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A Mills Revival?

by
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Prologue

Perhaps you know Foucault's remark that despite the torrent of criticism directed against his philosophical system, "Hegel prowls through the twentieth century." Consigned to a kind of academic purgatory for the last three decades of the twentieth century, at a time when social theory had migrated from the social sciences obsessed with case studies and social "problems" to literature and philosophy where he was rarely discussed and almost never cited, C. Wright Mills was an absent presence. All sociologists, and most people in other social scientific disciplines knew his name, and in their political unconscious, recognized his salience, but were deterred by fear and careerism from following his path as a public political intellectual. Yet in the wake of scandals involving leading corporations and their Chief Executive and Financial Officers, which have become daily fare even in mainstream media, and the hegemony of corporate capital over the American state, which was widely reported in the press and television with unembarrassed approbation, Mills's work is experiencing a small but pronounced revival. Although his name rarely appears on the reading lists of fashionable graduate courses in social and cultural theory, the republication of four of his major books, with new introductions by the historian Nelson Lichtenstein (*New Men of Power*), the social critic Russell Jacoby (*White Collar*) political theorist Alan Wolfe (*The Power Elite*), and sociologist Todd Gitlin (*The Sociological Imagination*) is likely to aid in exposing his work to students and younger faculty.

For some, Mills does not qualify in this era when social and cultural theory is dominated by European influences. Except for his dissertation *Sociology and Pragmatism*, he rarely engaged in philosophical speculation; more to the point apart from some essays, in only one major instance, *Character and Social Structure*, did he address the "meta" questions such as method or the

underlying presuppositions of theorizing. Marxists criticize the lack, even disdain of “class analysis” in his work; indeed the commentaries in his collection of annotated readings, *The Marxists* constitute both an appreciation and an unsystematic critique of Marx and Marxism. And social historians, most of them informed by class and class struggle, object to his focus on the study of élites rather than popular expressions from below, even within social movements.

Yet Mills remains a model for those who wish to become intellectuals: by the evidence of his massive output in the twenty-three years of publications he was the antithesis of the specialist or the expert. When most in the human sciences followed the path of least resistance by writing the same articles and books over and over, Mills ranged widely over historical cultural, political, social, and psychological domains. He was interested in the labor and radical movements and wrote extensively on them; as a close student of Max Weber he made some of the most trenchant critiques of bureaucracy; he was among the leading post-war critics of the emergent mass culture and the mass communications media and, despite its ostensibly introductory tone, *The Sociological Imagination* may be America’s best contribution to the ongoing debate about the relationship of scholarship to social commitment, a debate which has animated literary as well as social science circles for decades.

His literary executor and biographer, Irving Louis Horowitz, turned against him, for the most part, so the biography tells us more about the author than about Mills. Other book-length treatments are sympathetic but limited, and to a large extent, dated. With the partial exception of some excellent dissertations and master’s theses, notably Tom Hayden’s insightful *Radical Nomad* more than forty years after his death, Mills awaits a major critical study, let alone a full-length biography.

We may speculate that among putative readers his contemporaneity, the sharp focus on the United States and its traditions and, most of all, his annoying habit of writing plainly (substituting vernacular expressions for scientific terms) turned away some who can only respect writers who invent neologisms and whose simple thoughts require complex syntax. But at a moment when these fashions have lost some of their luster, those who yearn for substance as well as style may return with pleasure to the dark ruminations of C. Wright Mills.

I

C. Wright Mills is exemplary of a vanishing breed in American life: the public political intellectual who, despite his grating message, often received a hearing in mainstream media. For almost fifteen years, beginning with the publication of *The New Men of Power* in 1948 and ending with his untimely death, at age forty six, in 1962, Mills was among America's best known social scientists and social critics. During the late 1940s and 1950s he published three books that constitute a theory and description of the post-World War II American social structure. His *Sociological Imagination* remains widely read in college classrooms, both for its attempt to provide a socially-committed introduction to the discipline, and its fierce critique of the prevailing tendencies in American sociology, what Mills calls "Grand Theory" and "Abstracted Empiricism." The grand theorist's scope is much too wide to yield practical and theoretical insight. And Mills criticizes the legions of Abstracted Empiricists who, in the service of incrementally accumulated verifiable scientific knowledge, confine themselves to producing small-scale investigations. Together with his collaborator and mentor, Hans Gerth, he edited one of the earliest and best collections in English translation of Max Weber's essays. And *Character and Social Structure* (1954), written with Gerth, an unjustly neglected work, may be considered Mills's premier work of social theory. This book elaborates what I claim was the "scaffolding" upon which he hung his major works of middle range theory, especially the trilogy. In fact, it is difficult to fully comprehend the harsh critiques of *Sociological Imagination*, and Mills's method, without the elaborated theoretical framework of *Character*.

While not exactly a household name, he was widely known among the politically active population and wide circles of academic and independent intellectuals. Unlike many public intellectuals he was neither a servant nor a supplicant of power but, in the sense of the 17th century English radical, was a "ranter"; in American terms, he was a Paul Revere whose job it was to sound the alarm. Indeed, some of his writings recall the pamphlets of the decades of the American revolution where the address of numerous and often anonymous writers was to the "publick" of small farmers and artisans, as much as to those holding political and economic power. Much of his later writing may be

Stanley Aronowitz

compared to turn of the 20th century populist and socialist pamphleteers whose aim was to simultaneously educate and arouse workers and farmers to the evils of corporate power.

Yet in his most fertile period of intellectual work, the decade and a half ending with the publication of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), with the possible exception of *The Power Elite*, Mills hardly expected to reach a popular, let alone mass public. Nevertheless, he always attempted to reach out to a wider public than did his fellow academics, even when he was formulating new theories, let alone engaging in public criticism. But Mills's intention is entirely subversive of contemporary mainstream social science, especially the notion that intellectuals should remain neutral observers of economic, political and social life. While he performed his fair share of funded research—notably his study of Puerto Rico and the collective portraits of characteristic social types—most of his writing is addressed to potential and actual political publics. Following Marx and Weber, who at the end of his life was a major contributor in shaping the moral and legal framework of the Weimar Republic, Mills held that intellectuals and their ideas were embedded in the social antagonisms and struggles of their own time; they bring to their analysis a definite standpoint, whether or not they are prepared to acknowledge it.

