

Soc. 240, section 1

The Self in Society: Studies of Autobiographies

Fall 2004

UMass Boston, Sociology Dept.
Fall 2004

Class Hrs.: Tues/Thurs 2:30-3:45 pm

Class Location: Wheatley, 1st fl, room 64

Prometheus Address: <http://boston.umassonline.net/>

Prometheus Course ID: 4985, Password: selfsociety1

Prof. Mohammad Tamdgidi

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The central aim of this course is to develop, through autobiographical research, our sociological imaginations about how our selves and broader society constitute one another. The course particularly addresses how the developments of personal identity and self-determination are affected by social processes of exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. Selected readings providing a historical typology of autobiographical self-interpretations and sociologically informed auto/biographical snapshots of everyday lives will aid in the interpretation of our own autobiographies. Our inquiries into the link between our personal troubles and broader social issues—the central concern of the sociological imagination—will be pursued throughout the course through a 15-page autobiographical paper developed along two drafts. The key purpose of the paper is to apply the micro and macro sociological concepts and ideas learned in class in the context of our sociological self-research. To achieve this end, we will pursue three lines of inquiry throughout the course: 1-class readings, presentations, lectures, and discussions will provide us with collective experiences and conceptual tools and methods necessary for our individual/collective self-studies; 2-an autobiographical research paper will focus our attention and explorations on a still unresolved significant question, issue, trouble, or problem we personally face in our everyday lives today, faced in the past, or may face in the future; 3-the films incorporated into the course will provide us with a common audiovisual medium in popular culture through which we can share our sociological reflections on ourselves and the world alongside class and outside readings. In addition to the sociological self-research paper, grading will be based on class participation, written and oral reading presentations, office-hour meetings, and self-critical thinking. Written and oral reading reports are used to practice the skills of listening, describing, analyzing, and interpreting.

COURSE ORGANIZATION:

The course is organized in a “research seminar” format where “teacher-student” and “student-teachers” learn *with* one another common subject matters (see Paulo Freire on pedagogy). While the instructor will introduce and guide class readings and discussions, students are required to present readings in class as discussants, sharing their reviews, questions, insights, and critical comments with one another. The students’ work will be evaluated on the basis of the following:

1. Attendance (30%): Attendance in class will be strictly observed. Attendance is not simply physical presence. It means being attentive. This requires having read the material assigned for the session, being prepared with pertinent comments to raise in class, coming on time to class, being vocal and engaged during class, and not leaving the room during the class before it is over. **Attendance points will not be given for absences, excused or unexcused; however, excused absences may be made up. All absences for which excusable notice (via email prior to or same day of missed session, and soon in person with documentation) is not given will be considered unexcused. Only excused absences may be made-up based on arrangements agreed upon with the instructor.** It is every students’ responsibility to hand in an absence letter (or send an email) to the instructor for each session missed (excused or not), including date of and reasons for any absence, accompanied by all relevant explanation/documentation. Points will

be taken off the student's total grade for each unexcused, unmade-up absent session (For once-per-week classes 3% per session, for twice-per week classes 2% per session, and for thrice-per-week classes, 1% per session). Students can make-up for their excused absences by writing a 3-4 page critical commentary on the readings/films/subject matter of the session they missed (format may follow the regular presentation report assignment below). Students with excessive excused or unexcused absences (more than 25% of already scheduled classes) will be disenrolled from class. Taking personal breaks during the class can be disruptive to other students; please try to avoid it.

