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Karl Mannheim on Fascism: Sociological Lessons About Populism and Democracy Today?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Martyn Hammersley** 

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Abstract

The parallels and differences between current forms of populism and early 20th-century fascism have been the focus for much discussion. This article examines the relevance today of Karl Mannheim's analysis of fascism and of its relationship to democracy in the 1930s. He argued that the threat of fascism arose from the very nature of liberal democratic society, rather than being a product of external forces. He claimed that liberal democracy is transitional, rather than stable in character, and that the new emerging form of governance that was required to replace it shared a key component with fascism: a high level of social and economic planning. At the same time, he insisted that, as a pathological development, fascism served to illustrate the disastrous consequences that a failure to engage realistically with the process of societal development can have for upholding Western civilisational ideals. This article explores Mannheim's arguments against the background of current thinking about populism and 'post-democracy'.

Keywords

democracy, fascism, Karl Mannheim, populism, post-democracy

A common, and contentious, theme in the substantial current literature on populism concerns its relationship to democracy. There is an interesting parallel here with discussions in the 1930s and 1940s about the origins of fascism. One aspect of this is captured in the title of Sinclair Lewis's (1935) novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Around the same time that Lewis was sounding a warning about the dangers of fascism in the United States, Karl Mannheim ([1936] 1940, 1943) was arguing against a similar complacency in the UK. He had been exiled there after fleeing Nazi Germany, and he became preoccupied with

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warning the British that the origins of fascism lay in problems intrinsic to liberal democratic society – that it could happen to them. Furthermore, he argued that these problems needed to be tackled with some of the same techniques as those used by the fascists, recognising that this would involve limits being placed upon individual freedom and democratic participation. There are strong resonances with present-day concerns about populism and its implications for democracy, including in the UK, and Mannheim offers a highly distinctive perspective on the issue.

I will begin with an outline of current debates about populism, before going on to discuss Mannheim's arguments about fascism in the 1930s. Finally, I consider what lessons might be drawn from his work.¹

Populism today

There are a variety of conceptions of populism in the current literature, and the uncertainties surrounding the meaning of the term have frequently been noted (McKibben, 2020; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016b; Urbinati, 2019).² Historically, the label seems first to have been employed (in Russia and in the United States, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) to refer to political positions that celebrate the virtues of some large category of people who are commonly looked down on by those belonging to the ruling elite or dominant class because their life orientation and circumstances are considered inferior. In the case of Russia, it was the peasantry that was valorised by populists; in the United States, it was commercial smallholding farmers (Berlin et al., 1968: 137–145; Kaltwasser et al., 2019: ch. 1). More recently 'populism' has come to be used in a usually derogatory manner to refer to a political strategy that adopts an ideology purportedly supporting 'the silent majority', the 'genuine citizen', or the 'true patriot', but which is primarily concerned with enabling its exponents to gain power. In other words, it is often seen as a strategy employed in what Pareto ([1901] 1991) referred to as 'the circulation of elites', although a few political leaders and movements have applied the label 'populist' to themselves, giving it positive connotation (Moffitt, 2020).

So, an influential current interpretation of 'populism' portrays it as a distortion of democracy in which a political agent – a particular leader, party, or party faction – attacks established elites in the name of a segment of the population whose interests are declared to have been sacrificed or neglected by those elites, a segment that is presented either as the majority or as the most authentic part of society (Mudde, 2004: 543; Müller, 2016a). Sometimes, another section of the population or some external agent, whether a country that is a traditional enemy or a diaspora individual or group, is scapegoated as well. This populist ideology may be framed in terms of a rhetorical conflict between localism and cosmopolitanism, with the universalist claims of the elite being dismissed by populists as disguising the particularistic interests of its members (Ingram, 2017). Also, there can be an appeal to tradition, religion, or common sense, as against the claims of science or other sources of specialised expertise (Babones, 2018). In response to this, critics point to the self-interested motives of populist leaders and parties, charging that their representational claims are spurious.