Yet Mills adhered to none of the mainstream parties nor to those on the fringes of mainstream politics. While he was a figure of his own time (his main work was done in the 1940s and 1950s, when issues of sex, gender and ecology were barely blips on the screen), his position was congenitally critical—of the right, conservatives, liberals, the relatively tiny parties of the left and especially members of his own shrinking group, the independent leftists. Like one of his heroes, the economist and social theorist Thorstein Veblen, himself a pariah in his chosen discipline, to paraphrase a famous aphorism of Marx, Mills was “in but not of” the academy insofar as he refuses the distinction between scholarship and partisanship. But, unlike Veblen, whose alienation from conventional economics was almost total, Mills was, for most of his professional career, a sociologist in his heart as much as his mind. The rhetoric and the methods embodied in his books on American social structure—*The New Men of Power*, *White Collar*, and *The Power Elite*—are firmly rooted in the perspectives of mainstream American sociology at the end of the war. These perspectives owed as much to the methodological precepts of Emile

Durkheim as they did to the critical theory of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Using many of the tools of conventional social inquiry: surveys, interviews, data analysis—charts included—Mills takes pains to stay close to the “data” until the concluding chapters.

But what distinguishes Mills from mainstream sociology, and from Weber, with whom he shares a considerable portion of his intellectual outlook, is the standpoint of radical social change, not of fashionable sociological neutrality. At the height of the Cold War and in the midst of the so-called McCarthy era, he fearlessly named capitalism as the system of domination from within one of its intellectual bastions, Columbia University, and distanced himself from ex-radicals among his colleagues who were busy “choosing the west,” otherwise giving aid and comfort to the witch-hunters, or neutering themselves by hiding behind the ideology of value-free scholarship. Anti-Stalinist to the core, toward the end of his life he was, nevertheless, accused of pro-Communist sympathies for his unsparing criticism of the militarization of America and his spirited defense of the Cuban revolution.

In the light of his later writings which, to say the least, held out little hope for radical social change in the United States *The New Men of Power*, Mills’s first major work, occupies a singular place in the Mills corpus. Written on the heels of the veritable general strike of industrial workers in 1946, and the conservative counterattack the following year embedded in the Taft-Hartley amendments to the Labor Relations Act, the study of America’s labor leaders argues that for the first time in history the labor movement, having shown its capacity to shape the political economy, possessed the practical requisites to become a major actor in American politics as well. But as both “as army general and a contractor of labor,” a “machine politician” and the head of a “social movement,” the labor leader occupies contradictory space. (Mills, 1948) By 1948, the year of publication of the first edition of *The New Men of Power*, buoyed by American capitalism’s unparalleled global dominance, a powerful conservative force was arrayed against labor’s recently acquired power and, according to Mills, had no intention of yielding more ground without an all-out industrial and political war. Yet, he found union leaders curiously unprepared for the struggle. Even as their cause was being abandoned by liberal allies, and belittled and besmirched by their natural enemies among the corporations and their ideological mouthpieces, right-wing intellectuals and

conservative politicians, union leaders remained faithful to the Democratic party and to the New Deal, which was rapidly fading into history. Mills and his collaborator, Helen Schneider, found that the concept that working people needed a labor party to truly represent their political interests had declined from the perspective of most labor leaders whereas a decade earlier, the apex of industrial unionism, a majority favored the formation of such a party, despite their expedient support of the Democrats.

You might say that Mills's notion of power owes much to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Just as Machiavelli reminds the prince that the old rules of the feudal oligarchy no longer suffice to retain power but that a public has formed which intends to call the ruler to account for his actions, in his book on the labor leaders Mills is, at first, in dialogue with a leadership increasingly attracted to oligarchical rule, and to the liberal center and whose love affair with established power has lasted to this day. His study admonishes the labor leadership to attend to the post-war shift that endangers theirs and their members' power. Arguing that the "main drift" is away from the collaboration between business and labor made necessary and viable by the war he suggests that labor leaders of "great stature" must come to the fore before labor is reduced. "Now there is no war," but there is a powerful war machine and conservative reaction against labor's power at the bargaining table.

"Today, knit together as they are by trade associations, the corporations steadily translate economic strength into effective and united political power. The power of the federal state has increased enormously. The state is now so big in the economy, and the power of business is so great in the state, that unions can no longer seriously expect even the traditional short-run economic gains without considering the conditions under which their demands are politically realizable." Top down rule, which implies keeping the membership at bay is, according to Mills, inadequate to the new situation where a military-industrial alliance was emerging, among whose aims was to weaken and otherwise destroy the labor movement.

How to combat this drift? Mills forthrightly suggests that the labor leader become the basis for the formation of a "new power bloc." Rather than make deals on the top with powerful interests, "he will have to accumulate power from the bottom. . . . If the democratic power of members is to be used

against the concentrated power of money, it must in some way create its own political force . . . the left would create an independent labor party” based on labor’s formidable economic strength. At the same time, Mills argues, it must enlarge its own base to include the “underdogs”—few of whom are in the unions. By underdogs Mills does not mean those at the very bottom. They are, in his view, too habituated to “submission.” He means the working poor, the unskilled who were largely left out of the great organizing wave of the 1930s and the war years. And he calls for the organization of elements of the new middle class and the rapidly growing white collar strata whose potential power, he argues, will remain unrealized unless they are organized.

One may read the *New Men of Power* with a number of pairs of eyes. At minimum it can be read as a stimulating account of the problems and prospects facing post-World War II American labor. It is descriptively comprehensive of the state of organized labor and the obstacles which it faced in this period. If Mills was mistaken to believe that unions would have to become an independent political force to meet the elementary economic demands of their memberships, it may be argued that this limitation applies only to the first three decades after the war. Unions did deliver, and in some cases handsomely, to a substantial minority of the American working class. They organized neither the “underdogs” nor the new middle class and white collar clerical, technical and professional workers who were all but ignored by the postwar labor movement, but forged a new social compact with large employers for their own members. For a third of the labor force in unions, and a much larger percentage of industrial workers, they succeeded in negotiating what may be called a “private” welfare state, huge advances in their members’ standard of living and a high degree of job security and individual protection against arbitrary discharge and other forms of discipline.

