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The Power Elite by C. Wright Mills

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## C. WRIGHT MILLS 50 YEARS LATER

Mills's *The Power Elite* 50 Years Later

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Fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills completed his trilogy on American society with the publication of *The Power Elite*, which encompassed, updated, and greatly added to everything he had said in *The New Men of Power* (1948) and *White Collar* (1951). The book caused a firestorm in academic and political circles, leading to innumerable reviews in scholarly journals and the popular press, most of them negative. Bristling with terms like “the warlords,” “the higher immorality,” “the power elite,” “crackpot realism,” and “organized irresponsibility,” it nonetheless contained a very large amount of research, much of it in the 47 pages of Notes. It became a classic because it was the first full-scale study of the structure and distribution of power in the United States by a sociologist using the full panoply of modern-day sociological theory and methods.

*The Power Elite* also broke new ground because it was one of the few critical studies of the American power structure inside or outside the academy that did not start with a class-struggle perspective, which caused it to be criticized as vigorously by Marxists as it was by liberals and conservatives. According to Mills, there was “political determinism,” i.e., a potentially autonomous state in today’s terms, and “military determinism” as well as “economic determinism,” the concepts he used to criticize what he saw as the overemphasis on the primacy of the forces and relations of production within the Marxian mode of production framework. The book thereby opened space for and helped create the field of power structure research, which employs a range of empirical methods in an attempt to synthesize competing theoretical views. Although seldom read or cited today by those studying power structures, *The Power Elite* has achieved iconic status in most introductory sociology textbooks, where it is usually compared with the pluralist and Marxist perspectives on power and politics.

*The Power Elite*, by C. Wright Mills. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1956. 448 pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN: 0195133544.

How do its main claims look today in light of subsequent events and research? From the perspective of this power structure researcher, the book still has an astonishing relevance and freshness in many of its characterizations of how the country operates. For anyone who thinks that there have been major changes in the nature and functioning of the corporate community, or that individualistic and relatively issueless political campaigns are something new, or that the current “high and mighty” are more arrogant or corrupted by power than in the past, re-reading it is a sobering reminder that some things have not changed as much as many people might think due to our tendency to mythologize and romanticize the past. As for the more important matter of theoretical soundness, it appears that Mills was mostly right about the top levels of the power structure, but mostly wrong about the other levels of American society. Most of all, his synthesis of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, Karl Marx, Franz Neumann, Harold Lasswell, and Progressive-Era historians underestimated the volatility and capacity for change within a capitalist society, including a possibility few, if any, social scientists anticipated: a successful corporate counterattack that would reverse the gains made by organized labor.

Today, Mills looks even better than he did 50 years ago in his characterization of the benefactors of American capitalism as a corporate rich led by the chief executives of large corporations and financial institutions, who by now can be clearly seen as the driving force within the power elite. His analysis also remains right on target as far as the nature of the political directorate, who circulate between corporations, corporate law firms, and government positions in the same

way they did 50 years ago (and well before that, of course). Thanks to subsequent research, we can add that the political directorate learns about policy issues and rubs shoulders with academic experts through a corporate-financed network of foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups. Although Mills knew of these organizations because he drew much of his information about the corporate community from *Business Week*, *Fortune*, and other business sources, he did not give them the attention they deserved in terms of formulating new policies that are carried to government through a variety of clearly defined avenues, such as testimony before Congress, blue-ribbon commissions, corporate-backed politicians in both parties, and appointments to government (Domhoff, 2006).

As right as Mills was to include the military chieftains in the post-World War II power elite, he was wrong to give them equal standing with the corporate rich and appointees to the executive branch from the policy-planning network. On this issue there already was a consensus among pluralists, Marxists, and other critics within a few years after the book appeared, and nothing that has happened since, or that has been unearthed by historians about past military doings, has challenged that consensus. This point is demonstrated most directly by the fact that military leaders are immediately dismissed if they disagree with their civilian bosses, as seen numerous times since the early 1960s, and most recently in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, when a top general was pushed into retirement for daring to say there was a need for more troops than former corporate CEO and current Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his think-tank advisors thought necessary.

Once we move below the power elite that Mills so tellingly portrayed, I think there are more serious problems with his analysis, some of which should have been apparent at the time, some not. Mills first of all underestimated the power of Congress and too quickly dismissed the political parties as indistinguishable on power issues. The power structure that he analyzed was, in fact, based in fair measure on a strong corporate grip on power at the legislative level, made possible by the fact that Northern industrial and financial capitalists controlled the Republican

Party and Southern plantation capitalists controlled the Democrats within an overall electoral context where it is impossible for a third party on the left or right to arise because of the single-member-district plurality system of American elections, as reinforced by the inclusion of a huge prize not part of most electoral systems: the presidency.

Due to this domination of both political parties by segments of the capitalist class, it was difficult, if not impossible, at the time for the parties to be different in the way that Mills thought they should be. To the degree that the liberal-labor coalition that developed during the New Deal could exercise any electoral and legislative power, it had to do so inside the Democratic Party and in the context of a sordid bargain with the segregationist Southern Democrats. Most critically, that bargain included acceptance of elite white domination of the low-wage labor force in the South, especially African Americans. It also meant tacit acceptance of the exclusion of African Americans from craft unions and good jobs in the North, which assuaged the many white workers who harbored feelings of racial superiority or saw African-Americans as a potential threat to their job security.

