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CHASING THE GHOST OF C. WRIGHT MILLS

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There has been a resurgence of interest in C. Wright Mills in the context of the 50th anniversaries of his "major works" and perhaps in light of the striking similarities between the pressing social issues of the 1950s and those of contemporary U.S. society. Although many of Mills' insights are significant today more than ever, his legacy remains unclear. This article takes issue with the conventional wisdom on the periodization of his life and work and points to serious shortcomings in "the trilogy". Instead, an emphasis is placed on his later writings, particularly *Listen, Yankee* (1960), as a break with his roots in Weberian sociology and as a partial solution to the problem of agency with which Mills continually struggled. The second part of this article attempts to offer a framework for coming to terms with Mills' inability to address the issue of the Civil Rights Movement, and why the man who traveled the world looking for agents of social change was so blind to events unfolding in the region of his own birth.

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Although C. Wright Mills is an icon of American sociology and international radicalism, his legacy remains elusive. This is even more puzzling in light of the length of time since his sudden death in March of 1962 (which is not to say his passing was unexpected to those who knew of his unrelenting and perhaps stubborn resolve to “take it big”, without the consent of his cardiovascular system). There is a sense in which his style tends to overshadow the political and intellectual substance of his work. Perhaps this has something to do with the stories that are passed down like mythologies to graduate students who have approached him with wide-eyed admiration: motorcycle antics at Columbia, double steak dinners, his frank assessments of those in the highest echelons of political, economic, and military power, to say nothing of his tremendous scholarly productivity. One author has gone so far as to claim that Wright was the “James Dean of left-wing sociology” (Lasch 1986: 103). It is therefore not surprising that Tilman has remarked, “Most of the best writing on Mills’ background has been done by graduate students. Indeed, with few exceptions, more mature scholars have shown little knowledge of Mills’ intellectual antecedents” (1984: 225). But beyond his undeniable “star power”, what of substance does Mills leave us?

I have characterized Mills as a “ghost” to imply not only the absence of a concrete and fulfilled legacy in spite of his looming presence, but also to convey the sense in which Mills is intellectually unpredictable. That is to say, he is elusive. Aside from a certain visceral notion that Mills *is* important, it is difficult to identify exactly *why*.

We could of course make some cursory comparisons between the climate in which Mills found himself and the contemporary world. Perhaps we feel something akin to the “Conservative Mood” about which Mills wrote in 1954. The United States is currently governed by “crackpot realists” (see Mills 1958: 89–97) who claim to protect peace and security through the maintenance of a permanent war economy and prolonged military occupation. There are certainly similarities to be found between anti-communism and anti-Islamic sentiments. Mills had Joe McCarthy; we have the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. One might draw further parallels between the ideologies: both are based on fear mongering and served to justify preemptive war.

Additionally, in the sphere of mass culture, Mills' 1954 observation may well have been written yesterday: "synthetic celebrities of national glamour…often make a virtue out of cultural poverty and political illiteracy. By their very nature they are transient figures of the mass means of distraction…" (Horowitz 1972: 212–213). The insight of John Alt, writing during the height of the Reagan years, still applies. "In fundamental ways, the culture and politics of the present resembles the fifties. It is not that America has regressed nostalgically, only that the country has not fundamentally changed" (Alt 1985–6: 6). There are other connections to Mills, even if those who are responsible for making them are unaware. During the stock market orgies of the late 1990s, the notion of a "poverty elite" gained some public currency.[1]

In spite of these historic parallels and insights, Mills' body of work is not without serious flaws, occasional wrong-headed observations and characterizations, and even glaring silences. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the publication of his most well-known and widely-read book, *The Sociological Imagination*, the time is right to reassess Mills' legacy, to come to terms with his shortcomings, and to uncover his continued relevance.

Harry Cleaver (2000) has written that there are many ways in which one can approach the work of Karl Marx: as sociology, as economic history, as philosophy, as political science, and so forth. And so it is with C. Wright Mills. His body of work ranges from erudite treatises concerning the sociology of knowledge and social psychology, to textbooks and academic writings, to widely-distributed attempts at public engagement. If Mills' legacy has not been fully realized, this is because there is little consensus over what it should be.

In a recent essay, renowned American sociologist Stanley Aronowitz outlines Mills' significance. Aronowitz sees the "unfairly neglected" *Character and Social Structure* (1953) as the "scaffolding

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[1] The term "poverty elite" appeared (with no mention of Mills) in an article by Sarah Bernard, "Let Them Eat Crab Cakes", in *New York Magazine*, March, 20, 2000. David Brooks spoke of a similar phenomena when he described status-income disequilibrium, "a malady that afflicts people with jobs that give them high status but only moderately high income" (2000: 180) – albeit in contrast to his assessment of the immediate postwar period.

upon which [Mills] hung his major works". It is his "main theoretical project" and Mills' other "major" writings coincide with this, "his most fertile period of intellectual work" that ended in 1959 with the publication of *The Sociological Imagination*. It was during this time, largely a result of the "main drift" in American social life, that Mills' shifts "decisively to the center" (Aronowitz 2003: 69, 78, 85).