2. Presentation Report (15%): At the beginning of the semester, students will be randomly assigned discussant numbers corresponding to the numbers assigned to readings (preceding each reading item on the schedule below; this will be explained in class). For each assigned reading prepare a written report to be handed in the SAME class in which it is to be orally presented and discussed. The report should be 5 pages (Times font, size 12, double-spaced) comprised of the following (including assigned grade points):

a)-Summary (3 points). The summary must be in your own words. Rules against plagiarism will apply to presentation reports as well. If you have to quote, you must provide proper citation. You must identify at the beginning of the presentation which part of the textbook you are presenting. Make sure you provide your name and date/topic of presentation at the beginning.

b)-Concepts (3 points). Identify, list, and define at least 10 concepts related to the perspectives discussed in readings being presented, concepts which you may find particularly useful to your own and perhaps others' term paper research.

c)-Linkages (3 points). Critically reflecting on the concepts learned from the reading and the value or shortcomings of the author's viewpoint, try linking the concepts/reading to the **other readings** of that session, of that week, and previous sessions when applicable. Other useful linkages can be to your own life and self-explorations, and to previous class discussions/films if applicable. **If you make no efforts in critically linking your assigned text to other readings of especially that session/week (and previous ones), and/or to other issues as explained above, you will not gain linkage points.**

d)-Questions (1 points). A set of three clearly formulated and relevant questions (listed separately at the end of report) arising from the reading in connection to other readings of class, its personal relevance to you, or in relationship to previous readings/discussions/films in class. Ask creative, mature, and thoughtful linkage questions that merit discussion in class.

e)-Oral Presentation (5 points). Presenters must try to orally demonstrate an understanding of the subject in their own words, perhaps aided by some written outlines or notes for specific highlighting of important passages in the text. **Suggested format:** start with a 2-3 minute summary of what your assigned reading is about, followed by a 4-5 minute defining and linking/applying (some) of the concepts/ideas learned from the reading and how they can be useful for your/others' sociological self-explorations; then end the presentation with sharing your questions about the readings. The oral presentation will be evaluated based on the clarity of communication (3 points) and degree to which it generates class engagement and discussion (2 points). Oral presentations should be 8-10 minutes per presenter.

[NOTE: depending on enrollment, there may be extra discussant reports assigned to volunteering students, in which case an extra 3-pg written/oral report may be presented for up to 2% extra make-up grading value].

3. Self-Research Paper Drafts: This is the heart of your work in the course, devoted to the serious sociological exploration, within a micro/macro framework, of an important issue in your life in conjunction with class/outside readings and films. A Term Paper Guideline is available on the course's Prometheus site. This assignment consists of a 15 page sociological self-research paper addressing the topic **"Critically reflecting on all class readings, films, and discussions what is a fundamental, still unresolved issue I face today, have faced in the past, and/or will face in the future, what is its nature, root causes, and consequences, and how can I move towards its effective resolution?"** The autobiographical paper will be progressively developed throughout the course along a 7-page first draft and a 15-page final draft. They must be typed, double-spaced, in Times font, size 12; relevant charts/tables are encouraged but will not be counted towards paper length requirement. The paper length requirement does not include any title pages or reference/bibliographies. For the due dates of the first and final drafts, see the weekly schedule further below.

A-The First Draft (15%): 7-pages. Involves exploring the problem or issue based on your present knowledge, views, and attitudes towards the subject. The first draft is mostly self-reflective and microsociological in nature, but should begin to involve concerns and curiosities about broader social forces at work in your life. You must also, at the end, include a bibliography of what readings in class or outside may be of relevance to your further self-exploration in the final draft. Although this paper is basically self-reflective, it must be serious, analytical, and as engaging as possible regarding all relevant facts or ideas pertaining to your inquiry.

The breakdown of percentage points for the first draft (15% total) are roughly as follows:

- 4%: Micro exploration of the research problem/question
- 5%: Use of at least 20 concepts from readings from the first half of class preceding the paper deadline (0.25 each concept) (**bold** each concept used in text) [use of each concept must be thoughtful and detailed enough to convey your practical understanding of its meaning in context]. Don't bold generic or common words as concepts; the concepts must be clearly derived from the perspectives learned in class.
- 3%: 1 cited linkage each to three articles in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (Journal issues on reserve, samples will be shown in class)
- 2%: 1 point for each linkage to the films viewed during the first half of class preceding the paper deadline.
- 1% A bibliography of prospective outside **scholarly** readings specifically related to your topic, readings which you will consult and read in preparation of your final draft in the next stage.

