

A Review of the Work of C. Wright Mills

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Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962) is most known today for his theory of ‘the sociological imagination’ which consists in the recognition of the influences of history and biography in the study of sociology. His works gained wide influence short after their publications and continue to have considerable significance today. *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) is judged by most critics as his masterpiece, for the great contribution it offers in the field of sociology and its unique avant-gardist vision. In it, Mills introduces his concept of Sociological Imagination which comes as his own vision of ‘doing’ sociology. This concept is introduced after a long and careful assessment of the major theories that dominated sociological research and after a comprehensive explanation of the major developments in the field of sociology during the second half of the twentieth century.

In an article first published in 1958, Mills defined ‘power’ as “whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live, and about the events which make up the history of their times”¹. Power, thus, belongs to the individual who is able to grasp the external forces that govern his life and his psychological development, to make reflections about them, and to take rational decisions in order to guide the course of his life. However, the picture that Mills introduces about the postmodern man comes far from this ideal of a rational free man. Postmodern men are rather “bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood.”² They are unaware and incapable to understand their position in society and the external influences that govern and shape their inner lives. From this state of powerlessness and unawareness comes the need for what Mills Calls ‘The sociological Imagination’. He explains that what ordinary men need is a “quality of mind that will help them to use information and develop reason in order to achieve lucid understanding of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves [...] The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical context in terms of its influence on the inner life and the external carrier of a variety of individuals. It enables one to

¹ Charles Wright Mills, *Power, craftsmanship, and private troubles and public issues*. Available on website < http://www.infed.org/thinkers/wright_mills.htm http://www.infed.org/thinkers/wright_mills.htm> . Seen on May, 18th, 2010.

² Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, Inc, New York, 1959) p9

take into account how individuals in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that confusion the framework of modern society is essential for any understanding of the behavior of individuals and groups. By such means, “the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement within public issues.”³

Through his concept of sociological imagination, Mills demonstrates his conviction that history and biography should be seen as intertwined. The individual interacts with different social structures, and is constantly crossed by these two fields of influence of history and biography. Recognizing the interrelation between these two disciplines of study, Mills explains, is crucial for a deeper understanding of the psychological development of the individual as a first step, which would make it clearer for the ‘scholar’ and the ‘honest journalist’ of what needs to be done to change the individual from the role of a mere puppet pulled by the strings of history and his biographical elements to the role of an active reactionary to these elements. This sort of awareness raising is crucial for breaking free from external imposed and often unseen influences, and the steady move towards a rational state of decision making that would benefit the majority instead of the concentration of power in the hands of a minority elite. For instance, Mills asserts that “the first fruit of this imagination-and the first lessons that embodies it- is the idea that the individual can understand his own experiences and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his social context, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.”⁴ In this light, Mills asserts that any scholarly work that doesn’t recognize the influences of biography, of history, and their intersections with social structures, has not “completed its intellectual journey”⁵. In fact, Mills argues that any sociological work should respond to these three fundamental questions:

- 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 its change?

³ Mills, p11-12

⁴ Mills, p12

⁵ Mills, p12

- 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 it's 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?
- 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?⁶

In chapter two of this book, Mills engages in a criticism of the dominant theories in sociology. He starts his analysis of Parsonian sociology with a direct assessment of Talcott Parsons' *The Social System* (1951). Grand Theory, according to Mills, is nothing more than a "confused verbiage". Through carefully selected sections from Parsons' *The Social System*, Mills states his aim as nothing less than "to help grand theorists get down from their useless heights." (p42) Grand theorists, Mills explains, "are so rigidly confined to such high levels of abstraction that the 'typologies' they make up- and the work they do to make them up- seem more often an arid game of concepts." (p43) Mills' criticism of the grand theorists is reminiscent of the idea of the romantic poet, who claims to be superior to society, and thereby has to remain detached from it on his high hill in order to make his observations on it. In a similar fashion, 'grand theorists' were obsessed with devising abstract concepts on social structure in an attempt to make up a definite list of universal social laws that could be adopted as governing all societies. In this manner, their approach comes as the mirror image of Mills' 'sociological imagination in that it completely disregards the interaction between history and biography together with the different social structures, and thus remains at a high level of abstraction. For Mills, "grand theorists never get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts." Consequently, Grand Theory cannot be

