Conflicting Imaginaries: Antagonism and the Sociology of Utopian Aspirations

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Abstract This article provides a re-reading of Karl Mannheim's founding treatise on the sociology of science, *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), against the backdrop of current invocations of a 'crisis of truth' as well as a 'crisis of political imagination.' Mannheim's own historical diagnosis shows many lines of connection to the present, as he assumes both a radicalization of political conflict and an exhaustion of utopian forces, which makes emancipatory alternatives to the status quo increasingly inconceivable. Mannheim offers resources for rethinking the conflictual, antagonistic character of political imagination and gives way to elaborating a heuristic conception of antagonistic political imaginaries.

0. Introduction: Political Imagination in Crisis[1]

In his *Man without Qualities* (1930), Robert Musil famously distinguishes between a sense of reality (*Wirklichkeitssinn*) and a sense of possibility *(Möglichkeitssinn)*. The sense of reality enables us to navigate a world of factual constraints, in which whoever «wants to pass through open doors [...] must bear in mind that they have a solid frame» (Musil 1930: 11). The sense of possibility discloses contingency and otherness. Sense of reality sees how things are the sense of possibility imagines things to be otherwise. Musil writes that if someone with a lively sense of possibility «is told that something *is* the way it is, then he thinks: Well, it could probably just as easily be some other way» (*Ivi*: 12). Additionally, the sense of reality is conservative, while the sense of possibility transvalues; it can «make the things that other people admire appear wrong and the things that other people prohibit permissible» (*Ibidem*) [2].

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[2] Musil also differentiates between a positive and a negative sense of possibility in its negative variety, it amounts to mere denial of reality. In its positive form, it acknowledges reality's malleability, which can again take on two different forms, as Barbara Sattler points out: «it can be a sense of the possibilities which are inherent, if undeveloped, in what is real; on the other hand, it can be a sense that reality as a

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Musil's distinction helps map some of the fault lines traversing contemporary political thought. For quite some years, liberalists have mourned a loss of our political sense of reality. Lamenting the decay of scientific authority, many found truth and reality under attack as lies and propaganda proliferate (Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019; Williamson 2019; Lepore 2016; Müller 2017; Hampe 2016; Boghossian 2006). In this wake, many 'new realisms' have mushroomed up in the most diverse places, as the crisis of truth seemingly called for regaining solid notions of objectivity. Authors as different as Bruno Latour (Latour 2004), Markus Gabriel (Gabriel 2015), or Timothy Williamson subscribe to the claim that «[t]here is no escape from the necessity of realism» (Williamson 2021), so that realism is without alternatives[3].

Critical theorists and radical democrats, on the other hand, submit that these calls for realism with the ideological neoliberal-capitalist dismissal of political dissent and imagination. As Margaret Thatcher's notorious slogan «There is no Alternative» suggests, it has become difficult to politically imagine otherwise. The realist mantra dismisses all meaningful alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, with all the destruction of nature, exploitation, discrimination, depression, and general exhaustion it produces. From this perspective, the verdict over imagination preserves order by foreclosing alternatives as unrealistic or utopian. Under these conditions, it seems impossible to envisage change as *political* change. If anything new can come into the world at all in this mindset, it will not be a political event, but a technological innovation. Consider the widespread idea that the ecological crisis should be addressed not by way of political action, but by deregulating tech companies: their formidable inventions and engineering skills will extinguish the world-on-fire, if only, of course, they are allowed to operate unmolested by taxes, laws, and workers' rights. Accordingly, the crisis we face seems to concern the regime of political imagination as much as the regime of truth, which affects the very self-understanding of Western democratic societies. Just as, according to Jürgen Habermas, a «post-truth democracy» that suspends any relation to truth «would no longer be a democracy» (Habermas 2011: 144), no society deprived of what Cornelius Castoriadis called «radical imagination» (Castoriadis 1997; 1991) could be called democratic. As Castoriadis writes already in 1991, «[t]he present crisis of humanity is a crisis of politics in the grand sense, a crisis of creativity and of our political imagination» (Castoriadis 1991: 274).

