

Sociological Imagination*

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14 June 2004

American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959: 3) argued that ‘nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps’. Mills maintained that people are trapped because ‘their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family [and] neighbourhood’ (Mills 1959: 3), and are not able to fully understand the greater sociological patterns related to their private troubles. Underlying this feeling of being trapped are the seemingly uncontrollable and continuous changes to society. Mills (1959: 9–10) mentions unemployment, war, marriage and life in the city as examples where tension between private trouble and public issues becomes apparent.

The feeling that Mills identified in 1959 is still present today and many examples can be found in popular media. One example is the tension that present-day women experience regarding their perceived housekeeping responsibilities, as discussed in a recent broadcast of *Life Matters* (Radio National 2004). The discussion focused on the rising popularity of domestic advice and support services, in particular the immensely popular American website *Fly Lady* (Cilley 2004), which provides advice to people (mainly women) who are not able to deal with their perceived roles as home maker. Sociologist Susan Maushart argues that feminism has ‘thrown out the baby with the bathwater’ (Radio National 2004) because, although the victories of feminism have ensured that women are not restricted to being homemakers, they have devalued the home in their wake. Many women thus feel trapped between the social change achieved by feminism and the cultural expectations of being home makers.

Mills offers a solution to this feeling of being trapped. He argues that because

*This paper has been written for the course *Foundations of Social Science* from Macquarie University in Sydney.

‘neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’ (Mills 1959: 3), we need to develop a way of understanding the interaction between individual lives and society. This understanding is what Mills calls *Sociological Imagination*: the ‘quality of mind’ which allows one to grasp ‘history and biography and the relations between the two within society’ (Mills 1959: 6). Mills believed, however, that ‘ordinary people do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world’ (Mills 1959: 4).

Sociological Imagination is much more part of contemporary society than in the days when Mills wrote his book. Programs like *Life Matters* mainly deal with issues located on the crossroads between private trouble and the public sphere. Many people do, however, not seem to be interested in developing the ‘quality of mind’ that Mills envisaged. They remain focused on private issues, without realising the social reality in which the issues are embedded. This lack of Sociological Imagination becomes apparent when, for example, the issue of drug addiction is discussed in Australian media. An example of this is a report about drug trade in schools in *A Current Affair*(2001). The issue was discussed without recognising the wider social issues relating to teenage drug addiction. The only solution offered to the problem in the program is ‘zero tolerance’. Some Sociological Imagination would go a long way in trying to find a solution to this problem.

References

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