

Book Review/Essay

Review of Radical Political Economics

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Otto Neurath and the History of Economics.

By Michael Turk. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 207 pages + vi. Cloth \$119.96.

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If one is interested in the connections between the history of analytic philosophy and the history of economics, one might rightly turn to the Austrian-born polymath, Otto Neurath (1882–1945).¹ After studying mathematics, history, philosophy, and economics in Vienna, Neurath went to Berlin—following the suggestion of Ferdinand Tönnies—to continue his higher education in political and historical economics under Eduard Meyer and Gustav Schmöller (1906). Neurath quickly became well known in the field of war economics (he even suggested that wartime economic structures and planning might be used in peacetime as well) and as a leading figure in the so-called socialist calculation debate. But he was also an ardent and lifelong defender of calculation in kind, and is now often conceived as a forerunner to ecological economics. Neurath emphasized the relevance of such non-monetary values and reasons in economics that constitute human happiness in relation to social and cultural matters.

Given the English translation of a selection from Neurath's economic writings, with a hundred-page-long monographically structured introduction by Thomas Uebel (2004), and the edited collection about Neurath's historical role and economic ideas from 2007 (Nemeth, Schmitz, and Uebel 2007), the interested reader is seemingly well served with introductory materials. Thus one might easily ask, what do we gain by any new volume on Neurath's economic thought? This question is of utmost importance as Michael Turk's *Otto Neurath and the History of Economics* is the first and hitherto only monograph-length treatment of Neurath and economics. Without a spoiler regarding the details, my answer to the above question is, unfortunately, "not much." But let us proceed step by step.

The upshot of Turk's introduction is quite promising. He claims that "[w]hile more likely lambasted—when acknowledged—than heralded in his time, Neurath... posed alternatives about how to think about economics that have a not insignificant resonance today" (1). Promises, reasons, and claims are thus stated: Neurath was often misunderstood and underappreciated, though he indeed had something to put on the table, something that might be still outstanding and relevant for recent discussions. What other motivation and reason would one need to pick Neurath as the subject of a focused monograph? By calling Neurath's ideas "unorthodox," Turk provides a short list of potential issues and topics to be discussed later on: questioning the philosophical foundations of economic concepts; the linguistic masks of economic discourses; the unwarranted reduction of economic theorizing to matters of price; the misplaced reliance upon certain forms of quantification; and the alignment of economics with a mechanical model patterned on physics (1). Much to discuss, much to expect!

¹I am much indebted to the two peer reviewers of the journal for their helpful and enlightening comments. Any errors that might still be in the review are only my responsibility. My work was supported by the MTA BTK Lendület Morals and Science Research Group and by the MTA Premium Postdoctoral Scholarship.

In order to keep the promises, the book is structured accordingly on focused and restricted topics. After a shorter introductory chapter, Neurath is placed in his socio-cultural and intellectual milieu in chapter 2. We get some short and reduced passages about the Vienna Circle in the 1930s, Marxism, Austrian economics, Neurath's father, and the German Historical School. After these, we jump to the first point of interest in the legacy of Neurath, namely his critique of the philosophical foundations of economics. The main or central part of the chapter presents a long list of principles attributed to Neurath (36–38). We might sense that this list might be of the utmost importance to understand Neurath, and we would be right: all the forthcoming chapters of the book refer back implicitly to these principles by discussing them in some detail. Concept formation, statistics, mechanism and mechanical analogies, utilitarianism, materialism, overproduction, values, generalities, intentionality, *Verstehen*, and methodology are just some of those topics covered in the rather short chapter.

The German Historical School returns in chapter 4 as Turk goes on to scrutinize the relation between Neurath and Max Weber. In the following chapter, however, we leave behind personal relations and advance to what, for many, is the most important contribution of Neurath, namely his ideas on qualitative measurement and ecological economics (chapter 5). Then comes another chapter focusing on persons (Neurath and Piero Sraffa) and their ideas (critique of prices and monetary calculation). We might start to sense that another “Neurath, X, and the problem of Y”—substituting for the “X” anyone from the history of economics and for “Y” any much-discussed topic—might be in order. But no!

