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# **EXPERIENCING MULTIPLE REALITIES**

**ALFRED SCHUTZ'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE FINITE  
PROVINCES OF MEANING**

Marius Ion Bența



# Experiencing Multiple Realities

This book offers a theoretical investigation into the general problem of reality as a multiplicity of 'finite provinces of meaning,' as developed in the work of Alfred Schutz. A critical introduction to Schutz's sociology of multiple realities as well as a sympathetic re-reading and reconstruction of his project, *Experiencing Multiple Realities*, traces the genesis and implications of this concept in Schutz's writings before presenting an analysis of the various ways in which it can shed light on major sociological problems, such as social action, social time, social space, identity, or narrativity.

**Marius I. Bența** is Associate Lecturer in the Journalism Department of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania.

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Alfred Schütz's Sociology of the Finite Provinces of Meaning

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**Marius I. Bența**

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**To my parents**



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# Preface

This work is a theoretical investigation into the sociological problem of reality as a multiplicity of finite provinces of meaning, and is based on my postgraduate research carried out at the Sociology Department of Ireland's University College Cork, which resulted in a PhD thesis that was defended in June 2014.

For the present version, the text has been edited, updated, and adapted to a wide academic audience interested in the contemporary problems of social theory. Particularly, the book is intended to be a critical introduction to Alfred Schutz's sociology of the multiple realities as well as an enterprise that seeks to reassess and reconstruct the Schutzian project. In the first part of the book (the first three chapters), I inquire into Schutz's biographical context that surrounds the germination of this conception, and I analyse the main texts of Schutz where he has dealt directly with 'finite provinces of meaning.' On the basis of this analysis, I suggest and discuss, in the second part of the book, several solutions to the shortcomings of the theoretical system that Schutz drew upon the sociological problem of multiple realities. Specifically, I discuss problems related to the structure, dynamics, and interrelation of finite provinces of meaning and the way they relate to the questions of narrativity, experience, space, time, and identity.

Two details may be important as a word of caution related to this research as a 'project.' The first is related to the fact that the order of the chapters in the book do not reflect the actual chronological line of my research. In fact, it runs more or less in the opposite way. My interest in the problem of the multiple realities began when I discovered that painted screens were used in Ancient China as a way of creating little 'virtual realities,' which strongly affected people's sense of space, time, and identity. My observations on Chinese painted screens are found in the last chapter of this book. My research went on following a certain 'archaeological necessity,' which made itself manifest every time unexpectedly. When a chapter was starting to have a clear shape, it soon seemed to ask for a foundation and required me to dig deeper into the problem. To understand the ways in which space, time, and identity were altered and reshaped in the virtual and mediated experience, a more elaborated version of the 'finite province of meaning' model was needed. Later, it became obvious that such a model required a detailed

discussion of Schutz's own texts on the topic, and, finally, it was clear to me that a work dedicated to Schutz's theory of the multiple realities could not ignore the biographical context in which it was produced.

The second detail refers to the complexity of the topic and its highly interdisciplinary character. An exhaustive coverage of the topic is simply impossible across such a large number of disciplines, and I could not have this intention. Equally important is the fact that some notions may sound too technical to a philosopher or a literary theorist, while other expressions may sound too metaphorical and vague to a sociologist or a psychologist. I tried to balance the style and the use of terminology from this point of view and to locate my discourse in the wide sphere of Schutzian sociology and interpretive social theory.

# Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Professor Árpád Szokolczai, who has guided, with immense wisdom and patience, my steps in conducting the present research by ceaselessly supporting and encouraging my work. My understanding of interpretive sociology has highly benefited from the new insights I received from his postgraduate seminars at University College Cork, from our discussions, and from the extensive feedback that he offered me. From these encounters, I have also learned to seek a measured order in the realities of words and ideas and to inquire into the measure of actions and things.

I am grateful to Professors Austin Harrington and Lidia Julianna Guzy for having offered me profound and detailed comments and useful suggestions that helped me to improve this book and see it in a different light.

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I thank my family for their unconditional love and support.

I thank God for the grace of this infinitely meaningful reality.

