

My discussant #(s):

## Soc. 470, section 1, Spring 2005 Senior Seminar: Liberating Social Theory?

UMass Boston, Sociology Dept.  
Spring 2005

Class Hrs.: W 9:30-12:00 noon

Class Location: Wheatley, 4th fl, room 22 (soc. conf. room)

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

Prometheus Course ID: 6650, Password: Soctam (when inside, click “Sociology Spring 05 Courses-Tamdgidi)

Prof. Mohammad Tamdgidi

Office Hrs: Mon. 1-3 pm (or by appt.)

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The central purpose of this capstone course in undergraduate sociology is to develop our critical and especially self-critical thinking skills—to be able to consciously problematize what we take for granted as the truths and givens of our everyday life in ourselves and the world, and inquire whether and how we can liberate ourselves from social structures within and without that limit our creativity and growth as human beings. For this end, using a variety of sociological, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural readings augmented by selected films, we will explore whether social theory has served, or can serve, as a guide to liberatory human practice in both self-reflective and world-historical contexts. We will critically engage with traditional and contemporary as well as postmodern perspectives to deconstruct both the intellectual architecture as well as the historical experiences of liberating social theory across selected mystical, utopian, and academic traditions in a comparative and applied framework. Student assignments will consist of engaged attendance and participation in discussions, shared reports and presentations, and a research paper cultivating students' critical sociological imaginations by exploring the link between their personal troubles and ever globalizing public issues.

We will study the subject by proceeding from micro- to increasingly macrosociological perspectives. 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 perspectives and concepts learned in class in the context of our global 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 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, three reading, paper topic, and conference reports, office-hour meetings, and self-critical thinking.

### 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). Taking personal breaks during the class can be disruptive to other students; please try to avoid it.

**2. Presentation Report (10%):** 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 (2 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 (2 points).** Identify, list, and define (using direct quotes from the reading, if desired) on a stand-alone page at least 10 concepts related to the theories or perspectives discussed in readings being presented, concepts which you may find particularly useful to your own and perhaps others' term paper research. Make copies of this page and distribute it to others in class. This will be a useful/collective effort to "harvest" important and useful concepts from readings and share them with other students.

**c)-Linkages (2 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 (3 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:** We assume all students have read the reading, so start with a VERY BRIEF summary (2 minutes) of what your assigned reading is about, followed by 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 (2 points) and degree to which it generates class engagement and discussion (1 points). Each oral presentation SHOULD TAKE NO MORE THAN 8 MINUTES.

[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. Sociological Self-Research Paper:** 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 **“Using various concepts and perspectives studied through class/outside readings, discussions, and films, how do they jointly help me understand in a global context an important, still unresolved issue I face today, have faced in the past, and/or will face in the future, its nature, root causes, and consequences, and how I can move towards its effective resolution?”** The sociological self-research 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-Paper topic Ideas (5%):** 2-pages. Early in the semester you will be asked to think about 3-5 topic ideas about what you would like to explore in-depth in your research paper. Read the research paper guideline on Prometheus to begin working on your topic and paper.

**C-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 larger national and global 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 theories and 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.

**D-The Final Draft (25%):** 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 its linkage to micro exploration (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 theories and perspectives learned in class.

- 7%: At least 5 QUOTED and INDEPTH linkages to issues or arguments advanced in all the required textbook/readings used in class (1 point each linkage)
- 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]
- 2%: Based on your critical sociological self-explorations in the paper, in the conclusion of the paper list and elaborate on 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. Social Theory Forum Conference Participation (5%):** The Sociology Department will host its annual Social Theory Forum this Spring semester, on April 6-7 (the program of the event will be distributed in class). This year's topic is "Theories and Praxes of Difference: Revisiting Edward Said in the Age of New Globalizations." Many faculty and students from this and other campuses nationwide (and international) will present papers and participate in discussions about social theory. One of the class sessions will coincide with this event. You must either attend the conference during that class session instead (see schedule), or attend any other parts (panel or lecture) of the conference during its two-day offering, and write a 3-page critical commentary of what you learned from your experience.

