Advancing the Sociological Imagination

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Edited by Bernard Phillips and J. David Knottnerus

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Bureaucratic Culture and Escalating World Problems

Advancing the Sociological Imagination

edited by J. David Knottnerus and Bernard Phillips
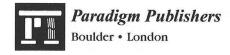
that aims to fulfill what C. Wright Mills called "the promise of sociology." These procedures also point us toward opening up to the full range of phenomena that are relevant to a given defined research problem. We believe that sociology and the other social sciences have, up to this point, very largely failed contemporary society in following this scientific ideal, given the narrow specialization and subspecialization—with very limited communication across specialized areas—that is the name of the game throughout these disciplines. And we believe that this failure is genuinely life threatening for contemporary societies, given what we see as escalating and fundamental social problems throughout the world.

Nevertheless, we are most optimistic—even at this very late date—about the possibility of fulfilling "the promise of sociology." Each one of the chapters to follow was written by a sociologist who has somehow managed to hold on to the optimism that Mills displayed about sociology's possibilities. And these authors have managed to accomplish this despite the prevailing pessimism and cynicism throughout the discipline of sociology, and despite the nightmarish nature of contemporary world events. It was one thing for Mills to be optimistic about sociology's possibilities in the 1950s, when the discipline was still riding a crest of enthusiasm and support from society prior to its fall from grace in the 1970s and on to present times. But it is quite another thing to recapture that sense of possibility at a time when films about the end of the human race have invaded our psyche.

We hope that readers will take heart from these chapters and reach deep down into the place where they have buried their earlier ideas about sociology's possibilities. For we know that those ideas have never been completely lost, given the widespread commitment throughout the discipline to the slogan of "the sociological imagination." We hope that each of you will once again raise the ideal of "the promise of sociology" to the surface as you proceed to read the following chapters. And we hope that you will come to see the possibilities of following in the footsteps of these authors by considering how you might apply the broad approach to the scientific method that they used in this volume to your own research and teaching. For the scientific method need no longer be the narrow quantitative or qualitative approach—divorced from broad theory or fundamental social problems—that, very largely, it is today. Rather, it can be an effort that builds on Mills's vision of "the sociological imagination."

CHAPTER 2

Reclaiming the Sociological Imagination

A Brief Overview and Guide

Douglas Hartmann

"You can't depend upon your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

—*Mark Twain*

IN GRADUATE SCHOOL THERE WAS A PROFESSOR in my department who loved to talk about the need for each generation of sociologists to "claim its theoretical inheritance anew." What this instructor meant by this phrase went beyond just knowing the classic authors and texts and concepts. His intention was more oriented toward the task of cultivating and continually reinvigorating the diverse but ultimately interlinked ways of thinking that distinguish the sociological enterprise in the modern world and the contemporary academy, the mindset and approach that mark sociology as what Karl Mannheim might have called a distinctive "style of thought" or what Kenneth Burke would have termed "the rhetoric of sociology." In an academic universe of perpetual ferment (interdisciplinarity, budget crises, specialization, and the like), I believe that the project of reclaiming

core sociological thought and practice may be more necessary and difficult than ever.

There are many different ways to go about this reclamation project. For some, it can involve rereading and rethinking classic texts like Weber's *Protestant Ethic* or Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*. For others, it may take shape in formulating new concepts and theoretical treatments—Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about habitus, field, and practice come to mind for example, or Anthony Giddens's notions of structuration. For still others the task of revitalization may entail carrying out creative, critical analyses of new social forces or phenomena. This chapter takes a somewhat different tack. It attempts to make a contribution to the cultivation of sociological thought by reexamining one of its most powerful and evocative phrases: the "sociological imagination." It is a project that I believe not only provides a general, conceptual foundation for the insights and methodological innovations that are at the core of this volume, but it also outlines some basic, practical steps that might guide and inspire all sociologists in their pursuit of the craft and science that is sociology.

