

The Sociologist of Knowledge in the Positivism Dispute

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Abstract

This paper studies the conflict between critical rationalism and critical theory in Karl Popper and Theodor Adorno's 1961 debate by analyzing their shared rejection of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. Despite the divergences in their respective projects of critical social research, Popper and Adorno agree that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is uncritical. By investigating their respective assessments of this research program I reveal a deeper similarity between critical rationalism and critical theory. Though both agree on the importance of critique, they are less concerned with the development of critical consciousness as a focus of this project. In this way, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, particularly in its formative stages, revolves around a set of problems relatively inaccessible to critical rationalism and critical theory, since it is centrally concerned with identifying and cultivating the possibility of critique in society. In closing, I gesture to the importance of political education in Mannheim's early work, suggesting that a return to these experimental texts will yield resources for political thought today.

KEYWORDS: Karl Mannheim, Theodor Adorno, Karl Popper, critical theory, critical rationalism, sociology of knowledge, social theory, intellectuals

Manuscript

This paper concerns the 1961 exchange between Karl R. Popper and Theodor W. Adorno that inaugurated the "positivism dispute" in the German social sciences.¹ Popper's and Adorno's respective presentations from this working session outline mutually exclusive visions of critique

¹ Although related discussions of methodology in the social sciences were ongoing at the time of Popper and Adorno's working session (see, e.g., Strubenhoff 2018 and Section 1 below), I use the phrase "positivism dispute" to name the debates following from their encounter.

and social research with striking relevance in contemporary discussions of science, society, and social change. Popper's critical rationalism, with its focus on the functioning of scientific and democratic institutions and concern with piecemeal reforms, provides an influential reformist and gradualist perspective on the role of knowledge in social change. On the other hand, critique for Adorno locates the problematic features of our social world in the very structure of capitalist society, including the academic institutions through which it is studied. Is the critical perspective needed today a matter of facilitating objective scientific research through a better specification of science's reach, or does an apprehension of the social present require a dialectical logic concerned with the way each of society's moments reflect an exploitative whole? If this question is important today, the Popper-Adorno discussion remains a productive conflict for critical social philosophers interested in theory with a practical intent.

Breaking with the tendency to "take sides" in a reading of this debate, I investigate a limitation common to Popper's and Adorno's respective positions through the analysis of their treatment of a third figure – the sociologist of knowledge, represented here by Karl Mannheim. Though Popper's critical rationalism and Adorno's critical theory share a commitment to *critique* as a force for improving social research and the social world, and they agree that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is *uncritical*, their readings of the sociologist of knowledge are inconsistent—with Popper tending to associate this figure with Marxists and other unscientific historicists, and Adorno viewing the sociology of knowledge as an un-dialectical research program not so different from Popper's. By reading these rejections of Mannheim in the context of their broader research programs, I show how the unstable appearance of the sociologist of knowledge in Popper and Adorno's debate alerts us to a limitation common to their iterations of critical rationalism and critical theory. Since neither Popper nor Adorno see the development of critical

consciousness as a topic with direct relevance for their conceptions of critique, their projects equally reject a reflexive possibility for critical social philosophy embodied in Mannheim's early sociology of knowledge. This debate is thus not only important as a confrontation between ameliorative and emancipatory views of science and social change, but as a testament to the ways in which a project of social critique as self-criticism is obscured in each kind of program.

The first section briefly outlines the debate between Popper and Adorno as a confrontation between divergent conceptions of critique. While neither are positivists in the sense common to postwar German sociologists, both see a role for critical philosophy, and particularly social theory, for the improvement of society. If their shared distance from a rapidly advancing form of empirical sociology helpfully complicates our idea of the conflict between critical rationalism and critical theory, their distance from the sociologist of knowledge helps us more clearly understand these positions, since this figure is equally committed to critique as a force for the improvement of society. In the second section, I thus outline Popper's and Adorno's respective criticisms of the sociology of knowledge in their debate and broader bodies of work. The two roles played by Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, and the inconsistency of this figure's presentation, alert us to the possibility that neither Adorno nor Popper deal with this research program in its essential dimension. In this way, Mannheim's simultaneous presence and absence in the dispute sets him up as the debate's "third person" – a universally rejected figure whose unreliable portrayal displays a limit in the theoretical work of each of the symposiasts. Beginning with these inconsistent interpretations of Mannheim's thought, the third section investigates how the rejection of this figure alerts us to a deeper agreement between Popper's and Adorno's respective methods and conceptions of criticism. Mannheim's own attitude—his commitment that the critique of society necessitates a self-critique of one's own social position as an intellectual, and an experimental

stance towards thinking and its development through education—is set aside by both discussants at the 1961 working group. In closing, I argue that the central problem of Mannheim’s early work is a challenge that critical rationalism, critical theory, and the tendencies indebted to them, struggle to entertain in a sustained way: How can a critical account of society incorporate the moment of its own development as a central part of its project? How can the critique of society become an organized process of educating critics?

1. The Conflict of Critical Social Philosophies

It is commonly pointed out that the name given to the volume in which Popper and Adorno’s seminar papers were published is somewhat misleading, since no logical positivist made an appearance at the working session where these papers were presented.² In his “Remarks on the Discussion,” published alongside the main documents of this dispute, Ralf Dahrendorf, who convened the working session, noted:

In terms of time and subject matter, however, the discussion was dominated neither by Popper nor Adorno, but instead by a ‘third man’, conjured up by almost all participants in the discussion, but yet against whom the two symposiasts unreservedly adopted a common stance. (Dahrendorf [1961] 1976, 125)

According to Dahrendorf, the “positivist,” which means a logical empiricist, or an empirical social scientist,³ is nowhere represented, although their presence seems to haunt the proceedings. The misunderstanding surrounding this term appears to have contributed to a general atmosphere of misunderstandings, as a part of a session that failed to accomplish what anyone was hoping for. According to this reading, the positivist is the invisible “third man,” since Popper and Adorno

² *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Adorno et al. [1969] 1976).

³ “This ‘third man’ was given several names by his friends and enemies alike—‘positive method’, ‘unmetaphysical positivism’, ‘empiricism’, ‘empirical research’, and so on” (Dahrendorf [1961] 1976, 125).

adopt a common stance toward this figure—both identifying in some way as “negativists”—but nevertheless seeming to disagree on exactly what counts as positivism.

In a recent article, Marius Strubenhoff (2018) has demonstrated that the role of positivism in this debate is an interpretive question often skewed by a misunderstanding of the debate’s historical background. By drawing on internal discussions within the DGS in the years leading up to the 1961 debate, Strubenhoff shows that a key dispute animating the formation of the working session between Popper and Adorno was the role of human choice in historical change.⁴ Positivists and more theoretically-oriented sociologists, to broadly characterize the opposed camps, differed in the way they understood the constraints on social theory, with positivists taking the position that certain aspects of human nature and social organization are intractable, and that the social sciences should therefore limit themselves to empirical research aiming at an increasingly efficient administration of society.⁵ Whereas researchers with a more voluntarist approach to social change might see a role for a strong theoretical component to sociological research, the positivist position rejects theory and philosophical speculation in favor of an increasingly precise study of objective social conditions. The confusion about the positivist in this debate, according to Strubenhoff, is related to the fact that neither Popper nor Adorno agreed with this position. Although their conceptions of criticism differ, both see a role for social theory in sociological research, and advocate for a simultaneously epistemological and political notion of critique.

