BOOK REVIEW


After two monographs on the Vienna Circle (VC) of Logical Empiricism were published already in the early 90s in German-speaking countries,¹ now Friedrich Stadler, founder and director of the Vienna Circle Institute in Vienna, has published his long-awaited magnum opus. One main difference between his book and those of his predecessors lies in its sheer volume: whereas Manfred Geier treats the theme in 157 pages and Rudolf Haller in 304 pages, Stadler requires 1035 for the same purpose.

The book is divided into two main parts, one being the (mainly) consecutive description of the history of the VC and the other – under the title “Die biobibliographische Dimension” – is a documentation containing the photographs, the curricula vitae and the bibliographies of 37 members of the circle and its periphery. The reader will mainly use this second part as a reference work. With one exception: the documentary appendix on the murder of Moritz Schlick (the founder and one of the main figures of the circle) reads like a suspense story.

Also here and there in the first part one finds highly interesting documentary material. The chapter entitled “Der Schlick-Zirkel”, for example, includes all the surviving protocols of the circle which are published here for the first time (pp. 267–363). Then there are sections containing the programmes of the “International Congresses for the Unity of Science” between 1935 and 1941 (pp. 402–436) and an excerpt from an interview with Karl Popper (pp. 525–545). In particular the protocols will contribute to a democratization of knowledge on the VC, because this first-rate material was formerly only accessible to experts. From all these highly welcome documentary additions which give the first part of the book the character of a collage, the reader will easily unearth the core of the VC story. This story covers its prehistory before the First World War (chap. 3 and 4), its non-public phase from 1918–1929 (chap. 6), its public phase from 1929 to the “Anschluß” (the occupation of Austria by the Third Reich in

March 1938) and, finally, the dissolution of the circle and the emigration of its members (in chap. 13). This description is rounded off by digressions on the relations of the circle to some of its prominent outsiders like Ludwig Wittgenstein (chap. 9) or Karl Popper (chap. 10). Experts will find Stadler’s discussion of the priority-claims to physicalism (between Wittgenstein, Carnap and Neurath) and his discussion of Popper’s strange assertion that it was he who “killed” the circle (and not for instance the Nazis) especially interesting and stimulating.

What then distinguishes Stadler’s book from those of his forerunners (like Geier and Halter)? There is, to begin with, the methodical approach, which is expressed already in the title of the book (“im Kontext”) and developed programmatically in its first chapter. There Stadler distances himself from the insufficiencies of purely internalistic philosophy and science histories and promises to take into consideration also the “social and institutional frame for the rise and fall of this blossoming science-culture in the first (Austrian) republic”. His approach makes itself felt mainly in the framing chapters of his story, that is in the long prehistory on the one hand and in chapter 12 on the other, where the relations of the VC to the University of Vienna or to the workers’ movement in “red Vienna” are treated. These latter sections contain material from Stadler’s very first publications in 1979 and 1982. But here, too, he adds many new things to these “old” publications like, for instance, the successions in the philosophy chairs after the dismissal of Heinrich Gomperz from the philosophical faculty and after the murder of Schlick.

Seen from a material viewpoint, his description can be distinguished from those of his forerunners in that the dense network of circles and groups (like those of Gomperz, Karl Bühler or Ludwig von Mises) in which the VC was imbedded, is described in detail. The astonishing multitude of such groups as well as the personal overlaps of their members are also made visible in some telling diagrams (p. 627). Stadler is the first to inform us about the “Mathematisches Colloquium” around Carl Menger with its interdisciplinary activities such as its public lecture series and publications (pp. 437–466 and 630 f.).

In an opus magnum like Stadler’s, some small mistakes are practically inevitable. The fact that Herbert Feigl is mentioned in some places as a contributor to the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (IEUS), although his planned monograph on Scientific Explanation was never finished nor published, is one of these small errors. Friedrich Waismann’s Königsberg lecture of 1930 on Wittgenstein’s viewpoint in the philosophy of mathematics is not, as Stadler tells us (on p. 389), lost, but has been published in the meantime. Paul Lazarsfeld was not an author of the