



# City Research Online

## City St George's, University of London

**Citation:** Willmott, H. (2018). Madness and Mindfulness: How the "Personal" is "Political". In: Stanley, S., Purser, R. E. & Singh, N. (Eds.), Handbook of Ethical Foundations of Mindfulness. (pp. 259-281). Cham, Switzerland: Springer. ISBN 331976537X

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/20771/>

**Copyright and Reuse:** Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

**Madness and Mindfulness: How the “Personal” is “Political”**

Hugh Willmott

Cass Business School, City University of London

Cardiff Business School, Cardiff, Wales

When we lose control over our minds through **hatred, selfishness, jealousy, and anger**, we lose **our sense of judgment**. Our minds are blinded, and at those wild moments, anything can happen, including war. Thus the practice of compassion and wisdom is useful to all, especially to those responsible for running national affairs, in whose hands lie the power and opportunity to create the structure of world peace (Dalai Lama, 2011: 250, emphases added)

The theme of this chapter is the institutionalization of unreason, taking the form of practices that engender and endorse “hatred, selfishness”, etc., and the role of meditation, including meditative Mindfulness, in disarming and deinstitutionalizing unreason. Meditative awareness can enable critical reflection and transformation, as contrasted with unreasoned reactivity, on practices that diminish our “sense of judgment”. The needless suffering associated with “hatred”, “jealousy”, “anger” and other ego-building and defensive emotions is manifest in contemporary expressions of sectarianism and fanaticism in corporations as well as in society.

I explore the de/institutionalization of unreason by considering the connection between what Mills (1959) terms “private troubles” and “public issues”; and what Hanisch (1970), relatedly but not synonymously identifies as “the personal” and “the political”. We may think, for example, of how ostensibly “private” or “personal” feelings of resentment, such as those resulting from the divisive impacts of neoliberalism and neocolonialism, are reflected and reinforced in the “public issue” of populism and its wider “political” reverberations.

In the absence of critical reflection, fear is assuaged and contained by identifying with something (e.g. a sect, the nation) that is assumed to provide security. Forms of populism involve “symbolic participation” by people who readily identify with, and defer to, the slogans of religious, corporate and/or national leaders promising solutions to their problems - often by veiling or trivializing the problem while presenting themselves as possessing the strength to implement the solution (Freire, 2005: 78). Increased opportunities for self-actualization or an expansion of self-determination are promised but, as Freire (2005) argues, freedom can only be *lived*, it cannot be bestowed; and this requires “risking life” in a demanding, liberating process of *continuously becoming*. Freedom is a product of *praxis*; it is not something that can be gifted by others.

To explore the institutionalization of unreason and the mystification of freedom, I interrogate two texts. The first is Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) which considers the dis/connect between “private troubles” and “public issues”. Addressing the context of post-War America, Mills argues that many US citizens had been turned, largely by big business, into superficially contented conformists, or “Cheerful Robots” (Mills, 1959: 189 *et seq*). As producers and as consumers, the “robots” are seen to have fallen prey to the unreason and unfreedom of an affluent society. Racked by a sense of “uneasiness” and “indifference” (Mills, 1959: 18), they lack the capacity to connect their “personal troubles” to the “public issue” of a “structure”, to invoke the Dalai Lama’s term (see indented quote above). In the context of the US

in the 1950s that, arguably, continues today, this “structure” is the medium but also an outcome of dehumanized, alienating processes of production and consumption.

A contemporary manifestation of the malaise of alienation and self-absorption identified by Mills is, perhaps, the robotic slave of Mindfulness who, by engaging in continuous self-surveillance of his or her inner state, has little awareness of its connection to “public issues” – that is, to “the regime and circumstances that are making people anxious, miserable and sick” (Purser and Forbes, 2017). For Mills, the key to addressing and correcting the malaise is the development and dissemination of a sociological imagination capable of converting “the personal uneasiness of individuals...into involvement with public issues” (Mills, 1959: 12).

My second text is a chapter by Carol Hanisch (1970) titled “*The Personal is Political?*”, a celebrated feminist work that appeared in an anthology *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*. Hanisch’s focus is upon how, in her experience, members of the women’s movement address(ed) the realm of the “personal”. Hanisch agrees with Mills that fostering this imagination is necessary to disarm unreason and diminish unfreedom. But she argues that it is insufficient and is potentially counterproductive – an assessment that she illustrates by reference to the attitude of many movement members’ towards non-activists. Specifically, Hanisch takes issue with how non-activists are dismissively described, and effectively written-off, as “apolitical”. In the Dalai Lama’s (2011) terms, Hanisch considers this disrespectful attitude, which effectively dismisses non-activists as “cheerful robots”, to lack “wisdom and compassion” (Dalai Lama,

2011: 250); and she commends greater openness to, and curiosity about, Otherness, including the stance of non-activists. When the political quality of the Other’s consciousness is appreciated and examined, it can stimulate critical (self) reflection on movement members’ disinterest in, or dismissiveness of, non-activists.

*The Sociological Imagination* and “*The Personal is Political*” are texts that address aspects of the post-War era. During this period, the conformity of the 1950s examined by Mills mutated, in the 1960s, into forms of rebellion that included the emergence of the women’s movement as well as an emergent interest in non-Western spiritual traditions. Despite the intervening decades, their themes and analyses have continuing relevance for progressive practices and movements. Amongst these, I include Critical Management Studies (CMS) in which I have had a close involvement (Willmott, XXXX), and also the Mindfulness movement that, for me, has resonances with a forty year commitment to a Tibetan Buddhist (Kagyü) tradition of meditation practice.

Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* commends an emancipatory vision in which, to quote, “the end product of any liberating education is simply the self-educating, self-cultivating man and woman; in short, the free and rational individual” (Mills, 1959: 207). Despite some noxious traces of chauvinism and macho individualism, *The Sociological Imagination* commends processes of learning as a means of “self-cultivation” that can mobilize and expand reason and freedom. “*The Personal is Political*” also prizes “self-cultivation” but focuses more directly upon its lived practicalities.

The educative impulse evident in Mills’ and Hanisch’s texts is central to a third text, Freire’s *“Pedagogy of the Oppressed”* (1970/2005) on which I draw more selectively when unpacking the dynamics of unreason and unfreedom. When read in conjunction with *The Sociological Imagination* and *“The Personal is Political”*, it can be seen that the leans more towards what Friere terms a “banking approach” approach to education, and to personal and social development, that conceives of learning primarily as a matter of acquiring a series of “deposits” that comprise each field of knowledge. People are conceived as vessels into which enlightening knowledge - such as the connectedness of “personal troubles” and “public issues” - is poured. When this approach is adopted, resistance to its application tends to be ascribed to deficiencies in its intended recipients rather than to the inherent limitations and performativity of its passive and conception of human beings as “objects of assistance” (Freire, 2005: 83).

In contrast, the pedagogy informing *“The Personal is Political”* more closely resembles Freire’s “problem-posing” approach which “affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality (sic)” (Freire, 2005: 85). This open, becoming condition applies no less to the educator than to the educated. Dialogical rather than didactic, “problem-posing” learning is embedded in experience: it enables people to “see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2005: 84). In the context of Mindfulness practice, the “problem-posing” approach resonates with an orientation that, in the words of one practitioner, enables him/her

“to be respectful and compassionate, rather than pursuing my own agenda or being trapped in my ego needs” (Sinclair, 2015: 9).

The chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a brief sketch of my understanding of meditation as this informs the reading of the contributions of Mills, Hanisch and Freire that follow. Since meditation forms the core of any coherent theory and practice of Mindfulness, its discussion serves to connect this chapter with other contributions to this volume. Reprising *The Sociological Imagination* and “*The Personal and the Political*”, I then consider their relevance for the development of progressive, emancipatory theory and practice in which I include the role of meditation in facilitating the dis-closure of a more awakened state of being wherein the destructive energies of “hatred, selfishness, jealous, and anger” are transmuted into those of “compassion and wisdom” (Dalai Lama, 2011: 250) . Finally, I expand briefly upon the idea that meditation offers a potent means of addressing the deficit in reason when attending to the problem of freedom.

### **Meditation and Mindfulness: A Brief Overview**

My understanding of *meditation*, its relationship to *mindfulness* as a practice and to *Mindfulness* as a movement, is summarized as follows:

Moments of meditative awareness or mindfulness arise when there is a sense of oneness, of being in the here-and-now (e.g. “in flow”) that is experienced as a “calmness and presence of mind” (Dalai Lama, 2011: 250), or *mindfulness*, that is comparatively uncluttered by a preoccupation with securing a sense of separateness. This awake awareness may occur spontaneously at any time in any place. It is not confined to any specific time or place such as ‘sitting’ or ‘walking’. Meditation practice may also be more concentrated where it is the equivalent of taking a language class, as contrasted with speaking the language. Meditation practice is concerned with dispelling the illusion of ego and discarding its armor in everyday life. Its effect is to debunk, reduce and ultimately eliminate sources of unnecessary suffering associated with pre-serving ego. The dispelling of ego occurs as the processual, impermanent nature of everything is disclosed, experientially as well as cognitively. Mindfulness as a movement tends to disembed meditation from spiritual traditions (e.g. by positioning it within a medical or mental health logic), and so it more readily endorses, or permits the adoption of, Mindfulness as a new ‘armour’ that, for example, fosters a sense of invincibility by “building resilience”, “boosting emotional intelligence” and “enhancing creativity” (Seppälä, 2015; see also et al. 2016) - all for the strengthening of ego rather than its debunking.

Schematically, meditation can take the meditator in three possible directions, all of which have political consequences for the reproduction or transformation of the self and social relations.

*First*, meditation practice may do little to disclose and disrupt habitual patterns of being-in-the-world: the meditator may fall asleep or becomes completely carried away by, rather than become more aware of, the normal stream of consciousness. By default, the ostensible normality of the status quo is undisturbed. The primary obstacle to meditative awareness is distracting - ego-threatening or alluring - thoughts or sensations. Unless this obstacle is recognized and removed, meditating makes little difference, except perhaps to provide a spiritual or “cool” badge of identity.

*Second*, meditation practice may have the rather paradoxical and perverse effect of strengthening or inflating the ego and, in this respect, is continuous with therapeutic culture that is indebted to ego psychology (see Rakow, 2013). As it is possible for virtually anything, including spirituality, to become a vehicle of ego inflation, the illusion of separation and sovereignty may be magnified rather than diminished by meditation practice. Meditation-as-Mindfulness may, for example, feed arrogance and self-deception by regarding it as a source of achievement - as exemplified by a sense of being “holier than thou”, or of being better equipped than others to manage stress or perform better in the workplace or elsewhere. This sense may be short-lived, or it may intensify feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, thereby undermining rather

than building “personal capital” and associated capacity (Grant, 2015). I associate this “dark” outcome with the direction of meditation practices, including forms of Mindfulness, that promise to increase the person’s capacities of adjustment, resulting in performance ‘improvements’ being celebrated as a *personal* achievement that must then be safeguarded and defended, rather than simply registering it as an unremarkable outcome of meditation.

Just as forms of meditation embedded in spiritual traditions (e.g. Buddhism and Christianity) may be misapplied in ways that are “spiritually materialistic”, practices commended by Mindfulness may diminish, rather than strengthen, the illusion of separation and sovereignty that supports and sustains a sense of ego-hood. In Buddhist traditions, such as the Tibetan Kagyü school, the motivation for meditation practice is the development of compassion towards all beings that is most fully realized by undertaking practices whose outcome is enlightenment. Secular practices, including many forms of Mindfulness, lack this ethical underpinning and animation and instead favor secular “self-identified values or cross-culturally recognized virtues and character strengths” and they, it is argued, “have stronger theoretical and empirical foundations in psychological science” (Baer, 2015: 966). Nonetheless, secular meditation practices, such as those that are promoted or engaged as a means of increasing resilience to work pressures, may also have the (unintended) consequence of drawing its practitioners towards another state of being as they are inadvertently take in a different, third direction. As Sinclair (2015: 6) notes:

“Although it is true that practicing mindfulness often helps people to cope with stress, to just treat it as a tool would be to miss many other profound opportunities that arise from being mindful. Rather than lashing ourselves to the mast of life, driving ourselves harder, mindfulness can open the door to being in the world and in our lives differently, without being hounded by the relentless drive to change ourselves and others”.

The *third* direction of meditation practice is one of a greater *openness* [to the Other]: “a state of open expansive awareness, able to notice – and appreciate – more of what’s there” (Sinclair, 2011: 5). The meditator’s sense of separateness and sovereignty in relation to the Other – natural and social – is unsettled and dissolved rather than affirmed or strengthened. As the desire to defend ego weakens, the prospects for “figuring out” the Other, in Hanisch’s (1970) words, are improved, though never guaranteed. There is no certainty because an inclination, or impulse, to defend one’s sense of identity or selfhood – by disregarding or being dismissive of the Other, for example – is liable to reappear.

Where “personal” transformation involves increased openness to the Other, and reduced defensiveness in securing an established sense of self, it is progressively, if not intentionally, “political” in its expression and consequences. One significant outcome is the greater likelihood that the Other will be respected, listened to, and learned from. Increased openness fosters an agonistic and engaging orientation, as contrasted to one that is antagonistic and dismissive. Antagonistic relations to the Other tend to involve, but also obscure, a rather cowardly, defensive

stance. In order to avoid scrutiny by the Other, its proponents avoid meaningful, substantive engagement – for example, by invoking procedures.. An agonistic orientation, in contrast, requires courage as well as considerable patience to communicate more directly and respectfully with the Other (which is often, but not necessarily, reciprocated).

Before moving on, it can be acknowledged that advocacy of meditation as a means of connecting the “personal” and the “political” may strike some readers as incongruous, if not ridiculous. That, I suspect, is because meditation tends to be associated, and conflated with inward-looking passivity that eschews “public” or “political” involvement. As noted earlier, meditation may be inconsequential when it has minimal effect on the practitioner or it may be hijacked by ego to develop a more comfortable, spiritually accomplished, sense of separation that changes little or nothing except the further solidification of the ego. Meditation practices, including those associated with Mindfulness, may be seized upon as a means of escaping from, rather than attending to and examining, whatever is experienced by ego as threatening and/or painful:

“We want to escape. We want to run away from pain rather than regard it as a source of inspiration. We feel the suffering to be bad enough, so why investigate it further? Some people who suffer a great deal and realize that they cannot escape their suffering really begin to understand it. But most people are too busy attempting to rid themselves of irritation...”  
(Trungpa, 1973: 162)

In meditation practice, as in everyday life, the three orientations outlined above may engage and circulate in the space of a few minutes or seconds. Distractedness and day-dreaming are commonplace, as is the desire to escape from vulnerabilities, become better adjusted, or elevate (one)self over the Other. Such desires, and associated enslavements to them, are media and outcomes of unfreedom and unreason. In the next section, I outline how, in *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) argues that the key to revealing and overcoming unreason and unfreedom resides in addressing and transforming the relationship between “private troubles” (the personal) and “public issues” (the political).

