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CHAPTER 11

C. WRIGHT MILLS AND THE THEORISTS OF POWER

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INTRODUCTION

Mills can be conceived as a ‘noble gadfly like Socrates’ (Casanova, 1964: 66) seeking to warn American citizens of the 1940s and 1950s about the dangers of their era. Mills’s primary contribution as an engaged scholar was to attempt to warn Americans of a new distribution of power associated with the hegemony of business, political, and military elites in an era in which, as he saw it, they had become increasingly politically apathetic and indifferent to the forces that determined their existence. Questions of power were at the centre of Mills’s sociological interests in his earliest published work (Mills, 1939). Indebted at this stage to Mead’s pragmatism for his conception of the ways in which the inner life and conduct of the human subject was shaped through symbolic interplay with others, Mills viewed pragmatism as insensitive to the institutional contexts and power dimensions of such processes. But it was in the years of the Second World War, seeking to refine an inchoate sense of change in American society, that Mills began to refine and develop his analysis. As we will see, Mills’s explorations of power suggest a dowry of intellectual influences, but above all perhaps the central concepts—of social stratification, structure, and bureaucratization—were borrowed from a reading of Max Weber (Gerth & Mills, 1974). Mills conceived power as the realization of the will, even if this entails the resistance of others. Mills assumed any society to be divided into distinct, but interconnected, institutional orders, raising the question of the distribution of power both within and between institutional orders. He was concerned with those actors that enjoyed the power of decision in his time. Mills’s analysis, as we will see, revealed both the concentration and coordination of power as distinctive trends in this era. Increasingly monopolistic in business organization, centralized in the processes of political decision making, and with an expanding military, the fate of American citizens was increasingly determined by powerful and remote forces. Mills’s central problem

with American society in his era related to a state of affairs that undermined democracy, involving an unhealthy integration of powerful political, business, and military forces excluding the wider public and holding out the prospect of a dangerous war economy in peacetime.

This chapter revisits Mills's analysis of power in his three major substantive texts (Mills, 1999, 2001, 2002). We consider elements of his project that often attract less comment: Mills's search for possible ways of redistributing power and his attempt to forge an ethico-political stance in rapidly changing conditions. We reveal Mills's various intellectual debts, suggesting that he refused a relation of mere imitation to those from whom he borrowed. Mills's use of the thought of others was always selective and creative in character, suggesting the foundational relevance of classical pragmatism to his project (Tilman, 1984). Contemplating the evidence of a revival of interest in Mills's thought in recent times, we reflect on what we might take from his analysis today—considering an array of criticism of his project.

THE LEADERS OF LABOUR

In the earliest of his three key texts (Mills, 2001) Mills explored the relationship between the emergent American labour movement and those he judged to be the dominant political forces of the time. Both during and immediately after the Second World War, Mills acknowledged the growing power and political potential of the American labour movement. There had been a dramatic expansion in union membership after Roosevelt's enabling Wagner Act of 1935. In the face of the pressures and iniquities of wartime management, shop-floor activism was widespread during the war years (Zieger, 1995). In the aftermath of war not only had labour militancy resurfaced as the rank and file responded to the end of the wartime wage freeze and overtime payments. Elements of the leadership of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—especially the United Auto Workers union (UAW) with whom Mills sought to cultivate relations—explored new political options. Yet Mills, seeking to appraise the characteristics and aims of the labour leaders and the balance of power at a time of considerable political uncertainty, was ultimately pessimistic in his appraisal of the situation of labour.

Mills situated the leaders of labour in a complex of conditions and forces. Bargaining practices were evidently shaped by the leaders' assessment of the balance of power with respect to the employer side. But as 'a social actor', the first condition of the 'character of the union leader', Mills remarked, 'is his union' (Mills, 2001: 3). In general, narrow 'business union' or liberal ideals guided the union leader acting on behalf of the membership at this time. At the same time the leader responded 'to the images' (Mills, 2001: 3) of union members and these remained, Mills argued, predominantly pecuniary and instrumental.

What the union leader desired and could aspire to achieve was nevertheless shaped by an array of forces. Not only the membership of the union and the agents of the business

enterprise, but various 'publics'—and most especially those he termed 'political publics'—were a decisive influence. For Mills, adapting Dewey, 'political publics' were groupings of politically alert actors actively involved in discussing and organizing in the public domain. Mills identified an array of such forces—different shades of the left and right, organized movements with varying degrees of influence—that acted on and influenced the labour relations field. But it is the influence of one particular public that Mills chose to highlight, those he termed the 'sophisticated conservatives'—an alliance of forces that threatened the interests of labour. In the aftermath of war, labour unions, and especially the leaders of labour, were vulnerable to the political ploys of those Mills judged to be the true agents of decision and the most dangerous political forces of his time.

