

# STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 4, NO. 2

November, 2018

## **The Continuing Relevance of C. Wright Mills: His Approach to Research and What We Can Learn From It**

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Irving Louis Horowitz, his biographer, called him “the greatest sociologist the United States has ever produced,” but many of his colleagues at Columbia University considered him shallow and dangerously simplistic and others thought him to be embarrassingly naïve and believed his work grossly distorted reality.<sup>2</sup> A man of large ambitions and huge energy, C. Wright Mills elicited highly charged reactions, both positive and negative, in his admirers and his detractors. He had little use for the academic prose style of most of his fellow sociologists and played the role of synthesizer, social theorist, radical social critic, and committed polemicist in his own spirited and inimitable way. Though admired by and serving as an inspiration to many of his fellow sociologists, Mills was largely ignored by his discipline as a whole, aside from the work he did on social stratification. His influence, however, extended to many investigators in related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>3</sup> Unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries, Mills made all social inquiry his domain and plugged into increasingly ambitious projects during his all-too-short career.

Through it all, he left much behind to teach historians and all students of place and region. My intention here is not to recount his Midwestern roots or the larger story of his career, delve into the many controversies surrounding it, or engage in explorations of his personality.

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<sup>2</sup> Horowitz, quoted in Dan Wakefield, “Before His Time,” *Nation* 239 (September 15, 1984), 212; Morris Dickstein, “Reconsideration: C. Wright Mills,” *New Republic* 176 (January 29, 1977), 36; “Legend of the Left,” *Newsweek* 63 (May 11, 1964), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2-3. Aronowitz notes that Mills’s books have been translated into twenty-three different languages and that his work has been experiencing a revival in recent years.

Rather, it is to provide enough details of his life and thought to enable us to understand how his career might provide a model for how historical research can be practiced by students of place and region—whether of the Midwest or any place else. Mills is not the perfect guide, as would be true of anyone else whose career we might investigate. He had his foibles, deficiencies, failures, and missed opportunities. He was not particularly interested in regionalism as a historical/sociological phenomenon, preferring to cast his net more widely at the national and even international levels. But in his enthusiasm, his vision, his ambition, his creativity, and his work ethic, he provided an inspirational example of what investigators are able to accomplish if only they are willing to imagine broadly and work energetically. My purpose here is to describe and comment on some of his most important ideas, concepts, approaches, goals, and methods in such a way that they might serve as a list, a toolkit, a recipe, or a guide for approaching our own work.<sup>4</sup>

My own initiation to Mills occurred in 1962, when I was a freshman political science major at the University of Missouri, six years after the appearance of *The Power Elite*. The professor in our Introduction to American Government class assigned the book supplementary to our large textbook, and I found it fascinating. Later on, in graduate school, I read more Mills on my own and was especially taken with *The Sociological Imagination* and the essays collected in *Power, Politics, and People*, especially those relating to the sociology of knowledge. I set aside a special place in my intellectual toolkit for the sociology of knowledge and “social epistemology” after that. I also picked up *The Causes of World War III* and *Listen, Yankee* in cheap paperback format when they came out because they were inexpensive, I had been a college debater interested in issues of war and foreign policy, and I found Mills’s prose to be especially readable. He has been a person of interest to me ever since.

<sup>4</sup> One of the inspirations for this article is the collection of essays on American historians edited by Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). There are many other historians, social scientists, humanities scholars, and other researchers who come to mind as possible subjects for this kind of analysis, including Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, Drew Gilpin Faust, Michael Kammen, Barbara Tuchman, Eric Foner, David Hackett Fischer, Joan Scott, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Natalie Zemon Davis, Bernard Bailyn, William Leuchtenburg, and C. Vann Woodward. Of even more interest for readers of *Studies in Midwestern History* would be treatments of scholars and writers such as Patricia Limerick, William Cronon, John Mack Faragher, Richard White, Michael Steiner, R. Douglas Hurt, Jon Lauck, Robert L. Dorman, Andrew Cayton, Catherine Stock, James Madison, Jon Gjerde, John Hudson, Kathleen Neils Conzen, and others.

Mills was a Texas native, around 6' 2" tall and weighing more than 200 pounds. Loud, brash, self-centered, flamboyant, and egotistical, he was also enthusiastic, committed, idealistic, hopeful, and often generous to others. Outfitted in camping boots and motorcycle helmet or scruffy cap, carrying a knapsack full of books, and displaying a purposeful mien, he exuded a sense of impatience and restless activity. "Twelve books, scholarly essays, journalistic articles, two houses and a solid substantial cottage on an island in a Canadian lake were the fruit of twenty years of hard work, toil, and trouble," observed his graduate school mentor and later writing partner, Hans Gerth.<sup>5</sup> At Columbia, he became a legend in his own lifetime. A former student of his recalled that his most frequent word of advice was, "Take it big, boy!" It was a philosophy "he not only preached but applied to everything from eating and drinking to writing."<sup>6</sup> Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman contended that "almost single-handedly in the 1950s, Mills would try to keep alive what he later called the sociological imagination in countering the drift toward conformity, homogenization, and instrumental rationality: in short, mass society." According to his longtime neighbor and friend, the novelist Harvey Swados, Mills possessed "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."<sup>7</sup>

Most of his contemporaries and readers thought of him first of all as a Manhattanite or, beyond that, as a wild-eyed rebel out of Texas. But if spending two years in Madison as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin makes one a Midwesterner, he was also a Midwesterner. The city was the home of "Fighting Bob" La Follette, Wisconsin's progressive Republican governor, United States Senator, and 1924 presidential candidate on the national Progressive party ticket. His sons, "Young Bob" and "Phil," carried on the family tradition in the U.S. Senate and in the governor's chair during the 1930s, around the time that Mills was living in Madison. Although the young Mills appears to have been intensely focused on his academic interests at the university, immersion in the progressive atmosphere of Madison—the home of the La Follettes, economist John R. Commons, philosopher Max Otto, political scientist Harold Groves, and other

<sup>5</sup> Hans H. Gerth, "On C. Wright Mills," 1962, reprinted in *Transaction/Society* 17 (January/February 1980): 71.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Wakefield, "Taking It Big: A Memoir of C. Wright Mills," *Atlantic* 228 (September 1971), 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman, *Seeds of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 30; Harvey Swados, "C. Wright Mills: A Personal Memoir," *Dissent* (Winter 1963), 40.

similarly committed progressive activists and thinkers—could only have inclined him further toward the kind of left-wing political views he later became identified with. The time he spent in the city reinforced his naturally rebellious nature; introduced him to major questions worthy of attention to philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, historians, and activists of every stripe; and pushed him along the path to intellectual maturity. Mills was on a fast track from the very beginning, and his Midwestern experience helped propel him to quick success and influence. The dissertation on pragmatism that he completed at Wisconsin linked him to the intellectual leanings of progressive politicians like the La Follettes, who believed in action and practical application of theory to social problems.

