Austro-Marxist theory, education and culture played a crucial role for social, political and even economic transformation.

The Austro-Marxist idea of culture consists of different elements that cannot be expounded upon here in their entirety. Nevertheless, at least two of them should be mentioned. First, there was strong interest in working-class life. However, the question of whether there is such a thing as working-class culture in the bourgeois society was definitely not beyond controversy. Within the socialist movement, different approaches existed. Many socialists claimed that the question could not be addressed before the social revolution had taken place. Working-class culture could only be realized after a revolutionary change, they asserted. Realizing a proletarian culture, they said, is not a question for the capitalist, but rather for the socialist society. However, a number of Marxist intellectuals put forth a contradictory idea. They claimed that working-class attitudes and values such as collectivity and solidarity should at least partly be implemented even in the existing society. Austro-Marxists such as sociologist Max Adler (1873–1937) were among them. Although the conservative and pan-German academic establishment constricted his career, Adler was one of the very few socialist scholars who taught at the university. As a follower of Neo-Kantianism, he strictly opposed materialistic conceptions and was therefore convinced that parts of the socialist society could be anticipated even under contemporary conditions.² The concept of a counter-cultural socialist milieu in Red Vienna was based at least theoretically upon these assumptions.³ For Austro-Marxist intellectuals such as Max Adler, there was no reason for “economic fatalism.”⁴

²Max Adler, *Neue Menschen. Gedanken über sozialistische Erziehung [1924]*. Vienna, Munich: Jungbrunnen, 1972.

³Ibid., p. 17.

⁴Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna. Experiment in Working-Class Culture 1919–1934*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Second and in conjunction with it, there was a critical discourse on pedagogy and education within Austro-Marxism. It was again Max Adler who rejected the idea of non-partisan, status-quo-oriented education. In his view, socialist education aimed to overwhelm capitalism, even by the establishment of a socialist consciousness. He was convinced that, embedded in societal antagonisms and conflicts, socialist-oriented education could never be neutral. Young socialist intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s such as Marie Jahoda and Paul Lazarsfeld followed this approach and tried to put it into practice. They combined their activities in the socialist youth movement with research studies that, as we know from the history of the social sciences, broke new ground. The most famous example was the Marienthal Study⁵ that brought forth a rather pessimistic view. Unemployment, it said, does not lead to revolutionary attitudes and behaviour but results in passivity, apathy and depression. However, earlier studies, which focused on youth culture and were more closely connected with questions of pedagogy, followed a more optimistic approach. Among other findings, they came to the conclusion that solidarity is an essential attribute of working-class youth in particular, and this should be promoted by means of education. Already in 1924, Lazarsfeld together with Ludwig Wagner organized a youth camp that aimed to bring together proletarian and bourgeois adolescents and to establish a non-authoritarian, self-administered community. Although the experiment failed at least in part, it was nevertheless a valuable experience for both the participants and the young socialist intellectuals.⁶

Naturally, Austro-Marxism also referred to culture such as art, literature and philosophy and defined it idealistically as the best that has ever been thought and written. However, in addition to this traditional and very common understanding, culture in the socialist context had a broader meaning. On one hand, culture stood for workers' education. While appropriating the liberal and even revolutionary heritage of the bourgeoisie, the working class should assimilate culture and become qualified to form a new society. Obviously this approach did not break with the traditional and hegemonic meaning of culture but brought in a collective of new cultural agents: the proletariat, which, for a very long time, represented the opposite of culture and civilization. On the other hand, culture was considered as a way of life, even a counter-cultural one. In contrast to the bourgeois culture of individuality and competition, a new socialist culture should be based upon collectivity and solidarity. Within the socialist milieu (or "camp" as historians and political scientists later named it), an egalitarian society and the "new human being" could be partially realized.

⁵ Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel, *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal. Ein soziographischer Versuch über die Wirkungen langandauernder Arbeitslosigkeit [1933]*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975.

⁶ Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Ludwig Wagner, *Gemeinschaftserziehung durch Erziehergemeinschaften. Bericht über einen Beitrag der Jugendbewegung zur Sozialpädagogik*. Vienna: Anzengruber Verlag, 1929.

