

BEYOND MILLS' SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION:
*Using a Pedagogy Based on Sorokin's Integralism to Reach Today's
Introductory Sociology Students*

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*The paradox of modern American life, especially in regard
to the young, is that while it seems driven by ambition,
its citizens are not ambitious enough.*

David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive*, 2003.

In this paper I explore some important limitations of the typical pedagogy of introductory sociology based on C. W. Mills' sociological imagination, and suggest a deeper, more effective approach that incorporates the best of Mills' idea but goes beyond it. Sociology faculty commonly hope that introductory students embrace a type of liberal political ideology embedded in how Mills originally defined the "sociological imagination," but in today's classroom one often encounters students for whom this teaching model does not work. I examine what might lay behind students' seeming rejection of sociological disciplinary messages, a rejection rooted in their experience of a "horizontal" culture. Then I present certain teaching strategies, based on Sorokin's "integral" sociology, that may assist faculty to more effectively reach students who seek something deeper and more meaningful than political leftism—something that respects and connects and grounds the empirical, the conceptual, and spiritual—but who lack the tools to pursue it because of how sociology has been framed for them.

This paper got started because of something I frequently observe my beginning sociology students do in the midst of what is supposed to be a discussion designed to encourage their commitment to both the field and to some sort of value position on a social issue. If you teach introductory sociology these days, I am sure you have seen it yourself. At a certain point, one or more students will shrug at the discussion, especially if it is getting testy, and say with a certain irony, "Well, like whatever."

Why do students go there? Are they really opting out, refusing to discuss, not caring? What do they really mean by such a statement, and what is underneath it? Do they really mean *whatever*, or do they have, perhaps paradoxically, a “specific whatever” in mind? This is what I want to start to explore here.

Sociology faculty have long struggled with beginning students’ problems grasping the discipline’s central messages because of, for example, their tendencies to psychologize explanations of social structural patterns and overgeneralize from their personal views and experiences. And their scholarship of teaching has met with considerable success.¹ I agree these are both authentic pedagogical problems that Catholic sociology teachers must also work to address. But Catholic educators can only draw so much help from their discipline, for their secular colleagues so often ground their pedagogy in a crucial assumption—one that has actually been voiced repeatedly in the mainstream discipline since its earliest days in this country. They claim that students are unduly influenced by what are termed pre-rational, “unreflective” religious, “unscientific” or other sectarian modes of thought in their efforts to analyze and understand social life; such mental schema must be actively broken down or transcended if students are to “truly” grow intellectually and academically. The original complaint about students during the early and mid-20th-century heyday of positivism and behaviorism has been modified, since scholars in cultural studies and the sociology of religion (e.g. Smith, 2003) now recognize that the thesis of secularization in modern cultures is not empirically accurate—if by secularization is meant the disappearance of religions and religious thinking.² Today’s more nuanced complaint is that students’ symbolic, ethical, emotional and spiritual dimensions, while indeed valuable to explore, are often malformed by “excessive” dogmatism or “rigidity,” sometimes labeled “fundamentalism.” This “rigidity” is deemed out of step with a more “thoughtful” religiosity such as that documented by Alan Wolfe (2003), where dogma and certainties are not in fashion and have been replaced by personally crafted amalgams and a certain “spirituality.” Nevertheless, so the argument goes, sociologists still have their work cut out for them because “fundamentalism” and adherence to traditional doctrines can lurk in the mix of Americans’ experimenting with polyglot spiritualities and cafeteria doctrines, especially out there in Bush country. So teaching materials must ensure that any sign of such retrograde thinking in students is dealt with effectively, through their acquisition of a *certain kind of* sociological imagination: one that forms students’ consciences and consciousnesses in a definite direction away from “blind acceptance of given truths.” So the argument goes.

Haynor and Varacalli (1995), Krason (1993), and others have amply explored the roots of such a lament in the triumph of a positivist, materialist paradigm in the discipline; while Peter Berger, Norvall Glenn, and Anne Hendershott, for example, have examined how contemporary sociology became essentially politicized in a leftish way both in general and in main specialty areas such as family studies and deviance (Berger, 2002; Glenn, 1998; Hendershott, 2002). In a recent paper I studied how the American Catholic Sociological Society, begun in 1938 and lasting until 1970 and claiming around 500 members at its peak, could not manage to make any serious headway against the hegemony of the dominant scientific paradigm (Sharkey, 2004).

So let me take here as a given the hostility of mainstream sociology to anything like a deeply Catholic sociology. Since truly orthodox Catholicism qualifies as one of the varieties of fundamentalism in mainstream sociology circles, it is often cast as representing anti-sociology. Thus Catholic educators today still face the problem of how to ply our teaching trade using methods and materials that authentically express for our students our own convictions about the nature of truth and how to know it, when the discipline is moving in another direction, and when that direction is strongly reflected in our textbooks. In order to achieve our Catholic-informed teaching mission, we need a clearer understanding of how our discipline tends to frame sociological thinking, especially at the beginning level, so we can avert its errors and advance our own vision of critical analysis among our students. We need strategies to counter the gist of the mainstream discipline as its dominant paradigm seeps into the materials we use in our basic course.

One expression of that dominant paradigm is C. W. Mills “sociological imagination,” a pervasive centerpiece of sociological teaching and learning. In what follows I examine this notion’s strengths and weaknesses, then explore why so many students may not buy into the paradigm it represents, because of both its inherent intellectual weaknesses and contradictions, as well as its empirical lack of fit with today’s students’ social experience. Finally, I offer some specific suggestions for a better approach to teaching the intro course, based on the Integral sociology of Sorokin, whose grand theory may be seen as a framework helpful in the necessary redefinition of “critical thinking” appropriate for a Catholic social science. I believe our students are actually ripe for something more than our discipline tends to offer, and perhaps in Integral sociology we have the tools needed to provide it.

