

# The Sociological Imagination, Neoliberalism, and Higher Education

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## Abstract

One of the main goals of sociology is to identify and evaluate institutional changes in society. The concept of the sociological imagination has gained wide use as a means of observing how personal issues are affected by social arrangements. This article critically examines how many contemporary sociologists, particularly in the area of teaching and learning, are using their sociological imaginations to observe and evaluate the changes taking place in higher education due to a paradigm shift that emphasizes occupational-professional programs at the expense of the arts and sciences. It is argued that this shift toward neoliberal principles is so pervasive that social scientists tend to think and speak in neoliberal terms even when expressing the importance of maintaining a sociological imagination. While some educators celebrate this trend in higher education, C. Wright Mills, the sociologist who coined the term, “sociological imagination,” believed (like John Dewey) that a well-rounded education is vital to preserving a democracy.

## Keywords

education, sociological imagination, neoliberalism, paradigm shift

## Introduction

C. Wright Mills has been characterized in many ways over the years: maverick, cowboy, biker, radical, prophet. It is easy to project images onto a dead person. It is also easy to reduce a person’s lifetime to a soundbite—in Mills’s case, “the sociological imagination.” The phrase has become a ubiquitous part of teaching introductory sociology and is used loosely and interchangeably with seeing the world through a sociological perspective. However, the radical meaning of the concept continues to be difficult to grasp, internalize, and convey (Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995). The question that I want to address here is how we, as sociologists, can use the sociological imagination to understand our role in academe today.

## The Sociological Imagination

In the first chapter of *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) defined the concept in the following way:

What we experience in various and specific milieu . . . is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieu we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing

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and more intricately connected with one another. 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 milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination. (Pp. 10–11)

The intent of the sociological imagination is to facilitate a sociological awareness of one's circumstances. Mills (1953) asserted "that the individual cannot understand his own experience or gauge his own fate without locating himself within the trends of his epoch and the life chances of all the individuals of his social layer" (p. 135). To possess a sociological imagination, one must keep in mind how the influences of personal biography, social structure, and history interconnect. Mills (1959) directed the following comment to novice sociologists: "Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problems that you take up for study" (p. 226). The concept of the sociological imagination may appear in every introduction to sociology textbook, but Mills's advice is more pertinent than ever in the age of neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial university.

### Higher Education and the Rise of Neoliberalism

A time series of the major trends in higher education from 1915 to 2001 by Steven Brint et al. (2005) "suggests an underlying trend toward occupational-professional programs combined with shorter-term cyclical movements" (p. 156). These cyclical movements involve a "resurgence" of the arts and sciences, and they usually occur during periods of economic prosperity. Today, except in the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, many sociology programs are in the position of needing to defend their usefulness while resources are increasingly being invested in occupational-professional programs. This would be familiar territory to Mills (2000), who, early in his career in the 1940s, wrote to a colleague,

[O]ne of the finest men I've known resigned over the unhappy administrative situation . . . Well, now there is no head and probably won't be. The Business Administration dean . . . seems to want to gobble up the department as one aspect of business training! (P. 69)

Many of Mills's writings express concern about taking an apathetic or apolitical position about what we would now describe as a neoliberal approach in higher education. Neoliberalism arose in the mid-twentieth century and gained momentum in economics and public policy in the 1970s and 1980s. A basic assumption of neoliberalism is that free market capitalism is the best way to organize and manage the social institutions of society. The transformation of American society from New Deal and Great Society policies to neoliberalism was relatively dramatic, rapid, and complete as Americans seized upon it as an economic system that might extend the prosperity of the postwar period. The economic tensions of the late twentieth century led to a paradigm shift in American society; what Mills described as an encroachment in the 1940s has become so commonplace today that its ubiquitous presence is taken as a given. For example, sociologist Burton Clark (2000) wrote,

In the making of a strongly proactive university, much depends on acceptance of a new evolving posture . . . [The departments] have to accept the overall need for more enterprising action . . . Science and technology departments commonly become entrepreneurial first . . . Social science departments find the shift more difficult, but led by economics and business they tend to be the next major segment . . . When carried out effectively, a widespread embodiment of entrepreneurship in a university strengthens selective growth in its basic units, as it strengthens the unity of the whole. (P. 18)

