

PART TWO

Reflections and encounters

Kathryn Mills

War and peace, civil rights and gender: a few reflections about my father

Why did C. Wright Mills decide to write and speak about issues of war, peace, and international relations? After publishing *White Collar* (1951), *The Power Elite* (1956), and *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), he could have chosen to coast for a while – to work on relatively easy projects – but that idea didn't interest him. Instead he took on an issue even more difficult than the ones he had chosen before; he confronted the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the nuclear arms race, and the related international tensions after rebel forces in Cuba overthrew the regime of Fulgencio Batista and brought Fidel Castro to power in January 1959.

Wright discussed his preoccupation with Cold War issues and some of the ways his travels outside the United States affected his thinking when he wrote the following to Tovarich, his imaginary counterpart in Russia, in a letter from Sarajevo in the winter of 1956–1957:

The idea of writing to you came to me in the fall when I was here in Europe. Traveling in foreign countries, of course, turns you in upon yourself; you get away from your routines; and you begin to sort yourself out. At the same time, it makes you feel the need to tell the strangers around you what you are all about. You want to look at self and world together before the strangers. Do you understand? But I have to add: all that's when you're young; after a while, when you're a stranger in your own country, you do this both at home and abroad.

Without quite realizing it, all during the first months I spent in Europe I felt the need to write a 'Letter to the Europeans.' I wanted to raise some questions in such a way as to make clear what Europe looks like to one man from America and also to make clear how he has come to see America. I wanted to hand that letter to the old man in the black cloak in one of those Italian hill towns on the road from Bari to Salerno, who on a cold morning in January, arrogantly refused to let the children come into the café until I had finished coffee; to the Norwegian businessman who on a road out of Stryn in the Nordfjord helped me fix a flat on a drop-rim motorcycle wheel; to that girl on

the scooter who translated for us; and to the unskilled worker in Zagreb [Yugoslavia] who had been one of the Nazis' prisoners of war. One night outside a dismal railway station he said: 'Socialism? Maybe that's OK, but around here they don't pay us enough to build it up.' I wanted to hand that letter to the young girl – a hotel clerk in South Shields, England – who thought of America as One Big Hollywood where everyone knew everyone else and duly celebrated their all-around triumph; to the worker by the Autobahn near Kassel, Germany, who was a blur to me as I swept by at speed on my main beat between Copenhagen and Munich; to the fishmonger on the southeast coast of Sweden who asked me to phone up his cousin in Minnesota; to the kindly policeman in Paris who so carefully told me to be very cautious in Germany or those barbarians would in some way surely damage me; and to the old woman in the third-class restaurant in the Hauptbahnhof [central station]. She asked me – in that merry confidential way that comes only with Munich beer, 'What's it really, really like in America?' ...

At any rate, I never wrote any such Letter to Europeans. I tried to, but each time I began to write to them, I found myself writing to you, Tovarich – at first alongside Europeans and then only to you, although the Europeans were listening. That I feel so strongly the need to write to you is all the more curious because I have not yet been to Russia. Of course I have read something of most of the really big men of your country. For example, once for an entire summer I was up in the Canadian woods on Lake Temagami, reading nothing much but a set of books by Dostoyevsky; it nearly killed me. I think I can say that Dostoyevsky is as much mine as he is yours. Maybe more, if you've never happened to earn him. I do not know what kind of a Russian you are, but I know that Dostoyevsky is no more yours than Melville is mine.¹

Of course writing to an imaginary Russian – initiating a personal and cultural exchange, which he intended to publish despite the hostilities between US and Soviet governments – was a political act. It was another expression of Wright's defiance against the power elite's permanent war economy, which also led to his writing *The Causes of World War Three* and *Listen, Yankee*.

By writing *Listen, Yankee*, Wright gave voice to the Cuban belief that the Batista regime was intensely corrupt and destructive to the best interests of ordinary Cuban people and that Fidel Castro – with his promises of literacy campaigns, universal health care, and improved education and human services – offered Cubans their best *available* hope for a brighter future. This was not a view often expressed in US media a year after the fall of Batista's regime. As Wright wrote to E.P. Thompson in 1960, referring to his upcoming debate about US policy towards Latin America, which was scheduled to be televised:

I have to do it: it's my god damned duty, because nobody else will stand up and say shit out loud, but ... I know little of Latin America and have no help to get me ready for such a thing. But I have to.²

At the time Wright was the only American radical with a national reputation who did not have some sort of allegiance or former allegiance to communist or socialist groups. For that reason he was in a unique position to speak up in favor of peaceful coexistence and an effort to understand the situation in Cuba from the point of view of the majority of the Cuban population.

Where did Wright stand vis-à-vis two other issues that were gaining public attention in the 1950s and the early 1960s – civil rights and feminism? Wright's letters and writings show that he understood the need to do away with stereotypes linked to race and gender, and of course he sympathized with activists seeking an end to discrimination against people of colour and women in employment, housing, and education.

In a letter to Tovarich dated in 1960, Wright described his exposure to racism when he was a young man and his strong, visceral reaction against it. Wright believed in, to use his words, 'full and complete marriage between members of all races'.³ He wrote that in his Tovarich manuscript when, according to some state laws in the US, interracial marriage was a crime.