⁴ For another account of this history, which puts less thematic emphasis on the history of the Tübingen working session, see Rolf Wiggershaus’ discussion of a 1959 debate between Max Horkheimer and König (1986, 566-568).

⁵ It would be helpful to understand this debate in terms of the opposition between positivism and historicism, an opposition that George Steinmetz (2020) shows is of lasting importance in sociology. Due to different senses of “historicism” used by all parties involved here, this will not be possible in this paper.

With Strubenhoff's reading of this debate as a guideline, it becomes clear that the core differences between Adorno and Popper cannot be understood through an appreciation of their distance from "positivism," however we mean the term. Both are committed to critique as a project outstripping merely epistemological concerns and believe that a study of history is important for critical sociology. Moreover, both stress the malleability of social arrangements, and both think that improvements in these arrangements are not only possible, but desirable. The most important difference between their programs lies, then, in the role of critique in social change, pertaining to the kind of social research that they think is possible, and the kinds of problems it can uncover. Indeed, when it comes to their conceptions of critique – and thus of the role of social research in social change – we find that Popper and Adorno are diametrically opposed.

Popper understands critique as a social process of conjecturing and refuting theoretical statements through the use of deductive logic.⁶ His logic of the social sciences is thus meant to provide a theoretical basis for rigorous empirical research into society. In his seminar paper, for example, he draws on the recent use of the assumption of rationality in the field of economics as a demonstration of the way in which social scientists can reduce the complexity of the social world in order to derive testable, and thus falsifiable hypotheses.⁷ Rational criticism functions not only to produce the theoretical principles and policies allowing for this kind of research, but as a limiting principle, spelling out the kinds of phenomena inaccessible to empirical social sciences. In this way, Popper's social theory works to exclude unfalsifiable hypotheses such as those arising from overly general concepts (such as the "social whole") and concepts that are ineffable by definition (such as God or the unconscious). Critically guided social sciences are able to progressively

⁶ "...[A]ll criticism consists of attempts at refutation" (Popper [1961] 1976b, 89).

⁷ See, Popper [1961] 1976b, 102. See Popper's contemporary essay "Models, Instruments, and Truth" ([1963] 1994, 162–66) for a more detailed discussion of models in natural and social sciences.

develop because the elimination of such concepts allows researchers to focus on the deductive-logical task of falsifying hypotheses through experience.

For Adorno, on the other hand, critique is not limited to the deductive refutation of statements or hypotheses. Whereas the logic guiding Popper's form of critique is deductive, for Adorno society must be studied dialectically.⁸ This means that social theory does not stop at giving researchers tools and policies to help them handle contradictions between statements or problematic gaps between experience and theoretical expectations, but instead aims for reflection on the real contradictions and antagonisms existing within social reality.⁹ Adorno's conference paper thus defends the use of unfalsifiable elements in critical social theory, precisely because the most essential insights are often not amenable to empirical testing.¹⁰ An apprehension of the kinds of phenomena that are central for critical theory's work – for example, the structuring of individual sensibility and subjectivity through immersion in mass culture – is simply impossible with a model that reduces the complexity of the social world in order to grasp it as a series of facts.

A brief study of the divergent conceptions of criticism meeting in this debate yields an opposition between an ameliorative vision of science and social change juxtaposed with an emancipatory one. Though Adorno and Popper agree on a role for social theory in the achievement of a just society, Popper sees the process of social change as the slow work of gradual improvements, while Adorno views superficial advances without a transformation of the

⁸ "... I interpret the concept of logic more broadly than Popper does. I understand this concept as the concrete mode of procedure of sociology rather than general rules of thought, of deduction" (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 105).

⁹ "For the object of sociology itself, society, which keeps itself and its members alive but simultaneously threatens them with ruin, is a problem in an emphatic sense" (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 108).

¹⁰ "Probably no experiment could convincingly demonstrate the dependence of each social phenomenon on the totality, for the whole which preforms the tangible phenomena can never itself be reduced to particular experimental arrangements. Nevertheless, the dependence of that which can be socially observed upon the total structure is, in reality, more valid than any findings which can be irrefutably verified in the particular and this dependence is anything but a mere figment of the imagination." (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 113)

underlying social structure as a form of manipulation.¹¹ The difference between these critical visions thus reflects divergent conceptions of political change and what we can hope for. Popper is a reluctant optimist, and a liberal democrat. Social change comes about through piecemeal reform, guided by the limitation of the sciences through rational criticism. New social arrangements and regulations require time and careful testing to implement. The fact that the social sciences are not oriented by unfalsifiable ideas means that the urgency often driving rapid and drastic social changes will be prevented from overshadowing this process of conjecture, refutation, and gradual social experimentation. Research guided by the principles of the “open society” takes on limited, empirically specifiable problems, and eschews a view of the whole of society, since such a potentially metaphysical conception often provides “scientific” cover for unchecked political authority.

For Adorno, on the other hand, social change must include deep transformations of precisely the kind that Popper’s philosophy of the open society disavows. In opposing the ideological myth of the open society, Adorno’s research program seeks to expose how the “closed” character of the capitalist social totality hides behind a methodological proscription of the whole. In contrast to Popper, Adorno’s critical theory places itself in the history of Marxist social theory, as a critique of capitalist society.¹² That the fetishized categories of economics such as the commodity form attain in Adorno’s thought cultural, linguistic, and historical dimensions means that the recognition of capitalism’s power to structure the social world is greatly expanded. Beyond

¹¹ See, e.g., Adorno’s “Reflections on Class Theory”: “The theater of a cryptogenic—as it were, censored—poverty, however, is that of political and social impotence. It turns all men into mere administrative objects of the monopolies and their states, on a par with those paupers of the liberal era who have been allowed to die out in our own high age of civilization” (Adorno [1942] 2003b, 105).

