C. Wright Mills: A New Left for a New Day / Slow Thoughts for Fast Times

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Thomas Paine, during a crucial moment in the American war against its colonizers, said famously: "These are times that try men's souls." Many think, I among them, that these too are times that try men's souls. At such a time, one must look back for clues as to what to think and do. One from not that long ago who lends us wisdom of a sort is C. Wright Mills, who in the 1950s, tried to make sense of America's changing culture. However, a bad heart killed him in 1962, just after he wrote of the possibility of a New Left. He deserves another look.

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) was born Waco, Texas. In later life, when he rode about on his motorcycle, it was tempting for some to say this was somehow a hint of his cowboy days. He didn't quite deny it:

> I grew up in Texas, curiously, enough on no ranch but in Waco, Wichita Falls, Fort Worth, Sherman, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio—in that order. My family moved around a bit. The reason I was not stabilized on a ranch is that my grandfather had lost my ranch. He was shot in the back with a .30-30 rifle, always it's in the back, but he really was.[1]

Cowboy or not—this is the way Mills was: brash, bare bones honest, one who cut to the truth as he saw it, and more.[2] Mills was also uncommonly ambitious and brilliant. By the time he finished undergraduate studies in sociology and philosophy at the University of Texas Austin, he had published articles in sociology's two leading academic journals, the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*. Even so, he came close to letting self-doubts keep him from going on to graduate studies.[3]

In September 1939, he and his wife, Freya, moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he began doctoral studies. The following summer, they divorced, then in the spring of 1941, they remarried just before Mills finished his coursework for the Ph.D. At Wisconsin, he met and began to work with Hans Gerth. Together, they translated, edited, and published in 1946 *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* which for a long while was a primary sourcebook for students of Weber without reading knowledge of German. After the Ph.D. from Wisconsin in 1943, he began teaching at the University of Maryland with the support of Robert K. Merton—whom no major figure in the field was more generous to younger sociologists getting started at the time. While at Maryland, he was hired by Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Research which led in short order to an appointment at Columbia in 1947. Through these years, his marriage was on and off again. Freya and he divorced for good, this time in July 1947.

Such was the story of his life. From UT Austin in 1939 to Columbia in 1947 with major publications along the way, his days sped on and away. Everything went by fast. In 1942, his high blood pressure exempted him from military service. This was the first sure sign that his heart would fail him. He died of a heart attack twenty years later at only 45 years of age on March 20, 1962.

Before that final moment, he published 19 books and pamphlets; and 185 articles, essays, and reviews; as well as countless other lectures and interventions—and was the inspiration and subject of 171 books and shorter commentaries.[4] The major and still influential books, among the many, are *White Collar: The American Middle Class* in 1951, *The Power Elite* in 1956, and *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959. In his book on Mills, *Radical Nomad*, Tom Hayden classified Mills' writings as falling into four time periods, each with its own characterization:

- *Apprehension and Maturation*, 1939-1949
- *Pessimism Formulated*, 1950-1956
- *Radical Polemics, Analyzing the Default*, 1956-1960
- *Tentative Hopes*, 1960-1962[5]

Hayden—famous for many things in politics and his relationships with Casey Hayden, Jane Fonda, and Barbara Williams—is important here because he was among the founders of the *Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS), for which he was the principal author of its Port Huron Statement. Hayden's MA thesis at Michigan was on C. Wright Mills. He was thus ahead of the others in SDS and other radical student movements in that he saw the importance of Mills to a New Left—an importance that remained unfulfilled because of Mills' early death in March 1962 just more than a year after his famous "Letter to the New Left" in *The New Left Review*, published September 1960. For this reason, among others, Hayden's classification of Wright Mills' literary career is particularly helpful.

As for the 1939-1949, *Apprehension and Maturation*, we have seen already the strange fact about this man who otherwise was always out there doing whatever, yet nonetheless had a period of severe self-doubt before starting graduate studies. But, the apprehension faded quickly once he moved to Madison such that Hans Gerth said this of him in the day:

> He was no man with a pale cast of the intellect given to self-mortification. He was a good sportsman with bat and ball, a dashing swimmer and boatman, sailing his shaky dory on Lack Mendota. We would walk with machetes to make our way to the boat. Mills dashed with his motorboat past the more imposing houses of Midwestern corporation executives to the pier of the village store.[6]

Whether this was part of the maturation in Hayden's scheme is not clear. What was clear is that the books of this period were serious in every way—his 1946 book with Gerth, *From Max Weber* and, in 1948, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, which was, among other things, an implicit if not quite fully mature theory of social and political structures in the United States. Here, he wrote: "The American labor leader, like the politician and the big businessman is now a public figure, different groups hold various images of him. He is reviled and acclaimed by small and politically alert publics, he is tolerated and abused by the mass public. As always, like other men of power, he is carefully watched by men inside his own organization."[7]

This, of course, is but a hint of Mills' view on the new Post-War American social structure which was thriving economically and socially—when also, by contrast to the 1930s, labor leaders were rebels representing down-and-out workers in a collapsed economy. If Mills was ebullient like many others, it is easy to understand why he would soon become more and more a left-liberal critic of that

society. Labor leaders and the business elite could work cooperatively for the good of all. *The New Men of Power* is not one of Mills' great books, but it is an important marker on the road he would soon travel.

