



Open Letter to C. Wright Mills

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Dear Mills

Excuse the familiarity, but I've known you for a very long time. I first read *The Power Elite* (1956) in 1970 when I was preparing for my MA in social anthropology in Zambia. I then read it again in 1973 while studying for my sociology PhD at the University of Chicago. You should know that this unmasking of the concentration of power has become a classic text, a mainstay in any political sociology class. It has enduring truth—the interlocking of corporate, military and political elites making life and death decisions that affect us all.

I read your *White Collar* (1951) and *New Men of Power* (1948) while I was writing my dissertation that was an ethnography of industrial work. *White Collar* long anticipated the 1970s interest in the transformation of work and the new middle class, while *New Men of Power* spoke to the cynicism with which rank and file workers regard their labor leaders. Both retain powerful insights for the world of today. I can't remember when I first read *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), but I think it must have been in Zambia too—the appendix on the sociologist as “craftsman” was inspiring and comforting in those lonely days when I wondered whether I'd ever make it as a sociologist. It has roused generations of sociologists to engage the big issues of the day. Reading it has become an initiation rite for graduate students.

In recent years I have had reason to return to *The Sociological Imagination* because there you gesture toward the idea of “public sociology”—the sociologist talking to publics and at kings. You would be amused to know that the idea of public sociology is enjoying quite a little renaissance in this country, especially following the meetings of the American Sociological Association in 2004, which were devoted to public sociology. I'm sure you would have difficulty believing that the sociology profession would be so interested in public sociology, and perhaps you would be even more surprised to learn that such a meeting would break all records of attendance and involvement! There was a hum and buzz about the possibilities of public sociologies. I'm sure you

would have had your criticisms, but still you should be pleased at what you have inspired from so many years ago.

You would have appreciated the electrifying panel on W.E.B. Du Bois, even though I don't think you ever refer to his writings, and the address on the sociology of human rights from Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN. The high point, however, was surely Arundhati Roy's oration on "Public Power in the Age of Globalization". She did not mince her words about US Imperialism. The conference ended with the massively attended debate about the fate of neoliberalism—the return to market fundamentalism that you, like so many others, thought was relegated to the past. The protagonists in the debate were two major public figures—one a sociologist and two-time President of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and the other an economist and acerbic columnist for *The New York Times*, Paul Krugman.

The issues we debated in San Francisco in 2004 were not that different from the ones that pre-occupied you in the 1950s. Sociology has moved on from what it was in your day, in part because of the legacy you left us, in part because social movements shattered the consensus sociology of the 1950s. Mainstream sociology is no longer so euphoric about the United States as the "exceptional" society, a paragon of truth and beauty. As you told us 50 years ago, if the US "leads" it does so by force of arms rather than force of ideas or of example. Power and inequality have become central to the sociological agenda, which has assumed a more global focus, although we still have a long way to go in provincializing our sociology, that is, recognizing how spurious are so many of its claims to universalism. Today sociologists devote a lot of attention to dominations, exclusions and marginality along lines of race, gender and even sexuality—issues that are entirely foreign to your writings, notwithstanding occasional flashes of redemption.

Public sociology has become the focus of many recent debates in professional journals in the United States, but also in countries as different as South Africa, Finland, China, Hungary, France, Russia, Portugal, Brazil, Germany, and England. In the last year three books have appeared, devoted to the issues raised by public sociology. The concern with public engagement can also be found in neighboring disciplines such as anthropology and geography. So it seems to have become almost a little social movement. This is not so surprising when one considers that most of us became sociologists out of dissatisfaction with the world around us, and believe me, today, there is a lot to be dissatisfied with.

I teach sociology at Berkeley, and have done so since 1977. It is a university that came of age in the 1950s with the explosion of higher education. It housed the leading department of sociology in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when you had already turned your back on the profession. Indeed, Berkeley's sociological star would rise until the

explosion of the Free Speech Movement in 1964—students rising up against the suffocating society you so vividly portray in *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*. Indeed, many trace the student movement that spread across the country and indeed even the world, to your own writings. One of the major student leaders, Tom Hayden, devoted his MA to your work. It was written in the early 1960s, but only recently published as *Radical Nomad*. Following the Free Speech Movement the Berkeley Sociology Department was drowned in conflict for two decades. When it reemerged in the 1990s it did so with its commitment to public engagement intact.

