



1957

## The Power Elite by C. Wright Mills

C. Arnold Anderson  
*University of Kentucky*

Harry L. Gracey  
*University of Kentucky*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj>

**Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.**

### Recommended Citation

Anderson, C. Arnold and Gracey, Harry L. (1957) "The Power Elite by C. Wright Mills," *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol46/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Law Journal by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu).

There is a very helpful discussion as to who can qualify as dependents of the taxpayer. An interesting case is given where a father supports his daughter all the year long, and gives her away in marriage in December. He is prevented from claiming a deduction for her support by the fact that she signed and filed a joint tax return with her husband. The father was, however, entitled to deduct the medical expenses he had paid since under Section 213 (a) "medical expenses paid for a dependent are deductible even though an exemption may not be claimed for the dependent."

The editor of *Working with the Revenue Code* has devoted many pages to corporate distributions. It is here that an accountant finds his work laid out for him. Varied and complicated as well are the problems that arise under this chapter. Many of the problems are such that much tax money may be saved a client if the right course is taken. Nearly ten pages of the text are devoted to loss carry-overs, and nearly as many to deferred compensation.

In making a settlement with the tax authorities over a doubtful claim, our editor reaches the conclusion that "In any event, a more favorable settlement climate appears to be in the Tax Court and not in the pre-docketed stage before the Appellate Division."

The tax lawyer who is constantly working with the 1954 Code is certain to gain much from this summary of the conclusions and opinions of the men who do the figuring on tax returns.

*W. Lewis Roberts*

University of Kentucky  
College of Law

THE POWER ELITE. By C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford 1956.\*

This is an exhilarating book that deals with fundamental problems. Its orotund style carries the reader from one crescendo to the next. Though its themes are familiar, one is challenged to fresh thinking. The two chapters on the "social elite", for example, will become standard college assignments.

This is also an exasperating book. Whether or not its conclusions are valid, they cannot be derived from the data offered. The few bits of new data are handled incautiously. Language is used as a banner,

\* The scope of this review encompasses much more than a mere summarization of the contents of Mills' book. The authors challenge many of the statements and conclusions of Mills and build, around the discussion of the book, a general analysis of the problem of power. Citations to pages of the book have been made in the text to minimize footnotes.—Ed.

not a tool. One is stimulated but he will find little guidance to sound judgment or wise policy.

Since the role of power in society is so problematic, the several themes propounded by Mills call for scrutiny, especially since Mills' position and reputation will lead many to accept his conclusions. It is our intention to examine this book from two points of view: 1) textual criticism and stylistic examination raise questions as to the author's methodological habits; and 2) what is known about our society does not accord with Mills' conclusions.

A few comments about the manner in which the author handles logic and facts are followed by a summary of Mills' broader philosophy of society as expounded in an earlier book. Later sections of this article deal with the recruitment of the power elite, their operations upon government, the paradoxical reluctance of this alleged elite to rule, and the fundamental question of elite functions.

### *Every Man His Own Methodologist*

Mills spurns collaboration with the established social disciplines and dislikes the conventional tests of evidence. Academic men "remain on the most concrete levels of description" and view reality "in terms of existing detail" (245). His eschatological mood enlarges upon provocative hunches and though he decries the rise of public relations he cannot resist argument by loaded phrase: "visible government" (230), "higher immorality" (341). It is difficult to entice Mills into a discussion, so to speak, for he finds others' perspectives ridiculous. He perceives "an elite in irresponsible command of unprecedented means of power and manipulation" where other scholars naively discover "a scatter of reasonable men overwhelmed by events and doing their best in a difficult situation" (325). Again, Mills excludes a whole series of perspectives as when he says liberals have not defended any "militantly liberal position" but have been content mainly "to celebrate the 'civil liberties,' in contrast with their absence from Soviet Russia" (334).

There is a consistent failure to use the comparative method by searching for parallel processes in familiar settings. For example, he does not seek to draw causal explanations from "the accumulation of advantages" in professorships at great universities. Over and over the assertion is made that elite power is growing though most of the evidence relates to recent years only and even that evidence is used selectively while contradictory indications remain unexamined.

The task of drawing general conclusions about power from this

study is magnified by Mills' penchant for circular reasoning, as in this statement: "American 'militarism,' accordingly, involves the attempt of military men to increase their powers"(223). One infers that Mills was impelled to write his book because he sees a power elite threatening our way of life; but in asserting the key role of these elites he never searches for their positive functions. A concession often is worded so as to imply support for his thesis: "Their inclination for longer-run profits, for a stable take, requires that corporations become more political"(126). The expansion of high schools "has met the business demands for white-collar skills at the public's expense"(317).

