Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *Picture of the Month*

Now "Ulrich's Bimonthly"

November, 2004

HOME
WERNER ULRICH'S BIO
PUBLICATIONS
READINGS ON CSH
DOWNLOADS
HARD COPIES
CRITICAL SYSTEMS HEURISTICS (CSH)
CST FOR PROFESSIONALS & CITIZENS
A TRIBUTE TO C.W. CHURCHMAN
LUGANO SUMMER SCHOOL
ULRICH'S BIMONTHLY *(formerly Picture of the Month)*
COPYRIGHT NOTE
A NOTE ON PLAGIARISM
CONTACT
SITE MAP

The safe-harbor metaphor: a mistaken conception of professional competence November is for many professional people a rather hectic month. The days get shorter, the deadlines tighter. Fortunately, though, land is in sight. Soon it will be time to haul in the net and sail the boat back to the harbor. What a beautiful metaphor the harbor offers us in this busy period – a promise of arrival, of solid ground and security, of rest and relaxation! But is it a sound metaphor? Let us reflect on what it might suggest to us not only aesthetically but also philosophically and professionally.

The age-old quest for a safe harbor After a long sea voyage, and indeed even after a short pleasure-boat trip on a lake, arriving in a safe harbor is meaningful and reassuring. This may be one reason why ports are so attractive places. They are symbolic of the quest for a safe harbor which, I suspect, all humans dream in some way or other. Of course, experience tells us that not all harbors are safe; but this does not question the dream as such. There is, however, a deeper paradox involved, one that we need to consider lest the dream become deceptive.

Ship-at-sea philosophy Ships are safest in the harbor, but alas, that is not what ships are built for. Although the quest for a safe harbor resides deep in us, especially now that the cold season is beginning, everyday life constantly requires us to leave the harbor and to confront the challenges that are waiting beyond the harbor mole. Much the same dilemma confronts the practice of philosophy. As soon as we want to practice philosophy not merely as history of philosophical ideas but as an applied discipline that should be relevant to our professional and private lives, we cannot content ourselves with staying in whatever

Previous | Next

For a hyperlinked overview of all issues of "Ulrich's Bimonthly" and the previous "Picture of the Month" series, see the site map

philosophical harbor we have found to offer us some shelter in the past. Philosophy-at-work cannot play it safe and stay in the harbor. It cannot find its foundations in the dry dock but resembles a ship that is useful, and can be maintained and repaired, afloat only.

Neurath's ship The ship metaphor was first introduced to philosophy in 1932 by the Austrian philosopher and sociologist Otto Neurath (1882-1945), in a famous article in the philosophical journal *Erkenntnis*.* Due to its anti-foundationalist and, ultimately, anti-fundamentalist implications, it has become one of the most significant metaphors of philosophical thought today. Neurath used it to argue his case against empiricist foundationalism, that is, the idea held by some of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle (a school of empiricist philosophy of science or "science-theory" of which he was a leading member) and by other empiricist science theorists of his epoch (notably the "critical rationalist" Karl Popper) that empirical observations, formulated as so-called protocol sentences (also called basic statements), were the starting point of all science and provided its ultimate justification basis. Rather, Neurath suggested, any body of knowledge must be compared to a boat that needs to be repaired at sea:

* Otto Neurath: "Protokollsätze," *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 3, 1932/33, pp. 204-214.

> ***There is no way of taking conclusively established pure protocol sentences as the starting point of the sciences. No tabula rasa exists. We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials. Only the metaphysical elements can be allowed to vanish without trace.***
>
> (Otto Neurath, "Protocol sentences," in *Logical Positivism*, edited by A.J. Ayer, Free Press, Glencoe, IL, 1959, pp. 199-208, there p. 201)

Ship-at-sea repair in professional practice, or the vain search for grand theory I would argue that we'd do well to apply Neurath's ship metaphor to our contemporary notion of professionalism. Many academics and professionals still appear to dream the dream of an ultimate, all-embracing theory that would serve them as a definitive reference point for developing

and justifying their research and practice. This is certainly the case in my special field of interest, critical system thinking and practice, which is concerned with the methodological underpinnings of applied science and expertise.