As an Austrian socialist intellectual, Otto Neurath was concerned with questions and debates like this. What was his position? To answer this question, three subjects will be addressed. First, I will (briefly) characterize Neurath's approach to Marxism. Second, I will analyse his position on base and superstructure, including the discussion about Max Weber and other "bourgeois" intellectuals. And finally, I will raise the question of whether something like a cultural theory emerged in (some of) his writings.

2 Neurath and Marxism

Initially, I want to characterize Neurath's approach to Marxism in three steps: First, Neurath's relation to Austro-Marxism; second, his "synthesis" of Marx and Epicurus; and finally his approach of Marxism as empirical sociology.

2.1 *Austro-Marxism*

What was Neurath's role in the political and intellectual formation of Austro-Marxism? As a young man, he had been deeply influenced by the social reform milieu of turn-of-the-century Vienna. The social philosopher Josef Popper-Lynkeus (1838–1921) and the natural scientist and monist Ernst Mach (1836–1916) crucially influenced his intellectual development. In this time, issues such as peace, women's rights, social reform and even housing played a prominent role in his political socialization. Although he also introduced socialist ideas and concepts in his writings, he blazed his own path in socialist theory. Anyway, he became a very active intellectual in the Austro-Marxist milieu. But although he dealt with highly relevant political issues such as the question of socialization, he was never an important political theoretician within the Austrian Socialist Party (SDAP). However, he was strongly integrated in the cultural and educational movement of Austro-Marxism. Among other things, he had close contacts to leading representatives of the SDAP such as Otto Bauer, the party's chief theoretician. After World War I, he "saw a chance of practical application of ideas he had been developing over the last decade"⁷ in the Bavarian Revolution. But the socialist experiment failed in 1919 and Otto Neurath, its president of the central office for economic planning, was imprisoned. Beside academics such as Max Weber who pointed out that Neurath was a scholar and not a politician, it was Austrian Foreign Secretary Otto Bauer who spoke on his behalf and secured his release after a few weeks.

⁷Thomas Uebel, Introduction: Neurath's Economics in Critical Context, in: Thomas Uebel and Robert S. Cohen (eds.), *Otto Neurath. Economic Writings. Selections 1904–1945*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004, pp. 1–106, p. 40.

Furthermore, there was a process of intellectual exchange that took place, for instance, among the circle of thinkers surrounding Otto Bauer (which included Otto and Helene Bauer, Otto Neurath and Edgar Zilsel),⁸ an intellectual formation whose activities are unfortunately not very well known. In addition, Neurath collaborated and carried on discussions with Austro-Marxist intellectuals such as Marie Jahoda and Edgar Zilsel. Whereas Jahoda worked for a short time in his museum,⁹ Zilsel was always a critical commentator on his research work, as his review of “Empirical Sociology” demonstrates.¹⁰ To sum it up: The fact that he was part of the socialist cultural formation of Red Vienna was crucial to the development of his research projects and activities in knowledge transfer. This was not only a question of intellectual exchange. Neurath’s connection to Austrian socialism also provided infrastructure and financial support that was essential for his intellectual activities. The Museum of Society and Economy probably would never even have been founded without the political support that was primarily provided by the Viennese Chamber of Labour and the City of Vienna, two institutions dominated by the socialists.

However, there were also disagreements among Neurath and Austro-Marxists such as those in the socialization debate (in which he disagreed with socialists such as Käthe Leichter, Helene Bauer and others) and, what is more important in this context, in cultural questions. As his review of the influential book “New Human Beings” (*Neue Menschen*, 1924) demonstrated, he was rather critical of the approach taken by Max Adler, who failed in his opinion to sufficiently characterize his subjects, the new people.¹¹ Otto Neurath as well as socialist scholars such as Edgar Zilsel rejected the paternalism that, in their view, some of the Austro-Marxists (including Adler) advocated. In contrast, they had more confidence in the autonomy of working class people, who were never disparaged as “the masses,” as they were referred to by a widely accepted phrase in then-contemporary political and cultural discourse. Democratization of society also meant deconstructing a phenomenon Zilsel called the “religion of the genius” that necessarily results in the condemnation of the masses.¹² The idea that socialist educators must implement their cultural conception among the working class based on a top-down process was

⁸ Wilhelm Filla, *Wissenschaft für alle – ein Widerspruch? Bevölkerungsnaher Wissenstransfer in der Wiener Moderne*. Innsbruck, Wien: Studienverlag, 2001, pp. 426–429.