Ironically, this book is far more accurate in its central prognostication of labor’s decline for the years since 1973. Labor has paid a steep price for its refusal to heed Mills’s admonition to forge its own power bloc. Buffeted by economic globalization, corporate mergers and the deindustrialization of vast areas of the northeast and midwest and by the growth of the largely non-union south as the industrial investment of choice, many unions have despaired of making new gains and are hanging on to their declining memberships for dear life. Labor is, perhaps irreversibly, on the defensive. In this period, union

density—the proportion of union members to the work force—has been cut in half. Collective bargaining still occurs regularly in unionized industries and occupations and employers still sign contracts. But the last two decades are marked by labor’s steady retreat from hard-won gains. In many instances, collective bargaining as yielded to collective begging.

Corporations and their political allies have succeeded in rolling back one of the most important features of the New Deal-era reforms, the provision of a minimum income for the long-term unemployed (pejoratively coded as “welfare” by post-New Deal politicians). Many who still collect checks are forced to work in public and private agencies for minimum wages, in some states replacing union labor. Social Security is on the block and privatization of public goods, especially schools and health care facilities, seems to be the long-term program of conservatives and many in the liberal center.

Mills recognizes, as few labor leaders do, the importance of reaching out to the various publics that frame the political landscape. During the era of the social compact, union leaders saw little value in taking labor’s case to the public either during strikes or important legislative campaigns. As junior partners of the power élite they were often advised to keep conflicts in the “family” and rely on lobbying, influence with leading politicians through electoral support, and other traditionally élite tactics to achieve their goals. Labor leaders would rarely divulge the issues in union negotiations and during the final stages of bargaining because they agreed to a press blackout. Only as an act of desperation, when an organizing drive or a strike was in its losing stage, did some unions make public statements. Following Mills’s advice, one might argue, especially for public employees unions and unions in major national corporations, the public is always the third party at the bargaining table and the struggle to win it over has generally be won by management.

The ambiguity comes in when the subsequent writings are considered. Discouraged by the labor movement’s inability to reverse or halt the reactionary legislative and political offensive, by the early 1950s Mills had abandoned hope that the labor movement was capable of stemming the tide of almost complete corporate capitalist domination of economic, political and cultural life. Discussion of the labor movement’s social weight is largely absent from *White Collar*, published in 1951, only three years after *The New Men of*

Power. The Power Elite, which appeared in 1956, more or less permanently consigns organized labor to a subordinate status within the pantheon of national power. In Mills's view the moment had come and gone when unions could even conceive of making a qualitative difference in power arrangements. Whereas in 1948, Mills's address was chiefly to the labor leaders themselves—it was both a careful sociological portrait of these new men of power and an attempted dialogue with them—the subsequent works do not have a specific labor public in mind.

It was the theory of mass society, a concept that spans radical and conservative critiques of late capitalism, that informed Mills's later pessimism. Mills was a leading figure in the sociology of "mass" culture and mass society which developed along several highly visible lines in the 1940s and 1950s. He observed the increasing homogenization of American culture and brilliantly linked some of its more egregious features to the decline of the democratic public. While his rhetoric was distinctly in the American vein, his views paralleled, and were crucially influenced by, those of Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, the leading theorists of the Frankfurt school. While there is little evidence that he was similarly impressed by psychoanalysis, like them he linked cultural massification to mounting political conformity associated with the emergence of fascism and other authoritarian movements in nearly all advanced industrial societies.

This pioneering study of the emergence of the middle class of salaried professional, technical and clerical employees situates the spread of mass culture after World War I to their growing significance in advanced industrial societies. Consistent with his emerging obsession with questions of political and social power and of the prospects for radical social transformation, *White Collar* may be read as an assessment not only of the occupational situation of the various strata of the middle class in the manner of traditional sociological analysis, but of the social psychology of what Mills terms the "new" middle class—the rapidly growing strata of salaried professional, technical and administrative employees—many of them working in large corporations. The book opens with an obituary of the "old" middle class—farmers, small merchants and manufacturers—perhaps the leading class of the 18th and first half of 19th century. The transformation of property from a welter of small independent producers and merchants to large concentrations of capital which marked the

second half of the 19th century reduced the economic and political influence of the old middle class to the middle levels of power, mostly in local communities. The functions of administration, sales and distribution grew faster than manufacturing, but even in production industries the traditional blue collar industrial work force expanded more slowly than the bureaucracies of the various strata of white collar employees.

By World War I, the oligopolistic corporations in basic industries such as steel and energy, and large light-manufacturing industries such as textiles and durable consumer goods, banking and insurance, and wholesaling and retail enterprises, were hiring huge armies of clerical employees and sales personnel, and smaller but important coterie of engineers, technicians and managers, the latter growing numerically with the decline of the family owned and operated firm. To be sure the small firm has survived, according to Mills, but small business of all types is increasingly unstable:

Nationally, the small businessman is overpowered, politically and economically, by big business; he therefore tries to ride with and benefit from the success of big business on the national political front, even as he fights the economic effects of big business on the local and state front. (Mills 1951, 51)

Small entrepreneurs go in and out of business, their chance of survival diminishing with the growth and scope of large scale enterprises: grocery chains, department stores and large manufacturing corporations all of which are able to benefit from economies of scale and ample supplies of capital with which to invest in technological innovation to drive prices down and their small business competitors out of the marketplace.

Among the diverse strata of the new middle class the managers, according to Mills, occupy a unique place. The “managerial demiurge” signifies a new form of power, and not only at the workplace. Their numbers are growing rapidly and, to the degree they run corporate and government bureaucracies, “the managerial type of man becomes more important in the total social structure.” (Mills 1951, 77) While the top managers are given the task of controlling the underlying population, at every level of economic, political and cultural activity—middle managers, supervisors and line foreman, as well—the job of

coordination and of control expands with the complexity of the occupational structure and the manifold problems associated with advanced capitalism. Mills accepts the idea, first advanced by Berle and Means in the classic *Modern Corporation and Private Property*, that advanced capitalist societies are marked by the separation of ownership and control in the everyday functions of the large corporate enterprise, the owner has gradually handed more power to the manager. In turn, government and private corporations are run as rationalized bureaucracies rather than in the image of the individual corporate tycoon of the late 19th century who ran his business like an old fashioned sovereign.

