

The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology



Alvin W. Gouldner

THE
COMING CRISIS
OF
WESTERN
SOCIOLOGY

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Preface

Social theorists today work within a crumbling social matrix of paralyzed urban centers and battered campuses. Some may put cotton in their ears, but their bodies still feel the shock waves. It is no exaggeration to say that we theorize today within the sound of guns. The old order has the picks of a hundred rebellions thrust into its hide.

While I was working on this study, one of the popular songs of the time was "Come on Baby, Light My Fire." It is characteristic of our time that this song, which is an ode to urban conflagration, was made into a singing commercial by an auto manufacturer in Detroit, the very city whose burning and looting it celebrated. One wonders: Is this "repressive tolerance," or is it, more simply, that they just do not understand? It is this context of social contradictions and conflicts that is the historical matrix of what I have called "The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology." What I shall be examining here is the reflection of these conflicts in the idiom of social theory.

The present study is part of a larger work plan, whose first product was *Enter Plato*, and whose objective is to contribute to an historically informed sociology of social theory. The plan envisages a series of studies called "The Social Origins of Western Social Theory," and I am now at work on two other volumes in it. One of these is on the relation of the nineteenth century Romantic movement to social theory, and another is a study in which I hope to connect the various analytic threads, presenting a more systematic and generalized sociological theory about social theories.

Like others, I owe much to many. I am particularly grateful to Dennis Wrong for a massive critique, at once sensitive and sensible, of the entire study. I am also indebted to Robin Blackburn, Wolf Heydebrand, Robert Merton, and S. Michael Miller for their trenchant suggestions concerning the chapter "What Happened in Sociology." I am deeply indebted to my graduate students at Washington University, perhaps most especially to Barry Thompson and Robert Wicke, for their criticism and encouragement of my work, in and out of our seminars together. My ideas on "methodological dualism" were developed in the course of working with William Yancey while I was his dissertation advisor. Admirers of England's Raymond Williams will also recognize that I have been much influenced by his emphasis on the "structure of sentiments."

I am also grateful to Orville Brim and the Russell Sage Foundation of New York for assistance that helped to make possible extensive European travel during 1965-1966 and without which this study would be a much different and, indeed, poorer one. While in Europe I was fortunate in having the assistance of a multilingual secretary, Manuela Wingate, and in the United States I had the great help of Adeline Sneider in preparing the manuscript. My thanks to both of them for their unflagging good humor, their technical skill, and their great capacity for work.

As I mentioned, this study is a part of a larger series on which I have been working and for which I have been preparing for the last twenty years. I have therefore felt free to draw upon certain of my previous publications and to use them here where they seemed appropriate. Conceiving of the present study as a work of synthesis, I have not felt compelled to inundate its pages with a sea of footnotes. If the substance and logic of what I say here does not convince, neither will the conventional rituals of scholarship. I shall not impose upon the reader's intelligence by making the usual perfunctory statement about where the final responsibility for the defects of this work resides.

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PART I

Sociology: Contradictions and Infrastructure

CHAPTER

I

Introduction: Toward a Critique of Sociology

The criticism and transformation of society can be divorced only at our peril from the criticism and transformation of theories about society. Yet the gap between theory and practice, so common in the history of American radical movements, is in some quarters growing wider. Some of the most militant of American radicals, in the New Left or in the movement for Black liberation, have at least temporarily avoided any serious concern with social theory.

This neglect of theory doubtless has various origins. In some part it is due to the fact that these social movements are still new and their political activism consumes their necessarily limited energies and resources; the new radicalisms will, in short, need time to produce their new theories. Although the neglect of theory is scarcely peculiar to Americans, it is in part also due to the fact that American radicals are often more American than they know and may prefer the tangible outcomes of pragmatic politics to the intangible outputs of theory. Again, part of their neglect of theoretical problems is probably due to the close links that some young radicals have with the "hippie" contingent of their generation, whose more expressive and aesthetic styles of rejecting American culture dispose them to avoid what they take to be the sterile "hassles" of intellectual confrontation. There is also a vocal minority who, as has been said, feel personally excluded when they hear an appeal to reason.