¹² In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, Adorno compares the commodity fetish to the process of identification underlying calculative rationality itself (Adorno [1966] 1995, 146). See Prusik (2020, chap. 1) and Bonefeld (2014) for helpful elaborations of Adorno’s critical theory as a critique of capitalist society.

limited changes in policy arrangements or institutional practices, then, critical theory strives for a modification of aesthetic sensibility, culture, and a transformation of educational institutions. Social researchers uncovering the antagonistic logic of a society in crisis resist the temptation to give recommendations or propose policy innovations, since critical theory retains a sensitivity to the way in which the institutional context inhabited by these researchers reflects and furthers the ideology of an increasingly operationalized society. Even if his political orientation in the 1960s is relatively modest in its aspirations, Adorno's critical theory still adopts a deeper task than Popper's critical rationalism: to transform sensibility through the critique of ideological illusions.¹³

The fixation on positivism for understanding the Popper-Adorno debate is an interpretive guide with limited value. Beyond the controversy caused by Adorno and his colleagues' association of Popper with the positivist position,¹⁴ the supposed "agreement" between Popper and Adorno on the rejection of positivism fails to capture their differences. When he discusses positivism, Popper refers to logical empiricists whose theories of the social sciences are based on a rejection of speculative thought and the verification of scientific theories through observation and induction. In his use of this term, Adorno refers to a broader style of thought—nevertheless including logical empiricism—that tends to cover over the contradictory nature of society by eschewing metaphysical speculation and focusing on the "facts." We might follow Popper and his colleagues and argue that Adorno, Horkheimer and their colleagues simply have no idea what positivism is, and that their failure to use words in the proper way is an abdication of the scientific spirit. Or we might follow Adorno, arguing that the positivist tradition is much broader than Popper

¹³ See Adorno's "Education After Auschwitz," ([1966] 2005a) and "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" ([1959] 2005c) for introductions to this project of the transformation of sensibility.

¹⁴ "There is no answer to the question of how the book got a title which quite wrongly indicates that the opinions of some 'positivists' are discussed in the book" (Popper [1970] 1976a, 291).

recognizes, and that he is more of a positivist than he might think.¹⁵ In either case, we would come no closer to a perspective on the debate able to appreciate the exigencies and theoretical commitments of either side.

There is another figure in this dispute, however, who receives negative treatment from both symposiasts, and whose identity requires less interpretive work to discern. Popper and Adorno both take time during their original seminar presentations to criticize the sociology of knowledge in ways that align with their earlier criticisms of Karl Mannheim, an early and influential exponent of this research program.¹⁶ The rejection of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge allows us to analyze an instance of Popper's and Adorno's theories in agreement, where the object of this agreement is not at issue.¹⁷ In this way, their common dismissal of Mannheim might help us understand whatever affinities exist between Popper and Adorno, affinities whose identification would not be the result of a misunderstanding, or our own bias in favor of one of their programs, but would stem from their actual conceptions of critique. As we seek to understand the confrontation between critical rationalism and critical theory as a conflict of possibilities facing

¹⁵ Positivism is a tradition the Frankfurt School theorists consciously construct, for instance, in Horkheimer's "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" ([1937] 1992a), which exerted a lasting effect on the Institute's research activities. See the works of Douglas Kellner (1989), and Matthias Benzer (2011, 93–95).

¹⁶ Max Scheler was also a proponent of the sociology of knowledge, and the originator of the term. Mannheim's first use of the term is, accordingly, in a discussion of Scheler (Mannheim [1925] 1952). A longer discussion of the relationship between Mannheim's thought and the broader tradition of sociology of knowledge is not possible here for length considerations. It bears mentioning, however, that the use of Mannheim as the sole representative of the sociology of knowledge in this context is an interpretive choice, as is the turn to Mannheim's earlier work towards the end. Since Adorno's and Popper's respective criticisms in their debate align with their earlier criticisms of Mannheim, and since Mannheim's earlier works in my estimation outline a dynamic idea of education not found in either Popper's or Adorno's respective projects, I have decided to limit my discussion of the sociology of knowledge to Mannheim, and gesture towards the unrealized potential in Mannheim's earlier essays.

¹⁷ Aside from Simonds' (1978) study of Mannheim, Steve Fuller's *Kuhn v. Popper: The Struggle for the Soul of Science* ([2003] 2004) is one of the only treatments of this debate to identify and address the shared criticism of Mannheim. Fuller's aim is less to understand the limitations of Adorno and Popper, and more to articulate how all three thinkers are part of a similar tendency of attempting to think through social problems with scientific rationality.

critical social research, it is therefore important that we engage with their treatments of this third figure.

2. *The Two Roles of the Sociologist of Knowledge*

Despite their disagreement on the concept, aims, and hopes of critique, Popper and Adorno agree in their seminar papers that the sociology of knowledge is “uncritical.” But owing to the opposition between critical rationalism and critical theory, the critical shortcomings of the sociology of knowledge means different things for each of these programs. On the one hand, Popper sees in the sociologist of knowledge an enemy of the open society, dedicated to universal historical laws and grand plans of utopian engineering. On the other hand, Adorno locates in this figure yet another—highly sublimated—mode of bourgeois thinking, content to know more about society without really opposing it.

In their brief discussion of the sociology of knowledge, and Mannheim as a representative of this tradition, Popper and Adorno repeat arguments leveled at his work since *Ideology and Utopia* appeared.¹⁸ In this way, Popper’s and Adorno’s critiques of the sociology of knowledge exemplify Mannheim’s reception by broader tendencies of social and political thought. Mannheim is often criticized by empirically oriented social scientists on the one hand, and Marxist social theorists on the other, often for opposite reasons. As A.P. Simonds notes in his detailed treatment of Mannheim’s career:

The sociology of knowledge has... suffered the classic fate of a position which questions orthodoxy in a fundamental way: if the heretic is condemned, then his position is by that fact confirmed as diabolical; if he is allowed to go free, it is because his position has been

¹⁸ In the case of the Frankfurt School theorists, some of these criticisms go back to *Ideologie und Utopie*’s publication in 1929 (Marcuse [1929] 1990; Horkheimer [1930] 1993). Though the sociology of knowledge was a lively and new discipline by the time Mannheim published his work *Ideology and Utopia* in 1929, many of Popper’s and Adorno’s criticisms focus on Mannheim’s work from his “English Period” (1933-1947), especially his *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* ([1935] 1940). Critiques of Mannheim’s work from across the intellectual spectrum are collected in Volker Meja and Nico Stehr’s volume on *The Sociology of Knowledge Dispute* (1990).

either disavowed or successfully assimilated to orthodoxy and thereby rendered pointless. (Simonds 1978, 12–13)

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is distinguished not only by the seeming incongruence between its difficult historical reception and its simultaneous ubiquity as a reference across the social sciences, but also by the inconsistencies among its critics. If there is any truth to Simonds's assessment of a heterodox strain in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, uncovering these insights requires careful attention to these common rejections of this research program. By treating the criticisms in turn, we investigate two roles that the sociology of knowledge has been called upon to play—the enemy of the open society, and the defender of the status quo—roles that seem mutually inconsistent, but which nevertheless describe much of Mannheim's reception beyond the Popper-Adorno debate. In the shared rejection of this research program, we thus observe a complex affinity between the traditions associated with Popper and Adorno, exposing a difficulty encountered by both the ameliorative and emancipatory traditions of critical social research following from their methodological orientations.

a. The Enemy of the Open Society

Popper's treatment of the sociologist of knowledge in his 1961 seminar paper begins with a brief story. He tells of a conference he recently attended, organized around the theme "Science and Humanism," featuring scholars from various fields in the human and natural sciences including theology, physics, anthropology, and biology. After an intense day of discussion, the lone anthropologist in attendance spoke up for the first time. He claimed he had not been paying attention to the content of the conference proceedings, but had merely been studying the discussion as a collection of behaviors. Apparently imagining himself to be doing field work, he had attended the conference more to learn about the social and psychological functions of verbal behavior in a

professional academic setting, than to arrive at any shared understanding with the other researchers.