C. Wright Mills and Beyond

In 1959 at the end of one of the most productive and stimulating decades of work in the history of American sociology, C. Wright Mills released a slim volume that bore the title *The Sociological Imagination*. I don't know if Mills was the first to use the phrase, and I'm also not sure whether the book, brilliant as it was, really changed a whole lot in the field. Many of the problems Mills identified—the tendency toward either abstracted empiricism on the one hand or grand theory on the other, not to mention substantive overspecialization and narrowness—appear as entrenched now as when Mills was writing over a half century ago; indeed, they are precisely what bring the contributors to this volume, and the Web and Part/Whole Approach more generally, into common cause (cf. Phillips, 2001; Phillips, Kincaid, and Scheff, 2002; Phillips and Johnston, 2007). Nevertheless, I do believe that the phrase "the sociological imagination" has shaped the thinking of almost every sociologist who has come in Mills's wake. It is, in my view, one of those rare phrases that motivates, inspires, and informs sociologists of all subfields and methodological inclinations, appealing as much to first-year undergraduates as to luminaries in the field. "The sociological imagination" is a phrase, in short, that unites us.

Yet I fear that the phrase "the sociological imagination" may roll off the tongue too easily—at the cost of papering over key tensions and debates in the field, debates about the practice of sociology that keep all of us intellectually vibrant, engaged, and engaging. Indeed, it seems the phrase is now so ubiquitous and watered down that much of its original

ambition and intent would seem to have worn off. The challenge for the discipline, therefore, is to recapture and enrich—rather than eliminate—the contentious mix of ideas, insights, and approaches inspired by Mills's wonderful phrase, book, and lifelong project.

Revitalizing the concept of the sociological imagination is not, however, just a matter of going back to the formulations of the master. A good deal of the challenge has to do with Mills's own relatively cavalier definitions and surprisingly sparse use of the term. Despite the book's title, Mills does not say a lot about the sociological imagination in its pages. Only two references appear in the book's main chapters. They are both in the first chapter of the book, and neither is particularly well-developed. "The sociological imagination," Mills writes in its first appearance, "enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals" (1959: 5). He then offers the definition that is perhaps most famous and widely quoted: "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" (6).

In his second reference, Mills describes the sociological imagination as "the quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (15), and speculates halfheartedly about the probability of it eventually displacing physical and biological science as "the common denominator of serious reflection and popular metaphysics in Western societies" (14). A footnote on his preference for the phrase "social studies" over "the social sciences" (18–19) provides a bit of context for these formulations, but only in an appendix entitled "On Intellectual Craftsmanship" (212–217) does Mills return to the term explicitly. (The book is essentially a critique of approaches that, in Mills's view, fall short of the full glory of the sociological imagination, and a series of chapters on his ideas about the proper practice and values of social science.)

Of course, the generality and imprecision are part of the charm, and in many ways key to Mills's rhetorical genius. Not unlike powerful symbols and social rituals, the theoretical constructs that motivate and inspire large numbers of students and scholars tend to be relatively abstract and multivalent. For all of the uses of ambiguity (Levine, 1988), however, there is also a time for precision and clarity. That is what this essay is all about.

In the pages that follow I will offer some reflections on the two interpretations of Mills's sociological imagination that I believe are most dominant and familiar in the discipline today. The first is the impulse to situate social phenomena in broad structural and historical contexts. The second is the commitment to cultivating critical-theoretical perspectives

in, through, and against which to deepen and expand our understandings of things as they are (not to mention how they might be made different). In homage to Mills's own dialectical inclinations, I will sketch the core assumptions and insights of these alternative visions, highlight their respective strengths and weaknesses, and argue that the two are actually deeply intertwined and both essential to the ongoing project of imagining the world sociologically. By way of connecting this essentially theoretical reconstruction with the issues of sociological practice and method that are the focus of this volume, I will then conclude by returning to Mills's neglected appendix "On Intellectual Craftsmanship." Based upon Mills's advice and example, I will sketch out some basic steps that both practicing and aspiring sociologists can take in cultivating their own sociological imaginations and contributing to the ongoing reclamation project we call sociology.

