

Global Public Life

The Sociological Imagination and its Imperial Shadows

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Abstract

This article commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of *The Sociological Imagination* by recalling, renewing and updating C. Wright Mills' pledge to expand a politically aware, self-reflective and publicly accessible intellectual culture between aestheticism and scientism. We begin by sketching how Mills' 'bifocal' vision of the translation between the close-up perspective on personal milieus and the longer view of social structures contrasts with recent calls for a public sociology which would sustain its professional legitimacy while reviving its critical conscience. To illustrate this point, we argue that his project can be reframed in a way that 'provincializes' the universalizing claims and scientific aspirations of much of North American sociology by exposing its imperial unconscious in pre- and post-war movements toward the professionalization and scientization of knowledge. Here our focus turns to the prospects for a 'sociology of empire' to trace imperial forms which are symptomatically manifested both in the discipline's assumptions about historical progress and in Mills' critique of these assumptions. Finally, with an example from the history of British colonialism in Egypt, we show how, despite its blindspots, Mills' vision of the sociological imagination implicitly projects an alternative 'sociological map' with distinct vantage points that can account for the changing cultural tasks of our time, especially concerning how collectives of human and non-human agents are unequally mediated within networks of power. We conclude by revisiting Mills' distinctive approach to 'the craft of sociology', considered more as a prayer than a profession, and undertaken more as a personal and political calling than as career.

Key words

human/non-human ■ imperialism ■ C. Wright Mills ■ public sociology

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C. WRIGHT MILLS' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) must be read in the first instance as a timely attempt to mediate the increasing polarization of scientific realism and artful idealism in an effort to address the mounting sense of public disenchantment over the failure of each to meet the pressing demands of the day: 'Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference – not yet formulated in such ways as to permit the work of reason and the play of sensibility' (Mills, 1959: 11). What Mills famously calls the task and 'the promise' of the sociological imagination – 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society' – expresses a commitment to confront this pervasive apathy and confusion (Mills, 1959: 6). The present article commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of this text by recalling, renewing and updating Mills' pledge to open up a politically aware, critically self-reflective and publicly accessible intellectual culture between the two extremes of aestheticism and scientism (Lepenies, 1988). Specifically, our interest is to highlight the colonial gaze of sociology and the epistemic reverberations of its imperial unconscious which restrict its critical vision and inhibit its theoretical voice.

Rather than indulge in a Nietzschean polemic about sociology's 'bad conscience' and its collective amnesia, Mills modifies the critical tone he takes in other empirical and occasional works. Instead, he examines more systematically the social, biographical and historical conditions under which the promise of the sociological imagination has been made, and which now determine whether it will be kept or broken. Although he was critically aware of and politically engaged with how intellectual claims are implicated in the dynamics of empire-building, we identify symptomatic expressions, even in his own radical thinking, of the tendency to universalize European and American history and thought. We argue that the challenge Mills posed to sociology, as *both* a theoretical and methodological project *and* as a political or critical challenge, still remains urgent in an era increasingly shaped by changing imperial forms. However, cultivating the 'quality of mind' that Mills envisioned requires updating his arguments and advancing beyond his intellectual and historical frames of reference. By drawing from recent developments in colonial/postcolonial studies and in science studies, we argue that the sociological imagination needs to be expanded to account for non-human forces as a strategy for 'provincializing' the universalizing claims of sociology and displacing its anthropocentric orientation. The politics of nature and the critique of the uneven power dynamics which mediate human and non-human relations are arguably even more pressing concerns today than they were in Mills' time.

Sociological Bifocals

Whether viewed as a style of thought or a moral impulse, a scientific discipline or an aesthetic sensibility, the sociological imagination must find its way between recurring moments of opacity and insight. In Mills' use of these commonplace *visual* metaphors, successfully cultivating this faculty entails 'the capacity to shift from one perspective to another'. The 'close-up scenes

of job, family, and neighborhood', for example, must be viewed through the wide-angle lens of economic institutions, fluctuating divorce rates and the spectacular structures of the big city. Conversely, the 'longer view' of historical and structural transformations remains the abstract assumption of a vicarious 'spectator', unless one can also take a magnified and microscopic look at how these transformations are experienced personally and in everyday life (Mills, 1959: 7, 3). What is needed, then, is the ability to hold these contrasting perspectives in view, either in succession ('cinematically') or simultaneously (as 'snapshots').

In Figure 1 we schematize one of Mills' most celebrated and cited theoretical and methodological arguments in terms of the ocular imagery he employs to elaborate it: 'Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure"' (Mills, 1959: 8). Here his 'bifocal' view of social life is depicted in the shape of a relatively recent and now widely accessible invention, which Benjamin Franklin is said to have designed in order to enhance the ability to see things clearly which are *both near and far away*. According to this visual analogy (the cultural significance of which would not have escaped Franklin), if in some sense we have lost our capacity – or lately discovered our inability – to understand our personal milieus in light of the expanding social structures which envelop them, then a prosthetic device is needed to correct and clarify this distortion-effect (White, 1999). The figure traced here suggests that 'private troubles' are distinct from yet connected to 'public issues', at least as long as they are not framed too broadly as social – or too narrowly as psychological – 'problems'. What we are calling Mills' 'sociological bifocals' is therefore also a 'binocular' technology insofar as these corrective lenses

