

## CHAPTER 4

# C. Wright Mills and Education

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*Gnothi seauton!* (Greek for “Know thyself!”)

Educating was originally and fully focused on matters of gnosis.

*(Davis, 2004, as cited by Upitis, 2003: 2)*

In ancient Greek thought, gnosis emerges as a word to suggest a special or hidden kind of knowledge—but Greek philosophers do not establish a rigid distinction between gnosis and episteme.

*(Paranjape, 2002: 3)*

### Introduction

IN ORDER TO SET THE STAGE, Mills (1959) is briefly reviewed following the introduction and the outlining of the chapter’s key idea.<sup>1</sup> His discussion of the craftsmanship involved in utilizing the sociological imagination is based on an intuitive grasp of sociology as a calling.

Next, that sense of craftsmanship is then applied to education in the social sciences and history. There are at least eight major teaching options (Davis, 2004) and Mills’s approach tends to be more metaphysical and

intuitive than scientific. For Mills, the mature scholar is an independent thinker and public intellectual, but not a positivist scientist.

From this application to education in the social sciences and history, the idea is extended to education more generally, with some thoughts on the education of body and spirit as well as mind. The “new sociological imagination” requires moving beyond certain limitations in Mills’s way of thinking about our discipline. Previous discussions of the idea have not been adequate (Fuller, 2006).

## Key Idea

The key idea in this chapter is that a web approach requires us to be open to the complex interrelatedness of various kinds of knowledge and learning. Hence, while C. Wright Mills is in some ways a model for pedagogy, we should also be aware of some of the limitations of Mills’s rhetorical dismissal of abstracted empiricism (AE) and grand theory (GT). A combined Web and Part/Whole Approach can encompass not only an expanded version of Mills’s sociological imagination but also that which is valuable in empirical research and theoretical speculation.

One such structure is dichotomy. Dichotomization is separation into two parts (Greek *dikha* + *tomie*, two parts). One example would be “black” versus “white.” Most Aristotelian-based logic and Enlightenment science tends to be based on dichotomies. Something either is A or it is not (not A).

The other structure of thinking is weblike. The key to the web approach is to examine ideas as having many linkages. It is a more “ecological” or “evolutionary” approach that involves looking at the ways in which ideas branch out over time. The simplified form of the web approach to thinking involves bifurcation. The term is derived from the Latin (*bi* + *furca*) and means “two-pronged” or “forked.” In other words, the simplest web is a fork in the road. But a web involves not just one fork; it involves many forks, like the branches on a tree.

The key difference between a web-bifurcation approach and a dichotomized approach is that dichotomies tend to appear to come out of nowhere, while a web or bifurcation involves paying attention to interlinkages. At the very least, if we have a fork in the road we know where we have come from; we know the path that led us to that split. The two prongs are not simply polarities in some kind of absolute “space.” As the saying goes, if you come to a fork in the road, take it! But when you take it you know where you have taken it, and (usually) why. Even if it was just a whim (like tossing a coin), you know a reason why that particular choice was made. It is concretely situated.

Therefore, after having briefly reviewed C. Wright Mills's polar opposition between AE and GT in this chapter, I will move on to Mills's stress on the importance of craftsmanship in education in sociology. This section examines Mills's ideas in terms of their more general relevance, not just for sociology and other social sciences but also for all disciplines.

### **Mills's Sociological Imagination:**

When Charles Wright Mills (1916–1962) put out his famous book *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959, he had already published seven books. He also had published two major “classic” articles (Mills 1940; 1943) when he was still a graduate student. Two of his books were coauthored with Hans H. Gerth. The Gerth and Mills (1946) volume is frequently cited by those who wish to cite Max Weber, and it is clear that some of Weber's ideas concerning “domination” (*Herrschaft*) influenced Mills significantly. However, the Gerth and Mills book published in 1953, *Character and Social Structure*, is not nearly as famous or widely read and cited today as the 1946 book. *The Gerth and Mills (1946) book is the Weber volume.* The translations would have been mainly done by Gerth since Mills does not do any further scholarly work involving translation from German into English. Mills's three most famous single-authored books are *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956). They examine labor leaders, the new middle class, and the elite.

