

C. WRIGHT MILLS, SOCIOLOGY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

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How are we to grasp the genealogy of the “public intellectual”? When, how, and at whose hands did this term first come into use, framing an ideal of democratic responsibility for those who devote their work life to fostering knowledge and criticism—an image usually raised as a reproach to academic insularity though also sometimes assailed for encouraging an evasion of scholarly rigor?¹ At first blush, the phrase seems redundant: the emergence of “intellectual” *simpliciter* is usually linked to a particular episode—the Dreyfusards’ defense of the French republic—that already implied a commitment by writers, thinkers, and artists to political or civic action.² From that time and place, the term traveled quickly across borders and before long to the United States, occasioning controversies from the start over who represented the “intellectual” as a social type and who did not, what activities or purposes best defined the role, and whether that role deserved respect, derision, or reinvention. To be sure, the social, cultural, and political world of “modern” societies has always featured individuals noted for scholarly, creative, speculative, or critical work that resonates with literate audiences attuned to key issues of the moment—whether such people were known as ministers, *philosophes*, journalists, poets, men or women of letters,

¹ The clearest exponents of these alternative assessments are Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); and Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

² A great deal of writing on US “intellectual history,” for that matter, concerns figures who made their names and found their audiences outside the academy. If such figures occupied academic posts as well, they nonetheless carried significance (for the historian) by virtue of the effect and influence their work had in social affairs broadly speaking; and so such “intellectuals” were by definition “public.”

Transcendentalists, or even, in some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usages, natural philosophers or scientists.³ Nonetheless, the emergence of the noun “intellectual” (and its plural) from the early twentieth century, and its widening use since the 1920s, spawned a persistent and self-conscious discourse concerning the character, value or virtue of such figures.⁴ A skeptic might conclude that the addition of the modifier “public” has perpetuated old, tangled debates about intellectuals as such, without bringing with it much greater clarity. Words nonetheless are signs of historical troubles and social discontents. Excavating the usages of “public intellectual” over time can highlight some of the dilemmas that have confronted writers, critics, citizens, and political actors, past and present.

Locating some of the key historical moments when debates flared brightly over these roles—“intellectual” or “public intellectual”—can mark a first step toward gauging their meanings. In recent US history, it is easy to cite three such moments: (1) at mid-century, broadly speaking from the 1930s through the 1950s, from Depression to Red Scare, when the roles of expert and critic aroused, for varied reasons, both extraordinary hope and recrimination;⁵ (2) the late 1960s, when the

³ On earlier models, see, for instance, Isaac Kramnick, “Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley’s Scientific Liberalism,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986), 1–30; and Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, vol. 2, *The Public Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ As Stefan Collini has demonstrated, the term “intellectual” (as noun) came with “the question of intellectuals”—a field of discussion, full of variation and hard to navigate, that has borne, along with some insight, a host of loaded meanings and misunderstandings. Among the latter lies the reflexive identification of “intellectuals” with a particular kind of politics. The salience of the Dreyfus case in sparking the spread of the neologism has encouraged a presumption that the social figure in view belongs on the leftward part of the spectrum, challenging constituted authorities—though recent historiography concerning ideological components of the American right turn has turned attention to a wide range of conservative intellectuals as well. The most important general account in this respect remains George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). The trend continues through works such as Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael Kimmage, *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and such exceptionally supple work as Angus Burgin’s “The Radical Conservatism of Frank H. Knight,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6 (2009), 513–38. For an introduction to the “question of intellectuals,” focused on Britain but having wider reference, see Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–44.

⁵ The preoccupations of this period were reflected somewhat later, in summary, in Philip Rieff, ed., *On Intellectuals: Theoretical Studies, Case Studies* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969); and Lewis Coser, *Men of Ideas: A Sociologist’s View* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

antiwar movement excited debates over academic complicity with governmental power and duties to dissent;⁶ (3) the 1980s and 1990s, when the right turn of American political culture to market fundamentalism as well as disputes over the politics of the academy (especially vis-à-vis feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism) combined with the theoretical revival of civic republicanism to stir discussion of scholars' contributions, or lack thereof, to the "public sphere."⁷ The present time, when the nation's political discourse appears to be either in suspended animation or peculiarly degraded, even as the recent economic crisis and the 2008 election made reform aspirations more urgent, may count as yet a fourth such moment marked by special concern over intellectuals' relation to public and political life.

It was in the first moment that dissenting sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–62) played a significant role in raising the question of the responsibility of "intellectuals" to "publics," and in the third moment that writer Russell Jacoby—with reference to Mills among one of his chief models—did most to fix the term "public intellectual" in the discourse of academics and (what Mills would have called) the higher journalists.⁸ Also in Mills's footsteps, Berkeley scholar Michael Burawoy set off widespread discussion in his own discipline by calling in 2004 for renewed commitment to "public sociology."⁹ Recent books by Daniel Geary and David Paul Haney, by revising our understanding of Mills's career and reprising the professional, disciplinary debates in which he played a prominent role, do a great deal to illuminate, clarify, tease out—and sometimes mix up again—the meanings borne by all these notions of intellectuals, their roles, obligations, and defaults over the past seventy years.

⁶ The arguments were most vigorously stated in Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *New York Review of Books*, 23 Feb. 1967, reprinted in *idem*, *American Power and The New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).