Popper's anthropologist visitor claims that "truth" and "objectivity" are indistinguishable from the operations of power within the group. By claiming that ideas of objective truth or falsity and distinctions between valid and invalid arguments are all subjective phenomena, this anthropologist is a clear enemy of the open society. In their eyes, truth is degraded into a subjective, temporally and socially variable phenomenon. Different historical periods and different sectors of society have their own "truth." The search for truth embodied by the attendees of this conference is thus transformed by this social "scientist" into yet another "scientific" phenomenon – and rational discussion is itself rendered an object of study. By rejecting any kind of truth that could orient a scientific community, and turning to the operations of those in the community, this relativistic social researcher destroys the critical dualism that characterizes the open society, blending the facts and values held apart by scientists into a monistic description of "behavior." By studying discussion as yet another kind of behavior, the anthropologist makes any further rational discussion impossible.

The degradation of truth represented by this anthropologist characterizes the social science of the closed society. Popper blames this extreme position on behaviorism, and a few ideas from German sociology: historical relativism – the idea that truth is historically conditioned; and sociological relativism – the idea that different social groups have their own kind of truth or science. In addition to these relativistic forerunners, Popper also faults the sociology of knowledge: "I also believe that the sociology of knowledge has its full share of responsibility, for it contributed to the pre-history of the dogmas echoed by my anthropological friend" (Popper [1961] 1976b, 95). The research program developed by Mannheim appears as a dogmatic precursor to this

anthropologist, since it supposedly attempts to study the process of scientific research itself as an object of scientific investigation. In this way, the sociology of knowledge is a kind of “science of science” aiming to understand even the principles guiding scientific research and the attitude of reasonableness they proceed from in sociological terms. Popper, for his part, rejects any attempt to understand these commitments sociologically, for fear of eliminating a distinction between reason and its opposite, between the tools of rationality and the force of coercion.

According to Popper, the sociologist of knowledge purports to solve the issue of relativism and objectivity in the social sciences by recourse to a notion of a “free-floating” intelligentsia, or a group of intellectuals who are sufficiently detached from their social position that they can overcome the biases noted by the historical and sociological relativists. But Popper finds this solution to the problem of objectivity highly misleading, since it gives the mistaken impression that the objectivity of science depends on the objectivity of individual scientists. In fact, objectivity depends on the mutual rational criticism of a community of researchers. Popper writes:

The so-called sociology of knowledge which tries to explain the objectivity of science by the attitude of impersonal detachment of individual scientists, and a lack of objectivity in terms of the social habitat of the scientist, completely misses the following decisive point: the fact that objectivity rests solely upon pertinent mutual criticism. What the sociology of knowledge misses is nothing less than the sociology of knowledge itself—the social aspect of scientific objectivity, and its theory. (Popper [1961] 1976b, 95–96)

In his attempt to overcome relativism, the sociologist of knowledge – and here Popper is certainly criticizing Mannheim as a particular exponent of this field – leans on a stratum capable of overcoming ideologies and thus knowing society in general. In this, he comes close to the sociological relativists, such as Lukács, who claim that certain classes have better insight into the structure of society. In Lukács’ case, this privileged group is the proletariat; for Mannheim, it is

the “free-floating intelligentsia.”¹⁹ According to Popper, this attempt to ground objectivity in social science on a socially detached group of researchers is based on a grave misunderstanding of the methods of science. While Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge seems to depend on a group within society to provide the individual thinkers able to achieve objectivity, Popper holds that objectivity is itself a product of a social group.

The prevalence of a plurality of worldviews, rooted in diverse forms of life and experiences of social reality, does not pose a problem for the pursuit of objective knowledge in the way that relativists seem to believe, according to Popper, since objectivity is not a matter of individual thinkers and their social background but comes about through competition and cooperation in a community of scientists. An objective view of social phenomena is not gained through a reflexive synthesis of the competing forces in society, but through the mutual work of a group whose project of conjecturing and refuting statements remains relatively indifferent to these forces. The effect of “ideology” on the theoretical perspective of individual scientists is thus less of an issue than Mannheim or other relativists make it out to be, since the “minor details” of social class or ideological conditioning are overcome through the collective process of scientific inquiry.²⁰ The sociology of knowledge thus, ironically, blocks itself from understanding the sociological character of knowledge.²¹

¹⁹ The parallels drawn between Mannheim’s intellectual stratum and Lukács’ proletariat rest on a particular understanding of each thinker, which closer investigation would significantly complicate. Since we are here concerned with Popper’s criticism, we take this reading at face value. In the following sections, however, we will begin to see that Mannheim’s conception of the intellectuals is more complex than this criticism—and many of those repeating Popper’s and Adorno’s arguments—lets on.

²⁰ “Such minor details as, for instance, the social or ideological habitat of the researcher, tend to be eliminated in the long run; although admittedly they always play a small part in the short run” (Popper [1961] 1976b, 96).

²¹ Here Popper repeats formulations from *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper [1957] 1961, 155) and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper [1945] 2013, 424).

While the treatment of the sociology of knowledge in the Tübingen working paper ends with these remarks, Popper elsewhere subjects Mannheim's work to criticism. In *The Poverty of Historicism* ([1957] 1961), for example, Mannheim represents a kind of historicism that Popper labels "holism" for its efforts to weave all the disparate understandings of society into a "whole" that operates according to its own logic. The hope of synthesizing the various tendencies and worldviews in society produces an unscientific approach to social research, since it seeks to combine these viewpoints into a metaphysical unity that cannot be experienced as a series of facts. Since the notion of "truth" contained in such a synthesis is not based on the testability of statements about possible experiences, but on a speculative belief in the conditioning of thought by existence, and the existence of a group able to overcome this conditioning – it is thus fundamentally anti-democratic. With unfalsifiable principles guiding their "criticism," sociologists of knowledge will have a hard time articulating an unambiguous opposition to totalitarian political programs, and might easily be used by them.

According to Popper's criticisms, the very starting point of the sociology of knowledge – the existential boundedness of thought – makes rational discussion impossible. In his *Open Society and Its Enemies*, for example, Popper groups Mannheim together with the worst kinds of Hegelians and Marxists, who aim to "unveil the hidden motives behind our actions" ([1945] 2013, 422). Psychoanalysts (such as Freud) and socio-analysts (such as Mannheim) claim to have the secret to their opponent's position, but really possess something much more nefarious: a weapon whose use is unlimited once its meaningfulness has been conceded. Socio-analysis—the name Popper gives to Mannheim's procedure of self-clarification—gives the sociologist of knowledge unbounded power to reject any criticisms of their work as rooted in vested social interests without having to answer the criticisms on their own terms. It also gives them the power to invalidate opposing

positions through recourse to unfalsifiable claims about the unconscious conditioning of their opponents' thought. In reality, however, those who claim to have overcome their prejudices are the most likely to be prejudiced.²² Just as none of the conference attendees could argue with the rogue anthropologist, since the latter could merely explain away their arguments as certain kinds of behavior, the sociologist of knowledge protects their work from criticism in a way unfitting of a true scientific researcher. Together these figures represent regressions to the dogmatic philosophies of the closed society.

