Religion, Utopia, and Ideology:

Reflections on the Problems of Spiritual Renaissance and Social Reconstruction in the Sociology of Karl Mannheim[1]

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The contemporary spiritual situation of western humanity extends back especially to the nineteenth century.[2] Although our contemporary civilizational crises have deeper roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth and, ultimately, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, new and distinctive phases of our experience began to become evident from the nineteenth century forward and have continued apace in different forms into the present.[3] From the present standpoint, the 1830s and '40s represent a particularly decisive breaking point with the past and a line of continuity with the present.[4] Whether we characterize the situation as "modern" or "Post-modern" (or some combination of the two) is less important than our identification of the precise qualities of this new phase of experience and our comprehension of its historical roots.

From the present standpoint, the central experiences of the new era are best seen as manifestations of a civilizational crisis whose main feature is, on one hand, the evanescence of the idea of a created cosmos, the collapse of the "transcendental" moorings of social existence, and disappearance of the idea of a chain of existence, and, on the other, the emergence of an orientation based more purely on an "activism" uncoupled from any hierarchy of value rationales.[5] The turning point can be seen clearly in intellectual history (a central focus of this paper) in the move from Hegel to Marx. The latter could still see the philosophical contemplation of history and existence as a road to the overcoming of alienations of the spirit and a way back to a unified sense of reality, even as a step toward a higher ecstatic experience. With Marx alienation is overcome in history through collective human self-changing in which the objective becomes not the interpretation of reality but the changing of it, a standpoint stated with special clarity in his theses on Feuerbach, notably the eleventh thesis.[6] However, all across the cultural horizon of the last century and a half there have appeared ever renewed symptoms of this spiritual condition in agonistic and anomistic movements of varying types. The oft noted triumph in our own century of the "principles" of instrumental rationality and utilitarian cost-benefit analysis is itself only the most massive symptom of a deep

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2. The wider set of issues concerning Western civilization which form the background of the present paper is best approached through an examination of the work of Max Weber (esp. 1976) and A. O. Lovejoy (1936).

3.On those phases of history, see Nelson (1981).

4.See the remarks and references to literature in Nielsen (1991).

5.See Lovejoy (1936), Arendt (1958) on this crucial transition.

6.See Rotenstreich (1965) for a particularly sharp discussion of this problem in Hegel and Marx and the great transition which takes place between the two.

shift in cultural sensibility and in no way do these "principles" represent a new "ethic." On the contrary, their preeminent position today reflects the attempt of societies and cultures to function—often quite successfully as "systems"—in the very absence of any hierarchical value structure. Even the "innerworldly" ethics of Protestantism, already a step toward modern "activism," represent a bygone era, one eclipsed by these principles of "functioning" in society, and the "otherworldly" standpoint of the Medieval world is merely an echo found in thinkers still committed to the now ossified versions of Medieval theology.[1]

As Weber pointed out, a "polytheism" of values is implicit in the functional or purposive rationality of our time and is only barely hidden by the attempt of calculating utilitarianism to turn statistical averages into social and moral norms. No hierarchy of values can any longer be convincingly offered under these circumstances, despite the fact that the reestablishment of such a hierarchy has been on the cultural agenda of Western humanity since the turn of the century.[2]

One author who early on gave a particularly interesting diagnosis of our situation was Karl Mannheim. He continued the insights of Weber into the understanding of the structures of consciousness of the twentieth century. From his earliest essay on "Soul and Culture," written during the tumult of the Hungarian revolution, and still under the influence of the intellectual circles of that time (ones which included the young Lukacs), to his most important statement in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), to his final diagnosis of our time, in which "religion" once again plays an important role, Mannheim was deeply preoccupied with both spiritual renewal and with social reconstruction, although the balance between the two shifts away from the former and toward the latter as his life and career were transformed under the impetus of external events and his geographical exodus. His sharpest diagnoses of our current situation are found in *Ideology and Utopia*, a book which stands as both a milestone of sociological analysis and a barometer of our current condition.[3] One of three extraordinarily influential books written in the inter-war years, it stands, along with Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, as a landmark of contemporary consciousness. Indeed, the fate of these three works and their authors' ideas is worth further contemplation.