⁷ The reinvigoration of "public" commitments in response to the privatism of market ideology was evident in the conjoint concepts of "civil society" and "public sphere." See Flora Lewis, "The Rise of 'Civil Society,'" *New York Times*, 25 June 1989, 27; John A. Hall, ed., *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), especially the dissenting contribution by feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *ibid.*, 109–42.

⁸ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*.

⁹ Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70 (Feb. 2005), 4–28.

C. WRIGHT MILLS AS A LEADER IN THE REFOUNDATION OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

For all his notoriety as a rebel in post-World War II intellectual life, C. Wright Mills has received rather little sustained analytical attention as a figure in US intellectual history.¹⁰ Daniel Geary's title, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought*, seems intended to strike a slightly discomfiting note: ought a perpetual dissenter to have professional ambitions? Did this malcontent also aspire to share "the authority of experts"? Can a radical also be careerist (without impugning the integrity of his convictions)?¹¹ Since books continue to appear that paint Mills as the archetypal (and legendary) outsider of the postwar academic Establishment, Geary makes a significant claim merely by insisting that a good part of Mills's early years working in sociological theory and empirical research was occupied by his pursuit of distinctly professional aspirations.¹² The figure usually regarded as Mills's archrival—Talcott Parsons—believed that the advent of modern sociology marked an intellectual revolution in the West, and Mills in the 1940s shared that very sense that sociology represented a new way of thinking with enormous promise for grasping human experience and possibilities for remaking social and political reality.¹³

¹⁰ From within sociology, there have been numerous accounts in critique and defense, including Irving Louis Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (New York: Free Press, 1983); and Rick Tilman, *C. Wright Mills: A Native Radical and His Intellectual Roots* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1984). Among intellectual historians, partial studies have appeared often in many more general accounts, such as Steven Weiland, *Intellectual Craftsmen: Ways and Works in American Scholarship, 1935–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991); and Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945–1970* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002). The most compelling work in intellectual history regarding Mills, prior to *Radical Ambition*, could be found in the essays of Richard Gillam, "C. Wright Mills and the Politics of Truth: *The Power Elite* Revisited," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 461–79; *idem*, "Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and the 'Critical Ideal,'" *American Scholar* 47 (1977–8), 69–85; *idem*, "White Collar from Start to Finish," *Theory and Society* 10 (1981), 1–30; and his unpublished "C. Wright Mills, 1916–1948: An Intellectual Biography" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1972).

¹¹ Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹² The legendary maverick image of Mills appears especially in Keith Kerr, *Postmodern Cowboy: C. Wright Mills and a New 21st-Century Sociology* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009); and—though actually less romantically—in Tom Hayden, *Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Time* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006).

¹³ Parsons remarked on the rise of sociological theory as "a historic breakthrough in Western intellectual history" in his final, unfinished manuscript, "The American Societal Community," posthumously published as *American Society: A Theory of the Societal*

Although Mills had not quite the same estimation as Parsons of what it took to “charter” a new field of “science,” he had no less a conviction in the virtues of thinking about “society” in terms that challenged a great deal of intellectual tradition invested in liberal individualism and universalist assumptions about the fixity of human nature and the terms of human relations.¹⁴ Geary reminds us that despite a past in works by Comte, Spencer, Sumner, and Ward, and despite the institution-building accomplished by Albion Small, Franklin Giddings, Robert Park, and a raft of “objectivists” between the wars, American sociology was effectively refounded in the 1940s. At least that is how the most dynamic figures in the field imagined their place and their project at the time.¹⁵ Beyond simply the dramatic expansion of independent sociology departments during the 1940s and 1950s and the new fascination postwar students showed for courses in the field, an influx of new texts and mentors seemed to set the discipline on a different footing. Both Parsons and Mills, in different ways, vigorously promoted Max Weber’s work as theoretically central to refounding the discipline in the United States,¹⁶ and both imagined that new means of engaging theory and empirical research in concert promised great gains to come.

At the same time, Geary demonstrates, with the levelheaded clarity and understated brilliance of insight that marks the whole of this book, that Mills’s approach to the discipline’s reconstruction was *sui generis* in its commitments both to an American pragmatist current of epistemology and to the sociology of knowledge promoted by Karl Mannheim. Whether due to old-fashioned

Community, ed. Giuseppe Sciortino (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007). See Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 242.

¹⁴ Charles Camic, “Structure after 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (July 1989), 38–107.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1865–1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Donald Bellomy, “William Graham Sumner: The Molding of an Iconoclast” (unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1980); Fred Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1977); Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988); Robert Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1937); Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1947); *idem*, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

objectivism in the discipline or the newer neo-Kantian bases of Weber's methodology that Parsons embraced, neither John Dewey's problem-solving rebuttal to the "quest for certainty" nor Mannheim's perspectival relativism was to carry the day in postwar social thought.¹⁷ Mills was one of the few who recognized the possibilities of convergence between Mannheim and Dewey, and he had the vigor and self-confidence, while still only in his early twenties, to go to bat in professional journals on behalf of the sociology of knowledge and, in its terms, for the sociologist's self-reflexive analysis of his own social-historical placement.

