

Karl Mannheim (1893-1947)

Great figures in sociology are remembered for their original and influential contributions to the theory or method of social inquiry. Characteristic too is the range and scope of their work. Measured by these standards, Karl Mannheim arguably belongs to any survey of such distinguished sociologists. His studies of generations, economic ambition, competition, structures of thinking, and similar topics in the sociology of culture, as well as his later work in political sociology, notably on the theme of planning, mark him as an ingenious and innovative thinker. Above all, he is known for his methodological and substantive work, beginning with his seminal essay on conservative thought, in the sub-discipline he helped to establish as “sociology of knowledge.” Notwithstanding his other achievements, it is his approach to the study of the ways of knowledge that qualifies Mannheim as a classic. Mannheim’s most famous book is *Ideology and Utopia*. It first appeared in German in 1929 and then in an expanded and revised English version in 1936. It has remained in print ever since. In the last analysis, the most striking contributions to sociology are those that embody a compelling vision of sociology as a practice.

Mannheim was born in Budapest, Hungary and died in London, England. As a student and young intellectual in Hungary, he was close to several individuals who later became prominent Communists. Although that was not his own political affiliation, he was nevertheless forced to flee when the short-lived Soviet regime in Hungary was overthrown in 1919, and the new rulers persecuted anyone they distrusted. Between 1920 and 1933, he lived in Germany. In the Spring of 1933, soon after Hitler’s rise to power, Mannheim lost his university professorship and was forced into exile because he was a foreigner and a Jew. Mannheim’s repeated victimization by political

upheavals is relevant to understanding his approach to political ideas. He knew first hand that political ideas were not empty talk; they could have consequences, even deadly ones.

As a writer and even more as a teacher, Mannheim believed that one had to speak directly to people's experiences, that it was pointless to offer answers to questions that people have not been led by their lives to ask or recognize. With his sociology of knowledge, Mannheim sought to clarify—and to help overcome—at least three kinds of troubling experiences, all of which are as common today as they were in his time.

The first experience takes the form of a discrepancy between one's own situation, as lived subjectively in mind and body, and the supposedly objective 'meaning' ascribed to it by the publicly recognized and officially sanctioned ways of talking about things. Mannheim cites the cases of women and young people: there is an accepted definition of what it means to be a woman or to be a youth, but women and youths cannot apply those meanings to make sense of what is happening to them, what they are doing and what they are feeling. The existence of a generally accepted objective construction of meanings—often called 'world-view'—caught Mannheim's attention early on, instructed by some of the intellectual mentors of his younger years, notably the sociologist, Georg Simmel, and the literary and social theorist, Georg Lukács. While other sociologists are more likely to emphasize the extent to which such socially constituted constructions of reality shape and define our experiences, Mannheim focused on the experience of discrepancies between the 'objective' and the 'subjective,' which his own mentors variously saw as a source of profound and irremediable dissatisfaction (Simmel's 'tragedy of culture') or as a potential source of crisis and revolutionary overturn (Lukács' theory of 'alienation').

The second of the troubling experiences qualifies and to some extent undermines the first, in that one is often confronted with conflicting ways of assigning 'meanings.' There may be no single

‘publicly recognized or officially sanctioned way.’ And these multiple ways may be mutually incomprehensible, so that one group may not even understand what another group means. They ‘talk past each other.’ Mannheim emphasizes such contested concepts as religion, superstition, science, education, but also such fundamental philosophical categories as time and space. After Mannheim came to Germany, which was embroiled in pervasive intellectual, political and social conflict, he concluded that most sectors of modern societies are characterized by a competition among incompatible models of meaning, not by a single integrated world-view.

To designate these multiple constructions, he borrows and revises the concept of ideology from Marxist theory. From Marxism, too, Mannheim adapts the notion that ideologies have to be understood as a ‘function’ of some distinctive social location, that there is a ‘correspondence’ between occupying a certain position in society and interpreting the world in a certain way. Ideologies are socially grounded; they are ‘imputable’ to a given social site. Mannheim avoids a causal vocabulary; he does not claim that all individuals sharing a social location profess the same ideology. Yet he is confident that a ‘fit’ can be demonstrated and that the ideology can only be elucidated by reference to that experiential grounding.

Mannheim’s adaptation differs from the Marxist theory in two important respects. First, he identifies social locations additional to economic class position as the grounds of ideologies. His prime examples in *Ideology and Utopia* are the bureaucracy, to which he imputes a special kind of ‘bureaucratic conservatism,’ as well as, within the strategic formation of ‘the intellectuals,’ a deracinated segment that serves as social reference point for an understanding of fascist ideology. Generational and gender differences also enter, but only as sources for modifications or adaptations of ideological structures. As these examples suggest, Mannheim saw the primary ideologies competing in his time as taking the form of political ideologies, and he designated them by the names

of prominent political tendencies and parties: socialism, liberalism, conservatism— and, as noted, bureaucratic conservatism and fascism. Yet unlike Max Weber, who was important to him in many respects, Mannheim does not consider ideologies with religious contents or social constituencies, notwithstanding the influence of the Catholic religious party in Weimar political life. Religion remains a puzzling blind spot.