In these terms, populism is at least potentially at odds with liberal democratic institutions, in that these may be seen, or presented by populists, as not working to serve the

interests of the whole, or the ‘true’, citizenry; thus, populist parties and leaders in government frequently seek to circumvent, control, or abolish some of those institutions, such as parliaments or independent judiciaries. Examples can be found in the recent history not just of Poland or Turkey but also of the US and the UK. More broadly, populist governments are often at odds with any notion of a balance of powers, insisting that these restrict their capacity to represent the people properly.³ Given this, some commentators have argued that populism is a distortion of democracy analogous to fascism and National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s (Finchelstein, 2017). Indeed, it is suggested that in some respects it is a throwback to premodern absolutism: that, despite populist leaders’ use of the rhetoric of democracy, populism leads to dictatorship and to reliance upon political theatre rather than the exercise of sovereignty by citizens.

By contrast, others have argued that populism is a development from within democracy (Kaltwasser, 2014). As already noted, populists often claim to be thoroughly democratic, indeed more democratic than the elites they are challenging or which they replace. They may argue, for example, that elected representatives have become distant from their electors and are pursuing their own agendas, that parliaments in which voting is governed by party allegiances do not represent citizens, that current legal rules and procedures are more amenable to the rich and powerful than to ordinary people, and so on. In place of mediating bodies that are denounced as failing to represent ‘the people’, what is (at least purportedly) offered is a direct democratic relationship with a symbolic figure who embodies its will (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

One version of the sociological argument that populism grows out of democracy draws on mass society theory (Giner, 1976). This theory typically relies on a contrast between community and society (as characterised in Tönnies’ ([1887] 1957) hugely influential book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*). Often, a community is believed to have coherence and structure, thereby giving rise to an organic ‘general will’ embodied in the state, whereas a *society* consists of differentiated and conflicting groups, or even of atomised individuals, whose thoughts and actions are governed entirely by their own divergent interests, rather than by any notion of the collective good. From this point of view, democracy may be regarded as a symptom of a fall from grace – of the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* characteristic of modernity; and populism as the inevitable consequence, whether viewed negatively or as offering a solution. Populists often appeal to the *Gemeinschaft* ideal in challenging existing democratic institutions, though what is involved is not usually the project of restoring the *ancien régime* but rather of instigating a new type of political system that draws on conservative ideals while at the same time reshaping them, along with the means by which they are to be realised. In this respect, there is a direct parallel with fascism (Finchelstein, 2017) and other forms of ‘reactionary modernism’ (Herf, 1984).

While populism has frequently taken Rightist, often nationalist, forms, there are those on the Left who have argued not only that it is a symptom of the failure of representative institutions, indeed of liberal democratic society generally, but also that it constitutes a means by which democracy can be rejuvenated and society transformed to realise Leftist ideals. From this point of view, what the emergence of Right-Wing populism signifies is that true democracy has not yet been achieved, and that it must be extended to all aspects of social life, including the economy. The main obstacle to this is regarded as capitalism – liberal democracy must be replaced by socialist democracy. An influential version of

this argument is post-Marxist in character (Laclau, 2005a, 2005b; Mouffe, 2016, 2018). These authors take over the common perception of populist leaders as constructing ‘the people’s will’ that they claim to represent, but it is argued that this process of construction is essential to politics. This view arises from Laclau’s and Mouffe’s rejection of the claim of traditional Marxism to identify different classes with distinct, structurally defined interests. Instead, it is insisted that interests must always be constructed, and support mobilised to serve them, in a political field that is contingent rather than socially determined (See also Frank, 2010).

Finally, while some, whether on the Right or the Left, have regarded populism as a symptom of the failings of actually existing democracy, others have argued that populism highlights a fundamental, but perhaps productive, conflict within democracy that can only be managed not overcome. The tension may be identified as between ideal and reality: there is an inevitable gap between the promise of democracy – that it enables self-rule – and the practicalities that are necessarily involved in reconciling the conflicting preferences of diverse groups and individuals, and the delays and compromises associated with this (Sartori, 1987: 7–8; Bobbio, 1987: 26-27). Taking a slightly different approach, Canovan (1999) distinguishes between redemptive and pragmatic aspects of democracy. The first portrays democracy as an ideal to be enthusiastically embraced because it constitutes ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’. The second treats it as a means of avoiding or minimising conflict, a useful governmental technique rather than an ideal. She suggests that both aspects are essential if democratic states are to function well: the redemptive element provides the positive motivation to participate in, and to support, democratic regimes; while the pragmatic emphasis on the contribution that democracy can make to peace and stability is essential to reconcile citizens to the messy business of actual politics – here the rationale is a negative one, that the alternatives are worse.