⁹ Marie Jahoda, Aus den Anfängen der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung in Österreich, in: *Zeitgeschichte*, 8, 4, 1981, pp. 133–141; Marie Jahoda, Im Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum, in: Friedrich Stadler (ed.), *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Otto Neurath – Gerd Arntz*, Vienna, Munich: Löcker, 1982, pp. 43–44.

¹⁰ Edgar Zilsel, Rezension zu Otto Neurath: Empirische Soziologie, in: *Der Kampf*, 25, 2, 1932, pp. 91–94, p. 93.

¹¹ Otto Neurath, Rezension zu M. Adler, *Neue Menschen* [1925], in: Rudolf Haller and Heiner Rutte (eds.), *Otto Neurath. Gesammelte philosophische und methodologische Schriften*, Vol. 1. Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1981, pp. 219–220.

¹² Edgar Zilsel, *Die Geniereligion. Ein kritischer Versuch über das moderne Persönlichkeitsideal [1918]*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.

never one Neurath advocated. In contrast, he favoured the idea of democratization of knowledge and humanization of science.¹³ In this context, he explicitly rejected the philosophical approach in worker's education and juxtaposed to it his pictorial statistics approach.¹⁴ However, in practice, these contradictory approaches were probably not in conflict and actually complemented one another.¹⁵

2.2 *Between Marx and Epicurus*

In contrast to Max Adler, the philosopher to whom Otto Neurath referred to most was definitely not Immanuel Kant. Neither were Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Friedrich Hegel among his philosophical favourites. Rather than Neo-Kantianism, Neurath advocated a materialistic approach (physicalism) that corresponded within Austro-Marxism, for instance, with the views of Friedrich Adler, a physicist and disciple of Mach. However, the way he defined his own Marxism was a singular phenomenon. It was based upon the idea of combining the approaches of Epicurus and Karl Marx. As he pointed out in "Personal Life and Class Struggle,"¹⁶ he was an advocate of a theory that combined the ideas of the Greek philosopher with social reform. For Neurath, Epicurus negated transcendental ideas and theology but supported earthly things such as friendship and human happiness. Neurath wanted to transform Epicurus' doctrine of happiness into a collective programme with the help of Marx. He named his approach "Socialepicurism." "Everything is significant in so far as it is so for happiness," he concluded.¹⁷ He was convinced that the realization of individual happiness and social reform on a collective level are the crucial elements for a future society. They could help to realize an ideal human being in a society that transcends the antagonisms between city and country, nature and culture, manual labour and intellectual activities, as he put it in a 1921 article entitled "Humanity."¹⁸ Although he was a well-known and acknowledged intellectual, this concept of pleasure and happiness (which seems to have been influenced not only

¹³ Neurath, Otto, Visual Education, in: Elisabeth Nemeth and Friedrich Stadler (eds.), *Encyclopedia and Utopia. The Life and Work of Otto Neurath (1882–1945)*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996, pp. 245–335, p. 257.

¹⁴ Otto Neurath, Bildstatistik und Arbeiterbildung [1929], in: Rudolf Haller and Robin Kinross (eds.), *Gesammelte bildpädagogische Schriften*, Vol. 3, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1991, pp. 139–143.

¹⁵ Josef Weidenholzer, *Auf dem Weg zum "Neuen Menschen". Bildungs – und Kulturarbeit der österreichischen Sozialdemokratie in der Ersten Republik*. Wien, München, Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1981, p. 87.

