

# Paradigm for the Sociology of Knowledge

1945

The last generation has witnessed the emergence of a special field of sociological inquiry: the sociology of knowledge (*Wissenssoziologie*). The term "knowledge" must be interpreted very broadly indeed, since studies in this area have dealt with virtually the entire gamut of cultural products (ideas, ideologies, juristic and ethical beliefs, philosophy, science, technology). But whatever the conception of knowledge, the orientation of this discipline remains largely the same: it is primarily concerned with the relations between knowledge and other existential factors in the society or culture. General and even vague as this formulation of the central purpose may be, a more specific statement will not serve to include the diverse approaches which have been developed.

Manifestly, then, the sociology of knowledge is concerned with problems that have had a long history. So much is this the case, that the discipline has found its first historian, Ernst Gruenwald.<sup>1</sup> But our primary concern is not with the many antecedents of current theories. There are indeed few present-day observations which have not found previous expression in suggestive aperçus. King Henry IV was being reminded that "Thy wish was father, Harry, to that thought" only a few years before Bacon was writing that "The human understanding is no dry light but receives an

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1. Nothing will be said of this history in this paper. Ernst Gruenwald provides a sketch of the early developments, at least from the so-called era of Enlightenment in *Das Problem der Soziologie des Wissens* (Vienna-Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumueller, 1934). For a survey, see H. Otto Dahlke, "The Sociology of Knowledge," in H. E. Barnes, Howard Becker, and Frances B. Becker, eds., *Contemporary Social Theory* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940), pp. 64–89.

infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called 'sciences as one would.' " And Nietzsche had set down a host of aphorisms on the ways in which needs determined the perspectives through which we interpret the world so that even sense perceptions are permeated with value-preferences. The antecedents of *Wissenssoziologie* only go to support Whitehead's observation that "to come very near to a true theory, and to grasp its precise application, are two very different things, as the history of science teaches us. Everything of importance has been said before by somebody who did not discover it."

### The Social Context

Quite apart from its historical and intellectual origins, there is the further question of the basis of contemporary interest in the sociology of knowledge. As is well known, the sociology of knowledge, as a distinct discipline, has been especially cultivated in Germany and France. Only within the last decades have American sociologists come to devote increasing attention to problems in this area. The growth of publications and, as a decisive test of its academic respectability, the increasing number of doctoral dissertations in the field partly testify to this rise of interest.

An immediate and obviously inadequate explanation of this development would point to the recent transfer of European sociological thought by sociologists who have lately come to this country. To be sure, these scholars were among the culture-bearers of *Wissenssoziologie*. But this merely provided availability of these conceptions and no more accounts for their actual acceptance than would mere availability in any other instance of culture diffusion. American thought proved receptive to the sociology of knowledge largely because it dealt with problems, concepts, and theories that are increasingly pertinent to our contemporary social situation, because our society has come to have certain characteristics of those European societies in which the discipline was initially developed.

The sociology of knowledge takes on pertinence under a definite complex of social and cultural conditions.<sup>2</sup> With increasing social conflict, differences in the values, attitudes, and modes of thought of groups develop to the point where the orientation which these groups previously had in common is overshadowed by incompatible differences. Not only do there develop distinct universes of discourse, but the existence of any one universe challenges the validity and legitimacy of the others. The co-existence of these conflicting perspectives and interpretations within the same society leads to an active and reciprocal *distrust* between groups.

2. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 5-12; Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, 4 vols. (New York: American Book Co., 1937), 2: 412-13.

Within a context of distrust, one no longer inquires into the content of beliefs and assertions to determine whether they are valid or not, one no longer confronts the assertions with relevant evidence, but introduces an entirely new question: how does it happen that these views are maintained? Thought becomes functionalized; it is interpreted in terms of its psychological or economic or social or racial sources and functions. In general, this type of functionalizing occurs when statements are doubted, when they appear so palpably implausible or absurd or biased that one need no longer examine the evidence for or against the statement but only the grounds for its being asserted at all. Such alien statements are "explained by" or "imputed to" special interests, unwitting motives, distorted perspectives, social position, and so on. In folk thought, this involves reciprocal attacks on the integrity of opponents; in more systematic thought, it leads to reciprocal ideological analyses. On both levels, it feeds upon and nourishes collective insecurities.

