

# Introduction: Mills today

**Ann Nilsen and John Scott**

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C. Wright Mills is one of the towering figures in contemporary sociology. His writings continue to be of great relevance to the social science community today, more than 50 years after his death. A radical intellectual and an innovative sociologist in his day, he expressed opinions on politics and the social sciences that aroused controversy among his contemporaries in sociology and in the wider American society. In many ways he was a thinker ahead of his time and his political activities were unconventional – for instance during the height of the Cold War he went to Cuba and met with Castro and Che Guevara. The paperback version of the book published after the visit, *Listen Yankee* (Mills 1960), sold half a million copies.

Generations of sociology students have enjoyed learning about the discipline from reading his best-known book, *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1971 [1959]). Over the years the title has become a term in itself with a variety of interpretations, many far removed from the original. Central to Mills's thinking was the relevance of history for understanding contemporary society and the people who live in its specific communities. Similarly, he held that ideas must be considered in relation to the time and place in which they originate. It is precisely because of Mills's insistence on relating the interpretation of concepts and theories to their historical context that his own ideas and writings still come across with a clarity and freshness that the years have not diminished.

The world may have changed beyond recognition in the half century since Mills's death, but many of the problems identified and discussed in *The Sociological Imagination*, and in his other writings, are with us still. The *public issues* may sometimes be different, but the *private troubles* are often the same. Indeed, this pair of concepts and the relationship between the two go straight to the heart of Mills's vision for sociology: the relationship between biography and history:

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both. Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connexion between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connexion means for the kinds of men they are becoming and the kind of history-making in which they might take part. (Mills, 1971 [1959], pp. 9–10)

Making sense of this relationship is the prime role of sociology: '*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' (p. 11). For sociology, if not for the whole of the social sciences, Mills's vision was for the sociological imagination to guide the thoughts and practices of its scholars.

Mills died in 1962 and in 2012 several events were launched to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his death. Among these were a special session at the BSA meeting in the UK and also an international symposium at the University in Bergen, Norway, from which the papers in this book are drawn. The social science community seems to be in agreement about the continuing importance of Mills's intellectual legacy in the world today.

The chapters in Part One of this book begin with general issues around the nature and significance of the sociological imagination, continue through discussions of modes of theorizing and historical explanation, the relationship between history and biography, and the intellectual and political relationship of Mills to Marxism. They conclude with considerations on issues of class, power, and warfare. The variety of questions addressed in these chapters reflects the richness of topics in Mills's writings.

Part Two of our book includes a series of reflections from scholars who were invited to give personal and spontaneous thoughts on the impact of Mills's writings in their sociological work, with particular attention to 'biography and history'. In this way we sought to illuminate how the same writings were received by scholars at different ages and in different historical circumstances, thus turning Mills's own ideals and ideas into practice. We have also been fortunate to have Mills's younger daughter, Kathryn Mills, write the Foreword to this volume, as well as a piece for the personal reflections section.

Jennifer Platt considers the influence of the methodological views set out by Mills in the appendix to the *Sociological Imagination*. In a thorough and critical examination she places his work in the context of

the American and European sociological debates of his time and examines the numerous references to the idea of the 'sociological imagination' in journals, monographs and textbooks. The often provocative style of Mills's writing invited strongly held opinions, both positive and negative. Platt shows that the book has been enormously influential, in terms of citations and discussions, but had little impact on actual methodological discussions. This reflects, she argues, his particular choice of intellectual style and of his own role within sociology.

Krishan Kumar addresses Mills's call for history to gain a more prominent place within sociology. Mills's writings are drawn upon in a comprehensive discussion of the general relationship between history and sociology, and the development of historical sociology in particular. Kumar holds that although Mills never did a study that could be classified as located within formal historical sociology, his writings are nevertheless permeated with historical understandings and explanations. Kumar discusses the case of de Tocqueville's writings on revolutions to highlight the points made by Mills about the necessity of understanding the past in order to set present 'public issues' into historical context.

