Michael Hviid Jacobsen

The Prodigious Provocateur!

- An inevitable Invitation to the Sociology of C. Wright Mills
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The Prodigious *Provocateur*!
- An Inevitable Invitation to the Sociology of C. Wright Mills

1. Introduction

To be unfashionable, and indeed downright unpopular in sociology, some would claim, is the predicament of most academics some of the time and something almost everybody will suffer from to certain moderate degrees at particular periods of one’s career; but continuously and intensively to be so is something of a rare honour only conferred on the very few chosen ones within our scientific field. Charles Wright Mills, at one and the same time an intellectual prodigy and an *enfant terrible* of his discipline, appears to belong to this latter exquisite group of sociologists labelled as outcasts and unfashionable thinkers, but as it has been rightly noted, that “*a doctrine [or a person for that matter] that is unfashionable today is, among sociologists, almost guaranteed to be fashionable tomorrow*” (Cohen 1980:141). As an analyst of his time, a critic of American McCarthyism in the political sphere, a castigator of the Cold War realism in international and military affairs and in constant opposition to the academic stalemate of American sociology, Mills was bound to find himself in a never-ending battle with his contemporaries, a battle that in the long run gave him more agony than victories won and eventually appeared to be instrumental in crushing him. In the following a brief presentation, primarily aimed at students of sociology but equally readable for people generally interested in the field, to the sociology of C. Wright Mills will centre around the different and distinct phases of his life and academic career and will seek to narrow down exactly where, in a rather obscure series of writings, we can gain valuable insights from this prodigious *provocateur* of sociology. It is, it should be noted, doubtlessly easier to paint the biographical as well as academic picture of a person, whom one have had the chance and pleasure, and in Mills’ case also the disturbing experience, of meeting alive and discussing one's ideas and interpretations with. This has not been the case in this particular introductory writing, as Mills died a decade before the birth of the author. One the one hand, this leaves a gap between what Mills was really like, how he himself would have verbally presented his theories and defended his assumptions, and what he has been depicted like by other scholars in their subsequent writings on him. The danger here lurks that their perspectives and stresses also become your own view, and that their books become straightjackets in the development of your own position. On the other hand, the fact that one has not been around, been
intimately familiar with, the scholar whose credentials and efforts one tries to capture in a introductory text also allows for far greater openness to and appreciation of a diversity of sources and insights and makes such a thing as personally inflicted bias insignificant. For obvious reasons I never had the chance to know Mills in person, but after completing this introduction to his work, I feel as if I actually do know the man and his wonderful writings.

As the title of this paper signal, Mills was equally a sociological prodigy as well as a provoking personage. The former denotes that he in many respects is rather similar to the main character of Hermann Hesse’s (1957) brilliant novel *The Prodigy*, who although being an extraordinarily gifted person with an appetite for knowledge and wisdom, nevertheless was also a self-effacing and humble person. The latter trait of character denotes, that although Mills never craved an academic career, never sought sociological salvation through titles, chairs and honours (Horowitz 1972:7), he was a person who liked to stage himself - particularly against the so-called *orthodox consensus* of the times (Giddens 1982) comprised by a mixture of positivist research techniques, structural-functionalist theories, pragmatic philosophy and modernisation theories. Mills was therefore also at odds with the mainstream of the sociological tradition of his time which relied heavily on the ideas of this orthodox consensus and although an award for best book in sociology was eventually named after him (Wilner 1985), the orthodox consensus nevertheless completely dominated the picture of the sociology between 1940 and 1965 and Mills never became a *salonfähig* scholar – not that he ever wanted to be. C. Wright Mills encountered this orthodox consensus many times in his lifetime and painstakingly attacked it, and during his brief visiting period in Denmark in 1957 he, in the personified form of late professor Kaare Svalastoga’s positivist approach to sociology, found yet another diametrical opposition to his own more humanistic vision of the sociological imagination (LEO-Group 1997:3) and throughout his own life time he dedicated his effort to distance himself from this kind of positivist, and in his view also reactionary and arch-conservative, sociological epistemology.

Due to Mills’ never-ending attacks on others, he himself fell victim of both aversion as well as admiration and thus there are supposedly two positions on

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Actually, the English notion of a *prodigy* is particularly apt when it comes to describing a person like Mills. At one and the same time the concept contains the dichotomy of the valorising as well as of the defamatory. We can, for example, both speak of *an infant prodigy*, who is a spectacularly gifted child, which is a positive evaluation, as well as of *the prodigal son*, who is an outcast that eventually returns to his native fold, and which is something of a negative notion. And finally *prodigy* can also denote someone who is monstrous in his or her thoughts and actions. Mills was the incarnation of all these definitions.
Mills within the sociological tradition after his demise - either to valorise Mills or to debunk his influence and reduce his wisdom to trivial and common sensical insights; an exercise not too unfamiliar to Mills himself, as we shall see below. Exponents of the former uncritical yesmen for example writes: “When Charles Wright Mills died in 1962 at the age of forty-five, he was reputed to be the most widely read sociologist in the world. His work was marked by vigour and energy. He challenged much that passed for conventional wisdom in the spheres of politics and sociology” (Eldridge 1983:13). The latter group, though, claims that Mills “has little importance for contemporary American sociology, although his books are bestsellers outside the field and are widely hailed within certain political circles” (Lipset & Smelser 1961:50). His reputation and the underestimation of his importance and relevance for the sociological tradition today is best illustrated by looking to the more than meagre time and space afforded his sociology in many a sociology textbook for undergraduates used in Danish social scientific educations at university level (Andersen & Kaspersen 1996, Bottomore & Nisbet 1978, Ritzer 1992). My own ambition here is merely to present and to estimate the impact of his position within sociology, trying to keep myself and my invitation - which, although I claim that it is as well as ought to be inevitable for scholars to confront Mills’ work, as the sub-title suggests, it is not consciously biased nor intentionally disinterested - at a realistic distance of both of these extremes. Just for the record I want to note initially that while Mills certainly is not the most central and important sociologist - any claim to such an honour cannot be bestowed on anybody - it is, however, necessary to take him into account and any history of sociology that fails in this is both impoverished and paints a distorted picture of sociology. So whilst others tries to keep him at bay, in the subsequent paper I intend to outline a chronological and coherent presentation of a rather incoherent person and

Few Danish texts have dealt properly with Mills’ sociology and the only one that springs to mind is Joachim Israel’s brief introduction in his book on Marxism and alienation (Israel 1969). In much of the conventional international literature on C. Wright Mills (Aptheker 1960, Bhadra 1989, Eldridge 1983, Horowitz 1983, Scimecca 1977), we either encounter an excessively positive stance towards his sociology or the exactly opposite, and whether one supports the one or the other camp there appears to be almost unanimity when presenting his credentials and accomplishments and they seem to present almost identical accounts of the reception and general reactions toward his writings. The point of different in these official evaluations of Mills is whether his credentials were regarded as desirable or as downright useless. This polarisation of perspectives is due to the complexity of Mills’ work combined with the simplicity of his personal attitudes. However, in Rick Tilman’s (1984) book on Mills we are faced with many of the so-called underground perspectives on Mills’ academic position in the form of exciting dissertations by young scholars and previously unpublished manuscripts by amongst others his own daughter, Pamela Mills, who about her father’s work wrote an illuminating paper titled The Dialectic of C. Wright Mills (1956).
2. Who was Charles Wright Mills and what makes him interesting?

C. Wright Mills was as unique a sociologist as he was peculiar as a person. He is often depicted as something of a hybrid between the secluded and snobbish intellectual in his own private ivory tower and the uncompromising and cheeky cowboy with a tendency to shoot before he asked as this quotation from Edward Shils shows: “What does this solitary horseman - who is in part a prophet, in part a teacher, in part a scholar, and in part a rough-tongued brawler - a sort of Joe McCarthy of sociology, full of wild accusations and gross inaccuracies, bullying manners, harsh words, and shifting grounds - want of sociology?” (Shils 1960:78). Leaving these very harsh words and gross inaccuracies of this selfsame quotation aside - what Eldridge (1983:109) termed nothing but “an ugly insult” - and waiting to answer the question posed about Mills’ mission and demand of sociology until later in the paper, this probably is a somewhat accurate description of the way Mills is viewed by many sociologists even today. But never judge a book by its cover and never uncritically accept so-called official accounts of how people are to be viewed and categorised; especially those whose ambition it is to tarnish the reputation of others. Actually he probably came closest to an American version of the Danish social critic George Brandes - something which his texts also reveals. Like Brandes he also decided quite early in his life to debunk the same society that he himself was part of, to question the validity of the claims made by those in power positions and to try and disclose the fact that the emperor simply has no clothes on: “He hated sham and illusion. He did not fear the naked truth and realized that power needs to be clothed, lest if appear naked, and the Emperor has no clothes on like in Andersen’s fairy tale...He was tough minded and loved tough-minded writers, men of tall talk and no bones about it” (Gerth 1980:72). And like Brandes, he always did this in a direct and often downright rude and preposterous manner. But before we get entangled in more quibblings about the reception of Mills in society and sociology, let us start with the beginning or close to it.

The twisted journey from Texas to New York

The beginning of the story almost takes place on the prairie where C. Wright Mills is brought into the world on August 28th 1916 in Waco, Texas. Being the son of respectively Irish and English parents and with a touch of French ancestry, he almost inevitably had to turn into some strange kind of immiscible hybrid of the countryside and cosmopolitanism. His parents were both religiously practising Catholics living in a Protestant area (Tilman 1984:5), but
he, as Weber had also described himself as some decades earlier, was religiously unmusical and did not, although being placed in the middle of the Bible Belt, take an interest in religious matters. In his years of adolescence he was sent to a rural military school and according to many biographers had a miserable time there - an experience which together with his poor physical shape made him a conscientious objector during World War II. His academic career takes off when he is enrolled at the University of Texas in Austin where he studied philosophy and became acquainted with the writings of respectively Thorstein Veblen and G. H. Mead. During this period he lived a rather insulated life and did not really detach himself from the greyness of mediocre anonymity.

In early 1939, as an undergraduate student, he was transferred to Wisconsin, the birthplace of his great idol Thorstein Veblen, and it was here, at Mills’ second destination, that he took up a keen interest in sociology guided by two equally liberal and muckraking sociologists, Howard Becker and Edward Ross. From this institution he received his PhD in sociology and anthropology and it was also here that Mills’ tendency to cause problems, or academic havoc is perhaps a more apt formulation, took its beginning as he ceaselessly started to confront his colleagues with his own ideas and vision of sociology and by many he was already now regarded as much as a provocateur as a prodigious whippersnapper as well as the prodigal son. His erstwhile professor, George Gentry, already at this stage remarked, that “if Mr. Mills doesn’t go places in the academic world, I will be greatly surprised” (Gentry in Horowitz 1983:21). However, critical voices were also raised at this time, as when his philosophy teacher, the famous Clarence Ayers, noted that “Mills is tremendously eager and incredibly energetic. If he gets the idea that somebody has something, he goes after it like the three furies. I think he may have worn his welcome to shreds in some quarters”. But also he had to admit that Mills was a unique student: “As I see it, the picture that emerges...is that of an unusually strong student, a youngster who may become a headliner. I think any department would be lucky to have him...” (Ayers in Tilman 1984:7). After spending a few years here, which amongst other minor academic gains culminated in his friendship with Hans H. Gerth with whom he was to write several unsurpassable sociology books, he moved on to the University of Maryland. Here he spent the years of World War II and contrary to many other notable radical sociologists such as Herbert Marcuse and Barrington Moore Jr. he did not want to take up work in the State Department. Although he was extremely critical of the Nazi regime there supposedly were two reasons for this; first, that he was a pacifist and believed that any involvement in the war would be an acceptance of war as a means to achieve a given end. Second, that he was suspicious of the Roosevelt administration which, to him, represented a gigantic Leviathan with the ability as well as the ambition to control and regulate society.
After the war Mills received a Guggenheim fellowship to the University of Columbia in New York and it was from this base that the world would come to hear of C. Wright Mills throughout the next more than 15 years. Here he quickly earned the position of associate professor and came to work as director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research under the direct supervision of Paul Lazarsfeld (Bhadra 1989:8) which after Mills’ arrival turned out to be a battlefield for conflicts and antagonism as well as a forum for alliances and new friendships. The intellectual transition Mills experienced coming from the mid-West outskirts to one of the main two academic sociological strongholds in the U.S.A. at the time (Harvard University being the one and Columbia University the other while the return to sociological prominence of the University of Chicago had to wait until the 1960’s) was initially as much a challenge as a white-knuckle ride and among those few in whom Mills found kindred spirits and well-meaning intellectual sparring partners were Robert Lynd, Robert K. Merton, Robert MacIver and some of the exiled members of the Frankfurt Institute. But he also encountered the opposite - hostility and academic feuds. Throughout his years here he was connected to many fascinating empirical projects, most notably those dealing with the distribution of power in American society, and he wrote several theoretical as well as downright polemical pieces of work which ranged from anywhere between superb to dubious in quality. It was here that his critique of how prosperity was a facade of misery in American society began to take its form and it was here that his own sociological imagination saw the light of day. Eventually it was also here that this light was finally extinguished.

Due to excessive work burdens and the constant trench wars with colleagues at the University of Columbia Mills’ position in the end became increasingly uncomfortable, particularly after his publicised attacks on his superior Paul Lazarsfeld (Mills 1959a) and also his physical health began to fail him. Mills was an unhealthy man with an unhealthy lifestyle, and as his life-long friend Harvey Swados (1963:38), reflecting on Mills’ life and lifestyle, noted: “He [Mills] worked hard, often twenty-four hours at a stretch, and he relaxed hard. Since he knew nothing of tennis, swimming, skiing, even walking, he took his relaxation in the form of sleeping...eating...gadgetry, and building”. Here in his more infantile preoccupation with model-building and gadjetry we can see his almost playful passion for constructing and constantly adjusting his own theoretical insights with the actual nature of social reality. He was a weak-hearted person, which the rejection for war service due to hyper-tension also was evidence of (Eldridge 1983:25), and an awareness of the short life span allotted him and of a premature death was a present but not determining factor in his life (Horowitz 1983:5). He died in New York on March 20th 1962 at the age of forty-five, by many regarded as a outcast prophet but by equally many also looked
upon as a failure and an opportunist of his time. Saul Landau captured the duality of the responses to his death by stating that “C. Wright Mills lived a full life – much fuller than most people – and died a revolutionary, much criticized, much misunderstood, and much mourned by the few persons who really loved him” (Landau 1965:46).