Mills was a young man in a hurry. During the two years he spent in Madison, he picked up a mentor and future literary collaborator (Hans Gerth); further deepened his knowledge of the subject matter of sociology; made building upon the intellectual foundations of classical sociological theory more of an essential element of his habitual mode of thought; and made it clear to everyone that he was a rising star. Success, it seems clear from this vantage point, was bound to follow, no matter what route he took and in whatever place he landed.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL**

Charles Wright Mills – he dropped the first name in college – was born in Waco, Texas, on August 28, 1916, into a middle-class English and Irish Catholic family. Although his parents sent him to parochial school when one was available, he wound up an atheist. His father's work as an insurance salesman forced the family to move frequently—from Waco to Wichita Falls, Fort Worth, Sherman, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. This continual moving around militated against the boy's developing long-term relationships with others his age; the young Mills grew up shy and lonely. Nevertheless, he impressed those who met him as being exceptional and strong-willed. In college at the University of Texas, he blossomed intellectually; took delighted interest in books, music, and theatrical activities; made Phi Beta Kappa; and was elected president of an honorary sociological fraternity. He was introduced by his teachers to the writings of George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and Thorstein Veb-

len and became an intellectual rebel, wearing outlandish clothes and adopting a flamboyant personal style that he never abandoned.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his life, he remained a loner and a rebel: “I have never known what others call ‘fraternity’ with any group . . . neither academic nor political,” he wrote. “With a few individuals, yes, but with groups, however small, no.”<sup>9</sup>

Going on to graduate school in philosophy at Austin, he wound up on a first-name basis with most of the senior professors there, earned a reputation as a “campus intellectual giant,” and managed to publish articles in each of the two leading journals in sociology. While finishing up his master’s degree in philosophy, he applied for admittance to doctoral programs in philosophy at the University of Chicago and in sociology at the University of Wisconsin. Though Chicago was his first choice, when officials there failed to offer him a fellowship, he enrolled at Wisconsin, which did. Now able to “compete with the big boys,” as he put it, he concentrated his studies on sociological theory and methodology. Mills took three courses with Professor Selig Perlman in economics; the rest were all in sociology. Reflecting his increasingly abrasive temperament, he appeared to disparage the professors in the department more than admire them, having derogatory things to say about Howard Becker, Eliseo Vivas, and departmental chairman John Gillin.<sup>10</sup>

The professor with whom he established his closest bond was one he did not take any courses from—Hans Gerth, a refugee from Nazism. Gerth recalled Mills at Wisconsin as being “a good sportsman with bat and ball, a dashing swimmer and boatsman, sailing his shaky dory on Lake Mendota.” He arrived from Texas as a “young radical democrat shaped by the Great Depression.”<sup>11</sup> From the German scholar, who had studied at the University of Frankfurt, Mills obtained a first-hand view of European intellectual trends and sociological theory, especially the theories of German sociologist Max Weber.<sup>12</sup> Mills’s primary interest in Madison was pragmatism and the sociology of knowledge, to which he was introduced through the writings of Americans such as Mead and Dewey as well as Europeans such as Karl Mannheim.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1977), 9-10; Irving Louis Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 20-22.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Press, *C. Wright Mills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 40, 44, 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> Gerth, “On C. Wright Mills,” 71.

<sup>12</sup> Gerth’s influence on Mills’s sociological outlook could be seen especially in the latter’s utilization of Max Weber’s analytic categories for understanding social stratification, his structural and macroscopic approach in studying society, and his special focus on political power. Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>13</sup> C. Wright Mills, *Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 39; Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 41-53.

After completing his Ph.D. dissertation on sociology and pragmatism in 1941, he took a faculty position at the University of Maryland, where his colleagues included historians Richard Hofstadter, Kenneth Stampp, and Frank Freidel, all of whom would later distinguish themselves as scholars. At Maryland, he matured as a political radical. He opposed American participation in World War II, escaping the draft because of health reasons. In 1945, he was able to crack “the big time,” receiving an appointment at Columbia University (where Hofstadter would again be a colleague). During the late 1940s, his major research interest was organized labor, as he worked with a group of investigators under the direction of political scientist Paul Lazarsfeld, publishing *The New Men of Power: America’s Labor Leaders* in 1948.<sup>14</sup>

By the 1950s, Mills was ready to write off the trade union movement as a potential agent for bringing about broad political change, and his interest turned toward a widely conceived effort to analyze and expose the bureaucratic nexus that presided over the United States and to apply his analytical framework to the workings of society in a series of books. *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951) brought him considerable critical acclaim. *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* (1953), co-authored with Hans Gerth, provided a conceptual framework that informed all of his later writings. *The Power Elite* (1956) became his most controversial as well as his best known work and signaled his shift to a more left-wing position. The book’s greatest acclaim came from non-academics, while pluralist intellectuals attacked it from the right and Marxists criticized it from the left. *The Causes of World War III* (1958) and *Listen Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960) were polemical tracts, strongly critical of the way in which the power elite in the United States was leading the country toward war and which depicted Castro’s revolution as a model for other third world nations to emulate. Meanwhile, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) expanded upon notions first developed in *Character and Social Structure* and launched a broadside upon the normal type of social science practiced by establishment sociologists, whom he divided into two main camps—“grand theorists” and “abstracted empiricists.” Neither group, he believed, dealt adequately with the real problems average people faced in their everyday lives. Mills was nothing if not prolific in cranking out books, articles, and speeches during the 1950s, as he proceeded through his late thirties and into his early forties.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and ‘The Critical Ideal,’” *American Scholar* 47 (Winter 1977/78), 71-78.

Meanwhile, he went through three wives, fathering a child with each of them, quarreled with his colleagues, and suffered increasingly severe health problems. He worked too hard, never able to slow down. He visited Great Britain, Poland, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and a number of other countries. His “Letter to the New Left” (1960) quickly emerged as a popular manifesto for the rising New Left. University of Michigan student Tom Hayden, who in 1962 drafted the famous “Port Huron Manifesto,” observed, “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.”<sup>15</sup> Mills took hope from the notion that the student movement might usher in a political renaissance of the kind that the labor movement had not been able to deliver. He suffered his first heart attack the night before he was scheduled to participate in a nationally broadcast television debate with Kennedy adviser Adolph A. Berle on U.S. foreign policy regarding Latin America. As his health worsened during the following year, he continued to work without relent, preparing books on intellectuals and the New Left and planning a projected six- to nine-volume *magnum opus* to be entitled “World Sociology.” Prematurely, at age forty-five, just as the New Left was beginning to make headway, Mills died on March 20, 1962.<sup>16</sup> As time went by, he became a role model for a whole generation of leftist and radical students, such as Tom Hayden, Al Haber, Rennie Davis, and Todd Gitlin, all of whom knew Mills’s work well, while also finding inspiration in the writings of Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Roszak, Charles Reich, and other leftists who tended to get scant respect from academic sociologists.<sup>17</sup>

### MILLS’S SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

No doubt Mills’s Texas background and childhood had an impact on his viewpoints. Among other things, he was called a “prairie radical,” a “populist,” and a “Texas Trotskyite,” all of which implied the influence of his origins. While Mills’s personality, ambition, drive, iconoclasm, and individualism may all in some ways have derived from his Texas underpinnings and his experience as a student at the University of Texas, his intellectual pedigree was also influ-

<sup>15</sup> Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 17-21; Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 185-87.

enced by the atmosphere prevailing in Madison and in the seminar rooms, libraries, and bull sessions he encountered at the University of Wisconsin. During the early twentieth century, the intellectual winds blowing out of the Middle West were strong. Chicago possessed a claim on being the literary “capital” of the United States, being home to such luminaries as Carl Sandburg, Harriet Monroe, Ernest Hemingway, James T. Farrell, Richard Wright, and Saul Bellow. Universities such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Chicago, and others in the region easily held their own with those located on the East and West coasts. Other Midwestern writers and intellectuals, ranging from Robert Park, Thorstein Veblen, John Dewey, and Jane Addams to Clarence Darrow, Roscoe Pound, Charles Beard, and Carl Becker contributed to the ferment of ideas that shaped the early twentieth-century American zeitgeist. Wisconsin itself boasted a large number of influential writers and thought leaders, including, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner, Zona Gale, John R. Commons, Edwin E. Witte, Aldo Leopold, and, for a time, Frank Lloyd Wright, who was, in his own distinctive manner, as flamboyant as Mills.<sup>18</sup>

Mills might have been more intellectually comfortable and felt more at home had he remained in the more familiar Midwest to pursue his scholarly career than he later turned out to be in New York City. Operating in the “cultural capital” of America on the island of Manhattan, Mills felt somewhat out of place.<sup>19</sup> His lonely childhood no doubt contributed to his lifelong iconoclasm, and the heavy intellectual criticism that was aimed at him, especially after the publication of *The Causes of World War III*, led Mills more than ever to think of himself as a lone wolf.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On Chicago’s role in the American literary scene in the early 1900s, see Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900-1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966) and Carl S. Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Irving Louis Horowitz notes that when Mills moved to Columbia University, he remained a unique holdout against the functionalist intellectual tendencies prevailing there, preferring to adopt an emphasis upon symbolic interactionism. Warner E. Gettys, in sociology at Texas, had “made possible Mills’s appreciation of the linkage between the Chicago style as a way of doing sociological work and a style of thinking in terms of human actions and symbolic interactions.” Another indication of Midwestern influence on Mills’s later career was the way in which Hans Gerth and others at Wisconsin directed him toward an interest in the study of Marxian thought. Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 31-32, 131.