Adrianna Kezar (2004) stated that higher education has been based on two competing models, one based on a communitarian philosophy and the other on a neoliberal philosophy. Since the rise of neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial university in the 1980s, the number of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty has

risen from about 30 (Gerber 2014:119) to 61 percent of instructional positions at four-year institutions, 84 percent at two-year institutions, and over 99 percent at for-profit institutions (American Sociological Association [ASA] Task Force on Contingent Faculty Employment 2019:1). At the same time, the number of administrative positions has outpaced the growth of academic positions (Gerber 2014:155). This trend of increasing the number of nonacademic personnel reflects the growing top-down management style in higher education. Along with this trend, gaps in wages have become wider. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that salary differentials widened across the disciplines (Gerber 2014:154). With some exceptions, differences in salary for most of the twentieth century were based on rank and not academic field (Gerber 2014:154). While supporters of the neoliberal university argue that these strategies facilitate greater access to higher education and generate revenue, the evidence does not support these claims (Kezar 2004).

Within the neoliberal model, students are human capital; individuals possess varying skills that may be used to secure a living; and government is not obligated to assist individuals in developing their skills. Despite the demand for highly skilled workers, federal assistance is inconsistent with neoliberal ideology. Consequently, the burden of going to college is on the student, and students are going deeper into debt to get an education. According to the principles of neoliberalism, such austerity produces a more capable or disciplined work force (Heller 2016:136–7).

The increase in nontenured faculty has decreased the amount of leverage that faculty can exercise in trying to maintain academic freedom and shared governance. The reduction of tenured members in the academy and the deprofessionalization of the faculty have weakened their influence. Christopher Newfield (2008) stated,

The brilliance of knowledge management, from the company's point of view, was to have created a new hybrid—a service-knowledge worker, an information worker who was smart and cheap and

fully manageable and ultimately interchangeable, with someone much less costly and troublesome. (P. 134)

Could someone as troublesome as Mills gain the attention of sociologists and the American public today? It seems unlikely. So long as the professorate fights among themselves for ever diminishing resources and clout, they will be at each other's throats rather than presenting a united front to address the structural issues that are redefining and limiting their roles for the public good.

### **Self-Interest and the Common Good**

Do sociologists today exercise their sociological imaginations to observe and evaluate the hegemony of contemporary trends, or are they participating in the process? In comparison with 70 years ago, African Americans and women have made great strides toward achieving equality of opportunity. These accomplishments were the product of collective action: disenfranchised people realized that by working together, they would be more likely to accomplish their individual goals. However, in recent decades, collective action to achieve personal aims has gotten bogged down. Neoliberalism does not recognize collective action; instead, it emphasizes individual action. In a neoliberal society, working for the common good is assumed to be for self-interest: one may acquire status, wealth, and well-being by participating in the common good. A part of this paradigm shift is a change from an emphasis on the common good to achieve individual goals to an emphasis on the individual to accomplish the common good. The latter, however, has produced a society with greater economic inequality, thereby limiting resources and realistic opportunities. From a self-interested point of view, it is difficult to reconcile these social conditions with the rhetoric. One needs to use the sociological imagination to step outside of the neoliberal enclosure.

While our personal interests inform our work and vice versa, as sociologists, it is important

to minimize the extent to which our passions cloud over our work as disinterested examiners of society. Sociologists who use their sociological imaginations concerning issues such as race or gender because they believe that it will help them to see how their personal troubles are tied to public issues may not realize that their examination may reflect a neoliberal outlook. Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert (2006) stated,

Notwithstanding the efforts of sociologists around the world who have taken heart from Mills' maxim . . . the privatization of social issues has indeed become a matter of overriding political importance today. As market forces penetrate ever more deeply into . . . social life, what we see . . . is a shift from a politicized culture to a privatized culture. People increasingly seek personal solutions to social problems in the hope of shutting out the risks, terrors and persecutions that dominate our lives . . . (P. 9)

Unless sociologists take historical and structural factors involved in an issue into account, they are more likely talking about themselves than about society in sociological perspective.

