Book Review

The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology. By Alvin W. Gouldner. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970.

An examination of the title of Alvin Gouldner's new book, The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology, reveals some of the things that are wrong with what one finds between the covers of the book. Despite its title, the book is not concerned with a coming crisis, nor is it concerned with Western sociology. In reality, it is focally concerned with the long-standing crisis which has faced Parsonian theory. In my view Gouldner is wrong on two points: the crisis facing Parsonian theory is not coming, it has arrived; and Parsonian theory does not equal Western sociology. Despite the misconceptions which are communicated by its title, the book does have some merits, but these are far outweighed by its liabilities. Whatever its failings, the book should not simply be dismissed. I would like to underscore this by discussing its assets first before turning to a more lengthy discussion on the inadequacies in Gouldner's work.

The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology is really two books. In the first one Gouldner is engaged in an exercise in the sociology of sociology. In the second he is engaged in a critique of Parsonian theory and, more generally, modern sociology. The main strengths of the book lie in the first task; its main faults lie in the second.

When Gouldner is concerned with the sociology of sociology he makes some important contributions. He is bothered by the fact that sociologists seem to feel that they are not governed by the same social processes which govern the behavior of those they study. Gouldner contends, and correctly, that sociologists are affected by these same processes and we must study their effect on sociologists and sociological theories. Recognizing this, Gouldner is calling for two things which he lumps together under the rubric of "reflexive sociology." On the one hand, he wants more studies, like his own, which seek to explain the theories of sociologists by the milieu in which they find themselves. Secondly, he is calling for a heightened self-awareness on the part of sociologists of the effect of the social order on their work. One could hardly quarrel with either of these points.

In addition to the social setting, the theories developed by sociologists are affected by the "domain assumptions" of the author. He contends that all of us start with certain assumptions about, for example, man and society which determine the theories we will write or find to our liking. So, in order to understand any sociological theory we must analyze the social setting in which it is produced as well as the domain assumptions of its author. While the setting may be ascertained objectively, the domain assumptions must be inferred from the theory itself.

The major asset of this book lies in its effort to ascertain the effect of the social setting and domain assumptions on the theories of Talcott Parsons. It is when Gouldner turns from being an analyst to a critic that he finds himself in trouble. As an analyst Gouldner examines (but too briefly) Parsons' upper middle class background, the Harvard setting in which he worked, and the prosperous situation in the country (and the world) when he was developing as a sociologist. He finds, not surprisingly, that all of these factors help to explain the essential conservatism of Parsonian theory. Gouldner sees Parsons as an apologist for the status quo. If this is true, then he should find Parsons' theory undergoing change as the nature of the social system is experiencing change. In fact, this

is exactly what Gouldner does find. In the Depression years of the 1930's Parsons emphasized the idea of "voluntarism" in his theory. In effect, Parsons was telling his audience that their actions did make a difference (although often not the difference they intended) and therefore they should keep trying even though the system around them seemed bo be breaking down. Parsons believed in the system and felt that the Depression was a temporary aberration. If everyone could be kept busy and involved (but not hoping for too much) things would shortly change for the better. However, with the end of World War II the American system had become prosperous and was moving in the direction of the welfare state. Hence he no longer had to worry about keeping individuals involved in the system. What he did have to worry about, though, was providing a rationale for the increasing intervention in society of the welfare state. Parsons shifts and turns increasingly to the power of the social system and its coercive effect on individual behavior. Even though Parsons shifted his focus to the system level, his theory never fit well with the interventionist policies of the welfare state. For one thing, much of what went on in Parsons' social system was spontaneous. For another, he saw all factors as interdependent and was unwilling to give one factor (such as the polity) preeminence. In fact, the difference between Parsonsian theory and the welfare state is one of the reasons that Gouldner offers for the current decline of Parsonsian theory.

Before turning to Parsons' domain assumptions, it is important to note that there is another factor determining Parsonsian theory. That is, his ongoing debate with some of his theoretical predecessors. Of primary importance is his disagreement with Marxian theory. So where Marx is seen as giving primary emphasis to the economic subsystem, Parsons develops a model of the social system in which all subsystems are interdependent and none is of focal importance. While Parsons likes the anti-Marxism of theorists such as Weber and Sombart, he is troubled by their determinism, pessimism and anti-capitalism. Thus he focuses on the idea of voluntarism which enables him to be anti-deterministic since men's actions do make a difference. Further, he can be optimistic because men's actions do make a difference and capitalism will survive.

This, of course, leads us to some of Parsons' domain assumptions which also serve to shape his theory. Perhaps the best way to approach this is to juxtapose the domain assumptions Gouldner infers from Parsons' theory with Gouldner's own domain assumptions. (Which, by the way, are not labelled by Gouldner as his domain assumptions. This is a major failing in the book, since Gouldner takes great pains to show the importance of domain assumptions in sociological theory. Apparently, reflexive sociology is to apply to all sociologists, except Gouldner.) In do doing, we can make the transition to the second part of Gouldner's work, his critique of Parsons. I shall not try to be exhaustive here, but simply try to outline some of the major domain assumptions of Parsons and Gouldner.