<sup>19</sup> Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and ‘The Critical Ideal,’” 75.

<sup>20</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology: Essays in Social Science and Social Theory in Honor of C. Wright Mills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 19.



One admirer called him a noble gadfly.<sup>21</sup> He stood out as a utopian and a moralist, but it was difficult to determine exactly where on the political spectrum he belonged. Mills did not develop a “system” or inspire a school of followers.<sup>22</sup> His writings, however, revealed a coherent vision of society, which remains a useful tool for social analysis.<sup>23</sup> During his lifetime, however, the coherence of his basic framework was not so readily apparent to many of his readers—friends and foes alike.

Mills was an unrelenting critic of society, pursuing what Richard Gillam called “the critical ideal.”<sup>24</sup> He wished to confront head on the great issues of the time, confident that critical intelligence could make a difference. For him, intellectuals possessed a critical calling. He disdained those who sold their birthright for a “mess of pottage,” carrying out the bidding of the government, the corporate elite, or the established society. Douglas Dowd called him a “beacon of systematic social criticism in a Saragossa Sea of academic insipidity.”<sup>25</sup> According to Ralph Miliband,

Unlike many critics of American society, Mills . . . went the whole hog. He was not a critic of this or that particular aspect of American society, of this or that evil in American life—he was against the American condition as a whole, against the way America went about making a living, against the way it treated people, against the way it conducted its political affairs, against the values, rhetoric apart (indeed, rhetoric included), by which it was guided; he was against what America was doing to itself, and what it was doing to the world. The point must not be burked: in relation to American society, Mills was wholly alienated and utterly unsentimental; his commitment, in a negative sense, was total.<sup>26</sup>

Mills’s central mission was to connect individual biography with social structure and historical change. More than most sociologists, he viewed society through the prism of history. “I seem automatically to try to put historical depth into my reflection,” he wrote. “Some knowledge

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph A. Scimecca, “Paying Homage to the Father: C. Wright Mills and Radical Sociology,” *Sociological Quarterly* 17 (Spring 1976): 180-96.

<sup>24</sup> Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and ‘The Critical Ideal,’” 70.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas F. Dowd, “Thorstein Veblen and C. Wright Mills: Social Science and Social Criticism,” in Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Miliband, “Mills and Politics,” in Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 78.

of world history is indispensable to the sociologist; without such knowledge, he is simply a provincial, no matter what else he knows.”<sup>27</sup> Putting things in historical context clarified the contours of one’s own situation. “As a writer, I have always tried, although in different ways, to do just one thing: to define and dramatize the essential characteristics of our time,” he wrote.<sup>28</sup>

Mills sought to illuminate the ways in which personal troubles are integrally intertwined with public issues. In *Character and Social Structure* and in *The Sociological Imagination* he provided a model of society, a methodology, and a demand for action that he hoped would inspire other students of society to make their research relevant and useful. Mills possessed a powerful intellect and an unbounded curiosity, but he lacked some of the qualities normally associated with the scholar. He was willing to risk being incomplete and to think in large terms and was more concerned about doing something worthwhile than about discovering absolute “truth.” Yet, Mills was firmly committed to discovering the truth or as close an approximation of it as he could attain.

Truth safely ensconced in an ivory tower would do people little good, so he was determined to transmit sociological knowledge to the public. He thought it should be as inescapable for people on the street as cartoon characters or the latest detergent. He was especially pleased with the sales of the polemical tracts that he wrote shortly before his death—“mass circulation stuff,” he called them.<sup>29</sup> Like Marx, Mills sought not simply to understand the world but to change it. Sociologists could, like Georg Simmel, adopt a stance of detachment, or they could follow the path of commitment.<sup>30</sup> He was passionately committed to the basic values of truth, reason, freedom, and action.<sup>31</sup>

Persuasion required, first of all, that the social critic “define and dramatize the essential characteristics of our time.”<sup>32</sup> Mills, like Marx, wanted to unmask false consciousness and to give people a true image of reality, which is a precondition for transforming society. But knowledge alone was not enough. Dedication and commitment were also required. People had to

<sup>27</sup> C. Wright Mills, “On Intellectual Craftsmanship,” published in 1952, reprinted in *Transaction/Society* 17 (January/February 1980): 70; See also Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), chap. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Mills, *Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, 279.

<sup>29</sup> Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 70.

<sup>30</sup> R. P. Cuzzort and E.W. King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 2d ed. (Hinsdale, Ill.: Dryden Press, 1976), 141.

<sup>31</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 162.

<sup>32</sup> Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 71.

act, not simply react; they had to create the conditions of their own lives. Mills adopted an international view, largely free from national parochialisms.<sup>33</sup> He operated like a secular preacher. Unlike many academics, he was not given to cynicism, but he was often outraged. He was “a moralist preaching to his peers.”<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, he harbored his share of dilemmas, ambiguities, and doubts, but he never questioned what he was up against<sup>35</sup> Defining what he was for proved more problematic. He thought of himself a “radical humanist.”<sup>36</sup> Others sometimes referred to him as a “romantic humanist.”<sup>37</sup> Like many of the counterculture radicals of the 1960s, he was better at defining the enemy than he was at articulating a positive vision of what society should become. Joseph Scimecca wrote that “Mills is being looked upon more as a romantic hero than as a social theorist.” His books, feuds, lifestyle, and early death made him “something of a Hemingway character, an existential man who was always saying ‘No, in thunder.’”<sup>38</sup> Once, when asked, “Just what do you believe in, Mills?” he looked up from the motorcycle on which he was tinkering and replied, “German motors.”<sup>39</sup>

Charles Frankel, a colleague at Columbia, questioned those who called Mills a moralist. He “wished to be a moralist,” Frankel agreed, “but he didn’t have the equipment. He knew so little about people. He wrote about the white-collar class but he had little idea what really went on in offices or whether the typists for whom he felt so sorry were as unhappy as he imagined.” Nevertheless, there was much to admire about a man who was so intense, passionate, and dedicated to making his work count. “Looking back,” Frankel commented, “it’s easy to criticize Mills, but when you were with him you knew that you were in the presence of an extraordinary human being.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 49-50, 169-70.

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, “C. Wright Mills,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), Vol. 10, pp. 362-64.

<sup>35</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Dickstein, “Reconsideration: C. Wright Mills,” 37.

<sup>37</sup> “Legend of the Left,” 91.

<sup>38</sup> Scimecca, “Paying Homage to the Fathers,” 180.

<sup>39</sup> Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 71.

<sup>40</sup> “Legend of the Left,” 92.

## INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Mills was at various times called a Marxist, a leftist, a pessimistic radical, an optimist in the American mold, a Freudian, a neo-Freudian, a Weberian, a neo-Machiavellian, a pragmatist, a radical humanist, and several other things. Some have argued that he progressed from symbolic interactionist to Weberian to Marxist or through some other intellectual odyssey. However, the best way to view Mills's intellectual journey is to recognize the eclectic nature of his thought from the very beginning of his career.<sup>41</sup> Mills was more influenced by American ideas than he was by ones emanating from Europe, but he drew upon wisdom wherever he could find it.