I wish to take issue with this reading of Mills, and with the corresponding assignment of a periodization that identifies Mills' most "fertile" period with the work he did while largely trapped within the rather narrow confines of Weberian sociology. Of course, there can be no doubt that "the trilogy"[2] represent something of a climax for Mills in terms of his own scholarly productivity, but also in establishing him as one of the leading theorists of his day. Observations in *The New Men of Power* (1948), although somewhat anti-communist in tone,[3] remain relevant in so far as unions and union leadership act as "managers of discontent" (1948: 9) and as organized labor struggles to reinvent itself in the age of globalization. Yet as Mills observed the ambiguous role of union leadership, he failed to consider the rank-and-file; empirical evidence offered in the text is based only the attitudes of union officials. By the middle of the 1950s, Mills had given up on the American industrial working class as an agent of social change. As for *The Power Elite*, it is perhaps the first book of the postwar period to explicitly identify the existence of a ruling *group* (not a "class", to be sure) and to challenge – in bold terms – the notion of American pluralism at a time of relatively low unemployment and high wages for the (white) working class. The text provided a coherent framework for what would

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[2] "The trilogy" refers to *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1954).

[3] In the introduction to the 2001 reissue of *The New Men of Power*, Nelson Lichtenstein writes "like so many of his friends on the anti-Stalinist left, he was essentially contemptuous and dismissive (of the Communist Party). From his Columbia perch, Mills saw the party as composed of Union Square hacks and a shifting residue of lower-middle-class members whose influence was less on the labor movement, where they were being eliminated, than on the excitable liberals, to whose political sentimentality they appealed" (2001: xxiii–xxiv). For Mills' treatment of the Communist Party, see especially (1948: 186–219).

eventually be seen as an entire subfield of sociological inquiry: "power structure research" (Domhoff 2006: 547).

The most consistent and obvious problem with "the trilogy" and with this period of Mills' writing more generally is that the conception of agency is largely, if not entirely, lost. In sum, "publics" are transformed into "masses" (1956: 302–304), and "cheerful robots" wonder amid a bureaucratic ethos (1951: 233).[4] I will return to the issue of Mills' inability to locate a source of agency momentarily.

Periodizing Mills' career is a slippery slope. Aronowitz is right to point out that Mills "fiercely named capitalism as the system of domination" during a time in which most of his colleagues were busy "neutering themselves behind the ideology of value-free scholarship" (2003: 71). However, Aronowitz situates this development in Mills' life while he was employed at Columbia University. In fact, it happened much earlier. In 1942, the year Mills received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin and while he was working at the University of Maryland, he published a review of Franz Neumann's *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*. It is in this piece that Mills first acknowledges his conception of the "enemy". "The analysis of Behemoth casts light upon *capitalism in democracies*…if you read his book thoroughly, you see the harsh outlines of possible futures close around you. With leftwing thought confused and split and dribbling trivialities, [Neumann] locates the enemy with a 500 watt glare. And Nazi is only one of his names" (Horowitz 1972: 177, emphasis added).

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[4] Dwight Macdonald recognized this tendency. In his review of *White Collar*, he wrote, "(Mills) has no alternative theory or explanation of why things are as they are...Only Mills won't admit it. So he writes a book in which he tries to disguise his indifference, and therefore his lack of ideas or even of interest, by energetic manipulation of impressive abstract words, by interrupting both his interviewees and quotees [sic] before they can say anything, and indeed by constantly interrupting *himself* before he can say anything either, or rather before he can give away the fact that he hasn't anything to say. I wish he hadn't done it." Mills never forgave Macdonald for the review, which effectively ended their personal and professional relationship. The infamous review may be found, along with some frank and unapologetic afterthoughts, in Macdonald (1974: 294–300). See also Mills' response – or lack thereof – in (Mills and Mills 2000: 162 – 166).

