**The Sociological Imagination – C. Wright Mills**

Nowadays men and women often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary people are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men and women 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 connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary people do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of people they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them…

It is not only information that they need — in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need — although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called 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. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination — and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it — is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of "human nature" are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise.

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, and how are they related to one another? 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 man 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 intrinsic 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 he has his quality and his being…

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between personal troubles and public issues. This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu — the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various mile overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call "contradictions" or "antagonisms."

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we property look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people 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 a scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honor; 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 milieu and within it to survive the war or make one's death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men and women 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 850 out of every 1,000 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 connection — most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieu 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 and 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 his restricted milieu will be powerless — with or without psychiatric aid — to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him. In so far as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a 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 ingenuity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific mile, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. 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 one another. 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.

**The Sociological Imagination** (C. Wright Mills)

1. What terms are used throughout the article to compare the “intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history”? Identify 4 pairs. (Ex. Biography - History)
2. What are the three types of questions sociologists must always ask?

1. What three examples does he use to illustrate his main idea?

a) Unemployment:

b) War:

c) Urban problems:

Complete this chart with your own biographical situations. I’ve provided 2 brief examples to get you started:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Biographical Situation** | **Personal Factors** | **Social Factors** |
| * Decision to become a teacher * I struggle with anxiety | * Loved school, want to help students * Chemicals/wiring in my brain | * Teachers in family, status/income * Socialization (family coping mechanisms) |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

**Sociology as an Individual Pastime – Peter Berger**

The sociologist…is someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way. The nature of his discipline is scientific. This means that what the sociologist finds and says about the social phenomena he studies occurs within a certain rather strictly defined frame of reference. One of the main characteristics of this scientific frame of reference is that operations are bound by certain rules of evidence. As a scientist, the sociologist tries to be objective, to control his personal preferences and prejudices, to perceive clearly rather than to judge normatively .This restraint, of course, does not embrace the totality of the sociologist’s existence as a human being, but is limited to his operations *qua* sociologist. Nor does the sociologist claim that his frame of reference is the only one within which society can be looked at. For that matter, very few scientists in any field would claim today that one should look at the world only scientifically. The botanist looking at a daffodil has no reason to dispute the right of the poet to look at the same object in a very different manner. There are many ways of playing. The point is not that one denies other people’s games but that one is clear about the rules of one’s own. The game of the sociologist, then, uses scientific rules. As a result, the sociologist must be clear in his own mind as to the meaning of these rules. That is, he must concern himself with methodological questions. Methodology does not constitute his goal. The latter, let us recall once more, is the attempt to understand society. Methodology helps in reaching this goal…Finally, the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical. That is, he is interested in understanding for its own sake. He may be aware of or even concerned with the practical applicability and consequences of his findings, but at that point he leaves the sociological frame of references as such and moves into the realms of values, beliefs and ideas that he shares with other men who are not sociologists…

We would say then that the sociologist…is a person intensively, endlessly, shamelessly interested in the doings of men. His natural habitat is all the human gathering places of the world, wherever men come together. The sociologist may be interested in many other things. But his consuming interest remains in the world of men, their institutions, their history, their passions. And since he is interested in men, nothing that men do can be altogether tedious to him. He will naturally be interested in the events that engage men’s ultimate beliefs, their moments of tragedy and grandeur and ecstasy. But he will also be fascinated by the commonplace, the everyday. He will know reverence, but that reverence will not prevent him from wanting to see and to understand. He may sometimes feel revulsion or contempt. But this also will not deter him from wanting to have his questions answered. The sociologist, in his quest for understanding, moves through the world of men without respect for the usual lines of demarcation. Nobility and degradation, power and obscurity, intelligence and folly – these are equally interesting to him, however unequal they may be in his personal values or tastes. Thus his questions may lead him to all possible levels of society, the best and the least known places, the most respected and the most despised. And, if he is a good sociologist, he will find himself in all these places because his own questions have so taken possession of him that he has little choice but to see for answers…

The sociologist will occupy himself with matters that other regard as too sacred or as too distasteful for dispassionate investigation. He will find rewarding the company of priests or of prostitutes, depending not on his personal preferences but on the questions he happens to be asking at the moment. He will also concern himself with matters that others may find much too boring. He will be interested in the human interaction that goes with warfare or with great intellectual discoveries, but also in the relations between people employed in a restaurant or between a group of little girls playing with their dolls. His main focus of attention is not the ultimate significance of what men do, but the action in itself, as another example of the infinite richness of human conduct…

