

*Journal of Sociology. (Sosiologisk Tidsskrift)* Universitetsforlaget, Oslo  
No. 3, 2008, pp. 281-291.

Professor emeritus. Dr. Philos Sigurd Skirbekk,  
(Institute for Sociology and Social Geography, University of Oslo.)

### **“Crisis of sociology” – and consequences for an adequate understanding of contemporary cultural conflicts**

#### *“Crisis of sociology”*

I have two books in front of me, both entitled “crisis of sociology”. The one, written by Alvin W. Gouldner and published in 1970, is entitled *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. The other, written by Joseph Lopreano and Timothy Crippen and published a generation later, in 1999, is entitled *Crisis in Sociology. The Need for Darwin*.

These three authors were all concerned about the scientific status of sociology, the tack that sociological theory has taken as well as the direction it should have taken in order to give sociology a more solid basis for understanding modern society. Otherwise the authors can be quite different.

Gouldner was living at a time when many scholars were claiming that Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism should no longer remain the dominant paradigm for sociology. He wanted sociology to become more politically oriented, more critical to established laws of society and to notions of America as a model for modernity. The other authors, Lopreano and Crippen, meant that contemporary sociology was about to fall prey to abortive attempts to become politically relevant instead of developing sociology as a scientific subject of its own, with general laws and recognized relations to other human sciences. They regarded a connection to the functionalistic perspective in the Darwinian tradition as a requirement for a future-oriented sociology. They did not, however, discuss the

critique of the positivistic program of a unified science on the basis of concepts derived from the natural sciences.

Alvin Gouldner found both the Parsons-inspired structural-functionalism in the West and the orthodox Marxism in the East to be sterile traditions. He recommended a rejection of the distinction between neutral science, moral discourse and political commitment, believing that such a program would lead to some sort of critical and politically potent sociology. There is good reason to believe that the kind of politization that followed this kind of critical sociology has led many sociologists into a political debate over rights and injustice, liberation and suppression. It is not so obvious that this endeavor has also benefited sociology as a scientific subject. When the campaign for world liberation had calmed down, and the eastern ideals had faded away, many sociologists apparently saw themselves as subjects of an emperor with no clothes, or as scientists with no science of their own. The result is that many, if not most, sociologists these days have become workers for private and official bureaucracies for work and welfare. Sociologists can give data and interpretations of social inequality in society. But very few contribute to a cumulative building of an overall framework for the interdependence of various structures of modern differentiated societies, the original program for Emile Durkheim's sociology.

Contemporary sociology does not compete very well with other sciences in providing important perspectives on human behavior. This is the message from Lopreano and Crippen, and they see this as a crisis for sociology as well as for society. Sociologists do not have a common paradigm as a reference for research in different fields. Therefore we seldom have original sociological explanations to offer, except from what other educated people could also have delivered.

### *The rejection of structural functionalism*

Both Joseph Lopreano, Timothy Crippen and Alvin Gouldner began by discussing the classical sociological tradition – Durkheim, Weber, Parsons – and ended up by discussing what should come after the Parsonian structural functionalism.

There is no doubt that Talcott Parsons' grand theory from the middle of the twentieth century is open to criticism. It is most uncertain, however, whether a legitimate critique of this theory was bound to lead to a total rejection of theories about vital connections between institutionalized structures and functions necessary for society to survive. The most serious critique of Parsons can be divided into three branches.

First, he could be criticized for being too middle-class America-oriented in his interpretations of the requirements for modernity. He did not develop adequate interpretations of the power and particularistic interests that might lay the groundwork for interpretations of what he called American dynamics and civic religion. He had not integrated a Marxist perspective of conflicts in his somewhat harmonious models.

Second, he could be criticized for not being strictly scientific in his theories, even if most paradigms do not have to be testable theories. He used "patterns" as units in explanations of links between structures and functions. Statistical invariances can certainly put sociologists on the trail of finding more substantial explanations. But structures *per se* are not independent entities for explanations. Such power can only be found in systems where a C follows the identification of an A and a B. Parsons could make impressive distinctions between cultural and social levels of analysis, to some degree following Edward B. Taylor's definition of culture from 1871. But culture, in this respect – understood as laws, norms, beliefs and customs that people learn as members of a society – is not one system. If culture is used to explain a player's orientation and social behavior, then it must be recognized as a system, or group of systems. We can speak of several cultural systems, but Parsons did not identify them in a convincing way.

