



Research Article

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Heuristic Potentials of the *Sociological Imagination*

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Abstract

The concept of sociological imagination, originally proposed by Charles Wright Mill, is a classic of Sociology. This paper aims to present and discuss the sociological imagination projecting its heuristic capacity in contemporary society, in which the digital is a novelty vis-a-vis the original social context that shaped this proposal. The results of this analysis allow concluding that there are some contemporary challenges to be considered in this crucial analytical proposal in Sociology.

Keywords: *sociological imagination, Sociology, interdisciplinary, social organization*

*But our ability to develop this form of imagination has been a harder nut to crack.
(Norgaard, 2018, p. 172).*

1. Introduction

The concept of sociological imagination, originally proposed by Charles Wright Mill in 1959, is a classic of sociology and is either explicitly or implicitly heavily mobilized in social analysis. For example, on the potential relevance that the sociological imagination can have on the analysis of various topics, such as climate change, Norgaard (2018) advocates that

[...] in order to understand and respond to climate change we need two kinds of imagination: 1) to see the relationships between human actions and their impacts on earth's biophysical system (ecological imagination) and 2) to see the relationships within society that make up this environmentally damaging social structure (sociological imagination). The scientific community has made good progress in developing our ecological imagination but still need to develop a sociological imagination. The application of a sociological imagination allows for a powerfully reframing of four key problems in the current interdisciplinary conversation on climate change: why climate change is happening, how we are being impacted, why we have failed to successfully respond so far, and how we might be able to effectively do so (p. 171).

However, what exactly is the relevance of the concept of sociological imagination (Mills, 2000) as an “analytical tool” (Solis-Gadea, 2005, p. 114) in apprehending the social real, even after several transformations from the original social, political, economic and cultural context at the time of this proposal by Charles Wright Mills in 1959 (Beamish, 2015; Bratton & Gold, 2015; Brubaker & Fernández, 2019; Frade, 2009; Hegeman, 2014; Scanlan & Grauerholz, 2009; Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019; Selwyn, 2015; Solis-Gadea, 2005; Staubmann & Treviño, 2019; Edwards, Housley, Williams, Sloan, & Williams, 2013)?

This paper aims to present and discuss the sociological imagination, projecting its (possible) heuristic capacity in contemporary society, in which the digital is a novelty vis-a-vis the original social context that shaped this proposal.

To attain this goal, the preferred technique for collecting information on the topic under study was document analysis, developed based on different types of document sources, with scientific articles being the main document source. The choice of the article as an empirical field of analysis results from considering that the article is the central formal means of the scientific production and communication process, accounting for the scientific activity of scientists, where argumentative persuasion strategies are developed and favored, and interpretative principles are advocated by the authors and legitimized by the peers.

Thus, the authors carried out a bibliographic search in the *Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online* (Online Knowledge Library) (b-on) database (which “provides unlimited and permanent access to research and higher education institutions to the full texts of thousands of scientific journals and online e-books from some of the most important content providers, through nationally negotiated subscriptions” (Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online, online)). The authors used the term “sociological imagination” in their search, in the publications’ title, on January 26, 2020, and obtained a total of 597 results. The authors analyzed the abstracts and selected those publications that seemed to most pertinent to attain the objective of this research.

2. Sociological Imagination

Sociology has always been a science that sought to denaturalize the social reality deemed natural, inevitable or obvious (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017). According to Lange (2015), “Since the eighteenth century, sociology has explored the elements in society hidden or taken for granted, elements we accept every day without reflection. The Latin word *logos* means the ‘study of’ and *socius* means ‘being with others’ – the study of being with others” (p. 494).

Mills frames his work *The Sociological Imagination (TSI)*, in which he puts forth the specific concept of sociological imagination that is analyzed below (A biographical history of Mills or a deepening of the more general proposal of Mills is out of the scope of this paper. For this purpose, the following literature is recommended: Frade, 2009; McCoy, 2012; Selwyn, 2015; Hegeman, 2014; Staubmann & Treviño, 2019; Solis-Gadea, 2005; Lange, 2015):

TSI remains a book that is inspiring to all from different political positions who are not afraid of being outsiders, who want to be free and rational in this technocratic society, who intend to maintain their enthusiasm to change the world, as only as it is an indifferent and irresponsible, unfair and unjust world (Xiang, 2015, p. 123).

