C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination

Contemporary Perspectives

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PART TWO   REFLECTIONS AND ENCOUNTERS

1. *The Sociological Imagination*, 'On intellectual craftsmanship' and Mills's influence on research methods

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This chapter is concerned with Mills's thought on research methods and its influence. Although it is clear that Mills's central interests were not in method as such, he had strong views on some methodological topics, most clearly and systematically expressed in *The Sociological Imagination* (*SI*), so this chapter focuses on that.

As we all know, Mills was already famous – and in the eyes of some notorious – when in 1959 *The Sociological Imagination* reached publication, and some of its themes had already been introduced in earlier works. What was the audience that Mills targeted in this book? That does not seem altogether clear. His earlier books had aimed at a general audience wider than that of professional sociologists, and had sales which indicated his success in reaching their targets. But a book specifically about sociology, rather than the wider society, must surely be aimed mainly at fellow social scientists? He does not say so in his first chapter, but there and later he implicitly takes for granted the considerable general background knowledge of current sociology that is needed to understand his references, as he develops a strong critique of key contemporary theoretical and methodological styles.[1] In the appendix 'On intellectual craftsmanship' he made detailed suggestions on procedure in sociological work, particularly aimed at graduate students.[2] However, the emphasis in the book on going beyond personal troubles is put as if this were a novel idea, while surely the emphasis on looking for larger causal structures was hardly original for a sociological audience. In addition, the marked failure to cite any particular data to support any of the large number of empirical statements that he makes in the introductory chapter might be taken to suggest a lack of interest in a serious professional audience. Thus the intended audience remains somewhat ambiguous.

Here, however, I deal only with his influence on the broadly defined professional sociological audience, since it is at least simpler to find systematic data on that.

This chapter takes it for granted that factors on the reception side are essential to the creation of 'influence,' whatever the factors on the creation and delivery side of the process. Baxandall's (1985, pp. 58–62) fine discussion of the relationship between artists lists a suggestive variety of ways in which the second comer can make use of the work of the first comer, which include 'adapt', 'parody', 'resist', 'misunderstand' … As will become evident, the available data do not always make clear what processes have been involved in the uses made of Mills's work, but I attempt to bear such possibilities in mind, not staying within the limits of the model in which 'influence' is what the first comer does to the second rather than how the second uses the first.

The assessment of influence always raises methodological problems. There are two broad alternative strategies. The first one is to look for similarities between the work of an earlier author in the work of later writers, or to look for later practice that observes earlier precept, and to infer that any similarities follow from influence. This can have serious problems, despite its traditional popularity. Writers can have similar ideas which have been derived independently of each other; similarity may be a necessary condition for the existence of influence, but it is not a sufficient one. In addition, what is counted as 'similar' rests in the eye of the beholder: influence can be experienced and shown in ways which other readers will not find recognizable, and similarities which the authors would not have accepted as such can be imputed by comment-ators.[3] For instance, the perception of Weber as taking a 'qualitative' position involving the use of empathy has led to the historically quite misleading assumption that the early proponents of participant obser-vation were influenced by his thought (Platt 1985). There are obvious dangers in applying current concepts to past practice.

There is also another problem in *SI* for the assessment of Mills's influence, which is that he does not always appear consistent; this leaves it unclear which version should be treated as the criterion of similarity. Influence can be diffused by imitation of practice rather than following precept, but if practice is internally inconsistent, or inconsistent with precept, that makes it harder to know what should be identified as examples of influence. A propos of these problems, a note on some of the key concepts presented in the book is needed. They seem to me not very clearly defined, which complicates the identification of similarities. We look at 'sociological imagination', 'craftsmanship' and 'classics'.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Many sweeping statements are made about this – for example:

> 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 … 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 … The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. (pp. 5–6)

But if it *enables* us to do this, surely it *is* something other than this? And is the 'understanding' to consist of subjective identification, or of empirical explanation? The idea of the relations between history and biography seems to be read in only one direction, starting from personal troubles and reaching large social problems, though to move in the other direction could seem equally desirable.[4] There is a presentist orientation in assuming that we already know the personal troubles; for past history one is more likely to have access to data on the large patterns.

> [H]ow do ideas come? How is the imagination spurred to put all the images and facts together, to make images relevant and lend meaning to facts? The sociological imagination … in considerable part consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components. (p. 211)

This passage seems much less concerned than the first with correct background knowledge, and nearer to 'imagination' in what, in this context, could almost be the pejorative sense of making things up rather than searching for evidence.

Shils's remark, in his very hostile review (1960, p. 79), that Mills 'does not tell us what [imagination] is except to say repeatedly that it is the state of mind which will produce the results at which he himself has already arrived, through its use' seems not altogether inappropriate.

'Craftsmanship'

The 'craftsman' of Mills's methodological world has a rich collection of characteristics, as the quotations below show. This image surely rests on a somewhat romanticized historical picture[5] – as well as one emphasizing the development of individuality rather than the more customary sense of apprenticeship as induction into a tradition?

- [T]he intellectual workman forms his own self as he works toward the perfection of his craft … In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. (p. 196)
- Be a good craftsman. Avoid any rigid set of procedures … Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. (p. 224)

But '[o]nly by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student' (p. 195), so he learns on the classic model of apprenticeship training, by observing a master craftsman at work and observing what he has learned from experience. This master will not define himself as theorist or methodologist, but be a person who deals with particular substantive topics as they require. At the same time, the apprentice draws on his own life experience, and works as an individual scholar, feeling his way along ad hoc as he works on a topic. Is this not potentially contradictory? If the master craftsman's guidance is followed then the apprentice will not simply be devising his own methods to fit his topic.

Nobody could object to the aim of choosing methods and theoretical ideas that fit the topic under study – but how could one evaluate the possibilities and find what these are without having some knowledge of existing ideas, whether to be applied or rejected? Or is one expected to invent them all from scratch? I think not. The field that Mills is most specifically rejecting, that of the survey, shows very clearly how what may have been an excessive commitment to a single method has, just because of that, led to very considerable technical improvement in the method over time. Is that to be dismissed as 'fetishism', when the results are available to the whole intellectual community?

'The Classic Tradition'

Mills frequently refers with enthusiasm to 'the classic tradition', and 'classic' authors, as exemplars. But when he makes statements such as this:

> All classic social scientists have been concerned with the salient characteristics of their time – and the problem of how history is being made within it. (p. 165)

What is he asserting? Is this in effect his operational definition of work he regards as worthy of 'classic' status, or is it meant to imply that 'classics' defined as such on some other basis are found all to have this empirical characteristic as well? On a broader social basis, he seems to regard the group, however identified, as intrinsically having 'classic' status rather than having been selected for that status by the historical processes of social reception of their work. (It will not do as a sociological explanation to say that they have been regarded as classic because their work is so good; why is it regarded as so good?) Attention to the topic in hand might well mean following different lines of work in the 1950s from those of the classical analysts, since there was a different historical situation when they were writing, and now the classical work is already available to learn from without requiring invention from scratch. Even if that were not so, more diversity of methodological approaches had been invented by the 1950s, so there was more scope for choice.

These ambiguities or gaps are to some extent concealed by Mills's fine rhetorical style, which is often very persuasive,[6] but rather lacking in operational detail. We are left without clear criteria for evaluating the merit of his arguments, or identifying examples of his practical influence. This would make it hard to follow the first approach sketched, of looking for similarities.

Perhaps it would help to put his points in more operationally 'object-ive' style? It seems fair to do for his work what he did for Parsons's, so in Table 1.1 I have attempted a little translation, presented in a comparison between 'Good' Mills (approaches as described by himself) and 'Bad' Mills (the same approaches described more pejoratively). This shows up what are, at least in conventional terms, some weaknesses that have a striking effect on their apparent attractiveness. Bad Mills is certainly somewhat self-indulgent. If one felt tempted to give his approach a name like those he gives to the approaches of others, how about 'methodological egoism'? Well, perhaps that goes a bit too far! It is, however, Bad Mills that his sternest contemporary critics focus on when raising methodological issues. In relation to influence, one may wish to ask whether it is Good or Bad Mills who has been attended to. However, Bad Mills represents some styles of work that do not require specific rationalizing influence to appear, which makes it hard to detect effects specifically from Mills, even if his name is invoked.

The difficulties exposed here lead me to abandon any attempt to follow the strategy of trying to detect similarities to Mills's work or conformity to his methodological recommendations. Instead, let us turn to the second broad strategy, which is to look specifically at direct textual evidence for

Table 1.1   'Good' Mills and 'Bad' Mills – a comparison

'Good' Mills	'Bad' Mills
[Y]ou must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work' (196)	Have a narrow perspective that privileges your own experience, as interpreted by you.
{I]t does seem foolish to undertake any detailed studies of smaller-scale areas before we have good reasons to believe that … they will permit us to draw inferences useful in … problems of structural significance.' (66)	Avoid detailed empirical work that might draw attention to themes you have not already thought of; take a deductive approach, without drawing on other sources of empirical data.
The classic craftsman does not usually make up one big design for one big empirical study … designing his work as a series of smaller-scale empirical studies …' (126)	Have uneven data; avoid methods which cover a wide area of your concerns and interpretations, and do not test your broader interpretations directly.
Now I do not like to do empirical work if I can possibly avoid it … Facts discipline reason, but reason is the advance guard … (205)	Pay little attention to potential subjects' views, experiences and approaches to their lives; hold on to what you think you already know.
Avoid any rigid set of procedures … Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist … (224)	Do not learn from the research experience of others, or worry about possibly committing known methodological errors.
To be mastered by method or theory is simply to be kept from working, from trying, that is, to find out something about what is going on in the world.' (120–1)	Do not pass through stages of working intensively on theoretical or methodological areas to develop approaches and skills to feed into empirical work.

influence: citations or declarations of support in the work of the potential recipient of influence, data such as the responses made to questions like 'Which books have most influenced your work?' and so on. This has an attractive face validity, but citations may be of trivial aspects, may be

inserted for decorative legitimatory purposes without the work cited having played any role in the development of the argument, or may rest on misinterpretation of what the author cited meant. In addition, a work may be cited because it supports a position that the citing author already holds for other reasons, so that if there is any causal relationship its direction may be unclear. (We shall see below that even the use of the same words as Mills does not always appear to mean that his ideas have been significantly incorporated.) However, this strategy avoids the problems of the first one.

USES MADE OF MILLS'S WORK

What Mills did is one thing, and what other people have used his work for is another; we turn now to review the uses made of it by others, as manifested by the references to it made in a variety of settings. This is inevitably a crude approach, but the results nonetheless have some meaning worth discussion. The somewhat mechanical procedure by happy chance fits with Baxandall's approach, since initially it does not distinguish between favourable and critical, crude and sophisticated, or correct and misleading comments; trivial and stupid uses of the work count equally as examples of its influence.

We can see in the initial reviews of the book by sociologists that, despite the diversity of those who authored them, there is a broad similarity in the conclusions of many, underlying some important differences; we may take this as potentially representative of the wider sociological reactions of the time. Obviously reviews of the book cannot provide data on its influence, but they may be presumed to have had some effect on the way the book was approached, and to indicate which parts of it might attract attention, favourable or hostile. The extent to which it is treated as about research methods is limited, although the critique of 'abstracted empiricism' sometimes rings a bell. Mills's lack of empirical data where it seems required to support his assertions, and failure to follow his own methodological principles, are criticized; some strong examples are offered of the existence already of the kinds of work that he favours, the uses of relatively bureaucratized social research are explained, and the positive value of a disciplinary division of labour which allows room for diversity is argued. Several of his early reviewers see his famous appendix as simply suggesting that others work in the same way as he did, which de-emphasized systematic work, though one could also say that it does not deal with the stage when the need for systematic work arises. Yet even those who provided a devastating

critique often also express agreement with some of his values and goals, and think it valuable to raise such matters for discussion. It comes across, in sum, as an important book that one ought to read, even if there is good reason not to approve his style of presentation or to accept his conclusions uncritically. That very mixed reception shows in the ways that his work has been used. The contexts in which we have searched for citations are articles in leading US and British journals, methods textbooks, general introductions to sociology, collections of autobiographical accounts by US sociologists, and the *New Left Review*.

Learned Journals

The leading journals are traditional sources for studies of influence; clearly they have limitations, and cannot be assumed to have discipline-wide representative status, but they are nonetheless of general symbolic and practical importance in the field; the two used are the *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*) and the *British Journal of Sociology* (*BJS*), chosen because it has been suggested that there were differences in the US and British receptions. The main aim was not to count the number of references, but to examine their character.

The methods used were constrained by the limitations of the online resources available. The first 100 articles[7] from 1960 or later found from each journal with the word 'imagination' in them were located and then the minority in which it was '*sociological* imagination' have been examined.[8] (The key words may appear only in the list of references, or in a quotation from another writer.) The sample used cannot be treated as a formally representative one, since it is taken via the JSTOR search facility, which does not make public the detailed formulas used to list some articles before others;[9] however, this is self-evidently not simply a date order, and at least my personal biases or interests have played no role in the selection made. The sample of uses of Mills that we are left with has to be taken as just a set of examples, not a formally representative sample even of the uses made in those two journals, but one which does something to illustrate the range of possible uses of his work.

A first point to note is that by no means all the references made cite Mills (or any other author) as their source – only five out of 13 for the *ASR*, and ten out of 18 for the *BJS*, gave the book as the source of the phrase. (Even Hughes's 1963 ASA presidential address, with the phrase in its title, did not cite him.) This is, of course, a clear indication of 'obliteration by incorporation'; the phrase by luck lends itself to a rich variety of meanings, and has entered the general language of sociology. In that sense it indicates significant influence from Mills – but it has

become so detached from Mills's original context that it is by no means obvious that it has carried with it the meanings that it had for him.

A number of the references were so perfunctory, and made in passing without elaboration, that caution was required in inferring what was meant by them. These included a number of those that used the term, but without giving a reference to the book – for example:

- '[I]t greatly curtails the 'sociological imagination', in my judgment, if this moral dimension is neglected' (Bendix 1963, p. 536).
- '[S]ociologists continue to believe that they can fulfill [*sic*] the sociological imagination by looking at one part or another, as lonely scholars, clinging to their preferred methods and chosen paradigm.' (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000, p. 72).

Others drifted in the direction of using the term in a sense which sounds quite distant from that intended by Mills:

- '[Ethnomethodological] initiatives enrich the sociological imagination regarding the nature of the social actor and social action' (Pollner 1991, pp. 371–2).
- 'I leave it to the reader's sociological imagination to conjure up other cases [of use of rootless alien groups as servants to maintain power] … where this approach might bear sociological fruit' (Coser 1972, p. 580).

Setting caution aside, we may say that there are also quite a few sources which seem to mean nothing more by the phrase than the sort of things that sociologists usually do, more or less by definition, or at least that good sociologists do; thus Hart (1994, pp. 22, 24) treats it as what a trained sociologist more or less automatically has.

Other references, even if very brief, show signs of more specific engagement with the idea of the sociological imagination as originally expounded by Mills:

- Pilcher (1994, p. 494) suggests that the concept of the social generation straddles history and social psychology, and so epitomizes what Mills was in favour of.
- Allcock (1975, p. 486) cites Mills's book as important to the growing recognition of the need for more emphasis on history among sociologists.
- Leonard (1968, p. 375) advocates 'a fuller exercise of the sociological imagination' among social workers, to replace the excessive emphasis on psychological and psychoanalytic factors.

Not even such engagement, though, indicates that Mills's ideas were important to the argument of the paper. How important they were is a matter of judgement, but in my judgement only one of the *ASR* papers (Burawoy 2003) made any use of Mills's ideas in its argument, and that only to a small extent, while four of the *BJS* papers used it slightly.[10] Where the book is used, that is sometimes in a minor point made in passing, and refers to an aspect, such as the critique of obscure technical language, that is not of central importance to the article's argument.

Of course the provision of citations to sources which have played only a small part in the main argument is entirely conventional, so these observations are not to be interpreted either as specific to uses of Mills's work or as indicating any weakness in his influence – indeed, quite the reverse. But they do suggest more about the extent to which his work was, at least superficially, well enough known to come to mind when points to which it was not essential arose, than they do about its major influence on the authors' thinking. Many can hardly be read as either critical or approving; they just take Mills as part of the scenery.

ASR and *BJS* are conventionally seen as the leading national journals, but it could be that the citations made in other journals would have some not of the same character. As a small check on this, issues of *Social Problems* (*SP*),[11] which could be seen as ideologically committed to a more Millsian approach, as well as having a narrower remit close to his concerns, have been (more impressionistically) scanned in the same way. Most of the citations are still made in passing, without playing any special role in the argument. A few, though, like Spencer (1973), make rhetorical use of relatively long general quotations from Mills as a summary conclusion to a paper on a substantive problem area, or say that although they make some use of a Mills idea they need to modify his formulation to fit their topic. Then there are others where Mills's work is used more centrally: Derber (2004) shares Mills's rejection of professional sociology, in favour of what is now known as 'public sociology'; Juroku (2004), in an attack on the increasing privatization of public life, invokes Mills as offering resistance to its colonization of ideological spaces by striving to connect history and contemporary biography; Restivo (1988) looks at modern natural science and its wider social role, and sees the sociological imagination as providing a call to arms for social change. There is, thus, some suggestion of a different perspective in *SP*, more favourable to Mills's political ideas, but the citations are still commonly on superficial points and, where Millsian ideas are reused, perhaps more likely to misrepresent them a little by building on them in order to fit authors' current concerns.

General Textbooks

A reference in a textbook cannot in itself be taken as data on the relation between the author's and Mills's intellectual work. It probably says more about the author's perception of Mills's uses by others in the discipline, since a textbook is expected to give some idea of the range of opinions on the topics it deals with. As such, it might be regarded as a particularly valuable source. The students who study these textbooks must pick up messages about what one is expected to know, and what the tone of the right answer will be in the exam, so in that sense there will be a derivative span of influence. Of course, when one looks more closely at individual passages some of them have a clearly hostile or respectful tone which probably reflects the authors' personal views, but may be read by students as consensual.

Introductory general textbooks might not seem an appropriate place to look for the uses made of a book whose agenda is a critique of current sociology, and which is plainly addressed to those who already have some commitment to and knowledge of academic sociology, but it is clear that many authors have seen mention of it there as appropriate – indeed, it often appears as suggested reading in relation to the introductory chapter, where sociology is defined, though one certainly cannot assume that this implies consistent support for the Millsian critique in the rest of the book. Many references to Mills's other works are made in the textbooks; impressionistically, Gerth and Mills's joint work is especially drawn on, sometimes as a substitute for direct use of Weber. One could have little doubt of real influence there, with substantive conclusions given detailed discussion. *SI* does not lend itself to treatment in the same way, especially because it is clearly aimed at people already thinking in terms of making their own contribution to research and social thought, not beginning undergraduates.