Within this social context, an array of interpretations of man and culture which share certain common presuppositions finds widespread currency. Not only ideological analysis and *Wissenssoziologie*, but also psychoanalysis, Marxism, semanticism, propaganda analysis, Paretanism, and, to some extent, functional analysis have, despite their other differences, a similar outlook on the role of ideas. On the one hand, there is the realm of verbalization and ideas (ideologies, rationalizations, emotive expressions, distortions, folklore, derivations), all of which are viewed as expressive or derivative or deceptive (of self and others), all of which are functionally related to some substratum. On the other hand are the previously conceived substrata (relations of production, social position, basic impulses, psychological conflict, interests and sentiments, interpersonal relations, and residues). And throughout runs the basic theme of the unwitting determination of ideas by the substrata; the emphasis on the distinction between the real and the illusory, between reality and appearance in the sphere of human thought, belief, and conduct. And whatever the intention of the analysts, their analyses tend to have an acrid quality: they tend to indict, secularize, ironicize, satirize, alienate, devalue the intrinsic content of the avowed belief or point of view. Consider only the overtones of terms chosen in

3. Freud had observed this tendency to seek out the "origins" rather than to test the validity of statements which seem palpably absurd to us. Thus, suppose someone maintains that the center of the earth is made of jam. "The result of our intellectual objection will be a *diversion of our interests; instead of their being directed on to the investigation itself*, as to whether the interior of the earth is really made of jam or not, *we shall wonder what kind of man it must be who can get such an idea into his head. . .*" Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1933), p. 49 (italics added). On the social level, a radical difference of outlook of various social groups leads not only to ad hominem attacks, but also to "functionalized explanations."

these contexts to refer to beliefs, ideas, and thought: vital lies, myths, illusions, derivations, folklore, rationalizations, ideologies, verbal façade, pseudo-reasons, and so on.

What these schemes of analysis have in common is the practice of discounting the *face value* of statements, beliefs, and idea-systems by reexamining them within a new context which supplies the "real meaning." Statements ordinarily viewed in terms of their manifest content are debunked, whatever the intention of the analyst, by relating this content to attributes of the speaker or of the society in which he lives. The professional iconoclast, the trained debunker, the ideological analyst and their respective systems of thought thrive in a society where large groups of people have already become alienated from common values; where separate universes of discourse are linked with reciprocal distrust. Ideological analysis systematizes the lack of faith in reigning symbols which has become widespread; hence its pertinence and popularity. The ideological analyst does not so much create a following as he speaks for a following to whom his analyses "make sense," that is, conform to their previously unanalyzed experience.<sup>4</sup>

In a society where reciprocal distrust finds such folk-expression as "what's in it for him?"; where "buncombe" and "bunk" have been idiom for nearly a century and "debunk" for a generation; where advertising and propaganda have generated active resistance to the acceptance of statements at face-value; where pseudo-*Gemeinschaft* behavior as a device for improving one's economic and political position is documented in a best seller on how to win friends who may be influenced; where social relationships are increasingly instrumentalized so that the individual comes to view others as seeking primarily to control, manipulate, and exploit him; where growing cynicism involves a progressive detachment from significant group relationships and a considerable degree of self-estrangement; where uncertainty about one's own motives is voiced in the indecisive phrase, "I may be rationalizing, but . . ."; where defenses against traumatic disillusionment may consist in remaining permanently disillusioned by reducing expectations about the integrity of others through discounting their motives and abilities in advance;—in such a society, systematic ideological analysis and a derived sociology of knowledge take on a

4. The concept of *pertinence* was assumed by the Marxist harbingers of *Wissenssoziologie*. "The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, the actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, 2 vols. [Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society, 1935], 1: 219 [italics added]).

socially grounded pertinence and cogency. And American academicians, presented with schemes of analysis which appear to order the chaos of cultural conflict, contending values, and points of view, have promptly seized upon and assimilated these analytical schemes.

The "Copernican revolution" in this area of inquiry consisted in the hypothesis that not only error or illusion or unauthenticated belief but also the discovery of truth was socially (historically) conditioned. As long as attention was focused on the social determinants of ideology, illusion, myth, and moral norms, the sociology of knowledge could not emerge. It was abundantly clear that in accounting for error or uncertified opinion, some extratheoretic factors were involved, that some special explanation was needed, since the reality of the object could not account for error. In the case of confirmed or certified knowledge, however, it was long assumed that it could be adequately accounted for in terms of a direct object-interpreter relation. The sociology of knowledge came into being with the signal hypothesis that even truths were to be held socially accountable, were to be related to the historical society in which they emerged.

To outline even the main currents of the sociology of knowledge in brief compass is to present none adequately and to do violence to all. The diversity of formulations—of a Marx or Scheler or Durkheim; the varying problems—from the social determination of categorical systems to that of class-bound political ideologies; the enormous differences in scope—from the all-encompassing categorizing of intellectual history to the social location of the thought of Negro scholars in the last decades; the various limits assigned to the discipline—from a comprehensive sociological epistemology to the empirical relations of particular social structures and ideas; the proliferation of concepts—ideas, belief-systems, positive knowledge, thought, systems of truth, superstructure, and so on; the diverse methods of validation—from plausible but undocumented imputations to meticulous historical and statistical analyses—in the light of all this, an effort to deal with both analytical apparatus and empirical studies in a few pages must sacrifice detail to scope.