One of the most important resources for reflecting upon present crises is historical distance. With regard to the crisis discourses on truth and imagination, and to contextualize them, taking recourse to the interwar period seems particularly suitable. For the interwar period is pervaded by a whole range of social and political conflicts from which connecting lines to the present can be drawn: from the strengthening of authoritarianism, right-wing extremism and totalitarianism, to the emergence of a realistic desire within the «New Objectivity» movement of the 1920s, and to the foundational crisis of the sciences, which problematizes the epistemic conditions of all social cognition. These developments have been contemporaneously analyzed in prototypical fashion by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim. Mannheim's founding treatise on the sociology of knowledge reflects on these crises via an analysis of the

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whole could perfectly well be different.» (Sattler 2014: 88) While the first notion comes down to the traditional Aristotelian understanding of possibility in terms of potentiality, only the second notion enables «toy[ing] with completely new kinds of reality, in which previously unthought possibilities may have a place. This is the *sense of possibility* in its genuine sense.» (Sattler 2014: 88). Recently, Gösta Gantner set out to explore the political ramifications of such a radicalized, non-Aristotelian conception of possibility (Gantner 2021).

[3] They of course champion very different, even contradictory notions of realism, for that matter (see Vogelmann 2019).

conflictual relationship between *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). I propose a reading of Mannheim that carves out the essentially conflictual, even antagonistic character of imagination and political imaginaries. This is backed by the conviction that understanding the political conflicts of our times requires rethinking imagination in its conflictual character. To this end, I (1) reconstruct Mannheim's diagnosis of his times in terms of radical dissent, to which he responded with his famous conception of «total ideology». I then outline (2) Mannheim's idea of conflictual utopian aspirations, thus developing Mannheim's insight that political imaginaries are always characterized by, antagonistic fault lines and can only be understood these conflictual tensions. On this basis, I discuss (3) Mannheim's own diagnosis of a crisis of political imagination and propose (4) to inscribe the notion of conflictual imaginaries into a political ontology of antagonism.

1. Total Ideology, Democracy, and Conflict

Mannheim's epoch, the interwar period, bears several vantage points that connect to our own political predicament. Indeed, his diagnostic remarks strangely echo today's post-truth discourse. Mannheim observes certainty and epistemic authority being relentlessly shattered. Conflict is radicalized, as any consensual basis for deliberation is lost. Moreover, conflict is no longer confined to opposing value-judgments but erupts already at the level of facts, Mannheim claims. For centuries, truth and reality have been philosophical problems. Today, in 1929, says Mannheim, they have turned into political problems of general concern. «The alarming fact that the same world can appear differently to different observers» (Mannheim 1929: 5) has become common knowledge.

Mannheim sees this radicalization of conflict as a necessary historical condition for his own endeavor of founding a new sociological subdiscipline, namely the sociology of knowledge. For only insofar as the plurality of perspectives and worldviews is commonly recognized can a sociology of knowledge be envisaged. An epistemically stable world remains blind to the social constitution of worldviews: «such problems can become general only in an age in which disagreement is more conspicuous than agreement» (Mannheim 1929: 5). To account for this predicament, Mannheim coins the notion of *total ideology*. Total ideology means that no worldview, not even one's own, can be presupposed as unideological. What is needed, in Mannheim's view, is «the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including one's own, to the ideological analysis» (Mannheim 1929: 68-69).

Mannheim argues that this insight into the pluralism and particularism of worldviews is cultivated in democratic societies. Democracy shakes the «social stability» that «guarantees the internal unity of a world-view» (Mannheim 1929: 6). In democracy, the voices of the many are heard, which challenges the dominant groups' imaginary self-conception; «the ideas of the lower strata are […] in a position to confront the ideas of the dominant strata» (Mannheim 1929: 7). Democracy «subjects the objects of the world to a fundamental questioning» (Mannheim 1929: 7)[4]. In turn, anti-democratic sentiment reflects the desire to de-problematize some given regime of facticity and normativity.

On Mannheim's account, democracy affirms politics in terms of conflict and decision. Democracy recognizes that «Politics is conflict» (Mannheim 1929: 34). As such, politics is essentially eventful, as Mannheim underscores by distinguishing between *politics* and

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[4] Similarly, Cornelius Castoriadis argues that explicit questioning of given norms and interpretations can only be meaningful on a societal level under conditions of democratic autonomy. In a society that relies on some transcendent foundation, deviation can only appear as madness (Castoriadis 1991; 1997).

