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THE LIFE AND WORK OF C. WRIGHT MILLS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article analyzes the interesting, though brief, scholarly career of the radical American sociologist, C. Wright Mills. Despite the fact that he wrote a number of pioneering works in a short period of time, Mills remains largely ignored in twenty-first century sociological literature. Mills challenged conventional wisdom by arguing that sociology should be approached from a less academic standpoint involving the linkage of private problems with public issues. According to Mills, the contemporary approach to sociology did little to address the true problems of society and needed to be replaced with greater activism on the part of scholars.
Keywords: Mills, Gerth, sociology, power elite, white collar, sociological imagination

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to introduce the controversial American sociologist of the last century, C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), within the context of his intellectual mission. The epilogue by sociology professor, Todd Gitlin, to the 2000 edition of Mills' *Power Elite* characterizes Mills as follows:

"C. Wright Mills was the most inspiring sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century, his achievement all the more remarkable for the fact that he produced his major work in a span of little more than a decade. For the political generation trying to find bearings in the early Sixties, Mills was a guiding light of radicalism. Yet he was a bundle of paradoxes, and this was part of his appeal whether his readers were consciously attuned to the paradoxes or not. He was a radical disabused of radical traditions, a sociologist disgruntled with the course of

sociology, an intellectual frequently skeptical of intellectuals, a defender of public action as well as a craftsman, a despairing optimist, a vigorous pessimist, and all in all, one of the few contemporaries whose intelligence, verve, passion, scope – and contradictions – seemed alive to most of the main moral and political traps of his time. A philosophically-trained and best-selling sociologist who decided to write pamphlets, a populist who scrambled to find what was salvageable within the Marxist tradition, a loner committed to politics, a man of substance acutely cognizant of style, he was not only a guide but an exemplar, prefiguring in his paradoxes some of the tensions of a student movement that was reared on privilege, amid exhausted ideologies, yet hell-bent on finding, or forging, the leverage with which to transform America root and branch."[1]

Equally enthusiastic is a comprehensive biography by Irving Horowitz entitled *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*.[2] Horowitz's work is complemented by a compilation (produced by Mills' two daughters) of Mills' correspondence with family, friends, colleagues, and publishers: *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*.[3]

Not all reviews of Mills have been so positive. His correspondence reveals his feelings concerning professional reviews of his publications and his reactions to them. Of note is the recent book *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life: Hans A. Gerth and C. Wright Mills*.[4] This well-documented analysis of the long collaboration among both social scientists over two decades helps illustrate Mills' complex personality and may raise some questions about his character and integrity. Czech readers were introduced to Mills' biography and publications in a succinct and well-written afterword to the Czech translation of *The Sociological Imagination* by Lubomír Sochor entitled *C. Wright Mills and the Sociology of Sociology*.[5]

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1 Todd Gitlin, Afterword to *The Sociological Imagination*, by C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 229.

2 Irving L. Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (New York: Free Press, 1983).

3 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, eds., *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

4 Guy Oakes and Arthur J. Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life: Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

5 Lubomír Sochor, "C. Wright Mills a sociologie sociologie", Afterword to *Sociologická imaginace*, by C. Wright Mills (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1968), 193–199.

Brief Biography

Mills was born on August 28, 1916, in Waco, Texas to a middle-class Catholic family of Irish-English background. His early education would suggest a future career in engineering. Mills attended Dallas Technical High School where he took no social studies courses. After graduating, he entered Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College. One year later, Mills transferred to the University of Texas where he graduated in 1939 with both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. According to Horowitz, the University of Texas was an exciting time to be during the 1935–1939 period: "A school in turmoil and transition in sheer size, as well as in political orientation. The university which emerged during this period reflected the larger-scale impact of the New Deal on Texas politics."[6] It was in Texas that Mills received his first exposure to Marxism. Horowitz concludes that it was there where Mills learned that Marx's method represented a "signal and lasting contribution to the best sociological ways of reflection and inquiry available."[7]

Mills wished to pursue further graduate study, but the University of Texas at this time offered no doctoral programs in sociology. Therefore, Mills decided to start his Ph.D. work at the University of Wisconsin. A faculty member at the University of Texas helped gain Mills' acceptance at Wisconsin.[8]

Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison was rated among the best in the country. This was Mills' first departmental affiliation. In Wisconsin, he began his controversial friendship and collaboration with Hans Gerth, a German non-Jewish refugee and junior faculty member. It resulted in a volume of translated essays entitled *From Max Weber*[9] and later in a book on social psychology, character, and social structure.[10] Horowitz concludes that "The two years at Wisconsin could be summarized as a mixed blessing. Mills' personal relationships had turned sour."[11] At Wisconsin, Mills continued a pattern of learning he began in Texas, which emphasized broad interdisciplinary tasks, rather than narrow disciplinary boundaries.[12] Mills' association with Selig Perlman proved important. Perlman's courses on socialism and capitalism influenced Mills. It was in Madison

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6 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 15–19.
7 Ibid., 34.
8 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 24–26.
9 Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1946).
10 C. Wright Mills and Hans H. Gerth, *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1953).
11 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 53.
12 Ibid., 45.

that Mills formulated his first attack on academic sociology.[13] With the exception of Gerth, Mills' interactions with the faculty at the Department were adversarial and confrontational, including the chairman, John Gillin and Professor Howard Becker.[14]

In 1942, Mills moved to the University of Maryland, College Park. He participated little in university affairs and viewed Maryland as a place to get away from. Instead, he related his professional affairs directly to the Washington, D.C. area. In a letter to Robert Merton at Columbia, Mills wrote that "University of Maryland is a sinking ship" and asked for help finding another position.[15] Mills had not been required to serve in the military during the war because of a heart ailment. His name had achieved recognition in some circles thanks to some articles he had produced for the leftist periodicals, *The New Republic* and *The New Leader*. During this time, Mills developed a relationship with the editor of *The New Leader*, Daniel Bell, who introduced him to literary notables. In 1944, Mills received a part-time position at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University under the leadership of Paul F. Lazarsfeld. Mills' task was to evaluate target projects in mass communications and public opinion.[16] In 1947, he was given an appointment at Columbia College. The reasons appeared to be complex. He failed to complete the results on contracts at the Bureau and was thus transferred to the College. It turned out that his teaching performance there was also disappointing, leading to the postponement of his promotion to Associate Professor. In 1948, Mills completed a contracted project on Puerto Rican immigrants in New York, which resulted in a book, *The Puerto Rican Journey*, which appeared in 1950.[17] In 1948, the first of Mills' books in trilogy on stratification *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* was published,[18] followed by *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* in 1951,[19] and by *The Power Elite* in 1956.[20]

In 1953, the book, *Character and Social Structure*, co-authored by Gerth, was released. A detailed description of this book, the history of Mills' collaboration with Gerth, which may raise questions about Mills' character, can be found in a