Wright showed no patience with racism, which he viewed as a symptom of extreme ignorance. In fact he had so little patience with racism that he basically wanted it to disappear as a problem. At the same time he recognized, in his letter to Tovarich, that his suggestion of massive intermarriage did not provide a practical programme for the near future. He left the work of civil rights advocacy to other people; to paraphrase his comments to Tovarich, Wright had enough other problems with white people on his hands at the moment.

My mother, Ruth, remembered when, in the 1950s, Wright told her that the civil rights movement already had outspoken leaders; they didn't need him the way efforts to counter Cold War hostility needed him. I think his decision about where to focus his energy was partly pragmatic. Where could he have the most impact?

Wright acknowledged some of the work of others on civil rights when he wrote a favourable review for the *New York Times* of a book called *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination*, by George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger. In that review, Wright pointed out that:

[T]he problems of minorities, viewed domestically and internationally, represent at once America's liability and her opportunity. As going facts, these problems are often liabilities before the divided world. As opportunities, their proper solution could help make America a truly international nation in which the universal in man is liberated.⁴

Similarly, in a review of Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, Wright again emphasized the importance of human liberty. He recognized that it's necessary to throw off the shackles of stereotypes in order to develop oneself fully as a human being. In his posthumously published review, Wright wrote:

[P]erhaps in sharing Mlle de Beauvoir's passion for liberty we would all gladly forego femininity and masculinity to achieve it; and perhaps the best types would follow Coleridge's adage and become androgynous characters in an androgynous world.⁵

The topic of liberty and gender came up in a personal way when Wright and Ruth chose a first name for me. Dan Wakefield told me that Wright was very enthusiastic about the name Kathryn shortly after Wright and Ruth chose it because its nicknames offered so many choices. Wright pointed out to Dan that, if Kathryn or Katie grows up to be a full-time homemaker, she can call herself Kathy. If she wants to be a career woman she can call herself Kate, and if she lives in Russia for a while she could become Katerina. This was a do-anything, go-anywhere name!

Sometimes I hear Wright Mills's work, and the ever-developing course of his writings, compared to Pablo Picasso's work. Mills and Picasso both mastered classical methods in their fields at a fairly early age and then restlessly experimented and pioneered one new frontier after another.

At the same time there are many aspects of Picasso's and Wright's outlooks and biographies that are not parallel. For example, Picasso lived to be 91 years old; Picasso had twice as many years on earth as Wright.

When Picasso presented his epic painting, *Guernica*, at the Paris International Exposition in 1937, he was protesting the bombing of a Basque village – and the horrors of war anywhere – and he was making art history. At the time Picasso was 55 years old. If he had died at age 45 the way Wright did, the world would not have Picasso's *Guernica*, now one of the most famous paintings of the twentieth century.

We don't know what new approaches or projects Wright would have embarked on if he had lived to the age of 90, but it's easy to imagine him reading today's news and participating in teach-ins to protest war, growing income inequality, corruption, or the violation of human rights.

Wright responded to a wide array of activism and political and social changes around the world in 1960, including student participation in the civil rights movement in the United States, protests against US military presence abroad, and other political movements, when he wrote the following passages of his 'Letter to the New Left':

[W]ho is it that has been breaking out of apathy? It has been students and young professors and writers ... never mind that they've not won; never mind that there are other social and moral types among them ... we've got to study these new generations of intellectuals around the world as real live agencies of historic change ... 'But it's just some kind of moral upsurge, isn't it?' Correct. But under it: no apathy. Much of it is direct non-violent action, and it seems to be working, here and there. Now we must learn from their practice and work out with them new forms of action. 'But it's all so ambiguous. Turkey, for instance. Cuba, for instance.' Of course it is; history-making is always ambiguous; wait a bit; in the meantime, *help* them to focus their moral upsurge in less ambiguous political ways; work out with them the ideologies, the strategies, the theories that will help them consolidate their efforts: new theories of structural changes of and by human societies in our epoch.

Isn't all this, isn't it something of what we are trying to mean by the phrase, 'The New Left'? Let the old men ask sourly, 'Out of Apathy' – into what? The Age of Complacency is ending. Let the old women complain wisely about 'the end of ideology'. We are beginning to move again.⁶

NOTES

1. Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills (eds) (2000), *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 222–4.
2. Letter quoted in E.P. Thompson (1985), 'Remembering C. Wright Mills', in *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future*, London: Merlin Press, pp. 268–9.
3. Mills with Mills (2000), p. 314.
4. 'The symbol of race', *The New York Times*, 26 April 1953).
5. C. Wright Mills (1963), 'Women: the darling little slaves', in I.L. Horowitz (ed.), *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 339–46.
6. C. Wright Mills (1960), 'Letter to the New Left', in John H. Summers (ed.) (2008) *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 265–6.