This semester I have had the rare privilege of teaching an undergraduate seminar on contemporary theory. We devoted ourselves to your work, fathoming your notion of public sociology. We, therefore, began with *The Sociological Imagination*, interrogating its every page to work out the project you lay out. The idea was to see whether and how you followed this project in your own treatises on US society. But first we set the theoretical scene with readings from Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* to which I believe you are heavily indebted, despite all those combative remarks in *The Power Elite*. We even read the reviled Talcott Parsons. I think students were inclined to sympathize with the mockery you made of his work. Then we took a taste of the great Robert Merton, your sponsor and supporter for so long, sadly neglected today. I believe he had a major influence on your early career. The remainder of the course was devoted to *The New Men of Power*, *White Collar*, *The Power Elite* and *Listen, Yankee*. We discovered that each book in your trilogy could be divided into two—sociological analysis and political program. So we discussed each book in two installments—in the first we compared your frame with the classics and in the second we compared your analysis with the world today.

Let me give you a sense of what sociology students of today read so that you can better appreciate our criticisms. They had already taken two semesters of classical social theory. In the first semester they learned Marxism as an evolving intellectual and political tradition. We started with Adam Smith before moving on to Marx and Engels and from there to Lenin, Gramsci and finally to Fanon. My assumption is that sociology cannot exist without its sparring partner, Marxism! I know your last book was your own version of the Marxist tradition but, sad to say, you gave only passing mention to the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). His notions of hegemony and civil society give a very different frame for understanding US society and, indeed, public sociology. We'll come back to that! I'm even sadder that you did not get to read Frantz Fanon. His book *The Wretched of the Earth*, first published in 1961, became the bible for revolutionary change in Africa and the Third World more generally, and indeed it was also adopted by black revolutionaries in the United States during the 1960s. Many of Fanon's arguments are similar to those you yourself made about the

Cuban Revolution in *Listen, Yankee*, although he writes as a participant in the anti-colonial war of Algeria.

Anyway, students are well schooled in Marxism when they come to Durkheim and Weber in the second semester. You don't have much to say about Durkheim but your selection of writings from Max Weber—the one you undertook with Hans Gerth—has lived on as perhaps the definitive collection of Weber's writings. Again we are enormously in debt to you for providing an alternative Weber to the one proposed by your nemesis, Talcott Parsons. You'll be interested to know that after Weber we read a very different type of theorist, a Frenchman by the name of Michel Foucault, a theorist of power and postmodernity—a notion you already prefigured in *The Sociological Imagination*—whose fame has spread across the world. He's a bit obsessed with power, just as Durkheim is obsessed with solidarity. Indeed, he is Durkheim's Other. There's an uncanny correspondence between Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarities and Foucault's sovereign and disciplinary powers. His ideas of disciplinary power or biopower are akin to those of rationalization in Weber. Foucault offers altogether different approaches to your mass society, which he would regard as the product of insidious micro-powers. The metaphor for contemporary society is the prison! How do you like that!

Finally, we turn to the modern history of feminism. This is an area of social thought quite beyond your ken. Students were appalled by your condescending characterization of women in *White Collar*, especially the sections on “the salesgirls” and “the white-collar girl”. I was surprised you so completely missed the boat on gender since your hero Thorstein Veblen was such an ardent feminist and spoke about the exploitation of women in a consumer culture with such vitriol. No matter. We start with Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which first appeared in French in 1949. Just as you inspired but did not anticipate the student movement so De Beauvoir unknowingly laid the foundation of a feminist movement she could not imagine. We then read two texts of what we now call second wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s: Catherine MacKinnon, a radical feminist, and Patricia Hill Collins, a more conciliatory feminist who insists on the intersection of gender with race and class. I tell you all this so that you can better understand how we reacted to your own work.

As I said, we began with *The Sociological Imagination*, which seemed to be a settling of accounts with sociology, published in 1959 only three years before you died. The notion that the sociological imagination is a quality of mind that turns personal troubles into public issues is perhaps the most oft-repeated mantra of the sociologist's self-representation. It is, indeed, a powerful idea. You might even say that it captures the project of public sociology. But we detected an unwarranted slippage across the line from, on the one side, the linking of *social milieu to social structure*,

showing how our daily lives are shaped by forces beyond our immediate control, to, on the other side, turning *personal troubles into public issues*, which is a political project.

