

C.W. Mills *The Sociological Imagination* (extended review)
Oxford University Press, 1959 (citations and quotes from Pelican Books 1970
Edition)

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In *The Sociological Imagination* Mills captured - and was himself part of - the spirit of renewal and discovery that was beginning to infect sociologists and that was itself part of an age of optimism, of full employment and rising prosperity. The book was one of the key forerunners of one of the discipline's most expansive and inventive eras. I read this book for the first time as an undergraduate in 1962, the year of Mills' death. It summed up for me much of what was wrong with 1950s sociology and staked out a way forward that I found exciting and challenging and forty years after its first publication it still has the power to move.

It is difficult to convey the impact this book had on a whole generation of sociologists. Every chapter had an important message and each chapter became formative of one or another sociological issue that later became central concerns. In general terms, the book eschewed the fiction of detached objectivity that coloured so much sociology at the time. Mills had a mission and his writing often expresses anger, sometimes - as in *Listen Yankee* - even fury. From *The Sociological Imagination* many sociologists learned that an interest in sociology is powerfully driven by being involved with the social world and not trying to stay aloof from it. Mills based much of his arguments on critiques of what he saw as negative trends in sociology at that time. Sometimes these could be overdrawn and laboured. At other times they could be insightful and challenging. But Mills' engagement with, and involvement in, the issues of society was unquestionable. And he avoided the temptation to dress his arguments in pretentious sociological jargon.

The book opens by making a distinction between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure" (p.14). This was the first clear formulation of what later became known as the micro-macro distinction in sociology. This was, of course, to become a key issue in sociological theory during the late 1970s and the 1980s through the work of Norbert Elias, Tony

Giddens, Randall Collins, Michel Foucault and others. Mills not only made the distinction two decades earlier but began the work of linking the two levels to show how they related to one another.

But Mills' distinction between the levels was much less abstract and theoretical than those made by the distinguished members of the next generation of sociologists. Mills was not primarily concerned with the theoretical articulation of the levels. That was a task that Parsons had taken on with only limited success and that was only to be re-addressed in a major way some twenty years after Mills. He was, rather, concerned to keep the distinction between the levels both concrete and policy-relevant and using the distinction to address key social issues.

For Mills the ability to study the relationship between the lives of ordinary people and large scale social organisation and to shift perspective from one to the other without losing sight of either, was the key to the sociological imagination. As he put it: "No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within society, has completed its intellectual journey" (p.12) and:

"[The sociological imagination]... is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another - from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assesment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self - and to see the relations between the two" (pp.13-14)

One of Mills' key concerns in relating personal troubles and public issues was the ways in which the former became translated into the latter. For Mills the sociological imagination comprised in large part the ability to show how personal milieux translated into large-scale social structures and societal issues, or as he put it:

"*Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutiouons of a historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life." (p.15)

Mills saw the definition of social issues out of personal troubles as a key area of conflict and disagreement in society, a view not developed significantly further until interactionist approaches to the construction of social problems were developed in the early 1970s.

Mills' starting point was a critique of some of the main tendencies in early post-war sociology. He showed, in the two chapters that follow the introductory

chapter - entitled "Grand Theory" and "Abstracted Empiricism" - how sociology had tended to polarise into, on the one hand, theorising removed from social issues, and on the other hand, detailed empirical studies that become so buried in examining the *minutiae* of personal milieux as to lose sight of the wider social context.

Mills' treatment of Grand Theory concentrated in part on a critique of structural functionalism. During the 1950s, Parsonian structural functionalism had become widely established in sociology and political science. Mills focused his critique of Grand Theory on the work of Parsons himself. He did so by first quoting large meandering extracts and then translating them into a few trenchant phrases. But Mills was mostly critical of the way Grand Theory abstracted social structure out of its cultural and historical context and attempted to devise universal social laws that could be seen to govern all societies.

