

Paul Lazarsfeld: Living in Circles and Talking Around Tables

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This paper draws upon a series of interviews conducted with Paul Lazarsfeld and others who knew him, especially those who knew him as a young man in Vienna, the purpose of which is to demonstrate that his interest in mathematics and quantification is not as often assumed. The paper maintains that he never had a philosophical position on quantification, nor did he extol quantification at the expense of other approaches to social research. To this end, the paper examines his early life in Vienna growing up amid the intellectual circles of the city and the influence that they had on him, especially his interest in mathematics. His fascination with quantification, which offered a sense of order, is best understood through attention to his personal life and in terms of his “fractured life”—not least, as he expressed, a life destroyed by his mother.

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Four-Fold Tables

Bernard Berelson, in discussing Paul F. Lazarsfeld’s 1950 plan to establish “A Professional School for Training in Social Research” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1972), dismissed the whole idea on the grounds that “Paul’s very clever with four-fold tables, but he thinks that the world lives in them and there’s a lot more to the world.” He continued: “Other universities would no more have sent one of their students over to him than they would have dropped them out of the window” (B. Berelson, personal communication, July 12, 1973). Possibly so, but Berelson is wrong in viewing Lazarsfeld in such a fashion. Far from the implied extolling of quantification, or any narrow view of knowledge for that matter, Lazarsfeld refused a singular approach to social understanding. This article examines the cultural ethos of interwar Vienna, especially the role of the intellectual “Circles” that formed such an integral and integrated part of the world within which Lazarsfeld grew up. Those times, however, cannot be understood without some understanding of Austrian history.

A Reduced World

Briefly, following defeat in the First World War, and the imposition by the victors of the Treaty of St. Germain, in similar spirit to that imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, Austria’s once great empire was reduced, almost overnight, from 50 million people to a mere 6 million, of which 2 million lived in Vienna (Bullock, 1939, p. 68). The returning soldiers, in revolutionary mood, forced the establishment of the First Republic (Bauer, 1925, p. 56), but the elections held in early 1919 did not give the Social Democrat

Party an absolute majority, so they formed a coalition with their arch enemy, the Christian Social Democrats. Complexities of Austro-Marxism aside (Leser, 1966, pp. 48–49), the failure to push through total transformation of the economy was referred to by Lazarsfeld as the “failed revolution,” and that “those of us on the socialist side were very much affected by this ambivalence” (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973). Vienna, however, became a socialist stronghold, but Red Vienna never became Red Austria, allowing the forces of the right to re-gather and crush the Republic. As Charles Gulick (1948), in the opening to his authoritative two-volume work on the Republic, states: “To a degree unique in the history of nations the story of Austria between the world wars, particularly between 1918–1934 is a history of struggle between socialism on the one side and fascism on the other” (p. 1). Lazarsfeld was very much a part of that struggle.

Marie Jahoda, Lazarsfeld’s first wife, said, “All the time Paul was in Vienna and was director of the *Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle* [Economic and Psychological Research Center] it was still a time that he was conscious that if only he could be he would rather be in politics rather than social research” (M. Jahoda, personal communication, September 26, 1973). The *Forschungsstelle* mentioned by Jahoda was set up by Lazarsfeld in 1925. The first of its kind in the world, it transformed the organization of social research, moving it from the departmental setting of a university to a hierarchical structure of production financed through its own research activity (Morrison, 1998, chapter 3). The *Forschungsstelle* became the model for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, which Lazarsfeld later established, and in turn became a model for other research centers in America (Shils, 1970, p. 794).

In discussing the background to the *Forschungsstelle*’s establishment and the position that he and his socialist friends were experiencing, Lazarsfeld recalled that it “enabled this whole defeated socialist group” to transfer to “a new activity which was close enough to social reality and had some academic glamour” (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973). For social reality, one can read political relevance. Indeed, Jahoda, in discussing the *Forschungsstelle*, said:

Paul had a little conflict in his life over his political ambition and the impossibility of fulfilling it in the Austrian situation. So, a personal solution was to be concerned with social affairs whilst not influencing them in a leading fashion. (M. Jahoda, personal interview, September 26, 1973)

Anti-Semitism

The Social Democrat Party was not anti-Semitic, nor were its members (Pulzer, 1964, p. 280). Indeed, the main barrier to Lazarsfeld fulfilling his political ambition was that the party leadership was overwhelmingly Jewish. Jahoda explained:

Paul was so obviously Jewish, and he just didn’t have a chance in the Party. He was so very intelligent that nothing on the second level would have suited him, and the fear of general reaction to another Jewish dominant figure in the Party was very strong. (M. Jahoda, personal communication, September 26, 1973)

She finished by saying: "He had great political ambition and I think the great dream of his life would have been to be foreign minister for a Socialist Austria one day" (M. Jahoda, personal communication, September 26, 1973). If anti-Semitism blocked Lazarsfeld's political career, it also blocked any chance of a career at the University of Vienna.