John Scott

Encountering the sociological imagination

Like many people, I encountered C. Wright Mills through *The Sociological Imagination*. When I began my studies as an undergraduate student in 1968 it was one of the books recommended to us as an introductory guide to what good sociology is all about. Its radical perspective and direct style of writing immediately appealed to me and served to give me a perspective on the social world that has stayed with me ever since.

Mills's view of the intrinsic and essential relationship between social structure, history, and biography gave a view of the discipline that resonated with those things that had drawn me into the subject and still provides a charter for a comprehensive view of sociological understanding. Before engaging with sociology proper I had read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and Marx's *Capital*. Marx showed the ways in which individuals could be understood as determined yet active products of socially structured economic processes that exist as definite historical stages of social development. Freud showed that individual subjectivity and unconscious processes were an essential for understanding everyday social behaviour. While Mills was no Freudian, his argument did show me how psychological and historical-structural elements could be inter-related. It was only somewhat later, as I read more of his work, that I discovered the particular social-psychological preferences of Mills himself.

Through reading *The Sociological Imagination* I discovered his *Character and Social Structure*, written with Hans Gerth. The textbooks we used were written from a largely structural-functionalist perspective and aimed at comprehensive empirical description. This book by Gerth and Mills, written explicitly as an anti-textbook, provided a radical and theoretical perspective on this material and gave an historical and comparative framework in which that empirical knowledge could be better grasped. It also demonstrated the specific social-psychological

ideas that Mills took from the pragmatist tradition and showed how these could not just inform the kind of 'role theory' depicted in the conventional texts, but could also figure as a central element in a sociology of knowledge. It was this discussion that, somewhat later, led me to discover the importance of Karl Mannheim's approach to knowledge and social structure.

I explored the themes raised in *Character and Social Structure* through the essays collected together in *Power, Politics, and People*. These have remained a constant source of inspiration and have pointed me towards the various other aspects of Mills's output. I discovered the importance of his reflections on psychology in *Sociology and Pragmatism*, his discussion of class and status in *White Collar*, and his view of power in *The Power Elite*. Taken together, the anti-text and the essays provide a comprehensive take on almost everything the sociologist needs to know, and the key works explore and elaborate those themes in exciting and thoughtful ways.

It is *The Power Elite* that has been the biggest influence on my career. It was Mills's combination of Marx and Weber in his discussion of the relationship of class and status to power that led me to investigate these issues for myself. Working in Scotland in the early 1970s, I began a study of the Scottish power elite that took Mills's discussion as my model, though I could not live up to his example. I looked at the social background and recruitment of directors of industrial and financial undertakings and their overlap and interconnections with political leaders, and through Mills's emphasis on networks of connection I determined to learn about the then developing area of social network analysis. I sought to understand how economic and political elites could be understood in relation to their economic basis in propertied class situations and their cultural location within traditional status ideals. Moving from Scotland to England, I extended the scope of my analysis and began a larger series of comparative investigations into elite structure in Britain, the United States, and Japan.

It was Mills's work also that drove my methodological interests. Not only did his view of the power elite lead me into social network analysis, it also pushed me towards the use of documentary sources in social research. Mills made great use of existing data in directories, yearbooks, and social registers, and this type of material became the basis of my own investigations. In order to understand the uses of this material, I began to develop a systematic approach to the use of documents in sociology and published a number of books and chapters on the topic. Mills's own reflections on methodology in *The Sociological Imagination* showed clearly the importance of not disconnecting methodology from

theory and provided a useful sociology of knowledge approach to understanding sociological methods.

Another of the early books to which I had been introduced as a student was *The Marxists*, in which Mills set out his relationship to the Marxist tradition of social theory. This showed me how Marxian economics and class analysis could be placed in the context of wider social and cultural processes. Reading his *Images of Man* I began to see how this connected with the non-Marxist sociological tradition and to appreciate the importance of understanding the history of social theory. All of Mills's own work shows an explicit engagement with classical ideas, and his doctoral dissertation had been a detailed exploration of a particular tradition in its historical and institutional context. I have used this as a guide to my own investigations into the sociological tradition and, most recently, some neglected contributions to the development of sociology in Britain. The writers with whom I have been most concerned are Patrick Geddes and Victor Branford, probably unknown to Mills. They were strongly oriented to American and European social thought and counted among their strongest friends and intellectual supports both William James and Thorstein Veblen, who were, of course, major sources of inspiration for Mills's own work.

The work of C. Wright Mills is a veritable sociological library and education in its own right. A student of sociology needs little more, though it is a great guide to the sources and ideas that are an essential part of a larger sociological understanding. His works provide a basis for the exercise of the sociological imagination in whatever field one wishes to work, and *The Sociological Imagination* itself is a continuing source of inspiration.

A. Javier Treviño

C. Wright Mills as designer, craftsman and stylist

C. Wright Mills saw biographical development as involving the different roles a person takes up and casts off in the various passages of life. For him, a person's biography consists of the transformations in character that result from abandoning the old roles and taking on new ones. The challenge is to understand the content of Mills's character in the elusive dynamic of his biographical development. Indeed, he has already been depicted variously by scholars as an 'American utopian', a 'radical nomad', and a 'disillusioned radical'. I contend that another way to envisage Mills today is in the three main roles, and their sensibilities, that he repeatedly assumed throughout his life: those of designer, craftsman, and stylist.

