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Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. G, Řada sociálněvědná. 1992-1993, vol. 41-42, iss. G35, pp. [79]-89

ISBN 80-210-0925-X

ISSN 0231-5122

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/111554>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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MANNHEIM, SCHMITT AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE SPHERE OF POLITICS

This essay discusses and compares two theoretical conceptions of political enterprise and respective visions of political rationality. One of them has been elaborated by Karl Mannheim, the other by Carl Schmitt.

Why to juxtapose just these two thinkers? The sole fact that they have commonly been counted among the most outstanding figures of modern political theory does not seem to be a sufficient reason for this. Yet the deep concern their works share about the nature of the phenomenon of the political already calls for our attention. Within the theoretical tradition that discusses the question of the political as such, Schmitt's and Mannheim's theoretical models are two outstanding examples. Both of them have elaborated conceptions absorbing almost all major ideas generated within European political thinking heretofore. Yet each of them appears to accentuate different and often opposite branches of that tradition. Eventually, they have reformulated the sets of ideas absorbed into two distinctive visions of political enterprise; these were visions that would later significantly influence the development of 20th century Western political theory. Because their theoretical claims concerning the nature and prospects of political enterprise were formulated in a rather straightforward and uncompromising manner, however, they would influence theoretical thinking more often and more significantly by provoking reactions or challenging disputes, rather than through shaping prospective mainstreams in political theory. Political theorists in general, and political sociologists in particular, would later have paid more „positive attention“ to another theoretical conception of politics that emerged shortly before the two in question – that of Max Weber.

There is another circumstance that makes Mannheim and Schmitt possible and worthy to compare with one another. It is their common historical – temporal and spatial – location. They passed basically through the same political and cultural experience, although each of them with a significantly different personal destiny than the other. Although it was only Mannheim who explicitly understood his historical–personal experience as a constituent part of his theoretical position,

understood his historical–personal experience as a constituent part of his theoretical position, they both reacted to the same historical reality – namely, to the reality of the Weimar Republic.

Carl Schmitt was born in Germany in 1888. He studied law, and his first works, which made him renowned as an original and rather provocative political thinker, emerged in the years after the World War I.¹ Karl Mannheim was born in Hungary in 1893. The intellectual life in Budapest in the first decades of the 20th century kept close connections to the intellectual life in the German speaking world. Political and cultural experience in the whole of Central Europe was shaped at that time by some essentially common or similar events and developments. Furthermore, Mannheim alone studied with Georg Simmel in Berlin during the war, and he escaped to Germany immediately after the defeat of the Hungarian revolution in 1919, in which he had taken an active part. He then shared the fortunes of the Weimar Republic from the beginning to its end. It was during this time (precisely in the late 1920s) that his major work in political sociology – *Ideology and Utopia*² – came into being.

The two conceptions of the political in question are often treated as two opposite theoretical patterns. Nevertheless, they bear some similar structural features. They both represent a kind of critique of the actual state of affairs in politics in general, and (though more explicitly in Schmitt's case) in the political enterprise of the Weimar Republic in particular. They both attempt to offer a positive theoretical concept of politics as a model for overcoming the unsatisfactory condition of given political practice. Thus, they both are guided by a unity of theoretical and practical interests.

Furthermore, they both aim at a **rational** foundation of politics. It is another matter – yet also one that stands in the center of our attention here – that each of them does this with an essentially different vision of what is rational. Although Schmitt's theoretical position has often been understood to rest upon irrationalist premises, I hope to make it clear in the following in what sense Schmitt also aims at an image of a rational political enterprise. Moreover, I will attempt to show that also in this respect the two models considered retain one common feature: to find a ground for rational politics means for both of them to **eliminate ideology** from that sphere. To be sure, the sense and ways of such an elimination again are seen quite differently, according to the respective visions of rationality. Focusing upon this difference may lead us to a better understanding not only of the nature of the phenomenon of ideology, but also of the crucial question proper to all politics: how a political decision (and hence political action) can be rational.

