

Why Mills and Not Gouldner?

Charles Lemert

Looking back, one cannot help but be struck by the similarities between C. Wright Mills and Alvin W. Gouldner. Born within four years of each other (Mills in 1916, Gouldner in 1920), both were so archetypically tough guys that neither, were he starting out early in the 2000s, would get quite the same hearing in a time when feminist sensibilities are so well established. Both died relatively young (Mills at forty-five in 1962; Gouldner at sixty in 1980) —both, it would seem, of broken-heart syndrome, which, among other possible causes, may have had something to do with the then changing times.

Already by 1962, in the early storm of the American civil rights movement that issued in a series of new social movements, the writing was already on the wall that straight-shooting cowboys from Texas would have to clean-up their acts. Mills's heart began to give out when his wholly admirable *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960) was about to be savaged on national television by a wing of the same liberal establishment that had rejected him at Columbia. No less, Gouldner died on the streets of Madrid after his failure to hold on to the love of his life. It was 1980, when street-fighters from the Bronx no longer impressed the girls as once they may have. If (and it is a big if) their final heart attacks were brought on by personal troubles aggravated by the gathering structures of public issues, neither could be held fully blameless nor fully accountable for their sad and early ends.

Yet, when men (and I mean men) are remembered or ignored, the cause must be sought in the work, which in these two instances is symptomatic of their personal styles. Yet, today, Mills is very well remembered, if mostly for his famous slogan that revived a sociology which, in 1959, was ill-prepared for the revolutionary decade already brewing. *The Sociological Imagination* comes to mind even among those who would never think of reading Mills seriously. The concept, as distinct from the book, was the acknowledged inspiration of an American New Left of mostly white northern students who took from the slogan a sufficient justification for demanding and proposing the outlines of a better world, as only the more serious among them studied the corpus as source books for, as Dick Flacks put it, making history.

Still, this being granted, one wonders in 2005 just how seriously it is possible to take, say, *The Power Elite* just shy of fifty years after it appeared in 1956. The book remains great because of its dual contributions—first, as an appreciative rethinking Weber's "Class, Status, and Party" as a systematic method for understanding power; second, as a source for the idea of interlocking elites which seems to have reached, by one or another means, President Dwight D. Eisenhower whose farewell address to the nation in 1959 called attention to the military-industrial complex. The former of these is itself sufficient to seal Mills's place in history, with or without *The Sociological Imagination*. Still, it is hard to imagine how anyone would today begin a project on power with primary reference to Mills. The work of advancing his conception of power as having economic, political, and cultural expressions was already been done by Pierre Bourdieu among many others, just as Bill Domhoff and others have fleshed out the idea of elites working in a community of interest, if not a conspiracy. Then, there is the Foucault-problem for even so subtle a top-down theory of power as Mills's—power is culture/culture is power; both arise as much from the bottom as from above. Whatever we eventually determine globalization to be about, it is at least about the requirement that now we must think about power with respect to its many articulations, including those by which it colonizes the culture that colonizes everyday life. Elites remain, of course, but the metaphoric lesson of 9/11 is that the lesser powers resist and confound the global elite even the higher circles work their will down upon the nameless masses.

Alvin Gouldner, on the other hand, is mentioned less often in inverse proportion to the value of his ideas to the current situation. Google Gouldner and Mills in 2005 and you will get a scant 4,000 for Gouldner and some

50,000 hits for Mills. Neither could have begun to imagine such a fast thing as Google, but Gouldner at least lived to see and write about the social foundations on the new class of rapid-fire technologies, while Mills was still filing his research clippings in paper folders. Gouldner, too, took his notes by hand in his dark attic study. The difference lay in Gouldner's prophetic theory of the social foundations of information technology as a culture of human proportions; hence the irony that a lifelong Weberian would see in the far reach of rationalizing techniques the prophetic hope Weber longed for as much as the iron cage that baffled him.

Shortly before Al Gouldner died in 1980, I asked him offhandedly what he would do next. He had just finished *Against Fragmentation* (published posthumously in 1985) which he saw as the fulfillment of the decade's work on Marxism and sociology announced in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). He said, no less off the cuff, "I may write my own critical theory," by which he meant, I believe, his own version of the German project. It was an odd thing for him to say because I would have thought he'd have seen the work he'd just completed as itself a very substantial critical theory—a project that, among other accomplishments, opened the differences between himself and Habermas and, certainly, Mills.

In the latter connection, Gouldner's *Coming Crisis* is remembered today in much the same manner as Mills's *Sociological Imagination*—as books still read, if and when, more for their political clues than their scientific value. They were, together, the book ends of the 1960s—or, at least, the sixties of the young and mostly white students who, after attacking university cultures, got serious in their opposition to the war in Vietnam. Mills is thought by many to have called forth this new left in 1960 as Gouldner is said to have called a good many of them back to sociology in 1970 after the turmoil began to recede under the ravages of age and Nixon's counterrevolutionary programs. Mills gave the younger radicals confidence in the power of imagination, while Gouldner gave us, as we grew older, his own conception of the reflexive intellectual—a model that helped justify the transition back from the streets to the academy.

Yet, unlike Mills's books of the 1950s, Gouldner's of the 1970s could well merit the effort of a fresh look. Of these the two that formed the heart of what I, if not Gouldner himself, always thought of as his critical theory, are *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (1976) and *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979). In the former he introduces the concept he developed explicitly in the latter: CCD, Culture of Critical Discourse. The concept is awkward on the tongues of those who have grown up in the wake of a so-called linguistic turn in social and cultural studies. Had Gouldner lived he would have, certainly, worked more on CCD. Still, CCD stands up well enough, I think, against what was then the insufficient critical theory he thought he might displace.

