

## Karl Mannheim – Ideology & Utopia

### I. Intro.

Mannheim is seen as (one of) the founder(s) of the *sociology of knowledge*. This is an aspect of social theory that we haven't focused on much yet in this course. The key sets of questions in this field deal with how knowledge is constructed – think of it as a sort of applied epistemology. The goal isn't to identify in a philosophic sort of way the ultimate 'truth' of something, but instead to figure out in practice how people frame, perceive and interpret "the world out there." One of the key insights here is that the world is not given to us simply by our senses – we interpret it, through lenses based on culture, position, interests, and – Ideologies.

As such, this aspect colors our notions of action and identity, as it plays directly on the relation between the self and society – on how people see the world and thus themselves and other in it.

Mannheim is also part of a group known as "critical theorists" – who take the Hegelian/Marxist line of "radical critique" – the goal is to gain new insights by questioning the assumptions and foundations of what is given. This is, in essence, the logic behind most of the "Socratic method" (though the underlying epistemology differs) and also the way we've been working in this class.

Note that the sociology of knowledge is a vibrant subfield in sociology unto itself. It is particularly strong in the Sociology of Science.

### II. Types of Ideologies.

If we're going to understand the social foundation of thought (Mannheim's goal), then we need to start by dealing with the problem of "ideology" – this is a tricky word for us, as it will take on a slightly different meaning for Arendt & Baumann after WWII, but we'll have to deal with that...

Mannheim distinguishes between two sorts of "ideology": "Particular" and "Total"

General overview:

Particular Ideologies

- These are local representations of things in the world that might be colored by specific interests or points of view. They are limited to specific domains and rest ultimately with individuals. This is, I think, the sort of bias that creeps into people's statements when they don't want a freeway going through their backyard. The real issue isn't the best place for the freeway, it's that they don't want their property values changed.

Total ideologies

- These are entire categories of thought and ways of thinking that color how actors see the world around them. They encompass everything we see and how we interpret

each of these. You might think of these as the unseen glasses we're wearing that systematically distort our perception of the social world.

Mannheim's way of putting it:

Both of these *have in common* the notion that what a person says/mean/sees is a function of their position in society.

“The ideas expressed by the subject are thus regarded as functions of his existence. This means that opinion, statements, propositions, and systems of ideas are not taken at their face value but are interpreted in the light of the life-situation of the one who expresses them.” (p.337)

*Main Differences:*

Particular	Total
Only relates to part of an opponents assertions	Calls into question the opponents total Weltanschauung [worldview] and attempts to understand these concepts as an outgrowth of collective life.
Parties differ on interpretation of events, but “it is still nevertheless assumed that both parties share common criteria of validity” (p.337) – we can still decide arguments by pointing to common “facts”. Calls this “psychological”	Parties have fundamentally divergent thought-systems and widely different mode of experience and interpretation. The very foundations of their thinking differ. Calls this “Noolgical”
Works mainly with <i>interests</i> – showing alterier motives, hidden agendas and such.	Focuses on structural differences of minds rooted in different settings. Sees differences not <i>merely</i> in different interests, but primarily in ways of knowing.
Point of reference is always the individual. Even in “groups” you really have multiple, similar people reacting to similar stimuli “conditions by the same social situation, the are subject of the same illusions”	Point of reference is a reconstruct6ion of the theoretical basis underling the single judgment – think of it as an attempt to identify a “grammar” of thoughts.

III. Problem of False Consciousness

[The reference here is to a Marxist notion, that workers who do not recognize their class interests suffer from a false conciousness. Mannheim is really arguing against what he sees as a simplistic version of this. It's effectively that we shouldn't be focusing on the “particularistic” aspects of class ideology, but instead on the total aspects.]

Start by pointing out that the general history is to move from “generalized” toward “particular” sorts of ideology (I wonder if he still believed this after WWII?).

Now that we know/understand that norms and values are never absolute, we can’t go back. The knowledge of the social construction of the world “can never escape us.”

This then changes the task of a sociology of knowledge. We are to look not for ultimate truth, but for understanding historically situated truths, norms and modes of thought. (p.339)

The real false consciousness is thus not seeing the historical contingency of thoughts and existence. They do not, according to Mannheim, “bear a static relationship to one another in an unchanging universe” (p.339), but thought and existence condition each other continuously.

We might see this as a sort of relativism, which raises obvious ethical questions. Mannheim is perfectly comfortable with this, and states that we can get a definition of ethical behavior. The idea is that an ethical theory is wrong if the actions it proscribes can’t accommodate current living. So, it’s only unethical if it’s a personal action within a set of moral codes that do not fit, rather than a set of moral codes per se which can’t fit the world as a whole.