B-The Final Draft (30%): 15-pages (including reworked pages of the first draft). The concern with macro dimension of your inquiry, i.e., the relation of your selves and broader social forces must now become the central subject of your investigations. The final draft is to link together in a purposeful and meaningful way your critical self-reflections begun in the first draft, with class/outside readings and films shown in class. The evaluation and grading of the final term paper will be roughly divided in terms of how students bring the three essential required elements of the term paper together (self-explorations, broader social dimension as learned through required class readings, and ALL films shown in class). Other outside sources with specific relevance to each student's particular topic/issue/problem must also be critically incorporated into the class readings.

The breakdown of percentage points for the final draft (15 pages, including reworked pages of the first draft) are roughly as follows:

- 8%: Macro exploration of research problem/question (4 points), and linkages to the micro-exploration begun in the first draft (4 points).
- 5%: Use of at least 20 **ADDITIONAL** concepts from readings for the second half of class (0.25 each concept) (**bolditalic** each of these new concept used in text) (continue the concept usages from the first draft and keep them marked in **bold** only) [use of each concept must be thoughtful and detailed enough to convey your practical understanding of its meaning in context]. Don't bolditalic generic words as concepts; the concepts must be clearly derived from the perspectives learned in class.
- 6%: At least 6 **QUOTED** and **INDEPTH** linkages (1 point for each linkage) to issues or arguments advanced in required textbook/readings by Bjorklund and Cahill.
- 5%: At least 1 **QUOTED** and **INDEPTH** linkage to each of the readings by C. Wright Mills, Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan, Erving Goffman, and G.I. Gurdjieff (you can further explore their ideas in the recommended readings).
- 3%: **ADDITIONAL** linkages to the other films viewed in second half of class [keep and further develop the linkages to the films linked to in the previous draft]
- 3%: Based on your critical sociological self-explorations in the paper, in the conclusion of the paper list and elaborate on three or more specific and concrete steps you can take to bring about important change in your life towards resolving the issues and problems you explored in the paper.

4. Office Hours (5%): Each student must schedule and meet at least twice (preferably in the first and second halves of semester respectively) with the instructor during office hours to discuss the topic and progress of her/his research paper. The meetings should indicate serious and active engagement by students with their papers, readings, and discussions of the course. Experience has shown that those students who regularly consult during office hours with the instructor regarding their progress in the course and their papers do better than those who don't.

5. Self-Critical Thinking (5%): Students are expected to view everything, every text, and every viewpoint, especially their own predispositions and perspectives, with a (self) critical eye. You are in this class to learn beyond what you already know, not simply to prove what you already know. This necessarily means being open to question your own existing views in order to critically enrich and move beyond them with new insights. You will not be graded on whether you agree or disagree with a certain viewpoint. You will be graded on whether you substantively engage with and demonstrate an understanding of the views you agree or disagree with, and self-critically develop your own viewpoints in a well-rounded, researched, and coherent way.

6. Plagiarism: No plagiarism will be allowed in student papers, and the corresponding work will be immediately dismissed with no grade percentage (and no make-up possibility). Any ideas or texts you borrow from your sources must be clearly referenced, and supplied with an accurate bibliography. Each and every citation and passage quoted must be meaningful and relevant to the context of paper, and the reason for the use must be clearly elaborated in your own words before and/or after the quotation. NO PARAPHRASING (copying text from others with few words changed here and there) is acceptable, and will be treated as plagiarism; a passage in your text is EITHER borrowed from someone else, which then should be in quotes and clearly referenced with page numbers, OR is your own ideas and expressed in your own words, without any "floating" citations (will be explained further in class).

