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# In Memory of Amitai Etzioni

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*Wolfgang Streeck*



Amitai Etzioni, who founded SASE in 1989, was born in January 4, 1929, in Cologne, Germany, under the name of Werner Falk. Five years later, a year after Hitler had taken power, his family fled to England. Following several detours, they reached Palestine in 1937, where he grew up in a radical-socialist kibbutz. As a young man, Etzioni adopted a Hebrew name, Amitai meaning true, Etzioni meaning Zion. At age 17, he joined the Palmach, a commando unit of the Jewish underground army, the Haganah, which fought to end the British occupation, to open routes for Holocaust survivors into Palestine and clear the way for the establishment of the state of Israel. After the war, Etzioni studied for a year with Martin Buber in Jerusalem, a humanistic Austrian-German-Jewish philosopher (1878-1965) who had escaped to Palestine in 1938. From there he went on to study sociology at Hebrew University. In 1957, after finishing his BA and MA, Etzioni moved to the University of California at Berkeley. Working as a research assistant to Seymour Martin Lipset, he finished his dissertation on the sociology of Kibbutz life in 1958, in a record 18 months. In the same year,

he was appointed assistant professor of sociology at Columbia University, where he soon received tenure and stayed for two decades.

I first met Etzioni in the fall of 1972. Having just earned my *Diplom* in sociology at the University of Frankfurt, I was lucky to have been offered a quite generous scholarship that allowed me to study for two years at an American university of my choice, including travel to New York by one of the two remaining ocean liners, the QEII. For me, this was a welcome opportunity to leave behind the intellectual and political confusions of Frankfurt at the time, where I felt hard-pressed to choose between an academic and a political career. As to where in the United States I wanted to study, I didn't need to think long. Sociology in Frankfurt was then divided between the Faculties of Philosophy and Economics, the so-called "Frankfurt School" being housed in the former. Experience had convinced me that if I wanted to make a contribution to the practical pursuit of democratic socialism – which I definitely did want – "critical theory", as it called itself, was not enough. So I sometimes took classes in the other, less esoteric branch of sociology, among them a seminar held by the late Wolfgang Zapf that was devoted entirely to Etzioni's book of 1968, *The Active Society*. That book, scoffed at by critical theorists who at the time were becoming enamored with a normative version of structural functionalism, was like a revelation to me. Since with the scholarship I had the means to do what I wanted, I decided to indulge myself and go to Columbia to study with Amitai Etzioni.

Today the *Active Society* is almost forgotten. It never really registered with the sociological mainstream, for which it was too long, too complex, too much political science, too political I presume. To me, it is to this day one of the great books of the sociological tradition, perhaps even its culmination: a heroic attempt to give Parsonian functionalism, the dominant macro-sociological paradigm of the time, an activist twist – conceiving societies as self-governing rather than self-stabilizing, as collective actors rather than collective entities, actively self-transforming rather than passively being kept in a preestablished equilibrium by nature-like mechanisms of social integration. The book, in short, undertakes to explore how a human society should and must be organized to be able democratically to take charge of its future – no longer to be subject to sociological laws which it has no choice but to trust, but rather to discover and discuss alternative futures for itself, choose between them, and make real what it has chosen.

If this was close to themes in the Marxian tradition – the end of prehistory and the beginning of history – Etzioni didn't really care, and he may not have been aware of it. Capitalism appears in the book's index only once, pointing to a passage where it is claimed no longer to be a problem as Keynes had devised the tools to discipline it. All that was now required was for society to learn how to deploy those tools to make capitalism serve the collectively determined collective interests of society. The late 1960s when the book was written were the heyday of postwar democratic capitalism, and it was not only Etzioni who was convinced that the issue was no longer to fight capital but to build an effective democracy able to put it to good use. It was in the crises of the 1970s that the political optimism of the Golden Years vanished, and with it the hope for a politicized social theory offering "guidance" – one of Etzioni's key terms – for a democratic politics in a democratized society.

A few weeks before we set out for the United States, a German social science publisher got in touch to ask if my wife and I would translate the *Active Society*, for what was, to us, an amazing fee. We agreed, also because this promised to be a good entry to Etzioni, who in fact was eager for a German translation. Since I had no idea of where his name came from, I had somehow come to think of him as of Italian origin, so we didn't expect any help with the

translation. This was realistic since, as it later turned out, his German had almost completely disappeared. It was remarkable, and I still feel a deep gratitude for it, that there was no reserve, no suspicion on his part because of my German background. Soon I found myself hired as research assistant, to work with him on the second edition of his first major book, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, published in 1961, a standard text at the time in the sociology of organizations. I never learned more on the craft and art of doing sociology than in those twelve months or so, an experience that must wait to be recounted on another occasion.