Mills typically called himself by his mother's British family name of Wright. The noun 'wright' – with its etymological origins in the Old English word *wryhta* meaning worker or maker – refers to a person who creates, builds, or repairs something. The word is now most commonly used in combination with the thing being constructed, such as a playwright, a shipwright, a millwright. Although he was a tireless producer, who wrote fast and furiously, Wright Mills saw himself as a master builder and a skilled craftsman. Indeed, he often spoke of building lectures and of the craft of putting a book together.

Craftsmanship, for Mills, had a moral, indeed a religious, quality to it. It was premised on the Protestant work ethic, or the wilful feeling that the individual can command the future to serve his or her ends. Mills always maintained a fierce devotion to the idea of working hard. Historically, his industriousness had its heritage in the character structure of his English Puritan ancestors. They sought to master the world through all the traits that Mills personally admired: hard work, self-discipline, and control over external circumstances.

Social science, Mills insisted, is the practice of a craft. By 'craft' Mills meant the manual or mental processes through which workers freely

employ their capacities and skills in creating the products of their enjoyment and enjoying the products of their creation. Mills used the term 'intellectual craftsmanship' in referring to a reflective style of work as well as to the joyful experience of mastering the resistance of the materials with which one works.

Mills's implementation of design and craftsmanship extended to include motorcycle mechanics, photography, furniture making, and even bread baking. Indeed, he seems to have had a compelling artisanal need for doing things with his own hands and on his own terms.

Those who have looked into Mills's early education note that in high school he took courses in mechanical drafting and in architectural drawing. Even after he became world-famous as a sociologist, at one point he openly confessed that he still thought he ought to have been an architect.

Whatever his skills in various areas, it is fairly well known that Mills designed, built, or remodelled houses – three of them, in fact. He once boasted that all he needed to build a house were no more than a few basic materials: four-sided wood, sheets of glass, electrical wiring, tin sheet metal, and plumber's pipe. He preferred to make the windows and doors, and indeed the entire house, according to his own design.

Mills was also very much the literary stylist endeavouring to create what he called 'sociological poetry', or the style of experience and expression that reveals the human meanings of empirical facts – in the manner of James Agee's aesthetically moral *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Mills is known for writing in a straightforward English and eschewing the Parsonian, jargon-laden sentences characteristic of much of the academic sociology of the time. Like the assiduous measurements he took in designing and building furniture, Mills gave the same detailed attention, rather like an ancient master builder, to constructing meaning through clear writing. But Mills struggled, as do all writers, with his own prose. This was especially true of *White Collar*, the magnum opus that took him many years to write, and to write it right. Indeed, he frankly admitted while he was working on it that 'this designing of a book, making an architecture out of it, is a tricky business'.

The skill and artistry with which Mills formulated his sociological ideas, and that gave clarity and lucidity to the compositions through which he conveyed those ideas, may have perhaps found its finest physical expression in his furniture making. In telling a friend about a cabinet he was building, detailing its dimensions exactly to the inch, he described it as being made of Philippine mahogany, with aluminium-angle legs, and plastic sides. It was at this time that Charles and Ray Eames, the prominent American designers of modern furniture, began

producing their practical and stylish Eames Storage Units. Most interesting is that Mills copied the ESU design from a photograph – reproducing his cabinet in every detail, and for a fraction of the cost.

Mills's philosophy of design, style, and craftsmanship is exquisitely articulated in two talks that he delivered in Aspen and Toronto, in 1958 and 1959 respectively. In both cases he addressed his comments, specifically, to designers, city planners, artists, and architects. Mills said he intended to theorize for them, and did so by making them aware of their powerlessness within the context of mass society. He also chastised them for abnegating their independence, decision-making, and creativity to the forces of marketization, the moneyed interests, and powerful bureaucracies.

Mills, in various ways, influenced many practitioners of the aesthetic arts. To provide but one example: In an interview, the American architect Sandy Hirshen, widely considered an advocate for socially responsible architecture, was reminiscing about his undergraduate training at Columbia in the liberal arts some 30 years earlier. He recalled Mills as a motorcycle-riding rebel with whom he had identified on several levels: politics, sociology, architecture, and personal style. Mills, Hirshen gratefully acknowledged, exposed him to the world of ideas – to the question of class struggle, to the historical evolution of philosophical positions, to Marxism, and to the concept of social justice.

Why should we, a full half-century after he suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 45, be concerned with Mills as designer, craftsman, and stylist? Simply put: because it is in these roles that Mills presents himself to all cultural workers – city planners, artists, architects, and sociologists – as a twofold exemplar. First, he inspires us to work in accordance with the value of craftsmanship, as a style of work and a way of life. And, second, he provokes us to use the autonomous and self-fulfilling nature of our work in our political, economic, and aesthetic visions of what society ought to become.

