

## ARTICLES

### SISYPHUS HAD IT EASY: REFLECTIONS OF TWO DECADES OF TEACHING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION\*

The Sociological Imagination is among the most recognized books in the history of American Sociology. Yet, the sociological imagination as such, a radical form of self-consciousness, is not commonly well understood nor easily acquired. This essay examines the challenges thus faced by instructors who seek to accurately impart what Mills meant by his famous neologism and the even stiffer challenge for those struggling to instill the sociological imagination in their students. Two pertinent examples of creative and probably productive pedagogy are discussed, Maurice R. Stein's "Sociology of Birth & Death" at Brandeis University and Brian Rich's senior seminar in sociology at Transylvania University. The essay concludes with advice for the instructor in pursuit of fidelity to Mills's original argument and guidance vis-à-vis the typical constraints encountered in today's classrooms.

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AS I SIT DOWN to reflect upon 20 years of attempting to impart to students not only what is meant by the sociological imagination, but the rudiments of an actually functioning sociological imagination within themselves (and we can all agree upfront that these are fundamentally different pedagogical goals), I learn that Edna Parker of Shelbyville, Indiana, is soon looking forward to another birthday. Born on April 20, 1893, Parker is recognized as the oldest living human on the planet. I am attentive to news of people like Ms. Parker for the simple reason that I sometimes have my students imagine for themselves the broad outlines of such unusual biographies in light of the changing societies in which they have transpired. I learned of Edna Parker's birthday today because today, the day at which I first apply myself to the work of drafting this reflection, I read online at Yahoo.com what amounts to a human interest story, that Kaku Yamanaka yesterday fell ill at her

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Yatomi City nursing home and was transported to hospital where she later passed away. Ms. Yamanaka was born on December 11, 1894, and at her demise was recognized as Japan's oldest citizen. As Yahoo's story implies but does not explicate, Ms. Yamanaka was fortunate to live her life in Japan, where over 30,000 centenarians routinely walk the earth and where women's life expectancy is over 85 years, a species record.<sup>1</sup>

This preface is not a hint about the importance of such theoretical concepts as *historical specificity* or *totality* or a means to intimate the essential relationship between imagination, on the one hand, and empirical exactitude on the other (what Theodor W. Adorno called "exact imagination" [see Nichol森 1999]), nor is it fodder for the fabled if also clichéd intersection of biography, history and social structure. Rather, my purpose is to underscore the lengths that professors of sociology will go—and probably must go—if their aim is to stimulate, and not merely describe, what C. Wright Mills meant by the oft-cited but, I would

<sup>1</sup>Online at [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/us\\_world/2008/04/05/2008-04-05\\_japans\\_oldest\\_person\\_dies\\_at\\_age\\_113.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/us_world/2008/04/05/2008-04-05_japans_oldest_person_dies_at_age_113.html).

argue, rarely understood notion of “sociological imagination” (Mills 1959). For what is most productive in the above is not the fragmented shadows cast by demography, gerontology, media or gender studies, but the barely concealed theoretical self-consciousness that is slightly sickened by Guinness Book-style human interest stories (see Orr 1990, 2006) and the notion that it is fortuitous to have lived through the Second World War in Japan. When the first atomic weapon was detonated over Hiroshima, the late Kaku Yamanaka was exactly 18,500 days old.

I have spent the last 20 years preaching the gospel of C. Wright Mills.<sup>2</sup> And not only before captive audiences of hundreds if not thousands of undergraduate students, for nearly every scrap of sociology I have ever published (and not a few that failed to see the light of day) have made use of Millsian theory and methods and (with varying success) emulate Millsian purposes and style (e.g., Dandaneau 2008, 2007, 2006a, 2006b, 1996, 1994; Dandaneau and Falcone 1998). I am also the author of a book explicitly directed to people of the age typical for undergraduate students, a so-called textbook supplement, its sole *raison d’être* the stimulation in the reader of what Mills, in the title of his 1959 masterpiece, called the sociological imagination (Dandaneau 2001). Let me be clear: I am unusually sympathetic to, and invested in, the sociology of C. Wright Mills, which I regard as among the finest and yet most systematically misunderstood ever produced. This assessment of Mills’s complexity and relevance may ex-

<sup>2</sup>In the interest of full disclosure, I should clarify that my experience in this regard is almost entirely at the undergraduate level and that in 1989 my “teaching” consisted of little else than helping Professor Maurice R. Stein and his many other teaching assistants at Brandeis University with Professor Stein’s course entitled “The Sociological of Birth and Death” (more on this below). It is also the case that my teaching in 2009, a year hence from the production of this manuscript, is predicated on the assumption that economists so often implicitly deploy in their work, the assumption of *ceteris paribus* (“all things being equal”).

plain, in part, why it is that I find the task of successfully teaching Millsian sociology so utterly challenging, so nearly impossible.

