

## CHAPTER 4

# " C. Wright Mills and Education "

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*Gnothi seauton!* (Greek for "Know thyself!")

Educating was originally and fully focused on matters of gnosis.

(Davis, 2004, as cited by Upitis, 2003: 2)

In ancient Greek thought, gnosis emerges as a word to suggest a special or hidden kind of knowledge—but Greek philosophers do not establish a rigid distinction between gnosis and episteme.

(Paranjape, 2002: 3)

### Introduction

IN ORDER TO SET THE STAGE, Mills (1959) is briefly reviewed following the introduction and the outlining of the chapter's key idea.<sup>1</sup> His discussion of the craftsmanship involved in utilizing the sociological imagination is based on an intuitive grasp of sociology as a calling.

Next, that sense of craftsmanship is then applied to education in the social sciences and history. There are at least eight major teaching options (Davis, 2004) and Mills's approach tends to be more metaphysical and

Therefore, after having briefly reviewed C. Wright Mills's polar opposition between AE and GT in this chapter, I will move on to Mills's stress on the importance of craftsmanship in education in sociology. This section examines Mills's ideas in terms of their more general relevance, not just for sociology and other social sciences but also for all disciplines.

### **Mills's Sociological Imagination:**

When Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962) put out his famous book *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959, he had already published seven books. He also had published two major "classic" articles (Mills 1940; 1943) when he was still a graduate student. Two of his books were coauthored with Hans H. Gerth. The Gerth and Mills (1946) volume is frequently cited by those who wish to cite Max Weber, and it is clear that some of Weber's ideas concerning "domination" (*Herrschaft*) influenced Mills significantly. However, the Gerth and Mills book published in 1953, *Character and Social Structure*, is not nearly as famous or widely read and cited today as the 1946 book. *The Gerth and Mills (1946) book is the Weber volume.* The translations would have been mainly done by Gerth since Mills does not do any further scholarly work involving translation from German into English. Mills's three most famous single-authored books are *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956). They examine labor leaders, the new middle class, and the elite.

Since Mills died early, at age forty-two, he did not leave a large number of additional works after *The Sociological Imagination* came out. (He died in 1962, and the book was published in 1959). Randall Collins calls *The Sociological Imagination* Mills's "most important contribution" (Collins and Makowsky, 1998: 238). But that judgment could be challenged. It is his definitive statement on the nature of theory and methodology. Even if he had lived to a ripe old age, it is not likely that he would have significantly modified the views expressed in that succinct (234 page) book. It does present his views on the "craft" of sociology. But it is more of a work of polemic than a balanced assessment of others' views. Mills was in some ways a "utopian" thinker (Horowitz, 1983), an American variant of Ancient Greek thinkers like Plato. His progressive, radical ideology was based on an intuition of justice and not necessarily a carefully thought out philosophy.

Perhaps most carefully read by graduate students of my generation (the 1960s Vietnam War era "baby boomer" generation) were chapters 1, 2 and 3. Also frequently consulted by students writing a thesis was "Appendix" on "Intellectual Craftsmanship." But it is highly likely that many students did not have time to really read Chapters 4-10 carefully. It may

Mills's "translation" felt like a breath of fresh air. He suggests that "... one could translate the 555 pages of *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straightforward English," and "The result would not be very impressive" (Mills, 1959: 21). There is certainly a grain of truth in the assertion that a précis of Parsons's books would serve a useful purpose.

However, what is missing from Mills's analysis of "Grand Theory" (GT) is any attempt to apply some of the same rhetorical techniques to some of the classical social and sociological theorists: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Max Weber, Simmel, Pareto, Durkheim, Mead, DuBois, Addams, Nightingale, Martineau, Marianne Weber, and so forth. The one and only example of the excesses of GT is Parsons. So, Mills is not entirely fair. He cites Franz Neumann's (1942) *Behemoth* as an example of how to do it right; but, Neumann's analysis has not been all that influential in sociological theory. It is an excellent historically based analysis of the financing of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, but it is mostly known by specialists. Few sociologists would list Neumann as a leading classical sociological theorist, even though his work is cited by authors like Barington Moore Jr.

Indeed, when Mills chooses his heroes he chooses some of the better known classical sociological theorists. But he never makes that more sophisticated argument that at times Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are just as obscure as Parsons. Marx's *Capital* (volumes I, II, and III) and *Theories of Surplus Value* (volumes I, II and III) are often summarized in one short volume. Weber's *Economy and Society* (1968/1920) consists of two major parts, with part II actually the one that was written first and with part I sometimes contradicting part II. Durkheim is often quite straightforward in his writing style, but it would be possible to summarize the central thrust of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995/1912) in one short paper. Mills does not bother to point any of that out. Hence, the confusion which still exists as to exactly what the term grand theory is supposed to mean. In this chapter, I will always use the term as Mills uses it, hence it will frequently be symbolized by the use of GT. Mills's GT is not the final word on the general concept of higher levels of abstraction in theory. Indeed, one basic aspect of the combined Web and Part/Whole Approach is the explicit understanding that the highest level of abstraction may include the Whole and may, therefore, not always be immediately reducible to simple commonsense, everyday-life prose. The term GT is a rhetorical label. It is "the Other" in Mills's schema. As such it serves a useful purpose if, and only if, we can accept Mills's positive statement of belief in "Classical Theory."

