KARL MANNHEIM:

WISSENSSOZIOLOGIE AND BLACK AMERICA

Karl Mannheim lived in a trying place during trying times (Hungary – March 27, 1893 – January 9, 1947). These were the times of the two World Wars; therefore, it is easy to understand his, and others of this time and place, desire to nurture and study revolutionary and reactionary thought. Many of them were re-examining traditional views of reality, values and principles. In their unsurety, they posed questions of and about reality, and from their state of disillusionment, shaped the climate of young utopian thought. It was determined that the elders were to blame for the quagmire from which the youth would navigate toward perfect knowledge and perfect action. During this time, there were many contradictory systems of thought and each shaper of thought claimed truth more absolute with intent to implode truths of previous thinkers.

Mannheim’s concept of the sociology of knowledge (often misunderstood) pivoted around the possibilities that participation in social processes had an important role in acquiring genuine knowledge in spite of ubiquitous and contradicting relativistic assertions with which he contended. Not of relativistic thought, Mannheim’s believed relativism to be an issue when one develops an ahistorical perception. Instead, his relationist approach to developing a perception lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive perspective that fends fragmented and partial social / political perspectives. To Mannheim, sociology represented the “inescapable ground of self-validation,” and a “complete theory of the totality in social process. Wissenssoziologie (the sociology of knowledge) is unique in that it offers a study on human thought among
different groups at different times forcing an appreciation for the processes of adopting new knowledge and objectivity – a higher plane in human relations (Mannheim 1952). I am; therefore, positing the thesis that there is a need for thorough socio-historical investigation in and of America that would produce a worldview to jumpstart processes of amelioration for the ills of the Black community.

Mannheim and his teacher / associate, Georg Lukacs were influenced by the ideas of Georg Simmel. His list of works is impressive, for in my short and humble study; I often found myself spinning in thought on his concepts of thought, the many processes of acquiring information, and the transformation that makes this information knowledge! I am overwhelmed by the trail that he blazed through risky political thickets inviting thinkers and theorists to expand and consider other modes of thought.

**List of Karl Mannheim’s Work** (Listed Alphabetically)
- *An Introduction to the Sociology of Education*
- *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*
- *Diagnosis of our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*
- *Essays of the Sociology of Culture*
- *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*
- *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*
- *From Karl Mannheim*
- *Ideology and Utopia*
- *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*
- *Sociology as Political Education*
- *Structures of Thinking*
- *Systematic Sociology: An Introduction to the Study of Society*

Mannheim’s concepts were pragmatic – influenced by many theories and stressed practical consequences as being essential criteria in determining meaning, truth, and/or value (Pragmatic 1997), but for this particular exercise, the theories that we will focus on are of two modes of thought – ideology and utopia. Ideological modes of
thought surround our interests that usually generate an obscured reality driven by a collective interest-serving unconsciousness (conservatism), and utopian thought represents an opposing revolutionary movement to that ideological thought. We need to keep in mind that when the utopian modes of thought swell into power, that utopian thought is transformed into an ideology; therefore, it can be asserted that both of these modes of thought are distorted and self serving.

Mannheim’s definition of ideology involved two elements – the particular (thoughts shaped by skepticism of the ideas and representations of the opponent), and the total (thoughts shaped by concrete socio-historical information about the opponent). The commonality of these two elements is that neither depends on what is actually said by the opponent in order to understand the opponent’s real meaning and intent. The ideas that are expressed are interpreted “in light of the life situation[s] of who expresses it” Being abstract, ideologies are difficult to apply to reality, nevertheless, these are ideas that are discussed and shared in common shaping what he calls a group’s Weltanschauung – their framework for viewing reality (Mannheim1952, 1954, 1962, 1982, Sanderson 2005).

Mannheim’s questions were raised during monumental societal movements. They were learning more about their physical worlds, and advancing technologies allowed them more control of nature. These movements (that we are still witnessing) create complex human relations. Our society will continue to advance in these ways; hence, the growing number of challenges in taking human relations to a higher level of consciousness while maintaining social order without sacrificing human or personal
dignity. Akbar (1994) asserts that Western society is challenged with basic human problems (love-making, parenting and peaceful interaction with others) more so than less developed societies. It seems that Mannheim (1952) had a similar thought that shaped this comment, “…Europe and Asia have tackled the possible tasks of human acquisition of knowledge from radically different directions. Europe was going from matter to the soul, Asia from the soul to matter.” It is upon this groundwork that Mannheim sought new concepts on the nature of truth and fact – new epistemology birthed from social experiences. Above scientific and philosophical pursuits of his time were questions regarding the meaning of existence.

