

**POWER,**  
**POLITICS**  
**& PEOPLE**

**The Collected Essays of**  
**C. Wright Mills**

EDITED BY

**IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ**

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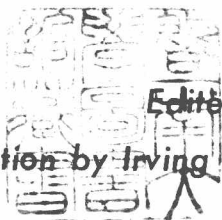
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# POWER, POLITICS AND PEOPLE

THE COLLECTED ESSAYS OF C. WRIGHT MILLS



*Edited and with an  
Introduction by Irving Louis Horowitz*

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C. WRIGHT MILLS

**To Yara**

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

In preparing the collected papers of C. Wright Mills for publication I have been guided by one central principle: to keep myself from interfering in the two-way communication between author and reader. Thus, except for matters of occasional lapses in punctuation and spelling (very rare I might add), the essays are herein presented as they were originally prepared by Wright Mills.

The outstanding difference from the original, is the replacement of sub-headings (most often put in by periodicals rather than by the author), with a uniform system of Roman numerals—signifying different sections of a particular paper. In large measure, Mills himself used this as a designation, so that the number of places where even sub-headings were deleted was comparatively small. The titles of each essay have been left intact. In a few places it was necessary to subtract or add a word, but the title of each paper can be checked against the title listings in the bibliography for an indication of any changes.

I have chosen to call this the “collected papers” rather than the “selected papers” because **POWER, POLITICS AND PEOPLE** covers every major essay done by Wright Mills. Again, the bibliography appended to the back of this volume indicates precisely what has and has not been included. Of those that have not been included a further word is in order. Mills, in his long career, did a number of “topical” pieces which have no clear relevance for the present, and which he himself would have unquestionably excluded from any collection of his essays. Also excluded are summary statements culled from his larger works, which are readily available to the general reading public. Since all of Mills’ major statements are herein included, only the liter-



ary archaeologist can possibly chafe at the omission of his occasional pieces. And I have tried to satisfy even the most sensitive and careful of readers by supplying this volume with an up-to-date and thorough bibliographical bank.

The one difficult moment came in deciding against prefacing each essay with an editorial abstract. While this is often a useful guide to a reader who wants to know whether or not to read a particular essay, in this case I am making the assumption that the reader is interested in *every* study herein contained, and therefore does not need (and indeed may even resent) a capsule version of each of Mills' pieces. The best "short cut" to an understanding of his writings is through reading them. For this reason, the essays follow each other without editorial commentary.

As for the arrangement of Mills' *corpus*, this matter is dealt with in my introduction. For those who might have preferred an "historical" sequence, instead of the present analytical and topical arrangement, it might be noted that this would have blurred any sound overview of Mills' way of doing social science, and it would have placed an extra burden on those readers unfamiliar with the sociological-linguistic minutiae that characterized the earliest stage of Mills' intellectual production. Nonetheless, since these early essays are no less vital and significant in an appreciation of Mills than his more popular writings (and indeed, form a meaningful intellectual continuum), they appear in part 4 of the book—by which time the reader should be quite ready and able to efficiently cope with the language and structure of sociology.

As a closing word I should simply wish to record my personal and intellectual gratitude to C. Wright Mills. If the reader has as much enjoyment in the reading of his essays as I had in the preparation of them, I shall consider this ample reward for my own small role in Wright's achievement.

ILH

## POWER, POLITICS AND PEOPLE

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO C. WRIGHT MILLS

“Try to understand men not as an isolated fragment, not as an intelligible field or system in and of itself. Try to understand men and women as historical and social actors, and the ways in which the variety of men and women are intricately selected and intricately formed by the variety of human societies. Before you go through with any piece of work, no matter how indirectly or occasionally, orient it to the central and continuing task of understanding the structure and the drift, the shaping and the meanings, of your own period, the terrible and magnificent world of human society in the second half of the twentieth century.”—  
*The Sociological Imagination*

What was the “magic” which C. Wright Mills possessed? Why did he become the singular intellectual “hero” of our age? How did he come to influence a generation of scholars, students and savants while at the same time suffering the outrages of ostracism and hostility from many professional sociologists? Did his reputation finally rest on his contributions to radical politics or to social science—or to both (and if the last, what was the nature of the “mix”)? These are not simple questions. Nor can any introductory essay properly claim to exhaust the problems that Mills bequeathed to us. From my point of view, a realistic evaluation of Mills must begin with how the public and personal careers of Mills intersect. This in turn may serve as a basis for settlement of the sort of questions which were asked by Mills and, no less, *about* Mills.

