

C. Wright Mills, "The Sociological Imagination", 1959

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C. Wright Mills, a world acclaimed public intellectual of the twentieth-century America, and a pioneering social scientist, left a legacy of interdisciplinary and powerful works including three books which provided individuals with powerful intellectual tools to address their personal ordeals and influence the power structure of the world in general and the American society in particular : *White Collar* (1951), *The Power Elite* (1956) and the *Sociological Imagination* ((1959). In the latter, Mills who consistently challenged the status-quo with regard to the power structure in the world in general and the United States in particular, shared his thoughts on an essential intellectual quality, the understanding and acquisition of which form the basis of a revolutionary social change.

According to Mills, “the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues. The first fruit of this imagination - and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it - is the idea that the individual can understand her own experience and gauge her own fate only by locating herself within her period.” (P.12)

Written in the 1960's, the notion of sociological imagination as described by Mills emerged during a period of rapid social change in the United States, characterized by a

disillusionment with the existing power, the social structure and a sense of loss by the young generation.

In his book, Mills argued that in order for distant individuals to have a comprehensive understanding of their personal troubles there was a need to situate themselves within their period, according to their history, and make the link between their private ordeals and the public policies of the society in which they live. Mills thus differentiates between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure.” (Mills, p.13) He considered that this distinction was “an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science” and explains that “troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his or her immediate relations with others; they have to do with one's self and with those limited areas of social life of which one is directly and personally aware. [...] A trouble is a private matter.” On the other hand, “issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of her inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an 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. An issue is a public matter.” (Mills, p.8)

Another understanding of this is the link between biography and history. By understanding the intersection between the two elements, individuals are able to “grasp what is going on in the world and understand what is happening in themselves.” (Mills, p.12) Mills argued that without the sociological imagination, most individuals are unable to “cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.” (Mills, p.12) The acquisition of this intellectual quality brings along the promise of a higher enlightenment. “The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of [...] self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. (Mills, p.12)

As such, let's consider the examples of unemployment as demonstrated by Mills. He explains that if an ordinary man is unemployed, he will automatically consider this situation as his or her personal failure. He may even be condemned by the society as a “lazy” person. However, if there are thousands of other individuals in the same situation, then it becomes a “public issue” and should be treated as such. Another good example of this is divorce. If only a few divorces occur within a society then it can be seen as personal troubles of the people involved. When a relatively high percentage of people are getting divorced every year then divorce becomes a public issue where institutions like marriage and law need to be looked at. (Mills, p.13)

Mills rightly asserts that these sorts of problems are interwoven with the large-scale problems of society where public policies may be involved and therefore are a ‘public issue’.

As a social scientist, Mills was inspired by Marx, of whom he was a great admirer. He supported some of his theories, particularly Marx’s emphasis on social classes and their roles in historical progress. Through his work, he tried to keep Marx's ideals alive. In the midst of the cold war era, he emerged as an influential member of the “new left” during the post-war America, calling for a break from traditional leftists who strongly believed that the working class, was the only social force capable of instigating a revolutionary change and establishing a society based on democratic ideals. On the contrary, Mills believed that the intellectual class and social scientists in particular were the ones who possessed the quality of mind necessary to operate a radical change.

Mills justifies the breaking away with the “old leftists”, and their approach to social issues by the fact that the post-war American society was experiencing radical change and therefore old patterns of thoughts, and ideals had to be replaced by new ones. Mills contested the two ideologies of socialism and liberalism which have long been considered as the two social alternatives to provide adequate solutions to the new social realities. He explained that “liberalism has been concerned with freedom and reason as supreme facts about the individual; Marxism, as supreme facts about man's role in the political making

of history.” (Mills, p.167). He considered that “the liberals and the radicals of the modern period have generally been men who believed in the rational making of history and of his own biography by the free individual.” (Mills, p.167)