¹⁶ Otto Neurath, Personal Life and Class Struggle, in: Marie Neurath and Bob Cohen (eds.), *Otto Neurath. Empiricism and Sociology*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973, pp. 249–298.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁸ Otto Neurath, Menschheit [1921], in: Haller, Rudolf and Heiner Rutte (1981) (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 197–201.

by Marxism but also by utilitarianism and utopianism) probably sounded a little weird (or at least too utopian) for some of the party's intellectuals.

2.3 *Marxism as Empirical Sociology*

In a number of publications, Otto Neurath tried to explain what kind of Marxism he advocated. One of these texts is "Empirical Sociology" from 1931.¹⁹ The importance of Marxism in the field of social sciences, as Neurath put it, derives primarily from its rejection of any theological and idealistic speculation in the analysis of the historical process. The analysis of how capitalism works is closely connected with the analysis of the transformation of the status quo. That is why Marxism prepares, in a way, the synthesis of (national) economy and history, which will become an inseparable unit. And it is only Marxism that represents sociology based upon materialism. Materialism in this context means dealing with human behaviour within a spatiotemporal order. For Neurath, there was a close connection between empirical sociology, unity of science and Marxism. A Marxist, as Neurath put it, doesn't need any philosophical foundation. As a sociologist, a Marxist is interested in finding correlations among sociological events with the aim of being able to make prognoses. What sort of crises do we expect? What are the relevant preconditions for revolution? And how do the living conditions of social classes change in both war and peace? These were, he was convinced, examples of those questions that are relevant for the Marxist.

Born of an activist outlook, Marxism starts from historical forecasts in the great manner. How did the social order of our days arise, how will it be changed and by whom? Those are the basic questions. To explain these, ethnology is not enough, nor economic history, nor social history; for this, as we saw, an economic analysis of the social apparatus is needed, with its wages, rents and amounts of goods, enterprises and associations. To the Marxist, human action appears not as the outflow of a sequence of concepts but as the result of specific preconditions.²⁰

Although Neurath characterized his activities as "apolitical" (in the sense of social technological) because of their scientific orientation, he was, without a doubt, politically a socialist. His intellectual activities were meant to result in internationalization and, finally, world socialism. However, in his view, Marxism was a scientific theory and a sociological approach but not, and least of all, a philosophy of life (*Weltanschauung*).

¹⁹ Otto Neurath, *Empirical Sociology* [1931], in: Marie Neurath and Bob Cohen (eds.), loc. cit.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 347–348.

²¹ Otto Neurath, *Marxismus eines Jesuiten* [1931], in: Rudolf Haller and Heiner Rutte (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 401–405.

3 Between Economy and Ideology: Base and Superstructure

3.1 On Ideas and Ideologies

In 1931, Neurath published an article entitled “Marxism of a Jesuit” in the Social Democratic monthly journal *Der Kampf* (The Struggle).²¹ At first glance, it was a review of I.B. Kraus’ “*Scholastik, Puritanismus und Kapitalismus*” (Scholasticism, Puritanism and Capitalism). However, in effect, it constituted a critique of Max Weber and Werner Sombart, the “bourgeois” sociologists. As Neurath put it, they always wanted to demonstrate in what ways ideas formed social order and economy. Naturally, he disagreed with such an attitude and accused Weber and Sombart polemically of presenting an almighty spirit as an important historical force. For him, this was nothing but metaphysics. As Neurath noted ironically, he gladly welcomed the fact that a Christian scholar, a Roman Catholic by confession, was the one who disproved Weber’s thesis of a Calvinist spirit that results in capitalism (Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism [1904/1905]). Weber, who aimed to refute Marxism, had been challenged precisely by a Jesuit! Neurath recommended the book very highly to every Marxist interested in Weber’s sociology of religion. To what extent was it a materialist one? Neurath summarized its basic assumptions as follows: It was not the Calvinist religion that formed the English merchant; rather, the English merchant adapted and adopted as well the Calvinist religion because they themselves were congenial to it. Those who wanted to merchandise and lend money became Calvinists. But it was not Calvinism that transformed them into merchants. Neurath appeared to be impressed by both the book and the author who, as he put it, cut his own path and established a third way between Weber and Marx. Ideas influence practice and vice versa, Neurath quoted Kraus, but it is first and foremost in the field of economics where practice and not theory has primacy.