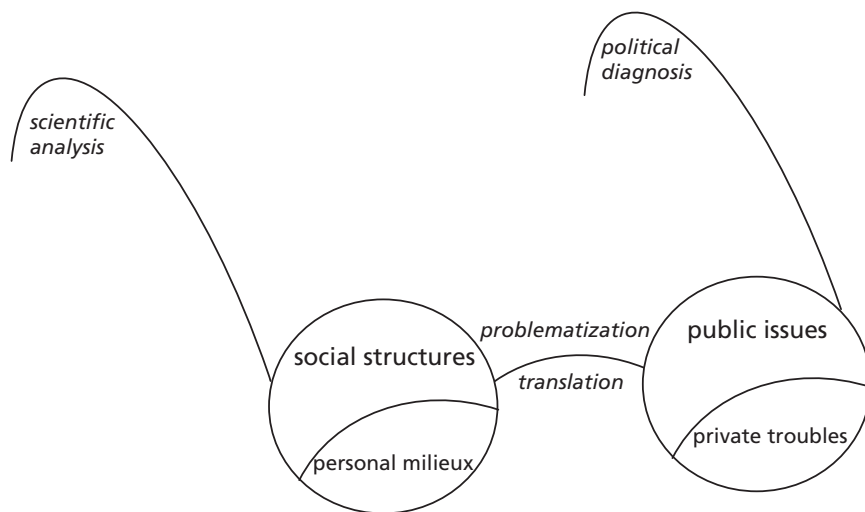


Figure 1 Sociological bifocals (based on Mills, 1959)

facilitate a differentially magnified quadruple focus on reality – two longer telescopic views plus two close-up microscopic angles – as well as alternating perspectives which produce a parallax view – the apparent displacement or difference of orientation of an object when seen along two different lines of sight. This way of picturing the sociological imagination helps to expose the scientific fiction of *disciplined observation*, according to which a realistic representation hides or ignores the embodied stance of the spectator, as in the conventional view of a scientific account presented as an objective *mirror* or *window* on reality (Wilson, 2004). In this depiction we draw attention instead to the necessarily *framed* and *partial* character of ‘seeing sociologically’, that is, to the relatively arbitrary, artificial, constructed and situated aspect of observation, which facilitates some views and ways of knowing while suppressing or restricting others.

The implicit oculocentrism of Mills’ formulation is qualified by what we also suggest is his *‘bivocal’* understanding of structures and milieus, that is, his political and critical conception of how issues and troubles may ‘speak’ to and be ‘heard’ through one another. He raises the question of how personal experiences may be ‘translated’ in terms of their ethical relevance, or how larger institutional dynamics may be ‘problematized’ with respect to their moral meanings for individuals differentially positioned in the world. Thus, social life can not only be ‘seen’ stereoscopically but also ‘heard’ stereophonically through the complementary and often competing demands of *scientific analysis* and *political diagnosis* (or, to expand the metaphor, sociological ‘ear buds’ or ‘hearing aids’ which attune us to the theoretical and critical requirements of each task). Rather than presume that knowledge equals power, or that insight leads to freedom, Mills draws on his earlier studies of Max Weber (pursued under the tutelage of Hans Gerth) to clarify these relationships (Weber, 1946). Structures and milieus are matters of interpretation (*Verstehen*): they involve selective description and sequential narration with differing degrees of particularity and generality, which may then be subject to causal analysis and functional explanation (*Erklärung*). Such *factual statements*, including empirical propositions which can be verified with varying degrees of certainty or accuracy, are logically distinct from yet necessarily informed by *value-judgements*, including evaluative claims which diagnose troubles as symptoms of a larger pathology, as ethical dilemmas that demand moral action, or simply as matters of aesthetic ‘taste’. In the terms we are using here, the ‘optics’ of the sociological imagination may be translated onto the ‘acoustic’ register insofar as facts are either treated (‘heard’) as scientific puzzles or formulated (‘voiced’) as political problems. In any case, the value-freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) and the relatively autonomous logic (*Eigenseztlichkeit*) of each plane or register must nevertheless be recognized and respected.

In the post-war era, Mills argues, ‘the cultural meaning of the social sciences’ is itself felt to be a personal trouble for citizens and social scientists, and ‘the problem of the social sciences’ is increasingly understood as a public issue (Mills, 1959: 8, 21). The crisis of ‘the liberal imagination’ is

not merely a political or cultural problem, but an epistemic one that can be detected in how the authority of scientific facts, the civic engagement of intellectuals, and the mass mediation of common sense are perpetually open to question (Trilling, 1950). In this respect, the ‘abstracted empiricism’ which dominates academic sociology contributes to a sense of entrapment and uneasiness when its narrow concern with correlating observable factors is not seen to be reflected in larger structural and institutional patterns. Likewise, the far-sighted vision of ‘grand theory’, with its panoramic overviews of large-scale social structures and historical transformations, enhances public indifference and political ignorance when such abstractions are not refracted through everyday experience and ordinary situations. By seizing on one scalar moment (*either* micro *or* macro) abstracted empiricism and grand theorizing become a hindrance to sociological explanation and interpretation, and to any political diagnosis or critique which they might inform (Mills, 1959: 50).

We have dwelt at some length on these opening arguments of *The Sociological Imagination* not merely because of the prominence they are given in introductory textbooks and undergraduate courses, at least in many North American sociology departments, but also for the depoliticizing function they have come to serve in projecting an image of Mills that is more palatable to much of mainstream sociology and its attenuated critical agenda. In many ways, Mills was a radical thinker, not only with respect to his political diagnosis of the key public issues, and his global consciousness of the human dilemmas of the day, but also regarding the scientific analysis of social and cultural problems. As we discuss more fully below, for example, he was acutely aware of the grand scope of European and American imperialism, the latter a more subtle strategy for enhancing the cultural prestige of power elites and knowledge brokers through the celebration of market freedoms both at home and abroad (Mills, 1960, 1963 [1955]). At various points throughout the text he makes explicit reference to how European and American dominance have come to define ‘Western society’, and to processes of colonization and decolonization which have given rise to new imperial formations that affect individuals in nearly every aspect of their daily lives. As Mills observes in the opening pages:

That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming ‘merely history.’ The history that now affects every man is world history. . . . [I]n the course of a single generation, one sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. (1959: 4)

Mills’ assessments here (which echo the lyrical passages of *The Communist Manifesto*) are not restricted to world history or to the study of empire, nor are they intended only to illuminate the political and personal experiences

of contemporary Americans. His aim is also to shine new light into the shadows of imperialism which have been recast by sociology in its pursuit of disciplinary knowledge.