The chapter on abstracted empiricism criticises much empirical work for neglecting the wider social and historical context of society. Empiricism thereby becomes, paradoxically, "abstract". The views expressed in, for example, an opinion survey, become detached and free-floating empirical "facts" which can only be understood as the attitudinal residues of individual behaviour that has been ripped out of its social context. Mills uses the writing of Lazarsfeld to illustrate this. Symbolic interactionists, with their focus on taking the actor's definition and conducting *in situ* research, and more generally qualitative sociology, would develop these embryonic ideas in the 60s and 70s and beyond.

Mills argued in both these chapters that sociology needs to avoid the extremes of Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism and develop a broader view that anchors analysis in comparative and historical studies of culture. In this, he comes close to Merton's appeal for a greater emphasis on "theories of the middle range", albeit expressed in a different way and with different emphases.

In the next chapter, Mills argues for the inevitability of adopting moral positions: that values are involved in all aspects of sociological work. This was a theme that was to be taken up several years later by others, such as Alvin Gouldner, Irving Horowitz and Howard Becker and the emergence of critical sociology. He also criticises the tendency for sociologists to abdicate moral responsibility and engage in contract research to address the problems of businesses, government and other interests irrespective of sociologists own moral position as the representatives of an intellectual craft. This is developed further in the next chapter, "the Bureaucratic Ethos" where Mills criticises the

narrow technical and administrative nature of much large-scale research and its tendency to lose touch with the larger issues.

Most of the remainder of the book develops what Mills regarded as the main task of developing a relevant but intellectually-rigorous sociology. In the chapter entitled "The Human Variety" he argues that the sociological imagination needs to grasp and understand people in all their variety and in their social and historical contexts - the modern Chinese peasant, the mediaeval knight, the Australian aborigine, the big city dweller and so on (p.148). The aim is the ability to understand the micro milieu of people and their personal troubles in different cultures and historical periods and in the context of different issues. For Mills there are a number of key ingredients to achieving this. These include the ability to shift perspective from micro to macro (milieu to wider social structures), an ability to identify different interests and forces and keep these apart from one's own values, a concern with power and its exercise in different social situations, and a comparative and historical perspective. Mills placed a strong emphasis on comparative studies that were historically-anchored but that at the same time strove to understand milieu.

It was this breadth that caught the imagination of a generation of sociologists, together with Mills' commitment and enthusiasm. Mills was interested in everything from social psychology (on which he wrote a book together with Hans Gerth) to large-scale historical changes. His approach was therefore anchored in the individual and her milieu yet contexted in larger social structures and the events that formed them. enhanced by a comparative and historical perspective that gave an important place to power and the state.

But perhaps the most important chapter of the book is the appendix: "On Intellectual Craftsmanship". In this, Mills conveys the sense of discovery and excitement that accompany the research process. He argues that sociological research is not an exact science but rather a craft in which a number of skills need to be deployed. He argues that the researcher's personal life is an important mirror to enhancing research.

He goes on to make a number of very practical suggestions on how research can be made self-reflexive, using the sociological imagination in a two-step process. The first is using files of notes on books read (to both record the contents and reflect on them). Mills illustrates how this can be done with concrete examples from his own notes on Mosca. He then shows how such voluminous files can be drawn on to first explore then develop concepts and ideas to be taken further, using index cards containing ideas and cross-referencing between books, personal experiences, theories, concepts, ideas *etc.* Again, Mills illustrates this

with his own research on elites, showing how he explored a range of ideas, experimenting with a number of conceptual frameworks and approaches, drawing on his files of notes and developing them.

The sociological imagination can be stimulated by rearranging the files and index cards in order to relate concepts and approaches in novel and unusual ways. This can lead to new classifications, polar types, reviews of previous books in a new light, and other innovative mental experimentations. In the pre-computer age that Mills was part of this involved using filing cards, but the technique is of course even more powerful using data technology.

The sense of adventure, enthusiasm and inventiveness Mills was able to convey for the maximum exercise of the sociological imagination together with his moral and political commitment, his comparative and historical perspective and his concern with contemporary issues and their relationship to individual life-worlds profoundly influenced the generation of sociologists who were students of his work.