After this, we get another chapter on the general importance of Neurath, this time on his envisioned linguistic turn in economics (chapter 7). Being a philosopher who worked in the era of the so-called linguistic turn (that is, mainly between 1920 and 1940), Neurath criticized the discourses, terminology, and verbal manifestation of economics on various occasions. Turk attributes to Neurath the achievement of predating some sort of postmodern discourse-analysis approach to the special sciences, where the critique of linguistic issues takes significant relevance since mistaken, ambiguous, and ill-defined usages might mask deeper theoretical differences in content and argumentation.

The last chapter that deals with Neurath's actual economic ideas is centered on the notion of “socialist calculation” (chapter 8). Neurath was an ardent and (in)famous defender of alternative approaches to calculations (especially concerning resource allocation). He thought that there were various problems with market systems (both in terms of measurement and scope) and suggested for three decades that such economic calculations should be based on in-kind considerations. Turk is right in pointing out some of the sources of Neurath (like ancient Egypt, the topic of his habilitation under the aegis of the German Historical School), and in naming the major critics (Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek). Though charges against Neurath were leveled on various grounds, one of the main issues was that Neurath embraced the idea of planning as well: namely, that natural resources, their distribution, and their employment should be balanced and planned by scientific means. As this task would require an unmanageable and unobtainable amount of information and knowledge, Neurath's suggestion was simply impracticable and utopian. In order to vitalize Neurath's discourse, Turk considers the issue of planning and natural calculation in the contemporary discussion, namely “in an age of information,” but we do not feel at the end that things are now settled in any sense.

Finally, the volume ends with a general chapter on modernism and postmodernism, scrutinizing these two notions and pointing out their context-dependent meanings. The relevance of this is that for many, Neurath is the arch-role model of modernism (with planning, scientism, unification, and positivism), while for others he is a forerunner of postmodernism and a neat instantiation of post-positivism (with his anti-foundationalism, historicism, social studies, and naturalism). Turk notes the tension here, but does not take any risks; he just quotes some well-known sources.

If the reader feels uneasy about all these short, sketchy, neutral, and quite abstract presentations of the chapters, then it might be not at all accidental. Turk's topic is indeed interesting and

the book could have been a landmark if it kept all of its promises, that is, if it situated Neurath in the history of political economy and presented his arguments in context. But that is not what actually happens. To be more precise, what happens is often less than skimming the surface. Though the author underlines various important points, he does not provide any further details—Turk indeed has a good line in detecting inconsistencies and tensions in Neurath's thought, but besides pointing these out, he does not increase our understanding of the matter.

In chapter 1, Turk describes some of the historical figures and their claims that are cited by Neurath. Though it is not made explicit, it appears that Turk's method consists in situating Neurath among those figures and debates that he actually cited or explicitly referred to in his works. Neurath's papers and books are, however, often short on these references—mainly due to his (academically often not approved) writing style, but also possibly due to a lamentable lack of care—hence utilizing this method might mean missing the very point of Neurath. Actually that has been the main argument of Uebel (1992, 2004, 2007) for decades now (with regard to Neurath's economic and philosophical writings), namely that in order to understand Neurath as someone who pursued theoretical work and produced intellectually evaluable material, we have to broaden our perspective and have to contextualize his work, situating it in multidimensional debates and webs of scholars who provided the discursive background for Neurath, even if he never named them. While we got to know all these in Uebel's 2004 introduction to the economic writings of Neurath, Turk does not discuss these figures and does not even refer to the works of Uebel in this context. Take for example the case of Wilhelm Wundt: Turk claims that “[o]ne need look no further than Neurath's early critique of the theory of the social sciences. . . to see how formidable a figure Wundt was” (70). After this, we get a short paragraph presenting Neurath's critique of Wundt from 1910, but nothing at all about what Wundt said or argued. So the reader might not get the sense of Wundt's importance for the formation of Neurath's social and economic ideas. We get a hint of an important issue, but we are left without any substance.

