

# Wright Mills and "the Power Elite"

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*When C Wright Mills talks of the growing trend towards centralisation in the United States, the monopolisation of power in the three major arenas of social leadership, the corporate, military and political, he chooses as his point of departure America of the mid-fifties. Oddly, not a word suggests that the New Deal thirties contributed the major impulse to these ominous developments.*

*Is Mills' hypothesis a sound one? We are presented with the picture of the slow culmination of historical trends which reach their apogee in the mid-fifties.*

*A fair appraisal of the historical situation, on the other hand, would lead to the conclusion that the power elite of the New Deal thirties was more centralised than the Republican administration of the fifties, the centralised administrative apparatus of which was, in any case, the legacy of the thirties.*

*Apparently, not centralisation and growing consolidation of power are at issue, but rather the changed political landscape, the decline of left centralisation and the emergence of a party more representative of bourgeois interests.*

MILLS once declared that the intellectual's politics should be the politics of truth. The intellectual should search for the most adequate definition of reality.<sup>1</sup> Not the politicization of truth but rather the demystification of politics, the creation of an atmosphere favourable to the scientific study of social and political life is what Mills most certainly had in mind when he penned this equation. Yet there are certain connotations which leave an unmistakable residue of doubt. The idea "politics of truth" implies a certain activism against which the notion of scientific investigation, gradual and laborious, appears as rather pusillanimous counsel, unsuited to the needs of the intellectual engaged in social reconstruction. Truth in Mills' usage is tied, not directly by the meaning of the equation, but indirectly by the connotative overtones, to a more aggressive task of social and political action. This link appears very markedly in the title of the essay in which the phrase appears, "On Knowledge and Power".

## Politics and Truth

The question with which we are immediately concerned is not the social and political programmes of reconstruction which Mills had in mind and which he brought together in a 'new left' appeal. That, after all, is a matter of political preference and neither here nor there as far as the appraisal of a man's scientific output is concerned. But we must ask ourselves if political and ideological criteria entered into the construction of the scientific edifice. We must determine the extent to which the equation of politics and truth was lopsided, whether the truth, the objects of scientific study, and the conclusions derived were assimilated to the patterns of political ideology. An examination of the development of Mills' scientific

work can leave no doubt but that this was the case. There are a number of prominent instances where scientific investigation became subordinate to the tasks of Mills' ideological struggles.

One good case of this appears if we compare one of Mills' earlier essays written in 1950 with the conclusions arrived at in "The Power Elite", published six years later. The earlier article, which did not appear in print until 13 years later, celebrated Truman's victory in the 1948 presidential election. Mills expressed therein his strong oche in the autonomy of public opinion in America. The American public demonstrates, according to Mills, its independence from the mass media and its ability to participate fully in American public and political life:

"no view of American public life can be realistic that assumes public opinion to be wholly controlled and entirely manipulated by the mass media ... The U S public has an autonomy of judgment, and on many occasions makes up its own mind, without direction from any center and without any authority but its own sovereignty".<sup>2</sup>

Mills goes on to provide scientific evidence for the conclusion that the mass media carry only diminished weight in the arena of opinion formation from the Decatur study, a Columbia University project on which he collaborated. That study had pointed to the preponderant influence of personal relationships in the transfer and formation of political opinion. Mills concludes :

"... both mass media and person-to-person discussion are important in changing public opinion. It is a question of which is the more important in different areas of opinion

... The American public is neither a sandheap of individuals each making up his own mind, nor a regimented mass manipulated by monopolized media of communication .. But today it is still the case that the most effective and immediate context of changing opinion is people talking informally with people."<sup>3</sup>

## Changed Perspective

Compare these findings with those which appear six years later in "The Power Elite". They are so patently contradictory that one must assume either that American society had undergone tremendous changes in the span of a few short years, or that Mills' science has taken its cue from changing political currents, namely, the Eisenhower victory in 1952. Mills has decided in 1956 that,

"the communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. The mass has no autonomy from institutions—on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion".<sup>4</sup>

This description characterizes Mills' ideal-typical model of the "mass", which has begun to displace the older 'publics' of American society, not as a model of the future, but as a reality of the present. American public life has more of the features of the "mass" than of the community of publics.

