

KARL MANNHEIM

1893-1947

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I

KARL Mannheim's untimely death in January 1947 left mourning friends and students all over the world — old friends and new, Hungarian and German, French and Scandinavian, English and American, Chinese and East Indian, all of whom feel that this death is more than a personal loss. It touches our work as well as our emotions, for Karl Mannheim was a unique phenomenon in the academic world at large and in the field of sociology in particular.

To Mannheim, sociology was a way of life, a basic attitude, a science, and a synthetic philosophy. It was not merely one academic discipline among many which he selected as a career. For him it was a moral choice based on the conviction that only sociology could establish scientifically the conditions under which modern societies could most intelligently engage in the processes of adjustment. Like the Saint-Simonians and Comte he spoke in solemn and religious terms of the New World and the Third Way — states of relative perfection that would result from the application of sociological knowledge. Unable to believe in religious dogma and metaphysical *a priori*s, Mannheim, like Comte and Durkheim, felt that sociology could be made a way of salvation for modern mankind in an age of positive science.

Karl Mannheim was not a contemplative character. By nature he was a lover of humanity. His primary concern was to help individuals and society by assuming the role of the good physician who makes the correct diagnosis and prescribes the proper remedies for a cure. Not satisfied with the mere profession of noble sentiments and lofty ideals, he was firmly resolved to elaborate the social tech-

niques and conceptions that would make it possible to reconcile the antagonistic principles of socialism and freedom.

Mannheim regarded his dedication to the sociological way of liberation as his ultimate human obligation. Thus he dedicated himself totally, through the media of teaching and writing. His choice of an academic career was a genuine sacrifice, for he felt, as did Comte, that what he had to say went beyond the confines of institutions of learning. After he had settled on this career, he said to me briefly, "*Totum me dedi*" — a remark made half in jest, yet he never uttered a truer or more sincere phrase. His life became a sublime asceticism in the service of social progress through sociology. Sociology was Mannheim's obsession, an obsession that referred to the crisis of the modern world and to his firm conviction that sociological reasoning could help to prevent the catastrophe of Western civilization. He was obsessed by the vision of a possible synthesis between past and present as a final alternative to the total decay into irrational barbarism. This vision created the furor sociologicus in all the utterances of his humanitarian pathos. This furor was fascinating to some, annoying to others, but moving to all as the expression of a candid soul.

No one who had the privilege of being Mannheim's friend or student will ever forget the intensity and vitality of his personality, or the stirring moral and spiritual force that animated his conversations and lectures. But as the years pass there will be fewer and fewer men who had any personal contact with the charm and human warmth of this abundant creative life. We must therefore try to catch in the written word some record of that radiance, so that an experience which contributed so greatly to all of us may be preserved and kept alive.

II

Mannheim was born in Hungary of Jewish middle-class parents. At the time of his youth it was taken for granted in the Central European countries and in Russia that Jewish intellectuals could only be socialists. In Central Europe that meant to be Marxist.

Thus Mannheim moved in the group of Hungarian socialists of whom George Lukacs was the most outstanding member.

It may fairly be said that Lukacs was a constructive element in Mannheim's early development, exercising an influence in two different directions. For one thing, he demonstrated the general value of the sociological method in all fields of social and intellectual history. He showed Mannheim how it was possible to make refined and scientific sociological analyses of literature from the Marxian position, and in so doing he contributed greatly to Mannheim's later studies in the sociology of knowledge.

