

# *Helping Students Make Sense of Mills' Sociological Imagination<sup>1</sup>*

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C. Wright Mills is one of my favorite sociological theorists and one whose work relates very easily to all of the courses that I teach. His definition of a sociological imagination connects nicely to all students' lives, once they can grasp his ideas. The key ideas of Mills that I like most to teach include the link between biography and history and the difference between personal troubles and public issues. Moving from text to students' understanding, however, is no simple task.

To me, Mills' ideas seem relatively easy and straightforward, once his extraneous words are filtered out. To students, however, the ideas are very challenging. I attribute the difficulty that students have with Mills to three things: (1) His writing style is dense, repetitive, and at times difficult; (2) Students are not very conscious of the larger historical trends that affect their lives; and (3) The distinction between a personal trouble and a public issue can seem confusing. I will describe here the pedagogical strategies that I use to address each of these difficulties.

## **MILLS' WRITING STYLE**

In the excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) that I use, which is only 4 pages long, Mills repeats his ideas in various ways, refers to thinkers whose names the students have never heard, and his descriptions of personal troubles and public issues are confusing. I do two things to address these difficulties head-on. First, I ask students to read the piece by Mills 3 times and to bring to class a 1-page double-entry journal assignment which requires that they copy a short passage from Mills that they find confusing and then write what they think it might mean. Students usually arrive in class groaning and complaining about the difficulty of the reading: "I read this 4 times and I still cannot make sense of it!" During the class, I divide the students into groups of 4-5 people and ask each group to "translate" one short section of the Mills excerpt into everyday English.

The difference in attitude toward Mills before and after this exercise is stunning. Dissecting and translating the essay paragraph-by-paragraph in a supportive group context renders Mills comprehensible. I invite students to critique his writing and they usually suggest that he could have been more clear and succinct. When I read the double-entry journals following the class, I observe that most of these papers reflect deep misunderstanding. Many students request extensions on their papers so that they can try again on that assignment. I ask many others to revise the assignment

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after I have read it.

As for references that seem obscure to the students, I suggest a look at the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Most don't follow through with that (and I have not required it), though they have a place to go if they want to learn more, about, say Veblen or Leakey.

## **HISTORY? WHY BOTHER?**

The best solution I have found for helping the class become aware of the historical events and trends that have affected them is to ask them to construct a timeline of events/trends that have occurred in the past 50-100 years and to trace some of the effects of the things mentioned on students' own lives. We do this on the blackboard, frequently starting with the present and working backwards by decades. I invite the class to copy what we generate into their notebooks and to add personal family events on the same timeline, perhaps in a different color. Students who seemed unable to make sense of Mills' requirement that we link biography and history are quite competent at generating lists of historical events and trends (especially if the process begins in small groups). As we work backwards in time, I ask them to talk about how their lives might have been different if they had been born, say, 20 or 40 or 60 years earlier. What might have been easier? What might have been more difficult? They are able to do this. As we talk about events in the 80s and 90s, we talk about the effects of those events on their current lives. Computers, HIV, civil rights struggles, and wars are all close to home for many of them. Budget cuts to public higher education and soaring college costs affect nearly everyone. Suddenly Mills' call to link biography and history is more than an abstract idea as students practice it in class.

## **TROUBLES VS. ISSUES**

Mills' descriptions of personal troubles and public issues are not perfectly clear and leave many students confused. Mills would argue, I believe, that if something affects many people it is a public issue, even if "the public" is not consciously aware of it. Students find this confusing and many think that because the problem has not been named publicly, it is therefore a personal trouble. In an effort to clarify Mills' position, I discuss two things. The first is the public attention to incest that emerged as a result of the second wave of the Feminist Movement. Father's Day speak outs became common in the 1970's and 1980's as bold incest survivors, many of them well into adulthood by then, came forward to denounce the sexual abuse perpetrated on them by their fathers and stepfathers when they were younger. I ask the class, "Does the fact that few people talked about incest mean that it was not affecting many people?" Usually they begin to get the point with this example. I also discuss the clergy sex abuse scandal. Since many victims were abused as children and took years or decades to come forward, it is clear that there was a large but unspoken problem. Students understand that the fact that people were afraid to speak up didn't mean the problem was not there.

Finally, in order to bring this intellectual difficulty closer to home, I ask students to meet in small groups and to name difficulties they face that are shareable in the class. They then need to try to figure out whether the difficulty is a personal trouble or a public issue felt at the personal level, and to say why it is one or the other. We explore whether there is such a thing as a truly personal trouble because we are often hard pressed to come up with examples. Nearly everything begins to feel connected to the larger picture.

## **ARE OTHER AUTHORS IN THE COURSE USING SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATIONS?**

As a final approach to helping students make sense of Mills, I ask students to evaluate other course work for a presence of a sociological imagination and ask them to give those authors a grade. Students enjoy this for two reasons. First, they have to apply Mills in a new context and it seems to help them pin down his ideas. Second, they get imaginary power for a moment as they give the author a grade and defend their evaluations. I use three different books in this exercise, each of which attempts to place individual lives in larger context. *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman includes a broad historical look at the definitions of trauma, shell shock, PTSD, etc. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Ann Fadiman examines a Hmong family's interface with the medical system in Merced, California in the context of the war in Vietnam and Hmong refugee settlement in the U.S. *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*

by Michael Patrick MacDonald looks at one family's experiences in a context of poverty, chaos, drug use, gang violence, and racial conflict. Asking students to grade these authors seems to help a lot. They find themselves in the professor's shoes, assessing someone else's work in relation to Mills. It requires them to take ownership of Mills to some extent and by doing so, most of them finally capture what he means by a sociological imagination.

In conclusion, Mills demands careful teaching. His work takes time to comprehend but the class time required seems to me to be absolutely worth it. I use aspects of these approaches in undergraduate classes at various levels with equal success.

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