A third objection to Parsons' theory is related to this inadequate understanding of cultural systems. It has to do with *meaning*, and other concepts are not easily integrated into a positivistic program for a unity of sciences. People do not follow norms merely because they have been socialized to accept them. Norms have to be connected to meaning for adults to be motivated. Human beings are intentional beings, not just role-players seeking social confirmation in stable societies.

I think this kind of critique of the Parsonian tradition is quite serious, but not devastating. I see no reason why it should not have been possible to develop a coherent paradigm for system-functional analysis, even if this meant doing a great deal of theoretical work, especially with regard to the analysis of cultural systems.

*Shortcoming of contemporary sociology – the fall of the Soviet Union*

Contemporary sociologists have not developed a dominant common paradigm. But what of it? Most sociologists are certainly able to say sensible things about society and to make a living doing so. The question is whether we should be satisfied with the role of sociologists as commentators of social policy and as deliverers of quantitative answers to questions put forward by others. I think not. I will give three examples, or fields of politico-cultural problems, where contemporary sociology, sociology from the last generation, has failed or at least not contributed to political understanding as much as one would have expected.

The first example is the fall of the Soviet Union. In one respect one could say that nobody at the beginning of the 1980s could foresee what would happen in 1989. But this is only part of the story. Even if nobody could have foreseen all the political events that year, it should have been possible to foresee that the systems of the USSR promoted self-destructive processes that could not be solved within the framework of the state. A further modernization on behalf of the Soviet Union would have required a differentiation among its citizens, as well as a certain degree of freedom. Such freedom could be foreseen as opening the door to national variations and solidarity on a national basis. Well informed sociologists, even at the beginning of the 1980s, should have been able to see nationalism as an emerging challenge to the USSR.

We did witness a disintegration of the soviet system during the 1990s. We should have been able both to foresee this and to interpret the Solidarity movement in Poland, the “singing revolution” in the Baltic States, the Protestant protests in eastern Germany as well as the military uproar in Muslim regions in a national context. Today, when I speak to people from Poland or the Baltic states, they wonder why we, social scientists from the free world, understood so little about what was going on at that time. Attempts to interpret the emerging national movements as mere ex-

pressions of a compensating identity after the loss of socialism as their main identity are dismissed as western arrogance.

I know something about this. When sociologists in the Baltic States wanted to have their sociological production evaluated by international standards, after ten years of democracy, Norway was given the task of evaluating the sociological production of the Lithuanians. I was a member of an evaluative group, and I have, I think, read all Lithuanian sociology written in English or German during these first years. What struck me, when reading all this material, was the eagerness of the writers to communicate some important experiences, and at the same time a shortage of adequate concepts and theoretical models for making their message convincing to others. They did not seem to have found adequate theories about the importance of nationalism and of religion from what they had learned from western sociology.

We could ask: Why is that so? Classical sociologists could write about both nations and religions in a sociological context, two elements of considerable importance for understanding the processes in the East. I think one reason for this has been some rather recent western ideas about modernity and about what can cause political changes in modern states.

In Norway, Gudmund Hernes has written about modern systems of power and of identification as units deriving from political choice, from bureaucratic professions and from the economic market. These were supposed to have replaced older units of identification, such as the family, the nation and religion as faith and community. According to this way of thinking, western sociologists should look for signs of economic exploitation or of political suppression, but not for the suppression of Nation and Church as the seeds of rebellion. And since people of the Eastern Block were politically less suppressed in the 1980s than in any previous decade of eastern socialism, the situation at that time was diagnosed as relatively stable.

Despite the abundance of literature about nationality and democracy, nationality and modernity, this has not been a central issue for most sociologists, who have either associated nationalism with its dangerous counterpart, imperialism, or with some rather innocent symbols of a changeable identity. Hardly any sociologists in our country have elab-

orated the five dimensions of “nationalism”, as they were put forward shortly after the war by the Norwegian historian Arne Bergsgård: A dimension of common language, with historic roots. A dimension of common religion, in faith and rituals. A dimension of identification with future and coming generations. A dimension of identification with the country as a land. And a dimension of political and historical identification. Each of these dimensions, and the combination of them, represents something more powerful than just an identification with some sort of imagined community.