Lukacs' book is the avowed progenitor of twentieth century Western Marxism and certainly one of the most provocative works of Marxian social theory—any brand of theorizing—in this century, in part because of the fascinating links it forges between the Marxian and Hegelian traditions and those of twentieth century German social theory, especially the writings of Weber, Simmel, Toennies and others. It had barely been published when Lukacs submitted it to an auto-critique in the interest of remaining within the active ranks of the Communist movement. Indeed, Lukacs consistently, and in good Marxian fashion, viewed intellectual life as subordinate to political practice, contemplation as subordinate to activity. His own explanation of these events found in the lengthy 1967 preface to the new edition (translated into English in 1971) makes fascinating reading as

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1.On these issues see Weber (1976).

2.See the differing efforts of Nietzsche (1968) and Scheler (1973) in this direction.

3.The literature on Mannheim has been growing rapidly in recent years. On his early Hungarian phases, see Kettler (1971). Kettler, Stehr and Meja (1984) are particularly strong on the effects of the English environment on Mannheim, while Kojecky (1972) discusses the religious circles frequented by Mannheim while in England (i.e. the so-called Moot, which included T. S. Eliot and other Catholic-English thinkers). On Mannheim in general, see Remmling (1975) and Woldring (1986) who notes the potential "critical" theory found in Mannheim's notion of "utopia."

a prime document in intellectual-political casuistry.[1]

The historical circumstances surrounding the completion of Heidegger's work—certainly one of the currently most influential philosophical works of this century[2]—and the subsequent political involvement of its author are now much better known and their relationship to his main ideas better appreciated.[3] The deep need for cultural and spiritual renewal is at the center of this difficult work, and the tumultuous events of the inter-war years lie only slightly below the surface. Lukacs' work, and Marxism in general, but all of twentieth century technological civilization and its instrumental rationality, are at the further recesses of the book's critical animus, one which comes out with increasing clarity in his later writings, both during the thirties and the war as well as afterwards.[4] And we also now know how much Heidegger believed that the Nazi movement would offer the hoped-for spiritual conquest of materialistic civilization, a belief not altogether renounced by Heidegger even in his well-known interview with *Der Spiegal* in 1967, in which he distinguishes the "spiritual" heart of National Socialism from the awful deeds presumably separable from the movement's "true" spiritual impetus.[5] This bit of casuistical argument along with Heidegger's active devotion in the critical years around 1933 to cultural renewal through social movement places his impor-

tant work and his subsequent publications in a different light, certainly not a wholly "contemplative" one, and makes it possible to better appreciate the degree to which social activism as well as the philosophical penetration of Being was its ultimate goal.

Both of the aforementioned works share an attachment to the "activism" characteristic of our modern condition, and this despite their standing as major works of twentieth century philosophy. In this respect, they represent symptoms of our current spiritual crisis (whatever else they may also be). Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* bears an ambiguous and, in fact, rather more sensitive relationship to these issues. His book is both symptom and diagnosis. The essayistic style cultivated by Mannheim gives the book's various parts a degree of independence and, indeed, even at times a mutually contradictory character.[6] The total, general, and evaluative conception of ideology reflects a recognition that contemporary collective consciousness is entirely fragmented. Each group's ideological consciousness provides access to only a partial view of truth about current reality and, as a result, every group views all others with "suspicion."[7] Consequently, there is a powerful yearning for "totality" in the book, one shared by the aforementioned writers, Lukacs and Heidegger.[8] Mannheim places his hopes for the achievement of a total vision of reality, at least one relevant to the achievement of a science of politics, in the hands of the "unattached

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1.See Lukacs (1971).

2.See Rorty (1979), who remarks that Heidegger, Dewey and Wittgenstein represent the most important moves toward a new philosophy which sees philosophy as mainly a form of life and breaks with the two millennium old traditional view that philosophy does or ought to mirror nature.

