A NOTE ON MARX AND WEBER IN GOULDNER’S THOUGHT

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The panel on Alvin Gouldner’s work at the 1981 American Sociological Association meetings in Toronto achieved as high a collective intellectual level as any I have heard on similar occasions. Yet, as was revealed in the discussion period at the end of the session, I was not alone in thinking that the speakers had unduly neglected the influence on Gouldner of Max Weber. Several of them displayed a corollary tendency to overemphasize Gouldner’s complex relation to Marxism, especially by claiming to find traces in his earlier work of his later interest in the Frankfurt School theorists. One senses that Keats’ “hungry generations tread thee down” when awareness dawns that one’s memories have become “history,” if only intellectual history. I am at least a decade older than any of the members of the ASA panel and, although I never knew Gouldner personally until 1969, I became a graduate student in sociology at Columbia in the fall of 1945, the term immediately following his last term in residence. Not surprisingly, Al was still a remembered presence among the senior graduate students, especially several who had been his close friends and shared his commitment to the American Communist Party.

At the ASA symposium, the first speaker, Randall Collins, referred to C. Wright Mills as a precursor of, even a “role model” for, Gouldner, as the latter himself had fully acknowledged in the introductory chapter of *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology*. Collins then mentioned the influence on Mills at Columbia of the Frankfurt School, several of whose members remained there through the 1940s. A later speaker, Martin Jay, enlarged on Collins’ statement that the Frankfurt School had influenced Mills by claiming that it had also influenced Gouldner during his years as a Columbia student. As several of the speakers reported, Gouldner worked briefly in the 1940s for the American Jewish Committee’s “Studies in Prejudice” project that Max Horkheimer originally directed and whose major volume, *The Authoritarian Personality*, was co-authored by Theodore Adorno.

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But it is highly unlikely that Gouldner was influenced by Frankfurt School Marxism, or even by Mills, as early as his graduate student years. The Frankfurt School theorists had by this time become completely disillusioned with the Soviet Union and both their political and theoretical views were heretical in the eyes of the CPUSA to which Gouldner belonged until the end of the 1940s. Gouldner had founded at Columbia a small association that published a newsletter, *Ideas for Action*, the ancestor of the journal *Trans-action*, which he later founded at Washington University, with the purpose of showing the relevance of research in the social sciences to issues of public policy. The association and journal were continued by his friends after he left Columbia.

I was invited to their first meeting at the beginning of term but was quickly disininvited when in informal conversation with the two chief editors I remarked that I regarded the Soviet Union as a "totalitarian" regime insignificantly different from Nazi Germany, a view I had formed through reading Erich Fromm, among others, and one that had been advanced by several other writers associated with the Frankfurt Institute, most notably, Friedrich Pollock. I was told that I had been disininvited because of my "blind spot about the Soviet Union."

As for Mills, he and Gouldner overlapped at Columbia for no more than a single academic term. Mills' political associations well into the 1950s were all with intellectuals who were passionate anti-Stalinists, linked to the Socialist Party, to various Trotskyist or near-Trotskyist groups, or to "independent leftist" circles and journals such as *Partisan Review*, Dwight Macdonald's *Politics* and, some years later, *Dissent*.

All this is perhaps of little interest except to fact-grubbing historians of recent American sociology. Yet there has been so much ideologically motivated myth-making, some of it even finding its way into introductory textbooks, about the past political and intellectual allegiances of American sociologists, especially at Columbia, the pre-eminent sociology department of the 1940s and 1950s, that one who was there often finds himself moved to try to set the record straight. Younger sociologists sometimes seem to believe that Marxism — like sex to so many young people nowadays — was discovered in America only in the 1960s except for a few intrepid spirits who picked up a hint or two from the aloof *doyens* of the transplanted Frankfurt Institute who sojourned here, allegedly unnoticed, for a few brief unhappy years.

The truth is that Marxism was almost as visible an intellectual presence in sociology and the social sciences generally in the 1940s as it has become since the 1960s. I qualify this statement with "almost" in recognition that the Marxism of the earlier period was a much more *political* Marxism, directly