Ottar Brox

What C. Wright Mills can teach us today

Years before the so called ‘anti-positivist’ turn of the late 1960s, I struggled with the problems of getting my seniors to accept my ‘mixing of social science with politics’. Doing fieldwork in North Norwegian fishing communities, I found it very difficult to analyse and explain problems like depopulation without treating politically settled conditions on the same level as other variable factors, like natural conditions or fish prices on the global markets. How would specific changes in the rules of the game affect the future of coastal communities? I found support in *The Sociological Imagination*, especially through discussions with the historian Kåre Lunden, who told me that my ‘mix’ of social science and politics was no sin, but rather an attempt to follow Wright Mills’s advice: personal troubles must be understood in terms of public issues!

As my North Norway project developed, methodically inspired by economic anthropology, as it was taught and practised at the University of Bergen, I became increasingly convinced that I was engaged in a political project, as well as a social-scientific one. The aspiring social scientist became – whether he wanted it or not – a participant in the drama that took place on the northern coast. And so did the government economists arguing for radical changes in the fishing industry – against the interests of the great majority of coastal fishermen.

The North Norway Plan – NNP – was launched in 1952, to increase the productivity and general level of living of the Arctic population, and the aim of my project was to somehow measure the effect of the Plan. But my fieldwork in fishing villages led me to raise more complicated questions. I quote from the Foreword of my first book: ‘What kind of society are we creating? And do we really want what it seems to be turning out to be?’

It will soon be half a century since this book was written, and in hindsight I don’t find it difficult to defend my ‘mix of economic anthropology and politics’ by means of C. Wright Mills’s teachings: in Northern fishing villages, households combining subsistence farming with seasonal fishing, and odd jobs were offered private solutions for

their 'personal troubles,' like unskilled jobs in the fishing industry in the growth centres or trawler jobs, as well as, in some cases, subsidized relocation. Centrally located planners and politicians informed them how to adapt to natural variations in fishing opportunities: They should acquire boats that were large enough to go fishing anywhere in all kinds of weather. We can safely conclude that these kinds of private solutions to the problems of the coastal people have had the aggregate consequence that many varieties of fish have become threatened with extinction. This again made it seem necessary to the authorities to take away fishing permits – in areas that always had been commons – from those who had invested little, who were no threat to the sustainability of fishing resources, and who had the poorest prospects of alternative employment. Thus many homes were abandoned and now, 20 years after the implementation of a new fishing quota system, billions are being invested in unnecessary fishing equipment.

To redefine the 'private troubles' of the coastal community population into 'public issues' implies the development of collective measures. The Fresh Fish Act of 1938 is a near-perfect example, as it gave the fishermen's organization the opportunity to bargain and settle landing prices for whole regions before the seasonal fisheries started. Overnight, the act changed the living conditions for a whole group of people who had been totally dependent on their power in the local market, where they often suffered from local monopolies. Thus the personal troubles of small-scale fishermen were made into a public issue, and solved politically. Small-scale fishing spontaneously became so profitable that the number of small fishing vessels quadrupled in many local communities – without posing any risk to the fish stocks.

Another, and more contemporary, example of 'understanding personal troubles as public issues' can be found in the field of education. Like many other families, Peter and his parents are concerned with a problem: How can the boy obtain a decent and well-paid job later in life, as he doesn't do well in school? A number of reasons could account for this: lack of talent, laziness, too few books in the parental home, teachers who are not good enough, etc. Now this family may find a solution to their problem in different ways: buying private tutorials, let his weekly allowance depend on his school results, or hope that university admission demands are lowered.

The latter 'solution' will generate the same type of aggregate consequences as capital subsidies for the fishing industry: there may in a few years be too many (semi-competent?) academics while at the same time labour must be imported from poorer regions of the globe for employment in unskilled occupations like cleaning, catering, and certain types of

transport work. These kinds of work are necessary for the maintenance of society, but Peter, with the help and support from parents and politicians appealing to young voters, would prefer to do other things for a living.

In some economically advanced countries this is the actual situation, with high unemployment rates among academics as a necessary consequence. What is more serious is seemingly of less concern, to Norwegians at any rate: the processes generating social equality which have been going on in this country since the implementation of the Constitution in 1814 seem to be reversed. Work that can be carried out without speaking Norwegian is becoming relatively less attractive, and the gap between 'good jobs' and 'bad jobs' is widening. At least in part this helps explain why parents of young people are highly motivated to make their offspring seek higher education, with a higher unemployment rate among academics and a poorly integrated 'servant class' as possible consequences.

If we followed Mills's advice, that is, understood Peter's personal troubles as public issues, Norwegian social scientists would be looking for and developing ways of reducing differences in attractiveness between academic positions and all the socially necessary work that we are turning into 'bad jobs' by our labour recruiting policies.

John D. Brewer

The sociological imagination and public sociology

I first encountered Charles Wright Mills's work in 1968 when I entered a further-education college in order to study A level sociology, which was then not available in traditional schools, and he has been the star by which I have since plotted my entire sociological career. I believe that sociology has a distinct imagination, in which it explores the intersections between individual lives, social structure, history, and politics. I believe there are no issues that cannot be approached in this way, although this is not to say that sociology always asks the most important questions about them, for despite my strong disciplinary identity, I am not a sociological aggrandizer. Like Mills, I see sociology as an inherently multidisciplinary subject, the least closed and the most open of disciplines. In this respect I am persuaded by his informative second footnote in the first chapter of *The Sociological Imagination*, where he describes sociology in terms that identify its interdisciplinary character. The working title for the book throughout his letters was 'The Social Studies', which I would have much preferred. And I subscribe to the same vision of sociology as Mills, that it has an essentially political task to try to make a difference to, and where possible, improve the lives of ordinary men and women.

