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Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, £20.95). Pp. 296. ISBN 978 520 25836 5.

This is a book about a six-foot sociologist in a four-foot academic environment where everything is too small and confining. Yet the common image of “See right” Mills as a lone rebel neglects, as Daniel Geary’s book shows, that the Columbia University sociologist was part of a broader insurrectionary undercurrent in the social sciences after World War II. Intellectually, his thought formed a genuine alternative to both the geriatric Marxism of the Old Left and the deadening conformity of Cold War liberalism. Methodologically, it provided a counterweight to the empirical number-crunching of a Paul Lazarsfeld and the obtuse social theorizing of a Talcott Parsons.

In six chapters the book reviews the fabric and texture of Mills’s thought, which combines heavy doses of home-grown radicalism, American sociological training and European influences. Mills’s democratic sentiment, egalitarian commitment, moral righteousness, academic rigor, and international linkages, Geary argues, were part and parcel of a viable, if sometimes inchoate and contradictory, tradition of political thought and sociological analysis. Its main aspiration was to elevate participatory models of democracy over consumerist ones, envision alternatives to both the bureaucratic state and the exploitative market, and uphold a self-reflective sociology that questioned its own underlying presuppositions.

Although a hero of the insurgencies of the 1960s, Geary locates the genesis of Mills’s ideas in the 1930s and 1940s. Questioning the “end of ideology” mantra of the postwar liberal consensus, Mills painted a bleak image of war-related social and political transformation. Concerned with the relationship between character and social structures, he was deeply worried about the effects of militarization, corporate power, and bureaucratic state-building, regarding them as totalitarian in their reliance upon hierarchical control and moral attenuation. In contrast to the vogue of behaviorist and economic models, however, Mills maintained that humans could both assert individual agency and construct social meaning in a society that promotes the democratic participation of self-governed citizens.

Geary traces Mills’s analysis to the historicism and contextualism of the transatlantic social-science discourse of the first half of the twentieth century. Inspired by John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, and the Chicago school, Mills was also receptive to the thought of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and the sociologists of the Frankfurt school. Together they enabled him to refine his conceptual tools for understanding putatively value-free research as an ideological system designed to legitimize established social norms and power relations. Anticipating the “reflexive sociology” of Alvin Gouldner and Pierre Bourdieu, Mills asserted that exposing the implicit social valuations and economic interests behind dominant ideas was part of the task of a sociology concerned with moral ends, rather than just procedural means.

Mills was not only a profound social thinker, but was also actively involved in domestic and foreign social causes ranging from the American labor movement via the Cuban struggle to the British New Left. Geary shows that this political

engagement frequently generated a sense of disillusionment, but also honed Mills's commitment to an alternative social vision. Deeply pessimistic about a society where rationalization and organization had destroyed the conditions for human freedom, he nonetheless displayed hope in participatory democracy, collective self-management and a "free-floating intelligentsia."

Though Geary offers a sympathetic reading, he also points out the limitations of Mills's approach. Throughout his career, Mills paid little attention to gender and race issues, including the civil rights movement. In offering a dystopian inversion of the liberal consensus, he constructed a cognitive cage that posited "rage against the machine" as the only expression of authenticity. Geary also aptly notes the conservative content of Mills's social vision, particularly his adulation of the self-dependent old middle class.

Geary's book is comprehensive, accessible, and convincing. It offers a well-written and erudite account of Mills's multivaried and imaginative thinking. As an intellectual biography it provides a refreshing engagement with Mills's ideas while respectfully ignoring his often tempestuous private life. The book would have benefited from a bibliography and from more thorough proofreading to avoid the misspelling of names, especially of Frank Freidel, Hans Fallada and Jean-Paul Sartre. These are minor concerns, however, considering that revisiting Mills is now more relevant than ever. As the self-appointed guardians of "free enterprise" get billions in taxpayer money, socioeconomic inequalities reach new heights, the public sphere is reduced to a service-delivery function, and the "war on terror" is used as a pretext for expanding the surveillance state, Geary's incisive reading of Mills is a timely warning about the lurking dangers and an equally timely reminder of possible alternatives.

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