

Josef Macek: How Do We Think? A Survey of the Ways of Reasoning (Vladimi Bena)cek's edition & introduction

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Grote, J. R. (2006). Josef Macek: How Do We Think? A Survey of the Ways of Reasoning (Vladimi Bena)cek's edition & introduction. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 42(6), 1269-12-71. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-56636>

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**Josef Macek: *How Do We Think?*
*A Survey of the Ways of Reasoning.***

(The posthumous publication of Macek's manuscript, introduced and edited by Vladimír Benáček.)

Prague 2006: The Karolinum Press, 292 pp.

How much energy, faith, and intellectual strength does one need to produce a piece of work like the one in this review after suffering eight years of persecution and another twenty years of exile? This certainly is one of the questions that come to mind when reading the last and as yet unpublished book by Josef Macek (1887–1972) on thinking in the social sciences. As a leading Czech economist, sociologist, and intellectual in the interwar period, Macek first had to renounce his university career during the Nazi occupation and subsequently fled the Gulag by emigrating to Germany, France, and then Canada, and finally ending up in the United States, where for eleven years (1950–61) he was a professor in economics at Pittsburgh University.

How Do We Think? transcends Macek's studies of economics and shifts the frontier of thinking closer to the philosophy of science by attempting to find common features in the methodology of economics, sociology, politics, law, and history. The book seeks to demonstrate how humanity has been moving towards more rigorous ways of reasoning in its proof of statements about facts, values, or logic in the social sciences, but at the same time has been unable to avoid abusing that rigour by succumbing to the temptation to prove the unprovable or to persuade the consumers of ideas to accept ideological statements biased by vested interests. While today there are ethics committees in professional societies, peer reviews, and other devices aimed at guaranteeing scientific accuracy and correctness, Macek, together with thousands of fellow scientists that suffered the atrocities of different totalitarian regimes, experienced first-hand the effects of biased trials and false proof. His thoughts and rec-

ommendations against premature judgement and generalisations therefore carry a weight that serious scholarship cannot ignore or dismiss. His book continues to be interesting, inspiring and in many aspects contemporary even today. It is also in a way testimony of how Czech, Central European, and even world thinking in the social sciences evolved.

It was Joseph Schumpeter, a contemporary of Josef Macek, who proposed the idea that instead of concentrating on the argument of the author and the evidence he/she has to support it, in the social sciences it is the way in which these arguments are formulated and defended that may be more relevant. Rather than content, it is the form of the explanation that in the more loosely structured sciences the relevance of the statements rests on. In this, his last manuscript, which he died before completing, Macek concentrated on the culture of persuading the public used by economists, sociologists, politicians, historians, and lawyers. The book looks at the statements that scientists, and even casual observers and moral preachers, claim about societies. How do we prove our ideas? What can be considered as satisfactory proof of their content? Such questions become even more significant given the erosion of trust in objective truths (for example, as was common in the case of the belief in eternal principles derived from god or natural forces) that has occurred over the past 150 years amidst rising relativism and subjectivism.

Macek was a sceptic and strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon social thought after the First World War. At the same time, having directly clashed with two totalitarian doctrines he was more sensitive to abuses of every kind in the social sciences. Thus the reader can relate to the ideas that Macek puts forth in this unusual book, wherein he draws from his extensive observations of both the history and the controversies of the modern world. He claims that while the world has advanced to unprecedented levels in technology, social behaviour and social

thought do not seem to have advanced at equal speed. As Macek claims, it was not 'the blind forces of nature' that caused the majority of human disasters – most of them have been man-made. Can this be understood in terms of a grand failure of the social sciences? Macek thinks not. Notwithstanding their methodological limitations and the risks of abuse, the social sciences have a positive explanatory power without which societies cannot progress.

This book opens with many interesting 'case studies', which are classic examples of the social thought of sociology, economics, or politics, where values always remain (often implicitly) a part of the argument. The ways in which fallible humans treat their ideas, declared as infallible truths, often turn out to be ineptly comic, despite a history of similar fatuous claims for the last 2500 years. But learning has been subject to progress, both in terms of what we do know and what we do not.

Josef Macek's life has been filled with ups and downs, and he shares the scepticism of his generation, which was massively influenced by the wave of revolutionary thinkers from Central and Eastern Europe. Life in this part of the world at that time provided rich material for social observation. When at the age of 62 Macek illegally crossed over to the other side of the iron curtain, fleeing for his life, he ended up at the University of Pittsburgh, where his ideas brought him to more philosophical cogitation than was customary for a professor of economics. In his view, people strive towards a trinity of aims: wealth, justice, and cognition (truth). They employ fascinating capacities in their effort to achieve them. The methodology of proof is an inalienable part of that quest. In this book he propounds the history of mankind as the fight for truth, where the fight itself is often 'a tilt at the windmills', with rules that are rather opaque and the judges not always non-partisan. When, as opposed to G. Leibniz but in line with K. Popper, we can never be sure that our reality evolves 'absolutely correctly'

(e.g. that we live in the best of possible worlds), there is an enormous amount of space for the social sciences to become instruments of human happiness, or conversely for their abuse. Thus the methods of proof remain the quintessence of the social sciences.