¹ Here I have in mind above all Schmitt's three major works in political theory published in the years 1919-1923: *Politische Romantik* (1919), *Politische Theologie* (1922), *Die geschichtliche Lage des Heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1923).

² Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie*, Bonn 1929.

It is Mannheim's conception that raises explicitly the question about possible elimination of ideology from the sphere of politics, and places this question at the heart of his political sociology. Such a political sociology not only should reveal whether and how such an elimination is possible. It itself is to represent the first and decisive stage in carrying out this task. Already this is significant. It points out that for Mannheim the sphere of politics and the sphere of theoretical discourse are essentially two realms of the same kind of rationality.

This is an assumption dramatically different from Schmitt's theoretical view that ascribes to the sphere of politics a kind of rationality of its own. Theoretical discourse may deal with such a genuine political rationality as its theoretical subject, but it can by no means contribute to its establishment and reproduction, to any kind of improvement, nor even lead to its elimination. The crucial question here is not so much about the nature of theoretical discourse and a corresponding kind of rationality. What is at stake above all is the question of how politics itself can be rational or rationalized. To explore this question – which largely coincides, in our context, with the question about the possibility and ways of overcoming ideology – however, requires first to take a closer look at what is conceived as ideology at all. Also here we are confronted with two essentially different approaches.

In general, Mannheim dealt with the concept of ideology as this had been generated in the Marxist tradition of political thought. He understood ideology in the proper sense of the word as patterns or styles of thinking, or world-views, which were bound to the social-historical positions of those who represented their producers or „bearers“. For the purpose of the comparison of his and Schmitt's approaches to ideology, however, it will be useful to mention the distinction Mannheim makes between two concepts of ideology: the particular concept of ideology and the total one. The Marxist model actually matches only with the latter, whereas the former corresponds rather to the way in which ideology was understood by Schmitt. It is true that Schmitt does not deal explicitly with the term ideology, but the basic objections involved in his project of „pure“ politics are directed against precisely the same phenomenon which is described by the particular concept of ideology.

For Schmitt, ideology was represented by essentially empty slogans or ideal constructions. The relationship of these constructions to the reality of social or political life was one of a different kind than reality serving as a source of their origin. In Schmitt's view, the subjects of social and political action are not bearers of ideas but their addressees. An epoch, class, etc. are seen as being sensitive to certain ideas rather than as alleged generators of these. Ideology stands above all for a kind of appeal. It is to serve to those in power or struggling for power as a mere instrument for either veiling their real intentions or demanding approval for their actions from the others people. With respect to his constant endeavour to unmask myths of the image of a „liberally“ governed society, Schmitt tends to deal with the latter case. In both of these cases,

nevertheless, ideologies occur as „more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation“, which is Mannheim's characterization of the particular concept of ideology.³

Despite what we can occasionally read or hear about Mannheim's aim to substitute the total concept of ideology for the particular one in his vision of rational politics, this is not exactly the case. This confusion is partly caused by his own insufficient delineation of the theoretical concepts he deals with. It is plain for Mannheim that ideologies in the particular sense of the concept, i. e. as „disguises“, are to be pushed away from politics. But it is not the task of the respective chapter in *Ideology and Utopia*, which treats the prospects of scientific politics⁴, to explain how or even why this should be done. Mannheim deals in this chapter exclusively with the total (Marxian) concept of ideology; i.e. ideology as, within its range, an all-embracing spiritual element. Here ideology is not merely represented by single ideas. The (total) concept of ideology coincides with an image of complex style of thinking proper to a certain epoch, with patterns of the perception of the world proper to certain social group or class, with a world-view. In short, ideology means „composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group.“⁵

In this context, the crucial tension is to be found rather between the terms „epoch“ and „group“. In concert with the Marxian view, Mannheim employs a model according to which different political, economical, or cultural locations or respective characteristics of social groups determine respective differences in the composition of the total structures of their minds; i.e. the ways they understand the world and orient themselves to it. Every such group has its own world-view. The point is that insofar as each of them occupies only a part of their common social space their world-views also reflect the world only **partially**. And it is this very partiality that is to be surmounted in (and by) Mannheim's theoretical project of scientific politics.