## Challenges to Academic Freedom and Democracy

Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein (2006) pointed out that neoliberalism constricts the university in the following ways:

First, there is the limitation of the institutions themselves and their recasting of themselves as producers of "useful" knowledge. There is a structural adjustment here that renders institutions virtually incapable of facilitating critical research. Second, there is an accelerating transformation of academic labor . . . that is, for the most part, constitutionally incapable of critical imagination. (P. 234)

The growing number of contingent faculty in sociology and in other fields not only weakens academic governance by the faculty, it may be functioning as a structural force that (by dividing faculty and increasing multitasking) hampers the ability of sociologists to effectively use their sociological imaginations to organize and

resist the neoliberal movement in higher education. According to the ASA Task Force on Contingent Faculty Employment (2019), the reduction of tenure-track positions and the rise of contingent faculty "has resulted in a two- or three tier faculty system" (p. 9). The precarious position of contingent faculty, and, to a lesser extent, tenure-track faculty, limits their academic freedom. At the same time, tenured faculty may not realize the political implications of the decline of tenure and academic freedom. As sociologists discuss how social phenomena are socially constructed, the ideology of neoliberalism continues to take over nearly every aspect of American society, including academe. Henry Giroux (2014) stated,

As considerations of power, politics, critique, and social responsibility are removed . . . the university and the intellectuals who inhabit it disassociate higher education from larger public issues, remove themselves from the task of translating private troubles into social problems, and undermine the production of those public values that nourish a democracy. (P. 100)

Where sociologists may have once described institutions, including their own college or university, using terms such as *rationalization* and *hegemony*, today's sociologists are more likely to be encouraged to "focus on their brand" and to "incentivize interest in their product." The former reflects a bottom-to-top examination of power, whereas the latter reflects a top-to-bottom fulfillment of power. Neoliberalism has colonized academe.

New faculty may only know institutions as markets within a neoliberal framework. College as a marketplace means self-interested persons interact to achieve personal ends. For students, the intrinsic meaning of learning is lost in the extrinsic motivation to acquire the skills necessary to get a job. For educators, Mills's concern about the role of education in preserving democracy is lost as professionals are transformed into disposable, pay-by-the-course employees. Under these circumstances, the American Association of University Professors's (AAUP) 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* may ring hollow. The document drafted by economist

Edwin Seligman and philosopher Arthur Lovejoy asserted that faculty are not employees of a university, like workers in a factory, but are appointees of a university, which is not an ordinary business (Finkin and Post 2009:33). The document goes on to say that as appointees, faculty acknowledge a responsibility to the authorities of the university; however, their professional activities entail serving the wider public. The failure to acknowledge these changes is symptomatic of underestimating the significance of the sociological imagination.

### Responding to the Times

In recent years, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has become popular inside and outside of sociology. An important concept in his work is called cultural capital. Bourdieu suggests that social inequalities are perpetuated by varying levels of cultural capital. Individuals who know how to present themselves and can navigate through different social circles possess more cultural capital. Individuals who possess different types of knowledge and can apply them have more cultural capital. Many of these social and cognitive skills are learned. When I talk to students about cultural capital, they inevitably apply it to themselves, and some wonder how they can acquire more cultural capital to be competitive in the job market. I then ask them to apply the sociological imagination to their thinking about cultural capital. It is at this point that I can see whether they understand what it means to use their sociological imagination.

Bourdieu's popularity in American sociology may not stem from the insights he brought to our attention concerning social inequality, but rather from how easily his work translates into the language of American capitalism. The acquisition of more cultural capital increases one's chances in the marketplace: in American hands, Bourdieu's work is about individuals and commodities. Bourdieu's cultural capital becomes neoliberal economist Gary Becker's human capital. The structural understanding of the perpetuation of social inequalities is lost in neoliberal terminology.

The educational system has always suffered from social inequalities. Today, the proposed solution is the problem, and neoliberal policies are making the problem of social inequality worse, both inside and outside of academe. In conclusion, I would like to make the following proposals for social scientists interested in countering neoliberalism in higher education.

