

Riesman, David (1909–2002)

Christian Fleck, University of Graz, Graz, Austria

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Abstract

David Riesman became famous because of his 1950 bestseller *The Lonely Crowd*. Before that he received his education at Harvard and was a professor of law at Buffalo and of social sciences in the College of the University of Chicago. Later, he returned to Harvard. Besides his devotion to teaching, he acted as a public intellectual during his lifetime. In the *Lonely Crowd* study, he proposed the change of social character from tradition-directed, to inner-directed, and then to other-directed. This heavily value-laden concept helped make the book one of the rare examples of a social science bestseller. Whereas an inner-directed person follows the instruction one picked up early in one's life, the other-directed person orients his behavior according to the cues he gleans from his peers and the prevailing mass culture. Riesman later on abandoned his own characterology but he continued to be concerned about changes in society and politics. His less-known publications on higher education demonstrate his familiarity with the world of undergraduate education in the United States and show his incorruptible personality vis-à-vis cultural pressures.

Like many others from his generation, David Riesman chose sociology because he thought the knowledge developed in this discipline might help not only to understand the present time but also to change it. More than many others, Riesman enjoyed real influence in his time and much beyond his own sociocultural environment. Looking at him and his *oeuvre* from a present viewpoint, even an unprejudiced observer would not file him and his writings under 'sociology'; at least they do not fit into the contours of that discipline as it is today. The sociology Riesman discovered in the aftermath of the World War II was quite different. Riesman questioned whether this obvious change was to the better of the discipline. After Riesman's death, one of his numerous friends, collaborators, and admirers published an op-ed essay on him and his legacy in the *New York Times*. He titled it 'The last sociologist' (Patterson, 2002). True or not, Riesman was a sociologist of a particular shape.

Apprenticeship Years

Riesman was born in Philadelphia in 1909 into a wealthy family of German-Jewish origin. His father was a professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and his mother a college graduate with a broad spectrum of interests. Their son, David Jr., showed similarly broad interests as early as in high school. He thought first to follow his father's path and become a doctor too. At college, he majored therefore in biochemistry, but the college was Harvard with its wide spectrum of digressions, several of which Riesman took. He became an editor of the student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, where he collaborated with, besides many others, the later Marxist scholar and economist Paul Sweezy (Riesman, 1990: 29, 45). Riesman later wrote that the *Crimson* was his 'major educative enterprise' and that the curriculum bored him (Riesman, 1953). In one of his autobiographical essays, he admitted that at this time, he accepted his mother's definition of him as an 'uncreative,' so his next decision might have been seen by his mother as a proof of her opinion (Riesman, 1988: 3). He graduated in 1931 and at this time his interests had changed to a complete different

field, law. He chose the Law School 'aimless' but with a clear agenda to remain near his new found mentor, Carl J. Friedrich, whose friendship lasted for the rest of their lives. Friedrich, 9 years older than Riesman, was a quite recent immigrant from Germany, and held a position in the Department of Government. Riesman admired him both for his erudition and encouragement and later claimed that he "owe[d his] introduction to the social sciences to Friedrich" (Riesman, 1988). Riesman must have possessed a particular brightness that his mother might have overlooked because in his second year as a graduate student he was recruited to the group of editors of the *Harvard Law Review*. For more than a decade, Riesman pursued law. After graduation, the eminent member of the Law School and future Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter, tried to channel Riesman into academic work, something the young man resisted for a while. Instead, he took up the private practice of law. In between Riesman served 1 year as a law clerk to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis. The young man started an argument during the hiring conversations by calling Zionism a Jewish fascism, probably because Brandeis's sternness reminded him of his father's one (Horowitz, 2010: 1008). Riesman did not like the year as a helping hand on the Supreme Court nor did he accept offers he received to join one of the New Deal institutions. In 1937, he got an offer from the University of Buffalo to teach at its Law School. Looking at Riesman's list of publications, the job offer must have been based on other achievements than written ones.