Though Popper does not systematically or thematically outline what "ideology" means in his thought, the term is used in the contemporary style, as a stand-in for irrational positions and superstitious beliefs made obsolete by scientific thinking. Mannheim's work on ideology, utopia, and their influence on human thinking is ideological in this sense. Instead of a belief in the power of reason to further human freedom, Mannheim stresses the forces of necessity weighing humanity down. His attempt to free people from the factors determining their thinking by becoming aware of those factors thus repeats the old Hegelian "prejudice" that freedom comes about through the recognition of necessity. Popper writes:

But that the sociology of knowledge preserves this particular prejudice shows clearly enough that there is no possible short-cut to rid us of our ideologies... Self-analysis is no substitute for those practical actions which are necessary for establishing the democratic institutions which alone can guarantee the freedom of critical thought, and the progress of science. (Popper [1945] 2013, 429)

Viewing freedom as the recognition of necessity is reactionary because it finds truth in the recognition and justification of existing political conditions. Since the sociology of knowledge

²² "Is it not a common experience that those who are most convinced of having got rid of their prejudices are the most prejudiced?" (Popper [1945] 2013, 429). This comes very close to an insight formulated by Mannheim: "Those persons who talk most about human freedom are those who are actually most blindly subject to social determination, inasmuch as they do not in most cases suspect the profound degree to which their conduct is determined by their interests." (Mannheim 1936, 48).

purportedly begins by identifying truth in our social conditions, and then attempts to “overcome” this connection through recourse to an intellectual stratum capable of self-clarity, it is an illiberal enemy of the open society and the progress it stands for. Truth is only possible as the product of a community committed to mutual rational criticism. In the place of an environment where all can criticize and be criticized, Mannheim posits a stratum committed to an esoteric synthesis to come. The role of these intellectuals – as advisors to those in power – is incompatible with the promise of democracy. Mannheim’s version of the sociology of knowledge promises only to strengthen the authoritarian tendencies of modern society. Popper’s treatment of the sociology of knowledge thus finds in Mannheim a metaphysician of the closed society.

b. The Defender of the Status Quo

Adorno focuses on the same aspects of Mannheim’s thought as Popper had in the 1961 dispute, since his comments there are a response to Popper’s. He writes: “Both of us surely adopt an equally negative attitude towards a philosophy based on standpoints and, consequently, to a sociology based on standpoints” (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 120). What Mannheim calls the “existential connectedness” or “standpoint-boundedness” of thinking actually refers, according to Adorno, to the ideological illusions belonging to particular sectors of society. The primary element motivating sociology cannot be the apparent contradictions between worldviews within society, but must arise from the experience of society as contradictory in itself. The dialectical investigation of social reality thus foregrounds its objectively contradictory character, theoretically explicating its material and organizational elements, while the sociology of knowledge studies ideas – ways of thinking, mental habits, and differences in society’s *appearance* – among its various strata.²³

²³ For a helpful critical treatment of the major works in which Frankfurt School authors criticized the sociology of knowledge, see Jay (1974).

According to Adorno, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge dissolves the distinction between true and false consciousness. This dissolution is evident from Mannheim's treatment of "ideology." Though the use of the concept of ideology originated in political conflict, where the thought of one's opponents could be reduced to their social conditions (*viz.* the "bourgeois economics" of Marx's work), Mannheim describes a process whereby this concept became total and general in its application: applying not only to the thought of everyone in the political field, but even to one's own thought. According to Mannheim, this general-total conception of ideology names a mode of conditioning present in all consciousness. Adorno, however, rejects the general-total conception of ideology, since it covers over the scientific concept of ideology that was developed by Marx still remains valid today.²⁴ Ideologies, according to Adorno, are socially necessary illusions that prevent members of society from understanding its conditions. By striving against the *false consciousness* of ideology, the critical theorist uncovers the contradictions necessitating these illusions, which are the contradictions of a class society. The general crisis of thinking that Mannheim locates in the spread of ideology as a concept is in fact merely a crisis of a bourgeois worldview in decline.

Through this recognition of ideology's pervasiveness, Mannheim's method is led into a kind of relativist positivism, where the facts of social life are taken for granted, and nothing can be subjected to criticism. All styles of thinking are limited, each perspective has its own mode of truth, and the truth about society as a whole—if this is even possible—would involve synthesizing all of these partial (and partially false) perspectives into some positive product. The intellectual

²⁴ "Whilst the sociology of knowledge, which dissolves the distinction between true and false consciousness, believes that it is advancing the cause of scientific objectivity, it has, through such dissolution, reverted to a pre-Marxian conception of science—a conception which Marx understood in a fully objective sense." (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 116)

stratum, the group concerned with effecting this synthesis, must hold together the divergent worldviews and viewpoints within itself, and through cultivation develop them into something new. The emphasis on ideology's pervasiveness, and the persisting hope for synthesis, combine to eliminate the possibility of a criticism of society's real conditions. As Adorno writes elsewhere: "Like its existentialist counterparts, [the sociology of knowledge] calls everything into question and criticizes nothing" (Adorno [1937/1953] 1985, 453). The intelligentsia's attempts to synthesize the contradictory interests in society in its intellectual work is bound to fail, since the "totality" this group of intellectuals aspires to is not a fundamentally contradictory, negative totality, like that of the critical theorists, but bears the promise of synthetic reconciliation.

Like Popper, Adorno finds that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge fails at the goal of criticism. Through empty gestures, this research program pretends that it has a concept of critique—an ability to distinguish between truth and falsity—when in fact it has none. Even Popper's criticism of Mannheim falls short under this standard, since Popper does not understand the need for critique to take aim at more substantial realities than mere scientific theories and the propositions expressing them. Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia," able to overcome its own social conditioning for the sake of objective knowledge, is of a piece with Popper's ideal of the community of scientists working toward objective knowledge: neither are able to grasp the true antagonisms within society, since neither conceive society as a negative totality. The hope for reconciliation, for some form of positivity amid the contradictions of society, leads both Mannheim and Popper astray. Adorno therefore writes: "In short, I am in agreement with Popper's critique of the sociology of knowledge; but it also is the undiluted doctrine of ideology" (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 116).

The critical theorists' treatment of the sociology of knowledge further takes issue with its attempt to create a scientific subfield to study the influence of social conditioning on thinking. In this way too, Mannheim falls prey to the same problems as Popper's philosophy of the social sciences: his research starts from within the "symptoms" of the current academic division of labor, but instead of understanding the functions of these conditions, attempts to devise an objective scientific research program concerned with truth.²⁵ By attempting to study ideology as yet another empirical phenomenon, Mannheim gives up the possibility of insight into the concrete contradictions of the prevailing order.²⁶ It is for this reason that Max Horkheimer, in one of his earliest published writings, inveighs against Mannheim's treatment of ideology in *Ideology and Utopia* as an "idealist illusion."²⁷ Like Popper and the empirical social scientists disavowing the dialectical theory of society, the sociologist of knowledge inadvertently ends up serving the existing order.

