

An Examination of 'The Sociological Imagination' by C. Wright Mills

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Peter Berger wrote in his book “*An Invitation to sociology: a Humanistic Perspective*” (1936) that:

“A more adequate representation of social reality would be the puppet theatre, with the curtain rising on the little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the little parts that have been assigned to them in the tragic-comedy to be enacted. ...We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the stings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theatre and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theatre and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom”(199).

Over a decade before Peter Berger gave this representation, the social scientist C. Wright Mills talked about the social reality of the 20th century in the same terms, depicting modern man not as a “puppet” but rather as a “cheerful robot” manipulated by the ruling elites who have the power of both economic and cultural production and who have maintained their systems of power through ideology. Marxists defined ideology as a set of beliefs, norms and values, a kind of “false consciousness” that individuals incorporate so that they serve the ends of the powerful class mechanically without questioning their robotic condition. Mills saw that it is the task of social scientists to reveal the structural roots and functions of ideologies in society. Mills’ fundamental sociological conception consisted in urging social scientists to make a connection between the personal biographies of individuals and their social history in order to achieve structural reform. He penned down his ideas in a book called “*The Sociological Imagination*” which was considered by the International Sociological Association as the second most influential book for sociologists in the 20th century. The sociological imagination was written as a reaction to the political apathy and the rise of bureaucratization and consumerism in the 1950s. In this book Mills expresses his disillusionment with both the power elites and the working class as radical agents who would stir political consciousness and call for a more participatory democracy. Mills’ sociological imagination had set this task for a new aspirant group of intellectuals.

Mills adhered to many of Marx’s ideas, the founder of the classical tradition of scientific socialism, but nonetheless he saw his social thought as providing a more adequate analysis of the nature of man and society than the classical American sociology. C. Wright Mills belongs to the “New Left” which arose in the postwar era in America and which adapted the class paradigm of Marxism. Mills called for a move away from the old leftists and their labor-centered ideologies. Because of the defeat of many radical labor movements by the

mid 1920s in Central Europe as well as the political apathy in the post-war era, C. Wright Mills like the majority of the New Left social scientists was skeptical about the working class's potential of forging more democratic social and political reforms. Mills, however, saw the intellectual class as the alternative radical agents that would challenge the status quo. Intellectuals more than "ordinary men" possess the quality of mind that makes a "connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history making in which they might take part" (p. 4).

In his book Mills discusses the importance of social sciences in the socio-historical analysis. For Mills the social scientist more than the political activist has the task of evaluating the social structure of his own period and measuring its development in connection with larger cultural and historical milieux. Mills decried two types of social scientists:

(1) Mills excoriated "The grand theorist" and characterized his work as "confused verbiage" and unimaginative common-sense. Grand Theory offers systematic theories of social life, and makes them universal laws about the nature of society and history. This sociological tradition consists mainly in the "associating and dissociating" of abstract and general concepts which never allow the grand theorist to "get down to observation" and set "many structural features of human society, features long and accurately recognized as fundamental to its understanding" (p. 35).

(2) Similarly, Mills was critical of the abstracting empiricists who are obsessed by "the scientific method". To Mills abstracted empiricism consists in the collection of atheoretical data "by a bureaucratically guided set of usually semi-skilled individuals" who apply the scientific method in order to conceal their intellectual poverty. These technicians are inhibited by methodological and statistical analysis lacking "substantive propositions or theories" the fact that deters the true analysis of the human condition.

Abstracted empiricism and grand theories are two different styles of social science but have a common goal which is to dismiss the possibility of a true understanding and inquiry about "the great social problems and human issues of our time". These two traditions turn sociology into the handmaiden of bureaucracy rather than an intellectual discipline aimed at ameliorating the human condition by rejecting conformist ideas. Mills contended that social scientists have lost their social engagement as they have become "less intellectually insurgent and more administratively practical" (p96).

Mills urges social scientists to "avoid furthering the bureaucratization of reason and of discourse" (p. 192). He called for committed sociologists who use reason and relate it to the human condition. In order to render "reason democratically relevant to human affairs in a free society and so to realize the classic values that underlie the promise of our studies" (p. 194), it is important to distinguish between personal troubles and public issues and identify them so as to grasp the connection between history and biography and to derive a clear understanding of the social structure and the effects that the larger institutions in society bear on the life of the individual. Troubles are matters that are connected to the personal character and experience of the individual and touch his local and immediate environment. Issues, however, go beyond

the local environment of the individual. These are public matters that affect the everyday life of the individual by shaping the structure and functioning of the economic and political institutions in a society.