Although little more than elevated wage workers and, for this reason, deprived by their subordination to management, of the work autonomy enjoyed by the “old” middle class, the salaried professional and technical strata remain culturally tied to capital. Mills saw little hope for their unionization as long as mass culture—their indigenous culture—was the “the main drift” of mass society. On the one hand, reared in images of American exceptionalism, they were the embodiments of the cultural aspiration for individual social mobility; on the other, their growth was accompanied by the proletarianization of professional and technical strata, proletarian because they neither owned their own productive property nor controlled their labor. Some may earn higher salaries than industrial workers but, in contrast to unionized workers who have the protection of a collective bargaining agreement limiting management’s rights, they were subordinated to arbitrary managerial authority in the performance of their tasks. Yet, their eyes were fixed on the stars. Lacking a secure class identity which is intrinsic to those engaged in the production and appropriation of things, as producers of “symbols” they were likely to remain an atomized mass, an oxymoron which signified what Erik Olin Wright later described as the “contradictory class location” into which they were thrust. As for the clerical and administrative employees they were cogs in the vast machinery of the “enormous file”; they were keepers of information and of the proliferating records accumulated by the growing significance of sales. (Mills 1951 189-214)

In the absence of social movements capable of making a genuine difference in power relations, these studies are directed to the general, largely “liberal center” for whom Mills never ceased to have mixed feelings. The liberals were a necessary ingredient of any possible grand coalition for social change, but this

center was marked by “looseness of its ideas,” an attribute which led it to “dissipate their political attention and activity.” Yet, in the wake of the failure of the labor leaders to face the challenge posed by the rightward drift of American politics, the hardening of corporate resistance to labor’s economic demands, the freezing of the political environment by the cold war and the virtual disappearance of the left, especially the independent left, until the late 1950s Mills’s public address shifted decisively to the center, even as his political position remained firmly on the independent, non-communist left.

The central category which suffuses Mills’ social thought and to which he returned again and again was that of power, especially the mechanisms by which it is achieved and retained by élites in the economy and social institutions. This is the signal contribution of the Italian social theorists Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto to Mills’s conceptual arsenal. In Pareto’s conception, élites, not classes, constitute the nexus of social rule. To derive his conception of power, Mills focuses neither on the labor process, the starting point for Marxists, nor on the market, the economic focus for Weberians. In contrast, Mills is a state theorist: élites are, for Mills, always institutionally constituted. He recognized the relative autonomy of corporations but consistent with the regulation era of advanced capitalism, he argued that the state had become the fundamental location of the exercise of economic, as much as political power. So, for example, in *The Power Elite*, his most famous and influential work, three “institutional orders” which are closely linked but spatially and historically independent—the corporate, the political and the military—constitute together what others might, in Marxist vocabulary, describe as a ruling class. Except it isn’t a “class” either in the sense of those who share a common relationship to the ownership and control of productive property or, as in Max Weber’s conception, groups that share a common interest in gaining access to market opportunities for employment and to acquire goods. The power élite is an *alliance* of the individuals who compose top layers of each of the crucial institutional orders and whose relative strength varies according to historical circumstances.

In the immediate post-World War II period, Mills detects the autonomous power of the military as, increasingly, the driving force in the alliance, just as the political élite occupied that position during the 1930s slump, when the provision of social welfare attained an urgency, lest by neglecting the needs of

the underlying population, the system might be endangered. The military, as a relatively autonomous power center, gained sustenance from the rearmament program leading to World War II but since there was no peace after 1945, it retained its central position in the power structure. Almost immediately the United States and the Soviet Union, the two remaining superpowers, were engaged in a new “cold” war in which nuclear and conventional weapons played an enormous economic as well as political role in world and domestic politics. And the cold aspects of the war were punctuated by discontinuous, but frequent, “hot” wars such as those in Korea, Southeast Asia, China, and Israel. Under these circumstances, the military, allying itself with those large corporations engaged in defense production, accumulated substantial independent power. Needless to say, the corporations, the holders of what he calls “big money,” are by no means ignored. After all, they remain the backbone of the entire system.

But in his analysis of the commanding heights, Mills is not content to describe the three institutional orders that comprise the power élite. He shows that the scope of its power embraces wide sections upon which the legitimacy of American society depends. Chief among them are the celebrities who, as the premier ornaments of mass society, are routinely recruited to lend prestige to the high officials of the three principal institutions of power. Political parties and their candidates eagerly showcase celebrities who support them; corporate executives regularly mingle with celebrities in Hollywood and New York at exclusive clubs and parties; and “warlords”—high military officers, corporate officials, their scientists and technologists engaged in perfecting more lethal weapons of mass destruction, the politicians responsible for executive and congressional approval of military budgets—congregate in many of the same social and cultural spaces as well as in the business suites of warfare. In short, following the muckraking tradition, but also international sociological discourse on power, *The Power Elite* uses the evidentiary method first perfected by the independent scholars such as Ferdinand Lundberg of tracing interlocking networks of social and cultural association as much as business relationship to establish the boundaries and contour of power. Moreover, in this work we can see the movement of individuals among the leading institutional orders that constitute the nexus of power, so that their difference tends to blur.

Naming the power élite as the only “independent variable” in American society, Mills was obliged to revise his earlier estimation of the labor movement. Barely eight years after designating the labor leaders “new men of power” who had to choose whether to lead the entire society in the name of working people and other subordinate groups he designated them a “dependent variable” in the political economy. Accordingly, he lost hope that, in any possible practical eventuality, working people and their unions would enter the historical stage as autonomous actors, at least until a powerful new left of intellectuals and other oppressed groups emerged to push them.

