How the *AJES* Got its Mission Statement in 1941

*Adolph Lowe’s Plea for Cooperation and Constructive Synthesis in the Social Sciences*

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Abstract. Adolph Lowe and his mentor Franz Oppenheimer were founding members of the Editorial Board of the *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in 1941. Both this journal’s name and its mission were inspired by Lowe’s greatly underappreciated 1935 book, *Economics and Sociology*. There, Lowe issued his “plea for cooperation” and “constructive synthesis” in the social sciences. Lowe was committed to interdisciplinary teaching and research for the entirety of his long and interesting career. When celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Journal*, it is worthwhile to recall Lowe’s enduring contributions. His expression “constructive synthesis” still remains part of the mission of the *AJES* as inscribed on the back cover of the journal itself.

I

Adolph Lowe’s “plea for cooperation in the social sciences” in his greatly overlooked and underexamined *Economics and Sociology* (1935) remained an important theme of his life’s work for the next sixty years. Even prior to 1935, Lowe was immersed in such a tradition. He held the Chair in Economic Theory and Sociology at Kiel University in the late 1920s and early 1930s. His mentor, Franz Oppenheimer, held the Chair in Sociology at Frankfurt University, then Germany’s sole full professorship in the discipline (Simonds 1978:5). Lowe would still claim as late as 1965 that Oppenheimer’s was “the most comprehensive system...”

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der soziologie ever written” (Lowe 1965:133). At a time when the Historical school still dominated the discipline (and especially the academy), Lowe identified Oppenheimer as one of the few scholars in Germany with whom “one could study theory in the classical and neo-classical meaning of the term” (Lowe 1959:60). Oppenheimer and Lowe were later founding members of the editorial board of The American Journal of Economics and Sociology. The Journal’s founding editor, Will Lissner, has reported that Lowe’s book was the inspiration for the title of the AJES, and the Journal continues to take Lowe’s call for cooperation and constructive synthesis as its mission.1

Following Oppenheimer’s tenure, Lowe’s close friend and associate, sociologist Karl Mannheim, held the same Chair in Sociology at Frankfurt. Lowe himself had moved from Kiel to Frankfurt in 1931. It was, in fact, to Oppenheimer and Mannheim that Economics and Sociology was formally dedicated. In the book’s dedication, Lowe’s reference to 1919–1939, those years in which the chair was occupied by Oppenheimer and Mannheim, as “a period of constructive synthesis in the social sciences” (1935:5) recalls the fact that his influences, experiences, and intellectual environment were steeped in such collaboration. Joint seminars were offered by Lowe and Mannheim, and their collaboration continued during their exile after 1933, first in Switzerland, and then in England (Kettler, Meja, and Stehr 1984:71–72, 81–82; Gansmann 1998). Lowe’s work did not go unnoticed among sociologists. No less a figure than Talcott Parsons wrote in his review of Economics and Sociology:

Lowe successfully transcends the old dilemma which has plagued so much of the methodological discussion of these problems between, on the one hand, the dogmatic “reification” of a system of individualistic, competitive economic theory on the classical model and, on the other hand, the tendency to repudiate theory altogether, which has been typical of the German historical . . . school. (Parsons 1937:477)

That the influence on Lowe of these collaborative efforts was not limited to this period is evidenced in the Preface to On Economic Knowledge, published in 1965, 30 years after Economics and Sociology. After stating that his influences are too numerous to mention, Lowe names four individuals to whom he owes “an intellectual debt which a lifetime is too short to pay” (1977 [1965]:ix). In addition to
Oppenheimer and Mannheim, a third sociologist is identified in this exclusive list: Lowe’s colleague at the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of the New School for Social Research during the 1940s and 1950s, Alfred Schutz, the father of phenomenological sociology (on Lowe and Schutz, see Gurwitsch 1969; Machlup 1969; Nagel 1969; Wagner 1983; Forstater 1997, 2000, 2001). Lowe also had important professional and personal relations with a number of other important figures relevant to economics and sociology, including Max Horkheimer, F. A. Hayek, Joseph Schumpeter, and Michael Polanyi (on Lowe and Hayek, see Hagemann 1994; Rühl 1994; and Forstater 1997, 1999b, 2000, 2001; see the latter for Polanyi and Lowe as well).

II

In Economics and Sociology, and in his writings on education from the same period, Lowe warned of “all the dangers of over-specialization” (Lowe 1937:387; see also Lowe 1940). The “trend toward specialisation,” he suggested, was “the natural and inevitable result of our technical civilization” (Lowe 1940:13). In The Universities in Transformation (1940), Lowe proposed interdisciplinary curricula and educational reform to counter the trend:

No medical student can truly face his medical problems unless he becomes acquainted with the organisation of modern industry, with the housing problems, the distribution of wealth and income, etc. No theological student may pray the petition referring to our daily bread, who does not know that its fulfillment is largely frustrated to-day by political and economic institutions of which he himself is perhaps a beneficiary. We know only too well that the weakness of our modern economists lies in the fact that, however elaborate their methods of solving problems are, they are able only in rare cases to ask the right questions. Their usual excuse that the immense number of “data” prevents them from giving exact answers does not hold. They lack in judgment, not in knowledge, because their notions of psychology and sociology are often not above the popular level. (Lowe 1940:50–51)

