Adolph Lowe on Freedom, Education and Socialization

Mathew Forstater
University of Missouri—Kansas City
forstaterm@umkc.edu

Abstract The lifework of Adolph Lowe (1893–1995) was greatly motivated by his struggle with the problem of “freedom and order”. This paper explores Lowe’s largely overlooked and under-examined writings on education and political philosophy, important components of his “political economics”. Lowe’s concern with the socialization function of education is highlighted and related to his notion of “spontaneous conformity”, as well as the ideas of Vygotsky on imaginative children’s play and C. S. Peirce on habit-change. Taking Gorman’s critique of Schutz’s conception of freedom as a point of departure, and drawing on the work of C. Wright Mills, Lowe’s own conception of freedom is critically examined. For Lowe, the stronger the commitment to community, the greater is the possibility for individual autonomy without the threat of social disruption.

Keywords: Adolph Lowe, freedom, education, socialization, spontaneous conformity, imagination

I. INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the Nazi’s seized power in 1933, Adolph Lowe was among the first social scientists to be dismissed from his academic position by Hitler. Before the year’s end, he and his family would be resettled in England, where he obtained an appointment as Special Honorary Lecturer in Economics and Political Philosophy at the University of Manchester. There Lowe continued his work on structural analysis and methodology of business cycles begun at Kiel University and the University of Frankfurt, but the collapse of Weimar and the fascist takeover turned his attention also to questions of politics and philosophy that would remain a central component of his life’s work. In a letter written to Paul Tillich in 1937, subsequently published as The Price of Liberty, Lowe expressed both the mood and the task before them:
If you turn your gaze ten years back, you see us full of reformist optimism, setting about the task of rousing the sluggish German Republic from its spiritual lethargy. Five years later, the great-hearted attack has turned into a desperate defensive. Today it is no longer to the point to waste words over the fact of our frustration and over the collapse of a social order which once appeared to us, in spite of all its defects, as the starting point of genuine progress.

Flung back as we have been into a stage of theoretical reflection, there is nothing left to us but to attempt a thorough stocktaking of our convictions, political and general. Until this task has been carried to a positive conclusion, there can be no respite from labour...

Where do the reasons for our failure lie? Does the lack of success bear witness against our ends, against our means, or against both...?... What antidotes are there against the demoniac tendency of any and every dictatorship to perpetuate itself as a tyranny?

(1937a: 7–8)

Lowe proceeded to grapple with these fundamental problems of "balancing freedom and order" (Hagemann and Kurz 1990). There are three cornerstones of this work which are encompassed in the phrase "political economics." The first is a concern with the methodology for combining theoretical analysis and public policy. This was the core of Economics and Sociology (1935) and continued in articles throughout the 30s, 40s, and 50s, eventually giving rise to Lowe's instrumentalism, first expounded in On Economic Knowledge (1965) and subsequently in a number of articles. Rather than taking initial conditions as given and attempting to predict outcomes, Lowe proposed starting with a vector of macro goals that are given independently of economic analysis, i.e. by a democratic political process. The task then becomes to discover the technical and social path(s) by which those outcomes might be achieved, the behavioral and motivational patterns capable of setting the system on to a suitable path, the environmental context(s) capable of encouraging those patterns, and the policies shaping or creating the environmental contexts (Forstater 1994; 1998; 1999a; 1999b).

Because social and political stability require a foundation of economic stability, a structural analysis of the macrodynamics of the economy is necessary for outlining the fundamental causes and cures of economic crises. This second cornerstone, rooted in the business cycle research at Kiel, was continued in articles on technological unemployment and the structure of production from the thirties through the fifties and culminated in The Path of Economic Growth (1976).

Last is the problem of individual freedom and liberty within a society requiring interventions and controls. This dilemma was the subject of The Price of Liberty, returned to often between that time and the appearance of Has Freedom a Future? in 1988. Lowe's work on education, beginning with his The Universities in Transformation (1940), may also be included here.

