



Completing Otto Neurath

Otto Neurath: Gesammelte Schriften. 8 vols. Expanded edition, edited by Rudolf Haller and Friedrich Stadler. Vienna: LIT, 2021–22, vol 1 xvi + 1–527 pp; vol 2 viii + 529–1033 pp; vol 3 xxiii + 674 pp; vol 4 xiii + 561 pp; vol 5 xiv + 633 pp; vol 6 xviii + 717 pp; vol 7 xv + 602 pp; vol 8 xxvii + 376 pp, all volumes €34,80 PB

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Otto Neurath died in 1945 and thus did not get to see the rise of logical empiricism in Anglo-American philosophy. He would have been furious about the many changes the movement went through after his death. Already sensing some of them in the early 1940s, he turned against fellow travelers such as Rudolf Carnap, Carl Hempel, Hans Reichenbach, and Herbert Feigl. He feared, with good reason, that his works would be overshadowed by others with slicker marketing, a better sense of the times, and the predilection to use the most fashionable terms and work on the fanciest problems. Neurath was very much untimely—ahead of his time. This is best shown by the renewed interest in his works, which started with the publication of his selected and then complete works in the 1970s and 1980s and is now continued by the republication of the original series of complete works along with three additional volumes, making eight altogether. It was a long path.

Right after Neurath's death, his friends and colleagues searched for ways to save the spirit and letter of his philosophy. The former was accomplished by Philipp Frank with the 1947 establishment of the Institute for the Unity of Science, funded with Rockefeller Foundation money that was requested by and promised to Neurath and Charles William Morris in the 1930s. The Institute attempted to carry out the plan of Neurath and the other logical empiricists, unifying the sciences by formalizing and sociologizing them (Frank 1947, 165–66). Besides the spirit, however, the concrete works of Neurath were to be saved as well, and it was done at first by the German-born American Horace Kallen, a professor at The New School. Kallen is known now to historians of philosophy of science for

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his biased, passionate, and one-sided attack on the unity of science movement, comparing it to Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism and linking it to the suppression of pluralism. The Neurath–Kallen debate started in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War, leaving no space for Neurath to properly engage with its arguments, but it was restarted in 1945 when the war ended. Though Kallen’s tone had not softened, Neurath stood his ground and they managed to have a balanced, respectful debate about the possible meanings and consequences of unification.

Despite his years-long, often quite aggressive battle with Neurath, Kallen had a very high opinion of his colleague and contacted Frank in 1951, stating that a bibliography of Neurath ought to be published, along with his unpublished writings, and offered his help in the process (Kallen 1951, January 29). Then in 1954, Kallen corresponded with Morris about publishing a selection of Neurath’s work with some biographical materials, reintroducing the reader to Neurath’s philosophy. Kallen pushed hard on behalf of this volume with both Frank, who was embarrassingly inactive, and with Marie Neurath, Neurath’s widow, because he thought that “Otto was so much more than a mere logical empiricist,” an affiliation that had by this time lost some of its luster due to attacks by W. V. O. Quine, Karl Popper, and others. “He had an enormous amount of compassion,” wrote Kallen, “a deep feeling for people as people, and an eagerness to serve their liberation and enrichment through the philosophic and sociological arts.” But such a volume could do even more, argued Kallen: it “could save logical empiricism ... from the barrenness into which it seems to me to have fallen” (Kallen 1957, May 7).

Kallen was pessimistic about the “general Nachlass” of Neurath and of publishing multiple works in a series, but he thought a “selection” would have been viable. At one point Neurath’s correspondence came up as well, along with a German edition, to be discussed with Heinrich Neider, a former member of the Vienna Circle. Marie Neurath even started selecting the material and discussed details with Frank and Kallen, expressing her fear that if they included Neurath’s Marxist papers people would accuse him of being a Communist—but Kallen countered that the volume should be authentic (Kallen 1957, September 24). In 1958, Morris approached Carnap, Feigl, Hempel, and Ernest Nagel to collect letters of support and recommendation for the planned volume, designed by Marie and comprising a biography, introduction, excerpts about society and economy, including planning, unified science, education, and isotype (Morris 1958, March 2).

As is known, no such volume was published for years, not even when Frank died in July 1966. By that time, however, Marie was backed up by Robert Sonné Cohen, who had announced already in 1963—in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, part of Open Court’s Library of Living Philosophers series—that the publication of the *Selected Works of Otto Neurath* was forthcoming (Cohen 1963, 151n113). The volume was submitted to the press in 1967, with the promise of Morris and Carnap that the Institute for the Unity of Science would support it financially. In the end, the volume appeared only in 1973, titled *Empiricism and Sociology*, as the very first volume of the Vienna Circle Collection published by D. Reidel. It was followed by *Philosophical Papers 1913–1946* (1983) and many years later by *Economic Writings* (2004), both co-edited by Cohen.