*The shortcoming of contemporary sociology – anti-western Muslims*

The shortcoming of modern sociologists in their understanding of national processes can also be found in sociological contributions in other fields of political importance. Most dramatic, perhaps, is the way we relate to the conflicts in the Middle East. Today most sociologists will certainly criticize the Bush administration for having been naïve in its war against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. Nevertheless, I think sociologists should rather criticize themselves for not having been able to develop a theory to foresee the unexpected – namely, why American troops were not welcomed as liberators in Baghdad in 2003, as they were in Rome in 1944.

To explain the difference between Italy and Iraq, it is not enough to talk about differences in economic structures and political traditions. We can also find differences in religion, in concepts of the society, in the functions of the family, in civilization as a whole. As the only Norwegian who has been a member of the *International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations* for almost thirty years, I know something about the complexity of these differences. To me it seems obvious that it is all too easy to explain the American miscalculations in terms of imperialistic ambitions or an interest in cheap oil.

Former president Jimmy Carter was certainly honest when, during a Nobel Price ceremony, he said that he knew Americans well enough to dismiss the accusations of interest in oil prices as the main motivation for American policy. There is a tendency to trot out “economic interests” as the central explanation for why everything goes wrong, but this does not always lead to a realistic understanding of complex civilizational differences and can, in fact, give rise to misinterpretations. Such an ideology

fails to become complete even when coupled with accusations against “fundamentalists” in the East and the West, where they are supposed to be blinded by pro-Israeli and anti-Arab prejudices. (According to *Foreign Affairs* for September/October 2006, concentrated on “Religion and US Foreign Policy”, 37 percent of the statements made by mainline Protestant churches on human rights abuses between 2000 and 2004 were focused on Israel.)

There are reasons for taking Huntington seriously when he talks about substantial differences between a European or a western civilization and other civilizations, past and present. According to him, seven hallmarks are of importance for understanding the potentiality and limitation of western civilization. These are, according to Huntington: the classical heritage from Greece and Rome, Catholicism and Protestantism, the division between spiritual and political authority, European languages, government by law, representative bodies, and individualism<sup>1</sup>.

A unique aspect of the West has been an inner tension between political and religious authorities. This goes all the way back to the church of the first Christians, being in opposition to the Roman Empire, and later to a balance of power between Emperor and Pope and to Luther’s teaching of the two regiments. The development of organizational differentiations from the twelfth century, the experimental sciences from the sixteenth century and modern individualization have all this tension as a background. In comparison, a Muslim civilization, developed after the fall of Rome, was based on an ideal of one Prophet being the authority both for religious, moral, political and military power. The sciences in the Islamic world could certainly be refined in various forms of systematizations, but it was never experimental, presupposing that the answers were not given at the beginning of an analysis.

These are major issues, and I do not intend to give a full description of them. What I will do is to point to some unique premises in western culture that cannot be defined away as mere notions of identification. A culture has much deeper premises than those that are realized by its individual residents.

---

<sup>1</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. (1996): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Shuster, NY. pp 69-72.

Civilizational analysis requires collective or supra-individual entities to be made adequate. This should benefit the sociologist. Nevertheless, many sociologists prefer to avoid any reference to a “clash of civilizations” by quoting some critique against Samuel Huntington, such as that by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. This represents a triple misunderstanding. First, Huntington never said that civilizations of the West and of the Middle East cannot live peacefully together. What he *has* done is to put forward five specific reasons why contemporary relations are beset by conflicts. Second, he is not alone in stressing the importance of cultural systems on a civilizational level to explain differences in political and economic adjustment, cf. Lawrence Harrison’s and Samuel Huntington’s anthology *Culture Matters* from the year 2000. Third, Eisenstadt cannot be used as an authority for a populist UN view, claiming that all cultures are equal in respect of developmental potentiality (Cf. *Human Development Program 2004*). Eisenstadt has, quite the contrary, been a spokesman for what he calls “multiple modernity,” i.e. different nations with different cultural heritages will develop different forms of modernity.

Sociologists have failed, not only in their interpretations of miscalculations in US foreign policy in the Arab world. Even in their predictions and interpretations of conflicts connected to non-European immigration to Europe, sociologists have on the whole been rather conventional, focusing on explanations well established in political organizations. In fact, as I claim to know something about this limitation, I will mention the Norwegian anthology *Gode formal – Gale følger? Kritisk lys på norsk innvandringspolitikk*, edited by Ottar Brox, Tore Lindbekk and Sigurd Skirbekk and published by Cappelen Akademisk Forlag in 2003.