In explaining the linkages between social locations and ideologies, Mannheim expressly avoids the notion that groups only talk about the world in a certain way because this promotes their economic interests. He acknowledges that this often happens, but he does not consider it to be the ultimate account of ideology. He explores instead the metaphorical language of ‘perspective’ and ‘standpoint.’ Things simply look different from different locations. Their peculiar socially grounded interpretations enable groups to orient themselves to the activities and problems peculiar to their location in social space and time, including their struggles for power. Ideologies make sense of the world they encounter.

Second, then, Mannheim differs from Marxism in rejecting its claim that a class may be ordained by history with a privileged point of view, because it is destined to shape the next stage in history. Not rarely, Marxists apply the label ‘ideology’ only to the views of their opponents and the term ‘science’ to their own. Mannheim expressly asserts that Marxism is as much an ideology as the ‘liberalism’ of the bourgeoisie or the ‘conservatism’ of the older dominant social groups hostile to modernity.

The third and most serious of the ‘troubling experiences’ mentioned above presupposes the other two. On the German political scene of the 1920s, Mannheim diagnosed a crisis of universal distrust. All political parties claimed that they could see through the arguments of all the others as nothing but the self-interested point of view of some class or social grouping, “ideology” in the

vulgar sense. Under these conditions, Mannheim concludes, there is no productive competition among ideologies. No one can persuade anyone of anything; they cannot even negotiate. And the Fascists, Mannheim observed at the time, were the most thoroughgoing advocates of the proposition that there was nothing to reason or to bargain about in politics, that the only thing was to have an ideology that could win. 'Ideology' and violence, on this view, are part of the same equation

For Mannheim, in contrast, ideology is a partial but invaluable mode of knowing. Sociology of knowledge is a form of wholistic 'therapy.' It is a strategy for having available social knowledge take a form that promotes the reasonable management of human affairs. Implicit is the possibility of achieving a 'synthesis,' which involved a 'total' vision, bringing together in a multi-dimensional whole the things that the various ideological perspectives are best situated to see. Socialists can see the mechanisms of economic exploitation, for example, while Liberals can see the dangers of oppressive state power. A 'synthesis' of perspectives would not eliminate all conflicts among groups, but it could provide a common reference point for calculating the costs and benefits of different alternatives, and a reference point as well for bargaining and deal-making. There would be new opportunities for responsible choices within a constitutional order of democratic competition, a culminating point of the analysis that reveals Mannheim as a successor to Max Weber in political thought.

How can such a 'synthesis' come about if all perspectives are partial? Mannheim's famous answer is that modern societies include a stratum of social actors who are in important ways 'detached' from the social ground – the 'intellectuals.' This formation, leaving aside the demoralized segment associated with fascism, is recruited from diverse social locations and engages in activities— notably of an intellectual kind— that keep its members from identifying with the groups and standpoints of their origins. Their formative experience of intense and advanced education produces

a ‘distance’ from the ideologies at home in one or another primary social location. They have insight into ideology without the bitterness or frustration that accompanies the dismissive versions of that insight, which is typical of the political groups caught up in the ‘crisis of distrust.’ As the intellectuals-turned-sociologists develop and refine the sociology of knowledge, then, they can promote ‘synthesis’ and help to overcome the ‘crisis’, not by presuming to take command (as Fascists do) but by a combination of two things. First, they act as catalysts in the political process, offering interpretations that cool temperatures and promote bargaining. And second, they bring ‘political education’ to the newly enfranchised democratic masses, to counteract fanaticism and to infuse the people with a recognition that there are no saviors or saving visions, echoing Weber, as well as a sense of their own responsibility.

What can we say today about Mannheim’s vision of sociology as practice? It is obvious that his proposals, although widely debated, did nothing to prevent the Nazi seizure of power. Translated into English, moreover, his work was stripped of its grand aims, even by those who valued it, and the ‘sociology of knowledge’ was taken as a way of explaining political ideas or other forms of socially grounded knowledge, without any expectation that such explanations improve practical political knowledge or lessen political incoherence. Sociology of knowledge became part of sociology as a value-free, strictly explanatory ‘science,’ rather than as a practice of diagnosing social problems and devising therapeutic interventions. Yet the idea of sociology as a kind of intervention in social life, conducted by and for actors, rather than simply a remote scientific explanation, as conducted by a totally disinterested spectator, never stays dead for long. Working through ‘classics’ like Mannheim’s famous *Ideology and Utopia*, encourages us to return to questions about the limits and responsibilities of social science. This is precisely what makes them ‘classics.’

Selected Major Works

Ideology and Utopia, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936

Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1940.

Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952.

Structures of Thinking, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982

Conservatism, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, 2001

Sociology as Political Education, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2001.

From Karl Mannheim (Second Expanded Edition), New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers. 1993.

Further Reading

Kettler, D. and Meja, V., *Karl Mannheim and the Crisis of Liberalism: "The Secret of these New Times,"* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 1995.

Loader, C. and Kettler, D., *Karl Mannheim's Sociology as Political Education*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2002.

Meja, V. and Stehr, N., *Knowledge and Politics. The Sociology of Knowledge Dispute*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990.

David Kettler (Bard College)

Volker Meja (Memorial University of Newfoundland)