It is clear that these three areas are fundamentally intertwined, and they are
dealt with accordingly throughout Lowe’s work. Regardless of which may be the primary focus at a particular time, the others are always considered. Thus, for example, a section on “Instrumental Inference in Operation” in On Economic Knowledge demonstrates the instrumental method using the analysis of structural change, and Has Freedom a Future? contains a chapter on “The Spectre of Technological Unemployment”.

Although Lowe published fairly widely, with his work reviewed in major journals, recognition of contributions has been long delayed and is only now coming into its own. There have been occasional articles dealing with his technical contributions to the theory of economic growth and the traverse, but even these have failed to appraise the relationship of this to other aspects of his work. Almost no attention has been given to Lowe’s work on political philosophy and education, however, and it is to these issues that the present paper is devoted. They include the social function of education; social norms and habit-change; freedom, control, and self-control. The aim of what follows is in no way to show what Lowe “really meant,” but rather to offer interpretations and possible elaborations and extensions of Lowe’s ideas through freely relating them to those of others working on related themes.

II. THE GREAT RIDDLE: FREEDOM AND ORDER

Lowe returned again and again throughout the course of his life to what he referred to as the great “riddle”: “how is freedom of [individual] choices compatible with integral [social] order?” (1942: 445). This dilemma of liberal society is a major organizing theme of Lowe’s lifework, the fundamental issue which directly and indirectly preoccupied his attention.

Lowe’s analysis masterfully demonstrates the fallacy of unlimited and spontaneous micro-autonomy in the classical liberal setting. The spectrum of possible micro-choices compatible with adequate macro-outcomes is limited by the environmental context in which the agent operates. Such external constraints define the set of possible choices adequate for maintaining societal order.

Given the behavioral requirements necessary for determinate economic outcomes, Lowe notes that the only alternative to the authority of a command system is voluntary restriction of goal-inadequate behaviors and the obeying of a general code of conduct (1935: 62; 1951: 413). If determinate behavior is not just any behavior, and if determinate behavior is not to be imposed from without, then such a code must be internalized, and ideally “‘experienced as . . . spontaneous decision’” (1942: 439–40). Lowe refers to this process as “spontaneous conformity”, which Clary (1998: 276) has defined as “the spontaneous consensus among the members of society to a social code of conduct, the standards of which are
accepted and obeyed by the individual members of society". Such self-restriction is "the price of political and economic freedom" (1935: 71; cf. 1937a and 1942: 440).

For Lowe, then, freedom can only be understood in relation to constraints. He carefully distinguishes here between constraints that are removable and those that are irremovable (1988: 4–5). Removable constraints are those limitations on individual freedom which, if removed, would not threaten the attainment of society’s macro-goals. Irremovable constraints are those constraints which presently are necessary for the attainment of those macro-goals. Of course, many of these external constraints are themselves not fixed, i.e. "irremovability" is itself related to historical, institutional, and social conditions.

Freedom in one ("negative") sense is thus essentially the absence of removable constraints. Put another way, in Lowe’s words, “freedom is the power of self-determination over the range open to human decision making” (1988: 5). Lowe emphasizes that freedom understood in this way is only possible if there is universal access to suitable means. In particular, he points to considerable class inequality, persistent unemployment, and race and gender discrimination as examples of fundamental obstacles reducing such access (1988: 6). These and similar obstacles are thus "legitimate targets of public control" (ibid. emphasis deleted).

Lowe realized that the idea of “public control” may be politically difficult to sell, and paid considerable attention to this issue. But this reflected more than simply a concern with political resistance or ideological opposition; Lowe was himself deeply concerned with the problems of bureaucratization, corruption, and power. In fact, it might be fair to say that the task of his life’s work was the discovery of possibilities for a social system in which societal goals can be achieved with the feasible maximum of individual freedom, where a foremost societal goal is freedom itself.

In fleshing out the difficulties of public control (including the question of "controlling the controllers"), Lowe speaks of the "transformation of control into self-control" (1988: 139, emphasis deleted). There is an inverse relation between self-control and external control, and thus the need for controllers, whose structural position breeds corruption. On what does such widespread individual self-control—i.e. spontaneous conformity—ensuring goal-adequate micro-behavior and limiting the necessity for externally imposed controls, depend?