This shift in Mills' scientific perspective can only be accounted for by the

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changes in the political fortunes of the Democratic Party, the Fair Deal and New Deal offshoots of which Mills had allied himself with and actively supported. How, in the face of rising educational and cultural standards, could so radical a change in America's social structure be accounted for otherwise? When Mills talks to us about the growing trends towards centralization, the monopolization of power in the three major arenas of social leadership, the corporate, military and political, Mills chooses as his point of departure America of the mid-fifties. Oddly, not a word, not a phrase, would suggest that the New Deal thirties contributed the major impulse to these ominous developments. But this is not at all strange when it is considered that Mills was a protégé of the New and Fair Deal programmes and in turn repaid the debt by exempting these programmes and the 'elites' which sponsored them from his critique.

### Legacy of the 'Thirties

Is his hypothesis a sound one? We are presented with the picture of the slow culmination of historical trends which reach their apogee in the mid-fifties. A fair appraisal of the historical situation would certainly lead to the conclusion that the power elite of the New Deal thirties was more centralized than the Republican administration of the fifties, the centralized administrative apparatus of which was, in any case, the legacy of the thirties. Remember: it was Roosevelt who attempted to stack the Supreme Court with additional members in order to insure the constitutionality of his legislation; it was Roosevelt who initiated the first major incursions upon economic power in the United States. It was the Republican administration which attempted to loosen the control of federal organs over economic life. Mills is very selective in the kind of centralization he objects to. We have no doubt that he would sanction socialist economic organization if it were undertaken in the name of "the people"; his writings point clearly in this direction.

With the exception of the military which was not a prominent force in the 1930s for obvious reasons relating to the international position of the United States, the governmental apparatus of the 1930's was much more highly centralized than in the fifties and, in its desire to gain preponderant influence over the judiciary and legislature on the one hand, and the economic dynasties on the other, had, if we may borrow a communist inspired epithet, 'social-fascistic' aspirations. Mills paints a

roseate picture of all of this, and makes it appear as though the Levathan awakes after the 1952 electoral tally. The rancorous rhetoric which pervades "The Power Elite" is tied to a historical theory which chafes at its harness. Not centralization and all of this business about the growing consolidation of power is at issue, but rather the changed political landscape, the decline of left centralization and the emergence of a party more representative of bourgeois interests.

### Idealised Picture

Another example of Mills' 'science' is the idealized picture of 19th century American society, presented as a contrast to the power pyramiding of contemporary institutions. Mills reports that the 'Jeffersonian scatter' and face-to-face publics of that earlier era afforded a much greater opportunity to the average citizen to participate in political decision making. The political domination unalloyed which Mills depicts for us in an early study is assumed to apply to twentieth century economic organizations. These royalists of capitalism have taken possession of the political organs of local communities.<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, a number of detailed empirical studies of local community power and historical trends in the composition of that power which appear to negate Mills' hypothesis and, in fact, argue the contrary. Rather, it is in the 19th century that economic domination of local community politics appears to have been most pronounced. This conclusion finds support in the work of Robert Dahl, Robert Schulze, Clelland and Form and others.<sup>6</sup> In his study of the New Haven 'power elite' Dahl finds the growth of "dispersed inequalities" as over against the monolithic organization of social influence which prevailed in the 19th century and which was tied to economic power. These hierarchies of 'dispersed inequality' represent the pluralization of power and the emergence of contending factions, professional politicians on the one hand, and on the other the economic managerial elite and social notables. Edward Banfield found the noticeable absence of economic interests in the civic controversies of Chicago. He even goes so far as to conclude that the failure on the part of the dominant economic overlords to interest themselves in local politics may have negative consequences from the standpoint of a balanced community democracy.<sup>7</sup> These studies of community power should be compared with Mills' work in order that a more balanced appraisal of American civic life may be

obtained. Notwithstanding their manifold defects, they present the more empirical side of political sociological work in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

### No Evidence

These studies, in addition to undermining the generalizations which Mills puts forth in regard to 19th century American democracy, also attack the problem of scientific investigation in a direct way, by examining the actual arenas of decision making, the context of power as it becomes manifested in civic controversies. Mills rarely observes the direct use of power and the flow of social influence. He assumes that certain contours exist on the basis of data relating to the political perceptions of the samples he investigates and the social background data on the individuals in the social strata under examination. Social background and mobility data allow of no scientific judgment of such sweeping claims as the following one, which appeared in an early study:

"...the small businessmen, especially in cities dominated by a few large industrial firms, are quite often fronts' for the larger business powers..."

"The organization of the Small Business Front is quite often in the hands of the Chamber of Commerce; and many of the hidden wires behind the scene are manipulated by the local bank setup, which is usually able to keep the Front in line whenever this is considered necessary by large industrial firms."<sup>9</sup>

This claim may be true; it may be false. No evidence is offered in the essay which would allow for some judgment. A good deal more is hidden than just the 'behind-the-scenes' wires it appears. Mills' crusading epithets lack empirical substance and foundations, and Daniel Bell's observation that Mills "takes statistic after statistic and clothes them with angry metaphors" really misses the mark.<sup>10</sup> The angry metaphors clothe theoretical generalizations which often have no intrinsic relationship to the statistical data.