The burden of the remainder of this essay is to consider two essential dimensions of the problem. The first deals with the classroom and the practicalities of instruction. The second addresses the theoretical challenges of explicating that which is notorious but rarely understood. With a biographical head increasingly gray, I am willing to risk hubris by offering by way of conclusion advice to professorial colleagues.

### TEACHING MILLS

Like all sociology, the so-called sociological imagination is almost always taught in standard-issue classrooms. But as we know from the fruits of sociology generally, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and actually existing teaching experience, today’s standard-issue classrooms are about the last place one would want to attempt to transform everyday consciousness into sociological self-consciousness. The commercialization and bureaucratization of higher education systematically renders our classrooms fortresses of rules and regulations walled-off from live experience, where too often student-consumers meet professor-producers in an un-free exchange of lifeless educational product, the veritable McUniversity (Ritzer 1998; see NSSE data online at <http://www.nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>; Vebler 1918). It is germane to recall that C. Wright Mills himself transferred after his freshman year at Texas A&M in search of greater academic freedom and intellectual stimulation, and that his own later pedagogy, confined mostly to the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Columbia University, was often as unorthodox as his sociology (see Wakefield 2000; Form 2007, 1995). Most professors, however, could not or would not compel their students to leave their home institution in search of perceived greener pastures elsewhere, nor are they in a position to put their instruction on-hold until their students return, say, from stimu-

lating study abroad or until they have completed an engaging faculty-mentored research experience, the sorts of tonic recommended, wisely, no doubt, by the results of the NSSE survey as antidote to the doldrums of too many American college and university classrooms.

Instead, I think it is fair to conjecture that most professors of sociology most of the time face ill-prepared undergraduates in mostly introductory courses, where the degrees of freedom are few and where the controlling institutional compulsion and subsequent vocabulary of motive involve standard general education requirements. Thus described, this is no place, anyone can see, to inculcate a profound and demanding form of self-consciousness. Indeed, this is hardly a worthy environment for any type of higher education. But as Adorno (1966) also observed, critical self-consciousness must necessarily emerge out of prevailing contexts of delusion. Although Adorno was referring to rather more menacing and damaging environments than merely lifeless lecture halls, his point is germane nonetheless. In this regard, and fully cognizant that many instructors of sociology are doing their level best to subvert the overarching constraints of their institutional locations, I celebrate the pedagogy of my sociological mentor as well as that of a colleague whom I have never met. In each, I find sober recognition of what we are up against, and in each lie examples of specific and, I hope, useful and usefully subversive classroom techniques aimed at demystification and consciousness-raising.

The perhaps less famous "Morrie" of Brandeis University's Department of Sociology, Dr. Maurice R. Stein taught "The Sociology of Birth & Death" to some 300 Brandeis undergraduates (about one-tenth of the entire undergraduate student population!) every year consecutively for 10-odd years, and it was during a three-year stretch of this remarkable run that I was first introduced as a graduate teaching assistant to what it might take to instill the sociological imagination in the setting of a university

classroom. Dr. Stein<sup>3</sup>, now retired after 50 years of teaching, was a Columbia University doctoral student in sociology during the same period that Mills held-forth on Morningside Heights. He and Mills did not, however, enjoy much of a personal relationship. I recall that Dr. Stein once quipped that Mills was not interested in Columbia's graduate students unless *they* were interested in helping Mills build his house in Rockland County, New York. Needless to report, the independent-minded Stein did not volunteer to wear Mills's tool belt, but he did very much admire Mills's fiery American brand of Frankfurt School critical theory nonetheless. He and the late Arthur Vidich, for example, would dedicate their edited *Sociology on Trial* (1963) to Mills, and Stein took up many of the same themes as did Mills in his own effort to chart a meaningful response to the same postmodern delusions that occupied Mills's attention. As a student and colleague of such luminaries as Alvin W. Gouldner and Herbert Marcuse, perhaps Stein could not help but be sympathetic to Mills's critical theory. While his birth-&-death teaching almost never—perhaps absolutely never—explicitly used Mills's work or any of characteristically Millsian concepts, his teaching was able to de-mystify, de-reify, re-enliven and re-enthrall in ways I have never known equaled. The Sociology of Birth & Death at Brandeis University circa 1980-1990 was perhaps the best friend the sociological imagination ever had.