He was working on *The Marxists* when he died, and many have assumed he was a Marxist himself. To Mills, Marx was one of the most astute interpreters of modern society, and he believed that any adequately trained social scientist needed to be knowledgeable about his work. But he was not an orthodox Marxist, and he was highly critical of many of Marx's formulations.<sup>42</sup> Yet, he drew copiously upon Marxian ideas, both directly and indirectly. He believed it necessary to go beyond Marx (as well as Freud, Mannheim, and others). Mills possessed a library of around 300 volumes on Marxism. He became acquainted with Marxist intellectuals around the world and drew upon the work of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, working with German émigrés such as Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>43</sup> Although caught up in political issues and controversies throughout his life, he remained a studious non-joiner. He never joined any socialist group, scoffed at U.S. Communism, and apparently never voted.<sup>44</sup> His radical brand of politics was intellectual, not organizational, just as it was mostly homegrown and not imported.

Mills's early interest in the sociology of knowledge was partly stimulated by his reading of Karl Mannheim, especially his *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*.<sup>45</sup> Here the indirect influence of Marx is apparent. But Mills's sociology of knowledge drew more upon the work of Americans with Midwestern connections, such as Mead and Dewey,<sup>46</sup> and upon other American sources than it did upon the writings of European thinkers.

<sup>41</sup> Rick Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills: A Reappraisal," *Western Political Quarterly* 32 (December 1979): 479-96.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 482-85; C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York: Dell, 1962), 9-40.

<sup>43</sup> Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills," 485.

<sup>44</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 78, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 32-33.

<sup>46</sup> Dewey, although having been born in Vermont and spending most of his life in New York City, spent the early years of his intellectual life at the Universities of Minnesota, Michigan, and Chicago.

Another European influence upon Mills in other areas was his reading of classical elitist thinkers, including Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels. Mills's interests were much broader than those of these sociologists, but like them he emphasized the importance of elites and the influence that they wielded. He emphasized the disharmony existing between the power elite and the masses and tried to show that people, in fact, can break the cycle of elite domination rather than succumbing to Michels's "iron law of oligarchy." Mills also drew upon the ideas of James Burnham, Harold Lasswell, and Ferdinand Lundberg in developing his ideas about elites.<sup>47</sup>

Although Mills chose not to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago, he absorbed many ideas from the Chicago School of sociology while a student at the University of Texas, especially its development of symbolic interactionism (particularly George Herbert Mead's formulations), its emphasis on social psychology, its commitment to democratic traditions, its foci on community and institutions, and its partiality to institutional economics.<sup>48</sup> In addition to reinforcing his interest in pragmatism as an approach to knowledge and a means of critiquing the discipline, its practitioners emphasized that "the arrangements of particular social actors in particular times and places" helped elucidate the workings of social life. Chicago's dual reliance on statistical and on qualitative sources such as interviews, participant observation, personal documents, life histories, social mapping, and ecological analysis provided a practical model for social investigation.<sup>49</sup>

Coming through the intellectual milieu at the University of Wisconsin on the way to New York, Mills no doubt reinforced his natural inclinations toward democracy, pragmatism, action, and a concrete, factual orientation. Arriving there during the late 1930s, Wisconsin was still very much under the influence of La Follette progressivism, although by 1938 a strong conservative reaction was already beginning to set in not only within the state but all around the nation. The intellectual traditions cultivated at the University of Wisconsin of vigorous investigation, openness to evidence, practical application, democratic participation, and critical reflection worked to push Mills toward an oppositional stance that dared to challenge what John Kenneth Galbraith later labeled the "conventional wisdom." The intellectual examples set by Frederick Jackson

<sup>47</sup> Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills," 487-91.

<sup>48</sup> Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 31-33.

<sup>49</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 20-21.

Turner, Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, Max Otto, and other Wisconsin professors carried over in later decades in the work of scholars such as William Appleman Williams, George Mosse, Merle Curti, Allan Bogue, William Cronon, and others.

Mills spent only two years—1939 to 1941—in Madison, and he said little at the time in his letters home or to other people about his experience there. But we can infer from his later writings and activities that he found the atmosphere in Madison congenial and that the broader Midwestern milieu, including influences emanating out of Chicago, both reinforced and extended his democratic and progressive leanings, his natural inclinations toward individualism and nonconformity, his openness to new ideas and empirical evidence, his desire to achieve practical results, and his bias toward action. Mills's pacifism and opposition to U.S. entry into World War II fit in well with the isolationist tendencies of pre-Pearl Harbor Wisconsin and the larger Midwest. His commitment to reason and knowledge and his passion to extend education to the broader public complemented the widely famous "Wisconsin Idea," which posited a close link between state government and the university and made extension work and broad-based educational programs integral parts of the university's mission. Reform-minded Wisconsin was a congenial intellectual way station for a person who was already on the road toward a vision of extensive utopian social reform.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author David Maraniss, whose father was a long-time reporter for the progressive-oriented *Madison Capital Times*, captured the intellectual atmosphere of criticism and dissent that prevailed in Madison during the 1960s and 70s in his book *They Marched into Sunlight*.<sup>50</sup> If Mills sometimes seemed a bit out of place riding his motorcycle and interacting with people in the streets and coffee houses of New York City, he might well have felt more grounded intellectually and personally had he remained in that hotbed of dissent and leftist thinking—Madison, Wisconsin—in the heart of the Midwest.

As part of their progressive program to analyze and reform American society, Hans Gerth and Mills, in their preface to *Character and Social Structure*, stated that sociology should integrate the ideas of Freud and Mead. Mills, in fact, drew only sparingly upon Freudian ideas in his writings. He was slightly more influenced by neo-Freudians such as Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen

<sup>50</sup> David Maraniss, *They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

Horney, and Erich Fromm, but his social psychology derived more from Mead and Dewey than it did from any European thinkers.<sup>51</sup> Max Weber was the most important European influence upon him. The Weberian concepts of authority, bureaucracy, profession, class, status, and power were central in Mills's writings. He also used Weber's "ideal type" method in discussing such phenomena as the "cheerful robot," "abstracted empiricism," "grand theory," and "overdeveloped society."<sup>52</sup> Like Weber, Mills was interested in the subjective interpretation of action, and he attempted to link individual action with social structure. Gerth and Mills were early translators of Weber into English. Gerth incorporated Weber's concept of stratification into his social stratification course at Wisconsin, and Mills adapted it in his writings.<sup>53</sup>

Mills believed every sociologist should be well-grounded in the thinking of the classical sociologists, and in 1960 he edited *Images of Man* to bring some of these ideas together and make them available to students in a single volume. Weber and Marx were the central sources for Mills's political sociology; while Peirce, Mead, and Dewey begat his social psychology.<sup>54</sup> His introduction to Mead began while he was still an undergraduate, and Mead's theory of concept formation and socialization was a foundation stone for his thinking. Mills's Ph.D. dissertation was largely devoted to an analysis of Charles Sanders Peirce, pragmatism's founder, and its two primary articulators, William James and John Dewey. Mills himself quickly subscribed to the pragmatic point of view, which had a pervasive influence on American thinkers during the

<sup>51</sup> Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1953), xiv-xvii, 96, 127, 149-50; Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills," 493-94.

<sup>52</sup> Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills," 491-92. "Ideal types" are analytical constructs that abstract from concrete, complex reality essential features that reflect typical or common elements of entities, actions, processes, or thoughts. Examples would include "capitalism," "Protestant ethic," "urbanization," and "charismatic leader." According to Edward Shils and Henry Finch, "An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct." Shils and Finch, eds., *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, ed. and trans., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946); Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 30-32.