Mills’s identification of power with the triumvirate of corporation, military and national state, was offered in the same period that political theorists and sociologists were proclaiming the concept of pluralism as a more accurate description. Robert Dahl’s *Who Governs*, a study of the city of New Haven’s power structure, construed power in the metaphor of a parallelogram of forces, none of which dominated political decision-making. Business, labor, consumer groups such as parent associations, taxpayers and other organized groups constituted power relationships through the mechanisms of compromise and consensus. Although not denying that big business and the political directorate exhibited oligarchic tendencies, Dahl vehemently refuted the concepts associated with both Marxism and élite theory that there were clearly articulated ruling groups that were the only genuine independent force. Dahl’s study became not only a model for the understanding of local power, but of national power as well. As persuasive as Mills’s argument may have been for progressives and other political skeptics, his views were subject to the severe criticism of many of his fellow academics as well as reviewers. For some he had failed to appreciate the resilience of American democracy, was importing ideas inherited from the non-applicable European context to American circumstances and, in any case, had offered yet another exercise in debunking.

II

HE DID HIS GRADUATE WORK AT Wisconsin under the mentorship of, among others, Hans Gerth, whose powerful mind was never matched by a body of equally compelling written work. In some respects, Mills gave an English language voice to Gerth’s ideas (although the collaboration has lately been

subject to critical scrutiny by some scholars who contend that Mills took advantage of Gerth). These ideas—a complex synthesis of Marx, Max Weber, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto—introduced a wide range of concepts into the study of modern institutional life. Crucial to Gerth and Mills’s understanding of how modern institutions work was Weber’s theory of bureaucracy, read through the pejorative connotation of its system of rules and occupational hierarchies as inimical to democratic decision-making. Rather than viewing bureaucracies as necessary institutions to make complex industrial societies work more efficiently as Weber argued, Gerth also provided Mills with the idea that bureaucratic control of institutions entailed domination, which Robert Michels extended to socialist organizations in his classic, *Political Parties*. For Michels the mechanism of domination was the leadership’s monopoly over the means of communication. Mills sees the development of the state, no less than the labor movement as a series of highly institutionalized bureaucracies which, in contrast to his preferred model of unions—voluntary, democratically run and rank and file controlled organizations—were rapidly mutating into oligarchies of power.

Mills’s dissertation, *Sociology and Pragmatism*, completed in 1943, was an explicit attempt to draw the implications of European sociological theory for the United States. He himself exemplified that connection. For pragmatism there is no question of intrinsic “truth” if by that term we designate the possibility that truth may be independent of the context within which a proposition about the social world is uttered. The truth of a proposition is closely tied to the practical consequences that might, under specific conditions, issue from it. And practical consequences may be evaluated only from the perspective of social interest. But, unlike John Dewey’s concept, there is no “win-win” thinking here. In the end, Mills adhered to the notion that whether a particular power arrangement was desirable depended on whose ox was being gored.

Mills drew heavily upon Karl Mannheim’s concept of ideology, but also adopted his lifelong preoccupation with the intellectuals whom Mannheim designated as the only social formation capable of independent thought and action.. Mannheim’s major work *Ideology and Utopia* is a critique of the Marxist designation of the proletariat as a universal class and, particularly of Georg Lukács’s argument that having adopted the standpoint of the proletariat

which, in relation to knowledge, has no interest in reproducing the mystifications which buttress bourgeois rule. According to Lukács, Marxism can penetrate the veil of reified social relations to reveal the laws of motion of capitalism and, therefore, produce a truthful account of how society works. Mills was much too skeptical to buy into this formulation; Mannheim's relativism—that "standpoint" thinking inevitably led to partial knowledge—was more attractive and corresponded to his own pragmatic vision. Accordingly, knowledge is always infused with interest, even if it occurs behind the backs of actors. But Mills leans toward ideology as an expression of intentionality and this characterization is particularly applied to the labor leaders who are the subjects of *The New Men of Power*, and the business élite described in an essay republished in the collected essays, *Power Politics and People* and later incorporated in *The Power Elite*. Lacking an explicit ideology does not mean that labor or corporate leader can dispense with the tools of persuasion. But according to Mills, these are the tools of a "practical politician" rather than that of an ideologue. Thus, Mills's employment of the word "rhetoric" to describe how leaders persuade and otherwise justify their constituencies of policies and programs that may or may not be in their interest.

Mills was also a close reader of the political and social thought of John Dewey, perhaps America's preeminent philosopher of the first half of the 20th century and one of the leading figures in the development of pragmatism. From Dewey and from his interlocutor, Walter Lippmann, whose debate with Dewey on whether there was a chance for a genuine democratic society and governance in an America increasingly dominated by experts, was among the most important intellectual events of the 1920s. Mills derived the concept of the "public" or, in his usage, "publics" from this controversy. By the time Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1921) appeared, many intellectuals expressed doubts that the ideal of the public as the foundation of a democratic polity, which made decisions as well as conferring consent, was at all possible in the wake of the emergence of mass society with its mass publics and massified culture.

Lippmann argued, persuasively to many, that a public of independent-minded individuals was, by the end of World War I, decisively foreclosed by the complexity of international relations, by advanced technology, the reduction of

genuine knowledge from which to adduce opinion to slogans by the mass media, and the growing role of the state. For a society of citizens, in the sense of the Greek city-state, who are capable of making the vital decisions affecting the polity, he held out no hope. Given the conditions for its formation, the public was shortsighted, prejudiced and, most of all, chronically ill-informed. While defending the claim that the élite of experts, which came into its own with the consolidation of the modern state and the modern corporation, was as desirable as it was inevitable in complex societies, Lippmann retained a trace of his former socialist skepticism. He wanted a democratic public to force experts and political leaders to obtain consent on a regular basis and, through the ballot, to pass judgement on their quasi-sovereign actions. Thus, democracy was conceived purely negatively, as the barrier against authoritarian, technocratic rule.

Deeply affected by this powerful argument against participatory democracy, John Dewey was moved to respond. *The Public and its Problems* (1925) is, for all intents and purposes, the most penetrating case for an active polity and for radical democracy any American has ever written. With Dewey, Mills held that the promiscuous use of the term “democracy” to describe the de facto plebiscite of electoral politics, and other mechanisms by which consent is achieved by representative political institutions, is unwarranted. The institutions of the liberal state still need the consent of the governed. But the legislative and executive branches are increasingly beholden to the holders of institutional power, not their electors, except insofar as the public refuses to confer consent to policies which they perceive to be contrary to their interests and, as in the case of social security “reform,” succeeds in staying the hand of legislators beholden to corporate power, at least for a time. Having entered into an alliance with the military and corporate orders, the political directorate becomes a self-contained body, undemocratic in both the process of its selection and its maintenance.