Main Features of the Secular Sociological Imagination

Today's dominant teaching paradigm in sociology draws together two main frameworks. First is C.W. Mills' version of the sociological imagination, defined as a form of critical thinking grounded in materialism, intended to lead students toward suspicion of anything like received truths, and fostering an essentially political engagement with issues, based on anger. The second is a contemporary adaptation of cultural relativism, one that functions to unravel beginning students' tendencies to "be judgmental," yet paradoxically then gives them grounds to affirm the validity of a particular political outlook. Understanding better how people live, in their own terms and without prejudice, is indeed one of the main benefits of sociological thinking, I certainly agree. Yet this neo-relativist version of open-mindedness allows mainstream sociology educators to at once set forth and legitimate a particular political agenda and at the same time deflect criticisms for doing so using relativistic qualifiers framed in sociological language.

Woven together in the infrastructure of the introductory course, these two frameworks create a specific classroom climate and direct students to particular conclusions that, I argue, both don't impress many students to major in the field, and more importantly, are unlikely to be deeply satisfying to them as learners. To change this we have to explore some factors influencing how students actually respond to this dynamic, based on my own work in the classroom and with other educators in teaching workshops. Some students do embrace the Millsian hermeneutic of politically righteous suspicion, and join the secular sociological fold. But others respond to the politicized relativism of the field with a peculiar relativism of their own, grounded in their actual experiences of life in this society. I believe their form of relativism, despite stereotypes about undergraduate slackers, is not so much about existential drifting and meaninglessness, but rather a justification for maximizing personal self-interest and safety in a highly competitive and confusing environment, and a deep search for meaning.

"Get Tough:" the Heritage of C. Wright Mills' Sociological Imagination

The phrase "sociological imagination" has been part of the vocabulary of the introductory course since 1959 when Mills published *The Sociological Imagination*-a book still in print after almost half a century; it is probably the most frequently cited text about the nature of

sociological thinking in the discipline today (Mills, 1959). In that work Mills articulated some very important messages basic to sociological thinking, and in a way accessible and meaningful to beginning students interested in how their own personal life histories take the shape they do. The core approach is to invite students to imagine—identify, articulate, think through, develop and explore—connections between personal history and social context: between “biography” and “history” as Mills expressed it.

He then translated this question into a practical research direction students could pick up on, built around a useful analytic distinction between what he called “private troubles” and “public issues.” Private troubles are problems that are the result of an individual’s circumstances or capacities. You all know particular women and men who may struggle in marriage, Mills wrote, or are unemployed. They have private troubles in their married life, or lose their jobs. But what is going on when a huge percentage of marriages in a society are ending in divorce or large numbers of people are without work? Something else must be happening besides the private struggles of particular individuals. This is a question of how the institutions of family and economy are organized and operate.

Thus students in a beginning course organized around Mills’ core concept are meant to learn the sociological craft by looking closely not only at individual lives—such as their own and those of people they know or can learn about, their “psychological” starting point, if you will—but also at patterns of many lives. This accomplishes two pedagogical goals: first, it is a natural setup for introducing the value of empirical tools for elucidating and illustrating social trends, like statistics. And second, it addresses the concern sociologists in general have, which is to find a way to meaningfully lead students out of their tendencies to psychologize and overgeneralize from their own experiences toward a need to look at the bigger social context for explanations of problems. This is why, in my view, despite its somewhat dated examples and sexist use of male pronouns, the Mills book itself is still in print, and its central chapter still shows up in many if not most introductory sociology article collections in the section on what thinking like a sociologist involves.

So far, so good: as Catholic educators we can use this too, without difficulty, and do so. It is no easy task to invite students most often in their late teens to inquire about how their behavior might be conditioned by social context and background, and to see how their much-sought-after uniqueness is not so unique after all, when they are coming to college to “make something of themselves” as individuals

and form their own ideas. In a way, sociology runs against the developmental grain of this age group: no wonder the psychology major remains so popular! If Mills helps with this, fine. Further, he was writing for an audience of Americans who, culturally speaking, have a bias toward understanding *everything* in psychological terms, as a result of forces within the individuals, resulting in a clear preference for turning to pop psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and self-help gurus when examining social questions. Mills thought sociology was a very important corrective against this one-sided type of analysis, and I shan't argue with that.

And there is another benefit. Driving Mills' framework is a strong moral concern for using one's sociological imagination to improve the lives of people in society by understanding what really causes public issues and trying to fix them by going to the social organizational sources. Mills, in fact, wrote out of a strong concern for lessening the extent of social inequality, and overcoming what today we would call *alienation*: a sense of meaninglessness and lack of control over one's life, that he saw creeping into the culture as it became more and more industrialized, rationalized, and routinized during the 1950's and early 1960's, as analyzed, for example, in his classic text *The Power Elite* (1956). Having a developed sociological imagination was an antidote to becoming what Mills called a "happy robot." He strongly believed that many public issues required radical changes in how society is organized. This too is consistent with a Catholic pedagogical concern for using social science to inform analyses of social problems and injustices as well as specific policy possibilities—for example, it connects to the eminently Catholic notion of "structures of evil"—so once again, so far so good.

In the classroom itself, Millsian sociology projects a sense of impending crisis, a horror of injustice and social manipulation that creates an atmosphere of urgency in the classroom: something is terribly wrong and we'd better fix it, fast. This sort of urgency often permeates beginning-level sociological instruction and can help jazz up the classroom climate, though it can also give sociology the rep among students as "the bad news discipline." Such urgency can be powerful and appealing to students, who appreciate the idea of a morally committed sociology. Many instructors I know try explicitly to encourage this sense, this "need to change things," and consider it a key affective feature of the sociological mindset.

But there is a crucial *limitation* to the Millsian pedagogy. He was adamant about *not* embracing transcendent spiritual truths as a source of both insight and motivation for learning. If not from higher

religious principles, then whence a healthy passion and compassion? Mills derived his moral outrage from a class analysis and critique of capitalism that, while never advocating classical Marxism (Mills was a big critic of organized communism), was really a precursor of the more culturally-oriented New Left. For him, sociology was a kind of stoic refusal of the mainstream and step toward political mobilization. He described his own sociological writing as both brave and political, once characterizing what he was doing as a combination of two types of men: the “Hemingway Man” and “The Wobbly” (cited in Dandaneu, 2001, p.82).