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13 Ibid., 55.
14 Ibid., 51–53.
15 Ibid., 60.
16 Ibid., 77–78.
17 Ibid., 80–82.
18 C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1948).
19 C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).
20 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

work by Oakes and Vidich entitled *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*.[21] Mills' most important publication, a handbook of sociological practice entitled *The Sociological Imagination*, was published in 1959. In 1956, at the age of 40, Mills was promoted to the rank of Professor at Columbia. Also in 1956, Mills traveled to Europe and lectured at the University of Copenhagen. At this time, he began writing his autobiographical letters to an imaginary Soviet friend, "Tovarich" (comrade), in which he tried to formulate his opinions on important political and social issues. Soon after his return to New York, Mills wrote his first mass-market publication, *The Causes of World War Three*, which appeared in 1958.[22] In the summer months of 1960, Mills visited Cuba where he met Castro and other leaders of the "new Cuba." Several months later, his defense of the Cuban revolution, *Listen Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* was published.[23] In December 1960, Mills was scheduled to debate Adolf Berle, Jr. on national television on the topic of United States policy towards Cuba. Overstressed and overworked, Mills suffered a major heart attack one day before the debate. In 1961, he traveled to the Soviet Union where he considered special treatment of his heart condition, but decided against it. In March 1962, Mills died at his home in West Nyack, New York. A few days after his death, Mills' last mass-market publication, *The Marxists*, was published.

Collaboration with Hans Gerth

Hans Gerth was a junior faculty member at the University of Wisconsin when Mills began his doctoral studies there. Mills did not register for any of Gerth's courses, but did attend a number of Gerth's lectures. Although Gerth's lectures were neither popular, nor easily understandable, Mills was very impressed. In his usual brashness, Mills commented: "Gerth is the only man worth listening to in this department."[24]

In 1940, their thirteen-year collaboration began. Their first joint publication was a review of James Burnham's book *The Managerial Revolution: What is happening in the World*. The critique, entitled *A Marx for Managers*, appeared in the small journal *Ethics*. Mills took the opportunity to send the essay to all important sociologists of that time.[25]

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[21] Oakes and Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, 57–90.
[22] C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958).
[23] C. Wright Mills, *Listen Yankee! The Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960).
[24] Oakes and Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, 2.
[25] Ibid., 15.

Gerth was an expert on German sociologist, Max Weber, whose works had not been known in North America prior to the publication in 1937 of Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*.[26] In 1943, Mills planned to publish an excerpt from Weber's *Economy and Society* as *Class, Status, Party*, which had been prepared and translated by Gerth. Mills took it upon himself to make all necessary arrangements with the publishers, and also claimed equal credit for this product.[27] Afterwards, Mills proposed the publication of a translation of selected works by Weber and succeeded in negotiating a contract with Oxford University Press.[28] Gerth was to translate the material into "rough English" and Mills would be responsible for editing the English as well as negotiating with publishers. The book's prospects became complicated when Edward Shils, a prominent sociologist from the University of Chicago, planned to publish his own selection of Weber translations. Shils had helped Gerth to secure his first university appointment in the United States and the two men were friends. Moreover, Shils was unhappy with the published *Class, Status, Party* and hinted that, as Gerth and Mills had Shils' original translation, their product might well be plagiarized. Mills orchestrated all dealings with Shils and the publication of *From Max Weber* was assured.[29]

For two years (1944–1946) a dispute over the credit for *From Max Weber* continued[30] since in an advertisement as well as in some reviews, Mills was listed as the first author. The arguments do not enhance the prestige of either of the two men. It was not only a disagreement over the allocation of proper credit for the book, but also a matter of collegiality and academic collaboration. Both Mills and Gerth sought witnesses and advocates in support of their respective positions and each engaged in vicious verbal attacks decrying the moral integrity of the other. While Gerth's contribution to the actual translations did deserve more credit, his claims that Mills' German was inadequate to deal with Weber's originals did not win Gerth many friends. Throughout the dispute, Mills was in control at all times.

The history of collaboration on the second book, *Character and Social Structure*, is even more twisted.[31] Mills had proposed the textbook on social psychology to Howard Becker, his doctoral supervisor, as a first-year graduate student already in 1941 as a collaborative project with Gerth. Becker secured them a contract with the publisher D.C. Heath, where Becker served as an editor. As initially project-

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26 Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1937).
27 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 55–56.
28 Oakes and Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, 17–37.
29 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 72–77.
30 Oakes and Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, 38–56.
31 Ibid., 57–90.

ed, the book was to contain 34 chapters. For years, nothing happened. In 1946, Mills drafted the so-called "Cleveland Protocol," which defined their respective responsibilities for the book. Gerth refused to accept the offered arrangements and, despite haggling, no work was done on the book for the next two years. In early 1949, Mills attempted to revive the project by securing a contract with Harcourt Brace Publishers, although they were still bound by the original contract with Heath. After prolonged disputes on the order of the authors' names and other details of collaboration on the project, Gerth consented in the spring of 1949 and signed despite their still-binding contract with Heath. Mills immediately began to work on gaining a release from the original contract, which they obtained at the end of February 1950. The book itself was published in 1953. Although the text was based upon Weberian principles, Gerth could not have written it alone. Gerth's encyclopedic knowledge required an editor and not just an English-language editor. Mills organized Gerth's notes into understandable texts. He also provided the discipline needed to meet the deadlines.

"Comparison of Gerth's notes and drafts for *Character and Social Structure* with the published text demonstrates that this book was Mills's major achievement as the editor and expositor of Gerth's thought. The book develops historical models of character structure and a theory of the institutional formation and selection of types of actors. Employing Weber's conception of institutional orders, Gerth and Mills examine political, military, economic, kinship, and religious institutions in a variety of historical periods and with reference to the themes of social control, stratification, power, and status. They construct models for investigating the unity of social structures and modes of institutional integration. Finally, they address large questions of social change, collective behavior, and the sociology of leadership by tracing the course and fate of the "master trends" of modernity: bureaucratization, the decline of liberalism, and the coordination of political, economic, and military institutions. The book ends with a breathtaking global tour of the prospects for communism and capitalism in the late twentieth century."[32]

Aronowitz characterizes *Character and Social Structure* as Mills' unjustly neglected premier work, which provided the "scaffolding" upon which to hang his future major works.[33]

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[32] Ibid., 131.

[33] Stanley Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", *Logos Online* (2003): 13, www.logosjournal.com/aronowitz.htm.

Stratification Trilogy

"Whatever place one ultimately gives Mills in the sociological cosmos, one fact remains indisputable: he was a master analyst of stratification. His trilogy *The New Men of Power*, *White Collar*, and *The Power Elite* provides a fundamental analysis of the American division of labor between 1946 and 1956. These three books helped define the critical literature concerning American class composition and indelibly stamped Mills as a scholar of first rank."[34]

Mills always tried to speak out to a wider public even when he was formulating new theories, let alone engaging in public criticism than did most other academics. Mills' intention was to be critical of the then prevailing notion that intellectuals should remain neutral observers of social, economic, and political life.