Mills' understanding of 'sociology' assumes that its intellectual capacity or aesthetic sensibility is already generally available and even increasingly pervasive: '[i]n every intellectual age some one style of reflection tends to become a common denominator of cultural life' (Mills, 1959: 13, 2008 [1954]). To notice that this thought style or mental quality is more vividly and frequently displayed by 'classic sociologists' (many of whom, like Marx, would never have considered themselves 'sociologists') is not to overlook how it is also evident in numerous academic disciplines and professional fields, as well as in literature, journalism, the visual and performing arts, and in the common sense of everyday life. A half century before Mills, Georg Simmel pointed out that, although a sociological mindset is indispensable to any understanding of modernity, it lacked a formal method, an established set of legitimate epistemological goals, or a well demarcated place in the system of the sciences (1992 [1908]: 9).

By contrast, a half century after Mills, in recent debates to revitalize the *public spirit and moral mission* of 'sociology', the institutional framing of sociology as *an academic discipline and a professional practice* relatively divorced from ordinary experience and from other intellectual fields is largely taken for granted. Michael Burawoy's (2005a) plea to the American Sociological Association to address this problem of cultural relevance and political commitment on behalf of a public sociology with an ethical conscience and a reflexive intent has generated considerable critical response, at least among professional sociologists. Seldom noticed, however, is the extent to which Burawoy's position largely *contradicts* rather than complements Mills' argument, despite similarities in their political motivation and critical tone (Burawoy, 2008). Although *The Sociological Imagination* is primarily remembered and revered today as a scathing critique of the intellectual pathologies which emerged from the departmental and disciplinary closure of sociology from other academic fields and schools of thought, its broader concern is with how matters of popular, political, and scientific concern can be cogently identified with, eloquently articulated by, and convincingly communicated to a variety of publics, not just salaried and certified sociologists.

For Mills, there is no question that professional sociologists must depend and draw upon – while attempting to develop and refine – this more pervasive feature ('common denominator') of contemporary culture, however vaguely recognized or poorly articulated. For Burawoy, by contrast, 'professional sociology' is the primary cause or control variable on which 'public sociology' depends. In Burawoy's view, professional sociology 'provides legitimacy, expertise, distinctive problem definitions, relevant bodies of knowledge and techniques for analyzing data'; for this reason, public sociology 'is not hostile to, but *depends upon the professional sociology that lies at the core of our disciplinary field*' (Burawoy, 2004: 1609, emphasis added).

The former constitutes a subordinate category of the latter insofar as it takes superstructural form as community outreach, organic intellectual activism or personal commitment, which in turn requires the institutional base and academic reputation of the university to sustain the social status and moral respectability of the profession.

Writing in the context of a significantly different institutional, political and historical climate from Mills', Burawoy's concern is to dynamize sociology's institutional response to a spectrum of social forces, including: the widening cultural gap between left-leaning academics and right-wing publics; the relatively low prestige, marginal status, thin power base and meagre resources of sociology in the university; and the intensification of a global information and knowledge-based economy within a hostile context of increasing market tyranny, state unilateralism, and civic disengagement. The solution he proposes for addressing these intellectual and institutional imbalances focuses on clarifying and redrawing the *intra*-disciplinary division of labour within sociology, despite the increased blurring of *inter*-disciplinary boundaries between all intellectual fields (Burawoy, 2005a). To do so, he makes sharp analytical distinctions between the relatively marginalized reflexive and evaluative concerns of critical and public sociologies, on the one hand, and the dominant instrumental interests and factual orientations of professional and policy sociologies, on the other. A further cross-classification completes this 2×2 table (or 'window') when he contrasts scientific and theoretical *puzzles*, which are the specialized focus of academic readers and writers of critical and professional sociology, with cultural and political *problems*, which are the common concern of non-academic audiences and producers of policy and public sociology. In light of the schema that Burawoy sketches out, we can begin to understand how the theoretical and methodological debates, divisions, and developments of the past several decades have reduced the retrospective picture of Mills' interventions either to his relatively outdated politics (often recalled with either nostalgia or hostility) or to his supposedly minor theoretical contributions (usually assumed to take a middle perspective between micro-empiricism and macro-theoreticism).

Although emphasizing the 'reciprocal interdependence', 'shared ethos' and 'relative autonomy' of these four orientations, Burawoy insists that the synergy between them must ultimately be produced from the institutional centre of the university and its professional division of labour (Calhoun, 2005). In fact, a hierarchy of power, prestige and funding increasingly characterizes strained relations between professional and policy sociologies at the top, and critical and public sociologies at the bottom. Mills explains the emergence of this stratified system in his own time: 'the economics of truth – the costs of research – seem to conflict with the politics of truth – the use of research to clarify significant issues and to bring political controversy closer to realities' (Mills, 1959: 64). At least in much of the North American university system today, which tends to be ruled by natural scientific and professional norms of research and resource allocation, the

result of this conflict is that professional sociology must struggle to maintain both its public face and its institutional blinders by drawing upon the moral and social capital of the non-academic world it takes as its object of study. Mills' (1959: 25–131) well-known critical diagnosis of the pathological 'distortions' of myopic 'abstracted empiricism' and far-sighted 'grand theory' therefore needs to be updated and expanded in light of these tensions. Contra Mills, we should say rather that today a certain 'abstracted theoreticism' and 'grand empiricism' characterize the dominant schools of sociology and promote their depoliticization. Insofar as 'theory' is stripped down to operationalizable concepts and hypotheses, and 'method' decomposed into quantifiable and correlateable variables, disciplinary specialists can only talk to themselves, or at most to their counterparts in policy studies. In post-war American sociology, the critical and analytical 'audio-visual' components of Mills' sociological bifocals have been further obscured and muted by their professionalization and scientization.

