

## Book Review

### **End of Sociological Theory and Other Essays on Theory and Methodology.**

By Nazrul Islam. Dhaka: Anana, 2005.Pp230.

Many Western sociologists today feel that sociology 'risk annihilation' unless we rework the sociological theory in a creative way in the face of onslaught by postmodernism (Denzin, 1995, p405). But few sociologists from the South have seriously grappled with the issue of theory or theory construction or the relevance of Western sociological theory for the South. In this volume Nazrul Islam has just done that admirably. Although it is a book of essays that he has written over the last two decades, the pieces hang together around the central concern of sociology –the concern carved out by the great minds of sociology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that continues to inform the sociological cosmos today. The articles of this book can be neatly arranged in four sections-the state of sociological theory, methodological dilemma, reexamination of the classical heritage of sociology in terms of works of Max Weber and Marx, and empirical studies as examples of theory construction in the context of the South.

In the first essay appropriately entitled "Sociology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Facing the Dead-end", the author develops a very fascinating hypothesis that sociology in the twentieth century was an American enterprise with a distinct biography of its own and which was quite different from its classical forms in Europe. The claim is quite novel and here it is worth quoting the author.

The focus of European sociology was on nations and civilizations and macro level generalizations. But this sociology came to an abrupt end in the 1920s because of the growth of Fascism and later the World War. Further developments in Europe took place from the 1950s onward but mostly as a reflection of the developments in America. So, when I refer to American sociology I refer to sociology quite different from the sociology the founding fathers in Europe intended to establish. All of such differences, however, turned out to be liabilities for American sociology and crippled the discipline from the start (P18-19).

From 1920s sociology in the US went through a process of unbridled or even cancerous growth without proper boundary or clear focus and was obsessed mainly with US society –a unique society without historical depth. There was no comprehensive paradigm or theoretical models to unite diverse fields of sociology. From the very beginning the US sociology was anti-theoretical. Although Parsons tried to synthesize the European masters in 1937 and focused on societal change in 1960s, it was soon discarded as a consequence of its serious shortcomings. Theory construction was never a 'hallmark' of American sociology. The other theoretical models that the US sociology developed were micro level theories like symbolic interaction theory and phenomenology, which had contributed very little to sociology. Sociology had become an anomic universe of scattered ideas. This was the reason why sociology had, in Turner and Turner's phrase become 'an impossible science.' The US sociology never in its history sought to study society. This is evident in any textbooks of sociology. Figures like Moore, Smelser, Bendix and Wallerstein have remained largely outside the mainstream American sociology.

Thus Islam finds that the best paradigm that US sociology developed – functionalism – never went beyond Comte and Spencer. For this reason sociology faces a dead-end. In this century sociology may be extinct because of its irrelevance or remain an umbrella term for a wide variety of sub-disciplines. Here the author has an original idea that he pushes to the extreme. Structural/Functionalism is not one single theory and it is a minor irony that sociology in the US followed Parsons rather than Merton who had developed a much more sophisticated form of functionalism.

Two other essays “End of sociological Theory”, and “American Sociology: Crisis in Isolation” follow the same theme in greater depth. Theory, according to the author, means quantitative, formal and macro level theory. The absence of this type of theory is conspicuous in American sociology. Between 1927 and 1937 no article was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* having theory as its title. Although use of theory has figured more prominently since 1930s, it has been mainly used for hypothesis testing in empirical research. The author, following Turner and Turner, suggests that efforts at theory construction was modeled so strictly on natural sciences that it was impossible to meet its requirements and it led to the undoing of theory construction in sociology. The great emphasis on positivism led to widespread protest against it and the rise of qualitative techniques.

Theory construction in American sociology has, however, proceeded along two streams- through meta theories and in sub-disciplines. Meta theories are mainly pursued by 500-600 sociologists from the older generation who remain largely isolated from the discipline. The development of theory is fragmented in the subfields. This is due to the sprawling of sub-disciplines. The ASA recognizes about 50 sub-fields of sociology and there are many sub-specialties within each sub-field. The crisis in theory building has also been fueled by decline of fund for research and lack of job opportunities which force sociologists to move increasingly to the margins of sub-disciplines. Theory courses are losing ground and in future, the author apprehends, there will be few left to teach or construct theories.

The author thinks that it is still possible to revive the tradition of theory building in sociology with the greater data-base and larger resources available today. But it is not possible to do it from USA because it has failed to incorporate its other and embody different realities and different voices.

In “The Paradigmatic Status of Sociology” Islam narrates the discourse on paradigm in sociology and argues that Kuhnian definition of paradigm is faulty and a more acceptable definition of paradigm has been provided by Ritzer in terms of space of inquiry and the range of possible discovery. Islam rejects the idea that sociology, as indicated by Kuhn himself, is in a pre-scientific stage. Sociology was born with a paradigm as crafted by Comte and has ever remained in state of crisis.