Since Mills died early, at age forty-two, he did not leave a large number of additional works after *The Sociological Imagination* came out. (He died in 1962, and the book was published in 1959). Randall Collins calls *The Sociological Imagination* Mills's “most important contribution” (Collins and Makowsky, 1998: 238). But that judgment could be challenged. It is his definitive statement on the nature of theory and methodology. Even if he had lived to a ripe old age, it is not likely that he would have significantly modified the views expressed in that succinct (234 page) book. It does present his views on the “craft” of sociology. But it is more of a work of polemic than a balanced assessment of others' views. Mills was in some ways a “utopian” thinker (Horowitz, 1983), an American variant of Ancient Greek thinkers like Plato. His progressive, radical ideology was based on an intuition of justice and not necessarily a carefully thought out philosophy.

Perhaps most carefully read by graduate students of my generation (the 1960s Vietnam War era “baby boomer” generation) were chapters 1, 2 and 3. Also frequently consulted by students writing a thesis was “Appendix” on “Intellectual Craftsmanship.” But it is highly likely that many students did not have time to really read Chapters 4–10 carefully. It may

have been different in another era, but I doubt it. In fact, it is highly likely that today Mills's famous book is more frequently cited than read. Everyone has heard of his famous argument that "personal troubles are public issues." It even became a rallying cry for the Feminist Movement of the 1970s (i.e., "the personal is political"). But one can question to what extent Mills's caustic and strident arguments concerning Parsons and Lazarsfeld, and their students, served for serious intellectual debate.

I will briefly review the main thrust of the book for those who may never have actually read it or who may have read it so long ago that the main thesis has been somewhat forgotten. The principal contention that Mills presents is that sociology as a discipline was suffering from two evils. He labeled those two destructive tendencies "Grand Theory" (GT) and "Abstracted Empiricism" (AE). He did not utilize those words in any kind of neutral manner. Instead, they are terms of derision. Mills uses the two labels in a thoroughly rhetorical manner. He has nothing good to say about either GT or AE. They are thoroughly misleading ways to do sociology and social science generally. A student who is sucked into either GT or AE is likely to go off the right path and never find his way back again.

I say "his" because Mills wrote in the late 1950s when the idea of giving equal voice to women had not yet become fully integrated. Mills, who rode a motorcycle to work at Columbia University in New York City, was a man's man, at least on paper. He reminds me a bit of Norman Mailer, but also of the Beat Poets. He does not attempt to integrate the Feminist Revolution in his writing style. His prose is Hemingwayesque. Sociology is a man's discipline, and a man who wants to become a sociologist should regard it as a kind of heroic journey of discovery. The GT or AE routes are not recommended. They in fact are viewed by Mills as inferior and likely to lead one astray altogether. Most sociologists today are vaguely aware of this, but they nevertheless tend to use the terms "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism"—if they use them at all—in somewhat softened ways. They become more like heuristic Ideal Types (or, Ideal Type Models) than rhetorical labels. But Mills did not attempt to be neutral about them. He used them as terms of derision, and he did not pull any punches in his mockery of them. That is part of the reason the book caught on.

Who could resist Mills's famous chapter 2 on "Grand Theory" where he "translates" the words of Talcott Parsons? Few graduate students had sufficient sophistication to be able to refute the one-sided attack on Parsons's theory. He does say: "In this translation, I must admit, I have not been altogether faithful; I have helped out a little because these are very good ideas" (Mills, 1959: 29). But the impression left on most readers is that most of what Parsons wrote was unnecessarily verbose and could easily be distilled into ideas that are found in many textbooks. For those of us who struggled with Parsons's prose and attempted to make sense of the various subtle shifts in emphasis in Parsons's architectonic system,

Mills's "translation" felt like a breath of fresh air. He suggests that "... one could translate the 555 pages of *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straightforward English," and "The result would not be very impressive" (Mills, 1959: 21). There is certainly a grain of truth in the assertion that a précis of Parsons's books would serve a useful purpose.