3.See the important, devastatingly revealing work on Heidegger and the Nazis by Farias (1989).

4. See the essays on technology, science and modern culture in particular in Heidegger (1977).

5.For the immensely revealing interview with Heidegger, see Wolin (1991).

6.On Mannheim's "experimental" and "essayistic" style see the discussion in Kettler, Stehr and Meja (1984).

7.On the issue of "suspicion," the Sociology of Knowledge, and the modern mentality see Remmling (1963). On the early phase (almost entirely German) of the debate generated by Mannheim's work, see Stehr and Meja (1984).

8.This yearning for philosophical totality was clearly not unrelated to the latter two authors' gravitation toward "totalitarian" mass movements of redemption. It was the sort of association which later led Adorno (1973) to remark that the whole is the untrue.

intelligentsia."[1] He sees the tendency to submit thought to action as characteristic of our time and seems himself to accept this standpoint in the form of the general idea that social existence determines consciousness. Indeed, since Mannheim's time, the competing groups with their existentially determined forms of consciousness have been further multiplied and social and cultural fragmentation has become even more acute. The class, generational, party, and national divisions which figured prominently in his work have been supplemented by ones rooted in "race," gender and ethnic consciousness, and the triumph of a fragmented consciousness saturated with ideology has reached new depths which preclude any idea of a universalizing standpoint. The very idea of universality is discredited and there is a strong tendency to revel in the suspicion which sees ideological bias as omnipresent. In this respect, there is little in "post-modernism" and "deconstructionism" which is not already foreshadowed in Mannheim's discussion of the total, general, and valuative notion of ideology. His own quest for a new science of politics, at the heart of his work, demonstrates his own inability to recognize that the subordination of consciousness to social group existence and thought to action, which he accepts as a hallmark of our time, is itself incapable of gestating the universal, scientific standpoint he desires. His work is thus as much a symptom and harbinger of our condition as it is an acute analysis of it. In this respect, he shares the preference for action over thought, and existence over consciousness, which is found in Lukacs and Heidegger, and was inherited as a problem from the nineteenth century. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, it is a central sign of the times. All three authors reflect a variant of the Napoleonic dictum:—"On s'engage, et puis on vois "—although Mannheim's greater openness to

competing standpoints, his desire to integrate them into a more comprehensive perspective and his increasing commitment to liberal democratic practice gave his work a rather different quality than the other two authors, despite their similar preoccupations. Indeed Mannheim's intellectual sensibility becomes especially evident when we examine the role of the idea of utopia in his work.

The concept of utopia, central to our present concerns, plays an important role in Mannheim's book, although he himself seems at times unsure of its full implications. Mannheim writes, "It is possible, therefore, that in the future, in a world in which there is never anything new... there can exist a condition in which thought will be utterly devoid of all ideological and utopian elements... the complete disappearance of the utopian element from human thought and action would mean that human nature and human development would take on a totally new character. The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing" (Mannheim, 1936:262-263). While the disappearance of ideology would effect only particular group interests, the eclipse of utopia would be a general human disaster. Utopian is identified with both the transcendence of and actual shattering of existing social reality. As such, utopian images are indispensable elements in any possible change and a world without utopias would be an entirely static one, fully transparent to our scientific understanding and subject to our effective managerial techniques, yet still static with reference to any fundamental change of ideals or outlooks. Despite this important role given to utopias in Mannheim, it is not entirely clear that they differ very much from ideologies, since the former are often (if not always) likely to transmute themselves into new ideologies, with one era's utopian images becoming the next era's dominant ideology. Here, We-

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1.Mannheim (1936).