Yet this distinctive stance connoted neither a corrosive skepticism of the capacities of modern science nor a congenital renegade's alienation. Whatever the signs of a youthful rebellious streak, in Mills's unhappy early experiences in Catholic schools or of the martial rigors at Texas A&M, his intellectual awakening at the University of Texas–Austin and his ambitious rush through graduate training at the University of Wisconsin owed very little, Geary finds, to any self-consciously political dissent. Mills testified, and Geary confirms, that a "politicizing" and "radicalizing" turn came at the *end* of his graduate training with the approach of US involvement in World War II. As a young Texan, C. Wright Mills had little sense of "Depression Decade" leftism, and by this point around 1942, the radical left in the United States had lost a good deal of its élan and organizational force. Geary wryly notes, "Political conversions are generally accompanied by a rise in political hopes; few are willing to be converted to the service of a lost cause. Mills was an exception."¹⁸ Mills gravitated to socialist politics at a point *after* much of the storied American radical intelligentsia had already passed through and beyond the Popular Front or the revolutionary anti-Stalinism that had challenged it. In 1942, amid wartime morale campaigns and following a flurry of disillusioned postmortems on "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Marxism," to be a socialist *and* a pessimist signaled one characteristic posture of radical opposition.¹⁹ In elucidating this sensibility of "disenchanted radicalism," Geary discerns an intellectual formation crucial to understanding many intellectual figures and groups of the 1940s and 1950s: the maintenance of critical opposition to the social, political, and cultural status quo

¹⁷ On American sociologists' negative response to Mannheim see David Kettler and Volker Meja, *Karl Mannheim and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Secret of These New Times* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995).

¹⁸ Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 66.

¹⁹ The break-up of the Popular Front under the force of the Stalin–Hitler pact; the rush of postmortems on the Depression-era left, such as Lewis Corey's "Marxism Reconsidered," *The Nation*, 17 Feb. 1940; and the impulse to chart a reformist position equidistant from left and right made the years around 1940 a first installment of "end-of-ideology" sentiment. See Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism*, 143.

combined with little confidence in the extant leftwing parties and deep skepticism that more effective popular movements would soon emerge. This characteristic disposition of Dwight Macdonald's magazine *politics* in its heyday had a lingering effect as a harmonic overtone accompanying the more recognizable trend of deradicalization through the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰ Yet relatively few besides Mills sustained the initial temper of disenchanting radicalism, in all its rigor, far beyond 1948. As Geary shows, however, the persistence of that hardheaded skeptical stance was lightened for Mills by occasional moments of enthusiasm for activist revival. Indeed, the oscillation between these two modes of disenchantment and renewed hope served as creative impulse to Mills's work throughout his short career.

Mills's ambition showed once he left Wisconsin for his first academic job at the University of Maryland, a place he intended to "write [his] way out of" and the base from which he eagerly sought funded research opportunities, such as his work as a staffer for Congress's Smaller War Plants Corporation. Traveling back to Midwest industrial towns and drafting his report, Mills saw the study as a chance to observe the war years' acceleration in the centralization of economic power. Within a few years, having already cultivated friendly relations with Columbia Sociology's young theoretical leader, Robert K. Merton, Mills won an invitation from Paul Lazarsfeld to join Columbia's new Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR). Mills then believed he had reached the place where he could best combine theory and research. His disenchanting radicalism and his commitment to self-reflexivity in the social sciences had none of the flat antisocialism of Macdonald or even the aggressive antipositivism of the émigré leader of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, Max Horkheimer, whose suspicion of Lazarsfeld's quantitative and survey methods Mills considered "adolescent barbs at 'statistics,' 'questionnaires,' and 'polls'."²¹ Ready to use whatever investigative tools came into his hands and lifted by the postwar surge of labor militancy to an uncharacteristic degree of radical hope, Mills was now positioned to begin building his sociological corpus, in a string of books including *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956). The core of *Radical Ambition* meticulously dissects the process that built these books and offers

²⁰ Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); on the *politics* style of alienation as an element of deradicalizing trends see Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); and *idem*, "The Disenchantment of America: Radical Echoes in 1950s Political Criticism," in Kathleen G. Donohue, ed., *Liberty and Justice for All? Rethinking Politics in Cold War America (1945–1965)* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, forthcoming).

²¹ Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 81.

a refined, balanced critique of their achievements and limits—in a trajectory that both brought Mills to the high point of his professional career and saw a steady, alienating drift away from confidence in the profession's norms, social location, and political promise. Geary's analytical rendition of that trajectory is a consummate performance of intellectual history at its best.

Mills's first book, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, emerged from a complex set of affiliations and special conditions: his new research base at BASR as well as participation in an alternative New York City milieu of left-leaning labor intellectuals headed by J. B. S. Hardman; the upsurge of strikes at the end, and in the wake, of World War II and a brief period when talk of a new labor-based third party circulated in non-Communist leftwing circles; and Mills's gravitation toward the anti-Stalinist Marxists of Max Shachtman's Workers Party. Mills set off on the project intent on using surveys concerning public attitudes toward organized labor as well as observation of union politics—particularly attention to the militant shop stewards who joined Walter Reuther's UAW faction—and wrote *The New Men* as he tried, unsuccessfully, to create a symbiotic relationship between unions, their research departments, and a labor branch of BASR. Meanwhile, Mills analyzed social trends toward a highly politicized economy as well as the ideological dimensions of public opinion, in order to argue that labor had the opportunity to stand forth as a politically mobilized competitor to the corporate liberals whom Mills called “sophisticated conservatives.” He urged labor to take up a vision of economic democracy that would provide work to all, forms of workers' control in industry, and widespread political participation, while averting a corporate-led “garrison state.”

