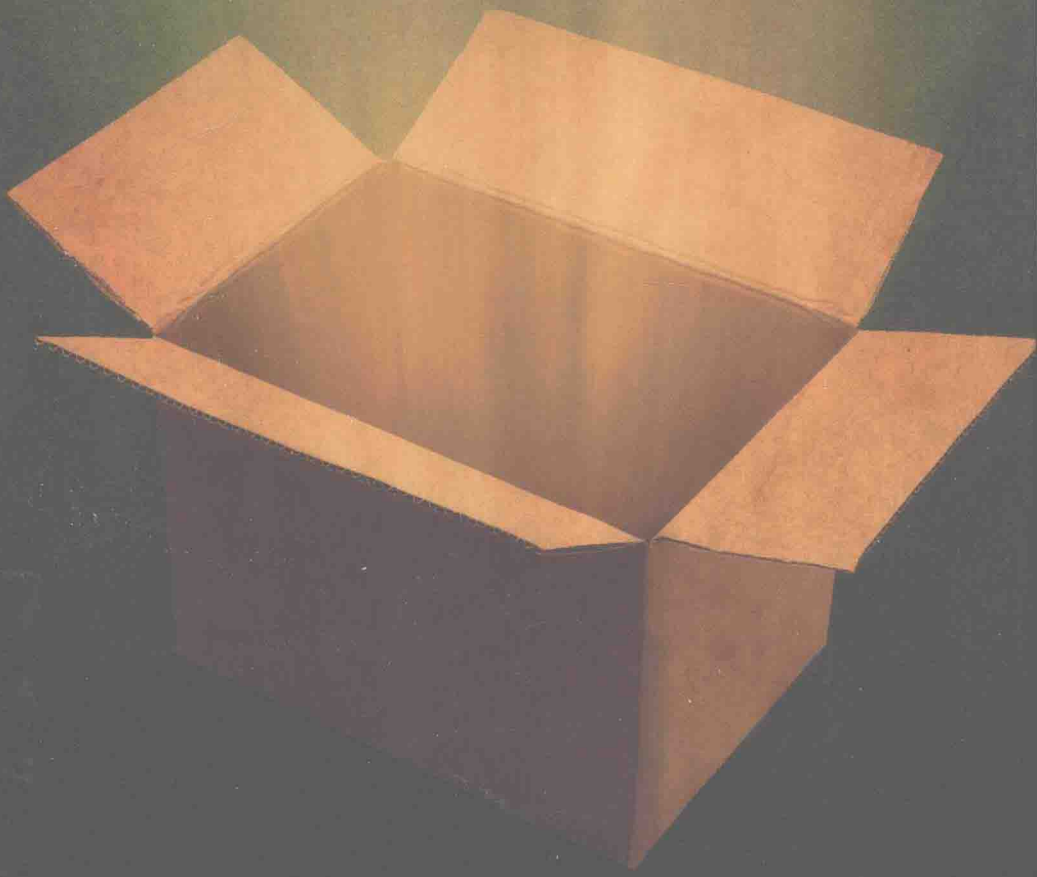
JOCK YOUNG

The Criminological Imagination



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Preface

This is the last book of a trilogy; the first, *The Exclusive Society* examined the extraordinary mechanisms of exclusion in late modern society, where sections of the population, whether indigenous or immigrant, are culturally absorbed, then summarily rejected as an underclass, detached, despised and unwanted in a process of inclusion and exclusion, the social bulimia of late modernity. The second, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, traced how such a process of othering relates to the vertiginous insecurities of our time. The tribulations of the economy and the insecurities of social life in late modernity where the old securities of family, work and community are undermined, generate a need for certainty and a secure ontology. It seeks firm social categories: the 'real' nature of marriage, the appeal to an absolute 'right and wrong', the true differences between the sexes; it is concerned with fixed demarcations and rigid distinctions. In reality, social categories are rarely distinct lines of demarcation between groups of people; social mores and social actions never clear and this is particularly true in the late modern world where norms are increasingly blurred, overlapping, changing and contested. Often, this desire for certainty is expressed in an essentialism of self and of others which is rooted in class, gender, race, ethnicity or nation. Such an othering involves a distancing and a diminishing. Binaries are created of them and us where there is seen to be an economic, social and moral hiatus between the superior and inferior, normal and deviant parts of the population.