Mills’ academic life, spread geographically over most of the Eastern part of the American continent, thus encompassed three interrelated yet distinct biographical-intellectual phases, as Horowitz (1972:2) informs us. In the first phase, which lasted approximately from the mid-thirties to the mid-forties, he was absorbed in theoretical work, reading the classics and conceptually trying to take the gauge of American society. The second phase, which ran from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties, was full of empirical studies and Mills in this period was preoccupied primarily with investigations into the power structure of American institutional life. The last phase, ranging from the mid-fifties until his death in 1962, was a phase marked by synthesis, of attempts at amalgamating his earlier theoretical work with the later empirical data. It is particularly in this latter phase that Mills can be regarded as a forerunner to our very own contemporary attempts at creating a synthetical social science and in which he championed radical sociology. This will be touched upon in more detail below.

A sociologist on the make

The life of C. Wright Mills, as we have seen above, was marked by many changes both in the society of which he was a part, the scientific field he represented, and in his own more private sphere. In the turmoil he himself created and in the maelstrom of his surroundings he was always out of touch with the mainstream. He never really settled down and never really settled his academic business once and for all. For him, as Woody Allen humorously noted in the film *Husbands and Wives*, lack of change equaled death, and Mills surely wanted to show the world of sociology that he was alive and kicking. Thus Mills’ was living life in the fast lane both privately as well as professionally. He was notorious for the vivacity of his alternative lifestyle; the affection for Harley Davidson motorcycles which he rode whenever given the time and the opportunity, his two passionate marriages and his womanising attitude, his brawling attitude towards others and derogatory language, his bad health and his two heart attacks - the last of which turned out to be fatal. But not just in the private sphere was he a vitalising input to the greyness and dullness of the American fifties. Starting out as a down-to-earth-person, he later transformed himself into an academic showman who liked to stage himself and his ideas to the public, and like a pundit from his sociological pulpit he preached his own gospel of radical social science and politics.

This kind of attitude was bound to hit a hard rock now and then but for
Mills this was more the order of the day than an exception from the rule and he consciously cultivated his image as an iconoclast and “a lonely intellectual rebel in anger” (Bhadra 1989:8). Mills’ friend, one of the few he was able to hold onto throughout his academic crusade and personal vendettas, William Goode, noted that “there was no estrangement that occurred between Wright and me. We began estranged. Indeed, at the memorial service or meeting that was organized at Columbia University at his death, I seemed to be the only person who could not say: ‘I used to be his friend, but we became somewhat distant’. It was rather the reverse” (Horowitz 1983:83). This perpetual estrangement between Mills and his contemporaries culminated in his book on the sociological imagination (Mills 1959a) in which he, as we shall see below, almost ended up stabbing some of his closest colleagues in the back. Generally speaking, Mills would with the terminology of today’s child psychology in mind have been labelled a maladjusted person or as an individual suffering from behaviour difficulties in his environment. He was indeed a difficult as well as different.

Travelling around the globe giving lectures to various semi-academic audiences in the latter part of his career, ranging from Latin America to London School of Economics and also on visits to the Sovjet Union, made him suffer from megalomania and made him power hungry although he defiantly claimed that it was not fame for fame’s own sake he sought but fame for the sake of liberation and enlightenment: “Mills, in the years between 1957 and 1960, sought a wider turf upon which to exercise his political imagination...These years were filled with conferences in Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, and especially Latin America. If the intellectual canvas had expanded, so too had Mills’ sense of the world...But along with the objective changes was a subjective reorientation as well: Mills’ growing identification with world history, accompanied by his own belief in himself as a big actor on a big scene...Mills began to think of himself as the special bearer of mass beliefs; he became a movement unto himself. Armed with an Enlightenment faith that truth will out, he also became convinced that he was the bearer of the truth...In this special context, Mills’ overall commitment to a sociological profession was largely dissolved; and a certain frigidity set in between himself and former associates and colleagues in other disciplines” (Horowitz 1983:282-284). Throughout the unfolding of the separate events in this process of international recognition as both a social scientific and political commentator of the state of affairs, Mills somehow erected an iron curtain between himself and his former friends, consciously chose a kind of self-alienated position and thus was successful in slamming the door to his own academic and private iron cage. Whether intentionally or not, Mills in the later part of his academic career possibly was instrumental in destroying his own reputation as a veracious and trustworthy social scientist in his blurring of the hitherto holy dividing line
between normativity and scientificality. In many ways he resembled a polemical populist and a sociological opportunist but his attempts at a reinvention of Marxism in sociology was something of a risky venture as the following will show - a venture that, although it in my opinion was a much needed breath of fresh air in the closed and stuffy scientific climate, probably is the main cause for his secluded position for many decades now within sociological theory.

**The variety of the sources of inspiration**

Before we look deeper into the actual writings of Mills, we ought to investigate a bit further into what Irving Horowitz (1983) termed the causes of C. Wright Mills with a not so subtle reference to the title of one of Mills own works (Mills 1958a). As so many attempts within the history of sociological knowledge has shown, it is indeed very difficult if not downright impossible to label the position that Mills belongs to and represents throughout his numerous writings. There simply is not one single and exhaustive epithet that fits his kind of theorising and his admittedly often rather inconsistent methodological considerations. Mills belongs to the same rather obscure tradition in American social science which also includes the likes of political philosopher and originator of the idea of civil disobedience David Thoreau, pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, critical philosopher Hannah Arendt and sociologist and critic of American society Thorstein Veblen. Like the latter two he was also to some extent placed on the periphery of where things were decided primarily due to their critique of the American university system as a conservative and self-perpetuating institution, and he was unlikely ever to be elected as president of The American Sociological Association, as Dennis Wrong noted (Wrong 1976:22). The sociologist John Alt places Mills’ radicalism between a native American Puritan individualism rooted in Jeffersonian ideals of democracy, a political Leftish orientation and a pragmatic philosophy with a touch of Mead’s symbolic interactionism and Veblen’s institutional economics: “C. Wright Mills was that rarity among American thinkers - a political intellectual - who drew primarily on Western liberal traditions, American traditions of moral pragmatism and craftsmanship, the social classics and methods of sociology, to fashion a unique critical voice...Glib and stereotypical categorizations should be avoided: he was neither a Wobbly-style or Marxian radical nor an existential pragmatist who became a pamphleteer and rhetorical pundit” (Alt 1985-86:6-7). I will touch upon this conglomeration of perspectives that simultaneously, and often ambiguously, resided in Mills more thoroughly below.

Leaving these difficulties aside, it is, however, still possible to detect the sources of inspiration in the work of Mills as he is often overtly indebted to certain traditions as well as named persons. Rick Tilman believes that there exist nine possible interpretations of Mills’ sense of sociological belonging: “The
nine are: (1) that Mills took a Marxian position, or at least worked within the Marxian tradition; (2) that he was influenced by Marxism, but unfortunately never underwent complete conversion; (3) that he was greatly influenced by both Marx and Weber with tension subsequently existing between the two theoretical systems at certain points in his work; (4) that he came under the sway of institutional and neoinstitutional economics, especially the work of Thorstein Veblen, John R. Commons, and Clarence Ayers; (5) that he was influenced primarily by the pragmatists Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead, and thus occupied a place in the pragmatist tradition; (6) that he was fundamentally swayed by the ‘neomachiavellians’, that is, the Franco-Italian elite theorists Michels, Mosca and Pareto, particularly at the time he wrote The Power Elite; (7) that Mills adopted a perspective that showed the influence of Freud and the neofreudians; (8) that he is difficult or impossible to catalog or label neatly; (9) that he had eclectic tendencies thus lacking a dominant commitment to any particular school of thought or intellectual tradition” (Tilman 1979:479-481).

I will start out by claiming that his primary source of reference and insights came from the classical sociological tradition and particularly the more humanistic orientations as became evident in his book Images of Man (Mills 1960a) on the sociological traditions and their valuable contribution to the moulding of civilisation: “The classic sociological tradition is a central part of the cultural tradition of Western civilization. The crisis of the one is the crisis of the other; of all the spheres of Western culture, the classic tradition of sociology is the most directly relevant to those areas where culture and politics come now to such a terrifying point of intersection” (Mills 1960a:9). Like the teacher Andrew Crocker Harris in playwright Terrence Rattigan’s marvellous The Browning Version, who mourned the demise of belief in civilisation and civilised behaviour in modern times, Mills is also on the verge of being a bit retrograde in his apologia of the demise of the great ideas of the great founding fathers of sociology as is found in his much appraised sociological imagination (Mills 1959a), to which we will return later. Mills is perhaps best viewed, and probably would tacitly acknowledge to be regarded, as a post-Weberian and post-Marxian with one foot solidly planted in each of these great traditions (Sigler 1966) with the implications that follows from this. Donald Hogdes observed that “for the most part Mills wavers between Weber’s pessimistic forecasts and Marx’s optimistic vision of a new society” (Hodges 1969:332). Weber was, however, his major idol and undoubtedly the person whose admiration for Weber is perhaps most evident in the book he edited together with Hans Gerth on the authorship and life of Weber (Gerth & Mills 1948) which to this day contains, in my view, the best and most exquisitely written introduction to Weber both as a person and an academic.
sociology Mills admired the most when it came to methodological issues whereas Marx was the theoretical, and some would include political, backdrop for many of his more conflict-oriented assumptions. His Marxist bias, as it were, could be seen in his plea for sociology to become relevant to the daily matters of American society and the individuals inhabiting this while this could equally be interpreted as a pragmatist position, that belonged more to the liberal part of the political spectrum. His admiration for Marx’s perspective became crystallised in his 1960 publication *Images of Man* in which he wrote of Marx that a much coveted and “a positive image of man, of what man might come to be, lies under every line of his analysis of what he held to be an inhuman society” (Mills 1960a). Thus a practical social scientific orientation is particularly present throughout his writings and can be depicted as something similar to the sociologist envisaged by Zygmunt Bauman (1998:48) who, through the practice of his skills and expertise, eventually works himself out of his job.

Apart from his dual fascination with both Karl Marx and Max Weber, whose works he throughout his life were unable to read in their own German language (Gerth 1980:73), for political and methodological reasons, he also found fertile ground for the construction of his sociological and political imagination elsewhere. The Franco-Italian School, which was a rather conservative and elitist grouping of scholars, who focused on power relations in society and their origin was one of the reservoirs from which he could fertilise his own theoretical soil. And thus Mills was instrumental in the revitalisation of the almost forgotten work of respectively Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca who were termed the *neo-Machiavellians* due to their national background and their interest in power both of which they shared with Machiavelli. From these Mills found insights to rational explanations of the irrational behaviour of men (Horowitz 1972:16), which had previously not been taken seriously by sociologists, and their insistence on the manipulation and power of persuasion in the relationship between people. Mills, however, diverged from their perspective on several issues and particularly regarding power and authority as the legitimate foundation for status and thus he has been termed a *radical neo-elitist* which denotes that although Mills paid tribute to the classical elitists for their interest in power, he was still dedicated to the ideals of democracy – representation and equal participation - and some would probably say a genuine participatory democracy.\(^4\) Where Pareto and Mosca obviously were sympathetic

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4 Even though they would not have agreed on many points, Mills and Anthony Giddens shared the view that democracy, in order to be a *real* democracy, had to be a strong dynamic in society. In his recently published pamphlet *Runaway World*, Giddens notes: "What is needed in the democratic countries is a deepening of democracy itself. I shall call this 'democratising democracy'...Rather than thinking of democracy as a fragile flower, easily trampled underfoot, perhaps we should see it more as a studly plant, able to grow even on
to the aristocratic idea and reality of the socially stratified society, Mills, on the other hand, was a severe critic of it, and where the former primarily paid attention to power as an inherited privilege, the latter instead looked at how institutions and organisations perpetuated and maintained certain patterns of power. We shall return to this below.\(^5\)

Of further major sources of inspiration for Mills we ought to mention his fondness and admiration of Thorstein Veblen, the so-called Marx of America (Brodersen 1994:77), both as a person and as a social scientist and he labelled him “the best critic of America that America has produced” (Mills in Parker & Sim 1997:370). Veblen, like Mills, was an obscure person and Robert Heilbroner wrote of him: “Many admired, even loved him, but he had no intimate friends: there was no man he called by his first name, and no woman he could wholly love” (Heilbroner 1986:219). These words could equally have described Mills, as they both shared the same convictions, ambitions and worries about the direction of the development of American society and both had somewhat radical solutions to offer as Douglas Dowd wrote of them: “Neither Veblen nor Mills, was a radical in the programmatic sense; neither had a program. They did not accept society as it was. Both had a single commitment...to the well-being of mankind. The bedrock of their commitment was composed of the same elements: democracy, and individual liberty, peace, and material well-being” (Dowd 1964:55). Veblen was, and has become a sort of symbol for posterity of, a peculiar academic who not until recently has been acknowledged for his major contributions to the early development of American sociology and Mills was clearly inspired by the institutional economics of Veblen and later Joseph Schumpeter who, like Mills himself, were both also difficult to categorise as either Marxists or capitalists and probably contained a touch of both. And last but not least also the authorship and longstanding acquaintance with Robert K. Merton had an impact on his sociological position as they both, in a time of aversion toward Marxist theory, experimented with a way of overcoming the inherent flaws in the current status quo orientation by adding small doses of Marxist insights and they also simultaneously contributed quite barren ground” (Giddens 1999:75-82). According to both, not the form of democracy is that which needs to be changed in democratic countries but the content. Thus it is a vertical and not necessarily a horizontal transformation of democracy that is needed. They also agree that democratic powers are able to flourish even in times that are dominated by bureaucracies and money makers. Mills, however, appear more pessimistic when it comes to a realisation of the idea of actually democratising democracy.

A very good description of Mills’ intellectual pedigree is found in Tilman’s (1979) article in which his relationship to respectively Marx, Weber, Freud, the Neo-Freudians and the elite theorists is presented in a compressed and accessible manner.
to the development of a sort of sociology of knowledge (Eldridge 1983:28).

