



The Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills , Amitai Etzioni (Contributor)

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C. Wright Mills is best remembered for his highly acclaimed work *The Sociological Imagination*, in which he set forth his views on how social science should be pursued. Hailed upon publication as a cogent and hard-hitting critique, *The Sociological Imagination* took issue with the ascendant schools of sociology in the United States, calling for a humanist sociology connecting the social, personal, and historical dimensions of our lives. The sociological imagination Mills calls for is a sociological vision, a way of looking at the world that can see links between the apparently private problems of the individual and important social issues.

The Sociological Imagination Details

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From Reader Review The Sociological Imagination for online ebook

Tyler says

A pretty outdated, but decent explanation of what sociology is, how an ideal sociologist ought to go about research and the ideals they should hold.

Whilst this book's general thesis is fantastic, the examples are largely outdated, the book is pretty dry and the book offers very little to somebody who has already studied sociology.

Whilst the book itself is about 2 stars, the appendix is 5. The appendix 'On Intellectual Craftsmanship' is a fantastic outline of how a sociologist or student of any social science ought to conduct themselves. Perhaps I'd recommend this book to someone totally uninitiated in Sociology if I'd no other recommendations, but the appendix however is worth reading for everybody studying a social science or humanities at university, it's inspirational and timeless (unlike the rest of this book).

Erik says

Como proyecto de sociólogo las lecciones que este libro me ha aportado no han podido ser mas enriquecedoras. El proyecto de la ciencia social de verdad pasa por ese tercer papel del investigador social, esa tarea de impulso de la "sensibilidad" en los sujetos; la humanidad, mujeres y hombres, somos el agente del cambio, tenemos una capacidad de manipular la estructura que hemos de potenciar, que hemos de comprender y saber como usarla para hacer frente a esos problemas que nos acechan día tras día. Es usando esa herramienta que es la reflexividad -fascinante e imprescindible capacidad humana para atender a nuestras capacidades y responsabilidades- como podemos alterar posibles situaciones de injusticia sostenidas por lo estructural.

Recomendaría leer tras este maravilloso libro, Sociosofía de Jose Ángel Bergua Amores (aquí una reseña del libro <http://www.intersticios.es/article/vi...>). Si bien es cierto que ese tercer papel del investigador nos puede llevar a una situación democrática, donde atendamos a las necesidades en base a las significaciones de los sujetos, el autor de Sociosofía plantea la interesante opción de la "anarquía epistemológica". Bien es cierto que esa "imaginación sociológica" es cultivada en los investigadores, pero con las nuevas nociones de "procomún" y "tecnociudadanía" parece ser que esa reflexividad de que es capaz el ser humano esta teniendo lugar. Colectivos de personas con un interés común (estoy pensando en comunidades de aprendizaje gratuitas contra la oligarquía de las revistas académicas) generan un conocimiento que, si bien difícilmente causan cambios profundos en la estructura, les permite desarrollar un tipo de subjetividad que altera esa situación de injusticia que logra tener un calado en un gran numero de personas.

Abby says

Probably some good stuff here, but past the first chapter it becomes unbearably dense, and I was unsure of how each of the chapters connected to each other. Will probably appreciate more after it's taught/put into better context vis a vis other works of soc theory

Julio César says

Un clásico. Fue determinante en mi rumbo inicial como sociólogo, gracias a su inclusión en el programa de

la materia por el profesor Rinesi. Recuerdo el prólogo de Germani, en el que ubica a Wright Mills en el contexto norteamericano, dice "está muy bien para EEUU, pero acá en Argentina hace falta burocracia primero".