ber's idea of the routinization of charisma takes on new life in Mannheim's analysis of utopia's fate. Perhaps this is why, as Kurt Wolff has noted, Mannheim opted for the formula "ideology and utopia" versus that of "ideology and no utopia," since the latter historical world would be entirely static while the former, even if imperfect, that is, not a fully realized "utopia," would at least have repeatedly "cyclical" dynamic, utopian elements.[1] However, this view of utopia makes it too easy to see utopias as little more than the ideologies of social groups rising to historical prominence within an existing stultifying and unfriendly political and social environment. While Mannheim's formulation finds a crucial role for utopia and preserves a dynamic sense of history, his devotion to an "activistic" view which measures utopia's value by its ability to immediately shatter existing social reality gives his analysis some real limitations. From an alternative standpoint, it might be argued that only those groups whose utopian images utterly failed to take hold historically or "succeed"only in limited social environments (i.e., in smaller communities or as individual thought projects) have a truly enduring utopian character and this by the very fact of their opposition to dominant society or perhaps even by their very failure. While Mannheim does not formulate the matter precisely this way, there is an oddly anti-Hegelian twist to the notion of utopia— only those ideals are viable as universal images which have "failed"—which roots hope in the "lost causes" and neglected remnants of the cultural past. By doing so, it also places utopia so far outside the existing, dominant historical trend that the utopian images take on an "otherworldly" quality, one reflected in our current popular sense of the term utopia. But it is here that Mannheim's notion of utopia has its greatest value in pointing to unrealized and

seemingly unrealizable hopes and ideals which yet propel actors on to their realization, however "impractical" they appear and however limited their actualization in small groups or even in the dream images of individuals.[2]

At several points in his work, Mannheim sees these utopias as also related to the quest for the transcendent and spiritual through the "ecstatic," an "ecstasy" which has, however, become increasingly "democratized" in the last century.[3] The longing for spiritual ecstasy is echoed in Mannheim's earliest work on "Soul and Culture" and reoccurs at several (but only a few) points in his later work.[4]

Perhaps more interesting is the linkage of the gestation of new ideas and ideals (transcendent utopian images) to the withdrawal of the individual either permanently or temporarily into solitude and contemplation. Mannheim writes: "It will become more and more a question whether something corresponding to the monastic seclusion, some form of complete or temporary withdrawal from the affairs of the world, will not be one of the great remedies for the dehumanizing effects of a civilization of busybodies" (Mannheim, 1943:126). Mannheim goes on to add that the functions performed by such seclusion will be both a specialization in religious experience and a consequent passing on of spiritual ideals to new generations, as well as the provision of more secular orders for politicians and others from the world of "action" who wish to temporarily withdraw and seek spiritual renewal. The hints here at a

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1.Mannheim (1971:Introduction).

2.Mannheim actually distinguishes utopias in this sense from dreams, wishes and fantasies and to the detriment of the latter, which he seems to consign to the realm of the impractical or ineffective. See Mannheim (1936). In my view, Mannheim is mistaken to take this view and the two types of phenomena are much more closely related than he imagines. Regrettably, sociologists have yet to say very much very systematically about such phenomena.

3.Mannheim (1971).

4.See Mannheim (1971:Introduction).

"new monasticism" which might provide the social basis for a struggle against the power of a "busy" contemporary society to absorb the individual were not new with Mannheim. They are already found in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.[1] However, they may represent the most "radical" element in Mannheim's thinking when seen in the context of contemporary society which insists that the greatest danger is the individual who removes himself from its rituals of interaction and its busywork. The danger is even greater when such solitude becomes the setting for the gestation of utopian ideas contrary to existing or avowed "values."