<sup>54</sup> C. Wright Mills, *Images of Man: The Classic Tradition in Sociological Thinking* (New York: George Braziller, 1960); Irving Louis Horowitz, "The Intellectual Genius of C. Wright Mills," in introduction to Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America*, ed. Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 24.

years immediately preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> The pragmatic approach to knowledge and investigation continued to inform Mills's thinking throughout his career, committing him to an interdisciplinary project combining the efforts of a variety of human sciences. Pragmatism drove him toward detailed empirical research at the same time that it encouraged recognition of the significance of theory. Mills developed a highly contextualist and historicist understanding of the role that ideas played in the social world and in history.<sup>56</sup>

Working in the pragmatic tradition was the United States' foremost institutional economist, Thorstein Veblen, who was born in Wisconsin, attended college in Minnesota, and then taught at the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and the University of Missouri before moving on to the New School for Social Research in New York City (a trajectory vaguely resembling that of Mills). Mills drew upon Veblen's view of power in America, with its emphasis upon the conflict of interests that existed between producers and consumers and upon the deceptive role played by advertising and salesmanship. Mills discovered in Veblen an alternative theory of power, one which resembled his own version of the phenomenon as discussed in *The Power Elite*. But although he referred to Veblen as "the best social scientist America has produced," Mills considered many of his views simplistic and inadequate.<sup>57</sup> He also drew upon the ideas of other institutional economists, including John R. Commons and Clarence Ayres.<sup>58</sup>

Mills passionately believed that sociologists should address big and significant problems. His disdain for narrowly defined subjects shone through in a story about a party given for Columbia grad students at which he was present. As one of his former graduate students later described the scene:

"I simply sat in a chair in a corner," he said, "and one by one these guys would come up to me, sort of like approaching the pariah—curiosity stuff. They were guys working on their Ph.D.'s you see, and after they'd introduced themselves I'd ask, 'What are you working on?' It would always be something like 'The Impact of Work-Play Relationships Among Lower Income Families on the South Side of the Block on 112th Street Between Amsterdam and Broadway.' And then I would

<sup>55</sup> On the broad impact of pragmatic ideas, see Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

<sup>56</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 16-19.

<sup>57</sup> Wallerstein, "C. Wright Mills," 363.

<sup>58</sup> Tilman, "The Intellectual Pedigree of C. Wright Mills," 480.



ask—” Mills paused, leaned forward, and in his most contemptuous voice, boomed: “WHY?”<sup>59</sup>

Mills focused his attention on what he considered to be the big, important problems: bureaucracy, stratification, power, war, social change, and so forth.

### MILLS’S SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Mills is remembered most for his statements about power and the power elite. But his book *The Power Elite* clearly derives from a broader conception he entertained about elementary relationships existing between the individual and society. Early on, based upon the work he did with Hans Gerth, he developed a useful conceptual framework for showing how social structure constrains individual behavior. This model was most fully laid out in *Character and Social Structure*, and Mills expanded upon it in *The Sociological Imagination*.

He wanted to explain human thought and action in terms of both the historical actor and the organism or personality. Like Marx, Dewey, and Mead, Mills saw man as “a whole entity,” an “actor in historic crises.”<sup>60</sup> He and his co-author, Hans Gerth, wrote in *Character and Social Structure*, “To try to understand the individual only as organism and as a person is to leave out an area of experience and observation that is very much part of any adequate portrayal.”<sup>61</sup> The book, written early in his career, provided a foundation upon which he built his major works, especially the trilogy on labor, white collar workers, and the power elite.<sup>62</sup> A person’s psychic structure, in conjunction with one’s bodily drives, instincts, needs, and simple presence made up one’s character structure, which, in turn, interacted with the surrounding social structure through the mechanism of the many roles a person played during the course of a lifetime. Individual and social action, therefore, emerged through a complex process of social action interwoven with the myriad factors and influences that bore down upon a person in one’s everyday life and interactions with others.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 70.

<sup>60</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 109.

<sup>61</sup> By “organism,” Mills meant the person’s physical being with all of its bodily needs, drives, instincts, and functions.

<sup>62</sup> Aronowitz, *Taking It Big*, 8. Although the book was published in 1953, Mills had started work on it a decade earlier.

<sup>63</sup> Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, xv-xvi, 11, quotation at 19.

Mills saw people as historical actors and thus deemed Freud's instinctual drive theory of human motivation to be inadequate. Man as an historical actor is a symbolic creation and thus is influenced in his behavior by words and images rather than simply by biological drives. Roles furnish cues for individual action, providing means for adaptation to individual and social needs. He viewed man as both a biological organism and an historical actor. The playing out of various roles is what fuses individual and society.<sup>64</sup>

Mills, who in his prime was often perceived as an outsider, an *enfant terrible*, or exclusively as an isolated, radical critic of society, was also a part of some of the major midcentury trends that were transforming sociology, in particular, and the social sciences in general. "By focusing on social psychology," writes Daniel Geary, "Mills participated in a prevailing trend of American social science. Within sociology, social psychology was becoming an important sub-discipline." It engaged investigators in a variety of fields, from Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict to Erich Fromm, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons.<sup>65</sup>

Roles emerge in interaction; they develop out of the expectations of others. Mills and Gerth provided a schematic diagram of social structure and the individual person in which one's various roles constitute the key linking function. Personality was conceptualized in terms of four key concepts: (1) "Organism" referred to a person (as with other social scientists of the time, he generally used the term "man" to cover what he was talking about) as a biological entity, embodying various drives, impulses, and needs. (2) "Psychic structure" referred to the integration of feeling, sensation, and impulse within the person. (3) "Person" referred to people as a role-players. A person is a social actor and can be analyzed in terms of the social action he or she undertakes. (4) "Character structure" is the broadest term for the individual.<sup>66</sup>

Linking the individual with social structure are the roles that individuals play within institutional contexts. The roles one acts out are determined by one's understanding of the expectations of others. An institution is an organization of roles. There are a number of institutional orders. Together they form the social structure. Institutional orders are defined according to func-

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 33, 110-12.

<sup>65</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 108-9.

<sup>66</sup> Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, chap 4; Scimecca, "Paying Homage to the Father," 184-88.

tion, e.g., political, economic, military, kinship, and religious. There are also “spheres of conduct” relating to the institutional orders. The four main ones are symbols, technology, status, and education.<sup>67</sup> This image of society draws mainly upon Weber for its notion of social structure and upon Mead and Dewey for its notion of character structure and role.

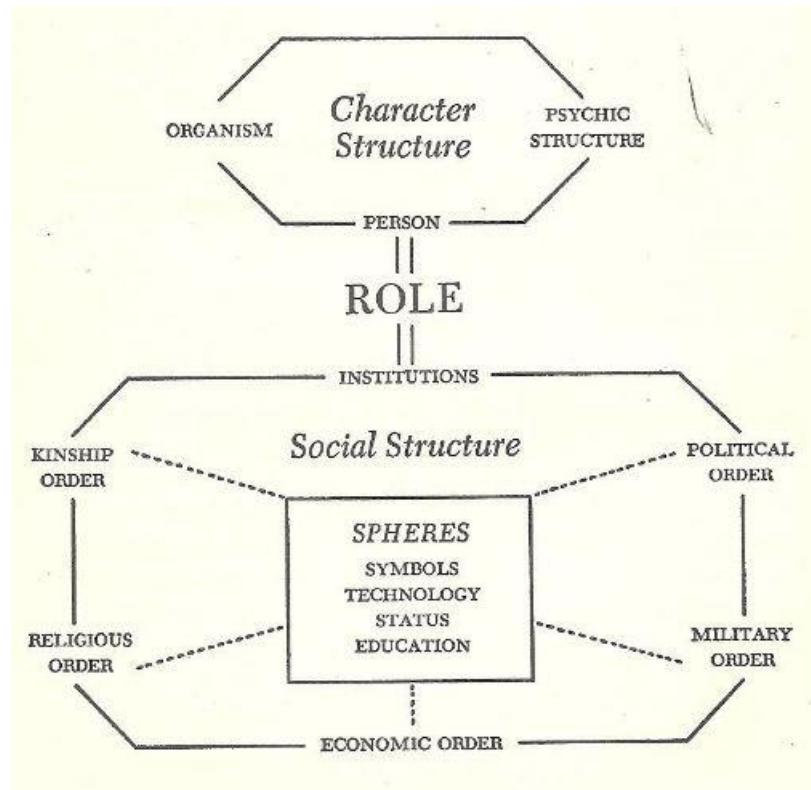


Image from Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1953), 32.

### SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Amon Rapoport considered Mills’s sociology of knowledge to be his most important intellectual contribution and one that will remain useful long after his other ideas are forgotten.<sup>68</sup> The sociology of knowledge offered a practical tool allowing Mills to bridge the inevitable gap separating his critical empiricism from his rationalist approach to knowledge. The assumption that a person’s claim on knowledge is heavily influenced by one’s social-historical context guided his thinking throughout his career and informed his choice of subjects to investigate.

<sup>67</sup> Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, 32-34.

<sup>68</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 101.

Nevertheless, the notion that this might have been his most lasting contribution to thought seems a bit overblown, since, with several exceptions, most of Mills's work devoted to the subject was done while he was still a graduate student.<sup>69</sup> His early interest in pragmatism was specifically motivated by his desire to use it as an aid in improving social science methodology. In part, he was influenced in this interest by the German sociological tradition, especially the work of Marx and Mannheim. During the early 1940s he was almost alone among American social scientists in defending Karl Mannheim's approach to the sociology of knowledge, as developed in his 1936 book, *Ideology and Utopia*. This early interest continued to inform his work throughout his entire career. He did not see sociology as an isolated academic endeavor but as part of a common project in the human sciences that included history, psychology, political analysis, and other forms of social inquiry.<sup>70</sup>

Much more influential on him in this respect was his reading of Charles W. Morris's *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* and of the work of Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and others connected to the American pragmatic tradition.<sup>71</sup> It should be noted, however, that the social constructionist view of reality pervaded Mills's later writings and was fundamental to his thinking. People are attentive determiners of what they perceive and experience, not simply passive receptors. A person's "frame of reference" or "apperceptive mass" constitutes an integral part of his character structure.<sup>72</sup> Mills's interest in pragmatism reinforced his historicist-structuralist sense of the function that ideas play in people's lives.<sup>73</sup>

Mills's doctoral dissertation, "A Sociological Account of Pragmatism," later published as *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America* (1964), was an exercise in the sociology of knowledge, tracing the manner in which pragmatism became entrenched in American higher education. He treated the major works of Peirce, James, and Dewey, relating them to their careers, their publics, and the social-historical context within which they operated. Peirce's scientific outlook and his position as an outsider in philosophical discourse were set in relationship to his ideas on inquiry, belief, action, logical realism, and so forth. Central to James's pragmatic approach were his thoughts concerning the intersection between science and religion. Dewey,

<sup>69</sup> Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, 149-50, 159.

<sup>70</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 16, 18, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*, chap. 7; Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 48-49.

<sup>72</sup> Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, 70; Scimecca, "Paying Homage to the Father," 185.

<sup>73</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 19.

who received most of his attention, was placed, as were the others, within the context of his wide associations and readership, with special focus being placed on his theory of logic. "The Cultural Apparatus" (1959) remained an unpublished manuscript that analyzed the organizations and networks in which art, ideas, and scientific work are distributed to the public. "Inside the apparatus," Mills wrote, "standing between men and events, the images, meaning, slogans, the worlds in which men live are organized, hidden, debunked, celebrated. Taken as a whole, the cultural apparatus is the lens of mankind through which men see; the medium through which they interpret and report what they see." Truth is defined by the cultural apparatus, which is controlled by the power elite. *The Sociological Imagination* is based upon the same sorts of assumptions but goes further in urging its readers to throw off the constraints imposed by society so that they will be able to transcend their milieu and the false consciousness it imposes upon them.<sup>74</sup>

### MILLS'S SUBSTANTIVE SOCIOLOGY

Mills always said, "Think it big," and his work can be seen as an effort to analyze American society in its multifarious totality. By the end of his life he was formulating a plan for a world sociology which would involve comparative study of as many as 100 different nations. The central concepts that guided his research were social stratification, occupation, class, status, power, and powerlessness, all of which were derived from Weber, with help from Marx. Against the dominant sociological functionalists and political pluralists of the forties and fifties, who talked about pattern-maintenance, tension-management, and conflicts among interest groups, Mills posited a dualistic version of power in which a power elite, linked closely to the cultural apparatus, exercised dominant power in society. Power, according to Mills, derives from a person's position within institutions, and so the study of power is, in effect, the study of institutions.<sup>75</sup>

After graduate school, Mills's major interest shifted from the sociology of knowledge to stratification and power. He drew upon Weber's conceptualization of class, status, and party (power), adding a fourth concept, that of occupation.<sup>76</sup> Mills's effort to understand social structure, as reflected through the lens of social psychology, was central to his sociological approach.

<sup>74</sup>Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism*; Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 62-64.

<sup>75</sup> Cuzzort and King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 142-44.

<sup>76</sup> Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 65-66.

In this, he was participating in a broad general trend that encompassed investigators from Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton to many other lesser known ones. Far more than most of his contemporaries, however, he also relied heavily on historical comparisons. In this, he was influenced by Hans Gerth at Wisconsin and his history colleagues at the University of Maryland—Frank Freidel, Richard Hofstadter, and Kenneth Stampp.

During the late 1940s, in his studies of labor unions, Mills focused not so much on power as on powerlessness. *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, written when Mills still retained a great deal of faith in unionism as a means to transform society, attempted to describe the timidity and ineffectiveness of labor leaders and held out the hope that they could work together to become more effective. Later, he would term his earlier identification with labor unions as a transforming social force as a “labor metaphysic,” one that was more of a dream than an effective tool for change. Even in the forties, however, Mills had come to the conclusion that power lay elsewhere and that there was little chance that labor unions could do much to bring about significant social change.<sup>77</sup>

In *White Collar*, the book that made Mills's reputation as a major social critic, he described a middle class that was powerless but didn't know it—a group of passive losers who were so blinded by the cultural apparatus that they possessed no notion of their true condition. The volume described what had happened to the American class structure during the twentieth century and the consequences this had for individual lives. “White collar” was an ideal type, encompassing office workers, managers, professionals, and most of those in the middle class. Social scientists at the time were just in the process of analyzing and interpreting the concept of a “new middle class” in America. Since people in that category lacked freedom on the job, they often sought release in leisure-time activities. Increasingly alienated from their jobs and from themselves, they often were confused, apathetic, and dominated by a herd mentality. They operated under the illusion of having power, but in fact they had none. Uncertain of their status, they engaged in a continuous but futile drive for prestige, which simply made them more subservient to the groups that did wield effective power.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 66-68; Nelson Lichtenstein, “Reconsiderations: The New Men of Power,” *Dissent* (Fall 2001), 121-30.

<sup>78</sup> Cuzzort and King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 146-49; Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 75-82.

*The Power Elite*, like his previous book, was the study of a social type, this time the people who rule American society through interlocking political, economic, and military orders. Through coercion, authority, and manipulation, a small group of politicians, corporate heads, and military leaders possessed real power in the United States, according to Mills. In addition, they exhibited similar psychological traits. Members of the mass public were manipulated through the mass media, remaining passive spectators to the actions that controlled their lives. Mills avoided using the term “ruling class,” because he wanted to underline the fact that the power elite was not merely an economic class. For him, power resides in institutions; it is a person’s position in the institutional framework that secures power. Class and status followed from power.<sup>79</sup>

Bleakly pessimistic and critical of what he termed the nation’s “power elite,” Mills rejected the pluralistic assumptions of postwar liberal democratic theory, substituting for it a vision of the manner in which American corporate and governmental institutions had successfully foisted their own vision of social reality on an unknowing and passive public. While Mills’s portrait of an interlocking directorate controlling huge influence to shape people’s perceptions of reality contained important insights into the working of American society and politics, his tendency to exaggerate his case and his failure to do justice to countertendencies and trends that might challenge the dominant power structure weakened his case and undermined his persuasiveness.<sup>80</sup>

These vulnerabilities became increasingly evident in two polemics he published in 1958 and 1960. Hastily written and published, these “pamphlets,” as Mills referred to them, reached a wide and often enthusiastic reading public but undermined Mills’s reputation with a more staid and cautious professoriate. *The Causes of World War III* (1958) recapitulated some of the basic ideas that Mills had expressed earlier and extended his analysis by arguing that the power elite was leading the United States headlong toward nuclear war, astride a permanent war establishment characterized by “moral insensibility” and uncontrolled by the political system.<sup>81</sup> The book marked a shift from sociological analysis to polemical pamphleteering, emerging in a period when the political torpor of the fifties was about to be shaken. During the next several years, the

<sup>79</sup> Scimecca, *The Sociological Theory of C. Wright Mills*, 83-87; Cuzzort and King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 144-46.