Consider one other of the not inconsiderable number of sweeping generalizations which emerge from "The Power Elite". The 'Big Three' Mills claims, the corporate, state and military elites, are increasingly 'shaping' the educational, religious and familial institutions. Let us designate these latter the 'dependent three.' But the question naturally arises: Shaped in what way? Some hypothetical derivations about the con-

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crete nature of this flow of influence would be expected if the study were scientific. Anyone familiar with current demographic tendencies in the new nations realizes that the explosive growth rates have major implications for the Big Three—not just major implications but revolutionary ones. Since procreation is certainly a 'family affair' and since these explosive rates of growth may have far more impact on the social and political structures of these nations than the latter will have on these rates of growth, it may be claimed that one of the 'dependent three', the family, is shaping Mills' Big Three. The test of power has still proven unfavourable to the power elites of those states which have attempted to curb fertility. We mention this example only to illustrate the difficulty involved in sweeping generalizations about the flow of social cause and effect. On this point Mills has departed from his 'plain Marxian' orientation because that orientation has always pointed—and with indubitable validity—to the fact that major social revolutions (violent and non-violent) come 'from below'.

These and other related inconsistencies and inadequacies in Mills' scientific work stem from the repeated interference of political considerations in the scientific blueprint. A hard indictment? The evidence is there for everyone to view for himself. It is one thing to permit ideology to determine the topics of research—with this kind of intrusion none can argue. It is quite another thing to let ideology guide the research operations and generalizations arrived at. Mills' articles and *obiter dicta* on scientific craftsmanship notwithstanding, we believe that this indictment stands.

## II

### Mills and Marxism

Mills has described himself as a 'plain Marxist'. This implies much more than the recognition of the value of the Marxist theory of history and social organization, a recognition granted generously by social and economic thinkers who are politically conservative. Indeed, the Marxist scaffolding has been retained as an analytic tool by some who, like Joseph Schumpeter, were never sympathetic to the Marxist political struggle. Recognition of the value of the Marxian approach to history, or even the use of that framework in concrete scientific work, are not alone sufficient to warrant the appellation. Rather it is the *sympathy* of a political and moral kind for the left wing swing of history—perhaps more broadly conceived than allegiance

to the twenty-one conditions of the Comintern—in combination with the use of Marxist categories of analysis which justifies Mills' self-designation.

### Populist Conception

The use of the adjective 'plain' is characteristic of Mills. It underscores his individualistic political style and populist conception of the ideal political order. With him it means that where political dogma is concerned, flexibility is more suitable, and where organizational loyalty and obedience are required, an individualistic rebuff may be expected. It means to be eclectic where theoretical construction is involved. Where practical politics is concerned, it means to be in the spirit of revolt, and not in the ranks of the *aparatchiki*.

The antipathy towards moralistic—Marx would have said "Utopian"—programmes of social action which lack a foundation in theoretical understanding of historical possibilities is probably the clearest and strongest link between Mills and Marx. Mills fulminated against the kind of scientific research which he felt characterized most of the important currents of American sociology, that which focused on delimited "milieux" and therefore lacked a broader historical perspective. The roots of scientific thinking should not arise from moral and emotional impulse but from the broader theoretical undertaking. It is this scientific realism which links Mills to the Marxist tradition, and, as far as American social science is concerned, would make him appear as the representative of that tradition in the United States.

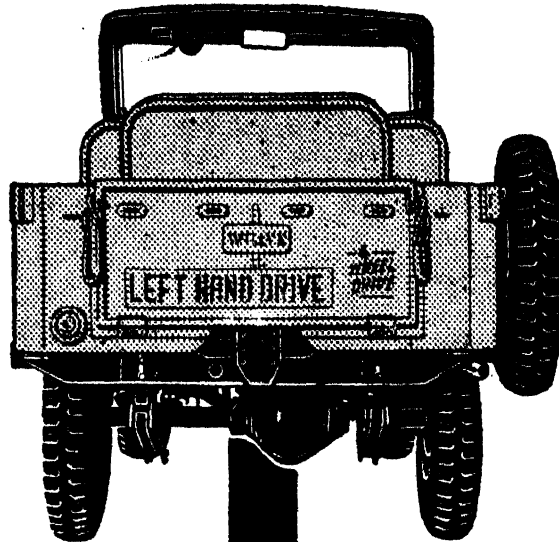
Mills' favourable reception in Marxist circles, in particular among the young intellectuals of the new nations, is the result not of methodological orthodoxy in the use of Marxian theoretical categories—which Mills used very loosely and mixed in with the blueprints of bourgeois social scientists—but rather of his left-wing sympathies, and his virulent criticism of capitalist economic power and American foreign policy, or, as Marxists would say, of American neocolonialism. In any case, it would be most difficult to describe Mills' approach as Marxist as far as theory is concerned. His system was never a closed one as was Marx's in the sense of a closely interrelated body of propositions linking economic forces to social and political processes. Mills received from Marx the tools of class analysis but even here his notion of class is closer to Weber's. Mills' determination of who constitutes the 'elite' and who the 'mass' depends on the