It matters little for the moment whether utopian images originate from "traditional" religious or other sources[2] or represent some more recent variants in consciousness, since cultural traditions, when taken seriously, are clearly the source of the most "radical" and "utopian" ideas and the contemporaneity and immediacy of an outlook in no way guarantees its radical or innovative quality, however much it may be touted as "revolutionary" because of its facile appeal to younger generations.[3] As Mannheim noted, real intergenerational conflict of a significant cultural sort, involves the "non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous" in a way which necessarily includes the appeal to non-present standpoints. What is crucial is that the new utopian images be denied any access to processes of routinization, institutionalization, or absorption within the regimes of existing reality. The tendency to instrumentalize all cultural values or to turn them toward ideological uses is a powerful one today and only utopian images whose promise outstrips all practicality or ideological group-solidifying functions can serve as a universalizing agency for spiritual renewal, the critique of contemporary society, and the reestablishment of new value hierarchies—with the attendant effect of marshalling spiritual energies in the service of new transcendent standpoints. As Mannheim already saw in 1929, the ideological quality and even the "deconstructive" element in contemporary consciousness—one to which Mannheim himself contributed—makes it unlikely that any utopian candidates will have any easy time gaining a foothold, especially ones rooted in any of the inherited religious or cultural traditions—themselves seen these days as thoroughly tainted by ideological bias emerging from class, gender, race and so forth and as therefore serving only the purposes of domination. Yet, from what other sources other than a hermeneutically renovated traditional culture or cultures can new experience be ushered forth and such utopian images emerge? In an era which has proven itself incapable of creating any new morality,[4] a period of history in which a bogus, manufactured "charisma" is omnipresent and therefore utterly without significance for the central problems of human existence, it is not likely that new utopias can be created out of purely contemporary resources of experience. Yet, experiences which appeal to the cultural traditions of the past are also discredited. What can be said of a civilization that is incapable of moral and religious innovation and yet repeatedly insists upon destroying its own inherited culture and ideals by virtue of their alleged attachment to repressive so-

1. See Kierkegaard (1962) and Nietzsche (1968). Also, the discussion of these issues in my unpublished essay, Nielsen (1990).

2. It is clear that many utopian projections hark back to ideas and ideals portrayed in earlier literary forms (e.g. Biblical narratives about an Edenic state or about the True Jerusalem) or philosophical and literary ideas about the state of nature. See Lovejoy and Boas (1973) and Nielsen (1991).

3. Mannheim (1952) had a good deal to say about generational experiences.

4. See Ortega y Gasset (1932) who remarks, in a convincing fashion, that the youth movements of his day have provided absolutely no "new ethic" or morality. The same could be said of youth movements in our time.

cial orders? Unwilling to say "yes" to any future, yet able to say only "no" to the past, it circles endlessly about itself, pitting one group's ideological standpoint against another's in the quest to see the immediate realization in "action" of its own view and the total destruction of its opponent's.[1]

Under these circumstances, the call to withdraw from society and the idea of a contemplative standpoint seem the best alternatives, ones which indeed complement each other well. As Mannheim notes, these moves must themselves be "authentic" ones, "necessary conditions for higher religious experience" and not be confused with "mere despiritualized seclusion" (Mannheim 1943:126). While the utopian images nurtured under such circumstances may not be immediately "applied" to current "needs," in the manner of functionally rational "solutions" to an alleged set of "social problems," and may even appear in the immediate context of demands for "action" as irrelevant and even immoral pursuits, they can and must form the basis for long run reconsideration of the most vital issues of human experience and consciousness. Perhaps more important, their very existence and the social processes through which they are gestated serve immediately to reestablish the reality of "contemplation" and its priority over "activism" and reverse the disastrous trend of recent history toward an idolatry of mindless instant "solutions" to human problems offered by all of our "great simplifiers."[2] In achieving the renovation of the contemplative life with its attendant outcomes, the possibility of ecstatic experience and the hope of new utopian ideals, much will already have been accomplished. As Weber wrote: "It is not accidental... that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together" (Weber, 1946:155). But perhaps not even there does it exist any longer.

1.See the comments by Valery (1962) on the experience of helter-skelter inability to fix on any generally acceptable standpoint or ethic.

2.The phrase "great simplifiers" (or "terrible simplifiers") is Jacob Burckhardt's (1943). Fascism in its various forms, ones being revived widely again today, represents the most "pure" commitment to action-without-rationale. See Mannheim (1936). As Arendt (1973) noted, the essence of fascism is the belief that anything is possible.

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