CHAPTER 2

Intellectuals and Radical Sociology

Introduction

Gouldner was trained in the hotbed of establishment sociology circa the 1950s, namely Columbia University. From Merton, Gouldner learned the ropes of conventional sociology and functionalism, even acknowledging that Merton also taught Gouldner to remain skeptical about unquestioned allegiance to certain master voices or proclamations. This is the program of “organized skepticism.” Although Gouldner made a name for himself in the field of organizational sociology, his positivist roots were never firmly planted, and by the early 1960s was moving toward the role of social critic and taking a more evaluative stance toward his subject matter. Within this example of Gouldner's shifting allegiances is an interesting story to tell about the basic debate that has continued to plague sociology, and that is, is sociology akin to the natural sciences in which causal explanations are derived from careful, systematic empirical observations of the social world utilizing standard methodologies such as survey research, experiments, and statistical analysis? Or is sociology more of an art or humanities discipline, which seeks truth not through the quest for covering laws of the social universe, but rather through interpretive and evaluative approaches which aims more toward understanding? (Lepenies 1988) Within this discussion I will begin with a theme touched upon in Chapter 1, namely, Vico's conceptualization of a “new science” which emphasized moral, political, historical, and religious elements in opposition to the traditional sciences of the physical universe. I will go on to confront Gouldner on this issue, and I will also engage the two Gouldners (younger and older) in a dialogue with one another over the nature of science reflected in the time periods he (they) were writing.

Back to Vico

In his writings on the new science, Vico (2002) notes that primitive social organization springs first from commonsense religious convictions (e.g., that

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there is [or are] a supreme beings [or beings] affecting our daily affairs, and that the dead should be buried), which reflected a common will of the people, thereby contributing to primitive social order. Over time, however, this original “vulgar wisdom” is converted into higher or loftier notions about the perfectibility of the race, leading to the formation of the sciences, disciplines, and arts. These newer sciences, disciplines, and arts were all “directed towards the direction and regulation of men’s faculties,” yet they were all deficient insofar as there had been no systematic study and research on the origins—that is, the history—of the civilizations within which these various undertakings emerged (Vico 2002: 11). These deficiencies of previous studies cited by Vico represent virtually the same argument St. Simon would make almost a century later concerning the failings of those who came before him (including of course Vico), the useful aspects of which could be built upon to erect a true “new science.”

Reacting to Descartes who launched the idea that mathematical thinking and reasoning lead us to certitude about (at least) the physical universe, Vico argued that since human beings make the human social world, they should understand it better than nature, the laws of which are not available to experience but must be conjured through mathematical or logical axioms. As Cahnman (1981: 26) observes, “Vico especially objected to Descartes’ disregard of history because it was lacking in mathematical certitude.” Here Cahnman (1976, 1981) is correct to note that Vico’s conceptualization of a new science of humanistic inquiry as a supplement to the (then) establishing natural sciences can certainly be pointed to as a key starting point for what would later be described and understood as the social sciences generally and sociology specifically. It is, according to Cahnman and other authors, an indication that Vico had already hit upon a sociology of knowledge, a historical sociology, and a hermeneutics insofar as the explanation of how people acquire status, property, and other social things must take into account the historical, cultural, and geographical contexts within which lives were configured.2 Indeed, Marcuse and Neumann (1994: 119) go so far as to suggest that Vico was the first thinker to give a sociological account of social change. The object of study which gave rise to the institutionalization of sociology by the 1880s—this object being society in its totality—had already been articulated by Vico back in 1725, to the extent that the totality of material and non-material culture in its historical development was “the work of men.”

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2 Some additional authors who have made the case that Vico was either doing or had discovered sociology include O’Neill (1976), Stark (1976), and Swinny (1914).