On one side of the line, sociologists demonstrate that the individual's experience is not a product of individual idiosyncrasy but of social forces. People commit suicide, says Durkheim, not only from an inner impulse but also because of an external compulsion, specifically, the state of society, egoistic, anomic, altruistic. Capitalism was born, says Weber, because of the unintended consequences of the Protestant Ethic. Calvinists thought they were serving God but they were actually creating the enormous fateful cosmos of modern rational capitalism! The capitalist system, Marx avers, is brought down by capitalists competing with one another for profit, inventing new ways to extract surplus from their workers. As they conscientiously pursue their daily surplus, they know not what they do, destroying the foundations of their very existence. As you know in the United States people explain their descent into poverty as bad luck or inadequate application but sociologists know better—they claim that poverty and unemployment are a product of the nature of the capitalist economy. Responding to Herrnstein and Murray's now famous *The Bell Curve*, which argues that inequality springs from the inevitably unequal distribution of individual intelligence, Berkeley sociologists wrote *Inequality By Design*, focusing on the institutions that produce social and economic inequality. These are just a few ways in which we illustrate your idea of the sociological imagination.

So far so good. But recognizing the link between social milieu and social structure does not mean crossing the line, turning personal troubles into public issues. Knowing that my unease or malaise is due to anomie in society, or knowing that I'm without a job because I live in a world of unregulated capitalism does not necessarily lead me to turn my personal trouble into a public issue. In fact, knowing the power of social structures is just as likely to paralyze as to mobilize. Indeed, sociological insight may even be universal but that would not guarantee bringing personal troubles into the public sphere. This is your first scholastic fallacy—that knowledge is liberating. Today, following Michel Foucault, we are more likely to follow the bleak hypothesis that sociological knowledge is disabling, incapacitating, a form of control. I know you saw that sociology could be used to serve power, as in your article "A Marx for managers", but you thought that if sociologists were independent then their sociological imagination was liberating. Not necessarily so.

But let us not descend into postmodern pessimism. Understanding the relation between milieu and structure may not be liberating in itself, but it still may be necessary for such liberation. In addition to sociological imagination we also need a *political imagination*. Your books, actually, make this very clear, and most interesting, your political imagination shifts over time. In *New Men of Power* you offer a bold criticism of

labor leaders who had lost touch with their members as they reached for the power elite. Rank and file workers are marooned by the status anxiety of their labor leaders in their relation to their negotiating partners from corporate capital, or by the temptations of racketeering with local contractors. That's the sociological imagination. But you end the book where you begin, with a variety of publics—Far Left, Independent Left, Liberal Center, Practical Right and Sophisticated Right—that are active in relation to the question of labor. They have detached themselves from the mass society of inert publics—the underdogs, the working class and the middle class. You propose a socialist political program that calls for a labor party, worker control of production and democratic planning. This is a radical program, indeed, reflecting the radicalism of the left publics, and intended to bring the working class from inertness to alertness—a public in itself to a public for itself! But this program remained abstract. It would have to contend with the shock troops of the “practical right” and, then as back-up, the material concessions and ideological weapons of the “sophisticated right”.

As you quickly learned, the balance of forces was never favorable to such a radical program—your political imagination was utopian. Whether it was because the anticipated slump and ensuing political crisis never materialized, or because inertness is far more deeply implanted than you recognized, your political imagination could not connect personal troubles to public issues. Things haven't got better since! Indeed, there has been a steady decline in organized labor since the 1950s. Today only 7.4% of the labor force in the private sector is unionized, as compared to a peak of 36% in your day. If there is any bright spot it is organizing in the service sector, organizing of immigrants, and the importance of appealing to identities beyond simply working class. Your analysis of the breaking of ties between leaders and led prefigured the demise of the labor movement.

In your next book, *White Collar*, your political imagination takes a more cautious turn. But first let me congratulate you on this brilliant sociological analysis of the demise of the old middle classes (small entrepreneurs) and the rise of the new middle classes (the new professions, the sales workers, and the expansion of the office). It's a *tour de force*, bringing together Weber's analysis of bureaucratization and Marx's analysis of class. You anticipate so much that came after you and for which you have not been given enough credit, for example studies of deskilling, pioneered by Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974), that became an industry in the 1970s, or your idea of the sale of personality in service work that Arlie Hochschild's *Managed Heart* (1983) would term emotional labor. Once again you show the link between social milieu and social structure, how white collar workers' sense of unease and alienation is caused by the broader anonymous forces of corporate capitalism or what you call the main drift.