It is a partiality of ideologies, however, that fall under the total concept of ideology. Such a partiality is basically inevitable, since a given political, economical, or cultural attachment of a group does not allow their members to go, in their perception of the world and in their respective expectations, beyond the horizon determined by their specific interests tied to that attachment. Insofar as the individual is a member of a specific social group, he or she takes on the group's particular interests that determine its views of and attitudes to the world.

³ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, A Harvest/HBJ Book 1985, p.55.

⁴ *The Prospects of Scientific Politics: The Relationship Between Social Theory and Political Practice*, in: Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, A Harvest/HBJ Book 1985, pp. 109-191. In this very chapter of his major work, Mannheim provides the most elaborated example of his vision of rational political action with respect to the problem of ideology. In my essay, I do not take into account his later works dealing with the question of rational politics published in the 1930s, which largely lack the kind of epistemological self-reflection present in *Ideology and Utopia*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.56.

In the sphere of politics, according to this model, once one such group comes to power or gains a dominant position in the system, it tends to assert its interests and consequently its partial views over the entire society. Here ideology is not a veil of real interests but their expression. To surmount the partiality of world-views, respectively, means to surmount the partiality of respective interests.

Here, to overcome the kind of ideology that, despite its partiality, claims to have attained a privileged access to the only right understanding of the world and its needs, is not the matter of a purely voluntary act of a strong individual. Such an individual would have to be able and willing to bear ultimate responsibility for his/her own decisions, instead of binding these decisions with an attractive ideal, and presenting him or herself only as its agent. This kind of understanding of political responsibility coincides rather with the existential level of the vision of non-ideological politics provided by Carl Schmitt. In his view, ideology is something superfluous; it is nothing but a burden for the enterprise of politics. Therefore it not only can but also must be eliminated from the process of political decision-making.

Mannheim's assumption concerning inevitability of the ideological nature of mind operating within the sphere of politics leads him to a different kind of proposed solution. For him, to eliminate ideology from the sphere of practical politics means to eliminate that partiality of interests and respective viewpoints that are to **guide** (not perhaps to veil or merely justify) political decisions. And he proposes to surmount the partiality of views through their **synthesis**.

The idea of synthesis represents a focal point within Mannheim's conception of rational politics. He transplants this idea into his sociological theory of politics from the tradition of German historical-philosophical thinking as this was carried on, in the first decades of 20th century, by conceptions related in a way to the theory of objective spirit. To put it briefly: the idea of objective spirit is transformed here into an image of a spiritual totality of a time, its world-view, an ideology of the epoch. It provides an epoch with a ground for its self-understanding. It determines or is manifested in the thinking of this epoch, in the prevalent and all permeating style of reasoning about the world as well as the patterns of perceiving it. What is important here is that this spirit is to be related to the entire epoch, i.e. to the social and political space as a whole, and not only to one or some of its sections occupied or represented by particular social groups. Such an ideology is neither particular, nor is it partial. It is, so to say, „double-total“. It embraces the entire cognitive structure of the mind, and it reflects the historical position of society as a whole. In the former instance, it is total in the sense of Mannheim's conception described above; in the latter, it is conceptually related to Lukács' Hegelian idea of the totality of (historical) life. Eventually, when Mannheim attempts to stress the directedness of such a spiritual entity to the whole (or totality of life), he alone tends to replace the term ideology with the less pejorative notion of world-view.

The idea of synthesis of partial views, in Mannheim, points to the possibility of a conscious and reflective **articulation** of that objective spirit. This articulation is understood as reflecting and expressing conceptually a spiritual emanation of a time, its basic values, needs, tabus, expectations. As a rational reconstruction of these inherent (background) tendencies of a time, such a synthesis is projected as a foundation of a scientific, **reflective**, i.e., in a sense non-ideological politics. A political enterprise following the imperatives resulting from such a reflection now may be seen as based on scientific grounds, since synthesis is to be attained through and provided by theoretical insight. It is the unmasking potential of theoretical thinking that is to serve as a kind of a transcendental agent to rationalize the sphere of the political.