Economics and Sociology begins with Lowe lamenting recent developments in the social sciences in general, and economics in particular: Academic research in the social sciences and the practical application of their results are suffering to-day from a general defect for which even the greatest achievements within the special branches cannot compensate. An
excessive division of labour, a lack of synthetic co-operation between the various sections of social research more and more restrict the truth of any partial knowledge, the efficiency of any concrete action. (1935:19)

On the surface it looked a natural division of labour between the various social sciences, enforced by the widening range of research. But in fact one particular branch, economics, usurped a growing preponderance . . . This social superiority of economics was accompanied by a growing scientific autonomy. During the last half century the economists tried to eject just those substantial elements of their doctrines that before linked economic research with political science, law, psychology, and history—striving after “pure economics” as an independent body of knowledge. (1935:26)

While noting some of the areas in which it appeared economics and sociology are in collaboration, Lowe underlines the fact that in all of these cases, “only the outworks of the two sciences are in contact with each other” (1935:32). Sociology, Lowe writes,

renders the theoretical generalizations of economics more concrete and appropriate to individual cases. But these generalizations themselves, the fundament of economic analysis, appear as an entirely independent body of knowledge, not requiring sociological research though certainly concerned with a particular section of society. In fact, the majority of modern economic theorists deny any relevance of sociological investigations for their essential work; some of them even insist on the a priori character of their generalizations. In this they represent the tendency toward purification . . . which has formalized economic theory. (1935:32–33)

As he put it in another paper written in the same period: “The modern theory of choice and valuation claims to have disclosed the essence of economic activity, independently of the forms in which this activity manifests itself in space and time” (1936:18).

Lowe thus recognized that some of the obstacles to cooperation were methodological. The economist “usually asserts that sociology can never work with the same exactness of method as economics, and that its results will never attain the same degree of certainty as his generalizations on ‘human behavior disposing of scarce means’” (Lowe 1935:33). Meanwhile, it is “precisely the extremely rational structure of economic theory” that repels the sociologist from economics (1935:36).

The formal exactness, the approximation to mathematics, all those qualities that constitute the economist’s pride, render [his work suspect to a type of researcher, who is constantly faced with the mutability of human impulses,
organizations and processes, and hardly ever achieves any generalization which does not need thousandfold reservations. (Lowe 1935:36–37)

In his attempt to find an opening for true cooperative synthesis, Lowe embarked on an investigation of the “pure laws” of economics. In so doing, he came to reject the orthodox idea that universal economic laws exist. Instead, he began to explore the notion that economic theories are historically relative, their differences deriving primarily from the selection of data depicting structural features representing alternative historical economic systems. Conventional market generalizations describe a very specific set of socio-historical circumstances; these generalizations are not applicable to modern industrial capitalism.

Claims for the universal applicability of traditional theory must be rejected, insofar as determinacy is guaranteed only under “one very definite and exceptional social order” (1935:147f). Traditional economics obtains its “exactness” and “determinacy” not by abstracting from sociological and historical factors, but rather as a result of the narrow limits of its underlying sociological assumptions. The laws of traditional economics are not absent from reality because of their purity, but rather because of their limited sociological, psychological, and technical applicability (1942:456f).

III

By his own account, up until Economics and Sociology, Lowe “shared the orthodox opinion that economic theory had to be a self-contained body of generalizations, independent of socio-political considerations and valid for all types of economic systems” (1977 [1965]:vii). With Economics and Sociology, however, he “abandoned this latter dogma” and “began to realize that classical, neoclassical, and Marxian theories of the market, not to mention later blueprints for a socialist economy, depicted different forms of social and technical organization” (ibid.:n2).

Lowe’s deconstruction of economic laws, and demonstration of their underlying sociological premises, constituted just the type of work Will Lissner and the other founders of The American Journal of Economics and Sociology viewed as representative of groundbreaking attempts at “cooperation and constructive synthesis” (Lissner 2001: 426–427). Economics and Sociology also presents an early and almost
completely unknown exposition of the principle of cumulative causation (Forstater 2003); an important critique of the long-period method; a novel interpretation of the history of economic thought that would inspire Heilbroner’s The Worldly Philosophers; arguments for interdisciplinary social science way ahead of its time; prescient insights on matters that today would fall under the headings of ecological economics and cultural studies; a theory of the business cycle rooted in structural and technological change; and more. As the fields of economic sociology, sociological economics, and economics and sociology all attract renewed interest, it will be worthwhile to make this work—along with Lowe’s other contributions—part of the required reading.

**Selected Bibliography of Lowe’s Works**


Notes

1. See Lissner 2001. A number of articles about Lowe’s work have appeared in the *Journal* over the years. See, for example, Lissner 1981, 1996; Chase 1983, 1989; Rima 1997. Notes and articles by Lowe appeared often in the early years of the *Journal*. See, for example, Lowe 1944a, 1944b, 1944c, 1946, 1949.

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