⁶ Mills, p13

adopted as a proper approach to “define systematically [...], in a clear and orderly way, the problems at hand, and guide our efforts to solve them.”⁷

On different grounds, Mills criticizes ‘Abstracted Empiricism’ for neglecting the wider social and historical contexts in their sociological inquiries. Indeed, Mills explains that “as a style of social science, abstracted empiricism is not characterized by any substantive propositions or theories. It’s not based upon any new conception of the nature of society or of man or upon any particular facts about them.”⁸ The basic approach that abstracted empiricists adopt consists in collecting data from selected groups of people, and then generalizations are made. In such a way, individual behavior is ripped out of its social context and the results we obtain are both ‘a-historical’ and ‘non-comparative’. Mills reaches the conclusion that ‘Grand Theory’ and ‘Abstracted Empiricism’ merely represent “abdication of classic social science”, lacking any firm connection with substantive problems. Accordingly, what is common between these two theories is the lack of any genuine attempt to identify “the great social problems and human issues of **our time**”.

At the beginning of chapter three, Mills tackles the major issues that the field of social sciences was witnessing after the second half of the twentieth century. As a first step, Mills makes it clear that any sociological research must inevitably adopt moral positions and make value judgments. “Whether he wants it or not”, Mills asserts, “anyone who spends his life studying society and publishing the results is acting morally and usually politically as well.”⁹ This is to say that the social scientist’s values are inevitably involved in his sociological work, whether it’s the ethical, the political, or the ideological. In this light, Mills prefers that the social scientist makes his inclinations explicit, rather than keeping them hidden and “drifts morally.”

Mills identifies “Liberal Practicality” as the dominant ideology of social sciences in the pre World War II period. The most noticeable characteristic of this ideology is that it advocates piecemeal social reform, departing from the conviction that “the causes of social

⁷ Mills, p42

⁸ Mills, p65

⁹ Mills, 90

events are necessarily numerous, scattered, and minute.”¹⁰ The guiding line of this approach to social studies is that “as scientists of milieu, we must become aware of many little causes, to act intelligently, as practical men; we must be piecemeal reformers of milieu, one here and one there.” For Mills, this approach has many deficiencies, basically because “if we break society into tiny factors, naturally we shall need quite a few of them to account for something and we can never be sure that we have hold of them all.”¹¹ In other words, when the social scientist becomes guided by a mild mode of pragmatism, striving to account for all the ‘factors’, he will inevitably embrace those that suit him best to fuel his balanced approach. In such a way, he will fall blind from considering the “organic whole”, and will fall short from understanding the “status quo.” Mills consequently laments the fact that social studies have lost their reformation push. Sociology has become simply a set of principles grouped in “textbooks for classroom purposes.” The search for new ideas, which has traditionally been a pillar of social sciences, has lost ground for the scholarly use of sociology which consists of merely imposing new facts on old ideas in textbooks exclusively targeting “middle-class” youngsters who are on their way to become professionals and young executives, thereby dismissing any possibility for innovation or new discoveries. Hence, Mills reaches the conclusion that “problems of politics are seldom radically considered. Liberal practicality tends to be a-political or to aspire to a kind of democratic opportunism.”¹²

Mills remarked that social sciences have taken a more conservative turn after the Second World War, from liberal practicality to what he calls “Illiberal Practicality.” Illiberal practicality is predominantly guided by the principle that what serves the economic, the political, and the military orders, is “held to be practical,”¹³ As far as the working class is concerned, illiberal practicality tends to ‘psychologize’ the problems of industrial relations. The workman is neglected, and efforts are made to make managers “intelligent’ and ‘knowledgeable’. The basic course of such an approach is the notion of power: the hierarchical structure of industry places power in the hands of managers and those “ should not to break up this formation but rather should exploit [it] for their own ends[,,]This might be done by recognizing and studying them, in order to manipulate the workers involved in them rather