But all this only makes me more deeply aware of the paradox of the man: his view of sociology fits the mood of our epoch for engagement, for a form of public social science that addresses the real world problems facing twenty-first-century society, but his sociological writings are increasingly irrelevant to us as society becomes more liquid and reflexive and our 'wicked problems' prove to be so different in nature from those of his era. Of course, elites remain exclusive and structures oppressive, and people's lives are still embedded in forces about which they have little knowledge and over which they have no control. The super-rich abound and war and militarization are aplenty. The ruthlessness of some

power elites has not changed. But cultural analysis competes with class analysis and Bourdieu is more cited after his death than Mills ever was.

In defence of Mills, one of the things often overlooked in assessing his sociological writings is that Mills was a sociologist always in the making. He had no firm position or school, developed no sociological loyalties, turning from Weberianism to Marxism late and with immense ambivalence, and was always open to new ideas, new influences. Hence the accusation that he was inconsistent. This also helps explain his many public spats with former colleagues and friends who evinced more fixity in their positions. His letters allow us to glimpse the constant making and remaking of his sociology. Thus we do not know what he would have become had he lived longer than his 45 years or how his sociological writings would have changed with the times. We are left only with the promise.

This is ironic because his chapter on the promise of sociology in *The Sociological Imagination* has probably become his most cited work and what he is largely remembered for today. Yet there is very little of substance to it: it is better at critiquing convention than in outlining Mills's alternative. What we take from it, I think, is a vision of how sociology ought to be and his very vagueness allows us to infill that vision in our own particular way. *The Sociological Imagination* is a bumper sticker, a flag, an icon – call it what you will – for a way of doing sociology differently. So Mills the radical critic of American capitalism is reduced these days to being a radical critic of sociology. The cohort of teachers of sociology who entered the labour market in the 1960s, when Mills's early death put him in vogue precisely at a time of political radicalism, introduce generations of their students to *The Sociological Imagination* essentially for its vision of sociology – one that they fill with their own expectations of change and senses of the purpose and value of sociology. I fear that when they retire so will Mills's routine outing in first-year, introductory sociology lectures.

This is because the vision for public sociology is not being filled anymore by Mills but by Burawoy. *The Sociological Imagination* is no longer the motif for a radical new way of doing sociology. Burawoy's language of public sociology is the contemporary patois. Irrespective of Mills's famous dictum that the essential sociological task is to turn people's private troubles into public issues, this oft-cited phrase does not come near to answering the normative questions sociologists in the twenty-first century face about the public responsibilities of sociology. The term 'public' is code for a series of normative questions that have emerged in late modernity about the nature of power. These questions are raised locally, nationally, and globally by governments, citizens, civil

society groups, and social scientists, as power competes and fragments across its various sources. Use of the adjective 'public' implies fundamental questions about accountability but poses additional queries about to whom we as sociologists should primarily feel accountable. It also moderates questions about accountability with others about responsibility, shifting focus away from our answerability towards our responsibility, by asking to whom sociologists should primarily feel obligated. It defines sets of issues which, as sociologists, we should be interested in but asks whose perspectives on these issues we should consider the most important. If no longer a question of which side sociology is on, as Mills might have put it in the heady days of the 1960s, since in late modernity there are no stark zero-sum answers, the adjective 'public' nonetheless conjures up deeply normative questions about the purpose and point of sociology. But it will not be Mills whom newer generations of sociologists will turn to in order to address these normative questions. Mills is my star, and will remain so, but my generation is making way for others who are plotting their careers by different lights.

Ole Johnny Olsen

Learning from an early encounter with *The Power Elite*

For me, as for most sociologists, the strongest inspiration from Mills stems from *The Sociological Imagination*, which I first read around 1980 as a master's student, and which ever since has been a good companion in introductory courses – or elsewhere – when presenting the idea of sociology as an engaged intellectual project, and when arguing for the relevance of a historical approach in sociological analysis. This, however, was not my first encounter with Mills. Already in my third semester as an undergraduate sociology student I was happy to join a course on 'economy and society' dealing with – among other themes – the military-industrial complex in the United States. On that course *The Power Elite* was a central text on the reading list.

From my notes (kept, I suppose, for nostalgic reasons) I can see that we spent quite a lot of time on academic discussions of the elitist vs. the pluralist perspective on the development of the relations between the military, the economic, and the political elites. Stanley Lieberman's (1971) article 'An empirical study of military-industrial linkages' in the *American Journal of Sociology* is carefully commented on. I did try to follow his argument supported by statistical regression analysis for comparing the relevance of the two perspectives. But I don't think I was very impressed. Much more interest was found in reading C. Wright Mills himself – the main proponent of an 'elitist' perspective. Especially chapters 8, 9, and 12 of *The Power Elite*, dealing with the warlords, the military ascendancy and the power elite in general, were thoroughly read. I found a stack of reading notes, emphasizing the growing self-confidence in the elites' efforts in coordinating economic, political and military interests, the domination of the 'military mind', and the development of modern capitalism as a permanent war economy.