**FIGURE 1: MILLS’ MAJOR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION**

![Diagram of Mills' major sources of inspiration]

The figure above shows the mixture in Mills of many different, and also contradictory and diametrically opposed, positions within sociology. Mills’ sociology is marked by a certain element of eclecticism and he acknowledged this himself when he wrote of the form and depth of his theorising: “My formal sociological work has been pitifully fragmentary and theoretically shallow” (Mills in Tilman 1984:14). This eclecticism, I believe, is equally one of the vital strengths and one of the most fatal weaknesses in his sociological theorising. Before we move on to a general evaluation of his contributions to sociology let us dwell for a while on some of his most important pieces of work ranging from the early attempts of creating a philosophical foundation for his position via the more substantive writings to end with his political and polemical outbursts that marked as well as marred the latter part of his academic career.

**3. The early years and philosophical sociology**

As we have seen above, Mills found inspiration many different, and often opposed and mutually contradictory, places within the discipline of sociology and built his own unique position. But even before Mills started intentionally to erect his own perspective he, due to his initial fascination with philosophy, had written extensively as well as intensively about some of the traditions that caught his immediate attention throughout his years as a novice to the more regular sociological tradition and he was particularly inspired by the American pragmatist position that dominated in philosophy for many years in the beginning of the 20th century.

**The impact of American pragmatism**
One of the traditions that Mills first encountered in his years as a student of philosophy at the University of Texas and of sociology at the University of Wisconsin was pragmatism and he wrote his doctoral thesis Sociology and Pragmatism (1964)[1942] on this topic. His friend and collaborator Hans Gerth wrote of Mills’ intellectual ballast in his younger years: “[He] came from Texas University with Veblen in one hand and John Dewey in the other” (Gerth 1980:71), and the latter certainly inspired his more sophisticated thinking as much as the former. At the centre of attention for most pragmatists is the contention that knowledge must serve some kind of purpose, knowledge, as it were, is purposeful and that there is no such thing as empty and irrelevant knowledge. Knowledge has a function and serves as a means toward a certain end. We know the more common use of the word pragmatic, when we claim that a person is acting pragmatically if he or she is utilising his or her knowledge in order to achieve a practical solution, if he or she is guided by the ambition to overcome problems, and sometimes also if a person is compromising in order that things can be carried out. In short, a pragmatist is a person who actively and persistently seeks solutions to the problems faced by individuals as well as society. Thus according to pragmatist philosophy, as it was developed by amongst others John Dewey, William James and Charles Peirce, was the instrumentalist idea that knowledge and also truth has a value, that truth has a utility value. Therefore, knowledge is always knowledge from a particular point of view with a certain potential for utilisation and truth is never absolute or infallible, as both rationalists and empiricists united in positivist philosophy would be claiming (Jacobsen 1999), but is always an until-further-notice phenomenon. From this perspective Mills, who, as we have seen previously, was interested in making social science relevant to practical problems facing societies and individuals alike, such a position appeared promising as knowledge according to him should be socially useful in some way or other and as such pragmatism in his understanding and appreciation of it is an attack on formalism, yet another of Mills’ favourite victims, and the more withdrawn and starry-eyed form of social science. In pragmatism the focus is on the individual as the locus of reason and reference to some level of emancipated and unbound reflexivity in connection to the consequences of actions and such a focus was bound to appeal to Mills and his vision of the almost enslaved individual subjected to the

As one of my colleagues and friends, Mikael Carleheden, has shown, the relationship between pragmatism and reason is more complex than appeared to be the case in Mills, and he argues, as I understand his perspective, from a modified Habermasian position, that although reason and action are indeed intertwined phenomena they need not necessarily comprise a revolutionary or transformative rationality but can consist of a relatively neutral position towards external reality (Carleheden 1999). Thus, pragmatism is not a monolithic feature merely found in symbolic interactionism or American liberal philosophy but can equally be found in diverse forms in the sociology of Jürgen Habermas, the Chicago-school theorists, the political philosophy of Karl Marx as well as in variants of liberal and neo-classical economics.
laws of society, as we shall see later. So pragmatism offers a liberal model of the relationship between thought and action, as John Alt (1985-86:9) has noted, and here Mills leaned heavily toward the pragmatist position of particularly Dewey and “he admired them because they emphasized the potential power of human intelligence to control human destiny” (Eldridge 1983:45). Furthermore pragmatism implied a humanistic conception of the world in which the focus on the individual as a unique and knowledgeable person was dominant; something that Mills found acceptable.

Pragmatism was also a fertile foundation for one of Mills other major interests - the relationship between the intellectual and the social world. For the pragmatists in general and for Peirce in particular, scientists formed a sort of scientific community or intellectual enclave - like the one later envisaged by Robert Merton - which could contribute with knowledge to the wider areas of society like ripples spreading across the water. So they much to Mills’ delight insisted on the social dimension of knowledge - that knowledge cannot be the property of only the few chosen ones in retired university positions or the know-how of technical experts. Knowledge, although it is unequally distributed in society, should ideally be the property of all to the benefit of all and therefore pragmatists stressed the importance of education and the diffusion of scientific knowledge. Politically the pragmatists also were known to take the side of the underdogs and were normally opposed to big business, big political parties and the inertia and bureaucracy of large corporations and organisations and often praised the Jeffersonian idea of the small-scale idyllic democratic community. For Dewey community, understood as a sort of local Gemeinschaft,\(^7\) is the prerequisite for democracy (Eldridge 1983:52) and the pragmatists, like Mills, were very fond of democracy and particularly liberal democracy.\(^8\) But Mills was also extremely critical for exactly the very liberal conception, the liberal rhetoric, immanent in pragmatism and he “began his intellectual odyssey with virulent criticisms of liberalism, especially that of the pragmatist tradition” (Bhadra 1989:170), who he amongst other things accused of being conservative, laissez-fairists, apologists of war with no real political dimension or depth and as an expression of middle-class ideology. He believed that although pragmatism

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Mills was, however, painfully aware of the problems of believing too naively in the cosy atmosphere of a Gemeinschaft and how this can be merely a representation of official ideology and used for political purposes and personal ambitions. In his analysis of Franz Neumann’s *The Nazi Behemoth*, to which we shall return later, he wrote: “Ideas are political cloaks. The ideology of Gemeinschaft, e.g., masks the impersonality of a rationalized society. Those academic sociologists who in American silos yearn from a ‘primary-group’ society, take note: Jefferson died in 1826. As human relations become impersonal by virtue of bureaucratic intervention, the ideologies of ‘community’ and ‘leadership’ have been imposed” (Mills 1942:436).

Mills was particularly critical of John Dewey’s variant of pragmatism, although they shared a common ground on certain matters. He was, amongst other things, critical of Dewey’s biological way of viewing human behaviour, his incrementalist position in politics, and his neglect of the political importance of technology and science (Simich & Tilman 1978).
offered a reasonable perspective in which the individual presided, it perhaps was
too individualistic for his critical taste and that it appeared class-restricted and a
tad solipistic. And he moreover was well aware of the contemptuous attitude
the pragmatists held toward Marxist theory – and although both Marxism and
pragmatism shared the idea that science is social, the former defended the
revolutionary potential of science, whereas the latter believed that the impact of
science ought to be less radical. Mills never really resolved exactly where in this
debate he should place his bet, on revolution, reform or incrementalism, but he
felt certain that science should play an active role in the shaping and changing of
society.

**Inspiration from G. H. Mead and early symbolic interactionism**

Not only pragmatism understood as the philosophical system of thought caught
Mills’ eye and also the more sociologically relevant position of the symbolic
interactionists was appealing to his early theorising of the relationship between
individual and society. Mills was first introduced to the writings of George
Herbert Mead during his period at the University of Texas where his lecturer,
professor George Gentry, was particularly inspired by the early symbolic
interactionists and of the Chicago School and Mills’ master dissertation titled
*Reflection, Behavior, and Culture* (1939) dealt with Mead’s position amongst
other things. Mills was especially preoccupied with the connection between
individual and society, the centrality of the development of a life history and
trajectory of the singular individual and how others, generalised others, had an
impact on this. These elements are also evident in many of his later writings,
where the insights gained from Mead are visible more often implicitly than
explicitly.

Mills’ first publication in a well-reputed periodical, when he was still in his
eyarly twenties (1939), centred on the centrality of language in the formation of
our selves and how language is serving a mediating function between people.
However, language is also an instrument for the exercise of control: “*We can
view language functionally as a system of social control...Language, socially
built and maintained, embodies implicit exhortations and social
evaluations...Along with language, we acquire a set of social norms and values*”
(Mills 1939:677). Language in this way is the key to the understanding of social
integration (Mills 1972g) but what Mills did not recognise was the fact that
language might just as well serve as a reinforcement of social disintegration and
dissolution. It here becomes evident that Mills does not only borrow insights
from Mead but equally from such writers as Kenneth Burke and the other
pragmatists. So although Mills appeared to accept the overall framework of the
symbolic interactionists in general and Mead in particular, he was rather critical
of Mead and the idea of the *generalised other* as incorporating the totality of
society. To Mills this was too indiscriminate and a “*too inadequate theory of
society and certain democratic persuasions*” (Mills 1939:672). Some
generalised others are more significant than others, as it were, and not all
generalised others has a particular significance for a given individual. Hence,
Mead is attacked on the same ground as the other pragmatists – keeping in mind the Mead termed himself a *social pragmatist* – that his conception of the social world is excessively liberal and does not take into account class and other possible social denominations. Mills tried to make it clear, that we are more likely to learn our social roles and perform our social functions by looking to those closest to us and not to the wider aspects of society. Implicitly in this assumption is also the understanding that social inheritance, and thus social differentiation and possibly inequality, is a result of the milieu in which we are socialised and that a vicious social circle can be hard to break. To Mills the main importance of the symbolic interactionist perspective is that they focus on how mind and the social world are not two distinct spheres of reality but are, on the other hand, tightly entangled in how we perceive of the world and why and how our understandings of others is a product of who we are ourselves. Furthermore, Mead’s sociological pragmatism was much more fruitful for Mills than many of the other sociological perspectives that flourished at the time, as he was trying to create a theory that was as socially relevant as it was philosophically sound.

*From the sociology of knowledge to a knowledge of sociology*

Mills was actually introduced both to the philosophical pragmatist position and social pragmatism through a slight detour starting with his encounter with the so-called *sociology of knowledge* tradition which in these days was still in the process of gaining a solid foothold in American social scientific circles. Throughout his life, Mills now and again returned to the sociology of knowledge tradition whenever he needed inspiration or help in transcending mounting theoretical problems.

It was the ideas of especially Karl Mannheim that Mills initially appeared to accept more willingly than those of other sociologists of knowledge, and the primary reason behind this was Mannheim’s understanding of the concepts of ideology and his general acceptance of the relevance of Marxist notions in his *Wissensorsoziologie* (Horowitz 1983:150). Mills also paid his homage to Mannheim as one of the most profound thinkers and critics of Western rationality (Mills 1960a). Central to Mannheim’s position was the insistence that knowledge is always socially distributed and that knowledge is bound to particular positions within the social structure in the general historical process. And Mills furthermore found a political soul mate in Mannheim, who, like Mills as we shall see in a moment, tried to fuse a notion of liberal democracy with socialist planning. And like Mannheim, Mills was also accused of being a relativist (Horowitz 1983, Scimecca 1977) understood in the aforementioned pragmatist fashion, that knowledge is never absolute and is always an ideological representation. As we saw above, he believed, like the pragmatists, that truth is infallible and never definitive, always open to new interpretations and always itself a representation: “Drawing upon the theories and findings of all social science, sociology of knowledge is an attempted explanation of the phenomena of intellectual history. In its explanation of these materials it appeals to the data of social history. And in order to trace the mechanisms...
connective of mentality and society, the sociology of knowledge must be informed by a ‘psychology’ that is socially, ethnoculturally and historically relevant” (Mills in Horowitz 1972:471). In this way it is not merely the truths that permeate everyday life that are regarded as representations but equally the scientific claims to valid knowledge that are undermined by the severe attack of relativism in their writings. So Mills and Mannheim had many overlapping ideas which can be summarised as the three-fold view that sociology, history and philosophy are intimately interrelated disciplines; that power and knowledge necessarily come together in the concept of ideology which is central to any analysis of social reality; and that American society lacked a public sociology that could point to the problems of Western civilisation and especially capitalist rationality.

Apart from the Mannheimian variant above, other sources of inspiration within the sociology of knowledge that Mills found useful was of course the position of Robert Merton (Phillips 1974), which Mills encountered while working with him at the University of Columbia and they almost single-handedly defended the sociology of knowledge in American sociology throughout the 1940’s and 1950’s (Eldridge 1983:27). But Merton and Mills quickly had a quarrel about the lines along which the sociology of knowledge should develop in the future and Merton accused Mills of being a relativist - in the negative sense of the word (Horowitz 1983:159). On the broader aspects of the sociology of knowledge, Merton, however, obviously admired and respected Mills’ contribution, although it next to his own may have appeared rather meagre and spineless, and he accepted and probably even adopted Mills’ idea of the not so generalised other as compared to Mead’s more liberal variant as when he stated: “Men of knowledge do not orient themselves exclusively toward the total society, but to special segments of that society with their special demands, criteria of validity, of significant knowledge, of pertinent problems etc.” (Merton 1957:482). Knowledge is itself a result of and also a motor behind social stratification and differentiation, or to put it more briefly, knowledge is power. Both Mills and Merton recognised this in their writings, and they moreover shared a common interest, which was to inform the sociology of knowledge in the years to come, namely what Merton termed the unintended consequences of action and what Mills discussed as respectively thrust and drift with the former denoting intention and the latter the unintended aspect of action. But more of this below in our discussion of power and social change.

