

# Assessing the sociology of sport: On revisiting the sociological imagination

International Review for the

Sociology of Sport

2015, Vol. 50(4-5) 547–552

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DOI: 10.1177/1012690214539342

irs.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Jim McKay, a wide ranging and influential international scholar on sport, gender, power and globalization, reflects on the benefits for the field of revisiting C Wright Mill and his work on the ‘sociological imagination.’ McKay notes this is important at a time when the ‘parent’ discipline of sociology continues to exhibit myriad longstanding controversies and crises and the hegemony of neoliberal ‘common’ sense continues to affect adversely the arts, humanities, and social sciences. In focusing on the challenges of the field, the author draws on Mills’ distinction between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues,’ and their ongoing relation to diverse issues such as the study of minority experiences in sport, the agenda for research on sport, development and peace, achieving a rapprochement between tourism and sport studies, and the building of a performative cultural studies approach to sport. The essay closes by focusing on the affinities between Mills’ standpoint of ‘studying up’ power structures and other critical epistemologies that interrogate neoliberal hegemony.

## Keywords

critical sociology, C Wright Mills, power, sociological imagination, sport

## Reflections on the trajectory of the sociology of sport

It is difficult to anticipate a trajectory for the sociology of sport, for several interrelated reasons. First, the ‘parent’ discipline of sociology continues to exhibit myriad longstanding controversies and crises (Cole, 2001; Cuff et al., 2006; Gouldner, 1970). Related subjects that provide valuable sociological insights into sport also manifest systematic disagreements (e.g., anthropology, gender studies, geography, economics, cultural studies, politics, history, philosophy). Sociology has also increasingly been cannibalized by areas that are both methodologically and theoretically weak and

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primarily concerned with vocational and/or industry objectives. Sports tourism, sports management and physical education are some relevant examples of this process (having spent over half of my academic career in schools of applied social science, tourism and physical education, this is not an argument against practical concerns *per se*). Finally, the hegemony of neoliberal 'common sense' means the arts, humanities and social sciences will continue to be on the defensive for the foreseeable future (Andrews and Silk, 2012; Hall and O'Shea, 2013; Miller, 2012). In this challenging context I advise using a critical and interdisciplinary approach that includes both an array of sociological perspectives as well as relevant insights from other fields of study. My reflections consider how the work of C Wright Mills can be useful in this respect in thinking about the ongoing challenges for what has become the *sociologies* of sport.

## Mills and challenges for the sociologies of sport

In his best-known book, *The Sociological Imagination (TSI)*, Mills (1959: 6) wrote:

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst ... No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.

Evocative passages like this are one reason why Mills, who is sometimes called the first postmodern sociologist, still inspires scholars around the world more than 50 years after his death. The C. Wright Mills Award, established in 1964, is one of the most prestigious prizes in the social sciences (Society for the Study of Social Problems, 2014). Mills' work is also relevant to important issues such as elite power (Freeman, 2013), the international rise of neoliberal regimes (Geary, 2012), and public sociology (Burawoy, 2013). I frequently refer to Mills during conference papers because most social scientists are familiar with his work. Thus I was surprised when some young scholars approached me after recent presentations at sports studies gatherings for more information on Mills because they had never heard of him. Hence, what follows is explicitly intended to encourage people who are unfamiliar with Mills to read his work as *one* way of developing a critical perspective on sport.

In 1972 I stumbled into a specialist Masters' degree in sociology of sport with the vague idea of doing a thesis on class inequalities. This topic was partly motivated by my working-class childhood in postwar Glasgow and adolescence in regional Canada during the 1960s. I was floundering until I met Rick Gruneau and Alan Ingham, who were visiting scholars in my department and working on projects that later became landmark publications on sport. They generously offered valuable advice on many fronts and their recommendation to read scholars who had inspired them was particularly instructive. I began with *TSI*, which contained nothing on sport, but transformed my worldview and taught me numerous lifelong lessons.

The best way to understand what Mills meant by the sociological imagination is to read *TSI* and take notes on how relevant his concepts are today. An illustration is his

distinction between *personal troubles* and *public issues*. According to Mills, powerful groups frame social problems such as unemployment as private troubles, thereby blaming individuals for being out of work, rather than redressing the economic and political structures that produce high rates of joblessness. This syndrome is extremely relevant to the current global financial crisis, which has caused official (i.e., underestimated) unemployment rates of 25% in some countries. Many governments have responded by imposing 'austerity measures' on their citizens while bailing out the incompetent and corrupt financial institutions that caused the disaster on the premise they are 'too big to fail'. Meanwhile, poor people around the world subsidize the rich via loopholes that allow multinational corporations like Google, Microsoft and Starbucks to avoid paying trillions of dollars in taxes.