According to Aronowitz, "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."[35]

Mills was critical of the right, conservatives, liberals, and the left. He always maintained a clear separation from the Communist movement.

Mills wrote: "It is very difficult to locate the Communist Party as a specific unit on any United States political scale. Its outlook and activities are those of a foreign national bloc within the lineup of United States politics."[36]

Mills used the tools of conventional social research: interviews, surveys, and data analysis. Though staying within the framework of his data, Mills advocated social change that was often radical in nature.

The first book in the trilogy *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* was based on a research project Mills directed at the Labor Research Division of the Bureau of Applied Social Research. It was completed after major strikes in 1946, which were followed by Taft-Hartley changes in labor relations. This was not a study about the working classes, but rather their top leaders. Mills concluded that, for the first time in history, the labor movement had an opportunity to become a major actor not only in shaping the political economy, but also in American politics as well. Mills pointed out that:

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[34] Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 209.
[35] Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 3.
[36] C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1971), 22.

"Labor leaders occupied contradictory space, whether as army general and a contractor of labor, machine politician and the head of a social movement. The union is a human institution, established to accumulate power. Its leaders are members of the power elite. They do not simply represent workers, but are new participants in a world of powerful contending elites."[37]

Mills recognized the existence of a powerful conservative force that was assembled against labor, which had no intention of yielding more ground without an all-out political confrontation. Mills thought that labor leaders were poorly prepared for such a struggle.

"They are the only ones who can do it; that is why they are now the strategic elite in American society. Never has so much depended on men who are so ill-prepared and so little inclined to assume the power."[38]

Mills pointed out the major gap between the major unions, namely the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.[39] Mills introduced a number of new phrases into the technical vocabulary, such as "the main drift," "the great trend," or "the great shift." The precise meanings of these terms are sometimes difficult to grasp. His "main drift" is away from the cooperation between business and labor made necessary and viable by the war. He suggested "that labor leaders of 'great stature' must come to the fore before. Now there is no war, but there is a powerful war machine and conservative reaction against labor's power at the bargaining table." He warned that corporations translate economic growth into effective and united political power. The power of the federal state has increased. 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 short uneconomic gains.

Mills proposed that "labor leaders become the basis of a 'new power bloc'. Rather than making deals on the top, they will need 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 base in labor's formidable economic strength."[40]

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37 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 216.
38 C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power*, 291.
39 Ibid., 68–83.
40 Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 6–7.

As we know, Mills' prophecy was not fulfilled. Labor unions never formed a labor party, but the two main labor organizations did merge forming the united AFL-CIO. New gaps appeared, however, between the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters. Indeed, organized labor forged a new social compact with large employers for its members. Labor unions succeeded in negotiating striking advances in their members' standard of living and a high degree of job security.[41] In summary, unions did deliver to a substantial portion of the American working class.

Although Mills' dire prognosis for the unions did not materialize for the next quarter century after he published *The New Men of Power*, labor is paying a steep price now for its failure to heed Mills' admonition to forge its own power bloc.[42]

"Buffeted by economic globalization, corporate mergers, and the de-industrialization of vast areas of the Northeast and Midwest and by the growth of the largely non-union South as the investment of choice, many unions have despaired of making new gains and are hanging on to their declining membership 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 has yielded to collective begging."[43]

In the early 1950s, Mills lost confidence that the labor movement would be able to resist the complete corporate capitalist domination of economic, political, and cultural life, as is reflected in the next two books of the stratification trilogy.

The second book in the trilogy, *White Collar*, is an analysis of the American middle class. The characterization of the new middle class is introduced by the statement "The white collar people slipped quietly into modern society." "White collar" is the term which encompasses the various layers of the "new" middle class – the rapidly growing layer of salaried technical, professional, and administrative employees, primarily urban dwellers working mostly for large corporations. They perform non-manual labor at better-than-average salaries, and, in their social behavior and political attitudes, they always aspire to a middle course. Mills presents a description of the "old" middle class, farmers, small merchants and manufacturers. The transformation of property in the second half of the nine-

41 Ibid., 7–8.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 5–6.

teenth century from this class to large concentrations of capital severely limited the economic and political influence of the "old" middle class to middle levels of power in mostly local communities. The function of administration, distribution, and sales grew faster than production and the bureaucracies of the various levels of white collar employees markedly expanded. Mills regretted the disappearance of independent individualism as a lifestyle and as a social value. The "captain of industry," the free speculator in land, the free small entrepreneur of rural America – these gave way to the dependent and anonymous "little man" of the new urban culture and one whose "white collar" marks the shift of the middle class from older entrepreneurial groups to the mass of today's office dwellers.[44]

In the twentieth century, the large corporations of heavy industry, large light manufacturing, banking and insurance as well as wholesalers and large retailers employed large numbers of clerks and salespersons as well as technicians, engineers, and managers. Mills pointed out that small business of all types was becoming 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 front, even as he fights the economic effects of big business on the local and state front."[45]

Mills assigned a unique place to managers.

"The 'managerial demiurge' signifies a new form of power, and not only at the workplace. Their numbers are growing and, to the degree they run corporate and government bureaucracies, the managerial type of man becomes more important in the total social structure."[46]

With the decline of the small entrepreneur, the shared fate of economic dependence, and the great increase in the number of employees, the middle classes have increasingly adopted union-style methods of struggle. A significant portion of organized unionism was extending to transportation, communication, education, and even state and federal government. White collar people, according to Mills, have come to unionism too late and are thus sharing unionization in the period of its incorporation as an economic interest group into the "liberal state."

44 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 227.
45 Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 7.
46 Ibid., 8.

"Mills saw little hope for their unionization as long as mass culture – their indigenous culture – was "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 industrialized 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. […] 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."[47]

In *White Collar*, Mills coined the term "lumpen-bourgeois" to complement the concept of "lumpen-proletariat" in the Communist Manifesto. This marginal middle class stratum was barely earning its way in the city or country and existed from day to day, anxious and dependent. Mills attributed this to the high rate of small-business failure and the growing mentality of dependence. It was located at the "bottom of the entrepreneurial world." Mills had been advised by Gerth during the preparation of the manuscript that he misunderstood the German word "Lumpen," which is not a synonym for victims of economic deprivation, but rather a pejorative term meaning "riff-raff" or scum. The lumpen-proletariat was composed of pimps, prostitutes, petty criminals, and confidence men. Economically, they were parasites who performed no productive functions. Mills coined the term anyway and was clearly mistaken. The lumpen-bourgeoisie were disenfranchised and impoverished business owners. The lumpen-proletarians of Marxist theory were recruited from all strata and included "socially heterogeneous materials."[48]

The response to the book was overwhelming. There were assaults from commercial quarters and serious reviews by fellow sociologists. Not all of them were positive.[49] Mills responded to published reviews either to authors directly or through his various friends. Here is his reaction to a review by his former friend, Dwight MacDonald:

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47 Ibid., 8.

48 Oakes and Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, 118–119.

49 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 244–254.