Dr. Stein's pedagogy was effective because of courage. He had the courage to reduce much of the McUniversity standing in the way of learning. His course required extensive reading and writing (some 10 books and weekly papers, plus a major research paper and attendance at both lecture and discussion), but was geared to result in

<sup>3</sup>I have never referred to Professor Maurice R. Stein as "Dr. Stein" and do so herein only in deference to the formality of the context. As per normal at Brandeis, Dr. Stein is known to his graduate students, colleagues, and friends as "Maury."

the sort of transformative “general education” one associates with learning in the classic tradition, not merely of sociology, but of Western *and* Eastern civilization in toto. No one cared much about earned credits and final letter grades, or at least no one that I knew ever dwelled on such matters. The point was to learn and to learn deeply, not to take the next step along an academic career path.

Not surprisingly, Stein also had the courage to trespass the disciplinary boundaries that normally construct and constrain “sociology” as such (see Agger 1989a). The texts he assigned were not authored by Marx, Weber and Durkheim, or, as noted, Mills, but by such figures as Wicca adherent, Starhawk (1982, 1988), Buddhist Stephen Levine (1989), and popular feminist birth industry critic, Suzanne Arms (1975). There was also Richard Rubinstein’s (1987) rather more traditional and therefore remarkably stinging sociological analysis of the Holocaust and such easily recognizable scholars as the late social psychologist, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. But the mainstay of the course was unofficial sociological writers such as the poet Audre Lorde (1980, 1984) and the ecologist Thomas Berry (1988) as well as films depicting, for example, alternatives to Western medicine’s version of how a human being is best delivered onto the planet.

Equally as important, the students themselves had the courage to follow Professor Stein in his open-ended experiment. When as part of a discussion of the meaning of thermonuclear warfare they were asked to turn to one another and hold the hand of the student to one’s left or right, gaze into their eyes and note the fragility of their hands, Stein’s courageous students were more or less universally obedient to classroom authority in a manner that served to undermine the much more threatening authority of then-prevalent nuclear war propaganda. I am not aware of the author of *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) doing any such thing with his students, but who is to say what effect “the 60’s” might have had on Mills’s pedagogy. Perhaps his “plain Marx-

ism” (Mills 1962) and events on the ground would have led Mills to such courageous efforts to confront the depths of “alienation” (on Mills’s free use of this albeit vague concept in his teaching, see Form 1995).

An additional form of courage exemplified in *The Sociology of Birth & Death* lie in Professor Stein’s remarkable decision to eschew teaching the course, which is to say, he went as far as he could to devolve the authority for teaching to the students themselves, so they would become self-taught. But as a sociologist who was not in the least naïve about human beings, Stein knew that he needed a structure that would facilitate his student’s burgeoning intellectual independence as well as check any abuse of the freedom required for its realization. For this, he created and oversaw a complicated system of peer instruction, where so-called “advanced undergraduates” (i.e., veterans of the course who enrolled in an advanced version of the *Sociology of Birth & Death*) were given the role of leading novice students in low-enrollment discussion sections, and where graduate students such as myself were responsible for x-number of advanced undergraduates and their x-number of novices. Students would thus receive three and four sets of comments on weekly papers and otherwise experience the power of “the social” in the form of the course content as well as in the content of the course’s form. Despite the relatively large enrollment of the “lecture” (and Stein’s lectures were systematically unorthodox, but also supplemented by many guest lectures and just plain guests, such as the regular appearance of children who would play in the classroom while parents talked of parenting and child development), students received considerable attention and were engaged in extensive dialogue with numerous “teachers.” Not incidentally, the various teachers were themselves engaged in parallel learning at ever more sophisticated levels, including especially extensive reflexive dialogue with themselves.

