

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

**THINKING TOGETHERNESS**

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY**

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Liana Kryshevska

## THE NOTION OF THE SOCIAL WORLD IN GUSTAV SHPET'S CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THE WAYS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

*Abstract:* The topic of the article is one of the key notions of Gustav Shpet's conceptualizations, the notion of the social world. The meaning of this notion is defined in two theses. One of them defines the social world as a teleological world, whose things are accessible to consciousness in their entelechy. The other asserts that the social world is a world of phenomena, in which transcendence receives its expression. The two theses are based on the specificity of Shpet's phenomenology as a phenomenological ontology as well as on his approach to resolving the problem of the emergence of sense. The understanding of the social world is based on the analysis of intentionality and the structure of the word, which Shpet considers as a prototype of all social phenomena. In his considerations, attention is dedicated to the distinction between sense and signification, which represents a special feature of Shpet's phenomenology and directly influences the notion of the social world.

*Keywords:* social world, inner form of the word, sense, signification, phenomenological ontology.

### **The notion of the social world and the context of Shpet's phenomenology**

The main works of Gustav Shpet regarding the notion of the social world were written about 100 years ago. However, Shpet's notion of the social world still stays relevant for the contemporary debate about the social phenomena. Moreover, it is important in the context of the changes that have characterized phenomenology since Husserl and up to the present. Shpet is one of those representatives of early phenomenology who expanded the scope of phenomenology and its methodological as well as conceptual foundations. In Shpet's notion of the social world this feature of early phenomenology is reflected directly, since it is grounded in those tendencies. Above all, this

concerns the rejection of the idealistic position, the analysis of the problems with ontological character, and the question of the formation of sense.

Perhaps this direct connection between the notion of the social world and the basic tenets of Shpet's phenomenology is due to the fact that Shpet does not consider the notion of the social world as a separate and independent one. He does not create a distinct and developed phenomenological concept of the social world, which could be regarded as a kind of "proto-sociology." Shpet's understanding of the social world is fundamentally different. This notion is one of the key elements of his phenomenological conceptualization, from its beginnings onward. Therefore, in order to understand the notion of the social world, it is necessary, on the one hand, to determine the specificity of Shpet's phenomenology and, on the other hand, to clarify the relation of the notion of the social world to other key notions of Shpet's philosophy, most importantly to the notion of the word, which is a key concept in Shpet's philosophy.

132 However, in the currently established analytical position with respect to Shpet's phenomenology this connection is not obvious. Such an approach to Shpet's phenomenology not only obscures the connection between the notion of the social world and the notion of the word, but also impedes an adequate understanding of the specificity of Shpet's philosophy as a whole. I have in mind the analyses of Shpet's phenomenology within the framework of the hermeneutic turn (Kalinich 1992) and its interpretation as hermeneutic phenomenology (Artemenko 2020).

Above all, such an approach is reflected in the understanding of the key notion of Shpet's philosophy, the notion of the word. The definition of Shpet's conceptualization as hermeneutic phenomenology entails treating the notion of the word mainly "in einer kommunikativen Perspektive" (Plotnikov 2006, 118); it considers it only as a "prima facie communication [...], consequently, a means of communication; [...] a condition of communication" (Shpet 1989, 380). One must admit that Shpet's thought gives grounds for such an interpretation. However, the communicative perspective of the analysis of the notion of the word veils the holistic meaning that Shpet bestows upon this concept. Shpet does not limit the word to its ability to act as a message. He treats the word broadly, and regards it as "the archetype of culture" (Shpet 1989, 380), not limiting it to verbal language alone, because, for Shpet,

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language itself is “a prototype of any cultural and social phenomenon” (Shpet 2006, 143).

It is important to emphasize this, because Shpet’s notion of the social world is closely linked to the notion of the word and cannot be examined adequately without this connection—the word for Shpet is a social (or sociocultural) thing, and the social world itself in the broadest sense can be understood as the word.