Periodizations are important because they illustrate continuity and change over time. If we use the one proposed by Aronowitz, Mills' "Letter to the New Left" of 1960, while hailed as "the single most influential document in the early history of Students for a Democratic Society, one of the key organizations in the development of the social movements of the 1960s" (Aronowitz 2003: 83–84), would paradoxically fall outside of Mills' intellectually "fertile" period. This relegation would also apply to *Listen, Yankee* (1960). The text is given next to nothing in terms of serious treatment, cordoned off into a period that seems unworthy of our intellectual attention. "Mills wrote scholarly works but, in keeping with the style of a public intellectual[5], he was *also* a pamphleteer, a proclivity that often disturbed his colleagues and, in one of the more odious forms of academic hubris, led some to dismiss him as a 'mere journalist'" (Aronowitz 2003: 87 emphasis added). Although Aronowitz disapproves of the "mere journalist" designation, he nonetheless reproduces the tendency to neglect the "pamphlets" by placing them outside of Mills' "fertile period". They are treated as if they have nothing to do with his "academic" writings and are drained of their theoretical content. In fact, they are perhaps among his richest contributions to theory as they anticipate developments that didn't emerge for at least another decade. *Listen, Yankee*, while having an undeniable mass appeal, is Mills' most significant theoretical departure from the Weberian tradition (and the Old Left framework) and his analysis of the mid-1950s.

Listen, Yankee is first and foremost a statement about the right of the Cuban people to determine their own destiny. But it is about more than a revolutionary island in the Caribbean. In recognizing the small farmers whose revolution was in part incubated within the Cuban university, Mills discovers something that had profound implications for his previous theorizing about bureaucracies, in which the dependent masses are subjugated to the whims of the elite, whose hand holds the key to unlocking the secrets of historical social change. Even though he referred to himself as a "wobbly" (the nickname for mem-

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[5] For a critical assessment of the "public intellectual" idea in the context of Mills' milieux, see (Yang 2008).

bers of the I.W.W.), Mills had lost hope of seeing a revolutionary industrial working class in the U.S. and ironically paid scant attention to grassroots activism and agitation. Instead, he made repeated appeals to the "cultural apparatus" – in a sense the ideological servant of the elite – to change the "main drift". In 1956 with *The Power Elite*, Mills fails to examine the causes of what he sees as a certain national apathy and sees historical change as resulting from decisions made in "higher circles" or by those "strategically located" within the social structure (he referred to this group as the "Swiss Guard of the Power Elite"). In so doing, he can not focus on any potential initiative of the alienated public. This tendency in Mills can be understood in light of his relationship with Gerth and his influences from the "Frankfurt School" (particularly concerning the influence of the mass media, which no doubt influenced his notion of the "cultural apparatus"). The non-elites are thus trapped within the tendency toward bureaucratization of modern life and there is no room in the analysis for any sort of self-directed radical activity.

With the publication of *Listen, Yankee*, Mills makes something of a clean break. He understood the ways in which the Cuban Revolution was partially incubated within the setting of the university. Neither the Cuban revolutionaries nor the students were "strategically located" in the sense of Mills' earlier analysis. With the realization that the agency of the Cuban peasants had undermined years of U.S. foreign policy toward the island, he found a way to begin to appreciate a potential "new left" within the United States. Although he didn't live to see the fruition of the student movement in the late-1960s, one might suspect that he saw it coming and began to re-imagine ways to "unify thought and action".[6] With the re-emergence of Cuba on the radar of the

[6] Fredy Perlman, a student of Mills at Columbia from 1956 to 1959 wrote a pamphlet about Mills 1970. The neglected text explores the extent to which Mills struggled to resolve the inherent limitations of Weberian sociology. Perlman places little emphasis on Mills' writings with Gerth – perhaps overstating his case – and looks instead to the development of Mills as a radical "public intellectual" and the way in which Mills tried to arrive at the moment of a "unity of thought and action" – that is to say, at purposive political action embedded with intellectual work. In a reflective piece published 18 months after Mills' death, E.P. Thompson wrote, "I must say plainly that I don't think he ever achieved such synthesis. Nor would he have made any such

American public as Castro delegated power to his brother in early 2008, Mills' declaration of the right of Cuban self-determination begs to be re-published. However, in spite of the energy and excitement that Mills felt at the prospect of Cuban self-determination,[7] one can not fail to be struck by his lack of interest in somewhat similar developments within the United States.

Mills was a southerner and came of age in the immediate post-WWII period. Born and raised in Texas, he certainly encountered the harsh realities of racism and segregation in daily life. And yet, apart from his correspondence, he never so much as mentions anything having to do with race and / or racism. It is interesting to note that the most substantial piece of writing having to do with these issues was penned to Mills' imaginary Russian friend Tovarich in the summer of 1960. He writes,

> The point is I have never been interested in what is called 'the Negro problem.' Perhaps I should have been and should be now. The truth is I've never looked into it as a researcher. I have a feeling that if I did it would turn out to be 'a white problem' and I've got enough of those on my hands just now. But that isn't quite good enough is it? The only answer – I didn't say practical program, feasible plan, etc., I said answer – is *so obvious that it has no intellectual interest, and so in the long term, as matters now stand, it has no political interest*. The answer, of course, is full and complete marriage between members of all races. (Mills & Mills 2000: 314, emphasis added)

How is it possible for someone of Mills' intellectual and political stature to have so blatantly ignored the nascent Civil Rights Movement, which by the time Mills traveled to Cuba in the summer of 1960, had already witnessed the apogee of citizens' councils and massive resistance? I do not believe that Mills' silence can be simply written off as a typical instance of white blindness to racial injustice.

