Preface

This book is intended as an accessible, current, and uncompromised introduction to what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination." It explains and demonstrates the value of the sociological imagination vis-à-vis the demands of today's postmodern society, critically addresses the chief forces working against its development, and invites students to adopt this form of self-consciousness as their own.

Sociological thinking and, in turn, sociological learning, cannot get off the ground until the minds of students are freed from the myriad constraints that thwart the workings of a live, empirically exact imagination. The chief initial problem for the teacher and student of sociology is finding the means to accomplish this liberation. With this challenge in mind, I have composed *Taking It Big* in an unusual way, as a series of interrelated essays intended to encourage beginning students of sociology to think through a wide variety of topics from ecological crises to panic disorder, from hyperreality to the sociology of disability, and from Generation X to Generation Next. My hope is that this style of presentation will be true to the elusive nature of postmodern experience and will transform the reader's consciousness of this experience. This book is not Mills-in-a-box, a replication of Mills's mid-century distillation of the form of mind underlying the classic tradition in sociology. It is alive to today's social problems, the issues and troubles that afflict the postmodern world that Mills glimpsed only at its inception.

Any book that sets for itself the goal of presenting and encouraging the adoption of a form of self-consciousness that grasps the interrelations between history, biography, and society, the never-ending interplay between levels of reality, and seeks to

define the primary political challenges facing today's young adults sets for itself a difficult task. But such a book is needed for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, people in this world and at this time need to develop a quality of mind that allows them to conceptualize the mind- and soul-boggling crises that confront humanity worldwide. There is no value in sugarcoating the fact that modern social development has left strewn in its wake a series of unprecedented human catastrophes and that the mindless extrapolation of modern society portends only greater catastrophes. Postmodernity is, as Zygmunt Bauman has defined it, "modernity without illusions." Students today, I believe, must be presented a candid appraisal of our situation, an unflinching assessment of empirical realities.

Of equal and related significance is the politically strategic importance of the present generation. Fundamental social change is a certainty in the near future. How will so-called First World societies act toward the demands for change associated with global ecological problems such as global warming? How will Americans use their economic, political, military, and cultural power to affect the tragic human experiences that result from increasing global inequality? Will Americans come to see their current way of life as unsustainable? These are the types of practical questions that confront members of postmodern society. We can expect the current generation of educated young adults in societies such as the United States to play a crucial role in answering them one way or another. It is vital that members of these mass democracies have the ability to bring such issues into focus and meaningfully relate them one to the other and to what Mills called our "cherished values." There is no other way, I think, to sustain hope for a viable democratic future than through efforts to make actual the everyday realization of the sociological imagination.

We must also appreciate the situation faced by individuals fated to live in postmodern culture. Postmodern culture is a disillusioning way of life awash in antidepressants and submerged in a sea of television reality. Properly developed, the sociological imagination not only addresses the phenomenon of globalization but it also offers a defense against postmodern cultural excess. Indeed, it is a means for confronting the violence and harm inflicted by disillusionment itself. Such far-flung ambitions have always stood back of the promise of sociology.

Taking It Big is a book that invites the reader to adopt a new form of self-consciousness appropriate to the challenges of today's globalized world and disillusioning everyday life. The reader is asked to critically engage topics chosen to highlight the postmodern extremes of imaginative sociological thinking and to take issue with any and every substantive argument presented. I do not, in other words, mean in this book to flatly present *the* truth of all things, nor do I mean to convey the sense that sociology has all the answers to the problems that confront human society and individual lives. Any effort to develop the ability to think sociologically—to think

critically, reflexively, and with empirical moorings—is an open-ended project. This book is thus intended as a catalyst for learning, as an invitation to try on for size what is arguably the most fruitful form of self-consciousness developed in modern times, and then from this perspective, to weigh its value with respect to the troubles and issues of our postmodern lives. The point is not so much to learn *the* truth but to learn how to think about essential issues and troubles as sociologists themselves try to do, to become a participant with others in facing down the challenges of our present epoch.

The book is divided into four parts. The Introduction, Chapter 1, is the only chapter that could be said to stand on its own. It presents the book in microcosm. Part I (Chapters 2 through 4) discusses current global and individual realities as a precursor to a detailed and original explication of the sociological imagination. In particular, I survey the chief global problems such as global warming that beg for urgent remedy and introduce panic and cynicism as the current defining polarities of what Mills called the experience of "trap." I argue that the sociological imagination is the best means available for conceptualizing today's global problems and liberating one's mind from entrapment in postmodern culture.

Part II (Chapters 5 through 7) presents three models of the sociological imagination in practice. Each model emphasizes the extreme forms of history, biography, and social structure under conditions of postmodernity. In particular, I discuss the experience of disability, the hyperreality of Generation X, and the dynamics of postmodern religion. Each topic is treated as a liminal aspect of today's social and cultural world, that is, as edges and undersides of reality well suited to spark critical sociological thinking.

Part III (Chapters 8 through 10) addresses the chief forces working against the widespread adoption of the sociological imagination. I discuss aspects of postmodernity that take direct aim at the very possibility of a sociological conceptualization of history, biography, and social structure. In particular, I attend to the collapse of public life into postmodern forms of propaganda, the much-discussed but dubious thesis of the end of history, and the tendency of sociology itself to suppress its connection with people living everyday lives. This last topic also encourages an understanding of sociology as inherently reflexive and self-critical.

Finally, Part IV formulates the sociological imagination as a form of dialectical thinking dedicated to the practical development of critical social theories. That is, by way of conclusion, I underscore the ultimately political nature of the sociological imagination in part through an account of my own education in sociology.

In private conversation, often with students, Mills would wave his hand in the air and advise, "take it big." By this he meant to encourage expansive critical thinking not for its own sake but because the world—New York City, say, or the advent of

nuclear weapons—demanded that we as humans learn to think in ways appropriate to the extraordinary nature of postmodern society, which, like its modern precursor, is a new and revolutionary type of society of our own design and construction and which in some ways is aptly regarded as a grand hotel and in others, alas, a grand hotel abyss. It is my contention that in the forty or so years since Mills originally penned his vision of what makes sociological thinking the most needed form of self-consciousness in the emergent postmodern world, our collective and individual problems have only grown larger, more insidious, and potentially more overwhelming. We must therefore, I believe, continue to pursue the project of taking it big but with renewed energy and with a more sober attitude than even Mills was able to maintain. We must work to develop our sociological imagination for these postmodern times in the hope that soon opportunities will present themselves for its effective use in the making of a human world organized around the values of reason and freedom. Even if the chances for its realization are increasingly distant, there is still a promise of sociology. This is not, in other words, a happy book. Given the state of the world, however, this should come as no surprise.