Another difficulty arising from treating Shpet’s phenomenology as hermeneutic phenomenology is related to the veiling of the essence of Shpet’s philosophy. To understand this, it is necessary to focus not on the individual theses of his works, but on the main topic of his project that as a leitmotif unites his early and late phenomenological studies, which are actually very different as far as the subject of analysis and analytical approaches to it are concerned.

The main problem of Shpet’s phenomenology is the problem of the realization of sense. He develops this topic in his key works and considers it in different aspects. In his first phenomenological study, *Appearance and Sense* (1914), Shpet considers the question of the emergence of sense in the context of intentionality. The thematic core of *Aesthetic Fragments* (1922–1923) is the concept of the structure of the word, which is nothing other than a statement of the genesis of sense as a constitution of the phenomenon. In *The Inner Form of the Word. Studies and Variations on a Humboldtian Theme* (1927), this topic is developed further—the genesis of sense in the structure of the word, which Shpet understands as a prototype of all phenomena, is researched in Shpet’s last phenomenological work in detail.

The claims that Shpet develops original phenomenological concepts of language and aesthetics<sup>1</sup> are not erroneous, because the problems of word and language, art and aesthetics are heavily researched in Shpet’s phenomenology. However, Shpet does not develop one or even more regional phenomenologies. His project is an integral phenomenological project, the main question of which is the question of the possibility and conditions of cognition. Shpet addresses this question by establishing the genesis of sense, its “availability” for the cognizing consciousness and its realization in the

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<sup>1</sup> Such a position in the studies concerning Shpet’s phenomenology is held, for example, by N. Plotnikov (2006, 119) or A. Haardt (1993).

structure of the phenomenon. The main notions of the solution to such a questioning are word, idea, actuality, art, and social world. Here, the word is a condition of the emergence of sense and a key to understanding the connection between the perceptible reality and the sphere of the ideal; the social world is such a world in whose phenomena the sense manifests itself in its being a function.

### **Social world, social intuition, and social being**

It has already been mentioned above that the reconstruction of Shpet's notion of the social world requires pointing out the specificity of Shpet's phenomenological project. In order to do this, the focus must be placed on the main problem of Shpet's phenomenology and on its solution.

134 Shpet's phenomenological project can be characterized as a project of phenomenological ontology (cf. Kebuladze 2013, 114). He postulates such an understanding of the essence of phenomenology already in his first phenomenological work, *Appearance and Sense*, created immediately after attending Husserl's lectures in Göttingen.

Shpet sees the main task of phenomenology not only in studying cognition itself, not only in cognizing consciousness itself as a means of cognition. Phenomenology should aim at this cognition in its being:

Our concern is with a study of the being of cognition in its essence, that is, a distinctive kind of being.

Therefore, if what results is a "theory" [...], it is a theory not of knowledge or cognition, but of being. (Shpet 1991, 98.)

According to Shpet, phenomenology is in this form capable of claiming the role of "a universal theory of science and of knowledge in general" (Shpet 1991, 126). In other words, the function of phenomenology as the universal theory of science and cognition for Shpet is a matter of content, but not substantiation, as was the case with Husserl. Therefore, it is understandable why the main phenomenological question according to Shpet is the question: "What is?" (Shpet 1914, 99.) And why that what for Shpet "is" is the subject

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of phenomenology, which is not limited to the ontology of cognition, but necessarily includes the ontology of the cognizable world.

This understanding of phenomenology defines the area that should be in the scope of the research. The solutions phenomenological ontology is looking for should be applicable to the cognition as such. Considering the task of phenomenological ontology in this respect, Shpet points to the existence of a certain empirical being, which Husserl “missed” and in connection to which the analysis of “cognition in its being” is only possible. This type of empirical being is the social being that has a special mode of givenness and a special mode of cognition (Shpet 1991, 100).

In his argumentation regarding social being, Shpet relies on Husserl’s “principle of all principles.” However, his arguments relate only to the first part of the “principle,” namely on the assertion that “every originally presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition” (Husserl 1983, 44). Shpet critically assesses the very distinction between the two types of intuition—sensual and ideal. For Husserl, this is the distinction between natural attitude (*natürliche Einstellung*) and eidetic seeing (*Wesensanschauung*). Shpet does not consider the distinction as being sufficient for the possibility of cognition. He does not deny the cognitive function of sensual and ideal intuitions, but insists on their limitations: both are associated with the cognition of only one type of reality, either empirical or logical.