<sup>80</sup> Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 160-61.

<sup>81</sup> Cuzzort and King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 149-50.

civil rights sit-ins began, anti-nuclear rallies proliferated, and the war in Vietnam escalated. As the sixties wore on, Mills came to be viewed by many on the left as a prophet before his time.

During the fall of 1960, armed with a tape recorder, Mills traveled to Cuba. Returning home, he dashed off *Listen, Yankee* in only six weeks' time, presenting his views on the Cuban revolution. While the book sold well, it confirmed the view of many observers that he had gone off the deep end and had become a mere political activist.<sup>82</sup>

During the 1940s, like other intellectuals of his generation, Mills had focused upon labor as the vanguard of social change. Quickly disillusioned in this, he shifted his hope by the late 1950s to intellectuals and students. The role of the intellectual in his view was to transcend drift, to dispel false consciousness, "to confront complications," "to sort out insistent issues in such a way as to open them up for the work of reason," and "to respond to events."<sup>83</sup> He didn't expect the intellectual to get actively involved in politics but rather to create the intellectual means necessary for people to realize their true condition and to take necessary action.

### **THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND MILLS'S METHODOLOGY**

Mills was extremely critical of intellectuals for not speaking out on the issues of the time. *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) lambasted sociologists for avoiding the real issues and problems that people constantly faced. Mills ridiculed "grand theorists" such as Talcott Parsons for being so abstract and vague that they seldom touched upon problems that had any concrete relevance. He seemed even more concerned with the fact that most sociologists concentrated upon such narrowly defined subjects that they lacked any conception of major issues. "Abstracted empiricism" was so dependent upon the accumulation of mere facts and upon arcane methodologies that its practitioners could not see the forest for the trees.

*The Sociological Imagination*, which put forward a program for a new social science, contained ideas well worth consideration by historians. Mills's insistence on grounding empirical studies in the classical tradition of sociology suggests that historians should be aware of the his-

<sup>82</sup> Wakefield, "Taking It Big," 70.

<sup>83</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 148.



torical literature relevant to their investigations. As always, he started from the point where biography intersects with history and looked for the ways in which personal problems emerge as historical issues.<sup>84</sup>

Mills was guided by several principles in his work: (1) Focus upon big problems. (2) Show how personal problems are connected to social structure. (3) Use the historical approach. (4) Do comparative work (which he contemplated toward the end of his life).<sup>85</sup> Mills also provided a number of useful practical guidelines for scholarship: (1) Do not split work from life. (2) Keep a file or files. (3) Continually review your thoughts and experiences and write continually. (4) Obtain what you can out of bad books as well as good books. (5) Develop an organized system of notes. (6) Adopt an attitude of playfulness toward words and ideas as you try to make sense out of the world. (7) View things from the perspective of others. (8) While speculating, think in terms of imaginative extremes. (9) Be direct and simple in your writing.<sup>86</sup> Although Mills did not always follow his own prescriptions, the principles he advanced were both practical and often inspiring.

He achieved legendary status before his death, and his position as a countercultural prophet during the 1960s led many to assume that he must have been an extremely popular teacher. He did develop a host of admiring students, but apparently he often despaired of the job he was doing.<sup>87</sup> Dan Wakefield, who studied and worked with him, remembers how he would return from classes tired and frustrated, slamming his books down and exclaiming with regard to his students, “Who *are* those guys?”<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Aronowitz, *Taking It Big*, 216.

<sup>85</sup> Scimecca, “Paying Homage to the Father,” 192-93.

<sup>86</sup> Cuzzort and King, *Humanity and Social Thought*, 157-58. Despite the attractiveness of many of Mills’s suggestions for doing practical work, he was taken to task by some of his colleagues for his failure, in practice, to follow his own exhortations. For example, the sociologist Dennis H. Wrong, who found *The Sociological Imagination* to be “incredibly rich in ideas,” also chided, “There is a striking discrepancy between Mills’s own work and the admirable conception of what sociology ought to be advanced in *The Sociological Imagination*. To begin with, his books are surprisingly diffuse and repetitive if measured against the altogether fascinating discussion of his methods. . . . And if there is one rule that Mills insists on again and again as an absolute prerequisite for the exercise of the sociological imagination, it is the necessity of thinking historically and comparatively. . . . Yet, in spite of these exhortations, I find his own studies of contemporary America lacking in historical depth and comparative perspective.” Wrong, “The Failure of American Sociology: C. Wright Mills’s Indictment,” *Commentary* 28 (November 1959), 379, 380.

<sup>87</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 62.

<sup>88</sup> Wakefield, “Taking It Big,” 68.

### THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF MILLS FOR US TODAY

Mills tended to elicit strong responses from people, both positive and negative. He was accused of offering too many generalizations based on too little support, of not using statistics, of operating like a journalist trying to meet a deadline, of being shallow and simplistic, of lacking a coherent theoretical framework, and, perhaps most importantly, of not being objective in his work but rather of operating as a political polemicist and activist.<sup>89</sup> Others, however, saw in him someone who was committed, who was dedicated to sociological understanding, who asked important questions, who linked sociology with philosophy and history, who did “soak up facts,” who jarred people out of complacency, who was a good writer, and who, in his own words, always “thought it *big!*”

Mills’s insistence on “thinking big” inclined him toward subjects of national and international scope rather than ones of simply local or regional significance. This might lead students of regionalism in general, and those of the Midwest in particular, to conclude that therefore he has little to offer them. This would be wrong, however. Many of the issues and problems that Mills turned his attention to resonate with investigators of Midwestern history and culture. My purpose in writing this article has been to suggest how the mindset, concepts, methods, practices, questions, topics, and resources that Mills relied upon and encouraged others to utilize could be practically applied by historians and scholars in every subject area, including those interested in Midwestern history. Mills’s particular appeal for students of the Midwest seems obvious enough, if one just thinks about it a little bit. Here, in conclusion, I will give several examples of issues or themes connecting Mills’s writings with the region.

In the first place, consider the prominent place in his work of his critique of cultural homogenization and the rise of mass society. His writings on the subject coincided with a cascade of similar jeremiads published around the time that he was working, ranging from David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* and Sloane Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, and Tom Hayden’s “Port Huron Manifesto” (a document owing much to Mills’s inspiration). The explosive growth of television in the fifties, along with the expanding influence of popular culture in its many forms, worked to diminish local and regional distinctions and to stimulate fears about the possi-

<sup>89</sup> Horowitz, ed., *The New Sociology*, 64, 66, 134, 148, 159.

ble negative impacts of “mass society” on people’s lives. In his incisive recent analysis of the decline of Midwestern literary and historical regionalism, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge*, historian Jon Lauck notes a number of causes behind the phenomenon, not the least of which is that the “growth of radio and television and their natural inclination to produce a ‘mass culture’ for a popular audience further eroded the capacity to retain regional identities.”<sup>90</sup> While Mills joined with many others in condemning the corrosive effects of cultural flattening and the menace to citizenship posed by mass society, students of regionalism today, including those interested in Midwestern history and culture, necessarily need to grapple with the implications of these developments on regional distinctiveness and even on their survival in the United States.

