

RE-IMAGINING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION¹

From “The Promise” to Aesthetic of Existence

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What is the meaning of C. W. Mills' “sociological imagination” after 50 years? This article grapples with this question by juxtaposing Mills' notion of “promise” with Foucault's poststructuralist notion of “exit” or “way out” in relation to modernity and sociological imagination. This paper explores the similarities and the radical differences between Mills' conception of sociological imagination and Foucault's “aesthetic of existence” as a postmodern version of the sociological imagination. Their main divergence in interpreting the sociological imagination stems from Mills' use of Marx's modernist legacy and Foucault's deployment of Nietzsche's more aestheticized rendering of modernity.

Keywords: *sociological imagination, Mills, Foucault, Enlightenment, Modernity*

INTRODUCTION

“The Promise,” Chapter 1 of Charles Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), has always been a required reading for students who take introductory sociology courses. The “sociological imagination,” of which Mills so passionately wrote about, is very much a product of mid-twentieth century modernity. He was writing after the horrors of the two world wars and the ascendancy of “mass society.” Today many of the problems that Mills diagnosed are very much still with us. However our “socoscape” has dramatically changed. Many social scientists claim we are now living in the threshold of late modernity (Giddens 1990; Jameson 1984; Harvey 1989). So, I wonder what the sociological imagination, advocated by Mills, might

mean in the late modern world, a world where “grand narratives” are already discredited, and globalization has shrunk the world into a “small global village” (Lyotard 1984; Robertson 1990).

In this paper I turn to Michel Foucault to find some clues to these queries. Why Foucault? Why not Habermas? Or even better, Richard Rorty? Because I believe that the Foucauldian critique could enhance and renew considerably C. W. Mills’ modernist version of the “sociological imagination.” Foucauldian critique problematizes Mill’s version of the sociological imagination in the light of our post-modern condition. In this paper I want to delve into some of the fruitful lessons that social scientists might learn from the Foucauldian critique. I want to show that Foucault, in contrast to Mills, does not provide any “promise,” but “a way out.” And this “way out” is through the “aesthetic of existence.” Through this problematization I want to reconsider the sociological imagination so as to provide social scientists a “new” sensibility appropriate to our present condition. I will briefly consider these new directions at the end of my paper.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AS A TOTALIZING PERSPECTIVE: THE MILLSIAN VERSION

Connecting Biography and History in Society

At the heart of Mills’ version of the sociological imagination are two poles: biography and history, and their intersections within social structures. And these poles “are the coordinate points of the proper study of man” (p. 143). By linking biography with history, social scientists should “try to understand man not as an isolated fragment, not as an intelligible field or system in and of itself” (p. 225). Mills insists that sociologists must “understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals” (p. 5). Society for Mills is the grand canvass upon which biography and history unfold their inner dynamic. Only the “sociological imagination” can comprehend the meaning of the intersection of these two poles within society. That is the task and promise of sociological imagination (p. 6).

Social transformation could only happen if social scientists could make sense of the disjunction between individual biography and historical currents within a totalizing analysis of society. In doing so, the “sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time” (p. 226). This “difference” is the power of social scientists to help people consciously dominate the welter they experience in daily life.

Mills insists, "The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which biography is enacted" (p. 161). Hence he argues that "the most radical discovery within recent psychology and social science is the discovery of how so many of the most intimate features of the person are socially patterned and even implanted" (p. 161). Any attempt to explain social issues on the basis of "human nature" is "a violation of the social and historical specificity that careful work in the human studies requires" (p. 164). Sociologists cannot start with the assumption of humanism that there is an immutable, intrinsic human nature (p. 172). Sociologists must inquire into the question of "what in man's nature, what in the human condition today, what in each of the varieties of social structure" makes the type of individuals that live today in modern societies. To answer this, sociologist must be able to locate individual biography within unfolding dynamic of history in society. What is needed is to "understand men and women as historical and social actors, and the ways in which the variety of ways in which men and women are intricately selected and intricately formed by the variety of human societies" (p. 225). Such task would reveal, and should not be the starting point, the limits and extent of the malleability of human character.