Mills contends that “Many great public issues as well as many private troubles are described in terms of ‘the psychiatric’ – often in a pathetic attempt to avoid the larger issues and problems of modern society” (p. 12). Instead of relating human problems to the social structure and the historical features, psychoanalysts tend to explain these troubles in terms of mental and psychological disorders. This constitutes another way of narrowing the interests to problems of Western societies ignoring two thirds of the world’s population; it also removes any possibility for serious consideration of the impact of the larger institutions on the individual life. (p. 12)

For Mills individuals incorporate some motives, impulses, roles, values that are closely related to the established social structure. Mills explains that these motives and values are socially defined; they “are to be understood in terms of the vocabularies of social changes and confusions among such vocabularies” (p. 162). Mills’ main idea is that individuals express their motives using different vocabularies or statements which are well-established within a social context. For a thorough sociological analysis it is important to scrutinize human motives in its particular social framework. Social changes cause the confusion of these “vocabularies of motive”. Psychological features cannot be made universal they are instead “socially patterned and socially circumscribed”. The larger institutions within a social structure set up a sort of expectation and high premium on man’s conduct and role in society. Our conception of ourselves is shaped by taking into account what others in the institutional order expect us to be. Mills says that the ideal man is the one who perfectly socializes and who “does not brood or mope; on the contrary, he is somewhat extrovert” (p. 91), perfectly “adjusting” to “the routines of his community”. Mills confirms that “the most radical discovery within recent psychology and social science is the discovery of how so many of the most intimate features of the person are socially patterned and even implanted” (p. 161). Individual’ self image as well as the roles he plays in a society can be understood only by referring to the “institutions within which his biography is enacted”. Mills argues that by developing the sociological imagination individuals will be able to link their personal troubles to the macro sphere and think of them as public issues of the social structure; as a result this would enable them to better understand and solve their problems.

Mills characterized the dominant ideology of the social sciences before the Second World War as that of “liberal practicality”. This is an “a-political” practice that serves administrative interests. It advocates piecemeal social reform; far from engaging in radical policies, liberal social scientists hold rather progressive and pragmatic political orientations. Mills laments the fact that “liberalism has become less a reform movement than the administration of social services in a welfare state; sociology has lost its reforming push; its tendencies toward fragmentary problems and scattered causation have been conservatively turned to the use of corporation, army, and state.” (p92) It is nothing but rhetoric aimed at defending the status-quo. Liberal practicality has a “fragmentary character” that handles social issues in a piecemeal approach. Social phenomena are divided into tiny separate

components based on the assumptions that any social event must have multiple causes. By this process the practitioners of the liberal practicality get only a “formal” look of the ‘organic whole’.

In sociological studies the application of the liberal practicality has only contributed to the mere adoption of old facts in students’ textbooks. The search of new ideas is always dismissed as it may be problematic and disturb the long established order and may as well take a longer time for adoption than the settled conceptions. “Liberal practicality” is a kind of “democratic opportunism” it informs a homogeneous group of people, usually those from the middle-class who are usually “professional people and junior executives”, and tries to adjust the whole society to the values of this class.

Mills argued that there has been a shift in the political orientation of the social sciences “during the last several decades, alongside the older practicality a new kind has arisen—in fact, several new kinds” (p91). The older liberal practicality was replaced by a conservative ideology or as he called it the “illiberal practicality” (p100). Illiberal practicality tends to rationalize social analysis. Its aim is “human engineering” and the bureaucratization of social inquiry. Illiberal practicality is like abstracted empiricism, it makes sociology a bureaucratic enquiry practiced by some administrators and semi-skilled technicians who select some problems for research instead of others aimed at maintaining the social order and stifling radical reform possibilities. Mills says that all that which is thought to serve the interests of the bureaucratic elites who seek only to foster the ideology of a profit-driven consumer society, is deemed “practical” (P.92). Mills states that this “new practicality leads to new images of social science—and of social scientists”, it has created specialized agencies that fragment the sociological studies among these agencies Mills notes the “industrial research centers, research bureaus of universities, new research branches of corporation, air force and government” (p. 95). Mills gives “the human relations in industry” as a perfect illustration for this kind of practicality. ‘Human relations’ theory in industry is centered on a simple formula which is if “to make the worker happy, efficient, and co-operative we need only to make managers intelligent, rational, knowledgeable” (p. 92). This Mills argues serves the manipulative tactics of the managerial elites that seek to create cheerful and submissive workers as it “psychologizes” the problems of managers-workers relations and ignores the power and hierarchical relations in industries that disciplines workers to become “cheerful” and obedient so that the work is done more effectively. This managerial theory ignores the “authoritarian structure of modern industry” and the “morale of the worker” who is “powerless but nevertheless cheerful” (p. 94). This seeks to maintain the status-quo and to blunt any possibility for workers to grasp any chance to exercise or share authority.

