

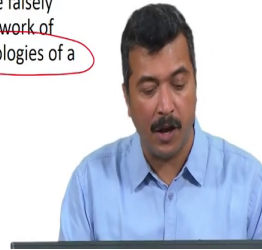
**C Wright Mill's 'Socioloigcal Imagination'.
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Lecture 3**

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C Wright Mills 'Sociological Imagination'



- Understanding one's own life experiences: Essential to understand the relation of the individual with society through a historical perspective
- "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".



Welcome to the next session. Today I will be talking about the sociological perspective of C Wright Mills. In the previous class, we had a brief discussion on Peter Berger's argument about sociological consciousness as a particular ability that people need to cultivate in order to understand the society around them through the perspective of sociology. So, in this lecture, I will be closely following the writings of C Wright Mill's, especially his introductory chapter to the book, the Sociological Imagination.

C Wright Mills talks about the importance of sociological perspective, the kind of a unique standpoint that sociology offers to its reader. As I mentioned earlier, C Wright Mills's essay, 'sociological imagination' have been widely used across the globe to introduce the discipline. One of the very important aspects that Mills highlight in this essay is the connection between individual life or individual biography and the wider social history, which many times we do not make a direct link between. But C Wright Mills argues that it is one of the fundamental points of developing a sociological perspective, that we cultivate the ability to connect our own life with the larger historical processes taking place around us.

Mills in this essay says that in order to understand one's own life experience, it is essential to understand the relation of the individual with the society through a historical perspective. As I mentioned in the previous lectures, one of the promises of sociological perspective is that it

offers enormous insights into one's own life, along with providing information and insights about the society around you. If you are interested to understand more nuanced aspects of your own life, the way in which you are living, your own choices, your own freedom, your own unfreedom, the compulsions, that many times you find yourselves under, the kind of freedom that you declare for yourselves, all these aspects become very fascinating. You will be able to gain much better interest and insights about each of these aspects if you develop this ability to look at society through sociological perspective.

He argues that in order to understand one's own life experience, it is essential to study the relation of the individual with society through a historical perspective. Here one can see the connection between the discipline of history and discipline of sociology as extremely important. Thus, one cannot develop a sociological perspective without historical consciousness. In other words, one cannot understand the uniqueness of her own life, the uniqueness of her own context without placing it in the larger picture or larger canvas of history. Mills opines that 'the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external carrier of a variety of individuals. So, this term the inner life and the external carrier 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'.

This is a very powerful passage which asks you to understand how individuals need to recognize their own experience, their own personal life, through the larger historical understanding of their own society and especially, how you can understand the psychologies of a variety of men and women. This understanding of psychologies are possible only when you keep these people in a particular historical context. In other words, C Wright Mills argues that you cannot reduce people's actions into their own psychological orientations, rather, these psychological orientations emerge from the very specific historical and cultural context.

Mills through this essay argues that a person who develops a sociological consciousness or a sociological imagination will be able to look at his own life, his own inner life, the kind of ideas and the kind of feelings that he has, and his external carrier of an individual through by placing him or her in this larger historical context.

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- "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 her own experience and gauge her own fate only by locating herself within her period, that she can know her own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in her circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one."



- "That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men and women now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening to themselves as minute points of the intersection of biography and history within society".



‘The first fruit of this imagination, and the first lesson of social science that embodies it, is the idea that the individual can understand her own experience and gauge her own fate, only by locating herself within her period that she can know her own chance in life only by becoming aware of all individuals in her circumstances. In many ways, it is a terrible lesson. In many ways, it is a magnificent one’. So, what is this particular passage trying to communicate?

He is arguing that understanding of our own life becomes plausible or it becomes intelligible, only when we try to understand the stories of people around us. Our own life is in no way unique. Our own life is one among the lives of the people around us. So, only by trying to understand our own life, Vis-a-vis the lives of people who are around us, or the people who constitute the community or society around us, we will be able to get insights about the way we are actually living. In other words, we are living, we are part of a society, a society that thinks and acts and behaves in a particular way, a society that is structurally compelled to behave or structurally compelled to exist in very specific forms. And he says that this in many ways is a terrible lesson. Why does he say that it is a terrible lesson? It becomes a terrible lesson for maybe people who think that they are the masters of their own destiny. It also might become a terrible lesson for people who think that they can decide their own fate or they can decide their life the way they want. Here he cautions us that such kind of a confident argument about one being the master of one's own destiny is very short sighted. You are able to make those very tall claims because you do not really understand the way in

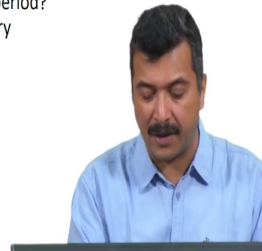
which your ideas and your arguments and your taste and your orientations are already structured by the society. But this in many ways, he says is also a magnificent one.

Why is it magnificent? Because it does not say that you are a prisoner of your own society, or you are a prisoner of your own conditioning. In other words, the sociological imagination also has the ability to open up opportunities for you to break away from quite a lot of self imposed or socially imposed restrictions that we undergo or we experience in our day to day life. So, we will come back to that point later.