The textbooks used are those published from 1960 onwards, appearing first in English in Britain or the US, whose authors' names start with letters up to M,[12] of which copies were found in the Sussex library or the British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), the major British library of reference for the social sciences – not counting more than one edition for any of the many cases where there had been revised editions, since the revisions made do not generally appear to affect the areas of interest here. Of the 67 found, 46 were from the US and 21 from Britain. The US ones are skewed towards the earlier part of the period, with 28 from the 1960s and only three from the 2000s; it is not known to

what extent this reflects rates of production of new texts, as compared with the buying policies of the university libraries from which they were drawn.[13]

These have been searched for the presence of references to *Sociological Imagination* (the book) or 'sociological imagination' (the phrase), starting from the index and any general bibliography, and where there was chapter-by-chapter listing of further reading not included in the general bibliography each chapter's list too has been searched. When a signalled (or clear but unsignalled) reference to *SI* was made with any pretension to convey the content of the book on a point of recommended method, its adequacy as an account of what Mills actually said was estimated. Themes potentially relevant for influence which were regarded as correct included the need to relate biography and history, or personal troubles and social structures, and the orientation to concern with the solution of major social problems. Themes related only to the critique of Parsons and Lazarsfeld/grand theory and abstracted empiricism, or to the general radicalism sometimes mentioned, are certainly correct on the book's content, but do not in themselves contain recommendations of what should be done instead, and so were not counted.

SI figures to a considerable extent in these textbooks, and some of them give it serious attention. Twelve did not mention it at all; the rest do mention it, though some in curious ways, and the references made are sometimes so brief that they are not easy to interpret. Thus four of the books list *SI* as further reading in relation to their first chapter, but without any indication of its content to explain its inclusion, though Fernandez and Barrile (1979) add the characterization 'A distinguished book; what sociology could and should be.' A further one could also have been placed in that category; without mentioning Mills, it says:

> [S]ociologists use a sociological imagination. This means that, while they study the familiar routines of daily life, sociologists look at them in unfamiliar ways or from a different angle. They … re-examine existing assumptions, by studying how things were in the past, how they've changed. (Browne 1998, p. 3)

This could hardly be said to suggest a distinctively Millsian intellectual position, but it can be seen as a version of that, watered down to the sort of thing that other textbooks commonly say in their introductory chapters without any trace at all of Mills. This overlaps with the set of books which mention *SI*, but with questionable correctness, or excessive vagueness or narrowness of interpretation:

- Giner (1972, p. 11) defines the sociological imagination as 'an attitude of mind which asserts the basic interdependence of all dimensions of social reality';
- Bilton et al. (1981, p. 755) describe Mills, bracketed with Gouldner, as anti-establishment and in favour of bringing values in;
- Giddens (1989, p. 750) defines 'sociological imagination' as 'The application of imaginative thought to the asking and answering of sociological questions. [It] involves the individual in 'thinking herself or himself away' from the familiar routines of day-to-day life.'

The boundary between 'correct' and 'incorrect' interpretations of SI is not a clear-cut one! Note, too, the lack of overlap implied between the different definitions, which suggests some difficulty in identifying precisely what Mills intended.

The themes of connecting biography and history, private troubles and public issues, the personal and the structural, are however prominent in the way *SI* is used, and several authors have quite extensive discussions of his ideas or present a general profile of his work. For example, Chinoy (1967) ends his introductory chapter with a paragraph quoting *SI* on the hope of sociology improving society, and under 'Suggestions for further reading' calls *SI* 'An important statement on the cultural role of social science in the modern world', as well as referring to it in a number of other parts of the text; Macionis (1987) calls his first chapter 'The sociological imagination', and presents a full-page profile of Mills with many *SI* quotations, listing as key factors biography/history and structure. Among the US texts, even when favourable comments are also made there are more criticisms of points in Mills's arguments than in the British, but that is of course part of giving his work more, and more serious, attention.

Methods Textbooks

Methods textbooks are a more obvious place to look for methodological influence, so we have scanned a large number of US and British methods texts. Again these had to be chosen in a way which could not be described as systematically representative sampling. Every US or British general methods textbook[14] from 1960 or later found at BLPES was used; that gave 27 US and 15 British cases. Each was scanned, starting from the index.

Mills was a much more salient presence in the US texts, mentioned in nearly half of them – sometimes with considerable enthusiasm. Some of

the mentions are trivial in the sense that they do not lead to any extended discussion, or imply any clear methodological action by the reader – for example:

- Young (1966, p. 124) gives eight lines, in a section on the scientific attitude which gives similar treatment to a number of other authors, to describe Mills's call to use the sociological imagination, and describes the book as a 'stimulating and colorful presentation'. He does not appear further.
- Eckhardt and Ermann (1977, p. 3) merely say that 'theory, method and substance are inseparable. Indeed, as C. Wright Mills once observed, each social scientist must be a theorist and a methodologist.'
- Black and Champion (1976, p. 25) call his description of 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism' grossly oversimplified, but place the book on a long list of 'further reading', and also mention his name on several other long lists of authors seen as taking various stances.

These somewhat perfunctory mentions are of a kind indicating the authors' knowledge that Mills's name is in the air, whether or not they have anything to say to which his work is important. Others give much more serious attention to Mills's particular recommendations. Thus Smith (1981, p. 52), Williamson (1982, p. 31), Phillips (1976, p. 48) and Denzin (1989, p. 62) all support his strategy of keeping files and/or a journal, and some single him out as 'brilliant' or 'vibrant'. The US mentions, though, show a marked downward trend by the 1990s. While one could remember Mills as ground-breaking and important, by the 1990s what he criticized is no longer a newly dominant hegemony. Might this, in addition, be a cohort effect, as the generation of the 1960s approaches retirement?

Only three of the British texts mention Mills or *SI* at all, two of them just to cite his critique of styles of US sociology. (The third, Stacey 1969, addresses some of his methodological ideas seriously, disagreeing with him on the value of small-group studies to throw light on the larger society, and noting that participant observation in a community study had provided data to relate personal problems to public issues.) If one can make anything of such small numbers, one might consider interpreting the fact that Mills figures so much less in the UK than in the US texts as due to the lesser hegemony of the tendencies he criticizes in British sociology. (In his book review, British sociologist Halsey (1959, p. 71) suggested limits to its local relevance by remarking that 'no British

sociologist has either the taste for grand theory or the money to set up as an entrepreneur of abstracted empiricism.')

For Britain,[15] there is another useful source of data. Meetings of groups of university teachers were held in 1968 and 1979 to discuss the teaching of research methods, and for the occasions collections of their course documents and reading lists were made (Peel 1967; Wakeford 1963). In 1968 these varied in their completeness, and this was such an early stage in the development of British sociology that some departments were in the process of introducing a methods course for the first time, or revising a primitive version as staff expanded, and so could not yet give details. However, there were 26 reports, some of them on courses combining theory and methods, and of those nine listed *SI*, quite often in the category of basic or preparatory reading. In 1979 there were reports from 53 universities and polytechnics, not all of them including reading lists; Marsh (1979) transcribed the records of books set to computer, and ranked them in order of frequency of mention. This showed *SI* at the 12th rank, tied there with several other books also cited on ten different lists. (Most of those ranked higher were general textbooks, and much more specifically on practical research methods.) That seems a high rank for a book so little of which is about methods in the conventional sense; however, the 'critical' tone of British sociology was marked, and we may note how strongly that is manifested from the fact that Cicourel's *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (1964) ranked number one, with 32 mentions. Some methods courses at that period, when many British sociologists teaching them had little methods training themselves, spent as much time on denouncing 'positivism' as they did on teaching practical techniques. I would be surprised if similar results were found in comparable US sources of the period.

Autobiographical Collections

Collections of autobiographical pieces by sociologists are a less obvious source of data on the salience of *SI*. The justification for looking at these is that the contributors to such collections have been a fairly mixed bunch, though skewed in the direction of prominent members of the discipline, and were commonly invited to write in some detail about themselves and the influences on their work and careers; this provides, therefore, information much nearer to the point of meaningful production than citations. The 11 identified such collections of US origin have been briefly examined for references to Mills. It turns out that, although there are some such references, they are commonly invocations of his linking of biography and history, made to describe and to justify the

activity of producing such autobiographical work, rather than statements about Mills's influence on the authors' careers and intellectual development. Four of the books had no reference at all to Mills, and no contributor reports vital influence from Mills. This might seem particularly surprising in Sica and Turner (2005), whose contributors were students in the 1960s and 1970s, and took part in various forms of the turmoil of activism of the period; that absence might, however, be connected with their later status as well-known sociologists of a relatively conventional kind. The editor of the earliest collection, Hammond (1964), cites SI, but only as providing another example of a research chronicle like those in the collection; Goetting and Fenstermaker (1995, p. 5) mention Mills, in the introduction to their feminist collection, as one of several authors who 'have extolled the virtues of subjectivity in general or biography in particular as central to the understanding of social processes and social structures'. This makes Mills appear as supporter of a methodological stance important to feminist thinking, which is a little ironic given his general attitudes towards women; he surely had no active responsibility for its development in that context.[16]

New Left Review[17]

The *NLR* was not founded until just after the publication of *SI*, but its constituency clearly overlapped with Mills's. He took a considerable interest in the British movements that it represented, too, and had developed personal friendships with some of those involved with it; it was also for the years to come after Mills's death an influential source of theoretical discussion on the left. It has, therefore, been searched for references to Mills. There were ten in the 1960s (the first of them a response by historian Edward Thompson to a letter from him), and then from three to five for each of the subsequent decades. Miliband's obituary of Mills appeared in 1962 and, as was appropriate for a political scientist writing in a political journal, he concentrated on Mills's politics. *SI* is still briefly mentioned, and characterized as an expression of indignation at the failure of some social scientists to involve themselves in the struggle for enlightenment and social improvement; questions of method are not mentioned. This is followed by Rustin (1963), a sociologist, on 'The relevance of Mills's sociology', a substantial paper which is in effect a review of Mills's collected essays (Horowitz 1963); this gives some space to Mills's broadest methodological points, and relates them to perceived local and general needs, but does not touch on details like those of the *SI* appendix. In the later, more fleeting, citations of Mills, which revealed no special interest in *SI*, he figures as part of the

background, somebody everyone knows enough about for his name and general position to be recalled, but (in a setting where there was long and serious dispute on changing contemporary leftist political and theoretical issues) only of historical interest. The pattern looks like one where there was so much spontaneous sympathy with many of Mills's key political points that his influence was not required for compatibility to be evident, though obviously Britain was in some ways different from the US, while questions of social science method were not salient.

DISCUSSION

How can one account for the paradox that Mills's *SI* has both been enormously influential, and yet seems to have had little or no identifiable influence on methodological thinking? We have shown that, however widely diffused references to *SI* were, they did not necessarily indicate any serious use of Mills's main ideas; it is the fate of extreme popularity to be exposed to many trivial uses, and his rhetorical style, and gift for finding phrases that others could take up, helped them to be remembered and diffused, often irrespective of their original context. Fame is not the same as influence.

I have written a general book on the history of US research methods over Mills's period (Platt 1996). Why did I hardly mention him in that? I think this is because what he wrote about is not what is usually treated as part of 'research methods'. Indeed, in some ways Mills's message on conventional method was that one should ignore it, because other things were more important – a message that will not appeal to conventional methodologists, even if they think the other things are important, and not a helpful one to teach to students. (It can also be used to justify a variety of bad practices, and that remains true even if the familiar alternatives are also bad.) His contemporaries were divided on which side they took on this, and their political commitments played a major role.

Politics apart, his unusual focus on the development of research ideas, rather than the technicalities of how to collect and analyse data, made his methodological ideas hard to fit into the usual methodological discussions. In that sense it is not surprising that they are inconspicuous there, and certainly do not seem to have been influential. Perhaps one should look elsewhere for an appropriate field of work to relate to his? The generally current books I am aware of which seem to have some overlap in coverage are Glaser and Strauss's *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and Becker's *Tricks of the Trade* (1998). Glaser and Strauss make passing references to Mills which indicate that they do not altogether

trust his strategy for deriving general accounts, seen as insufficiently inductive and not adequately tested. Becker makes no reference to either *SI* or Glaser and Strauss's book.[18] The three books are hardly self-consciously part of the same literature, and a quick resort to a few pages of Google Scholar on each shows that they seem to have had different audiences. Most of the references to Becker's book that come up are on ethnography or case studies; those on Glaser and Strauss tend to be on 'qualitative' method, particularly associated with nursing research; those to Mills are markedly concentrated on the teaching of introductory sociology. There are obvious hints here of the role of what is more generally known about the authors' work in affecting who gives their methodological ideas some attention.

Textbooks do not necessarily cover the more sophisticated and up-to-date discussion on methods. Where was the more sophisticated discussion taking place in the 1950s? Some of it was in the philosophy of science, and it is clear that Mills knew about this, because he vigorously rejected it. In relation to the more strictly sociological work, at Columbia he was at the heart of things, but the intellectually exciting work led by Merton and Lazarsfeld[19] did not appeal to him, despite the potential relevance to his concerns of Merton's work on the focused interview, and Hyman's work on problems in interviewing. To be a cause of response to attack is to have influence, and in the field of method this manifestation of the functions of social conflict has indeed sometimes led to the elaboration and diffusion of innovations (Platt 1996, pp. 31–3, 62–3). However, I have not come across any evidence of Mills's critique having this effect within Columbia; it would be interesting to look further at how his interventions were received.

Survey-related work was not only at Columbia, and much technical development of sampling, questionnaire construction and scaling proced-ures took place elsewhere, while there was also in much of this a new preoccupation with research design which was of major intellectual importance. The important new writing on qualitative methods such as participant observation which was starting to appear in the 1950s received a marked lack of attention from Mills. In fact, it is very striking that not a single one of the monographs on method published from 1945 to 1958 (listed in Platt 1996, pp. 14–16) is mentioned in *SI*, even to be criticized and rejected. Work on the uses of personal documents and life histories, carrying on some of the pre-war concerns, was also still being done. One of the people who worked on the use of personal documents, and also attempted to use analytical induction, a strategy that one might have expected to be of interest to Mills, had been Robert Angell. He moved on to work on topics such as that of his 1951 ASA presidential

address 'Sociology and the world crisis', and had worked at UNESCO's Social Science Department on issues of world peace, sometimes using official statistics. Such themes could hardly be closer to Mills's declared priorities, but SI does not mention this work.

At the end of his career Mills was looking at the possibilities of broad comparative study (Mills and Mills 2000, pp. 274, 283) even drawing on national official statistics, but there is no trace of this either in *SI*. He said that 'Some of the very best sociology being done today is work on world areas and regions' (p. 150), though he gave this little more attention in his general picture of what was going on. If we look for any developments in that area, we may compare his career with that of Rokkan, who from the 1950s onwards was actively involved in developing the resources and networks for internationally comparative historical work on important topics, leading in the movement for the setting up of data archives.[20] What has Mills to offer to compare with the idea of a data archive?[21] The Vienna Center, bringing together researchers from each side of the Iron Curtain, was an idea launched in UNESCO in 1960, but Mills did not move in those circles and was probably unaware of that (as its proponents were probably unaware of his interest in comparative work). Both those initiatives drew heavily on the survey research that Mills criticized so strongly.

In addition, there were contemporaries whose work raised broader issues of a kind that Mills thought appropriate, and had even been close to him, who achieved his kind of goal without using the strategies he advocates. Thus Form (2002, p. 215) interacted intensively with Mills in his student days, describes Mills as his mentor, and is favourably mentioned in *SI* (p. 95), yet did not follow the approach he recommends – indeed, if anything the opposite, doing work that was heavily empirical, sometimes markedly quantitative, and starting (but not finishing) with the study of small units:

> My research became increasingly macro level and structural. I did not, perhaps could not, follow Mills's broad, largely qualitative, insightful, critical, analysis of societal problems. I preferred to study them empirically in concrete organizations: the work plant, management, labor and government, the labor market, the community, and in different institutions in different societies.

Although Mills's general argument is that one should look behind personal troubles for the structures underlying them, when it comes to proposing how the direction of US sociology should be improved his ideas were puzzlingly individualistic: things for each researcher to do for

himself, rather than using existing or developing potential new structures, which seems sociologically odd. The attack on Parsons and Lazarsfeld is in effect on those who focus most strongly on one part of the total sociological process for not doing everything; he gives no consideration to the possible uses of specialized work by others. He recommends the creation of a circle of other people who will listen and talk about your work (p. 201), but does not recommend, or appear to make much use of, available organizational opportunities for that. Although all but one of the US sociologists listed in his SI acknowledgements were in 1959 members of the American Sociological Association, he himself was not; if the ASA seemed too much part of what he attacks, he could have suggested organizing through the Society for the Study of Social Problems, or founded a new section. (We may note, too, that of the people whose help is acknowledged not one was known as a methods specialist.) This does not seem like the approach most likely to lead to practical action by others, and may have contributed to the fact that some of the work most compatible with what he advocated happened entirely independently of his role. Most methodological innovations in sociology arose in group contexts, and Mills was choosing to place himself outside some of the significant networks. He has often been portrayed as choosing to move away from professional sociology, and not without reason. The increasingly intense political commitment of his work, manifested in the ways in which *SI* took a stronger line than the articles of his that can be seen as its direct predecessors,[22] meant that his message tended to follow the lines of political networks rather than of purely sociological ones, though the two overlapped.

Although *SI* contains methodological ideas, they were not in the conventional way isolated from political issues, which was part of their attraction to some. It is clear that there was something more to Mills's general impact than approved research methods, given the anecdotes about young people who named their first sons C. Wright. He was a hugely charismatic figure, with a political appeal that fitted the time but had nothing to do his ideas on method. As Flacks (2006, p. 24), who was there at the time and has kept the T-shirt, says:

> Mills's appeal was not just based on his ideas. His language was refreshingly free of the jargons of the established Lefts and of the academy as well … He was in the university … but he was not of it, being bitingly critical of the academic mainstream and strikingly different in pose and practice from your typical professor. So his persona was very appealing to student intellectuals of the time, who ourselves hoped to be in the university while rebelling against the merely academic.

The old left was breaking up everywhere, and something new was needed; Mills responded to that felt need as well as to the need for objects of youthful rebellion. This meant that his ideas were spread through political channels (even if they were ones in which many social scientists were active) as much as through strictly academic ones – which is presumably as he would have wished.

Some of those who were there at the time have imputed wide influence to Mills's work. Berger et al. (1975, p. 345), in their chapter on change, see there as having been 'a resurgence of radical sociology … This development can be dated rather precisely with the virulent attack by C. Wright Mills on the prevailing sociological approaches.' Thus they, like a number of other authors, see Mills as part of a larger movement, sometimes associating him with Gouldner in this. Bottomore in his text (1971, p. 24) said that:

> Within the last decade … sociology has taken a new direction, largely inspired at the outset by the work of C. Wright Mills … [his earlier books] showed the value of historically oriented studies of fundamental structural elements.