### **Only Connect...Private Troubles and Public Issues: The Sociological Imagination**

*The Sociological Imagination* is concerned with the dulling of reason and trivialization of freedom in post-War America. Published in 1959, it has over 13,000 citations on Google Scholar. What makes *The Sociological Imagination* a classic that continues to be referenced, including by students of organization and management, is its identification of a practical and theoretical disconnect between personal troubles and public issues. It continues to resonate in contemporary advanced capitalist societies where, to invoke another binary coined by Galbraith (1958) in the 1950s, private affluence (or greed) is accompanied by public squalor (or disadvantage). That said, *The Sociological Imagination* is not without flaws. For example, Mills

repeatedly uses of term ‘man’ and there is an associated absence of any reference to the ‘problems’ and ‘issues’ later addressed by feminism.

A key figure in *The Sociological Imagination* is the “Cheerful Robot” – a trope that identifies people who, in Mills’ imagination, become social robots radiating an air of contentment that veils their growing “alienation” (Mills, 1959: 190-1). As workers/ consumers/ citizens they compliantly execute instructions within modern, “rationally organized” institutions where they feel helplessly trapped, morally insensible and are increasingly incapable of taking responsibility for their actions. For Mills, “politics” and “the political” are not confined to government or electoral processes. “Politics” refers to all forms of power relationships, including those within workplaces. A society of ‘Cheerful Robots’ is, for Mills, “the antithesis of the free society – or in the literal and plain meaning of the word, of a democratic society” (ibid: 191). As he writes:

“Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of *traps*...Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of *moral crisis*. Is it any wonder than ordinary men feel that *they cannot cope with the larger worlds* with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That – *in defense of selfhood* – they become *morally insensible*, trying to remain altogether *private men*? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap? (Mills, 1959: 9, 11, emphases added).

In the contemporary context, it is not difficult to appreciate the continuing relevance of Mills’ references to a sense of being “trapped” by larger forces – of nuclear annihilation, financialization, immigration, globalization. Indeed, the sense of “uneasiness and indifference” that he identifies as “the signal feature of our period” (Mills, 1959: 19) has, arguably, become amplified in the face of global warming and mass migration. Today, the indifference associated with feelings of “moral insensibility” and being “trapped” has morphed from the fanatical mass consumerism of the late twentieth into the unreason of moral sectarianism and populist fanaticism of the twenty-first century. Mills’ concerns about moral insensibility are echoed *inter alia* in warnings and appeals, including those that urge us to be “mindful of McMindfulness” (Purser and Forbes, 2017) because, in the contemporary corporation, yesterday’s “Robot” is invited to become a “Mindful Zombie” (Purser and Forbes, 2017; See also Goto-Jones, 2013). When the latter’s “personal troubles” (e.g. anxiety) are tackled (narcissistically), by encouraging an “obsessive self-monitoring of one’s inner state”, as a means of performance enhancement or productivity improvement, any “wider vision of the outer world” is displaced (Purser and Forbes, 2017). More generally, Mills cautions that:

“Rationally organized social arrangements are not necessarily a means of increased freedom...In fact, often they are a means of tyranny and manipulation, an expropriation of the very chance to reason, the very capacity to act as a free man” (Mills, 1959: 187)

Today the impersonality and soullessness of the “rationally organized” workplace is supplemented and renewed, but not replaced, by “post-rational” elements which extend the forms

of unreason and unfreedom. Novel elements extol strong culture, fun and/or freedom, including commercialized packages of Mindfulness adopted by major companies, including leading social media companies. By facilitating greater groundedness through relaxation and embodied awareness, mindfulness initiatives may appear to mitigate, and perhaps reduce, the “traps” of rationalization (Mills, 1959: 9). To that extent, they seek to address “alienation” (Mills, 1959: 190-1), taking the form of mental absenteeism and stress. However, when remedies for “alienated man” (Mills, 1959: 190) are geared to, and justified by, the quest for productivity improvement, they are an example of the “traps” to which Mills makes reference, not a release from them. They offer an ineffective, if not “futile, attempt to shield us from the various suffering and vulnerabilities of daily living” (Purser and Forbes, 2017). In the form of corporate Mindfulness programmes, they tend to invite a slavish dedication to a “hyper vigilant” (Purser and Forbes, 2017), self-absorbed kind of mindfulness. Such Mindfulness may promise to harness the full range of employees’ productive capabilities, but it is deafeningly silent on the role of collective self-determination in addressing institutionalized alienation.

In Mills’s terms, alienation and needless suffering is perpetuated when a “public issue” - such as collective estrangement from the means of production where the creative powers of labor are commodified and disempowered - is framed as a “private trouble”, conceived as stress or psychological absenteeism. Far from being passé, Mills’ observation that “in the big-scale organization...[t]here is rationality without reason... *Such rationality is not commensurate with freedom but the destroyer of it*” (Mills, 1959: 189, emphasis added) has a contemporary resonance. This is especially so when “freedom” is conflated with forms of self-expression in the

workplace that are considered to contribute to productivity (e.g. by reducing stress-related absenteeism), and so counteracts any inclination to associate unfreedom with the operation of established structures of ownership and control in which employee well-being is equated with successful performance management.

### **Diagnosing the Modern Malaise**

It is not hard to understand why, when finding that “they cannot cope with the larger worlds”, desperate people are drawn to “solutions” that rely upon unreason and perpetuate unfreedom, often in the name of freedom and rationality. These “solutions” frequently cast their adopters as beneficiaries of change frequently delivered by authoritarian, messianic demagogues for whom the domains of business, sport and management consultancy as well as religion and politics are alluring and rewarding. Masquerading as the champions of “the little guy” or the “downtrodden”, they emerge and thrive in circumstances where the capacity of people to organize collectively to make changes, rather than robotically lend their trust and support to ostensibly benevolent leaders, is underdeveloped or weakened.

Unfreedom is, for Mills, symptomatic of societies where citizens are unable “to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions” (Mills, 1959: 11). The sociological imagination is conceived to enable its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life

and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills, 1959: 11). Sociological imagination is commended as a remedy for the malaise by providing the knowledge that connects “private troubles” and “public issues”. The resulting knowledge “enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills, 1959: 11). It thereby corrects the moral insensibility of the Robots, dissolves their false consciousness, and so facilitates their release from - or, better, the removal of - the “traps” (Mills, 1959: 9).

Sixty years after its publication, many insights of *The Sociological Imagination* remain relevant. Yet, Mills offers little commentary - beyond an occasional, teasing reference to “the defense of selfhood” - on how to overcome resistance to the release of consciousness from its “falsity”. What, it may be asked, can enable citizens to “possess”, as Mills puts it, “the *quality of mind* essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biology and history, of self and world” (Mills, 1959: 10, emphases added)?

