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EXPERIENCING MULTIPLE REALITIES

ALFRED SCHUTZ'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE FINITE PROVINCES OF MEANING

Marius Ion Benţa

Experiencing Multiple Realities

This book offers a theoretical investigation into the general problem of reality as a multiplicity of 'finite provinces of meaning,' as developed in the work of Alfred Schutz. A critical introduction to Schutz's sociology of multiple realities as well as a sympathetic re-reading and reconstruction of his project, *Experiencing Multiple Realities*, traces the genesis and implications of this concept in Schutz's writings before presenting an analysis of the various ways in which it can shed light on major sociological problems, such as social action, social time, social space, identity, or narrativity.

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To my parents

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Preface

This work is a theoretical investigation into the sociological problem of reality as a multiplicity of finite provinces of meaning, and is based on my postgraduate research carried out at the Sociology Department of Ireland's University College Cork, which resulted in a PhD thesis that was defended in June 2014.

For the present version, the text has been edited, updated, and adapted to a wide academic audience interested in the contemporary problems of social theory. Particularly, the book is intended to be a critical introduction to Alfred Schutz's sociology of the multiple realities as well as an enterprise that seeks to reassess and reconstruct the Schutzian project. In the first part of the book (the first three chapters), I inquire into Schutz's biographical context that surrounds the germination of this conception, and I analyse the main texts of Schutz where he has dealt directly with 'finite provinces of meaning.' On the basis of this analysis, I suggest and discuss, in the second part of the book, several solutions to the shortcomings of the theoretical system that Schutz drew upon the sociological problem of multiple realities. Specifically, I discuss problems related to the structure, dynamics, and interrelation of finite provinces of meaning and the way they relate to the questions of narrativity, experience, space, time, and identity.

Two details may be important as a word of caution related to this research as a 'project.' The first is related to the fact that the order of the chapters in the book do not reflect the actual chronological line of my research. In fact, it runs more or less in the opposite way. My interest in the problem of the multiple realities began when I discovered that painted screens were used in Ancient China as a way of creating little 'virtual realities,' which strongly affected people's sense of space, time, and identity. My observations on Chinese painted screens are found in the last chapter of this book. My research went on following a certain 'archaeological necessity,' which made itself manifest every time unexpectedly. When a chapter was starting to have a clear shape, it soon seemed to ask for a foundation and required me to dig deeper into the problem. To understand the ways in which space, time, and identity were altered and reshaped in the virtual and mediated experience, a more elaborated version of the 'finite province of meaning' model was needed. Later, it became obvious that such a model required a detailed

discussion of Schutz's own texts on the topic, and, finally, it was clear to me that a work dedicated to Schutz's theory of the multiple realities could not ignore the biographical context in which it was produced.

The second detail refers to the complexity of the topic and its highly interdisciplinary character. An exhaustive coverage of the topic is simply impossible across such a large number of disciplines, and I could not have this intention. Equally important is the fact that some notions may sound too technical to a philosopher or a literary theorist, while other expressions may sound too metaphorical and vague to a sociologist or a psychologist. I tried to balance the style and the use of terminology from this point of view and to locate my discourse in the wide sphere of Schutzian sociology and interpretive social theory.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Professor Árpád Szakolczai, who has guided, with immense wisdom and patience, my steps in conducting the present research by ceaselessly supporting and encouraging my work. My understanding of interpretive sociology has highly benefited from the new insights I received from his postgraduate seminars at University College Cork, from our discussions, and from the extensive feedback that he offered me. From these encounters, I have also learned to seek a measured order in the realities of words and ideas and to inquire into the measure of actions and things.

I am grateful to Professors Austin Harrington and Lidia Julianna Guzy for having offered me profound and detailed comments and useful suggestions that helped me to improve this book and see it in a different light.

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I thank my family for their unconditional love and support.

I thank God for the grace of this infinitely meaningful reality.

Abbreviations

FPM finite province of meaning
EDL everyday life
NAE natural attitude *epochè*

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Introduction

Realities just 'real enough'

Do we ever have a feeling that the conversations we have by e-mail, our Facebook experience, our Internet banking transactions, or our daily interactions with our smartphone apps are not real or not relevant for our existence as human beings? Most often, we don't doubt their relevance to our lives, we don't doubt their power to affect us and those around us, and we don't doubt their reality. Smartphones, smart watches, smart eyeglasses, smart homes, smart cities, and smart things all come up with quite the same ambivalent offer. First, they promise to help us depart our everyday world and enter different realities with no pain, no shock and, most importantly, no fear that 'the other realm' could be experienced as a *fake* reality. Second, they promise us, on the contrary, to invade, enrich, and *augment* the reality of our daily life by preserving, again, the authenticity of our sense of reality. We are invited to admit that, ultimately, it makes no difference whether the things we see and hear are real or just *appear* to be real as long as our experience of them is *real enough*. In other words, we have an invitation to ontological neutrality.