Riesman had recently married Evelyn Thompson and the young couple moved to upstate New York where they remained for 4 years. For the academic year 1941–42, Riesman moved down the Hudson to spend time as a visiting fellow at Columbia University's Law School. Even before this occupationally related move, Riesman joined another broad movement, the one that brought educated and well-to-do people to the couches of psychoanalysts. In Riesman's case, it came at the 'urging' of his mother, who was a patient of Karen Horney whereas he had been commuting since 1939 to New York to see Erich Fromm (Riesman, 1988: 7). Whatever positive functions psychoanalysis might have had for the young professor, it seems that one shortcoming never burdened him: shyness

(Riesman laments his juvenile awkwardness and slow reading as hurdles, in Riesman, 1990: 24, Riesman, 1988: passim). During all the years as a young aspiring man he made the acquaintance of many people, famous and ordinary. In Manhattan, he rubbed shoulders with what became then known as the New York intellectuals and this climate was much more to his liking than the 'abstract and unempirical' world both of Friedrich's political science and the lawyers' environments at Harvard, Buffalo or Washington, DC. During his early stays in the metropolis he got in touch with Robert and Helen Lynd, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict and joined the American Association for Public Opinion Research. The entry of the United States into the World War II forced the University of Buffalo, then a private institution, to close its law school and Professor Riesman had to see where he should continue his trade. He first served for 1 year as an assistant district attorney in New York and worked for the next 3 years as an executive at the Sperry Gyroscope Company on Long Island, a middle-sized war contractor firm (Anon., 2002). An article he wrote during his fellowship year at Columbia and came out in print in 1942 (Riesman, 1942) attracted the attention of Edward Shils who managed to invite Riesman for a job interview to Chicago. There Riesman started his sociological journey in 1946.

For a long period of time, Riesman was affiliated with the undergraduate College of the University of Chicago, not with any of the university's graduate departments. He started as a visiting assistant professor and became a tenured full professor the following year (Riesman, 1988: 8). The College consisted of regular faculty and Riesman belonged to the social science staff, hired primarily to teach an extensive course on social sciences for undergraduate students (Riesman, 1990). Riesman obviously enjoyed teaching and his contribution to the series devoted to autobiographies in the *Annual Review of Sociology* is dedicated mostly to his teaching experiences. A great many students came under Riesman's spell during his decades teaching social science, but his sociological writings made him even more well-known (Gans et al., 1979). One book in particular stands out from all the rest: *The Lonely Crowd*.

A Sociological Bestseller

In 1947, the interdisciplinary Committee on National Policy at Yale University, where Harold D. Lasswell pulled the strings, invited Riesman for a 1-year stay there to do some research on anything, which fell into the frame of the inviting committee. Riesman happily accepted the offer. He was able to persuade his superiors at Chicago that he would come back and found a perfect substitute to teach 'Soc2' there: C. Wright Mills. At Yale Riesman had enough funds to hire a research assistant and managed to persuade Nathan Glazer to fill this post part-time by commuting between New York and New Haven.

The book appeared in print in 1950, after less than 3 years, and has been reprinted several times, and translated into all major languages (Riesman et al., 1950, [1950]1969). The story of how *Lonely Crowd* came into being has been told by Riesman and Glazer independently and needs not to be repeated here in detail (Glazer, 2012). Instead, a kind of analytic appreciation of the book should help to grasp its nearly unique place in the postwar-social science scenery.

Looking purely at the text, one might have troubles to identify the discipline to which it belongs. The then usual form of presenting sociological research results was not observed by its author. If one would put it into the sociology basket, it would fit better with older examples, probably best be located near the two *Middletown* volumes by Robert and Helen Lynd. One is not very surprised to read in one of Riesman's memoirs that he would have been most happy, if the Lynds had invited him for another community study endeavor.

The Lonely Crowd most closely resembles books written by anthropologists in the course of World War II effort to understand the social and cultural side of the enemy nations, Japan and Germany. People with whom Riesman had made professional acquaintance the years before he started at Chicago, such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, authored books to whom Riesman paid tribute with *The Lonely Crowd's* subtitle: *A study of the changing American character*. Character was then a widely used concept, in most cases defined more closely by prefacing the term with the word 'social.' 'Social character' meant typical patterns of behavior and belief that particular societies force upon or elicit from their members. Moreover, not only outside observers but even particularly well-prepared members of a given society were thought to be able to perceive the social character of that society with some exactitude. Riesman obviously did not have any reservations with regard to any of his own prepossessions. Nowhere in the book's first edition, do readers get any hint of relativism or 'perspectivism,' as it was called by Karl Mannheim, an author Riesman obviously did not hold in high esteem, probably because of Mannheim's relativism.