Indeed, the last element of courage encoded in this course was its focus on self-

hood, not so much in the abstract sense one associates with the interactionist version of George Herbert Mead's social-psychology, but in a material, corporal and ecological sense in which the phenomenology of the body becomes "the ground" for Stein's version of critical theory, in largely the same way that universal pragmatics is the epistemic ground for Jürgen Habermas's famous second-generation version of critical theory (see McCarthy 1978). In Steinian critical theory, the universality of critical reason is founded in cultural anthropology. That is, its foundation resides in our culturally various but biologically unavoidable experience of birth and death (think of Mills's attention to the "human variety" [1959]) and in self-reflective analysis of the life-course between. Meditation on necessary and inescapable human experience thus becomes a legitimate means for the theoretical mediation that is sociological self-consciousness. In Professor Stein's classroom, one starts by becoming aware of one's breath; the rest is a lifelong intellectual and physical challenge. Given the depth of alienation and reification, perhaps forms of Eastern meditation are in fact among the few viable means for developing critical sociological self-consciousness. Reading the average textbook or journal article certainly is not.

His larger and largely implicit emancipatory theoretical project notwithstanding, Stein construed his course in this manner, I believe, in order to encourage interplay between forms of identification and educational estrangement that would permit the emergence of a non-trivial, life-changing sociological self-consciousness. Call it a dialectical imagination, call it the stuff of the traditional liberal arts, or label it the sociological imagination. As Mills (1959) emphasized, it does not matter what one calls it (p. 19).

I imagine a reader who at this point says, "sure, a tenured full professor at Brandeis might be able to get away with teaching Starhawk and assigning Buddhist meditation to her or his undergraduates, but most of us hardly have the institutional support or

much less the time necessary for undertaking such grand pedagogical experiments." Consider, then, the teaching of Dr. Brian Rich, Associate Professor of Sociology at Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky. Dr. Rich and I have never met, but I know that he teaches a senior seminar for 10 or so majors in sociology. I know this because I have on two occasions received a package of letters from his students. These letters have been addressed to me because Dr. Rich assigned his students *Taking It Big: Developing Sociological Consciousness in Postmodern Times* (2001), the book I wrote on the sociological imagination. The students are not only assigned to read the book in its entirety (a rarity these days), but they are to do so twice! One wonders if most sociologists have ever read *The Sociological Imagination* in its entirety or just the few lines and few pages that are so often reproduced in textbooks and collections, the same that they assign their students. Likewise, one wonders how many sociologists have read *The Sociological Imagination* on multiple occasions, or recently. In any case, Dr. Rich's students read and re-read *Taking It Big* and are then given Transylvania University stationary and directed to address a critique of what they have read to the book's author.

Dr. Rich offers an interpretation of these letters with which I wholly concur. He notes that the students' letters "confirm . . . that there is, indeed, hope, that our work does indeed matter, that we can surely lead them to water, and then watch them drink of their own free will without coercion after all!"<sup>4</sup> My goal in writing *Taking It Big* the way I did, as a challenging series of essays, is consistent with Rich's evident goal in construing his course as he does, to avoid at all costs condescending to undergraduate students, who are typically underwhelmed, not overwhelmed, by sociology. I meant to offer an unflinching, hard-edged restatement of Mills appropriate for postmodern

<sup>4</sup>All quotations from Dr. Brian Rich and his Transylvania University students are derived from personal correspondence (November 26, 27, and December 4, 2007).

conditions, the very conditions that Mills was among the first to identify and analyze but which he did not live to see fully and horribly realized. Part of what makes mass society so alienating, of course, is the loss of individuality. Dr. Rich's straightforward, low-cost pedagogical method works to dispel the impersonal nature of society and connect students to public life. It says to these students that they are important, that their thoughts are worthy of discussion beyond the boundaries of the classroom-in-a-box. It says that sociological self-consciousness cannot be won through performative contradictions, where the radicalization of sociological consciousness proceeds privately in a too often paranoid world disconnected from the social.

The implications for the professor of sociology are also potentially profound. In Dr. Rich's own formulation:

Our work is harder than I thought it would be, back when we were starting graduate school and then becoming slowly aware of what an academic work life means. As our careers elongate and we are witness to regressive changes in our work environment and the larger social milieu, it is sometimes very difficult indeed not to become cynical about our work itself. These letters, and this group of seniors themselves, remind me of the important and good reasons we made that decision to stick with it.