In fact, Mills himself was strongly critical of religion, as he wrote in his 1958 *The Causes of World War III* (cited in Dandaneu, 2001). Though raised in a Catholic family in Texas, he rejected the Faith as he grew up and believed that religion, especially Christianity, had become “soft,” even “too feminine” (his terms), the radical message of Jesus having been lost in the assimilationism and social climbing of all the major denominations—just part of being a conformist in 1950’s, grey flannel, suburban America. Like so many earlier founders of the discipline, he saw sociology and religion as virtually antagonistic: religion’s role was as a palliative useful for helping those in power stay in power by diverting the attention of those lower down the social hierarchy from getting angry at their circumstances and trying to change them. He even called himself a “pagan,” perhaps just to provoke a certain outrage (cited in Dandaneu, 2001, pp.159-60), and advocated a sort of bitter analytic heroism: sociology was defined as suspicious muckraking, which only the courageous can endure because it undermines all one’s own cherished hopes and beliefs.

What may we conclude as Catholic educators about the role of Millsian thinking in our basic course? From a teaching perspective, the sort of forceful moral concern grounded in scientific data analysis that Mills expressed—and that is carried over into the texts where his ideas are the core framework—is a good *starting point* for students, perhaps, because it is better than dry technicalism, pseudo-objectivity, and ethical indifference; and it correctly points students to the role of broader social conditions in creating problems. But the perspective is not grounded enough in transcendent principles to stick, pedagogically, because the fuel used to drive it is a distinctly non-transcendent, materialist anger. It must be constantly refueled, in my view, with political skepticism, together with outrage channeled into a *political, this-worldly utopianism* that is, in fact, quite *antithetical* to a Catholic sensibility, even a sensibility angered at social injustices. And further, Mills sets students up to be outsiders in their own world, self-reliant and

skeptical of all given truths. To be rootless, first, and suspicious of all given authority, second, is cast as a sign of intellectual sophistication, with exceptions made for more working class or other oppressed group identifications in the leftist tradition of authentic consciousness.

There is, to be sure, an emerging literature in sociology that is trying to refine or soften the Millsian notion of sociological imagination and is just starting to influence some basic texts. There are two strands of this: the first attempts to frame the sociological imagination more broadly, as “higher level” or “deeper” thinking, often called reflective thinking, problem-solving, or thinking in context (e.g. Geertson 2003). The second comes from developmental and feminist theorists (e.g. Perry, 1999; Parks, 2000), who quite appropriately observe that the sort of embattled commitment Mills proposes is at once too macho, and empirically a very advanced level of intellectual development, something even the senior undergraduate men at Harvard in Perry’s studies rarely displayed.

But such change is slow in coming, and in any case, even the revisionists take for granted that “education” is essentially *deconstructive*, and about “ending oppression:” college is about having one’s “givens” undermined and challenged, and anything like absolutes remains posited as primitive or unthinking. The solitary individual loses capital F Faith by learning to reject the messages social institutions have provided, then regains a new, personal, small f faith in the context of strong doubt that must be repeatedly engaged and overcome. The newer critical thinking models share with the older Millsian approach the assumption of a world of doubt amidst daunting complexity. It can be addressed either alone or with others, but the profound doubt and bewilderment are essential. There is, in fact, a deep Protestant strain in this approach to defining students’ critical thinking: a vision of the student as, if not the angry young man à la Mills, then the solitary questor for truth in a doubt-filled universe or the utopian seeker of warmth and community in a hard, isolating culture. This vision of academic development shows up in many different pedagogical contexts today, for example in the works of the very popular teaching consultant and “recovering sociologist” (as he calls himself) Parker Palmer (see for example, Palmer 1993, 1997). Mills’ vision of the courageous, masculine, religionless explorer reappears again in the shape of the softer, more androgynous questioner, making commitments with others in community.

Where are beginning sociology students supposed to go, intellectually and affectively, once they have begun to deconstruct themselves and their “rigid” traditions? The answer is, *into*

transformational politics. Here, the beginning course models the disciplinary subculture: the appeal to students is that they become fighters for truth and the underdog/outsider, using social science data, in tandem with their political commitment to upending cultural hierarchies, as their weapons. Transgression is an intellectual virtue.³

The student is meant to learn that the playing field for truth is a combat zone, *hierarchically* arranged. To embrace the discipline means to fight to overcome the ideology of the traditional power holders by wielding social facts as compellingly as possible; opponents include all vertically structured systems including the economy and certainly the Church. This is why when sociology faculty operationalize critical thinking as a learning outcome in their basic course syllabi, they tend to draw on their indigenous tradition of critical sociology and critical theory—a Marxist and New Left heritage—to write their criteria for student success. A student who is learning to “think critically” is one who in his or her class performance is becoming “more tolerant of diversity” and “less judgmental,” which one can recognize in a student becoming *more politically progressive*: pro-affirmative action, pro-abortion, pro-gay rights, and so forth. It was no surprise to me that in a 2004 American Sociological Association member resolution opposing a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between one man and one woman, the ayes approved the referendum with 75% of the vote, 13% opposed, and 8% abstaining, thus making opposition to such an amendment the official policy of the ASA by an overwhelming margin. And in a related membership opinion poll done at the same time, 79% of ASA member respondents indicated they personally opposed legislation that bans same-sex marriage, 9% favored such legislation, 8% abstained, and 4% expressed no selection (ASA, 2004). How can this not affect what students are learning?

Propping Up Politics with a New Form of Relativism

But how can a Millsian political commitment remain plausible in the face of post-modernist relativism? Here we get to the second major thread in the secular sociological imagination.

Though it is well known that sociology is a low-consensus discipline compared to, say, chemistry, such that the picture of the field offered to new students in 101 varies considerably depending on the instructor and department, one strong pattern of broad agreement is that the sociology of knowledge has worked itself into the basic course through the emphasis on how race, class, and gender filter or shape both perceptions of social reality and the use and abuse of power (Keith and

Ender, 2004). Sociology has always invited students to try to stand in others' shoes, and the topics of culture, cultural diffusion, and cultural boundaries are central to the introductory palette. Students usually love this material because the examples are fun and elicit deep challenges to customary ways of seeing and acting.

Thus the social fact that we all make judgments about people is immediately on the teaching surface in our intro courses. Where is such a discussion to go? Toward what sociologists term "cultural relativism": that is, the sociological "practice of evaluating a culture by its own standards," as John Macionis, one of the best-selling text authors, typically puts it (Macionis, 2001, p.79). This stance is opposed to "ethnocentrism," a feature of all peoples but something we should try to avoid: namely, "the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one's own culture" (ibid.). We all tend to be ethnocentric, but if we want to better understand others, we must try to set it aside, and once we do that, we can better empathize and even appreciate their ways, the argument goes.