So Mills’ sociology of knowledge was a more general perspective than that which came to dominate the field later, the so-called sociology of scientific knowledge, as he not only focussed on scientific insights and their relation to social structure but equally – due to his initial fascination with Mead and the pragmatists – oriented himself towards the knowledge of laymen in their everyday construction of meaning. And he would probably have agreed with Pascal’s phrase, which was later popularised in the publication by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s treatise in the sociology of knowledge titled The Social Construction of Reality (1967), that what is true on one side of the
Pyrenees is bound to be false on the other. To Mills this had to be evident to even the most weary-eyed social observer. Berger and Luckmann, however, in their variant of the sociology of knowledge had their reservations about the originality of Mills’ contribution to the development of the sub-field and claimed that his works were merely descriptive and reproducing. In his later years, Mills, as we shall see below, increasingly started to shift from this preoccupation with everyday knowledge and the general knowledge of knowing how to go on, in Wittgenstein’s notion, in quotidianity, to focus instead on the knowledge of the intellectuals, the knowledge of the professionals. Thus Mills was, whether one is willing to accept this or not, one of the bigwigs of the development of a sociology of knowledge and a knowledge of sociology and one of those whose position even today appear most original as well as incomplete.

The Marxist leitmotif in Mills and the political imagination
Despite the above rather conventional sources of inspiration, Mills is often depicted as the only Marxist practising his discipline in American sociology in the 1940’s and 1950’s, as a lone rebel fighting the Conservative attitude prevalent in this discontented period – a discontent stemming more from success and prosperity than from failure and poverty. This is a rather distorted picture, not just of Mills as a Marxist thinker, but equally of the total absence of a left-wing alternative in American politics which, although it was not overwhelming in importance, still contributed to colour the debate narrowed down by the self-righteous and contended American public. Mills clearly belonged to this radical and somewhat secluded minority and he wrote many articles for minor left-wing periodicals and magazines such as The New Republic, Politics and Partisan Review, as when he spoke in favour of the coal miners against the tyranny of big business (Mills 1943a), or when he later in pacifist notions agitated against the conscription of soldiers as human cannon fodder for the battlefields of World War II (Mills 1945). He was in many ways, as Casanova (1964) noted, an exemplar of the American conscience who in times marked by war, violence, modernised barbarism and hatred, spoke the voice of a critical social conscience that would not allow itself to be silenced.

But Mills was not a Marxist in the way we would conventionally conceive of one, and the reason for placing him in this category has been more to stigmatise and discredit than to praise his social scientific efforts. Ralph Miliband noted on the curious nature of Mills’ political thinking: “One feature of Mills’ political commitment which immediately invites attention is that it is very difficult to give it an obviously appropriate name” (Miliband 1964:77). Leaving these definitional difficulties aside, he was and to certain degrees still is, however, most often in the books dealing with his position published during
and after his demise labelled as a Marxist and he more than anybody was well aware of the dangers of being lumped especially with the Marxists as when he noted in a rather sharp tone: “Let me say explicitly: I happen never to have been what is called ‘a Marxist’, but I believe Karl Marx is one of the most astute students of society modern civilization has produced; his work is now essential equipment of any adequately trained social scientist as well as of any properly educated person” (Mills in Aptheker 1960:7). In this way Mills both recognised the great heritage left by Marx whilst distancing himself from those who believed Marx’s writings to contain the salt of social scientific enterprise. Therefore Mills later in his career tried to fathom the varieties of Marxist thinking as when he in *The Marxists* (1962) delineated the three disparate Marxist frames and factions: *Vulgar Marxism, plain Marxism and sophisticated Marxism.* One might have suspected that Mills was so fond of himself that he labelled himself a *sophisticated Marxist* but actually he did the contrary – he termed his own position that of a *plain Marxist*. Whereas vulgar Marxism was practised by those who in an unexamined and uncritical fashion accepted the writings of Marx and who worked within a closed ideological system, and sophisticated Marxism consisted of those who assimilated some of the Marxist concepts but still were able to distance themselves from the orthodoxy, plain Marxists, like Mills himself (Clecak 1966), were scholars who on a more spiritual and abstract level and in a more distanced fashion sympathised with the Marxist notions and picture of how social reality is constituted, and of equal importance, for what reasons. Anatol Rapoport has rightly stated that “there was nothing of the hack Marxist in Mills. He honoured Marx by taking the ideas of the sociology of knowledge seriously, not slavishly...The real fabric of American life, not a textbook case of a ‘capitalist society’ is the field against which he examined American institutions, culture, types, and in particular, his own profession and its failure in his eyes” (Rapoport 1964:102).

In other words, Mills was the practical left-wing writer, not the catechised Marxist theorist – something which also becomes outrageously evident when contemplating the fact that Mills did not read Marx until the late 1950’s (Eldridge 1983:19), and by that time only in translated versions. He was initially introduced to the writings of the Marxists by his friend Hans Gerth, and if there were two who stuck together in times of academic despair for varieties of Marxist thinking, it was Mills and Gerth (Oakes & Vidich 1999). Gerth brought with him to the States, after he like so many others from the Frankfurt Institute had fled the Nazi regime, the magic of German critical philosophy and dialectical thinking and

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According to Eugene Schneider (1968), Marxism meant to Mills three different things: 1) an approach to the nature of social phenomena (an ontology), 2) a method for studying them (an epistemology and methodology), and 3) a system of values held about society and by which to formulate programs of action and *praxis* (a politics). In his own variant of Marxism, Mills incorporated and mixed all these different levels of thinking and created a radical political sociology. Mills, however, has also been termed an anti-Marxist as when Daniel Bell noted that “Mills is not a Marxist, and if anything, his method and conclusions are anti-Marxist” (Bell in Horowitz 1962:648).
Gerth’s collaboration on many pieces of interesting work, and amongst these their common Weber project, was - which most commentators believe - one of the main reasons behind Mills’ meteoric rise to prominence within the field of sociology. Gerth mediated the work of a grand sociological tradition from Europe of such writers as Weber, Mannheim and Marx to Mills, and it is due to his tireless efforts that Mills primarily owes his, however modest, Marxist flavour.

Therefore Mills did share a common theoretical territory with many of the more subtle and dialectically oriented Western Marxist writers such as Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács and Walter Benjamin and like other Marxists “Mills was above all a man of enlightenment, a believer in the practical worth and consequences of ideas. His sympathy for the writings of the Marxians was a belief in the human passions...He had no illusions about the cynical uses of Marxism in the Soviet Union” (Horowitz 1972:15). Like many of his economic reductionist contemporaries, which hailed the writings of the older structuralist Marx, Mills belonged to the faction who was more taking the subjectivist position of the younger Marx. Mills was clearly inspired by Marxian thinking but never gave totally in to in. As he commented on the relevance of Marxism is sociology: “No one who does not come to grips with the ideas of marxism can be an adequate social scientist; no one who believes that marxism contains the last word can be one either” (Mills 1962:13). However, Mills was unfortunately rather handicapped in many of his writings in that he lacked an adequate definition, discussion and comprehension of central Marxist concepts such as of false consciousness and ideology, whereas his understanding of alienation appears to be of more sophistication and profundity, as we shall see below, than many of the traditional Marxist theories. One of the main reasons for Mills’ lack of depth in his treatment of central Marxist concepts was the fact that he consciously sought out a position, as we saw above, which both paid respect to revolutionary as well as more reformist positions. He thus simultaneously stressed the liberal notion of individual freedom and the socialist conception of obligation and, in his view, freedom and obligation separated from each other are nothing but hollow concepts without any substance serving either personal ambitions or societal constraints.

This combination of liberalism and socialism, individualism and collectivism, is actually the essence in the so-called new sociology (Horowitz 1964b:403). Thus he accepted the understanding of the emergence and fall of phenomena and ideas that is so central to dialectical thing – the notion of critical overcoming.
of which Mills was a key figure and this position was informed by as well as sought to inform public issues. Thus the new sociology had as its objective a twofold manifesto: “The orientation of the new sociology is directed to changing the world as well as explaining it” (Hodges 1969:329). In other words, the new sociology focused on political issues – how the personal became political, as feminists have fancied to call it – and would not accept merely an armchair position in academia but equally saw itself as one of the combatants on the barricades. This link between the individual and the surrounding social structure was a recurrent feature in Mills’ sociology and as many commentators has noted, not a new element in sociological theorising at all but just new wine on old bottles and it appeared in some form in almost all his publications. Talking about a new sociology only makes sense insofar as one has in mind an image of the old sociology and perhaps for Mills the intention was not so much to create an entirely new politically informed position within sociology but instead to distance himself from what already was - a clinical and socially irrelevant sociology. Mills, as we have already seen, was extremely fond of the classical tradition in sociology and particularly the sociology of Max Weber. So the old sociology he disliked was actually the predominant positions in the shape of the hollowness of the structural functionalist theorising and emptiness of the empirical analyses carried out by many research institutes to which we shall return later. Mills was extremely critical of the demand for the stern kind of objectivity that these positions exhibited as he himself was an incarnation of the zoon politikon, the political being, in sociology: “Indeed there were contradictions in Mills. He was on the Left but not of the Left, a radical but a lone guerilla, and always a political man but never with any political affiliations” (Bhadra 1989:3). Although normativity and values informed his social science, Mills never voted in any elections and never took part in the practice of realpolitik, as did for example his spiritual mentor Max Weber. Mills was an ethical man and the social ethics he championed were a cocktail of respectively the Weberian notion of Verantwortungsetik and Gesinnungsetik which he combined into an ethic that weighed both the responsibility for the consequences of actions as well as the personal motives and virtues that guided those actions. He echoed Marxian political philosophy when stating that some consequences are more consequential than others, and Kantian moral philosophy when claiming that some virtues are more virtuous than others. In short, he remained a political man without political aspirations. After this brief presentation of Mills’ epistemological base and political convictions we will now move on to discuss the more foundational sociological position he contributed to establishing.

4. The duality of individual character and social structure

In a time when and academic climate when it is fashionable and indeed a mark of distinction that social theorists try to come to grips with the interrelated nature of different levels of social ontology and try by the sweat of their brows to
combine the micro with a macro perspective, structure and agency, objectivity and subjectivity, the social with the individual, we can only smirk at the supposed novelty of these endeavours. Once again C. Wright Mills stands before us as a forerunner to many of these allegedly undiscovered, or inadequately developed, aspects of sociological theorising.

**Character and Social Structure: The contribution to social psychology**

Already in his first ever officially published manuscript Mills dealt theoretically with attempts at combining different levels of social reality when he puzzled with the social psychological dimension. His verdict was that sociology was short of such a perspective and that “*a theory of mind is needed which conceives social factors as intrinsic to mentality*” (Mills 1939:670). But it was not until the publication of the work *Character and Social Structure* (1953) which was co-authored by Hans Gerth, that Mills himself developed something of an adequate understanding of this dimension. It would be beyond the scope of this introductory paper to go into extreme detail with this book which, although being immensely fascinating and innovative, is a rather inaccessible and voluminous piece of work. The book - which is often hailed as the most insightful and philosophical products of Mills’ career, while other critics say that the study is marked by clumsy confusion and blurry eclecticism (Horowitz 1983:50) - is primarily a theoretical attempt at constructing a comprehensive understanding of society and its reproduction by developing conceptualisations of sociality and the interplay of individual and societal processes supporting and maintaining this.

Mills and Gerth started out by describing two different ways of understanding human beings, the biological mode and the sociological mode, that were prevalent at the time when this book appeared. The one is obviously a behaviourist position and the other can either be regarded as a more symbolic interactionist understanding of human relations or a functionalist position of the interplay of institutions and individuals. Both of these are lacking somewhat in their perspective if utilised rigidly and therefore Mills and Gerth attempt to overcome the inherent problems and limitations by focussing on the intermediary level, the social psychological understanding of the impact of social institutions on human beings and particularly on their personality and character and vice versa. In his foreword to the edition, Robert Merton, stated that “*for all their emphasis on the shaping of character by the social structure, the authors avoid dogmatism. They refuse to be drawn into the position, rapidly grown archaic, of maintaining that everything about human conduct must be explained by the organization of social institutions*” (Merton in Gerth & Mills 1953:viii). Merton’s sympathy with their project clearly stems from the fact, that what they were trying to do, was to create some kind of *theory of the middle range*, which became the mark of distinction for Merton’s own later work. Simultaneously, they make it quite clear that they want to avoid both the character determinism of Sigmund Freud as well as the structural determinism of Karl Marx. So how do they come about at creating a convincing hybrid and
acceptable alternative to either structural theory or individual psychology?

At the outset of the book, with which Mills later became particularly disconcerted (Horowitz 1983:48), they exclaimed that “our general aim, then, is to display, analyze, and understand types of persons in terms of their roles within institutions in given orders and social structures within various historical eras” (Gerth & Mills 1953:34). The writer, thus, quickly becomes aware of the centrality of the role concept in their work; something which may have had a ring of structural functionalism to it, but this is not entirely the case. Mills had been interested in the concept of role from the beginning of his career, and he did not see a role as a straightjacket to individuals but equally as something with a certain element of freedom and elasticity to it. As Mills and his erstwhile co-author Patricia Salter once wrote: “Men in society learn to will what is objectively required for the enactment of institutionalized roles. And values and slogans legitimize these roles and the trained impulses which sustain their enactment. Freedom lies in choice of roles being open to individuals and to classes of individuals” (Mills & Salter 1945:315). This freedom is part and parcel of roles and thus the role concept is relational in Mills and Gerth’s writing; a relation between a given individual, or group of individuals, and the social structure. We are of course socialised into our respective roles, but this socialisation is a continuous process (Eldridge 1983:57) as well as a reciprocal procedure between individual and society. As figure 2 below illustrates, Mills and Gerth link biology, psychology and institutional arrangements by the role concept. Furthermore their model clearly illuminates the fact, that they had a very developed and sophisticated view of the structural level and the overlap and corporation of many different spheres and orders within this. This also came to inform Mills’ later work on power structures in which he noted as a critique of excessively biological models of humans: “We cannot adequately understand ‘man’ as an isolated biological creature, as a bundle of reflexes or a set of instincts, as an ‘intelligible field’ or a system of and in itself. Whatever else he may be, man is a social and a historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in a close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures” (Mills 1959a:158) and therefore the model below has to be circumscribed by historical

It is noteworthy that Mills and Gerth nowhere in their book Character and Social Structure (Gerth & Mills 1953) mention the writings and theories of Talcott Parsons as they appeared in his The Social System (1951). However, they appear to accept his general framework for the understanding of the intimate relationship between individuals and society. Both positions have clearly borrowed a great deal from the authorship of Max Weber but Mills and Gerth have incorporated, as far as I am capable of looking through their arguments, a more dynamic and dialectic perspective of the change occurring within social structures and they dedicated the entire last chapter of this book to a thorough causal analysis of the causes of change. Among some of the major reasons behind social change they list in Weberian fashion the role of leadership, the Marxist emphasis on the function of social masses and movements and the impact of the decline of ideology and the rise of bureaucracy. Moreover, they paid attention to potential conflicts within the social structure – something which only Merton within his revised structural functionalism also accepted, whereas Parsons spoke of conflict avoidance through the existence of a value consensus.
and cultural contingencies.
FIGURE 2: THE LINK BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHE AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

As the figure highlights, the level termed character structure is a three-fold entity, consisting of respectively the biological organism, the psychological structure and the personal level which relates to man as a social and motivational creature of feelings and emotions (Bhadra 1989:12). The social structure, which is linked to the individual by the role he or she is expected to perform, or chooses to perform, functions as an integrating and organising factor for the different roles performed by different people as different times – as a sort of intersection of the multiple different roles existing within society. The various orders are not utterly disorganised but form a somewhat coherent whole – they are only relatively autonomous to utilise an apt neo-Marxian term. In this way the concept of role expresses “the inner experience of the person as well as the institutions which make up an historical social structure...The organization of roles is important in building up a particular social structure; it also has
psychological implications for the persons who act out the social structure” (Gerth & Mills 1953:14). This link between individuals and social structure becomes important when we later shall discuss concepts such as social power and alienation.