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administration. Administration manages the «routine affairs of state» (Mannheim 1929: 163) and reproduces the given order, while politics, in an emphatic sense, establishes new states of affairs. Administration's bureaucratic rationality is antipolitical, as it reduces the latitude of conflict, thus «denying the reality of politics» (Mannheim 1929: 146)[5].

Conception of politics assumes the conflictual and «perspectival character of all expression» (Arendt 1939: 129, my trans), without however irrationalizing politics. Rather, Mannheim asserts a particularly political rationality. In politics, the necessity to position oneself does not inhibit understanding but enables it: «political knowledge […] is impossible without […] decision» (Mannheim 1929: 168). Moreover, knowledge, science, and theory are intensified in their political import in modernity. Modern democracy, Mannheim argues, involves democratizing knowledge and theory: «with the growth of democracy, all social strata have been drawn into the political and philosophical discussion» (Mannheim 1929: 30). Politics then becomes an arena of conflict involving worldviews, imaginaries, and theories: «with increasing democratization,» political actors «strove to provide their conflicts with philosophical foundation» (Mannheim 1929: 33).

Democratization thus involves two tenuously interwoven tendencies: democracy *epistemologizes conflict* by intensifying the political import of theory and knowledge, but it also *politicizes epistemology*, so that «every type of scientific attitude […] came to bear a political coloration» (Mannheim 1929: 33). Mannheim repeatedly stresses that this democratization process, in which politics and epistemology blend into each other, cannot be conceived in terms of pacification. On the contrary, elevating political conflict to the level of worldviews and theories even raises the stakes as it were. For brute force aims at our bodily life, while an attack on our imaginary self-conception can tackle our very status as political subjects: «Physical repression is […] harder to bear externally, but the will to psychic annihilation (*geistige Vernichtung*), which took its place in many instances, is perhaps even more unbearable» (Mannheim 1929: 35). Force operates on our bodily vulnerability while psychic annihilation attacks our recognizability as political subjects.

Mannheim thus points to a violent flip side of social rationalization processes: replacing weapons with words, images, and concepts entails that words, images, and concepts become weapons. With unmistakably Schmittian overtones, Mannheim sees political concepts as essentially polemical: «words like conflict, breakdown, alienation, insurrection […] would lose their content if their orientation, their evaluative elements, were dropped out» (Mannheim 1929: 39). Analogously, Carl Schmitt had argued that «all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning». «Words such as state, republic, society, class […] are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term» (Schmitt 1932: 30). The conflictual nature of political concepts proves decisive for Mannheim's notions of ideology and utopia. Ideologies cannot be unmasked from an unpolitical observer standpoint but require political investment. In turn, to «call something 'utopian' is often a means of dismissing it without further consideration» (Sargent 2008: 266).

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[5] At the same time, Mannheim cautions against inflating politics' eventful character so as to equate political action with revolutionary action: «One must not assume that only inculcated interests are interests, and that only revolutionary or counter-revolutionary action is truly action.» (Mannheim 1929, 163)

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2. Conflicting Utopias

This leads us to Mannheim's notion of conflicting utopias. As Mannheim shows, utopias are conflictual in at least three senses. First, the notion of utopia can be employed, within political conflict, to denounce one's opponent's aspirations as unrealistic. Mannheim illustrates this with reference to Marxist critique of ideology: the Marxist «analysis of ideology worked out a coherent, critical method which was […] an attempt to annihilate the antagonists' utopias» (Mannheim 1929: 217). Second, utopian imaginaries are conflictual insofar as they combat competing utopian proposals. Every utopia encompasses an anti-utopianism diredted against other utopias: «Each […] utopian mentality […] turns against the rest» (Mannheim 1929: 217). Put differently, all utopias are counter-utopias; a specific utopia is «intelligible only in the light of its struggles with the other coexistent forms of utopia» (Mannheim 1929: 211). Thereby, antagonistic utopias can intensify each other: «a reciprocal conflict of the various forms of the utopia […] heightens the utopian intensity» (Mannheim 1929: 224). Third, utopia is in permanent conflict with ideology. On the level of political imaginaries, Mannheim assumes an endless conflict between the ideological drive to maintain order and the utopian drive to break it. In a sense, both ideology (as false consciousness) and utopia (as desire of the otherwise) are incongruent with the present order. But ideology serves the status quo while utopia subverts it. Utopia «transcends reality» to «break the bonds of the existing order» (Mannheim 1929: 173).