The university was the most anti-Semitic in the country (Pulzer, 1964, p. 8). If he could have, Karl Bühler, head of the psychology department where Lazarsfeld held a lowly position as assistant, would have promoted him, but Bühler feared the response of the university. Indeed, he considered that there was a blacklist against Jews, but he was also in a "sensitive" position in that his wife, Charlotte, was part Jewish. Consequently, the course taken by Lazarsfeld was to establish the *Forschungsstelle* outside the university; it was loosely connected by Bühler agreeing to become head of the board. The important point is that free from the strictures of the university, where sociology was underdeveloped (Rosenmayr, 1966; Zeisel, 1969) and empirical work anathema to the powerful Othman Spann (Konig, 1958, p. 785), Lazarsfeld was open to engage in empirical research. Moreover, to fund research however he wished, which, in the main, was by commercial contract—a pattern of operation carried over upon emigration in financing the work of the Bureau.

As innovative as the *Forschungsstelle* was in engaging in research while standing outside the university, as intellectual enterprise it was not alone. The intellectual "Circles," a Viennese phenomenon, were themselves outside the university.

Talking in Cafés and Thinking in Circles

The University of Vienna, no matter how esteemed, was a "bastion of conservatism" (Edmonds, 2020, p. 65)—not just in the politics of those who taught there, but in the rules and ethos by which it was governed. It is within that context that the intellectual Circles ought to be seen—that is, the carrying of learning outside formal institutional structure, and thus free to operate ungoverned by conventions. For sure the university was conservative, but of itself, that would not account, or at least not easily, why Vienna became host to a particular form of intellectual exchange, that is, through intellectual Circles. As a phenomenon the Circles are peculiar to Vienna, at least in terms of their numeric presence and intellectual depth. Vienna, however, was also home to another phenomenon, a phenomenon that predates the Circles: the café as meeting place for artists, writers, and scholars.

Although café culture was common to Continental Europe, it flourished to a greater extent in Vienna than elsewhere. Certain cafés became known meeting places: Sigmund Freud and colleagues at Café Landtmann, the writers Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal at Café Giensteidle, and then Café Herrenhof favored by Robert Musil and Joseph Roth. The precursors of the Vienna Circle (*Wiener Kreis*) of logical positivism—Hans Hahn, Philipp Frank, and Otto Neurath—met between 1907–1912 in the splendid Café Central, a favorite also of the writer and commentator Karl Kraus, the architect Adolph Loos, and Leon Trotsky, née Lev Bronstein (Edmonds, 2020, p. 71). In short, if not generic then Viennese cafés ought to be seen as offering a tradition of intellectual exchange that offered a familiar arrangement of discourse, identity, and membership. Though perhaps not in precise fashion, the intellectual Circles can be seen as an extension of café conversation, or, at the very least, they offered a familiar form of meeting that then easily extended to the more formal organization offered by the intellectual Circles.

Intellectual Circles

Lazarsfeld's own exposure to intellectual gatherings began at an early age, in the salon of his mother, Sofie. The salon attracted key figures from Viennese political and intellectual life. For example, Alfred Adler, the psychoanalyst, talked about individual psychology, afterward singing Schubert songs. Otto Bauer, the leader of the Social Democrat Party, and Fritz Adler, who had competed with Albert Einstein for the chair of physics at the University of Zurich, were both frequent participants. Rudolph Hilferding, the Marxist economist, with whom Lazarsfeld lived for a time under his wardship, was a regular attendee. Recalling those days, Jahoda said that those attending "noticed Paul's intellectual gifts while still in his teens and talked to him seriously about their ideas" (Jahoda, 1998, p. 137).

As an introduction to the life of the mind, the salon was no doubt important, but it was the mixing in the more formal Circles as a young man that shaped his appreciation for forms of knowledge. It was a world of learning free from the demarcations associated with the structuring of a university by department and faculty. Attendance at the Circles, the range of thought represented, came to underpin that which Raymond Boudon identified as a refusal by Lazarsfeld "to become enclosed in one discipline" (Boudon, 1972, p. 418). In short, the location of the Circles outside the control of the university was an essential part not just of the mixing of individuals drawn from various disciplines, but in the range of knowledge areas addressed. For example, the philosopher Heinrich Gomperz ran a discussion group that met at his house on Saturdays. More than philosophy was covered; politics, economics, and psychoanalysis were also addressed.

