

Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Political Knowledge

Written by Henrik Lundberg

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HENRIK LUNDBERG, OCT 26 2013

It may be stated that the peculiar nature of political knowledge, as contrasted with the "exact" sciences, arises out of the inseparability...of knowledge from interest and motivation.
– Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1955 [1936], p. 190)

The Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) is today recognized as the founder of the sociology of knowledge and as one of the major theorists of early sociology. No less deserved, however, would it be for him to also be considered as an innovator in political theory, as I would like to propose below. To be sure, Mannheim's contributions to political theory do not consist of pioneering analyses of key political concepts such as equality, justice, freedom, power, and participation. His achievements in this regard are to be located on another, more abstract level: they arise, first and foremost, from his realization that "there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured" (Mannheim 1955, p. 2). Where Mannheim's contribution to the advancement of political theory can be located is, in a word, just that: his sociology of knowledge. But let us be more precise about this. What is Mannheim's sociology of knowledge all about, and how, exactly, does it relate to political theory? What does he actually mean by saying that certain modes of thought need to be understood in terms of their social origin, and why and how does that really matter? The question is worth a closer look.

Existentially Connected Knowledge

According to Mannheim, modern Western society is characterized by the fact that in it, different social groups struggle with one another over the privilege of being able to expound the public interpretation of reality (Mannheim 2011b, p. 404). Behind every knowledge claim in the social sciences, he claimed, an unconscious activist element was thus hidden, traceable, in turn, back to membership in groups of various kinds. In his essay "Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon," originally an address delivered to the German Sociological Society in Zürich in 1928, Mannheim proclaimed this basic point, probably as openly as he ever did, where he argued:

Philosophy...may look at this matter differently; but from the point of view of the social sciences, every historical, ideological, sociological piece of knowledge...is clearly rooted in and carried by the desire for power and recognition of particular social groups who want to make their interpretation of the world the universal one (Mannheim 2011b, pp. 404–405).[1]

Mannheim calls this knowledge tied to group membership 'existentially connected knowledge' (*Seinsverbundenes Wissens*).[2] To this category of knowledge he considered to belong, as already indicated by the quotation above, historical thought, political thought, and social and humanist thought (Mannheim 2011b, p. 401). (Mannheim famously exempted the so-called exact sciences from this rule of always being influenced by socio-political conditions.) One of the consequences of such a fundamental social conditioning of knowledge was, for him, that there can be no neutral knowledge about history or society, no knowledge that is possible for all groups to endorse. On the contrary, the latter will forever stand against one another when it comes to questions of how to interpret society and history. In resolving such issues, in other words, worlds will always struggle against worlds, as Mannheim concluded on a dramatic note (Mannheim 1986, p. 55).

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Political Thought Styles

Another central concept in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is 'thought style' (*Denkstil*). Mannheim never explicitly defined this notion of his anywhere in his writings on the sociology of knowledge. One way to formulate it, however, can be deduced from his texts: a thought style is a socially constructed ordering of arguments that is traceable back to a specific social group and its quest to influence the public interpretation of reality. The concept of thought style is central not least to the explanation of why groups seldom reach consensus in politically laden issues: different thought styles depart from radically different premises and assumptions (Mannheim 1955, p. 147). Behind the general concept of 'thinking' one, in fact, thus finds several different ways of thinking, each one approaching reality from its own particular point of departure; each thought style organizes perceptions of reality in different ways. In his essay on *Conservatism* dating from 1925 (Mannheim 1986), Mannheim illustrates this heterogeneity of political thought by showing how "conservative," "liberal," and "socialist" thought styles approach the question of political legitimacy.

The line of thought favored by conservatives, according to Mannheim, places the problem of legitimacy onto the plane of *mythical transcendence*. The argument from "divine right", for example, drew from a basic stock of ideas relied upon by the conservative way of thinking. With the declining influence of religion, God was, nevertheless, eventually replaced by tradition, the nation, and history. In more modern times, it has primarily been history that has provided the justification for, for instance, a given rule or form of government, taking the place of divine transcendence. In the liberal-Enlightenment thought style, on the other hand, the same question is posed on a *juristic* plane. Political legitimacy is then justified by reference to purely theoretical constructs such as the social contract. Mannheim's socialists, on the other hand, primarily defined problems on the plane of economics and global capital, dismissing liberalism as well as conservatism as ideological constructs (Mannheim 1986, pp. 56–57). Mannheim's main point here, however, is that different thought styles not only deliver different answers to substantive political issues: each thought style also specifies a certain realm of reality as prescriptive for valid thinking. All thought styles start from their own, distinct premises: the conservative thought style focuses on God and tradition as the starting point for thought, the liberal thought style takes its point of departure in law, especially natural law, and in the socialist thought style, a materialist theory of history forms the basis of a proper understanding of society (Mannheim 1986, pp. 56–57).