Abby Brown says

The Sociological Imagination was written by C. Wright Mills in 1959, and he died in 1962 only three years later. He was a sociologist at Columbia University, and the goal of this book was to analyze the discipline of sociology with suggestions for improvement. He felt most mid-century sociologists lost their true purpose: "That these three - biography, history, and society - are the co-ordinate points of the proper study of man has been a major platform on which I have stood when criticizing several current schools of sociology who have abandoned this classic tradition" (p. 143). He holds central the importance of looking at power relations, historical realities experienced by humans, comparative understandings of social structures, the ability to study small environments in terms of larger structures, and to not be bound by disciplines (p. 135). And he warns against sociologists accepting the imbalanced social structure by participation: "But whether the social scientists is aware of it or not, merely by working as a social scientist he is to some extent engaging a bureaucratic or ideological role" (p. 81). Mills believes history is moving from "The Modern Age" to "The Fourth Epoch," and old ideas and images are based in the past. He states "...all these ideals of The Enlightenment have rested upon the happy assumption of the inherent relation of reason and freedom" (p. 166) but in this new epoch reason does not create freedom. This book has encouraged me to think about my proposed field of work post-graduation. I am not primarily interested in becoming a faculty member at a traditional four-year institution of higher learning. While I value knowledge-seeking in various settings [individual, household, community, educational, etc.], I tend to be more interested in working with knowledge-seeking and social justice outside the traditional academy. It seems Mills warns against such applied research in his detailing of liberal and illiberal practicalities. He feels those of liberal practicality tend to "think in terms of situations" and fail to challenge the status quo (p. 88). Those of illiberal practicality tend to be actually working within the bureaucratic system only focusing on the problems "chosen" by those with great power within the system (p. 96). Is it possible to be a sociologist working to change status quo through applied research?

Melissa Corbett says

It's an interesting book but hard to understand.

Andrew says

Think of this as a manifesto for the social sciences. Its key points: think critically, always consider ideological implications, and think holistically but pay close attention to the evidence. Mills was a remarkable thinker, and he shows why the social sciences have something to say about the world we live in. And, unlike many of his fellow Marxist writers, he has no patience for jargon or obscurantism. It's a clarion call for action that retains all of its power to this day.

Jonas Carlsson says

The Sociological Imagination is a very inspiring read for all sociologists or social scientists to be. Mills makes some great arguments on what social scientists' real purpose and responsibility should be - focusing on the relationship between the individual and social structures when defining research problems, comparing structures to the societies and historical eras they exist in, and taking on a political role by informing the public of serious societal issues. Eventhough the book is very clearly a product of the time it was written where there was either an excessive focus on theory or statistical methods, Mills' points are still relevant today, and he delivers some interesting methodological advice in the appendix. Finally, he presents his view on what he believes to be a major social issue - the rationalisation of the individual and lack of reason when making decisions - which is both intriguing, relevant, and very much in line with Max Weber's iron cage of rationality.

Fereidoun says

The Sociological Imagination is a usefull book to read for every one that like to underestand Social and Political relations. Specially inequality in human relations explained well. I enjoied of reading this book.

Trevor says

I've been teaching a first year university subject to student teachers on the sociology of education – I hadn't realised how much fun I would find the course. It is sort of an opportunity to talk about all of my favourite things. But in the first lesson I had to explain what sociology is and so I talked about the sociological imagination and felt a bit of a fraud, as I hadn't actually read the book. So, now I have.

And it's a wonderful book. Conveniently, Mills provides his own three-sentence summary – perhaps more authors should be so handy: “What are the social sciences all about? They ought to be about man and society and sometimes they are. They are attempts to help us understand biography and history, and the connections of the two in a variety of social structures.” pp. 31-2

This just needs a very little explanation. Sociology is generally defined as trying to work out where we sit on a particular spectrum. The two ends of that spectrum are not really positions that anyone sensible ever really holds. They are that we are entirely self-made or that we are completely the product of our environment. In Mills' terms: we are either the product of our biography or of our history. In the West we like to place our bets closer to the self-made end of that spectrum. And we do that despite the evidence, rather than because of it.

But if social science is a science – and a lot of this book goes over that dead and sterile debate and so on, but in interesting ways at least – then we expect sciences to have both theories and methods. Mills doesn't say 'have no theories' but rather that we shouldn't trust grand theories that provide too many answers. Mills is more of a questions, than an answers sort of guy – best to be one of those if you possibly can – and so a lot of this book is devoted to looking at the kinds of questions sociology ought to ask and some of the ways that it might be worthwhile seeking out answers to those questions.