We cannot survey here the effects these tendencies have had on the restricted reception and widespread resistance to European critical theory in American sociology over the past 50 years – from the Frankfurt School to French post-structuralism, for example – which arguably might have charted an alternative path more in tune with the one promoted by Mills. However, we can at least note how the prevailing methodological and theoretical orientations are given professional sanction within 'leading' sociology journals published in the United States (note that the critique by Agger, 2000: 107–13, which we follow here, pre-dates Burawoy's call for a public sociology by several years). In these venues, a restricted view of 'social problems' and 'sociological puzzles' is endowed with a quasi-natural aura of scientific realism through the compulsory use of such textual formats as the abstract and the literature review (which subordinate the formulation of intellectual and critical problems to sanctioned form and method), the regression table and the scatter plot (which invert the traditional relationship of discursive argument and figural display). This combination of technical bravado and substantive superficiality, of methodological inhibition and theoretical poverty, promotes a code of 'secret writing' and 'intellectual surveillance' which academic cliques employ to determine the accumulation and conversion of 'career capital' through the enforcement of benchmark standards of reward and reputation. At the same time, the disciplinary attention of readers and writers of these *self-consuming accounts* is trained to focus on the display of verifiable 'sociological facts' and discrete 'findings' within the parameters of professional publication, rather than to foster an open 'quality of mind' necessary for public communication and political critique. As we argue in the following section, folded into these mechanisms of disciplinary knowledge production are implicit and largely unacknowledged assumptions regarding the universality of historical experiences and the place of human reason in the production and organization of social life.

Sociology's Empire

The 'literary act' of reducing and dividing social life into discrete and quantifiable variables is not just a scientific procedure with strictly intellectual applications but also a political problem of power/knowledge with significant historical implications. The intellectual gesture of trading in master narratives, such as the progress story of freedom through reason, has moral and ethical significance, as do the proliferation of zombie concepts, including vague a-historical notions of 'capitalism', and what Mills calls 'sponge words', such as the fungible vocabularies of 'postmodernism'. What has been called the 'social scientization of all knowledge' does not just affect the assimilation of disciplinary-specific uncertainty principles which increasingly characterize the rise of cultural studies in the humanities and the latest advances in the natural sciences (Wallerstein, 1999: 91). It also refers to the assertion of a kind of disciplinary imperialism and a historical universalism which applies a specific model of knowing to sociology everywhere while most closely reflecting a particular type of American-style (professional) sociology that draws on the histories and experiences of American society (Creese et al., forthcoming; Haney, 2007).

As several commentators have recently observed, sociology, like other social science disciplines, was not simply a creation of the modern university but also a product of Europe's imperial reach and its colonizing gaze (Burawoy, 2005b; Go, 2009; Goldberg, 1993; Steinmetz, 2007a, 2007b). Insofar as the discipline was 'formed within the culture of imperialism and embodied a cultural response to the colonized world', the task of discerning and problematizing its colonial birthmarks is 'crucial in understanding the content and method of sociology as well as the discipline's cultural significance' (Connell, 1997: 1519). While the ascendancy of anthropology, geography, and political science in the expansion of European empires has received considerable critical attention (Cohn, 1996; Edney, 1997; Harley, 1992; Said, 1978, 1993; Winichakul, 1997), sociologists have spent remarkably less time thinking through the discipline's emergence within, alongside, and sometimes outside European expansion. To Mills' (1959: 146) insistence, citing Paul Sweezy, that sociology must learn to write 'the present as history' we might add, citing Michel Foucault, that we still need to write 'a history of the present' which would include a history of sociology itself.

The social sciences flourished from Europe's prior self-generated cultural and political resources. Their development in the course of trade, exploration, conquest, and domination 'instantiated Western modernity' (Prakash, 1999: 13). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sociologists focused on 'global difference' and 'modern progress' as two key questions for theory and research (Connell, 1997: 1516). Although Mills does not address the imperial context of these problematics directly, he offers a useful critique of sociology's bureaucratic uses and ideological preoccupations regarding social betterment and progression on a local and global scale (Mills, 1959: 80, 84). Even demography, a seemingly objective

and value-free ‘statistical specialty’, was long ‘involved in the conflicts of policy and the factual controversies first aroused by Thomas Malthus’ (Mills, 1959: 83). Many of these contestations were centered on ‘formerly colonial areas,’ and the ‘economic and political problems of these countries are generally defined as the need for rapid economic progress’ (Mills, 1959: 83).

In contrast to the outward gaze of geographers and cultural anthropologists, who have been ‘deeply concerned with the facts and ethos of colonialism’ (Mills, 1959: 83), many sociologists by the close of the 19th century were turning away from questions of global difference to explore how modernity shaped and realigned social distinctions, relations, and inequalities within the western metropole (Connell, 1997: 1536). This ‘looking inside’ was unevenly pursued across Europe and the US. As Mills explains of late 19th century America, the social sciences had already started changing scales, shifting their attention away from the global to the domestic, national, and local. The rapid growth of American sociology thus became tightly linked to social reform activities and state-centered projects in metropolitan centers. The American Social Science Association, organized under the auspices of the ‘Social Science Movement’ in 1865, for example, was a late 19th century attempt to ‘apply science’ to social problems, and ‘to turn the troubles of lower class people into issues for middle-class publics’ (Mills, 1959: 84).