The students' dilemma is what to do with the cultural relativity they have just learned to value. Where does that leave you? Once you realize you speak and think from a social location and there are many locations, all of which can be understood in their own terms, then what? Sociology seems not answer this question, yet it does, because underneath this first-level relativism is a clearly identifiable moral framework linked to the Millsian framework, which, following Robert George, we might call *relativistic secularism*. In his *Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion and Morality in Crisis* (2001), George observes that the prevalent cultural context within which our sociological teaching occurs is that of "moral pluralism": people are no longer disagreeing just about the best means of protecting known public goods and combating known public evils. People today fundamentally disagree—reasonably or otherwise—about what public goods and evils are in the first place. My introductory students experience a world where not only is there big disagreement in classes, among both peers and faculty, about the *means* of achieving social goods, but also about social goods or ends there actually might be that we could know are truly worthy.⁴

But the students' relativistic confusion has a very unique color. As George explains, the relativism of our students is *not* a sophomoric, blanket inability to make any sort of judgment about anything, or the mindless relativism of glib conversations. Judgments are acceptable and encouraged when the topic is framed as a right of personal choice. In other words, what goes on between consenting adults simply isn't subject to critical moral evaluation. A moral issue arises only when the

“rights of others” are violated or placed in jeopardy. The new relativism thus allows making judgments *when* judgments are connected to an agenda defined by what Glendon (1993) has called “rights talk.” Rights talk trumps relativism. Then the question becomes which rights are to be non-relativized, and this is a *political* question.

From a beginning student’s perspective what is the message? It is dual. On the one hand, do not judge others because it is sociologically incorrect to do so: the discipline teaches you to examine others’ ways by seeing the world from their point of view. You may personally judge, but then you lose scientific standing, so hold off your opinion. On the other hand, when any behavior or thought pattern is framed as a question of fundamental individual or “private” rights, then the non-judgmental stance is trumped and the role of social science is to serve the political pursuit of rights. You can judge and still remain scientific because the discipline represents itself as the scientific pursuit of justice regarding personal rights and freedoms.

From here, the question is which and whose rights acquire standing in the texts, and the political persuasion of the authors and the broader discipline step in. Of special interest here is the notion of “consent,” as George notes: whenever constraint is discerned, consent is in doubt, and therefore the discipline searches for violated rights. This means that any outsider group which can frame its issues as a question of consenting adults’ rights being violated by cultural pressure or social structure acquires moral standing and power. Relativism no longer applies. Lines can be drawn around what relativism applies to. The individualistic “rights talk” nature of this perspective ironically dovetails neatly with the Millsian preoccupation with social structural problems. Together they forge a unified theory of political formation: the discipline provides basic tools for deconstruction of dominant ideology in the name of a sociology of knowledge-based relativism, then stops the relativistic spiral downward into moral chaos through a political solution that grants certain groups a ticket out of the morass and into the limelight.

What’s Wrong with This Picture?

If all this were so successful a theory of student intellectual formation and also pedagogical design, sociology would have outstripped psychology long ago in terms of the number of majors. Yet, despite some cyclical increases, images of the field persist that it does not deal with interesting questions in personal terms, that it tends to emphasize social determinism, that a lot of what is studied is common sense, and that it is too political. I believe that the fundamental

pedagogical model embedded in Millsian critical thinking, and lived out in so many introductory sociology classrooms today, is fundamentally flawed. There is simply a collision between mainstream sociological ideology, expressed in its pedagogical model, and the experiences of our students in this society.

First, the zero-sum image of the cultural territory within which conflict occurs over truth and power, among hierarchically arranged groups, is a half-truth. Of course the power structure affects the nature and variety of discourses in our society. But, I argue, *students do not experience their lifeworld as so vertical*. While students are certainly aware of, and often frustrated by, the clear economic stratification in our society, their experience of, and response to, this stratification is not combative in the Millsian sense. Their lifeworld is, in fact, *more horizontal*, with ample cultural space for parallel realities and perspectives to coexist. Thus their relativistic responses to the press of vertically-oriented sociological messages is actually reasonable, in the context. Sociology is trying to say that their morally and culturally pluralistic playing field is actually a contested terrain rather than an open field, but students tend not to be buying it.

Second, within this horizontalism is not indifference or slacking, not existential ennui; but rather a need for affirmation of personal dignity and a search for deeper meaning. This is how we can explain why so many younger Americans who externally articulate a very wide sense of what they call “tolerance” are *at the very same time* getting ever more greatly involved in organized religions of all sorts (Carroll, 2002), and community volunteering rather than organized politics.⁵ To the Millsian sociologist this paradox suggests either students’ errors or, more likely, false consciousness. To me it suggests an apparent paradox expressing a deeper truth. What truth?

Student Life in the “Achievatron:” Some Insights from David Brooks

In his most recent book, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense* (2004), David Brooks delves quite deeply into the social organization and character structure of contemporary Americans striving mightily for upward mobility, and analyzes the lifeworld of our students in intriguing ways. He argues that such striving is fully expressed by the middle and upper classes, but importantly serves as an ideal toward which other classes gaze—including students from more modest backgrounds, first generation college students like those I have at my own institution, who are quick to acquire the culture of achievement.

Brooks pays considerable attention to the role of the educational system in reproducing social stratification, a system he wryly calls the *achievatron*, that enables students to function in a world Brooks describes as the “*social structure of sprawl*.” Sprawl is both a geospatial and a cultural reality: a “where” and also a way of thinking in which everything can spread out.

With all these vast, growing suburbs, there is even more geographic space. If you don't like the neighbors moving into town, you get out. With the panoply of channels, specialty magazines, and Internet sites, there is social space. With the explosion of alternative-lifestyle enclaves, there is cultural space. If the southern Baptists don't really sympathize with your decision to be a Wiccan, then you find your own Wiccan cluster. In other words, living in an abundant society that's rich in financial and technological possibilities, you don't have to fight over scarce land and cultural space. You can move on and build your own milieu. Everything that was once hierarchical turns cellular. (pp.70-1).