With regard to the second direction, Mannheim was deeply influenced by the development of Lukacs' theoretical Marxism. It must be emphasized that Marx remained the fundamental experience for Mannheim's thinking, and that although he transformed orthodox Marxism in the progress of his research, he never gave up the basis of economic and social variables in his theory of historicism. Originally, Lukacs had understood Marxism as a necessary element in an eschatological dialectics. Amid the calamities of capitalist societies, he regarded Marxism as the very device to remedy the organizational deficiencies and insecurities of industrial mankind. Only when total socialism had been established and external institutions had relieved the individual and collectivity of the lasting pressure of insecurity, would it be possible for liberated mankind to experience and understand that true suffering and genuine passion arise beyond the pale of social institutions. Then a new and genuine despair and humility might create a religious and eschatological renaissance. Lukacs withdrew from this position with his increasing understanding of Marx as the only serious philosophical genius who had completely grasped Hegel's idea of self-alienation. He illuminated the fateful transformation of Hegel that Marx performed when he transferred the redeeming function of philosophy to the social revolution.

It is indicative for the evolution of Mannheim's thought that he later accused Lukacs of a dogmatic and metaphysical historicism that would prevent him from recognizing the variability of the

determining factors. That Mannheim could make such a criticism was the result of his scientific approach to the problem. He admitted historicism as the lasting determination by a dynamic kaleidoscope of conditions among which the economic-technological remain preeminent; however, he stated the complex character of the social context.

In 1920 Mannheim went to Heidelberg. Here he continued revising his Marxist theories in the direction of relativistic historicism, under the influence of Emil Lederer and Max Weber. Lederer had transformed the notion of the forces of production into the formula of the "whole of the social context," which meant that the forces of production included social habits, value attitudes, and their legal and political realities as independent of, although interdependent with, economic processes. Max Weber left his sociological work unfinished and fragmentary, without even clarifying his own thinking with regard to the articulate character of sociology as an independent discipline. He died without giving his students any direction how to proceed in elaborating sociology as a science with its own problems, specific content, and definite scope. Thus Mannheim felt that it was his duty to systematize and integrate Weber's suggestions, ideas, and methodological principles in order to put forth convincingly the claims of sociology. He wanted to demonstrate that sociology has systematic unity and cohesion, and a range of research problems whose solution could contribute to the elimination of social frictions and conflicts, and he hoped to serve this purpose in a very specific way.

Influenced by Lederer's relativistic Marxism and Weber's radical historicism, Mannheim transformed Marx's sociological debunking of all social modes of thinking from the absolute stand of his own dogmatism into a sociology of knowledge in which all positions are relative to their specific situation and perspectives. The result of these studies was his book *Ideology and Utopia*. The book was a tremendous success with progressive groups, but was severely criticized by philosophers as confounding the issues of contemplation and politics. It was also attacked by those who were

of the opinion that scholars should destroy convictions and values only when they are able to build a new world to take their place. In any case, publication of the book brought Mannheim not only the offer of the only full professorship in sociology in Germany — the chair of the liberal Franz Oppenheimer in Frankfurt — but also, after Hitler came to power, invitations to teach in other countries. He eventually accepted a lectureship at the London School of Economics — a decision of great importance for the development of his work after 1933, in particular, his books *Man and Society in the Age of Reconstruction* and *Diagnosis of Our Time*. In 1945 he was appointed to the chair of sociology of education in the University of London, as successor to Sir Fred Clarke.

His radio addresses, his educational papers, and his activity as editor of the “International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction” testify to his new social experiences and new responsibilities, which were, as he himself noted, both theoretical and political. They were efforts to enlighten the English people in a prewar and war situation with regard to the social and psychological conditions for the survival of democracy in a totalitarian world. They were attempts to convince English society that universal planning in all spheres of life was the required prescription for maintaining freedom in a world that would be largely totalitarian. For this reason, Mannheim’s last books refer to planning for freedom and education for freedom as the most urgent goals of a sociologist. Thus, during the last twelve years of his life Mannheim made his humanitarianism articulate and concrete. In the most literal sense he dedicated his life to the rise of a socialist England that would maintain her liberal heritage, and he demonstrated his allegiance to England by serving as her guide and educator. He was as much admired and loved in that country as he had been in Germany, and students flocked to his classes from all parts of the world. England, so proud of her academic traditions and so scrupulously careful about accepting new disciplines, was won by the fervor, the enthusiasm, and the sincerity of his personality.