It is important to note here, however, that the desire to influence the public interpretation of reality consists not only in the articulation of a material group interest. To be sure, a group may profess certain economic theories or certain political ideas simply because these are in keeping with the group's interests. Nevertheless, as Mannheim reminds us, it is much more difficult to try to explain group-specific aesthetic preferences from this same perspective. Phenomena such as fashion or a general aesthetic preference have, just as political ideologies, been developed by certain groups as an outcome of socio-historical factors, but can only with great difficulty be explained in terms of direct group interests only (Mannheim 2011a, p. 236). It seems reasonable, therefore, to distinguish between two different aspects of group competition in modern society: an economic-political competition and a general cultural one (cf. Longhurst 1989, p. 51–52). In the latter case, it is more appropriate to speak of wishes or desires rather than material interests. The general cultural aspect of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge displays, as Dahl (1994) has rightly noted, a clear existential dimension. In an important passage in his *Conservatism*, Mannheim draws attention to how conservatives, liberals, and workers do not strive for the satisfaction of their interests alone: they also want to live in a world where they feel at home (Mannheim 1986, p. 55; cf. Dahl 1994, p. 117). They, in other words, seek to create a world that is self-evident for them and in which their socialized being is confirmed.

The Liberal-Enlightenment Thought Style

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge targeted a specific theoretical enemy: the idea of the existence of a universal and ahistorical reason in which all human beings partake and through which we are able to reach definite and objective truths about history and society. This type of thinking, Mannheim held, was typical of the liberal thought style dating back to the era of the Enlightenment. One characteristic trait of this kind of thinking, for him, was its explicit denial of the idea that knowledge is existentially connected and thus inseparable, as a construct, from the socio-political aspirations of the different groups in society. Since liberal thought, from its very outset, has argued for

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a fundamental difference between thinking and the evaluation of thinking, those working in this tradition have always rejected the postulate of existentially connected knowledge (Mannheim 1955, p. 122; Mannheim 2011b, p. 425). Karl Popper's critique of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge in the second volume of *The Open Society and its Enemies* offers one example of this insistence. What thinkers in the liberal tradition had steadfastly held onto was, in Mannheim's analysis, the notion that thought and validity belonged to two distinct logical spheres.[3] According to Mannheim, however, developments in modern society had already rendered this kind of thinking outmoded. We can no longer turn a blind eye to the existence of several rival groups in society, groups that approach and view social reality from radically different angles. No one not wanting to retreat from the concepts of rationality and truth today can today merely wave off the world and uphold the illusion that these two remain unaffected by socio-political aspirations. The possibility to exert social influence on thought, moreover, presents itself to those only who accept it as a fact that knowledge is existentially connected. As Mannheim himself explained it:

It is possible, of course, to escape from this situation in which the plurality of thought styles has become visible and the existence of collective-unconscious motivations recognized simply by hiding these processes from ourselves. One can take flight into a supra-temporal logic and assert that truth as such is unsullied and has neither a plurality of forms nor any connections with unconscious motivations. But in a world in which the problem is not just an interesting subject for discussion but rather an inner perplexity, someone will soon come forth who will insist against this view that "our problem is not truth as such; it is our thinking as we find it in its rootedness in action in the social situation, in unconscious motivations. Show us how we can advance from our concrete perceptions to your absolute definitions. Do not speak of truth as such but show us the way in which our statements, stemming from our social existence, can be translated into a sphere in which the partisanship, the fragmentariness of human vision, can be transcended, in which the social origin and the dominance of the unconscious in thinking will lead to controlled observations rather than chaos". (Mannheim 1955, p. 42)

It should be evident from the tone of this passage that Mannheim viewed these issues in most urgent terms. The polarization of thought styles and groups in modern industrial society, for him, was so far-reaching that it threatened to render rational communication between social groups impossible. The ultimate risk one was then faced with was that of modern society's transforming into a bloody battlefield. In his well-known text "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber made a distinction between, on the one hand, the politician and, on the other hand, the academic teacher and researcher. Unlike the teacher's and researcher's, the politician's words were "not plowshares to loosen the soil of contemplative thought; they are swords against the enemies: such words are weapons" (Weber 2009, p. 145). Mannheim was not as prone as Weber to drawing such a sharp distinction between the researcher and the politician. To him, also the words of the researcher were weapons designed to overpower and subjugate political opponents.