7. Special Needs: Students are encouraged to seek assistance from the university's Academic Support Services and The Lillian Semper Ross Center for Disability Services for accommodation of any special needs. Considerations for disability accommodations will depend on presentation of written documentation from appropriate campus offices.

Final Grade Curve:

100-93=A	92-90=A-	89-87=B+	86-83=B	82-80=B-	79-77=C+
76-73=C	72-70=C-	69-60=D	59 or less= F/NP		

Required Readings: (*in book store, † on reserve)

*Bjorklund, Diane, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998. ISBN: 0226054470

*Cahill, Spencer E. *Inside Social Life: Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology*, FOURTH EDITION. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2004. ISBN: 1931719144

*Speeth Kathleen R., *The Gurdjieff Work*, Putnam Publishing: [1976] 1989. ISBN: 0874774926

†Four issues of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. I, No. 1 & 2; and Vol. II, No. 1 & 2. [Two sets of each issue are on reserve; additionally the articles can be individually downloaded from the course's Prometheus page, to be explained in class].

Recommended Readings:

Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays With Morrie*, Broadway, 2002. ISBN: 076790592X

Andrews, William, ed. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993.

Carpenter, Dana and Winfree Woody (eds.) *I Am Beautiful: A Celebration of Women*, Alliance House Inc., 2nd edition, 2000, ISBN: 0967511305

- Friedman, Lawrence J., and Robert Coles, *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Eric H. Erikson*, Scribner, 1999. ISBN: 0684195259
- DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press, 2000. ISBN: 0807072435
- Deikman, Arthur J. *The Observing Self: Mysticism & Psychotherapy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983. ISBN: 0807029513
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century*. (1968; 1991).
- Erikson, Eric. *Childhood and Society*, W.W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition, 1993. ISBN: 039331068X
- Erikson, Eric. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. W.W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition ISBN: 0393311325
- Erikson, Eric, and Robert Coles. *The Eric Erikson Reader*. W.W. Norton & Company; 2000. ISBN: 0393048454
- Franklin, V. P. *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, Reissue edition, 1993. ISBN: 0674445449.
- Gilligan, Carol. *The Birth of Pleasure*. Vintage, 2003. ISBN: 0679759433.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor, 1959. ISBN: 0385094027
- Goffman, Erving, Lemert, Charles and Ann Branaman (eds.). *The Goffman Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998/2001. ISBN: 1557868948.
- Haley, Alex. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (1964)
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000. ISBN: 0415924847
- Horowitz, Irving. *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*. Free Press, 1995. ISBN: 0029150108
- Levering Lewis, David. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. NY: Penguin, 1994.
- Mills, C. Wright, Kathryn Mills (ed.), Pamela Mills (ed.), Dan Wakefield (intro), *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*. University of California Press, 2001. ISBN: 0520232097
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. Afterword by Todd Gitin. Oxford University Press, July 2000. ISBN: 0195133730
- Pilardi, Jo-Ann, *Simon de Beauvoir Writing the Self: Philosophy Becomes Autobiography*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999. ISBN: 0313302537
- Roses, Lorraine Elaine and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. *Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900-1950*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Schwartz, Morrie. *Morrie: In His Own Words*, Dell, 1997, ISBN: 0385318790
- Smith, Dorothy E. *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Northeastern University Press, 1997; ISBN: 1555530362
- Terrell, Mary Church. *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940)

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Note: All students (including each reading presenter) must read all the readings assigned for each session. Presenters basically go further in reading their particular assigned reading more in-depth while preparing their written reports and oral presentations.

WEEK ONE

Tuesday, September 7: First Day of Class.

Course Objective, Organization, Schedule. Assignments of Readings/Introductory questionnaire.

Thursday, September 9: Film: TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE

WEEK TWO

Tuesday, September 14: PBS Documentary AFFLUENZA. Discussion.