There's no shortage of sociological imagination here, but what has happened to your political imagination? You end up arguing that the middle classes find themselves in what Erik Olin Wright called "contradictory class locations". They waver between the dominant and subordinate classes; they are no vanguard, they are the rearguard, flowing with political winds, and in your time the winds came from the main drift of corporate capitalism. There was no sign that personal troubles would turn into public issues. That hasn't changed, even though in recent years we have seen a systematic assault on the new middle classes with downsizing, outsourcing, overwork and deskilling within corporations. Again your analysis prefigured so much, except you gave the impression of a stagnant monopoly capitalism whereas it has proved most dynamic under the pressure of competition, especially from foreign capital.

The final book in the trilogy, *The Power Elite*, curiously created much less excitement among today's students than the previous two. While this was indeed another bold move to be making in 1956, especially in view of reigning paradigms of pluralism—the idea of the power elite has been broadly assimilated into the collective consciousness of the United States. Again, knowing that one's life is so profoundly controlled by interlocking corporate, military and political elites is as likely to lead to cynicism and apathy rather than anger and action. Notwithstanding your own anger at the higher immorality, I think you were also skeptical that corporate exploitation could mobilize public sentiment. At the end of the book you juxtapose your mass society, seduced by consumerism, indoctrinated by the media, distracted by celebrities, to a democratic republic in which publics express their views openly, debate with one another, have their expressed needs realized under the assumption that this public sphere is autonomous from dominant institutions such as state and economy. This is harking back to a bygone period of Jeffersonian democracy rather than pointing forward to new possibilities. This retreat into an imagined past suggested that you had given up on the project of turning personal troubles into public issues, even before you announced it in *The Sociological Imagination*!

What we didn't like about *The Power Elite* was your characterization of mass society, which missed the contestations that do arise and, of course, did arise soon after you died—the student movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement. I'm sure you'd be surprised to learn about all these, since *The Power Elite* intimated no opposition from below. To be quite honest, we have been more persuaded by Gramsci's theory of hegemony than your theory of manipulation. Instead of an incoherent mass society, we think of civil society made up of organizations, movements, and publics. Instead of mass deception and false consciousness, we believe that subaltern groups do have a good sense within their common sense, and that they actively consent to domination. This is not a matter of false consciousness—

consent is rational and it can be withdrawn. From this Gramscian standpoint it is far easier to understand the appearance of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

We must now return to *The Sociological Imagination*. In the chapter on politics you distinguish the “independent intellectual”—your model for yourself—from the Philosopher King, the intellectual who rules in the name of superior knowledge, and the advisor to the King, the servant of power. You fear that the servants of power, the technicians, the experts, are taking over our discipline. They accept the terms of their clients, solve their problems and receive their paychecks. Your fears were exaggerated. Today the world of power, whether corporations or states, is less enthusiastic about sociology—perhaps because you were so successful in giving it a radical color! And so, whether we like it or not, our political role concerns talking to publics and at kings.

But how should we talk to publics? Your *modus operandi*, I have to tell you this, is to talk down to publics. You place yourself above publics. In fact you don’t believe there really are any publics except the New York intellectuals that surround you. For the rest you have mass society, atomized, deceived, and manipulated individuals. It’s as if making direct contact with people would contaminate you or your thoughts. There is a deep elitism in your detachment. You represent what I would call *traditional public sociology*—books written for but not with publics.

There is another type of public sociology, what I call *organic public sociology*, in which the sociologist steps out of the protected environment of the academy and reaches into the pockets of civil society. The organic public sociologist enters into an unmediated dialogue with neighborhood associations, with communities of faith, with labor movements, with prisoners. If, for traditional public sociology, publics, say the readership of *The New York Times*, are national, thin (people hardly aware of one another), passive, and mainstream, the organic publics are likely to be local, thick, active and often counter-publics.