In the 1930s and 1940s, commentators sometimes concluded that the rise of Italian fascism and German National Socialism revealed the failings of liberal democracy, showing that it needed to be reconstructed in significant respects. A key example of this line of argument is the later work of Karl Mannheim, particularly his book *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, which was published in 1940.⁴ He viewed fascism as both highlighting what was wrong with liberal democracy and as indicating the means by which its problems could be solved, and the threat from fascism met. However, his ideas were significantly different from those put forward today by advocates of ‘Left populism’.

Mannheim on fascism and democracy

Mannheim’s analysis of the rise of fascism draws primarily on his experience of Weimar Germany.⁵ While living in his native Hungary until shortly after the First World War, he had gained deep knowledge of German ideas and culture. His mother was German, and he studied there briefly. With the failure of the communist government in Hungary in 1919, he moved to Germany to continue his education, subsequently being appointed as an instructor in sociology at Heidelberg, and then full professor at Frankfurt from 1929 to 1933 before he was forced to flee, eventually settling in the UK. It was after this

second exile that most of his writings about fascism and its implications for social democracy were published.

Mannheim argues that National Socialism arose out of the anarchy that occurred in liberal democratic Weimar Germany, where the regime was put under enormous pressure as a result, first, of the post-war political and economic settlement and then by the world recession. However, he also points to the extension of suffrage, and of political participation more generally, that occurred in the 19th and early 20th centuries, this bringing new sections of the population into the electorate who previously had had little or no political involvement, and therefore little experience of the complexities of policymaking and the constraints on it.⁶ While Mannheim views the process of democratisation as an inherent trend in modern societies, and as desirable, he argues that the great demands made on the post-war German state by newly enfranchised groups resulted in an inevitable failure to satisfy expectations, this feeding the growth, on both the Left and the Right, of radical parties that rejected liberal democracy, eventually resulting in the National Socialists' taking power.

So, Mannheim puts forward a structural analysis of this process, suggesting that, while there were significant local features relating to the particular circumstances of Germany, the demise of the Weimar Government arose from fundamental problems with liberal democracy generally.⁷ Rather than seeing the latter as a stable new form of society that had emerged out of medieval restrictions, in the manner of Hayek (1944; Hammersley, 2021), Mannheim ([1936] 1940) argues that it is in fact a transitional phase in a long-term move towards a form of society in which there is greater governmental planning. This planning is essential because of increased economic and social complexity, not least as a result of developing technologies and new forms of economic organisation, which can no longer be rendered orderly by the operation of markets and other forms of spontaneous social organisation. He uses the analogy of the need for traffic direction at crossroads once the amount of traffic has grown beyond a certain point (Mannheim, [1936] 1940: 157).⁸

Mannheim also insists that, where democracy operates in large states, elites are necessary – since there is no possibility of direct democracy, it must take a representative form, and a powerful executive is required to exercise the essential planning control. Problems arise if democratisation is too rapid so that elites become insufficiently homogeneous in their assumptions and orientation, both because of the increased diversity in the social origins of their members and because new constituencies have to be wooed for support. In line with his earlier argument in *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim ([1929] 1936) argues that a balance is required between a conservative and a utopian orientation; so that, while adaptation to changing social structural conditions is necessary, attempts to institute utopian changes, whether of the Right or the Left, must be controlled. For him, fascism is one form of utopianism, offering a vision of a new society that cannot be realised, so that what results is a new and dictatorial political elite which subsequently represses even the spontaneous forces that had brought it to power (Loader and Kettler, 2002). He labels this as a process of 're-primitivization' (Mannheim, [1930] 2001: Lecture 5).⁹ Here we can perhaps see a direct parallel with the character of some current populist governments (Finchelstein, 2017).