Mills defines power as something that “has to do with whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live, and about the events which make up the history of their period” (p. 40). He explains that the central question that one might ask so as to have an explicit understanding of the nature of power relationships that prevail in a society is that who is involved in making decisions about the arrangements under which men live. He argues that “In the modern world (...) power is often not as authoritative as it appeared to be in the medieval period” (p. 41). More implicit forms of exploitation and authority have

appeared that helped to get people's consent and allegiance and thus maintain the unequal distribution of wealth and power.

Mills asserts that "we are at the ending of what is called the Modern Age" and now we live in the post-modern era or what may be called "The Fourth Epoch" as he explains "Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call the Dark Ages, so now the Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch". In this epoch all social realities have witnessed dramatic changes and that older standards of thought and expectations have been replaced by new ones. Mills contends that the ideals of the Enlightenment and its faith in "the inherent relation of reason and freedom" as well as the two ideologies of socialism and liberalism have collapsed as they don't give anymore adequate interpretations and complete understanding of the new social structures. In the Modern Age, it was assumed that the increased rationality of man is an essential condition for its liberation and freedom. In the post-modern age bureaucratic organizations and institutions have taken a grip on the private lives of individuals, depoliticized them and supposedly rationalized them through the excessive use of technological advances in every domain of their social life. In fact the rationalization of society was expected to enhance individuals' freedom as well as their levels of creativity and intelligence, Mills argues, however, that the rationalization of men has contributed to a large part in the deterioration of the human mind both in "quality and cultural level" as those who "use these [technological] devices do not understand them; [and] those who invent them do not understand much else." (p. 175) He cites as an example the soldier who executes many "functionally rational actions" through the use of scientific innovations, but who is not aware about the long term destructive repercussion of his actions on humanity. Bureaucratic organizations have long perpetuated a consumerist culture and promised the fulfillment of freedom and democracy. In fact this was only a delusive promise that the rationalization of human beings would lead to the ultimate use of reason in social life and as a result to the spread of freedom. In reality, this only led to the creation of mass society that was drifting into consumerism, individualism and political apathy. In this society individuals conform to the values installed indirectly by the bureaucratic elites and adjust themselves to the requirements of the competitive economy in order to procure a socially-respectable status. Mass culture has given post-modern man an ephemeral gratification with consumerism and with this they have taken their freedom to work as manifestation for their powerfulness and independence. Mills refers to what Karl Mannheim calls "self rationalization" and defines it as the way in which an individual, caught in the limited segments of great, rational organizations, comes systematically to regulate his impulses and his aspirations, his manner of life and his ways of thought, in rather strict accordance with 'the rules and regulations of the organization' " (p. 170). Thus Man of the post-modern era can be compared to a the "cheerful robot" because he has been manipulated and tamed to secure the interests of the profit-driven bureaucratic elites and nevertheless remains cheerful as he has been programmed to do so and is not aware of the hidden manipulations behind this whole system.

Mills repudiated both socialism and capitalism and thought that they "have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves" (p. 166) as these major

orientations did not cope with the new social realities and remained rather focused on ideological interests. Mills argued that to get out from his robotic condition, man should engage in a critical endeavor and serious analysis of his current social reality that links biography to history and transcends the mere methodological representation of social facts. Mills asks “where is the intelligentsia that is carrying on the big discourse of the western world and whose work as intellectuals is influential among parties and publics and relevant to the great decisions of our time?” (p. 183). He saw that intellectuals have an important role to play in raising the cheerful robots’ awareness about the dangers of their political apathy and the mediocrity of their culture. Intellectuals should first develop their sociological imagination and this is by asking three main questions which are: first what is the structure of a particular society and how does it differ from other varieties of social order. Second where does this society stand in human history and how does it differ from other periods. Third what varieties of men and women live in this society and what is their most salient ‘human nature’ and its meanings so as to unveil the major characteristics of this society.

Mills contends that “what social science is properly about is the human variety, which consists of the entire social worlds in which we have lived, are living, and might live.” And the essential task of the social scientist is “to understand the human variety in an orderly way”, that is, to attain a level of understanding that is “comprehensive enough to permit us to include in our views the range and depth of the human variety”. Mills saw that social science must deal with each variety of the social structure “in its components and its totality”. Mills maintains that social structure is the most important study unit of sociologists and in the postmodern era the most inclusive unit of social structure in terms of power is the nation-state (p. 135). Mills also states that social structures are composed of various institutions: political, economic, military, kinship, religious and educational “classified according to the functions each performs” (134). It is very important to understand the connection between these different institutions in order to grasp the overall characteristics of the social structure of a society.