**5. 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.

**6. 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.

**Plagiarism:** No plagiarism will be allowed in student papers. All quoted and borrowed texts and ideas must be properly credited to their authors and sources. Any ideas or texts you quote from your sources must be clearly referenced, and supplied with an accurate bibliography. Each and every citation and passage quoted must be properly cited, and the reason for its use in text must be clearly elaborated in your own words before and/or after the quotation. For the UMass Policy on Academic Dishonesty and a tutorial on plagiarism visit the Healey Library website at <http://www.lib.umb.edu/webtutorial/module6/Module6-1.html>

**Special Needs:** If you require accommodation due to disability, you should contact the UMB Center for Disability Services, which is located on the First Floor of McCormack Hall, Room 401, Tel: 617-287-7430; TTY: 617-287-7431; Fax: 617-287-7466. 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/prometheus)**

- \*ISBN: 0874774926, *The Gurdjieff Work*, by Kathleen Riordan Speeth
- \*ISBN:0140190643, *Views from the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, Berlin, London, Paris, New York and Chicago (Arkana S.)*, by Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff
- \*ISBN:0896083063, *Liberating Theory*, by Michael Albert
- \*ISBN:1565844572, *Utopistics: Or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century*, by Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein
- \*ISBN:097200212X, *Them and Us: Cult Thinking and the Terrorist Threat*, by Arthur J. Deikman, Doris Lessing
- \*ISBN:0787956015, *The Power of Critical Theory : Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*
- †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:**

- Gurdjieff: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas, by John Shirley, ISBN: 1585422878
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed, by Paulo Freire, Myra Bergman Ramos, ISBN: 0826412769
- Orientalism, by EDWARD W. SAID 1594200084, Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies, by Ian Buruma, Avishai Margalit, ISBN: 039474067X
- Culture and Imperialism, by EDWARD W. SAID, ISBN: 0679750541
- The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World, by Immanuel Wallerstein, ISBN: 1565847997
- Colonial Fantasies : Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism (Cambridge Cultural Social Studies), by Meyda Yegenoglu, Jeffrey C. Alexander, ISBN: 0521626587
- Inward Journey: From Freud to Gurdjieff, by Marc J. Seifer, ISBN: 1931261040
- The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy, by Arthur J. Deikman, ISBN: 0807029513,
- The New Imperialism, by David Harvey, ISBN: 0199264317
- Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts (Routledge Key Guides), by Sophia Wellbeloved, ISBN: 0415248981
- Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research, by Marjorie L. Devault, ISBN: 1566396980
- Orientalism: A Reader, by A. L. Macfie, Alexander Lyon Macfie, ISBN: 0814756654
- The Marx-Engels Reader, Robert C. Tucker, ISBN: 039309040X
- Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference, by Craig Calhoun. ISBN: 1557862885
- Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism, by Sara Ahmed. ISBN: 0521597617
- Ideas of Difference: Social Spaces and the Labor of Division, by Kevin Hetherington, Rolland Munro. ISBN: 0631207686
- The Theory of Difference: Readings in Contemporary Continental Thought, by Douglas L. Donkel. ISBN: 0791449289
- Privileging Difference, by Antony Easthope, Catherine Belsey. ISBN:0333786297
- Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality, by Michele Lamont (Editor), Marcel Fournier (Editor). ISBN:0226468143
- A World Beyond Difference: Cultural Identity In The Age Of Globalization, by Ronald Niezen. ISBN:1405126906
- Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference, by Nikos Papastergiadis (Editor). ISBN:1854891537
- Social Geographies: From Difference to Action, by Ruth Panelli. ISBN:0761968946
- Globalization and Difference, by Sylvia Walby. ISBN:0803985185
- Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, by Peter Barry. ISBN:0719043263
- Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber, by Anthony Giddens. ISBN:0521097851
- Civilization and Its Contents, by Bruce Mazlish. ISBN:0804750823
- World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction, by Immanuel Wallerstein. ISBN:0822334429
- Difference (The New Critical Idiom), by Mark Currie. ISBN:0415222222
- Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism, by Bryan S. Turner. ISBN:0415108624
- Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness, by John Jervis. ISBN:0631211101

## COURSE SCHEDULE:

**Important Note:** All students (including each 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

Wednesday, January 26: First Day of Class.

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

Film: Meetings With Remarkable Men

### WEEK TWO

Wednesday, February 2: The Sociological Imagination: Previous Student Papers Symposium.