Mills's analysis reflected changes in the American political economy that had begun in the 1930s. An alliance of sections of business and the political classes had developed to facilitate the administration of the New Deal (Lichtenstein, 1982). The labour leadership, in turn, became a junior partner. Their leaders were involved in direct and cooperative relations with the state and with business, assisting in a subordinate capacity with the formulation of codes of fair competition under the National Recovery Act of 1933. The war years saw business and labour collaborating in the administration, with the military joining the alliance and playing an increasingly dominant role. In the aftermath of war, as Mills saw it, labour unions were vulnerable to the political ploys of an alliance of sections of business, the political classes, and the military that favoured the maintenance of collaborative relations with labour. Such 'sophisticated conservatives' sought to promote a narrow collective bargaining agenda, offering union recognition and economic concessions in return for the active cooperation of their leaders in reinforcing management aims and suppressing labour rank-and-file dissent. Speaking the language of labour management 'cooperation', conservatives of this type sought to obfuscate their ambition to stabilize a particular and unequal distribution of power. The future, according to Mills, held out the likelihood of further dangers. The cooperation of labour was now sought as a necessary element in fresh plans for the American economy: the building of a corporate 'garrison state' (Mills, 2001: 233). The expansion of the military during peacetime, and economic and military aid to sympathetic and vulnerable foreign states, formed the basis for a new strategy for stabilizing the American economy—a means of warding off the danger of a return to the economic conditions of the 1930s as well as promoting broader geo-political objectives.

Mills here was drawing on the analysis that he had first begun to develop during wartime (Mills, 1942), suggesting parallels between the wartime economies of Germany and America, with Franz Neumann emerging as an important but often unrecognized source for his arguments. Neumann argued that after the suspension of the rule of law in 1933, power in Nazi Germany ultimately lay with four political blocs—the Nazi party, the state bureaucracy, the military, and heavy industry. Each bloc had its own mechanisms for making and enforcing rules but operated collaboratively in pursuit of national imperial objectives. On Mills's reading, Neumann's account of the German system of interlocking elites captured a broader drift in international capitalism—suggesting not

only important aspects of the American political economy during wartime, but the harsh outline of 'a possible future' (Mills, 1942).

Mills characterized the leaders of American labour as largely devoid of political will and imagination. Yet at the time of writing the study of labour the hope of an alternative to the problematic circumstances that Mills outlined had not been entirely extinguished. Throughout this study, there are allusions to the potential of the rank and file and elements of the leadership of the CIO—particularly the UAW. In part, Mills's optimism reflected the influence of the political circles in which he was moving (Wald, 1987). In the style of those he called the radical left Mills believed at this time in the inevitable tendencies of capitalism to catastrophic economic crisis. With the impending crisis would come class polarization and a radicalization of the labour rank and file. The sophisticated conservatives, with their strategies for the political economy, might well prevail in these crisis conditions. Yet labour too, Mills believed—strengthened by its radical membership and by independent intellectuals of the kind employed by the UAW—also stood some chance of prevailing.

For the benefit of a game of power that Mills believed, to a degree at least, to be still open, he elaborated possible alternative futures for America. Emersonian and classical pragmatist (Barratt, 2011) influences surface in Mills's image of an ideal democratic subject. Effective freedom in any sphere of life presupposed the individual capacity to articulate relevant moral issues and preferences and the exercise of critical intelligence. As a student in the 1930s, Mills had commended those citizens who possessed 'the imagination and intelligence to formulate their own codes. . . . the courage and stamina to live their own lives in spite of social pressure' (Mills, 2000: 34). Now he wrote of the need to induce a capacity for 'initiative and self reliance' (Mills, 2001: 264) in the union membership. Mills gestured towards the possibility of a new 'free man of a free society' in the workshops of America (Mills, 2001: 268). Democracy in the labour unions required an attempt to cultivate democratic virtues. Mills imagined the possibility of a context in which politics would become so much part of the way of life of the American worker, of daily work and social routine, 'that political alertness would be part of his social being' (Mills, 2001: 269). The development of a 'vision' for labour implied the constitution of an organization capable of seeing 'with a hundred eyes. . . . elaborating what might be done about it with a hundred minds and stating. . . . all the probable consequences of each possible move' (Mills, 2001: 284).

Mills, like Dewey, assumed that wide ranging institutional and political changes—including changes to the ownership and control of enterprise—were required to make possible his favoured political ideals (Barratt, 2011). There was an assumption also that effective freedom required a capacity to contribute actively and intelligently to the collective direction of all social institutions that affected personal existence—including the workplace. And like Dewey in the 1920s, Mills looked to British socialism—to the guild socialism of G. D. H. Cole—for his conception of workplace democratization. The basic ideals of the guild system of democracy in the shop, works, and industry are borrowed from Cole. Both Cole and Mills envisaged a transitional mechanism—the collective contract (Cole, 1917; Mills, 2001)—by which labour could gain valuable organizational

experience as it acquired control of wages and the organization of production. Like Cole, Mills also imagined a role for the state in enabling the organization of consumers as a political force (Mills, 2001: 263).