Two Variations on the Theme

The most basic and, I believe, most widely accepted interpretation of the sociological imagination in contemporary disciplinary parlance is the notion that any phenomenon of the human realm must be situated in its broader social and historical context if it is to be understood properly. This is what I think of as sociology's *contextualizing impulse.* Perhaps the most fundamental motivation and contribution of the sociological impulse to "put things in context" is to call attention to the social conditions and historical forces that limit and constrain human agency and choice. But the concern with context—or structure, as it is often called—is more complicated and multifaceted than just this. In the sociological imagination, context also serves to frame, focus, and organize an otherwise disorderly social world, thus empowering human beings to take action and give meaning to their lives. This is the famous Durkheimian notion of "enabling constraints." Furthermore, the project of situating people in their social worlds is intimately bound up with, and almost inevitably gives rise to, holistic ways of thinking about communities and societies and the component parts and sets of social relationships that make them up. Seeing "the forest for the trees," in the words of one notable introduction (Johnson, 1997), allows sociologists to understand how complex social systems operate, the conflicts and inequalities they generate, and why they are often resisted and sometimes break down.

What makes this holistic, contextualizing vision of the sociological imagination so unique and powerful is that most human beings—especially Americans with their rationalist and individualist worldviews (Cf. Gusfield, 1990; Wrong, 1990)—are almost tragically unaware of the

social structures and historical forces that shape and constrain their lives. The sociological imagination in this contextualizing mode thus involves bringing to light structures and social forces that are typically not seen or simply taken for granted. The oft-used example of the fish and the water is illustrative: The fish probably doesn't even know what water is until you take the creature out of it—and at that point, its reality and substance suddenly become obvious. The project for the contextualizing sociologist is to make manifest "the water" that constitutes the social world.

The project of convincing unseeing, doubting others of the power of context, history, and social structure is far from an act of faith for sociologists. On the contrary, it tends to be a thoroughly empirical enterprise. Sociologists do case studies or analyze survey data to demonstrate (as well as analyze) the reality and impact of structuring forces ranging from bureaucratic rationality and globalization, to racial prejudice, peer pressure, or cultural norms and values. More often than not, what makes claims about context compelling and convincing is empirical, material evidence of social forces that human actors are otherwise not aware of. Sociology's engagement with the empirical realities of the world is one of its great strengths, one of the operational characteristics that distinguish it from other humanistic inquiries such as cultural studies, philosophy, or literature.

C. Wright Mills, it is worth noting, was in complete accord with this empiricist emphasis and contribution. "The purpose of empirical inquiry is to settle disagreement and doubts about facts, and thus to make arguments more fruitful by basing all sides more substantively" (1959: 205). Yet Mills also had an acute appreciation for the challenges and ultimate limitations of purely empirical work. As evidenced in his broadside attack on "abstracted empiricism" in the third chapter of *The Sociological Imagination,* Mills was convinced that empirical facts never speak for themselves, no matter how sophisticated the methods from which they were derived. Indeed, some of the "facts" that he considered most dangerous were precisely those that were most commonly and uncritically accepted by so-called experts or the masses in society. Social facts always, as the Mark Twain quote at the head of this chapter suggests, require interpretation and theoretical synthesis.

Perhaps the biggest danger of the standard sociological emphasis on context, structure, and conditions—at least insofar as a vibrant, creative analysis of society is concerned—is that it can easily deteriorate into an empiricist or even positivist exercise wherein "context" is posited as singular and absolute, yet detectable only by sociological methods that are authoritative and beyond dispute. Conceived and constructed in this way, the imaginative aspect of the enterprise disappears, or is severely circumscribed. Put even more provocatively: In the empiricist contextualizing mode, the sociological imagination can become less an act of creative,

interpretive engagement with the social world than a valorized, ritualistic documentation of forces that are presumed to be both self-evident and impervious to change.

Which brings us to the second common interpretation of the socio-logical imagination, which I describe as sociology's *critical orientation* to the social world. Sociologists, of course, are notorious critics—of individu-alism, of inequality, of social control (or the lack thereof), of conflict and change (or the lack thereof). There are sociological marxists, feminists, critical race scholars, institutionalists, and others. We need not concern ourselves with any of the specific substantive criticisms sociologists may have here. What is important is that these criticisms have their roots in a vision of how things in the world might be different, how they might be made better. And these various critical perspectives afford sociologists analytic standpoints and standards that they can use to conceptualize and evaluate the social world as it exists in current, everyday practice. The key insight for critical sociologists is that the analysis and understanding of the social world requires a certain conceptual distance and detachment, comparative standards or perspectives in and through which to situate one's self and one's conception of society in relation to the social world itself. Suffice it to say that this aspect of the sociological imagination takes the concept of imagination very literally: to understand and/or explain how things in the empirical world are, one must have some imaginative conception of what they are not.