What I like most about him is he goes out of his way to be as clear as possible – something that academics and academic writing often tries to avoid as if on pain of death. He says that too much of sociology is three

hundred page books that could comfortably have had everything important in them said in thirty pages. That this is also true of some of the research that is done – that is too grandiose and not at all clear about what it is seeking to answer (or why) and so stumbles and trips if never actually seeming to fall on its face - although a lot of it is so unclearly written that it could fall on its face and no one might notice.

The lessons here are to be clear about what it is you want to answer, lay traps for yourself so you don't just end up echoing the obvious in ways no one can understand, avoid echoing The power, and learn the craft – that being good at the craft is the path to success in this science.

I really like sociology. I think there are too many things in life we take for granted – a similar idea to Socrates' one of the unexamined life – and that there are relatively simple methods to 'interrogate' the world with that illuminate aspects of our world in surprising ways – particularly around the big three major themes of race, gender and class – themes that we just wouldn't see otherwise.

The appendix On Intellectual Craftmanship, by the way, is worth the cover price of the book.

leighcia says

The first 100 pages of this book were really hard to get through, and even after that, the book was very dense and took quite a bit of effort to understand. All that being said, this has been one of the most thought-provoking and academically-inspiring books I have read in the past year. Mills was a prominent sociologist of the earlier half of the twentieth century (if I'm not mistaken, he coined the phrases "WASP" and "white collar"). In this book, Mills criticizes the two dominant methods of studying sociology (grand theory and abstracted empiricism), and then goes on to delineate the sociological imagination—a way of studying society that factors in historical, political and individual factors, that does not get too lofty with grandiose theories and abstractions nor too mired in the numbers and statistics of abstracted empiricism. He then writes about the need for the sociological imagination in today's society, in relation to our reason and freedom, our democracy and politics. The appendix provides some guidance on how to conduct such research. Though Mill had a few touches of elitism to him, it was so refreshing to read someone who had a vision for social sciences (and for the academy) that mandates relevance to society at large and the individual. To summarize his stance on the subject: "Our public life now often rests upon such official definitions, as well as upon myths and lies and crackbrained notions. When many politics- debated and undebated – are based on inadequate and misleading definitions of reality, then those who are out to define reality more adequately are bound to be upsetting influences. ... Such is the role of mind, of study, of intellect, of reason, of ideas: to define reality adequately and in a publicly relevant way. The educational and the political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain public and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities."

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

I'm writing a paper for the New York State Sociological Association and am going to use Mills as one piece of my theoretical foundation. His book is a pretty interesting look at sociology that matters and tries to make change as well as the interplay that happens between the individual (biographical) and the societal (historical) when making change. It also has some interesting parallels with journalism that I want to explore further.

For instance, Mills talks about sociologists who have become technicians in the service of power rather than to humanity; journalists, for-profit/corporate ones at least, tend to create fictions out of reality that conform to the needs of power/societal institutions instead of writing about reality and demanding the kinds of changes needed to give everyone in society the dignity and material support that they need. Objectivity can get tossed in here as well at this point. Again, objectivity and its questionable usefulness when doing sociology is raised by Mills just as objectivity is raised when journalists try to write to change the world (as in being biased) rather than pretend they have no interest in the topic and are thus objective. Mind you there are a slew of constraints in journalism, just as there are in academic institutions. Quick read and pretty straightforward. Accessible. I enjoyed.

océ says

Read in part for CRM3301 (Contemporary critical theories in criminology) and other sociology classes. Any one who fancies themselves a social scientist should read this book. Mills provides the basis for any good social research.

Eren Bu?lal?lar says

C. Wright Mills, ABD akademisinin yaln?z muhaliflerinden. 45 senelik k?sa ömrüne Türkçede ?ktidar Seçkinleri ve Toplumbilimsel Dü?ün olarak bilinen sosyal bilimler kitaplar?n?n yan?s?ra, Dinle Yankee gibi bir anti-emperyalist metni de s??d?rm??. Uzun y?llar kendi halinde çal??malar yapt?ktan sonra, Küba Devrimi belli ki onu siyasi hayatta daha aktif olmaya itti?. Hayat?n? sonland?ran kalp krizi de, kat?ld??? bir tart??ma program?nda, emperyalizmin Latin Amerika politikas?n? ele?tirdi?i bir s?rada bulmu? onu.