Students entering our introductory sociology classroom come from this sprawled social system. There is some exception to this among minority students, especially African-Americans and Hispanics, who may be versed in the more vertically-oriented cultural tradition of being victims of top-down racism. But many of these students are willing to play the game to overcome this victimhood through upward mobility and personal achievement. They are not going to send their kids to a troubled school for the sake of political solidarity.

The achievatron system, especially for those with sufficient means, starts very early to place kids on a highly designed, planned path to produce “success” and enable them to “embrace the GPA mentality”: “They must learn not to develop a consuming passion for one subject, lest it distract them from getting perfect marks across the board. They must carefully and prudentially budget their mental energies.” (p.154) Relationships can be a drag on their velocity, so “let's not get intense” is a crucial byword. In fact, this lack of intensity in the midst of apparent intensity is a major marker of the cultural pattern. Based on his experience teaching at various institutions and visiting many, Brooks remarks that “today's college students, by and large, are not trying to buck the system; they're trying to climb it. Hence they are not a disputatious group.” (p.159) They will go to enormous lengths to not challenge. This is why they do not understand the concept of

“argument” as we academics usually mean it, and often rush to an artificial and premature consensus in debates.

Further, these students do not see themselves inhabiting a very politicized, zero-sum world—a view that drives their much more left-of-center sociology faculty crazy—but the students can confound their faculty with a relativism that seems a distorted version of their own. This is because a central feature of the *achievatron* culture is that students on the way up embrace a certain surface set of norms and values actually rooted in the postmodernist radicalism of the 1970s. The students see an economically vertical world, but not the one their faculty see, and take the hard-fought cultural radical ideas of the 1960’s as more a matter of convenience. As Brooks puts it, the chic idea that ultimate truth is indeterminate is actually very suited to the ethos of the achievement-oriented capitalist. The students Brooks has observed are thus pragmatic, “realistic.” Connections to ideas—and people—tend to be rather temporary and loose. After all, why should the achiever want to make enemies or waste time in disagreement? Why should one get involved in the problematic rigor of judging? Easygoing tolerance is energy efficient. It is no accident that much data on student subculture indicates that they glide along pursuing their goals, and have no time for depth. *Irony* is a central motif in dress, sex, and self-expression, because irony and semi-detachment keeps things open-ended. Hooking up replaces love, activities replace causes, choice stands in for standing up. So, when push starts to come to shove, there is plenty of horizontal cultural space in which to step aside: we hear “*Well, like, whatever.*”

Thus, our students deflect the sort of political righteousness central to the Millsian paradigm, but in the context of horizontal culture have difficulty framing another system of meaning. One might ask why students so determined to get ahead do not develop clear moral beacons to keep them on the straight and narrow path to future accomplishment. Brooks replies that students swept up in this system form a veneer of morality suited to their situation that can allow them and others to get by and even seem deep. Brooks describes what he calls a *theology of achievement* that students imbibe quite early on: a theology strongly emphasizing both the glory of the self and the innate goodness and perfectability of each individual.

This is hardly new sociology, but in the present situation it acquires a poignant irony. *While students may seem to develop a lot of the good Protestant virtues necessary for capitalist social climbing, deeper moral issues leave them bewildered because the explicitly Christian roots or sources of those more surface behavioral patterns and ways of thinking have been excised or dried up. What they have*

acquired is a semblance or shell of the Puritan virtues documented by Weber as part of the Protestant ethic. Our students are sunny, they have no appreciation for—or sense of—the idea that people may be inherently sinful, nor can they grasp the dramatic (even tragic) vision that the human condition requires salvation.

Brooks remarks that college students are often articulate about every subject save morality: there they hesitate to say anything definitive, “as if any firm statement about which lifestyle choice is conducive to firm character development might break the code of civility” (p.174). While the achievatron micromanages many details of daily life, in the realm of morality and character-building it is strictly *laissez-faire*. In fact, the whole concept of *character* creates a problem that I have observed many times in class discussions. In a life designed to maximize movement, fluidity, adaptability, change, and ascent, *character* is something solid, heavy, slow, and even inconvenient. In a world where you are supposed to be an arrow shot into the sky, how can you also be an oak solidly planted in the ground?

This gets me to the epigram from Brooks at the beginning of this paper. Students in the achievatron are certainly taught to think about and prepare for the future, so they have a forward-looking worldview connected to fulfilling their ambitions in a competitive and vertical economy. But for all their forward looking tendencies, they actually do not look far enough ahead. Ironically, their ambition is actually quite stunted. They may be quite worried about two or even ten years from now, but have great difficulty and few tools to help them think about any larger mission, any bigger picture, or longer-term historical project than might take generations to unfold. This is what Brooks means when he says that our students today are, yes, quite driven by ambition to climb the ladder, but in truth are not ambitious enough: they don’t or can’t take on the truly great issues that require solid foundations and principles that endure, and can cost.

When I begin to probe my students’ ideas about larger, longer-term issues or the problems of the human condition, many sense their own limits and, in moments of frankness, wonder aloud why they don’t know how to examine these things. For all their critical-thinking skills, their human core is undernourished, but *not* for the reasons their Millsian sociology instructors might believe. They tend not to buy the Millsian paradigm, because they see it, yes, as too much hassle, but more deeply, as *strange*. They can move laterally to acquire meaning and group identity, and do not believe they must fight upward for cultural space or legitimacy. Why does sociology keep insisting that everything they think is wrong, especially their attempts at beliefs about

the big questions and their experience of a more horizontal cultural map? They also sense the void in the persistent sociological harping on political solutions to their problems, and I would add that the national data on college students' political involvement vs. their community engagement makes this case very strongly. Finally, the achievatron is very real for them, but its cultural baggage of slippery identity and low commitment leaves them chilly. They want to think about society and do something about its problems, *but not in the Millsian way*. They seek a different sisterhood and brotherhood.

This is why I am convinced our whatever-izing students are actually ripe for a better approach to sociology, one that can at once value scientific inquiry but also help them develop their reason and draw on religious traditions for a framework to address their bigger questions.