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Shpet insists on the existence of something, as he says, “third something” (Shpet 1991, 101), which is not a synthesis of sensual and ideal intuitions, but is their basis, has a primary meaning, and is an originary givenness (Shpet 1991, 101). By this third something, he understands a special kind of intuition, which he designates as social intuition.<sup>2</sup>

This interpretation of “the principle of all principles” makes it possible to outline the context, in which the concept of the social world gets its first concretization. For Shpet, the social world is an appearance of social being; it is an originary givenness, it means, it is an actuality; its essence is grasped in social intuition. This context indicates that the subsequent concretization of

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<sup>2</sup> The term “social intuition” is used by Shpet only in *Appearance and Sense*. Later on, Shpet abandons the term, replacing it, in *The Inner Form of the Word*, with the notion of intellectual intuition.

the notion of the social world is associated with the structure of intentionality. In this respect, special attention should be paid to the question, which concerns Shpet all the time—how is originary givenness present in the structure of consciousness?

### **Sense and signification. An ontological distinction**

136 The question how originary givenness is present in the structure of consciousness means a shift of emphasis in the main phenomenological problem—the problem of the correlation between consciousness and actuality. For Husserl, this is a problem of pure intentionality. For Shpet, the main issue is the question about the source of originary givenness in the structure of intentionality as well as of the phenomenon. The question was formulated by Shpet in two ways. On the one hand, it concerns the givenness of sense in the noema. On the other hand, Shpet raises the question of the ability of positional acts of categorical positing, which leads to sense and objectivity (Shpet 1991, 136). The meaning of such questions can be fully clarified, if we bear in mind the distinction Shpet draws between signification and sense.

As is well known, Husserl does not distinguish between sense and signification, while Shpet draws the distinction between them, based on their formal difference. In other words, for Shpet the distinction is a systematic distinction stipulated by the structure of intention. Shpet defines signification as an indication of the content of an expression. Signification does not go beyond the defined content and is established by a logical connection. Sense is the designation of an object in its “defining qualification” (Shpet 1991, 154). It is associated with the definition of the ontological status, since it is the sense of a concrete thing (Shpet 1991, 154).

It may seem that this definition violates the logic of argumentation. The logical connection between an object and signification and the ontological status of a concrete thing are not categories of the same order. The feeling of violation of the logic of argumentation is intensified, when Shpet characterizes the definition of sense as hidden (*verborgen*), intimate to the thing itself or its

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origin.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this is a very symptomatic choice of words, which brings to mind Heidegger's philosophy. Yet, despite the sense of broken logic, Shpet's thought is actually very consistent.

Shpet's distinction between signification and sense gets fully clarified by his definition of the internal sense of the object itself as entelechy, which is directly reflected in Shpet's understanding of intentionality. Methodologically, the difference in Shpet's point of view is due to the function of entelechy as a motivation that directs the flow of the acts of consciousness. According to Husserl, the concatenation of experience (*Erfahrungszusammenhang*) is postulated by the correlation of motivation and the horizon of experiential actuality (Husserl 1983, 107). For Shpet, motivation correlates with a concrete thing given originally.

The result of Husserl's description of intentionality is the constitution of the phenomenon, which is implemented as a discovery of signification. For Shpet, the analysis of intentionality alone is insufficient, since it does not provide the possibility to answer the main question of phenomenology, how the world and consciousness correlate, and, hence, how the things of the world, the concrete things are given in consciousness. Shpet insists that the problem of intentionality should be viewed as a problem of the actual being, meaning, the problem of intentionality is a problem of reason and actuality. He sees the purpose of his searches as the discovery of the "source of originary givenness" (Shpet 1991, 150) in the structure of the phenomenon. He does not find it in Husserl's presentation of intentionality, and therefore develops his own and original concept of intentionality, the core of which is the correlation of consciousness and actual reality.