However, what is missing from Mills's analysis of "Grand Theory" (GT) is any attempt to apply some of the same rhetorical techniques to some of the classical social and sociological theorists: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Max Weber, Simmel, Pareto, Durkheim, Mead, DuBois, Addams, Nightingale, Martineau, Marianne Weber, and so forth. The one and only example of the excesses of GT is Parsons. So, Mills is not entirely fair. He cites Franz Neumann's (1942) *Bebemoth* as an example of how to do it right; but, Neumann's analysis has not been all that influential in sociological theory. It is an excellent historically based analysis of the financing of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, but it is mostly known by specialists. Few sociologists would list Neumann as a leading classical sociological theorist, even though his work is cited by authors like Barrington Moore Jr.

Indeed, when Mills chooses his heroes he chooses some of the better known classical sociological theorists. But he never makes that more sophisticated argument that at times Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are just as obscure as Parsons. Marx's *Capital* (volumes I, II, and III) and *Theories of Surplus Value* (volumes I, II and III) are often summarized in one short volume. Weber's *Economy and Society* (1968/1920) consists of two major parts, with part II actually the one that was written first and with part I sometimes contradicting part II. Durkheim is often quite straightforward in his writing style, but it would be possible to summarize the central thrust of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995/1912) in one short paper. Mills does not bother to point any of that out. Hence, the confusion which still exists as to exactly what the term grand theory is supposed to mean. In this chapter, I will always use the term as Mills uses it, hence it will frequently be symbolized by the use of GT. Mills's GT is not the final word on the general concept of higher levels of abstraction in theory. Indeed, one basic aspect of the combined Web and Part/Whole Approach is the explicit understanding that the highest level of abstraction may include the Whole and may, therefore, not always be immediately reducible to simple commonsense, everyday-life prose. The term GT is a rhetorical label. It is "the Other" in Mills's schema. As such it serves a useful purpose if, and only if, we can accept Mills's positive statement of belief in "Classical Theory."

The additional "Other" for Mills is "Abstracted Empiricism" (AE). He makes it perfectly clear that anyone who does AE is likely to be too enamored with the techniques ("method" in the narrow sense). He is particularly strong in his opposition to those who are the second generation AE

researchers. While the originators, particularly Paul Lazarsfeld, may have a wide education and a genuine understanding of what they are leaving out in their utilization of reductionistic scientific techniques, the average graduate student utilizing cross-tabulation or regression of secondary data frequently does not have that wider grasp. Being a GT is bad because it means speculating in arbitrary ways and creating numerous pigeon holes that have little or no relationship to any empirical information. But being an AE is even worse because it requires hardly any sophistication about the pressing concerns of sociology as a discipline. The average AE researcher is more interested in solving little puzzles than in really grappling with important topics. It is a routinized and bureaucratized way of doing sociology. It results in "public opinion" polls which are only one step removed from advertising, according to Mills (1959: 51). The procedures can be learned with ease, but the use of such techniques simply results in research that has no relevance whatsoever to the sociological imagination as Mills conceives of it. Like Grand Theory, Abstracted Empiricism is mainly useful for ideological purposes. It has no "critical" component. Mills is not happy with Samuel Stouffer's four volumes (See, for example, Stouffer et al., 1949) on the U.S. military during World War II and much prefers studies such as Alfred Vagts's *History of Militarism*. (Of course, today no one in sociology reads Vagts; but, every textbook mentions Stouffer's study as a breakthrough work.) Mills is particularly concerned with the way in which AE tends to be an approach to sociology that requires a large team of researchers and an administrative apparatus to keep things organized. He favors the single researcher who is both theorist and methodologist. That is, Mills favors the kind of work that, by and large, he himself did, and which made him famous. (Presumably he might also have liked Erving Goffman's insightful work for the same reason, since Goffman did all his research more or less by himself, but Goffman is never cited by Mills.)

In chapter 6 on "Philosophies of Science" Mills returns to his dichotomy and examines AE in terms of the implicit positivism or natural science orientation to epistemology that AE tends to utilize. He points out that, in his opinion, it is not too difficult to get all of the different styles of social science together if we merely consider the problem from a very abstract "philosophical" perspective. But, he states, "... the pertinent question is: suppose we do 'get them together' in one or another grand model of inquiry—of what use is such a model for work in social science, for the handling of its leading tasks?" (Mills, 1959: 119-120). It is his clear intention that it should be the leading tasks that should dictate the way in which we do sociology and not any abstracted philosophy of science. The leading tasks, according to Mills, do not get done using either GT or AE. Instead, what is required is a genuine sense of craftsmanship.

