

***The Sociological Imagination* is a book by American sociologist C. Wright Mills, first published by Oxford University Press in 1959 and still in print.**

Mills felt that the central task for sociology and sociologists was to find (and articulate) the connections between the particular social environments of individuals (also known as "milieu") and the wider social and historical forces in which they are enmeshed. This approach challenges a structural functionalist approach to sociology, as it opens new positions for the individual to inhabit with regard to the larger social structure. Individual function that reproduces larger social structure is only one of many possible roles, and is not necessarily the most important. Mills also wrote of the danger of malaise, which he saw as inextricably embedded in the creation and maintenance of modern societies. This led him to question whether individuals exist in modern societies in the sense that "individual" is commonly understood (Mills, 1959, 7-12).

In writing *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills was trying to reconcile two varying, abstract conceptions of social reality - the "individual" and "society" - and thereby challenged the dominant sociological discourse to define some of its most basic terms and be forthright about the premises behind its definitions. He began the project of reconciliation and challenge with critiques of "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism," outlining and criticizing their use in the current sociology of the day.

Grand Theory

In *The Social System*, Parsons describes the nature of the structure of society and the creation and maintenance of a culture through the socialization of individuals. Mills criticizes this tendency in sociology on several grounds. He argues for a more heterogeneous form of society in that he challenges the extent to which a single uniformity of society is indeed possible (Mills, 1959, 26-30).

Social order

Mills (1959) criticizes the Parsonian formulation of social order, particularly the idea that social order can indeed be seen as a whole. He writes that every individual cannot simply be fully integrated into society and internalize all its cultural forms. Furthermore, such domination may be seen as a further extension of power and social stratification.

Role of social theory

He further criticizes Parsonian Sociology on its ability to theorize as a form of pure abstraction that society can be understood irrespective of its historical and contextual nature without observation.

That he argues that society and its cultural symbols cannot be seen as self-determining and cannot be derived without reference to individuals and their consciousness. All power according to Parsons is based on a system of beliefs enforced by society, writes Mills. In this he criticizes Parsons for his view in terms of historical and social change and diversity (Mills, 1959, 40-46).

He thereby criticizes the means by which a social order can be derived without observation (Mills, 1959, 46-48).

Abstracted Empiricism

In his third chapter, Mills (1959) can be seen to criticize the empirical methods of social research which he saw as evident at the time in the conception of data and the handling of methodological tools.

This can be seen as a reaction to the plethora of social research being developed from about the time of the Second World War. This can thereby be seen as much a criticism by Brewer that Mills may have been critical of the research being conducted and sponsored by the American government (Brewer, 2004).

As such Mills (1959) criticizes the methodological inhibition which he saw as characteristic of what he called *abstract empiricism*. In this he can be seen criticizing the work of Paul F. Lazarfeld who conceives of Sociology not as a discipline but as a methodological tool (Mills, 1959, 55-59).

He argues that the problem of such social research is that there may be a tendency towards "psychologism", which explains human behavior on the individual level without reference to the social context. This, he argues, may lead to the separation of research from theory. He then writes of the construction of milieu in relation to social research and how both theory and research are related (Mills, 1959, 65-68).

The Human variety

In chapter seven of his work, Mills (1959) sets out what is thought to be his vision of Sociology. He writes of the need to integrate the social, biographical, and historical versions of reality in which individuals construct their social milieus with reference to the wider society (Mills, 1959, 132-134).

He argues that the nature of society is continuous with historical reality. In doing so, Mills writes of the importance of the empirical adequacy of theoretical frameworks. He also writes of the notion of a unified social sciences. This he believes is not a conscious effort but is a result of the historical problem-based discourses out of which the disciplines developed, in which the divisions between the disciplines become increasingly fluid (Mills, 1959, 136-140). Thus Mills (1959) sets out what he believed to be a problem-based approach to his conception of social sciences