Despite his thesis that modern institutions foster “rationality without reason” and may become “a means of tyranny”, Mills places much faith in the power of reason, as exemplified by the demystifying capabilities ascribed to social scientists for whom “one of our intellectual tasks [is] to clarify the ideal of freedom and the ideal of reason” (Mills, 1959: 198). The example is given of teaching that helps students “to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and problems *open to reason*” (Mills, 1959: 206, emphasis added), thereby enabling students to

become “*reasonable and free*” (Mills, 1959: 206, emphasis added). The aim of the teacher, guided by sociological imagination, is commendable: “to combat all those forces which are destroying genuine publics...or put as a positive goal, his (sic) aim is to help build and to strengthen *self-cultivating publics*. Only then might society be reasonable and free” (Mills, 1959: 206, emphasis added). I fully subscribe to the Enlightenment ambition of exercising the power of reason to debunk and remove unfreedoms (e.g. slavery and bigotry). Reason can play a key role in challenging knowledge claims and associated practices that institutionalize suffering, including structured social inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, disability and so on (see Renault, 2010) . To this end, it is crucial to connect “‘the personal troubles of milieu’ with ‘the public issues of social structure’” (Mills, 1959: 14) – such as connecting contemporary feelings of uneasiness with a reluctance to take political irresponsibility for how “rational organizations ... systematically regulate [our] impulses and aspirations” (Mills, 1959: 189, citing Mannheim).

The exercise of reason can disclose the structural conditions of actions, including “Robots” “impulses and aspirations”. While necessary, this is, however, an insufficient, basis for attaining “freedoms *to*” that include engagement in practices of (collective) self-determination. For, tellingly, when Mills commends the sociological imagination as an antidote to “false consciousness”, he has very little to say about the contents of such consciousness beyond its manifestation in the disconnection of “private troubles” from “public issues”. Mills is silent on how to address and overcome indifference or resistance to the acquisition of his favoured antidote. He simply repeats the “only connect” mantra and insists that “Above all, do not give up

your moral and political autonomy” (Mills, 1959: 248) that, on Mills’s own account, the “Robots” have either never developed or have largely discarded. Even if, *contra* Mills, the “Robots” retain a measure of autonomy, and have even imbibed some of elements of Mills’ sociological imagination, the courage and conviction to act with greater “political responsibility” (Mills, 2005: 195) may well be wanting. As we shall see, the obduracy of that deficit is an example of how, for Hanisch (1969), the personal is political. What is “personal”, including our “private troubles” is not only disconnected from “public issues”, as Mills’ sociological imagination shows. Additionally, the contents of the “personal” are “political” as they impact upon the the latter’s reproduction or transformation. It is why the injunction to become Mindful “just be mindful” as a means of addressing the “private trouble” of stress, for example, is a “commodification” and “instrumentalization” of mindfulness (Purser and Forbes, 2017). It is also why criticism of Mindfulness is politically and personally coherent, rather than misdirected or misconceived. The potency of the criticism resides in its dis-closure of how, when Mindfulness practice is privatized, its restrictive focus on continuous, obsessive, self-surveillance acts to narrow, rather than expand, awareness.

**“The Personal is Political”**

It would be presumptuous to claim that there is an easy or fully compelling way to act with greater “political responsibility” (Mills, 2005: 195) but *“The Personal is Political”* (Hanisch, 1969) offers some valuable pointers. The phrase “the personal is political” is widely attributed to Hanisch but she credits it to her editor. I confess to a nostalgic interest in the 1960s which, for me, was a formative period. I was considerably influenced by countercultural ideas, especially those that drew no firm line between political activism and personal experimentation in processes of challenging convention and seeking to change the world.

For Hanisch, as for Mills, the challenge is to diagnose and repair the disconnect between “the personal” (private troubles) and “the political” (public issues). When reflecting upon her involvement in the women’s movement during the 1960s, she shows how, in everyday life, the “personal” and the “political” are practically fused, yet ideologically become disconnected. Hanisch illustrates this contradictory relation when she examines how members of the movement identified and dismissed non-activist women as “apolitical”:

“What is happening now is that when non-movement women disagree with us, we assume that it is because they are “apolitical”, not because there might be something wrong with our thinking” (Hanisch, 2006).

Hanisch’s reflections, I want to suggest, have broad applicability for facilitating processes of progressive change. Instead of dismissing the Other (e.g. non-activist women) Hanisch is

sufficiently curious to examine the contents of their ostensibly “apolitical” consciousness. “Apolitical” consciousness, she argues, is endemically political. Their disinterest in, or hostility towards, non-activist women is, Hanisch contends, the expression of a different politics. To characterize non-activists as “apolitical” is, from this perspective, politically illiterate. It is also self-deceptive and self-defeating in terms of expanding the women’s movement. That is because processes of normalization that construe such politicization as neutral or “apolitical” contribute to the systemic disadvantaging and oppression of many women. Hanisch insists that the growth and effectiveness of progressive movements and practices depends upon an awareness of *what is “political” in the “personal”*. This awareness, she argues, was undeveloped in the women’s movement of the 1960s where, notably, its members were disinclined to address their complicity in “othering” non-activists, thereby restricting the appeal, growth and influence of the movement.

Expanding on this theme, Hanisch contends that “ there are things in the consciousness of “apolitical” women (I find them very political) that are as **valid** as any political consciousness we think we have.” (Hanisch, 2006, emphasis added). I interpret this claim as an acknowledgement of how every “political” stance is partial; it is valid from its own limited standpoint; and it therefore merits both respectful attention and constructively critical examination. Practically, it means nurturing curiosity in respect of the position of the Other, rather than presuming to know the Other and/or engaging in their casual dismissal.

To recognize the consciousness of the Other as “valid” is not equivalent to saying that “anything goes”, with its implication that challenging any view is pointless or groundless. Instead, it is to argue that productive dialogue depends on striving to appreciate *how* the views of the Other are rendered valid *for them*., and equally how my interpretation of those views is rendered valid for me. The sociological imagination can play a valuable role in this process, albeit one that is partial and contingent in illuminating the sense of validity. Only by respectfully appreciating how the Other’s (political) consciousness is valid for them is it possible to begin a dialogue. Openness to the Other is also, I suggest, a precondition of democratic interaction and debate. A commitment to openness expresses how, in my endeavor to recognize the Other, I strive to resist any self-securing urge to reframe Otherness in terms of my Sameness (e.g. I am “political”, *ergo* the Other is “apolitical”). Recognising and then disarming the egotistical impulse to negate the Other, and thereby prioritize self-confirmation and self-elevation, is congruent with Hanisch’s willingness to learn from the Other (e.g. women hostile to the women’s movement), rather than labeling and dismissing the Other as beyond engagement.

“*The Personal is Political*” is of direct relevance for addressing “the Mills question”: how to expand freedom by mobilizing reason. Her analysis suggests that, politically-and-personally, a readiness, and especially a *preparedness* to pay respectful attention to, and thereby improve the prospects of a dialogue with the Other, is critical for effective politicization. How, then, might such “preparedness” be facilitated? Hanisch’s answer is that it *requires a reduction of complicity in inhibiting and avoiding such engagement*. Specifically, when recommending that “We should

figure out why many women don't want to do action” (Hanisch, 2006, emphasis added), she reflects that:

“Maybe there is something wrong with the action or something wrong with why we are doing the action or maybe the analysis of why the action is necessary is not clear enough in our minds.” (Hanisch, 2006, emphasis added)

In Hanisch's assessment, the liberating effects of the women's movement will be limited, and will not develop into a genuinely radical mass movement, so long as its members deny, and do not work harder to overcome, the restrictions of their own consciousness – restrictions that might, invoking Mills (1959), be ascribed to *the robot within*. This way forward requires not only respectful curiosity, rather than know-all-ness, about the Other that is based upon humility concerning the adequacy of our understandings of self in relation to the Other. To the extent that participation in a movement is motivated and governed by a desire to differentiate and elevate the self (“liberated or enlightened woman”) over the Other (“apolitical” - ignorant? naïve? - women), the outcome is predictable. Involvement is impeded because, from the outset, the Other is presumed to be beyond engagement. Potential insights into the limitations of movement members' activism and the opportunity to learn how activism might be more effective are then denied.

