

# Lester Embree on “Collective Subjects”

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**Abstract:** Embree claimed that Schutz did not remain a methodological individualist during all of his academic life since he came to consider the individual as an abstractum abstracted from a concrete collective life. In this view, the socio-historical world cannot be understood as a mere structure of individuals because it also contains groups that are related one to another in diverse ways and which are the concrete subject of the social world. I stress three major contributions of Embree to social phenomenology: to have shown the deficiencies of methodological individualism because it conceals that the social world is a world of groups; to have found a phenomenological way to speak of collective subjects not involving metaphysical mystifications; and to have found a different way to access phenomena by re-specifying the first person perspective as “first person plural.”

**Key words:** collective subjects; groups; first person plural; methodological individualism; egology

1. I first met Lester Embree in September 1999. He was invited to Buenos Aires by Roberto Walton to give a talk at the National Meeting on Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, which he organizes on a yearly basis. Walton was very kind to tell me in advance about Lester’s visit and suggested that I arrange a lecture in the Faculty for Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. That was one of the most impressive experiences in my academic life. Although we had never met each other, of course I “knew” him since long before by

reading his papers and the wonderful books he edited. I had the feeling that some of my books came to life and talked to me...

I still remember the topic of that talk he gave in Buenos Aires: “Groups in Schutz: The concrete meaning structure of the socio-historical world.” It addressed one of the most polemical issues in social science: the question of whether there are collective entities. He didn’t support the mainstream idea that Schutz objected its existence. Instead—to my surprise—he claimed that groups are prior to individuals.

As I continued reading Lester’s papers and books, I was pleased to note that he kept working on this idea along the years, particularly in his latest writings. Also I was pleased to realize that the arguments expressed in that talk were revised and expanded into two major lines of argument: one—methodological in nature—contesting the idea that Schutz remained a methodological individualist<sup>1</sup>; another—an ontological statement—claiming that individuals are abstracta abstracted from groups, which are concreta.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I will summarize both lines of argument as exposed in four different papers by Lester<sup>3</sup> in which—beyond the words of Schutz but intending to remain faithful to his spirit—he displayed an original concept of collective subjects. Among them, one can find few although meaningful changes which testify to Lester’s long-lasting interest in this matter. I will depict how, referring to Schutz’ sociology of groups with a personal twist, he developed an idea of “social collectivities” and “collective life.” I will also show that he gave a precise, even if not detailed, indication of how one should proceed methodologically to account for collective entities. Finally, I will stress the importance of Lester’s claim for the current debate in phenomenological sociology and social science.

2. Frequently, Schutzian scholars take for granted that Schutz supported methodological individualism. As Lester noted<sup>4</sup>, this perspective can be found in the first part of his *Aufbau...*, where he praised Georg Simmel and Max Weber for introducing it into the social science. Schutz even practiced it himself, in contrast with “so-called ‘methodological collectivism’ of Talcott Parsons”, for example.<sup>5</sup>

To consider Schutz a methodological individualist is not only a vindication of Weber but also an interpretation (limited in scope) of Edmund Husserl’s egological reduction which disregards the fact that prior to adopting the egological attitude we are in an intersubjective attitude. “This

<sup>1</sup> Embree 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Embree 2011, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Embree 1999, 2010, 2011, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Embree 2010: 40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

signifies—observes Lester—that we are each subjectivities alongside one another and share the world that is for us objective or, better, ‘public’ together. In yet other words, we are first of all members of a ‘We.’”<sup>6</sup>

In his insightful reading of *Aufbau...*, Lester is suggesting that Schutz’s methodological individualism didn’t last long since he circumscribes it to the first part of his opera prima. We might conclude from there that during most of his academic life Schutz upheld a different idea; what’s more, an idea that contradicts the mainstream perception of his work:

“while one might think that Schutz considers the individuals to be concreta out of which various collectiva are assembled, his position is actually the opposite. The individual is an abstractum abstracted from concrete collective life and, it would follow, the structure of the social world as a structure of individuals rests on an abstraction and is thus abstract.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Schutz considered a “fictitious abstraction” the idea that individuals may exist “separated” one from the other: “groups are concrete and individuals considered apart from their memberships are abstractions”<sup>8</sup> because “*we always already are members of some groups or others*. And this is something not always clear in the social world merely considered a structure of individuals.”<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the socio-historical world cannot be understood as a mere structure of individuals because it also contains groups that are related one to another in diverse ways. Furthermore, groups are fundamental with regard to individuals because they are concrete, not abstract. In Lester’s words:

“metaphorically speaking, groups can ‘live’ and ‘be born’ as well as ‘die,’ the analogy between the socio-cultural world as a structure of abstract individuals and as a structure of concrete groups holds and can be considered Schutzian in spirit even if somewhat beyond his letter. Moreover, while the social world as a structure of individuals emphasized by Schutz is based on an abstraction, one in which a member’s group memberships are abstracted from, the structure of groups in collective life is concrete and thus fundamental. It may even be considered to be what needs ultimately to be clarified beginning from abstracted individuals.”<sup>10</sup>

Here Lester goes definitely beyond Schutz’s phenomenology of the social world and makes a claim of his own. I would like to say that this is one of his precious contributions to social phenomenology. It might seem he is just

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Embree 2015: 125-126. See also Embree 2011: 5, 1999: 3.

