

## ON THE PASSING OF C. WRIGHT MILLS

Grateful readers of Charles Wright Mills' informative books the world over, widely dispersed friends in this country and abroad, and his loved ones are saddened, aggrieved and in mourning. Death came prematurely to the new home he had built near Nyack, New York on the Hudson River. Mills died of a failure of heart not of nerve, March 20 in his forty-sixth year. Like the charioting heroes of boyhood years of Western man, this spear-throwing "hero" of a new generation of restive middle class youths without a political home died young. Edward Alsworth Ross at Wisconsin and Lincoln Steffens, the academic and the non-academic "muckrakers" of the progressive era of America, still could publish their autobiographies in ripe old age. Mills' last book, The Marxists, just came off the press. It shows him to be the radical democrat that he was since his youth.

His Ph.D. thesis on the American Pragmatists still lies unpublished in the library of the University of Wisconsin. It was a study in the sociology of knowledge. The contextual study of man's thoughtways in times and places of his making came to be known by that name as a branch of sociology since the work of my teacher, Karl Mannheim, reached the English language community during the nineteen thirties. As has been said of Saint Simon, the utopian socialist and sociologist of the Napoleonic age of wars and revolutions, Mills "plunged into life." He packed several lives into one. And as Lorenz von Stein said of Saint Simon, his was an open ended "vie experimentale," a way of life, of risks and ventures, of essays and of thrusts held together by extraordinary hard and sustained work of mind and body under stress.

Eleven books, scholarly essays, journalist articles, two houses and a solid substantial cottage on an island in a Canadian lake were the fruit of twenty years of hard work, toil and trouble. Mills was committed to the active life, the hermitage of solitary contemplation had no attraction for the outgoing pragmatist man of the open horizons. Dürer's engraving of the knight on horseback without fear of devil and death, not his brooding "Melancholia" might be cited as symbolic of his commitment to the vita activa. When in New York, a European friend once told him that he could not help thinking of him in terms of those wax figures of the Christian Madonna whose inlaid hearts serve seamstresses as needle cushions. The figures are sold from stands around the Vienna Dome. "All I want is no more needles, please," said the friend. "You know, Gerth, what I answered," said this non-practicing Catholic from the Southwest? "Well and?" I said. "Ride and shoot," said Mills and he added whimsically, "you know, among my ancestors in Texas were cattle thieves."

Mills came from Texas University with Veblen in one hand and John Dewey in the other. He was a tall, burly young man of herculean build. He was no man with the "pale cast of the intellect" given to self-mortifica-

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tion. He would jump his salto mortale with surprising grace; he was a good sportsman with bat and ball, a dashing swimmer and boatsman, sailing his shabby dory on Lake Mendota. Years later I visited him on his Canadian island, where he had built a solid summer house in the solitude of fir and pine forests. A slender white birch tree here and there served to stress the somber quietude of the majestic stems of the coniferous bush. We would walk with machetes to make our way to the boat. Mills dashed with his motorboat past the more imposing houses of midwestern corporation executives to the pier of the village store. Some poor Indians stood around as forgotten men to admire the noise and the splash of swift cutters and motor boats, which had displaced the silent glide of their ancestral canoes. A sky writing plane left its fading ad in the sky--the rest was silence. After a while Mills was bored and we drove over to Madison.

Mills had grown up in far away Texas as a son of a white collar man and his wife. They are of English and of Irish stock. Mills became a military cadet in Sherman, Fort Worth and Dallas. In 1936 he was twenty years of age. Hence he experienced in young manhood the decisive turn of events. He found himself at the watershed of events leading to WW II. He read the headlines of the "China Incident." Japan had been on the war path anyway since 1931, now she broke out of the naval triad of the Pacific and aligned herself ambitiously with Hitler's "have not nation", Germany. Goering as the newly appointed "Commissioner of the Four Year Plan" shouted in the Sportsplatz of Berlin, "Give me four years time," German troops bluffed the French and marched with rifles but no ammunition across the Rhine bridges. Hitler scrapped the Locarno Treaty. Stalin joined the Geneva League of Nations, and F.D.R. summoned the Western Democracies to "quarantine the aggressors." The Wagner act released American labor to a new freedom of organized self-determination. The 2½ million organized workers of the American Federation of Labor saw at their side the Congress of Industrial Organization of bushy-eyed John L. Lewis. He led the campaign for organizing labor of the mass production industries in unions regardless of skill levels and occupational specialization. A flood tide sprang up and the membership figures of labor organizations jumped to sixteen million workers. When Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago reviled Hitler, the sinful son of his church as "that wallpaper hanger of Berlin and a poor one at that," the union of honorable interior decorators protested. There was no man by that name known to hold a union card.

Mills learned to look at public actors, their stage settings, words of explicit hopes and intentions with the attitude nowadays called "cool", the more so as cold war leads to hot war and after the victory of arms to the continuation of war by other means during the fifty year crisis when there is no peace. Mills had the eye of the Westerner trained to see majestic mountain panoramas, the expanse of shorelines and beaches under wide open and luminous skies. He liked to see things big. When he combined the skill of the Leica man with his "sociological imagination" he caught the "little man" hurrying home through the shadows of the Wall Street canyon of the big city landscape for the cover of his book White Collar.

He hated sham and illusions. He did not fear the naked truth and realized that power needs to be clothed, lest it appear naked, and the Emperor has no clothes on like in Andersen's fairy tale. Still it would be wrong to dismiss Mills as a mere debunker. Naturally, in an age of political and commercial build-up techniques, debunking is the indispensable tool in trade of sociology. Science is no branch of advertising. And Mills was no build-up man. He was a builder. He was a builder of houses, not their destroyer.

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He was an author of books, not a book-burner as we have experienced them from Dr. Goebbels to the inquisitors of the Amerika Houses in postwar Germany. The West German prestige papers giggled at Senator McCarthy's men. They burned Pearl Buck's Nobel-prize-winning novel, The Good Earth, and all music of Gershwin, if we may recall "only yesterday." Mills called such acts "idiotic" and spoke of "idiocy." He was tough minded and loved tough minded writers, men of tall talk and no bones about it.

Since his years as a cadet Mills had no talent for joining or conforming to disciplined ranks of any sort. He lacked the gift and the taste for disciplined ranks, unless they were to march behind him. He was an officer without an army. Possibly he feared to be boxed in, to be labelled, shelved or tied to a hitching post. He preferred to throw his weight and to look at the world of the film age with the moving camera eye of John Dos Passos.

Besides hard worked books and houses he would make some "fireworks" on the side. As an experienced man, he published his "Plain Talk on Fancy Sex" at the occasion of the Jelke scandal. He helped expose the call-girl and expense-account rackets.

He addressed a "Pagan Sermon to Christian Ministers," and his fan mail showed that he had found appropriate words for the shared agony of many who still are committed to the Christian faith as a religion of love rather than to an ideology justifying unbrotherly crusades against savage Indians, Huns, Krauts, Japs and other Easterners. The tune of "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" was popular, but did not appeal to him.

Mills loved to work at Weber materials, although he could not read Weber or Marx in German. Unfortunately he never cared to learn the language of Karl Marx. His last book on The Marxists betrays the deficiency. Hilferding and Otto Bauer remained unknown idea men to him, as their major works are not translated. Still, the distant always had the lure of the exotic to the boy from the far West. After all, Weber was a tough and subtle mind who called a spade a spade. He dealt with a world adrift and feared the division of Europe between the Russian officials with knout and Ukas ruling sullen masses and the Anglo-Saxon gentlemen capitalist with his conventional repression and athletic games and sports of calculated risks without daring. He feared for two decades what has come to pass in Europe. He worried that agrarian bolshevism might well appeal to the landless and exploited poor of the Chinese village.

Mills was invited by Fidel Castro to visit Cuba in revolutionary transition. He drove over the island and saw a new society in the making. Gamblers, fancy sex and tourism had faded away. He was enthusiastic and impressed by what he saw. He was thrilled to see what man can do once he can courageously take his own life in hands and afford national self determination and gain the hope for the good life for his children. Castro showed him the common people at the wide open beaches, the mushrooming school houses for illiterates eager to learn, the beginnings of fisheries, of diversified agriculture, etc.

What he saw struck the long forgotten chords of New Deal enthusiasm during F.D.R.'s "100 days" with "braintrusters" and planners. Coming from the open spaces of Texas with five persons per square mile he responded with all the compassion and righteous indignation of the middle class man out for a better world and smarting in impotent agony.

As a young man Mills had broken into print with a piece in the New Republic, "In Defense of the Miners." His was the one lonely voice in a res-

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pectable magazine to speak up for John Lewis and his "vacationing" miners, who would not unconditionally surrender to those who define the national interest. The nation was glued to the radio to listen to the President's voice. John Lewis tried to pull the carpet from under the President's feet by changing his line a few minutes before the President had to go on the air. Mills sided with the working men who risked their lives underground and were up against wage ceilings. Needless to say that for profits of men above ground the sky was the limit. Congress would not restrict or restrain all freedom. As George Orwell put it: "We are all equal yet some are a bit more equal." As Mills was a forthright, old-fashioned Democrat, as they still come out West--one may think of General Stillwell's Papers--he pleaded for the right of the workingman, to be levelled up with the rest, who wish to go it alone. Unlike Max Weber, the Kaiser's prophet of doom, Mills always hoped against hope. In his Cuba tract he chose to ignore the inevitable response of Cuba as a besieged garrison state, to the challenging threat of invasion, to be followed by naval blockade. Now, Cuba has to plead for medical pills. The blockade is tight all right.

Mills considered it the vocation of a professor to profess. His impressive and imaginative trilogy on labor and middle classes, old and new, and on the decision makers in world affairs was the first attempt of an American sociologist to answer the question, whence did we come, where are we going, who are we that we should look the way we do?

In bygone days America used to receive its image from abroad. De Tocqueville, James Bryce and Andre Siegfried presented to the world the accepted images of America. Brooks Adams at the beginning of our century answered tourists and visitors from abroad before the age of the motor car and airplane just when the open frontier closed. He published his critique As Others See Us. It is in the tradition of these older great writers that Mills now informs a world wide public what to make of it all. As he was no ambassador to Washington he did not have to delete as James Bryce did what he had published under the mask of Prof. Goodenough. He tried to tell the truth as he saw it and without sugar coating.

In trying times Abraham Lincoln with tears under smiles referred to this great Union of freedom loving men--the United States of America--as "the last best hope of man." Let us beware lest statesmen beyond distant horizons quip about these United States as they did once during the days of Munich about:

"England: the hope of lost causes  
England: the cause of lost hopes."

Mills' legacy is a summons, no secure possession. Neither truth nor freedom can ever be secure and transferable properties to be inherited from the past as a patrimonium. They are no things like a piece of real estate or securities. They wish to be pursued. Their pursuit, however, demands the ever new and imaginative question, the fine art of being astounded and baffled by what men without vigilance readily take for granted as "natural." A thousand and one ascertained correctitudes never add up to that truth that shall make us free. It always beckons from beyond the horizon of ascertained knowledge. It takes some courage and devotion to remain vigilant in its pursuit. It is in this sense that Mills risked himself ever anew in the ongoing essays of his vie experimentale without the hitching post of the absolute and the boundaries of any closed system. He began by assessing the pragmatists; his life and his work with all its ups and downs, its triumphs

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and defeats, its failures and its attainments or successes strikes us as the grand essay of an outstanding and eminently American "pragmaticist" as Charles Peirce, one of his philosophical mentors, liked to refer to himself. He has traversed the course of his life with the tempestuousness of a swift runner. Death struck him down. I have lost my friend, as the Romans used to say, my "alter ego." Requiescat in Pace.

Hans Gerth  
University of Wisconsin

Major portions of an address read at the memorial meeting, Columbia University, Monday, April 16, 1962.

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The discipline of sociology will be different now--a little calmer, less threatened from within. C. Wright Mills is dead. He sought what is best in sociology: to combine the critical faculties of the sociological imagination with an interest in the broad problems of analysis and a commitment to fundamental human values. Here I am not interested in the validity of his work--that question will not be resolved for precisely the reasons that made Mills different from most of the men doing academic sociology today, differences in fundamental assumptions about the society in which they live and the effect of these differences on the questions they ask. There is another important aspect to Mills' death, one having to do with the sociology of sociology and with what the absence of Mills as a symbol might do to the profession.

"The dynamics of progress have changed the university from a tiny band of scholars situated on the periphery of society to a large group of teachers and investigators operating at an intersection crossed by nearly all the paths of human activity; from a debating forum to a research laboratory; from an isolated retreat restricted to the contemplation of history, philosophy, the classics and the arts to a vast intellectual enterprise devoted also to the social, physical, and biological sciences. Some professors have transferred their investigations from the library into the factory and onto the farm. Today the university is much more an integral part of society than ever before." With much of the statement by the University of California's President, Clark Kerr, Mills might have agreed. But this is only to pose the problem. At least two fundamental questions remain unanswered by this statement: first, what is meant by "progress"? and, second, what special responsibilities are placed on these professors now that they have "transferred their investigations from the library into the factory and onto the farm"?

In each of these questions lies a matter of more than peripheral importance to the character of sociology as a profession. Perhaps it is the failure to ask these questions which allows matters of form or methodological rigor to cripple questions of content or broader social import. Mills was concerned with where we are going; he used his imagination and the tools of the sociological discipline to talk about these concerns, and his work attracted and attracts to sociology many an inquisitive undergraduate seeking a place in the university where he might relate his moral concerns to his critical faculties. In some sociology departments, in academic garb, is the debate of radical vs. non-radical or, more precisely in most cases, ex-radical: power elite vs. pluralism, ideology vs. its end, etc. It is this debate so enlivened by Mills' work, by his very choice of subject matter

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(in contrast to the bulk of sociological research), that has made sociology departments exciting places and that has enabled them to recruit many of their students. This has been especially true at Berkeley--but what is the direction in which we now move?

The transfer of investigation from the library to the field poses more sharply than was ever posed before the potential for use by the society of the results of academic labor. If this is "progress," then what does it mean? Is it something called "society" as a whole that benefits from our work or is it particular interest groups that can afford to buy what the academy has to sell and which have the power to put what they buy to work for themselves. Look at the tally sheet: control of the worker in "human relations," control of the voter by the cultivation of "public image," control of the consumer by advertising which "helps build freedom of choice." Balance these against those sociologists who work for the consumer, labor, or the maintenance of public discussion of political issues. The question, "whose sociologists are you?" is raised when we examine what sociologists do. It is raised unless it is assumed that these conflicts of interest groups are peripheral to human values or are part of a great underlying consensus so broad as to make peripheral the notion of conflicts of interest. If we reject this utopian conception, we are left with the question and its broader counterpart, "whose university are you?" This raises a critical question for today's scholar: who will his audience be? To some, this is a matter of deep concern. Indeed, the university is no longer the "isolated retreat" it may once have been. Today it is part of the factory system of commercial America.

Several responses to the commercialization of the university occur. One is to yearn for a return to the ivory tower, and this yearning is as utopian as the equivalent desire to return to medieval social integration, and its intellectual counterpart, grand abstract theory based on a society in static equilibrium. Another response is to invoke the image of the marketplace in which ideas, like any other commodity, are bought and sold on the marketplace. In this case, the sociologist is a technician for hire, and truth, like price, emerges from the competition. The intellectual counterpart to this view is found in empiricism without theory, with the further assumption that theory emerges, somehow, from the collection of data. The final response is to recognize that a process of the concentration of power is at work in our society and to fight that process in the name of freedom in the society is to fight for freedom of the intellect. This response is associated, though not exclusively, with the sociology Mills exemplified. Only with this response will freedom of inquiry, discussion and debate be retained in the university, for it is the same interests which are hostile to civil liberties and the democratic process which are increasingly playing a role in the university which "is operating at an intersection crossed by nearly all the paths of human activity."

Mills chose this last response. He was neither the romantic nor the staff intellectual to some pressure group. At the same time, he was notably successful in finding his way to the audience to which he wished to speak. Through a mass distribution publishing house he critically presented the Marxists; in the same way he defended the Cuban Revolution. The Power Elite became a paperback and also circulated as a selection of a radical American readers' club as well as earlier being the selection of a more widely known book club. His articles were scattered in the radical quarterlies and appeared in liberal magazines as well and, though less often as time went on,

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in the professional journals. Mills sought to relate his work to the revitalization of debate, what he called the "breaking out of apathy." In so doing he contributed to debate on the campus, in the sociology departments.

The problem of audience is the problem of those who are concerned with the consequences of their work. Society, it is clear, is interested in what goes on in the university. But if different groups have differential advantage in their access to the university, the university is more than an "intersection...of human activity." It is on one side of the street; it is, like it or not, partisan. It is used just as other social resources are used. Its uniqueness as an institution, as a community of scholars committed to the free and open search for knowledge, is of little interest to the agribusiness which pays its Department of Agriculture, to the military-industrial complex that supports its Livermore. Viewed in this manner, it becomes clear that the university is no less a part of The Establishment than is any other institution. Thus Mills' ability to maintain the autonomy of his intellect, choose his own questions for study, and still reach an audience was all the more astounding. He wrote, explicitly, to the intellectuals in and out of the universities and colleges and, again explicitly, identified them as a potential source of social change. Like Brecht's Galileo, he was able to operate within the system, enjoy his work, and still act as critic, attacking the very same system. Unlike Galileo, he was never silenced.

To the young graduate looking ahead to see what it means to be a university sociologist, Mills is one of the few examples of one who remains in the academy and remains independent. He was scholar and citizen, and the two were blended in his work. In his "Letter to the New Left," which was published both here and in England, he urged young intellectuals to engage in the study of "theories of society, history, and human nature, and--the major problem--ideas about the historical agencies of structural change." For sociology departments it is a plea to fight the drift of the university towards becoming a training mill, for when the university becomes that its critical functions will cease. In his writings from Columbia, Mills inspired many with the possibility of creative work in the university community. In a time when freedom, academic as well as civil, is under attack, he gave a new dimension to the role of scholarship in our society. He left a heritage for sociology which will continue to have effect in the schools. The schoolmen, so critical of Mills, will find that they need someone to take his place.

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