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SECOND EDITION

Questioning Sociology

CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by **MYRA J. HIRD** and **GEORGE PAVLICH**

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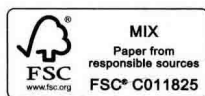
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Introduction: Sociological Questions

George Pavlich and Myra J. Hird

What Is Sociology?

As with other disciplines, this question attracts almost as many responses as the number of texts in which it is raised. Not wishing to add a static response to that dubious record, we will avoid describing sociology as a field definable by a fixed object of study, a core set of theoretical texts, a required theoretical approach, or even as a discipline held together by the use of one (scientific?) method.¹ Instead, this book identifies sociology more as an ever-evolving craft, as a process of systematically understanding and reflecting upon our historically specific interactions with others and the wider consequences of these interactions. Framed thus, sociology emerges as a changing but systematic attempt to create, assemble, or reassemble concepts to examine the assumptions that shape our social being at given moments in history.

Such a view echoes the work of an influential sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1916–62), who saw sociology as providing the space to create a uniquely sociological imagination. For Mills (1959), the sociological imagination may be described as a ‘quality of mind’ that seeks to ‘achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world’ (5). As the basis of sociology, this frame of mind promises ‘an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities’ (15). Sociology, for Mills, develops this quality of mind by making imaginative leaps to connect the most intimate of personal ‘troubles’ (experienced by particular individuals) to a history of the most general structures that shape a given society. Such leaps enable us to develop broader understandings of ourselves by connecting our current self-identities and wider socio-historical formations. The understandings help us to address the social patterns ‘of which we are at once creatures and creators’ (164).

The sociological imagination forms one part of the history of sociology—a history that reaches back beyond Mills’ writings to the work of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, August Comte, and Herbert Spencer. These theorists’ influential thinking permeates the ideas and research found in this book. For instance,

in the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx (1818–83) developed a comprehensive critique of capitalist society based upon the unequal relations individuals have to modes of production, labour, and property, which continues to inspire radical sociological analyses of societies and their political economies today. Also writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Max Weber (1864–1920) provided a theory of how one kind of rational (means-ends) way of thinking had radically transformed most areas of society, creating distinctively modern political, economic, legal, cultural, and social institutions. A good example of this rationalization process occurred in the administration of modern societies, which increasingly relied on formal bureaucracies that operate with great efficiency but come at the cost of ridding the world of magical enchantment and reducing life to a cold ‘iron cage’ of rationality. Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy still inspires critical sociological analyses of organizations, rationalization, and authority today. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term ‘sociology’ in the early nineteenth century, developed positivist sociology to derive absolute knowledge about how societies progress. Writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) focused his attention on understanding both how individuals are shaped by independent ‘social facts’ and how the structures of given societies are shaped by basic underlying factors, such as the changing divisions of labour within a group. Nineteenth-century theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was keenly interested in applying Darwinian evolutionary theory to society, and coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ to describe how individuals interact with each other in society. Although quite different in their various ideas and theories, what each of these founding sociological theorists shared was a commitment to situating individual beliefs, values, and actions within a wider group and societal context. Put another way, each of these founding theorists argued both that individuals cannot be understood outside of their societal milieu and that sociology offers a unique way of analyzing this social context.

In keeping with this fundamental starting point, and working within Mills’ sociological imagination as a helpful and accessible way of thinking about the relationships between individuals and society, this introduction explores different facets of the sociological imagination in four related sections. The first section uses hypothetical examples to describe key characteristics of the sociological imagination, while the second situates sociological thinking against other disciplines. The third section outlines three influential theoretical approaches in sociology often used to help create sociological imaginations. In the fourth section, we discuss the basic role that questions play in formulating a sociological imagination. Reflecting a central theme of this book, this section

shows how fundamental questions can arrest everyday views of the world and open us up to a sociological imagination.