In these journeys through the world of men the sociologist will inevitably encounter other professional Peeping Toms. Sometimes these will resent his presence, feeling that he is poaching on their preserves. In some places the sociologist will meet up with the economist, in others with the political scientist, in yet others with the psychologist or the ethnologist. Yet chances are that the questions that have brought him to these same places are different from the ones that propelled his fellow-trespassers. The sociologist’s questions always remain essentially the same: “What are people doing with each other here?” “What are their relationships to each other?” “How are these relationships organized in institutions?” “What are the collective ideas that move men and institutions?” In trying to answer these questions in specific instances, the sociologist will, of course, have to deal with economic or political matters, but he will do so in a way rather different from that of the economist or political scientist…

The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives. This also constitutes a transformation of consciousness. Moreover, this transformation is more relevant existentially than that of many other intellectual disciplines, because it is more difficult to segregate in some special compartment of the mind. The astronomer does not live in the remote galaxies, and the nuclear physicist can, outside his laboratory, eat and laugh and marry and vote without thinking about the insides of the atom. The geologist looks at rocks only at appropriate times, and the linguist speaks English with his wife. The sociologist lives in society, on the job and off it. His own life, inevitably, is part of his subject matter. Men being what they are, sociologists too manage to segregate their professional insights from their everyday affairs. But it is a rather difficult feat to perform in good faith.

The sociologist moves in the common world of men, close to what most of them would call real. The categories he employs in his analyses are only refinements of the categories by which other men live – power, class, status, race, ethnicity. As a result, there is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don’t people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms – until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology.

Let us take a specific example. Imagine a sociology class in a Southern college where almost all students are white Southerners. Imagine a lecture on the subject of the racial system of the South. The lecturer is talking here of matters that have been familiar to his students from the time of their infancy. Indeed, it may be that they are much more familiar with the minutiae of this system than he is. They are quite bored as a result. It seems to them that he is only using more pretentious worlds to describe what they already know. Thus he may use the term “caste,” one commonly used now by American sociologists to describe the Southern racial system. But in explaining the term he shifts to traditional Hindu society, to make it clearer. He then goes on to analyze the magical beliefs inherent in cast tabus, the social dynamics of commensalism and connubium [two types of relationships between two individuals], the economic interests concealed within the system, the way in which religious beliefs relate to the tabus, the effects of the caste system on the industrial development of the society and vice versa – all in India. But suddenly India is not very far away at all. The lecture then goes back to its Southern theme. The familiar now seems not quite so familiar any more. Questions are raised that are new, perhaps raised angrily, but raised all the same. And at least some of the students have begun to understand that there are functions involved in this business of race that they have not read about in the newspapers (at least not those in their hometowns) and that their parents have not told them – partly, at least, because neither the newspapers nor the parents knew about them.

It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this – things are now what they seem. This too is a deceptively simple statement. It ceases to be simple after a while. Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole…

People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like the safety of the rules and the maxims of what Alfred Schutz [educator and author (1899-1959)] has called the “world-taken-for-granted,” should stay away from sociology. People who feel no temptation before closed doors, who have no curiosity about the people who live in those houses on the other side of that river, should probably also stay away from sociology. They will find it unpleasant or, at any rate, unrewarding. People who are interested in human beings only if they can change, convert or reform them should also be warned, for they will find sociology much less useful than they hoped. And people whose interest is mainly in their own conceptual constructions will do just as well to turn to the study of little white mice. Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run, only to those who can think of nothing more entrancing than to watch men and to understand things human.

It may not be clear that we have, albeit deliberately, understated the case in the title of this chapter. To be sure, sociology is an individual pastime in the sense that it interest some men and bores others. Some like to observe human beings, others to experiment with mice. The world is big enough to hold all kinds and there is no logical priority for one interest as against another. But the word “pastime” is weak in describing what we mean. Sociology is more like a passion. The sociological perspective is more like a demon that possesses one, that drives one compellingly, again and again, to the questions that are its own. An introduction to sociology is, therefore, and invitation to a very special kind of passion…

**Sociology as an Individual Pastime** (Peter Berger)

1. What is Berger’s main idea?

2. Based on his criteria, how much of a Sociologist are you right now? Explain.

3. What is the benefit to society of this method of study?

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| --- | --- |
| **Sociology IS…** | **Sociology IS NOT…** |
| Sociology is scientific, bound by certain rules of evidence | Sociology is not the only way to look at society |
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**What “Everyone Knows” – Betty Yorburg**

It is commonly believed – “everyone knows” – that the United States is the land of opportunity. Sociologists know that class origin, family, ethnic origin, and community background are most important in the academic and occupational achievements of most children (Hauses and Sewell, 1986; Corcoran et al., 1990; Mayer, 1991). The late-nineteenth-century novelist Horatio Alger was the champion salesman of the “American Dream,” the belief that success is possible for everyone and that those who fail simply do not try hard enough. If we look closely at Alger’s novels, however, we see that his rags-to-riches heroes, Ragged Dick and Tattered Tom, make it by luck and pluck (marrying the boss’s daughter after saving her from certain death, for instance) and not simply by hard work, dedication, and determination. Even in popular folktales, opportunity in the United States is hedged by luck.