Elements of the American labour movement, with whom Mills was engaged in active dialogue, would also contribute to Mills's formulations. In particular, he appears to have valued the ideas of the socialist 'intellectuals' of the UAW. Mills—as others have emphasized (Geary, 2009)—drew inspiration from the UAW in the post-war years. To be sure, it was never a question of imitation, more of sources that inspired the political imagination. Positions that Mills ultimately adopted in the study of labour (Mills, 2001: 258–9), the possibility for the unions to engage in formulating their own plans for industry, certain macroeconomic redistributive policies—a sharply graduated income tax, reduced indirect taxes, higher wages, and the control of prices—are no more than sketched. But Mills was encouraged by new thinking among elements of labour. Diverse sources were thus drawn upon as Mills, in his more optimistic moments, sought new possibilities for redistributing power.

THE NEW MIDDLE CLASSES

By the final years of the 1940s Mills's disillusionment with labour had grown. Their moment, as he saw it, had passed. The problem, as he viewed it, lay largely in the conservative leadership, increasingly fearful of changing political conditions with the growing influence of the political right and seeking to protect their own newly won status. The labour leadership now focused overwhelmingly on traditional 'business union' issues: wages and job security, with few signs of resistance in the rank and file. But there were also wider social changes at stake. Mills now—like many others of the left at this time—increasingly emphasized the conservatism of the American citizenry. *White Collar* (Mills, 2002), although dedicated to an exploration of the American middle classes, sought to capture a broader change in American society. It is perhaps in the study of the white collar worker that the influence on Mills of what one writer has called one of the most 'extraordinary cultural transfers of modern history' (McClay, 1994: 194)—the arrival in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s of a significant number of German-speaking intellectuals—is most evident. As we will see, disparate sources—not only a reading of Max Weber but an interpretation of the early Marx, recent debates in German Marxism, and various critics associated with the Institute for Social Research—shaped Mills's appraisal of the balance of forces.

Mills's interest in America's expanding middle class began in the early 1940s, suggested by political debates in Germany. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, factions in the German socialist party (SPD) debated the class position and political affiliations of the salaried mental worker: a large, intermediate stratum underspecified by Marx. Familiarized with these debates by Hans Gerth (Geary, 2009), the questions that Mills posed—the class position and identity of the American white collar worker

and the likelihood of an alliance with the labour movement—suggested an attempt to raise analogous questions to those raised in the ‘mittelstrand’ debates in Germany.

Reflecting on the American middle classes at different times, Mills reached different conclusions. At times he appears to have imagined this emerging class as a probable ally of labour (Mills, 2001), sharing the interests of the industrial proletariat and receptive to the labour movement, if only the movement could acquire a more effective and imaginative leadership. By the late 1940s, however, his view had changed. Ultimately *White Collar* is Mills at his most politically pessimistic, presenting an analysis that suggests why he saw the new sophisticated conservatives gaining power with so little in the way of public debate or opposition.

If the theorists of the SPD that inspired him had assumed the German ‘mittelstrand’ to be an essentially homogeneous formation, Mills, addressing the American context, deployed Weberian concepts in a way that allowed a differentiated analysis. Mills viewed the decline of the small, independent property owner and the rise of the new white collar employee of the large enterprise as a decisive change in the nature of American capitalism during the twentieth century. Dependant white collar workers were required to sell their labour power. Yet their class position was not reducible to that of the industrial proletariat. What distinguished the white collar stratum as a class in its own right were the types of skills that they sold or the nature of the market situation. Capitalist enterprise was now planned, and the new middle class organized and coordinated the labour of others or marketed and merchandized the product of their labour.

Mills explored the differential power positioning of the white collar worker, the institutional milieu that shaped and influenced their ‘character’ and ‘social psychology’ (Gerth & Mills, 1953), highlighting the consequences and costs of work regimes for those now compelled to sell their labour to such organizations. Mills’s analysis reflected the drive towards the more efficient deployment of work processes in America in the post-war years (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1982) as a newly self confident management set out to regain the initiative from labour. For the most junior, unfreedom was felt most acutely in the more rigid forms of the division of labour now favoured. Yet the new work regimes imposed burdens and costs at each and every level of the bureaucratic hierarchy: from middle management, with its restricted and all too readily usurped ‘borrowed’ powers, to the aspiring senior managers who must always ‘listen attentively to the ones above’ (Mills, 2002: 81). Mills presented the white collar worker, especially those nearer the base of bureaucratic pyramids, as in the grip of a status panic, triggered by a loss of autonomy, declining levels of income, and the growing prosperity of unionized blue collar workers. A frantic status striving had become characteristic of this stratum as they sought to reclaim prestige, by associating with those of higher status or by advancing their education.