"Yesterday I read Dwight MacDonald's review in *Partisan Review*. As you probably have seen, it is a complete thumbs down. Of course, I know Dwight is an irresponsible reviewer, but I can't conceal that it hurts, for if he is half right, the best thing for me to do is to close up shop."[50]

The last book of the stratification trilogy is *The Power Elite. The Power Elite* was published in 1956, a time, as Mills himself put it, "when Americans were living through a material boom, a nationalist celebration, a political vacuum."

"Into this milieu exploded *The Power Elite*. C. Wright Mills was one of the first intellectuals in America to write that the complacency of the Eisenhower years was not enough. His indictment was uncompromising. On the one hand, he claimed, vast concentrations of power had coagulated in America, making a mockery of American democracy. On the other, he charged that his fellow intellectuals had sold out to the conservative mood in America, leaving their audience-the American people themselves- in a state of ignorance and apathy bearing shocking resemblance to the totalitarian regimes that America had defeated or was currently fighting."[51]

Mills' social thought centered around power, particularly the mechanisms by which it could be achieved and retained by elites in the economy and social institutions. His thinking was influenced by the theories of Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca.

"Society is (and always will be) divided into two categories of people: those who rule (elites) and those who are ruled (masses). The so-called political ideology is only a mixture of truths, half-truths, and lies. Its function is to manipulate the masses, make them believe that everything is in order, and that the system they live in is the best there is. Social theory is thus reduced to a theory of elites. The movement of society is a political movement, which is based on the movement of elites."[52]

Mills derived his conception of power, in contrast to Marxists, neither from the forces of labor, nor from the market. He was a state theorist: according to Mills,

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50 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 163.

51 Alan Wolfe, Afterword to *The Power Elite*, by C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 363–364.

52 Miroslav Jodl, "Sociolog humanista," Foreword to *Mocenská elita*, by C. Wright Mills (Praha: Orbis, 1966), 15.

elites are always institutionally constituted. He recognized the relative autonomy of corporations, but he argued that the state had become the fundamental location of the exercise of both economic and political power.[53]

One of the goals of *The Power Elite* was to show how much the organization of power in America had changed. The "local elites" of the beginning of the century became obsolete and power in America had become nationalized. Mills called attention to the three institutionalized legs it was based upon: the corporate, the political, and the military. Business had shifted its forms from primarily regional in scope to ones that produced products in national markets. What once had been a propertied class, tied to ownership of real assets was replaced by a managerial class, rewarded for its ability to organize giant corporate enterprises for ever expanding profits. The managerial class exercises national influence not only through companies, but through roles it may be called upon to play in "the national interest."[54]

Mills characterized the political leadership of the country as the "political directorate" and introduced it as follows:

"A small group of men are now in charge of the executive decisions made in the name of the United States of America. These fifty-odd men of the executive branch of government include the President, the Vice-President, and the members of the Cabinet; the head men of the major departments and bureaus, agencies and commissions."[55]

Mills pointed out that only about one fourth of the members of the directorate have by virtue of their career been professionals of government or party politics. The remaining three quarters are political outsiders, most of whom had been linked either financially or professionally or both with the corporate world.

A change took place in the military sector of American society, whom Mills calls "warlords." After the Second World War, Mills detected the autonomous power of the military as increasingly the driving force of society. Warlords had once been "only uneasy, poor relations within the American elite; now they are first cousins; soon they may become elder brothers." With its generous financial support and fantastic technological and scientific achievements, the military was becoming increasingly autonomous. Of the three legs of the power elite, this "military ascendancy" had the most dangerous implications.

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53 Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 9.
54 Wolfe, Afterword to *The Power Elite*, 364–365.
55 C. Wright Mills, *Power Elite*, 231.

"American militarism in fully developed form would mean the triumph in all areas of life of the military metaphysic and hence the subordination to it of all other ways of life."[56]

The military retained its central position in the power elite. The two superpowers were engaged in the Cold War. Under these circumstances, the military allied itself with those industries engaged in defense production. Mills refers to such big corporations as "big money" and "big money" is the backbone of the entire system. Mills thus formulated the concept of the military-industrial complex long before President Eisenhower.

Mills also discussed politicians' reliance on mass media and celebrities. As the premier ornaments of mass society, celebrities are recruited to lend prestige to high officials of the three principal institutions of power.

Mills described the power elite as the only "independent variable" in American society and revised his earlier high hopes for the labor movement. He lost hope that working people and their unions would enter the historical stage as autonomous actors, unless a powerful new left of intellectuals emerged to push them.

"The top of modern American society is increasingly unified, and often seems willfully coordinated: at the top there has emerged an elite of power. The middle levels are a drifting set of stalemated, balancing forces: the middle does not link the bottom with the top. The bottom of this society is politically fragmented, and even as a passive fact, increasingly powerless: at the bottom there is emerging a mass society."[57]

The Power Elite generated considerable controversy and most reviews were critical. We should mention those by Daniel Bell, Robert Lynd, and Talcott Parsons.[58]

Mills' view was at variance with the opinion prevailing at the time that pluralism was a more accurate description of American political power. Empirical studies were conducted to address Mills' leading ideas as expressed in *The Power Elite*. The best known of these is *Who governs?* by Robert A. Dahl.[59] Dahl studied the power structure of the City of New Haven (Connecticut), construed power in

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56 Ibid., 223.
57 Ibid., 324.
58 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 272–277.
59 Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

the graphic form of forces, none of which dominated political decision-making. Business, labor, consumer groups, taxpayers, and other organizations constituted power relationships through the mechanisms of consensus and compromise. Although not denying the strong tendencies exhibited by big business and the *political directorate*, Dahl vehemently rejected that there were clearly articulated ruling groups that were the only genuine independent force, thus rejecting Mills' power elite theory.

The Sociological Imagination

In 1959, Mills published his best-known book, *The Sociological Imagination*. He introduced the book by stating:

"The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society. That is its task and its premise."[60]

The most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between the "personal troubles of milieu" and the "public issues of social structure." Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others. Issues have to do with matters that transcend local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life.[61]

In order to illustrate his point, Mills discusses unemployment, war, marriage, and urban issues. He points out that the problem of unemployment cannot be resolved by individuals. Likewise, individuals are powerless to solve the problems connected to war, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of a purely private solution, and the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal ingenuity and private wealth.[62]

Mills claims that: "My conception stands opposed to social science as a set of bureaucratic techniques which inhibit social inquiry by methodological pretensions." He then continues to attack the accepted principles of sociological work of his time, which he claims are "subject to distortion, to being run into the ground." The theory of history, the systematic theory of "the nature of man and society" (grand theory), and empirical studies of contemporary social facts and problems also came under attack. As representatives of a theory of history, Mills names Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler. Talcott Parsons is presented as a "grand

[60] C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 6.
[61] Ibid., 8.
[62] Ibid., 9–10.

