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Changing Visions about the Post-Industrial Society: An Unannounced Paradigm Shift

1. Introduction

A treasured aphorism of Paul Lazarsfeld was: *In Russia the Revolution succeeded, so they need engineers; in America, the revolution failed, so we need sociology.* But what kind of sociology? The simple view is that Paul Lazarsfeld and Columbia sociology ‘sold out’ to American capitalism – as variously advanced by critics from C. Wright Mills (1959) to Alvin Gouldner to the Frankfurt sociologists (Pollack, 1984). The tawdry image, painted with Marxist themes, arguably helped destroy the Columbia Sociology Department after 1968, the Columbia Department on San Francisco Bay, and stilted development of these ideas worldwide. Yet paradoxically, the student activists were often trained and led by sociologists, many from Columbia. Since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, the tone of such debates has grown more abstruse, but many continue in the language of semiotics, structuralism, and postmodernism, in literature, politics, and social science. The Harvard discussions of 2001 show that ’68 is still alive. These issues are thus very current and should be addressed directly by contrasting these two competing interpretations of Columbia sociology in multiple instances: post-industrial vs. critical Marxist.

In distinct contrast to the simpler critics, I suggest that Marxism was incorporated into the Columbia amalgam of sociology from its very origins in the 1930s, and continued in ways often overlooked. For instance, *Marienthal* was Lazarsfeld’s (1932) study of the unemployed in a depression-devastated community, detailing how persons out of work suffered psychological damage. Perhaps Merton’s greatest work was *Science, Technology and Society* (1937), which showed how modern science was driven ahead by the twin forces of technology (in broadly Marxist manner) and protestant religion (using a broadly Weberian interpretation). Merton and Lazarsfeld’s personal involvement with political movements of the left was deep and intense, then and later (Lautman and Lecuyer, 1998). Merton was one of the leading Marxist scholars in America in the 1940s. Frankfurt-trained Franz Neumann recommended Merton to Oxford University Press in 1942, “as the best possi-
ble person to review a manuscript on the economics of Karl Marx.” The manuscript was Paul M. Sweezy’s *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (Simonson and Weimann, 2002).

The tawdry image is thus highly misinformed. Columbia sociologists, led by Lazarsfeld and Merton, helped create modern sociology through a continuous dialogue, albeit often latent, with Marxist themes and concepts. This holds in many areas, for instance if we examine key aspects of the topics chosen for study (voters and dress shoppers in Elmira, New York rather than the unemployed as in Marienthal), or the shift from a top-down focus in organizations (following Marx and Weber) to bottom-up cooptation (with Merton and Selznick). Core concepts were invented or redefined (from the proletariat to student activist, from the *Wissenssoziologie* to the sociology of science).

How can we build on the grand Columbia tradition to address more powerfully current and future issues of social science research? I seek to answer the question by identifying sources for the concept of post-industrial society in the work of Columbia sociologists from the 1930s onward. Core elements of the conception of post-industrial society were cumulatively assembled in several sub-fields at Columbia. The resulting framework generated a paradigm shift away from Marxist-inspired thinking, but this shift was largely ‘unannounced’ as elements of Marx continued in many Columbia studies. The big shift built on smaller ‘revolutions’ in sub-paradigms, like organization theory and mass media. Together they generated a deeper overall change. This is all the more intriguing a story as the conceptualisation of ‘post-industrial’ from Bell only came later than much of the innovative Columbia work. In a more ambitious claim, I suggest that this line of work from Columbia is more illuminating of major aspects of contemporary society than several competing approaches. A deeper perspective on alternatives to many current discussions can come from revisiting the Columbia experience. To help the comparison among alternatives, I offer a tabular list (in Table 1) of specific comparisons with the main competitors, Marxism and Individualism, and discuss related themes in post-modernist theorizing.

The analytical framework in this paper combines political sociology and the sociology of knowledge to interpret intellectual trends. I apply the idea of post-industrial society to characterize our current society and its ethos or Zeitgeist. Next, I suggest that Columbia sociology ideas emerging with Merton and Lazarsfeld are distinctly illuminating for interpreting key aspects of the contemporary Zeitgeist. They do better than many alternatives popular in sociology today, especially those of Marxist and Frankfurt School provenance and those linked to the concept of post-modernity. The grand Columbia tradition thus deserves review, rereading, and extension since it provides key elements for present and future work, in the form of core concepts and distinctive research sites.