At the same time bureaucratic work regimes imposed an array of uniform and regular costs. Mills noted the drift from formally legitimated power to increasingly opaque and manipulative practices. The source of management instructions became increasingly invisible and hard to discern for the white collar worker. Mills’s analysis reflected the manner in which unionized enterprises increasingly borrowed neo-human relations

techniques from the innovative non-union sector at this time, as they sought to weaken the influence of work groups and assert more effective control over work processes (Jacoby, 1997). At all levels, the emotional life of the white collar worker was becoming a target for control: from the 'salesmanship' increasingly expected of all, to the manners expected of the aspiring executive. Work regimes increasingly demanded control of the character of the American white collar worker. White collar workers at all levels—including the intellectuals who now merchandized their own labour—were deprived of control of their work, lacking opportunity for 'craftsmanship' or creation. Mills now adapted Marx's arguments in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, suggesting a double alienation. On the one hand—and in the style of the early Marx—the white collar employee was alienated from the control of his or her labour and the output of that labour. On the other hand, the white collar employee was estranged from his or her own very self as a potentially self-cultivating and independent subject.

Deprived of fulfilment, alienated from work and self, the white collar worker looked to the fields of leisure and consumption for satisfaction. Yet this left Americans passive and indifferent to the forces that shaped their existence. If the United States was evolving into a 'corporate form of garrison state' (Mills, 2001: 233) few were alert to the dangers of the moment. Mills offered his own interpretation on a familiar argument, locating himself in a leftist and liberal discourse of this era. Subverting popular discourse of the time, critics argued that the United States, as it opposed 'closed societies' and the forces of totalitarianism, had its own similar tendencies (McClay, 1994). Here the influence of the émigré scholars of the Institute for Social Research was decisive. Mills (2002: 284) appears to have been especially taken with the work of Leo Lowenthal (1961). The genre of the magazine biography and the images of success through consumption that such cultural forms promoted through their accounts of the lives of the 'headliners' of the world of leisure were symptomatic of a new order. Invoking the impersonal and constraining routine of city life, Mills's analysis suggested a debt to Tonnies, another inheritor of German romanticism. Yet features of the American context were suggestive of a distinctive variant of the mass society (Mills, 2002: 340–50). Political activism had been stifled by the heterogeneity of the population, by general prosperity, and the weakness of political parties. Further encouraging apathy in matters of politics, political decision making was increasingly conducted in remote, federal institutions.

If Mills was politically pessimistic, he still allowed for the possibility of change. There remained a faint possibility that the labour unions might alter their course. Revisiting the political argument of the study of labour, Mills presented the alternative of the collective control of the already collective conditions and results of human labour as an essential precondition of human freedom and security. A genuine democratic politics required that citizens be more extensively involved in political decision making. But now there was a new element to his alternative. The notion of 'craftsmanship' (Mills, 2002,) was borrowed from romantic and socialist romantic sources (Lowy, 1987). John Ruskin challenged the division of labour in the Victorian factories and its dehumanization of labour, believing that a state of affairs in which one man's thoughts were executed by another to be immoral. He looked back to the Gothic era and the image of the Venetian

craftsman. Later, William Morris (Lowy, 1987) incorporated the same romantic vision in his socialist ideal. Mills took much from these sources. But he was not nostalgic or regressive in his thinking. Contemporary conditions—particularly the emergence of large-scale enterprise—set the limits within which alternatives could be constructed. Mills did not wish to revive the traditions of Gothic handicraft, but rather to incite others to explore the possibilities of an old ideal at a different historical moment.

THE POWER ELITE

Inspired by the example of Balzac (Mills, 1959), Mills completed his trilogy of the major 'classes' of his time with an examination of the ruling elites. The final text in the series (Mills, 1999) was the most widely read, with a particular appeal for those that led the American New Left during its early years. The New Left drew inspiration from Mills, making an effort to explore the possibilities of more participatory forms of democracy (Miller, 1994). The early New Left's own internal political processes, as well as their attempts to organize the poor in several American cities between 1963 and 1967, were inspired by Mills. But the leading theorists of this movement (Hayden, 2006) also derived their notion of the 'establishment' from Mills's exposure of the interconnected cliques of the power elite.

Mills now considered the processes of formation of the elites, the solidarity and commonalities of value, and interest among their members. Mills wrote of the expansion and concentration of the 'means' of power at the disposal of those that occupied positions of 'command' in the elites of business, the military, and the polity. Such means had been greatly expanded by changes over the course of the twentieth century: the emergence of the large-scale enterprise, the expansion of the military after 1914, and the growth of central government, associated especially with the period after the New Deal. The expansion of the powers of the elites had been accompanied by a pattern of coordination or integration among those who led these organizations. Mills wrote of an 'inner circle of political outsiders' now occupying key positions in the administration. Composed of 'members and agents of the corporate rich and the high military in an often uneasy alliance with selected policy makers' (Mills, 1999: 156), Mills argued that a clique of 'outsiders' had effectively taken over the executive posts of administrative command. The consequences for American citizens were profound. If, as Mills put it, their powers were circumscribed, 'in the rounds of job, family and neighbourhood', Americans were also driven by powerful forces that they could 'neither understand nor govern' (Mills, 1999: 3).

