

To Examine Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* Through the Lens of
Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology*

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1. Introduction

Marx and Engels were pioneers in theorizing the social conditioning of knowledge, a perspective later developed further by Mannheim in the 20th century. This paper examines Mannheim's arguments in *Ideology and Utopia* through detailed analysis and adopts Marx and Engels' perspective as a meta-theoretical framework in evaluating them. While Mannheim broadens Marx's insight into socially conditioned knowledge, his approach departs from a strictly materialist critique. Specifically, though he does employ a materialist ground when theorizing the idea of "particular ideology," Mannheim emphasizes "total ideology" as social location and perspectival conditioning across various social groups, rather than shaped by material and class relations. In doing so, he shifts his main argument around ideology away from its original function as a critique of class domination raised by Marx and Engels and toward a more relativized, descriptive framework. Therefore, this paper argues that although Mannheim expands the scope of social conditions in shaping one's knowledge, he simultaneously weakens its critical and political force. This paper elaborates on this argument by first summarizing Mannheim's arguments in *Ideology and Utopia* by deconstructing his assumptions, grounds, warrants, and conclusions; then, I will illustrate Marx and Engels' critique with respect to their materialist determinism and ideology arguments; ultimately, this paper argues that while Mannheim succeeds in expanding the analysis of socially conditioned thought, his relativist epistemology is internally self-refuting, arguments on ideology rests on an inadequately defended one-way causal model between social position and consciousness, while his account of utopia offers a compelling account.

2. Exposition

2.0. Background and Assumption

Mannheim defines reality as "*a concrete historical form of social existence*", a "*operating order of life*" (Mannheim, 1929). He is primarily concerned with how individuals perceive and interpret this reality. According to him, thought and knowledge are socially conditioned, shaped by the social positions and historical contexts of thinkers rather than being purely objective (Mannheim, 1929). His arguments, to this end, focuses on uncovering the underlying mechanism of how social context constrains and enables what individuals recognize as "real" and what is actually real.

At the foundation of Mannheim's analysis lies the key assumption: both individual and collective ideas are rooted in one's social existence. As he puts it, "*the ideas expressed by a subject are a function of his existence*" (Mannheim, 1929), which is explained as one's opinions, statements, and systems of ideas as a whole should be interpreted in the light of the life-situation of the one who expressed them; in other words, the intellectual perspectives of individuals are shaped by the social conditions in which they live. It's important to recognize this assumption as it lays the groundwork for how Mannheim builds up his entire argument on the social conditioning of knowledge.

2.1. Grounds

Based on the assumption, Mannheim points to observable, stable patterns of collective thought across social groups and historical contexts as the evidence in showing how socially conditioned worldviews can be public, and how they diverge from reality.

First he proposed empirical evidence that specific social groups exhibit distinct and relatively stable patterns of thought throughout different stages of history. These patterns reflect the shared ways in which members of one specific group perceive and interpret the world, as he notes, "*the ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group... the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group*" (Mannheim, 1929). An example is the historical taboo against taking interest on loans. Interest on loans used to be publicly perceived as unethical due to the social condition at the time: the societies were structured around

intimate and neighborhood relations. However, as social and economic structure changed, interests on loans were not taken dismissively anymore and even strategically accepted in fighting against emerging capitalist forces by the Church (Mannheim, 1929). This illustrates how collective mentalities, while stable within their historical context, are inherently tied to social conditions in which one group lives in and shift along with changes to social and historical conditions.

A Second empirical ground Mannheim proposes is that traits on collective worldview persist regardless of variations in individual experiences and perspectives within a group. As he observes, “*the individual members of the working-class, for instance, do not experience all the elements of an outlook which could be called the proletarian Weltanschauung*” (Mannheim, 1929), he suggests that a collective worldview of one group is not a sum of fragmented individual perspectives. Instead, the coherent system of thought systematically integrates itself rather than being a random aggregation of personal perspectives (Mannheim, 1929). By the working-class position mentioned, for example, although individual workers experience only fragments of capitalist reality - some facing harsh factory labor, others low wages, and the rest limited coworker interactions - their shared social position still produces a coherent collective worldview regarding production conditions, class relations, and social inequality.