Central to Mannheim's account is a sophisticated conception of the irrational and the rational, and of the relationship between the two. While he regards fascism as a product of the irruption of irrational forces, disrupting the rational governmental control that the Weimar Government sought to exercise, he does not view irrationality in an entirely negative manner. The term refers to anything that comes from outside of what is currently under control, psychologically or socially. The consequences of irrational forces can be undesirable, but they may also be progressive; indeed, they are the major spur to necessary social change (Mannheim, [1936] 1940: 62–63). He writes that '[. . .] planning can only have a positive value if it is based on the creative tendencies in society; i.e. if it controls living forces without suppressing them' (p14). What are involved at the individual level are spontaneous desires of one sort or another that motivate action, but which need to be brought under control if that action is to be effective, or is not to have an unacceptable level of cost. Indeed, sometimes what is required is redirection of such desires. Similarly, at the societal level, as a result of democratisation, new groups with new needs and desires are brought into political play, which will spur change. But these will not have been rationalised so as to take into account the constraints imposed by current social conditions and future prospects – a failure of what Freud, who was a major influence on Mannheim's thinking, referred to as the reality principle. So, Mannheim's ([1936] 1940: 63, 91) argument is that if the process of democratisation occurs too quickly, so that the new tendencies cannot be rationally controlled, they will have undesirable consequences, causing major social disorder and/or bringing about regimes that pursue unrealisable utopias, communist or fascist. He refers to this as 'negative democratization'.¹⁰

Equally important, Mannheim ([1936] 1940: 86–87, 352–353) sees pluralism, or excessive pluralism, as a dangerous problem, which is why greater governmental coordination is required than is characteristic of liberal democracy. The problem arises from the very nature of modern society, for example that economic efficiency and productivity are maximised through the concentration of ownership and control of the means of production in the hands of a relatively small number of very large companies. Given their economic power, it is necessary to ensure that their activities serve national goals. While the invisible hand may work effectively in the early stages of commercial society, over time plural centres of power come to be at odds with one another, creating deep-seated conflicts. Thus, Mannheim argues that there is a need for democratic control of economic and political power by an elected elite, who act on the basis of scientific knowledge in deciding how best to achieve collective goals and serve the common good. This amounts to a distinctive blend of ideas whose political complexion is hard to characterise, but one that is some distance from most of those that inform contemporary social scientific analysis.

It should be clear that Mannheim displays a strong commitment to the preservation of social order, similar to that of some early sociologists and to what has often been characterised as mass society theory (Bramson, 1961; Yamada, 2018). There are echoes, for instance, of Comte, who believed that liberal forms of governance are not adequate in the context of newly industrialising and urbanising Western societies (Bourdeau, 2018). However, as with Comte, Mannheim's position is clearly at odds with that of restorationist mass society theorists like de Bonald and de Maistre, who wished to reinstate the

feudal or absolutist regime that had existed prior to the French Revolution. Furthermore, unlike Comte, Mannheim is committed to both freedom and democracy, but at the same time he stresses the important role that sociology must play in indicating what is feasible in current social conditions and what is not, and in identifying what will result in regressive outcomes if uncontrolled. There are strong parallels here with Durkheim, even though the proposed remedies are different (Bellah, 1973; Challenger, 1994).

Mannheim ([1929] 1936) recognised that sociology necessarily relies upon ideological assumptions. He argued that ‘total ideologies’, in other words comprehensive world-views relying on discrepant assumptions, were characteristic of modernity and unavoidable. However, he also insisted that the point had been reached where we must recognise that it is not only our political opponents’ views that are ideological, in the sense of stemming from their distinctive social location and fundamental assumptions, but also our own. Indeed, he believed that it was precisely this that opened the way for the development of sociology, and specifically for the sociology of knowledge. This involved recognising that every total ideology carries some insights as well as errors, and can only be understood in its social context. This was the basis for his attempt to learn lessons from fascism despite his opposition to it.

Lessons for today?

While there are many differences between the situation in the 1930s, when Mannheim was writing *Man and Society*, and how the world is now, there are also parallels. There was a major world depression at that time, and in the early years of the 21st century there was the financial crisis of 2008 and the ‘Great Recession’ that followed. More recently, there have been the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 1930s, there was criticism of liberal democracy and of unrestricted capitalism; there was much pressure for government intervention to counter the economic crisis. Mannheim’s views about the need for social and economic planning matched a strong stream of opinion at the time (Hammersley, 2021). Similarly, in the past few decades there has been increasing criticism of capitalism and calls for government action to counter its effects; notably, growing social inequalities and disastrous climate change. Furthermore, some have seen UK governmental decision-making during the pandemic, despite its deficiencies, as a model for what is required in dealing with these problems, much as Mannheim believed that the mode of governance in Britain during the Second World War indicated what would also be necessary in peacetime. Finally, as noted at the start of this article, parallels have been drawn between the spread of fascism in the 1930s and of populism in present-day societies.