The joint venture of Mills and Gerth shows one of the first comprehensive and eclectic sociological attempts at integrating social structure and individual psychology and physiology by rejecting rigid reductionism – whether Freudian psychology or the stern structuralism of the older Marx. This became particularly evident in the closing paragraphs of the book where a new perspective – almost a new anthropology - on man, history and society emerges: “Man is a unique animal specie in that he is also an historical development. It is in terms of this development that he must be defined, and in terms of it no single formula will fit him. Neither his anatomy nor his psyche fix his destiny. He creates his own destiny as he responds to his experienced situation, and both his situation and his experience of it are the complicated products of the historical epoch which he enacts. That is why he does not create his destiny as an individual but as a member of society” (Gerth & Mills 1953:480). The echo of Marx, who stated that man is a product of the times he lives in, is here very loud and resonates throughout the book. Mills had previously in a more sporadic piece of work struggled with this connection, at that time by looking at what he termed vocabularies of motive, and although Weber had been hailed on many accounts by Mills, he was here heavily criticised for his inadequate conception of motives according to which motives are only expressions of subjective meaning and individual will. To Mills, in this symbolic interactionist informed piece of work, motives are also socially situated and part of the social organisation of life as we saw above – to imagine personal motives utterly cut off from one’s social position would be completely unimaginable: “Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts...Motives are of no value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are appropriate. They must be situated...Motives vary in content and character with historical epochs and societal structures” (Mills 1940:907-913). In this combination of a Schützian and Marxian perspective, motives can be located historically and be present either in the individual psychology or in institutional arrangements, but will most often appear as a result of the negotiation between these two in the form of role motivations or motivated roles. In this way roles, freedom of choice and motivation melt together in a model that is more flexible than that of Parsons. Much more could be said about these early ontologically informed studies of Mills; suffice to say for the moment, that these considerations were not thrown overboard later by Mills but were incorporated in many of his following analyses and they appear as a pumping and life-giving artery in many of the books we shall deal with below.

Mills’ more methodological considerations
After having touched upon Mills’ ontology and epistemology throughout the last couple of pages, let us for a short while dwell on his general methodological
orientation. He is often regarded as a man completely devoid of methodology, but as his masterpiece *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959a) clearly outlined, he was a sociologist whose methodology was more implicit than explicitly stated as when he criticised the narcissistic methodology of empiricism. Methodology deals with the more practical aspects of how we can understand, grasp and capture the social world as it lies there in front of us as social scientists and Mills, more than anyone, was interested in means how to do this most adequately. He was therefore not an anti-methodologist but rather one who believed that methodology and scientific means should not overshadow concerns with the more substantial and ends-directed purposes.

Implicit in Mills’ methodology lies the radical notion that society has to be regarded from a conflict and change oriented perspective, that any adequate analysis of society must look at the contradictions and antagonisms innate to any kind of social order. Therefore his methodology is extremely normative and value-oriented – to him a capitalist society, which in the shape of American society throughout the post-war period was his primary unit of analysis, without conflict and strife would be completely incomprehensible and out of this world. He said: “No political philosopher can be detached; he can only pretend to be” (Mills 1962:11), and Mills was perhaps more of a political philosopher and activist at times than a detached sociologist. As Collins Fletcher (1974:197) notes on Mills’ methodological model: “The model I have ‘taken’ is C. Wright Mills. I have rejected arse-licking empiricism and bland theory in favour of his ‘new sociology’. Mills did create a new method, theory and subject area with each substantive work. I do not think that the new sociology is, in fact, new. It seems to be a traditional sociology surfacing in yet another generation with its very modernity coming as a shock. Mills united his sorrow, anger, knowledge and dignity in his sociological imagination. He did his very best...I have a wish for fellow researchers; make Mills your model” . Although my ambition here is not to sell Mills’ so-called model, I do agree with Fletcher that Mills did develop a unique theoretical cocktail, a methodological mixture and a new way of looking at the social world. At the centre of this new way of looking into social reality was an understanding of the fact that everything is not as it seems to be, and in an almost critical realist fashion, he seemed to contend that below the surface of visible reality lurks yet another deep structural reality that is the key to our comprehension of the world as it appears to us.

Mills’ sociology has been named many things throughout the last almost forty years since his death. From *radical sociology* (Deutsch 1970) over *imaginary sociology* - unfortunately not imaginative sociology (Shils 1960), and *vulgar sociology* (Bell 1962) to *skeptical sociology* (Wrong 1976). Common to all these attempts at finding a label that befits his position is the realisation that there is indeed something new about his sociology. The threefold character of his methodological position can be summarised as *relativism*, *historicism*, and *critical social science*. Mills was clearly a relativist, as we saw above, and was to some extent proud of it, as when he in one of his articles dealing with the sociology of knowledge contended that “the assertions of the sociologists of
knowledge escape the ‘absolutist dilemma’ because they can refer to a degree of truth and because they may include the conditions under which they are true” (Mills 1940:323). To Mills, truth was something one could only expect to approximate and never really to be able to arrive fully at. Truth may be out there, but it was not something tangible and it changed according to time (history) and geography (culture). To speak of truth as something immutable was therefore very far from Mills’ position.

Dennis Wrong (1961) has also highlighted Mills as a representative of a historicist stance, and therefore also of diachronic, and dialectical thinking against achronic and so-called eristical thinking of structural functionalism. Whereas the former takes into consideration historical transformation and tries to capture a conflict perspective where questions lead to ever new questions to be asked, the latter, on the contrary, is locked in a model of society where conflict is toned down and where questions asked by the social scientist are becoming oblivious with the arrival of an answer. To Mills it is the job of the sociologist to make historical comparisons (Mills 1959a) and to look to new horizons in the quest for knowledge and understanding. His sociology was clearly informed by the Weberian idea of trans-historical studies and comparisons. A sociology worth its name is never satisfied with the initial answers popping up occasionally but keeps looking ever harder in order to find either forgotten, neglected or hidden connections. Therefore Mills is also a bigwig and an exponent of a conflict perspective in sociology (Strandbakken 1996) and together with the names of Barrington Moore Jr., David Lockwood, Reinhard Bendix, Lionel Trilling and Ralph Dahrendorf he championed the idea of conflicts as inherent to and inevitable in every kind of social orders. According to Mills every society contained conflict and the only variation was whether that conflict was allowed to come out into the open or whether it was a latent and oppressed conflict. As we mentioned above, Mills belongs to a diluted Marxist tradition in his predilection for looking at conflicts – either potential or fully blown- and I would term this a critical social science which is both critical of society and the social science practised in order to grasp its functioning. In the framework of the two sociologies that Alan Dawe (1970) depicted as respectively one that is oriented towards external control of and constraint on individuals and another that gives individual volition supremacy, Mills is placed betwixt and between these two oppositions as was also the younger Marx. This is not an altogether mediocre scholar to be compared to.

**Overcoming the barrier between society and individual?**

As we saw above, Mills’ ambition was to create a theory that could capture the relationship of individuals and the social structures under which they lived their lives. Initially this theory was not intended as a normative manifesto, but as his work progressed it became clear, that it had to be utilised in his understanding of the empirical reality he encountered and described in his many studies, a reality he saw as overwhelming the individuals who constituted it.

He generally, with his backbone of pragmatist philosophy,
regarded the individual as an intelligent and knowledgeable person who under normal circumstances, whatever they may be, would be able to take care of his or her self and defend his or her own case. However, in *mass society*, which Mills terms the modern capitalist society, the individual appears merely as a feeble-legged and weary creature unable to understand society and the conditions surrounding it. According to Mills this is the product and the consequences of industrialisation, bureaucratisation and urbanisation – or modernity to put it short. His distinction between *masses* and *publics* is evident of this (Bhadra 1989:55). Masses, which later appeared in the conception of the *mass society* as David Riesman (1973) in his classic *The Lonely Crowd* also analysed more profoundly, were those who were not aware that they are thoroughly manipulated by powers beyond their reach. Publics are also a collective notion, but publics are collections of individuals who are knowledgeable and active and not passive, brainwashed and controlled. *Publics* contain a glimmer of hope and potential whereas *masses* refer to a state of despair and apathy. The former are those who will hold their politicians accountable and, if necessary, act in order to set things straight. The latter, on the other hand, are those who accept reality as it is, with no ambition to change it and no insight into how things can be improved and problems of scarcity and poverty meliorated. Mills clearly wanted to change masses into publics, the ignorant into the knowledgeable, the passive into the active.12

In his depiction of mass society, Mills often utilised a very powerful language and often resorted to the use of emblematical metaphors: “Society itself under the weight of these metaphors comes to take on something of the character of a giant machine, out of control and moving in the direction which will bring about its own destruction. Mills is looking for a way to bring this machine under responsible human control again. To do so its to run the risk of being regarded as a quixotic, ridiculous individual with grandiose ambitions to save the world. Others, however, would define this as heroic and applaud the vision. The intellectual outcast and the cult figure were both experiences which beset Mills as people responded in different ways to his work” (Eldridge 1983:43). Like the Giddensian notion of modernity as a *juggernaut* crushing everything on its way and eventually also itself (Giddens 1990), also Mills saw mass society as containing the cause of its own destruction. Mills wanted man to take control of this machine, to become master of his own fate and he saw

Robert Notestein (1964:50) remarked on Mills’ fascination with *publics* that even though these publics in the future might emerge from the masses and thus eventually become informed by sociological wisdom about their oppressed position in society, the chances that they would, and could, alter these conditions were rather meagre and required that 1) ideas and alternative courses of society were debated openly within them, and that 2) they had the means with which to realise these ideas and visions.
democracy, participatory democracy, as a bulwark against the intrusion of the mass society into the intimate spheres of the lives of individuals. His distinction between *issues* and *troubles* and their intersection in social problems, as we shall return to later, is also part and parcel of his dissatisfaction with the status quo of mass society in which the individual almost drowned in an atomised existence and a life not bothered to the problems faced by others. Mills in this respect was a young radical inspired by the troubles, personal as well as collective, that many Americans experienced in the wake of World War II and as a result of the Great Depression in the 1930’s (Gerth 1980:71). He was angry at those, politicians as well as ordinary people, who were reluctant to solve the many troubling issues of the day and he not only preached this gospel but equally lived by it himself as when he stated: “I am a Wobbly. But do you know what a Wobbly is? It’s a kind of spiritual condition...Wobbly is not only a man who takes orders from himself. He’s also a man who’s often in the situation where there are no regulations to fall back upon, which he hasn’t made up himself: He doesn’t like bosses, capitalistic or communistic, they’re all the same to him. He wants to be, and he wants everyone else to be, his own boss at all times under all conditions and for any purposes they may want to follow up. This kind of spiritual condition, and only this, is Wobbly freedom” (Mills in Scimecca 1977:11). To Mills we should all become so-called Wobblies who reject illegitimate manifestations as well as symbols of power and unnecessary constrains on our existence, only abiding our own individual conscience spiced up with a social dimension and indeed feelings of solidarity.

His predilection for metaphors, that almost equalled that of Erving Goffman (Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2000), was also noted by other commentators amongst who Richard Gillam notes: “His prose trades in mechanical and military allusion, in metaphors of death and termination; the ‘enemy’ is ‘big’, ‘giant’ or ‘mighty’ while ‘victims’ are ‘small’, ‘little’, ‘weak’ or ‘dwarfish’. Modern business enterprise, the adversary of democracy, is a ‘cadre’ with a ‘military-like’ shape. People have become ‘robots’, ‘objects’, ‘interchangable parts’ or, in an extended description, ‘cogs in a business machine that has routinised and made oppressive an impersonal principle of organisation’” (Gillam 1981:2). His utilisation of words from the spheres of engineering or geometry are, some scholars agree (Eldridge 1983:43), due to his early fascination and unfinished studies of engineering but there probably also was a great writer lost in Mills’ choice of career. Moreover, his words often take on a life of their own, and the reader is not always sure whether Mills’ description is reality as reality really is or reality as some strange image conjured up in Mills’ imagination. Take as a vivid example of his way of creating symbols, metaphors and images – particularly his portrait of a machine society versus the lonesome Don Quixote individual - the front cover of Mills’ *White Collar* (1951), which shall discuss below, where a tiny little man hurries past a huge
dark building as in an almost Kafkaian nightmare vision of *The Castle* (1998). As in Kafka’s unfinished masterpiece those in power are here also hiding behind impenetrable facades in incalculable corridors, are never present in person but are always deputised and whose lines of command are completely incomprehensible to outsiders. Therefore they cannot be held accountable for their actions and the consequences of these - an accountability Mills craved, indeed demanded, of those who claimed to hold the key to decision-making processes in companies, corporations and countries alike. This had to be rectified but who were we to turn to for assistance? The politicians or the people? Who holds the key to social change? The elite, the middle-classes, the trade unions or the proletariat? In the following we shall begin to see contours of Mills’ interest in power, who has it, and who most spectacularly lacks it.