Only by paying closer, respectful attention to the Other is there a prospect of advancing sufficiently relevant and appealing ways of showing how “private troubles” are instructively illuminated and fruitfully addressed by appreciating and (re)framing them as “public issues”.

### **The Robot Within**

Defenders of the women’s movement have, unsurprisingly, taken issue with Hanisch’s analysis. For her critics, “the personal is political” signifies an unwelcome preoccupation with the “personal” that is a distraction from, rather than a contribution to, the “political” mission and impetus of the movement. Paying attention to “private” issues (e.g. the “subjectivity” of women’s movement members) is considered an individualizing or psychologizing diversion from actively tackling and changing their “political” conditions. Hanisch (2006) recalls that, in the 1960s, Leftist radicals might “sometimes admit” that women were systematically oppressed, and would support demands for “equal pay for equal work, and some other “rights””. They would make a partial connection between “personal troubles” (e.g. women’s grievances about inequalities, especially those external to what is considered to belong to the private or personal sphere) and “public issues” (e.g. the necessity of campaigning for changes in legislation). Even so, “...they belittled us no end for trying to bring our so-called “personal problems” into the public arena—especially “all those body issues” like sex, appearance, and abortion. Our demands that men share the housework and childcare were likewise deemed a personal problem between a woman and her individual man.... What personal initiative would not solve, they said,

“the revolution” would take care of if we would just shut up and do our part” (Hanisch, 2006). More determined action, not introspection about “something wrong”, is commanded. As Hanisch observes, activists regarded her participation in “consciousness-raising groups to discuss their own oppression” as “‘navel-gazing’ and ‘personal therapy’ – and certainly ‘not political’” (Hanisch, 2006).

It can be readily conceded that “endless navel-gazing” ushers a retreat into subjectivism, and so is unlikely to advance the aims of a social movement. Social movements require activism; but their continuing existence and influence is conditional upon members’ capacity to attract and retain new members. Building this capacity requires a release from the confines of a self-referential “circle of certainty” (Freire, 2005: 39) in which, for example, it is presumed that causality (and blame) for “personal problems” is fully ascribed to “the system”. For Hanisch, this ascription is not just facile; it is counter-productive for the radical mission of disarming unreason and debunking unfreedom. She doubts that problems, such as childcare and housework, are simply “personal” and so are to be resolved by being more assertive or taking greater “personal initiative”. Receptiveness to the Other, Hanisch argues, requires critical reflection upon, and as transformation of, the consciousness of the members of the women’s movement; and she illustrates this by reference to her own experience:

“As a movement woman, I’ve been pressured to be strong, selfless, other oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my own life. To admit to the problems in my

life is to be deemed weak. So I want to be a strong woman, in movement terms, and not admit I have any real problems that I can't find a personal solution to (except those directly related to the capitalist system). It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say.” (Hanisch, 1970)

Hanisch (1970) notes, or confesses, that being a “movement woman” came at a price: she felt pressured to present herself publicly as a persona – “strong, selfless, other oriented - that she did not recognize privately. Movement membership was, she claims, defined by an outward appearance of seeming to be “in control of my own life”. There is more than an echo here of Mills' conformist Robot – perhaps a less cheerful, gendered automaton, but no less willing to comply with an alienated condition (Mills, 1959: 189). The comparison also suggests an occlusion of reason by ‘rationality’: “*The Personal is Political*” demonstrates how the institutionalized disarming of reason to suppress the disclosure and analysis of “real”, experienced “problems” (e.g. insecurity and inadequacy) is not confined to “big-scale” organization.

As Hanisch became aware of the oppressive subjection of her membership of the women's movement, she developed the view that acting politically encompassed speaking out about “what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say” (Hanisch, 2006). She resisted pressures to manage the impression of being “strong” and shed the self-deception of being “in control”. To remain silent was, for Hanisch, to be complicit in the

movement’s oppression of its members and to weaken, rather than improve the prospect of attracting new members. Instead of continuing to collaborate in the fantasy of the movement – notably, that its members, herself included, were “strong, selfless...” etc., - Hanisch resolved to traverse this fantasy by speaking the truth, as she believed it to be. Hanisch’s openness debunked, and threatened to destroy, the superhuman (robotic) pretense of being capable of handling all problems except those ascribed to the workings of the capitalist system. However, I do take issue with Hanisch’s seemingly uncritical endorsement of the idea that it is only the “capitalist system” to which we ascribe limits or barriers to our capacity to find “personal solutions”. In everyday life, we routinely identify, scapegoat and blame many “Others” or “systems” to escape acknowledgment of the extent of our own involvement and complicity in the reproduction of what Mills (1959) terms “public issues”.

### **Beyond Complicity**

Hanisch relates the inhibition of “telling it like it is” to the ideology of the movement. Members of the women’s movement were disinclined to acknowledge that they had any “real problems” that could not be solved by themselves “except those directly related to the capitalist system”. Likewise, Mills contends that at the root of the problem of “personal uneasiness” (Mills, 1959: 11) and feelings of “being trapped” (Mills, 1959: 9) is a cognitive deficit (Mills,

1959: 10). This framing is, I suggest, broadly echoed in the assessments of (women’s) movement members that characterize non-activists as “apolitical”. The implication is that they lack “the quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and what may be happening within themselves” (Mills, 1959: 11). This “information” is what members of the women’s movement seek to provide, or bestow, and thereby enable their sisters to acquire or “develop reason” that will penetrate false consciousness and thereby disclose “what is going on in the world” and “within themselves”. It is the limits of this “information”, and its capacity to connect with what is going on “within themselves”, that Hanisch seeks to expose and challenge.

In endorsing Hanisch’s challenge to the capacity of the sociological imagination to debunk forms of unfreedom and unreason, I do not question its capacity to connect “self and world” (Mills, 1959:10) and to appreciate the social conditioning of ostensibly “private troubles”, including feelings of “personal uneasiness” (Mills, 1959: 11). In the absence of such critical reflection, there is a tendency is to individualize, psychologize and pathologize both “troubles” and “issues” (e.g. unemployment, war, divorce, to uses Mills’ examples), perhaps “in a pathetic attempt to avoid the large issues and problems of modern society” (Mills, 1959: 19). However, it is one thing to insist upon connecting ostensibly “private troubles” to historical conditions and “structural changes” (Mills, 1959: 17). It is quite another to conflate private troubles with public issues by, for example, dismissing the play of so-called “dark forces” (Mills, 1959: 20 citing Ernest Jones), including fear and arrogance, in our everyday actions.

Following Hanisch, it is implausible to ascribe all “real problems”, for which a personal solution cannot be readily found, to the “system”. Such fantastical, wishful thinking and self-deception misses the opportunity to recognize, examine, and learn from feelings of “uneasiness” – such as Hanisch’s uneasiness about the pressures of managing the impression of being strong and selfless in order to gain acceptance as a member of the women’s movement. Reflection on such feelings can yield insights into other possible sources of discomfort, and thereby undermine their unthinking reproduction and debilitating effects. In Hanisch’s case, she relates the denial of weaknesses amongst women’s movement members to an ignorant dismissal of non-activists as “apolitical”. She shows how, by attributing the difficulties of attracting non-activists solely to their resistance, members of the women’s movement avoided reflection on their own complicity in that resistance.

