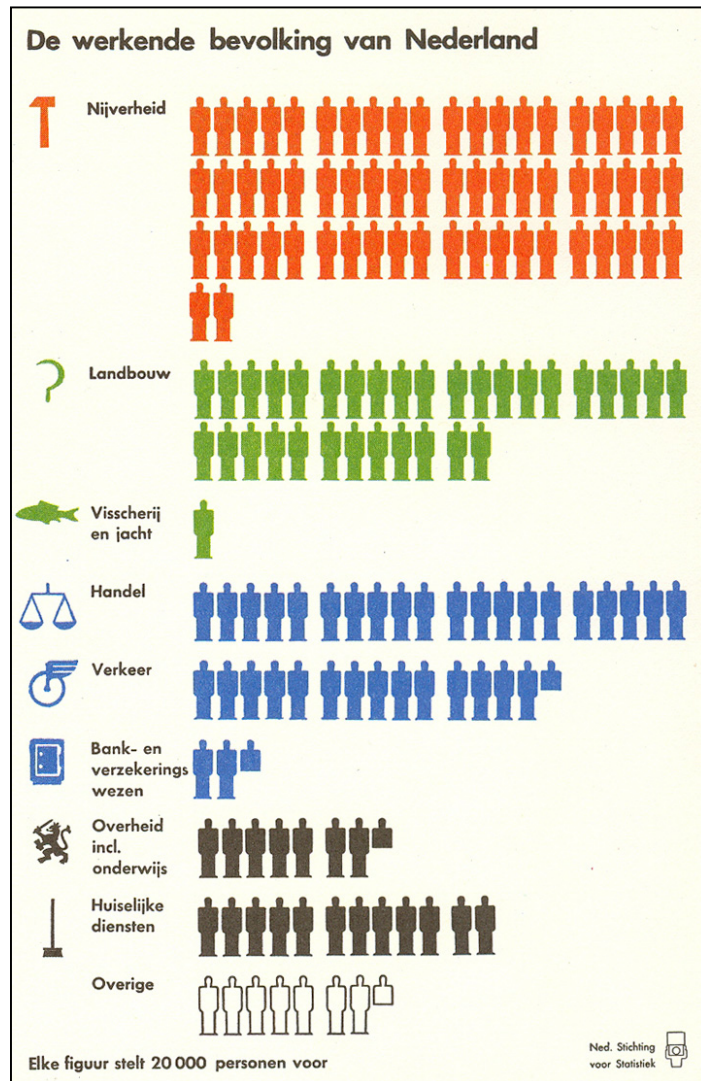


Otto Neurath

(1882-1945)

A brief biography

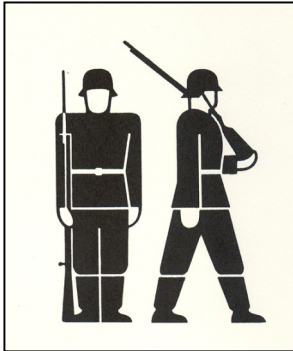


Otto Neurath

Born 1882

Early years

Otto Neurath, the son of a Viennese academic, begins his study into pre-capitalist economies and war economies; from this he develops his ideas on the moneyless economy (or economy in kind) - based on production according to need over the profit motive.



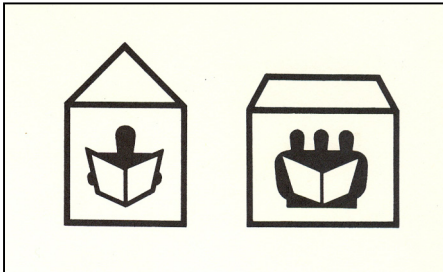
1914-18

Neurath joins the army and his skills as an economist are soon utilised as the planner of supplies for the German army, displaying an organisational skill he would later transfer to many future projects. He is appointed Head of the General War and Army Economics section of the War Ministry in Vienna and at the same time becomes director of the Museum of War Economy in Leipzig. This lays the ground for his later work in Vienna; the aim of the Leipzig museum is to educate on the basis of visual information; to display the whole mechanism of an economy with the use of text, models and statistical tables.

1918-1919

In early November 1918 the German revolution begins with strikes, demonstrations and armed rebellion. After the resignation of Emperor Wilhelm II and King Ludwig of Bavaria, The Bavarian Republic is declared, with the German empire to follow. The war museum in Leipzig is closed down. Having joined the Social Democratic Party, Neurath attempts to push through his plans for a socialised economy.

In January 1919 Neurath travels to Munich to discuss the economy with the president, Kurt Eisner, and to lobby every influential body that will listen to him. In March he is appointed president of the Central Economic Administration and he attempts to institute a programme of socialisation that he believes will take six years to institute. However, the Bavarian Soviet Republic is short lived and soon falls; Neurath is arrested, tried and imprisoned. He serves a short time of an eighteen-month sentence and returns to a greatly changed Vienna.



1919-34: 'Red Vienna'

In May 1919 the Social Democrats gained control of the Viennese government. Following Max Adler's philosophy of Bildungspolitik (emphasising that education has a vital link to emancipation), a policy of reform affecting everything from housing to education is instituted. In 1920 Neurath becomes General Secretary of the Research Institute for Social Economy with a remit to support the co-operative housing movement 'in the spirit of social economy'.