1. Citing Rogers Brubaker, Sam de Boise (2012) stated,

Social theory is itself a form of constantly "becoming" which shapes our expectations as sociologists. Therefore, we must be conscious of the ways in which identification with the discipline informs how we approach research and come to imagine what our research will yield. (P. 54)

Whatever framework sociologists use to interpret the world, they must be vigilant in recognizing when the framework does the thinking for them. For example, while social constructionism is a useful framework, its overreliance can interfere with the social scientist's ability to see its limited value. When social scientists uncritically claim that everything is social constructed, they fail to recognize that the claim itself is a social construction. The sociological imagination is a useful framework for recognizing how time and place, or history and structure, create hegemonic frameworks. Neoliberalism is the dominant theoretical framework of our time. To counter it, social scientists need to be theoretically nimble and ready to counter managerial proposals with academic plans based on scholarship and experience.

2. Professors need to reassert shared governance. This requires academic freedom, so tenured faculty must take the lead. Around the time that neoliberal policies were gaining ground, Bowles and Gintis (1976) wrote,

The integration of white-collar labor into the dominant wage-labor system has required changes . . . Prominent is the fragmentation of

white-collar skills . . . The compartmentalization of white-collar skills has become an essential aspect of the . . . “divide and rule” strategy for the control of the labor force. Equally important, the creation of a reserve army of underemployed skilled white-collar workers whose jobs by no means exhausts the limits of their skills or abilities has increased the pool of available labor. (P. 204)

People have always compartmentalized aspects of their lives, but compartmentalization may now be a survival mechanism for making decisions and engaging in activities that social scientists have learned by training is harmful to the well-being of others. Tenured faculty and former-faculty-turned-administrators must take it upon themselves to evaluate the choices they make within their higher status positions. How they fulfill their roles determines the course and character of the institution. Tenured faculty and administrators need to encourage contingent faculty to participate in department, division, and faculty meetings, and to make it safe for them to do so. Colleges and universities also need to decide which is more humane: maintaining a pool of struggling part-time faculty or hiring fewer faculty to work full-time. College meetings should not just be about assessment reports, or the latest gimmick that administrators would like faculty to implement; they should also be about equity in terms of teaching load, salary, and institutional support for research. The support of a campus chapter of AAUP can provide valuable resources in tackling these issues.

3. Resist the argument about limited resources. The issue is not resources, but allocation. There is money for marketing to students, but not money to help students earn a degree, nor money to support full-time faculty for adequately sized programs. The logic seems to be if you simulate it, they will come, as opposed to, if you really invest in it, they will come. For example, while more courses in women studies, gender, multiculturalism, and environmental studies are being offered, they are often additions to the courseloads of

existing faculty in understaffed departments. By creating the appearance of “offering it all” while not providing the necessary underpinnings for success in such programs, the administration implicitly imparts to students that these areas of study, ultimately, are not important. Instead, students are encouraged and funneled into areas that are more easily marketable.

4. Finally, Mills (1970) stated,

[T]he key problem is held . . . that social science lags behind physical science and technology, and political and social problems are a result of this deficiency and lag. Such a position is inadequate. Certainly, more secure knowledge is needed, but we already have a great deal of knowledge that is politically and economically relevant. Big businessmen prove this by their readiness to pay out cash to social scientists who will use their knowledge for the ends of business. The political man does not need to wait upon more knowledge in order to act responsibly now. To blame his inaction upon insufficient knowledge serves as a cheap escape . . . (P. 301)

Many of America’s problems are self-inflicted, stemming not from a lack of knowledge, but from a lack of will to act on what we know. Neoliberal policies assume that individuals are rational actors and that economic freedom produces political freedom. It is not rational to continue to act in the same way—as we have for the past 40 years—and expect a different outcome. It is not rational to expect economic freedom to create a fair-level playing field out of one that is already unfair and unequal. It is not rational to deny people equality of opportunity to get an education and expect to get a society of rational actors. Mills (1959) noted in *The Sociological Imagination*,

The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. The ideological mark . . . that sets it off from The Modern Age is that the ideas of freedom and of reason have become moot; that increased rationality may not be assumed to make for increased freedom. (Pp. 166–67)

Today, social scientists find themselves in a time when the word *freedom* is a political slogan (to

limit freedom), and every form of dissent is commodified. Edward Shils (1960) concluded his review of *The Sociological Imagination* by stating, “A properly cultivated sociological imagination would be . . . accessible to the concrete, and it would transcend the particular” (p. 80). Sociologists today need to transcend the particular to change the concrete.

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