This perspectival shift – from the global to the metropolitan – might be characterized as an epistemic break that divided an ‘old’ sociology pre-occupied with global difference from a ‘new’ one that explored differences within the occidental city (Connell, 1997: 1535). There were important continuities between these projects, however, including the persistent albeit changing force of empire. The ongoing traffic between the colonies and metropolitan centers reveals that urban locales, which became the focus of sociological attention during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were sites where ‘global differences’ and colonial knowledges were both transplanted and produced anew (Goldberg, 1993: 151; McClintock, 1995). ‘Spaces of the other’ were not restricted to the Orient, the ‘third world’, the village, or the township. Although urban and metropolitan localities in the West, including the ghetto, the slum, and ‘skid row’, provided sociology with distinct sites of disciplinary surveillance in the production of bureaucratic knowledge (Huey and Kemple, 2007), the comparative languages of ‘global difference’ and ‘modern progress’ were also mapped onto the interiorities of American society. By producing useable information, Mills observes, social research from the late 19th century onwards was ‘of direct service to army generals and social workers, corporation managers and prison wardens’ (Mills, 1959: 80). Rather than simply turn away from the public issues of empire, sociology cultivated its imperial mindset both abroad and at home amidst the troubles of lower class people and those on the margins of American society, including ‘the delinquent’, ‘the prisoner’, the ‘pauper’ and the ‘criminal’. Territories ‘out there’ provided the foundation for the comfort and poise of ‘home’, and the concept of ‘savage natives’ enabled European

and American elites to discipline their working classes and social misfits into modern self-governing subjects (Prakash, 1999: 13; McClintock, 1995; Said, 1978).

In critically characterizing these developments as the emergence of ‘sociology’s empire’, we are not suggesting that empire has been overlooked by sociology. On the contrary, since the late 19th century, and especially in the past few decades, empire as a topic of study and investigation has intensified among a growing number of comparative and historical sociologists (Connell, 1997; Go, 2009; Steinmetz, 2005, 2007b). Rich case studies of the dynamic processes of colonialism and its ongoing legacies have provided new insights into the production of regimes of knowledge and the politics of truth within a variety of colonial milieus and institutions (Adams, 2005; Go, 2007; Mawani, 2009; Steinmetz, 2007a). However, this literature has had limited influence on (re)shaping the discipline’s boundaries and in revealing how its ontological moorings, categories, and modes of analysis have been fundamentally structured by imperial pursuits and formed within cultures of colonialism. Insofar as imperial formations are constantly changing and reinventing themselves, then an important task is to examine how the beacon of sociology is produced by and productive of new imperial shadows. In this regard, the urgency to *provincialize* sociology, that is, to problematize assumptions concerning its abstract generalizability, unsettle its universalizing claims, and pluralize local meanings and sources of understanding, remains a project envisioned but largely left to pursue (Burawoy, 2005b; Featherstone and Venn, 2006; Go, 2007).

In his seminal book, *Provincializing Europe*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues that European thought is both indispensable to and inadequate for thinking through modernity in the non-West. Although Chakrabarty focuses on Europe, his insights can be extended to address the growth and hegemony of American sociology which preoccupied Mills. To provincialize sociology is not simply to bring sociological insights to bear on the study of imperial formations, or only to decenter the universal claims of American history and social life by ‘adding’ other non-western geographical and historical contexts to the sociological agenda (Burawoy, 2005b). Instead, to provincialize is to critically explore, examine, and scrutinize how sociology’s master categories all ‘bear the burden’ of European (and American) thought and history (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4). It is to consider how colonial and imperial expansion has figured centrally in the production of sociological knowledge and the formation of its epistemic boundaries. In the spirit of Mills (1959: 84), we can say that provincializing sociology means, in part, rendering the traces of its bureaucratic routines, ideological codes, and political meanings more explicit, legible, audible, and visible.

Chakrabarty’s call is an invitation to problematize what he considers to be two ontological assumptions deeply embedded in occidental ideas of the ‘social’ and the ‘political’: the notion of a uniquely secular historical time and the ontological singularity of the human (2000: 16). While we address the second point in the following section, here we want to

emphasize the distinct yet complementary arguments that Mills and Chakrabarty make regarding time as linear and progressive. Although insights from colonial history and postcolonial theory have been drawn upon to challenge sociology's claims to be a 'value-free science', these critical engagements have left the *form* and *objectives* of sociological explanation largely intact. Many fail to problematize the compulsory conventions of sociological writing in particular (as we note above and return to in the following section), and more generally to translate the universalizing claims of such master concepts as 'capitalism', 'industrialization', and 'racism' into their meanings for a variety of historical actors and cultural milieus (Mitchell, 2002: 2).

Though written in a different era, before the rise of poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of power/knowledge relations, Mills' condemnation of American-style sociology and the popularization of its ideas about 'cultural lag' provide useful coordinates to begin questioning occidental assumptions of historical time. A symptom of the apolitical ethos of liberal practicality, 'cultural lag' expresses 'the need to change something in order to "bring it into line" with the state of progressive technology'. Whatever 'is thought to be "lagging"', he explains, 'exists in the present, but its reasons-for-being are held to lie in the past. [Value-] judgments are thus disguised as [factual] statements about a time sequence' (Mills, 1959: 88):

The idea that 'institutions' in general lag behind 'technology and science' in general is a very popular idea. It involves a positive evaluation of Science and of orderly progressive change; in brief, it is a liberal continuation of The Enlightenment with its full rationalism, its messianic and now politically naive admiration of physical science as a mode of thinking and action and of the conception of time as progress. (Mills, 1959: 89)

Mills' critique challenges the eurocentric and unitary logics of sociological explanation which have positioned historical time as a measure of cultural distance between the West and non-West. In Chakrabarty's (2000: 7) assessment, this historicist project 'is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside of it'. From this viewpoint, the non-West was seen to be 'lagging' behind the West because capitalism, modernity, and technological and scientific progress were conceived to be European inventions. These processes would eventually be replicated in non-western regions as they slowly 'caught up'.