Geary astutely recognizes the ambivalence bound up in Mills's construction of *The New Men of Power*. Mills's major goal was to foster what he called “the union of the power and the intellect,” which would combine the new social weight that industrial unions and their most dynamic leaders possessed with the insight intellectuals could bring toward understanding the “big picture” of social trends and fashioning a political program of labor-led change. Even while completing the book, however, Mills was disappointed by the narrow segment of labor's ranks committed to militancy and by the purely interest-group, administrative (and hence socially subordinate) role most labor chiefs imagined for themselves in the new politicized economy. As Geary notes, Mills was “always inclined to place a high value on ideology,” which he imagined to be the province of intellectuals.²² The book concluded with a thin reed of hope hanging on the prospects of a resurgent labor radicalism amidst a coming slump, but labor was already headed toward the split over Communist-led unions that would deliver

²² Ibid., 102

the bulk of the movement to Cold War liberalism. Mills's focus on the role of intellectuals as analysts and ideologists—coming from the outside to labor, but rooted in Mannheim's notion of the social role of a “free-floating intelligentsia” rather than in a Marxist or Leninist disposition—set him on a course quickly to repudiate the “labor metaphysic” he had briefly shared and revert to a stance of marginal critic, the sophisticated oppositionist without constituency.

“Disenchanted radicalism” thus returned to the center of Mills's disposition, as he pursued his grand ambition to devote a series of studies to mapping the basic components of a social structure of class, wealth, and power in the new postwar order. From labor, he moved on to the “new middle classes”—already a hot topic, due to their apparent violation of traditional Marxist schemes of class polarization, among left-leaning and socialist theorists—and then to the strata of the upper crust and national political leadership.²³ *White Collar* and *The Power Elite* would secure Mills's reputation as a writer—indeed a writer with a “public” or relatively wide reading audience—while his analysis of the social forces at work for either order or change turned increasingly dismal.

Geary admires Mills's grand attempt to “provide a total picture of modern society from an unflinchingly radical point of view,” but he recognizes that the effort, including Mills's address to a wide audience with a style of sweeping eloquence and vision, tended to overreach his strictly sociological analysis and fostered a view of the white-collar work force that was “despite its brilliance . . . often disjointed, confused, ambivalent, and exaggerated.”²⁴ In these chapters, Geary's sympathy and critical acuity combine with great finesse. *White Collar* sketched the hierarchies that distinguished managers, professionals, and clerical and sales workers, and probed themes of “exploitation . . . less material and more psychological” in maintaining order and loyalty among salaried employees. The book also ventured a full-bore critique of bureaucratization (the key “alien power” he said had replaced the world market in Marx's scheme as the coercive force beyond control), mass culture as pacifying entertainment, and the ubiquity of powerlessness that turned employees into “cheerful robots” and the citizenry into “idiots”—that is, “if we accept the Greek's definition of the idiot as a privatized man.”²⁵ As Geary points out, Mills's vision hewed more closely to the critique of apathy and massified isolation and passivity than David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*,

²³ Studies of the “new middle classes” (*die neue Mittelstand*) had commenced in Germany during the 1920s. The social-democratic scholar Emil Lederer wrote on the subject in 1926, a work translated under the auspices of Columbia University and the Works Progress Administration, as *The New Middle Class* (New York, mimeograph, 1937).

²⁴ Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 106.

²⁵ Mills, cited in Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 134.

which is often misunderstood as precisely that kind of melancholic mass-culture critique.²⁶

The quandary of disenchanting radicalism only deepened with *The Power Elite*, a controversial work on the concentration of power in a tripartite alliance of military chiefs, corporate directors, and the federal authority carried by the top executive-branch decision-makers. While taken to task severely by his professional (sociological) critics, Mills received a wide and relatively fair hearing in the press. Yes, the book stood out for challenging bluntly the ideology of democracy in the “free world,” and was welcomed by leftists for its project of anatomizing power structure. Still, in the mid-1950s, attempting to unmask power-wielders did not necessarily mean the kiss of death for a serious author. The heritage of condemning robber barons, plutocrats, monopolies, and a leisure class rendered Mills’s assault not all that unfamiliar, even though its brashness in recovering such “old-fashioned” attacks (welcome to many dissenters) struck Mills’s professional colleagues as *gauche* in manners as well as in politics. On the other hand, the book’s thorough disregard of any actual protest in contemporary America (most notably the brewing civil rights movement) may have made the work both “radical” and palatable at the same time. Assailing the concentration of effective power was relatively “safe” as long as one did not suggest it was in any way vulnerable. *The Power Elite* had its roots in Mills’s initial wartime radical pessimism, influenced by Franz Neumann’s analysis of the conjunction of big business, party, and state in constructing the Nazi regime, and by his savoring (despite Neumann’s specific intent to demonstrate the long-run incoherence and chaotic nature of Nazi order) of the Frankfurt school’s view that totalitarian state capitalism or “administered society” had suspended the dialectic of social-historical change. Setting up his portrait of the three components of the power elite, Mills described something like modern “estates,” and the result was an order so structural that it appeared utterly static. Mills’s critics on both his left and his right made note of this feature: that conflict, of a class character or otherwise, was missing; that elites make decisions over substantive issues—hardly examined by Mills—which illuminate the character of central social processes at any particular time; and that power elites presumably *do* things with power—but what exactly?—which Mills barely specified.