The presentation of cultural conflicts in popular media may leave an impression that such conflicts are caused by stupid people, who are either irrationally prejudiced or disposed to irrational violence. A more mature sociological approach would have been to seek the rationality in the orientation and motivations of the parties to a conflict.

It might appear quite rational for people from overpopulated areas to turn to western countries to seek a better living for themselves. Even the custom of arranged family marriages could appear rational, if one wants to



strengthen the culture of one's own group instead of being fully integrated in one's new land. In fact, many immigrants see it this way, regarding western customs and culture as immoral and decadent and as not deserving full support. According to Ph. D. Siraj Islam Mufti at Islam-Online, western civilization is suffering from a weak religiosity, weak family morality and weak reproduction. This is not an irrational perspective. Statistical data on various birth rates around the world tend to support this view. Europe, which, according to population estimates from the UN Demographic Office, had some 27 percent of the world population in 1900 and some 21 percent by the middle of last century, had only 12 percent by the turn of the century and is estimated to have no more than 4 to 5 percent by the middle of this century. – Muslims can claim not only to be the people of Allah, but also that they have Darwin on their side.

The rationality of Muslim reluctance to adjust too closely to western values, can at the same time be a rationality on behalf of the so-called xenophobic natives in Europe, fearing contemporary immigration policy. They can see that schools and cities in their neighborhoods are on the way to getting a migration majority and also that many immigrants do not demonstrate a prime identification with European history and local culture. In a hundred years or so it may be realistic to foresee that some European nations will have a majority of people whose primary loyalty is to other cultural traditions than the European one. One might then ask: Why should we feel morally obliged to be loyal to some principles of equal human rights, derived from Harry Truman's world outlook, when these western ideas are not likely to be defended anyway by a coming majority of their country. The more sophisticated might even quote Samuel Huntington's critique of this western faith in the universal status of their culture as being false, immoral and dangerous.

The cultural dominance of various civilizations depends upon political order, economic strength and the number of people. The UN World Population Prospects has estimated that the world population could increase from 2.5 billion in 2050 to over 9 billion by the middle of this century. Nearly all this increase will come in non-European countries; the population of Africa might even increase tenfold in one century, from 220 million in 1950 to nearly 2000 million in 2050. The population of Asia might increase from 1.3 billion to 5.3 billion. Pakistan, which had about 40 million inhabitants in 1950, is expected to have a population of 240 million by 2050. Turkey, having had about 30 million inhabitants in 1950

and about 60 million by the turn of the century, will have more than 100 million inhabitants by the middle of this century. The total number of Muslims could reach 1.9 billion by the middle of the century.

Relations between civilizations are not determined by ideas alone. Nor should we expect that everything can be brought under control by some economic law of demographic transition. There are two main reasons why this is unrealistic. If people of the Third World need an English living standard in order to reach a zero-growth birth level, it has been estimated that we would need three planets like our own in order to support that population and still have a nature that can reproduce its resources. In addition, it is highly dubious that families in every society would adapt to British values, preferring two cars before three children, if they were given the choice on this level. The two value researchers Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have in the April 2003 issue of *Foreign Policy* presented the results of an investigation of the Huntington assumptions of civilizational differences in value preferences. Here they claim that when it comes to the issue of family values, the differences are considerable, and that we cannot expect all people to follow a European reproductive pattern, even if they had the economic prerequisites for it.

The problems connected to various value patterns in different civilizations is not only related to religion and family tradition. There are material reasons why people in most countries prefer a surplus number of children. In many countries this has to do with corrupt leaderships, a shortage of welfare arrangements and a general lack of national solidarity.

*Shortcoming of contemporary sociology – an unecological culture*

Demographic challenges are also ecological challenges. And, the ecological challenge that lies ahead is not only the challenge of limiting CO<sub>2</sub> pollution in the air. In the view of a number of specialists, our destruction of non-renewable energy sources is even more threatening to our common future. This speaks worlds of an incompatibility between a way of life, which in the long run destroys natural resources, and ecological systems over a wide range. If, in the name of progress, we let the present development continue beyond a certain limit, self-destructing processes will be strengthened and even proceed beyond the point of no return. I think I even know something about this challenge, since I have a daughter-in-law working with ecological studies at the *International Institute*

*for Advanced Studies* in Laxenburg outside Vienna. A policy for lasting survival would seem to require a revision not only of certain patterns of consumption, but of our most basic notions of what constitutes progress and what we can regard as human rights.