Looking back, I think that already then Etzioni's heart wasn't really in sociological theory anymore. He had always spoken up and written on the political issues of the day, for example from early on in opposition to the Vietnam War, very likely reflecting his experience in the war in Palestine. One day, when for some reason my year of birth came up, 1946, he told me that when I was born, he had been busy trying to kill British soldiers. (His first book, *Diary of a Commando Soldier*, was written in Hebrew and to my knowledge never translated.) Etzioni also spoke out about the American space program, arguing that in light of the country's growing domestic problems this was an irresponsible waste of urgently needed public resources (*The Moon-Doggle: Domestic and International Implications of the Space Race*, 1964). In the early 1970s at the latest, during my two years at Columbia, the decay of the New Deal welfare state had become increasingly visible. Ominous signs appeared on the wall, like a sudden rise in inflation and a general wage and price stop decreed by the Nixon administration in 1973, which was also the year of the Watergate hearings. By then Etzioni had received funding for a Center for Policy Research under his direction, located off campus on the Upper West Side. He spent a lot of time in Washington D.C. where he worked with Walter "Fritz" Mondale, Senator from Minnesota and widely seen as a future Democratic contender for the presidency. My final assignment working for Etzioni, in the spring of 1974, was to collect data on the nursing home industry in the state of New York, which was, and very likely still is, in scandalous condition especially for black people and poor whites.

In 1978, Etzioni gave up his position at Columbia to move to the Carter White House, as a domestic policy adviser, probably not least as a bridgehead for Mondale, then Vice President, who was readying himself to run for president after a second Carter term. When Carter lost to Reagan in 1980, Etzioni's time at the White House was over, and when four years later Reagan was re-elected in a landslide victory over Mondale, it was clear that a new era had begun in which there was no place in government anymore for someone like Etzioni, sometimes ironically referred to as the would-be Democratic Kissinger. Now a University Professor at George Washington University, Etzioni nonetheless stayed close to the center of power, where he lived until the end of his life, on May 31, 2023, in an apartment at the Watergate complex.

His prospects in government gone, Etzioni used his university position for a life dedicated to activist scholarship and scholarly activism, of unmatched breadth and depth. He had always been an avid consumer of literature on widely diverse and highly complex subjects, which he absorbed with an insatiable hunger for facts and theories, always asking what they implied for a good life in a good society. Already in the 1970s, he had become interested in the impact of advanced technology on societies (*Genetic Fix: The Next Technological Revolution*, 1973), a subject that was to continue to occupy him, especially after one of his sons became a leading figure in artificial intelligence. (He published a series of articles together with him.) Other issues he wrote about, in at least 40 (!) books and uncounted articles, included the limits of the right to privacy in a densely organized modern society (which earned him a position on the enemies list of the National Rifle Association), political integration and unification, in Europe

and elsewhere, and increasingly foreign policy, as the old “peacenik” that he called himself, trying to talk the American elite out of their preoccupation with ruling the world by military means (*Avoiding War with China: Two Nations, One World*, 2017, and *Reclaiming Patriotism*, 2019).

Unlike when he wrote *The Active Society*, now, in the neoliberal era, the economy in its capitalist version played a central role in his thinking. The way he approached capitalism was not, however, one of political but rather of moral economy – not in a left Marxian but instead in a conservative sociological, if you will: post-Parsonian tradition. The central theme of his life after politics remained what it had always been: with the subtitle of a book he published in 2015, *Finding a Balance between Individual Rights and the Common Good*. The problem of balance between individualism and collectivism, rights and responsibilities, interests and values, freedom and commitment, and of a common ground between them where the common good may be found, had already been at the bottom of his reflections on life in the kibbutz. Now it took center stage, and soon also in Etzioni’s engagement with the economics of the capitalism of the time. In 1988, after a year as visitor at Harvard Business School which he used to read up on economic theory, he published his third magnum opus, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics*. Its spirit is best captured in its final sentence: “The more people accept the neoclassical paradigm as a guide for their behavior, the more their ability to sustain a market economy is undermined” (p. 257). The book is a powerful attack, drawing on both theoretical reasoning and empirical data, on neoclassical economics and the “rational choice” paradigm that underlies it – the latter at the time embarked on a seemingly irresistible conquest of the social sciences, in particular sociology and political science. (Only seemingly, though, as Etzioni proved when he ran for President of the American Sociological Association in 1994/95 and was elected.) The message of the book, in short, is that capitalism in its neoliberal pure form is unsustainable because of a fundamental internal contradiction, different from the contradictions mapped by the Marxian tradition but no less destructive: which is that its progress undermines the moral foundations of social action without which the society on which capitalism depends cannot exist.

Just writing a book was no longer enough for the Etzioni of the 1980s. He wanted his message to be heard, and in his view, this required a social movement pushing it. Social movements were prominently present already in the *Active Society*, where to a European reader’s surprise it was movements not parties or trade unions that were the main drivers of social progress. In 1989 Etzioni founded the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE), dedicated to promoting his “new economics”, which he called socio-economics, as sketched out in the *Moral Dimension*. The idea was for SASE to lobby for socio-economics as a new academic discipline, with departments and curricula and degrees of its own, to rival and, ultimately, crowd out old-style neoclassical economics.