As the title of my essay suggests, I agree with Rich's assessment concerning the difficulty of instilling even the rudiments of a sociological imagination among today's students. Of course, the challenge is not so much the fault of the students or professors as it is the result of the societal formation Mills (and the classic tradition of sociology) meant us to analyze and of which we are all products. Neither we nor they chose to be born into a society awash in panic and cynicism, discouraging of reason and freedom, and encouraging of navigating life from birth to death as Cheerful Robots. *Taking It Big* was originally titled *Invitation to Melancholy Science*, but the publisher was not keen on the prospect of trying to sell a book

with depression in its title. Likewise, *The Sociological Imagination* was originally *An Autopsy of Social Science*, a title which Mills was encouraged to deep-six in favor of something more hopeful.<sup>5</sup> Titles aside, postmodernity—its planetary crises, its electronically mediated delusions—is urgent and alarming subject matter. There is no reason to soft-soap this urgency and alarm.

The immense challenges before the classically minded, theoretically reflexive professor of sociology notwithstanding, Maury Stein and Brian Rich point to how the sociological imagination might find a meaningful audience in sociology's classrooms. From Dr. Stein's grandiose and now retired *Sociology of Birth & Death* to Dr. Rich's measured but effective encouragement of his students to speak truth to author, glimmers of hope peak from the cracks in society's ever-chancy, indeterminate self-reproduction. What we do not know, however, and what would be very helpful to know, is how long-lasting this type of learning really is. Has the sociological imagination remained vibrant among Professor

<sup>5</sup>Among those who questioned Mills's original title was Paul M. Sweezy, who wrote to Mills that "whatever the dictionary may allow, it immediately calls up the image of a dead body, which is certainly not what US social science is today. I think closer to your theme would be 'The Abdication of Social Science'—the abdication of the great tradition of applying reason to human affairs. . ." (14 April 1958). In an exchange of letters with David Riesman (seven in total), Mills at one point wrote, "Perhaps I shall call the whole thing the Sociological Imagination," to which Riesman replied, ". . . I like very much 'The Sociological Imagination' as the title, for this is what it is about" (May 29, 1958). Others who, at Mills' invitation, weighed in on the manuscript include such luminaries as Floyd Hunter, Ralph Miliband, Irving Howe, Barrington Moore, Richard Hofstadter, Herbert Blumer, Leo Lowenthal, H. Stuart Hughes, Charles E. Lindblom, and Herbert Marcuse. (C. Wright Mills Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Box 4B384. The author wishes to thank Mrs. Yaroslava Mills and Mr. Nik Mills for kindly providing access to the C. Wright Mills Papers.)

Stein's Brandeis alumni? Has Dr. Rich's Transylvania students kept writing letters?

### MILLSIAN THEORY RECONSIDERED

In the preceding I have indicated my position that Mills's sociology, although notorious, is not adequately or fairly understood by the typical sociologist. Here, I wish to flesh out this claim, although probably not to the satisfaction of those whose interpretations I challenge. In particular, I discuss the consequences of my view for the instructor who wishes nothing more than to fairly impart what Mills said the sociological imagination was and for the instructor who wishes to follow Mills by encouraging the development of the sociological imagination within their students.

The received interpretation of Mills is that he is a sociological conflict theorist (e.g., Andersen and Taylor 2006; Collins and Markowsky 2007). In this view, Mills's *work* is understood to have addressed asymmetries of power and the conflicts which result within modern society. The "plain Marxism" and *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen, Yankee!* (1960a) mass circulation pamphlets of his later years notwithstanding, Mills's intellectual debt is thought primarily to accrue to Max Weber (via Hans H. Gerth at the University of Wisconsin) and to Thorstein Veblen (via Clarence Ayers at the University of Texas at Austin). In this reading, Mills abandoned sociology in favor of a career as a political activist, the result of various and mostly tragic personal peculiarities (see Horowitz 1983). Despite his idiosyncratic lifestyle, Mills's portrayal of the "sociological imagination" still sits comfortably (or, at least not uncomfortably) within the mainstream of the discipline. After all, *The Sociological Imagination* (and its companion volume, *Images of Man* [1960b]) advocated fidelity to sociology's "classic tradition" and, in particular, to its theoretical emphasis on the explanatory power of social structure. Indeed, it is commonplace for pedagogical renderings of the sociological imagination to explain its significance primarily in terms of

Mills's own posited distinction between "private trouble" and "public issues," where public issues are defined as the consequence of institutional arrangements and, thus, are the principal focal point for sociology (1959:8-11). But this interpretation, correct as far as it goes, relies on *The Sociological Imagination's* first pages at the expense of the remaining two hundred. Thus conceived, the sociological imagination and a budding career in the welfare state bureaucracy are simpatico. Thus reduced, the sociological imagination is that which helps one read the newspaper intelligently.