In the third chapter, Lars Mjøset analyses Mills's promise of the sociological imagination and divides it into two programmes. The internal one relates to the role of social scientists in the academic sphere of higher education and research, the external one to their role on various arenas of the public sphere. Comparing the two programmes, Mjøset finds six ambiguities and relates these to the US 1950s historical context and the public debates that Mills was participating in. The second part of the chapter traces the fate of the two programmes within the discipline of sociology after Mills's death. Two phases are compared: the 1960s/1970s turbulence, and the consolidation of disciplinary identity since the 1980s. He concludes that the sociological imagination cannot be considered sociological in a narrow, disciplinary sense of the word.

Ann Nilsen and Julia Brannen draw on the pragmatist roots of Mills's writings in the philosophy of science to discuss the history–biography dynamic in relation to different definitions of the micro–macro question. They explore ways of discussing and understanding contemporary concepts and theories in studies addressing changes in life course development. Inspired by Mills's dynamic understanding of the relationship between history and biography, they engage in a critical discussion of the current tendencies to neglect the history side of this pair of concepts. Taking illustrations from empirical studies of youth, they explore aspects of Beck's individualization thesis.

Michael Newman's chapter examines Mills's relationship to Marxism. Newman is especially concerned with Mills's close relationship with

Ralph Miliband and with his wider engagements with the European sociology community. He presents a fascinating account of friendship and political affiliation, while at the same time addressing important sociological questions about how time and place are important for understanding the intellectual and political sides of biographical development. He shows, in particular, that Mills and Miliband debated the nature of the power structure in Britain and developed concepts that had a wider explanatory purchase in understanding the dynamics of power.

Mike Savage addresses questions relating to biography and history as a methodological concern. Setting the discussion in a contemporary frame of debate on methods, the chapter argues that multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) that locates individuals in Bourdieusian fields is an innovative way of examining aspects of the biographical–historical link that is rather different from other methods for understanding this relationship.

John Scott is concerned with Mills's ideas on social stratification, but especially with his view of elite domination in *The Power Elite* (Mills 1956). He develops a Millsian understanding of elites and argues that the legitimation of power relations can usefully be understood by returning to Mills's views on 'vocabularies of motive.' Scott shows that these ideas, usually seen in relation to individual motivation, relate closely to contemporary views on ideology and discourse.

Daniel Bertaux writes about the relationship of Mills's ideas of power and relates them to those of Foucault. Starting with a discussion of sociological approaches on the individual–structure dynamic and outlining the differences between the European preoccupation with structure and the American liberal traditions focusing on individuals, he outlines how Mills's approach to biographies can bridge that gap. The chapter then uses the metaphor of the body to explore how power can be addressed from both levels and can be seen in relation to the imaginary space of the symbolic world.

Mills's views on war and peace, as set out in his pamphlet *The Causes of World War Three* (Mills 1958), are discussed by John D. Brewer. He holds that the argument in the book is a profoundly moral critique, rather more than it is a political one. This is demonstrated by outlining the book's main reasoning and setting it within the cultural spaces of its production as a text. Brewer argues that Mills failed to anticipate the changed nature of contemporary warfare, but sees the discussion as still having a relevance for the understanding of contemporary forms of conflict.

For the radical baby-boom generation in both the US and Europe, Mills's writings have a special resonance. Some of his ideas were more

appreciated by those who took part in the radical political movements of the late 1960s than they were by his contemporaries. Younger generations, also, have found inspiration in his work for both sociological and political thinking. Part Two of the book thus comprises a series of short reflections on Mills and some of the Bergen symposium participants' varied encounters with his work. The authors vary in age and nationality, thus making this part of the book an interesting reading from the viewpoint of the biography–history dynamic. Each author's reflection on how and when they first read some of Mills's writings says something about its impact on them from the viewpoint of their biographical situation and the historical circumstances in which they were located at the time.

We like to think that Mills would have enjoyed the symposium as much as we did. He would, perhaps, have expressed embarrassment at becoming the subject of such discussion, though there is reason to believe that he would have relished the recognition and that, more importantly, would have seen the symposium as confirming the direction that he charted for sociology. Mills lived his sociology and we hope that our own living of his work is a worthy tribute to a great sociologist.

## REFERENCES

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