This IST work is based on the following questions:

(1) *What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? [...] (2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? [...] (3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail?*” (Mills, 2000, pp. 6 and 7).

What exactly is the sociological imagination as an indispensable element for sociological knowledge (Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019), as proposed by its founder, Charles Wright Mills (2000)? According to the author himself,

The sociological imagination enables 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 experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. [p. 5] [...] It is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities (Mills, 2000, p. 15).

Mills (2000) offers the following reasons for his use of the sociological imagination:

(1) every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing, and for better or worse, I am a sociologist; (2) I do believe that historically the quality of mind has been more frequently and more vividly displayed by classic sociologists than by other social scientists; (3) since I am going to examine critically a number of curious sociological schools, I need a counter term on which to stand (p. 19).

The author felt that articulation between biography, history, culture, and society was critical in developing this sociological imagination (Mills, 2000; Bousalis, 2017; Bratton & Gold, 2015; Qu, 2017; Norgaard, 2018; Selwyn, 2015; McCoy, 2012), as the “capacity to shift from one perspective to another” (Mills, 2000, p. 211), in which the capacity for empathy is crucial: “Empathy not only evokes thinking, but also feeling” (Bousalis, 2017, p. 9). In other words, the “sociological imagination involves both reason and sensibility, reflection and feeling, thought and passion” (Frade, 2009, p. 23). However, the empirical component which the sociological imagination must be based on is also crucial (Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019; Staubmann & Treviño, 2019).

This is a new paradigm for sociological knowledge, inasmuch that “the sociological imagination is the quality of mind that allows one to imagine how historically conditioned social forces shape the inner life and personal experience of the individual, and how acts of individuals can, in turn, shape the social structures in which they are situated” (Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019, p. 48), “which enables its possessor both to grasp the world and to be affected by it” (Frade, 2009, p. 23). Then, this awareness, made possible by the sociological imagination, would also enable the development of an awareness that informs a social transformation (Bratton & Gold, 2015; Selwyn, 2015; Corbett, 2015; Lange, 2015; Rimke, 2010), as “it contributes to the critique of existing forms of society and thus opens the way for the collective construction of fairer forms of social organization” (Almeida, 1994, p. 21). In Mills’ (2000) own words, “the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” (p. 5).

In short, the sociological imagination as a concept “is an analytical perspective, rather than prescriptive or restrictive methodology, and ultimately an outward-facing political and ethical orientation” (Curtis, 2020, p. 3). As Mills (2000) sustains,

The sociological imagination enables 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 experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions (p. 5).

3. An Updated Sociological Imagination?

We must not forget that “Mills’ *Sociological Imagination* was largely a complaint against this instrumentalization of mid-twentieth-century social science and its newfound power and prestige, not as a capacious eye on society but a tool of hegemony: of marketing, governance, intelligence, and the social order” (Hegeman, 2015, p. 98).

However, there are limitations in the Mills’ sociological imagination proposal (Curtis, 2020).

Frade (2009) argues that

What Mills deserves criticism for is not exactly to do with having aimed high, but with having misjudged both the social expectations and demands for a culturally responsible social science which will provide a comprehensive vision to whole societies and cultures, and the power of social science to provide that vision (p. 28).

Several authors advocate that one lives an “a new sociological era, for which a new sociological imagination is required” (Solis-Gadea, 2005, p. 117). This article will highlight three perspectives that the authors deem central in the excellent synthesis that analyzes several of the main aspects to be discussed that shape the *sociological imagination*: Solis-Gadea (2005), Rimke (2010) and Shields (2017).

For Solis-Gadea (2005),

The new sociological imagination uses theory, history, empirical facts, logical formalization, systematic analysis, creativity, local knowledge, moral judgment and inspiration. What distinctively constitutes its elements is not just the search for correlations between abstract variables, but the search for pertinent relationships among facts, moral problems, structural conditions, historical concerns, personal worries and ethical values of contemporary societies [p. 118]. [...] This new sociological imagination recognizes that there are several ways in which a case or a problem can be analyzed” (p. 117).