In the years just after Gouldner's death in 1980, Habermas had completed the ponderous two volumes of *Theory of Communicative Action*. Few who were inspired by Habermas's writings of the late 1960s and early 1970s—of which none more wonderful than *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968)—could have been encouraged by these bulging disquisitions that covered old ground in mind-numbing detail. Worse yet, looking back, what is now clear is that what went wrong with Habermas was that he had, at least then, turned toward the pure theory he had so stunningly exposed in 1968. Still, many were caught up by Habermas's writings, then and since, to such an extent that subsequent attempts in the 1990s to revive critical theory for a new age, thought little of Gouldner, more of Habermas parsed by Bourdieu, occasionally Foucault. Habermas held the ground on which Gouldner sought a stake. We might have been better off, critically speaking, had those in a position to do so allowed our disappointment with Habermas to lead us back to Gouldner.

Gouldner's *Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* and *Future of Intellectuals* were both critical explorations of the question then just dawning as the fog lifted from the world's first massive technocratic war—a war in Southeast Asia begun by out-of-control liberal technocrats in Washington (of which none more so than Robert McNamara) and ended by a cadre of younger and lower echelon technocrats in the Pentagon (of which none more representative than Daniel Ellsberg), not to mention the by-then well aged new left academics and their students. In *Future of Intellectuals* it was precisely this internal conflict between opposing sectors of the technocratic intelligentsia that served as Gouldner's most explicit illustration of the thesis on the Culture of Critical Discourse. "In short," he said in Thesis Six of *Future*, "CCD is a common bond between humanistic intellectuals and technical intelligentsia, as well as among different technical intelligentsia themselves." Gouldner was here drawing on the theme of *Dialectic* in which the ideology and technology are described as having a critical edge which is rooted the nature of ideology itself. In this Gouldner salvaged ideology from the damage done by Marx's one-sided reduction of it in *German Ideology*. Of the latter's famous camera obscura figure of speech, Gouldner said, sarcastically, what about the cameraman? Ideology, Gouldner argued, is, simultaneously, a distortion of the interested origins of knowledge and the kind of knowledge that can serve to unmask the distortions. The ideology of Cold War containment used to justify American

intervention in Southeast Asia was cut of the same intellectual cloth as the progressive liberalism that came to attack the war as a betrayal of American values. Neither was on the side of the radical angels. Both were formed by an ideology of liberal humanism that was the glue of the American military and economic hegemony emerging after World War Two.

For Gouldner, everything was contradictory; nothing was sacred; and there were no attainable quasi-transcendentals of the kind Habermas sought. It was, in this aspect, Gouldner's faithfulness to a sociology of intellectuals that might have set him apart from both Mills and Habermas, who, differently, imagined themselves as engaged intellectuals able to profess universal theories and progressive (if not quite revolutionary) politics. Though he might have shuddered before the antiessentialist critiques that came into play after his death, Gouldner had scant regard for overly generalized theories. Quite apart from his own famously ponderous attack on Parsons in *Coming Crisis*, the books that followed directed his skepticism toward Marxism's vulgar totalizations. He was able to revive new class theory by describing it as, at best, a flawed universal class—as thus (in another figure he used) the hand we had been dealt, thus, the one we must play, which allowed him to account for Marx's missing cameraman. The intellectual need not be the pure revolutionary. It is sufficient that he be honest as to the contradictions of his position. Gouldner's critical theory as it took shape in *Dialectic and Future* was more rough-hewn but robust than the somewhat tepid idea of reflexive sociology in *Coming Crisis*. This is what gives Gouldner the edge over Mills. Gouldner's intellectual in a culture of critical discourse was better attuned to the contradictions of social history than Mills's more enlightenment ideal of the sociological imagination. Mills had a bit too much confidence that troubled persons could acquire a sociology of the structured issues on the simple grounds of knowledge alone. What is shocking today when one reads Mills closely is what shocks in a rereading of the 1962 Port Huron Statement of SDS it inspired—an innocent faith that to imagine the new social order is to make it possible.

Gouldner had no illusions about the potency of sociology in particular or of enlightened knowledge in general. For him critical theory was rooted in an insight that even the younger Habermas of *Knowledge and Human Interests* grasped only partially and passingly. Knowledge of all kinds is interested, to be sure; and the interest in emancipation is indisputably foundational to a critical theory. But does it follow thence that emancipated reason liberates us from the varieties of bondages that afflict the human condition? Certainly not. Critical theories are no less distorted and corrupted by the interests of those who produce them than are the varieties of pure technical knowledge produced in the interest of control. Knowledge is never one; always knowledges—many and unruly, always corrupt, sometimes emancipatory, occasionally powerful.

Had they survived their broken hearts, Mills and Gouldner would today be old men. One wonders what they would have to say to each other, if anything at all. Neither might have gone on to surpass the work he had already done. Still, one wonders what might have been. In the meantime, we have what they left which is enough, for me at least, to wonder why we read and remember Mills and not Gouldner? Is it the luck of the one to have invented a brilliant catch phrase? Or the bad luck of the other for having died after asking troubling questions still open decades later? Without taking any thing away from Mills's well deserved reputation, it is strange that a well-turned phrase ended up trumping a rough-hewn theory. Of this, we can be sure, Mills would not have approved, however much we would have enjoyed the lingering of his reputation.