… while *SI* advocated 'more adventurous, more imaginative studies of the momentous social and political problems of the post-war world. Since then, the kind of sociology which Mills espoused has enjoyed a revival', and part of the new outlook is a revival of Marxism. (Bottomore was himself a consistent Marxist theorist, with little interest in empirical work.) Interestingly, a more recent edited book (Levine 2004), with the subtitle 'How Radical Sociology Changed the Discipline', has only five index references to Mills, drawn from two of its chapters; perhaps this has something to do with the fact that it is a collection drawn from the history of the Berkeley-based *Insurgent Sociologist*, distant from New York and founded some years after his death. Could Berkeley perhaps be taken as a counterfactual conditional case to that of Columbia, sufficient to downgrade Mills's claim to a special causal status, because student unrest and New Left radicalism would have happened anyway? There certainly was a wider movement, and this makes it hard to say with confidence what can be seen as caused by Mills, rather than simply participated in by him or taken up by other participants.

Lipset and Smelser (1961) saw American sociology more generally as a field of conflict between those aiming to build a scientific sociology and using an equilibrium model of society, and their critics who favour historical explanation, a conflict model of society, and concern with

significant social and political problems. (It is striking how similar this general account is to Mills's, though it in effect contrasts the abstracted empiricists with the classics, or Mills's 'third camp', rather than the grand theorists.) This cleavage is seen as one that has persisted in changing forms over quite a long period; that could be seen as putting Mills in his place as merely another representative of the second group, joining a tendency that he has not initiated. (But were Lipset and Smelser committing the error of imputing similarities not seen by their subjects?)

We cannot give convincing answers to these rhetorical questions without covering a much broader canvas of US history. We can, however, argue on the basis of the material reviewed that Mills's choices did indeed make him enormously influential on sociology in some ways, though it is evident that methodological areas were not prominent among them. Many of his choices of intellectual style did little to further his own longer-term goals, and concealed his debts to work such as that of Lazarsfeld so effectively that they also cut him off from conventional channels of intellectual influence within the discipline.

NOTES

1. However, Geary (2009, p. 173) points out the oddity of the fact that in *SI* Mills fails to mention the 'third camp', seen as following the traditions of classic sociology, that he had identified in his 1954 article 'IBM plus reality plus humanism = sociology' (Horowitz 1963), although there are still occasional mentions of work seen as acceptable; acknowledgement of its existence would make the full picture less unequivocally critical.
2. Here and elsewhere, references to *SI* are given by page number only, without author and year.
3. An example of this is when Mills is described by some authors as a Marxist.
4. However, Mills's invocation of biography often seems to have as its prime aim persuading non-social scientists to realize that their personal problems are symptomatic of wider patterns, which presumably is unnecessary for those who are already social scientists.
5. This can be associated with Ralph Miliband's obituary (1962, p. 16) description of him: 'He only really liked two kinds of people: those who were good with their hands, a carpenter, a mechanic, a gunsmith; and those who were possessed by the intellectual passion, as he was himself.'
6. Denzin (1990) has offered a strong critique of the rhetorical construction of the argument, urging that Mills 'is the hero of his own text and the reincarnation of those dead theorists he so admires', and as such 'released from empiricism' (p. 3), and that 'His *imagination* served to legitimate a version of institutionalized sociological practice that … cast American society as a giant theatre where the performances of ordinary people could be read from the privileged perspective of a bourgeois sociological aesthetic' (p. 13) Others, of course, made very different evaluations.
7. 'Article' was defined to exclude short notes and replies, book reviews etc.

8. It is possible that some equally meaningful references appear without those words – for instance, 'abstracted empiricism' or 'biography and history'. Any such examples found by accident have been noted, but no systematic search has been made for them.

9. An email inquiry to JSTOR User Support elicited this explanation: 'Search results are listed in relevance order by default. This is the relevance as computed by our search engine's formula that includes how many times terms match in a document, how rare the matching terms are, the length of the matching field, and a couple other factors.'

10. A fifth one, by US authors Lipset and Smelser (1961), contained a violent attack on him, for actions such as his active reviewing for commercial publications (and recommendation there of his own books) as much as for the content of his academic writing.

11. The journal of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. This has since 1964 made an annual C. Wright Mills award, for which two of the criteria are that the work honoured 'critically addresses an issue of contemporary public importance', and 'explicitly or implicitly contains implications for courses of action'.

12. This was simply a way of limiting the magnitude of the task. Edited volumes with chapters by different authors have been omitted unless they appear to have been tightly enough edited to serve as comparable to books not presented with chapters by different authors.

13. Really keen critical readers might like to note the consequences of the exclusion of authors whose names begin with V, X or Z, in the light of possible differences in the ethnic composition of the relevant populations. Whether there were any such has not been noted.

14. Those on more specialized topics such as 'qualitative methods' or content analysis were thus excluded, as were any aimed at specialized audiences, and only one edition of any text which had had several was taken.

15. Unfortunately, no comparable material on US courses has been identified.

16. It is possible, however, that his ideas were diffusely more strongly influential in areas closer to his personal interests, and/or to discussions of social policy; the increased interest in biographical and life-course research could not be inspired by his example, but could have been encouraged by his advocacy.

17. Ideally similar data from *Dissent* would have been used in parallel, but unfortunately this was not practicable as only its relatively recent issues are available online.

18. The latter appears in his bibliography, but he assures me that that is a mistake.

19. It is interesting, however, to note what look like clear traces of Lazarsfeld's unacknowledged influence in the use of fourfold tables, and the implicit substruction of typologies, in 'Two styles of social science research' (1953), and in Mills's remark in *SI* (p. 213) that 'Rather than rest content with existing classifications, in particular common-sense ones, you will search for their common denominators and for differentiating factors within and between them. Good types require that the criteria of classification be explicit and systematic.'

20. It is clear that Mills rejects the possible benefits of disciplinary division of labour ('those who would fulfil the promise of classic social science … do not … accept the building-block (or old-ladies-putting-a-quilt-together) theory of social science development' (p. 127). A data archive provides a prime example of the potential value of a 'patchwork' approach, providing more and better data than any individuals would be likely to be able to put together for their own purposes. Some fine examples of another form of patchwork, too, appeared close to his period, before the diffusion of formal methods of meta-analysis. Bronfenbrenner's demonstration of what ahistorical studies of class differences in childrearing practices did not show was published in 1958, Miller's famous *Comparative Social Mobility* came out in

1960; each was able to review a greater range of studies by other authors than they could have carried out single-handed, and to use them to reach wider conclusions.
21. See Mochmann (2002) for a brief history of the movement.
22. One of which (Mills 1953), a very interesting discussion of how micro and macro approaches may be combined, appeared in *Philosophy of Science*, probably read by few sociologists.

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2. C. Wright Mills and the necessity of history

Krishan Kumar

> History is the shank of social study.
>
> C. Wright Mills (1967, p. 143)

> All sociology worthy of the name is 'historical sociology.' It is, in Paul Sweezy's excellent phrase, an attempt to write 'the present as history.'
>
> C. Wright Mills (1967, p. 146)

> To be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regard to one's (its) past, if only by rejecting it. The past is therefore a permanent dimension of human consciousness, an inevitable component of its institutions, values and other patterns of human society.
>
> Eric Hobsbawm (1998, p. 13)

> The past in the present – that is my task!
>
> Modest Mussorgsky, on his opera, *Khovanshchina* (1872–75)[1]

HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY: THE UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

'Sociology is history with the hard work left out; history is sociology with the brains left out' (Macrae 1975, p. 10). This *bon mot* of the LSE sociologist Donald MacRae may seem a little harsh on both parties. But like all such extreme statements it contains a nugget of truth. For many sociologists with an interest in history, and a conviction of its necessity, sociology has seemed a way of doing history by other – less painful or laborious – means. One relies on the historians as the honest day-labourers toiling in the archives, bringing to light hard-won facts and findings which the sociologist can then, with a brilliant flourish, airily spin into interesting theories and generalizations.[2] On the other side,

historians have often been content to leave 'theory' to the social scientists, insisting on the primacy of narrative, if not story-telling. They are suspicious of historians who call upon theory, seeing it as a short-handed abridgement of what is necessarily a long and tortuous process of telling, in which chance and contingency play a major role. Marxist historians have often been the objects of this charge, but so too have liberal 'Whig historians', as castigated by Herbert Butterfield (1951). Most venomous have been the attacks on 'philosophers of history', such as Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, who are seen as having betrayed the very profession of history by their reaching after impossibly large-scale theories of civilizational cycles of rise, decline, and fall (see, for example, Geyl 1955, pp. 91–178; Manuel 1965, pp. 136–62; Mazlish 1966).

It cannot be said that the relationship between history and sociology has become much smoother or sweeter in recent years. True, historical sociology – usually under the rubric, 'comparative-historical sociology' – has found a reasonably secure place in the discipline since the 1960s (Adams et al. 2005b, p. 30). But it has done so largely by becoming a 'subfield', a niche or enclave within the discipline, rather than transforming the discipline, as most of its principal advocates have usually urged (Kumar 2008). Moreover it has done so, as Craig Calhoun has charged with some justice, at the cost of being 'domesticated'. It has sought – with some success – to become respectable mainly by aping the 'scientific' methods of the dominant schools within the parent discipline, rather than stressing the importance of its own modalities of temporality and the specificities of time and place. Consequently, as Calhoun argues, it frequently amounts to no more than 'doing conventional sociology with data drawn from the past' (Calhoun 1996, p. 310; cf. Steinmetz 2005, pp. 143–55, 2007, pp. 6–7; Sewell 2005 pp. 81–2).

The historians, for their part, are in headlong retreat from sociology and social theory. For some time in the past, following especially the revival of Marxism in the 1960s, historians looked kindly upon sociology. Certain works by sociologists, such as Barrington Moore Jr.'s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1969), were treated with respect. The injunction of the historian E.H. Carr, 'the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both' (Carr 1964, p. 66), was frequently and approvingly quoted, by historians as much as sociologists. Historians such as Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, Keith Thomas, V.G. Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm, Lawrence Stone, and Peter Laslett – most but not all influenced by Marx – drew liberally on sociology, and called for a rapprochement or synthesis with it (Kaye 1984). But a later generation has reacted sharply to this sociological turn.

Sociology is now viewed with deep suspicion, and the earlier move towards it regarded as a mistake. Old-fashioned narrative history has made a sweeping comeback, together with an emphasis on the rigorous, archives-based, monograph, sticking doggedly to the facts (Thomas 2006).

There has been some return of 'big history', driven partly by the growth of 'world' or 'global' history in the discipline, and the need to tell the human story on the grand scale (see, for example, Mazlish and Buultjens 2004). A related stimulus is the feeling that the primacy of the West in the world is on the wane, or at least under severe challenge. A number of large-scale histories, taking as their main problematic 'the rise of the West', and its possible demise, have appeared in recent years.[3] But, despite the fact that these could easily have been linked to what we might after all call the 'Weber problem' – why the West? – it is striking that most of these works conspicuously avoid mentioning Weber or indeed any other sociologists, classical or modern (if Marx is mentioned, it is usually in passing, and generally simply to put him down). Moreover, though written in the main by distinguished historians, they are often presented in the form of 'high popularization' – sometimes linked to TV series, as in Niall Ferguson's case – rather than as works for the scholarly community of historians, who indeed often look upon them with amusement bordering on contempt (not unmixed at the same time with envy).

The work, in other words, remains to be done. There is not much we can do with or for the historians, who will or will not rediscover social theory according to the fashions of the profession (which suggests that there might be a swing back in the not too distant future). Sociology too is in a distinctly fragmented state, with no overriding paradigms and no dominating personalities to give the discipline direction. Within the discipline, historical sociology itself has lost the central themes and concerns that gave focus to earlier work in the 1970s and 1980s. Julia Adams and her colleagues speak of 'the kaleidoscopic quality' of today's work in the field, which is a kind way of saying that there is no consensus on either methods or problems in what they characterize as the current 'third wave' of historical sociology (Adams et al. 2005b, p. 64).

Perhaps we should not worry too much about that. The degree of consensus in any period, whether in the discipline at large or in historical sociology in particular, has probably always been exaggerated. Parsons did not really rule the roost in the 1950s, nor Marxism in the subsequent decades. Barrington Moore and Theda Skocpol were not necessarily the leading lights of 'second-wave' historical sociology. The point, as always, is to continue to make the case for historical sociology, to offer it not just as a desirable subfield but as an approach that is in principle transformative of the whole discipline. That is admittedly a tall order.

Professional interests and rivalries, institutional enclaves, the nature of funding opportunities, and other such matters will continue to allow sociologists to proceed in their own different ways, irrespective of the claims even simply of a 'historicized' sociology, still less of a full-blown historical sociology as the centre of the discipline. But, if we really believe that history is essential to sociology, as was clearly the case with most of the founders of the discipline, we must continue to press those claims.

In doing so, though, we will have to confront the fact that a good deal of recent historical sociology has taken a particular turn, one that might lessen its appeal to other practitioners in the discipline (and conceivably also to interested historians). We may need to reformulate the task of historical sociology. It is here that the example, and even more the advocacy, of C. Wright Mills become relevant.

MILLS AND HISTORY

Mills wrote no formal works of historical sociology. That may be why he is scarcely ever mentioned in histories of historical sociology.[4] Other reasons may have to do with the self-fashioned 'outlander' and 'outsider' image in the discipline – one which meant that, whatever his reputation outside, within the discipline his influence was very limited (Brewer 2004, 2005; cf. Horowitz 1967, p. 4).[5] While Mills's *White Collar* of 1951 and *The Power Elite* of 1956 were bound to invite comment and controversy, by the nature of their claims, his call for a historical or historicized sociology, in the absence of some provocative work demonstrating how it should be done, could safely be ignored. Only in retrospect was it possible to see him as a prophet of the historical turn that developed in the later 1960s and beyond.

But even though Mills wrote no work of formal historical sociology, his work is shot through and through with historical understanding and explanation. Thus in *White Collar*, the chapter detailing the rise of the 'new middle class' goes back to the early nineteenth century to trace its origins and to account for its rise in terms of sectoral changes in the economy over time (Mills 1956, pp. 63–76). The chapter on the meanings and philosophies of work goes back to the Greeks and their view of work as a necessary evil, best left to slaves, through the medieval craftsman's view of work as intrinsic to life, down to Marx, Morris and Ruskin, and up to contemporary views of leisure as the end of life, though with a very different meaning and context from those of the Greeks, superficially similar as they might seem (Mills 1956, pp. 215–38). Practically every

chapter in the book necessarily takes a historical perspective, as Mills tries to locate and analyse the condition and outlook of 'the new middle classes' – new, of course, in relation to the old middle classes, whom he therefore also has to describe and situate in their different historical context (Mills 1956, pp. 112–41).

In *The Power Elite*, a historical understanding is equally omnipresent, though once more blended with the presentation of present–day facts and tendencies.[6] Thus in his account of the 'Metropolitan 400', the American upper class families, he looks at their evolution since the American Civil War, their passage through the 'Gilded Age' of the 1880s, and their consolidation as a class in the 1920s. Only then does he describe their current way of life, the elite schools, clubs and universities that they all share (Mills 1959, pp. 47–70). Like E.P. Thompson, Mills is aware that classes are not static but dynamic entities, made and shaped by time and historical experiences. The chapter on 'The Warlords', chronicling the rise of the military as a power base in American society, contrasts the early republic, with its distrust of military power and the imposition of firm civilian control over it, to the present period of 'military ascend-ancy' and the widespread acceptance of 'a military definition of reality' (Mills 1959, pp. 171–98). The chapter on 'Mass Society' compares the power of 'public opinion' in the eighteenth century with the rise of a manipulated mass opinion in the twentieth century: 'the classic com-munity of publics is being transformed into a society of masses' (Mills 1959, p. 300). Again and again, it is the comparison and contrast between past and present that gives force to the case that Mills wishes to present.

Even in his least historically oriented study, *The New Men of Power* (1948), based mainly on surveys of 'America's labor leaders', Nelson Lichtenstein has shown how thoroughly it is penetrated by the historical understanding of the labour movement that Mills derived from the lectures of the famous labour historian Selig Perlman, whose course Mills took while a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin (Lichten-stein 2001: xii). Even though, at the time, Mills disagreed with Perlman's analysis of the predominantly 'job-conscious' nature of American union-ism, he was impressed by Perlman's institutional analysis, which indi-cated the always conservative leaning of the unions, their tendency to act as a 'delivery mechanism' on behalf of American capitalism. In later life, disillusioned with the labour leaders, Mills came very close to this view himself.

At the University of Maryland too, where Mills got his first teaching job, he became friendly with a number of young historians – Kenneth Stamp, Frank Freidel, Richard Hofstadter – who instructed him in the finer points of American and labour history. Something of the influences

of all of these can be seen in the early essays on labour and politics that are to be found in the collection *Power, Politics, and People* (Mills 1963). It was also during these years at Maryland (1941–5) that Mills collaborated with Hans Gerth on two works in which historical concerns stand out: the edition of Max Weber's writings, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1946), and *Character and Social Structure* (1953).[7]

But of course it is to *The Sociological Imagination* that we must turn for Mills's fullest statement of the role of history in sociology. Here is the canonical statement that 'social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersection within social structures … [T]hese three – biography, history, society – are the coordinate points of the proper study of man' (Mills 1967, p. 143). But we should beware of treating these three entities as separable, to be studied, say, primarily by the disciplines of psychology, history, and sociology. This disjunction would be exactly the opposite of what Mills proposes. What he advocates is an entirely integrated and unified sociology (or social science) which is indeed centrally informed by a historical consciousness, whether the focus is on society or the individual:

> The problems of our time – which now include the problem of man's very nature – cannot be stated adequately without consistent practice of the view that history is the shank of social study, and recognition of the need to develop further a psychology of man that is sociologically grounded and historically relevant. Without use of history and without an historical sense of psychological matters, the social scientist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought now to be the orienting points of his studies. (Mills 1967, p. 143)

Sociologists need history and historians, therefore, for the proper discharge of their task. But they must not take the history written by historians as necessarily the last word on the matter, to be taken as given. Many historians refuse to acknowledge that 'to keep the human record straight' is no simple matter. It requires more than simply 'telling the facts', a 'deceptively simple statement' in any case. History, with its inevitable selection of facts, the problems of interest and bias, the changing frameworks of interpretation, is in fact 'one of the most theoretical of the human disciplines'. Historians' innocence or indifference in the face of this poses a challenge to the sociologist. 'If historians have no "theory", they may provide materials for the writing of history, but they cannot themselves write it' (Mills 1967, p. 145). Mills's proposal is therefore far bolder than many people realize. He is not simply requiring sociologists to use or study history; he is inviting them to write it, where and when it seems the historians may have failed in

their task. In the end, and for the purposes of good sociology, history is too important to be left to the historians.