Dewey’s concept of democracy recalls the New England town meeting in which the “public” was not a consumer of the work of active and influential people, but a participant, a decision-maker, in the community’s political and social life. In this respect, it is important to recall Mills’s “Letter to the New Left” (1960). The letter outlined the principles of participatory democracy on the basis of Dewey’s concept of the public, and was, perhaps, the single most

influential document in the early history of Students for a Democratic Society, one of the key organizations in the development of the social movements of the 1960s. SDS's program, enunciated in its manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement* was constructed around the concept/demand for "participatory" democracy in which "ordinary people" could control the "decisions that affected their lives." It presupposed the same distrust of the state and its branches that Mills evinced years earlier. But unlike the immediate post-World War II years when, notwithstanding its de facto expiration, the New Deal still inspired broad support for what Herbert Croly termed *The Promise of American Life* (which Mills names as the most important work of liberal statism), two decades of militaristic statism and the appearance of a new generation of political activism made Mills's radical democratic appeal more audible.

III

Mills was also a great taxonomist. With his mentor, Hans Gerth, he published in 1953 a major social psychology, *Character and Social Structure*, which situates the self firmly in the social and historical context which shapes and is shaped by it. This work is, perhaps, the premier instance of Mills's efforts to combine theoretical social science with the distinctly American psychology of William James and George Herbert Mead, but in these days when the little boxes of the mind seem to pervade social thought, this book languishes in the archives of largely unread masterworks. Gerth and Mills's bold juxtapositions are simply too adventuresome for a social science academy for which conventional wisdom seems to be the farthest horizon of possibility.. And his numerous essays covered the broad expanse of issues in American politics and culture, a range which has caused more than one detractor to complain that he is "all over the place." In this respect, Mills is a true scion of the great thinkers who founded the social sciences. Their task was to provide a philosophical scaffolding to the disciplines, a project which Mills understood did not end with the canonical works. As a pragmatist, he was acutely aware that theory requires constant renewal and revisions and that, contrary to much current thinking, the problem is not one of "applications" of received wisdom but to interrogate the wisdom in the light of contemporary developments. So, even as

Mills borrows concepts such as “élite” from eminent forebears, he refuses the hierarchical thinking that informed the writings of theorists such as Mosca and Pareto. For example, he invests new significance to it in the process of investigating historically-situated élites. As a result, the labor union élite and the power (ruling) élite display different characteristics, although in *The New Men of Power* we can see the first pass at the development of a new theory

His main theoretical project, explicated most fully in *Character and Social Structure*, was to situate the biographies of leading economic and political actors—labor leaders, the main figures in business, military and political institutions—within the social structure and the spatio-temporal context which set the limits and provided the opportunities for their activity. This methodological imperative is designed to account for individual variation of broad types, but also demonstrate the degree to which the social structure—explicitly named in terms of key institutional orders sets, at a specific time and specific place, the limits as well as the opportunities for individual and group action. Thus, our biographies mediate, and are mediated by, the institutional frameworks which condition decision-making. While, except in *White Collar* Mills is interested mainly in describing and explaining the structure of power, rather than of the worlds of the relatively powerless, this work is always undertaken in the interest of reconstructing a democratic public.

we shall use this term *psychic structure* (emphasis in the original) to refer to man conceived as an integration of perception, emotion, and impulse. Of course there are other psychic functions, memory and imagination for example, but we shall limit our terms at this point. For our purpose, “psychic structure” will refer to when, how and why man feels, perceives and wills.

At the core of Gerth and Mills’s theory are the concepts of “institution” and “self.” The notion of institutional order connotes the complex of institutions which, taken together, constitute what we loosely designate as the structure of power in “society,” chiefly the political, economic and military orders. Thus conceived the character structure of individuals formed by physical, and social conditions, particularly those of childhood biography, including family and schooling prepares them for playing certain “roles” within the institutional

orders to which they gravitate or are assigned by virtue of their education and training, situations which themselves are the outcome of certain interactions and relationships. The formation of the self in childhood is crucial for structuring the life chances of individuals, conditioning, if not completely determining the ways they structure knowledge, their emotional and volitional proclivities. But these processes are only relatively unique in individuals; conditions of social location, class, race and ethnicity, and education—play a decisive part in shaping the choices available to whole groups of people. The basic unit of analysis then, is not the individual but collective selves.

Thus his writings are suffused with “ideal types”—Weber’s methodological prescription to fashion composite profiles against which to measure any particular instance of the type—arranged horizontally as well as vertically. The models assembled in *The New Men of Power*—of labor leaders, or in *The Power Elite*, where he provides a collective portrait of business leaders, and in his essays published in the collection *Power Politics and People* which contains several composites of the various publics which he addresses and to which he is obliged to respond—give a glimpse of Mills’s lifelong approach to social knowledge: first, produce a composite profile of the subject. Then, provide detailed historically-informed descriptions of the context within which the subject(s) operate, and evaluate the relative salience of each element of this context to how the subject is shaped. Then, return to the subject by unpacking the composite to break down the different social and character types. Finally, re-place them in the larger political, economic and cultural situations. To what end? To find out what are the alternatives to the main drift of politics and ideologies. Needless to say, although a student of élites, Mills asks whether the democratic movement from below, of the rank and file union members, fractured publics of consumers and intellectuals, may succeed in overcoming the pervasive tendency toward oligarchic domination of government and civil life.

For most of his academic career Mills taught sociology at Columbia University. He produced social knowledge but was also an intellectual agitator. He was deeply interested in advancing the science of sociology as a means of giving us a wider understanding of how society worked. But, from the late 1940s when, at age thirty two, Mills and Helen Schneider produced their landmark study of the American labor union leaders, he remained a close

student of social movements; his writings span analyses of the labor movement, the student left, the peace movement and others. He swam, intellectually, against the current, yet unlike many independent leftists who saw only defeat in the post-war drift toward militaristic-corporate political economy and despaired of relevant political practice, he was, above all, a practical thinker whose interest was always to describe the “main” chance as a dead end and to counterpose the chances for leftward social change. Consequently, even when he is the most descriptive of, say, labor leaders, and portrays the new middle class in terms of subordination and as allies of the leading élites, his eyes never strayed far from the question of “ what is to be done?” What are the levers for changing the prevailing relations of power? How can those at or near the bottom emerge as historical subjects?