The Gomperz meetings are a good example of how the Circles were free to cover areas at will, invite who they wished to join and speak. Added to which, not under the governance of the university, such Circles allowed for the movement of ideas across areas in a way not otherwise possible. For example, the philosopher Rudolf Carnap, a key figure in the Vienna Circle, attended the Wednesday night Circle run by the Böhlers, which Lazarsfeld not surprisingly attended. The important point here is not so much the Bühler Circle as site for the exchange of ideas but what it represented in general: the opportunity to meet with philosophers such as Carnap, but also leading figures from other disciplines. In this context, and contra Berelson, Jahoda said: "Paul for many years was familiar with all the major strains of thought in Austria of his time and so he brought this extra, not just methodological technician thing with him to America" (M. Jahoda, personal communication September 26, 1973).

It was this mixing within and across Circles that was an essential part not just in the generation of ideas but—in Lazarsfeld's case—a learned appreciation for a range of approaches to knowledge. Indeed, the Circles were part of a culture that in the attachment to ideas was to be found in very few other cities, if at all. Freud held a regular gathering at his apartment on Wednesday night, the constitutional lawyer Hans Kelsen had a Circle, as did Otto Bauer. The Bauer Circle met every second Sunday. According to Jahoda it was to the Bauer Circle that Lazarsfeld reported the now famous *Marienthal* study (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933). Again, in face of the charge made by Berelson of Lazarsfeld and four-fold tables, the study was a superb ethnographic work much admired by Robert and Helen Lynd (Lipset, 1998, p. 263) and heavily referenced in their own follow-up ethnographic study of Middletown (Lynd & Lynd, 1937).

Given that Bauer was the leader of the Social Democrats, his Circle, of course, attracted socialist intellectuals, but it should not be assumed that all the Circles were of socialist persuasion. The Geist Circle, for example, included the economist Friedrich Hayek and Oskar Morgenstern, cofounder of game theory. Morgenstern was also a member of the board of Lazarsfeld's Forschungsstelle, recruited specially, as Lazarsfeld said, to offset the left-wing membership (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973). The most overtly right-wing Circle was the Spann Circle (Landheer, 1958), which involved political figures that were most assuredly nonintellectual (Jedlicka, 1966, p. 137). In the main, the Circles were the site of serious intellectual effort. Karl Popper, for example, was drawn to Karl Menger's Mathematical Colloquium, itself modeled on Moritz Schlick's Circle. The importance Popper attached to the work of the Colloquium, the seriousness of the ideas developed—Kurt Gödel rarely missed a meeting and Alfred Tarski would sometimes travel from Warsaw to attend—can be gauged by the fact that he considered his membership as “the pinnacle of his intellectual life in Vienna” (Edmonds, 2020, p. 69). However, despite his position on verification, Popper was never invited to become a member of the Vienna Circle, possibly on grounds of personality—whereas Ludwig Wittgenstein was invited, repeatedly so, but never became a member.

As important as the Vienna Circle became to the development of analytic philosophy, logical positivism has a linkage, of sorts, to the quantification wing of sociology. In practice, it is difficult to point to anyone in the social sciences, however, who would claim to be, or was, a positivist, but in postmodernist thought, a process of understanding slashing at the very logic of empirical knowledge, the suspicion of quantification continues, especially on the political left; indeed, the attraction of the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodor Adorno, is witness to that. Yet, whatever the criticism of quantitative sociology for an overreliance on “facts,” as if facts are knowable in themselves, the fact is that, almost from the outset of the rise of quantification within sociology, the term *positivism*—sometimes exchanged for empiricism—has been a term of opprobrium. The term has come to be used for critical attack on a disliked movement of thought, namely, the quantification of social life (Rex, 1973, pp. 111–112) seen by the political left as a failure of the imagination to move, via theory, beyond existing arrangements. That was not, however, how logical positivism was understood by its founding proponents.