Mills himself lent credence to this style of interpretation when he spoke of *The Power Elite* as the third in a trilogy on power (see Dandaneau 2006b). And there is no doubt that he, like nearly every sociologist, attached great importance to the explanatory power of social structure. But the sociological imagination is much more than a metatheoretical bag of tricks and C. Wright Mills was much more than a theorist who would have been satisfied with perpetually asking and answering the question "Who rules America?" when not attending annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (see Agger 1993; Dandaneau 2006b; Domhoff 2005).

In my view, the key to Mills's distinctive theoretical approach is his attention to totality, which he conceives philosophically and generally as the emergent projection of the sum of mediation between every biography and every institution in on-going societies both past and present the world over (Dandaneau 2001). Mills was thus a realist, but he knew that an actually existing comprehensive body of knowledge, even via an ambitious comparative sociology, was impossible to ever collect and represent. Not only is this goal wholly impractical, it is also theoretically impossible. The so-called object of sociology does not stand outside of time and apart from our efforts to know it. Mills was a realist, but he was not a philosophical positivist nor did he shy away from postmodern experimentation with non-realist modes of representation. In Mills's

view, what was needed most of all was the cultivation of theoretical imagination, empirically disciplined and conceptually rich and enriching imagination, but imagination nonetheless. Part extrapolation, part synthesis, part mental time and space travel, part circling the ineffable, this particular self-consciousness aimed to conceive the human plane of reality and, through synthesis and simplification, render it sufficiently intelligible so that this understanding could usefully guide self-conscious history-making. Mills's realism was always already philosophically pragmatic in its orientation, and "orientation" was the grail which he sought with every printed word.

In the end, the sociological imagination is but the name Mills gave to enlightened self-consciousness of humanity's self-formative potential, which is not so simple to explicate or, even less so, to enact. The trans- and sub-historical ("grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism") must be pushed to the side in this rigorously and radically pragmatic approach to democratic self-government from within an emergent post-modern totality. Given the urgency of the situation, there was simply no time for the etiquette of the leisurely salon, no space permitted for continued harmful self-delusion. Mills was a critical theorist inasmuch as he sought enlightenment and emancipation (Geuss 1981), or, more to the point, emancipation *through* sociological enlightenment, the self-consciousness called the sociological imagination.

Mills was among the very first social thinkers to identify and squarely address "the post-modern period," which he defined sharply as the societal dystopia in which reason and individual freedom are "moot" (1959:13, 166). As I argue, Mills viewed postmodernity as built upon the twin pillars of a mass society autonomously reproducing itself by means of mass society on the one hand, and the emergence of the nuclear state on the other (Dandaneau 2008). Post-modern madness is rooted in both momentous developments, which, when combined in the form of the mid-century United States or the Soviet Union, threatened totalitarian

suffocation of societal self-knowledge. In Mills's view, the postmodern not only threatened to extinguish the species via nuclear holocaust, it also produced the specter of the willing "Cheerful Robot" and thus the eclipse of reason in human affairs.

Under such a societal totality, sociological imagination is impossible. Mills, of course, opposed the emergence of this dystopian postmodernity by numerous and various means, including the popularization of the sociological imagination. The arguments laid out in *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956) lead quite consistently, not only to *The Causes of World War Three* (1958), *Listen, Yankee!* (1960a), "Letter to the New Left" (1960c) and *The Marxists* (1962), but also to *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). The last is not, then, so much the work of a professional sociologist addressing the profession of sociology; rather, it is the work of a sometimes frantic political intellectual addressing the imminently and immanently threatened denizens of post-modernity, among them his sociological colleagues, who, not incidentally, Mills charged with abdicating their vital critical intellectual role (see Dandaneau 2008).