A third empirical ground Mannheim identifies is that many public mentalities can diverge from objective reality, a phenomenon Mannheim calls “*false consciousness*”. An example he raised is that landed proprietors in a capitalist society may attempt to understand and explain his relationship with laborers using patriarchal categories, imposing hierarchical and moralistic frameworks that deviate from the actual economic and social dynamics (Mannheim, 1929). This exemplifies how one public worldview, while is established and coherent within one group at specific historical and social context, can bring misconceptions of current reality.

2.2. Warrants

First, Mannheim adopts a functional reasoning perspective to explain the relationship between social position and collective mentality. He argues that a group’s consistent place within the social structure systematically corresponds to the particular cognitive framework and patterns of perception; as he phrases it, “*there’s a correspondence between a given social situation and a given point of view*” (Mannheim, 1929). By specifically using the term “correspondence”, Mannheim emphasizes that this relationship is a functional adaptation, meaning a group’s mentality evolves to fit and make sense of how the group lives their way at this position. Hence, Mannheim posits this connection is beyond a simple causal relation: a group’s social and historical position shapes a specific type of mentality; and this mentality, in turn, enables its members to interpret the world through a logic that makes them feel their social position justified and meaningful.

Second, because the second ground indicates how individual experiences vary while collective mentality remains coherent, Mannheim frames collective mentality as a structural existence rather than psychological or personal. From a collective perspective, he specifies the “structural origin” of a collective worldview as rooted in 1. historical conditions and 2. social position, including socio-economic structure, class relations, and cultural norms within a given historical context. From the individual perspective, those who share a collective mentality are not its creators but simply carriers. As Mannheim puts it, “*the individual can only be considered as the bearer of an ideology*” (Mannheim, 1929). For instance, in a capitalist society, the historical position of the capitalist class generates a shared cognitive lens. Their socio-economic and class position predisposes them to interpret labor relation through the logic of capital accumulation rather than physical labor. Variations in different capitalist’s personal experiences, such as which industry they’re in and their wealth accumulated, do not fundamentally alter their shared capitalist perspective.

Finally, Mannheim explains the existence of false consciousness as a result of limitation of one's perspective due to their social position; the perspective constraints can produce divergence between collective mentality and objective reality. He identifies three ways mismatch operates (Mannheim, 1929). First, groups may be prevented from recognizing the incongruence of their ideas. In other words, they are structurally unable to perceive the limitation on their own perspective. Second, groups may demonstrate "cant mentality", meaning capable of recognizing the misalignment but trapped into self-deceptive moralism. The third type is conscious deception, a deliberate, instrumental distortion of reality through purposeful misrepresentation out of personal interest.

2.3. Conclusion

Mannheim ultimately reaches several key conclusions with the arguments conceptualized. First, Mannheim puts his core epistemological proposition: no knowledge exists in an abstract, vacuum form; instead, what an individual or group can perceive and comprehend about the world fundamentally aligns and is shaped by the specific position within the social structure. Therefore, social location acts as an inevitable framework for ideas and perspectives.

Then, this social situatedness of knowledge generates a gap between ones' understanding and the objective reality. As a result of the perspective limitation, this gap would lead to ones' mentality deviating from real social condition and order operation. Mannheim conceptualizes this cognitive gap through a set of interrelated core concepts, as demonstrated in figure 1.

"Ideology" in the broad sense refers to such divergence between human cognitive interpretations of reality and the actual state of reality. Mannheim puts it as: *"the situationally transcendent ideas which never succeed de facto in the realization of their projected contents. Though they often become the good-intentioned motives for the subjective conduct of the individual, when they are actually embodied in practice, their meanings are most frequently distorted (Mannheim, 1929)."* Besides, he uses the term "total ideology" in denoting ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group, e.g. of a class, (Mannheim 1929). Specifically, for a collective at a certain social position composed of various individual members, a coherent ideology emerges among the members of this social group. This collective mentality, or total ideology, is universal among its group members and exists as a construct of historical and social structural forces rather than individuals' personal contribution. Particular ideology, conversely, refers to the intentional distortion of reality driven by self-interest, operating on a personal and psychological level in contrast to the total ideology.