The additional "Other" for Mills is "Abstracted Empiricism" (AE). He makes it perfectly clear that anyone who does AE is likely to be too enamored with the techniques ("method" in the narrow sense). He is particularly strong in his opposition to those who are the second generation AE

Note that Mills's rhetorical style is a dichotomization between AE and GT. He does not discuss those two abstractions as part of a web, or even as a matter of a branching. He thoroughly rejects both. But he does not as fully develop the third alternative, which he labels the sociological imagination. The sociological imagination, as discussed by Mills, is to a large extent a reliance on intuitive knowing. It is a form of gnosis. I will discuss the spirit of his key idea in terms of a more refined understanding of "Gnosticism" (King, 2004) and that will lead into a fuller conceptualization of education and the body, particularly in terms of *batba* yoga, gymnastics, calisthenics, and athletics. That is, if Mills is to be taken seriously then we have to view the sociological imagination in Socratic terms and situate Greek philosophy historically. I will not attempt to do that in any complete fashion here. But I do want to point out that Mills presents only a part of the picture. He does not utilize a fully "web-based" approach. I conclude that the synthesized Part/Whole and Web Approach can help to lead to a pedagogy that will emphasize the integration of mind, body, and spirit. A fully integrated approach to teaching requires awareness of all eight of the models of teaching and education that Davis (2004) discusses. Any pedagogy that is restricted to merely one of those eight styles is bound to be unnecessarily restrictive.

I wish to make the fundamental point that Mills's book is largely polemical and therefore does not serve as a complete analysis of what the sociological imagination is or can become. A more complete understanding requires a combined Web and Part/Whole Approach to a pedagogy directed at more than just sole authored Classical Theory and Methods and more than just "the mind" by itself. Just as it requires a web approach to understand Mills's implicit pedagogy, it also requires a Web and Part/Whole Approach to be able to move beyond Mills's limitations to a broader vision.

## Education

While not based directly on Brent Davis's (2004) *Inventions of Teaching: Genealogy*, I nevertheless feel in retrospect that Davis's book is a good way to frame what I am trying to clarify. I will not try to summarize the details of his book here. I will merely provide a very brief overview. Davis, holder of a "Canada Research Chair" in Mathematics Education and the Ecology of Learning at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, makes a crucial distinction between two basic "structures of thinking."

Davis's (2004) ingenious discussion of metaphors of teaching looks at two major forks in the road: Metaphysical and Physical thinking. If we choose the Metaphysical path then we are led to teaching as based on epistemologies of gnosis or episteme. If we choose the Physical path

quite multifaceted in his approach. There are hints of this throughout his books. Mills deserves great credit for making the phrase "the sociological imagination" a part of every sociologist's vocabulary, but we should not simply take his arguments in favor of *his version* of the sociological imagination at face value. I will, therefore, contrast Mills's Sociological Imagination (SI) with a more inclusive Web orientation to the sociological imagination *writ large*.

If we do not simply accept Mills's statements at face value but extract from his classic book that which is of lasting value—somewhat in the same way as Croce tried to distill Hegel—then we find an enthusiastic argument in favor of a sociological imagination that is not merely a matter of using one's analytical skills. Sociology, for Mills, is not just a cognitive task, a limited bureaucratic role. It is not a nine to five job. For Mills it is a calling. The word "calling" (Weber's *Beruf*) does not appear in the Index. But it seems clear enough that for Mills there is almost a religious significance to being a social scientist. He caustically derides all those who would approach research as merely a matter of applying existing techniques. Part of the reason the book caught on with so many graduate students of my generation in the 1960s was precisely that it severely criticized the very things we were so painfully required to learn: nonparametric statistical tests, regression analysis, factor analysis, and other such techniques. They were *de rigueur*. You could not be a sociologist without those tools in your backpack. Seemingly the only way out was to either become a "theorist" (i.e., know a lot about the history of classical theory) or opt for cultural/social anthropology (where quantitative methods were less emphasized in those days).

Many of us did accept the idea of sociology as a calling. After all, we could almost as easily have become something else. We could have studied any of the humanistic disciplines, like philosophy, or art history. We could have studied one of the professions, like medicine, law, or library science. There were many avenues open to the better-than-average students of sociology in the 1960s in North America and Europe. But we chose sociology. If we did not choose it in order to do AE or GT, then we often chose it in order to do some kind of sociological-imagination-based sociology. I myself was not interested in being a technician. Indeed, when I had the opportunity to specialize in urban planning and architecture, I returned to general sociology. I wanted to pursue the sociological imagination. It is somewhat surprising to me that I really have managed to support myself and my family while still always engaged in the pursuit of that calling.