Mills was distressed with those among his sociological colleagues who he felt had distorted and squandered the value of the classic tradition; he was bitter toward those who actively impeded the popularization of sociology's greatest asset, its hard-won radical self-consciousness. But personal animosities and conflicts aside, it should be recognized that C. Wright Mills was at least consistent in acting toward the world on the basis of the truth of his own analyses, which is not diminished by the fact that professional sociologists then as now often have difficulty following the trajectory of his thinking and living. As it turns out, teaching the sociological imagination effectively probably also entails embodying the sociological imagination, which is perhaps the most obvious obstacle between students and the development of their own critical self-awareness, their own sociological mind.



This interpretation bears directly, then, on the challenge of fairly rendering the sociological imagination in the classroom. Since few sociologists read Mills as I do or could be said to have nurtured a sociological imagination of the sort recommended by C. Wright Mills, it is not surprising to me that few available sources give Mills his due. When textbooks are unreliable, what is the instructor to do? The option of reading Mills's original work presents itself, of course, but undergraduate students are not usually equipped to wade through the surprisingly dense 50-year-old text any more than most instructors are prepared to dedicate an introductory or even advanced undergraduate course to its close textual analysis. Graduate students are not better off. The fragmentation of the discipline and its general ignorance of, and hostility toward, social theory make the experience of a graduate seminar in which *The Sociological Imagination* is subjected to thorough scrutiny a rare experience for the lucky few. Most will learn enough to wing it through a textbook version of public issues and private troubles. As Ben Agger (1989b) argues, "books write authors," which is to say, textbooks reproduce (the) discipline.

Brian Rich's students echo this assessment. One Transylvania University senior writes, "although it [the sociological imagination] has been taught in nearly every course in sociology that I've taken, I had not encountered it in the way that I did in your book. I can see where I have kept sociology within the academic realm without realizing the impact it can have in the public." Another confesses that ". . . I had heard the concept of 'sociological imagination' mentioned in previous courses . . . ; [h]owever, I am pretty sure this topic was never dealt with in a text covered in a course. This left me with an abstract idea of the sociological imagination, which is of little to no use to a student of sociology, or anyone for that matter." A third student divines the implications of a discipline that fails to present even itself as sociologically mindful: "If sociology has the task of protecting free, rational thought and civil soci-

ety, this signals big trouble to me." And a fourth student demonstrates sociological self-consciousness by realizing that, "Without . . . continued daily discussion . . . I do not believe that I would have benefited nearly as much as I did. . . ." from study of the sociological imagination. Breaking free from everyday consciousness under conditions of postmodernity is difficult to achieve in a critical-thinking-in-a-box manner. Anyone can see that, except, apparently, authors of best-selling textbooks in sociology.

To their enduring credit, Dr. Rich's students went beyond explication of the sociological imagination; they tried it on for size. A fifth student wrote:

I did find it unsettling . . . that although you weave an excellent analysis of Mills applied to post-modernism, he and other thinkers of his caliber did in fact predict our current predicament. The outlook I have perceived from Mills and others is quite bleak, much like the way we think of society today. Keeping this in mind, I have had to slowly develop a justification for maintaining a social awareness while also valuing my sanity.

In a view that I believe is consistent with Mills's own, I argue that the absence of sociological consciousness leaves the individual's sanity in danger of collapsing into cynicism in one direction and panic in the other. In the former, the individual is impervious to social experience (think "crackpot realism" [Mills 1958]), whereas in the latter the self is drowned in postmodern excess (which Mills [1959] intimates when he addresses the growing threat of a "deadly unspecified malaise" [p. 11]). A sixth student catches on to the stakes at hand:

The message that I am taking from your work is that in order for a society to properly and fully function, it must be a society in which the sociological imagination exists and is used to its fullest potential. In order to achieve such a society, sociology must leave a permanent impression on individuals within that society to ensure that the sociological imagination is being utilized in such a way that idiocy does not prevail.

While the notion of idiocy has an unfortunate linguistic lineage, the idea of a *permanent impression* correctly and insightfully points in the direction of what Maury Stein sought via *The Sociology of Birth & Death* and which is captured, in part, in a seventh student's response to the in-depth study of the sociological imagination:

I am the child of a single parent home, my mother having passed away when I was nine years old. My father, an assembly line worker in a local factory, barely made enough money to keep us going. I can recall more than once coming home with the electricity having been cut off, but he always ensured that I was able to get the most from my life, saving the money to allow me to travel to Europe and go to the college I wanted to attend.