Did Neurath ever define his concept of ideology? In any case, his understanding of ideology is not free of ambiguity. In his rather polemical review of Karl Mannheim’s “Ideology and Utopia,” he rejected Mannheim’s interpretation of Marxism and Marxist understanding of ideology. But what was his own approach? First he claimed that ideologies are “trains of thought” in general and rejected their meaning as “falsification.” Second, he brought forth a more precise concept. On the one hand, for Neurath, there were scientific and non-scientific ideologies and the former will overwhelm the latter. Therefore, he claimed that Marxism as a scientific ideology is the ideology of the proletariat.²² However, this definitely does not correspond to Marx’ approach to ideology as false consciousness. On the other hand, he saw only slight effects of ideologies such as religious doctrines when he highlights the contradictions between them and reality. There are no clear consequences of religious doctrines, he was convinced.²³

²²Otto Neurath, *Bürgerlicher Marxismus* [1930], in: Rudolf Haller and Heiner Rutte (1981) (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 349–356.

²³Otto Neurath, *Marxismus eines Jesuiten* [1931], in: Rudolf Haller and Heiner Rutte (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 401–405.

3.2 *Base and Superstructure*

How did Neurath himself define the relationship between ideas and economy and between theory and practice? In some of his writings such as “Empirical Sociology” (1931) he reflected on the way Marxism addressed the issue. In another article from 1931 entitled “Philosophy of Life and Marxism,”²⁴ he tried to make his position clear. First, he recapitulated his evaluation that Marxism is definitely not a philosophy of life but empirical sociology. Whoever is searching for correlations among sociological processes needs no any philosophical foundation. In contrast, he tried to prognosticate economic and social phenomena such as crises, revolutions, wars and even the development of the material conditions of certain social classes. Second, there are certain correlations that are crucial for Marxism. There are some processes that will be defined as superstructure. The Marxist demonstrates in what way they relate to processes of the order of production. The Marxist interprets even his own scientific formulations as superstructure and therefore as dependent upon the economic base. Therefore, certain theories will only emerge if social transformation has taken place. For the Marxist, societal transformations lead to new theoretical statements. However, theories as formations of physicalism are not only symptoms of changes within the order of life; they are also elements of change, as Neurath put it. In publishing and communicating certain findings, one can change the existing order and form a new basis for the advancement of theory.

The way Neurath interpreted the base/superstructure problem can be summarized as follows: Primarily, there are correlations between base and superstructure. However, a sort of primacy of the base should not be ignored. Nevertheless, this does not mean that only the base determines superstructure. Superstructural phenomena are more than mere reflections of the economic structure or the mode of production. In Marxism – which in Neurath’s view was essential for the social sciences – theory and practice are closely interwoven. Consequently, the bourgeois doctrine of neutral scholars who study social relations from “outside” ought to be rejected.

4 The Approach Towards Culture

A sophisticated understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure has always been a key element of socialist theories of culture.²⁵ However, the base and superstructure issue is also a distinguishing feature among socialist approaches

²⁴Otto Neurath, *Weltanschauung und Marxismus* [1931], in: Rudolf Haller and Heiner Rutte (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 407–412.

²⁵Raymond Williams, *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*, in: *New Left Review*, 82, 14, 1973, pp. 3–16.

because differences in it inevitably result in different ideas of culture. For this reason, it is worth considering what concept of culture Otto Neurath advocated. He very rarely used the word “culture” and was very sceptical about its application. The number of imprecise meanings of culture, a word that is full of emotions, as he put it in 1921 in “Anti-Spengler,”²⁶ is unsurpassed even by those of the word capital – a remarkable argument for a Marxist. However, there are three points to characterize Otto Neurath’s approach to culture. First, it can be discussed within his theory of coherence; second, the concept has significance in the context of working-class life; and finally, culture appeared as an important element in Neurath’s project for democratization of knowledge.