Sociologists and the Sociological Imagination

What sort of thinking is distinctive, though not necessarily exclusive, to sociology? In responding to this question, and to elaborate upon Mills' previously noted 'frame of mind', it is important to differentiate between two of many possible ways of thinking about the world; namely, the *everyday* approach and the *sociological* approach.² Typically, we rely on everyday, taken-for-granted assumptions to help us negotiate our lives. I may, for instance, know that I am in a hurry because I am late for an appointment. This perception encourages me to drive faster, or speed up my walking pace. In such circumstances, we seldom stop to consider the underlying assumptions of time, or the actions that follow from our common impressions of time. We do not ordinarily question underlying assumptions made when claiming to 'be in a hurry' or trying to 'keep an appointment'. For instance, we seldom examine how the idea of 'hurry' relates to socially established conventions of time, or how these ideas are ingrained in the sorts of individuals that we are. The common-sense meaning maps we use to guide us through life, once learned through socialization, become taken-for-granted frameworks. They condition our everyday thinking and actions.

To take a related example, I might ask someone, 'Excuse me, what is the time please?' Ordinarily, I do not expect that person to engage me in a philosophical discussion of time, or a history of how global time standards came to be established, and so on. In our everyday thinking, when we ask someone what the time is, we expect an answer like, 'Oh! It is a quarter past five.' In turn, I am likely to thank the person, and through the interaction both questioner and respondent embrace a shared common-sense view of time.

However, suppose the respondent happened to be a sociology major conducting fieldwork and responds thus: 'What do you mean "Do I have the time?" What is time? In what sense can one have it? Do you mean to imply that I, as a human being, can own the time?' This response is likely to strike one as facetious, if not downright rude. But it would also disturb the everyday commonsense meanings that we commonly ascribe to the term 'time'. Through this different interaction, the sociology major may prompt you to consider alternative possibilities. You may, for instance, think differently when understanding and responding to your world. Were this to happen, the questions would have encouraged you to examine assumptions grounding your common-sense ways of acting around time. In the process, you might begin to experience a quality of mind that is akin to Mills' sociological imagination.

The point could also be made through an even simpler example. Say I wish to hang a picture on the wall, and so reach for my hammer. In this situation, I typically do not raise questions about the nature of the hammer's existence (Is it real? What is the true nature of a hammer? Who defines what a hammer is?). I simply want to use it to drive a nail into the wall. However, there are situations that propel me to reflect on the being of the hammer. Let us suppose that after repeated and accurate swings of the hammer, the nail simply does not budge. I might hold the hammer up to scrutiny, asking, 'What is this confounded thing, and what is wrong with it?' These sorts of questions explicitly focus our thoughts on the hammer's existence, and prompt us to adopt an attitude beyond ordinary ways of existing. Again, events interrupt everyday patterns of thought to provoke fundamental questions, paving the way for reflective frames of mind to surface.

These examples suggest that we harbour several distinct qualities of mind. First, there are our ordinary, everyday, commonsensical patterns of thought (for example, seeking the correct time to make a meeting, or thinking about how to place the nail in the wall to hang the picture). This is the usual, familiar attitude through which we approach our worlds. When we think in this way, we simply rely on typical, everyday concepts of time, the hammer, etc. Second, and by contrast, there are moments that arrest our everyday, common-sense thought and action. Here we question the activities, tools, and concepts with which we are engaged. The challenging response of the sociology major, or the hammer's failure, provokes me into thinking about my assumptions of time, or the hammer's existence.

As noted, the second mode of thinking encapsulates the quality of mind akin to a sociological imagination. This sort of thinking requires a leap in which we, as participants in given social contexts, suspend our comfortable, everyday understandings of things. We do so in order to think differently about the ways in which we interact with others. This reflective jump is the foundation of sociological ways of thinking, speaking, and writing. It appeals to theoretical languages that may be related to, but yet are quite different from, the everyday languages that make up our 'common sense'.

In this sense, it is not too much of a push to suggest that becoming a sociologist is somewhat akin to learning a new (analytic) language, and this requires a particular sort of preparation. To think sociologically, we remain participants of ordinary life. We do our shopping, play sports, visit with friends, go to work, etc. But, in addition, we must learn to pore over particular aspects of that life from a different vantage (e.g., collective, socio-historical, critical), using the concepts derived from a dynamic, systematic, theoretical, and empirically informed language. This involves a process of learning how to think about collective life differently from the ways provided by everyday social meanings.

A basic tool for negotiating the passage from everyday to reflexive sociological thinking is none other than the difficult, the arresting, the provocative, even if always elusive, *question*.