The author's self-assurance is demonstrated in a then unusual usage of the first person singular. Very often Riesman speaks of himself, the author, by saying 'I,' starting as early as at the second page: "as I do throughout this book," "I do not plan to delay ...," "most of these writer assume as I do - [...] most of them agree - as I do," and finally "my collaborators and I base ourselves on this broad platform of agreement, and do not plan to discuss in what way these writers differ from each other and we from them" (1950: 4). Some 160 pages later, Riesman comments on the usage of 'I' by people classified as inner-directed ones. Summarizing a field exploration by some of his friends, conducted in rural Vermont, he has this to say about first person singular speech: There the old people "express feelings of responsibility for politics [...] In referring to events they use the pronoun 'I': 'I think, 'I want, 'I hate, and so on. They talk as if it were up to them to judge what happens in politics and, to the limits of their gifts and available energies, to guide it" (1950: 169). Very much the same could be said about the author David Riesman, who felt himself entitled to speak out about the failures of his society and politics in his country.

Besides the two classics from anthropology already mentioned, Riesman names Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, his and his mother's psychotherapists, Abram Kardiner, and Geoffrey Gorer as belonging to the orbit *Lonely Crowd* wanted to join. The social character all these authors tried to unravel was seen as one formed by parents, a relatively stable set of behaviors and beliefs within a particular society. Whereas Fromm and Horney, quite recent immigrants into the United

States, proposed to analyze modern societies as such, Riesman wanted to be one degree more down to earth and concentrated his analysis much more on his own society, that is, America. This alone put *Lonely Crowd* on a pedestal of its own and most probably contributed to its wide recognition and bestseller status (Gans, 1997).

In the 1940s and 1950s, personality and culture, personality and society, national character, and many more similar sounding publications and study programs flooded bookstores and classrooms. So, Riesman could expect that his book would be recognized in academia at least but due to his mastery of language and probably with the help of both his wife Evelyn Thompson Riesman, an experienced editor, and in particular Reuel Denney, a poet, he must have had ambitions going beyond the restricted readership of colleagues. And he succeeded. Within just a couple of month, David Riesman became a nationally recognized person. *Time Magazine* put him on its cover on 27 September 1954, announcing that 'social scientist David Riesman' will answer the question, "What is the American character?" The painting consists of a portrait of Riesman and two elderly men floating above his shoulders wearing satellite dishes as backpacks, probably an illustration of the 'other-directed character,' which occupied the center of the book.

The 300-pages-long study consists of three parts: First, Riesman outlines what he called his 'theory of character.' Second, he embeds the character types into American politics, and third, he ends with a plea for overcoming the restrictions of the character types. Crucial for the reception and the success of *Lonely Crowd* was the wording Riesman applied to the three character types outlined at length in the first part of the book: 'Tradition-directed,' 'inner-directed,' and 'other-directed.' One could be sure that the book would have got a different reception, if the author would have called his three types: T, I, and O, or 1, 2, 3. Only because of the surplus meaning in particular of 'inner' and 'other' Riesman has been able to gain the status of a diagnostician of the present.

The three types coincide with the trajectory of all societies: During the long period of static demographics – high birth and death rates balance each other – individuals are directed by tradition. Only when dynamic forces put a society on an expansive path, what later on W.W. Rostow would call the take-off, a new type of personality has to be formed: the inner-directed. Riesman locates this 'transition' to the period of Renaissance and Reformation, which means that the inner-oriented type's first appearance must have happened somewhere in Europe (more than once Riesman parallels his inner-directed type with those guided by Max Weber's Protestant Ethic). Putting all differences between Catholics and Protestants, Renaissance and Reformation, and so on, to the side, the core of the inner-directed character has to be seen in the fact that "the source of direction for the individual is 'inner' in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders and directed toward generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals" (Riesman et al., 1950: 15).