Provincializing sociological assumptions of linear historical time exposes and challenges the universality underlying sociology's own contemporary claims to scientific truth. Embedded within an ideological veneer of common sense that is translatable into ideas with popular currency, '[t]he everyday empiricism of common sense is filled with assumptions and stereotypes of one or another particular society; for common sense determines what is seen and how it is to be explained' (Mills, 1959: 123). What passes

for ‘common sense’ both inside and outside academic fields is often the privileging of a particular universal (American) point of view, and yet ‘what social science is properly about’, according to Mills, ‘is the human variety, which consists of all the social worlds in which men have lived, are living, and might live’ (1959: 132). Mills develops this point in an extraordinary passage:

The human variety also includes the variety of individual human beings; these too the sociological imagination must grasp and understand. In this imagination an Indian Brahmin of 1850 stands alongside a pioneer farmer of Illinois; an eighteenth-century English gentleman alongside an Australian aboriginal, together with a Chinese peasant of one hundred years ago, a politician in Bolivia today, a feudal knight of France, an English suffragette on hunger strike in 1914, a Hollywood starlet, a Roman patrician. To write of ‘man’ is to write of all these men and women – also of Goethe, and of the girl next door. (Mills, 1959: 133)

Sociology, in particular, has been largely unable to sustain a concerted investigation into this kaleidoscopic spectrum of histories, experiences, and identities. At most, the ‘human variety’ is considered from the view of liberal tolerance or as a comparative counterpoint that does not adequately problematize the universality and hegemony of American or European history and experience. Acknowledging the global diversity of identities and experiences entails holding contradictory points of view (of time, space, and scale) in dialogue or tension with one another, and cultivating ways of seeing that might be mediated through a contrapuntal reading (Chakrabarty, 2000: 254; Said, 1993) or corrected by a bifocal shift in perspective: ‘*the struggle for such viewpoints is the first and continuing struggle of social science*’ (Mills, 1959: 133; our emphasis). Challenging the universal narratives of ‘capitalism’ and ‘modernity’ while addressing a plurality of ‘ways of being human’ places social scientific categories and modes of thinking into question, and opens up new possibilities for a sociological imagination that takes the epistemic presuppositions and political effects of empire seriously.

Retracing the Sociological Map

Although Mills was acutely aware of European imperialism and American power abroad, *The Sociological Imagination* also demonstrates his own imperial unconscious and implicit Orientalism: ‘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 postmodern period’ (Mills, 1959: 166). Despite his eurocentism, Mills’ chronology suggestively places sociology’s master categories and ways of knowing into question. Sociological frameworks were derived from attempts to understand the transition between the Medieval and the Modern Age, ‘and when they are generalized for us today, they become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing’ (Mills, 1959: 166). The distortions and pathologies in the dominant

schools of sociology can also be treated as a call for diagnosis, and even taken as a sign of coming health, insofar as one acknowledges the persistence of the human variety, the critical uses of human history, the limits of human freedom and reason, and the political vocation of intellectual work (Mills, 1959: 132–194, at 132). Here we argue that for the sociological imagination to respond to the imminent political and cultural tasks of our time, Mills' analytical emphasis on human actors (rather than his political commitment to humanism) needs to be revised and expanded to include a serious analytical and critical engagement with non-human forces.

Examining a later historical transition from the high mark of British colonialism to the emergence of the Egyptian nation-state, Timothy Mitchell's book, *Rule of Experts*, resonates with and even extends Mills' critique of the outdated character of social scientific thinking. Without citing Mills, and writing as a political scientist, Mitchell echoes his diagnosis: 'We have entered the twenty-first century still divided by a way of thinking inherited from the nineteenth' (Mitchell, 2002: 1). But where Mills continues to focus on older notions of 'man' as the primary historical actor, Mitchell problematizes this anthropocentric (and androcentric) emphasis on the human and on rationality:

Nineteenth century Europe learned to understand the modern world as the outcome of history. People came to believe that the pattern of human affairs manifested neither the working of a divine will nor the self regulating balance of a natural system, but the unfolding of an inner secular force. There were several ways of accounting for this inner dynamic, all of them referring to the increasing power of human reason to order social affairs. (Mitchell, 2002: 1)

Amplifying Mills' critique four decades earlier, Mitchell points out that as the study of society became a modern university profession and was divided into separate disciplines, each inherited the assumption of 'a singular logic' of human forces underpinning the multiple dynamics of social life.

Since the 19th century, efforts to legitimize demands for distinct disciplinary boundaries have often been symptomatically expressed through spatial and territorial metaphors. The creation of autonomous fields of study has long been rendered analogous to the contemporaneous formation of nation-states. Just as 'nations acquire borders, so disciplines acquire boundaries, and for much the same reasons: for policing and self-policing what can be said and done' (Goldberg, 1994: 27). This 'departmentalization of social science' that Mills warned against has played a critical role in promoting a 'singular logic' which assumes that social, economic, and political institutions are autonomous systems and which authorizes sociology, economics, and political science to divide these domains between themselves (Mills, 1959: 140). Whether or not these fields emphasize the importance of understanding personal milieus through larger historical structures, as Mills advises, 'man' is taken to be the primary agent of transformation. But to study the human variety, Mills insists, 'requires that we avoid the

arbitrary specialization of academic departments, that we specialize our work variously accordingly to topic and above all, according to problem, and that in doing so we draw upon the perspectives and ideas, the materials and methods, of any and all suitable studies of man as an historical actor' (Mills, 1959: 134). It is especially the last part of this sentence which warrants our critical attention, since to focus solely on *man* is to maintain the centrality ascribed to human reason in the social sciences.

The work of imagination is often distinguished from the work of nature. Like a map, imagination 'puts together plans, images, ideal structures – in fact entire systems of cultural meaning – before they are taken outside and erected in reality' (Mitchell, 2002: 45). Retracing the sociological map from the place of the non-human does not simply expand or contract its contours. Rather, it involves tracing and translating between different assessments of meaning which imagine other agents – viruses, animals, insects, gods, and spirits – which do not recognize or adhere to territorial (or disciplinary) borders (Genosko, 1998: 1–13). Mitchell's illuminating chapter – 'Can the Mosquito Speak?' – usefully gestures to the explanatory potential for problematizing and redrawing maps which do not take human rationality as their sole or primary subject. Focused on 1942, he describes the battle that ensued between Erwin Rommel's Afrika Corps and British Troops at Al-Alamein which culminated in the Allies' first land victory during WWII in which an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 people were killed. Mitchell's project here is neither to narrate the events of 1942 as a war of human forces nor to mark the triumph or catastrophe of human agency and modern progress. Instead, he notes that in this year at least two forces invaded Egypt, one human and another non-human. The second invader was the *Anopheles Gambiae*, a mosquito native to sub-Saharan Africa but not previously found in Egypt. Its arrival produced significantly more fatalities than the war at Al-Alamein. Estimates suggested that 750,000 people might have contracted the disease over three years and between 100,000 and 200,000 people died. Despite this astounding loss of life, the mosquito has no place in history, because 'it cannot speak' (Mitchell, 2002: 50).

