

Structural Unemployment & Life Chances

A nice quote from C. Wright Mills article printed in Eltzioni, Social Change, p. 125:

"..'structural unemployment'--meaning, for one thing, that the men involved cannot personally control their job chances. Now, what individual men are usually aware of, and what they usually try to do, are limited by the horizon of their specific milieux. Most men do not transcend the boundaries of their jobs and families and local communities. In other milieux ~~the~~ which they encounter they are and they remain visitors. That is why the 'great changes' are out of their control, for great changes, by definition, are those whose causes lie outside the ordinary milieux of ordinary men but which nevertheless affect their conduct and their outlook. And that is why in periods full of such changes many ordinary men feel that they are 'powerless', which in all sober fact they are."

This applies most obviously to modern industrial society, and mass unemployment, and not so much to pre-modern society where the relationship between the worker and the work is much more obvious. (Compare with MacPherson's categories of work & market.) It is something to consider in the characterization of Life Chances through the ages, however, for such an attitude of powerlessness grows when the income is divorced from family-generated opportunities and local community services and wedded to massive society-wide economic systems. The reliance upon the family is now a reliance upon society, or rather the state.

Although Mills does not say it, he must assume that the older decentralized forms of society gave the elite ~~prize~~ position to the paterfamilias in many respects, but that this has been lost in the rise of the centralized state. Thus the psychological side of his power élite theories can be extended to the dominated and the history of their control or understanding of their life chances be strung out.