As we saw above, the specificity of the dialectical theory of society, according to Adorno, is that it opposes the overarching logic of the contemporary social order. To produce a failed criticism of this order is to develop theory that advocates for it, despite all its purported intentions. If the sociology of knowledge is possible as a specialized field, it operates within a part of the social order and claims to have adequate knowledge of the whole. The sociology of knowledge's claim to understand society beyond the particularity of its parts ultimately degrades the theory of

²⁵ "The irrational seems to endow ideologies with substantiality in Mannheim. They receive a paternal reproof but are left intact; what they conceal is never exposed. But the vulgar materialism of prevailing praxis is closely related to this positivistic tendency to accept symptoms uncritically, this perceptible respect for the claims of ideology" (Adorno [1937/1953] 1985, 463).

²⁶ "Research into ideologies, or sociology of knowledge, which has been taken over from the critical theory of society and established as a special discipline, is not opposed either in its aim or in its other ambitions to the usual activities that go on within classificatory science" (Horkheimer [1937] 1992c, 209).

²⁷ "The notion that one could understand a *Weltanschauung* purely on the basis of investigations of intellectual constructs, without consideration of the material conditions of their emergence and existence, is an idealist illusion" (Horkheimer [1929] 1993, 143).

ideology, since it tries to assimilate itself into the ideological division of fields. If the conditioning of thought by existence can be studied by a specialized researcher, however, the theory that results will not oppose the existing order but will agree with it in a fundamental, even if invisible, way. In his scathing review essay on Mannheim's *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* ([1935] 1940), Adorno thus writes:

While the sociology of knowledge dreams of new academic fields to conquer, it unsuspectingly serves those who have not hesitated a moment to abolish those fields. Mannheim's reflections, nourished by liberal common sense, all amount to the same thing in the end—recommending social planning without ever penetrating to the foundations of society. The consequences of the absurdity which has now become obvious and which Mannheim sees only superficially as a 'cultural crisis', are to be mollified from above, that is, by those who control the means of production. This means, however, simply that the liberal, who sees no way out, makes himself the spokesman of a dictatorial arrangement of society even while he imagines he is opposing it. (Adorno [1937/1953] 1985, 464)

The sociology of knowledge can only win itself a position in the academy by adopting a way of seeing shared by those in power – a mode of perception that eliminates at the outset the possibility of understanding the antagonisms of the social world. In its struggle for an academic field of its own, Mannheim's research seeks an alliance with the ruling class whose control over society expands beyond material and organizational realities, and into ideological and cultural ones. Social theory thus assumes, as a matter of its institutional aspirations, a profound agreement with the divisions and distinctions determining the shape of this order, when its properly critical goal should be to grasp these divisions in their necessity, and through understanding oppose them.

In his criticisms of Mannheim, Adorno thus also takes aim at the critical agent, the intellectual stratum. Where Mannheim sees a group in which the variety of society's class backgrounds and forms of life can be found, and in which this plurality still shares an intellectual culture capable of producing a synthesis, Adorno sees a growing group of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois planners-in-waiting. The way in which this group seeks to reconcile the competing

interests in society through its view of the whole masks the contradictions underlying its position. By rejecting the centrality of class—and therefore the organizational principle of society—the schemes for planning devised by Mannheim ultimately serve the interests of the ruling class. The deficiency of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge as a social theory thus comes from the fact that it understands a part of the social order to be disconnected from this order when this is scarcely possible. By positing an unconditioned or transcendental position capable of objectivity, Mannheim reflects the socially necessary illusions of a reified society.²⁸ The self-criticism or self-understanding sought by the sociology of knowledge is false, since it foregoes knowledge of the objective conditions of society in favor of idealistic dreams of an intellectual synthesis. These dreams only end up serving a ruling class that is steadily increasing its authoritarian hold. Because this research program contributes to the idealistic mystification of the social sciences, the sociologist of knowledge is therefore a philosophical advocate of the status quo.

3. Critique and the Critical Intellectual

For all their conceptual differences, Popper and Adorno took time during the papers at their 1961 symposium to criticize Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge. To Popper, Mannheim is a pseudoscientist whose theoretical pretensions eliminate the possibility of rational discussion; to Adorno, Mannheim is an empirical social researcher in search of an established field, and so not so different from Popper. The sociologist of knowledge in this debate plays the role of an irrationalist metaphysician of the closed society, and an empirically-minded social scientist working to maintain the status quo, depending on which account we believe. But the incongruity

²⁸ “Once ideology was called socially necessary illusion. Then the critique of ideology was under obligation to provide concrete proof of the falsehood of a theorem or of a doctrine; the mere mistrust of ideology, as Mannheim called it, was not sufficient. Marx, in keeping with Hegel, would have ridiculed it as abstract negation. The deduction of ideologies from social necessity has not weakened judgment upon their falseness” (Adorno [1961] 1976b, 115).

between these roles should raise suspicion. Although they agree in their rejection of the sociology of knowledge and its primary exponent, this is an agreement built on unstable ground, with each seeing in this figure something of the other. It thus seems likely that the inconsistent portrayals of this single figure tell us more about the critical rationalist and critical theoretical research programs, respectively, than about the sociology of knowledge. As the enemy of the open society and the defender of the status quo, after all, the sociology of knowledge plays roles it has often been called upon to play by the broader tendencies sharing the critical rationalist and critical theoretical outlooks.²⁹ That both an ameliorative liberal and an emancipatory Marxist position tend to reject the sociology of knowledge alerts us to a concrete possibility excluded by both, even if ill-understood by either.

Before we begin to briefly outline Mannheim's own program, we should note a common element to Popper and Adorno's criticisms of the sociology of knowledge: the part played by intellectuals. Both take issue with Mannheim's conception of the intellectual stratum, whether in his purported claim that this stratum is free of class commitments, or his belief that such a stratum is capable of overcoming relativism. For both as well, the portrayal of the intellectual stratum presents an untenable and undemocratic ideal of social planning. Supposedly attaining clarity regarding their ideologies and utopias, and capable of overcoming the problem of relativism so deeply felt in our time, the intellectuals in Mannheim's work, are apparently the only group capable of effecting the necessary synthesis. At the same time, this particular agreement in the critical rationalist and critical theoretical rejection of the sociology of knowledge is striking, as neither

²⁹ A.P. Simonds thus writes, for example: "A collection of critical conventions about Mannheim's views has come to stand in the place of those views themselves; what he actually wrote in *Ideology and Utopia* and the related papers has been both faded and distorted by the critical lens that has been held up to them" (Simonds 1978, 14–15)

critical vision is centrally concerned with the intellectual – either as a stratum in society, or as a process of developing critique.