Extending the idea of ideology, Mannheim also theorizes the state of mind named "utopia", defined as *"incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs"* and *"when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time"* (Mannheim, 1929). Hence, it could be concluded that Utopia is another type of situationally transcendent idea in juxtaposition to ideology; it also results from ones' social position, but has the potential of reshaping reality.

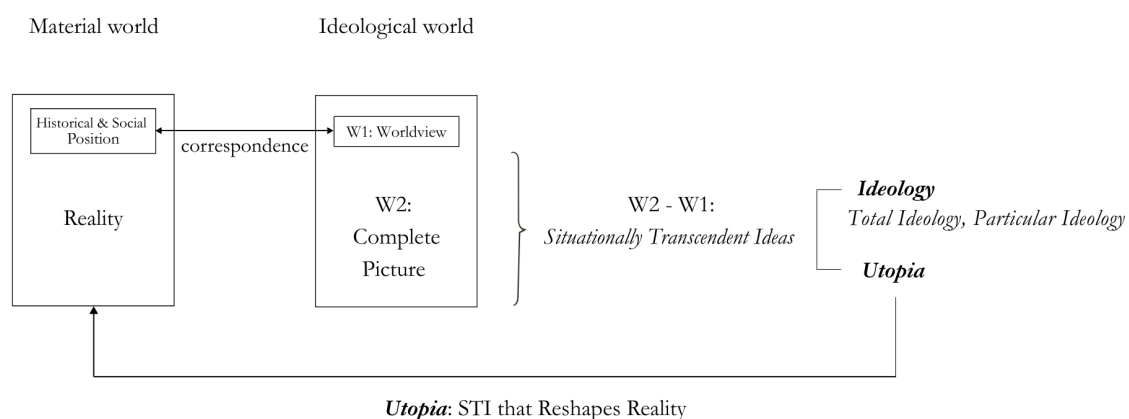


Figure 1: Graphic Explanation of Mannheim's concepts of Ideology & Utopia

3. Translation

3.1. Marx and Engels' Proposition

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argue that social existence determines social consciousness; and most importantly, materials and economic production conditions and relations fundamentally determine how one would think of the world. As Marx and Engels (1845) state, "*Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.*" and specifically regarding "the life-process", they further suggest that "*As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production*". This reveals that human consciousness is not an abstract, independent mental product but a concrete reflection of experiences in material life; the way individuals produce their means of subsistence, the material conditions they live in, and the economic relations they engage in all collectively shape their mentality inherently. It could be concluded that materials and economic factors are the fundamental determinants of human consciousness, and this idea is also one of the most significant premises they hold in further elaborating on their definition and justification of ideology.

Marx and Engels further propose that ideology reflects the interests of the ruling class, producing a public consciousness that serves to maintain their dominance. Even though it is often phrased as a universal and seemingly reasonable public consciousness among the ruled, its main effect is to obscure the true power relationship between classes. They build up this argument step by step from the materialist determinism premise. They claim, "*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force*" (Marx & Engels, 1845). This highlights that the class that controls the means of material production also seizes control over the means of mental production. Control over material and mental resources give them the ability to influence and disseminate a prevailing social consciousness through vehicles such as education, media, culture, religion.

Ultimately, the ruling class universalizes its class-specific interests using their control over the means of mental production. Marx and Engels (1845) notes, "*The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.*" This reflects their position that the ruling classes transform their class-specific material interests and power relations into ideas framed as universal, rational, and eternal truths, framing its particular interests as the common interest of all members in the society. This universalization conceals the exploitative class nature of lower, making its material rule appear legitimate. Hence, from the perspective of part of the ruled, the collective consciousness and perception of the world is constructed by what the ruling class wants the public to believe in. Marx and Engels specifically use a metaphor that, "*in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura*" (1845). Here, the inverted imaging of a camera obscura symbolizes how the ideology systematically reverses the real material logic of society. It enables the ruling class to falsely present its self-serving ideas as rational and rational truth, imperceptibly legitimating and consolidating the ruling class's dominance of production means and materials; whereas the underlying reality is that such material dominance is the very foundation of its ideological hegemony.