Mills rejects the view, advanced by 'a few misguided "humanists"', that history is the master discipline, that it contains all social science.[8] Rather he suggests that 'the productions of historians may be thought of as a great file indispensable to all social science', and that 'every social science … requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials' (Mills 1967, p. 145).[9] This suggests a certain division of labour – always with the proviso that if the historians don't do their job properly, sociologists might need to take over, or at least fill in the gaps. Sociologists, engaged often on comparative exercises, or looking at long-term trends, cannot generally undertake the primary research in the archives that is the source of much of the historian's work. We are generally reliant on what are taken to be the best or most scholarly publications by historians. Historians, for their part, if they are to engage with theory as Mills insists they should, will need to look to sociologists for at least some of their ideas (so that the suggested division of labour mischievously noted by Donald MacCrae may not be so wide of the mark after all!).

Mills suggests four main reasons for the 'intimate relation of history and sociology'. First, in the very selection of topics, in the very statement of 'what-is-to-be explained', sociologists need knowledge of 'the historical varieties' of human society (Mills 1967, p. 146). Comparison is implicit in much of what sociologists try to explain, even if they are not always fully aware of that. And while anthropology can also supply us with a range of alternative societies and practices to examine, if these are too dissimilar from the cases we are interested in then the comparisons lose force. Comparison, to be fruitful, involves similarities as well as differences. The historical record of particular societies or civilization can provide that similarity or continuity while at the same time exhibiting all the variety that history provides.

Mills gives as an example the question of explaining 'political indifference' or 'political apathy' in contemporary Western societies. To understand this, studies of 'the political psychology of voters' and the like are unhelpful and misleading. What one needs to examine are the different qualities and constitutions of 'publics' and 'public opinion' at different times. 'Indifference' meant a quite different thing in societies in which the expectations of political involvement were non-existent or low, and different again when it was restricted to a relatively small section of the population, the educated public of what we, following Habermas, might call the 'bourgeois public sphere'. The development of mass society, the growth of systems of mass communication, and all the

apparatus of 'opinion formation', change significantly the meaning that we should attach to concepts like 'political indifference'. 'To understand "political indifference", to explain it, to grasp its meaning for modern societies require that we consider the quite various types and conditions of indifference, and to do that we must examine historical and comparative materials' (Mills 1967, pp. 148–9; cf. p. 134).

The second reason for taking history seriously is that 'a-historical studies usually tend to be static or very short-term studies of limited milieux' (Mills 1967, p. 149). The familiarity of this charge, frequently levelled at sociological studies by historians, should not blind us to its force. 'Presentism' and short-termism are the bane of sociological research, not helped by the fact that it is often research of this kind that it is most easy to fund (usually because it claims to deal with some topical 'social issue' or problem which can be 'fixed' by a sufficient injection of funds for fieldwork or social surveys). Mills was a relentless opponent of this kind of research, which was one reason why he eventually parted company with Paul Lazarsfeld and the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, where he worked for several years (Brewer 2004, p. 321; Trevino 2012, p. 33). Lazarsfeld is indeed singled out as among 'the more sophisticated spokesmen' for the school of 'abstracted empiricism' that Mills castigates so mercilessly (Mills 1967, pp. 59–64). One of its leading traits is precisely its blindness to the 'historical social structures' within which it guilelessly carries out its studies (Mills 1967, p. 68).

For Mills, history and the long view or long term were necessary for the understanding of the working of 'structure', 'the most inclusive working unit with which social scientists deal' (Mills 1967, p. 134).

> We more readily become aware of larger structures when they are changing, and we are likely to become aware of such changes only when we broaden our view to include a suitable historical span … Awareness of structure, in all the meanings of this central term, as well as adequate statement of the troubles and problems of limited milieu, require that we recognize and that we practice the social sciences as historical disciplines. (Mills 1967, p. 149)

Even when we consider society in static terms, we have to see that in any given case we are dealing with a historically formed entity, for '[T]he image of any society is an historically specific image'. This becomes even more important when we consider social change, that is, change in social structure, and the mechanisms by which this comes about. For these mechanisms – which following John Stuart Mill, Mills calls

'principia media' – are not timeless and invariant but themselves creations of historically specific eras. *Pace* Comte, Spencer, Marx and others,

> we do not know of any universal principles of historical change; the mechanisms of change we do know vary with the social structure we are examining. For historical change *is* change of social structures, of the relations among their component parts. Just as there is a variety of social structures, there is a variety of principles of historical change. (Mills 1967, p. 150)[10]

Force and violence, for instance, were principal mechanisms in the creation of New World social structures in the Americas; scientific ideas, technology, and new urban forms might equally be seen as the principia media of modern Western societies.

Mills's third reason for advocating a historical approach is that it can help avoid parochialism, and encourage comparisons, especially when one comes to deal with unfamiliar societies. For when one studies '"his own country", he has often smuggled in the history; knowledge of it is embodied in the very conceptions with which he works.' Moving outside one's own country forces historical awareness on one, so enhancing one's understanding of one's own society.

> Comparative study and historical study are very deeply involved with each other. You cannot understand the underdeveloped, the Communist, the capitalist political economies as they exist in the world today by flat, timeless comparisons. You must expand the temporal reach of your analysis. To understand and to explain the comparative facts as they lie before you today, you must know the historical phases and the historical reasons for varying rates and varying directions of development and lack of development … Thus the historical viewpoint leads to the comparative study of societies: you cannot understand or explain the major phases through which any modern Western nation has passed, or the shape it has assumed today, solely in terms of its own national history … [T]he mind cannot even formulate the historical and sociological problems of this one social structure without understanding them in contrast and in comparison with other societies. (Mills 1967, pp. 150–1)[11]

Mills's fourth specific reason for promoting the cause of history in sociology also has to do with the avoidance of a certain sort of narrowness and provincialism. We must resist the temptation to freeze the flow of history, to abstract a problem or practice from history for 'scientific' dissection and analysis. 'Only by an act of abstraction that unnecessarily violates social reality can we try to freeze some knife-edge

moment.' Everything we study is subject to change, and that awareness needs to colour our selection of our analytical tools as well as our general understanding of the object of study. That means, in the first instance, recognizing and studying *trends*, short-term and, especially, long-term. 'Longer-term trends are usually needed if only in order to overcome historical provincialism: the assumption that the present is a sort of autonomous creation' (Mills 1967, p. 151).

Mills points out that in fact, ever since the classical sociologists of the nineteenth century, the central question in sociology has been the peculiarity and uniqueness of modern society, specifically as that has been constituted in the West. That has pointed the way to a consideration not just of long-term trends but of epochal transitions, such that

> most classic problems of modern social science … have, in fact, had to do with one rather specific historical interpretation: the interpretation of the rise, the components, the shape, of the urban industrial societies of the Modern West – usually in contrast with The Feudal Era. (Mills 1967, p. 152; cf. Abrams 1982, p. 4)[12]

Maine, Tönnies, Weber, Saint-Simon, Spencer, Durkheim, Redfield and others, with their schematic contrasts of types of society – 'status' to 'contract', 'militant' to 'industrial', 'mechanical' to 'organic', 'sacred' to 'secular', and the rest – are all using 'historically rooted conceptions', however generalized their use and even if there is no examination of their historical underpinnings.

This last observation is particularly important. It is quite normal among sociologists to assume that they know what 'the past' was. After all, Durkheim, Tönnies, Spencer and others have told us so, in their sweeping dichotomies contrasting past with present, 'tradition' with 'modernity.' As Craig Calhoun says,

> the construction of the canon shaped the standard historical views of most sociologists – these have come not so much from the study of history as from the study of what Weber, Durkheim, and other classical theorists have had to say about history. (Calhoun 1996, p. 321; cf. also Kumar 1978, pp. 45–63)

As a result there are some extraordinary views prevailing among even quite sophisticated sociologists as to what 'feudalism' was, or what really went on in 'ancient society.' The classical sociologists – Marx and Weber especially – actually did a considerable amount of exemplary historical work. But when they came to express the results in the form of general theory, they necessarily had to abbreviate their researches, express them in terse, schematic, form. It is these formulations that are learned by most

sociologists, thereby placing them doubly at a distance from the original historical sources. Add to that the increasing tendency for historical sociologists to go to other historical sociologists, rather than historians, for their historical data and historical knowledge, and the problem is worse compounded (Abbott 1994).

Mills's four reasons for making sociology historical all remain compelling. To these he adds two more general observations. One is that 'we must often study history in order to get rid of it' (Mills 1967, p. 154). It was one of his favourite sayings, to which he returns a number of times. It echoes a famous remark of the American philosopher George Santayana, that 'those who know no history are condemned to repeat it'. Related and more popular expressions – 'the dead hand of the past', 'the burdens of history' – refer to much the same thing. What all these point to is the fact that ignorance of history will come to haunt the present in its plans and purposes. 'Nothing that has not yet been done', said the philosopher Francis Bacon, 'can be done, except by means that have not been tried'. History does not provide recipes for future action; but without a knowledge of history, without an understanding of the successes and failures of the past, we confront the present and future with a misplaced and dangerous degree of confidence (or perhaps with an equally disabling lack of it). As Mills puts it, 'rather than "explain" something as "a persistence from the past", we ought to ask, "why has it persisted?"' (Mills 1967, p. 154). What is the chain of historical causation that has allowed this or that feature, this or that institution, to continue in being? What function is being served by its persistence? Merely to talk of 'survivals', as in the anthropology of old, is of course to beg the question.

This leads to Mills's second general observation, quoted in the epigraph to this paper, when Mills says that 'all sociology worthy of the name is "historical sociology"'. He immediately follows it with the sentence: 'It is, in Paul Sweezy's excellent phrase, an attempt to write "the present as history"' (Mills 1967, p. 146). In the frequent quotation of the first sentence, not enough attention has been paid to the second. And yet in some ways it may be the most important part of Mills's contribution to the methodology of historical sociology. For it points to one of the most fundamental reasons for doing historical sociology, for making sociology historical. It points to the linkage between past and present as the meeting point of history and sociology.

There are many statements, by historians and philosophers, of this fundamental nexus. It is implied in the famous saying of the Victorian historian, Edward Freeman, that 'history is past politics, and politics is present history' (in Burrow 1983, p. 163). It is there in the equally

famous saying of the philosopher R.G. Collingwood, that all history is present or contemporary history, that 'the past which an historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present' (Collingwood 1978, p. 97). E.H. Carr puts it somewhat differently but also stresses the connection between past and present: 'The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the present' (Carr 1964, p. 26). A particularly good formulation, as so often, comes from Eric Hobsbawm, in his *The Age of Empire*. Stating that he intends 'to trace the root of our present back into the soil of the past', he continues:

> The relation between past and present is central to the preoccupations both of those who write and of those who read history. Both want, or should want, to understand how the past has become the present, and both want to understand the past, the chief obstacle being that it is *not* like the present. (Hobsbawm 1987, p. 8)

These statements are all by historians, or philosophers of history. One looks in vain for a similar understanding among historical sociologists. On the contrary, one of the most pronounced and, when one thinks about it, astonishing tendencies among sociologists is precisely not to make the connection between past and present. That was not true of earlier sociologists. Marx in *Capital*, and Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, two of the greatest works of historical sociology ever written, were perfectly clear that what they were doing was investigating the origins of the present – their present, the present of modern Western capitalism. So too, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, was Alexis de Tocqueville – not so much in *Democracy in America* as in his great historical study, the *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution,* in which the spotlight is very much on the France of his day.[13]

Not so our present-day historical sociologists, in the main. There have been some very good recent works by historical sociologists. To take some American examples, these include Thomas Ertman's *Birth of the Leviathan* (1997); Richard Lachmann's *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves* (2000); Philip Gorski's *The Disciplinary Revolution* (2003); Julia Adams's *The Familial State* (2005). A noticeable feature of these works is that they deal almost exclusively with the early-modern period, which itself gives them a certain distance from the present. But the selection of a remote period by itself would not matter. Ronald Syme was able to write a brilliant study, *The Roman Revolution* (1939), which dealt with

imperial Rome but yet had a clear message for the Europe of the 1930s. There are plenty of works dealing with ancient and medieval history that shed an illuminating light on aspects of our present.

It is this that is lacking in the works mentioned above. They seem to feel that their duty is done if they give a theoretically satisfying account of state-building in the medieval or early modern period, or the nature of family capitalism in seventeenth-century Holland, or the effects of Calvinism on state development in some northern European countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. No attempt is made to trace the consequences of these developments on the later history of these societies. No attempt is made to show why the selection of period or even topic might be important in helping us understand how we got to where we are today. It is almost as if the sociologists were saying to the historians: 'Look, we too can do history – in fact we can do it better than you, because we have theory!'

This is a very strange state of affairs. If there is one thing – perhaps the only important thing – that distinguishes historians and sociologists it is that historians on the whole deal with the past and we, the sociologists, deal with the present. Of course, as we have already seen with Mills, understanding the present depends crucially on examining the past. But nevertheless the past is mainly important to us – the sociologists – for the light it sheds on the present, not for its own sake (however much in our spare time we might wish to curl up with a well-written historical work or a historical novel). We should not aim simply to take over from the historians. They, if they wish, may disdain concern for the present. That is their prerogative (though the best of them do not adopt this view). For us the task is to understand our own world, in its own time. That should be the real justification and purpose of historical sociology, however remote in time or place the subject it chooses to study. Here is where the real division of labour between history and sociology lies. We should not simply be aiming to outdo the historians at their own game. Mills's concern with 'the present as history' directs us precisely to where we need to go.

TOCQUEVILLE AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

In this last section I wish to consider Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* of 1856 (Tocqueville 1966) as an exemplary case of historical sociology. I want to argue that not only did Tocqueville give a brilliant account of one of the key events of modern French history; he did so in such a way that he was able to cast an

illuminating light on many of the social and political questions of his own day, so that the work is as much a contribution to sociology as to history. This is confirmed by the frequent use of many of the insights in this work by sociologists and others looking at revolutions, social protest, social movements, and many other aspects of politics and society (see, for example, Arendt 1963: *passim*).

Tocqueville's study of the French Revolution is, as is well known, unfinished. A second volume was sketched which would have dealt with the Revolution itself, the momentous series of events that is conventionally dated as beginning with the calling of the Estates-General in 1789 and that ends with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 (Tocqueville 2001). What we have, in the first volume, is a study of the origins and causes of the French Revolution in the life and body of the *ancien régime*, society as it was before the Revolution. This in itself has been highly influential.[14] Few today would study the French Revolution, or any major revolution, in terms of the aims and action of the revolutionaries themselves. They, the Robespierres and Lenins, usually come upon the scene when the old system is already tottering or indeed has already collapsed. They are not the cause of the collapse. The causes of the Revolution, Tocqueville shows, lie deep in the very heart of the old society, among the classes and institutions that are central to its life. It is indeed in the problems afflicting the monarchy, and in its relations with what would normally be considered the pillars of monarchical support, the clergy of the First Estate and the nobility of the Second Estate, that Tocqueville finds the source of the ideas and movements that would finally bring about the downfall of the *ancien régime*. It is the concerns and struggles at the very top of society, and not the demands of the Third Estate of bourgeois and other commoners, that are responsible for the fatal weakening of the system, to the point where a number of short-term precipitating factors were able to bring about the final collapse.

Tocqueville's first point therefore is that the causes of revolution are often to be found in the struggles between elites at the top of society rather than in struggles between the elites and the masses or common people, as is so often thought. He shows how, in response to the desperate attempts by the monarchy to reform the system of taxation and administration, the *parlements*, the preserve of the aristocracy, launched a nation-wide challenge to the power of the crown, in the process issuing radical and even revolutionary proclamations of which they were, eventually, themselves the victims.

Tocqueville's second point is to question the commonsense view that revolutions occur in a situation of misery, when people are ground down to the point where any further suffering is intolerable, and when,

therefore, they are driven to take up arms against their oppressors. Tocqueville shows that, on the contrary, eighteenth-century France was a period of economic progress for all classes, and that the peasantry in particular had benefited greatly from the general loosening of feudal obligations and impositions. That was indeed what made the remaining ones so galling. It was in this respect that France distinguished itself from other contemporary European states, where conditions were generally very similar. In France, the loosening of the ties of feudalism and the wholesale questioning of the authority of the *ancien régime* had gone further than in any other European country. That was why the Revolution broke out first in France, and not elsewhere (Tocqueville 1966, p. 51). Contemplating this situation, Tocqueville was led to make one of his most famous statements, one put to innumerable uses:

> It is not always when things are going from bad to worse that revolutions break out. On the contrary, it oftener happens that when a people which has put up with an oppressive rule over a long period without protest suddenly finds the government relaxing its pressure, it takes up arms against it. Thus the social order overthrown by a revolution is almost always better than the one immediately preceding it, and experience teaches us that generally speaking, the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways. Only consummate statecraft can enable a King to save his throne when after a long spell of oppressive rule he sets to improving the lot of his subjects. Patiently endured so long as it seems beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds. For the mere fact that certain abuses have been remedied draws attention to the others and they now appear more galling; people may suffer less, but their sensibility is exacerbated. At the height of its power feudalism did not inspire so much hatred as it did on the eve of its eclipse. (Tocqueville 1966, p. 196)[15]

A reforming monarchy, a resistant aristocracy and clergy, and an economic and social situation in which life for the majority was getting easier: these are the ingredients that Tocqueville identifies as the key factors in bringing about the revolution. All that was needed to bring the cauldron to the boil was the cost to the French state of helping the American colonists against the British, and two or three years of successively bad harvests. A bankrupt monarchy without the support of its natural allies, a people for whom prosperity and well-being were suddenly disrupted, made it possible for a cascading series of events to bring on a revolution in which clergy, aristocracy, and monarchy all but perished. That was the French Revolution.

It is unnecessary here to list the theories and approaches to the study of revolution – and not just revolution – that have been influenced by

Tocqueville's account.[16] After it, revolution could not, or at least should not, have been seen in the same light as formerly. A whole sociology of revolution was implicit in its manner of analysis. But Tocqueville was not just interested in providing a theory of revolution. He was acutely aware that the French Revolution was the great event not just of modern French history but also of modern world history. It had introduced something new in the world, something, he thought, akin to the force and power of the great religions of old.

> No previous political upheaval, however violent, had aroused such passionate enthusiasm, for the ideal the French Revolution set before it was not merely a change in the French social system but nothing short of a regeneration of the whole human race. It created an atmosphere of missionary fervour and, indeed, assumed all the aspects of a religious revival – much to the consternation of contemporary observers. It would perhaps be truer to say that it developed into a species of religion, if a singularly imperfect one, since it was without a God, without a ritual or promise of a future life. Nevertheless, this strange religion has, like Islam, overrun the whole world with its apostles, militants, and martyrs. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 43–4)

Here too of course Tocqueville has been enormously influential, in the study of the 'political religions' of the modern world, Communism being perhaps the best example. Durkheim's account of civil religion too, and his use of the French Revolution to illustrate the rituals and festivals of the civil religion, hark back to Tocqueville as much as to Rousseau. Indeed in its stress on episodes of 'collective effervescence' it seems to owe more to Tocqueville than Rousseau (Durkheim 1995, pp. 215–16, 429–30).

