

The sociological imagination – C. Wright Mills

Mills saw the sociological imagination as a habit or quality of mind, a way to understand the social world and one's place in that world.

Such a quality of mind frees us from the trap that limits our awareness and understanding to the narrow circle of our daily lives and allows us to:

- a) link the personal to the structural;
- b) locate one's self in the larger social context;
- c) link the personal to history;
- d) locate today's society in the larger context of history in order to achieve an understanding of the intersection of an individual's biography and the larger movement of history.

In this way we are able to link the personal not only to the structural, but also to history.

This gives us the intellectual tools to turn “the personal troubles of milieu” (e.g., unemployment, crime, poverty, racism, etc.) into “public issues of social structure” (i.e., the larger social, political and economic forces that cause unemployment, crime, poverty, racism, etc.). The unemployment of an individual is “a personal trouble of milieu”; but the unemployment of a million individuals is a “public issue of social structure.” When there are clear social patterns in the distribution of unemployment or poverty or crime – i.e., certain social categories are more “at risk” – that, too, is a “public issue of social structure.”

This habit of mind, a sort of lens on the world, enables one to answer the urgent questions of any epoch, and allows one to participate more fully in civil society by asking and attempting to answer the big questions for Mills: what are the major public issues and the key personal troubles of our epoch and how are they linked?

See Knuttila text, pp. 20-21, 405-409

See also, C. Wright Mills. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.