Note that Mills's rhetorical style is a dichotomization between AE and GT. He does not discuss those two abstractions as part of a web, or even as a matter of a branching. He thoroughly rejects both. But he does not as fully develop the third alternative, which he labels the sociological imagination. The sociological imagination, as discussed by Mills, is to a large extent a reliance on intuitive knowing. It is a form of gnosis. I will discuss the spirit of his key idea in terms of a more refined understanding of "Gnosticism" (King, 2004) and that will lead into a fuller conceptualization of education and the body, particularly in terms of *batha* yoga, gymnastics, calisthenics, and athletics. That is, if Mills is to be taken seriously then we have to view the sociological imagination in Socratic terms and situate Greek philosophy historically. I will not attempt to do that in any complete fashion here. But I do want to point out that Mills presents only a part of the picture. He does not utilize a fully "web-based" approach. I conclude that the synthesized Part/Whole and Web Approach can help to lead to a pedagogy that will emphasize the integration of mind, body, and spirit. A fully integrated approach to teaching requires awareness of all eight of the models of teaching and education that Davis (2004) discusses. Any pedagogy that is restricted to merely one of those eight styles is bound to be unnecessarily restrictive.

I wish to make the fundamental point that Mills's book is largely polemical and therefore does not serve as a complete analysis of what the sociological imagination is or can become. A more complete understanding requires a combined Web and Part/Whole Approach to a pedagogy directed at more than just sole authored Classical Theory and Methods and more than just "the mind" by itself. Just as it requires a web approach to understand Mills's implicit pedagogy, it also requires a Web and Part/Whole Approach to be able to move beyond Mills's limitations to a broader vision.

## Education

While not based directly on Brent Davis's (2004) *Inventions of Teaching: Genealogy*, I nevertheless feel in retrospect that Davis's book is a good way to frame what I am trying to clarify. I will not try to summarize the details of his book here. I will merely provide a very brief overview. Davis, holder of a "Canada Research Chair" in Mathematics Education and the Ecology of Learning at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, makes a crucial distinction between two basic "structures of thinking."

Davis's (2004) ingenious discussion of metaphors of teaching looks at two major forks in the road: Metaphysical and Physical thinking. If we choose the Metaphysical path then we are led to teaching as based on epistemologies of gnosis or episteme. If we choose the Physical path

then we are led to a model of teaching that emphasizes intersubjectivity or interobjectivity. Those four branches have further subbranches. The main options that Davis (2004) presents are that teaching can mainly be about:

1. Drawing out
2. Drawing in
3. Instructing
4. Training
5. Facilitating
6. Empowering
7. Occasioning
8. Conversing

He makes it very clear that his approach to models of teaching is not an exhaustive or all-inclusive typology. "A better model [of the models] to illustrate the crossing and recrossings of sensibilities would be something more weblike" (Davis, 2004: 5). He chooses to ignore the finer branches. But his general model of teaching allows me to make a generalization about C. Wright Mills and teaching.

I believe that Mills's (1959) *The Sociological Imagination* tends to argue implicitly in favor of a model of education that is ultimately a metaphysical one. Moreover, I think that Mills was mainly interested in teaching as a form of "Drawing Out." That is, he wanted to get students to rely on their intuitive understanding. To put it in one word, Mills advocates the goal that the Greek philosophers refer to as *gnosis*. The term is difficult to translate. At the conclusion of this chapter, I hope to have made it clear why I believe that Mills is ultimately a great deal more like Socrates, who is reported to have said, "Know Thyself!" (*gnothi seauton*). Mills's "Socratic" approach to knowledge is both his strength and his weakness. We can get an appreciation for the way in which Mills's emphasis on intuitive knowledge is interconnected with other forms of knowledge—and of teaching—if we do not think in terms of simple dichotomies but instead focus on branches of the complex web that was American social science in the 1950s. A web approach will reveal more about Mills's implicit pedagogy than a more linear approach.