Synthesis stands here for a spiritual body that comprehends, through an objective reflection of actual socio-historical situation, the real interests of the society as a whole. Realizing this, we can employ a parallel drawn from the history of political thought: By postulating the idea of synthesis as a base of rational political action, Mannheim introduces into a rather contemplative theory of objective spirit the „activating“ element contained in Rousseau's concept of the general will. The general will, in Rousseau, also represents an agent or carrier of the common interest of the people as a whole. I have introduced this parallel in order to show, without explaining this complex theoretical problem at a great length, how Mannheim attempts to reconcile, within given conceptual framework, several sets of polarities: society as institutional order vs. society represented by subjects of action, the contemplative nature of objective spirit vs. the active character of general will, the concept of what is vs. that of what ought to be, the possibility to recognize **objectively** the actual state of affairs vs. the ability to act (**decide**) accordingly.

The last expression of that „reconciliation“ demonstrates the urgent relevance the just explored level of Mannheim's conception of the political bears to the initial problem of my essay. For both Mannheim and Schmitt, the sphere of the political is first and foremost a sphere where decisions are made. Here to make a decision implies a voluntary act of political subject or actor. Arriving at certain decision is not a result of any impersonal rational calculation following some sort of formal rules or norms. It is this that makes the sphere of politics inherently open to irrationality. At this point, another conceptual opposition arises that interests both Mannheim as well as Schmitt: the irrational is an inherent potentiality residing in the realm of politics, as opposed to the ultimate calculability proper to the sphere of administration. Regarding this, both of the discussed models acquire the character of theoretical projects aiming at rationalizing the irrational in politics, yet not by way of its reduction to pure administration.

In Schmitt, the concept of decision-making as such is explicitly central, and it represents the core issue of his theorizing about politics. He seeks to demonstrate that making decisions is the essence and a hallmark of what he calls

„the political“. Here it is the *voluntas* itself that is to be defended and promoted. Schmitt's normative claim is to defend „purity“ of political action as being realized in the act of decision-making itself, as against the image of politics as an enterprise consisting in elaborating ideological justifications for these decisions. In Schmitt, to rationalize the naturally irrational sphere of the political does not mean to eliminate decisions from it but to eliminate all ethical or related factors possibly intervening in these decisions. What remains is a „pure rationality“ of the sovereign act of decision on who is one's friend and who is the enemy. The sovereignty of such a decision rests upon the fact that there exists no higher instance – a norm, rule, or ethical principle – which would predetermine this decision. The „negative“ rationality of decision consists in the fact that since there is no higher authority like the ones just mentioned, there are no higher criteria evaluating the rightness or falseness of such a decision. Sovereign decision is always right, as it is not subordinated to any other form of rationality than to its own. In other words, it is sovereign decision itself that establishes a kind of rationality but it does not yield to it in any sense.

Here the parallel with Rousseau's concept of general will emerges again. The general will also is sovereign and **therefore** can not be wrong. The sovereign „may do anything that he wills but he may not will evil.“⁶ The difference is that the decision or the will, in Schmitt's conception, is not bound to **any** interest in any respect, however formally or generally defined this might be, perhaps even as an interest of the whole. The only conceivable interest here is the interest in making decision itself. „It is definitely not in our interest that a question be decided in one way or another but that it be decided without delay and without appeal.“⁷ In this respect, Schmitt's position remains existential.

The fact that the decisive, i.e. the political entity is primarily identified with the state, in Schmitt, does not necessarily mean that the state represents the primary interest determining decisions. The state is the subject not the object of political decisions. That is also why Schmitt stresses the personal element in the state.⁸ Unlike Hegel, he does not defend an allegedly higher ethical principle of the state. He sees the state as a last remaining possible historical instance of the decisive power. After all, the state is not an instance that should know everything better. Nor is it even an instance that should know best the interests of its own. Schmitt deals with an essentially **imperfect** world – there is no subject who knows best of all simply because there is no best knowledge possible.