The task of fitting Mills' viewpoints into our developing knowledge about society is magnified by the fact that he never identifies the role of the elite in terms of actual decisions but is content merely to assert its power. Only the more careful readers, apparently, have discovered this hiatus in numerous recent discussions of power.

The same problems that Mills deals with on the national scale have been taken up at the level of local communities in recent years.<sup>1</sup> It is essential to notice that none of these studies has found consensus among local residents about the membership of local elites. Nor has any investigator yet demonstrated the power of a local elite on concrete issues. How much more difficult, then, to identify a national power elite.<sup>2</sup>

### *Mills' Positive Philosophy of Society*

This book lies in the tradition of populism, the Bull Moose, and the New Freedom, combined with that precious condiment—generic American cussedness. Mills' philosophy is to be found in an earlier book,<sup>3</sup> and this philosophy turns out to be guild socialism. A little attention to how Mills deals with these broader issues helps one to evaluate his manner of analyzing the problem of power.

<sup>1</sup> R. E. Agger, "Power Attributions in the Local Community", 34 *Social Forces* 322-31, 1956; A. A. Fanelli, "A Typology of Community Leadership . . .", *Id.* at 332-8, 1956; A. A. Fanelli, "Extensiveness of Communication Contacts and Perceptions of the Community", 21 *American Sociological Review* 439-46, 1956; M. Bressler and C. F. Westoff, "Leadership and Social Change . . .", 32 *Social Forces* 235-43, 1954; F. Hunter, *Community Power Structure*, 1953, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina. See the review of Hunter by H. Kaufman and V. Jones, "The Mystery of Power," 14 *Public Administration Review* 205-12, 1954; see also H. A. Simon, "Observation and Measurement of Political Power," 15 *Journal of Politics* 500-16, 1953; R. Bierstedt, "An Analysis of Social Power," 15 *American Sociological Review* 730-8, 1950; R. O. Dahl in *Research Frontiers in Politics and Government*, 1955, Washington: Brookings Institution, 550-7.

<sup>2</sup> P. H. Rossi has given a broad evaluation of these studies in "Community Decision Making", 1 *Administrative Science Quarterly* 415-43, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, 1948, New York: Harcourt. "Inside this country today, the labor leaders are the strategic actors" (3).

He wants direct democracy. Since the workshop is a more appropriate political unit than the precinct, "the unions would have to strive to take from the employer the right to appoint supervisors and foremen."<sup>4</sup> Everyone vitally affected by any social decision is to have a voice in the decision and a hand in its administration.<sup>5</sup> One wonders what chance Negroes would have to enter new employment in such a situation.

Mills anticipates that the present industrialists cannot raise levels of living; hence unions must take the initiative in planning. If their plans are rejected the industry should be nationalized and "the workers allowed to run it according to the plans they have set forth."<sup>6</sup> There should also be consumers' price control committees and refusal to pay higher prices and rents. White-collar workers are likely to be more receptive to price than to wage appeals.

The implications of this proposed organization of society for the problem of power can be summarized in a few questions. 1) How achieve consensus between workers and consumers about prices? 2) How achieve shifts of resources from declining to rising industries or firms? 3) How insure the labor discipline necessary for rising productivity? 4) With so narrow a focus upon economic affairs, how can the overt level of conflict within society be less than today? 5) Who will control the new managerial elite?

There is reason to doubt whether Mills has asked the important questions about the role of power in society. The elites deserve attention, but Mills implies we already understand their role. At no time does he examine the precise operations of any single elite in any actual situation. He offers hypotheses as proved conclusions and by his powerful writing shortcuts the tortuous path to knowledge.

Suppose we actually had a relatively complete picture of the composition of the elite in the early days of our nation. What might one have predicted about the later history of the nation? We can actually test this question by using the sociogram of the national elite in the first generation of nationhood that was constructed by Robert K. Lamb.<sup>7</sup> The writers' judgment is that from this map of elite relationships one could have made only the sketchiest of predications. Indeed this earlier elite was unable even to preserve its own prerogatives.

<sup>4</sup> Id. at 254.

<sup>5</sup> Id. at 258.

<sup>6</sup> Id. at 257.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in K. W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, 1953, New York: Wiley, 18-20.