This pattern of thought was challenged by the realities of the 20th century America. The ideas of freedom and reason seemed ill adapted to the new realities and became “ambiguous in both the new capitalist and the communist societies” of the 20th century. According to Mills, Marxism had become a dreary rhetoric of bureaucratic defense and abuse and liberalism, a trivial and irrelevant way of masking social reality. The major developments of the 20th century America could, in Mills' view no longer be understood in terms of the liberal nor the Marxian interpretation of politics and culture. (Mills, p.167)

According to him, the prevailing ideology of the social sciences before the Second World War was what he called “liberal practicality”. He observed that “the bias toward scattered studies, toward factual surveys and the accompanying dogma of a pluralist confusion of causes” was the “one line of orientation historically implicit in American social science.” (Mills, p. 66) Most social scientists' works before the Second World War remained purely bureaucratic and only served administrative interests. Instead of promoting a comprehensive and radical reform of the society, “the liberal practicality” focuses on specific societal entities and issues, only offering fragmented reforms in line and in support to the status-quo (Mills, p.86). Social scientists settled for a more bureaucratic role and did not engage in political activism thus making the discipline lose its reforming character.

Mills highlights the importance of social sciences in the post-war era, and their role in researching, analyzing and reaching the crucial notion of sociological imagination. He considered that any “social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey [...]. Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed-these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society-

and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination.” (Mills, p.12)

Mills continued by explaining that “the climax of the social scientist’s concern with his history is the idea he comes to hold of the epoch in which he lives. The climax of his concern with biography is the idea he comes to hold of man’s basic nature, and of the limits it may set to the transformation of man by the course of history.

All classic social scientists have been concerned with the salient characteristics of their time- and the problem of how history is being made within it; with ‘the nature of human nature’ and the variety of individuals that come to prevail within their periods.” (Mills, p.165) Referring to Marx, Weber and Durkheim, Mills recognized that each of these social scientists had “in his own way...confronted these problems” and noted that several others failed to address these issues which are at the core of the social sciences.

According to Mills, those social scientists “who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period-what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed,

liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of 'human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for 'human nature' of each and every feature of the society we are examining?" (Mills, p. 15)

Other social scientists before him had developed a similar theory, in particular Emile Durkheim. The 20th century French sociologist also considered that the individual was the product of his or her society. Both sociologists strongly believed that "the most intimate features of the person are socially patterned and even implanted." (Mills, p. 161)

Mills joins Durkheim when he asserts that "many great public issues as well as many private troubles are described in terms of 'the psychiatric' – thus ignoring and avoiding the larger problems of modern society (Mills, p. 12). Psychoanalysts have failed to relate human problems to the social structure and the historical features of the society in which they live. A very relevant example is Durkheim's study on suicide. After identifying four types of suicide according to different degrees of social integration, he argues that social forces and structures were responsible of driving individuals to suicide. Suicide is not merely the result of mental and psychological disorders. Durkheim's work aimed at proving that social behavior and social development stemmed from social processes. Mills and Durkheim both believed that society shaped individuals, but they also believed that individuals contribute to shaping the society.

Taking the example of suicide, and to support Durkheim's approach of this issue, let's note that suicide is more prevalent in western societies. The realities and social structures in those particular milieux make suicide something relatively specific to those regions. As Durkheim questioned, if Suicide was a purely psychological matter, why does the rate of suicide vary between societies? Why do the rates of suicide differ significantly between different groups in the same society? And why do the rates within groups and societies remain fairly constant over time? The psychiatric explanation of certain issues becomes void as they cannot be applied in all societies.

Every society with its structure, values and history affects the individuals leaving in that society in a specific way. On a related matter, let's consider a depressed individual. One

may reasonably assume that a person becomes depressed when they have been through a negative or traumatizing experience. If one is to solely rely on the psychological explanation without taking into account the influence the society has on individuals, then how can we account for depressed people who have not experienced an unpleasant or negative event? How can we explain that depression (or suicide) is not common in societies where the level and frequency of real suffering is far greater than that experienced in the western world? Why is depression or suicide not so common in third world countries where citizens have very relevant reasons to be depressed or to commit suicide?