Many misconceptions about the nature and aims of a critical approach to applied science and expertise seem to spring from this dream of a safe theoretical harbor. Some of my colleagues have argued that sound practice is conceivable only on the basis of a critical theory of society *à la* Marx or Habermas.** Of course it would be practical to have some overarching theory that would tell us what to do in order to improve the world. That would make us independent of individual views and errors and could tell us how to resolve conflicts of needs and interests. However, I do not believe such a unifying theory will ever be available, certainly not in the near future. Marx is dead, and Habermas (who else?) has not advanced it to date. Even if one day it should become available, it is hard to see why everyone should want to buy it as a sufficient justification for choosing among alternative visions of improvement and, consequently, for privileging some people's concerns over those of others. Such a theory would inevitably be utterly controversial, and would thereby lose its unifying, justifying nature.

** Two recent rounds of discussion in the *Journal of the Operational Research Society* ("Viewpoints" in Issues 5 and 11 of Volume 55) shed some light on the mistaken idea that reflective professional practice depends on grand theory, e.g.., on an all-encompassing critical theory of society and/or a meta-theory of methodology choice.

As a matter of principle, I do not think we should ever assume that we can justify interventions into social reality by referring to theoretical and methodological expertise. That would mean to give applied science the role of a superior arbiter among differing needs and interests of people, a role that it cannot legitimately fulfill. Yet this is exactly what happens every day when researchers present their findings and recommendations on some current issue of public concern, or when politicians justify their decisions by citing some studies that they commissioned paid researchers to do for them. The implicit idea is that reference to theoretical and methodological expertise can justify the manifold validity claims that decision-makers and researchers tend to raise in contexts of practical action, for instance, claims to knowing what should be done and what will

secure improvement, claims to personal objectivity and impartiality, or claims to the objective necessity and ethical acceptability of their particular proposals for improvement.

A mistaken conception of professional competence If reference to theoretical and methodological competence could indeed justify such claims, we would have to accept that researchers and professionals know better than ordinary folks what is good for everyone; and hence, that they should have more to say than others in matters of public concern, although they have no corresponding political mandate and responsibility. All efforts to enable citizens to play an active role as democratic *sovereign*, by learning to think for themselves and to question the proposals of authorities and experts before accepting them – the emancipatory utopia of Enlightenment – would be in vain. Likewise, all efforts to train professionals to become more self-reflective with regard to the way their professional proposals may affect different parties, and to limit their claims accordingly – the quest for reflective practice – would be futile.

An emancipatory counter-vision The dream of a safe academic harbor in the form of grand theory thus reveals itself to embody a rather technocratic and elitist vision of applied science and expertise. Let us abandon this foundationalist vision of applied science, for it is not conducive to reflective practice. It risks being inimical to the development of an open, living civil society. I would argue that in applied science and expertise, we need an alternative vision. Rather than dreaming the vain dream of a safe harbor, let us choose the emancipatory path and work towards ***reflective practice in a context of civil society***.

November mood in St-Tropez This month's picture shows the harbor of Saint-Tropez in Southern France. Photographed in late autumn, it shows the boats lined up for the winter to come. Now that the mass of the tourists have gone, the harbor radiates an appealing ambiance of calm and harmony that is difficult to resist. It shows itself in a mood that is very different from the hustle and bustle of the summer season but has its own charm – November mood!

Technical data Photograph taken in October 2002 with a conventional small-picture camera, ISO 200 negative film, focal length 35 mm, shutter speed 1/250 second, aperture f/8. Scanned from a 10 x 15 cm color print with a resolution of 300 dpi and 1780 x 1220 pixels, file size 514 KB. The present, edited picture has a resolution of 1040 x 687 pixels and a file size of 107 KB.

November, 2004

Taking shelter for the winter: the harbor of Saint-Tropez, France

„We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials."

("Wie Schiffer sind wir, die ihr Schiff auf offener See umbauen müssen, ohne es jemals in einem Dock zerlegen und aus besten Bestandteilen neu errichten zu können.")

Otto Neurath: "Protokollsätze," *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 3, 1932/33, pp. 204-214, there p. 206. – English transl. from: "Protocol sentences," in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1959, pp. 199-208, there p. 201.

Previous Picture Next Picture

Last modified 9 Aug 2006 (first published 1 Nov 2004)
Layout last modified 6 July 2006