This is probably one of the most stringent problems for contemporary social sciences and can pose serious theoretical difficulties. Was this ontological plurality and ambivalence of human experience an invention of our contemporary society? Did it land into our world on the wings of our marvelous technologies, or was it just emphasised and problematised[1] by them?

A closer look at the question shows us immediately that, regardless of their cultural, geographical, or historical context, humans have *always* lived in *multiple realities*. Even the simplest 'primitive' societies have experienced the world as plural, for their world of hunting had its own rules and structure different from the rules and structure that dominated the world of their myths and magical practices, and the world of their dreams was different from the world of their daily life. This fact makes the 'discovery' of the multiple character of the human world important for the social sciences because it points out that the multiple reality must be seen not as a contextual phenomenon of modernity but a universal anthropological condition of social life.

Unquestionably, the alternative realities created with the new technologies and the new media can provide researchers in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology with a thematic wealth that calls for both theoretical and

methodological innovations. In this apparent context of an increasing multiplicity of modernity's spheres of experience, we need to revisit and discuss such concepts as identity, presence, space, time, and discourse. The main objective of the present work is not a contribution to the sociology or anthropology of virtual experience in a hypertechnologised world. The amount of scholarly research that has been produced in connection with the subject[2] would make it an impossible task within the narrow scope assumed here. Rather, the large interest in such topics must be an argument for the idea that a solid theoretical foundation is needed for the understanding of human experience in a world that is irrevocably plural.

This fundamental problem has been approached by many scholars using various theoretical tools. In sociology, the most famous theory is Alfred Schutz's conception of the finite provinces of meaning, which is the object of the present work. Other thinkers, such as William James,[3] Herbert Nichols,[4] David Unruh,[5] and Nelson Goodman,[6] have studied the multiplicity of the life-world experience, and concepts dealing with tangent socio-philosophical questions can also be identified in Max Weber ('value sphere,' *Wertsphäre*),[7] Edmund Husserl (*Lebenswelt* and *Phantasie*),[8] Michel Foucault (*heterotopias* and *heterochronies*),[9] Peter Sloterdijk ('spheres'),[10] Jean Baudrillard ('simulacra'),[11] MacDonald et al. ('portalling'),[12] Eugen Fink (the 'windowing' character of pictures),[13] Eugenio Barba ('daily' and 'extra-daily' body techniques),[14] Mikhail Bakhtin ('acts' and 'values'),[15] or thinkers who studied the diversity of religious and magical experience, such as Béla Hamvas[16] or Mircea Eliade.[17] Ancient conceptions of plural worlds can be found in the philosophies of Anaximander, Leucippus, and others.[18] Richard Gerrig has studied the phenomenon that he called 'transportation,' namely the way a reader becomes immersed in a narrative,[19] while Kwan Min Lee opened up the field of study of 'presence'[20] as people's experience of virtual environments. Related logical and philosophical frameworks with implications for history,[21] economics,[22] or social psychology[23] are provided by such theorists of 'counterfactuality' and 'possible worlds' as David Lewis,[24] while applications of the possible-worlds semantics to the study of the reality-fiction opposition have been investigated by Lubomír Doležel,[25] Thomas Pavel,[26] and others.[27] Inspired by the works of Benjamin Lee Whorf and M.A.K. Halliday, semioticians have investigated the concept of *modality* as the status of reality attached to a text, which is founded on a pluralist conception of reality.[28] The problem in its generality goes way beyond the fields of the social sciences and philosophy and reaches such diverse disciplines as theology, mathematics, or physics with, say, the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics[29] or the theories of parallel universes and multiverses.[30] While a comparative study on this highly interdisciplinary topic would be extremely interesting, I cannot embark upon such a task here either.

The present work is dedicated to Alfred Schutz's theory and has a double objective. First, it is intended to be a critical introduction to his sociology of the multiple reality, which he founded upon the concept of 'finite province of meaning' and developed as part of an unfinished project of 'a phenomenology of the natural attitude.' Second, it attempts to initiate a reconstruction work on