Commentary

The Matryoshka-Concept

On the Interpretation of “Weltanschauung”

Karl Mannheim

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What kind of task is a student of cultural and historical discipline [...] faced when he seeks to determine the global outlook [Weltanschauung] of an epoch or to trace partial manifestation back to this all-embracing entity? Is the entity designated by the concept of Weltanschauung given to us at all, and if so – how is it given? How does it givenness compare with that of other data in the cultural and historical disciplines? (Mannheim, 1952a, p. 33)

In other words: what are we talking about when we use the concept of Weltanschauung, what kind of entity are we describing with this word? Is it actually useful for philosophers, historians and social scientists, or it just perturbs the scientific clarity?

Karl Mannheim has tried to answer these questions in his essay On the Interpretation of “Weltanschauung” (1952a), providing also some methodological coordinates in order to help a scientific recognition of the Weltanschauung of an epoch. Indeed, as David Naugle (2002, p. 223) points out correctly, Mannheim «is not so much concerned with providing a philosophical definition of “worldview” [...] but rather with the following methodological issues that could help social scientists and others in identifying a worldview underlying a particular epoch or culture». In the essay mentioned above, Mannheim’s first concern is to find a way to describe a worldview in theoretical terms, and to outline and define how a Weltanschauung could become the object of scientific investigation. Rather than proposing for the umpteenth time a summary of Mannheim’s methodological indications, in this short commentary I would like to extract from his works some clues about what a Weltanschauung is and what is its function and its significance in social and political life.

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The difficulty to manage this concept and its constitutive ambiguity is reflected even in the lexical confusion in its translation(s): “global outlook”, “worldview”, “world picture” are just a few options of the infinite possibilities. It is no coincidence that translators and scholars prefer often to utilise the German word as general concept. Also in Mannheim’s works, although their systematic nature, I think we have to distinguish at least three different meanings of Weltanschauung, three different magnitudes and directions of this concept: it looks like a matryoshka-concept with three levels of depth. Actually, my thesis is that exactly this versatility — which is for sure one reason of its fascinating power — is particularly highlighted in Mannheim’s thought, so that we can use his work to trace a taxonomy of the different features and senses of Weltanschauung.

At first sight — the biggest and most comprehensive matryoshka doll — Weltanschauung denotes the sphere of non-conceptual, or better the realm of pre-conceptual and pre-theoretical:

The difficult and paradoxical nature of the concept of Weltanschauung stems from the fact that the entity it denotes lies outside the province of theory. Dilthey was one of the first to recognize this; c.f. his remark: “Weltanschauungen are not produced by thinking”. (Mannheim, 1952a, p. 38)

According to this meaning, worldviews are the foundational entities which precede and foster every cultural objectification. Art, mores, religion, philosophy represent different ramifications starting from a least common denominator: they arises all from a Weltanschauung; understood «as a global unity [that] is something deeper, a still unformed and wholly germinal entity» (1952a, p. 41). Every cultural objectification is a fragment that can be and have to be re-considered and re-interpreted from the particular angle of — using Mannheim’s words — «the unity we sense in all works that belong to the same period» (1952a, p. 74).¹ So Weltanschauungen are the primary cultural layer of an epoch: this basic stratum remains normally unconscious to the people who live

¹ In this essay — written for a yearbook of history of art — Mannheim distinguishes what is a-theoretical from what is completely irrational: the aesthetics, for example, is pre-theoretical, but nevertheless can be interpreted and analysed. Theory has to find the structural unity of these phenomena, analysing three types of meanings: the objective meaning, the expressive and the documentary ones. The documentary meaning denotes the Weltanschauung of the epoch.
in it, while philosophers and artists are more the “witnesses” of their worldview than its authors.\(^2\)

Starting from this description of worldviews, at least three other questions emerge, which I would just mention: first of all, the fact that non-theoretical cultural objectifications (like art) are much closer to Weltanschauung than theories or philosophical systems. Who wants to study and define a worldview should look first to non-conceptual cultural products. Secondly, there is a problem of hermeneutic (vicious) circle: the unity and totality of a Weltanschauung can be distilled just from singular cultural objectifications, but these fragments can be properly understood just inside the worldview they testify.\(^3\)

