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A Draft Profile of a Very Unusual Scholar

Even in a laconic attempt to characterize the scientific profile of Fritz Schütze, it is difficult to not make any references to his person. With this in mind, I will first briefly discuss his achievements, and later move on to his individual style.

The Approach

The name “Fritz Schütze” is well-known as being linked with the narrative interview technique and the methods of developing materials from narrative interviews. This association is both accurate and misleading. Accurate, because the contribution of Fritz Schütze in the field of the modern biographical method is momentous. It is enough to highlight the contrast between, on the one hand, the largely intuitive method of approaching so-called personal documents in the early Chicago School (i.e., in *The Polish Peasant* [1918-1922], or *The Jack Roller* [1930]) and, on the other, Fritz Schütze’s proposal of the rigorous technology of the narrative interview, and the sophisticated instrumentarium of biographical material analysis. Misleading, as by limiting ourselves to this association, we reduce the scholarly profile of Fritz Schütze to the

figure of *Methodenmensch*, overlooking his achievements as a sociologist, which, in my opinion, are even more significant.

With regard to the latter, we should pay attention to a unique brand of interpretive sociology, which combines contemporary influences, derived, *inter alia*, from interactionist works by Anselm Strauss but also the fields of sociolinguistics, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis, with the key ideas of the early Chicago School. Fritz Schütze played an important role in the intellectual revival of German sociology, which took place in the 70s, and which still remains influential. His most valuable contributions at the time were, among other things, his role in the reception of new ideas, for example, his 1200-page book *Sprache soziologisch gesehen* (1975), or his involvement in a collection of translations of texts by contemporary stars of American interpretive sociology, entitled *Alltagswissen, Interaktion und gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit*, 1973. But, even these works, not to mention the numerous and extensive publications presenting his own achievements, show an original, authored proposal. Resisting the temptation to sub-

mit to a faithful continuation of existing trends, Fritz Schütze proposed his own sociological idiom, which he then developed and applied in different research contexts.

This specific link between the method and the object has a number of consequences. First, starting from the basic issue: today’s biographical analysis (including, importantly, sociological research on biographical processes) is one of the most dynamically developing fields of sociology, which until recently did not fall within the limits of standard ideas about its tasks. Admittedly, the opposite view is still held by a few influential “hardliners,” but this loses its importance over time when confronted with the knowledge of what has been accomplished by the method. Second, the interpretive analysis of biographical material overlaps with a further interpretive analysis of interactions, conversations, texts, and discourses, together comprising a variety of modern qualitative analyses. The result is more akin to a highly-qualified craft, consisting of the ability to “read” different materials, not only those of a biographical nature, and recognize their multi-level structures, as well as their social, political, and cultural references: the analytical tools here being, *inter alia*, “structural description” and “analytical abstraction.” Third, the research perspective includes both intensive case analysis and, importantly, processes on the meso- and macro-scales. Fourth, the preferred thematic areas relate to individual and collective trajectories of suffering, professional conduct, and European integration. Fifth, a set of original concepts, including “trajectory,” “biographical work,” “fading out” (*Ausblendung*), “schemes of action,” paradoxes of professional conduct, “liaison

work” (in other words, intermediary work), and “mental space,” gradually emerges from a variety of research contexts. These original concepts form an integral sociological perspective.

Teaching

The educational work of Fritz Schütze reveals his personal characteristics and style of scientific work, and although they are implicitly present in his publications, they nevertheless usually remain unnoticed. To a certain, limited, extent this is analogous to the phenomenon described by Harold Garfinkel and his two students, Michael Lynch and Eric Livingston. In an article from 1981, entitled “The Work of a Discovering Science Construed with Materials from the Optically Discovered Pulsar,” they included an analysis of long conversations between astronomers observing celestial bodies. Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingston contrasted these working conversations with a later scientific article by these astronomers, announcing the discovery they had made.