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claim…He never returned, in his later essays, to a sufficiently high level of abstraction to effect such a synthesis" (1979: 66).

[7] Mills wrote to his parents that "The Cubans are my Mexicans", in reference to his mother's "fondness for the Mexican culture" (Mills and Mills 2000: 331, 315).

In proposing a way to explain this apparent dilemma, one might suggest the following framework: Mills was the primary American intellectual who straddled the Old Left / New Left divide. The Cuban Revolution perhaps appealed to Mills to such an extent because it *too* straddled both old and new forms of radical organization and action. Although the movement was composed of peasant farmers and students, they were, to a certain extent, organized as communists, had the blessing of the Soviets, and their goal was the seizure of state power. In 1960, Mills had not yet developed a framework for understanding independent political action that was completely outside of old organizational models.[8] It would be easy to blame Mills for this sort of racial blindness, especially in light of the fact that he cites the significance of "non-violent direct action" that "seems to be working, here and there" in an international context (Horowitz 1972: 259). One might accuse Mills of racism via the "sin of omission" that prevailed in postwar white institutional life.

Instead, I prefer to situate this silence as a consequence of the inherent limitations of Old Left models of change. With one foot still in Old Left theorizing, Mills simply wasn't ready – nor did he have the conceptual tools – to acknowledge the significance of the Civil Rights Movement. This is not to say that prior to 1968 social theory had not attempted to reconcile issues of race within a Marxist framework or that Old Left theorists were not aware of the need to grapple with issues of race. As early as 1935, W.E.B. Dubois described the centrality of slave labor to the Confederate cause and saw the northern migration of former slaves as nothing short of a "general strike" ([1935] 1992: 55–83). Three years later, C.L.R. James wrestled with a similar set of issues in his analysis of the Haitian Revolution. James also emphasized the proletarian nature of slave production though his conclusion, "to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental (is) an error only less grave than to make it fundamental" ([1938] 1989: 85–86, 283) is

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[8] George Katsiaficas has written that "The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party…Martin Luther King [and] Malcolm X were New Left theorists. They were all part of, but not equivalent to, the New Left" (1987: 22). For a broad understanding of the term "New Left", see his analysis, especially (1987: 3–27).

rather unsatisfying. It is unclear whether Mills had read these two texts, although it is difficult to imagine that he entirely unfamiliar with them.[9]

In addition to the parallels drawn between the 1950s and present outlined above, one might offer yet another. During the 1950s, a large segment of the southern white population was clinging to preserve the "southern way of life" as politicians at the national level wavered in their commitments to civil rights legislation. Today, as Obama makes efforts to distance himself from the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the pan-African critic of U.S. foreign and domestic policy lambasted for addressing the historic oppression of black Americans, we are reminded of the ever-present issue of structural racism lurking just beneath the veneer of the supposedly "color blind" discourse of contemporary American life and thought.

Mills' silence on issues of race and racism and his complete neglect of the Civil Rights Movement might be understood in terms of the Old / New Left framework sketched above. Yet as Mills himself wrote to Tovarich, somehow "that isn't quite good enough, is it?". As we prepare to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Sociological Imagination*, we have cause to appreciate Mills' achievements and to celebrate his contributions and the ways in which he was ahead of his time – especially his recognition of the emergence of the New Left. No doubt, there will be many hagiographies in the coming months that surround this momentous anniversary in American social science. And yet, precisely because of his keen sense of the significance of these developments, we must not let our admiration for the "James Dean" of American sociology prevent us from recognizing his shortcomings, silences, and limitations. Although Mills' inattention to the grassroots was not limited to black southerners – his thinking was similarly restricted in theorizing about American society more generally – it is dif-

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[9] It is interesting to note that although Mills neglected black movements, a key text of black radicalism in the 1960s paid homage to his notion of the "cultural apparatus". Harold Cruse's influential (if not anti-Caribbean) *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* draws on Mills' notion of the "cultural apparatus" (1969: 461–469, 471–475, & 513 – 515).

ficult to comprehend why Mills missed the most significant U.S. social movement of the 20th century. Although he remains a figure who deserves our admiration, we must not let our starry-eyed appreciation cloud rightful criticisms.

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