Mills worked out his theory of society carefully, painstakingly, and without resort to the familiar crutches which so often serve as a substitute for fresh insight. His concept

of the "classic" tradition in social science was based on its capacity to satisfy the demands of an age for useful knowledge; for clarification instead of manipulation. Mills was tough-minded enough to face the changing world situation and generous enough to recognize that such changes as are brought about are man made. And what men make can often be unmade. That is why he eschewed the kind of romantic historicism and providential messianism that so often characterizes the truth-seeker. By the same token, his man-sized sociology avoided the opposite empiricist pitfall which converts men into data, and history into autobiography.

The four words: power, politics, people, and knowledge, sum up for me the enterprise of social science as Mills envisioned it. Mills' reputation does not rest upon any single essay or book. Whether he is right or wrong on the causes of World War III, or on the merits of Castro's Cuba may be subject to debate. But what is not open to debate is the *need* for social scientists to address themselves to the great agonies and issues of our age. This Mills did more conscientiously than any of his peers. And as the courage to face the future is the mark of the young, so too, Mills' reputation will increasingly come to rest with those generations still in the process of intellectual formation and fermentation. This is something Mills himself was totally aware of; it was a thought which sustained him on more than one occasion. Mills went into the good fight in the firm belief that truth will out. The response of the public to his "message" and "preachings" (as he called his popular works) did not disappoint him. His victory was both public and private. This study is an attempt to explain at least in part the fruits of this victory.

## I

A tough-minded, pragmatic view of sociology as human performance remained characteristic of Mills' writings throughout his career. Mills passed through three distinctive biographical-intellectual phases. First, social philosophy and a full absorption in the classics of social studies; second, an intensive period of empirical research in the

middle forties; and third, an effort at combining these interests into a workable style of sociological reflection. The first thorough expression of this last stage was made in the middle 'fifties in his paper on "Two Styles of Social Science Research." *The Sociological Imagination* is largely an elaboration of the ideas first presented in this pivotal paper.

Although technically trained in sociology and philosophy, Mills was indifferent to what he felt to be the specialized trivialities and pretentious rituals toward which so many in these disciplines have drifted. When Mills finally evolved his synthesis of social science and social philosophy his essays took on a distinctive and recognizable "style." If some of his earlier efforts still showed ambivalence between the theoretical and philosophical leanings of classical writings in sociology, and the pragmatic and journalistic tradition characteristic of American social science, by the time of 1945 and his various "collective portraits" of trade-union leadership and the business elite he had performed a methodological breakthrough unique in the annals of contemporary sociology. Mills' feat consisted in combining empiricism and prescriptivism; describing the world of human relations and also presenting solutions (albeit partial solutions) to the worst infections of the American social structure. As Mills once said in a letter to a "white collar wife" published in a weekly mass circulation publication: "It is one thing to talk about general problems on a national level, and quite another to tell an individual what to do. Most 'experts' dodge that question. I do not want to."

Mills' search for answers, no less than for the right questions, meant a conscious abandonment on his part of two established traditions in sociology: empiricism as an ideology limiting discourse to low-level generalities, small group studies, and an ethically unconcerned posture; and rationalism as an ideology committed to abstract solutions of concrete issues, intuitionist appraisals of civilizations and nations, and an ethical involvement having sources independent of and even alien to the findings of the behavioral and historical sciences. To escape the false alternatives proffered by "abstracted empiricism" and "grand theory"



meant a confrontation with human relations directly. At first, Mills effected this confrontation in terms of G. H. Mead's observed relations which are also shared relations, and later he augmented this pragmatic account with the findings of Marx, Mannheim and the European tradition of "conflict theory."

What we all observe are men agreeing, men quarreling, men killing. Such atomic facts of observation are the common property of all who care to look. When a factual settlement is made, we can then go forward to an examination of the question *why*, and the more complex question *what for?* To a large degree the "secret" of Mills' extraordinary ability to communicate with professional and popular audiences alike, from readers of *The American Journal of Sociology* to those of *The New York Journal American*, is telescoped in this classic approach to problems of men—an approach Mills felt to be noticeably present in the great figures of nineteenth-century social thought, and no less noticeable by its absence in the proponents of expertise and the prophets of social metaphysics alike. As he said in commenting on Lecky's work: "Those who would think about the nature of society and history in our time have been living off the big men of the nineteenth century." And Mills concluded with a simple reminder: "The trouble is that many of us do not know it."

That Mills did not garner widespread support for his approach is neither a consequence of his admittedly unique personality and temperament, nor a reflection of any particular political viewpoint. His attitude toward problems of war in a thermonuclear age is shared by many; his independent brand of party-less radicalism similarly is shared by many intellectuals; and his critique of American foreign policy is again not uniquely his own. What antagonized many was his singular capacity to transcend the parochialism, the pseudosecularization, and vicious circularity characteristic of the "peer groups" in American social science. Mills had an instinctive animus for those who would connect scientific methods to national life styles. He was unimpressed by the recitation of differences between sociology in America and elsewhere. What the scientific community has in common far outweighs and overshadows differences.