If we compare Mannheim’s attitude towards fascism with the views about contemporary populism I outlined earlier, he belongs in the second main strand: he does not regard fascism simply as a distortion of democracy but rather as indicating severe problems internal to it. Furthermore, he insisted that something could be learned from fascism in remedying these, this indicating a pragmatic rather than a redemptive view of democracy (Canovan, 1999).¹¹ However, his position stands in sharp contrast to influential political positions opposed to fascism and populism that continue to be influential today: in

particular, traditional economic liberalism and advocacy of increased democracy. It is worth exploring the relationships between Mannheim's position and these alternatives.

His views are clearly at odds with traditional economic liberalism, which prescribes a minimal state restricted to protecting property and providing a legal framework for economic transactions in competitive markets. This was the basis for Hayek's (1944) critique of the whole notion of central economic planning (Hammersley, 2021). And, while government in the UK during the Second World War and in the following couple of decades had some similarities with what Mannheim proposed, since the 1970s neoliberalism has largely prevailed. At the same time, there are, of course, significant differences between modes of governance today in the West and what was prescribed by classical liberalism: many markets are dominated by large, transnational firms, and governments have become subject to their considerable political influence, as well as outsourcing the supply of public services to them (Crouch, 2011).

Mannheim's model also contrasts with what we might call radical conceptions of democracy; especially those which prescribe the direct participation of ordinary citizens in policymaking. As we saw, while Mannheim welcomed democratisation as an essential part of the modernisation process, he believed that it could be destabilising if too rapid or if it was extended too far. The political ideal underlying his position was government by a meritocratically recruited and democratically elected elite. By contrast, perhaps the most common version of radical democracy portrays policy decisions as arising out of collective public deliberation (Landmore, 2017). Another version, put forward by Left populists, treats democratic action as the mobilisation of mass support in the name of equality, relying on strategies which evoke common experience and aspiration, rather than on the 'rational' discourse valued by deliberative democracy. From both these radical perspectives, what Mannheim proposed is a form of elitism that they would view as necessarily serving the interests of the ruling group, rather than empowering citizens.

In short, Mannheim's position can be criticised as neither liberal nor democratic. Indeed, it has sometimes been suggested that his proposed planned society amounts to a form of totalitarianism: that the cure he offers is no different from the illness (Hayek, 1944). However, it is important to recognise that, unlike fascism and Right-Wing forms of populism, the values by which Mannheim defined the common interest that government must serve were ones that are widely regarded as progressive: general economic prosperity, equality, and freedom. While he insists that these must be reinterpreted to fit current social circumstances, he does not abandon them. Nor, as noted earlier, did his commitment to the preservation of social order signify a desire to return to the *ancien regime*. His 'third way' is, therefore, positioned between classical liberalism and radical democracy, on the one hand, and communism and fascism, on the other. In this respect, it is also distinct from the ideological underpinnings of many contemporary forms of populism, of the Right and the Left.

Whether Mannheim's proposed mode of governance would be viable today remains to be seen, of course, but similar doubts apply to liberalism and radical democracy. While Hayek and others have denied that the domination of markets by a small number of large companies is at odds with the operation of free competition, this was not the view of the ordoliberalists with whom he was associated in the 1940s (Cerny, 2016; Jackson, 2010).

They argued that there are inherent trends towards oligopoly within capitalism, and that strong government action is required to prevent this if the benefits of competition – promoting efficiency and innovation, and reconciling multiple conflicting demands in a way that maximises utility – are to be preserved. Similarly, actually existing democracies are a long way from the model championed by radical democrats. They rely on representation rather than direct participation, and operate on a party basis. And government within them involves the exercise of executive power by an elite. Crouch (2020) argues that we have entered a phase of post-democracy that cannot be reversed, only coped with. Political parties and leaders have lost direct contact with their traditional constituencies, and politics has become a field in which leaders and parties market themselves through misleading publicity and strategic manipulation. Moreover, national governments no longer have the power to make many of the key decisions that affect the lives of their citizens, as a result of globalisation. Deploping these developments is easy enough, but bringing about change that would realise either the liberal ideal of a commercial society or radical democracy is much more challenging, perhaps utopian. Mannheim would have insisted that the structural characteristics of modern societies render both of these ideals impossible to achieve, and attempts to produce them regressive in their consequences.