# Abbreviations

**FPM** finite province of meaning

**EDL** everyday life

**NAE** natural attitude *epochè*



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# Introduction

## Realities just ‘real enough’

Do we ever have a feeling that the conversations we have by e-mail, our Facebook experience, our Internet banking transactions, or our daily interactions with our smartphone apps are not real or not relevant for our existence as human beings? Most often, we don't doubt their relevance to our lives, we don't doubt their power to affect us and those around us, and we don't doubt their reality. Smartphones, smart watches, smart eyeglasses, smart homes, smart cities, and smart things all come up with quite the same ambivalent offer. First, they promise to help us depart our everyday world and enter different realities with no pain, no shock and, most importantly, no fear that ‘the other realm’ could be experienced as a *fake* reality. Second, they promise us, on the contrary, to invade, enrich, and *augment* the reality of our daily life by preserving, again, the authenticity of our sense of reality. We are invited to admit that, ultimately, it makes no difference whether the things we see and hear are real or just *appear* to be real as long as our experience of them is *real enough*. In other words, we have an invitation to ontological neutrality.

This is probably one of the most stringent problems for contemporary social sciences and can pose serious theoretical difficulties. Was this ontological plurality and ambivalence of human experience an invention of our contemporary society? Did it land into our world on the wings of our marvelous technologies, or was it just emphasised and problematised<sup>1</sup> by them?

A closer look at the question shows us immediately that, regardless of their cultural, geographical, or historical context, humans have *always* lived in *multiple realities*. Even the simplest ‘primitive’ societies have experienced the world as plural, for their world of hunting had its own rules and structure different from the rules and structure that dominated the world of their myths and magical practices, and the world of their dreams was different from the world of their daily life. This fact makes the ‘discovery’ of the multiple character of the human world important for the social sciences because it points out that the multiple reality must be seen not as a contextual phenomenon of modernity but a universal anthropological condition of social life.

Unquestionably, the alternative realities created with the new technologies and the new media can provide researchers in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychology with a thematic wealth that calls for both theoretical and



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methodological innovations. In this apparent context of an increasing multiplicity of modernity's spheres of experience, we need to revisit and discuss such concepts as identity, presence, space, time, and discourse. The main objective of the present work is not a contribution to the sociology or anthropology of virtual experience in a hypertechnologised world. The amount of scholarly research that has been produced in connection with the subject<sup>2</sup> would make it an impossible task within the narrow scope assumed here. Rather, the large interest in such topics must be an argument for the idea that a solid theoretical foundation is needed for the understanding of human experience in a world that is irrevocably plural.

This fundamental problem has been approached by many scholars using various theoretical tools. In sociology, the most famous theory is Alfred Schütz's conception of the finite provinces of meaning, which is the object of the present work. Other thinkers, such as William James,<sup>3</sup> Herbert Nichols,<sup>4</sup> David Unruh,<sup>5</sup> and Nelson Goodman,<sup>6</sup> have studied the multiplicity of the life-world experience, and concepts dealing with tangent socio-philosophical questions can also be identified in Max Weber ('value sphere,' *Wertsphäre*),<sup>7</sup> Edmund Husserl (*Lebenswelt* and *Phantasie*),<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault (*heterotopias* and *heterochronies*),<sup>9</sup> Peter Sloterdijk ('spheres'),<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard ('simulacra'),<sup>11</sup> MacDonald et al. ('portalling'),<sup>12</sup> Eugen Fink (the 'windowing' character of pictures),<sup>13</sup> Eugenio Barba ('daily' and 'extra-daily' body techniques),<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin ('acts' and 'values'),<sup>15</sup> or thinkers who studied the diversity of religious and magical experience, such as Béla Hamvas<sup>16</sup> or Mircea Eliade.<sup>17</sup> Ancient conceptions of plural worlds can be found in the philosophies of Anaximander, Leucippus, and others.<sup>18</sup> Richard Gerrig has studied the phenomenon that he called 'transportation,' namely the way a reader becomes immersed in a narrative,<sup>19</sup> while Kwan Min Lee opened up the field of study of 'presence'<sup>20</sup> as people's experience of virtual environments. Related logical and philosophical frameworks with implications for history,<sup>21</sup> economics,<sup>22</sup> or social psychology<sup>23</sup> are provided by such theorists of 'counterfactuality' and 'possible worlds' as David Lewis,<sup>24</sup> while applications of the possible-worlds semantics to the study of the reality-fiction opposition have been investigated by Lubomír Doležel,<sup>25</sup> Thomas Pavel,<sup>26</sup> and others.<sup>27</sup> Inspired by the works of Benjamin Lee Whorf and M.A.K. Halliday, semioticians have investigated the concept of *modality* as the status of reality attached to a text, which is founded on a pluralist conception of reality.<sup>28</sup> The problem in its generality goes way beyond the fields of the social sciences and philosophy and reaches such diverse disciplines as theology, mathematics, or physics with, say, the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics<sup>29</sup> or the theories of parallel universes and multiverses.<sup>30</sup> While a comparative study on this highly interdisciplinary topic would be extremely interesting, I cannot embark upon such a task here either.