For a politically committed student in the mid-1970s engaged in the critique of monopoly capitalism and in the struggle against American imperialism, the reading of Mills's analysis was inspiring. It urged

further work. Accordingly I chose the military-industrial complex as the theme for my third-semester essay (the equivalent of a bachelor's degree thesis).

Looking at the essay today, it's obviously inspired by the discussion on the course and the reading of Mills. To my astonishment, though, and for reasons I don't remember, *The Power Elite* is not to be found in the list of references. One possible explanation might be that I didn't find it appropriate, since it was already in the syllabus of a course I was concurrently on (young students can sometimes make funny conclusions on such rules). It could not be that I didn't find it relevant – or not radical enough. My reading notes show the opposite. But on the other hand, I did extend the perspective. The title 'Militarism and Imperialism' indicates my ambition to accentuate how the military and industrial interests could be explained by the economic development of monopoly capital and imperialism. My theoretical perspective leaned heavily on the classical text of Lenin: *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (in several Norwegian editions). For support of my empirical argument, several books were at hand. Most influential were Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy: *Monopoly Capital* (1966) and Harry Magdoff: *Imperialism in Our Time* (1969), both in Norwegian editions 1971 and 1970. For my specific theme, two further books were used, John Kenneth Galbraith: *How to Control the Military* (1969), and Juan Bosch: *Pentagonisim* (1968), also in Norwegian editions 1971 and 1968.

But still, if not for the use of his theoretical perspective or his empirical material, my gratitude goes to Mills for his inspiration and his support for the interest of dealing with the 'big' questions of sociology. I can still remember the feeling of seriousness and the joy of relevance in doing sociology when working with this essay; contemporary sociologists asked the same kind of questions that Marx and Weber did a century and more ago. What are the central – economically and politically – powers that rules our lives? What are the historical conditions for social and cultural change and development? Such grand questions are laid at the feet of all the sociologists who I reckoned, insignificant or grand, old and young alike. I also experienced that sociology did not stand in contrast to political engagement and interests in a critique of capitalism and of the domination of imperialism, at home and abroad.

In many ways, I think, this understanding of sociology has been threatened over the years. The big questions were for a long time transformed and reduced to social theory and the political – or critical and public – engagement in sociology was marginalized and weakened. Since the late 1990s, however, there have been strong signs of a renormalization of classic sociology. The flourishing of a sociology of

global dynamics and the revived critique of the spirit of ('new') capitalism are among these signs. So is the renewed interest in a historical approach to the big questions of today. One of the most promising contributions to this I think will be the two last volumes of Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* (2012, 2013). For a special session at the Oslo Summer School in Comparative Social Science Studies 2012 I had the pleasure and the privilege of reading some of the chapters of the last volume covering the period after World War II. Reading the chapter on 'America in war and Cold War 1945–70: class conflicts', for example, gave inspiring flashbacks to reading *The Power Elite* and to my own struggles with the military-industrial complex as an undergraduate student. This is an inspiration I hope to convey to new generations of students today and tomorrow.

Another stimulating sign of the recovery of an engaged sociology is the growing interest of what Michael Burawoy calls 'public sociology'. Only a few years ago, Burawoy (2008) wrote an 'Open Letter to C. Wright Mills', telling him about this general wave of interest in public sociology in the spirit of Mills himself. He mentions for example that the 2004 conference of the American Sociological Association was solely dedicated to this special theme. He also tells him about the results of a seminar for undergraduate students, where they had read all Mills's major books. From the informative and stimulating review of the seminar discussions I took note especially of a reflection on reading *The Power Elite* – which may also give some insight into why I didn't use the book in my student essay on militarism and imperialism.

In comparison with the interesting and enthusiastic discussions at the seminar after for example the reading of *The New Men of Power* (1948) or *White Collar* (1951), Burawoy reports, *The Power Elite* created less excitement among the students. It even received serious criticism. The students, and I think Burawoy with them, didn't like the outline of what Mills calls a mass society (chapter 13 in *The Power Elite*). This was a concept widely used in the 1950s by drawing a picture of people as estranged, atomized individuals, in a rootless mass, dominated by sophisticated control by the elites. Beside Mills, Herbert Marcuse was one of the central names using the same concept – recall his *One Dimensional Man*. They all gave a strong picture of working people as 'embourgeoisified', as marked by consumerism and the lifestyle of the middle class.

The problem is, the Burawoy seminar held, that this concept of mass society did not portray any of the roots or sources of what actually followed in the 1960s: student movements, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement. I think we must agree with this. They give us a relevant and important critical reminder. Like

the ideas of ‘the end of ideology’, the ideas of mass society exaggerated some new traits of social life as dominant and everlasting.