From Biography to Social Structure

Sociological imagination allows sociologists to situate individual's private troubles within the larger province of public issues. For Mills, "To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieu," is the hallmark of the sociological imagination. Because, "Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps" (p. 3), Mills observes that they cannot explain their anxieties beyond the frame of personal troubles.

They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scene of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieu, they move vicariously and remain spectators (p. 3).

He thinks, "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" (p. 11). Therefore Mills laments the failure of sociology to deliver its "promise" to bring enlightenment to modern individuals. He decries the

alienation in modern society that blinds people from perceiving the real causes of their private “troubles.” Mills wants to empower modern individuals by enabling them to master the unruly social forces that overpower them. The “promise” of sociological imagination, Mills argues, is to deliver people away from the paralyzing effect of their myopic vision. As Mills puts it, “The moral and the intellectual promise of social science is that freedom and reason will remain cherished values, that they will be used seriously and consistently and imaginatively in the formulation of the problems” (p. 173). Mills hopes that by enabling people to transcend their “personal troubles” and link them with “public issues” people could be emancipated, and thereby be rescued from hopelessness.

The Principle of Historical Specificity

To analyze public issues is to locate them within the frame of history. Mills understands history in terms of Marx’s “principle of historical specificity,” that is, “any given society is to be understood in terms of the specific period in which it exists” (p. 149). Moreover Mills advocates a pragmatic use of history. Social scientists study trends and their totality within an epoch in order to answer the question “where are we going?” The emphasis is not on the past but on the “why has it [trend] persisted?” In this way history becomes an important ingredient in explaining the limits and possibilities for human emancipation (p. 158). Social transformation and the possibility for individual liberation could only be understood within specific historical trends and the limits they set.

However, this principle entails that there are no invariant social laws. There are only “*principia media*” or mechanisms that produce social change. But the principle of historical specificity does not prevent social scientists from doing comparative analyses because “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” (p. 151). Comparative historical analyses are necessary in order to explain the changes that social structures are undergoing. In addition, historical analysis must go “behind events and make an orderly sense of them.” It means, “in such studies we often try to focus on each trend just a little ahead of where it is now, and more importantly to see all the trends at once, as moving parts of the total structure of the period” (p. 153).

Two "Grievous Threats" to the Sociological Imagination

Mills sees the scientific attitude as inadequate in comprehending the alienation of modern individuals. It is incapable of delivering the "promise" (p. 16). It is part of the problem itself. But he could not also endorse the humanistic and fictional approach of arts and literature. They cannot provide the "big picture."

What fiction, what journalism, what artistic endeavor can compete with the historical reality and political facts of our time? What dramatic vision of hell can compete with the events of twentieth-century war? What moral denunciations can measure up to the moral insensibility of men in the agonies of primary accumulation? It is the social and historical reality that men want to know, and often they do not find contemporary literature an adequate means of knowing it. 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" (p. 17).

He also wants to expurgate social sciences of two "grievous threats" to the intellectual promise of the social science and to the political promise of the role of reason (p. 118). First is "grand theory." Grand theory, trapped in the theoretical morass, simply obfuscates social issue. It is far remote from the historical and social milieu of individuals. Abstracted empiricism, on the other hand, with its piecemeal approach, could not comprehend the totality of social issues. It leads to fragmentation rather than totalization. Both of these "practicalities" prevent social scientists from criticizing the status quo based on the "big picture." As Mills laments,

A merely formal emphasis upon 'the organic whole,' plus a failure to consider the adequate causes—which are usually structural—plus a compulsion to examine only one situation at a time – such ideas do make it difficult to understand the structure of the status quo (p. 86).

Thus Mills wants to continue the sociological imagination founded by the modernist project of classical sociology: to diagnose the ills of the present society in order to improve it. This sociological imagination will "determine the limits of freedom and the limits of the role of reason in history" (p. 184). So Mills believes, "It is not merely one quality of mind among the contemporary range of cultural sensibilities – it is the quality whose wider and more adroit use offers the promise that all such sensibilities—and in fact, human reason itself—will come to play a greater role in human affairs" (p. 15). In short, Mills like Habermas and the members of the Frankfurt School wants to rescue reason from the irrationalities of modern societies. Reason is indispensable in the realization of freedom.