Integralism and the Formation of a Post-Millsian, Catholic Sociological Pedagogy

How can we as educators informed by our Catholic faith begin to address the problems embedded in and reflected by the *whatever* mentality? In recent years, the notion of an integral social science is receiving greater attention within Catholic circles, as part of a movement to draw on the riches of an almost lost sociological tradition—best exemplified by Sorokin—to create a more religiously informed, holistic approach to research and theorizing about social truths. As Jeffries has observed, Sorokin's integralism was intended as both an ontology and an epistemology, a whole systematic endeavor for the pursuit of ultimate truth that employed the best insights and methods of the empirical sciences, rational theorizing, and spiritual or religious intuitions (2003).

The main details of Integralism and its roots in Sorokin's massive cyclical theory of culture have been very well explicated in a number of recent publications—for example, in the recent special Symposium edited by Jeffries titled “Integralism, Catholicism, and Social Science” published by *The Catholic Social Science Review* (2003)—so I will not review the general theory here except to outline a key principle. Sorokin empirically identified three systems of truth cycling over time since the dawn of recorded, observable history.

The first is *ideational* culture where truth and knowledge are those revealed by the grace of God and derive from above, “disclosed in a supersensory way through mystic experience, direct revelation, divine intuition, and inspiration. Such a truth may be called the truth of

faith. It is regarded as infallible, yielding adequate knowledge about the true-reality values” (Sorokin, 1951, p. 81). Then there is the *sensate* system, based on “the truth of the *senses*, *obtained* through our organs of sense perception” (ibid.). This is the world of radical empiricism, where only things that are empirically observable and verifiable have any real truth value. In this cultural world, nothing ideational can be held to be true for certain because it is not empirically verifiable. And finally, there is a type of synthesis of the two, often appearing in societies transitioning between ideational and sensate, which Sorokin called *idealistic*:

Idealistic truth is a *synthesis of both made by our reason*. In regard to sensory phenomena, it recognizes the role of the sense organs as the source and criterion of the validity or invalidity of a proposition. In regard to supersensory phenomena, it claims that any knowledge of these is impossible through sensory experience and is obtained only through the direct revelation of God. Finally, our reason, through logic and dialectic, can derive many valid propositions—for instance, all syllogistic and mathematical reasoning . . . Human reason also “processes” the sensations and perceptions of our sense organs and transforms these into valid experience and knowledge. Human reason likewise combines into one organic whole the truth of the senses, the truth of faith, and the truth of reason. These are the essentials of the idealistic system of truth and knowledge (1951, pp.81-2).

Sorokin argues that, in the 20th century, we entered a highly decadent stage of sensate culture, fraught by hyper-relativism, the substitution of power for the seeking of truth, the collapse of moral certitudes, the elevation of irony and sarcasm as cultural motifs, and a sense of despair that accompanies the loss of meaning. Totalitarianism and the world wars were the natural outcome of this decadence.

Sorokin believed, in his cyclical sensibility, that we are perhaps on the cusp of a transition to a more *idealistic* form of society and culture, one therefore characterized by the *integration* of knowledge from reason, the senses, and faith described above. Thus the term “integral” sociology: it is a sociology rooted in Sorokin’s vision of idealistic culture, a sociology characteristic of this phase of human social existence. Jeffries and his colleagues make a case that Integralism may very well be a nascent sociological paradigm in formation, one that in Sorokinian language is now rising on the ashes of the failing

“sensate” paradigm—the relativistic, empiricist way of knowing which has dominated social science for at least a century. For the present purpose, in fact, we may equate the terms idealistic and Integral. The main thrust of the perspective is to challenge two main features of contemporary sociological thinking that operate to the serious detriment of the discipline: its overwhelming, explicit antagonism to any but the most vapid and vague truths from “spirituality,” and its overemphasis on materialist, sensate assumptions about what constitutes both valid data for analysis and valid frameworks for theory construction.

There are other strains of more contemporary social thought that I believe converge with Integralism today in the search for a wider vision of human agency and social dynamics: for example, the moral order sociologies of the communitarians like Etzioni (1998), and the neo-Durkheimians examining civil society like Hearn (1997); theories of the acting person like that of Smith (2003); and the Sociology of Emotions group championed by Hochschild (1983). All of these thoroughly debunk late positivist models of human social conduct and thinking, like rational choice theory, arguing for sociologies that embrace the moral and experiential dimensions of human persons. My view is that these strains seem to go right up the edge of acknowledging the validity of spiritual truths as forms of human knowledge, but cannot quite relinquish the essentially sensate sociological view of religious ideas as products of other material realities, either within the person or within the social structure. Integralism goes the crucial *further* step, and in that way provides more pedagogical latitude.

In the sensate culture Sorokin portrays, empirical “facts” become in effect standards by which norms and values are judged, insofar as no higher order principles are thought to be defensible to use in an evaluative process. As a manifestation of sensate culture, secular sociology thus tends to conflate what is statistically normal with what is ethically and morally true, because there are no higher standards to bring to bear in making judgments. We have already seen that while relativism is a trump card in the secular sociological imagination, some defining principles do prevail, i.e. those, that defend the rights of individuals to their freedom to choose. In a relativist, sensate culture, what people believe to be their freedom has moral standing, and the only substantive principle for judgment about social norms and values becomes the defense or expansion of choices.

From an Integral point of view, critical thinking involves challenging this form of individualistic relativism by reaffirming the existence of different realms of true knowledge—the sensate, the reasonable, and the spiritual—and showing how they can be employed

together. In classroom practice, we can bring Integral insights to bear in some very specific ways to help widen students' sociological horizons.

First, students need to explore the difference between the cultural relativism explained in their textbook—i.e. that analytic relativism which is part of the sociological imagination—and the moral relativism which can be slipping in alongside of it. In effect, cultural and moral relativism must be clearly disentangled. Talking about the research act, already a standard topic, presents a good venue for this. By delving into the stance of the researcher or observer, and the role of his or her values in the encounter with information about other cultural systems, we open the door to relegitimizing moral discourse within the discipline itself. In particular, we need to go one step further than the usual line about how we need to make our biases clearer when we make observations. What if some biases are better than others? Students can learn to be very proficient at analyzing a culture from a non-ethnocentric perspective, but they should also consider how it is a whole different question altogether to judge that culture, because a judgment is needed from a human, idealist perspective.