It was while writing *Vertigo* that it dawned on me that such a process of othering which demanded clear lines and sharp demarcations was paralleled in the positivist movement in the social 'sciences', the nomothetic impulse to create universal laws and a science of society. For science requires distinct divisions between its subjects of study, whether atoms or species, and a consensus of definition to maintain its objectivity;

science abhors the blurred, the constantly contested and the subjective. So the binaries of society are readily imported into the academy. Furthermore sociology is frequently a subject where the social scientist looks downwards at the poor and supposedly more problematic parts of society. There is distance and there is diminishing. The criminological gaze all the more so; its traditional lens focuses on those who are seen to inhabit special universes economically detached, spatially segregated and morally reduced, consisting of individuals who by disposition, lack of socialization or circumstance are less than us. This process involves a detachment of individuals from the social structure, a denial of history, a loss of meaning; it forgoes transformative politics and concentrates on amelioration and accommodation. It is, as we shall see, precisely the opposite of the methodology which C. Wright Mills championed in *The Sociological Imagination*.

The sociological imagination can be engendered by social marginality, it flourishes at times of rapid change and environments of diversity; it can be obscured by academic isolation far from the maelstrom of late modern life, it can be forcefully suppressed by government intervention, it can be rung out of the budding scholar by a tedious apprenticeship within the discipline – a so-called professionalization – which prioritizes quantitative methods and digital distancing over human contact, *verstehen* and patient ethnography. For Mills a key indice of loss of such imagination was the rise of abstracted empiricism where reality was lost in method and measurement, where the tools of the trade become magically more important than reality itself, where to put it metaphorically, the telescope becomes of greater importance than the sky.

I have traced in this book how abstracted empiricism has expanded on a level which would have surely astonished Mills himself. How in much of the social sciences reality has been lost in a sea of statistical symbols and dubious analysis. I have, in part, focused on developments in criminology because it is here where abstracted empiricism has flourished to the greatest extent, producing a new genre of research and a novel breed of journal which has all but forgotten a great legacy of scholarship, where theory has been banished to the passing nod and the perfunctory and critical work significantly marginalized. But such a process has, as we shall see, spread to mainstream sociology and has clear resonances throughout the social sciences.

I have pointed to several areas which have been ill served by the hubris of abstracted empiricism. The understanding of the AIDS epidemic and methods of containing it were not helped by sampling frames which ignored precisely such groups which were most likely to be key to its spread and surveys which gave palpably false portrayals of human sexual activity, the debate over deleterious drug use is not enhanced by

self-report studies whose validity stretches credibility, and the inability to satisfactorily explain the fall of the crime rate in the US and the UK is a story replete with ethnocentrism; it is, as I will seek to demonstrate, a tale of a conceptual toolbox which is exceedingly limited in its instruments and tardy in its theory.

It has to be said that many funding bodies are simply not getting a decent return in terms of their policy concerns. That they would, in fact, get better advice if researchers were considerably more wary about their use of numerical data, much more reflective in their interpretation of the figures which they produce and who utilize statistical analysis in a much more limited and circumspect way. At the very least they must take cognizance of the fact that survey methods are riddled with problems and their results must be interpreted with caution, that regression analysis is limited in its capability and that recipe book statistical testing is controversial both in its scientific basis and its ability to test hypotheses and establish causality. As it is much of the 'precision' and statistical 'sophistication' is an elaborate window dressing which obfuscates rather than illuminates reality. It is, to be blunt, largely a waste of money in policy terms and in many cases actually produces results which are counterproductive and dysfunctional.

The criticisms of social surveys, statistical testing and mathematical modelling abound. Their limitations are debated in economics and among statisticians but precious little of this seems to get across to the journals of mainstream criminology and sociology. Intriguingly there are hints in the textbooks that all is not as settled and secure as might seem to be the case but such hesitations are quickly glossed over in the haste to get on with the job. For, as we shall see, the phenomenon of skating on thin ice, of sensing that one's premises are insubstantial and precarious, is combined with the notion that somehow the hubris of science will speed us safely across the pond. If I can, in this book, create a moment of hesitation and contribute somewhat to the growing scepticism with regards to the widespread desire to quantify every aspect of the human condition I will have succeeded.