**Desk clerks and the white collar nightmare**

During the period covering the late 1940’s to the middle of the 1950’s some of Mills’ most fascinating and concrete empirical studies saw the light of day. These studies were of such quality, both theoretically and empirically, and so original and controversial in their analyses and conclusions that even Mills’ most thick-skinned antagonists had to acknowledge the fact that he contained much depth and analytical skills. It is throughout this period in particular that Mills unfolds his intellectual arsenal as a brilliant researcher and his abilities as an empirically oriented sociologist. Let us begin, in a slight divergence from chronology for once, with his *White Collar* (Mills 1951) which is an exposé of the dialectics of individual and society, we discussed above, and which shows his propensity for normative judgements about social reality.

As we saw previously, Mills feared more than anything the progression of the mass society, perhaps due to his sympathy for the Jeffersonian idyllic idea of *small is good* and his pity for the individual confronted by this monstrous machine of mass conformity. In many ways, Mills in his works throughout this period was burdened, or perhaps inspired is more in line with reality, by recollections of his own private transitions in life which combined into a general framework for analyses on societal level. In this it almost appeared as if his academic writings were totally coloured by these positive experiences of his childhood on the farmlands which he opposed to the urbanised middle-class existence of his adult years, the story of how the American dream turned into a dreadful nightmare: “Mills conceded that his gloomy account of decline from propertied autonomy to salaried independence – from farm or ranch to office – recapitulated family history. In "White Collar” he sees ‘heroes’ like a larger-than-life maternal grandfather (Braxton Bragg Mills), killed in a gunfight on his Texas cattle ranch, giving way to ‘victims’ like his insurance-agent father (Charles Grover Mills) and status-driven mother. So a generational metamorphosis as exemplified in the contrast between Braxton Bragg and
Charles Grover becomes virtually emblematic of America as a whole” (Gillam 1981:5). In this way, Mills used concrete personal troubles, and indeed very private ones, to describe a certainly rather abstract societal drift towards new areas of public issues. But his analysis went much deeper than these initial and somewhat unsubstantiated notions of social transition from the happiness of the countryside to the miserable metropolitan lifestyle although his general picture remained the same. In almost Weberian fashion he stated that “in three or four generations the United States has passed from a loose scatter of enterprises to an increasingly bureaucratic coordination of specialized occupational structures. Its economy has become a bureaucratic cage” (Mills 1051:58). So the overall negative transformation of American society has taken place from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century with consequences on both the character structure of individuals as well as on the social structure of the system as a whole. His analysis in White Collar primarily dealt with the intermediary level of how social structures influenced the individual’s sense of well being, belonging and satisfaction with life as such.

One of the central aspects in this book appears when Mills (1951:28) speaks of the emergence of a lumpen-bourgeoisie, with an overt reference to the Marxian notion of lumpen-proletariat, who are the new social grouping of clerical workers who drag on their unacknowledged and miserable lives in offices and large-scale companies without recognition and reward. They are the symbol of the new middle-class of office workers as opposed to the old middle-class constituted by shopkeepers, farmers and other self-employed people. Mills show why, due to structural changes in society, these people are becoming victimised as their work process today – in the 1950’s of Mills’ America – has been fragmented and rationalised in an unprecedented manner leaving little space for personal fulfillment or creativity. Coherence, in the course of life and career, is an absent notion and the new environment of constant competition creates a work situation in which anxiety lurks and enmity prevails. Mills stated, that “in the case of the white-collar man, the alienation of the wage worker from the product of his work is carried one step further to its Kafka-like completion. The salaried employee does not make anything, although he may handle much that he greatly desires but cannot have...He is bored at work and restless at play, and this terrible alternative wears him out” (Mills 1951:xvi). The white collar worker no longer feels in control of his own destiny and merely as a marionette of the market forces emphasising supply and demand, conveyor belt

In a recently published book, Richard Sennett (1998) has also dealt with the personal troubles following from societal change and, as Mills, related this to the work sphere and how office workers today experience a so-called corrosion of character due to the change in the conditions under which work nowadays takes place. Sennett, in constructing a brilliant family scenario, tells the tale of how the father, Enrico, who was a typical blue collar worker, was generally satisfied with his daily existence. His son, however, named Rico and who is a well-paid white collar worker, finds it hard to accept the new conditions unfolding as the backdrop for his work experience in particularly and his life in general in which the prevalence of downsizing, market logic and rationalisation is the order of the day.
efficiency and increasing expectations. In short, the white collar worker experiences a situation previously the sole property of blue collar workers; he feels alienated. The white collar workers are those who earn their livelihood in the dark satanic mills of capitalist society as opposed to those who in the industrial era performed the manual labour in the factories but the feeling of alienation and a reified existence is similar. Mills, however, turns his back on the traditional Marxist model of alienation as the sole result of structural properties of capitalist society and an outcome of a certain mode of production, and views it instead as the interplay of social structure and individual psychology and is thus able to present a much more nuanced picture of work and alienation. His definition of alienation is therefore more in line with Allen Wood who in his book *Karl Marx* (1981) wrote on the concept of alienation, that we are alienated “if we either experience our lives as meaningless or ourselves as worthless, or else are capable of sustaining a sense of meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about ourselves and our condition” (Wood 1981:8). This is essentially the way Mills depicts the condition of workers – either blue collar or white collar – and can be visualised in figure 3 below.

![Figure 3: Alienation as a Product of Subjective and Objective Conditions](Appropriated from J. E. T. Eldridge (1983:39))
As the figure clearly illustrates, a lack of interest and participation in one’s work and an antisocial attitude can cause a feeling of alienation and insufficiency whereas the worker who actively contributes to the work process and in the transformation of the conditions under which it takes place will, ceteris paribus, feel more satisfied, happy and unalienated. Thus it is also the responsibility of the individual worker to take control of his own work situation and not just the attitude of for example unreasonable foremen, greedy executives or an unjust capitalist order that create a sense of alienation. As is also evident from the figure that individual psychology is equally important in an understanding of the phenomenon of alienation as is the structural level – a recurrence of the schema from Character and Social Structure we discussed above - the latter is perhaps even determining the former to some extent, and Mills therefore elsewhere noted that “the problem of estrangement arises from an urbanized, pecuniary, and minutely divisioned society and that the ground problem cannot be solved by moral consideration of personal ways of life...That self-estrangement arises from a social-historical condition has been demonstrated by such men as Marx, Simmel and Fromm” (Mills 1972h:161-162). So in a fashion rather similar to that of Marx, Mills here states that we to certain degrees are free, but that this individual freedom is circumscribed by social and historical structures that we have not personally chosen. Therefore it becomes important to ask at the individual level, and Mills thus based his own analysis on the feelings and motives of the white collar worker on more than 100 personal interviews conducted by himself and a staff of fellow researchers throughout the late 1940’s.

The problem with this model, from a Marxist position, is that it clearly lacks an adequate understanding of false consciousness and the social structures that can deceive the worker into a false feeling of happiness, security and contentment. White Collar thus primarily deals with office clerks as an example of the alienated worker, what is normally termed white collar worker in sociology, and not the worker on the factory floor, the blue collar worker, whose satisfaction and plight have traditionally been the domain of Marxist analyses. The form of alienation may be the same, and also the outcome, but the content of this and the reasons behind it are rather different: “Estranged from community and society in a context of distrust and manipulation; alienated from work and, on the personality market, from self; expropriated of individual rationality, and politically apathetic – these are the new little people, the unwilling vanguard of modern society” (Mills 1951:xviii). Mills was aware, and never rejected the Marxist idea, that blue collar workers were also alienated but he probably saw this as something trivial to analyse and therefore utilised all his efforts in focusing on the paradox of the alienated middle-class hero, the white collar worker, who had been deceived by society. Irving Horowitz, in his sociological professions, noted on Mills’ rejection of a Marxist model of alienation and his concern with middle-class alienation: “One Marx opened this pandora’s box of the social and cross-cultural locale of alienation, it was just a matter of time before others would see alienation of different social sectors from
those Marx had dealt with. Thus, for example, in a modern view of bourgeois society, that held by C. Wright Mills, alienation comes to be understood as a lower middle class phenomenon, something that debases salesgirls, technicians and even intellectuals in a similar way. In this Mills provided not only a bridge from one class to another, but even more importantly, a way of viewing alienation as a problem of all non-ruling classes, not only the factory-anchored urban proletariat” (Horowitz 1968:105). Mills was full of pity for those heroes of modernity on whom it had turned its back, who initially were hailed as entrepreneurs and creative beings but who ended up being consumed and drained by a bureaucratic ethos. Mills spoke, in usual verbose language, of the rise of the dominance of the managerial demiurge which had a threefold impact of the people being subjected to it. First, the world became rationalised and bureaucratised, as we have seen, with the consequence that people lost a sense of totality and meaning. The fragmented world in front of us, of which we are part, appears without real substance and coherence. Second, a fetishised economy arised in which everything has a price tag attached to it and everything could be sold or bought. And finally, we witness the growth of anonymous and omnipresent manipulation of people which means that we cannot be sure that we are following our own wills and desires or some imposed upon on (Mills 1951:100-107).

So who are these at one and same time pitiful and pitiless white collar men? Generally speaking, they are depicted as a new layer of people which has emerged and come into employment due to the advent of corporate capitalism and who perform all the tasks of big organisations and companies like the mechanical insides of a capitalist clockwork. But when it comes to who the really are, Mills is not at all clear on this point: Some places they appear as a specific group within society and other places they are depicted as men and women in general. He doubtlessly believed that the condition of the white collar men was not unique to them as when he stated that “the troubles that confront the white collar people are the troubles of all men and women living in the twentieth century” (Mills 1951:xv). Elsewhere we spot the notion that some people are more familiar with these troubles than others, as when Mills claimed in this rhetorical fashion: “In a world crowded with big ugly forces, the white-collar man is readily assumed to possess all the supposed virtues of the small creature. He may be at the bottom of the social world, but he is, at the same time, gratifyingly middle-class. It is easy as well as safe to sympathize with his

A dear colleague of mine, Ole Riis, has recently rightly categorised Mills’ position as some variant of an anti-technocratic vision of social science in connection to his discussion of qualitative versus quantitative research methodologies (Riis 2000). Mills, like many of the Frankfurt scholars, was highly critical of the development of a technocratic society aided by social research agencies that relied on an instrumental rationality that subjected the social world to a rigid logic. Mills, however, clearly belonged to those who favoured quantitative approaches, which many of his books give evidence to, but he never, as Paul Lazarsfeld, believed that the results of quantitative inquiries could stand entirely alone. To Mills data had to be interpreted and here he is heavily indebted to the Weberian tradition.
troubles; he can do little or nothing about them...The white-collar man is the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act, who works along unnoticed in somebody’s office or store, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand” (Mills 1951:xii). The white collar man, which reminds one of Fjodor Dostojevskij’s state employees, was equally informed by the uncomfortable position of those representing middle-class ideals and ideology and who are torn between being hailed as the heroes of modernity while suffering in an unprecedented manner from the impact of this epoch and Mills, according to Press (1978:72), was clearly sympathetic to the white collar workers plight as a sign of his own alleged bourgeois orientation.

Mills was extremely critical of what he termed the liberal rhetoric of competition (Mills 1951:34) that permeated American society and way of life, and he saw this kind of competitive attitude as something unhealthy and pathological contributing to the emotional imprisonment of people and as creating a superficiality of freedom (Mills 1946c). Not that he did not believe in freedom and individual autonomy, but he regarded the liberal notion of freedom understood as an absolute value in itself as utter nonsense. Their understanding of human freedom and liberty was nothing but a shallow excuse for the market forces to suppress people, and he saw how an acceptable active liberalism had been transformed into an administrative liberalism with bureaucratic undertones (Eldridge 1983:73). He was very sympathetic to the idea of free enterprise as the road to happiness and autonomy, but he felt that when this rhetoric came to permeate every single aspect of reality it was bound to produce consequences detrimental to the kind of society Mills envisaged as the good society – a society inhabited by free yet socially concerned human beings willing to try and eliminate social inequality and injustice. Although White Collar is a sombre book (Eldridge 1983:72), Mills was not an empty-hearted pessimist. He believed that the root of the problem of white collar alienation could be rectified if their world and work was re-enchanted, as it were, and made meaningful to those practising clerical work: “Human society, in brief, ought to be built around craftsmanship as the central experience of the unalienated human being and at the very root of free human development. The most fruitful way to define the social problem is to ask how such a society can be built. For the highest ideal is to become a good craftsman” (Mills 1972f:386). We shall return to the notion of people as craftsmen later, but here it will be sufficient to note that the craftsman, contrary to the white collar worker, is his own master and not the subservient cog in the wheel of fortune or a pawn in the game controlled by others.

With his focus on the labour market, its constitution and its changed composition, Mills was contributing to the development of the sociological subfield of industrial relations and organisations (Eldridge 1983 and Mills 1948b), and he was a pioneer in pinpointing the consequences of the emergence of a totally new type of social order in which people became dispensable and dehumanised. In this society individualisation and automatisation became prevalent as well as practised ideals and people were thus transformed into robots; Mills termed them cheerful robots, as they were unable to see through
their own alienated situation, and if they should become enlightened about this, they would be unable to act in order to change things substantially. Most people in Mills’ universe are thus nothing but small creatures fighting the mighty and the powerful and the slogan of *size matters* permeated Mills’ writings throughout the 1950’s, during which he saw the rise of a new type of society in which everything appeared to increase in size and power and many of his studies in this period focused on the proportion of power almost as something quantifiable and measurable. The weight of the mighty powerful was therefore seen as crushing the powerless people below them.