### **Education for Body, Mind, and Spirit**

To some extent that broader vision of teaching would involve all eight of the teaching strategies that Davis (2004) discusses. Mills was not a narrow thinker, and he had a broad understanding of many things. It would be incorrect to try to pin a label on him. He takes up many arguments and is



quite multifaceted in his approach. There are hints of this throughout his books. Mills deserves great credit for making the phrase "the sociological imagination" a part of every sociologist's vocabulary, but we should not simply take his arguments in favor of *his version* of the sociological imagination at face value. I will, therefore, contrast Mills's Sociological Imagination (SI) with a more inclusive Web orientation to the sociological imagination *writ large*.

If we do not simply accept Mills's statements at face value but extract from his classic book that which is of lasting value—somewhat in the same way as Croce tried to distill Hegel—then we find an enthusiastic argument in favor of a sociological imagination that is not merely a matter of using one's analytical skills. Sociology, for Mills, is not just a cognitive task, a limited bureaucratic role. It is not a nine to five job. For Mills it is a calling. The word "calling" (Weber's *Beruf*) does not appear in the Index. But it seems clear enough that for Mills there is almost a religious significance to being a social scientist. He caustically derides all those who would approach research as merely a matter of applying existing techniques. Part of the reason the book caught on with so many graduate students of my generation in the 1960s was precisely that it severely criticized the very things we were so painfully required to learn: nonparametric statistical tests, regression analysis, factor analysis, and other such techniques. They were *de rigueur*. You could not be a sociologist without those tools in your backpack. Seemingly the only way out was to either become a "theorist" (i.e., know a lot about the history of classical theory) or opt for cultural/social anthropology (where quantitative methods were less emphasized in those days).

Many of us did accept the idea of sociology as a calling. After all, we could almost as easily have become something else. We could have studied any of the humanistic disciplines, like philosophy, or art history. We could have studied one of the professions, like medicine, law, or library science. There were many avenues open to the better-than-average students of sociology in the 1960s in North America and Europe. But we chose sociology. If we did not choose it in order to do AE or GT, then we often chose it in order to do some kind of sociological-imagination-based sociology. I myself was not interested in being a technician. Indeed, when I had the opportunity to specialize in urban planning and architecture, I returned to general sociology. I wanted to pursue the sociological imagination. It is somewhat surprising to me that I really have managed to support myself and my family while still always engaged in the pursuit of that calling.

While there is much that is rewarding about pursuing social science as a calling, it is not always easy to strive to fulfill the sociological imagination. Even if one were to restrict one's attention simply to the sociological imagination in the stereotypical fashion that Mills sometimes reverts to, it would not be easy. But to strive to broaden the sociological

imagination even beyond the point that Mills was able to reach is quite challenging. Yet it is a challenge that is worth it. It may be easier to get tenure or promotion by pursuing AE, or even GT (in certain specialized circumstances), the lasting value of striving for the ideal of the sociological imagination is that it makes one's life better.

I wish to illustrate that by one example from my personal experience as a university professor and "teacher." I will start with the example of being a yoga teacher. Then I will use that example to discuss two recent ways in which I learned more about the integration of body and spirit with mind.

I became a yoga teacher almost accidentally as a result of volunteering one summer at a yoga camp, the Sivananda Yoga Centre in Val Morin, Quebec. There are many Sivananda ashrams around the world, but the one situated in the Mont Tremblanc area north of Montreal is where I spent the summer of 1987-88. My son was seven years old and as a "single parent" I wanted to find a way to be able to spend the summer with him that would be productive. A friend suggested I become a camp counselor. My son was allowed to participate in the kids' camp for free. After the kids' camp was over I continued on. I loved the work out doors in the fresh mountain air. Although there were minor irritations, by and large the summer was a great introduction to intense yoga, and by teaching the children yoga I had my first opportunity to teach yoga. I eventually chose to get certification. My "diploma" is from Kripalu Yoga Center in the Berkshires in Massachusetts. It took a month of hard work to get that recognition, but it was one of the best months of my life. I did yoga at least twice a day and at the end I felt physically fit and mentally alert. During the ten-year 1995-2005 period, I taught yoga in a variety of settings, albeit with several interruptions. Teaching yoga exercises (*asanas*) and breathing (*pranayamas*) has made me a much better academic teacher. Yet I did not initially start with yoga as part of a plan to improve my academic teaching. For a long time the two seemed completely separate.