Socio-economics was to transport into economics, and through it into the social science generally, a practical philosophy Etzioni was working out at the time, which he called communitarianism and which he hoped to set against the spirit of libertarian marketeerism he saw advancing in the United States. Communitarianism, building on longstanding “conservative” tenets of the classical sociological tradition, posits that a good and sustainable society has to be a community, or a community of communities. Shared interests were not enough to make a society viable, and neither were unbounded individual freedoms or, for that matter, a universal canon of general human rights. Instead, or in addition, social life had to be grounded in concrete, local, particularistic social bonds, like families entailing strong mutual responsibilities, founding individual identities in what Etzioni’s teacher in the late 1940s,

Martin Buber, had called I-and-thou (*Ich und Du*) relations. Buber became a frequent reference in Etzioni's writings on communitarianism.

In his effort to end what he saw as a drift of American and indeed Western society into an irresponsible individualism leading to social anomy, Etzioni did not mind being seen by some as a self-appointed modern-day prophet and moral guru. He liked discussing communitarianism in the media and with the powerful, like Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. They, in turn, took meeting with him as an opportunity to document their serious engagement with moral issues, at a time when their Third Way was losing touch with a growing part of their traditional constituencies. To further enhance his public presence, and perhaps also to compensate for SASE's still low visibility in the media, Etzioni in 1993 founded another organization, the Communitarian Network, following on his publication of a "Communitarian Platform" signed by prominent politicians, educators, feminists and public figures generally.

With Etzioni as President of the Communitarian Network, its relationship with SASE needed clarification. Etzioni had used his wide-ranging personal connections to attract scholars like John Kenneth Galbraith, Albert Hirschman and Seymour Martin Lipset to the Network and, with that, to SASE. But while the Network could comfortably remain a meeting place between the deservedly famous and the up-and-coming not-yet-so-famous, SASE needed to become a functioning professional association reaching into academic disciplines and departments, not just in the United States, to a younger generation eager, it was hoped, to learn about and contribute to the "new economics" with a "moral dimension", or in any case a social one.

One issue where this became a problem in need of practical address was whether the Network and SASE should continue to meet together. In 1995 Etzioni had asked my friend and colleague at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the late J. Rogers Hollingsworth, to serve as president of SASE for the 1996/1997 term. (Presidents were then appointed by the Founder by means of a telephone call.) Rogers, who saw it as his job to broaden SASE's appeal in real-world academia, recruited Jerry Hage of the University of Maryland, formerly also at Madison, as his successor, and, in the way of some Roman emperors, at the same time appointed me as his successor's successor (I was then on my way from Madison to Cologne). At some point the three of us resolved that the fact that SASE and the Network were separate organizations should be more visible. It fell upon me to convey to our Founder that we had decided that the 1999 meeting should not be held as planned in a Washington hotel simultaneously with a Network meeting, but in an academic setting for which we had picked the University of Wisconsin-Madison. So I went to see Etzioni and ask him to cancel the arrangements he had already made for SASE in Washington. We had lunch at his apartment, kindly prepared by his wife, and argued about the future of SASE, of socio-economics and of communitarianism in academic life, and as a side theme about how a symbiotic relationship between organizations may impede both organizations' development. After everything had been said, he looked me sternly in the eye and said, you're the president, aren't you. Yes, I said, I am. To which he responded: In that case, you make a command decision and I follow.

Madison was the SASE meeting with the lowest number of participants ever, and for a while I was afraid that we had wrecked the whole project. From then on, however, SASE grew and kept growing, attracting and cultivating a new kind of political economy work worldwide in the tradition of critical social science that was decidedly neither rational choice nor neoclassical. To honor SASE's origin, we continued to keep a string of sessions on "Communitarian Theory" on the meeting program, which did us much good as it connected us to other scholarly communities outside of sociology and political science. (With hindsight I

think that we could have paid more attention than we did to a normative in addition to an empirical-analytical view of the world and of our scholarly praxis, which our Founder would have appreciated.) Etzioni attended almost all of SASE's subsequent yearly meetings, not just in the United States but also in Europe, his advancing age notwithstanding. Apart from the occasional irritation, he was proud of what had become of SASE – a leading, globally respected professional association devoted to the study of the relationship between economy and society in its manifold forms, in the intersection between sociology, political science, economics, and modern history. When in October 2022, at age 93, Etzioni announced his withdrawal from public and scholarly life he made a major donation to SASE, indicating his lasting affection for what he had started and then let go to grow on its own in its own time.

<https://sase.org/news/in-memory-of-amitai-etzioni/>