The kind of challenges facing humanity in this century cannot be solved merely by a change of government, with governments legitimating themselves by a variety of liberal and socialist ideologies. These two predominant ideologies from the 20<sup>th</sup> century have to a large extent functioned complementary to each other; the one claiming more salaries so that the majority can increase its consumption, the other claiming economic conditions for more efficient production and sale, so that they can provide their employees with better wages and enable them to pay more taxes for a welfare system that encompasses all the victims of life styles related to one-dimensional efficiency. A society in equilibrium, to use a Parsonian term, has to rely on a culture giving meaning to a way of life adjusted to natural limits.

Some professional groups should be free to analyze the incompatibility between nature and contemporary culture. Someone should have the independence to say that not only do people to the right and to the left in industrial societies have to change their views of the world. Even the rights and the relations between a strongly productive North and a strongly reproductive South have to be changed. Declarations of rights to produce goods without limits or to produce babies without limits are not adequate as moral guides for future generations.

Very little is being said about these challenges by contemporary sociologists.

#### *An accusation and a self-defense*

I am accusing a broad range of sociologists for not living up to their professional program. And I am seeing the absence of an overall paradigm for cumulative sociological research as a central cause of this shortcoming.

The accused is likely to respond by asking the accuser for what he has done in this regard. And I must admit, I have not done all that I could.

But I have nevertheless done something, and I will end this contribution by mentioning some work related to my last book, *Dysfunctional Culture. The Inadequacy of Cultural Liberalism as a Guide to major Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, published by University Press of America, September 2005.

Here I discuss the concept of ideology. Ideology should be an important concept in sociological theory, as it combines culture and power, mass mobilization and the interests of the few. In fact, many sociologists have indeed shown an interest in ideological analysis. But most of the available analysis seems to be somewhat limited, focusing as it does upon the weakness of one or a few ideologies that are supposedly more deceptive than the one supported by the analyst. It has not been very easy to find literature dealing with common recognizable characteristics of all ideologies, right and left wing, liberal and conservative. In order to learn from the experience of inadequate understanding deriving from former dominant ideologies, it is crucial to see even contemporary liberalism as an ideology. This requires analytical hallmarks, not political polemic based on the premises of one ideology in opposition to another.

It is possible to draw attention to five hallmarks common to all ideologies with political implications: A system of thought, where ideas are in mutual dependence upon each other; a connection to particular interests, usually presented as universal; a distorted or limited reality orientation; victims or suffering parties, and an incorporation of a self-immunizing argument against threatening critique.

It is the system of thought that makes ideology a cultural entity. As for liberalism, its main value has always been its appeal to freedom, understood as freedom of individuals regardless of cultural background. This has consequences: If a person should be regarded as free when he or she chooses to be liberated from something, this something has to be seen as an external entity in relation to the individual. This has consequences both for a liberal understanding of the individual as well as culture; they must both be seen in external relation to each other. A liberal can regard culture as some form of art or as changeable social customs; culture can be regarded as stimuli for emotional experience or as sings of identity. But culture cannot be regarded as something that structures our very understanding of being a free social being; the internal relations between

a culture and what constitutes a person will be lost in liberal frames of thinking. This has implications for the liberal understanding of religion, of civilization, of national culture and also for a liberal understanding of morality in society.

What I am saying here is that it was not just an arbitrary miss that made sociologists fall short in their relations to the national processes related to the fall of the Soviet Empire, their relations to the religious and political process leading to violent opposition to western military force in the Middle East, and to the unwillingness of immigrants to fully adopt western culture, as well as the shortcomings in analysis of the cultural and political implications of the ecological challenges facing us.

Politicians may have to orient themselves to liberal rhetoric in order to stay in power. People of trade and industry may be limited by the rules of commercial competition. Sociologists needn't be bound by a dominant ideology in the same way, not if they have a frame of orientation of their own. When lacking such a framework, however, even sociologists easily become dependent on dominant ideologies in this day and age of liberalism, and with it all the limitations of a liberal construction of reality.