In the light of Mannheim’s work in England, his choice of the

London post appears logical and inevitable. Here he was able to dedicate himself to a task that called for the application of his sociological findings on the fateful social evolution toward reconciliation of the traditions of political freedom with the trends toward planning. He found complete satisfaction in contributing to the necessary synthesis of liberal and social democracies, and he wanted no other merit in an age suspended between revolution and reform.

III

Mannheim's work is marked by three distinguishing features: first, the effort to systematize sociology as a discipline; second, the sociology of knowledge; and finally, the attempts to identify education and sociology. In describing the place of sociology in the universe of learning, he provided the most thorough presentation of a curriculum in sociology. It implies, however, the inevitable temptation to transform the empirical science into a basic science which is a synthesis of all specialized sciences. As a synthesis, it takes over the function of philosophy and thus assumes the ambivalence that has always been implied in modern sociology.

Mannheim began with the analysis of sociology as a special science subdivided in three different branches. The first was *general sociology* or a theory of social invariables which aims to discover in the variability of social phenomena those basic elements that constitute the structure of society. In this connection Mannheim described Simmel's theory of social invariables. These invariables occur at all times and in all places and on all social levels. All social scientists, including historians and anthropologists, need such fundamental concepts, for these alone make it possible to explain and to understand individual and specific deviations from general types of conduct and of institutions.

It seemed essential to Mannheim to check the possible errors of such formal science with the specific requirements of the historical process. Therefore he calls the second branch *comparative sociology*, which is what we would call historical sociology. It supple-

ments the phenomenological description and the analysis of abstract general social phenomena with a theory which explains how such general types of relationships and institutions vary under the impact of changing historical conditions.

On the basis of the historical and formal sociologies Mannheim established *structural sociology* as the branch that elucidates the specific interdependence of social forces which integrate the interacting areas of society. Structural sociology actually explains consensus as the unity in social variety, the productive coexistence of different planes of living and of social action. It consists of two parts: statics and dynamics. The former deals with the problem of the equilibrium of all social forces in a given social structure, the latter with the elements which are antagonistic to each other and tend to disrupt society. This is the theory of social change, or of social equilibrium and disequilibrium.

Mannheim further postulated sociology as the theory of the context of social-cultural processes: sociology of culture. This was to be the substitute for the philosophies of history with their abstract hypotheses. It was to be the concrete analysis of the historical process on its different levels in their precarious coexistence. Mannheim also added a special division which should be concerned with the sociologies of the various disciplines of civilization such as law, art, language, literature, knowledge. According to Mannheim these disciplines would disappear as soon as they had accepted sociological methods as indispensable tools for their own research. And finally, he described practical sociology as social work, social institutions, and social statistics, all of them necessary fields of applied research.

Mannheim assumed that sociology is both a scientific theory and a method with a definite function in a world of transition. It transcends itself in two directions. First, it tends toward social transformation under the impact of Marxism; second, it points toward philosophy and philosophical anthropology, a trend implied in the results of sociological analyses of societal relationships. This assumption clarifies the coexistence of the various stages of the

historical development of sociology in Mannheim's thinking. He saw sociology's historical function as the rationalized manifestation of a time of revolution and reform; he was, however, not satisfied with ascribing sociology's modest and humble contribution to philosophy. True to the Comtean tradition, he made sociology transcend itself into philosophy. This *metabasis eis allo genos* resulted from his conviction that sociology had become a tool of amplification of mind and soul, and could therefore reexamine all past claims of absolute validity and final truth in science and philosophy.

Herein lie the roots of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which was first presented in *Ideology and Utopia*. Mannheim felt that he had succeeded in abolishing, once and for all, the claims of absolute validity for all kinds of thinking by discovering the social conditions under which the specific ways of reasoning and of evaluating came into existence. He was proud of having established scientifically the limitations of value judgments that resulted from the social perspectives of human thinking. Applying the method he reexamined the conditions of his own relativistic thinking and analyzed the perspectives of his own conceptions.