By taking up Hanisch’s analysis of the women’s movement, the forces of unfreedom have been shown to be “personal” in ways that are only partially apprehended by Mills’ sociological imagination. While “personal troubles” are conditioned by “public issues”, they are irreducible to them. Some “personal” constraints on our capability to debunk and overcome unfreedom cannot plausibly be fully ascribed to their disconnection from “public issues”. This is significant since, as a consequence of being inadequately acknowledged and addressed, “personal” constraints, such as a fear of freedom, operate to preserve “political” limits on the removal of unfreedoms. When reason is mobilized to debunk unfreedoms, it routinely

encounters, but also reinforces, the barrier of unexamined sentiment– the grip of emotional traumas and investments, as manifest in the appeal of black-and-white thinking, sectarianism and fanaticism – that pre-serves unfreedom.

It has been shown how this restriction upon the emancipatory power of reason addressed by Hanisch in *“The Personal is Political”* where she illustrates how women’s movement members “othering” of non-activists as “apolitical” contributed to the exclusion of meaningful dialogue with them (Hanisch, 1969). As Freire (2005: 39) notes, the actions of a person who is closed to dialogue “revolves about ‘his’ truth”, and so ‘he’ “feels threatened if that truth is questioned.” Release from the self-referential “circle of certainty” (Freire, 2005: 39), in which we are prisoners of an intense emotional investment in our truth, depends upon developing - or, better, freeing - a capacity to be “not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled” (Freire, 2005: 40). In Hanisch’s case, this capacity was expanded through her participation in small, “consciousness-raising” groups where, she writes, her political consciousness was no longer (so) suppressed or restricted:

“I went, and I continue to go to these meetings because I have gotten a political understanding which all my reading, all my “political discussions,” all my “political action,” all my four odd years in the movement never gave me.” (Hanisch, 1970)

Hanisch claims that the “political understanding” developed in the meetings was absent from her involvement in the women’s movement. She gradually came to better understand how “the personal is political” as her participation in the meetings yielded *experientially meaningful insights* into “the problems in my life” (Hanisch, 2006). This awareness was inaccessible to, or could not be acknowledged by, women’s movement members. Through her participation in consciousness-raising groups, the nature and significance of “the political” became more immediate and meaningful, and so enabled more effective, existentially grounded and committed kinds of action.

### **Towards Embodied Knowing**

We have seen how, in Hanisch’s assessment, an understanding of the Other is impeded and diminished by (ego-inflating) arrogance and (ego-threatening) fear. Defensiveness based upon fear makes it difficult, and perhaps unthinkable, for movement members to consider that “*there might be something wrong with our thinking*” (and our action) (emphasis added). So, is meditative Mindfulness of any relevance for addressing this personal/political problem? I conjecture that it can be of value when its effect is to reduce resistance to reflection on the solidity of selfhood, and so weakens the sense of egohood in which arrogance and fear, in relation to the Other, are rooted. By developing a more *open* orientation, it becomes possible, in principle, to enter a dialogue with the Other, and thereby comprehend better why, in respect of the women’s movement, for example, “many women don’t want to do action”. An open

orientation facilitates a (non-defensive) identification of shortcomings (“something wrong”) that may include a deficit of self-clarity for which possible remedies may be proposed.

I am particularly interested in the status of Hanisch’s claim that, as a consequence of the “political understanding”, developed by participating in “consciousness-raising” meetings, she was able, or empowered, to “say what I really believe about my life”? The first step was to disclose and acknowledge the *feeling* that there are “real problems” for which she lacked a “personal solution” – that is, a solution consistent with the presumption of being in (sovereign) “control of her life”. The second was to disclose and address, though her involvement in “consciousness-raising groups”, the self-deception and oppression associated with the pretense of being a “strong” and “selfless” (sovereign) subject.

It may immediately be asked: how is it possible to “say what [we] really believe”, as Hanisch puts it, when, in articulating our beliefs, we necessarily rely upon specific, partial, discourses? There is no escape from the limitations of language that necessarily conceals the Real in our attempts to communicate what we feel and/or believe. Indeed the Lacanian Real, points to the possibility of what cannot be symbolized and also to the prospect of liberation from the impulse to objectify / secure ourselves:

‘...liberation from our struggle with lack is synonymous with becoming that which we fear most: dwelling in the Real of no-thingness, groundlessness, egolessness – that which can never be objectified or symbolized’ (Purser, 2011: 301)

Hanisch’s efforts to communicate and justify her theory and practice of radical change - including the value she places on “figuring out why many women don’t want to do action and the benefits she ascribes to participating in “consciousness-raising groups” - are necessarily mediated by available forms of reasoning and communication. We are all constrained as well as enabled by what Mills (1959: 188-9) terms “self-rationalization” that “comes systematically to regulate [our] impulses and aspirations, [our] manner of life and [our] *ways of thought*” (emphasis added). How we interpret and articulate our feelings - as “uneasiness”, say, rather than as “weakness”, “timidity” or “suspiciousness” - expresses the priority given to particular beliefs and “ways of thought” that rationalize the felt relation of self-to-the-world. And, indeed, as Mills (1959: 18) notes, it is likely that “Much private uneasiness goes unformulated”, especially when it is normalized as a social and/or existential inevitability.

For Hanisch, the process of recognizing, addressing and debunking the “self-rationalization” that perpetuates unreason and unfreedom, such as that associated with her membership of the women’s movement, is facilitated by critical self-reflection of the kind engendered by the consciousness-raising groups in which she participated. To the extent that these groups incorporate *self-transformative praxis*, they include, but also go beyond, communication that is rational and analysis of “self-rationalization”. Developing and applying the capacity to reach out to non-activists, rather than dismissing them as “apolitical”, for example, is shown to require the exposure and enactment of a transformed, more open way of being. Examining and questioning the characterization of the consciousness of non-members of the women’s movement as “apolitical” was a first step in the process of reaching out to, and

engaging, non-activists, rather than casually dismissing them as Other. In Hanisch’s assessment, such engagement involves a transformation of *being*, and not just the acquisition of a different kind of *knowledge*.

As Freire (2005) has argued, there is a key difference between *imparting* and *banking* information – for example, about the connectedness of biography and history provided by the acquisition of a sociological imagination – and *embodying* knowledge based upon problem-oriented praxis. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere (2005) contrasts two, idealized and opposing approaches to education that have general applicability to wider processes of socialization and human development: “banking” and “problem posing”. The “banking” approach conceives of human beings as passive receptacles into which nuggets of abstract knowledge are deposited – such as knowledge that non-members of the women’s movement are “apolitical”. Repeatedly transmitted but rarely reflected upon, or put to the test, such knowledge is bestowed “by those who consider themselves knowledgeable [about] those they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 2005: 72). Assured of the truth of this knowledge, its possessors resist or suppress meaningful dialogue as, from their standpoint, there is nothing of value to be learned from it. The communication of knowledge as a series of deposits is, in effect, a “practice of domination” (Freire, 2005: 81) as the recipients of its truth are required to become defined and governed by its providers.