Mannheim's position has two features that are especially worth highlighting in light of the current preoccupations of sociologists, for example as represented in what Smith (2014) calls their 'sacred project' of championing equality and diversity. One concerns the very character of values like freedom and democracy. Mannheim insists that the meanings of these terms are not universal and fixed: they are always shaped by particular contexts. It is tempting to dismiss fascist appeals to freedom, and communist claims to democracy, as mere rhetoric. To a degree, this accusation is true, though the same might also be said of Western governments' appeals to those values. But underlying these various rhetorical claims are differences in what kinds of freedom and democracy are held to be both desirable and feasible. Mannheim is surely right to argue that democratisation does not always have beneficial effects in terms of good government, and that not all forms of freedom serve the common good. While he does not spell out in concrete detail what modifications to our conceptions of freedom and democracy are required, his discussion makes clear that the meaning of these principles in practical terms cannot be taken for granted. For example, in relation to liberalism, Mannheim (1943: 156) acknowledges the argument that the 'limitless craving for more and more luxury goods' is 'the unnatural response to endless stimulation of desires originating in a competitive system', where 'producers try to outdo each other by creating cravings for new kinds of goods'. He suggests that 'a movement could be fostered which is based upon the view that moderation and restriction are essential for the human being'.¹²

The second feature of Mannheim's work that I believe is instructive is his emphasis on the key role of science, and especially of sociology, in the process of policymaking.¹³ He viewed this as filtering and reformulating popular demands made on the governing elite, turning them into rational policies. He also saw sociology as providing the framework within which education needs to be restructured so that democratic demands are eventually rationalised at source, this simultaneously producing rational consent to the new mode of governance (Stewart, 1953; Wolff, 1971: ch. 11). He believed that many citizens who had been drawn into political participation did not have the knowledge,

experience, and capacity to make sound political judgements (Mannheim, [1936] 1940: 45). He was not unusual in taking this view at the time: a similar, perhaps even more pessimistic, argument can be found in the writings of Lippmann (1922, 1927), Schumpeter (1942), and (a little later) in Lipset's (1960) *Political Man*. Today, we find parallel arguments among those who advocate 'epistocracy': the restriction of political participation to the highly educated (Brennan, 2016). But Mannheim would have viewed this proposal as reactionary. He wrote that 'either one desires democracy, in which case one must attempt to bring everyone to more or less similar levels of understanding, or one must reverse the democratising process, which indeed the dictatorial parties are, of necessity, attempting to do' (Mannheim, [1936] 1940: 46).

Of course, there is a striking discrepancy here between Mannheim's conception of the nature and role of sociology and current views. Where he regards it as serving policy-makers, and as introducing a necessary realism into the process of government by identifying the structural characteristics of present-day societies and their likely future development, many contemporary sociologists view their task as to show that present socio-political arrangements are neither natural nor inevitable, that change is possible. In short, they view their discipline as fundamentally oppositional or 'critical' in character (Smith, 2014; Turner, 1992). Furthermore, as I noted, he specifically rejected political perspectives that are utopian – in the sense of proposing alternatives that do not recognise the constraints of the situation. Utopias must be rationalised if they are to have desirable political consequences. In this respect, his work prefigured claims about 'the end of ideology' in the 1950s (Dittberner, 1979).

Mannheim's emphasis on the role of scientific evidence is similar in some respects to arguments for evidence-based policymaking that have been influential since the 1990s (Hammersley, 2013). However, where these have focused on the provision of specific pieces of evidence about the likely effectiveness of proposed or existing policies, he believed what was required was a more comprehensive perspective, drawing on multiple political perspectives and synthesising knowledge from a variety of disciplines (Mannheim, [1929] 1936). While he recognises that there can be no stepping outside of ideological assumptions, he insists that specific events and processes can only be properly understood in their wider contexts. Where Weiss (1983) argues that policymaking is necessarily based on ideology, interests, and information, with the last being filtered through the first two, Mannheim holds out the prospect of ideological assumptions being progressively rationalised so as to provide a comprehensive practical-theoretical understanding that can guide policymaking.

