

POPPER AND MANNHEIM'S SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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In this paper I shall question Karl Popper's treatment of Karl Mannheim's *Wissenssoziologie* and his understanding of the sociology of knowledge itself. My aim is not to defend either Mannheim or sociological theory of knowledge, but if this were my aim the clarification attempted in this paper would still have to be accomplished.

Right away Popper places the sociology of knowledge in the "historicist" tradition of Hegel for it is "a Hegelian version of Kant's theory of knowledge." Hence, a brief look at his estimation of Mannheim's "historicism" or "historism" is in order.¹

A sample of his assessment of Mannheim's "historicism" follows:

Holistic or Utopian social planning as opposed to piecemeal social engineering, is never of a 'private' but always of a 'public' character. It aims at remodelling of the 'whole of society' in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint; it aims at 'seizing the key positions' and at extending 'the power of the State. . . until the State becomes nearly identical with society,' and it aims, furthermore, at controlling from the 'key positions' the historical forces that mould the future of the developing society. . .²

This passage, which is similar to several others, refers to certain statements in *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* in which Mannheim from the vantage point of the democratic perspective in England (after witnessing the totalitarian regimes on the Continent at first hand) tries to determine which, if any, of the democratic structures and processes can be salvaged in what remains of the "free" world. One will note that Popper depicts holistic planning as *aiming* at the increase of controls after the "key positions" in a society have been seized. But a few pages later, he drops the term "aim" and says instead that the planners "prophesy" that the "power of the State is bound to increase until the State becomes nearly identical with society"; and here—on the verge of accuracy—he cannot but add that the "intuition" of the approaching near identity of state and society is "clear enough." "It is the totalitarian intuition."³

Here is what Mannheim does say:

Compared with the Liberal State, the modern state, whether one likes it or not, has an almost complete power of control and it depends almost entirely on its own good pleasure whether it intends to take advantage of it and transform its activities into public service. During this process the power of the State is bound to increase until the State becomes nearly identical with society. It is not society which is absorbing the State but just the other way around. The State is absorbing society. If the present trend remains unchecked, the State instead of withering away, becomes more and more ambitious and powerful.⁴

It certainly should be clear that Mannheim's sinister aim of seizing control of society consists of nothing more than the observation, which many other sensitive social analysts share, that the modern bureaucratic-industrial state is becoming increasingly collectivistic and powerful. Probably many Americans currently witnessing the manipulations and malfeasances of the powerful and proliferating agencies of the federal government of the "democratic" United States would think that Mannheim's statements are rather on the mild side. Far from trying to implement the growth of state power, Mannheim sounds a warning:

Only if we know why Western society in the crisis zone is passing through a phase of disintegration is there any hope that the countries who still enjoy comparative peace will learn to control the future trend of events by democratic planning, and so avoid the negative aspects of the process: dictatorship, conformity, and barbarism.⁵

He further warns us that the Western democracies are working against time if they hope to retain their internal political freedom. His *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* is a penetrating essay on the multiplicity of factors and problems which must be kept in mind in the process of democratic planning.

Here I should point out that a great deal of Popper's criticism of Mannheim may hinge on a disagreement over methods of procedure. Popper believes that Mannheim's assumption that we must plan for the whole of society is a serious breach of what is either practical or feasible. Quite possibly he is bothered because "holistic" planning violates his accepted models for scientific research. Just as research is divided into a series of small steps, social planning should proceed in a piecemeal fashion. In what we gave as Popper's first attack on Mannheim's theory of social planning, we note that he contrasts "holistic or utopian planning" with the "piecemeal social engineering" which he finds acceptable. Moreover, Mannheim's hope that careful planning will help to salvage democratic institutions, plus the fact that he also actually believes that something can be done about society (just like the Marxists and other totalitarians), may lead Popper to brand him as Utopian, despite the fact that Mannheim says that he is not.⁶