One of the key things I learned about teaching as a result of teaching yoga is that it is very important to "walk the talk." On those days that I clearly had not been keeping up with the stretches and the breathing, I did what I myself considered a lousy job. I could fool some of the students some of the time, but it was quite apparent to me when I was not really doing my best. I had to be physically involved, even if I did not do each and every posture along with the students every time. Moreover, I had to have the right mind set. I have tried to take that into the academic classroom. I have become more aware that it is not just a matter of saying the words. One has to use the "yogic imagination" and come up with ways of "language-ing" the postures that are personally meaningful. For example, it is one thing to go through the motions when teaching the mountain

pose and it is quite another to have really felt that mountain pose. If I really have experienced a posture or stretch, then I can teach it. If I cannot get into a posture, I cannot teach it in a way that is really meaningful to most students. (I will probably never be able to teach the scorpion; it is too hard for me to do!) The best teachers of yoga are people who have really had the experience in a personally meaningful way.

Much the same is true of academic teaching in the classroom. Once, when returning from a conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, I gave a very spontaneous and unrehearsed lecture on social stratification. I grasped the significance of the West Coast Native People's symbolic art forms and utilized some Salish and Kwakiutl designs to illustrate the basic notion of "semiosis," the process of communication through signs. I had been lecturing about semiotics and signs for many weeks, but it was only when I fully got into the lecture body, mind, and spirit that I saw some faces light up in the back row. Some of the students had probably understood me before, but that day suddenly a large number of students who had been somewhat apathetic showed a real interest. I linked semiotics to the ways in which genderism, sexism, classism, racism, and all forms of the "idols of tribe" (Francis Bacon) get reified. The idea of "reification" through "symbols" became somewhat more tangible to the students. I never quite recaptured the spontaneity of that lecture when I would repeat some parts of it in other settings, but I was "on a roll" that day.

One of the main reasons that there is a discipline called sociology is because the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions of the 18th century greatly transformed Europe. The United States Constitution of 1783 is based in large part on the European Enlightenment traditions that were formulated by French, German, and British thinkers in the 18th century. Now the United States still tries to uphold those Enlightenment beliefs to some extent, but there is considerable political confusion. The Jeffersonian ideals have become largely just a memory as agriculture has become the main occupation of less than 3 percent of the population. The yeoman "family farmer" of the 18th century exists largely in the imagination of writers like Wendell Berry and not in everyday reality in Iowa or Missouri. There are a few real family farms left in Vermont and Idaho, but by and large agribusiness has taken over. This is not the place to launch into an extended discussion of the ways in which the United States of the 21st century could not possibly have been imagined by the founders in the 18th century, but clearly much has changed.

Yet what has not changed about the United States (and Canada) is an optimistic sense of open opportunity. The reality, as indicated very well by C. Wright Mills (1951; 1956) may be quite different. But the "American Dream" remains. That is a dream of individual human dignity and worth. The current political and economic climate is one of deep division in part

because many people disagree fundamentally as to how best to accomplish that dream. For some it requires going back to fundamental spiritual values. For others it requires changing with the times. But regardless of whether an American citizen lives in a so-called blue or red state, or in a state which some may regard as a "purple" mixture, the goal is much the same. The struggle is about means and not ends. Do we stay with the Protestant Ethic and the Puritan version of the city on the hill? Or do we move to a new age ethic and a postmodern version of the city on the hill? Do we radically conserve or do we radically change?

There are no easy answers. But one thing is clear. Sociology is a discipline well situated to provide detailed theoretical and empirically based analyses of the specifics of the overall problem of stratification and the general direction of history. The ability to move along the "ladder of abstraction" from the most "grand" theories (i.e., not GT in the narrow sense) to the most "empirical" bits of data (i.e., not AE in the narrow sense) is absolutely fundamental. We can build on Mills's vision of a sociological imagination and construct a new and improved version, one that takes into account the importance of a Web Approach (Phillips, 2001) and the significance of a Part/Whole Approach (Scheff, 1997). The *combined* Web and Part/Whole Approach can be a general sociological approach that will help to provide more cogent and useful answers.