In this very context, however, Mannheim believed his sociology of knowledge to have an important role to fulfill. Indeed, Mannheim proposed, it could even help one beat the swords into plowshares (cf. Kettler, Meja, Stehr 1984, p 54). Here Mannheim toyed with an idea of a sociology-of-knowledge synthesis that could bring together the different thought styles, enabling an overall perspective on society. Thanks to their diverging backgrounds, each group, in this scenario, would contribute its special insights to the synthesis. This idea of a grand synthesis was then Mannheim's attempt to restore the concepts of objectivity and validity, which he (as in the above quote) believed had been lost with the emergence of modern society. Rather than trying to discredit reason, which was what Popper accused him of doing, Mannheim thus tried to reconstruct reason on sociological premises. If such a reconstruction was not possible, however, neither would, for him, any objective science of the political (Mannheim 1955, p. 149). Mannheim's thoughts in this area are, however, tainted with great difficulties, and probably not worth further discussion here. What seems more useful to do, instead, is to consider how Mannheim says thought styles might be productively put to use today.

The Radical Left Thought Style

As Mannheim stressed, thought styles are not static, but rather constantly evolve in a competitive relation to one another. Mannheim, for instance, identified his "socialist" thought style as representing, in several respects, a mixture of the liberal and conservative thought styles (Mannheim 1986, pp. 63–70). Since thought styles are constantly changing, it is not surprising that the thought styles one today finds applied in academic and political discourse look

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somewhat different from those that Mannheim himself analyzed. One thought style making its presence felt in today's social sciences is what might be called a "radical-left" one. This style is above all characterized by the prescription that social phenomenon should only be interpreted in structural terms. In some academic disciplines, it has become almost an axiom that social phenomena are to be given a structural rather than an individual explanation. Another feature of this thought style is the notion that certain social phenomena and institutions have been promoted only so as to favor certain groups ("white middle-aged men") or marginalize and oppress others (women, people of LGBTQ sexuality, immigrants, etc.). In addition, adherents of the radical-left thought style often indignantly dismiss criticism directed at it as something merely promoting the perspective of the dominant or privileged groups. The problem with these latter, it is then maintained, is that they refuse or are otherwise unable to acknowledge their privileged situation advanced through the perspectives taken.

Friend or Foe?

If you who are reading this article consider yourself "left wing" or a sympathizer of positions represented by this, my admittedly rather awkward denomination, you might by now have begun to wonder whether what I have said about a Mannheimian radical-left thought style might in fact be but a thinly disguised attack from the right, instead of a sincere attempt at dispassionate analysis. Perhaps you are asking yourself whether my words are swords or plowshares, or whether I am a politician or a researcher; is there, indeed, a hidden agenda in what I am saying? If, on the other hand, you embrace the liberal or the conservative creed, perhaps you, on the contrary, find gratification and contentment in the fact that a way of thinking that you find vulgar and repellent is in this way subjected to analysis and thereby, inevitably, deprived of some of its strength. Be that as it may, what you will nevertheless in any case have to do is to admit to Mannheim's being right in claiming thinking in the social sciences to be existentially connected, and thus acknowledge that we, or at least those of us who are academically trained, when encountering knowledge claims spontaneously respond to them from political standpoints and positions. "Whenever such a term [e.g. radical left thought style] is found in a scientific text, it is not examined logically, but immediately either makes enemies or friends", as Ludwik Fleck aptly put it (Fleck 1979, p. 43). In doing so, moreover, your reaction will provide further testimony of the continued relevance of sociology of political knowledge of Mannheim's type.

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[1] According to Mannheim, in modern society different kinds of group membership affect intellectual thought. Among the groups we one way or another belong to are generations, status groups, sects, occupational groups, schools, and the like. In the final analysis, it is, however, class stratification that results in our most significant group membership from the point of view the sociology of knowledge. All the other groups arise from the conditions of domination and production in society and are transformed as these conditions change (Mannheim 1955, p. 276).

[2] This is the English-language translation that Mannheim himself approved for his term.

[3] To confuse between these two spheres, thinkers in the Liberal-Enlightenment tradition argues, is to commit the so-called genetic fallacy. According to Mannheim, however, there is no such fallacy with respect to existentially connected knowledge (e.g., Mannheim 1986, pp. 24–25).

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