Popper's repugnance for Mannheim's "totalitarian intuitions" seems to carry over into his analysis of the sociology of knowledge itself. The sociology of knowledge, he says, "believes that the highest degree of objectivity can be reached by the freely poised intelligence analyzing the various hidden ideologies and their anchorage in the unconscious."⁷ What Mannheim believes, however, is that the "*freigeschwebende Intelligenz*," the "socially unattached intelligentsia," have a better chance to analyze political problems objectively than, say, the members of one of the

Marxist-designated class affiliations such as the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, or proletariat, or more realistically, one of the political parties in Germany or elsewhere. Mannheim analyzes at some length the function of these intellectuals in achieving syntheses between opposing political views sponsored by special interest groups. Whereas the worker and the entrepreneur, he says,

... being bound to a particular class and mode of life, have their outlooks and activities directly and exclusively determined by their specific social situations, the intellectuals, besides undoubtedly bearing the imprint of their specific class affinity, are also determined in their outlook by this intellectual medium which contains all those contradictory points of view. ... Every point of view was examined constantly as to its relevance to the present situation. Furthermore precisely through the cultural attachments of this group, there was achieved such an intimate grasp of the total situation, that the tendency towards a dynamic synthesis constantly reappeared, despite the temporary distortions with which we have yet to deal.⁸

Here Mannheim is not as directly concerned with the unmasking or uncovering of subconscious "ideologies" as Popper seems to think. What we have is primarily a statement that the relatively unattached intellectuals have a better chance of harmonizing conflicting political proposals than those who are intimately involved on one side or the other of political issues.

But Popper suspects that the sociologists of knowledge are actually holding themselves up as the models of objectivity, after, of course, they have removed their own biases through sociotherapy. The Marxists, he says, "explain the disagreement of an opponent by his class bias" and the sociologists of knowledge do this by "his total ideology." Then he adds: "it would be the part of every total ideology to believe that one's own group is free from bias. . . ."⁹ Mannheim, however, does not say this. In making a distinction between the *particular* conception of ideology (primarily a psychology of interests) and the *total* conception (which relates assertions to the conditions of social existence), he does say:

... the general form of the total conception of ideology is being used by the analyst when he has the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis.¹⁰

Mannheim's purely methodological distinction between the particular and total conceptions of ideology has been slurred over by Popper; for he seems to interpret "ideology" to apply to the attitudinal biases of sociologists of knowledge who believe that their own perspective is unassailable. The foregoing passage is indicative of the fact that for Mannheim the "total conception of ideology" is precisely this: an attempt to discern the relation of an individual's constellation of beliefs, attitudes, etc., to the sociocultural conditions in which the constellation

originates with the aim of better understanding why an individual holds the beliefs, attitudes, and so on that he does.

Even so, Popper's repeated assertions that the sociologists of knowledge do believe that truth is achieved only by the individual whose mind has been purified by socioanalysis lead to the most amazing part of his attack, which begins:

If scientific objectivity were founded as the sociologistic theory of knowledge naively assumes, upon the individual scientist's impartiality or objectivity, then we should have to say good-bye to it.¹¹

Here I admit to puzzlement. A sociologist of knowledge, almost by definition, would insist that the basic categories of thought and the truth and validity criteria originate in collective, not individual, experience. Popper, however seems to be totally unaware of this fact; he continues his attack by stating that the sociology of knowledge "shows an astounding failure to understand its main subject, the *social aspects* of knowledge, or rather, of scientific method." Why so? Because it "looks upon science or knowledge as a process in the mind of 'consciousness' of the individual scientist, or perhaps the product of such a process."¹² As a result of this assumption of the incredible naivete of Mannheim et al, Popper spends a few pages explaining how criticism arises in the scientifically public evaluation of a proposed piece of knowledge. An ensiled, but scientific Robinson Crusoe, for example, might chance upon a scientific truth, but without the criticism of the scientific community, his results must be labeled as "miraculous," "revealed science," or "clairvoyance."