**5. The centrality of power and ideology**

We are, however, not all inhabitants of this mass society in which we appear powerless and feeble, and Mills devoted a considerable amount of time throughout some of his most productive years on analysing those who we able to live off the land, as it were, and remain at the top of the apex of the pyramid of power and the hierarchy of command, those who control the destiny of others and the general drift of society. His ideas about power and power struggles, often from a very original perspective, unfolded in a range of books from *The New Men of Power* (1948a) via *The Power Elite* (1956) and the article *The Power Structure of American Society* (1958a). In the following we shall look into his thoughts about power and its implications for people and society alike.

Mills lived in a time obsessed with power; an obsession that stemmed directly from the fact of having lived through a period of world history in which power manifestations were the order of the day, either on the international scene as World War II and de-colonisation struggles flamboyantly symbolised, or on the national level, as the struggle between men and women, capitalists and proletariat, the have and the have-nots were all special cases of. Mills’ writings were clearly contaminated by this obsession with power structures, domination and strong men but he did not so much focus on power as an end product but more on power processes that took place. He, however, commented on his alleged obsession with power in the following fashion: “It’s been said in criticism that I am too much fascinated by power. This is not really true. It is intellect I have been most fascinated by, and power primarily in connection with that. It is the power in the intellect and the power of the intellect that most fascinates me, as a social analyst and cultural critic” (Mills 1968:5). As we detected above, Mills was equally inspired by the pragmatists, who stressed the power of the intellect, as well as the elite theorists, who stressed power as a social weapon either from a conservative elitist position or a Marxist variant. Richard Peterson advanced the view, that “since 1956, the name Karl Marx comes more into the fore in Mills’ writings. The underpinnings of his work, however, seem to be derived more from the Franco-Italian realists, Mosca, Michels, Pareto and Sorel” (Peterson 1962:21-22). The year 1956 marked the publication of *The Power Elite*, but eight years prior to its publication, he gave birth to *The New Men of Power*, which together with the aforementioned *White
Collar formed his trilogy of power in American society.

**Mills as an inverted elite theorist (I): Power and the workers’ union**

Mills is often in introductory literature to political sociology classified as a variant of *elite theory* (Dunleavy & O’Leary 1987, Ham & Hill 1984, Haralambos & Heald 1985, Rush 1992), but actually he can more correctly be termed an *inverted elite theorist* in that he was not, like for example Mosca and Pareto, sympathetic to those in power but instead tried to dismantle the legitimacy of their power base which primarily lied in the institutional positions they occupied. This is exactly his ambition in several articles, reports (Mills 1946a and 1946b) and books such as *The New Men of Power* (1948a) and *The Power Elite* (1956). He shows how the power elite is comprised of people drafted, as it were, from the upper-class, Ivy League, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) backgrounds and how this perpetual self-recruitment is solidifying the power structure in American society.

*The New Men of Power* (1948a) concentrated on the labour leaders and is in style reminiscent of that of Robert Michels (1918) in his classic analysis of the socialist democratic parties in Germany in which his *iron law of oligarchy* saw the light of day. Here Mills, and those who had gathered data with him on the topic since 1941, decided - as did also Michels - to investigate those who claimed to represent the true interests of the labour class and to stand as defenders of some level of participatory democratic virtues. Mills decided to place these elected people under a critical lens in order to examine the actual extent of their democratic dispositions and intentions. It was clear from the beginning, however, that Mills has already made up his mind regarding the issue and that he wanted to use the book as an assault on the labour leaders who did not abide by the nature of their office and take their positions seriously.

The book is primarily a comparison between the traditional leaders of the old labour movement, American Federation of Labor, and the emerging leaders of the new type of union, Congress of Industrial Unions (Tilman 1984:21). Mills was initially most sympathetic to the new sort of labour leaders who first and foremost appeared to be more ideologically to the left and more radical in their ideas about the function of the unions and democracy in general. However, later Mills denounced them as being opportunistic and as becoming thoroughly integrated with the system of power prevalent in the U.S.A. He believed that they betrayed their occupation and position for their own sake and not for the sake of the people they were supposed to represent – in short, the became shrouded in a *labour metaphysics* that was more instrumental than idealistic.

The labour leaders simply had forgotten the reason behind their appointment, and as Mills notes: “Even as the labor leader rebels, he holds back rebellion. He

Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn (1980) classified Mills as belonging to the *radical elitists*, which is the label attached to theorists who were not particularly fond of elites, as the term could perhaps indicate, but scholars who, on the other hand, were extremely concerned about the existence of elites.
organizes discontent and then sits on it, exploiting it in order to maintain a continuous organization: the labor leader is a manager of discontent” (Mills 1948a:9). In the terminology of the sociology of organisations we can say, that the system goals take over from the goals that initially established the organisation and we can almost see the personal development of the American teamster boss, Jimmy Hoffa, as the personification of this trend described by Mills. Even labour movements eventually turn into gerontocracies and oligarchies in which the pursuit of power for the sake of power becomes the order of the day and all the good intentions fall into ruins. Mills states that “whatever the political promises of labor and leftward forces 15 years ago, they have not been fulfilled; whatever leadership they have developed has hidden itself for illusory safety, or been buried by events it neither understands nor wishes to control. Organized labor in the forties and the early fifties has been mainly another adaptive and adapting element. What goes on domestically may briefly be described in terms of the main drift toward a permanent war economy in a garrison state” (Mills 1952:4). Thus, instead of posing an alternative to the established conservative ideals, the labour movement has willingly or unwillingly contributed to the stalemate of the state of affairs and thereby led down their members and those believing in a socialist opposition in the U.S.A.

So who can we call upon in order to secure that labour leaders do not become obsessed with the games of power and instead focuses their attention on the well being of the members of their unions? Once again Mills is switching on the sociological searchlight so as to find a solution in a sort of re-mobilisation of the passive masses into publics aware of and concerned with the status quo. He distinguishes between six types of publics that are currently visible in the landscape of American society. The first is the far left, who is constituted by the Leninists and Trotskyists with their affection for syndicalism and a desire to crush capitalism. Although Mills is very fond of their idea of a revolutionary change in the consciousness of the workers in order to transform society, he does not believe that such a development will be realistic and thus dismissed this possibility. As we shall see later he was not overtly optimistic about too radical a change of American society in the direction of Leninism, as he regarded this as a threat to individual freedom. The second public is the independent left, which can be described as the intellectual back region of the revolutionary left. These people are not highly organised, as the former, and appear to take little interest in practical politics. This type of public, to which Mills himself claim to belong (Eldridge 1983:66), is formed by discouraged socialists and liberal-minded people but as a dynamic in society they lack the revolutionary forces and are thus not the saviours of the idea of real socialism. Mills noted, that to these people “political alertness is becoming a contemplative state rather than a spring of action: they are frequently overwhelmed by visions, but they have no organized will” (Mills 1948a:18). To them social change and reform appeared as an academic issue and not a matter of action.

The third public distinguished by Mills is the liberal centre. Not much can be said about this rather passive faction of American society which is constituted
by people with a social democratic notion of anti-monopoly, a hallelujah attitude toward New Deal collectivism, and a populist idea of practical politics. Although they support labour unions they do so more out of a status quo perspective than out of a desire for a radical transformation of society and they are informed by the notion about everything must change, so that everything can remain the same. Furthermore, they took no interest whatsoever in the problems of the actual underdogs of society, although they claimed to voice such a concern, and appeared as a shallow forum for the status quo. The fourth public, the Communists, was the party of revolutionary people who directly followed the Moscow doctrines. In Mills’ view, these would never become a bastion of power and thus could not be assumed to take responsibility for a re-direction of the labour movement along a more democratic pathway. Therefore we are left with the right side of the political spectrum comprised by two publics – the practical right and the sophisticated conservatives – who both leaned on the status quo and therefore would probably not try to alter the current situation. Mills did not at all believe that they would be interested in altering the current state of affairs of the labour movements or politics in general, as they were generally against these in the first place, and they would probably only rejoice in the internal problems of these. The practical right is the well-organised and rather coherent faction associated with the Republican Party and who are overtly political. They stand for liberal-minded economic ideals of anti-unionism, liberty and free trade and their primary interest is in making money, and preferably loads of it. Therefore they cannot be bothered by the petty problems of assuring a democratic process in the country as a whole and least of all in the labour movement, who they see as being obtrusive and disinterested in the creation of a sound and healthy economy. Last but not least we find the sophisticated conservatives, and there is no need in hiding the obvious, that these were Mills’ primary enemies in the political domain. They were the holders of the key to the political process as they were the ones who strategically plan and carry out their ambition of American society in which an economic liberalism is combined with a conservative politics – they are the forerunner to what we today would term the New Right. Their strength lie in their alliances with other social forces: “They tie in solidly with the industry – armed forces – State Department axis and move personally as well as politically within those circles” (Mills 1951:25), and they wilfully orchestrate divide-and-rule policies nationally as well as internationally in order to obtain their objectives. This we shall go further into below.

Thus the problem with the far right as well as the far left on this continuum is that neither know how to re-mobilise the masses into publics themselves, or how to solve the problems with the labour movements nor do they take any interest in preventing war and the drift towards yet another economic – and thus human – depression. The two camps on the political spectrum are internally divided and the weight of power shifts to the benefit of the political right as they are capable of joining forces whereas the left is divided by a deep chasm between the starry-eyed but well-meaning intellectuals and the practically-
oriented activists. His conclusion is, in a style reminiscent of Norman Mailer’s, that if the political left in general and the labour movement in particular is not re-organised along democratic lines, if the inherent bossism and corruption is not dealt with (Tilman 1984:21), its potential as a popular and credible bulwark against war and for disarmament and participation in politics is weak and full of cracks and poses no real opposition to the sophisticated conservatives. Together with being utilised specifically in the discussion of the labour unions, Mills’ typology of publics is also a snapshot picture of the political climate of America in the mid of the 20th century; a picture that shows that political mobilisation is not only centred around the major parties on the democratic front-stage but that a back-stage region of political horse trading and shadow play where real decisions are made is equally important to draw attention to.

Mills as an inverted elite theorist (II): Power and the people
Where The New Men of Power today is a sadly outdated piece of work (Aptheker 1960:38), the same cannot be said of its academic successor The Power Elite (Mills 1956). And where the former had focused on a special segment of society in the form of labour leaders, The Power Elite (1956) instead took on a more general analysis of who had the power in American society but on the analytical level it appeared as a rushed, prolix and unfinished piece of work (Gillam 1975:467). In most respects, The Power Elite was a more provocative, profound and promising contribution to a sociological investigation of power than its predecessor. American sociology and political science of the 1940’s and 1950’s was marked by the occurrence of so-called community power studies carried out by amongst others Floyd Hunter, Nelson Polsby and Robert Dahl in which those who held power positions in the local community were put in the limelight. Mills also contributed to these studies and moved equally well on the local as the national level and as we will touch on later also the international level was the object of his disclosure of power; who has it, why and how. Mills, however, compared to many of the aforementioned social scientists often worked at the more abstract level in his description and critique of the distribution of power.

In the beginning of his theorising about power, Mills, however, primarily turned against the position of James Burnham in his The Managerial Revolution (1941) which was a general analyses of how the formation and foundation of power had changed. In this foresighted and prognostic piece of work, Burnham, in a line of reasoning similar to that of Bruno Rizzi (1939), suggested that those in power in organisations and business were no longer those who owned the means of production or were the traditional owners of companies. Rather it was a new grouping of technocratic managers with know-how and an administrative rationality. He believed, as did Mills, that both capitalism and socialism were on the verge of bankruptcy and inadequate as points of social reorientation in the face of this bureaucratisation. Mills baptised Burnham a Marx for the managers (Gerth & Mills 1941-42), by which he meant someone who is not looking to the future of either socialism nor capitalism but as something with aspects of both, a sort of convergence on the level of business and organisation. Furthermore, it
implied that Burnham contained a general Weberian notion of historical transformation at the same time as he utilised certain Marxist concepts. Mills, however sympathetic he may have been to Burnham’s work, rejected his notion of the managers as a class. The managers could not be a class simply because they did not contain the components of a true class, for example a common goal, an ideology or a shared set of values. He was also critical of Burnham’s too rapid conclusions about the inevitability of technical expertise leading to power position. Both Gerth and Mills were highly critical of Burnham’s excessive pessimism about the drift of society, which they compare to that of Oswald Spengler, and they expressed this dissatisfaction with his thesis by saying that “much of the cogency that Burnham’s thesis has is due to the simple fact that the form of organisation all over the world is, perhaps increasingly, bureaucratic. But the ends to which these structures will be used, who will be at their top, how they might be overthrown, and what movements will grow up into such structures – these are not considered; they are swallowed in the considerations of the ‘form’ or organisation, the demiurge of history, the ‘managerial world current’” (Gerth & Mills 1941-42:214). The problem with Burnham’s theory, as they saw it, is that it does not relate to specific historical settings or structures but to some vaguely described and ethereal movement toward increasing bureaucratisation and managerial omnipotence. He did simply not capture the fact that bureaucratic structures differ in content and in their goal attainment strategies, to utilise a concept from Parsons. Moreover, they claimed that Burnham “suffers from too much Marx: for economic determinism, control over the implements of production is the only route to power” (Gerth & Mills 1941-42:213) and for his too rigid distanciation of masses from elites. In many ways they appeared to be more in accordance with the theory of Joseph Schumpeter in this respect although they disagreed conceptually. Where Schumpeter (1926:83) appeared to equate managers and entrepreneurs, they seemed to suggest that managers were the technical people – autocrats who believed in the logic of the conveyor belt – whereas the entrepreneurs were the innovative people – liberalists who believed in liberty. So the rise of the managers would have other repercussions than the rise of the entrepreneurs. One

In G. B. Sharps article from 1960, Mills’ position on power, class and stratification is analysed with reference to respectively the Weberian and the Marxist tradition and Sharp shows how Mills is inspired by primarily the former of these traditions in sociology with his focus on class as not entirely an economic phenomenon. Sharp, however, also delineates the Marxist strand in Mills’ stratification theory.

An interesting account, which bears close resemblance to that of Mills, is Cornelius Castoriadis’ (1997) description of the bureaucratic capitalism which he believed was to be found in both Eeastern and Western countries – something which Mills also subscribed to, as we shall see later. In this there is a constant struggle between executants or order-takers, on the one hand, and directors or order-givers, on the other hand. In its bureaucratic stage of development capitalism has turned into a monstrous and uncontrollable machinery in which people constantly struggle against the irrational factors in a rational machinery. Here the battle between executants and directors is central.
would lead to a variant of bureaucracy, the other to some sort of democracy.