Acknowledgements

This book was written first of all in New York, then in London, then back again, it is a product of work at the University of Kent where I was Professor of Sociology and the City University of New York where I am Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice. I owe a lot to discussions with post-graduate students at both institutions and particularly to my classes at the CUNY Graduate Center, where students have taught me as much as I have taught them and the subsequent debates spiced with gossip which, with some sort of inevitability, ended up in O'Reilly's or Jakes. My colleagues at the Centre for Criminology, Middlesex University, where I cut my teeth on survey research, particularly John Lea and Roger Matthews have been constant intellectual companions long after the institution itself has sadly been diminished and neglected. At John Jay College, Dave Brotherton and Michael Flynn have been an inspired source of support and of ideas as well as great fun to work with. Talking to Jim Lynch was a wonderful opportunity to bounce ideas about statistics; I can think of no more agreeable person to disagree with. Andrew Karmen was kind enough to look at my chapter on the New York miracle and offered very pertinent advice. Catriona Woolner was, as always, a great help and a good friend. Adam Edwards, Stanley Aronowitz, Frank Wilson, Peter Squires, John Hagedorn, Peter Marina, Cyann Zoller, David Downes, Paul Rock, Lynn Chancer, Phil Carney, Simon Hallsworth, Luis Barrios, Michael Jacobson, Michael Rowan, Brenda Vollman, David Fonsesca, Barry Spunt, Chris Stone, Rick Rosenfeld, Erich Goode, Carla Barrett, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, Mark Hamm, Louis Kontos, Chris Hale, Mitch Librett in no particular order, variously agreed or disagreed with me but everyone helped. What can I say about Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward and the late Mike Presdee other than their immense enthusiasm for cultural criminology made this book

possible. Jayne Mooney is my closest friend and my greatest critic, our children Joseph and Fintan seem to be taking the prospect of spending their teenage years in New York with great equanimity, my eldest son Jesse finished his PhD at the same time I finished this book but much more importantly, he and Stella brought Ira into the world and it is to him that this book is dedicated.

Jock Young, Brooklyn, October 2010

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Introduction: The Legacy of C. Wright Mills

Fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills published *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), a book which has both haunted and beguiled sociologists ever since. It is a volume resonant with forebodings as to what was happening to sociology, and predictions as to what might happen in the future. It has had a tremendous impact: most students of sociology have heard of it, although perhaps today few have read it. Warnings of the perils of Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism are deep in the consciousness of most academic sociologists – emerging every now and then as question marks set against their actual practice.

Mills was a sociologist's sociologist, a man of energy and commitment, a 'radical nomad', in Tom Hayden's words (2006). He was the constant advocate of 'sociology as a vocation', a man of political commitment and personal vulnerability, a passionate proponent of intellectual craftsmanship. He idealized such craftsmanship: the joy of writing, the excitement of weaving together theory and research, conceptually insightful and empirically grounded. Yet he was simultaneously a role model and a bitter critic of the way that craftsmanship and scholarship were being undermined; that the sociological imagination, so much needed, was being lost.

What was this imagination, and what was the necessity for it? Let us say from the start that, although many people are only too willing to endorse Mills' advocacy of 'imagination' (indeed who wouldn't?), it is rare that the actual nature of such imagination is understood, or the radical implications of his analysis. My aim in this book is to examine the way in which Mills' predictions have panned out today, and to gauge the extent to which his warnings have been heeded. In doing so, I will tend to focus on criminology – as one of the most rapidly expanding parts of the social sciences – but not at all totally, as we shall see

shortly. But let us first tease out the elements of Mills' sociological imagination.

