

C. Wright Mills

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I mourn the death of C. Wright Mills, bitterly and personally. We had, in the last five years of his life, become close friends. I am not minded to write a detached appraisal of his work and thought. But I think I can write about the man he was, and what he was about.

Mills was 45 years old when he died of a second heart attack last March, at his home in West Nyack, near New York. He had by then long established himself as the most interesting and controversial sociologist writing in the United States. With books like *White Collar*, *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination*, he had succeeded in proving to a new generation of students what most of their teachers had managed to conceal from them: that social analysis could be probing, tough-minded, critical, relevant and scholarly, that ideas need not be handled as undertakers handle bodies, with care but without passion, that commitment need not be dogmatic, and that radicalism need not be a substitute for hard thinking. With what he called 'pamphlets', like *The Causes of World War III* and *Listen, Yankee*, he had wanted, and managed, to reach a wider public, in the hope of doing what one man could against the brainwashing and intimidation to which his fellow Americans were, and are, exposed from all sides, day in day out.

Mills was as American as could be. He was born in Texas, and liked to recall that his grandfather, in the old days of one man one gun, had died, shot in the back. However, he not only fled from the intellectual desert of Texas as soon as he had graduated from its University; let his enemies make of it what they will, he also came to

feel a deep alienation from America, its ethos, its politics, its way of life. His was not the snob dislike which some Americans feel for a country incapable of matching the hierarchical graces of Europe; nor the alienation which often accompanies the romantic vision of vanished America, rural, small-town, face-to-face. Mills' interest in Europe was strictly sociological. Nor did he feel the need to look for radical inspiration outside America: the Wobblies would do quite well. And he was not, as some critics alleged, an *égaré* Jeffersonian, hankering for a pre-industrial age: he liked stainless steel, efficient heating systems, fast motorcycles. He was an excellent mechanic and professional with a camera. He would have made a first-class engineer. What he loathed about America was not its industrial strength, but the mess which a profit-oriented society had made, and cannot but make of its human and material powers; not America's cars, but their built-in shoddiness, not television but its commercialised misuse. *Caveat Emptor* did not strike him as the last word in social wisdom.

Enters *The Power Elite*. It is easy but dishonest to attribute the corruption of a society to its people. Rousseau was right: the people are never corrupt. But they are often corrupted; by those whom it pays to corrupt, by those who have the power to do it. In *White Collar*, which he thought his best book, he had analysed the various kinds of corruption which had affected the middle layers of American society. In *The Power Elite*, he went on to locate the corruptors-in-chief, the men of the 'higher immorality', and found them in three interlocking groups: the corporate rich and the 'warlords' (those whom an unexpected disciple, Eisenhower by name, has called the 'industrial-military complex') and the political directorate.

The Power Elite is a rich and intricate book, written, like all that Mills wrote, in a compelling style, intense, muscular, alive. It is one of the very few books to glitter among the grey mass of what, in the United States, passed for social analysis in the frightened fifties. There is room for debate about much of its detail. But I don't think there is much room for serious debate about the book's general thesis, namely, that in America, some men have enormous power denied to everyone else; that these men are, increasingly, a self-perpetuating élite; that their power is, increasingly, unchecked and irresponsible; and that their decision-making, based on an increasingly 'military definition of reality' and on 'crackpot realism', is oriented to nefarious ends.

Mills was an angry man, with the disciplined, directed anger of the humanist in an irrational society—for what is humanism if not anger at unreason? His fiercest anger, however, was not with the Power Elite: for they were merely acting out the role cast for them by the social setting in which they were allowed to wield power; nor with American labour leaders, the men whom he had, in one of his first books, hopefully called the New Men of Power. True, they had failed to form an effective counter-weight to the Power Elite; worse, they had adopted its ethos and its purposes. But then, Mills had long given up (mistakenly, I think) the belief that organised labour could

ever, in an advanced capitalist society, be the maker of radical history—the ‘labour metaphysic’, he called that belief. It was not the Power Elite, Labour or White Collar which angered him most, but defaulting academics and intellectuals.