That is why freedom cannot exist without an enlarged role of human reason in human affairs. Within an individual's biography and within a society's history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided – within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility (p. 174).

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AS AESTHETIC OF EXISTENCE: THE FOUCAULDIAN “EXIT”

The Ethos of Modernism as an “Exit”

Now let's turn to Foucault. In several interviews and writings, Foucault (1991, 1998) admits his affinities with the writings of the members of the Frankfurt School.² Foucault sees the important contribution of the Frankfurt School in explaining the atrophy of freedom despite the march of Reason (1991: 118). Like Mills, Foucault situates his overall project in relation to Enlightenment. He is also interested in the historical development of modern rationality. But unlike Mills and the members of the Frankfurt School, Foucault advances a different conception of Enlightenment. His discussion of Kant's *Aufklärung* departs considerably from Mills' modernist notion of “sociological imagination.”

At the onset, Foucault (1985) rejects the blackmail of Enlightenment: either one is for or against it. In his lecture on Kant and the question of *Aufklärung*, delivered at the Collège de France in 1983, Foucault argues that “what we need to preserve,” therefore, “is not what is left of the *Aufklärung*, in terms of fragments; it is the very question of that event and its meaning (the question of historicity of thinking about the universal) that must now be kept present in our minds as what must be thought.” What is worth preserving in the *Aufklärung* debate is the “ethos,” or “limit-attitude” itself (p. 34).

Foucault interprets the lasting significance of modernity not in terms of understanding the present as a search for universal structure of reason (that would enable us to distinguish the rational from the irrational). Foucault interprets the modern attitude as an “exit” or “a way out.” Unlike Mills, Foucault's attitude to the atrophy of freedom is neither that of establishing an analytics of truth (“What can I know?”) nor in setting the limits of power. He is interested in the “spirit” of Enlightenment and not in its “promise.” It is in the concept of “ethos” that Foucault wants to be faithful to the Enlightenment and “not faithfulness to doctrinal elements.”

Now, for Foucault, this ethos “could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.” This “limit-attitude,” that serves as a critique of the present, “a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression,” does not look for formal universal structures but “rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (p. 46). This “ethos” or “spirit” means relentless critiquing of what we are. It is an interrogation of the present that opens up “the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think (p. 47).³

Furthermore such critique is “experimental,” which means, “this work done at the limits of ourselves must...open up a realm of historical inquiry and put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take” (p. 46). Foucault re-defines the critical attitude derived from the Enlightenment:

In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and the goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in method. Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, do, or, think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far as wide possible, to the undefined work of freedom.

From these remarks it is evident that Foucault shares with Mills the belief that the central task of Enlightenment is to enlarge human freedom. Mills’ preference for setting out the limits of reason and freedom is also echoed in Foucault’s attitude to Enlightenment. However Foucault views Enlightenment less as giving a “promise” and more of providing an “exit” or “way out.” Mills’ notion of “promise” seems to suggest “a kind of founding act whereby reason, in its essence, was discovered or established and from which it was subsequently diverted by such and such an event” (Foucault 1998: 28). The fulfillment of the promise would mean the restoration of the Golden Age of Reason. Foucault rejects any notion of bifurcation of “original” reason. He prefers “to analyze forms of rationality: different foundations, different creations, different modifications in which rationalities engender one another,

oppose and pursue one another" (p. 29). Foucault is not interested in assigning a point "at which reason would have lost sight of its fundamental project, or even a point at which the rational becomes irrational." By examining different forms of rationalities that appeared in history, Foucault wishes to examine how different subjectivities were constituted in specific historical moments. In doing so, he hopes he might offer modern individuals a "way out" or "exit" from the normalizing discourses of subjectivization.⁴ The point is, "we must produce something that does not yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be" (Foucault 1991: 121). Or, "it's a question rather of destruction of what we are, of the creation of something entirely different, of total innovation." Such project led Foucault to situate the normalization of individuals in various historical periods by deploying genealogy. It is inspired by Nietzschean perspectivism rather than by Marx's materialist interpretation of history. Genealogy, as an historical method, is both minimalist and nominalist (Foucault 1998a).