I can think of no group more thoroughly in agreement with Popper that scientific method has a social character than the sociologists of knowledge. I need only divert our attention for a moment away from the German brand of *Wissenssoziologie* to French *sociologie de la connaissance*. Emile Durkheim, for example, the leading exponent of the French school, capsules the development of the categories from their social origin as "collective representations" to religious ideas, and then to scientific concepts. The categories, says Durkheim, "are the result of an immense cooperation... to make them a multitude of minds have associated, united, and combined their ideas and sentiments... A special intellectual activity is therefore concentrated in them which is infinitely richer and complexer than that of the individual." Man is dual, Durkheim adds: he is a biological organism and a social being. "This duality of our nature has its consequences in the practical order, the irreducibility of a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive, and in the order of thought, the irreducibility of reason to individual experience."¹³

However, at this point we may pose a question: even if the categories are socially derived, may not Durkheim still believe that scientific

objectivity is dependent solely upon the individual scientist's freedom from bias? Fortunately, he has given us the answer:

We have even seen that the essential ideas of scientific logic are of religious i.e., of *social* origin. It is true that in order to utilize them, science gives them a new elaboration; it purges them of all accidental elements; in a general way, it brings a spirit of criticism into all its doings... It surrounds itself with precautions to escape 'precipitation and bias,' and all subjective influences...¹⁴

Appropriately here Durkheim speaks of bias and subjectivity, but never once does he refer to an individual scientist. Science (actually the *collective* enterprise) purges itself of unwanted elements. Besides, he has already told us that reason is irreducible to individual experience. Are we to assume that he somehow excludes scientific reason?

We are, of course, furnishing evidence that sociologists of knowledge are quite "sociologistic," although such evidence should never have been needed. Consequently, the following statement by Popper which is still directed toward the "naivete" of the sociologists of knowledge is totally misdirected:

To sum up these considerations, it may be said that what we call 'scientific objectivity' is not a product of the individual scientist's impartiality, but a product of the social or public character of scientific method...¹⁵

We insist that Popper himself must be totally naive with reference to what the sociological theory of knowledge is all about and bring our final evidence from Mannheim himself who says, for instance, that in situationally determined thought, "objectivity comes to mean something new and different..."¹⁶

there is first of all the fact that in so far as different observers are immersed in the same system, they will, on the basis of the identity of their conceptual and categorical apparatus and through the common universe of discourse thereby created, arrive at similar results, and be in a position to eradicate as an error anything that deviates from this unanimity.

This "new and different" meaning of objectivity is the unanimity or consensus of the body of observers. Mannheim here is referring to the possibility of a science of politics, but his remarks can be extended to the natural sciences because in Popper's own argument, the constant criticism of the scientific community is the factor which neutralizes the biases of its individual members. Mannheim has said that much, though he has also said much more: that this resulting unanimity *constitutes* the new objectivity. Here Popper has to appeal to other criteria of objectivity or he has joined the sociologists of knowledge. In any case he is completely in error when he accuses them of not understanding the "social and public character of scientific methodology." The fact seems to be that it is he

who has failed throughout to grasp the essential meaning of a sociology of knowledge.

NOTES

¹Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 213. "Historicists," Popper says, try to "predict" social change (p. 212) and indicates that the Hegelian idea that "all truth is 'relative' in the sense of being determined by history, is sometimes called 'historism' . . ." (p. 214). Popper, however, does not make much of whatever the difference there may be between "historicism" and "historism" and neither shall I.

²Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 67.

³*Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1949), p. 337.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6. On the same page Mannheim expresses the opinion that we no longer have the option whether to plan or not—our choice lies between good planning or bad. Popper expresses his distaste of this opinion in *The Poverty of Historicism*. See p. 75 and the first footnote on that page.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7. "Realism prevents . . . prophesying a Utopian future."

⁷Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, p. 215.

⁸Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans., Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), p. 140.

⁹Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁰*Ideology and Utopia*, p. 69.

¹¹Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

¹²Loc. cit.

¹³Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans., Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1947), p. 16.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 429.

¹⁵*The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, p. 220.

¹⁶*Ideology and Utopia*, p. 270.

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