The present work is dedicated to Alfred Schütz's theory and has a double objective. First, it is intended to be a critical introduction to his sociology of the multiple reality, which he founded upon the concept of 'finite province of meaning' and developed as part of an unfinished project of 'a phenomenology of the natural attitude.' Second, it attempts to initiate a reconstruction work on

the Schutzian theory and to explore its epistemological promise for contemporary social sciences. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has carried out a similar project so far. Without claiming that Alfred Schutz's interpretive sociology is the best or the only possible framework for a sociology of the multiple reality, I believe that an analysis of his concept of 'finite province of meaning' can give us many clues to a better understanding of the social world in general and modernity in particular. In this approach, I will try to remain rooted in the epistemological ground of the interpretive-sociological school of thought, specifically in the phenomenological sociology that Schutz has founded upon Max Weber and Edmund Husserl, seeking to avoid value-oriented judgements, keeping from making inferences regarding the true existence or nonexistence of the objective world, and refraining from anchoring my approach within any particular constructionist framework.

Schutz exposed his theory of the finite provinces of meaning in his famous essay 'On Multiple Realities.'<sup>31</sup> The paper evokes William James's argument that reality is not a unique and noncontradictory sphere of life, but a multiplicity of autonomous and reciprocally irreducible 'sub-universes' that Schutz chooses to call 'finite provinces of meaning,'<sup>32</sup> such as the world of working, the world of children's play, the world of theatre, the fictional universe, and the world of religious experience. Phenomena occurring in a certain province of meaning are compatible among each other but normally incompatible with phenomena and experiences belonging to a different reality. Things that are possible and normal in a fictional world or in a play can be meaningless or hilarious in everyday life; actions and experiences that occur in a religious context can appear irrational to a modern engineer or scientist.

While this concept enjoys a great reputation among scholars familiar with the writings of Schutz – one can find it mentioned in virtually any introductory text to his sociology – it hasn't known subsequently the development that it deserved, and social scientists tend to ignore the epistemological potential of this theory. My own understanding of this misrecognition is related to the way Schutz himself approached the matter: he wrote about finite provinces of meaning in a sketchy and disconnected manner and provided neither an elaborate theory nor a well-defined methodological tool based on this concept. This is not to say that Schutz failed to grasp its true significance; as we will see, he *did* realise the importance of the matter, but his own multiplicity of projects, the life duties he was bound with, as well as his rather premature death at the age of 60 stopped him from developing his ideas fully into a 'phenomenology of the natural attitude.'<sup>33</sup>

A sociology of multiple realities, which would, first, reevaluate the Schutzian theory and, second, expand it by integrating various disconnected developments on the topic is yet to be written. The present work is intended as a first step in the first stage of such a project. The second stage – more laborious and extensive – should try to unify the results of the theoretical and empirical research of the past decades on the topic, such as the advances in the sociology of everyday life and the tradition of ethnomethodology inaugurated by Harold Garfinkel,<sup>34</sup> the theory of 'organisation of experience' underlying Erving Goffman's 'frame analysis,'<sup>35</sup>

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the critical assessment of the Schutzian theory by Aron Gurwitsch,<sup>36</sup> the works of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann on humour,<sup>37</sup> religion,<sup>38</sup> and general FPM theory,<sup>39</sup> Maurice Natanson's studies on history<sup>40</sup> and fictional worlds as finite provinces of meaning,<sup>41</sup> the recent studies of Michael Barber, John Dreher, George Psathas, and other authors on the general theory of finite provinces of meaning,<sup>42</sup> the studies on virtual reality,<sup>43</sup> the studies on drama,<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Marriott's analysis of television,<sup>45</sup> the studies on the social construction of the sciences by Karin Knorr Cetina<sup>46</sup> or Bettina Heintz,<sup>47</sup> the studies of medical provinces,<sup>48</sup> the studies of shamanism, religion, and experience in traditional societies,<sup>49</sup> the various studies on leisure worlds, such as pub drinking and vacation as finite provinces of meaning,<sup>50</sup> the studies on multilingualism,<sup>51</sup> and so on.

Obviously, Schutz did not 'invent' the finite provinces of meaning, nor did William James. They were just among those who realised that reality *is* plural and that we can never experience it otherwise. Before approaching with quantitative methods the many realities created with new technologies, scientists need to understand the multiple character of human experience in its simpler forms, which are historically older and genetically closer to everyday life. The question is not to prove that our reality is multiple or to find out which of the sub-universes is the 'true reality' but to investigate the conditions, dynamics, extent, and consequences of this multiplicity.