It’s a pity you did not live to see the feminist movement take root, because it represented an impressive case of organic public sociology. As Catharine MacKinnon once wrote, “Feminism is the first theory to emerge from those whose interests it affirms”. Feminism didn’t only connect social milieu to social structure but also turned personal troubles into public issues, as when wife beating became the felony of battery, as when sexual harassment and rape became subject to legal proceedings. Suddenly, as the feminists said, the personal became political and the rule of men was recognized as political regulation. Women were no longer chattel. You missed out on Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, an amazing grand historical analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural forces that have conspired to maintain male hegemony with the complicity of women. Patricia Hill Collins,

writing in the 1980s, brought race and class to radical feminism, arguing that those suffering from multiple forms of subjugation have the greatest insight into the social structures that oppress them. No shortage of sociological imagination among African–American women, expressed in tales, narratives and songs. The lesson: even the devastated ghettos of our nation are no mass society of deceived and ignorant people who need to have their understanding brought to them from the all-knowing sociologist. African–American women possess a common sense with a kernel of good sense, that is a good measure of sociological imagination, which they express in their cultural forms and, albeit more rarely, in social movements. Black feminists have borrowed from, entered into a dialogue with, elaborated and articulated what is often taken for granted by their sisters.

When they act as organic public sociologists, black feminists do not immerse themselves in their communities but instead retain a measure of independence that allows them a distinctive standpoint from which to enter a dialogue with those communities. They are after all still sociologists, but they are not your craft worker, insulated from the rest of professional sociology. As Collins makes clear, here too, there is dialogue between the African–American woman and the hegemonic forms of sociology, trying to shift the latter in a more humane and universalistic direction. No less than in your idealization of the independent intellectual, so in your characterization of the sociologist as craftworker you suffer, if I may be so bold as to say so, from a blunted sociological imagination. You commit the second scholastic fallacy, one you share with those pure scientists, the high priests of objectivity that you calumniated. You seem to believe that the purest and truest ideas somehow emerge *tabula rasa* from the mind of the intellectual and that partaking in society is a contamination. Engagement, you imply, must be at a distance.

Yes, I know you faced a hostile and uncomprehending world of triumphalist sociology, but still you were part of a common disciplinary division of labor that is here to stay. You can't retreat back into a world of the autonomous intellectual, a world that no longer exists. We are living in a very different time from Marx, Durkheim and Weber, we are living in a world of developed social science disciplines in which the craftworker has become an anachronism. We have to move forward to a division of sociological labor in which we learn from one another without sacrificing our independence.

Professional sociology will suffer from the pathologies you so brilliantly describe in *The Sociological Imagination*—the grand theory of Talcott Parsons removed from the concrete world, and the abstracted empiricism of Paul Lazarsfeld that has lost touch with any context whether theoretical or societal—if it loses touch with the very sort of public sociology you and others represent. Today, the aim of critical

sociologists, like yourself, must not be to destroy professional sociology but to bring it into dialogue with public sociology. As a work of critical sociology, *The Sociological Imagination* pointed in two directions: on the one hand toward a public sociology, and on the other hand, against the foundations of professional sociology, whether those foundations be value foundations or theoretical and methodological assumptions. Just as professional sociology supplies the tools for a policy sociology, geared to solve the problems of clients, so critical sociology not only targets professional sociology, but also infuses values into our public debates and engagements.

What values does sociology represent? In *The Sociological Imagination* you are quite explicit that the ultimate values upon which both sociology and society rest are those of reason and freedom. Without doubt those values are important, but are they the values that distinguish sociology from other sciences? In referring to freedom and reason you perhaps reflected the threats to those values from fascism and communism. Today, I might suggest that the values that underpin sociology are justice and equality—very much the continuing legacy of the transformation of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s.

Let me come to the end of my overly long letter. My admiration for your work knows no bounds. Your place in the history of sociology is assured. You have rightly been rediscovered as a pioneer of public sociology. But your vision here is still stuck in the past. Harking back to the classics of the nineteenth century and upholding the mythology of the non-attached free-floating intellectual, you present us with the Janus faced sociologist—facing outwards is the independent intellectual talking down to publics and at kings, facing inwards is the self-absorbed craftworker, fighting off the pathologies of professionalization.

Today we replace your individual monad with a division of sociological labor—a matrix of professional, policy, critical and public sociologies in which the flourishing of each is dependent upon the flourishing of all, a matrix which aims for an organic interdependence, and, at least in the United States, struggles against the hegemony of professional and policy sociology. In Marx, Weber, and Durkheim these four types of sociology combine seamlessly, but today they are separate types of interdependent knowledge, each with its own distinctive notions of truth, legitimacy, accountability, power and pathology. As individuals we tend to specialize in one or more of these four types of knowledge, sometimes moving between them, but hopefully never forgetting the joint project that unites us—to create a more humane, equal and just society. To do this a sociological imagination will not be enough, we will also need a political imagination.

From your long time admirer

Michael Burawoy, May 2007

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