Mills's development of his earlier assessment of the elites of power should be understood in the context of changing political conditions of the time. The prestige of the elites of business and the military had been greatly enhanced by their part in the war effort. The international context, the years of the Cold War and especially the Korean War, served to consolidate the role of these same forces in the administration. In 1944,

Charles E. Wilson, President of General Electric who served in the War Production Board—planning production during wartime—proposed a permanent war economy: a permanent set of relations between business and the military. As Mills judged it, a series of related developments signalled that such a pattern of relations had now come into being. Representative of business and the military, with the sanction of politicians, had effectively captured key positions in the executive branch of government. The executive had become the principal site of political decision making, with the legislature as well as the judicial branch relegated to a lower ‘middle’ (Mills, 1999: 4) level of national power. The military, in particular, now dominated the formation of policy in the fields of international diplomacy and foreign affairs, as well as playing a significant part in the fashioning of economic policy. A ‘military metaphysic’ (Mills, 1999: 198) now informed the policy of the state. The permanent expansion of military capability was presented as a means to national security, but served an array of other aims: enhancing the prestige of the military, warding off a return to ‘economic slump’, and promoting the relentless drive for corporate profitability. To those liberals who imagined the United States as a balanced society, with a freedom of association that allowed the formation of diverse and competing interest groups and a separation of powers between the elements of the state, Mills responded with the image of a social order now dominated by the loosely interconnected cliques of business and the military. Such a regime was at once unaccountable and secretive in its mode of operation. This state of affairs served to stifle democracy and left the citizenry fearful. Mills’s critique acquired an urgent, even breathless, character.

Mills’s elite was not a ruling class in the way that Marxists imagined. The polity exhibited its own institutional specificity, even if outsiders, associated with the military and business, now occupied central positions in the administrative branch. Nor was a unity of outlook among the elite born of an active conspiracy. Mills highlighted the regime of character formation and development through which the elites passed. A ‘preparatory’ schooling and higher education made possible by access to substantial wealth encouraged a similarity of values and manners among the business elite. Consonant codes were promoted in the disciplinary regimes of West Point and Annapolis. In important respects, the members of the elite were alike: American by birth, predominantly urban, and from the east. A familiarity among them had been born not only through joint experience in the administrative processes of government—in the planning mechanisms associated with war production or the agencies that emerged with the New Deal—but also through common involvement in trade associations or recreational activities. Although not without their differences, all were ultimately united in pursuit of common interests—the system of private property and the aggrandizement of the military. Mills thus explored the ties of solidarity and cultural homogeneity that made the power elite a social entity. For the elites of America at least, it seemed that the concept of ‘class consciousness’ had some relevance (Mills, 1999: 283).

Yet these developments took place largely behind the back of the American citizenry. Mills’s concept of the ‘main drift’ suggested the conventional wisdom of the time. Diverse forces were working to promote a particular liberal ‘version of reality’, a benign image of the forces of power promoting the national interest. The military was

now actively involved in a public relations campaign to redefine the reality of international relations in a way that justified the expansion of military capabilities. A combination of public relations and the artful use of the doctrine of 'official secrets' undermined reasoned political debate enabling the activities of the elites. At the same time, Mills returned to the conditions of the mass society. An atomized, passive, and compliant citizenry had developed in the United States, encouraged by the practices of mass mediation, alienating work regimes, and the expansion and bureaucratization of political and voluntary organizations. The masses were now moved mainly by culture rather than by reason, and in such conditions the possibility of independent thought and popular political action was seriously diminished. The United States had found its own path to the mass society.

Yet Mills continued to explore the possibility of a political alternative. Some hope could be found in the citizenry and the mobilization of the 'private tensions' and 'inarticulate resentments' that festered under present conditions. Mills offered an alternative of a politically alert and knowing citizenry that would take command of its own fate. The ideal of a 'community of publics' suggested diverse independent associations of politically alert citizens, exercising critical intelligence and challenging the clandestine forces that now ordered their existence. Such institutions would be positioned between 'the family and the small community' on the one hand and 'the effective units of the power elite' on the other (Mills, 1999: 309). Mills's community of publics suggested a return to republican ideals (Mills, 1999: 300). Under such arrangements, Mills argued, citizens were presented with a problem: they discussed that problem among themselves in many small groups, with a viewpoint emerging from a broader social dialogue involving the various citizen groups. 'Then the people act out this view or their representatives act it out and this they do' (Mills, 1999: 299–300), he remarked.