The second phase, *Pessimism Formulated: The Analysis of the Power Elite and the Mass Society*, 1950-1956, came to be during the events of the 1950s. Daniel Bell thought these were times when Post-War youth and the culture they imbibed had lost their grip of the traditions that mattered politically and socially. Even though Bell spoke at the memorial service at Columbia for Mills, his early reading of Mills was nothing if not the bitter personification of a younger generation unable to think and do what needed to be done to make America real again. Here's how Bell ends his essay on Mills:

> Much of Mills' work is motivated by his enormous anger at the growing bureaucratization—this is his theory of history—and its abettors and this gives [*The Power Elite*] its appeal and pathos. Many people do feel helpless and ignorant and react in anger. But the sources of helplessness ought to be made clear, lest one engage, as I think Mills does, in a form of "romantic protest" against modern life.[8]

If you want to deconstruct Bell's unqualifiedly psychological reading of *The Power Elite*, compare them to Mills' own words:

> The idea of the power elite rests upon and enables us to make sense of (1) the decisive institutional trends that characterize the structure of our epoch, in particular the military ascendancy in a privately incorporated economy, and, more broadly, the several coincidences of objective interests between economic, military, and political institutions; (2) the social similarities and the psychological affinities of the men who occupy the command posts of these structures, in particular the increased interchangeability of the top positions in each of them and the increased traffic between these orders in the careers of men of power; (3) ramifications, to the point of virtual totality, of the kind of decisions that are made at the top, and the rise of men who, by training and bent, are professional organizers of considerable force and who are unrestrained by democratic party training.[9]

Oddly, it is almost as if one of President Dwight Eisenhower's speech writers had inserted Mills' lines into the President's 1961 Farewell Address in which he warned the nation that "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the *military-industrial complex*. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."[10] In the last words of *The Power Elite*, Mills offers a soft form of righteous anger which may have been too much for Bell. "Commanders of power unequaled in human in human history, they have succeeded within the American system of organized irresponsibility."[11]

1950-1956 was indeed a period in which, as Hayden put it, Mills began to formulate a serious pessimism about American Society which was appropriate to those few years. America had in 1948 instituted the Marshall Plan—which is to say, the European Recovery Program—to rebuild Europe, including Germany, that it and its allies had so thoroughly destroyed in the War. Of course, Stalin wanted nothing to do with such a thing. The Cold War heated up, while at home, Senator Joseph McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee injected a virulent Red Scare into what had been, months before, America's warmly optimistic blood. Then, too, the Korean War began June 25, 1950. For three years, and still today, that War divided the Korean Peninsula and world opinion. The American nation was torn every which way. Also, these were the years when televisual media took over domestic entertainment attention and, as Herbert Marcuse would argue a decade later in

One Dimensional-Man in 1964, all-but destroyed the critical component of human consciousness. Just less than a decade before Marcuse, Mills was prominent among those who began to recognize just how sterile Mass Culture could be. Tom Hayden had it right in naming this stage of Mills' thinking as *Pessimism Formulated*. Just as Dick Flacks was right in criticizing Mills for "diagnosing the 'main drift' in society rather than claiming to be making predictions."[12] It is true that, as Irving Louis Horowitz said, from the days of *From Max Weber* in 1946 with Hans Gerth "Mills began to see himself carved in a Weberian mold."[13] In a sense, Mills from *The White Collar in 1950 and The Power Elite* in 1958 describes the beginnings of a Mass Society and its Higher Circles that end up as an irresponsible Power Elite. He wrote, in effect, of Weber's spirit of capitalism run amok—a conviction that Weber himself announced at the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "Specialists without spirit; sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines he has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."[14]