*Recruitment of the Elites*

One can agree with Mills that the social origin of elite members is less decisive for their operations than either their personality traits or their indoctrination after attainment of power. Yet Mills takes much time to document the upper class origin of each elite. Co-optation of new members and the growth of common codes of conduct reflect the fact that elites are a fraternity of the successful, he says. He fails, however, to examine the possible bearing of this common trait, success, upon elite behavior.

The foundation of these codes guiding recruitment and training is left unexamined. Surely there are some functionally appropriate elements in such norms over and beyond their defensive use. Doubtless a societal type is perpetuated—though other observers find a noteworthy change of elite type in our day—but this type may well have great utility for the society. It is necessary to ask also whether other elites (“responsible” bureaucracies, union leaders, ecclesiastics, professors) have developed more defensible selection procedures. Yet common codes and common habits of discourse and concourse do not prove monolithic policies by elites. It is yet to be ascertained whether community of elite interests prevails over sectional interests. Is more energy and money spent fighting competitors or fighting labor and government?

Co-optation is surely more prevalent among professors than among business executives. In either case, is the selection dysfunctional? To be sure, “there are not strict, impersonal rules of qualifications or seniority known to all concerned”(134) in the nomination of corporation heads, but it does not follow that selection is by ascription or is whimsical. The high rates of business misfortune and of executive turnover suggest that elites are not too successful in choosing agents who will serve them well.

Mills concedes that entry into an elite would be proof of merit if there were competition for places; today, he says, mobility provides no such proof (349). His statement that success of the elite “is not firmly connected with meritorious ability” is undoubtedly true enough. But is this because the elite “are not men selected and formed by a civil service that is linked with the world of knowledge and sensibility . . . they have succeeded within the American system of organized irresponsibility”(361)? Is the success of civil servants and college professors so much more solidly validated? Mills overlooks the tough competition within corporate hierarchies and between businesses. He overlooks also the imperfections of examinations and the protections surrounding those who have passed them. And he gives

no thought to the possible advantages in a society that provides many diverse channels of mobility.

But let us consider each of the power elites briefly. Higher military officers originate in upper-middle or upper class families—though Mills concedes that training outweighs origin for these men (192). He fails to point out the growing democratization of officer corps in most countries or to notice the role of nationalism in this trend. There is evidence that officers are less isolated from other citizens than in former generations, and it is probable that today they more fully share civilian viewpoints. We have little grounds for charging that they carry militaristic attitudes over into civilian positions upon retirement.<sup>8</sup>

Congressmen also, as is well known, are rarely of plebian origin (248). Yet while their composition has changed little for generations, governmental policies have drifted leftward. Are the well-born congressmen less interested in mass welfare than the more “representative” state legislators? One doubts that the national publics are less effective or less well informed than state or municipal publics. It would indeed be risky to infer anything about the social composition of a parliament from the character of the legislation adopted. Nor can one be sure that either the quality of congressmen has declined or that “more democratic” parliaments of other nations are of higher quality and more interested in the welfare of ordinary people.

It is trite to say that only a small fraction of top business executives are sons of laborers. But there is substantial evidence (not mentioned by Mills) that despite the growing size of corporations sons of laborers and clerks find it somewhat easier to rise into executive places. And such men of humble origin are more commonly heads of giant firms than of medium-sized firms and are more common in the rapidly growing or the non-family firms. This is the kind of topic, to repeat, about which we need comparative data: what is the proportion of workers' sons among bishops, professors, winners of Nobel prizes, etc.?

Coming to “the rich,” we must agree with Mills that accumulation of fortunes has been facilitated by corrupt private and public agents throughout our history. Many rich men really were “robber barons.” But here again Mills cannot decide what horse he will ride. He first decries this speculative method of amassing wealth. He then argues that such accumulation is becoming less common and that a growing proportion of fortunes are inherited. And finally he bemoans the decline in “new” fortunes. Surely the contemporary wealthy cannot be indicted on all scores at once.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The vivid sketch of the military personality (195) is undocumented.

<sup>9</sup> Though Mills' data on fortunes are inadequate to support either his own or the opposite conclusions concerning trends in the origins of “the rich”, his data

*The Power Elite as Subverters of Responsive and Responsible Government*

Mills' chapter on mass society is of outstanding quality. In a segmented society of aggressive interest groups and in which publics have inadequate "structural views" the tasks of government are indeed formidable. Characteristically, Mills sees only the dysfunctional trends and fails to credit healthy developments. After all, it is not certain the public today is less mature in judgment nor that its thinking has become progressively irrelevant. One can find little evidence that publics in nations with different political structures are more knowledgeable.

What, in fact, is Mills' position? It is not very illuminating to be told that "a small group of men are now in charge of the executive decisions"(231), for this has always been true; it is almost a definition of an executive. We must ask instead whether the political elite today have more autonomy of decision or whether they are increasingly checked by aroused interest groups, independent voters, and the closer texture of our societal pattern.

More important is the fact, emphasized by Mills, that institutions of power have shifted from political to administrative form(306). But from the way in which he writes one would infer that this is a dirty trick played on the rest of society by the power elite. Process and cause are confused by the focus on what Mills calls "political outsiders" and "party hacks" who now direct our government(235). Looking at the more pessimistic side of the picture, we may still wonder why the growing role of the nationalistic state in this trend is ignored.

---

contain important biases toward the results he finds. 1) The main bias lies in the 1925-50 comparison, since the two sets of names are not independent. He traced the heirs of the 1925 list together with the biggest holders of stocks (and their heirs) for the largest 200 non-financial corporations of 1937-38. These men were the core of his 1950 list, supplemented by what he could find in news items about other men, mainly Texans. If he had not added this supplementary group his whole 1950 list would have been a collection of heirs (plus a few men who had attained great wealth when very young in pre-depression years or when comparatively young and at the depth of the depression). 2) Another bias lies in dealing with the 90 richest men in each generation. Ninety men are a progressively smaller share of the 1900, 1925, and 1950 populations; hence he is using a more and more select group and his 1950 cases are the richest of the richest. It would be most surprising if there were not a larger percentage of inherited fortunes among the very richest men than among the richest. 3) Even if these biases were absent, it is notable that Mills pays no attention to the population of parents of each generation and thus fails to use chance frequencies as the base for his estimates. 4) There is one other point whose implications for inter-generation comparisons are not clear. The 1925 set, which is the only one anywhere near a sample, is taken from 1924 tax lists. However, all cases for which information concerning parents was lacking were omitted as were all 1950 "picked up" cases for which this information was not procured. In justifying this procedure, Mills makes the curious statement that such fortunes are not "durable" or "well-known" anyway. True enough, for they are rarely established families.



Alliances of military, large corporations, and federal officials may in the last analysis be rooted in the demand by citizens that their nation have an exalted rank. That the church, family, and school have yielded place to economic, military, and political domains is not new; what is new is the demonic power accorded to these dominant three by the reign of nationalism. Jouvenal's discussion of power seems more penetrating than Mills'.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is assumed that nationalism too is created by the elites for their own ends—an assumption difficult to prove in the face of evidence about the status incidence of internationalist versus nationalist ideas.

One other important aspect of causation is almost neglected by Mills, namely, enhancement of the central administration resulting from intrusion of the state into economic life and from the problems generated by a complex economy. A deeper and more widespread concern with public welfare is a strong influence here. Moreover, the economic elites find themselves constrained by pressures of many kinds to maintain mass levels of living. The increasingly public character of giant enterprises creates power but also vulnerability to counter power and public suspicion. Awareness of identities of interests become more widespread. Accordingly, elites become every year less able to act primarily in their own short-run interests.

Mills deplores the growing proportion of higher appointive officials who have never been elected to any public office (230). At the same time he suggests that, as is undoubtedly the case, much of the chicanery among the elites occurs in default of a "stable bureaucracy." It is not quite clear how he thinks the civil service and elective political leaders should function or what their respective roles and relations with one another should be. This vagueness makes it difficult to understand the nature of his argument concerning the unresponsiveness of the "political outsiders." Having argued strongly elsewhere for an objective merit system of advancement to the top throughout society, does he make an exception for top levels of government? Or does he assume, contrary to most political scientists, that an appointive official is responsive to the public in the same sense as an elective one? What is the relation between Mills' desire for a "stable bureaucracy" and his guild socialism?

But let us skip over these ambiguities of both realities and utopias. Other omissions are more important in the present context. Notable, for example, is Mills' casualness about the price to be paid for having the kind of officialdom he prefers. The absence of this group does give

<sup>10</sup> B. de Jouvenal, *On Power: Its Nature and the History of Its Growth* (translated by J. F. Huntington), 1949, New York: Viking.

great license to private bodies. Is it not probable, however, that pressure groups would be even more powerful under a more centralized government unless liquidated? Into the balance must be thrown the possible loss of an invigorating dynamic inherent in our present structure. We must not overlook both the services and the checks on power monopoly in the activities of many unofficial bureaucracies involved in the public business: farm and labor leaders, businessmen, volunteer civil groups, ornery journalists. Even patronage seeking may have positive functions provided it is sufficiently diverse and at the same time limited. We have more government in business as well as more business (and other groups) in government. Our government is not merely "the new state of the corporate commissars" (274).

