

# Sociological Imagination Excerpt (C. Wright Mills, 1959)

## Notes

- people feel that they are trapped in their private lives
- like they **cannot** overcome their troubles
- that is often true, as they are bound by the orbits they live in
- they are limited to/by job, family, neighborhood
- in other milieus they are like spectators
- the more they realize that there are threats, ambitions that are outside of their immediate surroundings, the more trapped they feel
- *e.g. the threat of losing your job because your company gets bought by another, something you can do nothing about*
- this sense of being trapped comes from impersonal changes to the structure of continent-wide societies
- history is the sum of individual experiences (success and failure)
- *e.g. during war, a store clerk becomes a RADAR man*
- **neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both**
- still, people don't tend to connect their own personal troubles to the bigger picture (world history, etc)
- people lack the 'quality of mind' to grasp this interplay of man and society, self and world
- people cannot cope with personal troubles in ways that control the structural transformations that usually cause them
- no wonder, as today there is more change faster than ever before
- in one generation, one sixth of mankind transformed from feudal, backwards to modern, advances, fearful
- colonies became independent, imperialism became less visible, revolutions occur, new kinds of authority emerge, totalitarian societies arise (fail or succeed), capitalism rose, even just formal democracy is only for a small portion of mankind
- global superpowers prepare for WWII
- the shaping of history outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values
- even those values are changing, collapsing, new ones are arising
- no wonder people cannot cope with worlds that confront them so suddenly
- they cannot understand the meaning of the current time for their own lives
- this leads to moral insensibility, as a mechanism of protection, to a feeling of being trapped
- they need information (Age of Fact), as it dominates and overwhelms their capabilities to deal with it
- *they need more than reason, they need a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summation of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves* -> **Sociological Imagination**
- **Sociological Imagination enables people to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of individuals**
- within this confusing mess, people look for a framework for society, within which psychologies are formulated
- this helps focus on troubles and leads to public engagement
- first derivative is the idea that an individual can understand their experience and gauge their fate only by becoming aware of all the individuals in their position and locating themselves within their period
- people contribute to the shaping of their society and to history, even though in small amounts, even if society made them by 'push and shove'
- SI enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society
- this is both a task and a promise, one which many great sociologists have fulfilled, it is the signal of what is best in contemporary study of man and society
- all social studies that have risen to this promise have asked three kinds of questions:
  1. What is the structure of society? What are its components and their relations? Where does

this society stand in history? How is it changing? What is its meaning for the development for humanity?

2. How is that which we examine related to its historical period? What are the features of this period? What makes this period unique? How is it making history?

3. What kind of people prevail in this society? What might prevail in the future? How are they shaped? What does this reveal about 'human nature'? What kind of rule does it play?

- regardless of the subject, these are the kinds of questions good social analysts ask
- they are pivotal to studies of man and society, and inevitably raised by anyone that uses sociological imagination
- SI enables one to switch perspectives from one to the other, from political to psychological
- meaning to see the relations from the most impersonal and remote transformations and the most intimate features of the human self
- this is why sociological imagination is a hope for grasping the world and in themselves
- SI is the most fruitful form of self-consciousness, it gives the feeling that one can now find some answers and orientation
- *by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences*