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The Power Elite by C. Wright Mills

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intimate with this reality, must ultimately be followed without ques-

On the other hand, Positivists would have us believe that real
problems (such as the problem of value determination) are solved by
wish or preference, or by the application of standards based on wish
or preference. We all seem agreed that, at least in physical affairs,
problems are empirical realities, demanding for their effective solu-
tion the insistent rigorous application of every available quantum of
human intelligence to the task of creating tentative statements about
a problem's causes and about the ends sought in its resolution. We
have been delinquent in not carrying over this attitude to the central
problem in the social sciences—the problem of value. The candid
actualities of the problem-solving process have never been popular
grist for the philosopher's mill. A philosophy so oriented is without a
traditional metaphysical base, and thus almost by definition, not
respectable as a philosophy. Thus while our behavior is and must be
problem-oriented, our attempts at a consistent formulation of the basis
of action result in profound theories whose only short-coming is that
they fail to describe what is really taking place.

Because they forcibly demonstrate the existence of this problem
these books are highly recommended.

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Professor Anderson is to be commended for his detailed analysis
of C. Wright Mill's THE POWER ELITE.* However, I believe Pro-
fessor Anderson's critique failed to emphasize the enormity of Mills'
undertaking, which, if fully appreciated, would lead to a higher regard,
if not genuine enthusiasm, for this provocative book.

My enthusiasm for this volume stems only in part from agreement
with certain of the conclusions. As a matter of fact, one could take

37 "Such concepts as 'freedom of conscience,' 'free speech,' 'inalienable
rights,' for example, established themselves as 'eternal truths,' after the manner of
the platonic tradition, which meant that they did not have to justify themselves in
terms of circumstance and function. ... [As such] there is no escape from the
necessity of relying on experts who can speak with authority on matters pertaining
to eternal truth." Bode, "Cleavage in our Culture," in Burchardt, op. cit. supra
note 17 at 8, 9.

* For the thorough discussion of Mills, The Power Elite, by C. Arnold Ande-
son and Harry L. Gracey. See 46 Ky. L.J. (Winter) 301 (1958).—Ed.
exception to several of the major findings, as I do, and remain impressed with this work as a heroic intellectual endeavor, and as a bold synthesis of psychological, sociological, political and economic materials in the complex task of delineating the power structure of American society. Mills sets for himself nothing less than the goal of analyzing the basic power relations of a capitalist-industrial order, of locating its mainsprings, of diagramming its mechanisms, and of mapping the broad cultural and historical channels within which it is moving or, perhaps more appropriately, drifting.

Mills can be attacked, as indeed he has been attacked by academic and non-academic men alike, in somewhat the same manner as was Kinsey in his efforts to study the crucial area of sex behavior. Objections were raised to certain of Kinsey's basic concepts, for example, his definition of the sex act with its physiological emphasis, to his interviewing methods, his sampling procedure, and to his tendency to impute meanings not warranted by the data. What was frequently forgotten, or only grudgingly conceded, was that Kinsey was among the first to attempt both a broad and a penetrating inquiry into a highly tabooed area of life, that both in terms of method and scope he was willing to challenge a number of myths, the myths of the academic researchers as well as those operative in wider circles, and finally, that in spite of carpings of narrow-gauged specialists, he produced a most provocative account of sexual behavior in our society.

Mills not only in THE POWER ELITE, but earlier in the NEW MEN OF POWER and WHITE COLLAR, has challenged some of the myths surrounding the distribution and uses of power in this country. He has been so bold as to suggest that John D. Rockefeller's gold came from some source other than God; he rejects wholeheartedly the idea that what is good for General Motors is good for the country. And he skirts the border of subversion when he questions David Riesman's argument that power is highly diffused, and takes issue with John K. Galbraith's contention that while power may be concentrated, there are "countervailing" forces which limit, weaken and shift it in the direction of new balances.

Perhaps much of the objection to Mill's effort is that he has challenged, and I think rather successfully, a near-fatal drift in American social science, which during the past few decades has retreated from basic responsibilities of trying to see a society in its totality, of developing concepts and insights applicable to the widest range of human action, of seeking to locate the fundamental sources and direction of social change. Certainly, we social scientists ought to be aware by this time of how much of our research endeavors are focused on
minute and superficial problems in our respective fields. We engage in a lot of well-executed, technically competent research. But it is frequently limited, and we hesitate to take on the bigger, tougher challenges. The fact that our results are largely meaningless does not seem to disturb us greatly, particularly when such findings through a process of “academic check-kiting” can be used to justify more requests for more funds for more research for more of the same results. We have become highly skilled in the scientific analysis of the unimportant. Rather than document these charges here I will merely refer you to the latest issues of your professional journals to which you subscribe— and perhaps even read. The first source of my enthusiasm for THE POWER ELITE then is Mills’ refusal to knuckle under to the demands of bureaucratized academic life and to the rituals of polite academic discourse.

The second source of my enthusiasm is Mills’ capacity to bring moral indignation and moral criticism to bear on a process of power-grabbing and power concentration which, if it runs its course, may well lead to a centralization of economic, political, and military control, not to mention over-all social influence, that will render meaningless the formal freedoms which men think they enjoy, and destroy the independence and integrity of the individual without his knowing it, or, if knowing it, then knowing it too late. For given control of the media of mass communication, and given the tendency to extend and consolidate their positions, the men of power—the big businessmen, the big brass, and the big political manipulators—can, in the words of Rousseau, “fling garlands of flowers around the chains that bind” the weak and the unaware. Mills regards these groups as evil, as immoral and as irresponsible, and he does not hesitate to say so. (One must read the chapter on the “Higher Immorality” to appreciate the intensity of his feeling.) The men of power, he insists, are not caught in impersonal social forces over which they have no control or of which they are mere instruments. They are aware of themselves; they know that what they say and do does make a difference. They are men who decide within a wide area of discretion the fundamental course not only of their own lives, but the lives of others who may be powerless to protest. They are in a position to make choices, and the consequent moral responsibility of their actions cannot be avoided.

The fact that these charges, couched as they are in ethical terms, are the work of a social scientist comes as something of a surprise for presumably we have vacated any obligation toward value judgments, or we have clothed our fears and misgivings in the rather threadbare garment of “objectivity”. And in the process, particularly if it is
attended by two cars in every garage, two television sets in every living room, and the promise of a five per cent raise next year, we may well be losing, if we have not lost already, our capacity for moral indignation. Perhaps, as Mills has suggested, we have lent not only our talents but our very beings to imbuing the great American celebration with the aura of intellectual respectability.

Ultimately, such criticism as we do bring to bear in our work does rest on fundamental moral premises, try as we might to conceal the norms of judgment. In THE POWER ELITE Mills makes his moral position explicit, while at the same time it serves as a source of numerous insights into the malaise of our time. In this respect he resembles in his humanitarian orientation the earlier Karl Marx, not to mention Rousseau and the later John Stuart Mill. One cannot avoid either a comparison with Veblen, whose castigation of and insights into the leisure class and the business system were a function of his abhorrence of laziness and his acceptance of the moral value of work. Mills' moral indignation is much greater than that expressed in THE POWER ELITE, if some of his more recent articles are an indication.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the value of this book lies only in its challenge to the mass-media propagated and the increasingly academically respectable myths concerning the American power structure, or in the author's capacity for moral indignation. This brings me to the third reason for my enthusiasm. Mills is a highly sophisticated man in terms of both theory and method as his specific researches and monographs will indicate. He is aware of the problem of proof in social science inquiry, of the taboos surrounding certain areas, of the unpopularity of the social scientist in the academic as well as the non-academic community, and the numerous difficulties in locating data concerning power relationships which are closely guarded by those who do not wish their actions to be a matter of public knowledge. In spite of these limitations he has amassed and organized a volume of relevant data that is little short of astonishing. At the same time he is aware of the gaps in his material, and he tries to bridge them. This, rather than resigning himself to those problems and questions on which data are easily obtained. This procedure leads inevitably to a certain amount of guesswork and places an undue emphasis on inference and imputation. And yet it seems to me that there is a remarkable amount of substantiated facts, coupled with insight and skill in its interpretation. Certainly, he has provided other social scientists numerous points of departure which, if followed, may well verify further the tentative conclusions at which he arrives.
His failures here, such as they are, should be judged not by ideal standards of research, but by the sweeping task he set for himself. Viewed in this light THE POWER ELITE can be seen as both an honest and sophisticated attempt to bring social science concepts and methods to bear on one of the fundamental processes of our time, the process of power.

One brief and final source of enthusiasm is found in Mills' style of writing. It is a welcome departure from the sociological jargon. If THE POWER ELITE does nothing else perhaps it will persuade social scientists that they need not write in a monumentally dull way in order to say something important.

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