“...an ethical attitude is invalid if it is oriented with reference to norms, with which action in a given historical setting...cannot comply. It is invalid then, when the unethical action of the individual can no longer be conceived as due to his own personal transgression, but must be attributed rather to the compulsion of an erroneously founded set of moral axioms.” (p,339)

Or again:

“A theory then is wrong if in a given practical situation it uses concepts and categories which, if taken seriously, would prevent man from adjusting himself to that historical age.”

- “antiquated norms” are classic examples.
  - o Not taking interest on a loan, for example, simple does not make sense in large semi-anonymous societies such as ours.
  - o [false consciousness] Recourse to myths and ideals that are not real. “we may cite those cases in which persons try to cover up the real relations to themselves and to the world, and falsify to themselves the elementary facts of human existence by deifying, romanticizing , or idealizing them, in short by resorting to the device of escape from themselves and the world, and thereby conjuring up false interpretations of experience.” (p.340)

- Using concepts that are no longer adequate to current reality – such as a brotherly love model for a capitalist setting.

This leads to an ultimate definition of ideology:

“...knowledge is distorted and ideological when it fails to take account of the new realities applying to a situation, and when it attempts to conceal them by thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate...” (p.340)

#### IV. Utopia, Ideology & The Problem of Reality

Now he want's to extend this idea of Ideology some, by contrasting it with “Utopia.” He starts with a very simple definition as a state of mind incongruous with reality, but will expand on that significantly.

*A state of mind is utopian when (a) it is incongruous with the immediate situation and (b) when passed onto actions, tend to shatter the order of things. (p.341)*

The point, of course, is that lots of ideological stances are perfectly “workable” in the everyday world. We can live our life thinking very odd things, and many times this works out just fine.

A notion of paradise in the next life, for example, serves hardship in this life quite well. (Think of “The meek shall inherit the world.”)

It is only when the thoughts about the world imply changing the social order – sparking a revolution of some sort – do they tend to be utopian.

- Note we see these of all sorts of flavors. Religious “revivals” are utopian in this sense in the same way that hippie communes are.

#### *The problem of reality*

Once Mannheim starts making claims about the relation of states of mind to the world, he's forced into the position of focusing on the reality of “reality.” Here he states his position pretty clearly and in a roughly pragmatic way (i.e. he's not going to get drawn into Descartes style questions of being):

“Inasmuch as man is a creature living primarily in history and society, the “existence” that surrounds him is never “existence as such,” but is always a concrete historical form of social existence. For the sociologist, “existence” is ... a functional social order, which does not exist only in the imagination of certain individuals but according to which people really act.” (p.341)

Note that he never speaks of truth per se. Ideas are either ideological or “adequate” or “situationally congruent” and these latter two are rare. Most ideas are “situational transcendent” (p.342)

Thus, to the extent that action is guided by ideology, it is effectively doomed to fall short of the ideal (since it's not congruent with the real world). "The individual is always compelled to fall short of his own nobler motives." (p.342)

This can happen in many ways:

- a) The subject is prevented from becoming aware of the incongruence of his ideas with reality by the whole body of axioms involved in his thought
- b) "cant mentality" the subject has the possibility of uncovering the incongruence, but instead conceals these insights in response to certain vital-emotional interests
- c) Conscious deception, where ideology is to be interpreted as a purposeful lie.

Utopias are not ideologies, in so far as if they succeed, they change the world to match the concepts/way of thinking. In practice, determining the difference is very difficult.

What appears to be utopian or ideological is dependent on the stage and degree of reality to which one applies this standard. "The representatives of a given order will label as utopian all conceptions of existence which *from their point of view* can in principle never be realized." (p.343)

This difficulty highlights the difficulties of thinking outside of an historical context. "the very way in which a concept is defined and the nuance in which it is employed already embody to a certain degree a prejudgment concerning the outcome of the chain of ideas built upon it." (p.343)

"Whenever an idea is labeled utopina it is usually by a representative of an epoch that has already passed" (p.345)

The point, of course, is that those currently in charge of the status quo have an interest and motive for keeping it that way. But, also, more than that: they literally can't see it any other way.

Note ultimately he takes a pragmatic view: The difference between ideology and utopia ideas is in how they affect the world. "Ideas which later turned out to have been only distorted representations of a past or potential social order were ideological, while those which were adequately realized in the succeeding social order were relative utopias." (p.346).

Note the implicit critique: just because you can't imagine a way of living in this world order, doesn't mean it can't work in some other world order (p.344) – *this is really a harder question, I [moody] think than may be evident here, as it begs a question about function and stability.*

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