The 'world-historic' role of the French Revolution has been much commented on (for example, *Social Research* 1989). But Tocqueville also had a more immediate interest, in the impact of the Revolution on the political life and manners of the France of his own day. In considering this, he was once more driven back into the politics and culture of the *ancien régime*, where so many of the seeds of the Revolution were born.

One of Tocqueville's most celebrated accomplishments was to show that the Revolution, far from marking a rupture with the past, was in fact in many ways a continuation and culmination of tendencies that had their origins deep in the society of the *ancien régime*. This too is an insight that has been applied to many other cases of revolution. But Tocqueville also had a particular message for the French people of his day. He wanted to show them that the bureaucratized and centralized state under which they lived was not only or even mainly the creation of the

Revolution, but was in some sense the result of a centralizing movement that began with the reforming monarchy of the old regime.

> During his entire reign Louis XVI was always talking about reform, and there were few institutions whose destruction he did not contemplate before the Revolution broke and made an end of them … [a] great many practices we associate with the Revolution had had precedents in the treatment of the people by the government during the last two centuries of the monarchy. The old order provided the Revolution with many of its methods; all the Revolution added to these was a savagery peculiar to itself. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 207, 211)

The centralization of power had preceded the Revolution, through the measures of a monarchy desperately seeking to assert itself against the entrenched opposition of the first two estates, the clergy and aristocracy. These measures had included the institution of the *intendants*, the sidelining of the *parlements*, and the establishment of a new system of 'administrative' courts to try state officials. The Revolution simply continued this process, completing what the monarchy of the *ancien regime* had begun.

> It was not, as is often supposed, the principles of 1789 that triumphed at the time (and are still incorporated in the French administrative system); on the contrary, it was the principles of the old order that were revived and have been endorsed by all successive governments … [T]he reason why the principle of centralization of power did not perish in the Revolution is that this very centralization was at once the Revolution's starting-off point and one of its guiding principles. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 87–8)

Such a long-standing and deep-seated movement, Tocqueville argues, has had a permanent and well-nigh ineradicable effect on French political life.

> We have had several other revolutions in France since '89, revolutions which changed the whole structure of the government of the country from top to bottom … All the same, the disturbances they caused never were widespread or lasted long; usually in fact, the majority of the population was almost unaffected by them; sometimes it hardly knew a revolution was taking place.
>
> The reason is that since '89 the administrative system has always stood firm and amid the debacles of political systems. There might be dynastic changes and alterations in the structure of the State machine, but the course of day-to-day affairs was neither interrupted nor deflected … For though in each successive revolution the administration was, so to speak, decapitated, its body survived intact and active. The same duties were performed by the same civil servants, whose practical experience kept the nation on an even keel through the worst

> political storms … And when, with the changing tides of fortune, the cycle repeated itself in the present century, the same men continued administering and judging, first for the King, then for the Republic, then for the Emperor on exactly the same lines. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 219–20)

Marx, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), made very similar observations about the continuity of administration in France through successive revolutions; and Weber, Mosca and a number of other thinkers generalized this insight into an observation about the place of revolution in modern bureaucratized societies as a whole: namely, that in these conditions of bureaucratic rule, all revolutions necessarily can be no more than *coups d'état* (in Kumar 1971, pp. 281–93). Here again is shown the fertility of Tocqueville's method. A historical study of a particular event in a particular country throws up insights into a more general phenomenon, so leading to testable hypotheses; at the same time, light is thrown on the contemporary condition of the society in question, so that the past becomes the gateway to an understanding of the present, illuminating it in a way that no merely 'presentist' study can. 'History', said Tocqueville, 'indeed is like a picture gallery, in which there are few originals and many copies' (Tocqueville 1966, p. 92). A study of one particularly momentous event in a nation's history has the ability to illustrate this perception – and indeed to test it, for we may well disagree.

We may consider three more examples of how Tocqueville deploys history to show its effects on the present. The first concerns the long-term impact of the weakening of the aristocracy in France, first by the actions of the eighteenth-century monarchs, and then, more violently, by the Revolution itself. For Tocqueville, this represented the loss of a vital part of French society, one that at various times had been a bastion of freedom.

> When the Revolution broke out, the nobility, destined as they were to be swept away with the throne, still maintained in their dealings with the King an attitude vastly more arrogant and a freedom of speech far greater than those of the Third Estate, who were soon to overthrow the monarchy. Almost all the safeguards against the abuse of power which the French nation has possessed during its thirty-seven years of representative government were vigorously demanded by the nobles. When we read the *cahiers* they presented to the Estates-General, we cannot but appreciate the spirit and some of the high qualities of our aristocracy, despite its prejudices and failings. It is indeed deplorable that instead of being forced to bow to the rule of law, the French nobility was uprooted and laid low, since thereby the nation was deprived of a vital part of its substance, and a wound that time will never heal was inflicted on our national freedom. When a class has taken the lead in public affairs for

centuries, it develops as a result of this long, unchallenged habit of pre-eminence a certain proper pride and confidence in its strength, leading it to be the point of maximum resistance in the social organism. And it not only has itself the manly virtues; by dint of its example it quickens them in other classes. When such an element of the body politic is forcibly excised, even those most hostile to it suffer a diminution of strength. Nothing can ever replace it completely, it can never come to life again; a deposed ruling class may recover its titles and possessions but nevermore the spirit of its forebears. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 134–5; see also p. 29)

It was a point Tocqueville had developed earlier, in his *Democracy in America* of 1835–40 (Tocqueville 2000], where the absence of aristocracy which had given America its deep commitment to equality was also seen as the source of a potential weakness, in the inability of American society to resist the force of a mass conformist public opinion. Once more the particular observation leads to a general principle, once more a contemporary predicament is traced back to its historical roots. We can see the same form of analysis at work in Tocqueville's discussion of the role of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* – the intellectuals and the men of letters – in the Revolution (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 160–9). The *philosophes* are seen as not simply providing the ideas behind the Revolution, but as creating a whole style of political discussion that has had a decisive and long-term effect – in Tocqueville's eyes, a deleterious one – on French political culture.

In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed cooperated with each other, the former setting forth their theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience. In France, however, precept and practice were kept quite distinct and remained in the hands of two quite independent groups. One of these carried on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles on which good government should, they said, be based; one took the routine measures appropriate to the needs of the moment, the other propounded general laws without a thought for their practical application; one group shaped the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion.

Thus alongside the traditional and confused, not to say chaotic, social system of the day there was gradually built up in men's minds an imaginary ideal society in which all was simple, uniform, coherent, equitable, and rational in the full sense of the term. It was this vision of the perfect state that fired the imagination of the masses and little by little estranged them from the here-and-now. Turning away from the real world around them, they indulged in a dream of a far better one and ended up by living, spiritually, in the ideal world thought up by the writers. (Tocqueville 1966, p. 167)

The influence of the style of the *philosophes* on political thought and public debate has for Tocqueville been highly destructive to French political life.

> Never before had the political education of a great nation been the work of its men of letters and it was this peculiarity that perhaps did most to give the French Revolution its exceptional character and the regime that followed it the form we are familiar with.
>   Our men of letters did not merely impart their revolutionary ideas to the French nation; they also shaped the national temperament and outlook on life. In the long process of molding men's minds to their ideal pattern their task was the easier since the French had no training in the field of politics, and thus they had a clear field. The result was that our writers ended up by giving the Frenchman the instincts, the turn of mind, the tastes, and even the eccentricities characteristic of the literary man. And when the time came for action, these literary propensities were imported into the political arena … These habits have become so much ingrained in the French character that, recent though they are and due solely to a very special type of education, many seem to regard them as inborn. (Tocqueville 1966, pp. 167–9; see also 183, 187, 187–8, 222)

Our last example brings Tocqueville back again to the plane of the general, where a particular occurrence brought about by the Revolution is seen to have general, worldwide, significance in the political life of modern nations. Tocqueville speaks of the firm belief in 'the perfectibility of man' that inspired the men of the French Revolution, and which led them on to the heights of patriotism and unselfishness.

> They had a fanatical faith in their vocation – that of transforming the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race. Of this passionate idealism was born what was in fact a new religion, giving rise to some of those vast changes in human conduct that religion has produced in other ages. It weaned them away from self-regarding emotions, stimulated them to heroic deeds and altruistic sacrifices, and often made them indifferent to all those petty amenities of life which mean so much to us today. (Tocqueville 1966, p. 177)

But this 'revolution of the saints', to use the phrase applied by Michael Walzer to the Puritans of the English Revolution, has its dark and destructive side. It introduces a disturbingly violent and uncompromising element in society. There had been religious revolutions in the past, and there had been political revolutions. The one wanted to change the system of religion but not necessarily that of the state. The other wished to overthrow the state but not necessarily the established religion. The

French Revolution combined the features of both kinds of revolution, and so brought in something new in the world.

> Revolutionaries of a hitherto unknown breed came on the scene: men who carried audacity to the point of sheer insanity; who balked at no innovation and, unchecked by any scruples, acted with an unprecedented ruthlessness. Nor were these strange beings mere ephemera, born of a brief crisis and destined to pass away when it ended. They were, rather, the first of a new race of men who subsequently prospered and proliferated in all parts of the civilized world, everywhere retaining the same characteristics. They were already here when we were born, and they are still with us. (Tocqueville 1966, p. 178)

Thus was the professional revolutionary born, men and women willing to risk their all in the complete overthrow of the established system and in the complete redesign of society. It was a type much commented on in the nineteenth century, from the ironic observations of Alexander Herzen to the fierce condemnation of Hyppolite Taine, Gustave Le Bon, and others. It found its most extreme expression in such credos as Sergei Nechaev's *The Revolutionary Catechism* of 1869, and in the lives of such revolutionaries as Mikhail Bakunin, both of whom provided much of the material for Dostoyevsky's unflattering portrait of Russian revolutionaries in *The Devils* of 1871 (Hingley 1967, pp. 238–42; Kumar 1971, pp. 115–20, 248–51). Praised or damned, the dedicated revolutionary, whose type Tocqueville first discerned in the French Revolution, has been a feature of the political landscape of much of the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[17]

Writing more than 50 years after the storming of the Bastille, Tocqueville could declare that 'the Revolution is still operative' (1966, p. 50). This reminds one of another famous statement about the French Revolution, by the former Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai. Asked by a journalist what he thought about the French Revolution, he is alleged to have replied: 'It is too early to tell.'[18] Chou was right: the Revolution is still with us, just as it was with Tocqueville when he wrote his study. It inspired the anti-communist revolutions of 1989, just as it inspired the Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in the same year (Kumar 2001, pp. 113–21). 'Liberty, equality, and fraternity' will continue to inspire people wherever – which is everywhere – these things remain to be achieved.

Tocqueville was therefore favoured in his choice of subject. Not all events will have the long-term, world-transforming effects of the French Revolution. But his study remains exemplary all the same. It is very much in the spirit of Mills's remark, 'We must often study history to get

rid of it.' The past will bear us down the less we understand it. The social scientist, says Mills, must ask,

> [W]here does this society stand in human history? … 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? (Mills 1967, pp. 6–7)

This was for Mills not just an academic matter, a matter for scholarly inquiry. It touched upon the moral and political function of social science itself, what it had to contribute to changing the world.

> My point is that one of the tasks [of the social scientist] is to determine his own views of the nature of historical change and the place, if any, of free and reasonable men within it. Only then can he come to know his own intellectual and political role within the societies he is studying, and in doing so find out just what he does think of the values of freedom and of reason which are so deeply a part of the tradition and the promise of social science. (Mills 1967, p. 192)

NOTES

1. In revising this paper, I should particularly like to thank John Brewer, Kathryn Mills, Lars Mjøset, and Javier Treviño for their many helpful comments. Thanks also to Ann Nilsen and John Scott for organizing such a stimulating conference.
2. Cf. William Sewell: 'Traditionally, historical sociologists have regarded historians as useful drones more than as genuine intellectual collaborators. Historians would do the tedious work of collecting archive data and producing narratives; historical sociologists would utilize the narratives as raw materials for their grander and more theoretically sophisticated analyses' (Sewell 2005, p. 111).
3. See, for example, Bayly (2004); Darwin (2008); Pagden (2008); Morris (2011); Ferguson (2011).
4. In the whole of the vast tome edited by Adams et al. (2005a), Mills is not mentioned once by any contributor. In the collection edited by Terrence McDonald (1996), there are a few references. Mills's call for a historicized sociology is seen by McDonald as having fallen on stony ground, in an ahistorical climate generated by Cold War conservatism and the dominance of modernization theory (McDonald 1996, p. 3). Margaret Somers gives more credit to Mills for having inspired a more historical turn in the generation of the 1960s, especially through his criticism of the political implications of 'abstracted empiricism' and 'grand theory' (Somers 1996, p. 55). In other large-scale works dealing with the history and present position of historical sociology (for example, Smith 1991; Delanty and Isin 2003; Mahoney and Rueschmeyer 2003), Mills is mentioned once or twice but solely in the context of his work on the power elite. Only Philip Abrams, in an early work, makes specific mention of Mills as a champion of historical sociology. He states that 'there is no necessary difference between the sociologist and the historian, and that sociology which takes itself seriously must be historical sociology'. This clear echo of Mills is followed by a direct quotation from him: 'As C. Wright Mills put it, the whole

'intellectual promise' of the discipline is 'to enable men … to become aware of historical structures and of their own place within them'' (Abrams 1982, p. 17). This concern with 'historical structures' then becomes the guiding theme of Abrams's own exploration of the promise and performance of historical sociology to date.

5. Horowitz notes that Mills 'was in all likelihood the most widely known and best respected American social scientist in Europe, Asia, and especially Latin America.' Moreover, whatever the professional American sociologists thought of him, 'he was widely appreciated and read by all other sectors of American social science' (Horowitz 1963, p. 5; see also Aronowitz 2012).

6. It is interesting that Mills himself says that preparatory work on *The Power Elite* was 'primarily inspired by seminar work in American history' (Mills 1967, p. 200).

7. For Mills's Maryland years, the collaboration with Gerth and his friendship with the historians there, see Mills and Mills (2001, pp. 47–89).

8. Actually it was not so much the humanists as the Marxists who would most likely have held this view in the 1930s and 1940s of Mills's upbringing. It was they who adopted Marx's view that sociology was a 'bourgeois science', indelibly coloured by bourgeois interests and outlooks. In the Soviet Union sociology was not permitted, since it was thought that Marxism, as the science of history and society, included all its insights. Mills shared many interests with the Marxists of his day, and was sympathetic to many of their political views, but he found their view of history and society unduly restricted. For Mills's critical appreciation of Marxism, see especially his last work, *The Marxists* (Mills 1962). Mills was equally unsympathetic to the grand claims of history as represented by the 'theory of history' in such writers as Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler. Such history, he said, 'can all too readily become distorted into a trans-historical strait-jacket into which the materials of history are forced' (Mills 1967, pp. 22–3).

9. Mills, anticipating later critics of historical sociology, considers the objection of some social scientists that historical materials 'are not precise or even known fully enough to permit their use in comparison with the better confirmed and more exact contemporary materials available'. To this he answers: 'The objection is relevant only for certain problems and may, in fact, frequently be turned around: For many problems we can obtain adequate information *only* about the past. The fact of official and unofficial secrecy, and the widespread use of public relations, are contemporary facts which surely must be taken into account as we judge the reliability of information about the past and about the present' (Mills 1967, pp. 145–6). It is striking that a strong and influential attack on contemporary historical sociology made by the British sociologist John Goldthorpe (1991) was based mainly on the objection that Mills considers, but with no mention of Mills or his answer. Responses to Goldthorpe's attack on historical sociology also made the same point as Mills – on the unreliability of *contemporary* data – but again with no reference to Mills. See *British Journal of Sociology* (1994).

10. Cf. Gerth and Mills (1954, p. 377): 'Every model of social structure involves a model of social-historical change'.

11. A brilliant and forceful example of the impossibility of understanding national development in terms simply of a nation's own history is offered by Arnold Toynbee in his examination of British historical development: Toynbee (1962, pp. 17–22).

12. Mills elsewhere commented on the limitations of this concentration on the 'great transition', blinding us to the epochal transition taking place in our own time: 'too many of our explanations are derived from the great historical transition from the Medieval to the Modern Age; and when they are generalized for use today, they become unwieldy or irrelevant, not convincing' (Mills 1963b, p. 236). It is in this essay, originally given as a BBC Radio talk in March 1959, that Mills announced the arrival of a 'post-modern period' that he called the 'Fourth Epoch'.

13. *Democracy in America* also of course has a pointed message for Tocqueville's generation; but this lies not so much in the relevance of the past for the present as in the relevance of a great *contemporary* example for showing all modern societies their future. See, for some stimulating reflections on this, Gargan (1962).
14. For the influence of Tocqueville's study of the French Revolution, and its place today in the understanding of the Revolution, see Furet (1981), Mitchell (1989), and the introduction to their critical edition by Furet and Mélanio (Tocqueville 1998, pp. 1–89). This is obviously not the place to attempt an assessment of Tocqueville's view of the Revolution, though I think it stands up in many respects remarkably well.
15. Throughout this piece I cite the English translation of Tocqueville's work by Stuart Gilbert, since I consider it still the best modern version (though Henry Reeves' translation of 1856 best carries the period flavour, appearing as it did in the very year of the original French edition). But I have also consulted the new translation by Alan Kahan (Tocqueville 1998).
16. Some of these, including James Davies's well-known 'inverted J-curve' theory of revolution, are discussed in Richter (1966) and Kumar (1971, pp. 43–8). For a later application, to the case of the East European Communist regimes brought down by Gorbachev's reforms – the '1989 revolutions' – see Kumar (2001, pp. 31–70). While Tocqueville's account of the causes of revolution apply best to the cases of the 'Great Revolutions' of Western society, they have considerable applicability to 'Third World' revolutions of the twentieth century as well, including Russia and China. See, for example, Wolf (1971) and Dunn (1989). For the extent to which later non-European revolutions might diverge from the Western pattern, see Sanderson (2005), Foran (2005), De Fronzo (2007).
17. It is not claimed that Tocqueville was the first to do so; Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), had already discerned the new spirit, if not yet the new type; and various writers of the Counter-Revolution, such as de Maistre, also commented on it. But Tocqueville had the advantage of a sufficient distance from the event to be able to see the emergence of a whole new class in the subsequent half century, notably during the revolutions of 1848. See further Tocqueville (1948).
18. Though an often quoted remark, I have been unable to track down a precise reference to it.