According to Popper’s critical rationalism, the intellectuals capable of changing society are social scientists working toward understanding the problems they want to change, devising and testing solutions to these problems, and convincing political powerholders and the democratic polity that their solutions are a good course of action.³⁰ Popper’s path from social science to political change thus rests on the community of scientists democratically realizing its insights in society. Though he is open to comprehensive institutional reforms and creative solutions to social problems, these experiments should be limited in their scope. The way to achieve anti-utopian social improvement – the best kind of change we can reasonably hope for – lies in heeding the serious risks of unintended consequences and focusing thereby on widely recognized, and carefully delimited, injustices. This model of social change is, like the other aspects of Popper’s thought, liberal and democratic. Democratic institutions and elections among a well-educated populace are where social science is put into action.³¹

Popper’s inclination toward gradual social change emphasizes the functioning of existing institutions as the environments where criticism is carried out. Since the work of criticism is difficult, requiring not just a community dedicated in common to the search for truth, but researchers trained in speaking and writing clearly and unambiguously, and an institutional climate sufficiently flexible to allow for the new discoveries that can result from unconventional combinations of researchers, the scientists and researchers carrying out this project must be highly

³⁰ See a clear statement of this vision in Popper’s essay “Utopia and Violence,” in Popper ([1948] 2002d, 485-488).

³¹ Jeremy Shearmur’s article on Popper’s political thought is a good resource for understanding what I am here calling his “theory of change” (2016). Malachi Hacoheh’s (1998) treatment of Popper’s life situates these commitments as responses to the political events that Popper lived through, including the rise of communism in Vienna and his exile to New Zealand.

educated. The modern research university, if properly shielded from undue political and economic influence, provides the opportunity for the best solutions to society's problems to be formulated, since it fosters the education and critical discussion of scientists and researchers in an environment where their academic freedom is guaranteed. Though this was not always the case, the critical intellectual today is mostly an academic researcher—a scientist—albeit one who is familiar with the work occurring in other fields, and who therefore understands the limits of specialization.³²

Due to his perspective on academic research and its role in the reproduction of capitalist society, it appears doubtful that Adorno can offer much in the way of an account of the role of intellectuals in social change. Since society is a collection of fragmentary moments that are nonetheless systematically related, the work of intellectuals – whether they are empirical sociologists or the broader “intellectual stratum” – is a part of the society it seeks to criticize. In the sense that the academy plays a political and economic role in the maintenance of the contemporary world, the lives of researchers, as well as the questions they ask, the unconscious reflexes they exhibit, and the trends developing among them, are determined by the order of society. The divisions and priorities realized in the research environment—who gets funding, the distribution of prestige, the way in which curricula are structured—are all important for understanding this environment. At the same time, as members of society, the researchers are conditioned by exactly these problems down to the level of their unconscious habits, personality types, and attitudes towards authority. Critical theory as Adorno conceives it amounts to a micrological reflection of these dimensions and aspects of contemporary life, and thereby a clearer

³² See Popper's postscript to the *Positivist Dispute* volume, titled “Reason or Revolution?” ([1971] 1976a), for summary of this position.

understanding of the shape and movement of the whole whose negativity is no less negative for the fact of its systematicity.³³

While a theoretical understanding of society is clearly a part of critical theory's emancipatory vision, the specific way in which the individual intellectual resistance necessary for this understanding relates to the transformation of the social order is far from straightforward. While this program aims to reflect on a negative social totality, the process of its production cannot aim at the better functioning of any part of this order.³⁴ Theoretical work must not only struggle against the conditions of exploitation in society, but must also resist the prevailing anti-intellectualism that demands direct effectivity as an index of truth, since this "actionism" is already a structuring principle of social reality.³⁵ In Adorno's later writings, this problem is addressed through an appeal to maturity and the autonomy of individual thought. The best hope for critique lies in a transformation of individual sensibilities and the development of a mature attitude toward culture.³⁶ In this way, Adorno's approach to intellectual work stresses the cultivation of a critical attitude resisting contemporary forms of specialization and sensibility.³⁷ But how this sense of maturity can develop – which seems to be a centrally important question for critical theory – is

³³ "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed" (Adorno [1966] 1995, 17–18).

³⁴ For example: "Although [critical theory] itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not, either in its conscious intention or in its objective significance, the better functioning of any element in the structure." (Horkheimer [1937] 1992c, 207).

³⁵ See the discussion of actionism and anti-intellectualism in the "Marginalia to Theory and Practice" (2005b).

³⁶ "The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of non-cooperation" (Adorno [1966] 2005b, 195).

³⁷ In this connection, Adorno's later writings on education are of interest, including the lecture courses he gave toward the end of his life. See, for example, his advice to sociology students and comments on the sociological discipline in the early lectures of his course, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society* ([1964] 2019).

less clearly or explicitly thematized. Ultimately, it seems that much of the responsibility for the critical spark rests on contingency. For example, Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*:

If a stroke of undeserved luck has kept the mental composition of some individuals not quite adjusted to the prevailing norms—a stroke of luck they have often enough to pay for in their relations with their environment—it is up to these individuals to make the moral and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see or, to do justice to reality, will not allow themselves to see. (Adorno [1966] 1995, 41)

The dialectical understanding of society that truly resists its logic, as we have seen, deprives these intellectuals capable of maturity of a simple function or social role. At the same time, in their theoretical resistance, critical intellectuals undertake a moral, almost representative task in the service of those lacking dialectical insight. Though a pedagogical process is outlined in some of these writings, this process ultimately requires the presence of an auspicious few who can think for themselves as the teachers and representatives of those who cannot.³⁸ The outlook embodied by these intellectuals is not solely the result of the education system but develops, in a certain sense, despite this institutional and social reality.

In Popper's critical rationalism and Adorno's critical theory, the work of diagnosing the problematic dimensions of society is, either by design or inattention, relatively disconnected from the process of becoming an intellectual able to offer these kinds of diagnoses. These research programs thus tend to obscure or push into the background their own learning processes, and critique appears to spring from critics whose process of *becoming critical* is either uninteresting or incapable of being planned. The question pervading Mannheim's work, on the other hand, is the role of the intellectual in the process of social change. Especially in the earliest works of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, this question is always reflexive, implicating the life and social position of critics, both as developing individuals and as members of a class. As intellectuals

³⁸ For similar remarks, see Adorno's talk with Hellmut Becker, titled "*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*" (trans: "Education for Maturity and Responsibility," Adorno and Becker [1969] 1999, 22-23).

in society, Mannheim holds, there is no way we can avoid confronting this issue if we wish to develop a critical account of the social sciences. If we concede the existence of major social and political problems as Adorno and Popper do, agreeing on the need for a transformation of society, what role do *we* have in realizing this transformation? While Adorno and Popper each fault Mannheim's program, their own visions of critique and social change shrink back from outlining the development of a critical perspective as question relevant to social research. While it might be true that Mannheim's philosophy of society falls short of Popper's and Adorno's relative standards of critique, it thus also seems likely that these latter programs leave untouched some of the questions driving the sociology of knowledge.