Lowe points the way towards an answer: it is "education in the widest sense of the term" (1988: 128, original emphasis). Lowe refers here not merely to intellectual training or information necessary for comprehending the social implications of individual behavior in the more technical sense. Rather, he associates successful education in this broad sense with "integrating the rational with the moral" and "commitment to a life-ordering principle" (1988: 130, original emphasis).
III. THE SOCIALIZATION FUNCTION OF EDUCATION

Like his writings on economic theory, history, methodology, and policy, and political philosophy, Lowe's writings on education span his career. What is probably his least known book, *The Universities in Transformation*, was published in 1940, but already Lowe had anticipated that work with an article, "The Task of Democratic Education". comparing university education in pre-Hitler Germany and England (1937b), as well as a related discussion of education in *The Price of Liberty*, published the same year. Lowe spoke to the topic of education often between that time and 1970, when he addressed the question "Is Present-Day Higher Learning Relevant?" both at Columbia University's *Seminar on the Nature of Man* and the General Seminar at the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science at the New School for Social Research, subsequently publishing the paper in *Social Research* in 1971. Education is a central theme once more in Lowe's last book, *Has Freedom a Future?* (1988).

Writing after four years in exile and with World War II imminent, Lowe makes clear in "The Task of Democratic Education" that it will no longer be adequate to merely profess the traditional postulates of democratic education:

> Intellectual freedom and personal responsibility. We have to *prove* that these liberal principles . . . are superior to the new gospel of indoctrination and enforced conformity

(1937b: 381, emphasis added).

Lowe then immediately turns to an issue that forms a crucial part of his lifework, the social basis for individualization. Far from denying the importance of individual freedom and personality, he refers to their role as serving a "leavening function, working on a dough which is composed of very different material . . . the pre-liberal heritage of attitudes and life patterns" (*ibid.*: 382). For Lowe, the disintegration of this communal base threatens the survival of free society:

> If this prove true, the task of democratic education extends far beyond the cultivation of freedom and personality. For the preservation of these liberal values modern democracy will have to undertake a much bigger task: that of reviving, or even creating, the substance of a new social and economic order.

(*ibid.*: 382)

Lowe goes on to compare the pre-Hitler German university system, characterized by a very high degree of academic freedom and independent research, with the English system, which Lowe views as "rearing grounds for a social type" (*ibid.*: 385). In the first half of the nineteenth century, 60 percent of the students in Germany were the children (sons) of civil servants, teachers and clergy, which meant that socialization was the province of the "feudal and military standards of
the Prussian tradition" (ibid.: 383). But this “division of labor” continued right up to World War I, by which time 50 percent of the students were now from the business classes.

The German system produced some excellent scholars, but the majority of students, Lowe laments, were not up for the challenge of self-guided education, and submitted to a “dull, though well-organized, cramming system” (ibid.: 383). Such a system was unable to shape and encourage a social consciousness in the students, who received:

Their real education—social and physical—. . . in their fraternities and student corps. There, however, not the humanistic ideal of free thinking, but the Wilhelminian parody of Prussian tradition was instilled in them . . . This dualism was much deplored as a sin against the true spirit of the German University. But as this university refused to do anything but train scholars and satisfy the desire for personal self-refinement, some other body had to step in to give the student masses human guidance and social drill. It was on this residue of the feudal and absolutist ages on which the leaders of the nation actually lived.

(ibid.: 383–84)

The universities became overcrowded following World War I, and the unemployment of the interwar period rose, with 50 000–70 000 unemployed graduates up to 1932 forming the basis of the “propagandists and the officers of the counter-revolution” who were to turn “an economic disaster into a general social upheaval” (ibid.: 384).

