Conclusion: The Promise of Sociology?

Abstract: The concluding chapter critically reassesses the future of sociology and C. Wright Mills’ vision of the promise of the sociological imagination, and discusses Michael Burawoy’s call for ‘public sociology’, a more recent attempt to address sociology’s cultural relevance. As Mills’ original idea of the sociological imagination has become even something of a truism in latter-day sociology, to continue stimulating thought and provoking novel insights we need new concepts and a new sociological imagination. The chapter also maintains that it is only by imagining a different sociology that we can make sociology responsive to life in the 21st century and to understanding the world in which we live as both a human and a non-human world, marked by, say, computed sociality, ubiquitous waste and global climate change.

Keywords: Burawoy; connectivity; Mills; more-than-human sociology; scale; the sociological imagination

In the late 1950s, Mills pictured the future of the sociological imagination as bright and shiny. He predicted that ‘[t]he sociological imagination is becoming, I believe, the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature’. And he went on by maintaining that although many social scientists of his day were in many respects lacking the sociological imagination, ‘in factual and moral concerns, in literary work and in political analysis the qualities of this imagination are regularly demanded. In a great variety of expressions, they have become central features of intellectual endeavour and cultural sensibility’ (Mills, 2000 [1959], p. 14).

It seems that the man who was starkly pessimistic in his opinion of the American society and sociology alike was overly optimistic in his assessment of the fate of the sociological imagination. What has become of the sociological imagination does not quite match the vision Mills had of its position in cultural life. Quite the contrary, it is rather the sciences of the mind, which Nikolas Rose (1996) has called the ‘psy’ disciplines – psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy – that by and large seem to shape the ways in which we understand and act upon ourselves and how we are acted upon by others, such as politicians, managers, doctors, therapists and other authorities. In addition, moral concerns and public matters are largely framed in terms of money and dominated by the logic of the marketplace. Environmental problems, issues of public health and education, for example, seem to always eventually come down to money and the question of ‘how much?’.

Surely, there have been many efforts to make sociology culturally relevant. A well-known recent attempt to break free from the disciplinary ghetto is Michael Burawoy’s call for ‘public sociology’ (2004; 2005). Burawoy is confident that ‘the world needs public sociology – a sociology that transcends the academy – more than ever’. He thinks that sociology has potential to speak to several publics: it can stimulate and inform public debate in the media, in policy-making as well as among minorities and social movements on a local, national and global level alike. And, much like Mills, Burawoy regards sociology as a ‘mirror and conscience of society’. He thinks that the primary relevance of sociology lies in addressing issues like social justice, gender regimes, environmental problems, market fundamentalism as well as state and non-state violence. However, as Kemple and Mawani (2009, p. 233) note, despite Mills’ and Burawoy’s similarities in critical ethos and in stressing the importance of public engagement, Burawoy’s plea for public sociology in

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