social interests, the possession of formal institutional positions, and the social background of a stratum, not on the formal relations to the means of production. For Mills, to give one concrete example, it is much more important to discover that high ranking officers and civil servants attended the same elite schools and join the same social clubs than to find that they own property. Since most members of these strata do not have considerable 'material' interests in that sense, their bond with the corporate elite must be sought in another direction. This is why the Weberian definition of *social* class (status) served Mills much better than the economic definition of class as defined by Marx.

### Antipathy to Capitalism

From Veblen Mills gained, in addition to a passionate rhetoric, the populists natural antipathy to the effete civilization of capitalism, its superfluous commodity production and the superfluous stratum which managed the economic engine.<sup>11</sup> But it is generally conceded that the most important formative influence came from Weber; Mills' central problem, the bureaucratization of contemporary society, had dominated Weber's thinking during the last years of the latter's life. The problem of the social control of monolithic power is clearly not a Marxist conceptualization, since it leads to the implicit recognition that the important impulses in modern life come from 'above.' From the standpoint of orthodox Marxists—whatever their orientation in terms of practice, which is usually a clear recognition of the impact of political power—this was a major heresy. If history moves 'from below' then the political instrumentalities of a given class, however cohesive, cannot alter the fundamental contours of development. But Mills suggests the exact opposite. Of course, whether you care to include Mills in the Marxist *tradition* or not depends very much upon how the boundaries are delimited. Marx did not emphasize elite vanguards, but Lenin did and Lenin's ideology of practice is compatible with Mills' position, if not with respect to methods, at least as regards the social stratum best suited to undertake social change.

The well known American Marxist, Herbert Aptheker, accused Mills of failing to determine the ultimate locus of social power in his tri-partite division of the power elite, that is, of failing to note that in any final test of strength, real power must lie with the corporate dynasties.<sup>12</sup> But the fact of the matter is, Mills does suggest that



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while the power elite is not merely the executive committee of bourgeois, corporate power, it is true that the corporate interests have relatively more power than either the state or the military. The unidimensional flow of power is difficult to observe primarily because the moral climate creates a 'natural' alliance of interests and outlook. This is partly the product of similarities in social background, and of the recruitment of government personnel from the ranks of industry. A moral consensus favourable to business interests has the same ultimate consequences as would format political power in the hands of the corporate elite—indeed, it is much better because much more conducive to a smooth operation of the governmental apparatus. But for all that the reservoir of power in the hands of the industrial bourgeoisie remains. Mills strongly suggests this in a number of articles.<sup>13</sup> Consider the following:

"For by now everybody, definitely including Big Business, knows that we must speak of the political and the economic in one breath, of a *political economy*. This means, in another set of terms, that 'business' and 'government' are more and more becoming one. That their 'conflict' has been institutionalized without the benefit of Congress... It means that 'business' can and well may become 'government'."

"... As government and business become increasingly interlocked, economic questions will more and more become: who is to staff the points of political decision in the governmental hierarchies and pinnacles?...today 'the political freedom of free enterprise' means the power of Corporations over and within the State."<sup>14</sup>

#### 'Political Capitalists'

Even in the case where the political elite recruits primarily from non-capitalist strata and Mills' theory about the effect of social backgrounds on political interests would appear to break down, we find Mills asserting that these political parvenues will become 'co-opted' into the traditional elites of notables and property holders. In other words, capitalist interests will be served whatever the electoral outcome. This thesis is worked out by Mills in collaboration with H H Gerth for the case of Nazi Germany.<sup>15</sup> The rapprochement between the petty bourgeoisie and the agrarian and industrial capitalists is achieved by allowing prominent members of the Nazi hierarchy to gain possession of capital, to become capitalists.

themselves. They become what Mills and Gerth term 'political capitalists'. This thesis goes against the propositional logic of Marxist theory in its tacit recognition of the importance of pure political power for the acquisition of economic power. But since Mills asserts the preponderance of economic power in the institutional triumvirate, at least in the long run, Aptheker's criticism would appear to be beside the point.