Mills is aware that to reach beyond the audience of professional social scientists he is obliged to employ a rhetoric that, as much as possible, stays within natural, even colloquial language. Addressing the general reader as well as his diminishing audience of academic colleagues, Mills conveyed often difficult and theoretically sophisticated concepts in plain, but often visual prose, described by one critic as “muscular.” And, perhaps most famously, he was a phrasemaker. For example, his concept of the “main drift” to connote conventional wisdom, as well as centrist politics encapsulates in a single phrase what others require paragraphs to explain. And, instead of using the Marxian-loaded term “crisis” or the technical dodge “recession,” to describe conditions of economic woe he employed the colloquial “slump.” He characterizes the rise of industrial unions after 1935 as the “big story” for American labor, a term which encompasses history and common perception. But the imperatives of the Cold War—especially the emergence of the military as a dominant institutional order—constitutes the big story of the immediate post-war era.

Mills wrote scholarly works but, in keeping with the style of a public intellectual, he was also a pamphleteer, a proclivity that often disturbed his colleagues and, in one of the more odious forms of academic hubris, led some to dismiss him as a “mere journalist.” In fact, this dismissal may, in addition to his boldness in attacking the big themes of social theory and analysis, account for the sad truth that since the late 1970s his major works are virtually unread in social science classrooms, have disappeared from many scholarly references, and are largely undiscussed in the academic trade. In the last decade of his life,

manifestos and indictments of the prevailing social and political order issued from his pen as frequently as sociological works. In fact, *The Power Elite*, which has inspired a sub-discipline whose academic practitioners include G. William Domhoff, America's leading consumer advocate and anti-corporate campaigner, Ralph Nader, and a veritable army of "public interest" researchers, has always been controversial on theoretical grounds, but also, despite its often meticulous and comprehensive collection of "data," criticized for lack of objectivity in its clear democratic bias. In these days when most members of the professorate have retreated from public engagement except as consultants for large corporations, media experts, and recipients of the grant largesse of corporate foundations and government agencies who want their research to assist in policy formulation, or confine their interventions to professional journals and meetings, Mills remains an embarrassing reminder of one possible answer to this veritable privatization of legitimate intellectual knowledge. In 1939 his colleague Robert S. Lynd published a probing challenge to knowledge producers of all sorts called *Knowledge for What?* He asked the fundamental question: to whom is the knowledge producer responsible? To the state? To private corporations? To publics that are concerned with issues of equality social justice? (Robert S. Lynd, 1939)

Mills rejects as spurious the prevailing doctrine according to which the social investigator is obliged to purge the work of social and political commitment. His values infuse the sociological research and theorizing and he never hides behind methodological protestations of neutrality. Mills is, instead, a partisan of movements of social freedom and emancipation while, at the same time, preserving his dedication to dry-eyed, critical theory and dispassionate, empirical inquiry. An advocate of a democratic, radical labor movement he was, nevertheless, moved to indict its leadership, not by fulmination, but by a careful investigation of how unions actually worked in the immediate post-war period. A self-described "man of the left," in the late 1940s Mills provoked his left publics to outrage when he concluded that the "old" socialist and communist movements had come to the end of the road. By the late fifties, as the frost of the Cold War melted a bit after the rise of Nikita Khrushchev to power in the Soviet Union and the power élite's recognition that the anti-Communist purges had hurt U.S. domestic as well as foreign policy, he was loudly proclaiming the need for a "new" left that had the courage to throw off

the ideological baggage of the past, especially Marxist orthodoxy and Stalinism.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *Critique of Dialectical Reason* appeared in 1960, he came to regard tradition, even radical tradition, as a political albatross. He never used Sartre's fancy term "practico-inert" to mark the encrusted habits that induce people to reproduce the past in the present but he was a persistent critic of the habituation of the left to old ideas. A withering opponent of the Communists, sensing the impending doom of the Soviet Union after the opening provided by the Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes at the 20th Communist Party Congress in 1956, he was among the first to urge the young to disdain their elders' preoccupation with the "Russian" question and instead attend with fresh eyes and hearts to the tasks at hand: to oppose U.S. intervention in the affairs of revolutionary societies and to establish the framework for a radical democratic society.

I have no doubt he was right to urge the young radicals to distance themselves from the past, at least in the short or intermediate term. But he never made clear that he himself had been reared, politically, on the Russian question and forgot that those who ignore addressing the failure of the revolution were doomed to relive it, an eventuality he was never cursed to witness. That the New Left, which soon captured the imagination of an entire generation, went awry may not be attributed exclusively to its refusal to address really existing socialisms of the Stalinist variety. But, it was entirely disarmed when, in the wake of the heating up of the war in southeast Asia, various Marxist ideologies became matters of urgent debate; most young leftists found themselves overwhelmed. They were moved by guilt as much as ignorance to confer uncritical support to the Vietnamese communists and even hailed the efforts of Pol Pot in Cambodia. By 1970, many reared the New Left were no longer Mills' spiritual children; they all but renounced his democratic faith in favor of a "third world" dogma of national liberation at all costs. But, ironically, Mills himself was not immune from such enthusiasms.

The book-length pamphlets were received as more than controversial, not only because they were, in many minds, notoriously heretical for their tacit violation of academic insularity, but also because they broke from the main tenets of the Cold War anti-Communist consensus at a time when, under

siege, political repression was still alive and well in the United States. *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) is, in many respects, a popularization and application to the international scale of *The Power Elite*. It depicts world politics in terms of the rivalry to two power blocs, one led by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union, both of which are governed by irresponsible élites whose conduct of the nuclear arms race threatens the very existence of humanity. Written in a period when one could count the number of radicals with full-time appointments in American universities on one hand and when the preponderant ex-radicals had “chosen the west,” this equalization of responsibility for the world crisis between east and west endeared Mills neither to the communists and their periphery, for whom the Soviet Union was virtually blameless for the state of things, nor to Cold War liberals for whom any suggestion that United States foreign policy could contribute to the chances for the outbreak of World War III was as shocking as it was absurd.