Whereas all Western civilizations were driven by inner-directed inhabitants, only 'in very recent years,' in particular parts of American society and in a handful of areas, did there emerge a new character type: "in the upper middle class of

our larger cities: more prominently in New York than in Boston, in Los Angeles than in Spokane, in Cincinnati than in Chillicothe" characters were formed who, astonishingly, look 'strikingly similar' to the ones seen by the French traveler to America, Alexis Tocqueville, a century earlier. Nevertheless Riesman argues that the other-directed type 'does find itself most at home in America' and adds as the defining streaks: "What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual – either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media" (Riesman et al., 1950: 20–21).

The contrast between a person who follows his father's instruction and the person who looks and listens primarily to his peers fills at least half of *Lonely Crowd's* pages. But only because the first was named inner-directed, and the second other-directed did readers conclude, probably correctly, that the author prefers the older over the newer type. By focusing on the then relatively new gadgets of modern life – movies, radio, yellow press media, abundance, consumerism, and personal improvement techniques – Riesman insinuated to his audience that the present might be worse than the recent past but never argued unequivocally against the present.

Lonely Crowd functioned like a Rorschach test: Every reader could come across what she wanted to read to better understand her rapidly changing environment. And indeed the US society and economy of the late 1940s was on the tip of another take-off, complete with rising earnings, increasing mobility, expanding suburbia, college education for more people, and, of course, the great baby boom. In a word, what later sociologists called Fordism, an era of full employment, mass society, mass media, and all the rest that cried out for analysis, indeed for understanding in the midst of bewildering change. Riesman, who wanted to understand himself and his contemporaries, offered Americans a portrait of themselves, very similar to the portrait *Middletown* drew two decades earlier or the portrait drawn by the huge and constant flood of diagnostics that became commonplace after *Lonely Crowd* smoothed the way.

It seems to be appropriate to file *Lonely Crowd* in the 'diagnosis of our time' genre. This type of writing assembles between two covers whatever its author has been able to collect as proof for his thesis – and this is the one big problem with this kind of reasoning. Methodologically, they are failures from the very beginning because it is always possible to find confirming instances for any thesis one wants to propose.

An Academic Life after the Bestseller

Very much different to other diagnostic writers, Riesman was open to criticism and dismissed his typology within a short period of time. In prefaces to reprints of *Lonely Crowd* and other replies to critics (see for a collection of critical comments: Lipset and Lowenthal, 1961), Riesman was willing to remove the backbone of his diagnosis. What he did not countermand was his interest in understanding the forces behind recent social changes. Since some of the criticism was directed toward the opaque methodology of *Lonely Crowd*, he and Glazer edited a second volume, *Faces in the Crowd: Individual Studies in*

Character and Politics (Riesman and Glazer, 1952) where one can find some of the empirical material corroborating the first book. Over the next decades, Riesman continued to write about his country and society, favored individualism and remained a scholar with his own style, or habitus. By bringing two concepts together one could call him a *citoyen* social researcher, which means that Riesman embodied quintessentially the concerned citizen and a scholar who preferred empiricism over abstract philosophical reasoning. What makes Riesman different to nearly all the others who want to contribute something grand intellectually seems to be his prioritizing of key questions to be raised and answered empirically, instead of clinging to abstract concepts one imposes on the world. Or, in Riesman's own words: "thinking countercyclically" (1988: 23).

Within a short period of time Riesman found another métier for his curiosity: higher education. In 1955, Paul Lazarsfeld asked Riesman whether he would be interested to do a kind of follow-up study of a quite recently finished survey, which became *The Academic Mind* (Lazarsfeld and Thielens, [1958] 1977). In this study, Lazarsfeld examined the side effects of the hysterical mood caused by the anti-Communist crusade, usually called by the name of its fiercest spokesman, Senator Joseph McCarthy. The former law professor and now best-known public intellectual David Riesman, with several publications on civil liberties on his *curriculum vitae* seemed to be the best choice to contribute a separate investigation of the validity of the questionnaire as an instrument. Riesman accepted and made himself familiar with the diversity of higher education institutions in the United States by visiting more than four dozen of them personally (Riesman, 1979).

