

Book Review

From Karl Mannheim. Edited by Kurt H. Wolff. New York: Oxford University Press.

The problem is: how can a unique human being, or group, or period, or 'Weltanschauung' -- how can what the Historicist School called a 'historical individual' -- be presented or mediated? Fundamentally it is the problem of how to go about interpreting intellectual or spiritual phenomena (xii).

This is Kurt Wolff's starting question in an attempt to provide an interpretation of such a phenomenon -- Karl Mannheim. His new book, From Karl Mannheim, includes selections from all aspects of Mannheim's lengthy writing career and is accompanied by a 130 page introduction which endeavors to summarize and interpret everything that Mannheim wrote. Before discussing the introduction, however, it might be useful to look at some of the selections.

The obvious choices were not made in this group of readings. Realizing that both Ideology and Utopia and Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction are in print inexpensively, Wolff decides to place much heavier emphasis on assorted essays, some of which were published independently and others in collections. All periods of Mannheim's career are represented here and, as follows, are also the varying emphases that characterize the course of that career. Mannheim's philosophical dilemma concerning interpretation (in a general sense) is represented in the first four selections: a review of Georg Lukacs' Theory of the Novel; the problem of studying Weltanschauung; the possibility of a sociology of knowledge (written prior to Ideology and Utopia), and the difficulties involved in the interpretation of intellectual phenomena. From this beginning, Wolff turns to Mannheim's more "applied" work with a particularly long selection on conservative thought and a shorter discussion of competition as a cultural phenomenon. Finally, Wolff includes Mannheim's later concerns with education ("Problems of sociology in Germany" and "Education, sociology, and the problem of social awareness") and with the relationship of education (and knowledge) to overall social planning ("the democratization of culture" and "On the diagnosis of our time"). It becomes obvious that this book of readings is not designed to be an "introduction to Karl Mannheim" as a theorist but rather a survey of Karl Mannheim as a man. In addition, the writings can be viewed as illustrations of Wolff's introduction to the book, and it is in that introduction that some threads are tied together.

One of the apparent goals of Wolff's introduction is to summarize the intellectual career of Mannheim, work by work. Considering the task involved, he has done an excellent job of taking the reader through each book, article, essay, and speech and retrieving the central issues in each. Of particular excellence is the commentary concerning the first four selections in the reader where Wolff combines his summaries with a discussion of the theoretical development of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and the relationships of that theory to philosophy (particularly the phenomenologists) and to dominant trends in sociology. Perhaps by comparison, the rest of the introduction seems less adequate in that Wolff becomes involved with his summaries and ignores many important theoretical transitions in Mannheim's later work. The summaries are presented one after another, and Wolff seldom looks beyond his immediate task as he did earlier in the introduction.

In trying to make sense of the work of any social theorist, it is tempting to separate his method of explanation from the substantive areas to which he applies the method. This temptation in analysis is particularly acute in understanding Karl Mannheim who claims to be searching for a method while, at the same time, dealing with such a variety of substantive areas while engaging in his search. As has been pointed out above, Wolff does an excellent job of combining an interpretation of Mannheim's method with his substantive concerns in the early part of the introduction, but in the remainder of the introduction, Wolff largely ignores the former for the latter. In the case of theorists such as Mannheim who proposes a method, as such, for sociology, a distinction between that method and the substantive concerns that result from it will lead to confusion.

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