Towards a Minimalist History

Foucault shares with Mills the passion to locate subjects within history. Interestingly, both Mills and Foucault reject the traditional notions of history as universalizing and objective. Both of them are opposed to "grand theory." But Foucault has a more compelling argument against "grand history" (understood as the totalizing narrative of the past). Foucault offers a genealogical hermeneutics that seeks to show how the different "games of truth" constituted and categorized different subjects.⁵ Foucault rejects any teleological account of history—"because this is, that will be" (Foucault 1998b: 37). Rather "history serves to show how that-which-is has not always been...What reason perceives as its necessity, or rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being, can perfectly well be shown to have a history; and the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced...and that since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made" (p. 37).

Foucault further differs from Mills by foregoing any hankering for a "total view" of the structure of a given historical period. Mills' historicism is rooted in Marxist conception of history; Foucault approaches history along the Nietzschean genealogy. Foucault's approach centers not on the issue of "persistence" but of descent and scattered moments of emergence. Foucault only sees proliferation of rationalities in history. Mills wants to diagnose the present through a unified view of rationality as it unfolds in history. Foucault's

method, which follows Canguilhem and Bachelard, focuses on discontinuities and rhizome-like descent. It is not intended "to recount the gradual discovery of a truth that has always been inscribed in things or in the intellect" (Foucault 1998a: 471). It is a "history of 'veridictions,' understood as the forms according to which discourses capable of being declared true or false are articulated concerning a domain of things" (Foucault 1998a: 460). But it is also a "history of subjectivity," which means "the way in which the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates himself" (p. 461).

However the attempt to investigate how subjectivities are made through various "regimes of truth" does not make Foucault crave for Mills' totalizing vision of social issues. Instead, Foucault opts for a regional and strategic analysis. As Foucault (1985) states,

This means that the historical ontology of our selves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical...I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas that concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century (p. 47).

Foucault is skeptical about all forms of "grand strategies" because "we know from experience that the claim to escape the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions." Thus Foucault exasperates his critics because he vexingly refuses to provide any "grand scheme" or plot to the stories he is telling.⁶ This is because Foucault does not believe that "people who try to decipher the truth should also provide ethical principles or practical guide at the moment, in the same book and the same analysis." He is emphatic that "All this prescriptive network has to be elaborated and transformed by people themselves" (quoted in Morey 1998: 119).

Mills equates the "big picture" with the analysis of nation-states. Consequently his notion of "totality" is tied to the juridical notion of power that Foucault found inadequate. In contrast, Foucault's analysis addresses the microphysics of power and the problem of governmentality.⁷ He is very much interested in the swarming of institutions and disciplinary practices that constitute different forms of subjectivities. And the state and economic

institutions are just a few among the many sites of power. Also, Foucault analyzes the individualizing forms of power through bio-power that targets population, anatomico-politics of the body, and pastoral power. And these various forms of “policing” are irreducible to state power. Foucault goes beyond Mills’ almost exclusive reliance on the Marxist language of state politics as overdetermined by class and class interests without completely jettisoning it.⁸ Foucault (1980a) is convinced that, “nothing in society will be changed if the mechanism of power that function outside, below, and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not changed” (p. 60).

Furthermore Foucault would be suspicious of positing social therapy as the goal of critique. Mills’ sociological imagination strides closely the precipice of prophetism and social reform. It runs the risk of the normalizing effects of the power it criticizes. Foucauldian sensibility eliminates the enthusiasm for intellectual messianism. Instead Foucault opts for the role of a “specific intellectual.”

The Prophet Versus the “Warrior”

Foucault agrees with Mills that science today has lost its capacity to free us from the fetters of modernity.⁹ But Foucault follows the Nietzschean critique of scientific will to knowledge and not the Marxist critique advanced by Mills. Mills thinks that the critical function of science has been corrupted by instrumentalist rationality enshrined in positivism. Science has been co-opted by the military industrial complex. Unfortunately, modern individuals could not even find salvation in the arts and literary approaches. Because, “Art does not and cannot formulate these feelings as problems containing the troubles and issues men must now confront if they are to overcome their uneasiness and indifference and the intractable miseries to which these lead.”