As Mills furiously worked to outrun his bad heart, the changes in his literary work fell into shorter and shorter periods—from 1939 to 1949, from 1950 to 1956, then from 1956-1960, a period of *Radical Polemics: Analyzing the Default*—in which Mills grew more and more isolated from American radicals. As Tom Hayden put it, Mills' isolation "was so complete that his writing turned into bitter inquiries into the default of the liberal and radical movements, and especially into the default of the intellectuals in their role as guardians of reason and freedom."[15] The three books of this period are each either outside the realm of what radicals then could or would think—*The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen Yankee* (1960)—or against the norms of liberal academics who were failing to protect reason and freedom—*The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

H. Stuart Hughes was a brilliant teacher but a bit of sourpuss in regard to Mills: "*The Causes of World War Three* is just as disheveled as it predecessors. If anything, it is even more disorganized and repetitious."[16] Here is proof positive of Hayden's observation that Mills' isolation from left-liberal intellectuals was all but complete. For many, he could do no right. Still, to Hughes' credit he adds: "Yet once again, as in the past, in *The Causes of World War Three* Mr. Mills has something arresting and important to say. And once again it is something that no one else seems to be saying—or at least in so forthright and explicit a fashion." This is the basic intellectual truth about Mills, especially in the books of his *Pessimism Formulated* period where he had neither time nor intention to persuade those he considered irresponsible—whether economists, politicians, preachers, or intellectuals. In *The Causes of World War Three* he renders a stern judgment on any and all, mostly in regard the then two major powers in the Cold War:

> Both the Russian and American elites, and intellectuals in both societies, are fighting the Cold War in the name of peace, but the assumptions of their policies and the effects of their interactions have been, and are, increasing the chances of war. War, it is assumed in their military meta-physic is the most likely outcome of the parallel existences of the two types of political economy. Such is the official lay of the land, the official definition of world reality, the contribution to peace of the national spokesmen among the power elite.[17]

Even more, Mills here has in mind the defaulted company of those who should have, but did not, criticize the power elites in a society that was on the way to being fully massified. *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960) properly drew widespread attention in part because it was based on an unauthorized visit to Cuba where he met with Castro, Che, and other leaders of the new Cuba after Castro's 26th of July Movement removed Batista from office and took-over the island nation in early 1959. One might assume that the book was a kind of intellectual and political travelogue. It was that in a sense, but much more.[18] *Listen Yankee* was a prophetic book. It reads today as slightly

weird, framed too much in the Cold War rhetoric he so despised, too optimistic as to the likelihood that Castro's political revolution would lead to a social revolution, still too bound to the logic that any who opposed the American power elites were *ipso facto* on the side of progress. Yet, *Listen, Yankee* provides much more than a hint of where Mills would have gone had he survived the heart attack in 1962. First, and most disgusting to his opponents, he wrote in the first person as if he were a Cuban revolutionary:

> So, this is who we Cubans are:
> We're part of Latin America.
> We're fed up with Yankee corporations and governments.
> We've done something about it.[19]

Audacious, yes; but also telling, simple, and the truth of things to come. Just the year before, in 1959, in *The Sociological Imagination*, he advised the sociological imaginer: "Keep your eyes open to the varieties of individuality, and to the modes of epochal change."[20] The sociological imagination, he thought, is never cautious, always willing to err, and always open to social changes the cautious will miss. Mills understood that the Cuba of 1959 was part of a global movement. *Listen, Yankee*, he said from the first, "...is about more than Cuba. For Cuba's voice is the voice of a hungry-nation bloc, and the Cuba revolutionary is now speaking. ... In Africa, in Asia, as well as in Latin America the people behind his voice are becoming strong in a kind of fury they've never know before. As nations, they are young, the world is new to them."[21]

That Mills had published *The Sociological Imagination* the year before his visit to Cuba means certainly that the 1959 book was deep in his head and heart. In *Listen, Yankee* in 1960, he was already imagining a new world beyond his personal troubles with other left intellectuals. Hence the all-but-scriptural lines in *The Sociological Imagination*:

> The sociological imagination enables the possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social experiences. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework, the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. *By such means, the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit <u>troubles</u>*, and the indifference of the public is transformed into involvement in <u>*public issues*</u>.[22]

This is Mills in 1959, offering a way to avoid academic sociology's naïve commitment to the classic subject/object dichotomy that became the micro/macro dichotomy, sorting out those studied small groups on the ground from those who soared into the abstract air of structures. Mills was the consummate structuralist who saw structures as visibly arising from personal troubles.