4.1 Coherence

Coherence is a key term for Neurath’s approach to culture. For him, the question of coherence of customs played a decisive role in the structure of sociology. He assumed that, in human society, there is always a coherence of mode of production, social structure and ideology. In contrast to Weber who argued that words, writings and ideas determine human behaviour, Neurath was convinced that there has been no determinism but rather coherence. The books one writes and the fairytales one tells are part of customs and traditions. They are coherent with the customs of the process of production and crucial to the lives of human beings. So even culture must be seen in the context of the theory of coherency. Modes of productions are coherent with ways of life, with technological, religious and cultural practices. Nonetheless, they are not determined. There are material relationships but there is no determinism. In the chapter on “coherence” within “Empirical Sociology,” he illustrated the unpredictability of intellectual and artistic activities with the example of a painter:

A relation through stimuli is much more ambiguous than a technical relation. If a painter painting sunny pictures is found in a foggy country, one might be inclined to explain this as compensation, based on many analogies: what he is denied in life he creates in his art. But if a painter of sunny pictures is found in a sunny country, then, based on many analogies, one might declare: this is a reflection of reality. Now a penetrating analysis might differentiate a picture painted by realistic association. It is more difficult to predict whether painters will paint sunny or not-sunny picture in foggy countries than to predict that we shall find mathematics wherever we find engineering.²⁷

Even the emergence of certain doctrines, Neurath was convinced, is not always to be explained one-dimensionally by the modes of production, but instead needs to be discussed sociologically or politically.

²⁶Otto Neurath, *Anti-Spengler* [1921], in: Marie Neurath and Bob Cohen (eds.), loc. cit., pp. 158–213.

²⁷Otto Neurath, *Empirical Sociology*, loc. cit, p. 385.

4.2 Working Class Culture

In Austro-Marxist theory, cultural and social elements were closely interwoven. In a way, Neurath's approach could be characterized in the same way. In capitalism, society is not only divided into social classes. There are also cultural contradictions that are interrelated with that. The political question is how to react to this development? In "Empirical Sociology" (1931), Neurath introduced conceptual terms such as terrain of life (*Lebensboden*), living standard (*Lebenslage*) and order of life (*Lebensordnung*) to provide a more scientific approach for sociology. However, Neurath also defined borders of a class-based way of life within a capitalist economy. Socialist humans were created by a socialist order; it is not the other way around. If one wants to change housing, clothing, festivals, reading, love, everyday life, sociability and personal life in general, one must change the power structures, the social order as a whole. Without the radical change of the economic order, socialist thinking, feeling and life will not be successful and there will be no socialist democracy.

Not until after the proletariat's victory will education and art be brought to all who today still must go without. Not until then will there arise in a greater measure an art more adapted to the socialist order. The practice of art and science today lies mainly in the hands of opponents to the proletariat. Only rarely will bourgeois recalcitrants wage single-handed war against the past or break through to the proletarian front. And in the proletariat there are, for the present, few possibilities to work in a scientifically or artistically creative field. Traditional means and forms are predominantly in use.²⁸

Initially, this sounds rather incompatible with Austro-Marxist cultural theory. Nevertheless, for Neurath, these efforts, cultural activities and socialist reforms of everyday life were not in vain because the socialist transformation had already begun. As he put it, there is a conflicting field between measures that are already possible in the "democracy of enemies" (capitalism) and those that can be realized only in the "democracy of friends" (socialism). However, Neurath was doubtlessly convinced that the activities of the working class cultural movements were an important instrument for establishing solidarity within the socialist milieu.

4.3 Culture as Democratization

The best example to demonstrate the importance of culture in Neurath's conception is, of course, his approach to democratizing knowledge. According to the ideas of the Vienna Circle Manifesto (1929), it was necessary "to fashion intellectual tools for everyday life, for the daily life of the scholar but also for the daily life of all those who in some way join in working at the conscious re-shaping of life."²⁹

²⁸Otto Neurath, *Personal Life and Class Struggle*, loc. cit., p. 258.