By redrawing the political-sociological map of Egypt and retelling its history to account for the mosquito and the malaria parasite, Mitchell offers a wonderful counterpoint which unsettles prevailing narratives of human agency, instrumental reason, and historical linearity which continue to pervade conventional *and* critical social science in various ways. In so doing, he attempts to maintain a double focus (a bifocal vision), not just on the personal and structural as Mills would have it, but also on the social and natural worlds. Holding these views in tension enables Mitchell to upset the conventional characterization of progress, causality and contingency: 'The protagonists of the history of the nation, of modernity, of capitalism are people. Human beings are the agents around whose actions and intentions the story is written' (2002: 29). By contrast, Mitchell's account of 1942 Egypt highlights the limits or inadequacies of explanations that hinge solely on human agency by noting how tanks, parasites, and synthetic nitrates

mutually, though asymmetrically, affected one another. His account highlights how the mosquito and its infiltration and invasion of Egypt triggered a complex set of processes in which dams, blood-borne parasites, synthetic chemicals, war, and man-made famine all converged, making 1942–4 one of the most devastating periods in Egypt's history.

The task of provincializing sociology, and more specifically, the project of de-parochializing its hegemonic American form which Mills inaugurates in *The Sociological Imagination*, does not suggest that 'anything goes'. To problematize the social sciences with their emphasis on human agency and universal reason does not authorize the introduction of 'a limitless number of actors and networks, all of which are somehow of equal significance and power'. Instead, it requires reformulating 'this issue of power and agency [as] a question, instead of an answer known in advance' (Mitchell, 2002: 53). The recent work of French sociologist Bruno Latour (which has had little impact on American sociology) has recently provided a sketch for just such a project of 'reassembling the social' in terms of a double-procedure which he calls 'deploying controversies' and 'tracing networks'. To be sure, we are not suggesting that Latour and Mills are political equals. Whereas Mills has been described as a radical thinker, Latour is often seen as politically conservative and criticized, among other things, for not fully appreciating the constitutive role of empire in western modernity (Prakash, 1999: 12). Our claim here is that, despite the relative lack of attention to the critical and political tasks of the sociological imagination for which Mills provides a model, Latour's inquiry into the multiple and mixed agencies which make up 'the social' offers some useful theoretical and methodological strategies for provincializing sociology and renewing its analytical and critical promise.

Insofar as the 'the social' can be extended to include interconnected collectives of human actors and non-human agents, then the sociological imagination may *begin* by acknowledging the persistence of controversy and the sources of uncertainty which characterize their associations at a number of levels: how 'groups' of such agents and their 'spokespersons' are formed; how 'actions' are taken and overtaken; how objects 'mediate' and facilitate various courses of action; and how 'facts' become translated into or problematized as actionable 'concerns'. The layered and sequential method of analysis that Latour outlines for following debates and tracking uncertainties comes to its 'point' when such controversies are finally accounted for by an observer or interlocutor from a specific stance (which must also be accounted for). Such an observer (who is also an agent) attempts to trace *networks* of association between actors and to draw up a comprehensible map of the attachments between them. This last (and most narrowly focused) level of sociological attention needs to include translating 'the linkages' between humans and non-humans, as in Mitchell's detailed description of how numerous agents are folded into a reverberating skein of moving and conflicting relationships in a given place and time. In Mills' terms, such a method entails problematizing the macro/micro division as *a matter of*

shifting perspectives and connecting scales, rather than of simply advancing epistemological or ontological claims. It also demands reconceiving the idea of structure as *a matter of following actors and tracing linkages* between institutions and ‘among a great variety of milieus’, rather than only of searching for concealed forces or discrete causes (Mills, 1959: 11).

Figure 2 presents our fanciful reconstruction of the argument that networks are not the thing represented in a sociological account, but rather an *indicator of a text's (in)adequacy*. That is, a network is a *principle of composition* by which a three-dimensional world (or four, if movement and time are factored in) is artificially ‘flattened’ out onto a two-dimensional surface (Latour, 2005: 132). Just as an instrument of observation (like our ‘bifocals’ above) should not be confused with its object, so a map or diagram should not be mistaken for the territory or relationships it seems to represent. As Latour notes, ‘surely you’d agree that drawing with a pencil is not the same thing as drawing the *shape* of a pencil’ (Latour, 2005: 142). At most, a sociological map can be traced out with tools of transcription (like a pencil) and held down by various artificial means (‘clamps’ that hold a transposable surface flat and stabilize it for closer inspection). Among the ‘clamps’ that he describes are what he calls ‘*panoramas*’ (sweeping wide-angle views, including master narratives and grand theories, that project large-scale snapshots of networks on a ‘global’ scale, but which are themselves products of particular places and times); ‘*statements*’ (including empirical propositions and evaluative assessments which connect and compare local sites, but often against a relatively undefined ‘background’ or unpredictable ‘environment’); and ‘*articulators*’ (‘built-in’ design features of collectives which distribute and locate agents in space-time, but usually in ways that are meant to sustain their *inter-action*). In short, we are suggesting that Latour’s