Let us return to the question of the broader use today of appointment of officials. Why does Mills find this so disturbing? For decades political scientists have urged its advantages in the public interest, but Mills does not consider it worthwhile to answer their arguments. Nor has he considered the possibility that the struggles of executive with legislature are due often to executive sensitiveness to broad and less organized interests. And how does all this fit with criticisms of the localism of congressmen?

Most of us are prone to criticize congressional localism, and for good reasons. Nevertheless there is something to be said on the other side. If this localism makes the congressman a less able judge of national issues, it may at the same time sensitize him to the interests of ordinary people living in a particular place. Every social problem has a local habitation. Within our constitutional framework this localism strengthens the widely distributed pressure groups such as small businessmen or farmers or laborers and the sub-groups among these. Mills finds such groups to have mainly nuisance value (243, 255). Yet the Eisenhower administration had to abandon its farm program. At no point does Mills examine any of the studies of the career of specific legislative programs. How can anyone in the present state of our knowledge assert that grass roots organizations play a smaller role than formerly?

Finally, while the effort to compromise contending pressure groups often compromises a legislator, it is by no means certain that this enhances the power of the elites. Nor is the role of giant corporations entirely dysfunctional. The policies of farm or labor blocs, objectively viewed, may be less in their own interests than the policies suggested to these blocs by spokesmen for "the corporate elite." That vested interests often "come together under the umbrella of government" tells us nothing about the power elite. Nor can we be at all certain that

the absence of "responsible, centralized parties" serves elite ends, injures the common man, aids the corporate rich, or strengthens the military.

### *The Strange Forbearance of the Power Elite*

Mills' failure to demonstrate power in action has already been mentioned. Moreover, a minor and contradictory theme developed by Mills himself brings out the reluctance of these men of power to act.

That military chieftains enjoy a more pervasive influence, perhaps largely by civilian default, is beyond dispute(200). The absolute power of this corps is not so readily assessed. Why, for example, can the military never win their cherished universal training? Tracing the ramifications of Pentagon officialdom is difficult, but the reader deserves at least a few examples from peacetime.<sup>11</sup> "In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the enlarged and military state, that clue becomes evident in the military ascendancy. The warlords have gained decisive political relevance and the military structure of America is in not inconsiderable part a political structure" (275). The opening sentence of this statement appears to reduce it to a formal proposition. The dictionary defines ascendancy as paramount influence, superior to all others. What does "decisive political relevance" mean?

Do the rich, we may also ask, have more privileges than in 1850? Do they in fact succeed in acquiring and holding a larger share of the aggregate wealth today? One is even curious as to whether the distribution of wealth among us is more unequal than in nations with reputations for greater probity.<sup>12</sup> When discussing income data Mills rejects out of hand the leading study (by Kuznets) which shows diminishing inequality of income distribution—on the grounds that tax evasion makes the data worthless. The tenor of Mills' arguments should lead us to expect that income inequality should instead be growing.

Cartter recently proposed an "ideal" income distribution: the top

<sup>11</sup> When one reads this statement by George C. Marshall one wonders whether disdain of civilians is as widespread among the warlords as Mills asserts. "The emphasis often placed solely on the military aspects of world affairs does a disservice to the cause of peace. The more that present differences are talked about and treated exclusively as a military problem the more they tend to become so."

<sup>12</sup> Though wealth appears to be more unequally distributed in England than here, some recent analyses by A. M. Cartter (*Redistribution of Incomes in Post-war Britain*, 1955, New Haven: Yale University) suggest caution. About one per cent of English wealthholders possess over two-fifths of all wealth, but only a fourth of this aggregate is held by the persons who are in the top one per cent of income receivers. Presumably corporate stocks are more closely held.

income not more than ten times the lowest and the lowest not less than half the mean income. For postwar incomes *before taxes* in England, Sweden, and the United States only about ten per cent of the aggregate national income would need to be redistributed to reach this ideal. Both before and since World War II the top five percent of income receivers in this country have received a smaller share of aggregate pre-tax income than the corresponding groups in England or Sweden.<sup>13</sup> These kinds of figures suggest that our theory of power and our theory of economic processes do not go along together.

Mills endorses no naive conspiracy theory of business operation, but such an assumption seems to contribute to the vagueness of his thinking. Due to the dispersal of security holdings, within a small circle of the rich but nevertheless across corporate boundaries, "the executives and owners who are in and of and for this propertied class cannot merely push the narrow interests of each property; their interests become engaged by the whole corporate class" (121). This elite therefore "possesses a certain autonomy from any specific property interest. . . . It is, in operating fact, class-wide property" (122). Until one is able to demonstrate that the balance of elite operations is against the public weal, this remains verbalism.

The whole argument about "concentration of business" remains equally equivocal. There is after all a widespread judgment among economists that the economy during our generation is becoming more competitive, or at least not more monopolistic. Do executives spend more time competing or in collusive action? If they did compete vigorously, this to Mills would be heinous. When they collaborate for the stability of the whole economy he calls them "sophisticated" and thinks they are "using the dominant liberal rhetoric for their own purposes" (122).<sup>14</sup> He believes the corporate elite shapes the economy and sets levels of employment and purchasing power.<sup>15</sup> Imagine the public wrath if they did have such power. And then "the fact that the executives do not own the property they manage means that by their decision they do not risk their own property" (129). If they are

<sup>13</sup> Cartter shows that in the England of 1880 42% of pre-tax incomes would need to be redistributed to *equalize* incomes; by 1937 this share was only 27% and in 1948 only 24%. For the United States in 1946 only 31% need have been reallocated. These data suggest that power elites have become progressively less able—or less willing—to divert income to their own pockets and suggest also that it is difficult to identify any power elite in terms of income.

<sup>14</sup> As with Freudianism and Marxism, so with Millsism, no man can demonstrate his sincerity.

<sup>15</sup> Economists have shown that there would be little possibility of maintaining a high level of employment solely through private business investment decisions and wage policies *even if* big business men had social ends as their primary goals.

not lackeys, what is their motivation? Would they be less profit-oriented if they were the owners?

This triple elite, in short, "are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society"(4). But this tells us nothing about where effective decision rests. Undeniably heads of government and of business dispose of more resources today, and organizations are more centralized. But at the same time the pattern of social relationships has become more integrated; it is not obvious that command posts today enjoy greater autonomy. Here again the nationalist state is a factor. The very salience of these men chains them.

In due course Mills turns to another way of defining this elite: "those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences. In so far as (sic) national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them"(18). Ignoring the key question as to how many things are really "decided" we must face the choice: are the elite the top men in the institutions, or are they the men who decide the key questions? These may be two quite different things. We must independently identify the elite and then ascertain if the actual course of events is decided by this elite.

Mills' definitions do seem wayward. He begins with an essential logical caution: "no matter how we might define the elite, the extent of its members' power is subject to historical variation. If, in a dogmatic way, we try to include that variation in our generic definition, we foolishly limit the use of a needed conception"(20). However, "the idea of the power elite implies nothing about the process of decision-making as such: it is an attempt to delimit the social areas within which that process, whatever its character, goes on. It is a conception of who is involved in the process"(21). This last statement is then supported dogmatically or by redefinition. War and depression are controllable and "by whom else but those who now command the enormously enlarged and decisively centralized means of decision and power?"(26). "All means of power tend to become ends to an elite that is in command of them. And that is why we may define the power elite in terms of the means of power—as those who occupy the command posts"(23).

What we really need are testable propositions about the locus and processes of power; we should have the questions before the answers. Mills undercuts his thesis that elites are exemplifications of institutions when he says an elite need not merely follow assigned roles but "may call into question the structure, their position within it, or the way in which they are to enact that position"(24).

Yet one infers that doubt about his major theses impels Mills to focus upon crises and to point out the serious effects resulting from failure of an elite to act. "Yet in our time the pivotal moment does arise, and at that moment small circles do decide or fail to decide . . . the sequence of maneuvers which involved the United States in World War II was such a 'moment'. . . . And is not that what is meant when it is said that we live in a time of big decisions, of decisively centralized power?"(22). But what does this tell us of the forces determining decisions or of why deciders decided as they did? What was their freedom to choose? Were the decisions in the "Fort Sumpter incident" any less big than today's decisions?

The same crisis theme recurs when Mills faces up to the conflicts within the elite. The elite is "frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of 'crisis'"(276). Perhaps the real decisions are made in the many antecedent events. Still the elite is not a mere agent of the upper class, for that "doesn't allow enough autonomy to the political order or its agents"(277). This might have been a fruitful lead, but there is no effort to trace any issue through the intricacies of the political order. The full circularity of the logic is finally revealed in saying that whether the elite does or does not decide "is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions"(4).