theorist," and George Lundberg, Samuel Stouffer, Stuart Dodd, and Paul Lazarsfeld are described by Mills as "abstract empiricists."[63] Parsons stated that people often share standards and expect one another to stick to them. Insofar as they do, their society may be orderly. Parsons' grand theory was, in short, rejected by Mills. "One could translate the 555 pages of *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straightforward English. The result would not be very impressive."[64] Mills addresses the meaning of "power." He points out that the last resort in "corrective" mechanisms is coercion, but power has other forms as well. Authority is the power justified by the beliefs of the voluntarily obedient. Manipulation is another form, which is wielded unbeknownst to the powerless. In fact, these three types of power have to be considered when we think about the role of power. What Parsons and other grand theorists call "value orientations" and "normative structure" has mainly to do with master symbols of legitimation.[65] The ideological meaning of grand theory tends strongly to legitimate stable forms of domination […] The value of the theory as presented in *The Social Structure* is as follows:

"It is only about 50 percent verbiage; 40 percent is well-known textbook sociology. The other 10 percent, as Parsons might say, I am willing to leave open for your own empirical investigations. My own investigations suggest that the remaining 10 percent is of possible – although rather vague – ideological use."[66]

Abstracted empiricism did not fare much better. Like grand theory, abstracted empiricism seizes upon one junction in the process of work and allows it to dominate the mind. As a more sophisticated spokesman of this school, he used Paul Lazarsfeld, who defined sociology as a methodological specialty. The sociologist thus becomes the methodologist of all the social sciences. Mills criticizes Lazarsfeld's opinion of the sociologist, well housed in research institutes, as science-maker, tool-maker, and keeper of the interpretations, as well as the whole style of work. Mills points out that "The economics of truth-the cost of research-seems to conflict with the politics of truth-the use of research to clarify significant issues and to bring political controversy closer to reality." He continues: " [B]ecause of the expansiveness of the method, its practitioners have become involved in the commercial and bureaucratic uses of their work."[67]

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63 Ibid., 22–24.
64 Ibid., 31.
65 Ibid., 37.
66 Ibid., 49.
67 Ibid., 64–65.

Later in the book, Mills distinguishes between the responsibilities of the writer who tries to persuade others about his own opinions and those of the teacher whose responsibilities are greater.

"The teacher has a captive audience, to whom he has to reveal as fully as he can just how a supposedly self-disciplined mind works. The art of teaching is in considerable part the art of thinking out loud, but intelligibly."[68]

He addresses one of the problems of the academic profession in America.

"The academic profession has often failed to make ambitious men contented with merely academic careers. The prestige in the profession has not been proportionate to the economic sacrifice; the pay and hence the style of life have often been miserable and the discontent of many scholars is heightened by the awareness that often they are far brighter than men who have attained power and prestige available in other fields."[69]

In a separate chapter, Mills addresses the "bureaucratic ethos" in social science and points out that abstracted empiricism in particular represents a "bureaucratic development." He returns to questions of academic reputation and prestige and presents a detailed analysis of the status of the social sciences at American institutions of higher learning. While this analysis may be factually correct, one feels Mills' sense of bitterness, his recognition that he himself was only "marginal" at Morningside Heights.[70]

"However, by his prestige, the new academic statesman has acquired means of competence-but which must be distinguished from his personal competence. […] A permanent professional secretary, a clerk to run the library, an electric typewriter, dictating equipment, and a mimeographing machine, and perhaps a small budget for purchasing books and periodicals –even such minor office equipment and staff enormously increases any scholar's appearance of competence. Any business executive will laugh at the pettiness of such means; college professors will not-few professors, even productive ones, have such facilities on a secure basis. […] This is one kind of situation which helps to explain how men may acquire considerable reputation without having in all truth produced very much. About

[68] Ibid., 79.
[69] Ibid., 98.
[70] Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 76–113.

one such man, a colleague remarked: As long as he lives, he'll be the most eminent man in his field; two weeks after he dies, no one will remember him!"[71]

Mills then continues by discussing "the cliques" in the academic world. It is an expose which is not limited to American academia and is even more prevalent in smaller scenes. The cliques compete to control the field of study. The career chances of younger scholars depend on whether "they belong or not." Reputations do not always depend on the value of work accomplished, but may be due to one's position in the clique. When relations between the cliques are considered, there are "statesmen," brokers dealing in allocation of prestige between the cliques and pretending to be spokesmen for the field as a whole. He then points out that academia does not only consist of cliques, but there are also unattached individuals of many varieties, some of whom "play the game," whereas others do not. Mills also addresses the question of "mutual admiration," which in America is called "I scratch you and you scratch me." He addresses the idea of scientific peer review.

"Everyone who has not only reviewed, but also written books knows that one of the easiest of all intellectual tasks is to "debunk" a book – any book – in a two- or three-column review, and that it is virtually impossible to answer such a review in the same space."[72]

This is perhaps Mills' response to critiques of his previously published books, which had previously gone unanswered. It is a valid point, however, which has become even more important with respect to "peer review" of manuscripts for publication in journals, which are often of very dubious quality. Mills concludes his criticism by returning to both the grand theory and abstracted empiricism as follows:

"Theory serves, in a variety of ways, as ideological justification of authority. Research for bureaucratic ends serves to make authority more effective and more efficient by providing information of use to authoritative planners. […] Should these two styles of work come to enjoy an intellectual "dropoff", they would constitute a grievous threat to the intellectual promise of social science and as well the political promise of the role of reason in human affairs-as that role has been classically conceived in the civilization of Western societies."[73]

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71 C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 168–169.
72 Ibid., 112.
73 Ibid., 117–118.

The book provoked multiple responses. The important ones are summarized by Horowitz.[74] Most of the reactions were negative. Opinions could be found also in the Czech literature. In their textbook, *Soudobá sociologie* (Contemporary Sociology), Jaroslav Klofáč and Vojtěch Tlustý adopted a critical stance. They pointed out that, contrary to nihilist views of sociology, Mills had proposed emotional general concepts and demands. These lacked accuracy and clarity, were not sufficiently broad or systematized, and thus did not conform to scientific requirements.[75] A more positive review was presented by Lubomír Sochor.[76] The most vicious review was presented by Edward Shils in *Encounter:*

"Imagine a burly cowpuncher on the long, slow ride from the Panhandle of Texas to Columbia University, carrying in his saddle-bag some books which he reads with absorption while his horse trots along. Imagine that among the books are some novels of Kafka, Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, and the essays of Max Weber. Imagine the style and imagery that would result from the interaction of the cowboy student and his studies. Imagine also that en route he passes through Madison, Wisconsin, that seat of a decaying populism, and that on arriving at his destination in New York, he encounters Madison Avenue, that street full of reeking phantasies of the manipulation of the human will and of what is painful to America's well-wishers and enjoyable to its detractors. Imagine the first Madison disclosing to the learned cowpuncher his subsequent political mode, the second an object of his hatred. The end result of such an imaginary grand tour would be a work like *The Sociological Imagination*."[77]

This review requires no comment.