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3. The fate of *The Sociological Imagination*: Mills, social science and contemporary sociology

Lars Mjøset

The Sociological Imagination was an unfortunate choice of title. To Mills, *SI* was not about sociology as a discipline, it was about a 'style of work' that he found also in the other social sciences and in history.

Mills challenged the discipline of sociology. His attacks on Lazarsfeld-type abstracted empiricism and Parsonian grand theory countered the two major attempts to define the identity of sociology as a thoroughly 'scientific' discipline in the 1940s and 1950s. Mills wanted to defend social science against this trend towards disciplinary closure, sensing that his own discipline played a leading role:

> Should these two styles of work – abstracted empiricism and grand theory – come to enjoy an intellectual 'duopoly', or even become the predominant styles of work, they would constitute a grievous threat to the intellectual promise of social science and as well to the political promise of the role of reason in human affairs – as that role has been classically conceived in the civilization of the Western societies. (pp. 131f.)[1]

MILLS'S PROGRAMMES FOR POSTWAR SOCIAL SCIENCE

There are *two* promises here, and we shall call them programmes. On the one hand, Mills links the sociological imagination to an 'intellectual promise' *internal* to the academic sphere of higher education and research. On the other hand, he links it to an *external* 'promise' related to Western civilization. Mills would suggest the internal programme to any aspiring social scientists as an account – contrasted to abstracted empiricism/grand theory – of how research may best be carried out:

In our very statement of what-is-to-be-explained, we need the fuller range that can be provided only by knowledge of the historical varieties of human society. That a given question – the relations of forms of nationalism with types of militarism, for example – must often be given a different answer when it is asked for different societies and periods means that the question itself often needs to be reformulated. We need the variety provided by history in order even to ask sociological questions properly, much less to answer them. The answers or explanations we would offer are often, if not usually, in terms of comparisons. Comparisons are required in order to understand what may be the essential conditions of whatever we are trying to understand, whether forms of slavery or specific meanings of crime, types of family or peasant communities or collective farms. We must observe whatever we are interested in under a variety of circumstances. Otherwise we are limited to flat description.

To go beyond that, we must study the available range of social structures, including the historical as well as the contemporary. If we do not take into account the range, which does not of course mean all existing cases, our statements cannot be empirically adequate. Such regularities or relations as may obtain among several features of society cannot be clearly discerned. Historical types, in short, are a very important part of what we are studying; they are also indispensable to our explanations of it. To eliminate such materials – the record of all that man has done and become – from our studies would be like pretending to study the process of birth but ignoring motherhood. (p. 163)

The external program concerns the social scientist in a capacity as public intellectual, communicating knowledge about the present to a broader public. Throughout this chapter, we shall treat the sociological imagination as two programs, understood as two alternatives to the prevailing standard program for social science in the 1950s.

As part of his polemic against Parsons, Mills summed up what the social sciences are all about: 'They are attempts to help us understand biography and history, and the connexions of the two in a variety of social structures' (p. 40). We note the internal aspect: only a relatively autonomous community of researchers can systematically study a variety of social structures. But this also refers to real-life connections between biography (micro) and history (meso/macro) – that is, processes of social mobilization. The external program is about men making history, as Mills puts it.

Mills understood the sociological imagination as a set of 'cultural expectations' that would spread outside of the social science research community, being acquired by the 'cultural community at large'.

The sociological imagination is becoming, I believe, the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature. This quality of mind is

found in the social and psychological sciences, but it goes far beyond these studies as we now know them. Its acquisition by individuals and by the cultural community at large is slow and often fumbling; many social scientists are themselves quite unaware of it. They do not seem to know that the use of this imagination is central to the best work they might do, that by failing to develop and to use it they are failing to meet the cultural expectations that are coming to be demanded of them and that the classic traditions of their several disciplines make available to them. (p. 21)

The scientists (abstracted empiricism) and the grand theorists were busy defining sociology as a *discipline* within a secluded academic sector. To Mills this focus disregarded the fact that social scientists are embedded in the society they study. At the time, social scientists strove to gain legitimacy (and thus prestige, students, and research money) for their nascent disciplines by internalizing notions of science and theory that dominated in the natural sciences. We shall call this the standard approach (Mjøset 2009). But natural scientists are not embedded in their object of study, and they can expose it to extensive experimental manipulation. Social scientists borrowing into this attitude were barred from sensing what 'culture' demanded from them.

Mills wished to inspire social scientists – displaying a 'truly fierce drive to make sense of the world' (p. 123) – to rise above the level of the 'mere technician' (p. 232), shifting perspectives so as to 'build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components'. He urged them to learn from the classical legacy in the social sciences, originating at a time when disciplinary distinctions were much weaker. Such social scientists would be catering to – or maybe helping to awaken – a 'demand' (p. 21) in civil society.

Mills *wanted* to sense a broad demand for the sociological imagination, but realized that it spread only slowly. We shall investigate whether the tensions in Mills's conception of the sociological imagination stem from the fact that in his own lifetime he saw very few empirical signs of such a rising demand. His internal programme was not easily generalized when it was promoted externally. Rather, he carved out another, external programme that created ambiguities in relation to the internal one. Six ambiguities will be specified. We then show how Mills's notion of sociological imagination anticipated social developments after his death in 1962, and how the discipline of sociology was one element in this process through the turbulence that marked 1960s and 1970s social science. By way of conclusion, we discuss the state of sociology in the present phase, arguing that attempts at a disciplinary recovery since the 1980s make the study of Mills's ambiguities very relevant.

Our analysis portrays Mills as a case of an academic intellectual reflecting on the participatory relationship of social scientists to society. The public role of the university-educated intellectual social scientist is the fulcrum between the internal and external aspect of SI. To prepare this analysis, we shall disaggregate the notion of the public sphere.

Table 3.1 distinguishes seven arenas on which social scientists can participate, contributing their knowledge in ways that may influence social processes. The extent to which they are 'public' varies, and more narrow definitions of a public sphere might exclude some of them. For our purposes, it is useful to include all seven types in order to see how they differ with respect to the relations that social scientists can establish to them.

Table 3.1   Social scientist relationships to arenas of the public sphere

	Organic (Gramsci)	Activist individual (Mannheim)	Social engineering reformist	Type of change
Administrative-bureaucratic			×	
Political parliamentary			×	Reform ↑
Private charities			×	
Academic research		×	×	Internal programme
Political/press/media	×	×		
Mobilization/movements	×			↓ Structural
Cultural literary		×		

The horizontal dimension of Table 3.1 distinguishes three types of relationships that social scientists may take as citizens: the organic-collectivist, the detached individualist, and the social-engineering reform-ist relationship. In the literature, the first is often associated with the history of Antonio Gramsci (1971), writing social science notes in Mussolini's prison, incarcerated because of his participation in interwar socialist mobilization. The second is associated with Karl Mannheim (1952, ch. 3), the sociologist of knowledge who held that 'the socially unattached intelligentsia' enabled them to analyse social developments in their totality. The third relation is often associated with the intellectuals

of Western European social-democratic parties, especially their roles as their parties reached government positions.

The crosses in Table 3.1 indicate the arenas that these different intellectuals *most typically* target. Academic research is the arena for Mills's internal programme, while any specification of external programme concern one or more of the six other areas. The six areas cluster into two groups: reform options and structural change options. We return to this topic towards the end of this essay.

We distinguish six properties of Mills's internal programme. The ambiguities emerge when features of his external programme contradict the internal one. We first cover the problem-driven nature of research, then research as craftwork. The latter is specified with reference to three crucial research procedures: explanation, comparison, and typology formation. Finally, we deal with the question of disciplines.

The external programme is less specified than the internal one. The six elements fit consistently together as an internal programme for the accumulation of knowledge in the social sciences. To match these elements, we also distinguish six implications of the external problem, but they emerge as repetitive, as permutations of the same general idea. For comparison with the statement of the internal programme, quoted above, consider this sample account of the external programme:

> We are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch.
>
> The ending of one epoch and the beginning of another is, to be sure, a matter of definition. But definitions, like everything social, are historically specific. And now our basic definition of society and of self are being overtaken by new realities. I do not mean merely that never before within the limits of a single generation have men been so fully exposed at so fast a rate to such earthquakes of change. I do not mean merely that we feel we are in an epochal kind of transition, and that we struggle to grasp the outline of the new epoch we suppose ourselves to be entering. I mean that when we try to orient ourselves – if we do try – we find that too many of our old expectations and images are, after all, tied down historically: that too many of our standard categories of thought and of feeling as often disorient us as help to explain what is happening around us, that too many of our explanations are derived from the great historical transition from the Medieval to the Modern Age and that when they are generalized for use today, they become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing. I also mean that our major orientations – liberalism and socialism – have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves. (p. 184)

What then are the tensions between this external program and the internal one?

First Ambiguity – the Nature and Scope of Research Problems

Criticizing abstracted empiricism as methods-driven, and grand theory as theory-driven, Mills's internal programme connects accumulation of knowledge in social research to practical challenges in social development. This differed from the prevailing standard approach, which considered research as testing of very general knowledge, cases being just raw materials for tests. The idea that knowledge develops in line with human evolution connects Mills to the philosophical tradition of the pragmatists (Pierce, Dewey, James, Mead, and Veblen). His early writings centred on sociology of knowledge implications of the pragmatist position. Quite soon Mills also discovered European critical theory, advised by his teacher and collaborator Hans Gerth, who had been a student of Mannheim.

The sociological imagination presupposes the ability to pose 'substantive problems on the historical level of reality' and to 'state the solution in the macroscopic terms of the problem' (pp. 142f.). The relevant set of research problems will emerge from discussions 'among working social scientists'. Since this is a 'free intellectual community', the array of problems covered is not 'monolithic' (p. 218).

But his external program links the sociological imagination to a narrower subset of problems, stated in a philosophical terminology. His argument has five steps. First, Mills defines what it means to state a problem: it 'requires that we state the values involved and the threat to those values'. Second, he states his belief that the core values of 'classic social analysis' are 'freedom and reason' (pp. 194, 144). This narrows down the range of research problems. Third, Mills holds that at present (late 1950s), these two values are threatened by 'the characterizing features of the contemporary period' (p. 144). Therefore 'the leading problems of the social studies … concern conditions and tendencies that seem to imperil these two values and the consequences of that imperilment for the nature of man and the making of history' (p. 144). Fourth, these 'characterizing features' ('conditions and tendencies') are equated with the term rationality, to which 'reason' is related (see pp. 184, 188), although Mills also uses the phrase 'rationality without reason' (p. 189). Fifth, Mills infers that freedom is undermined by rationality. This is his definition of 'The Fourth Epoch' (see the initial long quote from p. 184): reason and freedom are no longer connected.

Concerning the second step, it is possible to imagine other 'core values'. A relevant example from political philosophy is equality. Furthermore, Mills's statement puts him above the research community. It is not obvious that the research community – even if the first point is accepted – should easily converge on either the specification of the core values or on the nature of the 'forces' that threaten them.

Let us discuss Mills's notion of problems 'on the historical level of reality' with reference to the first step. It is possible to ask whether there are research problems linked to values that are not under threat. But the key point in Mills rather seems to be that below a certain level, problems become 'petty', in the sense that their solution has no repercussions beyond 'specific milieux and private troubles' (p. 144).

This topic was not new to Mills. Besides the criticism of abstracted empiricism and grand theory as two deviations from classical social science, *The Sociological Imagination* also criticizes a third school. These 'social pathologists' Mills linked to liberal social-reform movements in early twentieth-century US history. It included social-problems studies, as well as the sociological Chicago school in the interwar period. This criticism is not so often noted, since in the late 1950s that school was at a low in terms of influence. Mills claimed it had been replaced by abstracted empiricism. It was less of a threat to the sociological imagination than his other two targets.

The social-problems tradition focused on the 'practical problems' of 'everyday life', providing 'fragmentary' analyses of 'isolated and immediate problems' at 'lower levels of abstraction'. They saw these as the 'real' problems, pursuing an empiricist 'epistemology of gross description'. Already in Mills's early methodological criticism we find a political twist. This approach is 'apolitical' and 'reformist', marked by 'intense approval of the safe, of colourless, multiple-factor view of causation'. This 'liberal 'multiple-factor' view does not lead to a conception of causation which would permit points of entry for broader types of action, especially political action'. Judges and social workers display 'an occupationally trained incapacity to rise above series of "cases"' (Mills 1943).

In a later essay, Mills concluded that the reformist orientation typical of 1930s liberal offensives (New and Fair Deal) had disappeared. In the 1950s, politics, knowledge and power had been completely divorced. In the age of the classics, intellectuals engaged openly in public debate, drawing on their knowledge to influence social change. Now knowledge was fragmented as researchers conducted contract research for powerful groups and institutions. While conservatives (Eisenhower) held formal

power, real power rested with the 'silent conservatives of corporation, army and state' (Mills 1955, p. 603).

In *The Sociological Imagination*, however, Mills reiterated his criticism of the 'building-block (or old-ladies-putting-together-a-quilt) theory of social science development' (p. 142), combining his early methodological criticism with the rather externalist sociology of knowledge implied in the 1955 essay. Postwar focus on 'fragmentary problems and scattered causation have been conservatively turned to the use of corporation, army, and state' (p. 104). The 'administrative liberalism of the welfare state' had created a 'bureaucratic social science' (p. 144). Against Mead's social behaviourism, a crucial input to the Chicago school, Mills wrote: 'The small-scale setting of "interpersonal relations" is now clearly seen; the broader context in which these relations themselves, and hence the individual himself, are situated has not been' (p. 177). Mills required that all studies of biography and personal milieux 'reach out' to the 'historical level of reality'.

Fragmentation of questions and notions of scattered causation were common to both 'liberal practicality' and abstracted empiricism. The difference between them is based on the difference between liberal and corporate capitalism. Both are incapable of answering the kinds of research questions that are compatible with the sociological imagination. For corporate capitalism, 'abstracted empiricism is the most suitable tool and grand theory the accompanying lack of theory' (p. 144). And: 'Neither the old liberal practicality nor bureaucratic social science handle public issues and private troubles in such a way as to incorporate both within the problems of social science' (p. 144). Both represent 'a perspective in which all problems are seen as a scatter of requests for scattered information, statistical or otherwise, about a scatter of individuals and their scattered milieux' (pp. 77f.).

We can here turn to Mills's third and fourth steps. The features, conditions and tendencies invoked in the third step clearly refer to the changes in economy, power and violence brought about by corporate capitalism. However, in the fourth step, Mills adopts a Frankfurt school 'instrumental rationality' interpretation (Horkheimer 1947; Horkheimer and Adorno 1947). He thereby departs from the analysis of social structure at 'a historical level of reality'.

The values freedom and reason define Mills's external programme. The two main enlightenment ideologies, socialism and liberalism, both assume an 'inherent relation of reason and freedom' (p. 184), namely that 'increased rationality is … the prime condition of increased freedom' (p. 184). We then arrive at his fifth point, the statement that, in the present period, freedom is undermined by reason as instrumental rationality.

This argument takes the discussion to a philosophical level. With this move, problem-orientation does seem 'monolithic', since 'leading problems' *must* relate instrumental rationality to reason and freedom. Using existential notions, the set of research problems is restricted. Social science is made an appendix to abstract philosophizing, something that the internal programme wants to avoid! This is the first ambiguity. The narrow, philosophically oriented set of problems named in his external programme are the 'broadest' problems, so broad that one wonders whether they are the substantive kind of research problems that can be related to the 'historical level of reality'.

Second Ambiguity – Two Meanings of Craftsmanship

The first of Mills's eight 'precepts and cautions' includes the following advice: 'Be a good craftsman: avoid any rigid set of procedures … Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist, let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians' (245f., cf. also p. 134).

Conducting research, the social science craftsman relates closely to the meaning of actions and interactions, shuttling between 'conceptions and indices, guided by the desire not to lose intended meanings and yet to be quite specific about them' (p. 228). A craftsman focuses on substance, linking theory closely to explanation, requiring sensitivity to context. In sum, the formation of *middle range theory* is a key feature of Mills's internal programme.

Robert Merton was one of the academics who helped Mills get started at Columbia in New York (Geary 2009, p. 75ff.). Despite this early contact, Mills does not refer to Merton at all in SI. But Merton's emphasis on latent functions as social structural mechanisms acting behind the backs of men is compatible with Mills's focus on social structural forces, emphasizing functional relations between institutions. Both pursued a programme of moderate functionalism, although Merton's version was more social-engineering-oriented than Mills's.

Mills avoids Merton's loose biological analogies. Still, this core element of his internal programme parallels Merton, and is in line with recent reformulations (Pawson 2000). The counterpart to structure is milieux (and not 'action'). Several terms have been used, such as inherent structurism, generative structures, or deep structures. In the following, we use the term structural forces. This notion is connected to Mills's emphasis on 'substantive problems on the historical level of reality', since it indicates an 'adequate' level of explanation. It indicates

where one would need to intervene if structures are to be changed. Milieu is 'below' that historical level of reality. Mending problems within a milieu, only non-structural problems are treated. Structural forces are not even challenged.

Mills notes that in social science, prediction is possible not just in cases where there is extensive bureaucratic control! One can also make predictions on 'those areas of social life over which no one else has much control either' (p. 130). He mentions language as changing and persisting 'behind men's backs', suggesting that perhaps 'such regularities also occur in connexion with the structural mechanics of history'. Such 'major trends', he holds, were what 'John Stuart Mill called the "principia media" of a society' (p. 130).

For Merton (1967), J.S. Mill's notion was a precursor to his notion of middle-range theories.[2] He traced it back to Plato and to Francis Bacon's (1561–1626) notion of *axiomata media* – 'middle axioms' – in the hierarchy of the 'book of nature'. J.S. Mill in 1865 distinguished them from the 'lowest' empirical laws of 'imperfect accuracy' and the 'too general' general laws. These middle axioms, wrote Bacon, 'are the true and solid and living axioms, on which depend the affairs and fortunes of men'. Mill expected them 'to give sufficient indication of what happens in individual cases, where the circumstances are always immensely numerous'. Merton notes that in the interwar period, similar formulations were made by Karl Mannheim, Adolf Löwe and Morris Ginsberg. Mills had the term from Mannheim (p. 166).

Merton conceived the strategy of making middle-range theories a temporary one (Mjøset 2006), thus he had few specified methodological guidelines. Even Mills seems to make a virtue out of having *no* specified methodological guidelines. But he had grounds other than Merton's. He conceived craftsmanship in a way that allowed him to connect easily to his external programme. The way he emphasizes individuality (against teamwork), and disrespect for guidelines, makes us associate primarily to the craftwork of the artist, and to the artist in the capacity of being a literary intellectual.