In the “problem-posing” approach, in contrast, human beings are conceived to be defined by their capacity to exercise and develop “their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world” (Freire, 2005: 83). The ability to raise doubts is regarded as a condition of possibility of transforming the relation of self and world. The “problem-posing” approach is distinguished by “a practice of freedom” (Freire, 2005: 81) that “stimulates reflection and action upon reality” (Freire, 2005: 84). It “affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves” (Freire, 2005: 84). The difference between a banking approach to processes of politicization and a problem-posing approach is articulated by Hanisch when she writes that

“I am getting a *gut understanding* of everything as opposed to the esoteric, intellectual understandings and noblesse oblige feelings I had in “other people’s” struggles” (Hanisch, 1970, emphasis added).

This “gut understanding”, which is associated with embodied knowing, is nurtured within social spaces, such “consciousness-raising groups, where it is possible to voice, whether inwardly or externally, what otherwise is repressed or silenced. Spaces that facilitate the removal of confusion and dispelling of self-deception are commonly found in traditions where “the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2005: 81) is conceived as social and collective. As if speaking directly to members of the women’s movement who regarded non-activists as “apolitical”, Freire (2005: 67) writes that the deployment of “libertarian propaganda” or the endeavor to “‘implant’...a belief in freedom” necessarily reproduces domination by contriving to undertake a “transformation *for* the oppressed rather than one *with* them” (Freire, 2005: 67). Freire’s

preferred alternative is a “relationship of dialogue” (Freire, 2005: 67). On this point, at least, there is a shared understanding between Freire and Hanisch, and Mills (1959: 206) for whom the aim of the social scientist “is to help build and to strengthen *self-cultivating* publics. Only then might society be reasonable and free.” (emphasis added).

But how is such “self-cultivation” (Mills) within a “permanent relationship of dialogue” (Freire), in which there is a willingness and a receptiveness to “say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve always been told to say” (Hanisch), to be accomplished? How might it be possible to counter or at least mitigate tendencies or impulses to privilege private or selfish considerations rather than “publics”; to engage in monologues rather than dialogue; and to say what we believe others want to hear, to be countered or at least mitigated? As Hanisch’s experience of participation in “consciousness-raising groups” attests, “dialogue” can, potentially, be hugely supportive in counteracting such tendencies. But can it *by itself* release the power necessary to engage in acts of truth-telling and the formation of “self-cultivating publics” (Mills, 1959: 206)? For readers interested in this connection, Dyrberg (2014) provides a systematic exploration of the relation between a democratic ethos and institutions, and “truth-telling” (*parrhesia*), which involves communicating “freely and being up-front...in contrast to holding something back, being secretive, covert and manipulative” is explored by (Dyrberg, 2014: 2). His analysis illuminates the connectedness of “private troubles” (the personal) with “public issues” (the political): it “connects personal and institutional aspects of politics” (Dyrberg, 2014: 2).

I am attracted to Hanisch’s conjecture that critical reflection upon our assumptions and actions can be valuable for breaking or suspending habitual patterns of thought. It may thereby open up other kinds of practices including .the “inaction” of the “apolitical” Other? Such reflection, Hanisch contends, involves an appreciation of how the “personal” – for example, the antagonism or indifference of “apolitical” women to the women’s movement – is “political”. But the development of this appreciative orientation itself requires some openness. If the openness necessary for a dialogue is restricted or stumbling, how might its development – or, better, is disclosure - be enabled? To what extent can the willful application of reason lower or remove the (defensive, ego protecting) barriers to openness, and thereby reduce our complicity in forms of oppression?

### **Enter Meditation**

At the point, or moment when “dialogue” or communication fails or breaks down, greater receptiveness to practices dedicated to exposing and minimizing unreason and unfreedom in the guise of confusion, insecurity and defensiveness, may increase. A possible, if unlikely, antidote to the normalizing power exercised by everyday guardians of unreason and unfreedom - perhaps because it is so widely assumed to be “apolitical” – is meditation. Meditation?

The relevance of meditation for debunking and disarming unreason and unfreedom is certainly in doubt if it is narrowly defined cognitively or instrumentally as, for example:

“1 : to engage in contemplation or reflection

2 : to engage in mental exercise (as concentration on one's breathing or repetition of a mantra)

for the purpose of reaching a heightened level of spiritual awareness”

(Merriam Webster, 2017)

Its relevance is also questionable when meditation is defined as the practice of passive contemplation “focus[ing] one's mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting, for religious or spiritual purposes or as a method of relaxation:

(meditate on/upon) think deeply about (something): *he went off to meditate on the new idea.*”

(Oxford Dictionary of English, 2017)

According to the above definitions, meditation is, at best, very loosely coupled to *praxis*. It is seemingly confined to contemplation, reflection, spiritual awareness, relaxing and deep thinking. What is largely missing from these definitions is the transformative power of meditation and its relationship to enlightenment, not as the substitution of deposits of rational knowledge for the contents of religious mythology but as an *embodied praxis*. In its transformative effects, meditation is no more “apolitical” than the consciousness of the non-activist women” to whom Hanisch refers. As George Orwell persuasively maintained, “there is

no such thing as 'keeping out politics'" (Orwell, 1946). Meditation and Mindfulness are not exceptions.

As understood here, meditating is about discerning and dissolving the delusions of egohood, experienced as arrogance and fear, that impede the openness required for communication and communion. Meditating may involve some contemplation, reflection, relaxation, deep thinking and increased spiritual awareness. These are not the ends of meditation although, in the form of spiritual materialism, they may become its goal. Since meditation does not engage, or favor, any particular political philosophy, it may be mistakenly regarded as “apolitical”. As *praxis*, meditation can facilitate a process of becoming progressively more aware of, and becoming less identified with, and oppressed by, restrictive and/or confused patterns of thought and behavior. As a “practice of freedom”, meditation is oriented to the disclosure and removal of confusion. It involves processes of divestment or purification, not acquisition. It is a practice of surrender, rather than a perfection of technique. It permits the discovery, rather than the development or achievement, of a greater “awakeness” that extends to a clearer, less confused, awareness of the “political”. As Trungpa (1973, p.4) puts it:

“If the process [of meditation] were otherwise, the awakened state of mind would be a product, dependent upon cause and effect and therefore liable to dissolution...In meditation practice, we clear away the confusion of ego in order to glimpse the awakened state”

A release from unreason and unfreedom is enabled through a process of removing, or dissolving, confusion and self-deception. There is an opening up and letting go, rather than a building up, of defenses. Meditation can dis-close how, at the heart of our confused state, the existential denial of inseparability compels us to cling to, and defend, whatever is sensed to affirm our sense of separateness and solidity. This confusion and associated suffering is attributed to the credibility, necessity and importance ascribed to our sense of sovereignty. Meditation can facilitate a relinquishing of the perception, or delusion, that we are, and have, separate, solid selves that are permanent and continuous. It is a practice of acknowledging and then surrendering what, for example, “I’ve always been told to say.” (Hanisch, 1970).

Meditation fosters a capacity to admit that, for example, “I have real problems that I can’t find a personal solution to” (Hanisch, XXXX); and it offers a practice that addresses those problems. The key word is “I”. A “personal solution” to “real problems” is elusive. That is not only because, as Hanisch discovered, in the absence of a supportive group, it can be unbearably threatening to “tell it like it is”. A “personal solution” is also elusive because only a partial and temporary solution can be provided in the absence of diminishing the defenses of “I”. That said, as noted earlier, meditation practice may permit and enable, but it does not guarantee, an awareness of the connectiveness of “personal troubles” (e.g. suffering) with the “public issues” of an institutionalization of the preoccupation with preserving our sense of ego-hood.