The first collection of Neurath's writings was thus published two decades after it was originally envisioned, though the general structure and editorial approach did not change much: the 1973 volume had a long biographical part, mainly based on others' memoirs, and a few hundred pages of selections, mainly of Neurath's sociological, economical, and educational writings, including a lot of Marxist theorizing. The publication was designed, carried out, and motivated by Kallen. Despite his erstwhile role as an arch enemy of logical empiricism and of Otto Neurath in particular, Kallen still considered Neurath's work interesting and important enough to be prepared for a broad audience and published by a good press. Unfortunately, Kallen died just a year after the first volume came out and did not witness the publication of any further volumes.

The full scope of Kallen's vision could not be realized until Rudolf Haller began to publish Neurath's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Works) in the early 1980s. Haller co-edited five volumes of Neurath's works, which appeared between 1981 and 1997 with Verlag Holder-Pichler-Tempsky: two on philosophy and method, co-edited with Heiner Rutte, one on visual education, co-edited with Robin Kinross, and two on economics, politics, and sociology, co-edited with Ulf Höfer. Although there were further plans, Haller passed away in 2014 and Rutte in 2020, with work on the edition having stopped many years before.

Then in 2020, on the 75th anniversary of Neurath's death, the Vienna Circle Society, previously the Vienna Circle Institute, launched its plan to republish the old volumes and complete the missing ones, making Neurath's oeuvre available to broader audiences under the professional guidance of Friedrich Stadler. With the last volume appearing late in 2022, publication of the entire series spanned more than forty years, not counting all the years of preparation. Four decades is not exceptional for a complete works series, but it is unusual for figures in the history of analytic philosophy.

The newly expanded *Gesammelte Schriften* contains basically everything Neurath ever published, from 1903, when he was just 21 years old, to 1946, when his last papers were published posthumously. The first five volumes are exact reprints of those published in 1981–97, with the three new volumes following these in style and appearance. The papers in each volume are arranged chronologically without further internal divisions. Two of the three new volumes collect more of Neurath's economic, sociological, and political writings; they are co-edited by Ulf Höfer and Rudolf Haller, with prefaces dated to 2002. The last volume—termed “supplementary”—is co-edited by Höfer, Christopher Burke, and Günther Sandner, and includes scattered writings from 1903 to 1946 on topics ranging from philosophy, politics, and history to sociology, economics, and education.

It was a good choice to republish the whole edition of Neurath's works and not only the three new volumes. Anyone working on Neurath and the Vienna Circle has known that it was basically impossible to get a copy of the old edition, and if volumes popped up here or there they were unaffordable for students and early career researchers. From this point of view, the cheaper LIT Verlag edition is a significant benefit to scholars.

From a more philosophical point of view, the strength of the new edition is that it includes everything Neurath wrote. While the three English volumes in the

Vienna Circle Collection cover the basics, providing all one needs to know up to a point, detailed scholarship on Neurath's life and work has to come to terms with his minor writings: hundreds and hundreds of reviews, newspaper articles, and small pamphlets. Perhaps most important are the book reviews Neurath wrote: his funny, engaging, often sarcastic but always carefree style shines through them without restriction, modification, or forced academic framing. It is known that Neurath often had debates with others over the ambiguous, obscure, imprecise, and often aggressive style of his works: for example with Moritz Schlick regarding *Empirische Soziologie* (1931) and with Carnap regarding *Foundations of the Social Sciences* (1944). He was thus often forced to rephrase and rewrite, adopting a more academic style unsuited to the content and flow of the text. Because of this, it is of some importance that we now have better access to the real, everyday Neurath. We can read his works as he freely designed them, encountering Neurath as he wanted to present himself and not as Schlick and others wanted to see him.

On the other hand, this free style can make his writing fragmentary and nebulous, creating a barrier for those unfamiliar with Neurath and his historical and sociocultural context. Thus, even if Neurath's ideas had not withstood the test of time and we had no need for his empirical naturalism in philosophy, from a historical point of view it would still have been necessary to provide detailed commentaries on and reconstructions of his work.