Sociological Imagination, Mills'in "?yi bir sosyal bilimci nas?l olmal??" sorusuna verdi?i yan?tlardan olu?uyor. Yaz?lmas?n?n üzerinden neredeyse 60 y?l geçmi? ve bu süreçte akademi alan?nda önemli de?i?iklikler gerçekle?mi? olmas?na ra?men, Mills'in sundu?u perspektifin temel unsurlar? hala geçerlili?ini koruyor.

Kitap sosyal bilim felsefesinden sosyal bilimlerde çal??ma tarzlar?na kadar uzanan çok geni? bir alan? tarad??? için, k?sa bir özet sunmak mümkün de?il. Ancak Mills'in ba?l?ca argümanlar? ?unlar:

1. Ça??m?zda insanlar?n ya?ad??? sorunlar?n bireyselle?tirilmesine kar??, bu sorunlar?n ard?ndaki toplumsal mekanizmalar? çözmek önemli. Bu da ancak incelenen toplumun yap?s?n? çözümleyerek mümkün olur.
2. Sosyal bilimci, teoriler ve yöntemler üzerine dü?ünürken a??r?ya kaçmamal?d?r. Sosyal bilimcinin as?l sorunu bunlar de?il, ça??n?n insanl?k aç?s?ndan en önemli çeli?kileridir. Sosyal bilimci, teorisini ve yöntemlerini, ça??n?n bu çeli?kilerini tespit etme, onlar? unsurlar?na ay?rma ve çözümler önerme süreci içerisinde mükemmelle?tirir.
3. Cılal? sosyal bilim jargonu, küçük-burjuva akademisyenin arkas?na sakland??? duvard?r. Bilimselli?e de?il, akademisyenin statüye duydu?u arzuya i?aret eder. Oysa bir sosyal bilimci kendini toplumsal mücadelelerden ne kadar uzak tutarsa tutsun, yapt??? ve söyledi?i her ?ey zorunlu olarak, onun iste?inden ba??ms?z olarak bu mücadelede bir yer i?gal eder.
4. Bu nedenle, sosyal bilimci alan?n jargonuyla, süslü kavramlar?yla a?k ya?amaz. Sosyal bilim jargonu,

ancak o kavramı kullanmak gerçekten algılarımız? etkiliyor, ak?l yürütmemizi derinle?tiriyorsa kullan?lmal?d?r.

5. Akademide var olan sosyoloji, psikoloji, tarih, ekonomi, antropoloji, felsefe uzmanla?malar? yapay ve tesadüfidir. ?yi bir sosyal bilimci bu yapay bölünmelerin kölesi olmaz. Yapay uzmanla?klar geli?tirmez. O üzerine e?ildi?i sorunun uzman?d?r ve bunun için tüm alanlardan bir ?eyler ö?renir.

Mills'in kitaba ek yapt??? son bölüm, her sosyal bilimci taraf?ndan mutlaka okunmas? gereken bir makale: "Intellectual Craftsmanship". Mills burada iyi bir sosyal bilimcinin kendini nas?l yeti?tirebilece?ine, geli?imini nas?l takip edebilece?ine dair çok güzel öneriler sunuyor.

Mills'in zaafı? gördü?üm yanlar? da yok de?il. Bunlar içerisinde en önemlisi, kendi yaln?z, ba??na buyruk ama siyaseten "kayg?l?" küçük-burjuva akademisyen tavr?n?, tav?rlar?n en iyisi olarak göstermesi. Ona göre ideal akademisyen tipi, ba??ms?z çal??an, ara?tırma konular?na kendi karar veren ama çal??malar?n? daha anla??labilir k?larak, kamuya da ula?may? hedefleyen akademisyen. Oysa bu örgütsüz akademisyen tavr?, Mills'in kitap boyunca ele?tirdi?i tavra çok benziyor.

Sonuçta, Türkçeye Toplumbilimsel Dü?ün ya da Sosyolojik Tahayyül olarak çevrilen bu kitab?, her sosyal bilim ö?rencisininin ele?tirel bir ?ekilde okumas?, ek bölümündeki önerileri de uygulamas? çok faydal? olur.