Thursday, September 16: C. Wright Mills' Sociological Imagination. Previous Student Papers Symposium.

Readings:

- Read the short piece by C. Wright Mills, "The Sociological Imagination," attached to your syllabus
- Each student should carefully read and make commentaries in class on one student article chosen from the table of contents of the four issues of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (table of contents and copies are available via Prometheus site of the course--details to be explained in class; two copies of each issue is also available on reserve).

WEEK THREE

Tuesday, September 21: Carol Gilligan and Erik Erikson

Readings:

1. Read the piece on Erik Erikson on the eight stages of life (available as a PDF file online on the Prometheus site)
2. Read the piece on/by Gilligan regarding gender and human psychology (available as a PDF file online on the Prometheus site)

Thursday, September 23: Erving Goffman and G.I. Gurdjieff

Readings:

3. Read the piece by Erving Goffman on "The Presentation of Self," in the textbook *Inside Social Life (ISL)*, pages 108-116.
4. Read Chapter Three "The Psychology of Ordinary Human Beings" in *The Gurdjieff Work*, pages 30-49.

WEEK FOUR

Tuesday, September 28: Interpreting the Self. Autobiography as A Social Situation

Readings:

5. Bjorklund, "Prologue" (pp. ix-xii) and Chapter One, "Introduction" (pp. 1-15)
6. Bjorklund, , Chap. Two "Autobiography as a Social Situation" pp. 16-42

Thursday, September 30: Human Being and Social Reality

Readings:

7. Cahill, Part I (all three sections): "Neurology and the Soul," by Oliver Sacks, *Inside Social Life (ISL)*, pp. 2-6; "Culture and Psychology," by Jerome Bruner, *ISL*, pp. 7-15; "Islands of Meaning," by Eviatar Zerubavel, *ISL*, pp. 16-21

WEEK FIVE

Tuesday, October 5: The Moral Self

Readings:

8. Bjorklund, Chapter Three "The Self as a Morality Play" pp. 43-65

Thursday, October 7: The Social Construction of Self

Readings:

9. "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection," by Charles Cooley, *ISL*, pp. 24-29; AND "The Self as Social Structure," by George Herbert Mead, *ISL*, pp. 30-35
10. "Young Children's Use of Racial and Ethnic Identities," by Van Ausdale and Feagin, *ISL*, pp. 36-45; AND "Media Images' influence on Adolescent Girl's Self-Concepts," by Melissa Milkie, *ISL*, pp. 46-61

WEEK SIX

Tuesday, October 12: The Master Self

Readings:

11. Bjorklund, Chapter Four "Masters of Fate" pp. 66-88

Thursday, October 14: The Social Construction of Subjective Experience

Readings:

12. "The Development of Language and Thought," by Lev Vygotsky, ISL, pp. 64-69; AND "The Social Basis of Drug-Induced Experience," by Howard Becker, ISL, pp. 70-77
13. "The Historical Struggle for Self-Control in America," by Peter N. Sterns, ISL, pp. 78-91; AND "Managing Emotions in Medical School," by Smith/Kleinman, ISL, pp. 92-105

WEEK SEVEN

Tuesday, October 19: Film: Good Will Hunting (126 min.)

Thursday, October 21: Film continued. Discussion

WEEK EIGHT

Tuesday, October 26: The Uncertain Self

DUE IN CLASS: Oct. 26 ---> 7-PAGE PAPER DRAFTS DUE (No late papers will be accepted)

Readings:

14. Bjorklund, Chapter Five "The Uncertain Self" pp. 89-123

Thursday, October 28: The Self and Social Interaction

Readings:

15. "The Gloried Self," by Adler/Asler, ISL, pp. 117-126 AND "Salvaging the Self From Homelessness," by Snow/Anderson, ISL, pp. 127-138;
16. "Narratives of Self in Codependents Anonymous," by Leslie Irvine, ISL, pp. 139-153