Mannheim identifies important issues that are frequently neglected. He is surely right that a working democracy necessarily involves the mediation of popular demands: it cannot translate all of them directly into implemented policies. In this sense, he distinguishes democracy from good governance, rather than treating the two as identical. Furthermore, science, including social science, must play a key role in this process if problems are to be accurately diagnosed and effective means of implementing policies discovered. It is also true that we can learn from opposing political perspectives, rather than seeing these as fundamentally at odds: we must recognise that, while not easily reconcilable, they derive from differential emphasis on a set of values that is widely shared, as well as on discrepant assumptions about human nature and society. And these assumptions are

clearly open to investigation. Moreover, as even Weber recognised (Bruun, 2007), it is possible to engage in rational argument about value judgements regarding what is wrong, and what ought to be done, in particular cases – even though agreement is by no means guaranteed. Mannheim is perhaps also right to stress the need for any specific evidence about particular problems or policy options to be contextualised within a view of the larger society. This will be done implicitly anyway, so there is much to be gained from making what is assumed explicit.

At the same time, there are obvious weaknesses in Mannheim's position. He almost certainly has excessive confidence in the public service orientation of governing elites and their advisers, underestimating the potential for corruption. Furthermore, he surely overestimates the capacity of social science to provide the sort of comprehensive perspective he believes is needed for sound policymaking. Floud (1966) quotes A. D. Lindsay, who became a friend of Mannheim in England, to the effect that:

'Mannheim always resisted very strongly the suggestion that there was any limit to sociological knowledge, any suggestion that legislation, like moral action, was partly a leap in the dark. One always felt that he had a sociological faith that all these blanks of ignorance about society could be overcome'. (p. 970)

Furthermore, Mannheim seems to assume a continuity between science and wise governmental decisions. Yet there is a significant gap: research cannot provide all of the knowledge that these decisions require, nor can it validate the judgements that are necessary in balancing competing values (Hammersley, 2013). Hayek's distinction between technical and practical decisions is relevant here, only the first being open to scientific solution: the heterogeneous desires of individuals, as well as inevitable limits to available information, rule out any possibility that what is in the common interest could be determined by technical means alone (Caldwell, 2003: 187). From a very different perspective, Laclau (2005a) emphasises the agonistic choices that must be made in politics. However, while it is true that Mannheim probably exaggerates the contribution that social science and rational deliberation can make to policymaking, these other authors tend to underestimate it.

Conclusion

This article has examined connections between current discussions of populism and Karl Mannheim's views about the causes and significance of fascism in the 1930s. Diverse meanings have been given to the term 'populism', these implying different relationships between it and democracy. Some have claimed that fascism and populism are distortions of democracy. Others argue that both fascism and populism highlight failings in current democratic processes, indicating the need for radical change in the direction of broader and more participatory forms. Yet other commentators insist that populism arises from an essential tension within democracy that can only be managed, not eradicated. Mannheim does not use the term 'populism', but his discussions of fascism touch on many of the same issues. He treats fascism as a product of the anarchy that is always a potential threat during the process of democratisation in liberal societies. Moreover, he insists that, in some respects, fascism points to changes that are necessary if those societies are to be

stable and prosperous, in particular that a considerable degree of governmental social and economic planning is required. In this respect, his diagnosis and recommendations have similarities with those of some commentators on populism today, despite other differences (Kaltwasser, 2014). At the same time, Mannheim has a strong sense of the extent to which social structures, and changes within them, are beyond our control, of the dangers of social disorder, and of how our political ideals may need to be re-constituted.

It is not uncommon to find populism dismissed as a political evil, rather than examined for what can be learned from it about democracy.¹⁴ Given this, Mannheim's stress on the unavoidability of elites and the problems associated with democratisation may be salutary (Mannheim, [1933] 1956), along with his insistence on the technical, not just political, character of the problems that face modern societies, and therefore on the value of scientific expertise (Mannheim, [1936] 1940). Were he still alive, he would probably be pointing to the spread of populism as signalling that liberal democracies continue to be faced with deep-seated internal problems that destabilise them, as well as insisting that only a move towards a more planned society relying on scientific knowledge offers an escape.