For Lowe, the German University failed at mass education, the fundamental challenge of modern democracy. England’s success, on the other hand, Lowe attributes to its ability to meet the needs of the average student and “produce a social character” (ibid.: 385). Though English universities experienced similar demographic trends as those in Germany, the English system fulfilled its function of shaping “a general character pattern through the daily experience of a group life” (ibid.: 385).

As Lowe reiterates in The Universities in Transformation, from early on in life the socialization of the individual is intimately linked to societal institutions, in particular educational institutions. This is as true in a totalitarian society as a democratic one. But in the latter, the socializing forces must forge not a numbing, mindless uniformity; while still involved in the production of a “definite human type”, social institutions such as the educational system must be “flexible enough to enable, and even encourage, the type to develop ‘beyond the type’” (1940: 2, emphasis added).

For Lowe, the socialized individual of a democratic society must be “dynamic”, and he points to two crucial aspects of such a view:
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It recognizes... the 'incompleteness' of human history, and points to the significance of cultural evolution... [and] it by no means involves the uncritical acceptance... of the actual ideas and standards prevailing at any given moment.

(ibid.: 2)

As such, Lowe points out that while England produced no great "intellectual rebels against tradition" such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, it produced "the Friends, the Radicals, and the Fabians, that is, an intelligentsia whose members used the ruling social code for the most daring offensive against what they regarded as abuses of the true meaning of tradition" (1937b: 386–87). For Lowe, the characterization of nineteenth century England as "a liberal society" applies as a description of the economic system, but it must not be permitted to disguise the importance of voluntary associations and the underlying social fabric, which would not properly be described as "atomistic" (1940: 6).

Lowe reveals that the success of the English University system lay partly in the fact that its task was not as great: for Lowe, the English university had only to develop "existing attitudes which are pre-formed by family tradition and daily experience [and] permeate the social conduct of the whole nation" (1937b: 386). Whereas in Germany, the humanistic education and the Prussian socialization were socially and substantively separate, in England Lowe found an amalgamation of pre-liberal tradition and liberalism into "one homogeneous life pattern: spontaneous conformity"(ibid.: 386).

This idea of "spontaneous conformity" is a central thread in Lowe's work from the 30s through the remainder of his life.¹ His exile in England provided him the opportunity to observe English society in a detached manner, and he quickly became impressed with the apparent contradiction between individual freedom on the one hand and fairly strict social conformity on the other. Lowe's The Price of Liberty is dedicated to this phenomenon, and his conclusions had a significant influence on his writings from that time onward, regaining a central place in his last major work, Has Freedom a Future?²

¹ Lowe's notion of spontaneous conformity was developed during the time he was engaged in relevant exchanges with his colleague at the University of Manchester, the physical chemist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi. Polanyi coined the different, but related term, "spontaneous order", later picked up by Hayek and many Austrian economists. For more on Lowe and Polanyi, see Forstater, 1998: 197; 1999a: 11–14.

² Of course, the voluntary adoption of social codes or rules of conduct is by no means isolated to England, a point that Lowe emphasizes: "It is true I have spoken of England. But in the last resort I am not concerned with the unique historical phenomenon of a particular country and people and their future fate, but with the general pattern of a society whose mode of life is spontaneous collectivism" (1937a: 40).
IV. SPONTANEOUS CONFORMITY AND HABIT CHANGE

Such a socialization process instilling conformity in individuals may be thought of as the antithesis of “spontaneity” or “freedom”. More recent evidence regarding the socialization process in young children demonstrates that far from being the result of strict and rigid “training”, the acquiring of social norms is a rather spontaneous process and the “natural” outgrowth of free play and the imagination. Important contributions in this area may be found in the work of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, an early twentieth century Soviet psychologist who theorized about the way in which conceptual development occurs in children based on social practices. Vygotsky’s ideas may provide leads for better understanding Lowe’s seemingly paradoxical notion of “spontaneous conformity”, as well as extending the focus on education to a variety of levels and areas.