I obviously cannot offer a full explanation of all of the reasons why sociology's critical, theoretical orientation is so vital and important to the discipline and to society (the first few chapters of Craig Calhoun's 1995 book on critical theory provides a useful start; see also Phillips, 2008). But however convinced I am of its significance, I also have to point out one potential downfall of sociological critique: the way in which analysts can get so enamored with their own imagined, critical perspectives that they lose sight of the empirical realities of the world as it is.

When critical perspectives overtake reality itself, the sociological imagination becomes an unthinking perspective—a knee-jerk, Pavlovian response to everything including the empirical foundations and validity of sociological claims. In Mills's terms, this is the seduction of "grand theory," abstract theoretical formulations that are so intricate or held so obsessively by their authors that they lose touch with the world that is actually lived and experienced by real human beings. Today, this tendency expresses itself, not in the grand, abstract formulations of a Talcott Parsons, but in the rigid adherence to theoretical paradigms. For example, we race, class, and gender scholars have a tendency to see race, class, and gender every-where, structuring and determining everything, even when our theories may not be the most useful and meaningful categories for analyzing real world social actors and phenomena.

Putting Context and Critique Together

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, we were of-ten given essay topics that asked us to take a stand on arguments, texts, terms, or theories that were positioned in diametrical opposition to one another: Nature versus nurture. Individual rights or social responsibilities? Is history made by great individuals or determined by impersonal social forces? Is human life meaningful—or meaningless? Having been schooled in the competitive rigors of high school debate, I eagerly and all-too-easily embraced the combative terms suggested in the either/or formulation of these paper topics. After several less-than-successful attempts to pick a side and carry the day, I came to realize that students who got better grades and (presumably) wrote better papers tended to advocate for some kind of conceptual synthesis of the two ostensibly competing positions or perspectives. Basically, they argued "both/and," rather than "either/or." This reframing of the problem allowed my classmates to generate subtler, more nuanced arguments, analyses that incorporated the insights and contributions of two seemingly opposed alternatives while avoiding their shortcomings or blind spots. That is pretty much the approach I think we need to take in trying to reconcile these two distinctive visions of the sociological imagination: not to choose one over the other, but to recognize that both are useful and indeed necessary. (For a similar style of thought in the tradition of the Web and Part/Whole approach, see Kincaid [1996]).

The both/and synthesis of sociology's contextualizing and critical impulses is made easier because the two conceptions mirror each other so clearly. Where the penchant for contextualizing has the tendency to devolve into rote description of how things are, the critical orientation requires the sociologist to imagine things as they are not and, almost in-evitably, leads us to think about if and how we might bring about change. On the other hand, if critical perspectives sometimes lose touch with the realities and constraints of concrete human existence, sociological contextualizers are quick to bring these ideas back down to the ground and remind us that much of social life is structured and determined by forces we can only vaguely comprehend, and can never fully control or completely reshape. The strengths of the one reflect the weaknesses of the other; contextualizing and criticizing are not only equally necessary to the sociological imagination, they are profoundly complementary.

The challenge, of course, is to figure out how the two fit together. And the solution—yes, I am already to the solution—is to realize that the project of integrating sociology's contextualizing and criticizing dimen-sions cannot and should not ever be solved completely. The proper bal-ance between contextualizing and critique is not something that can be fixed or formalized; rather, these two, seemingly alternative approaches

need to be held in deep and constant tension with one another. We must cultivate and operationalize both in everything we do—in our thinking, our research, and our writing.