Along these lines, Mannheim assigns utopia a disclosing force. Utopia provides us with a distance from which to unveil the present's ideological encroachment. Utopia's distance to reality «prevents the existing order from becoming absolute» (Mannheim 1929: 178). In this sense, utopias help disclose our ideological predicament. Consciousness of ideological investment arises not from a disinterested, 'scientific' standpoint but from utopian radicalism. Mannheim proposes not scholarly neutrality but partisanship as the adequate standpoint to tackle ideology. For it is utopia that allows, as Paul Ricoeur puts it in his reading of Mannheim, an «exterior glance […] on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted». Utopia opens the field of the possible as «a field […] for alternative ways of living» (Ricœur 1986: 16).

Utopia's anti-ideological thrust as well as its conflictual nature can be best observed by taking into account Mannheim's reflections on temporality. For him, all utopias are uchronias, that is, they are in conflict with hegemonic time regimes. Temporality, for Mannheim, is key to understanding the self-conception of political groups. To make this clear, he discusses four paradigmatic utopias and their conflictual historical entanglement: _anabaptism, liberalism, conservativism,_ and _communism._ Although utopia is commonly associated with futurity, Mannheim's first paradigmatic utopia – Thomas Münzer's _anabaptist_ movement – is drawn to an ecstatic present. This religious utopia does not long for a distant future but attests to the radically Other in the here and now. An ecstatic present renounces all instrumental conceptions of political agency. For a presentist utopia, revolution is not a means to some end but «a value in itself, […] as the only creative principle of the immediate present» (Mannheim 1929: 196). Anabaptism thus endorses the unconditional, striving for the absolute in relentless immediacy. The _liberal_ utopia, Mannheim argues, counters this presentism with an evolutionary outlook on futurity. Liberalism constructs a utopia of pure normativity and linear progress. In this way, liberalism de-transcendentalizes utopia. The utopian Other is no longer absolute transcendence but a regulative idea for moral progress (Mannheim 1929: 202). Thereby, however, the liberal utopia gives rise to another counter-utopia: conservativism. The puzzling notion of a _conservative_ utopia illustrates utopia's conflictual essence. For conservativism as such is at odds with utopia, it was originally «not

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concerned with utopian ideas was its liberal opponent who […] forced it into this arena of conflict» (Mannheim 1929: 208). The conservative counter-utopia «serves as a means of self-orientation and defense» (Mannheim 1929: 207) against the liberal threat to the traditional order. Confronting the liberal endorsement of the future, conservatism mobilizes the past and values the concrete, the historical, and the conditional over unconditional Otherness and pure normativity. Against divine or normative unconditionality, conservativism summons the constitutive character of historical rootedness and tradition. The *communist* utopia, finally, can be understood, according to Mannheim, as synthesizing all three temporal ecstasies. As liberalism, communism turns to the future. However, by emphasizing the real dialectics of history, it takes up the Hegelian-conservative appraisal of the conditional. And by preparing the revolution in the here and now, it incorporates anabaptist presentism.

3. Beyond Utopia: Total Reification

As Mannheim argues, his own time heads into a total dissolution of utopia. In view of his present, he speaks of a «general subsidence of utopian intensity» and a «relative departure from the utopia» (Mannheim 1929: 223–24). In his eyes, the culprits are conservativism and even more so Marxism. Inasmuch as the conflict over the social imaginary is fought in terms of ideological criticism, it abets the disappearance of utopia. The hypertrophy of weakens the utopian aspiration, Mannheim claims: «we destroy the intensity of [the utopian] […] idea by showing that it is historically and socially determined» (Mannheim 1929: 225). When all utopias are discredited as ideological, the only tenable standpoint is sceptic relativism, which amounts to accepting the status quo. Mannheim dreads the «emergence of a matter-of-factness (*Sachlichkeit*)» (Mannheim 1929: 230), that is, a realism essentially complicit with the present order.