To the outside observer, “free play” (as opposed to organized, structured activities) appears as “free” and “spontaneous”. But, as Berk notes in her overview of Vygotsky’s ideas, “free play is not really ‘free’”:

[1] Instead, it requires self-restraint—willingly following social rules. . . By enacting rules in make-believe, children come to better understand social norms and expectations and strive to behave in ways that uphold them.

(Berk 1994: 33)

For Vygotsky, a fundamental aspect of allimaginative or representational play is that it “contains rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully act out the play scene” (ibid.: 31, emphasis deleted). Thus, free play “supports the emergence of the . . . capacity to renounce impulsive action in favor of deliberate, self-regulatory activity” and so has a crucial role in development and socialization (ibid.: 32). Dramatic and imaginative play therefore prepares young children for the more formal games with overt rules of middle childhood, “which provides additional instruction in setting goals, regulating one’s behavior in pursuit of those goals, and subordinating action to rules rather than to impulse—in short, for becoming a cooperative and productive member of society” (ibid.: 33).

Far from being an idiosyncratic or utopian notion of Lowe’s, “spontaneous conformity” may be seen as being at the foundation of human socialization and societal functioning. The work of Vygotsky and his followers demonstrates that there is no need for strict enforcement of conformity, which would be authoritarian and dehumanizing. Quite the contrary: socialization occurs naturally from early on in life as the outgrowth of imaginative play activities.

In the context of Lowe’s political economics, however, a question immediately

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3 For more on Vygotsky and Lowe, see Forstater (1997: 161).
arises. Vygotsky's theory describes the process of socialization, of rule-following behavior, but not the content of the rules themselves. The socialization that takes place from early childhood in a given society reflects the already existing social codes of conduct in that society. But at the core of Lowe's thesis is the idea that social codes are not universal and timeless, but historically contingent and context-dependent. Historical social, technological, and environmental transformations alter the efficacy of what Lowe's colleague at the New School, the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz, called social "recipes" (1970[1943]). On the one hand, if social codes become rigidly fixed, they may be continuously passed on as tradition from generation to generation even after socioeconomic change has diminished their goal-adequacy. On the other hand, negative anti-social and otherwise goal-inept habits will also be imitated and adopted by children in socialization processes.

One of the tasks of Lowe's instrumental analysis is to discover the suitable behaviors for setting the system on a goal-adequate path (1977[1965]). A variety of methods may be employed in order to try to induce goal-adequate behavior, ranging over context-making, moral suasion, public education, and "enforcement" of varying degrees of severity and formality. Often, goal-attainment may require that rigidly ingrained habits be altered or broken, and replaced by new practices.

For example, cautious wisdom in the face of environmental uncertainty may prescribe conservation in the use of paper goods and the recycling of glass, plastic and tin as necessary behaviors for a suitable sustainable path. It might be conceivable that such behavior may be induced by the dispatching of "eco-police" with surveillance equipment to every street corner and alley way, along with stiff fines or prison terms for violations. Such an approach, however, while potentially successful (at least in the short term) at promoting recycling and conservation, is in contradiction with the ever-present goal of political economics of minimal external coercion and maximum feasible individual autonomy.

As Lowe emphasizes, such external controls will be unnecessary to the extent that self-control is employed: voluntary adherence to a social code of recycling and conservation will eliminate the need for direct government control. Eventually, new practices will be established which will then become part of the socialization process. While there will be "violations", the viability threshold will not be crossed.

The key, then, becomes the ability of society's members to alter their practices

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when necessary. Political economics thus requires a theory of self-control, which itself entails habit-change. We have already seen above that Lowe considers “education in the widest sense” as key to self-control. Thus, the social function of education must not be limited to merely the process by which society’s members become socialized to fixed behavioral codes: *the very ability to alter one’s own habits, i.e. self-control, and the skill of adapting one’s behavior in the face of changing circumstances and in the light of social necessities, must itself be part of the content.*

Pragmaticist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce explicitly addressed these issues, which are not unrelated to his theory of abduction, a concept Lowe believed to be closely related to his own “instrumental inference”.

