

ALFRED SCHUTZ (1899-1959)

Austrian-born phenomenologist and social theorist Alfred Schutz made charting the structures of the life-world his life's work. In the course of this endeavor, he added a host of terms to the vocabulary of social science, including typification, in-order-to and because-motives, course-of-action and personal ideal types, multiple realities, finite provinces of meaning, and the social distribution of knowledge. Following his death in 1959, his devoted students published his collected papers, unfinished manuscripts, and an intellectual biography, arranged to have his first book translated into English (Schutz 1967), and integrated his concepts into a new theoretical perspective called social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966). A number of scholars in Europe and America continue to undertake phenomenological research in the Schutzian style. A group of economists explores Schutz's relationship to the Austrian school of economics while applying his analyses of temporality and the ideal type to the reform of the neo-classical paradigm. Many contemporary social theorists incorporate Schutzian concepts into their own distinctive systems of thought.

Born into an affluent Viennese family in 1899, Schütz—he would drop the umlaut after immigrating to New York City in 1939—received a rigorous classical education at the Esterhazy Gymnasium, where he distinguished himself as a pianist and student of European musical history and literature. After service in the First World War, he abandoned his hopes for a career in music for one in international law and finance. Completing his degree on an accelerated schedule, he served as executive secretary for the Austrian Bankers Association in Vienna for seven years before joining a private bank as an attorney in 1929. Schutz remained in banking until 1956, by which time he had been teaching at the émigré-staffed New School for Social Research for twelve years.

Schutz's three major intellectual mentors were French philosopher Henri Bergson, sociologist Max Weber, and Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Weber had taught one semester at the University of Vienna in 1918, just before Schutz matriculated there, and greatly impressed the economics

faculty, particularly Ludwig von Mises. After Schutz completed his degree in 1922, Mises invited him to join his private seminar, where the issues of objectivity, historicism, apriorism, *Verstehen* (understanding), holism, and methodological individualism were debated by a host of brilliant figures, many of whom became lifelong friends of Schutz's. During the ten years that he participated in the seminar, Schutz tried to reconcile the inconsistencies in Weber's use of the term "subjective meaning" and to show how the methods of *Verstehen* and the ideal type can yield objective knowledge in the disciplines that take human action as their foundation. He first tried, unsuccessfully, to use Bergson's analyses of "duration" and memory as the bridge from subjective to objective meaning, then found in Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness the starting point he needed. After reading parts of it in the seminar, Schütz published *Die Sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt: Eine Einleitung in die verstehende Soziologie* ("The Meaningful Construction of the Social World: An Introduction to Interpretive Sociology") in 1932.

The discovery of duration, internal time-consciousness, or the stream of consciousness (as William James called it) was central to Schutz's account of subjective meaning. Subjective meaning arises through the retrospective unification of segments of a perennial, heterogeneous flux of sensations, perceptions, and reactions into experiences of this or that "type." Only through disciplined reflection can one disentangle the layers of anticipation and interpretation involved in the typification of the simplest experience, and reconstruct the stages through which a given phenomenon is constituted in its typicality. In Husserl's formulation, meaning arises through a "monothetic glance" over the "polythetic" flux that preceded it. The crucial fact is the temporal one: Meaning always arises *retrospectively*. Even one's prospective intentions are linguistic formulated in the future perfect tense—as actions one *will have executed* in the anticipated way.

This discovery allowed Schutz's to clarify Weber's methodological concepts. According to Weber, the social scientist-observer understands the subjective meaning that an actor attaches to his action when she realizes that the

actor intends to accomplish a certain end by the observed efforts. On the contrary, Schutz argued, the alleged subjective meaning is only a hypothetical formulation of the actor's in-order-to motive. The lived experience of another is inaccessible to the social scientist, for she can apprehend neither the polythetic stages nor the monothetic glance that unified the intention subjectively. Moreover, the social scientist brings to observation analytical and methodological imperatives alien to the actor's own meaning-constitution. History, sociology, law, and economics can adopt the subjective point of view only in the formal sense of using analytical models that refer back to the shared typifications that actors use to make sense of their own experience.

By eliminating the residual romantic-emphatic elements in Weber's methodology Schutz felt he had resolved the long-standing conflict between the "individualizing" and "generalizing" cultural sciences—they employ personal and course-of-action ideal types of different levels of concreteness—and, in the process, validated Husserl's conception of phenomenology as a science of the foundations of the sciences. The book's publication led to an invitation to meet Husserl in person and to a life-long affiliation with the phenomenological movement. But the book was poorly understood by Weber scholars and had little effect on the methodological debates of the day, save for a few students of Mises who realized that ideal types provided a better account of the basic concepts and laws of economics than "intellectual intuition."

Alfred Schutz was the kind of thinker who returned repeatedly a core set of intellectual problems. The transcendental turn in phenomenology, which Husserl pursued from 1913 to 1935, was one. Schutz's misgivings about this project were vindicated in 1938 when Husserl turned back to the life-world, the world of common-sense realities. Pragmatism was another. Schutz's most sustained exploration of pragmatism can be found in the unfinished manuscript, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (1970). A series of papers on the methodology of the social sciences—the most famous being "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action"—fleshed out and updated the lessons of his first book. Another series of papers on "The Stranger," "The Well-Informed

Citizen,” and “The Homecomer” recalled his early enthusiasm for Georg Simmel’s studies of social types. The last series, along with “Making Music Together,” represent Schutz’s most important contributions to interpretive sociology.

As individually profound and influential as these essays were, they distracted Schutz from the task he first envisioned in 1932—to trace the multi-dimensional, multi-storied meaning-structures of the life-world back to the constitutive operations of mundane subjectivity. He further advanced this project in the essays “On Multiple Realities” and “Symbol, Reality and Society,” but was unable to complete it. As his health began to fail in 1957, he outlined a final work that could do no more than summarize his progress to date. Thomas Luckmann faithfully and lovingly executed his teacher’s plan in *The Structures of the Life-World* (1973).

The Structures of the Life-World represents Schutz’s foremost contribution to intellectual history. Following Husserl’s “law of oriented constitution,” Schutz analyzed the common sense realities of everyday life into layers of meaning extending outwards from a primordial “null point”—a mundane ego representing pragmatic subjectivity as such. The resulting stratifications of the life-world—temporal, spatial, social, and signative—incorporate all of Schutz’s familiar concepts so that the reader can clearly see the unity of his life’s work.

One of the most original and beloved figures of 20th century social theory, Alfred Schutz will long be remembered as the inspiring mentor of the social constructionist perspective. His intellectual achievements were rarely appreciated on their own terms, however, for reasons he well-understood: The requirements of theory construction in the social sciences preclude systematic inquiry into the cascading syntheses that make analysis and inference possible. Even as Schutz’s writings were becoming widely available in the 1960s and 1970s, the rival paradigms of structuralism and post-structuralism ceased to look to human subjectivity for the origin of meaning, but to systems of contrasting signs and discursive practices.

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Further Readings and References

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