Schmitt seeks to establish and demonstrate theoretically what for Mannheim serves as a basic presupposition and a starting point of his considerations when aiming at the conception of rational politics. For Schmitt, „making a decision is

⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1985, p.64.

This quotation, taken over by Schmitt from Emile Boutmy, refers explicitly to Rousseau.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 29-31.

more important than how a decision is made."⁹ Here the rationality consists in preventing every evaluative judgement from intervening into the purely political decision on who is friend and who is enemy. Such a decision does not imply, according to Schmitt's view, any moral, aesthetic, or economic judgement – its core lies in the mere and yet ultimate („purely existential“) distinction between „we“ and the others. Enemy is not necessarily morally bad, aesthetically ugly, or an economical competitor. „The worst confusion arises when concepts such as justice and freedom are used to legitimize one's own political ambitions and to disqualify or demoralize the enemy.“¹⁰

For Mannheim, on the contrary, the question „how a decision is made“ represents a real problem that is not only possible, but also worthy and necessary to deal with. Indeed, neither does his model of scientific politics claim to provide concrete decisions. It is to serve only as a sort of rational basis for decision-making itself: his „political sociology (...) aims not at inculcating a decision but prepares the way for arriving at decisions (...).“¹¹ For him, unlike for Schmitt, however, „every real decision implies a judgement concerning good and evil, concerning the meaning of life and mind.“¹² Here, at least potentially, the decisive instance is identical with the cognitive subject. They both operate within the same sphere of rationality.

On the epistemological level, both of the theorists compared are polemical towards positivism and towards the ideal of scientific objectivism related to it, though each of them from a different point of view. Schmitt does not see any other way for a formal, purely scientific, and thereby a „subjectless“ method to be connected to the procedure of truly political decision-making save to make it impossible or to blur it. Mannheim, from the other side, attacks „the positivistic prejudice“ that a social (political) actor, in making decisions, can be completely emancipated from his or her subjective life-experience. There is no way to ignore the agent of decision-making for either of the two theoretical projects of rational politics. There is no impersonal norm imaginable that could serve as an ultimate external guide for rational political decision-making.

Seemingly paradoxically, they both introduce into their theories of rational politics the element of subjective will. The crucial distinction consists in the following: Schmitt's ideal rests upon an existential will to action, upon a courage of political actor to make decisions, and upon his ability and willingness to bear full responsibility for the decisions; Mannheim still insists on an assumption that such a will can in a respect be intelligible. For both, thinking politically inevitably always opens the structures of mind to ideology. The task is to gain control over the open door. Schmitt uncompromisingly solves this problem by precluding substantive ideas from interfering with the act of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Rutgers University Press 1976, p. 66.

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, 1985, p. 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

political decision-making at all. His model rests upon a sharp distinction between „reason“ and „will“. Mannheim, on the contrary, attempts to reconcile these. The cognitive element of reason is endowed with a potential capacity to reflect the objective interests of society as a whole, and this is also why the will can act intelligibly, provided it acts in congruence with knowledge involving such a reflection.

Though with different accents, both of the discussed thinkers appeal ultimately to the same phenomenon: to the principle of **responsibility** for decisions to be made in the sphere of the political. In Mannheim, the capacity of taking responsibility presupposes reflection. In Schmitt, to be able to take responsibility means to generate will to decide upon the outermost existential questions without resorting to any kind of possible ideological justification.

For Mannheim, the ability to take responsibility for decisions made presupposes a twofold reflection: this ability first implies to „take into consideration the possible consequences of the action in so far as they are calculable“, and, second, it is also the mind of the subject of decision-making or „conscience itself (that) should be subjected to critical self-examination.“¹³ It is the latter kind of reflection that is at stake here. The socio-historical reality is an instance that is addressed, re-created, and shaped by the decisions made, and it represents the ground from which motives leading these decisions arise at the same time.