One key aspect of that new vision of a city on the hill is to be able to see that terms used to characterize "the other side" are almost always simplistic and always misleading. King (2004: 1-9) asks: "Why is Gnosticism so hard to define?" Her answer is that even the best scholars have used the term in such a way as to obscure its theoretical and historical significance. It never was and never will be a specific "thing" or "historical entity." It never had a single origin and never had distinctive boundaries, despite Adolf von Harnack's excellent work. That did not surprise me. Having read Randall Collins and Michael Makowsky's (1998) masterful book on "philosophies" I fully appreciate that all of the labels we use (e.g., "Buddhism") tend to be reifications. Why should Gnosticism be any different? But what did really surprise me was that King also argues quite cogently that the typological approach associated with Hans Jonas and the demythologizing method of Rudolf Bultmann are also not necessarily heuristic.

It is clear that Mills did not approach his discussion of the sociological imagination in order to discover something new. He had settled convictions. He believed in his intuitive judgments. Like a lawyer making a brief, he wanted to convince the jury, his academic peers, as well as the educated nonspecialist. Mills wrote as a public intellectual who was concerned with academic research bureaucratization (AE) and with empty theorizing based simply on logical pigeon holes (GT). He recommended an alternative he called the sociological imagination. But we do

not have to accept *his* definition of that phrase. Instead, if we are truly seeking to build a general sociology that overcomes the unnecessary degree of superspecialization that exists today, we can build on Mills to refine the idea of a sociological imagination. The situation has changed since the 1950s.

We need to be able to visualize both a discipline and an object of study that will make sociology more cogent and more practical. The vision has been opened up by thinkers like Bernard Phillips, Thomas Scheff, and Harold Kincaid. But each of us can contribute to it in our own way, utilizing our own sociological imagination. The cumulative effect could be quite significant. Heaven knows there is a crying need for the kind of "common sense" that goes beyond the run-of-the-mill common sense that C. Wright Mills complained about. It is crucial not to reify our concepts by giving them a meaning that they may never even have had when they were first formulated. It is extremely important that we view theories and methods as "tools" that serve specific purposes in a certain cultural and political-economic context. The social worlds that humanity occupies are a worthy subject for sociological study not limited by unnecessary and premature closure but nevertheless disciplined by a craftsman-like degree of precision. If we approach sociology as a calling that requires of us participation in body and spirit as well as mind, we will accomplish far more than if we think of sociology as merely a job or a career.

### **Conclusion: Open Air:**

Mills has allowed us to open a window to the fresh air that a sociological imagination can provide, and the combined Web and Part/Whole Approach of Phillips and Scheff will continue to improve our robust and healthy outlook. It is a question of integrating body and spirit and not just mind in the narrow sense. The true sociological imagination has yet to be fully developed. The next generation of students will have the opportunity to "stand on the shoulders" of such giants as Weber, Parsons, Lazarsfeld, Mills, and many others still alive and working today. We will have the option of utilizing all eight of the approaches to teaching that Davis (2004) elucidates. That will mean specifically that we will not just be involved in teaching from an ontological framework that is purely "physical" and "intersubjective." We will also have open to us an ontological framework that is "metaphysical" and "gnostic."

The physicist and the linguist can also benefit from Mills's analysis, yet few people outside of sociology and political science have ever heard of Mills. A real "education" (as opposed to mere technical training) requires paying attention not only to the mind, but also to the body and the spirit.

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## Notes

1. This version has been reduced from 18,000 words to 6,600 words. Therefore, the full discussion of the relationship between the Greek concept of *gnosis* and the Sanskrit idea of *jnana* will appear elsewhere.

# BUREAUCRATIC CULTURE AND ESCALATING WORLD PROBLEMS

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ADVANCING THE SOCIOLOGICAL  
IMAGINATION

*edited by J. David Knottnerus  
and Bernard Phillips*



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