Geary recognizes the stasis of the model, but the status of *The Power Elite* as a twofold provocation to complacency remains. It was not only the description of the concentrated power of undemocratic decision-making that “made” the book. Even more so, alongside his denunciation of “mass-society” passivity, Mills’s evocation of an alternative in “real publics” lent the book a great deal

²⁶ See Geary’s comparative treatment of Mills and Riesman, and his critique of Riesman, at 135–42.

of its critical force. Without seeing any transit between “is” and “ought,” Mills nonetheless suggested that “a public” as such required collective attention to problems exciting common debate, and hence implied a potential energy for remaking its given conditions—the absent key to renewed criticism and agency that charged both Mills’s purpose and his admirers’ appreciation. His definition of “publics” harked back to John Dewey’s defense of democracy and Mills’s initial embrace of the sociological vocation in the early 1940s. The link between these two constituted, for Mills, the profession’s neglected desideratum, as depicted in his critical “settling of accounts,” *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). There he described the concern that “all classic social scientists” had had “with the salient characteristics of their time—and the problem of how history is being made within it; with ‘the nature of human nature’—and the variety of individuals that come to prevail within their periods.”²⁷ The promise of connecting, for thinkers and readers, “biography and history” (the socially constituted individual and the potential of action for change at any given time) made “the social sciences . . . the common denominator of our cultural period, and the sociological imagination our most needed quality of mind.”²⁸ The devotion to that “quality of mind” had made the young Mills a significant player in sociology’s refounding, but by the late 1950s he had burned most of his bridges to disciplinary colleagues of his entry period. Lazarsfeld and Talcott Parsons were the targets of Mills’s acid mockery for representing the two slack variants of prevailing professional work: “abstracted empiricism” and “grand theory.” In Mills’s sometimes pointed, sometimes unfair renditions, this dichotomy of pettifogging fact-grubbing and airy speculation left out of consideration the real sphere of engagement—social structure as a milieu of agency and change—even though his own work had likewise left agency and change out of the picture for most of that decade as well. His definition of sociology remained aspirational.

Throughout his study, Geary notes both the virtues of Mills’s reach for audience and political effect and the weaknesses spawned by his increasingly casual drift away from scholarly standards of marshalling evidence and argument—which Geary argues would not necessarily have tamed but could have reinforced Mills’s political efficacy. In a revelatory final chapter, concerning a period (1958–62) beginning just when *The Sociological Imagination* signaled Mill’s “free-floating” alienation, Geary sees Mills tipping once again toward engagement and political hope, with ambiguous results. Mills’s last years were inspired by his travels abroad and exposure thereby to a three-part international left intelligentsia—British radicals such as Ralph Miliband around the Campaign for Nuclear

²⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 165.

²⁸ See Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 175.

Disarmament (CND) and the journal *New Left Review*; the East European dissident and “humanist” Marxists, most notably Leszek Kolakowski (and by contrast the wooden party loyalists he met in the Soviet Union); and Mexican intellectuals and enthusiasts of the Cuban revolution such as Carlos Fuentes—as well as his awakening to decolonization and Third World nationalism as part of a world suddenly astir. From these bases, Mills went for mass-market appeal, in *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen, Yankee!* (1960); Geary finds them somewhat oversimplified and strident. Meanwhile, Mills speculated on more ambitious sociological studies, one concerning the rise of the “cultural apparatus” in contemporary society and another a global comparative study of the contemporary “Fourth Epoch” (beyond the era of liberal Enlightenment)—both left far from firm conceptual development at the time of his fatal heart attack on 20 March 1962.

Throughout this account, Geary’s analysis is like fresh air in its fine-grained, exceptionally judicious intellectual history of a subject so often hailed as legendary, reduced to a posture, and evaluated in either/or terms as vulgar polemicist or heroic pathfinder of critical sociology. There are some costs, however, to Geary’s studied avoidance of biography as such. His portrayal of Mills (and Mills’s own self-representation) as utterly unengaged by the left in the 1930s before his idiosyncratic radicalization in the early 1940s still seems doubtful to this reader, given Mills’s early affiliation to Deweyan pragmatism (at the time when Dewey’s social-democratic politics and antiwar sentiments were most explicit) and his familiarity with Veblen via the UT–Austin radical institutionalist Clarence Ayres. Both these must have left a political residue that set the stage for Mills’s embrace of socialism in a mood both pessimistic and never tightly wedded to proletarian agency (not much different from Veblen’s views). More biographically significant is the downright peculiar character of Mills’s radicalism tied as it was to a remarkable self-absorption and vanity. Mills’s letters of the early and mid-1950s insisted on his acute loneliness in the scholarly and political world and seemed to shoulder the project of awakening radical criticism as *his* alone—leading us to wonder whether he could have been wholly unaware of the radicals, socialists, anarchopacifists, and civil rights agitators who kept working through the 1950s, evident in the 1956 foundation of the activist *Liberation* magazine, talk of leftwing “realignment” shortly after the rupture in the Communist Party following Khrushchev’s Twentieth Congress speech, and the growing civil-defense resistance protests in the late 1950s.²⁹ Even by 1960, Mills admitted he had never paid much attention to race and civil rights; perhaps, he

²⁹ Mills did have a tentative and before long testy relation with the democratic-socialist intellectuals of *Dissent* magazine, founded by Irving Howe and Lewis Coser in 1954. See Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 148, 202–4.

conceded, he should do so now. Such shortsighted dispositions tarnish Mills's reputation as pathbreaking oppositionist.³⁰ (Mills's lack of purchase on issues of gender inequality was, alas, much more characteristic of left intellectual men of his time.) To be sure, Geary recognizes these personal traits but refrains from examining them fully or trying to account for them.