To an extraordinary degree, Mills had something which is not very common among academics and intellectuals: an intense respect for the intellectual craft, for the world of ideas, knowledge and scholarship, for the intellectual as the high priest of reason and truth. He really liked only two kinds of people: those who were good with their hands, a carpenter, a mechanic, a gunsmith; and those who were possessed by the intellectual passion, as he was himself. He never made the vulgar mistake of taking seriously only those who shared his view of the world. Unlike many radicals (not to speak of anti-radicals), he was an intensely listening man. The basic requirement was not shared opinions, but honesty and knowledge, scholarship and relevance. Every working day (and every day was a working day), he was engaged, through books, essays, articles, newspapers, in a silent but active debate with fellow writers, anywhere. I have never seen anyone read as creatively as Mills did. He couldn’t even read a detective story without pencil in hand.

‘All social scientists’, he wrote, ‘by the fact of their existence, are involved in the struggle between enlightenment and obscurantism’. But he knew that there was an ‘ought’ missing from that proposition, that many social scientists, in the struggle between enlightenment and obscurantism, are on the wrong side, or refuse to be involved, which comes to the same. This is what roused him to indignation—conformist unthinking, reason at the eager service of unreasonable kings, sophisticated apologetics for the inexcusable, social scientists as shields of orthodoxy and bellboys of authority.

It is from that indignation that stemmed *The Sociological Imagination*. That book was both a denunciation and a plea: a denunciation of social science as abstracted triviality, as windy pretension allied to timid respectability, of the uses of social science for the purpose, not of challenge, but of adjustment; and a plea—for the big probe, for a social science ‘of direct relevance to urgent public issues and insistent human trouble’, for the social scientist as a man fired with the will ‘to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time’.

The trouble with Mills was that he never managed to emancipate himself from a view of the intellectual as the free man, in duty bound to help make others free. Such a romantic, naive belief is inconvenient; it poses a threat. No wonder he made enemies in the academic fraternity.

It was only in 1956 that Mills first came to Europe, on leave from Columbia University. He had, until then, been very America-oriented. In April 1957, he came to a week-end seminar in Surrey, organised by the Students’ Union of the London School of Economics. He was a big man, who looked bigger, reserved but intensely alert, deliberate in speech and coolly appraising, unassumingly at ease with the students, whom he bowled over, quite unselfconsciously. Shortly

after, in July, he and I went to Poland, where Adam Schaff, as the philosopher of official Poland, and Leszek Kolakowski, as the most acute of the young Polish ‘revisionists’, showed us two parts of an equation, to which neither had the complete answer, nor could have.

Until then, Mills had generally shared the outlook of that particular stream of American radicalism which views the Soviet regime as inherently evil, and present-day communism as the frozen caricature of a uniquely penetrating body of thought. For the record, I might as well add here that the label ‘Texas Trotskyite’ which some people stupidly tried to pin on him was doubly inaccurate: he was born in Texas but he was not a Texan; nor did he ever identify himself with any of the 57 varieties of American Trotskyism. He simply thought Trotsky one of the most remarkable minds of the Marxist tradition—who but a fool or an ignoramus does not? His visit to Poland, two subsequent visits to Russia, in 1960 and 1961, and much talk and debate with intellectuals in the Communist bloc, left him intensely interested and pondering, ‘ambiguous’, as he put it, about much of Soviet society, better aware of its problems, its evils *and* its promise. Unlike the dogmatic anti-Communists of the American Left, whom he now saw as ‘members of the old futilitarians of the dead left’, Mills did not react to the Soviet bloc as if he had a vested intellectual and political interest in the perpetuation of all that was evil in it: *his* world would not be shattered by the humanisation of Soviet society and by the unfreezing of its Stalinist mould. Some of his friends thought and said that he had ‘gone soft’ on the Stalinists. It was an absurd charge, which deeply distressed him, more than any other attack from any other quarter ever distressed him. He was the last man to surrender his judgment and his perception to the dogmatists, of either camp. He was still ‘working on’ Communism and the Soviet bloc when he died: his last book, *The Marxists*, published shortly after his death, is the last testimony to the rare honesty he brought to that effort. One of his unfinished manuscripts was a *Letter to a Russian Intellectual*, a book in which he hoped to enter into a thorough examination of the problems, common and dissimilar, which intellectuals of East and West confront, or ought to confront.