¹⁰ Mills, 97

¹¹ Mills, p98

¹² Mills, 102

¹³ Mills, 104

than merely authoritatively order them,”¹⁴ In this vein, Illiberal practicality comes far from the ideals of social sciences, as it is used not to make a change in the status quo, but rather as a bureaucratic instrument to maintain it and even improve it for the benefit of the ruling elite.

Mills laments the new heavily bureaucratic nature that social sciences have adopted in recent decades, He explains that with the rise of the conservative illiberal practicality, the position of the social scientist has shifted from “the academic to the bureaucratic,” The public to whom social studies are destined has changed too, “ from movements of reformers to circles of decision-makers.” The problems of their studies have also changed from “those of their own choice to those of their new clients.” Because of the heavy reliance on abstracted empiricism, sociological studies need considerable financial sources. Big corporations, the army, the advertising industry, are among those who have the means to provide this financial aid. As a result, social studies have become increasingly conducted on their behalf and for their own benefits, In this case, social studies have completely lost track of its traditionally stated goals. Instead of endeavoring to tackle the issues of the dispossessed, it has become a bureaucratic tool in the hands of the rich elite, conducting whole-scale studies to tighten their grip on the rest of the population,

In chapter six of his book, ‘Philosophies of science’, Mills addresses problems of absence of clearly defined scientific methods for the study of social sciences. The wide diversity in methods and research techniques, Mills asserts, is not necessarily problematic, for “every working social scientist must be his own methodologist and his own theorist, which means only that he must be an intellectual craftsman”¹⁵ The most important requirement for a “complete intellectual journey” is that the sociologist has to acquire what Mills calls the sociological imagination; the ability to recognize the influences of history and biography and their interactions with the different social structures. Put in the words of Mills, “the basic problem [...] and its answer usually require attention both to uneasiness arising from the ‘depth’ of biography, and to indifference arising from the very structure of an historical society.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Mills, 107

¹⁵ Mills, 136

¹⁶ Mills, 146

As far as the ongoing trend of the division of social sciences into different specialized departments in universities, Mills stresses the need to study the different interactions between them (sociology, economy, political science...) in order to reach balanced and all encompassing conclusions. A social scientist therefore has to develop an encyclopedic knowledge, taking into account the economic, historical, religious, institutional, biographical... elements during his research. This seems to be overwhelming, for the mastery of different theories and methods of these several disciplines requires an important intellectual effort. That is why Mills explains that the social scientist is not compelled to be familiar with them all at once, but has to be selective of the disciplines he judges of great importance for his research.

In chapter eight of his book, 'Uses of History', Mills addresses the importance of the use of history for the social scientist. "Without use of history and without a historical sense of psychological matters," Mills asserts, "the social scientist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought now to be orienting points of his study[...] every-well considered social study requires a historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials. This simple notion is the major idea for which I'm arguing."¹⁷ This to say that any social scientist should observe the issues he is dealing with under a variety of circumstances in order to avoid flat descriptions. This sort of comparative study will allow him to look at history as a continuing process, in order to reach full understanding of the issue at hand and to come up with the most adequate solutions for it. Therefore, any sociological research-whatever kind of problems it tackles- has to refer to a micro historical study of the period during which the issue takes place, then to a macro historical study of the same kind of problems and the solutions, if any, that were used to solve them, This would not only allow for a full-dimensional treatment of the problem, but will also leave room for innovation in the new solutions that are to be suggested,

Another major concern of sociology is the individual. Most social scientists complain that it's impossible to deal with each individual separately and tend to use Abstracted Empiricism: a small-scale research based on interviews with small groups of individuals, and then generalizations are made, Mills, on his part, stresses on the importance of biography in any sociological research. He explains that "to understand the biography of an individual, we