Although Mills took John Dewey for a nostalgist—for his belief that democracy should begin 'at home' in the local community and for his insensitivity to modern divisions of class and power (Mills, 1966)—there are evident echoes of Dewey's political ideals in Mills's formulations. Both Dewey and Mills sought to nurture 'creative democracy' through the face-to-face deliberations of numerous small groups of citizens believing democracy to be incomplete without further attempts to amplify their voices. Both Mills and Dewey associated democracy with the enlargement of human character. The self was enhanced by the capacity to determine purpose and desire in all the relations of life. And both Mills and Dewey owe much to the Emersonian ideal of the self-reliant American of the post-colonial era, able to compose the aggregate of a character.

Mills envisaged a variety of social and institutional changes if the ideal of 'creative democracy' was to be attained. He offered no definitive programme of reform, but rather intimated a set of principles that might be taken up and elaborated by others to enable a community of publics to thrive. In part this was a matter of the inculcation of habits in the citizenry. Mills wrote of education as a practice of 'self clarification in the ancient sense' (Mills, 1999: 318). Supplementing vocational learning, a liberal education would include the development of the skills of controversy with one's self 'which we call thinking' and 'with others that we call debate' (Mills, 1999: 318). It was the task

of a liberal education to enable an understanding of personal troubles by locating them in the social conditions of their existence. Education would develop the dispositions of character, both intellectual and moral capacities, which would fit men and women for a new democratic social order. Mills also intimated the possibility of a type of journalism that would enable the individual to transcend his narrow milieu and 'clarify its private meaning' (Mills, 1999: 314). The sociologist would help individuals to clarify the social sources of their inarticulate personal tensions and grievances. The enactment of a 'politics of truth', aiming to rouse individuals to exert pressure and to facilitate change, was a primary responsibility of the intellectual in the academy. Mills thus evoked the central argument of his *Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959). Diverse 'intellectuals' would thus help to call to account the elites of this era.

But a new and enhanced democracy also suggested the need for a more responsible form of government. Displacing the artfulness of the public relations campaign and the manipulation of the doctrine of official secrets, Mills looked forward to a new era based on free dialogue between the governed and those who govern—and responsible politics implied changes in the administration. Mills revealed himself as no simple anti-bureaucrat, but an enemy of the 'pseudo-bureaucracy' dominated by the 'political outsiders' of the military and business (Mills, 1999: 235). What the United States required was an independent bureaucracy effectively above party political pressure and with a genuine career civil service. The impartial bureaucracy of an independent civil service was indeed praiseworthy.

MILLS AND THE QUESTION OF POWER TODAY

Today we appear to be witnessing something of a revival of interest in Mills's work. Kerr and Robinson (2011), for example, praise *The Power Elite* as a classic—a considered engagement with the phenomena of elites that unjustly became unfashionable in the 1960s. Others draw direct parallels between the politics of our own era and that of Mills (Aronowitz, 2012). Recent administrations in the United States have enhanced the powers of the executive branch of government, and the business elite remains dominant in the executive. With the 'war on terror' policy is guided by a logic that bears a striking resemblance to the 'military metaphysic'. Political elites, Aronowitz reminds us, pursue international influence through the encouragement of business investment, the support of numerous foreign military bases, and the maintenance of client states. Mills may well have exaggerated the influence of the military in political circles even in his own era, but the 'permanent war economy' has not disappeared (Aronowitz, 2012) with expenditure on the military amounting to 4.3 per cent of GDP in the final year of the Bush administration.

Russell Jacoby (2002) in a similar way comments on the relevance of themes introduced in the study of the middle classes. Mills, with the notion of the 'personality market', anticipates contemporary developments. In *White Collar* Mills captures a juncture

in the politics of the workplace in which the logic of human relations extended its influence. The emotions and demeanour of the sales worker were likewise becoming a target for action and intervention. If today managers and the experts that advise them commonly seek to engage the psyche of the employee for productive ends, Mills records a decisive moment in the emergence of such a rationality or style of thought. Yet Mills's white collar worker did not know the contemporary work regime of minimal security and opaque boundaries between work and non-work existence. As Jacoby notes, in characterizing the control of demeanour among workers in his era the focus for Mills was sales work rather than services. With the ascendancy of 'financialization' (Williams & Savage, 2008), a particular segment of capital has acquired pre-eminence. The international political institutions of our era with their favoured neo-liberal orthodoxies (Murphy, 2006) would not have been familiar to Mills. Mills like any critic was a student of his own times (Aronowitz, 2012). At most, his substantive analyses suggest the beginnings of social phenomena that we now know or are a source of analogies with the present. Perhaps then it is more instructive to consider the broader ambition and aims of his project rather than his substantive propositions. What then can be made today of the general concepts and arguments that Mills deployed in both examining the power of the business and military elites and experimenting with possible forms of its redistribution?