To introduce a basis of comparability among the welter of studies which have appeared in this field, we must adopt some scheme of analysis. The following paradigm is intended as a step in this direction. It is, undoubtedly, a partial and, it is to be hoped, a temporary classification which will disappear as it gives way to an improved and more exacting analytical model. But it does provide a basis for taking an inventory of extant findings in the field; for indicating contradictory, contrary, and consistent results; setting forth the conceptual apparatus now in use; determining the nature of problems which have occupied workers in this field; assessing the character of the evidence which they have brought to bear upon these

problems; ferreting out the characteristic lacunae and weaknesses in current types of interpretation. Full-fledged theory in the sociology of knowledge lends itself to classification in terms of the following paradigm.

### Paradigm for the Sociology of Knowledge

1. Where *is the existential basis of mental productions located?*

a. *social bases*: social position, class, generation, occupational role, mode of production, group structures (university, bureaucracy, academies, sects, political parties), "historical situation," interests, society, ethnic affiliation, social mobility, power structure, social processes (competition, conflict, and so on).

b. *cultural bases*: values, ethos, climate of opinion, *Volksgeist*, *Zeitgeist*, type of culture, culture mentality, *Weltanschauungen*, and so on.

2. What *mental productions are being sociologically analyzed?*

a. *spheres of*: moral beliefs, ideologies, ideas, the categories of thought, philosophy, religious beliefs, social norms, positive science, technology, and so on.

b. *which aspects are analyzed*: their selection (foci of attention), level of abstraction, presuppositions (what is taken as data and what as problematical), conceptual content, models of verification, objectives of intellectual activity, and so on.

3. How *are mental productions related to the existential basis?*

a. *causal or functional relations*: determination, cause, correspondence, necessary condition, conditioning, functional interdependence, interaction, dependence, and so on.

b. *symbolic or organismic or meaningful relations*: consistency, harmony, coherence, unity, congruence, compatibility (and antonyms); expression, realization, symbolic expression, *Strukturzusammenhang*, structural identities, inner connection, stylistic analogies, logicomeaningful integration, identity of meaning, and so on.

c. *ambiguous terms to designate relations*: correspondence, reflection, bound up with, in close connection with, and so on.

4. Why *related? Manifest and latent functions imputed to these existentially conditioned mental productions.*

a. to maintain power, promote stability, orientation, exploitation, obscure actual social relationships, provide motivation, canalize behavior, divert criticism, deflect hostility, provide reassurance, control nature, coordinate social relationships, and so on.

5. When *do the imputed relations of the existential base and knowledge obtain?*

- a. historicist theories (confined to particular societies or cultures).
- b. general analytical theories.

There are, of course, additional categories for classifying and analyzing studies in the sociology of knowledge, which are not fully explored here. Thus, the perennial problem of the implications of existential influences upon knowledge for the epistemological status of that knowledge has been hotly debated from the very outset. Solutions to this problem, which assume that a sociology of knowledge is necessarily a sociological theory of knowledge, range from the claim that the "genesis of thought has no necessary relation to its validity" to the extreme relativist position that truth is "merely" a function of a social or cultural basis, that it rests solely upon social consensus and, consequently, that any culturally accepted theory of truth has a claim to validity equal to that of any other.

But the foregoing paradigm serves to organize the distinctive approaches and conclusions in this field sufficiently for our purposes.

The chief approaches to be considered here are those of Marx, Scheler, Mannheim, Durkheim, and Sorokin. Current work in this area is largely oriented toward one or another of these theories, either through a modified application of their conceptions or through counterdevelopments. Other sources of studies in this field indigenous to American thought, such as pragmatism, will be advisedly omitted, since they have not yet been formulated with specific reference to the sociology of knowledge nor have they been embodied in research to any notable extent.

### The Existential Basis

A central point of agreement in all approaches to the sociology of knowledge is the thesis that thought has an existential basis insofar as it is not immanently determined and insofar as one or another of its aspects can be derived from extra-cognitive factors. But this is merely a formal consensus, which gives way to a wide variety of theories concerning the nature of the existential basis.

In this respect, as in others, Marxism is the storm center of *Wissenssoziologie*. Without entering into the exegetic problem of closely identifying Marxism—we have only to recall Marx's "*je ne suis pas Marxiste*"—we can trace out its formulations primarily in the writings of Marx and Engels. Whatever other changes may have occurred in the development of their theory during the half-century of their work, they consistently held fast to the thesis that "relations of production" constitute the "real foundation" for the superstructure of ideas. "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and intellectual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their

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