Mills would have been puzzled by Foucault’s aestheticization of modernism. Foucault endorses Baudelaire’s *dandysme*, not the man “who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (p. 43). For Mills, the obscurities and the trivialities of the works of social scientists today—including the artists—stop them from suggesting any way out of the crisis (p. 20). And following Mills’ standard, Foucault’s “dandysme” fares no better.

Mills’ longing for social transformation would have made him choose the role of the intellectual as a prophet rather than the dandy. For Mills, the

role of social scientists is “to remain independent to do one’s own work, to select one’s own problems, but to direct this work at kings as well as to “publics” (p. 181). He further adds, “In so far as the values of freedom and reason concern him, one of his themes for the study has to do with the objective chances available for given types of men within given types of social structure to become free and rational as individuals” (p. 184).

Paralleling Foucault’s much-debated “knowledge/power scheme, Mills advocates an “educational task” for social scientists, who must intervene in “the politics of truth” through the use of sociological imagination (p. 185). But in discussing the possible interventions of social scientists to those with power and with awareness of it, to “those whose actions have such consequences, but who do not seem to be aware of them,” and to “those who are regularly without such power and whose awareness is confined to their everyday milieu” (p. 185), Mills oversteps the minimalist role of a “specific intellectual” preferred by Foucault.¹⁰ Mills’ sociological imagination invites social scientists to provide usable analyses to cure modern irrationalities. The “promise” of sociological imagination is therefore therapeutic. Foucault disagrees with Mills’ conception of the role of intellectual:

The Greek wise man, the Jewish prophet, the Roman legislator are still models that haunt those, who today, practice the profession of speaking and writing. I dream of the intellectual who destroys evidence and generalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present time, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, who is incessantly on the move, does not know where he is exactly heading nor what he will think tomorrow for he is too attentive to the present; who, wherever he moves, contributes to posing the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth the trouble, and what kind (I mean what revolution and what trouble), it being understood that the question can be answered only by those who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about (1988: 124).

Foucault opts for “specific intellectual” over the “universal intellectual.” The latter, prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, is often called the “man of justice,” the “man of law,” whose arguments depended only on universal laws that bind humanity. The intellectual is the one who is supposed to bear all values; opposes the unjust sovereign (1980: 129).¹¹ The intellectual is conceived as the master of truth and justice. “He was heard,” Foucault explains, “or purported to be heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all.”

On the other hand, the “specific intellectual” no longer works for the universal, “the exemplary” or “just-and-true for all,” but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work put them (housing, the hospitals, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, the family and sexual relations) in contact with grassroot struggles” (Foucault 1978: 207).

Of course Foucault would have endorsed Mills’ plea for intellectuals to intervene among “those who are regularly without such power and whose awareness is confined to their everyday milieu,” but he would definitely qualify the scope of the intervention. For the “specific intellectual” is closer to the archetype of the “warrior.” Paul Veyne (1997), a very close friend of Michel Foucault, describes Foucault’s ethical and political stance as that of a “warrior.” The “warrior,” in contrast to the prophet, “is a man who can get along without truth, who only knows the sides taken, his and that of his adversary, and who has enough energy to fight without having to justify himself in order to reassure himself” (p. 227). The “warrior,” unlike Mills’ prophet-intellectual, does not impute responsibility to the power-holders. Rather, the warrior works to “describe certain aspects of the contemporary world and its governmentality” that “will not tell you what you should do or what you have to fight against, but it will give you a map; thus it will tell you: if you want to take such-and-such a direction, well, here there is a knot of resistance and there a possible passage” (quoted in Veyne, p. 230). Foucault’s warrior-intellectual simply provides ‘instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups specifically to make these analyses, to wage these struggles, by using these instruments or others; this is how, in the end, possibilities open up (1998: 108).