Traditionally, thinkers share their personal thought. This is not necessarily helpful to those seeking to interpret or comprehend their own personal lives. The processes of thinking and methods of thought are practically unrecognized leaving an important bit of information inaccessible – intellectual control and self criticism. As societies grow, it becomes necessary to increase the correct “thinking through” of situations in order to maintain an atmosphere of keeping our social processes in check. Mannheim’s concept of the sociology of knowledge is an attempt to describe and analyze the processes of thought and the processes of changing misunderstood thought because of the obscurity of its social origins. He states that there are no original ideas/sentiments motivating any individual – they are formed by life’s experiences.

The Social Experiences

Mannheim sought to interpret thought of one in that one’s particular epoch (social/historical place and time) which involved understanding the styles of thought for
that particular time. These patterns of thought (in an epoch) have already been set and deem appropriate. One either 1) uses that inherited thought and shapes decisions based on that style of thought; 2) elaborates on it to further the inherited mode of responses; or 3) substitutes/consider new styles of thought to deal with new/un-dealt-with challenges.

**The Activistic Experiences**

Mannheim’s second point on knowledge was to reveal that we “act with and against” each other “in diversely organized groups,” and while doing so, we “think with and against” each other. We bind with our groups and attempt to meet our objectives shaped by the character and position of our groups. We do this as we change or maintain our surrounding world of nature and society. The challenge here is having the ability to acknowledge our personal concepts and forms of thought in order to maintain objectivity!

We have pointed out the phenomena that separate individual thought from group activity. This, in short, makes the connection between what one thinks and what actually happens basically irrelevant because of subjectivity that blocks our opportunity to make intelligent assessments or statements about our personal challenges. Ignoring these challenges does not mean that they do not exist! This attempt at nurturing a severance from social situations and activity in context to these situations is probably impossible if an honest assessment is being made of all forms and styles of thought. In the interest of obtaining objective factual knowledge, this form of complete dichotomy would have to be tossed (Manheim 1952, 1954, and 1982).
Mannheim (1954) says that, “….the ultimate criterion in truth or falsity is to be found in the object.” He goes on to say that “the sociology of knowledge is no substitute for this. But the examination of the object is not an isolated act; it takes place in a context that is colored by values and collective-unconscious, volitional impulses.” A new understanding in the social sciences is attainable through critical awareness and control of these objectivities. He points out that the different ways of thinking are not noticeable unless there is social mobility. Although one may think that a society is static, things are constantly changing. Thoughts about this movement remain the same – that is until this movement shifts from being routine horizontal movement! Confronted with the challenges of any vertical movement (ascending or descending), one attempts to cling to their style of thought perceiving the encountered style of thought imposed by other groups to be “errors, ambiguities, or heresies.” This is done without examination of inherited thought or the uniformity of thought in general. It is interesting to see how different groups within a society can have a different way of experiencing the world.

This conflict of epistemology is not what marks decay; it is what marks a crisis that leads to recovery paving a way for new and innovative reform. One should become curious about the gulfs that separate opinions or thought about the same experiences. There is the phenomenon of a particular group being monopolistic with styles of thought – theirs in particular. He refers to the early religious leaders assigned by the masses to be the intellectual strata that controlled the molding of that society’s epistemology. Differing worldviews were either reconstructed or reconciled depending on the naivety of the conflicting group. Nevertheless, the disadvantaged group lived with the
monopolized thought willingly or kicking and screaming. It is important to note here that one of the earlier, if not the earliest, monopolistic group was religious – the church.

In static societies, there is the need for system within the dominant role of experience and thought created by the jockeying for positions of power. We will see in this activity different interpretations of the dogmatize “truth.” In time, there comes the emergence of a “free intelligentsia” from what used to be a closed and organized strata of intellectuals. This puts in mind, the Sophists of the Greek Enlightenment where their expressions of doubt birthed collisions of thought (mythological and analytical). Societies have grown into perpetual movement of social strata (ascending and descending) and situations; therefore, the once monopolizing group is forced to consider multiplicity in styles of thought. Often strategically (maybe even intelligently), there is an adoption to a style of thought; nevertheless, the illusion of a single style of thought has been smashed (Mannheim 1952, 1954, 1962, and 1982).

With science, the development of knowledge is lineal – in an attempt at finding absolute truth, and as new insights and findings are introduced, the old ones that are inconsistent with the new ones are discarded. With art, new insights are not reason to discard the old ones. Each period is dated and stamped giving that period an exclusive validity. With philosophy, there is an attempt at absolute truth in this discipline (similar to science); however, old truths are not discarded after new findings, they are dated and stamped (similar to art). Therefore, Mannheim deducts that because there is no straight “yes” and “no” transition from one epoch to another in philosophy or art (a new
complete system is forming at every stage), which means that positivism would not be an appropriate approach in the study of cultural phenomena.