²⁹Otto Neurath: *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis* [The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle] [1929], in: Marie Neurath and Bob Cohen (eds.), loc. cit., p. 305.

Democratization of knowledge, as Neurath conceptualized it, included both the level of literary language and that of pictorial language. He not only criticized the use of “intellectual jargon”³⁰ but also tried to replace it through his activities in adult and workers’ education. As is well-known, the “Verein Ernst Mach” was founded in 1928 to “popularize” the ideas of the Vienna Circle by organizing lectures held mostly by association members such as Moritz Schlick, Hans Hahn, Edgar Zilsel and, of course, Neurath himself. In addition to these activities, Neurath cooperated with various institutions such as the *Volkshochschulen* (adult education institutions) and the *Arbeiterhochschule* (workers’ university), where he gave courses and lectures as well. Also a considerable number of his publications (books, booklets, articles etc.) were addressed not only to the scientific community but also to the general public.

A discussion of Neurath’s concept of humanization ought to include consideration of the following aspects: First, for Neurath, realizing humanization of knowledge was a necessary element in establishing and advancing democracy. “For a democratic society, it is important to have a common knowledge in a common language,”³¹ he pointed out. Second, for him, pictorial pedagogy was an important instrument to extend “intellectual democracy.” However, this project was not due to national borders. It was planned to create a universal language that would be independent of linguistic and cultural conditions. Visual education was an element of applied social science and international planning as well. And finally, Neurath’s utopian programme defined aims that had to be achieved: Cosmopolitanism, internationalism and world citizenship could be realized if cultural, social and linguistic barriers were transcended. The construction of a scientific worldview and the battle against metaphysical and theological tendencies had always to be carried on by means of social reform as well as economic and political planning. In contrast to Oswald Spengler’s book “The Decline of the West” (1918, 1922), there was no clash of civilizations but rather the possibility of a common culture of mankind.

5 Culture and Institution in Comparison

Neurath never referred to a base-superstructure conception in a narrower sense. That is the reason why culture mattered; even so, he was a materialist and a socialist. To point that up, a comparative perspective could finally be helpful. Carefully considered, there are a number of parallels between the approaches of Austro-Marxist intellectuals such as Neurath in the 1920s and 1930s and early British cultural studies in the 1950s and 1960s (meaning the intellectual and educational activities of scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and even E.P. Thomson within the British New Left). First of all, both referred to a broad concept of culture that was closely connected to a class-based meaning, to working-class

³⁰Neurath, Otto, *Visual Education*, loc. cit., p. 256.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 331.

culture. Second, and related to that, there were institutional similarities. Despite some university links, both the representatives of British cultural studies and many Austro-Marxist scholars were extra-mural phenomena. They worked in institutions of knowledge transfer and workers' or adult education. Therefore both represented models of "alternative institutionalization." This concept can be characterized along the lines of Edward Shils' well-known definition.³² First of all, there were research institutes. Besides the institutions of adult education, there were two new types of organizations. Already in 1924, Otto Neurath founded the "Museum for Society and Economy." On one hand, this was a location of science popularization (or "humanization"); on the other hand, the method of pictorial statistics was advanced there. Furthermore, all of the Austro-Marxist intellectuals were writing in a number of socialist journals. This diversity of periodicals was typical for the Austrian socialist milieu. They were specialized in topics such as education, philosophy and politics. Perhaps the most interesting one was *Der Kampf* since it combined all of these elements. Officially, it was the Social Democrats' theoretical party journal; in fact, it was also a discussion forum for critical intellectuals associated with the party. Surprisingly, although most of them were never associated with the university system, the Austro-Marxist intellectuals also had students (according to the meaning used by Shils) in exceptional cases. The example that can be given relates to Neurath. As one of his numerous activities, he was a teacher at the workers' university that had been founded in 1925 and conducted by Josef Luitpold Stern. After World War II, one of his students, Franz Rauscher, became director of the Museum for Society and Economy, which Neurath himself had founded in interwar Austria.³³ But other elements of institutionalization should also be mentioned: The interaction between the different representatives was remarkable and included participation in a number of discussion circles, the reception of their respective intellectual work by reviews, and even intellectual cooperation in research projects. Undoubtedly, they also communicated with the general public, a phenomenon that has to be seen within the context of the socialist counterculture.