In 1921 Neurath also institutes the Co-operative Housing and Allotment Association, an umbrella organisation for all housing co-ops that plan the construction of houses (with the participation of architects including Adolf Loos and Josef Frank). Neurath wrote: 'The happiness of the inhabitants has to be the measure for housing policy.'

In 1924 Neurath proposes the Museum of Economy and Society, an institution for public education and social information. It is in this context that the 'Viennese Method' (later to be known as ISOTYPE) is developed as a system of visualising statistical data which 'facilitates quick recognition and easy recall'.

In May 1925 the Museum of Economy and Society's first graphical displays are produced. In this year the museum also designs displays for an exhibition on health, social care and sport, which are exhibited in Austria House in Düsseldorf. This is the first display to be seen outside Vienna and causes a sensation. Commissions from foreign countries will soon follow, allowing Neurath to set up bureaus in other countries.

In 1927 the permanent exhibition space of Museum of Economy and Society opens in Vienna's City Hall (the space is designed by Josef Frank). The exhibition deals with the world economy, Germany and Austria, the labour movement and population.

In 1928 Neurath invites Gerd Arntz to join the team. The artist proves to be an invaluable addition. The exhibition Mother & Child opens and the book Die bunte Welt (The Colourful World), with drawings by Arntz, is published.

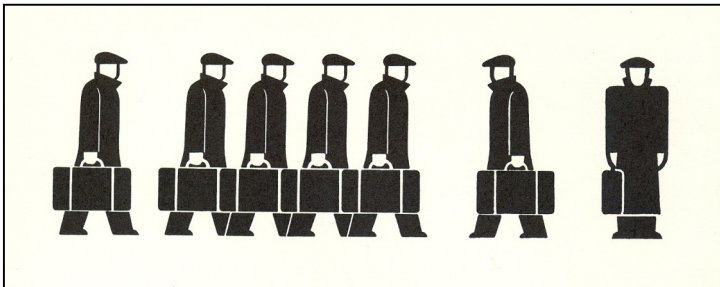
In 1929 touring exhibitions to Berlin, Zagreb, Klagenfurt, Mannheim, The Hague and Chicago are organised. By this time the collection represents a series of graphic elements that are reproducible and interchangeable. Neurath envisages a series of social museums across the world; the 'museum of the future' is mobile and flexible - rather than the people going to the museum, the museum goes to the people.

In 1931 the Soviet embassy in Vienna invites Neurath to establish a Museum of Economy and Society in Moscow. The Council of People's Commissars decree: 'All public and co-operative organisations, unions and schools are directed to use picture statistics according to the method of Dr. Neurath.'

In 1933 Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss suspends the powers of the Austrian parliament and rules by emergency decrees that dissolve the powers of the labour unions and the press. In February 1934, following two days of armed conflict, Dollfuss assumes total control, abolishing Social Democratic and Communist organisations and purging all public institutions, including the Ernst Mach Society (the vehicle of the The Vienna Circle). The Museum of Economy and Society is closed down and its offices searched. Neurath, at this time in Moscow, is warned by Marie Reidemeister not to return to Vienna and he makes his way to The Hague, via Prague.

1934-1940: Neurath in The Hague

Joined by Reidemeister and Arntz, The Hague becomes Neurath's principle centre of operations from 1934 to 1940. Here he continues his work, establishing the International Foundation for Visual Education in The Hague. Despite the difficult circumstances, the Foundation was receiving very few commissions, Neurath



managed to organise two conferences (in Paris and Prague) that launch the Unity of Science Movement. The principle members of the Vienna Circle, with whom Neurath has worked with for the past twenty years, have by now been dispersed (Carnap to Prague, Feigl to the USA and Neurath to Holland) or have died (Hahn and Schlick), the conferences provided a way in which the remaining members could meet and increase their

international profile. Other conferences would follow between 1934 and 39.

It was in The Hague that Neurath set to work on the encyclopaedia, a modern version of Diderot's great project, establishing an international committee that would oversee its production. (The first monograph was published in 1938). In 1936 the Unity of Science Institute is established as a part of the Mundaneum Institute in The Hague. In the same year Neurath publishes International Picture Language that gives a comprehensive description of the method now known as ISOTYPE. At this time he also publishes Modern Man in the Making.

Neurath travels to the USA to organise an exhibition on the prevention of tuberculosis. 5000 copies of the exhibition are produced and shown throughout the USA.

In 1937 Neurath and his team create a large exhibition Rund um Rembrandt (Around Rembrandt), their last work to be exhibited in the Netherlands during Neurath's lifetime.



1940-1945

As the Germans invade in 1940, Neurath and Reidemeister make their way to Scheveningen harbour and board a lifeboat called the Seaman's Hope, the boat is intercepted by a British destroyer and the passengers are taken to Dover. Neurath is interned for eight months. On his release he begins teaching in Oxford and he and Reidemeister set up the Isotype Institute, producing exhibitions, film documentaries (with Paul Rotha) and a series of books. Neurath resumes his work on housing projects and the Isotype Institute produce an exhibition called Housing and Happiness.

On the 22nd of December 1945 Neurath dies suddenly in Oxford. Marie continues to produce work in a series of publications covering a wide range of subjects.

Reference:

'Otto Neurath, Philosophy Between Science and Politics', Nancy Cartwright, Jordi Cat, Lola Fleck and Thomas E. Uebel, Cambridge 1996, p.7-88.

Illustrations designed by Gerd Arntz