While there is much that is rewarding about pursuing social science as a calling, it is not always easy to strive to fulfill the sociological imagination. Even if one were to restrict one's attention simply to the sociological imagination in the stereotypical fashion that Mills sometimes reverts to, it would not be easy. But to strive to broaden the sociological

pose and it is quite another to have really felt that mountain pose. If I really have experienced a posture or stretch, then I can teach it. If I cannot get into a posture, I cannot teach it in a way that is really meaningful to most students. (I will probably never be able to teach the scorpion; it is too hard for me to do!) The best teachers of yoga are people who have really had the experience in a personally meaningful way.

Much the same is true of academic teaching in the classroom. Once, when returning from a conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, I gave a very spontaneous and unrehearsed lecture on social stratification. I grasped the significance of the West Coast Native People's symbolic art forms and utilized some Salish and Kwakiutl designs to illustrate the basic notion of "semiosis," the process of communication through signs. I had been lecturing about semiotics and signs for many weeks, but it was only when I fully got into the lecture body, mind, and spirit that I saw some faces light up in the back row. Some of the students had probably understood me before, but that day suddenly a large number of students who had been somewhat apathetic showed a real interest. I linked semiotics to the ways in which genderism, sexism, classism, racism, and all forms of the "idols of tribe" (Francis Bacon) get reified. The idea of "reification" through "symbols" became somewhat more tangible to the students. I never quite recaptured the spontaneity of that lecture when I would repeat some parts of it in other settings, but I was "on a roll" that day.

One of the main reasons that there is a discipline called sociology is because the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions of the 18th century greatly transformed Europe. The United States Constitution of 1783 is based in large part on the European Enlightenment traditions that were formulated by French, German, and British thinkers in the 18th century. Now the United States still tries to uphold those Enlightenment beliefs to some extent, but there is considerable political confusion. The Jeffersonian ideals have become largely just a memory as agriculture has become the main occupation of less than 3 percent of the population. The yeoman "family farmer" of the 18th century exists largely in the imagination of writers like Wendell Berry and not in everyday reality in Iowa or Missouri. There are a few real family farms left in Vermont and Idaho, but by and large agribusiness has taken over. This is not the place to launch into an extended discussion of the ways in which the United States of the 21st century could not possibly have been imagined by the founders in the 18th century, but clearly much has changed.

Yet what has not changed about the United States (and Canada) is an optimistic sense of open opportunity. The reality, as indicated very well by C. Wright Mills (1951; 1956) may be quite different. But the "American Dream" remains. That is a dream of individual human dignity and worth. The current political and economic climate is one of deep division in part

not have to accept *his* definition of that phrase. Instead, if we are truly seeking to build a general sociology that overcomes the unnecessary degree of superspecialization that exists today, we can build on Mills to refine the idea of a sociological imagination. The situation has changed since the 1950s.

We need to be able to visualize both a discipline and an object of study that will make sociology more cogent and more practical. The vision has been opened up by thinkers like Bernard Phillips, Thomas Scheff, and Harold Kincaid. But each of us can contribute to it in our own way, utilizing our own sociological imagination. The cumulative effect could be quite significant: Heaven knows there is a crying need for the kind of "common sense" that goes beyond the run-of-the-mill common sense that C. Wright Mills complained about. It is crucial not to reify our concepts by giving them a meaning that they may never even have had when they were first formulated. It is extremely important that we view theories and methods as "tools" that serve specific purposes in a certain cultural and political-economic context. The social worlds that humanity occupies are a worthy subject for sociological study not limited by unnecessary and premature closure but nevertheless disciplined by a craftsman-like degree of precision. If we approach sociology as a calling that requires of us participation in body and spirit as well as mind, we will accomplish far more than if we think of sociology as merely a job or a career.

### Conclusion: Open Air:

Mills has allowed us to open a window to the fresh air that a sociological imagination can provide, and the combined Web and Part/Whole Approach of Phillips and Scheff will continue to improve our robust and healthy outlook. It is a question of integrating body and spirit and not just mind in the narrow sense. The true sociological imagination has yet to be fully developed. The next generation of students will have the opportunity to "stand on the shoulders" of such giants as Weber, Parsons, Lazarsfeld, Mills, and many others still alive and working today. We will have the option of utilizing all eight of the approaches to teaching that Davis (2004) elucidates. That will mean specifically that we will not just be involved in teaching from an ontological framework that is purely "physical" and "intersubjective." We will also have open to us an ontological framework that is "metaphysical" and "gnostic."

The physicist and the linguist can also benefit from Mills's analysis, yet few people outside of sociology and political science have ever heard of Mills. A real "education" (as opposed to mere technical training) requires paying attention not only to the mind, but also to the body and the spirit.

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## Notes

1. This version has been reduced from 18,000 words to 6,600 words. Therefore, the full discussion of the relationship between the Greek concept of *gnosis* and the Sanskrit idea of *jnana* will appear elsewhere.