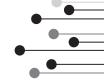# Thinking Sociologically

READING
1

The Sociological Imagination
The Promise

C. Wright Mills

Students often enroll in an introduction to sociology course without having any idea what sociology is. Oftentimes, the course description sounded interesting or the class fulfilled a requirement or a friend recommended the class. And sometimes, students leave class at the end of the semester having learned a great deal about poverty, social norms, culture, race, and gender but perhaps still a little fuzzy on what makes sociology "sociology." This is not just understandable, but it also should be of no great surprise given that many of the topics that sociologists study are also studied by other disciplines. Social workers and economists also study the distribution of wealth and the effects of poverty. Psychologists are interested in how social norms affect people's behavior. Anthropologists study culture. Historians look at how gender roles and race relations have changed over time. If there's so much overlap in what different disciplines study, what is it that makes sociology unique as a discipline?

The answer lies not in what *sociologists study but in* how *they study the world around them. This unique sociological perspective is described in this classic piece by C. Wright Mills. He uses the term* sociological imagination *to describe a way of studying the world that connects what happens to individuals to larger social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Or as he puts it, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (p. 3). What Mills is arguing is that sociology provides a perspective that lets people see how what happens to them is influenced by events, policies, and interactions that make up the social structure of a society. It's important to note that he's not at all arguing that we as individuals have no autonomy and that our own individual actions and efforts don't matter in what happens to us. Instead, he's urging us to be aware of the social and historical context in which our lives unfold and to think about how those social and historical forces shape our individual life chances. (Life chances are the odds that some opportunity or obstacle will present itself to you.) To give one example—college students who graduated between 2008 and 2014 are much*

more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than students who graduated before 2008. Why might this be? From an individual perspective, we might argue that these particular students are less motivated or not as smart or qualified as those who graduated before 2008. Perhaps they just didn't try as hard to get jobs. These are all individual-level explanations, and none of them explain why these graduates were so much less likely to find good jobs. But if we employ Mills's sociological imagination, it immediately becomes clear that the number of jobs available in the U.S. economy shrank drastically in 2008 due to the financial crisis. It certainly mattered for students graduating in that time period if they were smart, qualified, and motivated to find a job. But it also mattered that there weren't enough jobs in the economy for all the qualified candidates. This is an example of linking what's happening at the social and historical level (the economy shrank and had fewer jobs available) to what happens to individuals (the 2008–2014 cohort of college graduates were less likely to find good jobs). And it will be a similar case for those who graduated in May of 2020 in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their job prospects will not be the same as for those who graduated just a year earlier in 2019. Seeing this link between the conditions in the broader society and what happens to individuals is the underpinning of sociological imagination, and it is this way of thinking about the world that defines sociology.

As you read this article, think about what aspects of your life are shaped by where and when you are living. The sociological imagination is the underpinning of sociology as a discipline, but it's also incredibly useful in understanding how and why life unfolds the way it does for you and those around you. Once you start to be able to see the connections between what happens to individuals and larger social forces, you're well on your way to having a better understanding of the social world and being able to see the world from a sociological perspective.

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are 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; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant

becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate 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. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

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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 his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or

glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of "human nature" are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. It is characteristic of Herbert Spencer—turgid, polysyllabic, comprehensive; of E. A. Ross—graceful, muckraking, upright; of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim; of the intricate and subtle Karl Mannheim. It is the quality of all that is intellectually excellent in Karl Marx; it is the clue to Thorstein Veblen's brilliant and ironic insight, to Joseph Schumpeter's many-sided constructions of reality; it is the basis of the psychological sweep of W. E. H. Lecky no less than of the profundity and clarity of Max Weber. And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and society.

No 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. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those 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?

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. For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this 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. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences.

2

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public

issues of social structure." This distinction is an essential tool of the socio-logical imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and per-sonally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of a histori-cal 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: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call "contradictions" or "antagonisms."

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honor; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war's termination. In short, according to one's values, to find a set of milieux and within it to survive the war or make one's death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorga-nized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may expe-rience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four

years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

In so far as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. In so far as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in his restricted milieu will be powerless—with or without psychiatric aid—to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him. In so far as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and more intricately connected with one another. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Make a list of three to four important goals you would like to accomplish sometime in the future. What larger social forces will either facilitate you achieving these goals or make them more difficult to attain?

2. How do you think your life would be different if you had been born 100 years ago? What do you think would have been different about your childhood? Your diet and exercise habits? Your life expectancy? Your educational opportunities? Your career choices? Your fashion sense?

3. Friendship seems like a natural, freely chosen relationship that is based entirely on individual preferences. People who meet and enjoy each other's company often become friends. How do larger social forces influence our "choice" of friends? Does when and where you grow up affect who you might become friends with? Does your gender, race, or social class? What role do you think technology and social media might play in how people go about getting and maintaining friendships?