Elusive as it can be, the argument for the synthesis and ongoing, reciprocal interaction of the two different aspects of the sociological imagination that I have just posited is not particularly new or unique. It can be found in the work of classic founding sociologists ranging from Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel to Karl Marx and W.E.B. DuBois. It is what I think motivates the editors of this volume in their quest for a meaningful, systematic approach to the parts and pieces that make up the whole web of modern, 21st-century social life. And it is a lot like an argument that former ASA President Michael Burawoy (1998) offered about how to reconcile the two very different approaches to sociological research that dominate the field: the positivist, normal science side of the discipline, and the more critically oriented, reflexive tradition. Typically, sociologists aspire to unify these approaches or orientations to social research in some kind of grand, monolithic program or system. In contrast, Burawoy argued that sociology is best conceived and practiced as an ongoing, reciprocal exchange between these two distinctive ways of knowing. It is what Burawoy called a "dialogue" between two sciences. (For a similar analysis with a contrasting solution, see Pierre Bourdieu's (1988) plea for "heterodoxy" in the social sciences.) The point for sociologists like Burawoy or Bourdieu, or Phillips and Knottnerus, is not that every sociologist needs to be simultaneously engaged in both normal and reflexive sociology, or be expert at both qualitative and quantitative methods. The point, rather, is that the field as a whole needs both ways of thinking and knowing, and that all sociologists—no matter what their method of choice, or substantive specialization—need to appreciate the respective contributions of each.

So too, I believe, for the sociological imagination. It is best understood as an active, ongoing, and necessary dialogue between the discipline's contextualizing impulse and its critical orientation. Mills, it is worth noting, had a particularly broad and interdisciplinary sense of the dialogues and interactions required by the sociological enterprise. "The sociological imagination," he wrote in his introduction, "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" (Mills, 1959). Clearly, the sociological imagination is not some analytic system that can be mechanized and codified, but a process, an ongoing, never-ending project that exists only when it is activated in the analysis of the fascinating, multifaceted, ever-changing worlds of human experience and interaction.

Once these basic points are grasped, there is not a great deal intellectually standing in the way of anyone putting into practice this wonderful, dynamic, bifocal way of thinking about the lives that we lead and the worlds that we live in. But still, this may be easier said than done—especially if we aspire to the imaginative sociological heights achieved by a virtuoso like C. Wright Mills. Which brings us to the question: how, exactly, can we cultivate and refine the sociological imagination so broadly conceived? What steps can us ordinary and aspiring sociologists take to develop and sustain our own sociological imaginations?

Cultivating the Sociological Imagination

Near the end of the appendix that concludes *The Sociological Imagination,* C. Wright Mills poses the same essential question: "But, you may ask, how do ideas come? How is the imagination spurred to put all the images and facts together, to make images relevant and lend meaning to facts?" Mills's answer is disheartening at first but ultimately, I believe, useful, inspiring, and empowering.

What is disheartening is that Mills says that there is no real answer to the question. All he can do, he says, is to "talk about the general conditions and a few simple techniques which have seemed to increase my chances to come out with something" (1959: 211). His response, ironically, is so personal and particular as to seem almost asociological. Far from losing his sociological senses, however, Mills is making two points. One is that the sociological imagination is, ultimately, an intensely personal project—which is to say, the creative, synthetic act of a thinking, reflecting, synthesizing human being. On this point Mills argues it is better to have "one account by a working student of how he is going about his work, than a dozen 'codifications of procedure' [his quotation marks] by specialists who often as not have never done much work of consequence" (1959: 195). In addition, I think Mills means to suggest that the act of imagining the world in sociological terms—even when he does it—is somewhat less mysterious and magical than we may think, more about method and routine than anything else. And in fact, in seeing how Mills uses his own example to direct and guide the aspiring sociologist on how to go about her or his work, the sociological imagination not only takes on deeper meaning and shape, we are also provided with some practical, preliminary steps—methodological guides, essentially—for doing our own sociological imagining.

Mills offers both some specific techniques, as well as some basic observations about one's working environment. On the latter front, he talks about the need to surround yourself with "a circle of people who will talk and listen" (1959: 201), people who will stimulate, engage, and push you

to articulate and develop your ideas about the world. In addition, Mills says that the aspiring sociologist must refuse the conventional separation of work life from private life. This latter point is a bit counterintuitive for sociologists whose first lessons have been that the world is larger than themselves and that they therefore need to avoid the danger of overgeneralizing from one's own personal experience. For Mills, however, in order to understand the world around you, it is best to start with what you know, or think you know, and then to subject those ideas and that experience to ongoing, systematic reflection and examination. The deep assumption here is that sociologists are not outside the object of their study but rather part of it, and that their comprehension and explanation is better pursued by engaging (often critically) this reality rather than running from it. The sociological imagination is, in these respects, "a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career" (196).