“Everyone knows” that poverty breeds crime. Sociologists know that the rich commit crimes that are less publicized but more costly to taxpayers and consumers. Nonviolent upper- and middle-class crimes – investment fraud, embezzling, bribery, corruption, pollution, and the sale of unsafe products – are less obvious. And they are far less severely punished, because their perpetrators come from higher-income groups and are treated with greater leniency because of their higher prestige (Pizzo and Muolo, 1993; Day, 1993). The savings and loan scandal in the late 1980s added $13 billion a year in interest to the national debt. Four years after the scandal became public, two-thirds of the charges had been dropped and only 5 percent of the fines imposed had been collected (Day, 1993).

“Everyone knows” that family life in the United States is deteriorating. Sociologists know that over three-quarters of those who divorce eventually remarry, half within the 3 years after their divorce becomes final (Martin and Bumpass, 1989). On repeated surveys, two-thirds of those who are married (and have stayed married) report themselves to be very happy or very satisfied with their marriages (Glenn, 1990). Ninety percent of families in the United States live near at least one other set of relatives. Most older parents (about 70 percent) see at least one of their adult children once a week, and usually more often. And help between generations – bay-sitting in emergencies, loans, and gifts – is widespread, especially from older parents to their adult children (Goetting, 1990; Hoyert, 1991; Eggebeen, 1992). In times of crisis or disaster, most people still turn to their families first. On surveys, a majority of married people with children list family rather than friends as the source of their closest relationships outside of their immediate households. This is especially true among lower-income groups and among more recent immigrants to the United States. The family is changing. But it will not disappear and, in important respects such as communication, companionship, and friendship, it is stronger than ever (Kain, 1990; Skolnick, 1991; Coontz, 1992; Yorburg, 1993).

“Everyone knows” that unmarried career women are lonely. Sociologists know that career women who have never married are usually not lonely. They are very active with family and friends, as well as at work. Married career women who enjoy their work and do not find it excessively demanding have higher self-esteem and are physically and mentally healthier than full-time homemakers (Spitze, 1988). Married women who are at home full time but would prefer being out working are the women most likely to report being depressed (Ulrich, 1988). The higher self-esteem of successful career women stems from doing relatively well-paying work. In a business civilization, level of self-esteem tends to coincide with level of income (Kohn et al., 1990).

“Everyone knows” that the children of working mothers are more likely to be disturbed, delinquent, or deficient in some way. Sociologists and psychologists know, however, after many careful studies of the effects of maternal employment on children, that there is no hard evidence that this is true (Jay Belsky, 1990; Greenstein, 1993). Children reared in day care centers tend to be more outgoing, and they are usually somewhat slower in developing language skills (they have less exclusive, one-to-one teaching and contact with adults). But they catch up. Warmth, acceptance, encouragement, and emotional support by caregivers, whoever they are, are the most important factors associated with psychological security in children (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). And a little bit of love goes as long way, particularly when this love is consistent and relatively unambivalent. Furthermore, the mother’s emotional availability is not guaranteed by her full-time presence at home (Lerner, 1993).

“Everyone knows” that in the United States we worship the almighty dollar. Sociologists know that the occupations in this country that are consistently rated as having the highest prestige, according to repeated National Opinion Research Center surveys going back to the 1940s, are those involving responsibility for the public welfare. Physicians, college professors, and scientists rank higher than bankers.

And, finally, “everyone knows” that ignorance is bliss – that intellectuals are more nervous, high strung, and sensitive. But sociologists know that more highly educated people have higher self-esteem and better physical and mental health, live longer, and are more likely to report themselves as very happy (Kohn et al., 1990; Williams, 1992). We also know that it is not education alone that affects the general level of health and mood, but the better income associated with higher levels of education. Money does not buy health and happiness – but it helps.

In complex, constantly changing societies, sociologists go out and do the legwork for the powerful, the curious, the thoughtful, and the needy. Speculation, myth, ideology, and intuition are poor substitutes for knowledge if human destinies are to be changed rationally.

**What “Everyone Knows”** (Betty Yorburg)

1. What does Yorburg mean when she says, “Everyone Knows”?

2. How do you think Sociologists get their knowledge?

3. In what ways do you think this article may be different if it were written now, almost 20 years later?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What “Everyone Knows”…** | **“Sociologists Know”…** (give at least one example) |
| The U.S. is the land of opportunity |  |
| Poverty breeds crime |  |
| Family life in the U.S. is deteriorating |  |
| Unmarried career women are lonely |  |
| The children of working mothers are more likely to be disturbed, delinquent, or deficient in some way |  |
| In the U.S. we worship the almighty dollar |  |
| Ignorance is bliss- that intellectuals are more nervous, high strung, and sensitive |  |