When his close friend Everett C. Hughes lost the battle over the University of Chicago's sociology department's chairmanship, Riesman accepted an invitation by his old university and returned to Harvard, where he continued to give undergraduate courses under the title 'American character and social structure.' During the next couple of years Riesman published several books on higher education, mostly coauthored with junior faculty (best known is probably Jencks and Riesman *The Academic Revolution* from 1969), and continued to write magazine articles and commentaries for a larger audience (see Riesman, 1954, 1964). The student movement of the 1960s did not meet with his approval and he did not refrain from confronting the rebels with his arguments. Since Riesman did not scorn popular culture – in *Lonely Crowd* he even quotes children rhymes – he might have gotten some satisfaction when Bob Dylan paid tribute to the title of his bestseller: "Standing next to me in this lonely crowd/Is a man who swears he's not to blame."

In the social sciences Riesman's name can still be remembered by insiders but from his huge *oeuvre* only one title survived. Orlando Patterson was not right to call him the last sociologist (Patterson, 2002), but he was right insofar as scholars like Riesman are now available only in the history

books of the social and behavioral sciences – most probably not to their advantage.

See also: Benedict, Ruth (1887–1948); Communication Research and Media Studies, History of; Conflict: Education and Youth; Conformity: Sociological Aspects; Consumption, History of; Fromm, Erich (1900–80); Higher Education Management; Higher Education Market; Higher Education Research; Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix (1901–76); Leisure and Cultural Consumption: US Perspective; Mass Society: History of the Concept; Mead, Margaret (1901–78); Mills, Charles Wright (1916–62); National Character, History of; Professions, Sociology of; Psychoanalysis in Sociology; Psychoanalysis, History of; Social Structure: History of the Concept; Sociology, History of; Tocqueville, Alexis de (1805–59).

Bibliography

- Anon., 13 May 2002. David Riesman obituary. The Telegraph. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1394001/David-Riesman.html>.
- Gans, H.J., 1997. Best sellers by sociologists: an exploratory study. *Contemporary Sociology* 26 (2), 131–135.
- Gans, H.J., Glazer, N., Gusfield, J.R., Jencks, C. (Eds.), 1979. *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Glazer, N., 2012. My life in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, 1–16.
- Horowitz, D., 2010. David Riesman: from law to social criticism. *Buffalo Law Review* 58, 1005–1029.
- Lazarsfeld, P.F., Thielens Jr., W., [1958]1977. *The Academic Mind: Social Scientists in a Time of Crisis*. Arno Press, New York.
- Lipset, S.M., Lowenthal, L. (Eds.), 1961. *Culture and Social Character: The Work of David Riesman Reviewed*. Free Press of Glencoe, New York.
- Patterson, O., 2002. The last sociologist. *New York Times* 19. May 2002, correction: 24 May.
- Riesman, D., 1942. Civil liberties in a period of transition. In: Friedrich, C.J., Mason, E.S. (Eds.), *Public Policy: A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University 1941*. Wiley, New York, pp. 33–96.
- Riesman, D., Glazer, N., Denney, R., 1950. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Riesman, D., Glazer, N., Denney, R., [1950]1969. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Abridged Edition with a 1969 Preface. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Riesman, D., 1954. *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays*. Free Press, Glencoe.
- Riesman, D., 1964. *Abundance for What? And Other Essays*. Doubleday, Garden City.
- Riesman, D., 1979. Ethical and practical dilemmas of fieldwork in academic settings. A personal memoir. In: Merton, R.K., Coleman, J.S., Rossi, P.H. (Eds.), *Qualitative and Quantitative Social Research: Papers in Honor of Paul F. Lazarsfeld*. Free Press, New York, pp. 210–231.
- Riesman, D., 1988. On discovering and teaching sociology: a memoir. *Annual Review of Sociology* 14, 1–24.
- Riesman, D., 1990. Becoming an academic man. In: Berger, B.M. (Ed.), *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists*. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 22–71.
- Riesman, D., Glazer, N., 1952. *Faces in the Crowd: Individual Studies in Character and Politics*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Riesman Jr., D., 8 January 1953. Paper, Not Class Taught Sociologist David Riesman. The Harvard Crimson.