Toward a Critique of Humanism

As discussed earlier, Mills deconstructs the notion of “human nature” by situating it in history. In this sense, Mills shares Foucault’s antihumanist concerns. But Mills still harbors some humanist concerns. He considers the sociological imagination as enabling “its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experiences often become falsely conscious of their social positions” (p. 5). Foucault rejects ascribing “false consciousness” to individuals trapped in the welter of their daily experiences. Rather than talking about “false consciousness” Foucault explores the

discursive practices that regulate the circulation of “truth” within society. It directs us away from examining subjective intentions and human values as well as in assessing the truth of discourses. Foucault disagrees with Mills, because Foucault does not ask about the values that are threatened. Foucauldian analysis starts with the analysis of discourses that shape the way we perceive these values. What is at issue is not threat and indifference but the disciplinary mechanism that produces subjectivities that feel threatened and indifferent. The question is: How are individuals and their values governed by the “regime of truth”?

Moreover, Mills, by assuming that modern individuals are “trapped” within the webs of social forces, seems to suggest that emancipation would only happen when power is finally eliminated. He declares that “man’s chief danger today lies in its pervasive transformation of the very nature of man and the conditions and aims of his life” (p. 13). Mills wants to end the alienation in modern life. In contrast, Foucault posits the omnipresence of power in social life. Foucault (1980) dismisses as utopian any idea that we can get rid of power and free individuals from power-relations. Like Marcuse and Reich, Mills subscribes to the “repressive hypothesis.” Mills seems to assume that unless we get rid of power we will never be able to free modern individuals from alienation. Foucault rejects any notion of “repression.” Alienation connotes an “intrinsic nature” that is damaged. There is no deep human essence waiting to be liberated. Foucauldian sociological imagination looks at alternatives and greater space for the exercise of freedom rather than emancipation.

However by making power omnipresent the Foucauldian critique does not lead to political paralysis. Foucauldian sociological imagination does not turn a sociologist into a *flâneur* – the botanist of the asphalt or a city-stroller that remains esthetically aloof from what is happening around.¹² Neither are we left with a Weberian heroic individual who “faces the task of the day” but resigned to the fate of modern rationalization.¹³ Foucault is optimistic like Mills:¹⁴

My optimism would consist rather in saying that so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constant.

Politicizing Ethics: Towards a Critique of Power

For Mills the sociological imagination enables social scientists to shift from one perspective to another in order “to build an adequate view of a total society and of its components” (p. 211). The goal of Foucauldian critique is more modest. Its goal is not to comprehend social reality in its totality—circumscribed within nation-states—but to constantly change who we are. The Foucauldian critique celebrates intellectual nomadism and fluidity. It means taking seriously the endless creation of one’s self in relation to others and existing power configuration.¹⁵ It is a strategic resistance against the normalizing grip of pastoral power that shapes our identities.

In this sense, Foucault’s aesthetic optimism provides a corrective to Mills’ excessively rationalistic conception of the sociological imagination. Interestingly, both Mills and Foucault find in ancient Greek philosophy a rich font for developing their respective forms of critique. For Mills, “it includes a sort of therapy in the ancient sense of clarifying one’s knowledge of self” (p. 187). Mills interprets the Delphic oracle of “Know thyself” in a rationalist manner: “the end product of any liberating education is simply the self-educating, self-cultivating man and woman; in short, in the free and rational individual” (p. 187). Foucault connects the Delphic oracle to the ancient Greek precept of “*epimeleisthai sautou*” or “to take care of yourself,” understood “not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault 1998a: 282, 226). It is a quest for self-mastery in order to live a beautiful existence and leave others beautiful memories of one’s life.

Moreover whereas Mills talks about intellectual craftsmanship, Foucault talks about “aesthetic of existence.” Mills conceives social scientific craft as a *techne*. His emphasis is on intellectual craftsmanship, that is, in perfecting one’s craft or doing research. In contrast, Foucault advocates aestheticization of life. And he subordinates intellectual craftsmanship to his art of living.¹⁶ As Foucault says, “What can be an ethic of an intellectual...if not that: to render oneself permanently capable of getting free of oneself” (quoted in Bernauer 1989: 179). In another interview, Foucault (1998) writes,

You see, that’s why I really work like a dog and I worked like a dog all my life. I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation...This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic of experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting (p. 14)?