4. *Critique as Self-Examination*

Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* ([1929] 1936) was widely read and reviewed in the period following its publication. Initially a collection of three essays, it was expanded for its English publication in 1936, gaining an Introduction intended for an Anglophone audience, and an encyclopedia article on the growing field of sociology of knowledge. Though it is sometimes taken as a systematic or unified treatment of a single theme (or a pair of themes), this collection is highly experimental and often inconsistent. As Mannheim notes in the English Introduction of 1936:

At the present stage of development we are still far from having unambiguously formulated the problems connected with the theory of the sociology of knowledge, nor have we yet worked out the sociological analysis of meaning to its ultimate refinement. This feeling of standing at the beginning of a movement instead of the end conditions the manner in which the book is presented. (Mannheim 1936, 52)

According to Mannheim, humankind is at an early stage in its ability to grasp the problems posed by the relationship between thinking and social existence. Because the discovery of this relationship is new, the sociology of knowledge requires an experimental style of thinking,

allowing for inconsistency, repetition, and even contradiction.³⁹ Mannheim's experimental work attempts to do justice to these conditions without determining the problem complex too much in advance, and without committing itself too quickly to a rigid way of viewing the problems related to ideology, utopia, and the effect of unconscious factors on our thinking.

The connection between social existence and consciousness is potentially damaging for any project of social research: if different social groups and forms of life have incommensurable modes of perceiving the world—unique collective unconscious biases, or ideologies and utopias—how can we arrive at an objective or scientific description of society? Since the way we think seems intimately connected with our existential background, the difficulty of finding a unified or disinterested perspective, or synthesizing all the available perspectives into one, appears to be a very serious problem. Against the background of this relatedness of thought to social existence (the *Seinsverbundenheit* or *Seinsgebundenheit des Denkens*), Mannheim's work attempts to salvage a concept of knowledge and the criteria for its possession. Mannheim's solution to this problem is an intellectual process of self-clarification:

Man attains objectivity and acquires a self with reference to his conception of his world not by giving up his will to action and holding his evaluations in abeyance but in confronting and examining himself. (Mannheim 1936, 48)

The self-examination of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge claims to establish awareness of the unconscious factors conditioning our thinking – the wishes, hopes and dreams underlying our modes of thought. As Mannheim writes in this introductory essay, sociology cannot abolish or

³⁹ For commentaries centering the “essayistic-experimental style” of Mannheim's thought for an understanding of its social and political implications, see especially Colin Loader's *The Intellectual Development of Karl Mannheim* (1985), David Kettler's early essays on Mannheim (1967, 1975), and Richard Ashcraft's “Political Theory and Action in Karl Mannheim's Thought” (1981).

ignore these unconscious factors, but can help us become more aware of them.⁴⁰ The awareness of these conditions provides a crucial step toward our eventual ability to free ourselves from them.

As we can see from this brief exposition, critique in the sociology of knowledge turns on “critical self-awareness” and “self-criticism” (Mannheim 1936, 47). This perspective thus contains the germs of a different perspective from those of critical rationalism and critical theory, since the knowledge it seeks is directly related to an awareness of the critic’s perspective, their social background, and their process of education. In this way, the self-consciousness described in *Ideology and Utopia*’s English Introduction is naturally related to the education of the critic, a connection that becomes clearer and more phenomenologically rich the earlier we go into the history of this research program. Mannheim’s early explorations in “sociology of culture,” for example, are concerned with the cultivation and development of communities of learning capable of adopting new relationships to their social conditioning.⁴¹ In these works, in which some formulations of the later studies on intellectuals can already be found, the overarching aim of social critique necessarily concerns the cultivation of critical consciousness.

Although many criticisms of Mannheim find fault in his focus on the intellectual stratum for attributing an objective perspective on all of society to this group, it is necessary to remember this stratum’s distinctive relationship to critique. If the intellectual function is the ability to clarify and interpret life for acting individuals, the stratum performing this function is neither detached from the conditions of social reality, nor spontaneously able to relate to these conditions differently, but is composed of those who are able to clarify the interestedness of their thought to

⁴⁰ “A new type of objectivity in the social sciences is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them.” (Mannheim 1936, 5)

⁴¹ See, for example, Mannheim’s unpublished “A Sociological Theory of Culture and Its Knowability (Conjunctive and Communicative Thinking)” ([1924] 1982), and his earlier essay on *Weltanschauung* in social research ([1922] 1952a).

themselves, and thereby to cultivate their perspective through a conscious process of education. It is to this end that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge focuses on the intellectual stratum, as a group inside and outside the academy with a distinct relationship to culture.⁴² If we obscure the function of *criticism* in Mannheim's project, however, we lose sight of this essential dimension of the intellectual stratum and can easily see this group as a collection of aspiring planners, or unscientific charlatans. Moreover, though this reading obscures important dimensions of the early sociology of knowledge, it is a reading encouraged by Mannheim's own turn away from critical – and toward more empirical – studies of society and social planning later in his life. Though it is commonplace to take the writings during Mannheim's "English Period" to speak for the overarching tendency of the sociology of knowledge, we have begun to see that such a reading overlooks the development of Mannheim's thought, and the uncertain character of the sociology of knowledge expressed even as late as *Ideology and Utopia*'s 1936 English Introduction.⁴³

The sociology of knowledge seeks to recognize the conditioning of thought by social existence with the aim of freeing thought from its conditions through education. By rejecting this research program, Popper and Adorno equally dismiss a reflexive possibility facing critical social philosophy—the possibility of understanding the development of critique in society as a central question for critical social research. In this way, attention to Mannheim's role in this debate

⁴² As well as Mannheim's discussions of the intellectual stratum in the early 1930's (*e.g.*, Mannheim [1932] 1993, [1932] 1956, [1930] 2001), a longer study of education in his work would also discuss in detail the central chapter of *Ideology and Utopia* on the prospects for a science of politics, since this essay is ultimately about the institutional and historical possibility of a certain kind of education. Colin Loader and David Kettler's *Karl Mannheim: Sociology of Knowledge as Political Education* (2002) is an essential study for orienting this longer effort.

⁴³ Much of Mannheim's intellectual effort throughout his life was spent trying to manage his reception in different contexts – an endeavor driven by his life in exile. For this reason, assessing Mannheim's movement toward a more functionalist philosophy of social planning during his years in England is a task beyond our reach here. For informative treatments of Mannheim's reception, see: Kettler and Meja (1995, 1994, 1985); Kettler, Meja, and Stehr (1990, 1984).

discloses an often-overlooked commitment—and missed opportunity—shared by the critical rationalist and critical theoretical programs. Through their common rejection of this figure, Popper, Adorno, and the traditions reproducing their assessments of the sociology of knowledge avoid reflection on an early version of this latter project's central focus: the development of criticism as a practice of self-awareness. Embodying hope for a form of cultivation that is neither the product of luck, nor merely the result of contemporary academic institutions, these explorations seek a new form of education achievable through an organized process of development. Studying the earlier and more experimental dimensions of this project bears the possibility that we might glean fragments of a critical social philosophy quite different from both critical rationalism and critical theory, and in so doing, renew the possibility of social critique as the education of social critics.

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