C. Wright Mills as Activist

In 1958, Mills wrote a book entitled *The Causes of World War Three*. This treatise reflected Mills' frustration with the Cold War and he hoped that he could contribute to world peace. It depicted global politics in terms of rivalry between the two power blocs of the divided world, one led by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union. His argument could be summarized as follows:

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74 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 95–108.
75 Jaroslav Klofáč and Vojtěch Tlustý, *Soudobá sociologie* (Praha: Svoboda, 1965), 276–278.
76 Sochor, Afterword to *Sociologická imaginace,* 193–199.
77 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 101.

"Total war (understand nuclear) has become absurd as a means of national policy. The power elites of the United States and the Soviet Union continue to be ruled by a 'military metaphysics', which does not reflect the above reality. Their propaganda machines describe the world divided into two adversarial camps, 'ours' and 'theirs', where only nuclear bombs and intercontinental missiles guarantee security. The war is not 'fatally predetermined'. American officials who control the means of mass destruction and are irresponsibly bringing war closer, should be forced to promote peaceful international relations and favorably affect the attitudes of Soviet leaders. In fact, he called for a unilateral halt of nuclear testing and disarmament. Having lost his faith in the masses, Mills believed that the only way to affect such a change in American policy was for the community of scholars, writers, scientists, and ministers to stop buckling down before the mad strategy of the 'brisk generals', put forward alternative proposals for action and get them debated and adopted. American intellectuals should realize that 'war and not Russia is now the enemy'. It has to be remembered that *The Causes of World War Three* was written in a period when one could count the number of radicals with full-time appointments at 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 Three was as shocking as it was absurd."[78]

The central message left by the treatise is the abstract sense of good and a concrete sense of evil. As Horowitz writes: "It was a negative book with a holocaust message: namely, prevent a war nobody wants and that all will perish from."[79] Mills bluntly stated that the major reason America's most powerful should be considered dangerous was that they controlled weapons of mass destruction and were in a position not only to contemplate their use, but to launch them. Mills also claimed that the United States and the Soviet Union were converging into a "fearful symmetry."[80]

In 1960, Mills wrote *Listen Yankee! The Revolution in Cuba*, of which 160,000 copies were published. It represented a fierce defense of the Cuban Revolution during its early years. Mills' enchantment with the Cuban Revolution was many-sided. Initially, there was the personality of Fidel Castro. In Mills' letter dated July 15,

78 Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 17.
79 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 292.
80 C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three*, 20–30.

1960, to Hans Gerth, Mills glowed about his upcoming trip to Cuba: the UN delegate tells me that Castro sat up in the Oriente reading and discussing with his band *The Power Elite*.[81] During his visit, Che Guevara also told Mills that he had studied *The Power Elite* during the guerrilla war.[82] Mills was very impressed by Castro.

"You just have to come up with the facts about what kind of man Fidel Castro is, and what kinds of men the forty-or-so commandantes and the two-hundred-or-so capitans of the Council of Ministers – all those who make up the revolutionary government of Cuba today – what kinds of men they really are. They have a real respect for the people and a real belief in the people. It's not some romantic idea. It's just something they know and something they are.These are the people-we revolutionaries think-and so you trust them. These are the people-and they can learn very fast what has to be done."[83]

It is clear that Mills was assisted by Castro's propagandists when preparing the book. *Listen Yankee!* contains blunt reminders of Cuba's recent past, in which the United States was branded as the main, if not the only source of misery in Latin America.

"Latin America is a great world region; it is a continent, long and repeatedly plundered; and it is in revolutionary ferment. That it is now in such ferment is a heartening testimony to the will of man not to remain forever an exploited object. For over a century Latin American man has been largely outside world history-except as an object; now he is entering that history-as a subject, with vengeance and pride, with violence. The unilateral Monroe Doctrine is part of the epoch of Latin American isolation. The epoch, and with it the Monroe Doctrine, is now coming to an end."[84]

It seems that Mills was so mesmerized by events in Cuba that he failed to see the course events there were taking. For example, he failed to recognize the increasing influence of the Soviet Union in Cuban affairs, the speed at which the private economy was being abolished, and the disaster of the single-crop (sugar) economy.

In Mills' opinion, Castro gained independence on the battlefield. Mills embraced Castro because Castro seemed to confirm Mills' belief in the decline of

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81 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 304.
82 Ibid., 312.
83 C. Wright Mills, *Listen Yankee*, 124.
84 Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 294.

liberalism in the West and the growing embrace of democratic values by Communist countries. In addition, Mills believed that the Cuban Revolution represented a victory of experimentation over and against the old American colonial yoke or the new Soviet ideological yoke.[85] In a prophetic tone, Mills basically predicted that the rest of Latin America would experience revolutions as well:

"We're talking sense to you, Yankee; listen to us, please. What will happen, for example, when the people of all those South American countries realize their enormous wealth, both the actual and what could be, and yet find themselves poor? When looking across to tiny Cuba, they see the Cubans are not poor? What will happen then?"[86]

Mills' account of Cuba was strikingly one-sided. He neglected to acknowledge the terror in the early stages of the revolution, the mass exodus from Cuba he lived to see and the Soviet domination, which followed the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Mills' predictions about the prospective economic strengths of Cuba and the rest of Latin America were also inaccurate. Horowitz correctly concludes that *Listen Yankee!* was Mills' poorest effort at social analysis.[87]

The Legacy of C. Wright Mills

In the last two years of his life, Mills became a public figure, whose pamphlets against the Cold War and United States Latin American policy were more widely read than any other radical's.[88] His *Letter to the New Left*, published both in Britain and the United States, became a Bible for the Students for Democratic Society (SDS). After Mills' death, his friend and neighbor Harvey Swados wrote:

"All these people were responding to what was at bottom not merely a logical indictment which could be upheld or attacked, but a poetic vision of America: an unlovely vision perhaps, expressed with a mixture of awkwardness and brilliance, but one that did not really need statistical buttressing or the findings of research teams in order to be apprehended by sensitive Americans as corresponding to their own sense of what was going on about them, more truly and unflinchingly than any other contemporary statement. They were responding in that unlovely decade,

[85] Ibid., 296.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 300.
[88] Gitlin, Afterword to *Sociological Imagination*, 230.

the fat and frightened fifties, to one who refused to compromise or to make the excuses that others were making-excuses, mislabeled descriptions, or analyses-for what was happening to their country. They sensed correctly that, faulty and flawed as it was, the vision of C. Wright Mills cut through the fog and lighted their lives for them."[89]

Mills' impact on the 1960s has been discussed by Jamison and Eyerman, who characterize the stratification trilogy as follows: "These books stand alone as a comprehensive corpus of social criticism in the decades following the Second World War."[90]

Tom Hayden, a leading figure in Students for Democratic Society and author of the *Port Huron Statement*[91] wrote that "the two writers who had the most influence on the founders of the SDS were Albert Camus and C. Wright Mills.[92] Hayden also recalled:

"The Columbia University Sociology professor defied the drabness of academic life and quickly became the oracle of the New Left, combining the rebel life style of James Dean and the moral passion of Albert Camus, with the comprehensive portrayal of the American condition we were all looking for. Mills died in his early forties […] during the very spring I was drafting the *Port Huron Statement*, before any of us had a chance to meet him, making him forever a martyr to the movement. […] He seemed to be speaking to us directly when he declared in his famous letter to "The New Left" that all over the world young radical intellectuals were breaking the old molds, leading the way out of apathy. Mills's analysis validated us not only personally, but as a generation and as activist-organizers, the political identity we were beginning to adopt."[93]

Indeed, Mills' *Letter to the New Left* outlined the principles of participatory democracy and was perhaps the single most influential document in the early history of SDS, around which the *Port Huron Statement* had been focused. Tom Hayden even wrote his Master's thesis, entitled *Radical Nomad*, on Mills. Students were

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89 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 3.