Given its objectives (proof of facts, of logic, of values), the methodology of proof has a multitude of means at its disposal, not all of which have an equally strong power to prove. According to Macek, humankind first used analogy to prove (or rather augur) divine orders in the search for absolute truths. He is sceptic about their validity, even though until now such approaches remain a good point of departure for continuing with more robust techniques of proof – such as proof by fact or by consistence with logic or with human values. By accepting the possibility of confronting 'value judgments' (e.g. policies or legal prescriptions) with the methodology of proof, Macek departs from 20th-century mainstream economics. However, there has been rising interest recently in many social disciplines (e.g. in law and economics, axiology or theology) in subjecting value systems to the logic of rationality and discussing their validity as endogenous or optimal entities. This will definitely long remain an open side of all the social sciences.

Macek discusses other approaches to proof by citing numerous examples of the role of experience, statistics, or consensus. Although their methodology and degree of sophistication have progressed enormously since the 1960s (see, for example, econometrics, sociometrics, experimental economics, or data processing), many of their old weaknesses remain unchanged. Then there are two less robust approaches to proof: proof by authority and by tradition. In contrast to the previous, their methodology has hardly changed at all over time and has remained at a rudimentary level. Nevertheless, and quite surprisingly, contemporary social arguments and political decisions still rely heavily on such highly questionable underpinnings.

Proof of dubious value – proof by miracle, sacrifice, martyrdom, death, and silence – are definitely beyond the boundaries of modern science. Surprisingly, as Macek argues, they have not lost their appeal in some areas and many decisions made by otherwise enlightened social agents yield to their absurd implications. Even worse, sophisticated proof (i.e. in other words ‘proof’ by outright lying, by ignorance, or by intentional sloppiness) seems completely unacceptable. Unfortunately, as with the previous example, real life is not resistant to their existence. Many recent scientific techniques of proofs by logic, mathematics or statistics are so advanced and complicated that their error or abuse escape easily the attention of their users. Technological advances and the sciences are neutral to applications. They can be used as much for the progress of humanity, as for its destruction. Thus lying can also be done ‘scientifically’, as most of us know, not only owing to Winston Churchill’s famous dictum that ‘the only statistics you can trust are those you falsified yourself’.

How Do We Think is definitely not the last word on the methodology of proof in the social sciences. It cannot mask its mid-20th-century origin or its 1930s-style of writing. Nevertheless, the book addresses many issues of the contemporary social sciences, the limits of validity of their statements, and the critical approaches to them for reducing our exposure to their unjustified claims.

In an age of ‘publish or perish’, when quantity more often than not outstrips quality, Macek’s late-coming volume is unlikely to attract a wide readership. Just as it was when it could first have been published, i.e. in the late 1960s, the book is today still a disturbing piece of scholarship, because it invites us to rethink and reconsider our output before presenting it to a lay or a more scientific audience. While this is often ruled out by time and other constraints, with most of us struggling to meet publishing deadlines and get teaching agendas right, temporarily renouncing premature exposition and look-

ing at it from the perspective of alternative explanations may substantially improve both the form and the content of that output. Those who do read the book and absorb its ideas will hopefully diffuse them in both their writings and teaching, thus helping to keeping alive the intellectual heritage of this great Czech economist *cum* philosopher, while at promoting the endless search for scientific truth and its most appropriate form of presentation.

Macek does not provide us with ‘a king’s way’ of proving our ideas. While his *Weltanschauung* is anything but systemic – and systemism, rightfully understood, and according to the opinion of the author of this article, may indeed be an alternative to avoiding the type of scholarly pitfall, heroic generalisation, or premature judgment of which this book abounds with all sorts of examples – he nevertheless embraces one essential of systemic reasoning: he recommends that one transcend narrow disciplinary boundaries and the exposition of one’s own findings into the less familiar terrain of adjacent disciplines with a view to ultimately checking their validity in the light of equally relevant discourses. In the preface to the book there is a reference to Sir Josiah Stamp, a prominent English economist, banker, and lawyer, which Macek has evidently included deliberately. Stamp ascertains that he would rather deal with the man in the street than an opinionated doctor for a judgment in economics, theology, or music, not least because judgment, in his view, is more and more dependent upon common-sense synthesis and the convergence of different attitudes toward life and its qualities.

How Do We Think is not one of those books that should be left to disappear in the shelves as part of a collection of rarities that are never ultimately fully absorbed. The book deserves a place close to the desktop, where it can easily be consulted and is at hand to be re-read again and again.

Jürgen R. Grote