Despite his assertion about the inadequacy of socialism in coming to terms with twentieth century social realities, Mills still holds that Marxism is the principal sociological tradition that provided a crucial understanding of how to exercise the sociological imagination, he says that this classical school of sociology “has been central to the development of modern sociology” (p. 48) and that it is “at once historical and systematic-historical, because it does so in order to discern ‘the stages’ of the course of history and the regularities of social life” (p. 22)

The intellectuals’ task is to heighten the political consciousness of the masses who are under the influence of the consumer culture and adapted to the economic and political interests of the power elites. Mills saw intellectuals fulfilling this task by communicating their revolutionary ideas to the general reader not only the professional sociologists; in this way intellectuals are sure that by their craft they are increasing the integrity and sway of their work on a large scale.

In fact Mills exaggerated in his pessimism about the possibility of social change emanating from the labor movement and at the same time overstated the role of scholars and intellectuals as the new agency for democratic historical change. George Novack, a radical writer of the Depression years, asserts Mills' exaggerated emphasis on the political and social role of intellectuals saying that "This is neither reasonable nor realistic"¹. In fact Marx long held that workers can acquire political consciousness only if they fully understand their role and capacity in forging revolutionary change and assimilate the idea of historical materialism. So Mills cannot rely only on intellectuals to spur democratic change. Ideas alone cannot produce effective change; they can be translated into concrete material force only when incorporated into the consciousness of the masses. We cannot depend only on intellectuals because this class also like all other classes can become "less intellectually insurgent and more administratively practical" (p96) they can be hired by businessmen to serve their interests by working on specified problems finding "practical" solutions. They are not all the time autonomous and they don't always seek reform out of their research; they may instead look for new justifications for these corporate elites to maintain the status quo. Nowadays more and more scholars have become what Mills calls "the new entrepreneurs" who have built close contacts with big businesses and have secured for themselves prestige and fortunes outside their domains (p98).

Although C. Wright Mills developed these ideas over 50 years ago, "The Sociological Imagination" remains a valuable masterpiece that offers a progressive method for how to fight bureaucratic despotism with critical analysis of our epoch, where big corporations while manufacturing the assent of the people create cheerful robots. Mills contended that the basic unit of analysis for social scientists must be the nation-state. Although the current historical context of our lives has transcended the national boundaries and we have started to talk more and more about the transnationalization of the economic, cultural and political affairs, Mills' ideas remain, nevertheless, relevant in our analysis of the new historical changes with its new context of analysis: globalization.

Although Mills deflates the importance and relevance of Marx in understanding changes in contemporary life, especially his theories of "historical materialism", it is impossible for any social scientist to acquire a high level of comprehensive analysis and criticism of current realities without referring to Marx's social theories. Mills repudiation of the relevance of Marxism today stems from his pessimism about the possibility of the transition to a more socialist world based on a proletarian revolution, as Marx predicted. Mills forgets that the road to revolution includes different stages, and it is not always a linear path; instead it goes through many deviations. Great world revolutions, such as the Puritan Revolution in England (1642-1660) and the French Revolution (1789-1800), took a long time to achieve victory over the ruling class. They were not fought only through abstract ideas, but also through real material actions.

¹ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/novack/works/1960/x01.htm>

In our era where one crisis follows another, leftist intellectuals have been looking for real agents for revolutionary change. They have been looking for discontented groups from different social strata who have the will and capacity for eradicating the social injustices caused by capitalism. The new economic and political realities have led radical social scientists to abandon Marx's confident belief in a "proletarian revolution" and to talk more about the importance of raising class consciousness through intellectual radicalism. We find also new questionings on the future of socialism and the search for a new alternative system that shares with socialism the same ideal of an egalitarian classless society and that counters the cruelties of capitalism. It is very important to note that the road to social democracy is very sinuous, what we need however, as Daniel singer has noted it, is "a new manifesto. Not a blueprint, not a detailed program; but a project, the vision of a different society, the proof that history has not come to an end, that there is a future beyond capitalism." Social groups who are burning for a socialist transition of the world must abandon the use of empty rhetoric in denouncing capitalism, they should instead regain their autonomy and join forces to organize their political and ideological power in a way which surpasses the powers of the dominant capitalist classes.