Positivist Circles and Socialism

Most of the members of the Vienna Circle were socialists. Otto Neurath, for example, “believed that logical empiricism was integral to the struggle against fascism” (Edmonds, 2020, p. 4). For Neurath and others, it “represented Enlightenment values of reason and progress—sense against nonsense” (p. 4). Any statement that was not empirically testable—verifiable, or else a statement in logic or mathematics—was taken as nonsense. Not surprisingly, the work of Martin Heidegger was dismissed out of hand; indeed, Heidegger was seen as pretentious and a fraud. Popper, who shared much with the Vienna Circle, considered Heidegger a “swine and a swindler” (p. 143). Heidegger stood not just in abject derision politically—viciously anti-Semitic, and for a time a keen supporter of the Nazi Party—but the very uncertainty over what he was saying, if he was saying anything at all, had him cast as a charlatan.

The Vienna Circle, in changing its name, also saw a movement in knowledge description. Originally calling itself *Konsequenter Empirismus*, the Circle adopted the Logical Positivism label following visits to America by Schlick in 1929, and then 1931–1932 (Watson, 2010, p. 602). It is the term *positivism* that has

come to be lodged in the history of ideas, but as distortion, certainly when transferred, as noted, to sociology, where it came to function as a dismissal, to the point of abuse, of quantitative sociology. And Lazarsfeld, particularly at a general level through C. Wright Mills (1959), came to stand as the personalized expression of quantification, a summary statement, more political in nature than of intellectual integrity.

The Vienna Circle and Association

Given the association of Lazarsfeld with positivism, I raised his relationship, in terms of influence, with the Vienna Circle, in oral history interviews. "Well, I knew them all, but it would be physically wrong to see them as . . . you know, I met them later when I had already given those courses in statistics at the university." He went on to say:

You see, in the socialist, in Vienna, there was a sub-set [Circle], and we were very influenced by the importance of mathematics . . . the sub-set of Friedrich Adler. So, there was a convergence of social science and some kind of mathematics . . . it could easily be Wittgenstein and positivism, or it could be econometrics or relativity theory and Mach. (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973)

He concluded: "Mathematics had great prestige" (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973).

The Mach referred to is Ernst Mach, the physicist, after whom a Mach number—a ratio of the speed of an object to the speed of sound—is named. Clearly, the work of Mach, and Wittgenstein for that matter, were points of intellectual attraction for Lazarsfeld, but it is Friedrich Adler who is key not only as an influence on Lazarsfeld, but also on understanding the world that framed his intellectual development. It is here that the personal crosses with the intellectual, and in doing so challenges any understanding of Lazarsfeld as a vulgar quantifier. He told me, "I never had a philosophical position on that . . . I don't remember even having written anything extolling quantification . . . I simply do not find anything in my whole life." He ended what had been a long discussion by saying, "The reason I take your time with this is I want to know how so many people get such fixations" (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, June 19, 1973).

Friedrich Adler was a friend of Trotsky and organizer of the Karl Marx Association in Vienna. He was a close friend of Lazarsfeld's mother, Sofie, and had been living in the Lazarsfeld household when he assassinated the Austrian Prime Minister, Count Stürghk as he lunched in the noted hotel Meissl & Schadn. Sentenced to death, Adler wrote from his prison cell to the fifteen-year-old Lazarsfeld: "Dear Paul, I am glad to hear you are doing well [at school] in mathematics. Whatever you do later. Mathematics will always be useful to you." Commenting on the letter, Lazarsfeld said, "You see, that undoubtedly is of considerable interest if a glorious murderer wrote to you from jail to stick at doing mathematics" (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, May 25, 1973).

The Vienna of Lazarsfeld, perfectly captured by Adler, was one of political dedication and academic scholarship that came together to break through existing formations of intellectual thought. Yet it was a collapsing world, one poignantly captured by Stephen Zweig (1943) in his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*. For Lazarsfeld, however, living in Vienna was more than existing in the shifting of worlds noted by

Zweig; it was one marked by personal uncertainty, something that the psychoanalyst Siegfried Bernfeld, a left Freudian and well-known in psychoanalytic circles of Vienna, detected in Lazarsfeld. It was Bernfeld's view that his "obsession" with statistics, and "talking" with people through questionnaires, indicated a fear of people (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, June 19, 1973).