Mills—perhaps because from the early days at Wisconsin he thought of himself as a Weberian—was not drawn into an either/or way of thinking. However, he had well-informed, if extreme, views of academic sociology. The bulk of *The Sociological Imagination* is devoted to varieties of sociological methods, beginning with his famous condemnation of Talcott Parsons' Grand Theory, which mostly castigates the writing as unintelligible. "I suppose one could translate the 555 pages of *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straightforward English."[23] This is not a helpful criticism. Mills does better in the next chapter on "Abstracted Empiricism," which is always easier to criticize when it is too abstracted. "What has happened in the fetishism of the Concept is that men

have become stuck way up on a very high level of generalization, usually of a syntactical nature and they cannot get down to fact."[24] Fair enough. It would have been a better way to criticize Parsons.

Then, in a chapter on "Types of Practicality," Mills, having dismissed all-too-lofty empiricism, turns to the local. "The social scientist who spends his time on the details of small-scale milieux is not putting himself outside the political conflicts and forces of his time."[25] After his expose of the basic types of social research, *The Sociological Imagination* strays into a number of interesting essays on bureaucracy, philosophies of science, history, and the like culminating in the marvelous appendix that every beginner in most fields should read, "On Intellectual Craftsmanship."

All in all, the enduring importance of *The Sociological Imagination* is its scriptural lesson on the relation between *personal troubles* and *public issues*. His last notable piece was *Letter to the New Left* in 1960, which had more a symbolic than substantive effect on what was to come in 1962. At the very end of *Radical Nomad*, Tom Hayden does something both clever and important. He imagines what Mills might have said about the New Left had he lived. For example:

We know the importance of talking about and organizing around issues that are at one and the same time meaningful to people and radical. ... We think economic problems are the fundamental ones that connect most others, but we don't neglect cultual and personal problems that can't be postponed ... We figure it will take a long time, and much experimental work, before we come to reach all the people the movement needs to take power—which is one of the things we are seeking.[26]

Endnotes

1 C. Wright Mills, "Growing Up: Facts and Fantasies, 1957" in Kathryn Mills editor, with Pamela Mills, *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (University of California Press, 2000), 25.

2 As for Mills' brashness, see his 1939 letter to Read Bain, editor of the *American Sociological Review*, about his article "Logic, Language, and Culture." He would not graduate college studies in 1939, yet he declined to make many of the recommended revisions and wrote to Bain as if they were pals [in Kathryn Mills, *ibid*, 35.]

3 Irving Louis Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills, An American Utopian* (Free Press, 1983), 40.

4 See for a sample: C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, edited with an introduction by Irving Louis Horowitz (Oxford University Press, 1963). For a listing of his own writings and of those who commented on his thinking until his death, see in this collection "Bibliography of the Writings of C. Wright Mills," 613-641.

5 Tom Hayden, *Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times* with commentaries by Stanley Aronowitz, Richard Flacks, and Charles Lemert (Routledge/Paradigm, 2006), 67-69.

6 Hans Gerth, "On C. Wright Mills" (lecture at the memorial meeting for Mills at Columbia University) quoted in Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: American Utopian*, *ibid*, 46-47.

7 Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (University of Illinois Press, 1948), 13.

8 Daniel Bell, "*The Power Elite* Reconsidered," in G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard, editors, *C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite* (Beacon Press, 1968), 224. [The chapter was originally a 1958 *American Journal of Sociology* essay when Bell was himself in early stages of transition from a red-blooded journalist to an academic.]

9 Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, 1956), 296.

10 "Military-Industrial Complex Speech, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961," Part IV @ https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/eisenhower001.asp

11 Mills, *The Power Elite*, 361.

12 Dick Flacks, "C. Wright Mills, Tom Hayden, and the New Left," in Tom Hayden, *Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times* with commentaries by Stanley Aronowitz, Dick Flacks, Charles Lemert (Routledge/Paradigm, 2006),7.

13 Irving Louis Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (Free Press, 1983), 47.

14 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 182.

15 Hayden, *Radical Nomad*, *ibid*, 68.

16 H. Stuart Hughes, "The Politics of Peace: A Reflection on C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three*," *Commentary* (February 1959).

17 C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (Simon & Schuster, 1958), 49-50.

18 Some of the following is drawn from or based upon Charles Lemert, "After Mills: 1962 and Bad Dreams of Good Times," in Hayden, *Radical Nomad*, 48-50.

19 Mills, *Listen, Yankee* (Ballantine Books, 1960) 28-29.

20 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 225.

21 Mills, *Listen, Yankee*, 7.

22 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 5. Emphasis added.

23 *Ibid*, 31. [This is Mills the wise-guy. Cute but not quite right. I found Parsons a brilliantly clear teacher and his books difficult but clear enough. However, then, I'd spent years before that reading theologians like Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, who in, dealing with other-worldly matters, made sense only if one trusted them. CL]

24 *Ibid*, 74.

25 *Ibid*, 78.

26 Hayden, *Radical Nomad*, 191-192.