More specifically, Mills combined features of the artist's role with features of the most distinctly individualist role in the academic sector. We have already noted how this alternative relates to philosophical notions, and in academia, *philosophy* is the one discipline that really consists of individual thinkers. The ambiguity revolves around what it means to be an intellectual craftsman in the social sciences. One model relates to art, where craftsmanship is connected to innovation and transcendence of earlier styles. In research, innovation is also crucial, but

teamwork will often be involved, and manuals and instructions can be relied on, even if tacit knowledge is important in many respects.

When Mills develops his external programme around the notion of a threat to two selected values (first step above), he is inclined to couch this threat in personal-existential terms writ large to cover all humans who share the legacy of Western civilization. Such statements do not derive from substantive analysis of the present. Stating existential problems does not require craftwork and substantive study. The ambiguity is that this external programme runs counter to Mills's notion of craftsmanship – understood as the skill of explaining with sensitivity to context. We shall now specify how the internal programme implies accumulation of knowledge through these procedures: explanation, comparison and typology-formation.

Third Ambiguity – Historical Variety of Social Structures Versus Grand History

Social science is about 'human variety' (p. 146). The craftsman who studies substantive problems studies patterned variety. Mills particularly focuses on institutions. Social structure refers 'to the combination of institutions classified according to the functions each performs'. Social scientists aim to 'understand each of the varieties of social structure, in its components and in its totality' (pp. 149f.). The study of variety requires us to 'seek a fully comparative understanding of the social structures that have appeared and do now exist in world history' (p. 149).

Mills and Merton agreed that middle-range theories could be formulated within a framework of moderate functionalism. On this basis, Mills distinguishes history and social science. History tends to explain repetitive outcomes with reference to 'a persistence from the past' (p. 171). Variety here emerges as something that extends from roots way back. He notes that social scientists prefer to explain why such an outcome is reproduced. He grounds this moderate functionalism in periodization: 'the answer varies accordingly to the phases through which whatever we are studying has gone; for each of these phases we may then attempt to explain its contemporary features in terms of their contemporary function' (p. 171). His specification of this is more Weberian than Marxist. Combining the various properties (economy, politics, ideology) of social structure he notes that the kind of path dependency and lock-in that emerges must be understood according to historical periods.

This 'principle of historical specificity' Mills took from Marx. Rejecting the quest for 'invariant laws of society', it implied that 'any given society is to be understood in terms of the specific period in which it

exists' (p. 166), and that 'within this historical type various mechanisms of change come to some specific kind of intersection' (p. 166). Theories that refer to such bounded regularities are middle-range theories, Mill and Mannheim's principia media: 'the very mechanisms that the social scientist, concerned with social structure, wishes to grasp' (p. 166). Mills accepts only this notion of 'social regularities' or 'social laws': 'such principia media as we may discover, or if you wish, construct, for a social structure within a historically specific era … For historical change *is* change of social structures, of the relations among their component parts. Just as there is a variety of social structures, there is a variety of principles of historical change' (p. 166).

Criticizing grand theory, Mills rejects Parsons's vision of 'one answer' to the problem of order. The 'monolithic concepts' of grand theory are irrelevant, since, at the level of 'historical realities', there are 'types of social structures' and related 'modes of integration': 'To predicate anything beyond the most empty formalities about the historical range of social structure is to mistake one's own capacity to talk for all that is meant by the work of social investigation' (p. 54). Mills decomposes social structure into a range of institutional orders: political, kinship, military, economic and religious institutions.

Describing work on research projects, Mills suggests a bottom-up approach: during and after the collection of (qualitative) observations from diverse sources, the researcher seeks for 'patterns and trends', aiming to establish 'typical and causal' relations. These are the 'meaning' of what is researched. Coding of concepts leads to a 'working model', and the researcher checks whether this is a model of what one tries to understand. Working models 'are used to make us more aware, as we examine specific societies at specific times, of the links by which they are "tied together"' (p. 54). They are used 'in close and empirical connexion with a range of historical as well as contemporary structures' (pp. 56f.).

Mills held the national level to be the 'suitable level of generality', and provides examples from US and German development histories. With the 'national social structure as our generic working unit', social scientists can relate research problems to structural forces that influence 'major issues of public concern, for it is within and between the nation-states of the world that the effective means of power, and hence to a considerable extent of history-making, are now, for better or for worse, tightly organized' (pp. 150f.).

At the time of his death, Mills had started to work on a 'herculean project' (Horowitz 1983, p. 306) designed to study the 'state of the world', in particular 'American, Soviet, and Third World forms of

power' – a 'varieties of social structure' project. He noted already in *The Sociological Imagination* that there was a new kind of political economy in the capitalist world, a new kind of society in the Communist bloc, and escalating poverty in underdeveloped societies (p. 185).

But in his external programme, his definition of the present is not sensitive to any variety in social structures. This is the third ambiguity. Mills's external programme implies a notion of what we may call grand history, one that defines the present as a break with a broadly and vaguely defined period *of modernity*, a term from art history and the history of ideas. He postulates epochal change: 'The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch' (p. 184). In this period, Enlightenment ideals are negated: Rationality, for the first time in the history of modern civilization, makes people unfree! The triad of corporations/state/military has taken charge of history-making; their rationality makes people unfree.

Such a grand history periodization lacks specified properties. It is couched in existential or ideological terms. The ongoing 'epochal kind if transition' entails entirely new ways of defining 'society' and the 'self' (p. 184). Mills's external programme takes us to a philosophy-of-history level, substituting the internal programme for existential hunches in the style of literary intellectuals.

Fourth Ambiguity – the Tension Between Comparison and Convergent Trends

Mills's internal programme is built around specified substantive research problems and explanations with reference to the (historical) variety of social structures. By means of comparisons, this variety can be used for analytical purposes. Since it is mostly not possible to find topics that have sufficient individual variation at the same place and time, 'we must often design our studies as comparisons of social structures', and this 'requires that we make use of the variety provided by history' (p. 164). Social scientists should 'go fully comparative': 'Comparative work, both theoretical and empirical, is the most promising line of development for social science today; and such work can best be done within a unified social science' (p. 154). Contemporary units should be understood as products of different historical trajectories, and/or by comparison with earlier historical periods. For instance, crucial features of US society, such as 'the character of its élite and its extreme fluidity of status' (p. 174), should be related to the 'absence of a Feudal Era'.

Holding the nation state as the most relevant level of analysis, Mills argued that civilizations were 'too sprawling and imprecise to be the

prime units' (p. 150). Stages-theories (as those of Toynbee and Spengler) of social development distorted man's history 'into a trans-historical strait-jacket into which the materials of human history are forced and out of which issue prophetic views (usually gloomy ones) of the future' (p. 30).

But think back to the statements on the 'Fourth Epoch' quoted earlier. Mills's external programme, as we have specified it so far, isolates a narrow set of particularly broad questions, seeking to explain them by top-down claims in the style of a philosophically inclined literary intellectual. Mills refers to the rise of modern industrial society, with centralization of the means of power and decision-making in the huge corporations and a state monopoly on means of violence and administration. He portrays the 1950s Cold War situation in broad strokes, presenting a version of the then popular 'convergence thesis'. The discrepancy between such convergence statements and the emphasis on comparison is the fourth ambiguity.

In the 'Fourth Epoch', the US and the USSR are the leading states. For the power elites of these countries, 'the scope and the chance for conscious human agency in history-making is now uniquely available' (p. 202). Although they are in a historical context, in comparison with other epochs, they have a unique capacity to 'create history' (p. 202).

But this capacity rests with elites, not with social movements! Elites may enjoy a clear link between biography and history. But without social mobilization, the masses are not making history, the biographies of most people are trapped in social structures, and history is made behind their backs. The fact that 'men *can* now make history', argues Mills, is 'made ironic by the further fact that just now these ideologies which offer men the hope of making history have declined and are collapsing in the Western societies' (pp. 202f.). 'The crisis of individuality and the crisis of history-making; the role of reason in the free individual life and in the making of history – in the restatement and clarification of these problems lies the promise of the social sciences' (p. 192). Freedom and reason, the 'expectations of The Enlightenment' are collapsing. In old Hegelian terms, this was the definition of a non-epic age. In the epic age of classical antiquity, the action of individuals created structures, but in the modern age, as portrayed in modern art, individuals are facing a system of abstract laws determined by the state (Hegel 1835, s. 3, ch. 3, A & C).

The emphasis – in the internal programme – on comparison using a variety of cases, has – in the external programme – been replaced by a much cruder Enlightenment–postmodern distinction. One may call this a comparison, but it is conducted only at the level of ideology, not with

reference to historically specified social structures. Focus is on convergence and standardization of thought with reference to ideologies. There is, for instance, no consideration of the major processes of suffrage extension, or of the transformation and multiplication of state capacities that has taken place since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Fifth Ambiguity – continuity or Break in Concept Formation

Typologies are often neglected elements in the accumulation of knowledge, but they are crucial to Mills's internal programme. The 'skill of making up types' is not properly taught in courses on social science methodology, whether qualitative or quantitative.

> Many of the general notions you come upon, as you think about them, will be cast into types. A new classification is the usual beginning of fruitful developments … Rather than rest content with existing classifications, in particular, common-sense ones, you will search for their common denominators and for differentiating factors within and between them. Good types require that the criteria of classification be explicit and systematic. (p. 234)

These criteria yield property spaces that form the basis of typologies that go beyond common-sense classifications. Mills emphasizes that cross-classifications are of great value not just in quantitative, but also in qualitative research. He specifies how researchers try out notions both by breaking them down and by trying to stretch them to more abstract levels (p. 234). He clearly applies the qualitative research techniques of finding properties of a case by asking what it is a case of.

Mills regards history as the organized memory of mankind. But it is malleable, and it changes both with improved knowledge, as well as with the interests and tensions that prevail at the time of writing up the research. Historians 'cannot avoid making a selection of facts', and Mills therefore considers it 'the most theoretical of the human disciplines, which makes the calm unawareness of many historians all the more impressive' (p. 161). Given his formulas – 'The productions of historians may be thought of as a great file indispensable to all social science' (pp. 161f.); 'All sociology worthy of the name is 'historical sociology'' (p. 162) – it may seem that Mills somewhat arrogantly puts sociology in an elevated relationship to history. Historians with 'no "theory"' may 'provide materials for the writing of history, but they cannot themselves write it' (p. 161). This was Mills's harsh judgement on US historians in the 1950s, but he also implies that sociology is impossible without history.

Tracing institutional changes, Mills holds, historians 'tend to emphasize changes over some span of time and to work in a non-comparative

way' (p. 160). Theoretical divergence tends to take the form of a sequence of revisionisms. Historical social science, in contrast, urges us to alter the perspectives immediately by means of comparison. Furthermore, historians are not socialized to reflect on changing perspectives in sociology of knowledge terms, while social scientists should have this competence.

Mills's internal programme yields accumulated knowledge as the research community continuously cultivate grounded concepts, middle-range theories and typologies. The external programme, in contrast, claims that the present requires entirely new concepts. This is like the artist who longs to break down old conventions and tap the spirit of the time by creating entirely new forms of art. In his programmatic statement, Mills states not just that there is epochal transition, but that 'old expectations and images are … tied down historically' (p. 184). He concludes that both liberal and socialist (Marxist) ideas are outdated as guidelines for social science: 'These ways of thought arose as guidelines to reflections about types of society which do not now exist' (p. 185). J.S. Mill never imagined the 1950s kind of capitalism. Marx never imagined Stalin's communism. 'The ideological mark of The Fourth Epoch – that which sets it off from The Modern Age – is that the ideas of freedom and of reason have become moot; that increased rationality may not be assumed to make for increased freedom' (p. 185f.). The overall argument in Mills seems similar to Horkheimer and Adorno's (1947) earlier fully philosophical discussion, although that earlier analysis put more emphasis on cultural industry.

This reasoning makes him unable to specify the present according to the standards of his internal programme. He blames contemporary social scientists for not maintaining the classics' concern with 'the salient characteristic of their time' (p. 181). But once he stresses major differences between his own age and that of the classics, there is no sense in linking back to their concepts. Although Mills implies that Enlightenment has ended, he cannot resist holding its ideals against the reality of the new epoch. He invokes the classics and classical ideologies, but also claims that their concepts cannot grasp the Fourth Epoch. This is the fifth ambiguity.

Once we switch back to social science concepts and away from political-philosophical terminology (freedom and reason, liberalism and socialism), the problem is *not* outdated concepts or modes of understanding. The challenge is another one, that of always making sure that concepts grounded in earlier studies are judged sensitive enough to the new cases addressed, and that new theory is created to cater for the ever-diversifying variety. At any time, there will be both breaks and

continuity. This challenge is not addressed by an across-the-board revision based on some intuition that the world has entered an entirely new epoch while social science is hit by absolute conceptual inertia.

Sixth Ambiguity – Two Ways of Transcending Disciplinary Fragmentation

We have noted that the sociological imagination is not about sociology. The internal programme is critical of the trend towards disciplinary consolidation – 'integration and the boundary-making of "fields"' (p. 157) – of diverse social sciences. Mills wants 'unified work in social science', and finds the 'one-discipline introductory textbook' a main obstacle to this, mainly in the interest of publishers. They integrate the various social sciences in terms of 'conceptions and methods' rather 'than in terms of problems and subject matters' (p. 157). Mills insists that 'to state and to solve any one of the significant problems of our period requires a selection of materials, conceptions, and methods from more than any one of these several disciplines' (p. 158). Specialization should occur with reference to topical problems, not 'in accordance with academic boundaries' (p. 158).

This implies a commitment to local research frontiers, with contributions from many disciplines. Research should never be just methods-and/or theory-driven, since 'methods are methods for some range of problems; theories are theories of some range of phenomena' (p. 135). Mills does not really discuss whether some problems may benefit from different types of methods, but he would most likely have enjoyed the recent trend towards exploration of a variety of mixed-methods strategies.

Already in Mills's days, this internal programme of 'unity of the social sciences' faced major institutional barriers. Striving to gain from Cold War research funding, the social sciences organized into disciplines, however much Mills despised this trend. Mills held that sociology in his time was 'the center of reflection about social science' (p. 29). It worked most broadly on methods (abstracted empiricism) and displayed 'the most extreme interest in "general theory"' (p. 29). Mills's opposition to sociology's methods or theory-based disciplinary identity was a warning to other social sciences too.

Mills's external programme – existential worries that rationality has been divorced from freedom – included a critical edge towards the role of social scientists in the machinery of the 'welfare state'. If this shall be linked to interdisciplinarity, we see here a kind of reasoning that transcends the disciplines of social science, but *without* retaining any

relationship to actual local research frontiers studying substantive problems. This is the sixth and final ambivalence.

One of the factors behind the collapse of Enlightenment expectations, Mills stated, was 'the intellectual and political default of the intellectual community' (pp. 202f.). This is in line with Mills's inclination to overrule the research community, as already noted above. Mills develops arguments as to why his fellow social scientists cannot generally be trusted to decide research problems. With reference to the US specifically, Mills claims that the degree to which intellectuals are able to see the 'relevance of history' varies with the historical social structure. He suggests that 'ours may be a society in a period for which historical explanations are less relevant than for many other societies and periods' (pp. 173, 129). The point is obviously not that Mills himself can dispel with a historical understanding. But his idea of the irrelevance of history for the US present is turned into a sociology of knowledge principle: it explains why social science on the abstracted empiricism and/or grand theory model prevails.

Social science becomes a 'functionally rational machine', social scientists risk losing their 'moral autonomy and … substantive rationality' (p. 199). In both Cold War superpowers, the individual is made 'a part of a functionally rational bureaucracy' (p. 199). From their position in a 'specialized slot', they cannot view the structure of society. Only the individual, autonomous social scientist – such as Mills himself – is able to address the most urgent problems of the present.

Not only are most social scientists – by submitting to abstracted empiricism/grand theory – chained into the present rationality, Mills's cultural criticism is extended to citizens as such. In civil society he finds 'the alienated man',

> the antithesis of the Western image of the free man. The society in which this man, this cheerful robot, flourishes, is the antithesis of the free society – or in the literal and plain meaning of the word, of a democratic society. (p. 191)

This is just a further variation on the divorce between reason and freedom. This man 'is "with" rationality but without reason, who is increasingly self-rationalized and also increasingly uneasy' (p. 188). Mills also talks about the 'proper little man':

> Happily, he conforms to conventional morality and motives: happily, he participates in the gradual progress of respectable institutions. His mother and father were never divorced; his home never crucially broken. He is 'successful', at least in a modest way, since he is modestly ambitious; but he does not

dwell upon matters too far above his means, lest he become a 'fantasy thinker'. As a proper little man, he does not scramble after the big money. (p. 103)

This is the 'pleasant little world of liberal practicality', the main object of the 'last generation of American sociologists' (p. 103). Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) continued along these Millsian lines.

Why the Ambivalences?

Mills's *SI*-vision met with little success in his own time. His internal programme remained a minority position. Despite the publication of *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959, at Mills's death in 1962 the academic public sphere was still dominated by abstracted empiricism and grand theory.

Table 3.1 above indicates two directions in which academic knowledge could be taken. Mills's criticism of abstracted empiricism and liberal practicality, as well as his broader substantive analysis of the US power structure, indicates that he considered all three reformist options closed. Mills's externalist sociology of knowledge (cf. the first and sixth ambivalences) tried to unmask such links as corrupting social science, restricting it to petty problems only. Private charities were historically outdated. In US bureaucracy Mills saw no public openness at all. Political machines were no arena for social scientists. We have seen (sixth ambivalence) how Mills implies a connection between the social structure of the bureaucratic welfare state and certain styles of thought (abstracted empiricism/grand theory). Welfare policies are seen as functionally related problem-solving for an unjust society. These views were widespread as the New Left developed.

Only three options (Table 3.1) existed for Mills, allowing him to address structural constraints. As for the *press/mass media public sphere,* Mills in his later years did try to influence the political public sphere, most notably through his books on World War III and Cuba. Here Mills pursued the sociological imagination as an individual social scientist, a Mannheimian intellectual countering the 'power elite', wishing to enlighten civil society. His last books combined agitation, cultural criticism and analysis, and Mills became a name in the interface between the press/political sphere and the cultural/literary sphere. At times, this spelled problems for his academic credibility, as critics would accuse him of pursuing politically biased journalism.

Concerning *social mobilization* as a public sphere, Mills judged the 1950s to be a 'non-epic' age. He saw no strong links to be forged

between critical intellectuals and social movements. He had worked on labour unions, but considered them integrated. There were anti-nuclear-weapons marches, and the second half of the 1950s saw the earliest civil rights actions. But *The Sociological Imagination* contains nothing about the civil rights movement. He omitted issues of gender and racial equality (Geary 2009, pp. 6–8).

As for the *cultural literary public sphere*, our account of his external programme shows how Mills developed a cultural criticism that suits a role combining philosophical and literary intellectual attitudes. The intellectual judges the social situation as increasingly unchangeable. The present social structure undermines historical consciousness, homogenizing biographies into technical reports on cheerful robots. The robot is a product of engineering, it can be understood through the principles of natural science and maths.