When it appeared that the liberal-labor coalition could generate enough support to pass progressive legislation, the Southern Democrats usually joined with the Northern Republicans to form the conservative voting bloc, thereby thwarting legislation that would benefit the working class. The only two defeats of any significance for this conservative voting bloc occurred first in 1935, when the industrial union movement in the North was able to create enough disruption and elect enough liberals to force a split between Northern and Southern elites, and then again in 1964, when the civil rights movement in the South forced another rift between Northern and Southern elites. The insurgents thereby won legislation of great benefit to workers and African Americans, namely, the National Labor Relations Act and the Civil Rights Act, although it always has to be kept in mind that the labor relations act excluded domestic and agricultural labor, and that the strongest enforcement provisions were excluded from the Civil Rights Act, due to the insistence of the Southern Democrats. Moreover, the Southern Democrats renewed their anti-labor alliance with the Republicans in

1939 and wrote amendments to the National Labor Relations Act that outlawed several successful collective strategies developed by the unions. Those amendments, delayed by the need for good relations with organized labor during World War II, were passed as the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 (Gross, 1981).

Still, both the industrial union movement and the civil rights movement, and later the social movements aided and inspired by the civil rights movement, show that the United States is not a "mass society" in the sense that Mills meant it, i.e., one in which everyday people have no organizational bases and hence no way to develop their own opinions and political trajectories. Despite his earlier research showing that people often come to their own opinions, usually through discussions with family and friends, Mills compounded the problem by overstating the role of the media in shaping public opinion. He thereby contributed to the mistaken belief that most people are bamboozled, a belief that leads to an overemphasis on ideology at the expense of organizational factors in explaining why most wage workers do not actively challenge those in power.

Although Mills agreed that the unions were, to some extent, an independent power base at the middle levels, he did not take the dynamic of class conflict seriously enough to contemplate that it might be possible for unions to lose most of their hard-won gains. In effect, he assumed a stalemate, and even some degree of accommodation, between "sophisticated conservatives" in the power elite and the "new men of power" in the unions. Contrary to Mills, who believed that underlying class tensions were, by then, confined within administrative and judicial structures that would prevent the outbreak of class struggle, we now know based on historical research that there never was any real acceptance of unions on the part of the sophisticated conservatives (Gross, 1995). Moreover, the sophisticated conservatives quietly resumed an all-out class war as early as 1965 due to a National Labor Relations Board decision that management had to bargain with unions on the possibility of outsourcing. It was a capitalist victory in the effort to reverse that decision, along with an attack on construction unions for their alleged role in the inflationary spiral, that spelled the

beginning of the end for whatever power labor unions had achieved.

Mills's concept of a mass society also prevented him from seeing the organizational resources available to African Americans through their churches and colleges in the South and their involvement in the Democratic Party in the North. This combination of power bases, coupled with the brilliant and unanticipated use of strategic nonviolence, which attracted the support of activists from predominantly white universities and white Northern churches, led to dramatic changes in the American power structure. The civil rights movement inspired other new movements that were based in the fast-growing universities of the era—especially the anti-war and women's movements, and also the environmental and consumer movements, and later the gay and lesbian movement.

But it turned out that these various movements had conflicts among themselves. In particular, many white union members, especially in the building trades unions, saw the civil rights, women's, and environmental movements as threats to their good jobs and status claims as proud white males. Moreover, many white union members did not like what they saw as the anti-Americanism of the anti-war movement. They were not crazy about the war, but they came to dislike the protestors even more. Thus, and contrary to Mills's view, it was not lack of power bases, but lack of unity, that limited the possibilities for progressive changes in the overall power structure.

Within this context, the New Deal coalition began to fragment within a year or two after Mills's death in 1962. In particular, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 set in motion a train of events that led to the abandonment of the Democratic Party by the Southern rich because they could no longer use the party to keep African Americans powerless. They then carried a majority of white Southerners into the Republican Party on the basis of appeals to racial resentments, religious fundamentalism, super-patriotism, and social issues like gun control. The liberal-labor coalition in the North simultaneously fractured, due to white resistance to the integration of neighborhoods, schools, and unions. The two political parties became increasingly different nationwide along liberal-conservative lines,

with many white workers now on the conservative side.

The nationwide white turn to the Republicans made it possible for Mills's sophisticated conservatives to turn right on policy in the 1970s once the inner cities were calm again and the power elite was faced with new economic problems due to spiking oil prices and inflation, along with the challenges to their markets by the German and Japanese corporations they had decided to nurture after World War II in order to create a global capitalism. We know in detail about this decision to turn right because the issues were debated in think tanks like The Brookings Institution and policy-discussion forums like the Committee for Economic Development, where the majority said no to permanent wage and price controls, increased planning, and related liberal Keynesian policies. Instead, they advocated monetary policies that would cure inflation through throwing people out of work, cutbacks in the welfare state, deregulation of key business sectors, and continuing attacks on unions. The newly formed Business Roundtable, which gradually emerged as part of the anti-union offensive of the 1960s, took charge of the right turn. This, of course, brings us to the present moment, an almost unbroken march to the right on economic issues, along with an increasing concentration of the wealth and income distributions.

Finally, where do things stand in terms of Mills's major theoretical claims? At the most general level, the historical and cross-nation-

al evidence leaves me in agreement with Mills that the economic, political, and military sectors are potentially independent power bases, although I would add that power also can be generated from a religious organizational base, as seen in the civil rights movement, the rise of the Christian Right, and the Iranian Revolution. In terms of the United States, however, historical and sociological research leads me to place far more emphasis than Mills did on corporate capitalism and class conflict as the dominant factors in the power equation. Events and research in the United States since the 1960s also leave me with a belief that there are potential power bases for popular action that Mills overlooked, but with the proviso that these social movements are often in conflict with each other. Until organized labor, liberals, and leftists can forge a coalition of non-violent social movements and focus on Democratic Party primaries if and when they enter the electoral arena, the power elite will continue on its merry way whatever the consequences for everyone else.

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