Despite being very informative, texts written by Fritz Schütze afford an insight in only one part of his sociology. Another, more extensive part incorporates the research seminar format developed together with Gerhard Riemann and other colleagues, which is a long meeting usually devoted to an intensive analysis of empirical material. It also includes in-depth individual consultations, as well as a huge number of reviews of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, unusual in terms of their size and exceptional scientific quality. It can be added that these reviews would fill several thick

volumes if they were to be published, which gives some idea of the books Fritz Schütze would have written if not for his continuing support of the scientific development of others. One of the themes shared by these atypical forms of educational activity is the acquisition of an idea barely sensed by an entrant, before it is subsequently developed in full, adding further ideas of which the entrant was previously unaware. This is followed by a silent and generous donation of all these ideas to the entrant, with the comment that it was, after all, what he or she had in mind all the time.

The individual characteristics of an author are always important, but not always compelling. In many cases, it is not particularly worth knowing what kind of person an author is. From my own experience, I can say that familiarity with Fritz Schütze's teaching method is an extraordinary asset. This method offers the aspiring scholar an invaluable learning opportunity, and a point of reference when developing his or her own teaching methods. It also allows for a deeper assimilation of the meanings contained in the publications of Fritz Schütze, which should be interpreted with regard to the teaching, and vice versa. Last but not least, Fritz, as a teacher, offers his students the extraordinary gift of his personal friendship.

All these qualities are especially evident against the background of the rules and mechanisms of today's so-called knowledge-based society, which actually favor the mass production of superficial and seemingly useful knowledge by seemingly creative and supposedly innovative individuals, which nevertheless remain oddly similar. These

qualities are also different from traditional nineteenth century authoritarian teaching models based on cultivating distance between the master and the disciple. The research seminar method of teaching and mutual learning proposed by Fritz and his co-workers is a suggestion that goes beyond the opposition of these two models of education. I would see its major advantage, paradoxically, in that this suggestion does not fit the currently prevailing expectations or criteria for evaluation by many academics, students, and representatives of university authorities. All the more reason to appreciate one further contribution of Fritz Schütze, which actually merits a separate honor: the impact of his initiatives on the institutional structure of the sociological community, first, in Germany, for example, by organizing the Section of Sociology of Language within the German Sociological Association, then later, both in Germany and in Poland, through, amongst other things, his contribution to the development of the University of Magdeburg, and the German-Polish and European research projects.

An important link between the publications, and the educational and organizational work of Fritz Schütze is the idea of the fundamental equality of the partners taking part in interaction and reciprocity of their perspectives. While this idea recurs continuously as a basic theoretical concept in his publications, in his teaching, and organizational work, it constitutes a directive, which should be followed in specific situations. It should be noted, though, that this is not a principle evident in any of these contexts. Both in the field of communication theory, and in the area of commu-

nication practice today, it is sometimes challenged by new and influential directions pointing – in my opinion rightly – to the ubiquity of power relations in social interaction. But, even questioning whether knowledge can be separated from power, or whether it is reasonable to postulate such a division, it is not worth losing a sense of openness to different points of view.

Instead of Conclusion

The sociology of Fritz Schütze was originally a component of the ferment of the 70s and 80s, and over the years it has become a component of the classical resource of interpretive sociology. Today, new trends are connected rather with various poststructuralist, and also posthumanist approaches. These intellectually- and socially-significant prospects are

sometimes accompanied by a blunt claim for exclusive access to the light of knowledge and a fairly nebulous instrumentarium of data analysis. This situation by no means represents a paradigm shift, as the social sciences have always been multi-paradigmatic, and invigorating disputes and discussions within the social sciences have been needed, and continue to be so. However, if these debates take place in a quasi-adolescent atmosphere of a struggle for hegemony imposed by new directions, they may lead to artificial aggravation and simplification of the positions, and this would be to the detriment of sociology as a whole. There is ample room in sociology for many points of view and many opportunities to listen, as well as the chance to decide on how the next step should be taken. Although it took me some time, this attitude was one I also learned from Fritz Schütze.

References

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