Exploring extreme cases make this easy to accomplish: I often use the example of summer camps for children offered by hate groups in the US, or being raised as a kid in Nazi Germany. We can study how these socialization systems operate; but what we feel and believe about their human worth is another question. Once the thinking process is clearer, then the instructor can select examples closer to home: say, about being raised in a particular class or ethnic enclave, or a particular country quite different from this one. The whole point is to explain that the sociological step of culturally relative analysis is not the end of the line of thought, that full understanding must involve both reason and religious principles.

Still related to the material on research methods, we can also introduce studies that challenge conventional wisdom and politically correct conclusions set out in our texts and note that one of sociology's missions has always been to do just this sort of thing! We can show how newer empirical evidence can put the lie to earlier conceptions of what makes for "healthy, positive" social policies. Three great examples are in the areas of family, deviance, and demography. I have used the one-page Heritage Foundation fact sheets to raise questions about the liberal rhetoric about how any family system is as "good" as another, which highlights that policy always involves an implicit or explicit vision of the social good, and also how ideological preconceptions can cloud an understanding of actual results of social arrangements. In the area of

deviance, it is easy to ask students to search the web for advocacy sites they might find surprising, like that of the National Man-Boy Love Association, and as an assessment of their ability to apply sociological thinking, to ask students to serve on a mock panel for their public library, to make decisions about screening software on public computers accessible to youth. And finally, most sociology texts still present the J-curve in world population growth as a given, though they sometimes admit that even the UN has reduced its population estimates. But population growth is still usually portrayed as a problem, and little shrift is given to the argument that wider accessibility to and use of birth control and abortion are not solutions to the question of how to raise the standard of living of the poorest nations. Steven Mosher's Population Research Institute briefings provide many useful facts and comments to stimulate class discussion; and I have used brief excerpts from Jaqueline Kasun's fine book, *The War Against Population: The Economics and Ideology of World Population Control* (1999), to challenge assertions in the sociology text that technological family planning is the best approach to social improvement.

Second, students need to explore how the "whatever-ism" they see around them is, in fact, part of a particular historical era's and culture's vision of truth. Selections from Brooks' work itself on the horizontal culture work very well with beginning students because he is quite amusing yet poignant, and for further development students may be recommended to a work like that of Lawrence Friedman, called *The Horizontal Society* (1999). A metaperspective like Sorokin's can illustrate for them how the definitions of both truth itself, and how to get to it, shift. This means that the intro course *has to have at least some historical dimension*. Even freshmen can pick up on this, if it is cast in terms they can relate to. For example, I do a unit on socio-cultural change that incorporates a lot of information and illustrations of hunter-gatherer, horticultural/agricultural, industrial, and post-industrial types of societies. Many texts provide something on this, and I give it more play than the pages suggest I should. Often the text has a temperocentric bias toward modernism: "we have progressed from then to now" and so forth. For example, the concept of "cultural lag" always gets standard play in texts: the idea that actual living conditions, usually a result of technological change, often outrun current norms and values, resulting in a sense of experiential disjuncture.

This concept is cute to work with, but it also must be challenged for its bias toward evolutionism. So, it is very interesting to ask students to take the concept of cultural lag, and provide examples of it as its originator Ogburn would imagine: we still think of marriage as

for virgins, so brides wear white, but really that is a lagging custom; grandmothers have trouble programming video recorders that today's five year olds can handle, so does this technological change help encourage a generation gap? Yes, I say, those are good examples of what Ogburn meant. But are there some customs and ideas from that past that *endure*? Or, *what from the past might be valuable to retain, and why*? Then, *why do you say that*? What do you think is important about these customs or ideas? A very effective example to show that cultural lag is not always about the people "being behind" is the area of bioethics and medical decision-making.

This can lead into the idea that the sociological imagination is also about envisioning an entire society as a social, structural, *and* moral, *and* epistemological order—an idea right out of Sorokin. Case studies in the ethnographic tradition can be used with great effectiveness here since good ones portray a neighborhood or culture in holistic ways, as can learning sociology by studying science fiction. In this regard, I have used Huxley's *Brave New World* successfully with freshmen, which connects especially well with the current social debate around cloning, use of sperm and egg banks for designer children, selective abortion, and the nature of social stratification. His references to Shakespeare (especially Romeo and Juliet and Othello), joking use of names of dictators for main characters (e.g. Bernardo Marx, Lenina Crowne), and other literary devices need some explaining, but students were assigned to do sidebar research on such features, and they made great connections between the sociology course and others in their general education curriculum.

Third, Sorokin's extensive sociological inquiry into the meaning and social conditions favoring unconditional love, agape, suggests ways for students to consider how our culture does or does not enable what theologians call an "order of love." That is, as students wrestle with the demands of the achievatron and cultural messages about the priority of personal, individual rights and needs, they themselves have questions about the meaning of relationships both now and in their own future, like love and marriage.

For example, as we explored earlier in the discussion of Brooks' *achievatron* culture, we know that today there is evidence of the emergence of a new social system or institution for relationship formation that is gradually replacing the courtship-leading-to-marriage system that prevailed for centuries. As Barbara Dafoe Whitehead recounts in her recent book *Why There Are No Good Men Left* (2003), the traditional heterosexual "ladder of commitment" system began with socializing together, moved through various stages of seriousness in

dating, formalized itself in engagement, and ended in matrimony. Divorce was considered a “failure.” In its place has come what Whitehead calls “the relationship cycle,” not necessarily heterosexual, which consists of a series of relationships that form and break up, that can extend all the way through the life cycle from adolescence to old age. Some details include the notions that breakups are thought of as “normal,” and relationships are not necessarily seen as moving toward marriage. Even if one does marry, it is not framed as necessarily for life: first and second marriages now break up at the same rate, so people frame first marriages using terms like “icebreaker,” or “starter” marriage. A whole new helping industry has come about to help singles and recently split up people “manage their relationship breakups more effectively.”

This new social arrangement emphasizes temporary hookups and delay of long-term commitments, a certain freedom from responsibility, definitions of sexual experience as “satisfaction of a need,” and ultimately a highly planned relationship future shaped by an individual’s set of criteria for fulfillment. It’s a tough row to hoe, because there are few ways to meet unattached people, career pursuits delay or even replace relationship commitments, and the influence of the sexual revolution and feminism disconnect sexual intimacy from love.