¹⁷ Mills, p162

must understand the significance and meaning of the roles he played and does play; to understand these roles we must understand the institutions of which they are a part,¹⁸ This would allow not only to specify our research to the different roles that this individual has had, but to go deeper into the psychological development of the individual and consequently formulate a more adequate analysis. However, this study of the biographical elements of the individual has to pay attention to the interaction of early individual experiences and milieux with wider social structures. In such a way, we would be able to comprehend how the evolution\devolution of social structures has influenced early individual experiences and thereby to comprehend the causes of changes in the individual's psychological conduct. Put in the words of Mills: “When we understand social structures and structural changes as they bear upon more intimate scenes and experiences, we are able to understand the causes of individual conduct and feelings of which men in specific milieux are themselves unaware.”¹⁹

As far as the condition of the individual after the second half of the twentieth century is concerned, Mills explains that “we are at the ending of what is called the Modern Age[...], now the Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern, Perhaps we may call it: the Fourth Epoch,”²⁰ The most important characteristic of this new age is the collapse of Liberalism and Socialism as “adequate explanations of the world of ourselves.” Mills explains that the dominant belief during the Modern Age was that the increased rationality of man would inevitably lead to his liberation and freedom. However, in the Fourth Epoch, such ideas and beliefs have gradually lost their credibility and became moot, for the “increased rationality may not be assumed to make for assumed freedom.”²¹ Besides, Mills argues that there was a large-scale change in social structures, which makes Marxism a “dreary rhetoric of bureaucratic defense, and liberalism, a trivial and irrelevant way of masking social reality.”²² The ideas of reason and rationality that marked the Modern Age as necessary tools for the individual to access liberty and freedom have become irrelevant in the postmodern age since the bureaucracies and the social structures have become very sophisticated, while “the substantive reason of the individual” did not evolve. As a matter of fact, the bureaucratic

¹⁸ Mills, p179

¹⁹ Mills, p179

²⁰ Mills, 181

²¹ Mills, 186

²² Mills, 185

organizations and institutions have succeeded in tightening their grip on the private lives of the individuals. “The growth of such organizations within an increasing division of labor,” Mills argues, “sets up more and more spheres of life, work, leisure, in which reasoning is difficult or impossible.”²³ The post-modern man is thus heavily controlled by the new forms of technologies and social institutions. “Caught-up in the limited milieux of their everyday lives, ordinary men often cannot reason about the great structures-rational and irrational- of which their milieux are subordinate parts.” In such a state, neither the values of freedom nor of reason could be said to be known for the man of the Fourth Epoch. Mills joins the worries of Karl Marx of the rise of the “Cheerful Robot”: the alienated man who carries out actions rationally but with no ability to reason about them, a man who is caught up in the private spheres of his life, content with his conditions and seldom worrying about changing the status quo. In this vein, the human mind, Mills stresses, is “deteriorating in quality and cultural level.”²⁴

The gloomy picture of the post-modern society comes together. The rise of the 'cheerful robot' instead of the free man, the growing control of social institutions on individual lives, and the predominance of a culture of political indifference, all sound the alarm for the urgent need of intervention from intellectuals in general and sociologists in particular for firm and rapid actions both to understand and change the status quo. However, sociology as a science is in no better shape than the post-modern society. The dominant theories in this science such as ‘The Grand Theory’ and ‘Abstracted Empiricism’ have undeniable flaws and could not be adequately applied to study and solve the problems of the post-modern age. As a response, Mills advances his vision of the ‘sociological imagination’ after a thorough identification of the different problems that social sciences are undergoing. A quality of mind that genuinely recognizes the intersection of history and biography with the wider social structures has to be acquired by social scientists who want to produce complex and productive social inquiries. Only in this way serious actions could be made to bring back sociology to its classic ideals: a tool of social change rather than a bureaucratic instrument dominated by the wealthy elite.

²³ Mills, 186

²⁴ Mills, 196