Some men are pamphleteers by vocation. Mills was not. He became one in the late fifties, reluctantly, out of a deeply-felt need to present, to as wide an audience as could be reached, alternatives to the military definition of reality which he believed to be at the centre of his country’s foreign policies. What he was concerned with, he wrote about. By the late fifties, he had come to be haunted (as only idiots are not) by the fear that East and West were trapped in a terrible dialectic, which would ultimately turn the planet into a thermo-nuclear crematorium.

The detailed analysis and prescriptions of *The Causes of World War III* matter less here than its insistence on ‘the wholesale cultural and political default of NATO intellectuals during the past decade and a half’ as one of the causes of World War III. He had no illusions as to the likelihood of his proposals being acted upon ‘this

week by the power élite of the United States', the more so since, from their standpoint, these proposals 'were indeed utopian, expensive, idealistic, unsound and, for all I know, traitorous'. Mills was speaking above all to intellectuals, 'scientists and artists, ministers and scholars . . . those who represent the human intellect. . . who are part of the great discourse of inquiry and reason, of sensibility and imagination'. I don't know how many were persuaded; but I know that many listened, and drew strength from what they heard. He had, in those last years, become a voice and was becoming the spokesman of a movement, 'the big daddy of the New Left', as someone sneered. He did not relish the role. For all his intensity and impatience, he was a singularly modest, unpretentious man. He was embarrassed by the fan mail which poured into his letter box and he hated being distracted from the big books he wanted to write. But there was no surcease. For suddenly, there was Cuba.

As Mills wrote in *Listen, Yankee*, he had not thought much about Cuba until the summer of 1960—18 months after Fidel Castro took power in Havana. Cuba was forced upon his attention by visits to Brazil in the autumn of 1959 and to Mexico in the spring of 1960. 'In both Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City', he recalled, 'Cuba was of course a major topic of discussion. But I did not know what was happening there, much less what I might think about it, and I was then busy with other studies'. He decided to 'look into' Cuba: by the time he went there in the late summer of 1960, he had set up one of his beloved 'files' and had read voraciously on Cuba and Latin America. The book which came out of that trip was written in six weeks, at white heat, the way Tom Paine must have written *Common Sense*, for another revolution.

Mills was rather detached about his previous books: the next ones would be *much* better. But he was proud of *Listen, Yankee*, and with good reason. For it is a good and brave book, in which one Yankee tried to explain, well and bravely, through the fog of misrepresentation with which the American press had shrouded the island, why the Cuban revolution was by far the best and most decent thing that had ever happened in and to Latin America. Mills did not go into Cuba gooey-eyed, nor did he come out of Cuba gooey-eyed. As he wrote, '. . . I am for the Cuban revolution. I do not worry about it. I worry for it and with it'. He did believe that Castro, having been his own Kerensky and Lenin, could avoid becoming his own Stalin as well. His desperate anxiety to persuade his countrymen that the Cuban revolution should be helped, stemmed from his conviction that nothing was more likely to make the moustache and not the beard the symbol of the revolution than the United States' attempt to destroy it. Long before it happened, he had come to believe that the United States *would* attempt to destroy the revolution by force. It filled him with bitter, helpless shame. In fact, it broke his heart. It was in December, 1960, that he suffered his first major heart attack. It was altogether fitting that, when Mills died fifteen months later, Fidel Castro should have sent a wreath to the funeral. For Mills was a casualty of the Cuban revolution, and of the

revolution of our times.

C. Wright Mills cannot be neatly labelled and catalogued. He never belonged to any party or faction; he did not think of himself as a 'Marxist'; he had the most profound contempt for orthodox social-democrats and for closed minds in the Communist world. He detested smug liberals and the kind of radical whose response to urgent and uncomfortable choices is hand-wringing. He was a man on his own, with both the strength and also the weakness which go with that solitude. He was on the left, but not of the left, a deliberately lone guerilla, not a regular soldier. He was highly organised, but unwilling to *be* organised, with self-discipline the only discipline he could tolerate. He had friends rather than comrades. Despite all this, perhaps because of it, he occupied a unique position in American radicalism. He was desperately needed by socialists everywhere, and his death leaves a gaping void. In a trapped and inhumane world, he taught what it means to be a free and humane intellect. 'Get on with it', he used to say. 'Work'. So, in his spirit, let us.