It was Mannheim's sincere conviction that sociological analysis, like psychoanalysis, could make us free of irrational pressure. And of all the devices of sociology, the sociology of knowledge, in particular, he felt, would point out the irrational attitudes which prevent or support our adjustment to the social process. He stated frequently, however, that his debunking was not destruction. Its intention, rather, was to teach us to live in truth and to be able to stand the terrors of reality.

Mannheim's historical position is best illustrated by comparison. During the eighteenth century, debunking was as fashionable as it was in Mannheim's sociological age. But there was one major difference. Fontenelle wrote the *Origins of Fables* in order to reveal the various obstacles to the progress of reason and scientific intelligence. He presented a sociology of knowledge of a quite different type, by showing how ignorance, inertia, and irrational passions

contributed to establishing myth and constructing religion, and thus prevented the progress of enlightening reason. Such analyses could be made because the author was using the criterion of truth as verified by reason. Reason would make possible a new harmony and unification in human communications after the fables had been recognized as residua of prerational and instinctive drives to explain and understand the meaning of nature.

Mannheim, on the other hand, was not able to rebuild the worlds he destroyed. Sociology of knowledge as a theory of ideologies does not provide a new basis of communication that will make understanding possible among members of stratified societies. It leaves the social universe a chaos of antagonistic irrationalities which cannot even agree on the place and moment of the social process to which they should adjust. Mannheim could never understand the validity of the reproach that his sociological relativism was sociological imperialism and, in the final analysis, nihilistic.

In *Ideology and Utopia* Mannheim hinted at his concern for social reform, but in his later books the political, social, and moral problems of the survival of democracy and freedom are the focusing constituents of his inquiries. He was mainly interested in illuminating the trends that render planning on all levels and in all spheres of contemporary technological mass societies inevitable. In his opinion, there could be no freedom without planning, and no planning without freedom if Western civilization was to survive.

Mannheim presented his ideas on the modern crisis in a variety of studies. One element of catastrophe, according to him, resided in the general and social disproportionality of modern society, especially in the unequal distribution of rational and irrational faculties in individual and society. He emphasized, however, that progress of rationality, progress in control of passions, and progress in social morality never depend on individuals, but on conditions and problems imposed by social structures.

Since he considered basic democratization and universal interdependence characteristic features of the modern era, Mannheim entertained a modest degree of hope for the future. It was his con-

viction that in an age of such interdependence no part could gain any advantage by exploiting the remaining parts of the whole. And he trusted that understanding and compromise would be recognized as indispensable in a world of universal interaction.

Radical and penetrating research led Mannheim to believe that, at this moment of history, sociology and education are merging, that the problems of education are sociological and sociopsychological at all stages of human development. He stated, therefore, that the sociologist could contribute greatly to the postulates of the times, since he was able to make clear the interdependence of all social strata and to demonstrate the inescapable trends of universal democratization and of new homogeneities in the age of total technology. He hoped that wise planning would be made possible through the use of sociology, behaviorism, and psychoanalysis. In such a constellation, sociology would be the integrating element, because the social process has its own laws, its rules of adjustment, and its requirements with regard to valuations, techniques, and inventions. It is a mechanism that comprehends the whole life of man as individual and socius; it is scientifically intelligible and can be explained.

Mannheim's concept of planning as the construction of a frame of reference for social conduct is quite distinct from totalitarian planning, which manipulates man and society for the benefit of an abstract state or social machine. His notions imply quite different goals. He was mistaken when he said that his categories were formal, for they are formal only on the surface. They have specific content and value implications. For example, his category of planning is directed toward the goal of liberating man and society, a goal that presupposes a concept of human dignity as revealed by the individual's potential spontaneity of thought and action. By the same token he was wrong in stating that planning is limited by the biological facts of heredity and individuality. It finds its limits because spontaneous productivity of group and individual as a social value can only be conditioned, not manipulated.