[Note: Jan. 31 is add/drop deadline]

Readings:

- Tamdgidi, M.H., “ Toward A Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressive Selves: Paulo Freire and G. I. Gurdjieff in Comparative Perspective” (download copy from Prometheus)
- Read the short piece by C. Wright Mills, “The Sociological Imagination,” attached to your syllabus
- Each student should carefully read three student articles chosen from the table of contents of the four issues of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, trying to see how each student used their “sociological imagination” and various concepts learned in class in exploring their topic (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

Wednesday, February 9: Knowing and Working on Oneself

Readings:

1. *The Gurdjieff Work* by Kathleen Speeth, 1-67
2. *The Gurdjieff Work* by Kathleen Speeth, 68-117
3. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, preliminary pages, and section I (pages 3-37)

### WEEK FOUR

Wednesday, February 16: Knowing and Working on Oneself (continued).

Readings:

4. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, section II (pages 41-114)
5. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, section III (pages 115-192)
6. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, section V (pages 195-276)

### WEEK FIVE

Wednesday, February 23: Utopistics

**DUE IN CLASS: February 23 ---> 2-PAGE (Maximum) PAPER TOPIC IDEAS**

Readings:

7. Wallestein, *Utopistics*, ch. 1, p. 1-33
8. Wallestein, *Utopistics*, ch. 2, p. 35-64
9. Wallestein, *Utopistics*, ch. 3, p. 65-90

### WEEK SIX

Wednesday, March 2: Liberating Theory?

Readings:

10. Michael Albert, et. al., *Liberating Theory*, preliminary pages and p. 1-46
11. Michael Albert, et. al., *Liberating Theory*, p. 47-94
12. Michael Albert, et. al., *Liberating Theory*, p. 95-146
13. Michael Albert, et. al., *Liberating Theory*, p. 147-194

### WEEK SEVEN

Wednesday, March 9: Film: Fidel. Discussion.

### WEEK EIGHT

Wednesday, March 16: HOLIDAY (Spring Break)

### WEEK NINE

Wednesday, March 23: “Them and Us” Thinking

**DUE IN CLASS: March 23 ---> 7-PAGE PAPER DRAFTS DUE**

Readings:

14. Deikman, Them and Us, preliminary pages and p. 1-53
15. Deikman, Them and Us, p. 54-106
16. Deikman, Them and Us, p. 107-149
17. Deikman, Them and Us, p. 150-186

## WEEK TEN

Wednesday, March 30: Moving Beyond Your Degree: The Power of Liberatory Thinking

Readings:

18. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Meaning of Critical Theory for Learning, 1-38
19. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, The Learning Tasks of Critical Theory, 39-65
20. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Challenging Ideology, 66-92
21. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Contesting Hegemony, 93-116

## WEEK ELEVEN

Wednesday, April 6: SOCIAL THEORY FORUM CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION (Topic: Theories and Praxes of Difference: Revisiting Edward Said in the Age of New Globalizations) Attend either during the class session, or any other time during the two day (April 6-7) conference and write a 3-page critical commentary on what you learned in light of class readings and discussions so far. Due next week.

**[Note: April 7 is Pass/Fail grading and Course Withdrawal Deadline]**

## WEEK TWELVE

Wednesday, April 13: Film Fahrenheit 9/11. Discussion.

**DUE IN CLASS: April 13 ---> 3-PAGE (Maximum) Conference Commentary**

## WEEK THIRTEEN

Wednesday, April 20: Moving Beyond Your Degree: The Power of Liberatory Thinking (continued)

Readings:

22. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Unmasking Power, 117-147
23. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Overcoming Alienation, 148-180
24. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Learning Liberation, 181-218
25. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Reclaiming Reason, 219-246

## WEEK FOURTEEN

Wednesday, April 27: Moving Beyond Your Degree: The Power of Liberatory Thinking (continued)

Readings:

26. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Learning Democracy, 247-273
27. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Racializing Criticality, 274-309
28. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Gendering Criticality, 310-348
29. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Teaching Criticality, 349-374

## WEEK FIFTEEN

Wednesday, May 4: Film: Billy Elliot. Discussion.

## WEEK SIXTEEN

Wednesday, May 11: Last Class. Student evaluations of the course.

**DUE IN CLASS: May 11 -----> 15-PAGE FINAL DRAFTS DUE**



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! Write 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.

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 analysis, 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.