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From *The Sociological Imagination*

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.

"The first fruit of this imagination --- the first lesson of the social science that embodies it-- is the idea that the individual can understand her/his own experience and gauge her/his own fate only by locating himself within her/his period, that s/he can know her/his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in her/his circumstances. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that s/he lives out a biography, and that s/he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of her/his living s/he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as s/he is made by society and by its historical push and shove...

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? 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 people 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 s/he has her/his quality and her/his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that human beings 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 people's self-conscious view of themselves as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of society. People 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 works in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of her/his immediate relations with others; they have to do with her/his self and with those limited areas of social life of which s/he is directly and personally aware. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by her/him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of her/his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux

into the institutions of a 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, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves contradictions and antagonisms.

“In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one person is unemployed, that is her/his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the person, her/his skills, and her/his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million persons are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problems of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honour; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war’s termination. In short, according to one’s values, to find a set of milieux and within it to survive the war or to make one’s death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of persons it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

Or consider the metropolis—the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city. For many upper-class people, the personal solution to ‘the problem of the city’ is to have an apartment with private garage under it in the heart of the city, and forty miles out, a house by Henry Hill, garden by Garrett Eckbo, on a hundred acres of private land. In these two controlled environments—with a small staff at each end and a private helicopter connexion—most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieux caused by the facts of the city. But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of

the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence with work? Refurbish it as it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? These are structural issues; to confront them and to solve them requires us to consider political and economic issues that affect innumerable milieux.

In so far as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. In so far as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in her/his restricted milieu will be powerless—with or without psychiatric aid--- to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon her/him. In so far as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependants, the problem of satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution. In so far as the overdeveloped megalopolis and the overdeveloped automobile are built-in features of the overdeveloped society, the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal integrity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural change. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and more intricately connected with each other. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination.