

C. Wright Mills, the LSE and the sociological imagination

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The enduring popularity of Charles Wright Mills is deeply paradoxical. In his day he was *the* radical, the scourge of the sociological establishment, but nearly half a century after his death, he is remembered almost entirely for his critique of sociology, where his championship of the sociological imagination is employed now to conserve and defend the strong tradition of sociological determinism against newer radicals who want to fragment and deconstruct the discipline. This is doubly ironic for Mills never conceived his book *The Sociological Imagination* as narrowly about sociology. His drafts were entitled *The Social Sciences* and *The Social Studies* and in the second footnote to the text he requests the indulgence of readers to accept this disciplinary focus. He writes:

‘Political scientists who have read the manuscript suggest “the political imagination”; anthropologists “the anthropological imagination” and so on. The term matters less than the idea. By use of it I do not want to suggest merely the academic discipline of “sociology”. Much of what the phrase means to me is not at all expressed by sociologists. Nevertheless, I use “sociological imagination” because (1) every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing, and for better or worse, I am a sociologist; (2) I do believe that historically the quality of mind has been more frequently and vividly displayed by classical sociologists than by other social scientists; (3) since I am going to examine critically a number of curious sociological schools, I need a counter term on which to stand.’

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Of course, the book became famous – more properly infamous – for its attempts to demolish the sociological reputations of Talcott Parsons and Paul Lazarsfeld. The ferocity of this attack largely sustained the popularity of the book as the discipline underwent its internal feuds in the 1960s and 1970s, where these two were amongst the primary targets; and, incidentally, its popularity largely altered Mills's public reputation from being a radical critic of society and politics into a critic of sociology. Hence, the first irony: in the forty years since, sociology has shifted to the point where Mills's critique is used now to protect and conserve it. This embeds the deeper paradox, for Mills's account of the sociological imagination was not intended as a depiction of sociology at all. This is not to deny that Mills had reservations about the label 'social sciences'. 'Social studies' was a collective noun rejected as a description of his work because it sounded too much like an American high school civics course, but Mills also wanted to disassociate from the term 'science', whose prestige and meaning he queried. 'I do not feel any need', he wrote, 'to kidnap the prestige or to make the meaning less precise...perhaps "the human disciplines"' would do. But never mind. With the hope of not being too widely misunderstood, I bow to convention and use the more standard "social sciences."

In short, his outline of the sociological imagination, although now a bumper sticker to fend off the discipline's critics, was employed to characterize what Mills saw as a thoroughgoing review of all disciplines dealing with human relations. Outside the subject of International Relations – indeed by IR theorists in this very university – there is no evidence that any discipline but sociology was persuaded by his argument. Despite his ambitious horizons therefore, Mills's legacy is as a cobbler working in one medium. However, his ambitions for sociology were very broad indeed, and what I would like to do in this lecture is to make some general remarks on

his vision for sociology around an exploration of the LSE's contribution to them. This input should not be exaggerated but it seems uncommonly appropriate given today's setting.

It is fashionable to portray Mills as a very American sociologist. This means two things, I think: his immediate engagements were American, whether this was the country's foreign policy in the Caribbean, its changing domestic class and power relations or the state of its professional sociology, as exemplified by the Harvard-Columbia combo of Parsons and Lazarsfeld. Secondly, it means that he was self-avowedly American in his identity, an American aboriginal as he once described himself, one feature of which is the enduring impact of his Texan upbringing on his sociological writings, as I have argued elsewhere. In one sense however, Mills was the most European of American sociologists at the time. As I have also said in another place, while it is true that his most enduringly famous book *The Sociological Imagination* had its roots in biographical experiences that were decidedly parochial, it is no coincidence that it was written while Mills was on sabbatical in Europe. It is not that this intellectual space was sufficiently distant from the US to dislodge his reticence, for the main arguments of *The Sociological Imagination* had already appeared in two papers only marginally less abrupt and tactless. Mills was not now free of the shackles of polite professional discourse, since he was never a subscriber to that code of academic integrity. He was liberated instead from the American aspiration to professionalize sociology, from the desire to give it a vocabulary – drawn from Parsons – and a method – advanced by Lazarsfeld – of its own. In one of his letters Mills locates *The Sociological Imagination* directly in this context, writing: 'it is at once a "defense" of the kind of stuff I've done and a really detailed criticism of "the methodological inhibition" a la Lazarsfeld and of "the fetishism of the

concept” a la Parsons’. Europe got Mills out of this supposed straitjacket and acquainted him with the classical tradition of European sociology; a tradition wherein sociology was almost indistinguishable from moral philosophy and literature and engaged with the real issues of the day as a diagnosis and palliative of the modern condition, whereby sociology was value oriented.