Mills bequeathed to organization studies an interest in the formation of elites: the processes of corporate ascent, of socialization and inter-organizational advancement that enable elites to act on the actions of others (Useem, 1984; Pettigrew, 1992). But both Mills and those who follow an interest in elite formation are vulnerable to Dennis Wrong's concern that they fail to show what the elite 'do with their power' (Wrong, 1956: 279). Mills exemplifies what Barry Hindess (1996) terms the 'capacity outcome' conception of power: power is assumed to be a capacity or 'possession' of particular agents. The danger is of circular reasoning (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006), with greater power being assumed to prevail over lesser power and power relationships assumed in advance of the analysis of any particular field of human action. Mills was explicit here, arguing that 'the power elite implied nothing about the process of decision making as such' (Mills, 1999: 21). Rather, his aim was to attempt to delimit the social arena within which that process 'whatever its character goes on and who was involved in that process' (Mills, 1999: 21). How elites compete and vie for position is obscured in this analysis (Reed, 2012). Such a perspective tends to discourage the examination of the forms of knowledge available to and deployed by elites. Mills had little to say of the think tanks and exclusive political discussion groups that informed the thinking of the elites in his era, just as they do in our own (Domhoff, 2006). In his earliest published work, Mills (1939) commended the detailed study of 'vocabularies of motive' and their social and historical conditions of possibility. A research agenda, derived from a reading of classical pragmatism, was proposed but never fully exploited.

Other important conditions of rule, notably the tactics, instruments, and procedures that enable elite rule, are similarly obscured in Mills's perspective. He had little to say, for example, of important developments in the training of leaders in this era (Whyte, 1957), the widespread decentralization and delegation favoured by the major businesses in the

1950s under the influence of the consultancy firms (Drucker, 1946), or the advances in 'management by numbers' (Hoskin, 1998)—in methods of administrative scrutiny, examination, and measurement—that accompanied these changes. In this regard, Daniel Bell (1963: 52)—foreshadowing a contemporary Foucauldian interest in the prosaic mechanisms of power (Clegg, 1989; Rose, 1999)—was correct to argue that Mills gave little consideration to the norms and practices of 'leadership' that would give the concept of power greater substance. Mills ultimately obscures the dependence of the 'summit'—the elites—on a whole complex of power relations and practices beyond the 'strategic command posts' at lower levels, the minor expertise of the manager or of the consultant and the work of translation and interpretation that they must bring to bear in their 'implementation' of elite decisions (Clegg, 1989). And, as others note, the increasingly polyarchic characteristics of contemporary organizational hierarchies only serve to accentuate these tendencies (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Reed, 2012).

Mills, we have suggested, is always seeking a way out from the predicament he described. Our interest initially is in the different ways Mills framed the problem of social and political change. As we have seen at times in the study of labour, he is inclined to images of crisis and overcoming led by the forces of the working class, a conception borrowed from Trotskyism and Marxism but ultimately recalling the Hebrew prophets. This was the position that he would later dismiss as that of the labour metaphysician (Mills, 1960). More commonly in the later books, Mills was inclined to pessimism and determinism in his assessment of the prospects for change. Change was at once necessary but rendered impossible by virtue of the effects of bureaucratization and the mass society, pacifying and fragmenting the citizenry. American society was conceived as a largely static totality. This tendency was perhaps most apparent in the study of the middle classes. Here, David Riesman (1952) commented on Mills's implausible unthinking and even witless image of the white collar worker. Mills had failed to acknowledge his or her skilled activity. Sociologists, Riesman argued, should seek to learn more of the 'ethnic colouring' (Riesman, 1952: 514) of the white collar worker: how the Irishman might confirm his status as an American by moving from the factory to the office, or how the Italian derived pleasures and pains from the office or sales environment. Mills allowed insufficient space for the investigation of processes of accommodation or even sabotage in respect of bureaucratic mechanisms of control. The meaning of the mass media for its audiences required further investigation. As Norman Denzin (1990) argues, Mills neglects the detail of the experiences of the 'little people' in his major texts. He fails to think 'relationally' (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009) about the working of power—to address the acquiescent, compliant, or resistant responses of subordinate actors. This same inclination is apparent in the neglect of important countertendencies in this era (Geary, 2009), developments with the potential to destabilize the dominant forces which he documented. Mills had little to say of those that the New Deal had missed (Hayden, 2006): those who experienced poverty and racial oppression and who would later give birth to the Civil Rights movement. Mills's idea that there were political dimensions to personal existence (Mills, 1959) proved highly influential in the feminist movement of the late 1960s (Echols, 1997), but he was largely neglectful of the hierarchy of gender in

his account of the distribution of power in his era. Mills is neglectful of the politics of race and gender; the notion that he might help us to explore ‘power in all its dimensions’ (Aronowitz, 2012) thus appears in need of qualification. And Mills is vulnerable to the charge that he obscures the capacity for change and volatility in capitalist economic relations (Domhoff, 2006).