This might also be said about another approach that would explain why there was no spotting of any movements in the 1950s. This one, however, I think, had a stronger relevance. It is also presented in the writings of Mills, but in a less-known work. It focuses on class struggle and the role of labour movement. What became of the strongest movement of all in the history of capitalism, the labour movement? Mills himself described some of it in *New Men of Power*, in 1948. The keys are the formalization and bureaucratization of the unions, with the result of a confidence gap between leaders and rank-and-file workers. Other books of the time described the same tendency: *Union Democracy* by Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956) is maybe the most prominent, building on Robert Michels’s concept of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’. In European sociology the concept of ‘institutionalization of the class conflict’ had been introduced and the concept of ‘industrial citizenship’. Legal rationality and authority were the main concepts explaining class relations along these lines, not class power and class struggle. All this is excellently put forward by Ralf Dahrendorf in *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959).

For the Norwegian case a similar picture of strongly institutionalized class relations has been drawn by Norwegian historians. One early message was that the labour movement had turned from a movement to an instrument to move with. Another concept capturing the power relations of organized capitalism in Norway was the ‘partnership of the people at the top’. The conditions for these relations turned out to be the overall theme of my master’s thesis – which has followed me ever since. Strangely enough, without having read the book *The New Men of Power*, but still very much inspired by the general vision of Mills’s sociology: this is a plea for engagement and for the understanding of society as a historical process. In the last years the interest is renewed by an international revival of labour studies trying to catch up with and contribute to the tendencies of a revitalization of labour movements in different corners of global capitalism – much in the spirit of Mills’s historical sociology (see, for example, Fantasia and Voss 2004).

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Ann Nilsen

Encounters with pragmatism

The Sociological Imagination was on the reading list for my introductory course in sociology in 1980 and was my first encounter with C. Wright Mills's writings. In this historical period the women's movement had made quite an impact on Norwegian society and in 'institutions of higher learning.' The critical writings of feminist scholars received acclaim among many women sociologists in particular. As a young student I, along with many other women, was drawn to the novelty of feminism and the new perspectives on society they offered. In this climate *The Sociological Imagination* was considered a great title for a book, but the text itself was, by many, deemed irrelevant and outdated and seen as having little contribution to make in the study of gender and of women's lives in particular, so I had no great hopes of finding it of interest. I did however have to read it for my first sociology exam and was struck by the freshness of the text (it was a joy to read!) and the call for sociologists to recognize history as important for understanding contemporary society. I had studied history as a subject for my lower degree and was planning to return to it to write my master thesis after my sociology course, so at the time history was closer to my heart. *The Sociological Imagination* made me realize that I needn't choose sociology OR history – the two disciplines could actually be combined in research to gain a broader understanding of society and societal processes. Another feature that stood out was Mills's pointing out the pomposity of the writings of Parsons and grand theory on the one hand and the simplistic sociological understanding of 'The Methods Men' on the other. These were men of considerable academic influence and whose texts were also compulsory exam reading. Mills's take on their writings was a relief and a consolation for a young student struggling with their texts.

In the end I did my master's degree in sociology, but like Mills's vision promised, in my sociological research I have always found use for the insights the study of history taught me. It was however not until I started my PhD study later in the 1980s that the full empirical and

theoretical potential of Mills's history–biography approach became clear to me. I was combining perspectives from history and sociology in a study of three educational cohorts of women in engineering and teaching from a biographical perspective. Although Mills was of little substantial use in studying the lives of women in particular, his approach opened up a wider frame of reference that helped me understand the conditions and processes in people's lives in a way that was sensitive to both gender and social class. During this study I dug deeper into his work and went beyond *The Sociological Imagination* to his earlier writings. I found the relationship with pragmatism and the thoughts of G.H. Mead, another important figure in sociology, of particular interest. A few years after Mills defended his PhD thesis on pragmatism, he regretted the fact that he had not included the writings of Mead in it, and made up for this by engaging with them in several of his articles published in sociological journals. Mills's standpoint on the importance of contextualizing thoughts and ideas and his emphasis on the relevance of history bear testimony to his pragmatist roots.

There is a clear affinity between biographical life course research and the knowledge standpoints in pragmatism. Moreover, Mead's notion of the self as temporal and processual is a good starting point for all biographical research. Establishing the relationship between Mills's emphasis on the importance of biography and history and Mead's processual self provided a perspective from which to approach biographical studies that was very refreshing. This was especially so at a time when biographical research was heavily influenced by a focus on personal narratives and endless debates on issues of ontology and epistemology with little attention to wider social circumstances. Mills's insistence on paying equal attention to history and biography – never leaving out either from any analysis in order to understand the social world – was an extremely sobering way of thinking that kept the focus on the sociological research questions under scrutiny and barred any temptation to stray too far into the hinterland of philosophy. Sharing this approach were important life course researchers such as Daniel Bertaux who was one of the leading figures in the revival of the research tradition in the late 1970s. Although Mills's influence remains unacknowledged in many branches of life course and biographical research to this day, his way of approaching the relationship between the individual and society at large, his insistence on the dynamic relationship between biography and history, is a cornerstone of the research tradition.