Finally, in contrast to Millsian sociological imagination that operates on the tradition of “analytics of truth,” the Foucauldian critique follows the ancient tradition of “art of truth-telling” or *parrhisia*. A *parrhiastes* “uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (Foucault 1983: 8). A *parrhiastes* or truth-teller expresses what he believes to be “true,” not backed by the Habermasian notion of communicative rationality, but through frankness.¹⁷ The validity of his arguments is not based on the “truthfulness” of sociological analysis” but it simply is the voice of the governed against the normalizers. Foucault’s truth-telling lets the critic speak of “truth” because he cares about himself; and therefore, he also cares for others and the polis. Ethics is politicized! Freedom becomes the center of self-creation. This Socratic *parrhisia* allows the “agonistic self” to leave behind through transgression the “prisons of a particular historical determination and for creating a new relation to event and, thus, a self” (Bernauer 1994: 71). And this Socratic imperative, “Be concerned with yourself, i.e., ground yourself in liberty, through the mastery of the self,” serves as the foundation for critical thought (Foucault 1994: 20).

In summary, what distinguishes the Foucauldian sociological imagination from Mills’ is not the capacity of the mind to shift from one perspective to another, and connect biography and history within the overall structure of society. It is an “ecstatic thinking” (Bernauer 1987) that calls into question how we become what we are. So what is needed is less of an “imagination” and more of “creativity” and transgression (Foucault 1998: 262). That is, the ability to stylize one’s self through “permanent provocation” to “the knowledge, power and subjectivization which operate on us” (Bernauer 1997: 71). The goal is to enable the individual to create himself with maximum freedom. But Foucault’s emphasis is neither on the institutions that will guarantee our freedom nor the imagination that will allow us to analyze and transform these institutions. His concern is establishing an ethical relationship with one’s self, and thereby transforming one’s relationship with others. His main concern is not revolution or the politics of emancipation, but in the “politics of the personal” (David 1999). It is a way of making people deserve the revolution (Bernauer 1988); it offers a sensibility for revolutionary governance that does not only attack and wait for the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” to trample on human freedom, but more importantly, it also prevents the “four worms of everyday life” from eating the souls of

revolutionaries, thereby turning them into fascists!¹⁸ Its strength lies not in its “promise” (Foucault does not give one), but in “the exit” or “way out.” Or, in the words of Bernauer, in the “force of flight.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I do not want the readers to get the wrong impression that the Millsian version of the sociological imagination is completely outdated. To the contrary, I am convinced that many of the postulates Mills advanced in *The Sociological Imagination* are still very relevant today. Unfortunately, it also has some assumptions that need to be reconsidered. On the one hand, Mills’ plea for social scientists to provide a “bigger picture” (minus its totalizing tendency), his emphasis on historical specificity, his advocacy for the “politics of truth,” amongst others, still carry considerable weight today in our highly globalized world. On the other hand, his excessive rationalism, his language about “false consciousness,” his monolithic view of history, his “grand” view of the role of intellectuals, his juridical notion of power and subscription to the “repressive hypothesis,” and his delimitation of the sociological analysis to nation-states, need to be reconsidered today.

After having shown many striking similarities between Mills’s sociological imagination and the Foucauldian critique, I had also pointed out that Mills’ sociological imagination still spews some of the grandiose claims that inform modernist critique. By juxtaposing Mills’ version of the sociological imagination with Foucault’s version of critical theory, I hope I was able to invite the readers, especially the social scientists, to carry forward the critical vision of social science earlier essayed by C. W. Mills to make it relevant to the post-modern world.

As a concluding note, I can only adumbrate here some tentative directions. A reconsideration of the sociological imagination would embody the following orientations: (1) it will have to make its historical approach genealogical; (2) it will be local and regional in its analysis of power; (3) it will adopt an antihumanistic and a nominalist approach to subjectivities and subjectivization; (4) it will link the care of the self and intellectual craftsmanship with the impatience for freedom; and, (5) its goal will be to provide tools and maps for those concerned with the struggle against domination. It will wage war against domination on tactical level rather than on grand scale. These general characteristics, I believe, should inform the appropriate “sociological imagination” for our time. And this reconsideration,

that shows our faithfulness to the “ethos” of Aufklärung, would show “what difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday” (Foucault 1985: 38).