Neurath's philosophy was neglected during his lifetime. Neurath thought the "simplest hypothesis" was that he used a different folklore. People tend to use old and traditional folklores—which for Neurath meant ways of speaking, terminology, phraseology, but also the content and meaning of ideas—and they do not easily accept a new and strange folklore to which they are unaccustomed. There are only two exceptions: first, if the "alteration of the folklore is already in the air," and second, if one is working in a subfield where strange ideas are valued in themselves (Neurath 1944). It is indeed true that though Neurath's eye-opening formulations about protocol sentences, the nested formulations of what, where, and how Otto saw, were frequently quoted and cited, albeit sometimes just to ridicule him, Neurath was less accepted and often not even considered among philosophers, especially if one contrasts his case with that of Carnap or Schlick. The two volumes collecting Neurath's methodological and philosophical writings, first published in 1981 and now available again thanks to this edition, clearly show why it was a historical mistake to neglect him for such a long time.

Neurath was also isolated because his main subjects, education and economics, are "very conservative fields," in which "only people who transfer the old folklore can remain" (Neurath 1944). It is indeed Neurath's partisan economical thought that keeps him alive outside philosophy. His ecological economics is more relevant than ever, since it deals with standards of living that cannot be adequately measured by means of fixed monetary units: housing, well-being, clothing, leisure and quality time, existential safety, cultural habits. His ideas on socialism, calculation in kind, and alternative economics are recurring topics in popular and academic literature on the climate crisis and capitalism (Vettese and Pendergrass 2022; Herrmann 2022). Planning is another issue that connects Neurath's ideas on economics and everyday living with today's debates over neoliberalism and capitalism (papers and books

relating to these topics can be found in Volumes 4–7). Neurath’s ideas about education, and especially visual education—a topic stemming from his childhood, practiced in the 1920s and early 1930s, and developed in more detail during his British years—are also getting more and more important as we fight alternative facts and pseudoscience daily.

The everyday spatiotemporal world of our experience, the object of intersubjective discussions, was also a starting point for Neurath’s physicalism. His brand of physicalist-naturalism is still a rarity among philosophers. Neurath’s physicalism is a special worldview, a word he did not use, that has a place in contemporary debates over the nature and role of philosophy, the relation between the natural and human sciences, and the place of science in society (see Volumes 1 and 2 as well as parts of Volume 8).

This list of Neurathian topics relevant to contemporary philosophical debates could be continued with the charge against semantics, the critique of private languages, the boundaries of the sociology of science, the value-ladenness of science, utopianism, thought experiments, philosophical practice, the history of science, and the politics of design (see the chapters in Cat and Tuboly 2019). But beyond philosophy, Neurath had a significant cultural and historical role in Red or Socialist Vienna during the 1920s, a topic that is resurfacing now due to the populism and radicalism of conservative and right-wing parties. It is hard not to see parallels between how Black Vienna emerged in the web of religious movements, alternative scientific edifices, and right-wing political parties and the operation of today’s populist regimes (Wasserman 2017). Getting a new grasp on Neurath’s writings from this period might help us see alternative futures, design plans to overcome local anti-democratic tendencies, and understand all the tricks that worked back in the day and are about to be used again. In a world facing crises, scandals, anti-democratic tendencies, and top-down oppression, Neurath’s philosophy of humanistic brotherhood could have a new start and a wide appeal (especially if one reads Volumes 4–7).

One criticism I have regarding the volumes is that they lack substantive editorial introductions and notes. All of them—old and new—are introduced by the editors over a few pages, but only in the very last volume does the introduction stretch to twenty pages. It must have been a difficult decision, since these short introductions cannot possibly do justice to Neurath and the significance of his writings, nor can they adequately summarize and contextualize the varied contents of each volume, with some containing more than sixty different texts. Perhaps it seemed wiser not to do anything new with these volumes, prepared so long ago—secondary literature is abundant on Neurath, after all. But apart from a list of monographs and edited collections in the last volume, readers of Neurath’s *Gesammelte Schriften* are given no guidance on where to begin with this enormous literature. Some such guidance, even an online database, would be a real help to researchers and redress at least to some extent the regrettable lack of critical commentaries in the volumes themselves.

In closing, Neurath’s *Gesammelte Schriften* is a monumental achievement. Finally, all the works of Neurath are available again in their original language at a reasonable price (the one exception is his 1935 history of the Vienna Circle, published here in German translation and not reproduced in French). The only thing you need is a big enough bookshelf for eight volumes of almost six hundred pages each.

But I can assure you that they are worth both the money and the space: serious work on Neurath and the Vienna Circle is no longer an option without these sources.

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