A good way of relating Mills' concepts to sport is by reading the two chapters on him in Molnar and Kelly's (2013) introductory text. They draw on an essay by Loy and Booth (2004) that is also essential reading. I then suggest proceeding to some case studies:

- private troubles and public issues in the context of lifestyle and well-being (Howell and Ingham, 2001) and experiences of black, American male athletes at predominantly white institutions (Cooper, 2012);
- challenges facing scholars working in the field of development, peace, and sport (Donnelly et al., 2011);
- achieving a rapprochement between tourism studies and sports studies (Harris, 2006);
- conducting autoethnographies in sport (Spencer, 2010);
- failure in sport (Butt and Molnar, 2009); and
- the relevance of Mills' work to a performative cultural studies approach to sport (Andrews and Giardina, 2008).

These suggestions are not intended to canonize Mills or privilege his perspective as *the* way to 'do' sociology; this would both negate Mills' critical epistemology and ignore his contradictions and blind-spots (Sterne, 2005). Rather, I am intimating that Mills can be a touchstone for intellectuals who want to make practical contributions to justice and democracy. Phrases such as 'democratic impulse' (Lukes, 2012) and 'democratic imagination' (Peschek, 2008) are useful for approaching Mills in this broader sense. Mills' perspective is also not a formula; it requires using your *imagination*, acquiring a *quality of mind* and honing an intellectual *craft*.

After grasping Mills' main precepts, I discovered there were affinities between his standpoint of 'studying up' power structures and other critical epistemologies. For example, there are strong similarities between connecting personal troubles with public issues and the feminist premise 'the personal is political'. Thus Mills enabled me to relate to early feminist critiques of sport by scholars such as Iris Mary Young (1980). Her feminist, existential, phenomenological epistemology linked women's oppression in sport to wider power structures that constituted women as 'others'. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who highlighted intersections of racial, ethnic, class and gender oppression, also resonated with my understanding of interconnected social inequalities in sport.

The appendix to *TSI*, 'On Intellectual Craftsmanship', showed me the immense value of embedding both my own experiences and those of my students in my research and teaching. Thus I have continually refined an undergraduate course I have taught for decades on sport and social problems to mainly physical education students according to their changing experiences. A major benefit of this approach is that students can both connect private troubles with public issues and draw on policies and activist organizations to articulate what practical actions they can take in their personal, professional and community lives to advance democracy in sport (McKay, 2002). Mills has also inspired my graduate students, who, in turn, have introduced him to their pupils. I also learned that intellectual crafting was a perpetual work-in-progress and thus constantly fused Mills' perspective with other critical epistemologies such as profeminism, peace education, and critical perspectives from media studies, race studies, disability studies and queer studies.

### **Mills, critical standpoints and the future**

Mills noted that the sociological imagination teaches us both 'terrible' and 'magnificent' lessons about how we both shape, and are shaped by, the 'historical push and shove' of society (Mills, 1959: 5–6). If my parents had not fled Britain's oppressive class structure I never would have even thought about attending university. Luckily, I lived in Canada and Australia at a time when governments saw education as a vital investment, which allowed me to enrol in degrees based on critical thinking and strong ethical principles. When I belatedly decided to become an academic there was a reasonable chance of obtaining a tenured position. However, in an academic version of Gresham's Law, neoliberal governments have transformed education into a debased commodity, often with the assistance of university managers who are some of the worst purveyors of 'infoglut', 'management-speak', and 'weasel words' (Andrejevic, 2013; Watson, 2006). Secure jobs are now scarce, positions are being casualized and universities are driven by the manias of 'managerialist measuring' and 'grant-getting' (Rogers, 2014). This scenario personifies what Mills (1958: 178) described in a broader context as an ethos of 'rationality without reason' administered by 'cheerful robots', 'technological idiots', and 'crackpot realists'. Thus many young academics face the 'double bind' of being educators in anti-educational workplaces, where branding and grandiosity often trump intellectual substance (Alvesson, 2013). Consequently, I highly recommend an essay by Gary Marx (1990), an admirer of Mills, for tips in dealing with this predicament. For instance, Marx advises:

- valuing the creative process as an end in itself;
- developing new professional goals; and
- not making your career your life.

Mills would have railed against education becoming yet another of sphere of alienation and rationalization. Yet I suspect he would also have encouraged intellectuals to keep recrafting their sociological imaginations. His advice in the final paragraph of *TSI* is perhaps the best way to convey why he motivated me to stay in academic life. It might

have the same effect on readers who have not had the pleasure of making his intellectual acquaintance:

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 else's terms the illiberal practicality of the bureaucratic ethos or the liberal practicality of the moral scatter ... 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. (Mills, 1959: 226)

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to my Millsian 'fellow travellers' for their feedback on an earlier draft: Kate Baker, Doug Booth, Karen Brooks, Mike Emmison, Chris Hallinan, Helen Johnson, Matt Lamont, Catherine Palmer, Brian Petrie, Maarten Rothengatter, Martin Roderick, Phil Smith, and Brad West. I am also eternally indebted to Rick Gruneau and the late Alan Ingham for introducing me to the 'terrible' and 'magnificent' lessons of acquiring a sociological imagination.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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