This awareness opens the door for a sociological perspective in mental structures as “context-dependent.” With the exception of the natural sciences, Mannheim sought to keep existentiality of thought on the forefront in social and material relations so that all forms of social knowledge were considered and not just the falsity in ideology.

**Implications for Black America**

Fein’s (2005) analogy of the heavenward plume from an atomic explosion is appropriate as we examine how we interpret “new.” “Would this illustration of triumphant science usher in a renewed prosperity, or did it forecast their personal destruction? There are facts, as he asserts, that indicate a swell in the middle class population in America. This information is readily accepted and embraced by one group but repulsed by another. This dichotomy, as real as it is, is not exactly the discussion. It is more interesting to 1) understand the nature / history behind the swell of prosperity in America; 2) understand the nature / history of the Black American in this process; and 3) understand the nature / history behind the perpetual rebuttal about how this prosperity is dispersed (to put it bluntly, rebuttal about whether Black America is actually benefiting in this prosperity). There has been a culture of disbelief and distrust cultivated in Black America, and the seed was germinated deeply in America’s history.

Mannheim was an infant when DuBois studied at the University of Berlin (1892 – 1894). He wrote much about this very seed before its growth into this kudzu-type weed choking out prospects of new useful vegetation. He acknowledged his difficulty in
revealing everything possible on the suppression of the slave trade and the system of slavery in America, but he hoped that someone somewhere got something from his “small contribution to the scientific study of slavery and the American Negro” (DuBois 1970). Not many did. Realistically, when we consider the theories of Mannheim (or just sociological theory), as it relates to Black America we have a tendency to overlook the unnatural processes of their social experiences responsible for impairments. For, at one time, Black people had an epistemology until it became unlawful for them to claim it (Wamwere 2002, WaThiong’o 1986 and Rodney 1972). The point is that much of this information has not been, and in some cases, still not provided in early education curriculum (where a worldview foundation is built). The advantage that man has over other forms of life is that his information transitions from one generation to the next as a command of the medium for learning; however, we regress easily whenever our social institutions or our personal lives are disturbed. The psychological economy of a learner is as important as intellect when considering the ability of one to transition from one state of knowledge to another (Mannheim 1962, Akbar 1985, 1994, and Asante 1988). It is possible that, just the thought that DuBois (a Black man) had what he had to offer, would be enough information to encourage another Black man of his day (or even today) to stand up and claim something new and self-determining.

The attempts at providing a platform for newly freed slaves to learn was noble, but not completely thought through. At the foot of the social ladder were the Blacks, and curriculum perpetuated self hatred or the sense of insignificance as a result of omissions from the history books about Africa and the African’s rich contributions to humankind.
There are also implications that curriculum drifted from the truth (Woodson 1992). With all of this in mind, it would be great to think that the platform for newly freed slaves to learn was merely “not completely thought through” and not something thought through in an attempt to truly vaporize an unwanted neighbor. The development and nurture of one’s worldview is crucial, so is the monopoly of the worldview by a dominant group. When one’s worldview is shaped around dislike for oneself and high regard for the dominant group (without identifying with any heroes resembling oneself), there is an impairment created for the individual and collectively – expressed as some self dooming catharsis (Fanon 1963 and 1967).

Mudimbe’s (1988) thoughts on the restructure of Africa is highly applicable in Black America. Instead of taking responsibility of inventing an epistemological presence, there has been a reliance on “big brother.” This has been stifling on good days and, bluntly, suicidal on bad! Black American existence is very much a part of American history and in terms of Mudimbe’s depiction of Mabika Kalanda’s study, it takes strength to establish an autonomy in order to attain intellectual and political liberation. As a consequence we stand the chance of seeing the development of Black Americanism that embraces a less dichotomous existence in America. Of this framework, lies a strategy for new relationships between knowledge and power and a more holistic social / human study in and of America. This could be the abandonment of what DuBois (1996) called “twoness” in and of American society.
Conclusion

“If ever America undergoes great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the Black race on the soil of the United States, - that is to say, they will owe their origin, not to the equality, but to the inequality, of conditions.”

Alexis De Tocqueville

The story of slavery is nothing new; however, the story of slavery and the African in seventeenth-century America is one of horrific ending that left the enslaved group dreamless Costen (1993 and 2004). Nevertheless, for the Black in America, gone are the times for whining and navel-gazing. Once upon a time, worldview monopolists persuaded the Black in America to shelve the thoughts and theories of those recognizing monumental human-rights violations, and tragically for the most part, we have. Here is the newsflash - thoughts and theories on recovering from the degradation of slavery and/or other oppression began to swell as soon as these conditions arose! It is time to pick these works up, dust them off, and recognize how aged these theories are, how on-point they are, and how far behind we are in re-claiming and cultivating a worldview consistent with our origins.
WORKS CITED


(http://www.classicallibrary.org/tocqueville/democracy2/index.htm)