WEEK NINE

Tuesday, November 2: The Beleagured Self

Readings:

17. Bjorklund, Chapter Six "The Beleagured Self" pp. 124-157 and Conclusion pp. 158-166.

Thursday, November 4: The Organization of Social Interaction

Readings:

18. "Face-Work and Interaction Rituals," by Erving Goffman, ISL, pp. 156-166; AND "The Interaction Order of Public Bathrooms," by Spencer Cahill, ISL, pp. 167-177
19. "Wheelchair Users' Interpersonal Managt. of Emotions," by Cahil/Eggleston, ISL, pp. 178-189; AND "Conversational Structure," by Thomas Holtgraves, ISL, pp. 190-202

WEEK TEN

Tuesday, November 9: Social Interaction and Relationships

Readings:

20. "A Personal Story of Doing Family," by Nancy Naples, ISL, pp. 204-216; AND "Sympathy Biography and Relations," by Candace Clark, ISL, pp. 216-229
21. "Caring for and About the Mentally Ill," by Candace Clark, ISL, pp. 230-246; AND "The Social contexts of Illness," by Arthur W. Frank, ISL, pp. 247-255

Thursday, November 11: HOLIDAY (Veterans Day)

WEEK ELEVEN

Tuesday, November 16: Film: Awakenings (120 min.)

Thursday, November 18: Film continued. Discussion

WEEK TWELVE

Tuesday, November 23: Structures of Social Life

Readings:

22. "Preadolescent Cliques, Friendships, and Identity," by Adler/Adler, ISL, pp. 258-278; AND "The Contrasting Agendas of Black and White Sororities," by Berkowitz/Padavic, ISL, pp. 279-292
23. "Working and Resisting at Route Restaurant," by Gretta Foff Paules, ISL, pp. 293-303; AND "Competing Legalities on Sixth Avenue," by Mitchell Duneier, ISL, pp. 304-318

Thursday, November 25: HOLIDAY (Thanksgiving Recess)

WEEK THIRTEEN

Tuesday, November 30: The Construction of Social Structures

Readings:

24. "Society in Action," by Herbert Blumer, ISL, pp. 320-324; AND "Borderwork Among Girls and Boys," by Barrie Thorne, ISL, pp. 325-333
25. "The Black Male in Public," by Elijah Anderson, ISL, pp. 334-344; AND "Managing Emotions in an Animal Shelter," by Arnold Arluke, ISL, pp. 345-359

Thursday, December 2: The Politics of Social Reality Postmodern Social Reality.

Readings:

26. "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient," by Erving Goffman, ISL, pp. 362-370; AND "Self Change and Resistance in Prison," by Kathryn J. Fox, ISL, pp. 371-385
27. "The Evolution of Road Rage," by Joel Best and Frank Furedi, ISL, pp. 386-397; AND "The Historical Construction of the Holocaust," by Ronald J. Berger, ISL, pp. 398-409
28. "The Dissolution of the Self," Kenneth J. Gergen, ISL, pp. 412-419; AND "The Self in a World of Going Concerns," Gubrium and Holstein, ISL, pp. 420-432

WEEK FOURTEEN

Tuesday, December 7: Film: Patch Adams (110 min.)

Thursday, December 9: Film continued. Discussion.

WEEK FIFTEEN

Tuesday, December 14: Last class session. Student Evaluation.