Parsons	Gouldner
1) "From Parsons' standpoint emphasis is placed on the mechanisms that protect the interdependence and equilibrium of the system as a whole." (216)	"From our standpoint, emphasis would also be placed on the identification and analysis of the mechanisms that protect the functional autonomy of the parts." (216)

Parsons	Gouldner
2) Emphasis on the importance of the society's moral code in maintaining order.	2) "A moral code does not eliminate the tensions inherent in a social system; at the very most it provides a restraint on those inherent tensions; and at the very least it provides a language in which tensions are given public expressions and become the focus around which they are organized. Tensions abide." (218)
3) Emphasis on the socialization process in molding man.	2) "A theoretical model that implies this [the malleability of man], however, has one fatal flaw: it fails to correspond to the facts known about any social system ever studied." (218)
4) Emphasis on order	4) ". . . The human self develops and grows with social differences, in part, and conscientiously often seeks and needs confrontations." (220)

Ignoring Gouldner's domain assumptions for a moment, it is clear that among Parsons' domain assumptions are the unity of society, interdependence, equilibrium morality, socialization and order. These assumptions about man and society have clearly played a major role in shaping Parsons' theory.

When we turn from Parsons' domain assumptions to Gouldner's, we begin to see the inherent weaknesses in his critique of Parsons. Gouldner sees domain assumptions as metaphysical and concludes about Parsons: "In a serious sense, then, Parsons is not so much a substantive social theorist as a grand metaphysician of contemporary sociology. If I object to Parsons' metaphysics, however, it is not because I object to metaphysics in general, but only those that are befuddled." (207) If Gouldner had been content to stop there, few would argue. But, ever ambitious, Gouldner seeks to substitute his own metaphysics (domain assumptions) for Parsons'. Well Gouldner doesn't like Parsons' metaphysics, but I'm sure that Parsons would respond that he is not enamored of Gouldner's metaphysics. So what! Is this where we are in sociology? Can we do no more than criticize someone else's assumptions and substitute our own? Personally, I like Gouldner's assumptions more than those of Parsons, but that doesn't matter either. If the best we can do is bare our assumptions and call it theory, then sociological theory is dead.

As Gouldner sees it, "Parsons persistently sees the partly filled glass of water as half-full rather than half-empty." (290) On the other hand, Gouldner always sees the glass as half-empty. I frankly care about as much for how they see the world as how they see the glass.

In sum, to Gouldner Parsons is wrong, or at best half-right. He is wrong because of his background, his world, his intellectual debates, and its metaphysics. But what of Gouldner? Is he right? According to the author (Gouldner) Gouldner is right: "Does it mean that what Gouldner has said about the world of sociology and the trends in it has necessarily been distorted or falsified by his own experience with it? I believe not." (482) And that is where the issue is left. Gouldner is right; Parsons is wrong. Proof? No! Evidence? None! Simply little Alvin Gouldner stamping out of the room after hearing a lecture from his intellectual father (Parsons) murmuring I'm right, I know I'm right, I'm right. . . .

In any case, Gouldner concludes that Parsonsian theory, as we know it, is entering a crisis stage. Among the reasons offered are the inherent contradictions in the theory, the growing demand for applied sociology which Parsonsian theory cannot supply, and decline in the distinctiveness of functionalism as a sociological theory, the dissaffection of younger sociologists, and the growth of new theories such as those of Goffman, Garfinkel and Homans. He predicts that functionalism will survive, but in a changed form. More importantly he predicts that there will be a growth of radical sociological theory. It is on this growth that Gouldner is pinning his hopes for he sees his reflexive sociology as part of this movement: "Reflexive sociology is and would need to be a radical sociology." (489) I think Bennett Berger in a recent review of Gouldner's book is right when he says: ". . . regiments of radical young sociologists in search of a guru [will] begin to beat a path to his door."[1] (280) A cynic might even say that it is with this goal in mind that Gouldner wrote the book. Throughout the book Gouldner seems to be playing to just that audience. Two excerpts serve to illustrate this point:

> The self ". . . must at some point fight the system of which it is part and those who wish to subject it to that system." (222)
>
> "Everywhere in industrialized societies the "decencies" are growing, and everywhere in them we are being indecently diminished." (277)

I, and many others, happen to agree with Gouldner's metaphysics. But metaphysics is not sociological theory and that applies to Gouldner just as it applies to Parsons.

George Ritzer
University of Kansas

Footnote

[1]Berger, Bennett M. A Review of the Coming Crisis of Western Sociology by Alvin Gouldner. Social Problems 18 (Fall): 280.

Some Errors of Gouldner's History

Since I have been critical of functionalism as a methodology for sociology and anthropology, I have been enough interested in its history to do some elementary research on those ancestral figures, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). I was alerted to something peculiar in Alvin Gouldner's treatment of these men by the summaries in the (laudatory) reviews by Bennett Berger, and so I purchased the book and read the sections in question. What I read, I found appalling, for instead of careful analysis I found innuendo and smear. Gouldner's discussions are so inadequate that it is hard to take them seriously. His cry for what he calls a "reflexive sociology" can scarcely be achieved if we are to begin that enterprise by a series of distortions of the work of those who helped to found the discipline. Let me illustrate with crucial examples.