The second important point in the essay is that why it is by means of the sociological imagination, that men and women now hope to grasp what is going on in the world and to understand what is happening to themselves as minute points of the intersection of biography and history within the society. This concept of individual biography and history within the society is an extremely important point. It is because our story as an individual, or our story as a community, our story as a person who was born in a particular year as a part of a particular group, as a part of a community who reside in a particular geographical area, or who are engaged in specific kind of economic activity, who have a particular kind of political participation, who participates in particular kind of political processes, who believes in certain kind of cultural ideals and the ideologies, all these things constitute what we understand it as our biography. We can make sense of this biography only when we try to connect that with the kind of our contemporary history. Hence, without locating our own individual biography in the specific context of the larger history, our biography or our story about ourselves will become or will appear to be very hollow and superficial.

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- Some key questions
- 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?
- 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?



Now, Mills lists three sets of interesting questions, which usually we do not ask, in order to understand about our life or the story of the people around us. But these questions or trying to answer these questions will definitely provide you the way in which sociological imagination will be able to present you with the ideas and insights about the society.

For example, the first one, what is the structure of this particular society as a whole? We hardly ask that kind of a question, an ordinary person hardly ask that kind of a question because the very idea of the structure of a particular society is not something that an ordinary person is really familiar with. But sociologists do ask that question and an understanding of the social structure of every society and how social structure changes over a period of time is something very important for every individual. 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? This again, a series of very important aspects that are concerning around this whole question of social structure.

What are its elements? How is it constituted? And why is that certain elements of the social structure is something very important, and how are they different from the previous societies? These are some of the foundational questions about the basic nature of every society. The more you understand about these elements the better we are insightful about the society around us and also about our own life. One of the questions Mills raise in this essay is 'What varieties of men and women now prevail in the society and this period'? What does that mean? Are there different varieties of men and women exist in different periods in time? No instead he asks that why we exist as men and women as human beings? The question points

to the fact that they are very different in different epochs in time, in different cultures, in terms of our orientations, in terms of our understanding, in terms of our ideologies, in terms of our inclinations. So, in order to understand how people are unique in different periods in time, it is significant that we try to locate them in different aspects of the society in the larger canvas of History. And what varieties of and what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? These are all important themes in the larger literature of sociology, the whole question of how people are liberated, what is the understanding of liberation, what is the meaning of liberation, how there are systems of repression and oppression, and what are the ways in which human beings have been held captive under various forms of power relations, how we try to come out of that, what have been the stories of different types of revolutions, different types of resistance, and how did people understand these arguments or these points that people can fight and then come out of this regimes of repression. What kind of human nature are revealed in the conduct and character of the period?

The question of human nature is an interesting one. We must understand that there is no given or essential understanding of what constitutes a human nature. Though we can say in a very broad way that only human beings have culture unlike animals, they know how to make tools, know how to create knowledge and to pass it on to the next generation. But beyond that, to talk about a very specific set of human nature, as something applicable to people across the globe is very difficult. So, what we are confronting in different era is a kind of set of human nature that were discovered by that particular society during that particular time. It is very fascinating to understand how this argument of human nature was discovered, created and presented to the larger society. It is important, thus, to ask the question of the meanings of human nature of each and every feature of society to develop a sociological perspective.

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- 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?



The third set of questions that Mills ask is, where does the society stands in human history? To answer this, it requires a much larger understanding about history, as a larger canvas and whether we are able to place our community or our society in this larger canvas of history. What are the mechanics by which it is changing the whole argument about social change, what is its place within its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining effect and by how it is 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? And I must say that this set of concerns, they emerge from a very specific understanding of Mills time or especially from a very specific Eurocentric understanding of history as having a type of origin and a particular kind of a trajectory, leading to a particular kind of an end.

In other words, I would say that these kind of concerns are really emerging from a theoretical argument informed by the modernization theory, where this idea of becoming modern, the idea of progress, is something very essential in understanding human life in this particular fashion. This makes us to identify our own epoch, our own society in the larger canvas and we understand that every human society has to have an origin and it has to have a trajectory towards mostly a singular direction, which is decided and determined by the idea of progress and the idea of development. But Mills argues that it is very important that we develop these capabilities. We try to introspect into our own situation into our own society, try to understand, where we look at our own society. So, his basic argument, as I mentioned earlier, is to understand these questions, these larger questions in order to place yourselves into that and to keep or to identify ourselves in this larger story, so that you we develop a historical

consciousness. In that sense, we will be able to appreciate our own life and the life around us in this larger story of humankind.

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- The distinction between 'the personal troubles of the milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'
- Personal troubles as within the immediate context of an individual, related to their private sphere and they can probably resolve
- Public issues transcend local environments and individual lives; issue is a public matter; no immediate solution within the personal capacity possible
- Examples of unemployment, divorce, internet addiction etc.



Another very interesting set of questions that Mills brings about is this distinction between personal troubles of the milieu and the public issues of social structure. This is a very fascinating way of getting into the whole idea of sociological perspective. He argues that many times we confuse between our personal troubles and the kind of public issues of social structure to the extent that we are unable to distinguish between these two.