It is clear from this that the social science main focus is the influence of social forces on behavior and how individuals and groups respond to these forces.

Mills argued that achieving sociological imagination was the “social scientists' foremost political and intellectual task.” He believed at the time that the “social sciences were becoming the common denominator of all other intellectual studies in the 20th century America. As he explains, in a given period, a style of intellectual reflection would emerge and appear as a common denominator to cultural sciences. Mills rightly identified that “in factual and moral concerns, in literary work and in political analysis, the qualities of [the sociological imagination] are regularly demanded. In a great variety of expressions, they have become central features of intellectual endeavor and cultural sensibility.” (Mills, p. 15).

When one considers the 21st century society, it is a fact that the sociological imagination remains the common denominator to all cultural and intellectual studies.

Mills had a high sense of mission for himself, for intellectuals in general and social scientists in particular who, as explained earlier he considered to be the potential force to instigate social change.

Despite the fact that the uneducated masses cannot systematically achieve sociological imagination, one can argue with Mills that this quality of mind that he exclusively considers a marking of the intellectuals can also be achieved by the masses in certain

conditions. Indeed, in periods of crises, the population is violently brought to a level of social understanding that is only possible by exercising sociological imagination. In the American society for instance, the war in Iraq has resulted in a social enlightenment of the population over the power structures, interests and goals of the American Government in the Middle East. When American citizens in the context of this war became negatively singled out by the vast majority of the world's population, the uneasiness caused by this personal feeling resulted in a political awareness by which several Americans questioned the reasoning and policies which led the government that *they* had elected to invade another country. Similarly, the actual economic situation in the United States characterized by a high rate of unemployment, housing difficulties and even greater difficulty to access education can translate into a social understanding of the economic structures and the economic policies by the masses.

However, there remains a big gap between achieving sociological imagination and actually engaging in radical political involvement, whether this quality of mind is achieved by the masses or social scientists. Relying only on intellectuals to bring about social change is somewhat unrealistic and transpires an overestimation of their capabilities on the one side and an underestimation of the masses potential on the other. Even though theories and ideas are the basis of any action be it political or not, these ideas can only produce a concrete social force when they are assimilated by the masses, thus creating a real social pressure. As Mills explained, intellectuals like other social classes can become “less intellectually insurgent and more administratively practical generally accepting the status quo, they tend to formulate problems out of the troubles and issues that administrators believe they face... They also diligently serve the commercial and corporate ends of the communications and advertising industries.” (Mills, p.96)

This is the case with several intellectuals today who, for economic and materialistic reasons become the “puppets” of the power, using their research to help justify social inequalities. (Mills, p.98) Ideally, any radical social change or revolution needs to come from all the classes, intellectuals and masses altogether.

It is becoming critically necessary to point out that today, even when a group of people or different classes in a given society reaches social imagination, they sometimes find themselves trapped, as capitalism and its defenders have managed to portray this system as the only viable one. Several individuals and groups live this situation as a fatality. They would desperately embrace any viable alternative to the status-quo but they are often swiftly reminded that most real socialist or communist societies that ever existed did not survive. Socialism or Marxism then appears as an unachievable ideal.

At the opposite of Mills who argues that intellectuals and social scientists can bring about real social change, it would not be inaccurate to consider that if the masses who do understand the links between biography and history, or between their personal troubles and the public issues feel trapped, it is in a way because social scientists did not do their part of the work by providing an orientation to a viable alternative.

In many contemporary academic circles, it is distressing to see how many social scientists that rightly condemn the actual state of affairs within the capitalist context are unable to break from rhetoric and useless verbiage and engage in real social change.

It appears that most social scientists lack the confidence necessary to impose Socialism, Communism or Marxism as a real alternative. At this stage of human development and after all the damages caused by capitalism, social scientists should no longer be debating on what type of socialism or communism to establish. It is now time to stop hiding behind books, theories and rhetoric and start engaging in real action for an alternative to capitalism has always been and is still possible.