3.2. Marx and Engels' Response to Mannheim

3.2.1. On Epistemology

Marx and Engels share a core agreement with Mannheim on the social rootedness of consciousness. Both of them reject the idealist view of consciousness as an abstract, ahistorical construct in a state of vacuum. Going back to Mannheim, he argues that one's cognitive framework is shaped by the social position - specifically the social and historical context - of which one's in. Similarly, for Marx and Engels, they also argue that one's mentality is a reflection of their lived experience in the material world. Therefore, both thinkers share the underlying premise of knowledge situated in real social life rather than abstract rationality as the ground of their arguments respectively.

However, Mannheim's relativist epistemological stance stands in sharp opposition to Marx and Engels' scientific historical-materialist view. Mannheim infers the non-existence of objective truth from the social embeddedness of consciousness, arguing that all knowledge is partial and bound to specific social perspectives of different people, as he argues "*one's perspective contains within itself the whole system of thought representing the position of the thinker in question and especially the political evaluations which lie behind this system of thought (1929)*". Hence, it leaves no room for universal or objective understanding of the social world. By contrast, Marx and Engels hold that while one's consciousness is socially shaped, social existence is ultimately rooted in verifiable material production conditions. They indicated, "*Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production*", through which they suggest the existence of such objective social laws governing human development, which is that the social structure evolve out of material production, and this knowledge is not unknowable and objectively exists. Besides, they specifically argue for a rigorous method that allows individuals in various social positions to grasp and verify such knowledge, through the practical activity of revolution (1845). Therefore, in short, though Mannheim believes that because every single social member is in a specific social position that prevents them from knowing the world in an objective matter beyond the cover of ideology, Marx and Engels would disagree and argue that revolution allow individual to shatter the disguise of ideology and comprehend the fundamental law of social order.

3.2.1. On Arguments

Building on the critique on Mannheim's epistemology, Marx and Engels will further critique Mannheim for blurring the primacy of material conditions by incorporating non-determinant factors and social factors other than class, and historical context into his analysis of consciousness. While Mannheim acknowledges that social position shapes thought, he frames this position as a multifaceted construct and continuously uses the broad terms of "social" and "historical" when referring to the idea of position in a structure(Mannheim, 1929). For Marx and Engels, this pluralistic approach dilutes the core driver of ideology. In direct contrast, they assert that material production is the sole underlying determinant of mentality. They contend, "*The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production*" (Marx and Engels, 1845). For them, regardless of historical variations, the way a person produces their livelihood depends on materials, and this materialist primacy trumps all other social factors in shaping how one lives and how one's thoughts are formed. Henceforth, they will consider Mannheim's inclusive, "socially-driven" framework as failing to recognize the hierarchy among all social factors and underestimate the determining force of economic conditions.

Moreover, Marx and Engels further reject Mannheim's neutralization of ideology, which strips it of its critical, exploitative edge. Mannheim phrases the idea of ideology simply as the difference between how one perceives the society and what the reality is due the limitation of perspective (1929). Even Mannheim specifically uses the term of "particular ideology" in referring to the practice of politicians or people of power intentionally manipulating ideology for the sake of personal interest, Marx and Engels would point

out that Mannheim's neutral attitude toward public consciousness other than particular ideology ignores the power dynamic inherent in class societies. In response to Mannheim's indication of "limitation of perspective due to social position", Marx and Engels would argue that the very foundation of limitation in perspective is limitation in materials and means of productions; and, recalling the metaphor of a camera obscura, the reason that Mannheim attribute it to factors other than class and economic condition is itself a manifestation of how his ideology is manipulated by the people in power, as they prevent Mannheim from realizing the origin of social positioning is the inequality in materials and means of productions. Consequently, Marx and Engels would consider Mannheim's argument as neutralizing ideology's role as a mechanism of class domination and subconsciously consolidate the domination of the ruling classes.