6 Conclusion

So finally, I would like to state some conclusions that emerge from the comparative approach I have put forth.³⁴ Historically considered, there is a problem of context. As a matter of course, different time frames and even national traditions need to be

³²Edward Shils, Tradition, Ecology, and Institution in the History of Sociology, in: *DAEDALUS, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 99, 4, 1970, Cambridge, MA, pp. 760–825.

³³Franz Rauscher, Mein Lehrer Otto Neurath, in: Friedrich Stadler (ed.), *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Otto Neurath – Gerd Arntz*, Vienna, Munich: Löcker, 1982, pp. 45–47.

³⁴Günther Sandner, *Engagierte Wissenschaft. Austromarxistische Kulturstudien und die Anfänge der britischen Cultural Studies*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2006.

considered. I can only give some catchwords with respect to the British Left. In postwar Britain, the idea of class was challenged by welfare capitalism. The level of consumption rose even in the working class. In addition, mass culture and mass media provoked the question of classlessness, and even the reform of the educational system improved working class kids' chances of attaining better positions in society. In sharp contrast to this, the Austrian political situation in the 1920s and 1930s was conditioned by economic and social decline and political radicalization. Social classes and political camps were strictly divided. Nevertheless, there are comparable elements even on the level of political context. Both formations had to deal with political transformation after the war, which did not result in revolution, as some leftists hoped or even expected. On a theoretical level, this combination corresponded to the rejection of economic reductionism and the rise of leftist culturalism. The importance of culture and education within the Left was part of this phenomenon.

However, there is another interesting parallel worth mentioning. That is the idea that there is a relation between innovation in the academic field and the type of the cultural hybrid (i.e. the individual who moves between two different cultures). Interestingly, Paul Lazarsfeld formulated this idea in one of his publications on the history of sociology.³⁵ In a way, this hybridity applies to a number of intellectuals, either in the case of scholarship boys who came from working class families and entered academia, or at least in the case of intellectuals who were trained at the university but were active in the workers' movement and in workers' education as in the case of Neurath. The researcher who is familiar with working class life addresses different questions than the bourgeois academician who moves only within his own social class and cultural milieu. Therefore, there is a strong correlation between alternative institutionalization and the emergence of a critical intellectual discourse on culture. Among other elements I have mentioned, this is mainly due to political context, the extension of the concept of culture and new themes, and the transcending of disciplinary borders. Certainly, institutionalization was essential to establishing critical research on culture. Obviously, though, it sometimes had to find alternative ways.

However, in this context – and even because of it – the objects and the orientation of the idea of culture changed. Culture appeared as mass culture, popular culture, class culture and even youth culture. It became the object of trans-disciplinary work that was addressed even to a non-academic audience. And finally, the political context is worth comparing. Both conceptions, the Austro-Marxists and the British intellectuals around Birmingham, were integrated in a socialist milieu that needed to deal with the fact that an expected revolution didn't happen. This was one of the reasons why culture and education became important elements of a critical, socialist

³⁵Paul Lazarsfeld, Eine Episode in der Geschichte der empirischen Sozialforschung: Erinnerungen, in: Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Soziologie – autobiographisch. Drei kritische Berichte zur Entwicklung einer Wissenschaft*, Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1975, pp. 147–225, p. 177.

discourse on societal and political transformation. In interwar Austria, Otto Neurath was one of its most original advocates. This can be summed up by stating that, although Neurath didn't share the optimism of socialist reform of everyday life and insisted on the significance of the economic and social order, he also advocated an approach that relates social change, culture and political transformation in a way that – perhaps because of its ambiguity – does not belong to any single one of those then-contemporary approaches. He found his own eclectic way which, however, has been inspiring for very different theories and practices.