SCIENCE AND SOCIOLOGY, REDUX

In contrast to Geary, David Paul Haney holds on to a portrait of Mills as "renegade sociologist," though his book, *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States*, effectively places Mills within a larger framework too—in this case, debates over the scientific status of sociology in the second half of the twentieth century.³¹ Like Geary, Haney's book focuses on sociology from the period of its refoundation in the 1940s, but it also retraces steps taken in an older literature, including Thomas Haskell on professionalization, Mary Furner on the eclipse of "advocacy," Robert Bannister on interwar "objectivists" in sociology, Mark Smith on debates over science versus reform, and other accounts of Robert Lynd's 1939 polemic *Knowledge for What?*³² As a result, it remains somewhat unclear what, in Haney's view, made the science debates after World War II much different from the earlier disputes over objectivity. He depicts "Americanization" as a combination of postwar academic growth in sociology and allied fields, consolidation of the discipline on a stronger *national* plane than ever before, the seizure of global leadership in social science by United States academics, and the close association of social-science growth with scholars' national service in World War II as well as the Cold War. Indeed, Haney's title echoes the 1986 volume *The Nationalization of the Social Sciences*, which recounted attempts by social scientists, through

³⁰ See David Riesman's comments on Mills's vanity, cited in David Paul Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 229.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Thomas Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Thomas Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism*; Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975); Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate of Objectivity and Purpose, 1918–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Donald Fisher, *Fundamental Development of the Social Sciences: Rockefeller Philanthropy and the United States Social Science Research Council* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), to insert their disciplines in the coverage area of federal patronage by the National Science Foundation as the NSF's founding legislation took shape from 1945 to 1950.³³ The main document in that volume, the previously unpublished long draft Talcott Parsons wrote for the SSRC in 1948, "Social Science: A National Resource," in fact sets the stage for much of the debate Haney wants to recount in his book.

Parsons's rhetorical gambit in his plea for federal foundation support was to compare social sciences directly with natural sciences as experimental disciplines whose discoveries both had already served the nation fruitfully in wartime and demanded public sustenance as a resource for further national and social progress. Haney argues that this disposition defined the dominant positivist ideology of practicing sociologists after World War II—aside from a few outliers and dissenters.³⁴ Notwithstanding Parsons's argument for public support, Haney asserts that the insistent scientism of the dominant view led the discipline to resist notions of "public responsibility," accessibility to general audiences, and engagement in public controversies. Sociology was, in other words, a closed world. Despite challenges posed by radical currents to the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, Haney contends that the scientific cast has remained at the helm. In just the past ten years or so, however, that standard has faced a vigorous (and salutary) alternative in calls by Herbert Gans, Michael Burawoy, and Craig Calhoun, among others, for a new "public sociology" that would break down academic walls and professionalist insularity.³⁵

The postwar expansion of the research university and of public agencies of scholarly funding induced, as Haney rightly recounts, a preoccupation with establishing the "scientific legitimacy" of sociology as a discipline. Haney gives a special cast to that notion, arguing that the kind of positivism marking Parsons's "National Resource" paper entailed an insistence on expert "exclusivity"—the

³³ Samuel Klausner and Victor Lidz, *The Nationalization of the Social Sciences* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

³⁴ See also, in this regard, Mark Solovey's careful account, "Riding Natural Scientists' Coattails onto the Endless Frontier: The SSRC and the Quest for Scientific Legitimacy," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 40 (Fall 2004), 393–422.

³⁵ Herbert J. Gans, "Sociology in America: The Discipline and the Public," *American Sociological Review* 54 (Feb. 1989), 1–16; *idem*, "Wishes for the Discipline's Future," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 Aug. 2005; Craig Calhoun, "Toward a More Public Social Science," New York: Social Science Research Council, 2004; Michael Burawoy *et al.*, "Public Sociologies: A Symposium from Boston College," *Social Problems* 51 (Feb. 2004), 103–30; Burawoy, "Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Possibilities," *Social Forces* 82 (June 2004), 1603–18; *idem*, "The Critical Turn to Public Sociology," *Critical Sociology* 31 (2005), 313–26; and *idem*, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70 (Feb. 2005), 4–28.

sociological discipline as a special preserve impervious to popular and public examination, kept behind high walls by a turn to arcane quantitative methods, and reinforced both by the self-conscious alienation of social scientists due to their disappointments in the slowing of social reform and by their designation of public life outside as a mindless “mass society” hostile to intellectual inquiry. Fitting all these dimensions into the same frame of sociology’s exclusivity unduly homogenizes the dispositions of diverse practitioners in the field—most evidently in a critic like Mills who fully shared the “mass-society” dispositions that Haney credits to the positivist establishment. The best parts of *Americanization* nonetheless help to explain a bit of sociologists’ hypersensitivity on the “science question,” as Haney relates the record of sociology-bashing appearing in the press and from scholars in other disciplines through the 1950s and 1960s: William H. Whyte’s attack on scientific sociology as a species of bureaucratization, condemnation of the anti-democratic implications of B. F. Skinner’s behaviorist utopia *Walden Two* by Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Wood Krutch, conservatives’ complaint about uses of social-scientific arguments in the *Brown* decision, Malcolm Cowley on the discipline’s linguistic barbarism, Murray Kempton on the triviality of its findings, and so forth.³⁶ At the same time, Haney also offers an illuminating discussion of the pressures facing academics striving for wider audiences: Lewis Coser described Vance Packard’s work as sociological kitsch, and David Riesman—whose depiction on the cover of *Time* magazine after publication of *The Lonely Crowd* might have connoted sociology’s achievement of public repute—regularly faced insinuations by more “scientifically” minded practitioners that his work, like Margaret Mead’s, amounted to shallow “popularization.”³⁷