Thirdly, every historical interpretation is also a self-interpretation, every analysis of the Weltanschauung of an epoch contains traces of our own worldview: «To understand the “spirit” of an age, we have to fall back on the “spirit” of our own — it is only substance which comprehends substance» (1952a, p. 61). A few pages after Mannheim is even clearer:

«We understand the whole from the part and the part from the whole. We derive the “spirit of the epoch” from its individual documentary manifestations — and we interpret the individual documentary manifestations on the basis of what we know about the spirit of the epoch» (Mannheim, 1952a, p. 74).
[Geisteswissenschaften], but also permeates everyday thinking. Today it is impossible to take part in politics, even to understand a person [...] without treating all those realities which we have to deal with as having evolved and as developing dynamically. (1952b, p. 84)

So, historicism is nowadays «a worldview of the same universality as that of the religious worldview of the past» (1952b, p. 85).

Here we reach the second — smaller — matryoshka doll. We have just seen that Mannheim defined historicism as the Weltanschauung of his times, the prerequisite of every contemporary political stand; at the same time Mannheim was the one who pointed out and conceptualized the fact that contemporary political conflict is a struggle between different Weltanschauungen. This is the modern phenomenon called the «unmasking turn of mind», which «does not seek to refute, negate, or call in doubt certain ideas, but rather to disintegrate them, and that in such a way that the whole world outlook of a social stratum becomes disintegrated at the same time» (1952c, p. 140). The outcome of this process is that «from this point on, worlds confront worlds — it is no longer individual propositions pitted against individual propositions» (1952c, p. 144). So, these two sentences — historicism as comprehensive modern times’ Weltanschauung, and political conflict as collision between Weltanschauungen — are not contradictory because they involve two different meanings of the word Weltanschauung. Or better: they denote two different fields of action of a worldview. In the first case — the biggest matryoshka doll — Mannheim was concerned about the Weltanschauung “of an epoch”, in the second case his object of study is the worldview “of a social stratum”. Every single historical unit, every period, is neither monolithic nor monochrome: there are different social forces and respectively different ideas in reciprocal relationship and competition. It would be misleading to section his history only “horizontally”, in time segments; the sociology of knowledge should be able to complete a horizontal analysis with a vertical one, tracing the social stratification of the cultural process. This is exactly one of the reasons why, according to Mannheim, we need to develop a sociology of knowledge.4

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4 «The philosophy of history which mostly treats historical periods as units, overlooking their inner differentiation and stratification, must be supplemented by a socially differentiated view of the historic-social process as a whole, explicitly taking into account the distribution of social roles and its significance for the dynamics of the whole» (Mannheim, 1952b, p. 125).
Mannheim used this second meaning of Weltanschauung to describe the conflicting political worldviews; in this sense we can speak for example of a Marxist Weltanschauung or a conservative one. The emphasis on the concept of worldview in this context can be read also as a move against perspectivism: every social stratum develops a global picture of the world and tries to explain the whole world, not just a part of it (1952c, p. 147). It would be simplistic to believe that every group depict just a different section of reality, so that a simple addition is enough to make a synthesis. Every Weltanschauung, although inevitably partial and standortgebunden, reproduces the totality of reality; then political conflict can be very radical because it is based on objectively incompatible worldviews. The Gebundenheit of a class’ worldview to the specific concrete situation does not mean that it enlightens just a particular side of reality; it means rather a peculiar point of view on the whole reality.