Peirce invented the term abductive reasoning to refer to the inquiry we undertake to generate hypotheses about *how we might reform what we already do.* He believed this mode of reasoning was a power as well as a skill that could be improved by practice and by discipline.

(Ochs 1993: 61, emphasis added)

Peirce believed that in practice we use “guiding principles”, habits that, not unlike Schutz’s social recipes, “structure our behavior and experience” (Neville 1992: 29). Peirce was at first interested in the process of habit-formation, but soon after became interested in the question of what could be done if our habits prove faulty (Ochs 1993: 68). Peirce’s investigations identified a number of sources of habit-change, the most important of which he considered to be “efforts of the imagination” (CP 5.4: 78–81):

*Given free play, the imagination gives uninhibited expression to the fundamental categories of our existence in the contemplation of which inquirers may construct norms for reforming our habits of action.* The product of abduction is of practical import, because it offers possibilities that might really be enacted within our contexts of action: possibilities of real habit-change.

(Ochs 1993: 71–72, emphasis added)

Thus the role of imagination in the creative construction and reconstruction (in the face of changing circumstances) of social norms is in no way limited to young children. Such a process continues into adulthood, and becomes increasingly self-determined. In addition, this is increasingly so in modern society. As Lowe put it: “From now on, the future will have to be more and more the result of our deliberate choices, at every level of human activity” (1988: 2).6

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V. THE SOCIALIZATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

For Lowe, voluntary adherence to social codes of conduct eliminates the need for externally imposed controls. The family resemblances of Lowe's codes of conduct to Peirce's "guiding principles" and Schutz's social "recipes" have already been noted. It may be useful, then, to briefly examine Gorman's sharp critique of Schutz's notion of freedom, since it may also serve as an implicit critique of Lowe's similar conception of freedom associated with spontaneous conformity.

According to Gorman, if social recipes are what determine behavior:

Then there is little more than hypocrisy in contending that we are free, self-determining, meaning-endowing actors. [In this conception] the action we freely choose to perform is identical to the behavior we would exhibit if this were impersonally determined by social typifications . . . In the common-sense world, I am free only to obey.

(Gorman 1977: 71–72)

If codes of conduct are prescribed by society, and we are socialized to obey the codes of conduct, then how is our choice to obey them "freedom?" Gorman claims that in the Schutzian framework it is "freedom" simply because that is how it has been defined; freedom here is defined as voluntarily obeying the rules.

Gorman's analysis cannot be easily dismissed. But Schutz is susceptible to the critique because he claims that individuals will choose to act in a way that coincides with objective necessity. Such an imposed coincidence of objective and subjective necessity is not to be found in Lowe, however. For Lowe, individuals must decide whether or not to follow the social rules. In fact, continuous critical evaluation of our habits is necessary in order to prevent perpetuating those which are no longer workable or desirable. Because Schutz does not adequately consider structural change and the impact such change has on the efficacy of social recipes, there is little space given to (or necessity for) critical self-consciousness. But in a dynamic, transformational context, such critical self-consciousness is central to the adaptations required for societal functioning.

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6 The interpretation given here of "spontaneous conformity" as related to imaginative self-control in the context of social interaction may be related to the creative responsibility entailed in the individual musician-ensemble relation in improvisational music, e.g. in the African Continental and Diasporan traditions. The ability of musicians to play "free" and yet "together" has been attributed to the "inner pulse control" of the individual performers (Thompson, 1983: xiii). The greater the musicians' ability to keep the inner pulse, the freer they are to explore the furthest edges of the organizing principle of the composition without things "falling apart". In the case of spontaneous conformity in social life, the greater the commitment to community, the greater the individual autonomy possible without social disruption.
Gorman’s depiction of the Schutzian actor as “naive [and] unquestioning . . ., automatically responding to internalized social dictates” (1977: 83) is somewhat reminiscent of American sociologist C. Wright Mills’ “Cheerful Robot” (Mills 1959: 171). Mills believed that in what he called the “post-modern period” (8), the individual suffers from Mannheim’s “self-rationalization”, conforming to the rules and regulations of the rational “alienating organization” (Mills 1959: 166ff). Under such rationalization, “the guiding principles of conduct are alien to and in contradiction with all that has been historically understood as individuality”:

