

Sociology

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Sociologists of knowledge production are presented with two sharply contrasting images of the ideal intellectual - as represented in the works of Karl Mannheim (*Ideology and Utopia*) and Antonio Gramsci (*The Prison Notebooks*). Both theorists wrote in the first part of the twentieth century, when colonialism, world war, sharply competing ideologies of fascism, communism, and other challenges to Western hegemony were all in play. Mannheim's idealized intellectual was someone "above the battle" - a "free-floating intellectual" who, he argued, was best-positioned to ferret out the situated truth of a given time and place precisely because s/he was not attached to a particular ideology. For Gramsci, the opposite was true - namely, it was the very connectedness to a social movement aimed at social transformation that was the ideal setting for what he would call an "organic intellectual."

In more recent times, Banks' *Black Intellectuals* sharpens this contrast for African Americans. Under what conditions, he asks, can Blacks make their best contributions - and what constraints push them towards either of these two poles. In this framework, it will be instructive to consider the full trajectory of Bunche's intellectual life, and the social and political times in which he lived. Ralph Bunche came of age in the same period that Mannheim and Gramsci were struggling to grasp the social and political origins of intellectual contributions. Bunche was cast in a number of different roles that variably shaped, opened, directed, and constrained his ideas about social change. We note that in his early years, Bunche was vitally and explicitly concerned with "race betterment" - and in this period seems very much the organic intellectual. He is the Co-Founder of the National Negro Congress, and writes pointed and sharp critiques of the economic and social order of his day. Later, as he moves into the role of government bureaucrat, and finally onto the stage as a United Nations mediator, he casts off the role of passionate advocate -- at least publicly -- and becomes a voice of more moderate gradualism in the debates as to how, when, and at what rate the colonial yoke should be lifted.

Themes sociologists might wish to explore in using this film of Ralph Bunche:

1. The relationship between race and social class in the larger context of Bunche's life story.

The 1925 rally of the Ku Klux Klan down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. is but one of the more glaring signal events in the film which reveals just how much, during Bunche's formative years, U.S. citizens accepted and normalized deeply racist practices and assumptions. There are a number of other such moments in the film that are subtler. What are those moments, and how might they have helped shape Bunche's views about the relationship between race and class as stratifying practices? For example, we learn that Bunche's grandfather was college-educated, a situation that could represent no more than one or two percent of the entire African American population of this period. Bunche is located in the upper rungs of the class structure among African Americans, but "race" blocks certain access routes to his own mobility.

2. A parallel and related theme of the race-class issue concerns the political spectrum -- from communism to fascism -- , which Bunche confronted in his early adult life.

The height of the fascist ascent in 1936 (the racist appeal resonant between the KKK and the Nazis) was of course countered at the other pole by communism and the Soviet Union (the appeal of an unreconstructed Marxist class analysis). It was in this year, 1936, that Bunche wrote *A World View of Race*. From what we can discern from the film and other sources, how might one fairly capture and characterize Bunche's emerging understanding of the role of race in colonialism? Does Bunche see race as trumping class on the international stage, or is there evidence that he saw a more integral relationship between economic power and racial domination?

3. The coalition politics of his early years.

As co-founder of the National Negro Congress, a predominantly Black political group at Howard University, Bunche actively sought coalitions with progressive whites. This is a very different segment of the political spectrum than those with whom he would associate, and to whom he would report, for the rest of his political career. In this period, he was demonstrably aligned with those demanding speedy social change. Several interesting questions now emerge for further exploration and consideration. In this period, to what extent is Bunche the "organic intellectual" tying his intellectual resources and talents to the racial stratification of his people - and to what extent is he the "free-floating" analyst unencumbered by these constraints, and those that will soon confront him as he moves into government service? Also, do any of the social movements, literatures, which pose alternative models of resource mobilization, provide any analytic or heuristic purchase in reviewing this period?

4. The role of institutional and organizational constraints on Bunche's career.

His early career as a college instructor left him relatively free to express what at the time were quite radical views on the sources and possible solutions to the massive inequalities of American economic and social life. When he first moved into the government-consulting role, he brought his expertise to policy makers - but in the role of analyst of the existing order. What are some of the different implications of a policy orientation (a top-down institutionally encased) attempt at social change versus an action orientation (a more "bottoms up" populist organizing strategy) for social change? Finally, Bunche moved to the United Nations, and was cast into the role of a mediator between warring factions and fiercely embattled groups. He increasingly saw himself as a "trouble-shooter" assigned to put out fires around the world. But this meant that others were setting the agenda, with Bunche more in the role of reactor than leader. Despite this, the film captures hints that Bunche was capable of setting agendas. What were they, and how did he manage this?

1. The charge of co-optation from the Left, and the charge of "Communist" from the Right.

The greater concern with "peace" at the expense of "justice" can be seen as an issue that frequently attends class privilege - but it certainly is one of the more enduring and vexing issues of conflict resolution strategies. In the literature on conflict resolution, this joins the debate about the degree to which mediators (inadvertently or consciously) have a strong bias toward the preservation of existing institutions. This had direct bearing for Bunche and his critics in the African American community on the leadership issue in the increasingly radicalizing Civil Rights Movement. When that movement turned its lens on international affairs and de-colonization, its leaders would criticize Bunche for the more gradualist approach that was an intrinsic feature of his mediating function at the United Nations. It was therefore ironic that, at the height of his diplomatic career achievements, Bunche would be characterized by those "in the movement" as thoroughly co-opted by the constraints that attended his move into the bureaucracy. While he was criticized for not moving as fast as the radicals wanted him to, McCarthyism had attempted to link the more radical associations of his past in an attempt to discredit him during the red scare period. Are there similar political figures and political situations today that you see as having a parallel to this feature of Bunche's situation?