Power in all of its ramifications stood out above every other issue in Mills’s thinking, posing a threat to social flourishing. *The Power Elite* depicted the dominant influence of governmental, business, and military institutions in American life. For Midwesterners, the mid-twentieth century witnessed power flowing to the coasts, with the Midwest being left high, dry, and increasingly less influential in the middle. Meanwhile, perceptive observers began noticing the rise of the “Sun Belt” or the “Southern Rim.” Its ascent coincided with the Midwest’s relative decline, which found expression in its being referred to as the “Rust Belt,” “flyover country,” and one of the places that had been “left behind.”

Another important aspect of Mills’s thought was pragmatism, beginning with his doctoral dissertation on the subject at the University of Wisconsin. While many of the philosophical ideas surrounding pragmatism emanated from thinkers from outside the Midwest, e.g., Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Chauncey Wright, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, many leaders of the movement were connected to the Midwest personally or professionally, including John Dewey, George H. Mead, Jane Addams, Horace Kallen, Thorstein Veblen, and Roscoe Pound. The growing interest in Midwestern history today, including the rise of the Midwestern History Association, has re-energized debates about regional distinctiveness in the United States and about what characteristics, values, practices, and modes of thought might be considered to be characteristic of the various regions. Questions of regional identity play a prominent role in these discussions.

<sup>90</sup> Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920-1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 54-56, 104-5, quotation at 2.

To what extent, we might ask, is pragmatism a recognizable part of Midwestern thought patterns? Residents of the region have often been labeled “practical” or “pragmatic.” To what extent are these assessments accurate?

A final connecting point between Mills and the Midwest that we can mention here is their alleged radicalism. Mills was radical in his pursuit of the truth, in his desire to reconstruct American society, and in his unrelentingly critical assessment of that society in all of its manifestations. His hopes to promote a more radical brand of politics in the United States does not mean that the nation, or the Midwest as part of it, *did*, in fact, become radical. Only that he wished it were so. Studies of Midwestern radicalism or other, milder forms of left-wing politics have identified the region, or parts of it, as being “radical,” “progressive,” “liberal,” or “left of center” at various times in its history. Examples of the phenomenon would include the activities of William Jennings Bryan, John Peter Altgeld, George McGovern, Eugene Debs, Mother Bloor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Farmers’ Holiday Association, the La Follettes of Wisconsin, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party, and many others. Equally prominent, or even more so, were examples of conservative or right-wing activism, including Senators Joseph McCarthy, William Jenner, and Karl Mundt, Midwestern members of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the America First movement before Pearl Harbor, the Ku Klux Klan, the Black Legion, Robert McCormick’s *Chicago Tribune*, and Phyllis Schlafly. How should we understand the presence of radical left and radical right politics in their Midwestern forms? Heading into the third decade of the twenty-first century, the question remains an important one for Midwestern historians, inviting further research by students and scholars of the region.

One can discover many things in Mills if one just looks for them. Having originally encountered him by being assigned to read *The Power Elite* during my freshman year at the University of Missouri, I was fascinated by his broad outlook, his bold assertions, and his lucid writing style. I read several of his other books as time went by, taking special interest in his early articles on the sociology of knowledge, which quickly became a pet topic for me. Later on, his discussion of the “cultural apparatus,” which encompasses all of the media and organizational matrix that generates and passes on facts, ideas, information, and symbolic content, engaged my enthusiasm. “The first rule for understanding the human condition,” he wrote in 1959 in the language of the time, “is that men live in second-hand worlds. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of

their lives is determined by the meanings they have received from others.”<sup>91</sup> Had Mills been able to complete his book on the cultural apparatus, explaining how people’s experiences consist of stereotyped meanings shaped by ready-made interpretations, it might have become his most important work, taking its place alongside Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*, and other similar tomes.

Mills’s insistence on going back to the original classic works of sociology and working within the parameters of that tradition, while also breaking free from the canon when necessary and applicable, provided an excellent way for sociologists like himself and for historians and other social researchers to understand whence they come and to generate relevant and useful questions for further research. He turned his attention always to large themes and questions: power, bureaucracy, modernization, stratification, class, status, cultural transmission, and so forth. His relative lack of interest in race and gender constituted a major weakness in his intellectual armor, but most of us could never hope to exhibit the wide range of interests he pursued. The amazing extent of his ambition to learn and know can serve as an inspiration to all.

The methodological advice Mills offered in *The Sociological Imagination* was sensible and practicable. His advice to keep a file or files became a lifelong practice for me (somewhat to the chagrin of my wife). His emphasis on the need to put things in historical context was especially resonant for a history major (after I switched over from political science). I also admired his enthusiasm, his passion for learning, and his simple, down-to-earth way of communicating with ordinary readers. I resisted some of his ideological baggage, his credulity about the Castro regime, his occasional practice of going to press prematurely, and his tendency to alienate actual and potential friends and colleagues.

Some of the specific habits of mind, intellectual tendencies, practices, and methods that he modeled are worth special mention. He was a critic of society. He pursued the critical ideal. I consider myself a “two-handed historian”—one who tries to look at every side of issues and problems and see a little bit of good and a little bit of bad in everything. Mills gives us a model for stepping out of one’s comfort zone and avoiding complacency, both in one’s scholarly activi-

<sup>91</sup> C. Wright Mills, “The Cultural Apparatus,” in *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1963), 405.

ties and in daily life. The elementary linkages Mills and Gerth sketched out in *Character and Social Structure* may seem overly simple to some or just plain common sense, but I have found that models of the sort they constructed are helpful tools to guide our thinking. Mills's use of "ideal types" in the fashion of Max Weber, e.g., "cheerful robots," "abstracted empiricism," and "over-developed society," provide a serviceable method for analyzing society and social change. Mills's criticism of "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism" still provide us with two poles to avoid in our effort to hone in on workable and significant subjects.

Ultimately, it was Mills's ambition to think and act *big* that impressed me above everything else. In my own life and career, in a fashion similar to that of some of my colleagues, I came to realize just how hard it is to live up to such bold, ambitious goal-setting. Merely getting by from day-to-day is often as much as we think we can do. But we can dream, sometimes we can operate upon those dreams, and every once in a while our wildest dreams actually come true. We should never be deterred by the fear that our reach may exceed our grasp. Rather, we should be more concerned that our ambitions might not be large enough.

C. Wright Mills, I believe, would have appreciated the growth and the spirit of the Midwestern History Association. Several years ago, a small group of idealistic dreamers took notice of a gap that needed to be filled and then, rather than doing what most people probably would have done – shrugged their shoulders and gone about their regular business – they stepped up and made things happen. They *thought* big and they *acted* big, and who knows where it all will end?

Only lately have I come to appreciate that in some significant ways Mills, despite his Texas origins and academic career in the East, was also a Midwesterner. I share with him some of the spirit and inspiration emanating out of Madison, a reminder that places of intellect, imagination, and high-spirited practical application can greatly influence our lives and careers. Mills's two years in the Midwest may not have made him a typical Midwesterner, whatever that might be, but things that he learned there, the start it gave him on his intellectual odyssey, and the connections he made there exerted a major impact upon his thinking and career. My five years as a graduate student in Madison not only shaped my future path into academia. I also met and found a lifelong partner there, and our daughter followed along thirty years later to pick up a postdoc in Madison, meaning that our family will always have a continuing connection to the place. For someone like Mills, who always thought big and whose concerns were global in dimension, the

importance of place and region provided an important counterpoint and balance wheel to his large perspective and ambition, grounding him in ways that enabled him to do what he did in the short period of time that he was granted to do his work. Despite certain character flaws and intellectual failings, he has been and will continue to be an inspirational example of what an intellectual can do if he or she is willing to think big and follow a dream.