DUE IN CLASS: December 14 -----> 15-PAGE FINAL DRAFTS DUE (No late papers will be accepted)

From *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, 1959. Excerpted in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* edited by Charles Lemert, Boulder: Westview Press

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) was born in Waco, Texas. After undergraduate studies at the University of Texas, Mills did his doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin. There, he met Hans Gerth, with whom he edited, translated, and introduced *From Max Weber*, a still-important collection of Weber's writings. After teaching in what he considered a provincial exile at the University of Maryland, Mills moved to Columbia and the Bureau of Applied Social Research in 1945. His earliest days at Columbia were spent in empirical social research. Yet he never became an accepted member or even a full professor in Columbia's department. In the 1950s, Mills became much more the public intellectual, while teaching primarily undergraduates at Columbia. Works like *Power Elite*, *Listen Yankee!*, *White Collar*, and *The Causes of World War Three*—all written in this period—brought him much public acclaim and informal membership in New York's Left, intellectual elite. Mills was considered arrogant by many colleagues and a hero by many of his readers. He dressed and played the part of the young intellectual radical—complete with leather jacket and motorcycle. However, he suffered from a chronic heart condition that killed him at age forty-five in 1962, the year of SDS's *Port Huron Statement*. Mills was a source of intellectual inspiration to younger radicals and social theorists because, true to his ideal of the sociological imagination, his writings based strong critical ideas on careful empirical work. He read Weber in relation to Marx and the American pragmatists. He sought to unite the best of European and American classical theory into a social philosophy for the New Left.

The Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills (1959)

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

From *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills, Copyright © 1959 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Renewed 1987 by Yaraslava Mills. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

The Sociological Imagination

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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 reality 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.

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 sociological 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 personally 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 an historical 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 every intellectual age some one style of reflection tends to become a common denominator of cultural life. Nowadays, it is true, many intellectual fads are widely taken up before they are dropped for new ones in the course of a year or two. Such enthusiasms may add spice to cultural play, but leave little or no intellectual trace. That is not true of such ways of thinking as 'Newtonian physics' or 'Darwinian biology.' Each of these intellectual universes became an influence that reached far beyond any special sphere of idea and imagery. In terms of them, or in terms derived from them, unknown scholars as well as fashionable commentators came to re-focus their observations and re-formulate their concerns.

During the modern era, physical and biological science has been the major common denominator of serious reflection and popular metaphysics in Western societies. 'The technique of the laboratory' has been the accepted mode of procedure and the source of intellectual security. That is one meaning of the idea of an intellectual common denominator: men can state their strongest convictions in its terms; other terms and other styles of reflection seem mere vehicles of escape and obscurity.

That a common denominator prevails does not of course mean that no other styles of thought or modes of sensibility exist. But it does mean that more general intellectual interests tend to slide into this area, to be formulated there most sharply, and when so formulated, to be thought somehow to have reached, if not a solution, at least a profitable way of being carried along.

The sociological imagination is becoming, I believe, the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature. This quality of mind is found in the social and psychological sciences, but it goes far beyond these studies as we now know them. Its acquisition by individuals and by the cultural community at large is slow and often fumbling: many social scientists are themselves quite unaware of it. They do not seem to know that the use of this imagination is central to the best work that they might do, that by failing to develop and to use it they are failing to meet the cultural expectations that are coming to be demanded of them and that the classic traditions of their several disciplines make available to them.

Yet in factual and moral concerns, in literary work and in political analysis, the qualities of this imagination are regularly demanded. In a great variety of expressions, they have become central features of intellectual endeavor and cultural sensibility. Leading critics exemplify these qualities as do serious journalists—in fact the work of both is often judged in these terms. Popular categories of criticism—high, middle, and low-brow, for example—are now at least as much sociological as aesthetic. Novelists—whose serious work embodies the most widespread definitions of human reality—frequently possess this imagination, and do much to meet the demand for it. By means of it, orientation to the present as history is sought. As images of human nature become more problematic, an increasing need is felt to pay closer yet more imaginative attention to the social routines and catastrophes which reveal (and which shape) man's nature in this time of civil unrest and ideological conflict. Although fashion is often revealed by attempts to use it, the sociological imagination is not merely a fashion. It is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities. It is not merely one quality of mind among the contemporary range of cultural sensibilities—it is the quality whose wider and more adroit use offers the promise that all such sensibilities—and in fact, human reason itself—will come to play a greater role in human affairs.