For Mills, the key nature of the sociological imagination was to situate human biography in history and in social structure. The role of such imagination was to bridge the gap between the inner life of human actors and the historical and social setting in which they find themselves. It is this fundamental triangle of the individual placed in a social structure at a particular place and time that is at the centre of Mills' work. He dismisses the notion of the individual abstracted from society as either a creature of ahistorical reason or inner unruly forces. Rationality is shaped by society and setting, in our time, adaption to the rationality of the great bureaucracies may produce individuals who are like 'cheerful robots', their very rationality of career and lifestyle reflecting their profound alienation. Nor can we turn to some universal psychology to comprehend our predicament: It is true, as psychoanalysts continually point out, that people do often have 'the increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces within themselves which they are unable to define'. But it is *not* true as Ernest Jones asserted, that 'man's chief enemy and danger is his own unruly nature and the dark forces pent up within him'. On the contrary: 'man's chief danger today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy – in a word, its pervasive transformations of the very "nature" of man and the conditions and aims of his life' (1959, pp. 20–1).

He talks of 'the earthquakes' of social change, and of widespread feelings of people feeling themselves adrift, of being unable to understand what is happening to them, of individualizing their problems, whether it be in employment, or marriage, or community. 'Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps', he writes at the beginning of *The Sociological Imagination*. And he continues:

> They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel. (1959, p. 3)

They feel trapped, often disillusioned – they cannot make sense of their lives. It is absolutely no coincidence that, although Mills – true to his times – uses the masculine pronoun, almost at the same time Betty Friedan, in her pathbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1960), asked

herself, almost guiltily, as she ferried the kids on the school run, to the play dates, to soccer and to the Guides: *'Is this all there is?'* The sociological imagination proposed that sociology, if it is to be of any significance, must link the inner lives of people to the structures of power and ideology and the historical period in which they live – a project which Feminism so powerfully addressed in the process of making 'the personal the political' over the subsequent years. Indeed, any social analysis worth its salt must do this. 'For that imagination', as Mills put it:

> is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being. (1959, p. 7).

Such a consciousness is not merely the province of some elite of public intellectuals, it is an insight which is glimpsed in the flux of rapid social change which makes up the modern world. For, if the downside of such a momentum is feelings of entrapment and alienation, the upside is an increased reflexivity, a dereification of the social world, and an awareness of the ever-present possibility of change.

> In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences. (1959, pp. 7–8)

Finally, out of this analysis emerges one of the most forceful distinctions of the sociological imagination: that between 'the personal troubles of a milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. Without such

an imagination, the focus on the local milieu and the obfuscation of the wider structure, personal troubles remain as they are – personal, individual, isolated pains often tinged with self-blame and doubt, with imaginative help, the personal troubles of the many become collective issues: the personal becomes the political. But here too Mills moves backwards and forwards from the micro to the macro, from the local to the system as a whole, and back again:

> 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. Above all, do not give up your moral and political autonomy by accepting in somebody's else's terms the illiberal practicality of the bureaucratic ethos or the liberal practicality of the moral scatter. Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (1959, p. 226)

Let us pause for a moment and think of the relevance of this analysis for today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The speed of change has considerably heightened; there is, in Todd Gitlin's phrase, 'a new velocity of experience . . . a new vertigo' (1980, p. 233). I have charted such feelings of dizziness, of instability, in *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (2007): a world characterized by instability in all the three spheres of work, family and community, of economic uncertainty where reward appears arbitrary, random, and where all measures of distributive justice seem askew. A new world where self-development, self-invention and identity become a prime goal, yet where all the props of identity in the three spheres become more insubstantial and phantasmagoric, and the shock of pluralism is hastened by the forces of globalization. In short, a late modern social order where there is a chaos of reward and of identity. Here, too, people face an existential quandary: their uncertainty can easily be interpreted in terms of self-blame and individual failure, yet the widespread nature of economic and cultural instability and its daily dissemination in the global media, facilitate feelings of connectedness and of recognizing the parallel nature of the human condition, despite a plurality of social worlds and values. So that, if one response to uncertainty is the construction of hardened identities based on religion, nation, race

or gender – the creation of barriers of difference by othering all that is outside of our chosen camp – the other is to deconstruct such cultures, to welcome human creativity and celebrate difference. Surely, in a late modern world of heightened insecurities and competing fundamentalisms, the necessity for a sociological imagination becomes that much greater? Witness the need to link the local to the global, to situate, for example, terrorism – religious fundamentalism, poverty, AIDS, crime, heroin addiction – in personal biography, historical context and social structure. To connect together personal troubles in various parts of the world with collective issues across the globe, to make the personal political.