It follows that Mills is heedless of the evidence he himself elaborates about "liberal businessmen" and the sensitiveness of modern elites to public opinion. The following quotations and comments indicate this forbearance of the men of power.

Today we cannot allow larger firms to fail "given political expectations and military commitments"(8). But whence these decisive political expectations? "No matter how great their actual power, they tend to be less acutely aware of it than of the resistances of others to its use. Moreover, most American men of affairs have learned well the rhetoric of public relations"(4). But why do elites no longer dare to be arrogant publicly?

Though "prestige is the shadow of money and power", the elite go so far as to "strive to make their names notable, their actions acceptable, their policies popular"(83). "High political figures, even when it goes against their status grain, have had to learn to be folksy"(85). Still, while neither owners nor managers can damn the public, "together, as a set of corporate cliques, they can say what they want, although today they are usually too wise in the ways of public relations to say it, and besides they do not need to say it"(134). Power is "uneasy before the suspected opinions of the masses, and, accord-

ingly, opinion-making becomes an accepted technique of power-holding and power-getting"(310). "Manipulation becomes a problem wherever men have power that is concentrated and wilful but do not have authority, or when, for any reason, they do not wish to use their power openly. Then the powerful seek to rule without showing their powerfulness. They want to rule, as it were, secretly, without publicized legitimation. . . . Small circles of men are making decisions which they need to have at least authorized by indifferent or recalcitrant people over whom they do not exercise explicitly authority"(317). It is difficult to make any coherent interpretation of the foregoing statements or to harmonize this chaste picture of the elite with earlier assertions about their ascendancy and the potency of modern instruments of power.

Perhaps the elite really have little need to be uneasy before public opinion. Perhaps elite and mass opinion are not too different, or differ in other ways than Mills assumes. There is indeed evidence that on many issues (especially those not involving unions) business executives are to the left of the public. The Stouffer study of beliefs about communism reports business executives to be firmer defendants of basic rights than the public.<sup>16</sup> Though executives are not as a whole our most liberal group, if a professor seeks academic freedom he should look for the wealthiest board of trustees.

#### *The Need for a Functional Analysis of the Power Elites*

The fundamental shortcomings of this as of most other discussions of power groups is the failure to determine their societal functions. We can all agree that dominant groups have many deleterious consequences. But our society is complex and dynamic and by Mills' admission our society is operated by a power elite. This would seem to be a positive function. The problem is to balance the two sorts of

<sup>16</sup> "The Business Man and Civil Liberties," *Fortune*, May 1955, 114-15.

For example:	Business Men		Other Citizens		
	Education:	College	Other	College	Other
Percentages agreeing					
Persons favoring government ownership of railroads & big industries should be allowed to teach in college .....	59	34	42	30	
The book of an admitted Communist should be kept in public library .....	70	39	50	20	
A person whose loyalty has been questioned in Congress but who swears he never was a Communist should be kept as professor .....	91	80	78	66	

activities. At the same time one must not define the problem away. Mills, for example, denies that the elites are operating in a context of hard circumstances; he speaks of the present world situation "as now officially defined" (184). Which of the elites will take the initiative "depends upon the 'tasks of the period,' as they, the elite, define them" (277).

It is not analysis to say that the 1950 entrepreneur is engaged in "the setting up of a financial deal which merges one set of files with another" (133). How decide which sets of files to merge and for what purpose? "Only the uninformed would think that what was needed in high policy offices" was managerial ability (140) is a rash statement in the fact of business failures and weak corporations. Ironically, the Soviet government desperately seeks to instill this quality into executives and to rehabilitate profits as an economic control.

To be sure, Soviet history demonstrates that industrialization does not require "the services of a private stratum of multi-millionaires" (99). But it may have been the fact that our social order permitted millionaires which enabled us to effect rapid development without sacrificing liberty and millions of lives. Which country paid the higher price? Certainly also Soviet managers wield a power permitted to few western industrialists ever: power to keep a man from changing his job, power to deny him a roof over his head or sufficient food, loss of social security rights for trivial infractions of shop rules, or imprisonment. The tiny percentage of national income consumed, apart from reinvestment, by our millionaires may have been a modest price.

If we would evaluate the impact of the power elite we must comprehend also how decentralization of powers, and especially of economic powers, is built into the structure of our society. Our entrepreneurs are quasi-officials wielding publicly approved authority. Their tasks are not merely usurped. How they function must be judged by explicit criteria. Mills shirks this task because he just plain does not like business men, and one infers he has little more respect for the "vote market."

