C. Wright Mills
The Sociological Imagination
C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

- In all of his writings, Mills interprets the world through a theoretical perspective very much influenced by Max Weber.
- Like the classical theory of the discipline, Mills’ vision is a holistic view of entire sociocultural systems, this system is interdependent, and it has profound effects on human values, thought, and behavior.

- *The Power Elite*
- *White Collar*
- *The Sociological Imagination*
Rationalization

- Rationalization is the practical application of knowledge to achieve a desired end.

- According to Mills:
  - Its goal is efficiency, its means are total coordination and control over the social processes needed to attain that goal.
  - It is the guiding principle behind bureaucracy and the increasing division of labor.
C. Wright Mills

- He examined the extent to which business elites were tied in with military and governmental elites.
  - He was interested in the relationship because of its historical and political significance in a nation which subscribes to an ideology of democracy.

- We are, he suggested, now caught in a disastrous drift of a merging power elite which, in the name of “crackpot realism,” is carrying us ever closer to catastrophe.
Basic Assumptions

Human beings, Mills asserts, cannot be understood apart from the social and historical structures in which they are formed and in which they interact.

While human beings are motivated by the norms, values, and belief systems that prevail in their society, structural change often throw these "vocabularies of motivation" into some confusion.
Basic Assumptions

- Modernity - The number and variety of structural changes within a society increase as institutions become larger, more embracing, and more interconnected.

- Consequently, the tempo of change has sped up appreciably in the modern era, and the changes have become far more consequential for all
  - For those who are in control of these enlarged organizations, and for those who are subject to them.
Institutions and Individuals

- In order to have power one must be able to tap the power of something greater than oneself.
  - The “something greater” consists of the collective power of an institution.
  - People of power must be understood, then, to derive their power from an institutional base.
- This means that the exercise of power cannot be simply the exercise of individual eccentricity but must run parallel to the “grain” of power that characterizes the institutional source.
  - The study of power, then, becomes the study of institutions, the power relations between institutions, and the people who represent the expressions of those institutions.
Mill’s Model

Explaining Social Outcomes

1. Social Context
   - Culture, Institutions, Technology...
2. Actors in social context
3. Social Action
4. Social Outcomes
   - Retention, Diffusion, Order...
   - Implications and predictions

Constraints
Opportunities
Interaction in networks
Structured Actions
The Sociological Imagination

- Mills claimed that Sociological research has come to be guided more by the requirements of administrative concerns than by intellectual concerns.
  - It has become the accumulation of facts for the purpose of facilitating administrative decisions.
- For Mills the difference between effective sociological thought and that which fails rested upon imagination.
  - The sociological imagination is simply a "quality of mind" that allows one to grasp "history and biography and the relations between the two within society."
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To truly fulfill the promise of social science requires us to focus upon substantive problems, and to relate these problems to structural and historical features of the sociocultural system.

- Mills’ assertion is a reaction against the sociology of the 30s and 40s which argued, in effect, that worthwhile sociological thinking comes mostly from facts.
- Theory is supportive, but its main function is to lead to further facts. The product of this kind of sociology, said mills, is factual but lacking imagination.
- More importantly, it often bypasses problems that are more centrally significant.
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- These features have meanings for individuals, and they profoundly affect the values, character, and the behavior of the men and women who make up that sociocultural system.

- The importance of sociological thought comes out of the fact that it is not something that is limited to professors of sociology or courses in modern society on the campuses.

- Instead, it is an exercise which all people today must attempt.
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- The promise of the social sciences is to bring reason to bear on human affairs. To fulfill this role requires that we "avoid furthering the bureaucratization of reason and of discourse."

"What I am suggesting is that by addressing ourselves to issues and to troubles, and formulating them as problems of social science, we stand the best chance, I believe the only chance, to make reason democratically relevant to human affairs in a free society, and so to realize the classic values that underlie the promise of our studies" (Mills 1959: 194).

- Mills set forth his own conception of how a social scientist should undertake the work. He conveys a sense of what it means to be an intellectual who concentrates on the social nature of man and who seeks that which is significant.
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- First of all, a good scholar does not split work from life. Both are part of a seriously accepted unity.
  - Life experience can be used in work, and fruits of work can be used to enrich life
- Second, a good scholar must keep a file. This file is a compendium of personal, professional, and intellectual experiences.
- Third, a good intellectual engages in continual review of thoughts and experiences.
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- Fourth, a good intellectual may find a truly bad book as intellectually stimulating and conducive to thinking as a good book.
- Fifth, there must be an attitude of playfulness toward phrases, words, and ideas. Along with this attitude one must have a fierce drive to make sense out of the world.
- Sixth, the imagination is stimulated by assuming a willingness to view the world from the perspective of others.
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- Seventh, one should not be afraid, in the preliminary stages of speculation, to think in terms of imaginative extremes.
- Eighth, one should not hesitate to express ideas in language which is as simple and direct as one can make it. Ideas are affected by the manner of their expression. An imagination which is encased in deadening language will be a deadened imagination.
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- In this manner Mills left behind a statement of his concerns about sociology--an attempt to correct the excesses of an unimaginative empirical methodology.
  - Social thought was a matter of individual commitment--and it involved a sense of responsibility.
  - The greater the commitment, the greater the responsibility. To Mills, social thought was the stuff of life.
  - To live intensely was to think and work intensely. Life, work, and thought were inseparable.
- This is what Mills meant when he said, a year of so before his death, “God, how I have lived!”