Against this background, Mannheim contends that utopian imaginaries are urgently needed to assure the continued existence of politics as conflict. Therefore, and despite all criticism, he credits socialism and communism for upholding the cause of utopia in a world that has become arid: «Their presence in society implies the uninterrupted existence of at least one form of utopia, and thus, to a certain extent, will always cause the counter-utopias to rekindle and flare up again» (Mannheim 1929: 231). The hope is not that one utopian imaginary will be realized at some point, but that every utopia will generate political dissent and conflict. Instead, a total loss of utopia would mark an irreversible «decay of the human will» (Mannheim 1929: 236). Mannheim indeed claims that «the disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing» (Mannheim 1929: 236). In a word, what lingers beyond utopia is pure reification. A life purged of conflictual utopian imaginaries would no longer be political or even human but eternal languishing [6].

4. Conflicting Imaginaries and the Ontology of Antagonism

Mannheim's idea of democracy as a regime of social self-problematization bears some weak normative implications. Democracy enables and promotes conflictual self-questioning. Accordingly, a democratic imaginary would be one that provides resources

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[6] In this respect, Ricœur makes a crucial observation: Mannheim diagnoses the disappearance of all forms imaginary noncongruence with reality in 1929. With despondency, Ricœur writes: «1929, so few years before the triumph of Hitler. There is something frightening in this blindness to events.» (Ricœur 1986: 283). Ricœur asserts that this blindness may have to do with Mannheim's endorsement of liberal scientist ideology. Implicitly, Ricœur thus suggests that Mannheim failed to take his own advice to assume the partisan position of reality-questioning opened up by the utopian mentality.

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for self-reflection and even self-alienation in the name of radicalizing and deepening the democratic dispositive of freedom, equality, solidarity, and self-rule. This calls for developing conceptual grids to analyze forms of political imaginaries with respect to their stabilizing and destabilizing effects. Such an analysis counter what Silke van Dyk refers to as the «liberalist emphasis on truth» (van Dyk 2017: 350) in the current debates on populism, namely the liberal, anti-populist recommendation to rehabilitate positivist notions of objectivity in the face of freewheeling propaganda. Mannheim's idea of conflicting imaginaries carves out how the standpoint of critique, especially of ideological criticism, cannot be neutral and distanced, as the liberal anti-populist has it, but is inevitably polemical. It is not the positivity of the given but the desire of the other that makes the ideological political reality appear problematic in the first place.

Based on this insight, the notion of conflicting imaginaries could be inscribed into an antagonistic ontological conception of the political. Following Ernesto Laclau and Oliver Marchart, antagonism functions, on an ontological plane, as the groundless or abysmal ground of the social (Marchart 2018). The interplay of constitution and evasion that Mannheim points to in analysing the distinction of ideology and utopia is, in this line of thought, relegated to the ontological structure of antagonism. «Antagonism – understood as a name for the intrinsically political nature of social being – is not an empirically given or scientifically determinable object of political reality [...], It is that which undermines the very positivity of 'positive facts'» (Marchart 2018: 13). Antagonism is what constitutes the social as conflictual and at the same time threatens its coherence and continuity. This also explains how political imagination can take on ideological and utopian force, in the sense that imaginary significations partake both in suspending and constituting, in shaping as well as escaping, in consolidating as well as undermining the status quo. If one commits to the ontological notion of radical antagonism as the (abysmal) ground of social being, then these opposing tendencies can be redescribed as tenuous manifestations of the antagonistic ontological structure. This would also entail that the political imagination is not only one of many subgenres of 'the' imagination as such. To the extent that the imagination is drawn to antagonism, all imagining would be referred to the political, insofar as it is related to the rift constitutive of social being. For antagonism is always already imaginarily represented and hegemonic struggles are not least about *how* it is imagined.

What comes in to play here as well is that Mannheim's idea of conflicting imaginaries cautions against epistemologizing conflict. If it is true that questions of truth are always already interwoven with questions of imagination, then political conflict cannot be modeled with epistemological conceptions of disagreement, such as 'peer disagreement', 'rational disagreement', or even 'deep disagreement'. Mannheim's study of ideology and utopia points to how conflicts are constitutively overdetermined with affective aspects of belonging, partisanship, desire, and conviction. This involves reservations about one-sidedly championing imagination as an emancipatory force in times of vanishing alternatives. While we indeed lack political alternatives and a radical sense of possibility, merely amassing imaginary resources will not suffice. The polarity of ideology and utopia shows imagination's protean nature. Even as Mannheim's mapping of ideology and utopia is all but fine-grained, it points to the need for developing orientation marks that allow for a critical investigation of imaginary dispositives.

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