The philosophical terminology places Mills with the humanities. His existential account of the situation laments the dilemmas, frustrations, and challenges to the individual intellectual who cannot find any movement that shares his critical judgements of the present state of affairs. The intellectual craftsman, guardian of the classic legacy, retains the capacity for sociological imagination, asking only the broadest questions about how the basic social structure affects the human beings. The social scientist who moves into this literary intellectual role runs the risk of being treated by the mass media as what Howard Becker calls a 'Big Thinker'.

> Wanting to be recognized as a Big Thinker makes one sensitive to the opinions of non-professionals, which in turn makes it imperative or at least desirable to think in short-run terms. Professional Big Thinkers have to respond to the events of the day, the news, with opinions and analyses. They have to Know What It All Means and have an opinion on every subject. A Big Thinker can never say, as a social scientist might, 'I don't know' or 'that's out of my field.' (Becker 1994)

Big Thinker social scientists do not contribute to any local research frontiers, but try to stir up the public debate, and, of course, to influence students and academic peers. But Becker's (1994) claim that Mills's Big-Thinker inclinations led him to plan 'gigantic, undoable sociologies of the entire world' cannot be endorsed. Mills's internal programme of 'varieties of social structure' – mentioned above – might well have turned out as doable. Clearly, it would not be one man's work, but it would clearly be meaningful to put research teams at work on it. The role as professional Big Thinker available to address any sort of problem of the day in the cultural literary and/or political public sphere is *incompatible*

with the conduct of contextualizing projects, in which the researcher is committed mainly to the local research frontiers relevant to such a project.

The non-convergence of his two programmes helps us understand why Mills *imagines* the sociological imagination as a 'yearning' (p. 24). At most, Mills was an intellectual in a Mannheimian situation, longing to be a Gramscian organic intellectual. He would try to enlighten the US public so that social movements might arise. With no present movement to move with, Mills projected the 'organic' convergence of academic research and actual social mobilization into the future. The sociological imagination, then, is the vision that soon some social movement will bring the Enlightenment programme back on the agenda. The convergence of his internal and the external programme became a hope for the near future. 'Nowadays men everywhere seek to know where they stand, where they may be going, and what – if anything – they can do about the present as history and the future as responsibility' (p. 181). They long to be 'epic' in Hegel's sense, to live in an age where humans create history, and intellectuals are organically integrated in social movements. All men would be turned into social scientists, as such forming a transformative social movement! In our second section, we shall see that a social movement corresponding to Mills's vision did in fact emerge after his death.

SOCIOLOGY AFTER MILLS

Postwar social science developed through three phases. We have so far covered the first phase, marked by attempts to establish the disciplinary identity of various disciplines on a standard platform (Mjøset 2009).

The second phase – from the early 1960s to the late 1970s – saw an explosion of interest in the social sciences. This turbulent phase was influenced by the early 1960s New Left (which Mills helped establish) and by the late 1960s student revolt. Sociology was the main academic attraction for student revolters (Calhoun 2007, p. 36). The student movement was a social movement internal to the universities, radiating influence from the social sciences to other sectors of the academic world. Both the New Left and the student revolt were movements of the new intellectual middle classes, stimulated by the postwar extension of higher education and research.

Had he lived, Mills would surely have been a major voice in discussions on how sociology and social science developed. In a sense, he *was* present. Although *The Sociological Imagination* may not have

been required reading, the movement provided 'counter-curricula' that socialized those generations into social science. It is striking how Mills's work contains elements that spread after his death: attacks on abstracted empiricism and grand theory, interdisciplinarity, problem-orientation, and participation in social movements. Mills's 'varieties of social structures' is implicit in the book's plea for attention to 'the problems of the so-called underdeveloped countries' (p. 185) and to the temporal development patterns of 'world areas and regions' (p. 167). Programmes such as conflict theory, dependency theory, world systems theory, comparative macrohistory, Marxist and/or institutionalist political economy and even methodological ideas such as critical realism – these are all varieties of social science that were anticipated in Mills's work and later promoted by the student movement.

Just like Mills, the student revolters messed up whatever disciplinary identity sociology had worked up for itself. The second phase was marked by tensions and polarizations between standard views and the *movement's* plea for orientation towards participation, interdisciplinary studies, and philosophy of science traditions *not* referring to the natural sciences. The impacts were contradictory: there were futile 'paradigm wars' and excessive politicization, but also fruitful curiosity and inter-disciplinary enthusiasm. Within sociology these tensions opened up to a wide and heterogeneous variety of theoretical approaches, both because the movement revived several traditions that the early postwar standard orientation had marginalized, and because the mainstream standard approach was revised and upgraded in response to the criticism.

The student movement even tried to reach out of the academic sphere to converge with a broader process of socio-cultural change. There was a broad 'greening' of America that historians have recorded since the mid-1960s. Youngsters turned to alternative lifestyles, celebrating what Mills anticipated when he stated in *SI*:

> They yearn for facts, they search for their meanings, they want 'a big picture' in which they can believe and within which they can come to understand themselves. They want orienting values too, and suitable ways of feeling and styles of emotion and vocabularies of motive. (p. 24)

But that external surge had much less impact than the internal one, in many cases deteriorating into unrealistic, left-wing dogmatism. Other 1960s movements, especially the women's' movement, had much greater impact.

In the third phase, since the early 1980s, the turbulence faded, and the social sciences embarked on projects to re-establish their disciplinary

identities. Below, we shall relate sociology's new disciplinary profile to the ambiguities we found in Mills's *SI* programme. This three-phase periodization is crucial to the conclusion of our analysis.

From Turbulence to Revised Disciplinary Identity

The first phase had one standard benchmark for general theory, related to natural science and its assistant disciplines of mathematics and statistics. In the second phase, a variety of approaches to both general and middle-range theory flourished. We distinguish three second-period trends that became resources that were drawn on as sociology searched for a revised identity in the third phase. This search was necessary given the discipline's integration in the new mass university, with more academic personnel, more students, more research funding, and more jobs in research institutes, administrations and organizations (public and private sector).

The first trend is the marginalization of Parsonian grand theory within the standard approach. Parsons was attacked not only by student revolters but also by an emerging group that promoted rational choice and game theory as the high-level theoretical basis for a 'unity of social science' very different from the one Mills opted for. Mills had seen sociology as the leading social science, but now economics – with its idealized models – opted for that rank. We need not discuss these new standard varieties in any detail (see Mjøset 2009). All of them are influenced by the methods community with the natural sciences (with their experimental ideal) via the assistant disciplines of mathematics and statistics. As such, they are not in any sense particular to the discipline of sociology. In the third phase, they became broadly influential in the social sciences beyond economics, above all in political science, less so in anthropology. They strengthened theoretical thinking related to abstracted empiricism, since economists also had become the most sophisticated users of statistics among social scientists.

The second trend produced an alternative, social-philosophical notion of general theory. It emerged in the third phase as a consequence of the methods community extending from modern humanities – no longer committed to the defence of national cultural legacies – into social science. While already the student rebels had taken Marx's understanding of his present as a direct interpretation of the postwar present, from the late 1970s social philosophers related in the same way to statements on rationality (Weber), anomie (Durkheim), and similar expressions of cultural criticism, drawing on various social philosophers. A striking reversal is this: while Parsons's grand theory disappeared from the

standard camp, it was rescued and reinterpreted by a new group of social philosophers, working within a framework inspired by Continental philosophy and by a methods community with the humanities (linguistics, science of literature, rhetoric, history of ideas and art history). This is our definition (Mjøset 2009) of the social-philosophical practical philosophy of social science. In contrast to the new high-level standard notion of theory, this notion of theory *is* distinct to sociology.[3] This programme of high-level reconstructive theory developed into theories of modernity or subphases thereof, drawing on the Frankfurt school (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) and on French history of ideas (Foucault, Lyotard). These are theories by individual thinkers, writing grand history of the present, connecting these to individual biographies by means of *existential terms* (such as individualization, fragmentation of life spheres, and the like).

The third trend was the specification of a non-standard notion of middle-range theory. During the turbulent phase, interest in the ethnographic Chicago school tradition resurfaced. What Mills had discarded as 'liberal practicality' was revived in the second phase by the internal social movement, living out the 'yearning' Mills had longed for. This interactionist approach in sociology differed from both abstracted empiricism and grand theory, firmly supporting Mills's criticism of these. It revived also because, in most countries, sociology became more closely related to social reform, as social work was further professionalized, above all in the Western world. This trend towards grounded notions of theory relates to a third practical philosophy of social science. This *contextualist position* is defined by methods networking only internal to the social sciences, middle- or low-level notions of theory, and qualitative methods of contextualization. We define this as an explanation-based notion of theory, with grounded theory as a relevant example. Providing further specification along a number of relevant properties, Table 3.2 (drawing on Mjøset 2009) shows how these three positions thrive in three typical courses that are offered in most present-day sociology departments.

A professional administrator running a sociology department at an average university might fantasize about 'sociological imagination' emerging from a mix of qualitative and quantitative empirical research, with general theory – in a stroke of complementarity – deducing down to explain the findings. But any practising sociologist knows it is not that simple: the theory course offers mostly transcendental understandings of theory and grand history studies of modernity. The two methods courses imply separate and not necessarily compatible understandings of empirically based theory, in intricate ways influenced by the methods they

Table 3.2   The heterogeneity of present-day sociology curricula

Type of course	Approach	Role of researcher	Notions of theory	Topics (examples)	Reference faculty	Methods community	Possible pitfalls
Sociological theory	Social-philosophical	Individual	High-level reconstructive. Scepticist deconstructive	Structure/ action; modernity/ postmodernity	Humanities	…via philosophical reconstruction, linguistics, etc	'Grand theory', personal transcendental theory
Quantitative methods	Standard	Teamwork frequent	High-level idealizing. Middle-range law-oriented	Modelling, analysis of large data-sets, modified experiments	Mathematics/ natural science	… via mathematics and statistics	Methods- or formalism-driven
Qualitative methods	Contextualist	Participatory project work not uncommon	Middle-range explanation-based. Movements-oriented critical theory	Process-tracing, interpretation, knowledge by participation	Social science	…via case/ fieldwork, qualitative interviews, historical reconstruction	'Liberal practicality'

Note: Based on Mjøset (2009, 2012).

employ ('tools into theories'; Gigerenzer 2000). Moreover, the three course-types relate to different areas of philosophy. Rather than a neat division of labour between theory and two types of methods, sociology today includes three distinct theory–methods combinations (practical philosophies of social science), as sketched in Table 3.2. No other social science discipline is that heterogeneous.

It is small surprise that many sociology department administrators are tempted to sustain pluralism by celebrating 'the sociological imagination' as a vague, overall disciplinary umbrella. But such celebration of pluralism is not good for research: if sociology is like a microcosm of the social sciences, and if interdisciplinary research is fruitful (as Mills's internal programme indicates), the various fractions of sociology could benefit from mutually challenging each other. Hopefully, this could happen in a way that does not reproduce the futile paradigm wars of the turbulent phase.

We cannot here discuss future programmes for sociology at any length. To round off our discussion, we shall return to Mills. In a way that many may judge as too abrupt, we shall connect our account of Mills's ambivalences to the three trends we just sketched. These are our claims: First, in the third phase, Mills's external programme has been integrated into the social-philosophical general theory programme that mostly dominates sociological theory courses. Second, the tensions between Mills's two programmes have been transformed into an internal tension within academic sociology (between the main message of the theory course and the qualitative-methods approaches). Third, Mills's internal programme (as a macroqualitative approach, belonging in the qualitative methods course) is a relevant programme for contemporary sociology, even as an external programme, provided we question his criticism of liberal practicality.

As for the first point, we have sketched two contemporary and incompatible grand theory programmes. When the social-philosophical approach extends into theories of modernity, it converges with Mills's external programme. But in the style of the humanities, this programme is now connected to a notion of the personalized general theory reconstructed from earlier grand theorists. In the present average sociology curriculum, the Parsonian grand theory that Mills dismissed appears together with classics (Weber, Marx) that he wanted to honour. The external programme is thereby turned into an entirely internal programme. Its only remaining external feature is to attract into the sociology discipline people who seek a worldview to answer their existential worries.

To the extent that this social-philosophical grand theory position challenges the standard programme of grand theory (rational choice theory in particular), the ensuing debates follow the 'two cultures' pattern,

pitting styles of reasoning inspired by the two methods communities (towards the natural sciences and humanities respectively) against each other. A recent international incident was the 1990s science wars debate, and nothing was easier than to import that war into the discipline of sociology.

For the second point, we introduce Mills's internal programme, claiming that it converges with the broad interactionist tradition. Too often that tradition is only treated as micro-sociological one. Mills's internal programme, as we have seen, was distinctly macro-oriented. But the restriction of interactionism to micro studies is not a necessary one. Once we understand that notions such as grounded theory are not just relevant for micro-oriented research, but a 'general method of comparative analysis' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. x) we can draw on its principles also in macro studies.

Several scholars will object to such reasoning, emphasizing Mills's emphasis (noted above) on *structural forces*, which is philosophically more realist than most interactionist notions of theory. The latter are mostly considered 'constructionist'. However, this realism–constructionism dichotomy is yet another way to deflect potentially interesting debates in the philosophy of social science into a 'two cultures' blind alley. In contemporary philosophy, there is no such simple dichotomy (see, for example, Hacking 1986, 1999). Furthermore, notions drawn from interactionist traditions such as grounded theory are very much capable of connecting history and social science in productive interdisciplinary ventures. In line with Mills's views on history and sociology (surveyed above), the work of historians can be regarded as field notes of major importance to historical sociology. The difference between history and social science is that the latter codes concepts and samples new cases, thus developing tailor-made conceptual frames, converting them into grounded or middle-range theories by generalizing without loosing grip on context (Mjøset 2009). Mills's notion of 'working models' converges with the grounded theory notion of 'theoretical memos'. Mills states as his 'major idea' that 'every well-considered social study … requires a historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials' (pp. 161f.). This fits with the above account of principia media/middle-range theory. Thus, recent macrocomparative historical sociology and interactionism blend well together.

We find that one important line of division in contemporary sociology is between social-philosophical interpretations of the present through high-level reconstructive theories *and* a varieties of social structures (or varieties of capitalism) approach (Mjøset and Clausen 2007). The latter is grounded, working up from historical process-tracings via comparison

and typologization to establish contextualized generalizations that aim to capture structural forces driving present-day developments. As we extracted it, this was Mills's internal programme. That approach has no need for grand theory of structure/action, nor for grand history that employs history-of-art-and-ideas periodizations. Thus, Mills's criticism of grand theory applies to present social-philosophical modernity theories, and so the ambiguity between his two programmes is reproduced within present-day sociology.

Third, our additional claim is that Mills's internal programme also makes sense as an external programme. Although this may seem an innocent claim, it stirs up many complicated questions for sociology. Some of these questions can be related to Table 3.1. Is sociology today even more involved with social policy-making, organizational design and other practical matters than when Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination?* Should we pay even more attention to his criticism of liberal practicality today? Will the contextualizing approach as an external programme simply aid various elites in their efforts to solve problems below the 'historical level of reality'?

Worries to this effect are easily found in contemporary debates on sociologists as public intellectuals. From a position that reminds of (and probably owes a lot to) Mills's position during the first phase, a variety of scholars have criticized contextualist approaches such as grounded theory. Followers of Bourdieu pursue such criticism when they claim that interactionist approaches are unable to unmask deeper structures of power that produce self-mystifying symbolic forms (see Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). It can be found explicitly in the work of Burawoy (1991, pp. 8f., 303), who sees grounded theory as a positivist approach incapable of 'reaching out', and thus opposed to the 'extended case method'. These, and similar criticisms, have the same form as Mills's criticism of liberal practicality.

Such questions about how sociological production of knowledge – from sectoral policy advice to grand history diagnosis by Big Thinkers – relates to social developments cannot be discussed here in any detail. A meaningful discussion requires considerable contextualization. Answers will differ depending on whether we are in poor Third World countries, emerging economies, in a leading but ageing great power such as the US, or in Europe. In Europe, answers will differ depending on whether they relate to fragile, recent East European democracies, to crisis-ridden Southern EU-peripheries with their clientelist socio-political networks, or to the 'chronic idylls' of Nordic welfare states, influenced as they are by social-democratic legacies. One point in favour of contextualizing macro-qualitative comparisons of the type we found in Mills's internal

programme is that we need it in order systematically understand this diversity of contexts. Grand historical accounts of the anatomy of capitalism or the culture of postmodernity will not help us.

CONCLUSION

We find that Mills's ambiguities are still with us. This should not be read as a claim that Mills has in some way been a 'driving force' in the development of sociology long after he passed away. Rather, our point is that his activities in the first phase show how sensitive he was to the cross-pressures facing a Western academic intellectual. When contexts – both the broader social context and the narrower academic one – changed in the second and third phases, his work became one of several resources that disciplinary actors drew on in the new situations.

In that way, his ambiguities were transformed but also reproduced in contemporary sociology. While sociology has been able to revise its disciplinary identity through the third phase, this identity is a fragile and heterogeneous one. In the spirit of Mills, we should openly admit this and reflect on it. But instead, it seems that many introductions to contemporary sociology rather hijack Mills's formula of the sociological imagination, uncritically selecting quotes that gloss over these tensions. Mills's vision of a sociological imagination for social science deserves better than being turned into a fake banner for sociology's pluralistic disciplinary identity. The only way we can live up to the real meaning of Mills's sociological imagination is if we accept the heterogeneity of our discipline and turn this into an asset by practising inventive inter-disciplinarity and clever mixing of methods.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers in parenthesis in the text are to Mills (1959), the Penguin edition of *The Sociological Imagination*.
2. On the absence of any references to Merton in *The Sociological Imagination*, see Geary (2009, pp. 118f.). If there was a veiled attack on Merton in that book, only Lazarsfeld (Geary 2009, p. 172) claimed that it was directed at Merton's notion of middle-range theories. It should be noted that Merton introduced that term in the preface to the first edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949; see Mjøset 2006), while his essay with an extensive history-of-ideas excursus was only published after Mills's death, in the third, 1967 edition of Merton's collection. The excursus, which we draw on in the following, is useful since it strengthens our claim that Mills's internal programme includes an understanding of theory similar to Merton's.
3. Given that the two prevailing notions of general theory (the standard idealizing notion and the social-philosophical reconstructive notion) emerge as generalized theory

programmes rooted in two different disciplines, it can be argued that both face a *discipline/fundamentals dilemma*. Here are two disciplines that produce conflicting programmes of general theory. Both derive from a view of fundamentals (such as the structure/action problem) that should concern any social scientist. The dilemma emerges because none of the other disciplines generally accept any of the programmes.

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