We quite often think that the kind of personal trouble that we encounter is our own making, or somebody else has done to us or you are unfortunate or you must have done some sins in your previous birth or your astrological signs are not correct or your time is not good. So, you tend to attribute a lot of reasons for your own misfortune. But he argues that you need to develop an ability to understand your own personal troubles of the milieu of the important context by connecting it with the larger public issues of social structure. So, he says that personal troubles should be seen as happening within the immediate context of an individual related to their private sphere and then they can probably resolve it. And you know that all of us face challenges, all of us find ourselves in deep trouble. Most, quite a lot of in our personal life, in our professional life, in the social life, we quite often find ourselves in difficult situations. So, personal troubles, Mills argues are something within the immediate context of an individual. It is related to their private sphere, it very deeply affects their private sphere. they can resolve it through hard work, through very persistently working about it, or what or trying or trying to overcome that, they might be able to resolve it. But public issues transcend

this local environment and individual lives and they are the issues is that of a public matter, no immediate solution within the personal capacities are possible. So, our own personal lives or our own personal troubles or difficulties that we find could be a reflection of a larger public issues.

If you fail to understand the connection between that, we will most often end up in blaming ourselves, we will most often end up blaming somebody else, because we will not be able to, we are not able to locate ourselves in the larger social context and then see that our own personal troubles are the reflections of larger public issues of social structure. For example, he gives the example of unemployment. Finding oneself in a situation of unemployment is a very difficult situation. You are educated, you are formally qualified, but you find it very difficult to find a job. And how do we reconcile with the fact? Most often you will blame ourselves or we will blame our own misfortune which becomes a kind of personal trouble that affects your family, that affects your private sphere, that affects your carrier, your family, your ability to spend, your self esteem, all these things are very badly affected by your unemployment if you find it as a kind of a personal trouble.

But on the other hand, if the unemployment rate of your country is very high, there are a large number of educated youth who are unemployed, then you realize that your story has a much larger Canvas, your story of being unemployed is a result of the larger structural aspects or structural processes that produce large scale unemployment in a given time period in that particular context. So, that provides you with better insights to understand and make sense of your own difficult situation and deal with it to live accordingly. Similarly, he gives the example of divorce. A couple getting married and after some time, they find that they cannot continue with the marriage and they have to go for a divorce. This may not be a very pleasant experience for many people, and they can blame each other, they can blame each one of them for not understanding, not loving and for dowry harassment or for n number of reasons. The society around them as well will blame either one of them or both of them for not being accommodating enough or not being understanding enough, being egoistic or 'n' number of other reasons. But at the same time, when you look at the larger Canvas in the society, and if you find that the divorce rates among or within your society is very high, and that is true of the contemporary times in some of the developed societies and in societies like India where, divorce rate is very high among the upper class or upper middle class.

Then you realize that this divorce, why that divorce has happened to your marital life is not only a reflection of the incompatibility between two of you, between you and your partner, but it also has a larger story. A large number of couples are finding themselves to be incompatible and end up in using divorce as an easy way of coming out of the wedlock. And what does that indicate?

It indicates that the very character of marriage has changed, the kind of commitment that people make with each other when they enter into this marital or wedding alliance, its meaning has changed and people have very different ideas about how to lead their own life. So, you understand that your personal trouble, while it can have its negative impact on your life, has a much larger story. The society itself has a structural element of increasing number of divorce. And blaming either you or your partner or somebody else is unhelpful because there is a larger social process and you are just a part of that. You cannot be very different. You are just a part of the social product. And maybe another example is that of internet addiction. A large number of parents would complain that their children are spending so much time with the TV or with the mobile phone. They have lost the reading habit and they are all the time with the mobile phone. Scolding the children or finding fault with the children, or saying that our generation were different, we used to read a lot more, we were more serious, we were not distracted these type of explanations won't help in understanding the reason. This might help you to find fault with somebody, but it really prevents you from understanding the kind of a larger changes, in terms of the availability of internet, the kind of enormous possibility and enormous exposure that it provides you to the younger generation, and their much broader worldview, much, much larger understanding, information, awareness about a wide variety of issues, that has been made possible only by making use of internet.

So, he makes this very useful distinction between the personal problem of the milieu and the public issues of the social structure, in order to have a larger understanding of our own life instead of finding fault with it. This applies to the other set of examples. If we succeed in life, if you are able to find a very good job or if you are able to score very good marks in the examination. Again, sociologists would come and tell you that of course, your achievement is something very great. It means that you are a person of very high intelligence, but you must also look at the larger picture, the larger social and cultural background of your family that really enabled you to study well and make use of your intelligence in scoring marks. Maybe we will discuss that aspects and that themes later.

To understand any issue, this kind of connection between your personal trouble and the kind of public issues of social structure, as pointed out by Mills is something very important and it constitutes to be a cornerstone for developing a sociological perspective. We are concluding this session, and we will meet you in the next one. Thank you.

Keywords: Sociological imagination, Social structure, Historical context, sociological perspective.