The society in which this man, this cheerful robot, flourishes is the antithesis of the free society—or in the literal and plain meaning of the word, of a democratic society. The advent of this man points to freedom as trouble, as issue, and—let us hope—as a problem for social scientists. Put as a trouble of the individual—of the terms and values of which he is uneasily unaware—it is the trouble called “alienation.” As an issue for publics—to the terms and values of which they are mainly indifferent—it is no less than the issue of democratic society, as fact and as aspiration.

( Ibid.: 170–72)

Gorman contrasts the Schutzian actor with another who is “self-consciously aware” and “critically consider[s] and evaluat[es] the circumstances (including social recipes) he or she acts in” (1977: 83). Such a conception is closer to that of Lowe. As discussed above, Lowe explicitly rejected mindless conformity, arguing that socialization must be flexible enough to permit the “type to develop beyond the type”. The socialized individual of democratic society must be recognized as “dynamic”, meaning “incomplete” (i.e. still growing, changing, developing,

7 Schutz takes social structure as pre-given and fixed (“imposed relevances” in his terminology), concentrating instead almost exclusively on the determination of human action within that context. “Although Schutz recognizes the institutionalization of action in social settings, the objectification of human intentions in sign systems and language, as well as the objectivated results of human acts, he appears to consistently avoid analyzing their objective basis, viewing the latter as not a vital part of his investigation” (Smart 1976: 98–99).

8 “And now our basic definitions of society and of self are being overtaken by new realities. I do not mean merely that never before within limits of a single generation have men been so fully exposed at so fast a rate to such earthquakes of change. I do not mean merely that we feel we are in a kind of epochal transition, and that we struggle to grasp the outline of the new epoch we suppose ourselves to be entering. I mean that when we try to orient ourselves—if we do try—we find that too many of our old expectations and images are, after all, tied down historically; that too many of our standard categories of thought and of feeling as often disorient us as help us explain what is happening around us; that too many of our generalizations are derived from the great historical transition from the Medieval to the Modern Age; and that when they are generalized for use today, they become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing. I also mean that our major orientations—liberalism and socialism—have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and ourselves” (Mills 1959: 166).

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learning), and the individual must never uncritically accept society’s prevailing standards and ideas.

Lowe recognized the potential drawbacks even of “too much” spontaneous conformity: “the emancipatory goal must not be conceived as a macro order from which all frictions are removed. Some degree of disorder is the price of autonomous individuation, and thus genuine emancipation” (1988: 13). The key is to not cross the threshold beyond which there exists a threat to the viability of society and thus the basis for individual self-actualization. Peirce likewise noted that a considerable amount of what he termed “chance” and “novelty” are tolerable. For Peirce, system flexibility permits continuous “reordering” allowing increasingly greater internal variation (Neville 1992: 40–41). In fact, such a flexibility is indicative of the robustness of a system.

For Lowe, feasible maximum of individual autonomy is an ever present goal. It must be reconciled with “quasi order”, i.e. “admitting some degree of disorder and instability, so long as the critical threshold, below which the persistence of society is in danger, has not been overstepped” (1988: 13). The purpose of political economics, with its instrumental analysis, is to serve human society toward these ends:

We study the structural limits of human decision in an attempt to find points of effective intervention, to know what can and must be structurally changed if the role of explicit decision in history-making is to be enlarged ... We study history to discern the alternatives within which human reason and human freedom can now make history.

(Mills 1959: 174)

Lowe’s work in education and political philosophy remains overlooked and under-examined. Yet it is both an integral part of his Political Economics and a relevant and fertile body of work that stands on its own. Consideration of this work with an eye to making connections to related ideas may go some way toward contributing to the development of a valuable framework for conducting social analysis and formulating alternative policy measures in a constantly changing world, without abandoning—indeed, while promoting—a commitment to social justice and the inherent dignity of life.

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