All this may be in the social world of our college freshmen, but in my view it is not a settled matter for them even if it looks inevitable that they must operate within this new system. Sorokin wanted very much to know, in the ashes of the twentieth century, how true love, deep agape, might flourish on a societal scale. In class, I can raise this question by engaging a case study scenario Stephen Post (2003) refers to in his discussion of the Christian vision of the radius of “kinship” that often extends beyond blood or marital ties. Early in the semester I have started a class with the following question: Suppose you had one or more kids who were about to reach college age, and had been saving money up to help pay their tuition and thus, at least in theory, help assure their social position in the future. At the same time as you were thinking about spending the money to pay future tuitions, you became very aware of major human suffering in the surrounding world, brought on by a disaster or poverty, that your substantial saved resources could really help ameliorate. Do you have any responsibility to help those in need outside your immediate family, and if so, how much should you donate? Dealing with this scenario engages the whole Integral framework of both a sociological analysis of the norms and values we have established about the relationship between the public and private

spheres, the meaning of love and responsibility to others, and which others, those part of our kin system or a wider group we have a real concrete responsibility to help through a loving effort. To whom . . . does or should our love apply, concretely, and how do we define love in daily behavior? Imagine developing this conversation and identifying all the sociological/empirical, reasoning/ethical, and higher order moral principles that would have to enter into the discussion. It is a moral dilemma and sociological issue par excellence.

A second example involves both the analysis of language people use to reflect on relationships and some consideration of social theory. I do an exercise based on current data concerning co-habitation, and ask students to lay out for me in groups what they believe are probably the advantages of cohabiting with someone, both in general and before getting married. They find this amusing but also serious, since usually at least half admit to having done this in their own lives (and I speak about my own experience with this in grad school). When we get the rationales up on newsprint, I show them the data that debunks their strong assumption that cohabitation help assure that a relationship will be more likely to endure. But the real depth comes when we start examining the language they themselves have tended to use in describing relationships, their definitions of intimacy or love, and how they think about problems in relationships when they occur. Such language is often overwhelmingly *economic language*: about needs, costs, benefits, exchanges, deals, and literally contracts themselves if we go the route of prenuptial agreements and “divorce planning.” Some students usually catch on to this pattern and start to wonder aloud, “Hey, where is the LOVE in all of this?!” This gives me an entry into a broader theoretical analysis of the prevalence of rational choice theory in social science and the prevalence of utilitarianism in the culture. Post (2003) and Smith (2003) both do an excellent job exploring the rise to prominence of rational choice theory in the social sciences and provide good talking points about this social fact.

Finally, Sorokin invites us to define and present critical thinking in a truly holistic manner that can challenge the political spin it has acquired within the discipline. Integralism allows us a broader room to step back from the “take everything apart,” postmodernist account of what it is to acquire intellectual sophistication. Concretely, Sorokin’s work on love and altruistic behavior and his clear commitment to that as a deep, guiding moral principle, applicable universally to the human individual and social condition, is very hard to argue with or be clever about. That work points freshmen to consider one of the original Millsian paths—the link between personal

experience and social context—in a whole new light. For after all, these are students exploring both personal relationships and their cynicism about political and international relations. If Brooks is right about the meaning of “whatever,” Sorokin poses a plausible challenge to the Teflon model of both personal commitment and larger group-level dynamics.

The challenges to Sorokin’s view of the centrality of genuine love—positions grounded in sensate cynicism that reduce it to another form of self-serving manipulation (explored well in Post, 2003)—can be empirically shown to be inadequate, and students’ own sense of natural law is given space to emerge in classroom discussions even around such bitter topics as the causes and costs of social inequality. I have not had the chance to try this yet, but in a coming semester I want to ask students to document cases where kindness to a stranger has made some difference in the way an interaction proceeded, or in the way a group’s problems were addressed when active regard and respect were strong norms. They can learn interviewing or other inquiry skills, and at the same time not study just another piece of sociological bad news.

I invite the reader to continue to explore how Integralism can provide a very specific and theoretically rich source of pedagogy that can inform our challenge to the dominant types of sociology now prevalent in our classrooms, and to begin this process by carefully examining the potentially destructive assumptions embedded in the textbooks and other materials commonly employed to teach beginning students in our field. This is a critical endeavor if we are to help train a new generation of sociological thinkers whose concept of critical thinking can embrace more than Millsian politicized anger or ironic, horizontalist relativism.

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NOTES

1. For a quick overview of some of the activities and their scholarly bases, see for example Atkinson (2000); and for a current list of activities and resources, see the American Sociological Association web link to teaching resources at www.asanet.org.
2. John Paul II himself noted this shift in the broader intellectual culture, which sociology experiences within its particular domain, in his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994). His take is, as usual for him, rather optimistic, but does point the way toward an opening for the Integral sociology I will explore later.
3. Many articles on teaching sociology affirm this approach and conflate sociological critical thinking with developing a liberal package of socio-political views. They propose pedagogies for helping this ideological journey along. Just for a few recent examples, see DeWelde and Hubbard's "'I'm Glad I'm Not Gay:' Heterosexual Students' Emotional Experience in the College Classroom with a 'Coming Out' Assignment," which describes an assignment meant to assist

heterosexuals with identifying and modifying their “homophobia;” and one by Magdol called “Liberal Values and a Liberal Education: The Effect of a Family Sociology course on Undergraduate Students’ ‘Family Values,’” wherein the author somewhat regretfully reports that students taking her family course did not, on the basis of a careful statistical study, show much if any change in their starting political views on family life, and invites faculty to think about how they might improve pedagogy to assist students to be more “open minded.” For another, see Haddad and Lieberman (2002), pointedly titled “From Student Resistance to Embracing the Sociological Imagination: Unmasking Privilege, Social Convention, and Racism.”

4. So, for example, they react with a certain puzzlement to the diagram of Merton’s strain theory of deviance that typically appears in their textbooks, whose validity depends on consensus around the definition of socially accepted means and ends.

5. This is a repeated trend showing up in statistical data on freshman attitudes and values reported by Sandy Astin in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example. For a broad summary of the trend and additional detailed analysis see also Colby, Ehrlich, et. al. (2003).