Mannheim was not aware that his idea of merging sociology and

education was in the tradition of early sociologists from 1829 on. But his formulation with regard to sociology as education for freedom is challenging. There have been educators for freedom who were sociologists in a sense that was antagonistic to Mannheim's. Erasmus, for example, took a stand which is opposed to Mannheim's but is still sociological. In the "Apology" to the *Colloquies* he stated explicitly that the most effective way to educate children was to demonstrate the conditions under which men fail to live up to the required standards and fall into error and vice. Erasmus knew that the social and moral goods could be understood by reason and spiritual intelligence. Nevertheless most people do not behave as they should. Erasmus constructed most of the plots in the *Colloquies* around the idea that vested interests, uncontrolled passions, senseless traditions and habits prevent people from living according to the rules of equity and righteousness. He prepared the way for sociology as a science that explains error and frustration as determined by the concatenation of solid circumstances, even though at the same time truth and value are intelligible to human reason. Such a science has objectivity and evidence, because we know from philosophy the principles of the good life as citizen, socius, friend, lover. Thus we are able to explain human error and failures as deviations from enlightened reason that are the result of the context of social conditions. This is sociology as strict science.

Mannheim would have violently rejected such definitions of sociology. He refused to grant independence to philosophy and he classified as "idealism" all types of philosophy that could not be subsumed to pragmatism or behaviorism. His sociology is science, philosophy, and theory of social salvation according to the works of Comte and Marx, and he offered this synthetic basic science as a substitute for philosophy. He frequently rejected criticism on this score, but he never stated what should be left to philosophy after he had demonstrated that all ontological positions are partial ideologies. As a synthetic effort sociology implied claims for relatively final knowledge as relative to the respective situations. This was sociologism, the revolutionary imperialism of a genuine science,

the expression of a revolutionary situation that had prevailed since Comte and Marx, who laid the ground for totalitarianism in their sociological systems. Mannheim could not liberate himself from this fateful tradition of sociology, although his drive was in quite the opposite direction.

Mannheim served sociology well by elaborating the thesis that the social process is largely determined, and can be explained, by its mechanisms. Social life, however, is more comprehensive and complex than the most subtle mechanism of biological and social processes. There are attitudes, ideas, sentiments that transcend the processes of adjustment and cannot be explained as survival values.

It seems to be the fatal mistake of the revolutionary types of sociology to rule out the clear and distinct features of sociology as a science. It is perfectly fair that the sociologist should deal with opinions, valuations, tastes, and all activities of society. But the sociologist is wrong when he identifies opinions with knowledge, valuations with values, beliefs with religion, tastes with beauty.

There is no sociology of knowledge, but of error; there is no sociology of religion, but of pseudoreligion and irreligion; there is no sociology of aesthetics, but of fashions and tastes. Sociologists who consciously confound essences and functions, principles and acts, renounce philosophy in favor of sociology as universal science. Such sociologism is based on the anthropological hypotheses that man is *homo faber*. Both are sufficient to make the social mechanism work for social equilibrium. Such presuppositions, however, do not suffice for introducing the metaphysical and spiritual values into the sociological system. Nor are they capable of motivating the principles of freedom and human dignity which remain the goal of Mannheim's sociological theory of planning. Neither sociological nor psychological techniques of planning are of any avail if they do not create a frame of reference in which living and dying have some meaning.

Mannheim was worried by this dilemma and strove to eliminate the antagonism, but was partly inhibited from reaching a final solution by his touching belief in progress and human intelligence.

Imbued with the messianic attitude of the revolutionary sociologists, he was far more naïve than he imagined the men of the Enlightenment to have been. They knew the modest effect that philosophical and scientific reason exert on the social process with its human prejudices, convictions, and interests. And because of this sober and disillusioned knowledge, they were able to see what progress reason could make in the endless chain of philosophical contemplation. It is naïve to believe that a sociologist can persuade collective institutions by scientific reasoning that monopolistic control no longer pays in an age of interdependence. It is a grim and vain hope on the part of the sociologist when in the face of all indications to the contrary he believes that fear of catastrophe will prevent war and conflagration.