Of course, Mills was not a stranger to that tradition, for although his doctoral thesis was on the American pragmatists, he had previously announced himself to the sociological world through his translations of Weber. Yet it is also true if one reads Oakes and Vidich’s analysis of Mills’s collaboration with Hans Gerth on the Weber translations, that Mills was very much the junior partner, piggy-backing on Gerth’s knowledge. This is backed up by Mills’s letters from the period. He was also not unfamiliar with the social reform tradition in early American sociology, people like Small, Sumner, Giddings and Ward, since Edward Ross, a minor member of that generation of sociologists-cum-reformers, had been at Wisconsin where Mills was a doctoral student, and Ross was one of the few people from that place of whom Mills wrote kindly. Yet this was very marginal to mainstream sociology in the United States. The early aspiration of Albion Small was to make sociology a kind of social gospel – in his 1911 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society as it was called then, he referred to sociology as the organ for social examination and its practitioners as capable of ‘fundamental constructive public service’. Two decades later this was disavowed. The 1930 Presidential Address by William Ogburn preached against social intervention and insisted that sociologists’ ethical and political feelings be separated from their craft. But Ross was a connection back to the past. Ross was critical of the ‘pussyfooting sociologists’ of his generation, although this was a comment from the side-flow as contemporary sociology passed him by.

As Lewis Coser once remarked, Ross laid the foundations for Mills's later critical sociology. True as it is, this observation continues the Americanization of Mills and neglects the European influences on his work. In Europe Mills found critical sociology to be *the* mainstream. He found practitioners who continued to valorize the classical tradition of the nineteenth century that was marked by its social involvement in public affairs, practitioners who remained interested in analysing the whole social condition, self-confident enough in sociology as a subject to advance social amelioration and to espouse values and engagements that tried to reduce the disciplinary closure between sociology, moral philosophy and literature.

We should not romanticize European sociology, for as Halsey has shown, it was torn between its literary and scientific characters, but the tradition of sociology as critical literary comment survived longest in Europe, as Wolf Lepenies so ably demonstrated for France, England and Germany. This is how Mills perceived European sociology. He wrote in the reflexive second footnote to *The Sociological Imagination*:

‘In England, sociology as an academic discipline is still somewhat marginal yet in much English journalism, fiction and above all history, the sociological imagination is very well developed indeed. The case is similar in France: both the confusion and the audacity of French reflection since World War Two rests upon its feeling for the sociological features of man's fate in our time, yet these trends are carried by men of letters rather than professional sociologists.’

The manuscript for what later became entitled *The Sociological Imagination* was written entirely while in Europe in 1956-57. Drafts were presented at seminars in at least two European countries. In one letter he wrote home explaining that he was writing fifteen hours a day; and he was very proud of the outcome. In April 1957 he wrote to one interlocutor, ‘I've finished 9 of the 10 chapters of the little book on the social sciences. Last night in a drunken celebration it seemed a wondrous book. This

morning, very sober, by god it may well be'. This was Mills's first visit abroad and it clearly proved stimulating. But Copenhagen? 'Little Denmark' of imperial history? Gerth was clearly surprised at the choice. In one of Mills's letters to his collaborator he pens: 'you ask why Copenhagen? Well, they asked for me: nobody else did.' Ironic, then, that chance should play such a role in the development of a key sociological text.

In the same letter he listed amongst his plans the intention to spend a month in England, with palpable trepidation. 'Only place in Europe I just don't like at all', he wrote in a letter in the summer 1956 to friends in New York, 'especially London: horrible place from every angle. Blighty has had it.' Come the following March he wrote to the same friend:

'I have shifted my view of London, after being there a week to give a lecture at the London School of Economics. The truth is, I suppose, that I was very glad indeed to find out how well my stuff has been received in those circles, and how much their own work there is in line with it.'

In a letter the following month he wrote to Lewis Coser – one of the few sociologists from whom Mills was not eventually estranged:

'At the London School of Economics a few weeks ago. I was much heartened by the way my kind of stuff is taken up there. My God, it is nice to know it makes a difference somewhere. Well, it damned well does there. Naturally I'm nuts about the place and everyone I met there.'

Note here a man behind whose bombasticism lay vulnerability, who selected his likes and dislikes according to people's feelings toward him; and little perhaps did the LSE realise its impact on the man and the self-confidence it seems to have given him to continue with the audacious claims in *The Sociological Imagination*. In the very next paragraph of the same letter he continued: 'It's becoming quite a year. A pivotal year,

I think for me. Suddenly I feel I might become a writer after all. Suddenly there's the need to make a big sum-up. Suddenly there's a lot of ideas to do it with. They write themselves. Words flow. You can see what it's all about, can't you. Fire.'