In this sense, as discussed later in this introduction, sociological thinking most often starts at moments of astute questioning. Such questioning challenges the limits of ordinary, common-sense frames of meaning. It may lead us beyond the vocabulary and grammar of everyday thinking to sociology's conceptual languages. But how does sociological thinking relate to other academic disciplines?

The Sociological Imagination and Other Disciplines

Suppose you are drinking coffee on the deck of your friend's small urban back garden. Dew glistens on the green leaves of a maple tree, reflecting the bright morning sunlight. This tree is undoubtedly the outstanding feature of an otherwise bleak garden. Your friend's mood is glum as she reflects on her inability to pay mounting bills and debts. As a single parent, she supports a child and, when not trying to make ends meet, spends time trying to find a job that will accommodate her child care responsibilities.

She tells of her inability to buy the basics, such as groceries, water, and electricity. Your friend has come upon hard times of late, and she talks now of knowing what the term 'poverty' means. She even confesses to thinking about pilfering some 'good food', and has entertained ways of committing benefit fraud. Each time, however, she has thought better of it and let her life take its increasingly strained course. She has become frazzled by her predicament and blames the changing times; more specifically, she points to increasing calls for the erosion of social welfare and the increased cost of heating, water, and electricity. Unable to find a job that will allow her to tend the children, she has become dependent upon social services, and is perturbed by the identity this has foisted upon her. She stares meaningfully into her cup, and sighs deeply. You place your hand, reassuringly, on her shoulder.

There are many ways to analyze this snippet of life. In academic life, different approaches are often used to distinguish specific disciplines (e.g., engineering, anthropology, medicine, history, chemistry). However, the boundaries between disciplines are never clearly defined; their borders are usually contested, they change over time, new disciplines are created, others are merged, and there are often explicit calls for interdisciplinary work. But universities still distinguish between disciplines, although in different ways. They usually isolate social sciences and humanities from the natural sciences, medicine, etc., viewing the former as focusing on the human dimensions of a situation.

Referring to the above example of your friend's situation, a so-called natural science such as plant biology might refer to the species of maple tree in question, enlightening us how energy from the sun helps to sustain, through photosynthesis, the life of the tree with its bright colours. A physicist could examine the properties of sun's refracted light through the prism-like bubbles of liquid. Chemists may seek to establish whether the liquid in view is water, or some other translucent substance secreted by the tree. The physiologist might collaborate with medical colleagues, and indeed our noted chemist, to study the potential effects of coffee on the human body.

Within the social sciences, the economist might describe redistributions of money flow in free market contexts, explaining your friend's current plight as a result of basic adjustments to markets. Psychologists, by contrast, might discuss the elements of mind that explain your friend's depressed mood, and prescribe possible treatments for her 'frazzled' state. Those of a more psycho-analytic bent may interpret what lies buried in her expressive sigh or your comforting gesture. Feminist psychologists may locate the effects of patriarchal power relations that disproportionately disadvantage women. Political scientists would likely point to underlying changes to previous welfare state formations, to the ways in which the state is nowadays pressured by neo-liberal calls to surrender (sell off) many public services to private enterprise (e.g., water facilities, electricity). Classical criminologists might point to the supposed cost-benefit, rational, calculations that your friend makes before thinking about stealing. They would undoubtedly note her free choice to obey the law rather than face the punishments dealt to those who fall foul of it.

Sociologists are likely to approach the setting in the back garden through a rather different set of perspectives. The use of the plural form of the term 'perspective' is deliberate, for there is little consensus on the exact ways in which sociology ought to proceed. However, there are distinguishing approaches and practices of those who aim to develop specifically *sociological* (rather than, say, economic, political, etc.) approaches. Without suggesting there are absolute distinctions, one might say that sociology tends to be involved with naming, understanding, and critically evaluating collective patterns through which people live out their lives. These are often referred to as the *societal* aspects of contexts.

Yet, as noted, sociological imaginations are generated from many different theoretical approaches and license diverse practices, from surveys, laboratory experiments and statistical analyses to participant observation, interviews, interpretative analysis, theorizing, critique, and political engagement. The sociological imaginations of this book's chapters, however, tend to draw on three main traditions, asking questions involving sociological