Mannheim was the victim of his sociology when he attempted to develop it further, and when he dealt with the fundamentals for which democracy should fight in order to realize a liberal and planned society after the war. Most conspicuous was his failure to overcome the sociologistic fallacy when he attacked religious values. It is moving to see how he struggled with the reality of spiritual principles and how he attempted to coordinate these principles with sociological categories of mass experience. He failed because he was unwilling to recognize religion as a primary phenomenon that we cannot conceive of as sociological. Here he had to fail because he deprived all spiritual and intellectual phenomena of their original character and forced them into a sociological functionalism. By so doing he renounced any knowledge of archetypes and of primary phenomena. This is the inevitable fallacy of a scientific philosophy that reduces all phenomena to their functional position in the social process and that objects to any other explanation as unscientific. And in this we recognize the permanent limitation of Mannheim's work, which is suggestive and constructive in so many other aspects of sociological research.

Mannheim's attitude toward history was as ambivalent as his attitude toward sociology and philosophy. He knew that vested interests, inertia, and passions have always ruled societies and that

there is no progress whatever in social conduct, but he did not want to know the truth about history. He clung to the philosophy of progress as a necessary element of sociology, and historicism permitted him to maintain this stand. Actual history had no reality in his mind. For him history started with Marx and modern evolution. He never mentioned that many of his requirements for historical sociology and the sociologies of art, politics, literature, and ideas had been met by historians of the past and scholars of the humanities. He did not see that sociology as a method had been at work and had been cautiously applied by historians of philosophy and of ideas, particularly in the American scene.

IV

The analysis of Mannheim's work has led us into a critical appreciation of his ideas and methods. It would be misleading, however, to interpret such criticism as a negative evaluation. Mannheim himself was too passionate a scholar not to be more satisfied with critical arguments than with flattering agreement. He can no longer answer any strictures. For this reason I would like to state explicitly that I have penned these remarks out of a sense of the deepest friendship and gratitude. I, for one, would never have reconsidered the fundamentals of sociology if Mannheim had not stimulated the humanistic return to the roots of things themselves. His radical and violent dedication to the problems of sociology made it possible to reexamine the basic notions and problems of our science. His pioneering helped us to liberate ourselves from the bondage of sociologism. His moral and scientific sincerity set the standards for future inquiries. There is no better and no more affectionate way of expressing old friendship and enduring loyalty than by a frank description of deviating conclusions.

We may perhaps ponder on what final conclusions Mannheim himself would have reached had not death cut short his work, for he was so keenly aware that moral and spiritual values have a social reality that cannot be reduced to ideologies. During his life in England he recognized that brotherhood, clemency, moderation,

wisdom, justice, disinterestedness — in a word, spiritual and moral goods — penetrate the life of society and integrate societal relationships under the almost unbearable tensions of a prewar and war-torn period. He could not fail to see that the dynamics of social mechanism does not permit the irruption of such values into the system of survival and adjustment values. Thus in his last book we find notes on such topics as “creative adjustment” and “give-and-take,” which point toward fresh intention and effort to integrate the new insights into the system of social mechanisms. Pressed from all sides to solve the problems of values in a scientific world, he would have found a solution.

Karl Mannheim’s dedication to the basic social problems of the critical times in which he lived remains a matter of moral greatness; his historical limitations are his theoretical tools.

Karl Mannheim was a child of his time and the product of his personal virtue. As Goethe rightly said when reflecting on the death of friends and fellow scholars: “We all suffer from life. Who could dare to take to account and pass judgment upon our departed friends but God? Those who remain should be concerned with their accomplishments, not with their deficiencies. We recognize the general member of the species by his faults, the individual by his merits. Failures and limitations are the common lot of men. Virtue and humanity are the individual’s property and merit.”