

C. Wright Mills, "The Sociological Imagination"

[Intro]

What is needed to escape the traps that seem to constrain us in our private lives?

Neither information nor the skills of reason alone will allow us to understand either what is going on in our world or what is going on within ourselves. What we need is a "quality of mind" arrived at through "what may be called the sociological imagination."

We need the quality of mind brought about by the sociological imagination.

§1

What can be gained from learning to exercise our sociological imaginations?

We learn to see ourselves and our chances by seeing where we stand in relations to the chances of others in the same circumstances as ours. And we learn to see biography and history as interactive elements within society. We learn to address three questions: (1) What is the structure of some particular society as a whole? (2) Where does this society stand in human history? (3) What kinds of men and women prevail in this society? In this way we learn to see how the most remote and impersonal transformations of society play out and are shaped by the intimate features of our own lives.

We learn how our private lives interact with what and who we are as a society and a culture.

§2

What is the key to possessing the sociological imagination?

Troubles are a private matter, things that occur within our own lives and our immediate relations to others. Issues are public matters, threats to some value cherished by a public.

Awareness of the idea of social structure and using it "with sensibility" is what constitutes exercising the sociological imagination.

§3

What are the major issues and key troubles of our time?

Uneasiness and indifference is the "signal feature of our period." A "psychiatric" approach reflects parochialism and reluctance to confront this feature directly, structurally. The social sciences bolstered by the sociological imagination have become essential.

Denial and 'the psychiatric' have led us to mistake issues for troubles.

§4

What style of reflection has become predominant in our own cultural life?

The physical and biological sciences no longer serve as our exemplars of understanding. In our factual, moral, literary and political concerns, we turn to the sociological imagination. "It is *the* quality whose wider and more adroit use ...will come to play a greater role in human affairs." Technology arising from the physical sciences – particularly the H-bomb – has undermined "the cultural meaning of physical sciences." The search for "laws" – the task of "true science" – is being replaced by a search for meaning, a 'big picture,' a grasp on "social and historical reality."

What has been more the province of literature and the arts, the imaginative grasp of a 'big picture,' has become predominant but with a demand for more rigor than the arts have been able to provide.

§5

What is needed to address our key issues in a way that satisfies what we demand from our search for meaning and a Big Picture?

Classic social analysis and "the concern with historical social structures" can meet our demands, provided it isn't obscured by "great obstacles" now present in contemporary social thinking.

We need to revive the best of classic social analysis and remove the obstacles confronting that approach today.

§6

What are the obstacles that stand in the way of adequate social analysis?

Three kinds of "sociological work" stand in the way: (1) Theory of History that becomes a "trans-historical strait-jacket" used to prophesy the future; (2) Grand Theory – formal, systematic theories of 'the nature of man and society' – that offer supposedly invariant features but only become academic exercises in concept splitting; (3) Liberal Practicality – a miscellany of empirical studies of contemporary social facts and problems – that has led only to "a series of unrelated and often insignificant facts of milieu."

While these three tendencies may stand in the way, the historical tradition of social study found in the West has enough resources to provide the "new orientations" we need in the social sciences.