I

> While some Functional Anthropologists conceived it as their societal task to educate colonial administrators, none thought it their duty to tutor native revolutionaries (Gouldner 132).

From 1924 onward, Malinowski held an appointment at the London School of Economics, an institution founded by the efforts of those Fabian socialists (and pioneer British sociologists), Sydney and Beatrice Webb. Both in terms of its original endowment and the desires of the Webbs, the London School was designed to teach how to reform society. This is not the place to assess the achievement of the School, but we should note that among the participants in Malinowski's seminars during the 1930's was Jomo Kenyatta, and Malinowski wrote the "Introduction" to the latter's book, Facing Mount Kenya (first published 1938). Clearly, Malinowski did thereby assist and "tutor" at least one native revolutionary.

II

> Functionalism . . . arose following World War I, which is to say, against the backdrop of a violent challenge to English dominion and Empire; it arose when English precedence was no longer taken for granted, when the English could no longer feel confident . . . . Etc. In this setting the prospect was not the inevitable uplifting of backward colonies in their common evolution toward the future; the task was now to hold on to the colonies and to keep them under control. The sanguine expectation of progress gave way to the grim problem of order (Gouldner 127).

Radcliffe-Brown gained a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1901 where he studied what was then called moral and political science. While there, he fell under the influence of the Russian anarchist exile, Prince Peter Kropotkin, whose book on Mutual Aid was just being published (1902). Kropotkin had conducted naturalistic investigations in Siberia and thereby come to the conclusion that Darwinistic theories about the struggle for survival were a misinterpretation of the cooperative relationship among the members of a species. He extended these notions to the human world, and evidently he stimulated the young Brown to take up the study of comparative sociology. "Kropotkin pointed out to the young reformer (Brown) that it was necessary to study and understand society before trying to change it and that in order to understand such a complex society as Victorian England one should begin by making a systematic study of a faraway primitive community" (Srinivas 1958: xviii-xix).

Accordingly, in 1906 "Anarchy" Brown went to the Andaman Islands and there conducted his first and most famous field researches. He returned to England in 1908, and his fellowship thesis was the first draft of what later was issued as The Andaman Islanders (while the book was not published until after the war, its rewriting from thesis to book was completed in 1914).

In the case of Malinowski, the field researches on the Trobriand Islands were conducted during the period 1915-18, while his first major publication based on these researches, Argonauts of the Western Pacific, was in 1922. Given these historical facts, it is hard to find merit in Gouldner's attempt to portray functionalist anthropology as a phenomenon of declining colonialism, emerging after the first World War.

III

> In approaching English anthropology, it is vital to understand the gentlemanly self-image of its practitioners and of its audience of administrators (Gouldner 132).

More than any other scientists, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski -- especially the latter -- were responsible for the introduction into social anthropology of intensive personal field research. Prior to their work and their teachings, even the most eminent of anthropological scholars worked with data gathered by other men, for natives were regarded as if they were zoological specimens to be held at arm's length. In sharp contrast, the students of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were sent to live for many months in intimate contact with native peoples. Such conduct on the part of educated Europeans must have been profoundly shocking to the administrators, merchants, plantation operators, and missionaries of the colonial regions. Living with native peoples in a situation of social parity was an act that broke the color bar which kept natives and Europeans in social isolation from each other. These experiences of intimate living led social anthropologists to perceive native peoples as the cultural and intellectual equals of the Europeans, and this attitude is strongly stated even in the earliest works of Malinowski. Over and over again Malinowski contended that the native was equally human with the European, and that, if the native was to be classified as a "savage" why then so too were the colonial administrators and the anthropologist himself.

It is too easy today to forget that functionalist anthropology represented a critical attack on Social Darwinist theories that placed the non-European (native) peoples at the base of a ladder of evolutionary ascent. Today, profiting by the intellectual liberation achieved by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, men like Gouldner may derogate their work. He does so at his own peril, for it is precisely the labors of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and their students, which undermined the moral and intellectual pretensions of colonial policies. We should be grateful to these pioneer functionalists for their courage and their honesty.

Murray L. Wax
University of Kansas

References

Berger, Bennett M.
1970 A Review of The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology by Alvin Gouldner. Social Problems, 18, 2 (Fall): 275-280. (A shorter version of this review appeared in New York Times Book Review, October 25, 1970).

Fortes, Meyer
1949 Preface. Pp. v - xiv in Meyer Fortes (ed.), Social Structure: Studies Presented to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Gouldner, Alvin
1970 The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology. New York, Basic Books.

Kenyatta, Jomo
1938 Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu. London, Secker and Warburg, 1959.

Malinowski, Bronislaw
1922 Argonauts of the Western Pacific. New York, Dutton, 1961.

1938 Introduction. In Kenyatta 1938.

Muggeridge, Kitty and Ruth Adam
1968 Beatrice Webb: A Life, 1858-1943. New York, Knopf.

Srinivas, M. N.
1958 Introduction. Pp. ix - xii in M. N. Srinivas (ed.), Method in Social Anthropology: Selected Essays by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.