If this interpretation of Mannheim’s thought is correct, we can schematize in this way the relationship between the two matryoshka dolls – these two different meanings of the concept “worldview”: the Weltanschauung of an epoch (first meaning) depicts the Stimmung of that certain historical period, it delimits the broad area of the Zeitgeist and consists in the form of thought which is characteristic of an era. Worldviews, in this meaning, confine the horizon of what is “adequate” and believable, defining a relatively wide set of possibilities. Within this comprehensive area there is space for different Weltanschauungen (second meaning) linked to the diverse social strata. For instance, historicism is nowadays “the very basis on which we construct our observations of the socio-cultural reality” (1952b, p. 85), but there is a Marxist and progressive twisted historicism as well as a conservative and liberal one. So, historicism is “not something artificial contrived, something like a programme, but an organically developed basic pattern” (1952b, p. 85): inside this basic pattern it is possible to find different interpretations of reality, i.e. diverse Weltanschauungen in the second meaning of the term.

In turn, the dialectic among the Weltanschauungen of different social strata – using Mannheim’s words “the whole contrapuntal pattern of all the voices” (1952b, p. 125) – can influence and modify the comprehensive worldview of an epoch. This is the third matryoshka doll, the last meaning of Weltanschauung: every historical period has its own centre of reality, a sphere of experience which is considered as the basic one and «express[es] the truth of the epoch concerned» (1952b, p. 117). It is important to identify «the point of reference, that ontological sphere of central importance in respect of which
thought can be considered as relative or dependent» (1952c, p. 142). The dynamic of the shifts and changes of these centres is particularly clear looking at the history of thought:

One type of philosophical system does not destroy the preceding one, but neither does it complete it; rather it reorganizes itself from newer and newer centres. These new centres are, however, supra-philosophically, or rather, supra-theoretically; they are dependent on the new life situation. (1952b, p. 117)

So, the centres are not excogitated or invented, they are not the offshoots of arbitrary decisions, but rather they impose themselves in the concrete situation. Nevertheless, the rising classes have a privileged point of view on the historical process: it is easier for them to highlight the evolutionary trends of this process. For example, Mannheim wrote that the characteristic thing of his times is that the sense of reality became more and more concentrated upon the historic and social sphere, and that in this sphere the economic factor was felt to be the central one. Thus, theory in his time is not transcended in the direction of the religious or ecstatic experience; in particular, the rising classes experience the historic and social field as the most immediately real one (1952c, p. 142).

The fact that this conception is particularly suitable for the rising classes does not mean that it is their own exclusive possession: once «an idea becomes part and parcel of the global outlook of an epoch, then friends and foes, conservaties and progressives, relativists and absolutists will be bound to make use of it» (Kecskemeti, 1952, p. 16). In this sense I think we can affirm that the Marxist emphasis on the economic situation answered to the concrete reality of that time and “imposed” itself as centre of the Weltanschauung of the epoch.5

According to this short schema, it is no coincidence that Mannheim placed the different and conflicting political worldviews in the middle between other two levels. His wish for a synthesis is supported by his interpretation of the Weltanschauungen: although incompatible, the diverse political worldviews

5 «The discovery of certain facts (such as “class”, “ideology”) is connected with certain systematic and social commitments [...] What this suggests is that certain commitments, as it were, render us sensitive to certain realities of the past, present, or future. Nevertheless, once facts have become visible, they are also acknowledged by the other currents in the specific perspective in which they appear to them» (Mannheim, 1952c, p. 148).
share a common and dim background (the Weltanschauung of the epoch) and they already swap concepts mutually, defining themselves in relation to the others (third meaning).\(^6\)

The synthesis seems to be the self-awareness of the constitutive partiality of our own conceptions and the acceptance of the fact that every partial knowledge has its meaning only in relation to the others. Reality and history are inherently dynamic, a continuous process; no one can think to represent — alone — the whole historical movement, nor its fulfilment. The end of history is an oxymoron.

REFERENCES


\(^6\) «If we look at history as a stream divided into several branches [...] then we can easily be led to assume the extreme position that the history of ideas consists of completely isolated sequences of thoughts without the slightest intercommunication, so that, for example, conservative and progressive thinking would each have its self-contained independent tradition of world interpretation [...] it must be admitted that after one class has discovered some sociological or historical fact (which lay in its line of vision by virtue of its specific position), all other groups, no matter what their interests are, can equally take such fact into account — nay, must somehow incorporate such fact into their system of world interpretation» (Mannheim, 1952c, p. 147).