This myopia extends to his evaluations of the hybrid rich and corporate elite: the "new corporate world of privilege and prerogative" (147). We are not instructed by being told these are not two distinct and segregated groups, nor is it useful to write about giant corporations as basic units of wealth "to which individuals of property are variously attached" (116). Unless the rich will live from government bonds where else can they invest? Do corporation executives really feel a strong bond with the rich owners of their firms? One wonders if both groups view retention of undistributed earnings in the



same light. How about the adjustment of bonuses when earnings decline or the shift from bonds to stocks? These are the sorts of questions for which we need answers rather than comments on "managerial reorganization of the propertied class."

Mills prefers to indict rather than to describe. He says the corporate revolution has "transformed property from a tool of the workman into an elaborate instrument by which his work is controlled and a profit extracted from it"(119)—to which the appropriate reply is to mention the immensely valuable tools "loaned" to workmen and the resulting increase in productivity and incomes. What, moreover, do the statistics of profits tell us?

At several points Mills makes shrewd comments about the undermining of local elites by the nation-wide expansion of corporation branches. Such corporations are indeed giants, but do they have more power in the national arena than the smaller units of an earlier generation within their more local orbits?

Executives of such corporations live well and command many luxuries. But if one will interpret this picture in terms of power one must show that they live better, relative to the masses and relative to their services to society, than former elites.<sup>17</sup> There are the rich and the high salaried, but how much power would the elites lose if we changed our ways of distributing incomes? Perhaps then more powerful and uncontrolled elites of officialdom and the military would move to the center of the stage. Would a more centralized government produce more opportunities or generate more numerous countervailing powers? Perhaps we have some fluidities in our power structure gained by recognizing wealth accumulation as one source of power.

Mills' discussion of "the celebrities" is a delightful vignette, but its bearing on the rest of his discussion is unclear. He sees celebrities as a smokescreen for the elites; the "social visibility of elites is lowered by the status distraction." Mills believes these glamor pictures are created to divert public attention, and public wrath, from the real status and power positions. But a picture of executives running around to night clubs does not correspond to what we know of the work pressure on them. It is doubtful that the public is so stupid as to confuse Frank Sinatra with a corporation head; if they did, would it drain away antagonism to the real power holders or have the opposite effect? What poll data do we have about these public conceptions of executives and celebrities? Mills seems unable to tear his gaze from fascinat-

<sup>17</sup> Nowhere does Mills deal with the problem raised by Jouvenal (*op. cit.*, 80-1) who points out that while film stars and other entertainers are not begrudged their high earnings from "unproductive" services, the public resents high incomes of corporation executives who revolutionize the level of living of the masses.

ing but minor details of elite life that are dramatic but of questionable functional relevance.

\* \* \* \*

It has been the contention of this paper that we do not yet have an incisive dissection of the problem of power. Mills' exciting and persuasive book rests on a naive conception of social structure and is too prone to parade formal statements as empirical generalizations. The central theme about the paramount power of the elites is neutralized by an insistence that elites must conceal not only their motives but their operations and must use the mesmerism of publicity. The gravest defect, however, is the failure to examine the various functions of elites and the absence of any specific instances of power in the actual context of decision. There are numerous questions that writers on power typically fail to deal with.

1. When one's purpose is to attenuate class conflicts, can a book written in the temper of this one serve that end?
2. What really are the effects of the rich upon our society? If one wants a public-spirited elite, why deplore the multiplication of rentiers?
3. Under the sway of which type of elite—a trained governmental bureaucracy or corporation executives—would minorities have the most opportunities?
4. What are the sources of power other than wealth—which is the only one Mills deals with.
5. What business motivations are there in addition to money? Does not the professionalization of business management mean that men who could become very rich will become merely rich?
6. What is the role of money motives outside business?
7. In those realms, such as the academic world, where money motives are presumed to be less urgent, are 'interlocking directorates' and 'concentration of control' less prominent? Is recruitment of new leadership more efficient? How public spirited and responsible is the 'responsible bureaucracy' of academic life?
8. What is the power potential of labor unions and farm blocs and trade associations as compared to labor, farmers, and business men?

One may say of Mills what he said of Veblen: "His style makes it plausible, even when the criticism is not taken seriously. What he wrote remains strong with the truth, even though the facts do not cover the scene and the characters that have emerged in our time" (58).

*Harry L. Gracey*  
Graduate Student  
in Sociology  
University of Kentucky

*C. Arnold Anderson*  
Professor of Sociology  
University of Kentucky