In summary, “it is a disposition of the intellectual spirit in a permanent process of construction. [...] the new sociological imagination does not aspire to be a corpus of knowledge but, rather, grounded thinking in the service of questioning reality” (Solis-Gadea, 2005, p. 117).

For Rimke (2010),

The problem of much historical research is not that it necessarily neglects crucial patterns, processes, trajectories and cases of social change but that aspects of the past are divorced from their location in the present. [...] The sociological imagination thus emphasizes contingency rather than cause to guard against: 1) the exaggeration of present forms of social organization as necessary (and therefore beyond criticism and transformation); 2) losing sight of socially organized (and disproportionately profitable) power relations; and/or 3) the failure to conceive of, and pursue, alternatives (Rimke et al., 2010, p. 248).

More recently, for Shields (2017),

C. Wright Mills’ The Sociological Imagination has changed, as evident in sociologies that think beyond national societies and analyse globalization. This ‘imagination’ has in effect been ‘expanded’, moving from one-dimensional (linear) analyses based on historical vectors of force and teleologies to a more contextualized, relativized spatial analysis with more dimensions. [p. 533] [...] the sociological imagination of the late 1950s has been supplemented as a way of understanding a globalized social world in which inequality and difference are spatially fragmented and geographically dispersed. In effect, this supplement is a new dimension that the contemporary sociological imagination has taken on” [p. 534]. The ‘sociological imagination 2.0’ is first of all a sociological imagination ‘squared’ to encompass not only time and temporalization but also spatialization. [p. 540]. [...] a sociological imagination needs not only an historical dimension but the ability to work in an n-dimensional topological space that could contain several simultaneous, colliding 3D lived realities as well as their historical dimensions and virtual spaces (p. 545).

In summary, as Mills (2000) already advocated, there is the need to stress the importance of interdisciplinarity in the articulation between the micro, meso and macro levels (Norgaard, 2018; Serpa, Ferreira, & Santos, 2017; Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; Frade, 2009; Lange, 2015; Rimke, 2010) in the apprehension of the sociological imagination. Rimke (2010) claims that

Sociology continues to celebrate and produce scholarship committed to subverting and transgressing disciplinary divides necessary to study the relationship between knowledge and power. Indeed, the

attractiveness of sociology's transdisciplinary philosophy for many of us is that it cannot or will not be disciplined [p. 240]. [...] Mills argues that the "promise" of sociological analysis is to demonstrate how humans are products of their society as much as it concentrates on how they contribute to the production of that society (p. 241).

4. Conclusion

Although – like all sociological concepts – there is the need for a permanent critical updating to maintain and, if possible, increase its heuristic capacity to account for the real (this is the function of scientific theory), in its essence, the concept of sociological imagination reveals an enormous potential and relevance today in the understanding of where it is located socially speaking in a very complex world (Selwyn, 2015; Corbett, 2015; McCoy, 2012): “A sociological imagination suggests that society is constructed, conferring a sense of power, agency and hope for change, an important perspective considering constraints and an era shaped by the discourse of ‘inevitabilities’” (Lange, 2015, p. 492).

In Frade's (2009) proposal,

[...] the possibilities for a truly free social science essentially depend on three major 'conditions': the subjective stance or vocation, the sociological imagination proper, and an independent social science politics, conditions whose apt names can also be 'love', 'insight' and 'courage' [p. 9]. [...] The social sciences can make a decisive contribution to this task if they take on Mills' ambitious project and uncompromisingly devote themselves to enquiring about the ways in which men's and women's capacity for thought, and therefore for action, is shaped and curtailed, about the kind of human beings they become in the process, and about the possibilities for reason and liberty and what is required to strengthen their command over human life (p. 29).

It is concluded that there are some contemporary challenges to be considered in this crucial analytical proposal in Sociology – the sociological imagination – when “Sociology is losing its relevance at a time when we need to understand social context more than ever” (Chernoff, 2019, p. 2174), remaining central to the o Charles Wright Mills' assumption of already over 70 years ago, which affirms the

[...] intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them (Mills, 2000, p. 4).

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