4. Critique

4.1. On Epistemology

Mannheim's core relativist proposition that social position determines one's cognitive perspective leads to a self-refuting theoretical dilemma. Since Mannheim himself is situated in a specific social position, his own theoretical framework, according to his own argument, must be constrained by this positional limitation, as there's an inherent gap between his perceived understanding of society and the objective social reality itself. What deepens this contradiction is Mannheim's insistence on historical validation as the sole criterion to distinguish utopia from ideology, as he claims, *"if we look into the past, it seems possible to find a fairly adequate criterion of what is to be regarded as ideological and what as utopian. This criterion is their realization (Mannheim, 1929)"*. For Mannheim's arguments on ideology and utopia to hold true in a theoretical sense, his argument about social position and cognitive perspective ought to possess universal applicability across different historical periods and social contexts. Yet this universal demand directly conflicts with his own relativist logic: by his own rule, the accuracy of his theoretical interpretation of the social world can never be objectively verified or validated from the perspective of the future looking into the past. Thus, his arguments on ideology and utopia itself can never be known if they're simply a limited consciousness of Mannheim as his ideology. Consequently, this inherent contradiction makes Mannheim's arguments and relativist stance shaky as whether his core arguments fail to escape the very positional limitation he posits for all human cognition can never be verified.

4.2. On Arguments

Mannheim frames the relationship between social position and consciousness as a correspondence (1929); nevertheless, this framework implicitly assumes a unidirectional causal relationship that he doesn't explicitly defend. While he avoids the explicit language of casualty, his analysis of ideological and utopian formation is structured around the premise that social position is the antecedent, determining force of one's perspective. Under this assumption, individual mentality is treated as a passive reflection of one's social location rather than an interactive or constitutive element. This reasoning overlooks the plausible reverse relationship that non-utopian consciousness may in turn shape and redefine one's social position through deliberate practical action. For instance, students from similar socio-economic positions in the same school may develop very different academic interests or career goals, which are not necessarily determined by their social or historical positions. Over time, these professional differences can lead them into diverse social positions. Mannheim, however, does not provide any empirical evidence to exclude this reverse causality, or even to acknowledge the possibility of a bidirectional relationship through the use of tools like instrumental variables. In this sense, his core logic in the arguments in fact lacks rigorous empirical support, as the mere alignment of social position and ideology does not validate the casual primacy he attributes to the former.

Moving onto his conclusion of utopia, it posits that utopian ideas, grounded in specific social positions, hold the transformative power to propel social change. This is a compelling and empirically supported claim. Mannheim defines utopia as *“orientations transcending reality which tend to shatter the order of things prevailing at the time”*, and this is also a definition in historical thinking that *“depends necessarily upon one’s perspective”*(1929). This dual assertion aligns with observable historical reality. For example, it is mostly women leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Simone de Beauvoir who spearheaded the feminist movement, as their utopian idea of gender equality drives transformative changes like women’s suffrage and workplace equity. Their ideas are rooted in their experience of patriarchal oppression. Also, it is the black leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. who lead the American civic rights movement, dismantle Jim Crow segregation, and reshape racial justice laws. The fact that leaders of social movements generally emerge from the groups they represent aligns with Mannheim’s understanding of utopia, that such visionary ideas are inherently shaped by the social positions of those who conceive them, yet they retain the power to redefine social order.

5. Conclusion

Mannheim holds that thought is shaped by social position and historical context, conceptualizes ideology and utopia as two types of situationally transcendent ideas rooted in social position. Marx and Engels establish materialist determinism, take material production conditions as the fundamental determinant of consciousness, and define ideology as a ruling-class tool for consolidating dominance. Mannheim and Marx and Engels agree on social rootedness of consciousness but their ideas on epistemology diverge. Mannheim’s relativism denies perceivable social truth, while the latter admits the existence of objective social laws grasped through revolution. Marx and Engels would also critique Mannheim for diluting material primacy and neutralizing ideology’s class-based, exploitative nature. This essay further critiques Mannheim’s warrants and conclusions, arguing that Mannheim’s relativism falls into a self-refuting dilemma, with his theory bound by his social position and unverifiable by his own historical validation criteria. His correspondence between social position and consciousness implies a one-way causality that lacks sufficient justification. Yet his conclusion on utopia is valid with empirical and historical support.

6. Bibliography

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