Nothing from this is included in Schmitt's concept of decision-making. This concept here is deprived of any possible relationship to the socio-historical context, for all Schmitt's interest in the political reality of the Weimar Republic. The chief characteristics of the extrapolitical spheres of the world are not subject to any essential cultivation by purely political means, or at least the objective of cultivation cannot serve as a motive for the political decision-making. Nevertheless, the sphere or phenomenon of the political is an indispensable and in some „borderline cases“ the superior layer of this world. It represents a layer that retains its autonomy corresponding to the autonomous moment in genuine decision-making. Its first concern is the reality of its own. Even if the consequences of political action (decision) were calculable, they cannot be taken into consideration, insofar as the goals, to which such an action should lead, are not calculable, nor natural, nor otherwise self-evident. Thus, the motives that are generated within that world and bound to its historically relative and artificially originated values also cannot supersede the ultimate character of the *voluntas*.

Schmitt's chief instance of political decision-making, the state, is not a moral subject; the political decisions are ultimately made „beyond the good and evil.“ In Schmitt, the sovereign does not decide between good and evil. The sovereign decides without taking any regard to what could perhaps be postulated as good

¹³ Ibid., p. 191.

before the act of decision-making itself. For him, the proper realm of the political decision-making is an existential sphere of „either/or (...) in the sense of a life-and-death struggle that does not recognize a synthesis and a 'higher third.'“¹⁴ There are no better and worse decisions to look for here, there is only the option 'to decide' or 'not to decide', which alone is political decision. Therefore, Schmitt avoids having to cope with the crucial question of where the sovereign takes the sense of the good.¹⁵

For Schmitt, the question of competence for political decision-making is a question of **who** is able to make decisions at all, rather than who is able to make **the best** decisions, as it is the case in Mannheim. Says Schmitt: „In the independent meaning of the decision, the subject of the decision has an independent meaning, apart from the question of content.“¹⁶ The subject of decision-making in Mannheim, on the contrary, is bound in an essential sense to the very question of content. It is the so called 'socially unattached intelligentsia' that represents here the ideal social subject which – as being allegedly capable of freeing itself from partial social, political, and cultural ties – is capable of arriving at the common good.

Both Schmitt and Mannheim reacted to the actual state of political affairs in the Weimar Republic. One of the main targets of their objections was the relativism of a pseudo-democratic political enterprise reduced to bureaucratic administration and a struggle of political parties for mastering this apparatus. The horizontal idea in both of these conceptions was the idea of unity. In Schmitt, it was a unity that arises from an indivisible decisive instance. In Mannheim, it was a unity of interests generated by an exclusion of the elements of partiality from intervening into the process of political decision-making. The latter was an organic unity that was supposed to be based on grasping the objective spirit of the time through an intellectual reflection, which was to lead to a synthesis of everything partial into a coherent and comprehensive whole, and ultimately to articulation of corresponding common goals.

In the middle of the 1930th, after the German political life had really attained a kind of peculiar and tight unity, Mannheim accused the German intellectuals of having excluded themselves from nourishing the rational in politics and thus of having given up the responsibility that was imposed on them by virtue of their position and corresponding role in society and politics. Yet wasn't it just Carl Schmitt who articulated in a sense the objective spirit of his time? As national socialism came to power, he could have perceived that fact as a kind of theoretical victory. The time actually got what Schmitt had been saying it needed.

¹⁴ Carl Schmitt, 1985, p. 55.

¹⁵ This question remains unanswered in Rousseau. He refers to the common good as something plainly self-evident.

¹⁶ Carl Schmitt, 1985, p. 34.

It was the critical theory, represented by some other German intellectuals of the time, which showed how preposterous it was to rely on any independent objective reason of history or an epoch. All the less, however, did they see any way out of the peculiar historical circumstances by relying on a pure will to making decisions. They were confronted with reality that eventually collided with the idea of an essential independence of the sphere of the political. The political, deprived of any limitations, had finally found its interests in all other spheres of life, however marginal these might seem. The political did not find its proper core only in the 'borderline' case of making the decision on who is friend and who is enemy. The colonizing tendencies of the sphere of the political affected back this very sphere in a peculiar way: this was not the time of making decisions on who is enemy and who is not, this was a time of creating enemies, and doing so not at all independently of extrapolitical criteria.

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