

C. WRIGHT MILLS AND AMERICAN SOCIAL THEORY

Sociology 101A-B, if you took it with me, was largely devoted to European social theory. Whoever your instructor was, the course always included a reading of those three European theorists: Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, plus whomever else the instructor fancied. The United States of America, however, has its own tradition of social theory that has inspired US domination of world sociology since World War Two. Undoubtedly the major figure in this global hegemony is Talcott Parsons who produced the rightly celebrated *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) -- a grand synthesis of the writings of Weber, Durkheim, the Italian theorist, Pareto, and the English economist Marshall. From this great book Parsons and his students elaborated a body of theory known as structural functionalism that influenced virtually all sociological theory (positively or negatively) in the first two decades after WWII. They founded what came to be known as modernization theory in which US society was the model to be celebrated and emulated by the rest of the world. Alongside and in parallel with this tradition of grand theorizing there arose a powerful empirical research tradition, tied to the development of survey research and statistical methods, to buttress sociology's claim to science. Trying to bridge the two in what he called "middle range theory," Robert Merton wrote his brilliant essays contained in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949).

C Wright Mills (1916-1962) is the counterpoint to Merton. Like Merton, Mills, too, is firmly located in the tradition of American social theory but not as a peacemaker but as a hostile critic both of structural functionalism, or what he called "grand theory," and of sophisticated quantitative research, or what he called "abstracted empiricism." His critical theory is most famously presented in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) and laid the foundation for a new body of social theory -- a body of social theory he did not live to see but which included the Marxism and feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Pointing the way forward to a new canon, which included the works of Marx and Engels as well as Weber, and Durkheim, he wrote three classic monographs. The first, *The New Men of Power* (1948) dealt with the working class and trade unions; the second *White Collar* (1951) dealt with the new middle class and their intellectuals; and the third, *The Power Elite* (1956) dealt with the ruling class and its representatives. His critical assessment of US society harked back to that other great sociological critic of US society, Thorstein Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) just as it foreshadowed the rise of the New Left.

It is now half century since Mills wrote his four classics. He has inspired generations of sociologists. We will read his trilogy with a view to assessing their contribution to social theory on the one side and for the light they cast on the contemporary world of the United States on the other. We begin, however, with *The Sociological Imagination*, his most famous and most widely read book, before turning to the tradition of social theory from

which he sprung and to which he reacted. Here we will read selections from the works of Veblen, Parsons and Merton. We then turn to Mills's three major monographs and we will end with his last book, *Listen Yankee* (1960), written in the voice of the Cuban Revolution. His assessment of Marxism appeared posthumously in *The Marxists* but we will not be reading it.

This is a course in the reading, writing and application of social theory. Therefore, the requirements are as follows:

1. Read the assigned texts very carefully and come to class ready to discuss that text. I will expect everyone to have read the text and will cross-examine you accordingly.
2. To assist you in this, each week you must write up a no-more-than-300-word analytical commentary on the readings.
3. After reading each of the three classic monographs, *The New Men of Power*, *White Collar*, *Power Elite*, in place of the analytical commentary you write a longer essay of 500 words in the form of an editorial that applies the ideas of Mills to some contemporary issue.
4. Finally, there will be a final paper no longer than 2,000 words that elaborates Mills's ideas in relation to a contemporary issue, probably an extension of the previous editorials.

For the final grade each of the 4 requirements will be weighted equally.

Three books should be available at ASUC, *Sociological Imagination*, *Power Elite*, *White Collar*. The other readings will be in a reader that will be available at Copy Central.

If you are looking for secondary sources, then probably the best intellectual biography of Mills is Irving Louis Horowitz's *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*. When he was still a radical, Tom Hayden wrote his M.A. Thesis on C Wright Mills (1962??), which was recently published for the first time as *Radical Nomad* (2006).

COURSE SCHEDULE

- January 16th. INTRODUCTION: WHY C WRIGHT MILLS?
- January 23rd. C. Wright Mills, THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, chapters 1-5. (Background, Todd Gitlin, *Afterword*) What is the “sociological imagination”? What obstructs it?
- January 30th. C.Wright Mills, THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, chapters 6-10, Appendix.
- February 6th. Selections from Thorstein Veblen, THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS.
- February 13th. Selections from Robert Merton, SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE [“Social Structure and Anomie,” “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality,” “Role of the Intellectual in Public Bureaucracy”]
- February 20th. Talcott Parsons, EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES
- February 27th. C Wright Mills, NEW MEN OF POWER
- March 6th. Continued
- March 13th. C. Wright Mills, WHITE COLLAR
- March 20th. Continued
- March 27th. Spring Break
- April 3rd. C. Wright Mills, POWER ELITE
- April 10th. Continued
- April 17th. Cancelled
- April 24th. C. Wright Mills, LISTEN YANKEE
- May 1st. CONCLUSION
- May 18th. FINAL PAPER DUE