Still, there is something stilted in Haney’s account of a battle between the “established” view of “sociology-as-science” and a besieged minority of dissenters seeking what Burawoy *et al.* would later call “public sociology.” Haney fixes Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton as ringleaders of the dominant view, with little attention to their differences or to the inappropriateness of regarding either as a garden-variety “positivist.” There is no question that Parsons wanted to “charter” sociology, in Charles Camic’s phrase, as a scientific discipline, and that through a good part of his career he evinced a striking confidence in the steady maturation of his field.³⁸ Yet his notion of science arose from a critique of positivism that both recognized the key role of theory as “frame of reference” for investigation and highlighted the centrality of subjectivity in analyzing social affairs. That is why H. Stuart Hughes hailed Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action* as the inspiration

³⁶ Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science*, 172–202.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 203–21.

³⁸ Camic, “*Structure* after Fifty Years.”

for his landmark intellectual history *Consciousness and Society* (1958), which began by recounting the “revolt against positivism” in turn-of-the-twentieth-century European intellectual life—and why Thomas Kuhn’s notions of the social structure of science owed a good deal to Parsonsian views of frameworks and theoretical transformations. More recently, Joel T. Isaac has brilliantly outlined Parsons’s method as an instance of a fairly general epistemological stance distinctive to postwar intellectual life: a new platform for inquiry, based on various propositions about the centrality of “theoretical” frames and an associated “analytic” (not correspondence) notion of addressing reality—a platform that in retrospect appears as an intermediary between the old empiricism (prior to mid-century) and the more recent postmodern approaches that provide a sharp critique, or deep social/cultural contextualization, of scientific procedure.³⁹

Haney tends simply to assume the dubious proposition that a high degree of “scientific” self-consciousness rules out attention to publics or to political relevance. Historically, claims to value-neutral scientific procedure often served not as confirmation of a status quo in hidden affiliation with bearers of power and influence, but instead as a means, first, to shield free inquiry and dissenting thought from heavy-handed political intrusion and, second, to provide generally acceptable tools capable of promoting particular goals of social reform. Thomas Stapleford demonstrates the latter point in his recent account of New Dealers’ striving to calculate a statistical “cost-of-living index” that would help calculate the legitimate needs of wage earners and thus promote improvements in their material welfare.⁴⁰ Stapleford aims to disclose the illusions and counterproductive consequences of trying to “technicize” social standards in that manner, but the history of such practices must lead us beyond reflexes that see claims to scientific status as the enemy of relevance, critique, and social change. American traditions of seeing science as ally of democracy (in Andrew Jewett’s work), the early Vienna circle’s confidence that strict science was consistent with socialist reconstruction, the ardent claims of scientific rigor and specialist expertise voiced by Franz Boas and others who also vigorously intervened in public disputes: such examples should caution against rigid dichotomies between science and the public.⁴¹

³⁹ Joel T. Isaac, “Cold War Modern: Epistemic Design and the Postwar Human Sciences,” paper delivered at the International Congress of History of Science and Technology, Budapest, Hungary, 30–31 July 2009; *idem*, *Knowledge by Design: Crafting the Human Sciences in Modern America* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press).

⁴⁰ Thomas Stapleford, *The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Andrew Jewett, “Science and the Promise of Democracy in America,” *Daedalus* 132/4 (Fall 2003), 64–70; Jewett, *To Make America Scientific: Science, Democracy, and the University before the Cold War* (forthcoming); Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Janek Wasserman,

In Haney's narrative, the model of sociology-as-science survived the rise of radical critique in the late 1960s and 1970s, even as observers sensed a prolonged "interregnum" following the fall of the Parsonsian "functionalist" paradigm and the lack of a successor to serve as the discipline's center.⁴² Nonetheless, Haney finds that the steady accumulation of advanced technical means and the patterns of gate-keeping and graduate training have only perpetuated the inward-looking expert circle of practitioners shielding themselves from public intrusions. Against these standards, the calls for "public sociology" have marked a stout challenge.⁴³ Haney sees a new "public-spiritedness" among some sociologists who, he suggests, should strive to recast entirely the meaning of "science," as social inquiry becomes more intertwined with "democratic discourse."⁴⁴ Yet it is highly uncertain what today's talk about scholars' relevance to a "public" really means and why its invocation should be a solvent for the perceived narrowness or conventionality of academic life. Given the impoverished state of political discourse in the nation at large, it might appear that more aggressive initiatives by scholars to join public debate can serve to elevate, inform, and enrich the civic sphere. Such is a worthy goal, no doubt, though it evokes as much an "elitist" as a "democratic" understanding of intellectuals' roles. It would seem the better part of scholarly humility to assume that much more political work needs to be done—which scholars are welcome to join, as citizens, along with other actors—in order to rebalance social forces and challenge some of the means by which democratic debate is currently limited, skewed, and debased. In fact, numerous "public intellectuals" already populate the landscape, in throngs of think tank "fellows" (representing a more or less narrow span of liberal, moderate, and conservative views) who appear in print and on talk shows—viz. the "intelligent talk" of National Public Radio. And ever since the concerted campaign of the right to endow extra-academic centers of intellectual production began thirty or forty years ago, there is no shortage of those who recognize that ideas have political

"Black Vienna, Red Vienna: The Struggle for Intellectual and Political Hegemony in Interwar Vienna, 1918–1938 (PhD dissertation, Washington University in St Louis, 2010).