The reader, especially if he or she is not an expert in the field of economics, will have some difficulties as Turk usually proceeds without giving further details on those figures with whom Neurath argued; of course, we get some notions, claims, and stories, but they are just superfluous summaries for those who only have to be reminded of the main points. Something similar happens with Turk's conceptual toolkit as well. He frequently uses such notions as “materialism,” “physicalism,” and “unified science,” but either we do not get proper definitions or we just get something that resembles the old-fashioned stereotypes that have been overcome recently by Neurath experts. Apparently Turk cares little about the overwhelming literature on Neurath of the last few decades. His main reference is the jointly authored book by Nancy Cartwright, Jordi Cat, Lola Fleck, and Thomas Uebel from 1996, and John O'Neill's work on ecological economics and its relation to Neurath (2004, 2007). But that is all we occasionally get.

Turk often mentions that Neurath was fond of statistics. For a while, we may get the impression that Neurath was just an old-fashioned positivist who loved numbers, quantification, and statistical data. In the second half of the book, however, we get to know the inner tension of Neurath's conception, namely the unbalanced relation between statistical knowledge and qualitative measurements; but nothing is elaborated in detail. What is most frustrating, moreover, is that Turk does not even consider the relation between statistics and ISOTYPE (International System of Typographic Picture Education).

ISOTYPE was Neurath's own revolutionary pedagogical idea about how to present social, cultural, and economic statistical data through the objective repetition of pictograms instead of subjectively changing the size of pictures. To compare the number of ships in a battle, for example, the usual method was to represent the bigger number of ships with one gigantic ship in contrast to a smaller one. Neurath tried to find an objective way of representing numerical data by making ships of equal size and repeating those ships in accordance to the numbers; e.g., he tried to depict mainly proportions, so in the case of 2,000–5,000 ships he made a chart with 2–5 ships.

Numbers were different (though the exact amounts were always noted with smaller letters), but proportions and measures were always indicated and thus knowledge is gained.

The relation between ISOTYPE pictures that express numerical data with intersubjectively decodable schematized figures and statistical data is seemingly more than obvious—also Neurath wrote many articles and books about the usage of statistic and the relevance of numbers for workers in their daily life and practical knowledge—and could have enlightened the reasons behind Neurath’s obsession with statistics (as a means to emancipate the masses to understand their own economic situation and possibilities). Nevertheless, Neurath was neither a number fetishist nor a hardheaded positivist (as Turk’s descriptions would sometime suggest); he chose numbers only for the educational virtues and because they were more than useful to meet the requirements of structural and pictorial representation. Numbers and money were not enough for economy; similarly, numbers and quantitative measurement were not enough for education. Neurath always tried to emphasize the role of qualitative factors in economic reasoning and planning but qualitative measurement found a place for itself in pictorial education, that is, in ISOTYPE as well. Thus the whole situation is more complex than Turk depicts and suggests.

Besides some factual errors (e.g., Neurath’s Vienna Circle colleague was the mathematician Hans Hahn, not the physicist Otto Hahn; and he never taught after his habilitation in 1917 due to World War I), the most obvious and painful feature of the book is the absence of Neurath’s ideas on war economy in general, and his follow-up, namely his socialization schemes for national economies. This is especially so, given that Neurath was famous for decades exactly for his work in that field. We do not get much information about his “sociology of happiness” either, although it is explicitly linked to his economic considerations (and thus the case for Neurath’s relation to recent ecological economics might have been much stronger), and the description of his philosophical background is also lacking. Though we get something about that in chapter 7, we have to wait almost 140 pages for it. Not the best structure for an introductory work.

It is a great virtue of the book that Turk does not want to just slap Neurath on the back (as has often happened before in the literature), but takes a step further in the direction of criticism. But we almost never get answers, context, or details, and that is quite frustrating. Given this, the book could serve as a very general introduction to some important issues for the interested reader, but if one wants to know the details, and the flesh and blood of Neurath, then one has to turn to Uebel’s 2004 introduction.

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Adam Tamas Tuboly is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He works on the history of logical empiricism and the philosophy of the modalities. He edited *Neurath Reconsidered: New Perspectives and Sources* (with Jordi Cat; Springer, 2018), *Logical Empiricism and the Natural Sciences: From Philosophy of Nature to Physics* (with Sebastian Lutz; Routledge, 2020), and *The Historical and Philosophical Significance of Ayer's Language, Truth, and Logic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He is working now on a monograph about Otto Neurath's English years.

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