But let us return to Mills' discussion of the response of sociology to such a challenge, when he was writing in the middle of the twentieth century. His assessment of the situation is famously sceptical and acerbic. He identifies two diametrically opposed tendencies in the academic sociology of the time, both of which lose contact with social reality. Whereas the sociological imagination involves the movement from the local milieu to the total system and back again, one tendency – Abstracted Empiricism – concentrates solely on the local yet as we shall see in a strange and distant way, and the other – Grand Theory – focuses on the system, while both manage to abstract themselves from their objects of study.

Let us take Grand Theory first. Mills famously begins his demolition with a translation of sections of Talcott Parsons' *The Social System* (1951). He takes a slab of verbiage from the text and translates it in a few words into plain English. What is of interest here is the banality of much of what is being said once the dense prose is radically pruned, and how glaring omissions – such as the nature of power and its legitimation – are more easily overlooked. But what makes for a narrative so opaque and turned in on itself, written in a style which is almost defensive, having what Mills calls a 'protective advantage'? It certainly is conservative in its implications, but it is not so in a proselytizing fashion. The vitriol poured upon Parsons at the time, by scholars of the left, manifestly overestimated his influence. Indeed *The Social System* seems purposely written for a small scholarly audience of academics and students. It is rather like the language of the mediaeval alchemist, designed to pass on an esoteric knowledge, cautious and intricate, hidden under a carapace of scholarship and learning. It is abstracted from history and social structure, distanced from social reality. Thus Mills writes:

> history can be altogether abandoned: the systematic theory of the nature of man and of society all too readily becomes an elaborate and arid formalism in which the splitting of Concepts and their endless rearrangement becomes the central endeavour. (1959, p. 23)

He distinguishes semantics and syntax: semantics are words about reality, syntax are words in relation to each other. 'Grand Theory', he writes, is 'drunk on syntax, blind to semantics' (1959, p. 34). Thus typologies have a reality of their own, concepts chatter with each other, the academician ponders over subdivisions without questioning what is being divided. All of us working in sociology (or any of the social sciences or humanities for that matter) know of the extraordinary solipsis of the academy. It is seen in debates which are almost entirely self-referential, it is encountered in obfuscation and erudite vacuity, it seems to thrive on splitting hairs and dancing on pins: it is the reason, for example, why commentaries on Durkheim are invariably more complex than reading Durkheim himself, and how the latter-day Foucauldians have taken an outrageous and iconoclastic thinker and turned his writings into some sort of Talmudic parody of contested interpretation. In his appendix on intellectual craftsmanship, Mills caustically warns us against: 'using unintelligibility as a means of evading the making of judgments upon society – and as a means of escaping your readers' judgments on your own work' (1959, p. 224). And earlier in *The Sociological Imagination* he points in the most scathing terms to those intellectuals who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the world outside of the academy. American democracy, he notes, may not (at this moment in the 1950s) have a plethora of movements and progressive parties, but at least there is the form of democracy, the legal possibility of free speech and public criticism. The contrast was with the Soviet Union at that time. Thus, he writes:

> We ought not to minimize the enormous value and the considerable opportunity these circumstances make available. We should learn their value from the fact of their absence in the Soviet world, and from the kind of struggle the intellectuals of that world are up against. [And, he adds scornfully:] We should also learn that whereas there many intellectuals are physically crushed, here many morally crush themselves. (1959, p. 191)

In this book I will be on the lookout for evidence of the persistence of Grand Theory, the dissociation of concepts from reality. It reappears, we shall see, sometimes with totally different political valences, and it crosses over into new shapes and forms. But let us, now, look at Mills' second violation of the sociological imagination: Abstracted Empiricism. Here the structure fades out of sight, history is banished from thought, and the myopic eye of the researcher focuses on the immediate. For, if in Grand Theory the concepts dissociate from reality, become 'The Concept' and the concepts proceed to talk together, in Abstracted Empiricism the methods detach from reality, method becomes methodology, and 'the method' becomes absorbed in itself.