For Shpet, an indication of the "source of originary givenness" is the entelechy of a concrete object. As a motivation, it is a certain quality of the object, which does not coincide with the content of the noema. Entelechy deviates from the noematic core. It leads to the essence of the object and at the same time reveals the object being described in its essential relations or concatenations. Establishing, grasping entelechy is described as a conversion

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<sup>3</sup> In the Russian version of his text, Shpet used the German word "Ursprung" (Shpet 1914, 203).

of the intentional consciousness into the new stratum of experience. Here, the intention is directed to a deeper core of noema, in accordance with which noeses also take a new direction. The entelechy of an object is revealed in this stratum, the object gets fixed in its concreteness, that is, in its teleology (Shpet 1991, 150).

The establishing entelechy requires special acts in the structure of intentionality. For Shpet, the special acts are the ones, which “animate the doxa itself” (Shpet 1991, 153). They are not positional acts, but are found in these positional acts. Shpet refers to these acts as hermeneutic acts, since they are directed to the content of the noema as to the sign of entelechy. Shpet also calls these acts sense-bestowing, since they fill the notions with sense, namely, with the sense of actual being, without which the notion stays, as Shpet puts it, “mechanical” (Shpet 1991, 153).

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This represents a very important provision of Shpet’s conceptualization that is of fundamental importance for understanding the essence of being, which Shpet calls social, as well as for understanding the ontological status of the social world and its objects. Introduction of hermeneutic or sense-bestowing acts provides Shpet with the possibility of the theoretical substantiation of “ontological constructions of teleological systems” (Shpet 1991, 155). In other words, Shpet phenomenologically substantiates a certain order of essences as well as actions themselves. Shpet accentuates a direct connection between his conclusions and the issue of the means and the ends (Shpet 1991, 155), but his conclusions also open the possibility for systematic research regarding the issues of human existence.

### **Social world and/as word**

However, in the analysis of Shpet’s concept of the social world such a conclusion is still preliminary. A more or less complete understanding of Shpet’s notion of the social world requires not only an understanding of the structure of intentionality, but also the structure of the phenomenon as such.

Such an endeavor implies the need to consider Shpet’s concept of the inner form of the word, a concept that is an important part of his integral phenomenological project, which would stay incomplete without it. Shpet

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addresses the issue of the inner form of the word in two of his works: in *Aesthetic Fragments*, created during 1922–1923, and in the work written four years later—*The Inner Form of the Word*. Both works have a common topic of analysis. However, the conceptual focus of these works is different. The work *Aesthetic Fragments* gives a general idea of the function and position of the word as a social phenomenon, while research presented in *The Inner Form of the Word* is a systematic study.

Here, a clarification should be made right away. Shpet does not mean the verbal word. Therefore, an analysis of the concept of the word only within the framework of the philosophy of language does not quite fit Shpet's idea. He understands the word broadly, like any phenomenon that expresses sense: "Any sensory perception of any extent and temporal form, of any volume and of any duration can be considered [...] as a sense-bestowing sign, as a word." (Shpet 2006, 194; my translation.) This means that any phenomenon of culture is a word, that is to say, a word is a phenomenon and an archetype of culture. But what determines the understanding of the word in Shpet's conceptualization, and how can the term "social world" be understood through the word? Two factors need to be taken into account here.

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The first factor is the ontological status of the word, which is determined by its relation with transcendence. According to Shpet, the word is the only possible way "to translate" transcendence into an image, in which transcendence, being expressed, becomes accessible to understanding (cf. Shpet 1989, 365). Put differently, the word is an image of transcendence, which through the structure of the word finds its givenness in actuality and becomes accessible to reason.

The second factor is that the word is an ontological prototype of any social thing (Shpet 2006, 140). In other words, the formal features of the word, which Shpet understands as the law of the functioning of sense, are formal features of all sociocultural things. This very possibility is due to the universality of logical forms that correspond to all ideal forms. As a law of cognizing consciousness, this point makes the foundation of the phenomenological method in general. In the conceptualization of the inner form of the word, Shpet generalizes this principle, and on its basis methodologically substantiates the emergence of sense in phenomena.