<sup>8</sup> Embree 2015: 43. See also Embree 2011: 6, 2010: 44, 1999: 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Embree 2015: 125, Embree’s emphasis. See also Embree 2011: 5.

<sup>10</sup> Embree 2015: 129. See also Embree 2011: 11, 1999: 5-6.

drawing conclusions from premises set by Schutz because he expresses this idea in a subtle, unpretentious way. So I want to stress how personal, groundbreaking and even bold it is to say that there is a concrete collective life and that Schutz's position does "include social collectivities."<sup>11</sup>

3. I am aware that this idea might not be shared by many Schutzians. All I ask is that they listen to Lester's reasons before making up their minds. His argument is sound!

"If Schutz is thus willing to speak of groups, one can wonder if a group of some sort can serve as a *collective subject* and function like the self in the structure of individuals and one can also wonder if groups of others can then be related to by such a 'subject' in ways analogous to how individual consociates, contemporaries, predecessors, and successors are related to by an individual self."<sup>12</sup>

If we grant this, then we should admit that "members of groups can share or hold subjective meanings in common" and can also hold objective meanings<sup>13</sup>, all of which constitute a We-relation.

This is easier to see in the case of primary groups, which are "consocial collectivities."<sup>14</sup> Probably for that reason they allow Lester to best elaborate his analogy between the social structure of individuals and that of groups as follows:

"*when meeting face-to-face*, a group of consociates can be analogous to the I or self in the social structure of individuals. One might then speak of this subject as a 'We.' Such an actualized primary group would then have the collective standpoint from which there could most originally be shared meanings or interpretations, self-interpretations included, from which inwardly as well as outwardly directed influence can be exercised. [...] 'Thou groups' (not Schutz's expression), might be analogous to the individual consociates in the structure of individuals. After all, such other primary groups can have their own collective internal lives of mutual understanding and interaction when members meet, each group has a common situation that it defines and interprets, these common situations have then shared subjective meanings, and such groups are furthermore both in-groups in relation to other groups as out-groups and vice versa, i.e., We-groups and They-groups, Thou-groups included. [...] a group of others thus has its actual or potential collective internal life."<sup>15</sup>

It follows from Lester's argument that the concrete subject of the social world is the collective life of groups. For that reason, the social world is in the

<sup>11</sup> Embree 2015: 124. See also Embree 1999: 2, 2011: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Embree 2015: 124. See also Embree 2011: 3, 1999: 2.

<sup>13</sup> Embree 2015: 125. See also Embree 2011: 4, 1999: 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Embree, 2015: 127.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 127. See also Embree 2011: 7.

first place a structure of groups which hold their peculiar collective standpoint and (metaphorically speaking) lead their lives in mutual understanding and interaction.

4. So far we have seen that the social world is first of all a structure of groups and that methodological individualism cannot fully access it. Is there any other methodology we can use?

In order to answer this question I would like to go back to one line contained in the previous quotation from Lester's book on *The Schutzian Theory of the Cultural Sciences*. There he expresses that groups of consociates are subjects and that we might speak of them as a *We*. However in a previous essay<sup>16</sup> he expressed this a bit differently. Instead of saying that "One might then speak of this subject as a 'We'," he said: "One might then speak not in the first person singular but in the first person plural, i.e., of a "We."<sup>17</sup>

I heard Lester many times advocate enthusiastically for this first person plural perspective. This was a longtime held conviction, which he came to express eloquently in his paper at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Husserl Circle: "One [...] often hears it put these days that phenomenology relies on the 'first person perspective,' but one should then ask whether this terminology adapted from linguistics needs to be qualified as 'singular' or 'plural.'"<sup>18</sup>

The idea that phenomenology should begin in the first person singular seemed to Lester a result of an Eurocentric "knee jerk individualism." Yes, those were his exact words:

"it had been taken for granted that one begins in the first person singular and assumes that the individual was a concretum. This 'knee jerk individualism,' as I am tempted to call it, seems part of Eurocentrism in contrast with the alleged tendency in East Asian cultures to consider persons as always already members of groups."<sup>19</sup>

Lester confronted this egological individualism with a different perspective which he attributed to Schutz although it was indisputably his own. Based on the Schutzian dictum that "we must start from intersubjectivity," he upheld that phenomenology should always begin "in the first person plural perspective."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 7.

<sup>18</sup> Embree 2010: 40.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 40.

5. To conclude, I will stress three major contributions of Lester to the fields of the methodology of the social sciences, phenomenological sociology and “worldly phenomenology,” aiming to show their coherence as a whole. I mean, they are not three different, unrelated contributions but a threefold articulated set of ideas about the social science, its object and methodology.

First, one of his major contributions is to have shown the deficiencies of methodological individualism in order to account for the social world because it conceals that it is a world of groups and that individuals are always already members of one group or another.

Second, another major contribution is that Lester found a phenomenological way to speak of collective subjects without involving any metaphysical mystifications. Groups are concrete collective subjects, integrated by individuals or by other groups that can hold subjective and objective meanings and can act upon one another and influence each other.

Third, it should also count as a major contribution that Lester found a different way to access social phenomena by re-specifying the first person perspective as “first person plural.” It was mostly a motto, but a good one. Sure it needs to be defined in a more detailed way.

What does it mean to adopt a first person plural perspective? It is up to us to explore this enlightening idea, not in mere “scholarship” or “philology” (as Lester used to say) but by going back to things themselves and doing “worldly phenomenology.” This is, for me, the best way to honor his memory and legacy.

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