Let us sum up Mills' argument with regard to imagination. He insists on the need to see the individual in the context of the social structure and place this in historical period; he demands an analysis which moves from the macro to the micro and back again; he points to the gross inequities of our time in terms of the domination of a political elite in an intensely divided class society; he sees the sociological imagination not just as an attribute of the highly trained sociologists (indeed often the reverse) but as a world view which can arise out of the individual's attempts to make sense of a dizzying world; he sees two particular tendencies in academic sociology as directly obfuscating such an imagination; and last *but not least* he ties this imagination to transformative politics directed at attending to the gross economic and political inequities of the social order. The irony is, as Erich Goode (2008) has trenchantly pointed out, that mainstream sociology has trumpeted Mills' notion of the sociological imagination in every introductory textbook but has dropped the transformative politics which are so central to understanding Mills' mission. Furthermore, his methodological critique, so close to his politics has been likewise ignored. Indeed, abstracted empiricism has become the dominant tendency in sociology.

For Mills the central philosophical tenet of abstracted empiricists is their claim that their investigations are 'science'. Indeed, Mills is perhaps the first to depict such physics envy among sociologists. Thus, he writes:

> Probably no one familiar with its practitioners would care to deny that many of them are dominated by concern with their own scientific status; their most cherished professional self-image is that of the natural scientist. In their arguments about various philosophical issues of social science, one of their invariable points is that they *are* 'natural scientists', or at least that they 'represent the viewpoint of natural science'. In the discourse of the more sophisticated, or in the presence of some smiling and exalted physicist, the self-image is more likely to be shortened to merely 'scientist'. (1959, p. 56)

In his critique of positivism, Mills points to the rise of a new stratum of technical functionaries, and the decline of the scholar as intellectual craftsman engaged directly in research where theory and research constantly interact and develop. This bureaucratization of research involves costly research projects, extensive research teams, large surveys and databases. The aim is to collect, in an unreflexive way, findings – like building blocks – which supposedly automatically gain the larger picture. The research administrator no longer has direct contact with the data, the interviews are carried out on his or her behest by semi-skilled interviewers with little training, or indeed insight. *Precision is seen to be truth:*

> Those in the grip of the methodological inhibition often refuse to say anything unless it has been through the fine little mill of The Statistical Ritual. It is usual to say that what they produce is true even if unimportant. I do not agree with this; more and more I wonder how true it is. I wonder how much exactitude, or even pseudo-precision, is here confused with 'truth'; and how much abstracted empiricism is taken as the only 'empirical' manner of work. If you have ever seriously studied, for a year or two, some thousand hour-long interviews, carefully coded and punched, you will have begun to see how very malleable the realm of 'fact' may really be. Moreover, as for 'importance', surely it is important when some of the most energetic minds among us use themselves up in the study of details because The Method to which they are dogmatically committed does not allow them to study anything else. Much of such work, I am now convinced, has become the mere following of a ritual . . . (1959, p. 72)

And as for the new social scientists entering the profession, the apprenticeship dumbs curiosity and dims the imagination. Here his condemnation is complete:

> I have seldom seen one of these young men, once he is well caught up, in a condition of genuine intellectual puzzlement. And I have never seen any passionate curiosity about a great problem, the sort of curiosity that compels the mind to travel anywhere and by any means, to re-make itself if necessary, in order *to find out*. These young men are less restless than methodical; less imaginative than patient; above all, they are dogmatic – in all the historical and theological meanings of the term. Some of this is of course merely part of the sorry intellectual condition of so many students now in American colleges and universities, but I do believe it is more evident among the research technicians of abstracted empiricism.
>
> They have taken up social research as a career; they have come early to an extreme specialization, and they have acquired an indifference or a contempt for 'social philosophy' – which means to them 'writing books out of other books' or 'merely speculating'. Listening to their conversations, trying to gauge the quality of their curiosity, one finds a deadly limitation of mind. The social worlds about which so many scholars feel ignorant do not puzzle them.
>
> Much of the propaganda force of bureaucratic social science is due to its philosophical claims to Scientific Method; much of its power to recruit is due to the relative ease of training individuals and setting them to work in a career with a future. In both instances explicitly coded methods, readily available to the technician, are the major keys to success . . . But once a young man has spent three or four years at this sort of thing, you cannot really talk to him about the problems of studying modern society. His position and career, his ambition and his very self-esteem, are based in large part upon this one perspective, this one vocabulary, this one set of techniques. In truth, he does not know anything else. (1959, pp. 105–6)