Mills's reflections on his own scholarly habits and practices are more expansive and concrete. Indeed, the bulk of the appendix is Mills's attempt to "report in some detail" how he "goes about [his] craft"—and it is here that the work is most valuable. Though not delineated explicitly as such, there are at least three working guidelines that can be culled from these pages:

Learn from existing materials. Much as Mills insisted that the sociologist needed to trust her instincts and intuitions, he also realized that there is no need to constantly reinvent the wheel. Sociology, in Mills's view, is a fundamentally collective, communal enterprise, one in which every practitioner is not only allowed but expected to borrow from and build upon existing theory, data, methods, and understandings.

Be relentless in pursuit of your topic and put your ideas to the empirical test. For Mills, the sociological imagination is and must be relentless and expansive—asking questions about topics and questions in new ways, searching for more data and information, subjecting ideas to multiple types and layers of testing and analysis, conducting many inquiries and studies. "Good work in social science today is not, and usually cannot be, made up of one clear-cut empirical 'research.' It is, rather, composed of a good many studies which at key points anchor general statements about the shape and the trend of the subject" (1959: 202). Mills specifically recommends working out the design of a whole set of empirical studies on any research question, even those that may not be conducted. "Although you will never get the money with which to do many of the empirical studies you design, it is necessary that you continue to develop them. For once you lay out an empirical study, even if you do not follow it through, it leads you to a new search for data, which often turns out to have unexpected relevance to your problem" (205).

Write constantly and keep a journal. Mills spends the bulk of his appendix talking about the need for systematic recording and reflection of ideas in writing. Indeed, he begins by stressing the importance of what he simply calls "keeping a file." "You must set up a file, which is, I suppose, a sociologist's way of saying: keep a journal. Many creative writers keep journals; the sociologist's need for systematic reflection demands it" (1959: 196). Writing serves many different intellectual purposes according to Mills, but at its root the regular, systematic writing and reflection contained in a journal or intellectual "file" is both where and how the sociological imagination is created, cultivated, and made manifest. Writing is, for Mills, the sociological imagination in practice.

Of all Mills's suggestions, this advice about the need for systematic writing and reflection may be most revealing and important. For it is in his descriptions of the writing process that sociology emerges as so much more than the mindless application of theory or technique ("codifications of procedure" by specialists, as Mills describes them in one place). In and through the process of rendering sociological thought in material form, in other words, sociology clearly becomes a craft as well as a science, an intellectual project that requires active, ongoing interpretation, systematic attention to data, creative reflection and reevaluation. and the like.

What is also original and inspiring in these pages are the implicit points and taken-for-granted assumptions bound up in Mills's conception of "intellectual craftsmanship" itself. One of those is the need to take yourself and your work seriously; to see, as Mills did, that your work is intimately bound up with your life, and to work as diligently and systematically as possible on the former always in service of the latter.

Even when produced by a C. Wright Mills, sociological understanding is not an act of creative brilliance, much less the result of outright genius that cannot be explained, reproduced, or recreated. The act of imagining the world sociologically is more akin to how Dan Chambliss (1989) memorably described the accomplishment of athletic excellence: as the result of much hard, boring, mundane work. Similarly, it seems to me that Mills is reminding us that sociological excellence and insight requires a great deal of hard work and discipline, dedication to a craft that has a lineage and established techniques but that exists only in its application and practice on a social world and under unique and variable historical conditions (for additional cases, see Hammond 1964).

Conclusion

This essay has been an attempt to reinvent and reinvigorate—to reclaim or win anew—the pursuit we call sociology by focusing on contemporary uses and meanings of C. Wright Mills's infectious, evocative phrase "the

sociological imagination." What I believe is at stake in this, ultimately, is the heart and soul of sociology itself, a field that has so much potential to help human beings understand and explain the worlds that they live in, but that all-too-often deteriorates into specialized subfields of "experts" relying upon codified techniques or abstract theories and talking only to themselves. There is obviously a great deal more that could and should be said about the ongoing, reclamation project that is the sociological imagination. For example, we could talk about sociology's status and role in an increasingly interdisciplinary and yet specialized academic environment. I would also love to get into the question—raised under the banner of public sociology in recent years (cf. Burawoy, 2004)—of how to cultivate this distinctive way of thinking and knowing for broader and bigger public audiences. (On this score, we once again have no better role model than Mills himself, whose books found audiences far beyond the sociological fraternity.) But in terms of wrapping up this initial foray into the topic, let me highlight one final point on which C. Wright Mills may be distinguished from his and many of our contemporaries.