Such a structure or, rather, an element of the structure of a word, which is the formation of sense that is universal for all social phenomena, is the inner form of the word. According to Shpet, the inner form of the word is the result of the relation between a thing existing in real actuality and an object, that is, an ideal possibility of that thing. The thing is in the realm of sensory perception and is connected to the external forms of the word. The object is what is thought, it is free from content, from verbal form, and is attained in intellectual intuition (Shpet 1989, 393). It is related to those forms of the word, which Shpet denotes as pure or ideal forms.

According to Shpet, an object without verbal expression is only an abstraction: “Wordless thinking is a meaningless word,” he asserts (Shpet 1989, 398; my translation). Yet, being the sphere of the formally conceivable, the object contains everything that can be realized, filled with content, and embodied in a real thing. It is this feature of the object that gives Shpet grounds for defining the object as the formal generative core (формальное образующее начало) (Shpet 1989, 394–395) of sense.

140 The presence of a middle element in the structure of the word, which emerges as a correlation between external and ideal forms, is obvious. Using Humboldt’s term, Shpet defines it as the inner form of the word. In the inner form, Shpet distinguishes between two levels. The first is the logical form. Specifically, it represents the relation between external and ideal forms. These forms are dynamic, not set once and for all. The second level of the inner form is the inner poetic form. It is based on logical form and arises from the relation between logical form and syntagmas, which Shpet considers a part of the external form of the word.

In the holistic structure of the word, as Shpet establishes it, the relationship between the external and ideal forms of the word are determined by the movement from the sensually perceived or given in contemplation to the formal-ideal or eidetic object. The inner form of the word is realized on a different plane. It is not related to linear motion, but develops, as Shpet points out, “in the depth” (Shpet 1989, 382). The mechanism of its emergence is different from the static, given, requiring only reflection of the external and ideal forms (Shpet 1989, 400). It is constructive, dynamic, and giving (cf. Shpet 1989, 400). Its emergence is connected with a special situation, which

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is essentially a hermeneutic situation. And its realization requires from consciousness a special effort, an effort of sense-bestowing.

## Conclusion

A reference to the specificity of Speth's phenomenological conceptualizations is necessary for a primary understanding of the meanings that Speth puts into the notion of the social world. It is Shpet's understanding of intentionality and the structure of the word, which for him is the prototype of any social phenomenon, that creates the context, in which the notion of the social world receives its first definition. This can be expressed with two theses. The first one points to the connection between the social world and transcendence. The social world is an actuality, in whose phenomena transcendence receives its expression and becomes accessible to reason and understanding. The second thesis asserts the social world as a teleological world, whose things are grasped by consciousness in their entelechy. These are two differently directed theses. However, in Shpet's conception they have a common origin, namely the structure of the formation and realization of sense that constitutes the phenomenon of the social world and is grasped by the effort of intellectual intuition.

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This is the first, brief, but very intense definition of the notion of social world by Shpet. It provides a range of possible strategies for further analysis of the notion of the social world, but also of Shpet's holistic phenomenological conception. One of the strategies can be directed towards Shpet's understanding of the phenomenon, which states it as being irretrievable and irreducible. In other words, the phenomenon as described by Shpet can be considered as a phenomenon that J.-L. Marion calls saturated and relates to a form of experience, in which not the grasped phenomenon is constituted, but the cognizing Ego.

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“The publication edited by Andrej Božič on *Thinking Togetherness. Phenomenology and Sociality* presents a novel and up-to-date account of phenomenology, which comprehends this philosophy as an essentially intersubjective or a communal enterprise; in the volume, phenomenology exceeds narrow limits of subjective life of consciousness, and focuses on various phenomena connected to the public, communal, and political spheres. [...] The book can serve both as a textbook in the heritage of the phenomenological movement and as a collection of original studies.”

Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Witold Płotka**

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