

The Book Shelf: Karl Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge

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Karl Mannheim wrote many books that are aligned with a sub-discipline of sociology, called the sociology of knowledge. While his books are certainly not required reading for all professional coaches, there should at least be some awareness of the challenges associated with Mannheim's work and this sub-discipline of sociology. A few of the statements made in one of his books, *Ideology and Utopia*, are reviewed here, so that the reader considers his or her perspectives when reflecting on their own coaching practices

Mannheim was aligned with what sometimes is known as the Max Weber school of social analysis. Weber and Mannheim were early and mid-20th Century German social theorists who were critical of both American behaviorism and the Marxist perspective on society and culture. Even though they were anti-communist, Weber and Mannheim were certainly not welcomed by the emerging German leaders of their time. While Weber died prior to the rise of Hitler's Third Reich, Mannheim fled Germany in 1933 and went to England where he became a professor of sociology at the prominent London School of Economics.

Mannheim begins his analysis by noting that: ". . . the principal thesis of the sociology of knowledge is that there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured." (Mannheim, 1936, p. 2) It is important for us to recognize that the way in which we frame the issues we are facing is not unique to us (even if we consider ourselves to be "innovative"); rather our modes of thought are fashioned in powerful (and often unacknowledged) ways by the social system in which we operate. As coaches, it is particularly important that we challenge our clients when they ignore the influence that their own social context and culture has on the way they conceive their life and work. This is particularly the case when they serve as leaders of an organization and when their own organization is facing major challenges and the prospect of change. Under these conditions of anxiety, the leader is particularly vulnerable to the projections of those seeking his or her leadership. What the followers are projecting on the leader are modes of thought and untested assumptions about the organization (for example, about its strengths and weaknesses). As a coach to leaders faced with change and anxiety, we should not just challenge the leader's own assumptions, but also help our client identify the modes of thought other members of the organization are pushing for (explicitly or implicitly) and, as Mannheim notes, the social origins of these modes.

From this initial statement, Mannheim moves on to note that "it is not men [and women] in general who think, or even isolated individual who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterizing their common position." (Mannheim, 1936 p. 3) In this statement, Mannheim is declaring something

about the origins of a powerful mode of thinking -- this is where the major theme of the book ("utopian thought") comes to play. The influential thought leaders who are responsible for the dominant modes in any society are what today we would call either "change leaders" or "recalcitrant leaders" (those who resist all change). As Mannheim suggests: "these persons, bound together into groups, strive in accordance with the character and position of the groups to which they belong to change the surrounding world of nature and society or attempt to maintain it in a given condition." (Mannheim, 1936, p. 4) These words become particularly poignant when we come to recognize that they were written at the point in history when Hitler was taking control in Germany. It is in the mode of thought articulated and reinforced by Hitler that we find both the push for change (especially with regard to non-aryan societies) and the fervent desire to maintain existing traditions (especially with regard to German heritage).

What about the leaders whom we are coaching. Are they champions for innovation and change, or are they guardians of the organization's traditions (or of their own personal traditions and modes of thought if you are engaged in personal coaching)? Mannheim suggests that thought leaders tend to be bound up with other people with similar ideas. This collective thought (often today called "group think") can be very powerful, especially when group members believe that they are "right" and need to correct or convert other people to their way of thinking. These highly influential people, collectively, reinforce one another and become, as Mannheim notes, "the official interpreter of the universe." (Mannheim, 1936, p. 15) As coaches do we get caught up in our client's thought processes? Do we, in some way, become part of the reinforcing "group" for the powerful and influential leaders with whom we work? How do we remain "objective" in our perspectives regarding the world of our clients?

There is much more to convey in the sociological narrative offered by Mannheim regarding the sociology of knowledge, but this is probably enough to start all of us thinking about our own modes of thought and how we engage our clients in their own critical examination of untested assumptions, collusions with those who look up to them as leaders during challenging times, and the group with which they affiliate that helps to create and reinforce a specific set of beliefs and ways of thinking. And perhaps we can also look critically at our own modes of thought and our own "thought group" inside and outside the world of coaching. It is worth the effort--for the sake of our clients and for the sake of the coaching enterprise in which we are all involved and about which we all care.

Karl Mannheim (1936) *Ideology and Utopia*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.