Yet beyond Mills’s inclinations to determinism or faith in the course of events lies another side to his political sensibility. History in this conception had not stopped. Mills, reflecting his classical pragmatist influences, conveyed a sense of the future as open and unfinished. Such a sensibility is perhaps best illustrated in parts of the early study of labour, as Mills explored the disparate forces that shaped their practice while emphasizing that the future would be shaped by the calculations and actions of socially situated actors. Mills, again reflecting a pragmatist sensibility, is continually seeking a way out from the predicament that he recognized. Mills’s ethico-political stance was crafted from various sources, reliant on a labour of reflection and dialogue with others and subject to ongoing examination. The early image of ‘the free man, of a free society, in the workshops of America’ (Mills, 2001: 268) gave way under changing political conditions to a new conception of citizenship. He was not the rigid libertarian enemy of power that some of his liberal critics imagined (Parsons, 1957). He was certainly indebted to the long history of the left, to the political movements of his time, but liberal notions had a part to play as well. The state required a permanent check on its activity by active, critically intelligent, and politically imaginative citizens. Power was not simply the power of one agent ‘over’ another. Mills, as we have seen, assumed that wide-ranging reforms were required if subjects were to exercise their freedoms in more active ways. Mills reminds us that democratic virtues and capabilities are not natural but must be learned. We are strengthened by the power we enjoy through association and dialogue with other political actors (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). More generally, as critical scholars of management try to debate the politics of their practice (Barratt, 2011) Mills serves as an illustration of the long hard effort and work of reflection required to give distinctive style to a political identity. After Mills, cultivating such an identity demands that we should always be prepared to learn from others, to have our experience widened or radically altered through listening. Such an orientation appears to subvert any easy or stereotypical moves in finding one’s path in ethico-political matters.

But here again there are tensions in Mills’s major texts. Emerson, James, and Dewey—in the style of Socrates—argued that an attitude of doubt and an openness to change was to be maintained in matters of belief and value. Discriminating judgements, for both James and Dewey, presupposed a grasp of both the conditions and consequences of a set of convictions. One required a capacity for self-criticism and a willingness to put matters to the test of practical experience and—in Dewey’s case—open debate. Mills, in principle at least, appeared to take a similar view. In practice, however, his position is less clear. Relevant experience of Mills’s favoured ideals—most obviously the experiments in guild socialism in both Britain and the United States (Matthews, 1971)—were ignored in the study of labour. Mills can be said to have failed to ‘think against’ his own position. A host of relevant criticism of his favoured ideals was ignored. There were those

sympathetic critics of the guilds, of its limited forms of worker participation (Flexner, 1923), and indifference to the problems of restraining the powerful or those with an urge to the mastery of others (Russell, 1918). Mills forgot Nietzsche's (1968) reflections on the dangers of assuming a human 'will to good'. Mills, at times, was vulnerable to the charge of failing to recognize that the capacities of citizens must depend on social and cultural conditions of training and practice (Parsons, 1957). Mills's romantic and Ruskinian image of the human subject 'exuberant in work' is a case in point. An unproblematic world of personal satisfaction, devoid of the requirements of specialization or the binding rules and modes of self-discipline of the democratic workplace was implied (Minson, 1993). At times, the political imagination was inclined to excess.

Edward Thompson (1963) long ago highlighted the tension in Mills's project between the disposition of the expert and the craftsmen. At his most certain and dogmatic, Mills imagined himself as an agent of truth, enlightening others in the realities of their situation, with the capacity to penetrate false appearance and reveal the basis of false beliefs in a particular system of social relations. The expert was ultimately a custodian of the 'interests' of others—indeed the notion of interests became important to Mills in the later books in the series. The elites were pursuing their interests given to them by the social situation in which they found themselves.

Mills, as an expert, is not only inclined to dogma and circular reasoning, he forgets that 'interests' are only available to actors by virtue of a practice of discursive formulation. For the craftsman, by contrast there could never be a final or finished truth. Knowledge found its point in contemporary relevance, illuminating the private concerns and anxieties of citizens. Knowledge developed by critical reflection on the products of its activity, by posing new questions and mobilizing evidence relevant to the questions posed. Matters of truth were only available to the craftsman by the on-going process of question and answer and could never be settled by abstract philosophical argument. It was in the effort to harmonize word and deed, the attempt to live a critical life, that an existence found its truth. The elaboration of an ethico-political position similarly required an ongoing work of reflection and self-criticism, a willingness to be moved by events and by others. In the style of Mills, the craftsman is one who seeks to impose a style or taste on his or her values and politics. It is at such moments that he is most deeply persuasive and perhaps inspiring to us today.

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