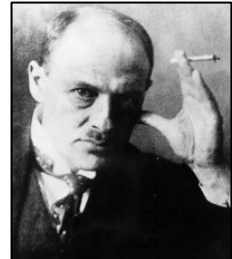




Karl Mannheim (1893 – 1947)



Overview

Karl Mannheim was a Hungarian-born sociologist, one of the founding fathers of classical sociology. He rates as a founder of the “sociology of knowledge”. Mannheim used the word “ideology” in an almost pejorative sense, reflecting a “false consciousness” based on the thought of those in the ruling class who strive to maintain the status quo in society. This he contrasted with “utopia,” or the thought of the oppressed who sought to improve society. Mannheim’s work was rejected by the Frankfurt School including Max Horkheimer and others, who saw it as a threat to Marxism. Although he called his approach “relationism,” the understanding that truth is not abstract and disembodied but rather depends on the social context, Mannheim failed to adequately address the relativistic nature of his theory to the satisfaction of his critics, nor could he successfully synthesize the different beliefs that he saw emerging from different social experiences. Nevertheless, his work remained popular, albeit controversial, and inspired debate on issues of leadership and social consensus in efforts to establish peaceful, prosperous societies.

Life

Karl Mannheim was born on March 27, 1893 in Budapest, Austria-Hungary, which is now Hungary. He was the only child of a Hungarian father and a German mother. After graduating from a gymnasium in Budapest, he studied in Budapest, Berlin, Paris, and Freiburg. He attended lectures by Georg Simmel, Georg Lukács, and Edmund Husserl. However, as he became influenced by Karl Marx and Max Weber, Mannheim’s interest shifted from philosophy to sociology,

During the brief period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, he was a lecturer in Budapest. After the collapse of the government, Mannheim moved to Germany, and from 1925 to 1929 worked in Heidelberg under the German sociologist Alfred Weber, brother of Max Weber.

In 1929, Mannheim moved to the University of Frankfurt, where he became a professor of sociology and economics. (Norbert Elias worked as one of his assistants, from spring 1930 until spring 1933). While in Frankfurt, Mannheim published his famous *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Mannheim fled to Great Britain where he stayed for the remainder of his life. He became a lecturer in sociology at the London School of Economics in 1933. From 1941 to 1944 he was a lecturer in the sociology of education, and from 1944 to 1947 professor of education and sociology at the Institute of Education of the University of London. During that time he also worked as an editor of the International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction.

Karl Mannheim died in London on January 9, 1947.



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Work

Mannheim's work can be divided into three phases: Hungarian, German, and British. In his "Hungarian phase," Mannheim was a precocious scholar and an accepted member of two influential circles, one centred on Oscar Jaszi which focussed almost exclusively on French and English sociological writings, and one centred on Georg Lukacs, with interests that focused on the enthusiasms of German diagnosticians of cultural crisis, notably the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and the writings of the German mystics. Mannheim's Hungarian writings, especially his *Structural Analysis of Epistemology*, anticipated his lifelong search for "synthesis" between these two currents of thought.

In the "German phase," Mannheim's most productive one, he turned from philosophy to sociology, inquiring into the roots of culture. His essays on the sociology of knowledge became classics. In *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) he argued that the application of the term 'ideology' ought to be broadened. He traced the history of the term from what he called a "particular" view, which saw ideology as the perhaps deliberate obscuring of facts. This view gave way to a "total" conception (influenced by Marx) which argued that a whole social group's thought was formed by its social position (for example, the proletariat's beliefs were conditioned by their relationship to the means of production). However, Mannheim introduced an additional step, which he called a "general total conception" of ideology, in which it was recognized that everyone's beliefs - including those of the social scientists - were a product of the context in which they were created. He feared, however, that this could lead to relativism, and so he proposed the idea of "relationism", the idea that certain things are true only in certain times and places. To uphold the distinction, he maintained that the recognition of different perspectives according to differences in time and social location appears arbitrary only from the perspective of an abstract and disembodied theory of knowledge. Mannheim felt that a stratum of free-floating intellectuals (whom he claimed were only loosely anchored to the class structure of society) could most perfectly realize this form of truth by creating a "dynamic synthesis" of the ideologies of other groups.

For Mannheim, 'ideology' meant the system of thought held by ruling groups in the society, which was maintained in order to preserve the status quo. On the other side was the "utopian" thought, which meant exactly the opposite, and which was supported by the oppressed. Mannheim held that "ideological structure does not change independently of the class structure and the class structure does not change independently of the economic structure" (Mannheim 1929).

Mannheim's ambitious attempt to promote a comprehensive sociological analysis of the structures of knowledge was treated with suspicion by Marxists and neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School. They saw the rising popularity of the sociology of knowledge as neutralization and a betrayal of Marxist inspiration. During his few years in Frankfurt prior to 1933, the rivalry between the two intellectual groupings - Mannheim's seminar (with his assistant Norbert Elias) and that of Max Horkheimer and the Institute for Social Research - was intense.

In his "British phase," Mannheim attempted a comprehensive analysis of the structure of modern society by way of democratic social planning and education. His work was admired more by educators, social workers,



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and religious thinkers than it was by the small community of British sociologists. His books on planning nevertheless played an important part in the political debates of the immediate post-war years, both in the United States and in several European countries.

Legacy

In the years after its publication, Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* stirred enormous interest. The list of reviewers who wrote on it includes a remarkable roll call of individuals who became famous in exile after the rise of Hitler: Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Tillich, Hans Speier, Gunther Stern (Anders), Waldemar Gurian, Siegfried Kracauer, Otto Neurath, Karl August Wittfogel, Béla Fogarasi, and Leo Strauss.

Eventually *Ideologie und Utopie* became the most widely debated book by a living sociologist in Germany during the Weimar Republic. The English version *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) has been a standard in American-style international academic sociology. In addition to *Ideologie und Utopie*, Mannheim wrote some fifty major essays and treatises, most later published in book form. His sociological theorizing has been the subject of numerous book-length studies, evidence of an international interest in his principal themes.

Some Major Publications

- Mannheim, K. *Structures of Thinking*. Routledge. [1924] 1980. ISBN 041513675X
- Mannheim, K. *Conservatism. A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. [1925] 1986. ISBN 0710203381
- Mannheim, K. *Ideology and Utopia*. Harvest Books. [1929] 1955. ISBN 0156439557
- Mannheim, K. *Sociology as Political Education*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, [1930] 2001.
- Mannheim, K. *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*. Routledge, [1940] 1998. ISBN 0415136741
- Mannheim, K. *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*. Routledge, [1950] 1998. ISBN 0415150825
- Mannheim, K. *Selected Correspondence (1911-1946) of Karl Mannheim, Scientist, Philosopher and Sociologist*.

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