Bernfeld's judgment was not an interpretation Lazarsfeld readily agreed with, but neither did he dismiss it. What he did say was that his fascination and commitment to mathematics had to rest in "some childlike experience." He gave examples of his excitement on first viewing mathematical arrangements. The experience, he said, was "like someone saying the first time they heard a violin play and he had to become a professional violinist." He went on: "With artists such experience is well-known—this feeling that it is the only thing worthwhile." He gave examples of incidents. Standing in front of a book stall when he was 19 years old, he noticed a book that on the outside had a scatter diagram, the type one might use to illustrate a correlation. He told me, "I didn't know quite what it was, but I found it so exciting. God knows . . . like seeing at that age the photograph of a nude girl or something." On another occasion, in about 1928 in Hamburg, he saw some ecological tables that Andreas Walter had brought back from a visit to Chicago. He commented: "They were colored by income levels. They had the same fascination, and I cannot trace behind that" (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, June 19, 1973).

When put to him that it was perhaps impossible to answer such questions, he replied, "No, I can't. You have to answer such questions, but I have to provide you with the material" (P. Lazarsfeld, personal communication, June 19, 1973). It is tempting to restrict his attraction to mathematics to the prestige of the subject among Adler's Circle. But that will not do, certainly not to the satisfaction of Lazarsfeld himself. He thought there was far more to it that can be explained by pure appeal to mathematics as a form of knowledge as such. Clearly, although attracted by Bernfeld's explanation, he was not convinced. Yet, there was a separation, of sorts, of a kind mentioned by Bernfeld, a removal from others—an unsettled existence, by which I mean a life disturbed by uncertainty and openness to injury. According to Jahoda, "Paul was always sensitive about his Jewishness—he had the most idiotic, but persistent inferiority feeling" (M. Jahoda, personal communication, September 26, 1973). Such a basic insecurity, if that is what it was, was probably something that Bernfeld detected in Lazarsfeld's fondness for statistics. Without question, as Jahoda noted, his interest in mathematics "was simply irrepresible." She also mentioned, at one point in the conversation, that his "life was always such a mess" (M. Jahoda personal communication, September 26, 1973). It is difficult to say what she meant, but others offered insight into what at best might be described as a disorganized life. Lewis Coser, then president of the American Sociological Association, recalled a meeting at Columbia when someone, almost as a passing comment, raised the question of the "meaning of life," to which Lazarsfeld responded: "I'll tell you the meaning of life. It's people sticking pins in you, and you spend the rest of your life pulling them out." (L. Coser, personal communication, December 19, 1979). It has all the suggestion of a life shaped by others, but not pleasantly. The answer rests in Vienna, and not just in the turmoil of the times already documented. His life was splintered by uncertainty.

Strange Times

As noted, Adler was living at the Lazarsfeld household when he killed the Austrian prime minister. Sofie's relationship with Adler had begun around 1915, after she had met him and his father, Viktor Adler,

the founder of the Social Democratic Party, at a summer resort. Friedrich moved in with the Lazarsfelds on a permanent basis, or at least for a few years. Gertrud Wagner, in talking of Lazarsfeld, described his mother "as a very strong woman" (G. Wagner, personal communication, October 9, 1973). She was very involved in the socialist movement, and helped run an advice bureau for women, possibly the first of its kind. Strong or not, and socialist activist or not, for Lazarsfeld, whatever took place in terms of domestic or public arrangements, his mother had a shattering effect upon him. Lewis Feuer, in researching his book on Einstein and his generation of scientists, which included Adler, interviewed Lazarsfeld. Of course, Lazarsfeld knew Adler well, but in the course of the conversation made a statement that is witness to what is a dreadful positioning. Lazarsfeld told Feuer, "My mother was responsible for destroying three men" (Feuer, 1989, p. x). He then listed them: "My father," "Friedrich Adler," and "myself." He added, as if to underscore that such statement was no passing consideration but one of deep and lasting experience, sufficient not to require studied analysis: "I always say that."

If one replaces Lazarsfeld's recall of his life as one "destroyed by his mother," and transfer that over to the operating plane of performance, of his life, as Jahoda said, "always such a mess," then it is also worthwhile to depart from Bernfeld's psychoanalysis. That is, to view the function that mathematics offered, and not, to view it as Bernfeld did, as the avoidance of the uncomfortable. My position here would be, if attraction is taken along functional lines, then in mathematics and its methodological offshoots, Lazarsfeld could engage a world where sense reigned and order was distilled, even imposed, by the power of his intellect. In short, he found an order there missing elsewhere. That is why he grew excited by ecological maps colored by income levels. That is why he thrilled at the sight of a scatter diagram.

Closing the Circle

It is not necessary to accept the explanation offered for his fascination with mathematics, only to accept that, even if the reasoning is wrong, even fanciful, the very attraction moves away from him having a philosophical position on quantification, more so that he never lived in four-fold tables, intellectually or otherwise.

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