⁴² Norbert Wylie, "The Current Interregnum in American Sociology," *Social Research* 52 (Spring 1985), 179–207.

⁴³ Haney cites recent literature on "public sociology" as a key inspiration for his critique of "sociology-as-science," although the most vocal proponent of "public sociology," Michael Burawoy, carefully distinguishes his advocacy of public engagement from blanket denunciations of *academic* sociology. In Burawoy's nuanced view, "public sociology" assumes its place and purposes in an ongoing interaction with "professional sociology" as well as with two other types of work he names "policy sociology" and "critical sociology." See especially Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70 (Feb. 2005), 4–28.

⁴⁴ Haney, *Americanization of Social Science*, 232, 250–51.

consequences. If scholars in academic institutions believe their own “public” commentary can check the biases introduced by “kept” think-tank fellows, they thereby only recapitulate the doctrine of scholarly disinterestedness that Haney, as critic of “sociology-as-science,” considers the problem.⁴⁵ At the same time, university websites are all too eager to publicize the number of media references to scholars and their achievements—though it is debatable whether this means scholarship is more “public” or more “commercialized.”

WHO’S A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL? WHO CARES?

In the late 1950s, Barrington Moore Jr, an iconoclastic and politically oriented scholar whose books never made very easy reading, provided a publisher’s report on Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* that argued that the book actually “does not convey much of a notion of the richness and diversity in present-day work in sociology.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, Moore wrote, Mills’s talk of addressing a vital “public” soft-pedaled the actual partisan intent lurking behind Mills’s critique of empiricist/theoretical irrelevance: “His critique is thereby blunted and his positive recommendations become rather pale.” Despite Moore’s reasonable suspicions of Mills’s trimming, it is not too hard to recognize Mills’s real motives. As Geary points out, one of the first times that Mills introduced the idea of “publics” in the plural, it did not refer either to an open field of disinterestedness or to a mere constituency rallied together to lobby in favor of an interest. Rather, in a 1947 essay on the politics of labor and industry, “Five Publics the Polls Don’t Catch,” the term referred to definite ideological positions, which he named the practical conservatives, the sophisticated conservatives, the liberal center, the independent left, and the far left.⁴⁷ At that point, insofar as Mills was a political man inclined to go beyond his purely professional purposes toward action, he would have sought to address, awaken, and mobilize one or both of the latter two “publics.” In

⁴⁵ The shift of policy-oriented knowledge production outside universities to privately funded but governmentally connected think tanks has marked an epochal shift in the relations between institutions, power, and democracy. See the discussion of the “Powell report” in David Hollinger, “Money and Academic Freedom a Half-Century after McCarthyism: Universities amid the Force Fields of Capital,” in *idem, Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); and the conclusion to Joy Rohde, “Gray Matters: Social Scientists, Military Patronage, and Democracy in the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 96 (June 2009), 99–122.

⁴⁶ Moore, quoted in Haney, *Americanization of Social Science*, 147–8. Apologies for the title of this section to Laurence Veysey, “Who’s a Professional? Who Cares?” *Reviews in American History*; 3/4 (1975), 419–21.

⁴⁷ Geary, *Radical Ambition*, 96–7.

other words, he imagined not merely a general service by public-spirited scholars dedicated to the civic good by enriching democratic debate; rather, he sought to help mobilize a definite partisan cause and advance a vision of dramatic social change.

At his best, C. Wright Mills is appealing because he struggled with a period of political disappointment for the radical left and strove, in the gap, to discover “what is happening in the world” in order to regain his (and the left’s) footing, while he worried that the ascendancy of his political enemies had degraded public discussion by excluding from salience any widespread talk of radical alternatives.⁴⁸ I suspect that the present resurgence of interest in Mills stems from a sense that we now occupy a moment like his, but even worse, when a former radical left (for us, that which was active from the 1960s through the 1980s, with a brief resurgence around the time of the Seattle WTO demonstrations in 1999) stands virtually defeated, and public debate, for the lack of an alternative rooted in such movements, appears vacant—suggesting that our way of life has become a “hollowed-out democracy.”⁴⁹ Such claims are often susceptible to exaggeration in moods of deep pessimism, as Mills’s were at a time when a left revival was actually brewing around him, from the mid- and late 1950s on. Applied today, however, Mills’s gloomiest views of radical prospects may strike a chord, while his willful sustenance of radical critique, against the current, evokes admiration. For Mills and perhaps for many of his admirers today, the troubling issues came to a focus at the juncture or hoped-for rejuvenation, as Daniel Geary puts it, of “the Left and American Social Thought.” Does the public need public intellectuals? It can’t hurt. But more than that, the public needs a left.

⁴⁸ Showing additional current interest in Mills, John H. Summers has edited a superb anthology of Mills’s (mostly hitherto unpublished) writings and speeches, *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Stanley Aronowitz compiled a marvelous three-volume compendium of commentary on Mills’s work, *C. Wright Mills*, in the series of Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought (London: Sage Publications, 2004). New biographical-critical studies of Mills are forthcoming from both Summers and Aronowitz.

⁴⁹ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2009).