Replacing defensiveness with openness is not adequately conceived as a “personal” matter or project; nor it is a “political” one. It is both. It is “political” because, the effect of meditative Mindfulness is a withdrawal from ego-invested struggles that simultaneously brings about change in prevailing structures and relations of power. Specifically, it undermines relations of domination and oppression whose reproduction depends upon complicity that is sustained *inter alia* by egoistic fear and arrogance. It is “personal” because the process of dissolving fear and arrogance enables an expansion of awareness and transformation of consciousness. The practice and application of meditation is a process of “transforming the material of mind from expressions of ego’s ambition into expressions of basic sanity” (Trungpa, 1973: 11). And in this sense, meditative Mindfulness is nothing special; it is very ordinary, as natural as breathing.

### **Conclusion**

For many people, Mindfulness and meditation are mysterious or taboo. Despite a growing interest in some of their forms, especially those that promise self-improvement or performance enhancement, experiential knowledge of meditation or even Mindfulness remains comparatively limited, fleeting and/or superficial. Given this state of comparative ignorance, it is prudent to treat claims about meditation, including the arguments made in this chapter, with some skepticism. Otherwise, there is the risk of engaging in unquestioning, robotic forms of meditation, Mindfulness, or “McMindfulness”. It is necessary, if more challenging, to strive to

be open(minded) to what is unfamiliar, even when it may seem improbably, counterintuitive or outlandish.

Commending meditation as a potential facilitator of emancipatory struggle does, I acknowledge, strike an unfamiliar, and perhaps incongruous, note. It is a perplexing proposition, mainly because meditation is so strongly associated with inward, aesthetic retreat from the world or with becoming “blissed out”. In defense of my improbable proposition, I submit that it is consistent with the responsibility ascribed by Mills to social scientists: to “deliberately present controversial theories...and actively encourage controversy” (p. 211). Shaking up commonsense thinking is important, according to Mills, because

“In the absence of *political debate* that is wide and open and informed, people can get in touch neither with the effective realities of their world *nor with the realities of themselves.*” (Mills, 1959:211, emphases added)

For Mills, “political debate” is key to becoming more “open” not only in relation to the “realities of the world” but also to the “realities of [our]selves”. But Mills is uncharacteristically silent on the question of how to establish and nurture openness, except in urging us to acquire the knowledge generated by a sociological imagination. Based upon her experience of the women’s movement, Hanisch argues that becoming open requires more than textbook knowledge of how, for example, “private troubles” are connected to “public issues”. Additionally, it entails the nurturing of a capacity to examine how “private troubles” impede not only the identification, but

also the realization, of this connection. Meditation, including meditative Mindfulness, can facilitate the process of “political debate” by enabling people to “get in touch” with the effective realities of their world [and] themselves (Mills, 1959 :211).

Hanisch’s “*The Personal is Political*” indicates how the effectiveness of “open and informed” political debate and the advancement of progressive political movements depends upon nurturing a capacity to attend carefully to the Other; and that this attentiveness involves a process of dis-closure and self-transformation. She illustrates the process when connecting “the realities” of her “personal” experience of being silenced, as a member of the women’s movement, to the “dark forces” (Mills, 1959: 20 citing Ernest Jones) that suppressed her voice. When in the grip of these forces, movement members elevated and defended their identity as “strong” and “selfless” by positioning and dismissing non-activists as “apolitical”. Generating and disseminating this ‘knowledge’ of non-activist women as “apolitical” allowed movement members to avoid the challenging, ego-threatening task of reaching out to them. Hanisch’s account of her own transformation exemplifies the burning out of received wisdoms, confusions and self-deceptions – a process that is at the heart of meditation practice. Insofar as they share a focus upon “clear[ing] away the confusion of ego” (Trungpa, 1973: 4), examples of meditation-in-action, such as Hanisch’s involvement in consciousness-raising groups, are continuous with other (e.g. sitting) practices. In whatever guise it takes, meditation practice is distinguished by its substance in removing the confusions of ego, and not by its form.

The claim made, and question begged, by this chapter concerns how the practice of meditation may enable us to penetrate more deeply into the realities of world/self. It has been claimed that meditation practice contributes to the disarming unreason and expanding freedom. By reducing suffering associated with the needless harboring of confusion and self-deception, it may reverse “the ascendancy” (p. 194) of the cheerful, or cheerless, Robot to which Mills’ sociological imagination aspires.

### **References**

- Alvesson, M. & Willmott, H.C. 1992. Eds. *Critical Management Studies*, London: Sage
- Baer, R. 2015. Ethics, values, virtues, and character strengths in mindfulness-based interventions: a psychological science perspective. *Mindfulness*. 6, 4: 956-969
- Dalai Lama. 2011. Taking Responsibility for the World’s Well-Being. In B. Boyce, ed. *The Mindfulness Revolution*. Shambhala; Boston, 248-251
- Dyrberg, T.B. 2014. *Foucault on the Politics of Parrhesia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Freire, P. 1970/2005. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum
- Galbraith, J.K. 1958. *The Affluent Society*. New York: Houghlin Mifflin
- Good, D.J., Lyddy, C.J., Glomb, T.M., Bono J.E., Brown, K.W., Duffy, M.K., Baer, R.A., Brewer, J.A. and Lazar, S.W. 2016. Contemplating mindfulness at work: an integrative review. *Journal of Management*, 42: 1: 114-142

Goto-Jones, C. 2013. Zombie apocalypse as mindfulness manifesto (after Žižek), *Postmodern Culture*. 24,3: pages unnumbered

Grant, A. 2015. Can we end this meditation madness. *The New York Times*. October 9, 2015

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/opinion/can-we-end-the-meditation-madness.html>

Accessed 17 July 2017

Hanisch, C.(1970/2006). *The Personal is Political*. Including 2006 Introduction. Available at

<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalIsPolitical.pdf> Accessed 18 July 2017

Merriam Webster. 2017. Meditate. Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meditate>

Mills, C.W. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Orwell, G. 1946. *Politics and the English Language*.

<http://www.panarchy.org/orwell/language.1946.html> Accessed 18 July 2017

Oxford Dictionary of English. 2017.

Purser, R. 2011. A Buddhist-Lacanian perspective on lack. *The Humanist Psychologist*. 39,4: 289-304

Purser, R & Forbes,D. 2017. How to be mindful of mindfulness. *Alternet*.

<http://www.alternet.org/culture/hollow-mindful-overkill-david-gelles> Accessed 17 July

2017

Rakaow, K. 2013. Therapeutic culture and religion in America. *Religion Compass*. 7, 11: 485-97

Renault, E. 2010. A critical theory of suffering. *Critical Horizons*. 11,2: 221-241

Seppälä, E. 2015. How meditation benefits CEOs, *Harvard Business Review*.

<https://hbr.org/2015/12/how-meditation-benefits-ceos> Accessed 17 July 2017

Sinclair, A. 2015. Possibilities, purpose and pitfalls: insights from introducing mindfulness to leaders. *Journal of Spirituality, Leadership and Management*, 8,1: 3-11

Trungpa, C. 1973. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Boston: Shambhala

Willmott, H.C. 2013. Changing institutions: critical management studies as a social movement.

In V. Malin, J. Murphy and M. Siltaoja (eds), *Dialogues in Critical Management Studies*, Vol. 2, *Getting Things Done*, Bingley, Yorkshire: Emerald, pp 123-164