90 Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman, *Seeds of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 16.

91 Francis D. Raška, "Impakt amerického studentského hnutí v šedesátých a sedmdesátých letech dvacátého století na domácí společnost," in *Konsolidace vládnutí a podnikání v České republice a v Evropské unii III*, ed. Jiří Pešek (Praha: Matfyzpress, 2002), 47–56.

92 Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 4.

93 Ibid.

attracted not only by Mills' radicalism, but also by his literary style and professionalism. The appendix to *The Sociological Imagination*, entitled *On Intellectual Craftsmanship*, represents not only an instruction manual for sociologists, but also an introduction to the adventure of intellectual work. Todd Gitlin, an acknowledged expert on the 1960s and also on Mills reminds us in his afterword to the most recent edition of *The Sociological Imagination* that the following excerpt from *On Intellectual Craftsmanship* was placed next to his typewriter when in college[94]:

"Before you are through with any piece of work, no matter how indirectly on occasion, orient it to the central and continuing task of understanding the structure and the drift, the shaping and the meanings, of your own period, the terrible and magnificent world of human society in the second half of the twentieth century."[95]

A distinguished sociologist, Stanley Aronowitz, has recently written that during the last three decades of the twentieth century, C. Wright Mills was consigned to a kind of academic purgatory.

"In the wake of scandals involving leading corporations and their Chief Executive and Financial Officers, which have become daily fare, even in the 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 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."[96]

Mills remains a model for those who wish to become intellectuals. In his afterword to *The Power Elite* published in 2000, Alan Wolfe analyzes the book's validity in the present day. Wolfe believes that Mills was right about the corporate elites, but adds that Mills could not have predicted the rise of some industries, such as information technology, and the decline of others. However, Mills portrayal of corporate executives has turned out to be invalid today. Mills had portrayed them

94 Gitlin, Afterword to *Sociological Imagination,* 232.
95 C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination,* 225.
96 Aronowitz, "A Mills Revival?", 1.

as men who "must fit in" with those already at the top. He was also disdainful of their competence. This may have been accurate in the 1950s, but is certainly not true today. In Mills' time, industrial leaders in the United States faced few challenges. Leaders at General Motors did not have to worry that Toyota or Honda would be their greatest challenge. In the stable American market of the 1950s, the best way to get ahead was by going along. The corporate executives of today face much stiffer competition and uniformity would drive their respective companies out of business.

As an interpreter of Weber, Mills accepted Weber's idea that a heavily bureaucratized society would also be a stable and conservative society. Only in such a society could the power elite control all events. The radical changes in the competitive dynamics of American capitalism have important implications for the characterization of the power elite today. While those in the corporate hierarchy remain today, as in the times of Mills, the most powerful Americans, even they cannot control rapid technological transformations and global competition. Often events control people, not vice versa.

Another part of the power elite were the warlords. Mills argued that America's military elite was linked to the economic and political elite. It is true today that politicians are extremely friendly to the military, and that military contracts are critical for key industries. The role played by the United States in world affairs has changed. Since the end of the Vietnam conflict, the United States has been unable to muster its forces for sustained use in any foreign conflict. Worried about the possibility of a public backlash against the loss of American lives, American presidents have either refrained from pursuing military adventures abroad or have confined them to rapid strikes. Moreover, since 1989, the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union has undermined the capacity of America's elites to mobilize support for military expenditures.[97]

A change came with the tragic events of 9/11 and President George W. Bush's response to it. The United States is, once again, involved in a prolonged military conflict abroad called the War on Terror. It is clear, however, that public support for Iraq intervention is in steady decline. The military continues to close its bases. At the height of the Cold War, military expenditures represented 60 percent of federal outlays. Today, despite the Iraq War, they are only a fraction of that. In contrast with Mills' time, it appears that the American economic elite finds more in common with economic elites abroad than it does with the military elite of its own country.

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[97] Wolfe, Afterword to *The Power Elite*, 366–373.

The third leg of the power elite are politicians and public officials in control of the executive and legislative branches of government. Mills believed that this part of the power elite must rely on public media and that access to such media is expensive. But Mills could not have foreseen the cost of the electoral process today and the media's role in it. Engaged in a permanent campaign for office, politicians have to become permanent fund raisers. As the political process becomes ever more expensive, corporate sponsors may have more power over politicians than when Mills wrote his books.[98]

In *The Power Elite*, Mills defined the "mass society" as a conglomerate of atomized individuals not connected through class interests and solidarity. It is a "lonely crowd" of human atoms formed by the decomposition of ties of classical class division. The mass in this concept is neither a creative, nor a destructive historical force, but only an inert base for extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of a determined minority. The mass society cannot be but a passive object of historical action. It is not a negative pole of historical dialectics, but has become a positive component of the one-dimensional society of "eternal return" of the same, to reproduction of basic relations of the existing society, i. e. relations of the "mass society" and "power elite."[99]

At the dawn of the new millennium, calls have been made to revive the Mills legacy. At the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Lauren Langman presented a lecture, *History and Biography in a Global Age: The Legacy of C. Wright Mills*.[100] Langman called for the application of the sociological imagination to the current state of society. In the 1960s, a number of audiences had begun to pay heed to the questions raised by Mills. This progressive moment of sociology, however, was ephemeral. Due to a variety of structural forces, a variety of mobilizations in favor of civil rights, against the Vietnam War, and to promote feminism had taken place by the end of that era. These events did inspire a number of sociologists who were informed by the sociological imagination. A number of social critiques addressed alienation, conformity, "one-dimensionality," and questions of meaning. The legacy of that era still endures if only in voto soce.[101]

Langman purports to answer why that era waned and how fewer sociologists pay attention to the sociological imagination as follows:

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98 Ibid., 376.

99 Sochor, Afterword to *Sociologická imaginace*, 207.

100 Lauren Langman, *History and Biography in a Global Age: The Legacy of C. Wright Mills*, www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/langmills.html.