The word 'multiple' is itself a peculiar adjective with *multiple* meanings. It was borrowed from French and has its etymology in the Latin *multiplex*, which means literally 'manifold' or 'composed of many parts.' The word is a condensed manifestation of the mereologic paradox that makes an object appear as a part or as a whole, depending on the perspective from which it is perceived. 'Multiple' can describe either a singular or a plural noun: one can say 'a multiple phenomenon' or 'multiple phenomena,' 'a multiple view' or 'multiple views,' or 'a multiple reality' or 'multiple realities.' Is reality a collection of *parts* or a fragmented *whole*? This is rather a philosophical than a sociological question, and it will not be addressed in the present investigation. In his texts, Schutz uses both the plural form of the noun 'reality' ('multiple realities') and its singular form ('reality' as either 'finite province of meaning' or 'multiplicity' of 'finite provinces of meaning'), and so do I throughout this work.

The social world may appear today more fragmented and compartmentalised than ever. While modernity and 'progress' may have led human society to a higher diversity of experience and thus to an increase in the number of provinces of reality, it is unclear what exactly has remained the same in the constitution of provinces. There is also the question of why humans have progressed particularly in the sense of increasing the diversity of experience and not viceversa. Is diversity of experience good for humans? Is it a source of pleasure? Is it a basic need? Or is it just a consequence of our seeking to fulfil other needs? Such questions cannot be answered without a good understanding of the concept of finite province of meaning.

The topic belongs to social theory, but can find empirical and theoretical connections in interdisciplinary fields such as anthropology, social psychology,

media theory, performance theory, drama theory, film theory, or other areas. Every finite province of meaning points, basically, to a different science: the province of fiction to literary studies and discourse analysis, the province of virtual reality to psychology and human-computer interaction, the province of psychosis to psychology and psychiatry, and so on. For this reason, it is obvious that Schutz's treatment of the subject could not have been but partial and fragmentary, and so is my present work. The theory of finite provinces of meaning can be developed in virtually any area of the social life – and here lies its methodological generosity and profound importance for sociology – and it can also be linked to other approaches in the social sciences.

Before we begin any technical discussion on the concepts and ideas related to the multiple realities, it is important to have an overview of Alfred Schutz's texts on the topic and the biographical context surrounding them. The first chapter aims at clarifying these preliminary questions.

## Notes

- 1 One cannot fail to acknowledge the recurrent themes of multiple reality, multiverses, parallel universes, everyday life as dream or illusion, dream-within-dream, or shifting identity in recent Hollywood or international productions, such as Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2012), James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Jaco Van Dormael's *Mr Nobody* (2009), Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* (2006), Masaaki Yuasa's *Mind Game* (2004) or the already classics *The Matrix* (1999, 2003) by Andy and Lana Wachowsky, David Cronenberg's *Existenz* (1999) or Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) to mention just a few.
- 2 See, for example, Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London/New York: Verso; Rolf H. Weber (2014). *Realizing a New Global Cyberspace Framework: Normative Foundations and Guiding Principles*. Heidelberg: Springer; Sylvie Magerstadt (2014). *Body, Soul and Cyberspace in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Jae-Jin Kim, ed. (2011). *Virtual Reality*. Rijeka: InTech; Edward Castro-nova (2004). *Synthetic Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; DeNel Rehberg Sedo, ed. (2011). *Reading Communities From Salons to Cyberspace*. London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Thomas Ploug (2009). *Ethics in Cyberspace: How Cyberspace May Influence Interpersonal Interaction*. Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer; Mark Poster (1995). *The Second Media Age*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press; Sandhya Shekhar (2016). *Managing the Reality of Virtual Organizations*. New Delhi: Springer; Thomas M. Malaby (2009). *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Mark W. Bell (2008). Toward a Definition of Virtual Worlds. In: *Virtual Worlds Research* 1.1, pp. 1–5; Christine Hine (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications; Tom Boellstorff et al. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Anne Friedberg (2009). *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Barrie Sherman and Phil Judkins (1992). *Glimpses of Heaven, Visions of Hell: Virtual Reality and Its Implications*. London/Sydney/Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton.
- 3 William James (1890). *Principles of Psychology*. New York: Holt.
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- 8 See Edmund Husserl (1980). *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung: Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898–1925)*. Ed. by Eduard Marbach. The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff; Edmund Husserl (1983 [1913]). *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. The Hague/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
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- 14 Eugenio Barba (2005 [1993]). *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*. London/New York: Routledge, p. 15.
- 15 Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1993 [1935]). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Ed. by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
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