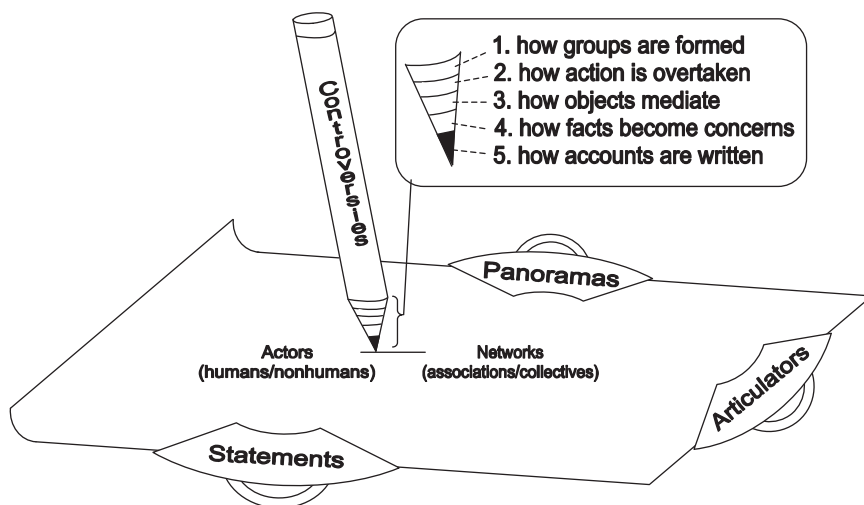


Figure 2 Retracing the sociological map (based on Latour, 2005)

tenuously named ‘actor-network theory’ extends and updates Mills’ ‘sociological imagination’ by expanding it onto an enlarged cartography of intimate associations and impersonal attachments – from mosquitoes to military manoeuvres – which can account for (and be accountable to) those non-human forces that have made (and continue to make) history, but are not often remembered.

To be sure, imagining the *critical dimension* of such a ‘cosmopolitics of nature’ would also involve the further task of sketching the multi-faceted and unequal power relations which operate within any given network, and especially the forced hierarchies, exclusions, and separations which are effected between and among human and non-human agents (Latour, 2004). Rather than make a fetish of reason or an idol of society (what Comte celebrated as the cult of ‘socialtry’), the revised sociological map which is called for today needs to display its own conditions of production, along with the signature of its author, as indices of both its (in)adequacy and its realism or artificiality. On its own, it cannot provide a reliable guide for criticizing unequally distributed resources or asymmetrical relations of power as long as this way of ‘writing sociologically’ remains tied to the surfaces of relationships, tracking their movements without detecting the silences and shadows they leave in their path. Like the beached whale of the Leviathan, which became disoriented in forgetting the hybrid character of the world of the deep it inhabits (Latour, 2005: 163), the old anthropocentric ‘Sociology of the Social’ (SoS) has been shipwrecked after colliding with the iceberg of ‘science studies’: each had to discover that neither ‘nature’ nor ‘society’ can simply be retrieved from the depths of reality with the tools of ‘science’ but are co-constructed in multiple ways and cobbled together from mixed materials. And yet this hard won analytical and methodological insight still needs to recover the critical and political imagination which has inspired it, and to which Mills gave such cogent and convincing expression.

In his well-regarded appendix to *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959: 195–226) outlines his own techniques for ‘reassembling the social’ by using pen and paper to fulfil the task of ‘intellectual craftsmanship’. His rough and ready guidelines for careful observation, close reading, and skilful writing do not depend upon any rationalist technology of transcription, nor do they aim for a neutral disembodied transparency which casts no shadows (O’Neill, 1972). He reminds apprentice sociologists that increasing rationality may not enhance freedom, or even encourage the critical exercise of reason. The latter entails the simultaneous cultivation and coordination of *methods* – durable ways of asking and answering questions in view of personal political concerns, and *theories* – including an attention to how one uses words and the relations between them with respect to their analytical coherence and rhetorical effect. Although theory and method strive for both ‘clarity of conception and ingenuity of procedure’ (Mills, 2008 [1952]: 45), writing sociologically is more like a prayer than a programme, and the craft

of sociology is more a personal and political calling than a professional career, as he suggests in confessing his own *sociological credo*:

In brief, I believe that what may be called classic social analysis is a definable and usable set of traditions; that its essential feature is the concern with historical social structures; and that its problems are of direct relevance to urgent public issues and insistent human troubles. I also believe that there are now great obstacles in the way of this tradition's continuing – both within the social sciences and in their academic and political settings – but that nevertheless the qualities of mind that constitute it are becoming a common denominator of our general cultural life and that, however vaguely and in however a confusing variety of disguises, they are coming to be felt as a need. (Mills, 1959: 21)

Despite his reputation as a populist radical, which he himself did more to cultivate than to conceal, Mills proclaims that the credibility of the intellectual is sustained by keeping faith with tradition and by fulfilling its broken promises. In this sense, he includes himself in the classical heritage of sociological thinkers who are as much concerned with communicating sociological thought through *a discursive method of scientific demonstration* as they are with cultivating its potential as *an expressive mode of aesthetic experimentation* (Kemple, 2009). 'To write is to raise a claim for the attention of readers,' and thus 'to claim for oneself at least enough status to be read' (Mills, 1959: 218). We might add that to speak – even from the margins of history (the subaltern, the prisoner, the criminal) or non-history (the mosquito) – is to argue for the right to be heard, and to seek an audience willing and able to listen to what one has to say.

In the end, it seems that Mills was more attuned to the conditions of the *performance* of sociological thinking than to the fate of its *products*, and thus he was more concerned with its character as *poetry and as politics* than with its status as a *profession or personal confession* (see Abbott, 2007). Nevertheless, he worried that the sociologist may risk becoming the main subject of his own account, just as the artist may get in the way of what he is trying to show and tell, each projecting more of an artificial self-portrait than a realistic 'photograph' (Mills, 2008 [1948]: 35). Lost would be any sense of the public urgency and social relevance that we need to address the most pressing problems of the day: how many, who, and what are we? (the question of metaphysical multiplicity) and how can we live together? (the question of ontological unity) (Latour, 2005: 247–62). By bringing these questions under the twin signs of 'sociology' and 'imagination', he challenges us to think within and act against a political, intellectual and historical legacy which often tends to distort clear vision and silence critical speech.

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