Kate says

The Sociological Imagination is a term coined by Mills to describe the way that good sociologists view a problem and the possible solutions. He suggests that we view everything through the intersection of history, biography, and sociology, and that we multidisciplinary approaches to finding solutions for sociological problems. It's a hard read at first, and you start of kind of hating Mills and thinking he's an arrogant sod, but by the time I got to the solution chapters, I had begun to "get it" and when I finished the last chapter I wanted to pump my fist in the air and join the revolution. I would recommend this for anyone who works in sociology or science that deals with humans. It gives a prescription for how to view problems and solutions within society, instead of assuming that they exist in a vacuum.

Simon Bailey says

This book is known as a classic of any sociological canon. It is best read, I think, as a polemic. When i read the opening chapters on grand theory and abstracted empiricism, I was thinking it a 'theoretical' and 'methodological' exercise in critique - and considered as such it is a bit limited; hardly breaking sweat for Mills to take apart the grand theory of Parsons or the abstracted empiricism of behaviourism. But read instead as a critique of politics, ethics and craft, it is much more powerful - as the latter chapters make clear. Having been written in the 50s, there is much which appears dated; the position on reason and freedom, for example, or the exclusive use of male pronouns. There are also intriguing oddities at work, the use of the term 'imagination', and how much farther one might take it, for instance. I think if I had read this as an undergraduate I would have underlined every sentence and missed the point.

Lobstergirl says

There's a scene early in *Crime of Passion* (1957, Barbara Stanwyck, Sterling Hayden, Raymond Burr) when a newspaper advice columnist named Kathy (Stanwyck), a self-confident, independent, unmarried dame, is trying to cover a story about a woman who has killed her husband. A police chief comes into the press room and Kathy tries to get some information out of him. He says, "What are you doing here? You should be at home with your children, cooking your husband dinner." Sadly, Kathy does not at that point reach down and twist his testicles in a full circle while pushing a stapler up his nose. In fact, she says nothing, preferring to avenge herself in a sneakier manner. But the line went into me like a knife, and so it is with *The Sociological Imagination*. Though I'm guessing Mills was unaware of what he was doing, in these mid-century books the world consists only of men (and one mention of Karen Horney). Only men are doing the important things, becoming sociologists, becoming academics, studying the bureaucratic ethos, researching Weber and Parsons and Veblen, earning salaries. Any woman who was able not just to exist in a world like this but to get an advanced education, have a career, succeed in a profession, ignoring all the language around her referring to men, men, men, men, a man, a man, a man, a man - language which says "this world is not for you" - my hat is off to her.

Sometimes commentators many years after a book is published will note such sexist language ruefully, but Todd Gitlin in his Afterword seems oblivious to it.

The book was deeply boring. I'm not a sociologist, but I have read enough sociology (Weber, Veblen, Durkheim, others) to sustain at least a vague interest in it, and I couldn't manage that here.

ben says

This book is written as a sort of textbook for aspiring sociology majors, although Mills wouldn't like the term "textbook". He spends the beginning of the book fairly aggressively attacking current (in the 50s but still I think quite relevant today) trends in sociology and then goes on to explain sociology as he sees it: a necessarily political and historical profession.

Though I wouldn't recommend it to everyone and it's certainly not light reading, it provides an excellent toolkit for starting to understand what is going on in our complex world. If Mills is not the smartest author I've read recently he is certainly one of the clearest thinkers.

Wossen Agnew says

A must read for sociology student.

Christopher says

The first chapter is what is most often read and/or assigned, but I think it continues to be one of the best statements defining sociology and a sociological perspective.

The other chapters on grand theory, etc. are also worth reading, but the first chapter 'The Promise' is perhaps the most important and also mostly commonly cited by contemporary sociologists.

Mills' description of the way in which Americans tend to perceive problems as emanating from the

individual - rather than considering larger, structural forces at play - captures the predominance of reductionist thinking in American society.

Just as timely today as it was over fifty years ago, it continues to be an excellent introduction to the discipline of sociology and how to think sociologically.