101 Ibid., 2.

"The Civil Rights Act and the end of the Vietnam War lowered the intensity of pressure for social change. At the same time, the Young Turks of sociology were seeking academic jobs and tenure, and the sociological establishment did not take kindly to leftist firebrands. Radicalism moved from social movements to deconstructing local texts and discourses. […] By the end of the 70s, the progressive movements of sociology had waned, as rock and roll became mainstream, sexual freedom became normative and remnants of activism became institutionalized. Yet in that era, radical changes in technology began to transform capitalist production. Little noted then, but Mills foretold what Bluestone, Bowles, and Gintis would later call the de-industrialization of an America being turned into an "industrial wasteland." New strategies of computerized, digitalized production, and/or the movement of production to off shore sites of cheap labor would portend the erosion of the labor movement and the decline of wages, colas, and many of the benefits that labor had won after hard struggles. By the 1980s, issues of unemployment, plant closings, and the growth of low paid service work garnered little attention in an era dominated by the make believe politics of the Reagan era in which the cultural tone was set by idolizing the rich of Dallas, Dynasty, and Knots Landing."

Langman calls for the revival of the sociological imagination and points out that changes in the labor market, the regional de-industrialization of America, sending production offshore, and the increase in low-paying jobs (called McJobs), and demands and enforcement of "pleasant" services by many service workers as well as the increasing number of people working from home has been leading to an increase in alienation. Some of the new arrangements of instrumental relations may provide "success" in business, but cannot provide a basis for social ties, connections, and commitments.

The nature of power elites has changed as well. The nation-state of Mills' era has been replaced by globalization. It is the condition of our age in which constraints of geography on economic, cultural, and political life have receded. Globalization now stands out as the fundamental historical context that most impacts people's lives. Thus, globalization is the central point of the sociological imagination of our time.

Globalization is accompanied by the changing dynamics of technologically advanced capitalism. Ownership is widely distributed beyond the country of origin and forms a network connected through the superfast electronic flow of information. It is also accompanied by the growth of multiple international regulatory agencies, global or continental, controlled by the most powerful members, namely the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the European

Union, NAFTA, CAFTA, etc. The dominance of international corporations, mergers, and acquisitions over national boundaries dominate most of the political and diplomatic decisions of today. Langman introduces some new terms, such as cyber-feudal society, and calls for cyber-activists as a needed balance of committed and concerned intellectuals whose role is to form conditions to publicize the information and impact publics for mobilization of demands for social policies of progressive change.[102]

In 2002, Kevin Mattson in his study of the New Left and radical liberalism reviews Mills' contributions in a chapter entitled *The Godfather, C. Wright Mills: The Intellectual as Agent*.[103] Mattson concludes that Mills became a "godfather" to the intellectuals who followed and who drew inspiration from him. It should be clear that they inherited tensions from Mills as well. Mills certainly left a living legacy. In 2003, John D. Brewer published a book *C. Wright Mills and the Ending of Violence*. He argues that it is possible to develop a sociological framework to explain the emergence and progress of the peace processes in Northern Ireland and South Africa, the two ethnically structured societies, using Mills' principle of "sociological imagination."[104] A brief evaluation of Mills by Dennis H. Wrong was published in 2003.[105] Wrong concludes that Mills was better at attacking the existing establishment than in proposing alternatives to it. As David Paul Haney writes in his recent book, *The Americanization of Social Science*:

"Mills himself, however, invoked the Deweyan principle of publicizing ideas in the name of the democratization of communication, regardless of the present obstacles to actual political activity. […] On the contrary, Mills set out to bend the mass media to his own ends, urging intellectuals to make the mass media the means of liberal-which is to say, liberating-education."[106]

Nevertheless, Mills' notions of what sociology should and might be remain powerfully attractive.

In his evaluation of Mills, Jan Balon points out the attempt of Michael Burawoy, who declared his allegiance to the concepts expressed in *The Sociological*

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[102] Ibid., 9–10.

[103] Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945–1970* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), 43–96.

[104] John D. Brewer, *C. Wright Mills and the Ending of Violence* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

[105] Dennis H. Wrong, *Reflections on a Politically Skeptical Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 163–169.

[106] David Paul Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 230.

Imagination, to revive Mills' projects in 2005.[107] In a discussion that ensued, however, Burawoy's opinion was criticized and rejected.[108] Burawoy defends his opinions in *An Open Letter to C. Wright Mills*. He proposes, however, that Mills' contention that the ultimate values on which sociology and society rest, i. e. *reason* and *freedom*, should today be *justice* and *equality* instead.[109] Burawoy concludes his "letter" as follows:

"My admiration for your work knows no bounds. Your place in the history of sociology is assured. You have rightly been rediscovered as a pioneer of public sociology. But your vision here is still stuck in the past. Harking back to the classics of the nineteenth century and upholding the mythology of the non-attached free-floating intellectual, you present us with the Janus-faced sociologist-facing outwards is the independent intellectual talking down to publics and at kings, facing inwards is the self-absorbed craft worker, fighting off the pathologies of professionalization."[110]

Steven Seidman also postulates that the promise of freedom is no longer adequate for new analyses.[111] Balon quotes Seidman as stating:

"The scientific inquiry was almost destroyed by a flood of sharp attacks by those who consider themselves to be its casualties, namely people of color, those not residing in the West, women, lesbians, gays, the physically disabled, the poor or economically weak."[112]

Balon's analysis of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* is a valuable contribution to the debate on Mills and his relevance to the discipline of sociology. Balon summarizes:

"His argument addresses crucially important questions about the public relevance of social inquiry and the underlying themes of social-scientific reflexivity, creativity, and non-conformity. However, despite his rhetorical force and stylistic

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[107] Jan Balon, "Ambivalentní odkaz Millsovy Sociologické imaginace," *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review* 45, No. 5 (2009), 1058.
[108] Ibid., 1067.
[109] Michael Burawoy, "An Open Letter to C. Wright Mills", *Antipode* 40, No. 3 (2008): 374.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Steven Seidman, *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
[112] Balon, "Ambivaletní odkaz," 1066.

brilliance, Mills' overall message is considered to be ambivalent. His concept of social inquiry based on identification of morally and politically relevant problems ultimately leads to the vaporization of the very substance of social inquiry and to the institutional debilitation of the field as such."[113]

Conclusion

The world has changed profoundly since the times of C. Wright Mills. His large following, particularly among young intellectuals, has waned over the last thirty years. Graduate course syllabi at major universities only rarely refer to Mills or his publications and he is seldom cited in the current academic literature. Some of Mills' early admirers or disciples try to keep his legacy alive. Yet, the modern sociological literature contains little analysis of Mills' ideas and contributions. The recent re-publication of four of Mills' major works, however, may be indicative of a revival of interest in Mills on the American intellectual scene. However, the accompanying chapters to these new editions are guarded and only point out that the new editions speak for themselves. The report on Mills' collaboration with Gerth raises more questions than it answers. C. Wright Mills' long-term legacy thus still awaits comprehensive evaluation. Enough time has elapsed to permit objective and unemotional analysis.

[113] Ibid., 1055.