Mannheim's emphasis on the role of science and expertise is at odds with much political thought today. Contrary not just to the views of most populists but also many liberals and radical democrats, he saw such knowledge as providing guidance that ought often to override the views of citizens and serve as a foundation in educating them for their role in society. This is, of course, in sharp contrast with many sociologists' conceptions of the public role of their discipline as oppositional or 'critical', or as redeeming 'subjugated knowledges' (Burawoy, 2005; Smith, 2014). We may find his views unpalatable, but in line with his own commitment to engaging with perspectives to which he was fundamentally opposed, not least fascism, we should give them attention. Doing so may help us to understand present crises better.

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Notes

1. For excellent discussions of Mannheim's work and the background to it, see Kettler et al. (1984, 2008) and Loader (1985).
2. There have been various efforts at conceptual clarification, for example distinguishing it from nationalism (see Moffitt, 2020), but in this article I will rely on the loose set of overlapping senses in which the term is generally used.
3. It is worth noting that one effect of this is that any criticism of a populist government or leader tends to be treated as criticism of the nation or the people, and therefore as treasonous.
4. There had been a German edition of *Man and Society*, published in the Netherlands where Mannheim initially sought refuge from the Nazis. Various parts of the later English book were given as lectures or published as articles or book chapters in the 1930s. See Mannheim ([1936] 1940: xxi)

5. Mannheim uses the term ‘fascism’ to cover not only the type of polity instituted by Mussolini and his followers in Italy, but also German National Socialism. For a useful overview of the Weimar political culture and Hitler’s rise to power, see McElligot (2009).
6. There are strong similarities between Mannheim’s analysis and that of Carl Schmitt ([1923] 1985) in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (see Bellamy and Baehr, 1993). In the case of Weimar Germany, universal suffrage, as usually defined, was achieved in 1919 with women gaining the vote. Furthermore, under the new constitution, the Reichstag had much more power than previously to make decisions. It is worth noting that Mannheim ([1936] 1940: 43) also believed that the existing structure of society generated differential possession of the knowledge and skills required for political participation: ‘It is the social structure which in this sense favours certain groups and condemns others to passivity, since to one it assigns tasks which require certain acts of thinking and deciding, while the others can adjust themselves to their position only by renouncing all insight or initiative’.
7. The complexities of any account of what happened in Weimar Germany are nicely illustrated by Ziemann’s (2010) account of diverse explanations.
8. His argument was at odds here not just with the views of Hayek, whose *Road to Serfdom* was in part a response to it, but also with those of Michael Polanyi, with whom he was in contact when in England. See Polanyi’s (1952) review of one of Mannheim’s books.
9. In his discussion of ‘Nazi group strategy’, Mannheim (1943: ch. VI) suggests that this involves the systematic breakdown of social ties, rather than a return to an earlier form of social life.
10. Brennan (2016), drawing on Schumpeter, takes the argument a step further, arguing ‘against democracy’, partly on the grounds that political participation is bad for people. Schumpeter (1942) had argued that ‘the typical citizen “becomes a primitive again” as soon as “he enters the political field”’ (quoted in Swedberg, 2003: xix).
11. Mannheim’s conception of democracy was closer to what Schumpeter (1942) refers to as ‘Democracy as Competition for Political Leadership’, as a governmental mechanism, than to ‘the Classical Doctrine of Democracy’ according to which democracy is of value in itself, as government by the people for the people. He nevertheless believed it was worth defending, echoing calls for ‘militant democracy’ (Mannheim, 1943).
12. However, Mannheim does not explicitly ground his views about freedom and democracy philosophically. Like many sociologists today, he seems to take his own value-commitments largely for granted. He had abandoned the sort of meta-narrative of human development provided by Hegel and Marx, but offered no explicit alternative – unlike some members of the Frankfurt School, notably Adorno. See also the more recent work of Honneth (Foster, 2011). It seems likely that what underpinned Mannheim’s views was Freud’s assumption of an essential conflict between desire and reality, and of the necessary role of the superego (or the state) in mediating between them.
13. On the neglect of this topic, see Turner (2003).
14. For criticism of this, see Eatwell and Goodwin (2018).

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