SOCIOLOGY AS POPULAR CULTURE

There are, however, other important sources of theoretical apathy among young American radicals today, and these, among other things, distinguish them from the radicals of the 1930's. One of these may well be the emergence of sociology, between the 1940's and the 1960's, as part of popular culture. Sociology then came of age, institutionally if not intellectually. It became a viable part of the academic scene: hundreds of thousands of American college students took courses in sociology; literally thousands of sociology books were written. At the same time, the newly emerging paperback book industry made these available as mass literature. They were sold in drugstores, railway stations, air terminals, hotels, and grocery stores, while, at the same time, increasing middle-class affluence made it easier for students to purchase them, even when not required as textbooks.

This mass availability of sociology (and the other social sciences) as part of everyday culture has had a paradoxical effect on the attitudes that some young people developed toward social theory and social problems. On the one side, the bookstore mingling of social science with other expressions of popular literature identified social science, by association, as part and parcel of the larger culture that the radicals rejected. Some young radicals thus came to distrust social theory because they experienced it as part of the prevailing culture. On the other side, however, sheer familiarity with the social sciences led some to accept it uncritically. For some young people the paperback sociology of the bookstore began to take the place of the earlier literature of radical criticism and protest.

Assimilating the social sciences as part of everyday culture, reading books about the nature of prejudice or poverty, the facts of life in America often seemed quite clear to them. Efforts to discuss theory might then seem to be an unnecessary obfuscation, a substitution of talking about problems for doing something about them. Viewing these researches against the background of their own values, they often experienced a simple moral revulsion rather than an intellectual stimulation. Theorizing, some came to believe, was a form of escapism, if not of moral cowardice.

Yet the neglect of self-conscious theory by radicals is both dangerous and ironic, for such a posture implies that—although they lay claim to being radical—they have in effect surrendered to one of the most vulgar currents of American culture: to its small-town,

Babbitt-like anti-intellectualism and know-nothingism. Moreover, if radicals wish to change their world, they must surely expect to do so only against the resistance of some and with the help of others. Yet those whom they oppose, as well as those with whom they may wish to ally themselves, will in fact often be guided by certain theories. Without self-conscious theory, radicals will be unable to understand, let alone change, either their enemies or their friends. Radicals who believe that they can separate the task of developing theory from that of changing society are not in fact acting without a theory, but *with* one that is tacit and therefore unexaminable and uncorrectable. If they do not learn to use their theory self-consciously, they will be used by it. Unable either to control or to understand their theories, radicals will thus in effect submit to one form of the very alienation that they commonly reject.

The profound transformation of society that many radicals seek cannot be accomplished by political means alone; it cannot be confined to a purely political embodiment. For the old society is not held together merely by force and violence, or expedience and prudence. The old society maintains itself also through theories and ideologies that establish its hegemony over the minds of men, who therefore do not merely bite their tongues but submit to it willingly. It will be impossible either to emancipate men from the old society or to build a humane new one, without beginning, here and now, the construction of a total counter-culture, including new social theories; and it is impossible to do this without a critique of the social theories dominant today.

The ambivalence toward theory among some sectors of the New Left, the simultaneous sense of its irrelevance and of its necessity, was clearly expressed by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the leading activists in the French student rebellion that began at Nanterre in the spring of 1968: the anarchists, he remarked, "have influenced me more by certain activities than by their theories . . . theoreticians are laughable." At the same time, however, Cohn-Bendit also observed "the existence of a gap between theory and practice . . . we are trying to effectively develop a theory."¹

That theory has had an effect upon the emerging New Left, whatever the attitude toward it, is evidenced, among other things, by the role of the "Frankfurt school of critical sociology"—including Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer—which has been said to be "as important as any single event"² in the political revitalization of the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentbund* from 1961–1965. Also, there is the international responsiveness of the new radicals to the work of another member of that school, Herbert Marcuse, whose practical importance was backhandedly acknowledged by recent Soviet critiques of his theory. Yet even