This is a very well-written paper that elegantly encapsulates much of the debates about paradigm within sociology. I have, however, completely different ideas about paradigmatic status in sociology. Although the debate is more or less over, it is not much difficult, with hindsight, to see what Kuhn meant by paradigm. For Kuhn paradigm meant an important discovery in science that solves a strategic puzzle and around which a community of scientists builds consensus about theory, method and space of inquiry. What Ritzer and many other sociologists have done is to distort Kuhn and claim paradigmatic status for sociology as an act of impression management. In a sense the debate over the paradigmatic status of sociology has been useless.

Sociology is characterized by war of worlds simply because it is different from natural sciences in the sense that there is no strategic discovery or puzzle –solving activity in sociology that can herald a revolution and claim the loyalty of concerned scientists. But what is fascinating about Kuhn’s theory is that any field of knowledge does show rise and fall of theoretical perspectives or schools-discourses change over time and space albeit often without dying. Sociology never had a revolution in Kuhnian sense and unlikely to have one in future.

In “Sociology, Phenomenology and Phenomenological Sociology” Islam provides an interesting critique of phenomenology focusing on Husserl and Schutz. He shows that phenomenological sociology did not remain true to Husserl and its programme to liberate itself from the vices of positivism had failed. It has achieved nothing except escalating the fragmentation of the discipline. In “On the Question of Validation in Qualitative Methodology” Islam carries his arguments further by examining the claims of qualitative methods. In this powerful analysis the

author meticulously exposes the weaknesses of the qualitative methods and finds that it has no scientific validity at all.

If qualitative sociologists accept that sociology is a science, they should also recognize that science has one and only one method that classifies such disciplines as Physics, Chemistry and Biology as sciences...If sociology claims to be a science it must be on the basis of the same method of inquiry. When we talk of a different methodology we are talking of a different class of disciplines...We are then no more in the domain of science. A different methodology means a different approach to knowledge and hence is necessarily a distinctly different class of disciplines (77).

In "Problems of Sociological Theory Building: Call for a Micro-Macro Divide or Old Wine in Two Old Bottles" Islam advocates that sociology be divided into macro sociology dealing with issues such as societies and civilizations and micro sociology focusing on the individual and interaction.

Islam explores Marx through an analysis of positivism in his thought, his concept of alienation, and the Asiatic mode of production and occasionally provides new insights on these enduring issues. Two essays on Max Weber—"From ideal Type to Pure type: Max Weber's Transition from History to Sociology" and "Protestant Ethic and Not-so- Sociology of World Religions" stand out as two of the most important essays of the collection which are provocative, original and fascinating to read. Islam does debunk the Protestant ethic thesis of Weber not in terms of historical evidence or Orientalism, but more on logical/methodological grounds.

Again another two of his essays deal with the issues of development and underdevelopment. In "Defining Intellectuals and Their Social Locations in a Peripheral Society", Islam builds upon Marx, Mannheim and Gramsci for identifying the role of intellectuals in peripheral society. Islam was one of the first sociologists to undertake an empirical test of development theories. A brief summary of this work is presented in the paper entitled "Sociology of Development: In need of a Fresh Paradigm" and thus his data-set covers two decades from 1960s to 1970s. The analysis shows that none of the existing theories explain the dynamics of development in terms of the interface between domestic growth factors and foreign economic influences and the results call for a fresh paradigm.

In this book Islam, as an apostle of Comtean positivism, renews the call for revival of grand theories of sociology for the comparative study of societies and civilizations. He hopes that such a revival can begin from the South. For many in the South who are looking for a way out from the postmodernist impasse or from a Western sociology that has little relevance for the South, Islam provides a pathway – a return from the South to puritanical positivism. Although I agree with some of Islam's ideas (Islam, 2003), I am not so cynical about the present or future state of sociology. I am rather skeptical about going back to the stranglehold of positivism. I agree with him that we, from the South, need to venture into new theoretical terrains to fill the blankness created by the fading 'rage' of postmodernism.

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible as Islam shows, to fruitfully engage with sociological theory from the South and Bangladesh in particular where we don't have good library facilities or any support for purely academic activities. It is really laudable that Islam has been able to keep his gaze fixed on theory for all these years. And it is always a pleasure to read him – always intellectually stimulating. The book has quite a few typing errors and then it is not easy to find a professional publisher in the country who would like to publish such an 'eschatological treatise'. In the hubris of Postmodern Age and in the 'End of History' who needs a theorist!

## References

- Denzin, Norman k.1995. 'Post modern Social Theory.' In *Readings in Contemporary Sociological Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity*, edited by Donald McQuire. New Jersey: Prentice –Hall
- Islam, S. Aminul.2003."Postmodernism and the Future of American Sociological Theory". In *Regional American Studies Conference 1999*, edited by Niaz Zaman and Hasina Matin. Dhaka:Bangladesh Association for American Studies

S. Aminul Islam  
Department of Sociology  
University of Dhaka