In trying to capture the reciprocal, interactive dynamic between context and critique that I believe is the sociological imagination, I borrowed from a parallel argument that Michael Burawoy made about cultivating an ongoing dialogue between positive and reflexive modes of sociological investigation. Burawoy and Mills have a great deal in common, but one point on which they diverge is their attitude toward the label of science; Burawoy insists on seeing all of the different dimensions of sociological research and practice as scientific. Mills was far more ambivalent. As he wrote in an early footnote: "I feel the need to say that I much prefer the phrase 'the social studies' to 'the social sciences'—not because I do not like physical scientists . . . but because the word 'science' has acquired great prestige and rather imprecise meaning. I do not feel any need to kidnap the prestige or to make the meaning less precise by using it as a philosophical metaphor" (Mills, 1959: 19). Indeed, in depicting sociological work as "intellectual craftsmanship" I believe Mills was, not only trying to avoid the pretensions and truth claims so often associated with "science," but was also suggesting that the kind of knowledge and understanding we produce using our sociological imaginations is unique—in its production, in its substance, and in its contributions to the world. (For a recent similar argument, see Robert Alford's (2005) depiction of sociology as a craft.)

I understand that there is a danger here—that in emphasizing sociology's creative dimensions, its critical roots, and craftsman-like practices, we may unintentionally minimize the capital role of theory, methodological rigor, and analytic systematicity in all of our work, not to mention undermine our larger public and professional standing. This would almost certainly be a mistake. Who, after all, does not believe in the power of "science" in our modern world? Isn't the claim to science

key to our legitimacy, our attempts to speak with authority in the public realm? Indeed, one of the great appeals of the Web and Part/Whole Approach championed by Bernie Phillips and his colleagues is its attempt to organize and systematize Mills's unique way of shuttling up and down and across ladders of conceptual abstraction and empirical documentation in his concrete research and writing. Still, I think the risk of following Mills in this terminological territory may be worth it, if only to better capture and convey all the work involved in the ongoing project of understanding and explaining the world in sociological terms.

Note

Thanks especially to Peter and Patty Adler, Kathleen O. Slobin, Monte Bute, Bernie Phillips, and David Knottnerus. As with other contributors to the Web and Part/Whole Approach, my engagement with "the sociological imagination" stands in contrast to interventions such as those collected in Rhonda Levine's 2005 volume or a later (2006) Mills tribute conference in New York that emphasize Mills's contributions to more radical visions of sociology and social science, focusing especially on his economic and political analyses. While I am extremely sympathetic to these projects (for additional review essays by Joya Misra, Anthony Orum, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, see *Contemporary Sociology,* March 2006), my focus here is more oriented toward reinvigorating the discipline as a whole without respect for specific ideological or substantive implications. What goes along with this alternative critical standpoint or perspective—what emerges from it quite naturally, in fact—is a social-change agenda. Some folks really push for this; others don't. Indeed, this is the face of Mills that many sociologists consider to be the most important and powerful. What I am not agnostic about is that good, imaginative sociological work should have real world social change possibilities and applications. If it doesn't, it is more than likely out of touch with reality and has probably deteriorated into philosophy or political ideology. For a slim and engaging volume on the uses and abuses of utopian thought, see Rothstein, Muschamp, and Marty (2003).

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CHAPTER **3**

Putting It All Together

Toward Increasing Sociology's Relevance to Ecological Research

Debbie V. S. Kasper

Global climate change. Species extinction. Desertification. Water scarcity. This list of gloomy, but familiar, terms includes some of the major challenges facing the world's citizens today—challenges which are typically thought of as "environmental problems." While this label is not necessarily incorrect, it is incomplete. These problems, environmental though they be, are in large part products of the organization of human social life. Despite increasing recognition of the need to study the interrelations between humans and the natural environment, the social sciences continue to play a minimal role in ecological research (Endter-Wada et al., 1998). "Environmental problems" tend to be viewed as the result of discrete physical events, while the ongoing social practices that create them are largely ignored (Beamish, 2002). As is becoming increasingly apparent, this attention-bias acts as a tremendous hindrance to addressing