Hidden in the pages of his work is the influence of the one rather obscure strain of radicalism which, after the war, declared that both camps were forms of a new anti-democratic, militaristic capitalism and boldly, but futilely, called for the formation of a “third” camp whose base would be a radicalized labor movement in alliance with other anti-capitalist elements of the population. The project failed since at the time of its formulation, the leading unions in every capitalist country were busy making deals with their own corporations and with the capitalist state, and leftists were divided between those who were safely ensconced in the Cold War consensus or, despite everything, remained Soviet apologists. Mills’s appeal to the “public,” translated in this context to an appeal to the middle class liberal center, proved more effective for it corresponded to the emergence of a mass movement against the testing and use of nuclear weapons and for an end to the Cold War. Needless to say, the preponderance of American labor leaders, including Walter Reuther, the liberal president of the largest industrial union, the auto workers, were aligned with their own government’s policies and were convinced that the price of demilitarization was nothing less than a new slump. And even as he discounted the politicians as allies to the top layers of corporate and military power, Mills was equally skeptical that the intellectuals, the social type upon which political dissent conventionally relies, were adequate to the occasion.

A self-declared independent leftist (which, in the Cold War era meant an anti-Stalinist, but unaligned radical), Mills had been influenced by Trotskyism early in his life. He carefully separated the still influential Communists from radicalism. The Communists were influential precisely because the party had been an important vehicle for organizing major industrial unions and for bringing militant workers into the New Deal. During the war, they played a major role in enforcing the wartime no-strike pledge and the government's drive for productivity. Mills believed that whatever oppositional politics they evinced after the war was due, almost exclusively, to the chasm between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Listen Yankee (1961) an exemplary instance of Mills's penchant for rowing upstream, was, during its early years, a fierce defense of the Cuban revolution when, even for many anti-Stalinist radicals, it appeared that the regime was dedicated to raising living standards and was still open to a democratic society. At a time when even the liberal icon, Oregon Senator Wayne Morse, was a vocal advocate of counterrevolution and supported the Kennedy administration's ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, Mills asserted the right of the Cuban people to determine their own destiny and sharply condemned U.S. policy in the Caribbean and Latin America. He excoriated liberals and conservatives alike for their support of anti-popular regimes such as that of Batista in Cuba and Somoza's brutal Nicaraguan dictatorship, pointing out how the U.S. government had opposed democratic efforts by financing military counterinsurgency, especially against the Arbenz regime in Guatemala as well as Cuba's new revolutionary government. While he had been a lifelong anti-Communist, Mills saw the Cuban revolution as a harbinger of the long struggle of peasants and workers for liberation from colonialism and imperialism and predicted serious future confrontations between the spreading insurgencies and the United States which, under Democratic and Republican national administrations alike, became the main defender of the dictators.

Indeed, for the length of the 1960s and beyond, Mills's provocative intervention seemed prescient. In Colombia, Douglas Bravo led a formidable armed uprising and Che Guevara led a band of guerillas into the Bolivian jungle which, like the Colombian revolt, failed. But, with Cuba's material help the Sandanistas in Nicaragua and the National Liberation Front in El Salvador were alive with revolutionary activity and, by the mid-1960s the

dormant Puerto Rican independence movement revived under Marxist leadership which closely identified with the Cuban revolution. In the 1970s, Maurice Bishop organized a successful uprising in Grenada which openly aligned itself with the Cuban revolution and Michael Manley's democratically-elected left social-democratic government in Jamaica forged close ties with Cuba. However much he was smitten, Mills framed much of his own discourse in terms of the significant of these events for America's neo-colonial foreign policy and for America's future. Lacking the tools of discriminating evaluation, many young radicals not only gave their unconditional support but enlisted as volunteers in Grenada, Cuba and Nicaragua's education and health efforts.

IV

Mills is both an exhilarating exemplar of the role and reach of the public radical intellectual, and at the same time, a sobering reminder of how far the human sciences have descended since the end of the Vietnam War. For even in death Mills was an inspiration to a generation of young intellectuals estranged from the suburban nightmare of post-World War II America and eager to shape their own destiny, and to some in his own generation who, in fear and trembling, had withdrawn from public involvement, but yearned to return. The decline of social engagement and political responsibility that accompanied the ebbing of the impulse to reform and revolution in the 1970s and 1980s, witnessed the shift of labor, socialist and social liberal parties and movements to the liberal center. Many erstwhile radical intellectuals who retained their public voice moved steadily to the right, motivated, they said, by the authoritarianism of the New as well as the Old Left, and by their conviction that American capitalism and its democratic institutions were the best of all possible worlds.

He suffered the sometimes scorching rebuke of his contemporaries and, even as he won the admiration of the young as well as the tattered battalions of left intellectuals, had severed his ties with much of the liberal center which sorely needed to hear his argument that, in face of the awesome and almost complete hegemony of the power elite, American democratic institutions were in a state of almost complete meltdown. That recently a small body of scholars have revisited his legacy should be welcomed. The question of whether intellectuals

Stanley Aronowitz

will remain tucked into their academic bunkers depends not only on the depressions or wars to pry them out. Indeed the economic slumps that have punctuated the last two decades have failed to move most to utterance, although there is evidence that, after 9/11 some radical intellectuals have engaged in protest against the U.S. promulgated war on Iraq or have entered the debate on the side of the government. In the final reckoning, even if, after 1950, most of Mills's tirades were self-motivated, although a decade later Mills looked to an aroused coterie of young intellectuals as the source of a new democratic public, it is usually resurgent labor and other social movements to which intellectuals respond. While it can be argued that prior to 9/11 there were signs of revival in the political opposition, it remains to be seen whether, after suffering the defeats of the early years of the 21st century, the radical, nomadic spirit of C. Wright Mills will inculcate the minds and hearts of the intellectuals and activists upon whom he bestowed so much hope.

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