What was it about the LSE specifically that put such heat in the man? I believe it is more than just Mills's absorption in the European tradition of classical sociology. The LSE's own traditions and history were significant as a representation of that heritage in high relief. Its roots in Fabian social activism, the institutional support for interdisciplinarity, decades before such a thing became *de rigueur*, and the central placing of history within the social sciences made the LSE appear as European sociology in microcosm. But we should also not romanticise the LSE – and here appropriately I can declare *not* to have studied here – for sociology for a very long period was not one of its most glorious parts. This is paradoxical for in its early days the LSE sent out people trained in political economy to teach sociology throughout the Empire, Canada in particular, but Hobhouse and Ginsberg, respective occupants of the sole LSE chair in sociology, persisted in championing two strikingly Victorian ideas, evolutionary theory and rational progress; Victorian in the sense that although they survive in some form even today, they will be forever associated with the social and intellectual milieu of the nineteenth century. One can only imagine what sociology in Britain would have been like, and at the LSE in particular, had Patrick Geddes rather than Leonard Hobhouse got the Martin White Chair as Victor Branford had intended, and civics had become the focus rather than these more outmoded ideas.

It has been remarked that for a very long time Ginsberg *was* sociology at the LSE. For the advent of the British Sociological Association in 1952, Ginsberg chose as his chair's address 'the idea of progress', Britain's sole professor of sociology thereby somehow defying the legacy of the Holocaust and the experiences of the

world wars to associate sociology at the LSE with the idea of ever increasing progress in moral rules. But Ginsberg had critics snapping around him and by the time of Mills's arrival at the LSE, the place was able to put him in contact with people who also seemed to have the sociological imagination as an ethical code for their public and private lives.

Mills's host at the LSE was Norman Birnbaum, a native New Yorker, who also found in the LSE a respite – temporarily at least – from narrower American notions of sociology and who helped found the *New Left Review*, having earlier edited *Universities and Left Review*. Birnbaum was actively engaged while in London in New Left affairs and continued to be so throughout his career, working later with the federation of labour unions in the US and the Congressional Progressive Movement. The nascent New Left group at the LSE then also included Tom Bottomore and Ralph Miliband. Bottomore tried to persuade Mills to move permanently to the LSE, such at home did he seem to be there, and Miliband, then a lecturer in politics at the LSE, became a life-long friend and correspondent. It was Miliband who acted as the chief commentator on drafts of *The Sociological Imagination*, amongst thirty others who read it in whole or parts, including LSE staff like Bottomore and Birnbaum – which suggests an inordinate need for reassurance – and Miliband was responsible for re-ordering its structure and contents, suggesting in an almost final edit the removal of the famous passages 'On Intellectual Craftsmanship' to an Appendix to ease the narrative, with which Mills concurred. Another American with British connections, Robert Bierstedt also commented on the book, although Bierstedt's connections this side of the Atlantic were merely as the son-in-law of Robert MacIver, an Isle of Lewis man who had travelled as a sociologist through Aberdeen and Toronto before arriving at Columbia with Mill but then close to retirement, and very much a public

intellectual like his younger colleague but from a politer, more distant and gentlemanly generation of scholars. Bierstadt incidentally was chief amongst those who had lampooned Ginsberg's BSA address, thinking progress an idea out of time and place.

Together Bottomore and Miliband were responsible for inviting Mills back to the LSE in January 1959, a few months before *The Sociological Imagination* went on sale, to deliver something then known as 'The University Lectures', a series of four entitled 'On Reason and Freedom', that were also aired on the BBC Third Programme the following month; Radio 3 for younger members of the audience. Mills stayed with Bottomore on his next and last visit to the LSE in 1961 and for the short time left of Mills's life – it was eleven months before his fatal heart attack – he kept in close contact with his LSE chums. He had intended the lecture series to be part of a larger book on intellectuals in America, except for a small number of whom he considered to have evacuated their proper terrain by withdrawing from the public sphere and the topical issues of the day. The book remained unfinished at his death, although the BBC's magazine *The Listener* published an essay intended as part of the larger work entitled 'The Cultural Apparatus'. It is significant to the argument, I think, that it was the British Broadcasting Company that showed such a level of interest in his work; *The Listener* appears now the most sedate of publishing outlets for such radical material and probably reflects no more than some personal connection between LSE staff and the BBC, mediated by the latter's London-centricism.

Mills was, of course, an ardent popularizer; it was part of the way he defined his role as a public intellectual and a necessary consequence of his formulation of the sociological imagination. He even published in *Esquire* before it shifted focus from intellectuals' minds to women's bodies, although Mills was something of an expert on

those too if you read some of his sexist comments in his letters, but it was not that which he got from the LSE. The LSE gave him total immersion in the European classical tradition of sociology as well as like-minded colleagues who shared some of his vision for the social sciences: an imagination that emphasized social engagement and intervention, sociological ideas put to use to analyse the social condition and a value commitment that returned sociology to moral philosophy and literature, all of which undid the worst features of American professionalization of the discipline that Europe temporarily rescued him from.