NOTES

- 1 Of course Mills was very much aware that “the sociological imagination” is not a privileged possession of sociologists. It is common to social scientists, politicians, writers, and even journalists. And so in this essay, I will follow the general and very broad definition of Mills.
- 2 Foucault (1991), with much irony writes, “Perhaps if I had read those works earlier on, I would have saved useful time, surely: I would not have needed to write some things and I would have avoided certain errors. At any rate, if I had encountered the Frankfurt School while young, I would have been seduced to the point of doing nothing else in life but the job of commenting on them” (p. 120).
- 3 For a discussion of Foucault’s relationship with modernity and Habermas’ critique, see Habermas (1986); also Ingram (1994).
- 4 Mills employs the more sociological term “socialized individuals” for the normalized individuals.
- 5 For Foucault’s discussion of historical method, see his essays, “On the Ways of Writing History” (1998a), “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History” (1998a), “Return to History” (1998a), and his book *Archaeology of Human Knowledge* (1989).
- 6 For criticisms raised against Foucault supposedly political nihilism, see McNay (1994); Walzer (1989); Taylor (1989). For defense, see Hoy (1989); Smart (1989); Dean (1994); Prado (1995).
- 7 Yet Foucault does not turn “power” into a new totalizing concept. Power itself “is that which must be explained” (Foucault 1991:148; also Foucault 1998:451).
- 8 In an interview, Foucault (1980) qualifies his anti-statist stance: “I do not want to say that the state is not important; what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state” (p. 123). Foucault (1980) also admits, “Thus it is possible for class struggle not to be the ‘ratio’ for the exercise of power’, yet still be the ‘guarantee of intelligibility’ for certain grand strategies” (p. 142).

- 9 Mills writes, "Surely this is the paradox of our immediate situation. The facts about the newer means of history-making are a signal that men are not necessarily in the grip of fate, that men can now make history. But this fact is made ironic by the further fact that just now those ideologies which offer men the hope of making history have declined and are collapsing in the Western societies. That collapse is also the collapse of the expectations of the Enlightenment, that reason and freedom would come to prevail as paramount forces in human history" (p. 183).
- 10 See Foucault's interview: "Minimalist Self" (1988). In this interview, he says: "I am sure I am not able to provide these people what they expect. I never behave like a prophet" (p. 15).
- 11 Foucault mentions Voltaire and Emile Zola as examples of universal intellectuals. Usually their weapon is writing and literature.
- 12 This is very much similar to Frisby's (1994) Lukacsian critique of Simmel's aestheticized sociology. For a defense of Simmel contra Frisby, see Weinstein and Weinstein (1998).
- 13 See Weber's famous essay, "Science as a Vocation" (1967). For a discussion on the similarities between Weber's diagnosis of modernity and Foucault's analysis of discipline, see Turner (1992).
- 14 The same optimism is found in Mills: "Social science may be confused, but its confusion should be exploited rather than bemoaned. It may be sick, but recognition of this fact can and should be taken as a call for diagnosis and perhaps even as a sign of coming health" (p. 132).
- 15 Foucauldian approach documents the microphysics of power and not the grand design of domination (Rabinow 1985; Smart 1983). Foucault wants resistance and leaves the question of revolution to those who are directly involved in it. As Foucault (1987) puts it, "My objective is not to propose a global principle for analyzing society" (p. 85). But the "final Foucault" tends to favor "aesthetic of existence" as a form of resistance. See his interviews: "On Power" (1988); "Truth and Power" (1980); "Revolution until Now" (1978).
- 16 Mills comes closest to this aestheticized politics in his discussion of intellectual craftsmanship. Mills writes, "It is best to begin, I think, by reminding you, the beginning student, that the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other...But you will have recognized that as a scholar you have the exceptional opportunity of designing a way of living which will encourage the habits of good workmanship. Scholarship is a choice of how to live

as well as a choice of career; whether he knows it or not, the intellectual workman forms his own self as he works toward the perfection of his craft; to realize his own potentialities, and any opportunities that come his way, he constructs a character which has as its core the qualities of the good workman" (p. 195-196).

- 17 For Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia*, see Foucault (2001) and his interview: "Aesthetic of Existence" (1988). A good commentary is in Flynn (1998).
- 18 These metaphors are based on the interview, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1998), on the occasion of a film *Hitler: A View from Germany*.

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