To be sure, other similarities between Mills' model and Marx's appear. Both employ a kind of polarization hypothesis which assumes the historical growth of a gap between the powerful and the powerless. With Mills the antipodal social forces resolve themselves into 'elite strata' on the one hand, and the 'masses' on the other; with Marx, pauperized proletarians over against the remaining groups of capitalists who have survived the competition of accumulation. Since, as we noted above, Mills' gives preponderant emphasis to the force of capital for the interests of the power elite, it might be concluded that the two models do not differ radically, at least, on fundamentals. But ownership of capital could not possibly serve as the defining criterion of membership in Mills' model. Into the 'mass' fall small businessmen, farmers, professionals along with proletarians and celebrities. Membership in the elite does not require property. In the United States military and civil service officials qualify as members of the power elite. They are not capitalists if by that we mean owners of the means of production.<sup>16</sup> Yet they might certainly be said to serve the interests of corporate power at least, according to Mills thesis—as well and very probably better than strata which are technically capitalistic, farmers, small businessmen and the like whose antipathy to centralized corporate power is a well known fact.

Further, the historical dynamics involved in Mills' polarization lack the technical economic foundations which Marx provided for his model. For Mills, as for Weber, this was more or less an accomplished fact, the product of a variety of causes, technological and organizational rationalization being the most significant. Marx's laws of primitive accumulation and the process of intra-capitalist expropriation are not to be found within Mills' framework.

In summary. Mills' modified Marxism amounts to a sympathy for leftwing movements and principles plus the use of class categories in social analysis. But the body of amorphous theoretical

principles which constitutes Mills' approach to and vision of the historical process is no more Marxian than it is Weberian or Veblenian. It is a composite of these and other patterns of thought.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> C Wright Mills, 'On knowledge and Power,' in "Power, Politics and People," (ed) Irving L Horowitz, New York, Ballantine Books, 1963, p 611.
- <sup>2</sup> Mills, 'Mass Media and Public Opinion,' in "Power, Politics and People", pp 577-578.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 586.
- <sup>4</sup> Mills, "The Power Elite", New York, Oxford University Press, 1959, p 304.
- <sup>5</sup> Mills, 'The Middle Classes in Middle-sized Cities', in "Power, Politics and People", pp 274-291.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert. O Schulze, 'The Bifurcation of Power in a Satellite City', in "Community Political Systems", (ed) Morris Janowitz, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1961, pp 19-80. Robert A Dahl, "Who Governs?", New Haven. Yale University Press. 1962. Donald A Clelland and William H Form. "Economic Determinants and Community Power: A Comparative Analysis". American Journal of Sociology, March, 1964.
- <sup>7</sup> Edward C Banfield, "Political Influence", New York, the Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.
- <sup>8</sup> A good discussion of the problems involved in the analysis of the flow of power and influence can be found in Morris Janowitz's "Community Power and 'Policy Science' Research," in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26, (Fall. 1962), pp 398-410.
- <sup>9</sup> Mills. "The Middle Classes in Middle-sized Cities", *ibid*.
- <sup>10</sup> Daniel Bell, 'Is There a Ruling Class in America', in "The End of Ideology". New York, Collier Books, 1962, p 47.
- <sup>11</sup> Mills was not personally adverse to the superfluous gadgetry of capitalism as his interest in and possession of racy sports autos and motor bikes demonstrates. See Harvey Swados' delightful discussion of Mills' personal life. "C Wright Mills: A Personal Memoir", *Dis-sent*, 10. Winter, 1963. pp 35-42
- <sup>12</sup> Herbert Aptheker. "Power in America", *Mainstream*, 9, September 1956, pp 1-16.

- <sup>13</sup> Mills, 'Collectivism and the "Mixed-up" Economy'; 'The Decline of the Left', p 227; 'The Political Gargoyles: Business as Power', all in "Power, Politics and People".

- <sup>14</sup> Mills, 'Collectivism and the "Mixed-

up" Economy', *Ibid*, pp 185-186. Gerth, Hans H, and Mills, 'A Marx for the Managers', in "Power, Politics and People". Mills found that a larger proportion of the political elite of the two de-

cade span, 1933 through 1952, came from the lower classes than from either the middle or upper classes. 'The American Political Elite; A Collective Portrait\*', in "Power, Politics and People" p 199.


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