And while I had always thought that these hardships that I had experienced in my life had built character, I had never realized that they also gave me the unique perspective on the world to be able to cultivate a sociological imagination. . . . The "damage" in my life has allowed me to have "splinters in my eye" to critically look at the world around me . . . [even though] I know I still fight a personal battle against cynicism and hopelessness. As you say, "shiny, happy people and sociology do not readily mix," and as I prepare for graduate school, I hope I am able to maintain the perspective that . . . [the sociological imagination] has given me.

As these students begin to adopt a sociological self-consciousness, they realize that, as an eighth Transylvanian writes, "We need not fear politics and changes, we need to embrace them to further our understanding and to improve our world." "I need not fear being radical or political," emphasizes this same student, which is the sociological equivalent of asserting, "I need not fear being."

#### DO'S AND DON'TS

To the instructor who seeks to present the sociological imagination to their students, I would offer the following do's-&-don'ts:

1. *Do not rely on available sources.* Read Mills's key texts and then render their

meaning for yourself and in your own terms. This material is simply too important and too distorted historically to permit anything less. Fortunately, more of Mills's writings are available today than ever previously. For my money, Kathryn and Pamela Mills's edited *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (2000) and the recent work of the intellectual historian, John H. Summers (forthcoming, 2007, 2006), are indispensable. But the key point is that Mills's original work, including especially his often-overlooked articles and essays, are rewarding for any student of sociology, even those with doctorate in-hand.

2. *Do not soft-soap Mills.* Students need and deserve the truth. The sociological imagination is not a feel-good self-consciousness. It may have therapeutic qualities, as Mills himself noted, but not in anything like the popular meaning of this term. Be confident that today's students can handle the sociological imagination's rough edges, what Mills (1959) called its "terrible lessons"; indeed, students who exhibit an interest in the subject are those most likely to be accustomed with rough edges. Let them talk about themselves, and you will discover this for yourself.
3. *By all means, experiment with pedagogy.* Maury Stein and Brian Rich offer two examples of what might be done, but the key is to find that which brings sociological self-consciousness alive for you and your students when and wherever you meet. This varies with the intersection of every biography within every history and every society.

And to the instructor who seeks to cultivate the sociological imagination within their students, three additional norms seem germane:

1. *Do not proselytize.* The sociological imagination goes to the roots of human experience and is, therefore, a radical form of self-consciousness, but this does not lead necessarily to any political position, party affiliation, or cultural disposition.

tion. While there may be many good reasons for prohibitions against proselytizing among students, the best reason in this case is that it is contrary to the very thing which is being taught. The possessor of the sociological imagination is in a position to evaluate every ideology and, more to the point, ideology as such. They will act in accordance with their own self-understanding. They will be self-determining and self-directed as much as any individual can be under conditions of postmodernity.

2. *Be not forgetful of the facts.* The sociological imagination will not develop without stimulation from the overwhelmingly real, pressing and always already on-going world. Even Adorno (1966) wrote of the "primacy of the object." Unfortunately, today's students, even the best among them, tend to be woefully ignorant and inexact in their knowledge of history and society. The presentation of exact and exacting statistical analyses, numerical data, historical narratives, and the many and various fruits of qualitative research, is essential to the formation of sociological self-consciousness, especially in postmodern times. Mills emphasized this same point. The sociological imagination is critical theory, not philosophy.
3. *Create a safe, honest, and trustful environment for learning.* This is easier said than done. In so many circumstances, institutional arrangements impede transformative learning and alienate student and professor alike from their communicative relationship inside and outside of the classroom. While surveillance may reduce abuses between status unequals and contribute to the rationalization of education, sociologists should be the first to appreciate what is irretrievably lost when the McUniversity replaces the messiness of traditionally all-too-human collegiate life. The sociological imagination will not emerge without active and, to some degree, effective resistance to the dehumanization of education. The lengths to which one may go in this di-

rection varies, but, in my experience, Dr. Maurice R. Stein of Brandeis University has set the bar appropriately high, while Dr. Brian Rich of Transylvania University gives us all hope of significant success under conditions not of our own choosing.

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