As we have seen above, Mills was eager to distance himself from the concept of class in his explanation of power. He was of the opinion that *elite* was a much more suitable notion as it, contrary to *ruling class*, contained non-economic factors in the narrowing down of the powerful. Therefore he turned his back on the much appraised ruling class concept at that time in order to distance himself from the too overt structural Marxist or neo-Marxist, as for example that of Ralph Miliband (1969), connotations in his analyses: “Mills...objected to the theory of a ruling class on the grounds that it was a ‘badly loaded phrase’ which presupposed what should be established empirically” (Dunleavy & O'Leary 1987:151). He also turned against the elitist psychological model of Vilfredo Pareto which solely viewed the elite as constituted either by *foxes* or *lions* due to their personal psychological habitus and their mental abilities. He was moreover critical of Pareto's notion of *elite circulation* in which foxes and lions continuously dethroned each other for a certain interval of time only to rise to prominence later again. To Mills this was an unrealistic scenario as the elite today had a much more anchored position in society. Another model he rejected was the *reputational approach* of Floyd Hunter, which lacked concreteness in its determination of where the alleged reputation leading to a top spot in society came from and who nourished it, for what purposes and with which consequences. Although Hunter's analysis is an extremely fascinating study, to Mills it will have appeared too vague and insinuating a description of the tangible expressions and locations of power. Moreover, he refuted aspects of the approaches of Michels and Mosca, although he appeared more inspired by their insights, as for example when Gaetano Mosca noted that “in all societies two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled...The first class, always the less numerous...The second class, always the more numerous class” (Mosca 1939:50). But once again we can see the notion of a class, which Mills could not accept, and Robert Michels work was rejected due to its law-like determination of the inevitability of bureaucracy and the blind worship of a *herocultus*. Mills wanted to paint a picture that was empirically informed and which belonged, not to a universalist position, but to a Weberian line of thinking that showed sensitivity to differences and nuances in history and geography.

**FIGURE 4: THE ORIGINS AND DIMENSIONS OF POWER**

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There are, as figure 4 suggests, many different approaches to the study and comprehension of the origin of power and also in this respect did Mills’ work appear to be unique in its perspective. His approach could also be termed a positional approach since it basically is the institutionalised position that a person holds which grants him or her power and not, although he was aware of the importance and relevance of these aspects, the background, status or privileges to which one can fall back upon. He noted, that “if we took the one hundred most powerful men in America, the one hundred wealthiest, and the one hundred most celebrated away from the institutional positions they now occupy, away from their resources of men and women and money, away from the media of mass communication that are now focused upon them - then they would be powerless, and poor and uncelebrated...To be celebrated, to be wealthy, to have power requires access to major institutions, for the institutional positions men occupy determine in large part their chances to have and to hold these valued experiences” (Mills in Putnam 1976:15). Power is situated in institutions and therefore in the men that occupy positions within these. Thus a power elite emerges which fundamentally rests on the integration of different institutional spheres and, as figure 5 below illustrates, the power elite is at the top of the societal hierarchy - an elitist triumvirate which is placed at the top of the pyramid of power with the people placed at the bottom only connected to the elite via a thin layer of organisations and groupings in society.

Even this thin stratum of democratic organisations and local governmental offices, which is often hailed as the true cradle of a representative democracy and a society based on voluntary associations, cannot resist the power imposed on them by the power elite and their insignificance in the political process, as it really unfolds in America, is striking. Already Weber noted this in his idea of politics as a vocation, where he noted a political expropriation (Weber 1948a:83), which meant that politics had been turned from a matter of gentlemanship into a bureaucratic and professional struggle for power. In this process, the middle layer of political organisations and associations had been crushed and power appeared as naked and intangible as a the image of a
mermaid. Mills’ idea of the concentration of power at the top, is thus perhaps not very original but what is novel is that he actually was capable of investigating and testing this, previously unconfirmed, assumption empirically.

**FIGURE 5: THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX**

The notion of the military-industrial complex was actually first coined by one of Mills’ favourite enemies, namely the President in office, Dwight Eisenhower, but Mills found the term very covering for the type of phenomenon, he wanted to describe – the interlocking of interests. What was particularly central to his notion of the military-industrial complex, which is synonymous with the power elite, is that we see a double centralisation of power, as it were, in the constitution of this Leviathan in American society. Regarding each of the components – the military, the economic and the political elite – there appears a drastic centralisation of their power base throughout these years following World War II. Small companies and businesses are changed into monolithic multinational corporations with incomes exceeding that of smaller nations in the Third World. The political milieu, which previously was characterised by internal strife within the parties and the existence of a lot of smaller parties, is gradually changed into a two party system in which there is no room for internal disagreement and the administrative staff, as we know it from the American spoils system, becomes tightly knit into the political structure. Thus no
tripartition of power exist and political power is centralised at the top. And finally the military is turned from localised and regionalised militia into one gigantic, coherent and systemic structure, with one exclusive unity of command line, which can reach even beyond the borders of the country and has a monopoly on the exertion of coercion. Furthermore, the military is suddenly represented in all the other organs within the decision-making process in order to guard national safety and security. These three centralised cores of power throughout the twentieth century also start to communicate more systematically between them and finally melts together in the military-industrial complex. Thus a course of institutionalised centralisation has taken place in American society, much to Mills’ regret: “The shape and meaning of the power elite today can be understood only when these three sets of structural trends are seen at their point of coincidence: the military capitalism of private corporations exists in a weakened and formal democratic system containing a military order already quite political in outlook and demeanor. Accordingly, at the top of this structure, the power elite has been shaped by the coincidence of interest between those who control the major means of production and those who control the newly enlarged means of violence; from the decline of the professional politician and the rise to explicit political command of the corporate chieftains and the professional warlords; from the absence of any genuine civil service of skills and integrity, independent of vested interests” (Mills 1956:276). The power elite thus becomes solidified and internally self-recruiting and Mills did not see any way out of this: He was critical of the Weberian notions of a plebiscitary democracy or a charismatic leadership; he did not believe in the Marxist idea of the revolt of the masses, and only had meagre hopes for a mobilisation of the aforementioned publics; and for the democratic dispositions and aspirations of the elite he only left badly hidden sarcasm and irony.

Hence the problem of the power elite is that it is unrepresentative of people in general, undemocratic in its decisions and immoral in its foundation – he therefore frequently termed it the higher immorality. Mills noted this in the closing paragraphs of the book on the power elite, and I quote in toto in order to visualise his rather sinister but nevertheless eloquently stated point: “The men of the higher circles are not representative; their high position is not a result of moral virtue; their fabulous success is not firmly connected with meritorious ability. Those who sit in the seats of the high and the mighty are selected and formed by the means of power, the sources of wealth, the mechanisms of celebrity, which prevail in their society. They are not men selected and formed by a civil service that is linked with the world of knowledge and sensibility. They are not men shaped by nationally responsible parties that debate openly and clearly the issues this nation now so unintelligently confronts. They are not men held in responsible check by a plurality of voluntary associations which connect debating publics with the pinnacles of decision. Commanders of power unequalled in human history, they have succeeded within the American system of organized irresponsibility.” (Mills 1956:277). There simply are no checks and balances in this system of power, where those at the top are entirely free to
practise their wills and carry out their deeds without squinting at any morality, public opposition or institutionalised responsibility. His findings did not come out of thin air and the American political scientist G. W. Domhoff (1967) several years later confirmed Mills’ findings about the interconnectedness and cohesion of the elite in American society. Clearly, this was a thorn in the side of a country which believed that it contained the true democratic virtues and the most developed democratic process.

Latent in his analysis of the power elite was the idea that the state had turned from servant to master, as a result of the emergence of the mass society mentioned above, and the subsequent decline of democracy. Already in his evaluation of Franz Neumann’s book *The Nazi Behemoth* more than ten years earlier, to which Mills paid his almost unreserved tribute and of which he was unfamiliarly approving (Mills 1942), did we see contours of his understanding of the structure of power. In Neumann’s book the reader was presented with an analysis of the structure and practice of the National Socialist regime in Germany. Mills’ approval rested primarily on the fact that Neumann, in a manner not too far from his own conclusions above, had pinpointed the existence of a power structure, a solidified fabric of people with similar interests and backgrounds at the top of the societal ladder of German society; what Neumann termed a *Behemoth*. This so-called *Behemoth* consisted of people stemming from the armed forces, the state bureaucracy, the Nazi party and the big German corporations in the heavy industries (Eldridge 1983:81) and rested on a corporate idea of the functioning of the state apparatus. Mills found this study a great source of inspiration for his own later analysis of the American power structure. Therefore Mills with his *The Power Elite* (1956) was also at odds with the more dominant liberal democratic view, amongst others represented by Dahl (1958), Parsons (1960) and Polsby (1960), who all to different extents rejected the idea of a unified and solidified ruling elite model in favour of a pluralist idea of *polyarchy* which means that power is distributed throughout society due to the foundation in representative democracy, voluntary associations and the mobilisation of the knowledgeable public. He thus launched a critique of the pluralist notions of the equal distribution of power in liberal democracies and contended that power is unequally distributed and will remain to be so until changes are made in the direction of a more participatory democratic process. Mills, although being a democratically informed person, was therefore more in line with those elitists or neo-Marxists who claimed that stratification is the order of the day locally as well as on a national scale in the U.S.A. and that an unstoppable process of power concentration in the hands of the political elite, such as friends of the President, in the financial superstratum and the administrative agencies, is set in motion. This almost irreversible process means that power rests in the pandemonium of a few thousand of a country with a population exceeding 250 million people.

On a note of criticism, it is evident that Mills was not as sophisticated in his analyses as were for example his mentor Weber or the later neo-elitist positions which contended that power is not merely the direct exercise of influence on the decision-making process but is equally present in the *mobilisation of bias*
(Schattschneider 1975), which refers to the fact that certain decisions are not made and that certain plans are not carried out, as already Bachrach and Baratz (1962) recognised in a much acclaimed study. Like Weber in his elucidation of the concept of power, Mills, however, was rather advanced in his separation between authority, manipulation and coercion (Mills 1958b), where the first is legitimised and followed voluntarily, the second is power going on behind men’s backs and the third – the last resort of power – is the raw physical dimension of power. Mills also had a Weberian notion of power, when he stated that “by the powerful we mean, of course, those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it” (Mills 1956:9). Max Weber, in a memorable definition, separated power and authority in saying that “‘power’ [Macht] is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance” (Weber 1947:152). Whereas authority had to be legitimate in order to be carried out, power, on the other hand, had no such demand to be legitimised. The connection, at least on the spiritual level, between Mills and Weber is also evident in a discussion of power and rationality.

Weber claimed that the powerful, personified as the bureaucrats, contained an instrumental rationality and not a value-rational orientation. Mills probably agreed with that when he spoke of the men with rationality but without reason as those at the top of the pyramid of power who were more calculable than humanly intelligent, who possessed a hard-core rationality but no responsible reason: “It is not too much to say that in the extreme development, the chance to reason of most men is destroyed, as rationality increases and its locus, its control, is moved from the individual to the big-scale organization. There is then rationality without reason” (Mills 1959a:170). When reason evaporates into some kind of ethereal phenomenon only tangible to poets, politically enlightened social scientists or polemical critics of society and when those in command of these big-scale organizations are equipped with the logic of an instrumental rationality, society is faced with a problem. They may have had a goal and some means to achieve this but quickly the means obviously took over from the goals which became rationalised for the sake of rationalisation. Social philosopher, George Friedman, once stated in similar fashion that while the profoundly bureaucratised “Auschwitz was a rational place...it was not a reasonable one” (Friedman in Ritzer 1992:283).¹⁸ Both Mills and Friedman echo a concern with

¹⁸ As we saw above when discussing the origin of many of Mills’ ideas, we touched upon the inspiration he found in the writings of the classical elite theorists of Mosca, Pareto and Michels. They, like Mills, were well aware of the irrationality behind the rational and vice versa but unlike Mills, the former two did not seem to understand the value of a democratic check and balance on leadership. To them, Pareto and Mosca, an elite, and especially an aristocratic elite, was not merely an inevitable empirical phenomenon but equally a desirable normative superstratum on society which could prevent it from falling apart or giving in to socialist notions of collectivity and expropriation of land and the means of production. Michels, however, was more in the same line of thinking as Mills since they both championed the ideal of a participatory democracy in which people felt responsible for upholding the process and for the outcomes of this active democratic decision-making process.
the fact that rationality, although often regarded in this way by sociologists, is not synonymous with reason (what German philosophers since Hegel has acknowledged by differentiating Vernunft from Verstand).\footnote{Mikael Carleheden (1996:156) shows how the Hegelian notion of Vernunft refers to more objectivist notions of rationality while Verstand entails a somewhat subjectivist notion of reason.} Earlier Mills had noted that “what is reason for one man is rationalization for another. The variable is the accepted vocabulary of motives, the ultimates of (justificatory) discourse, of each man’s dominant group about whose opinions he cares” (Mills 1940:910). The men with rationality but without reason were the instrumental, but not ethical sophisticated new conservatives in the power elite. These were the ones who were in control and who determined the course of American history as well as world events.

As we can clearly see, a theory of conspiracy is lurking all around Mills’ theorising on power and sometimes it appears as if he could not see social reality as it actually was merely for conspiracy and hidden power structures: “In a phrase reminiscent of Veblen, Mills argues that history is going on behind men’s backs and that the main drift in the American political economy is that which is being quietly planned and orchestrated by the sophisticated conservatives. This is perhaps the closest Mills gets in his writings to a conspiratorial view of history” (Eldridge 1983:68). The sophisticated conservatives were the embodiment of everything that was rotten in the state of affairs in the U.S.A. The main problem, as well as one of the reasons why they could keep on occupying power positions, was the fact that “American conservatives have not set forth any conservative ideology. They are conservative in mood and conservative in practice but they have no conservative ideology. They have no connection with the fountainheads of modern conservative thought. In becoming aware of their power they have not elaborated that awareness into a conscious ideology...In the meantime, political decisions are occurring, as it were, without benefit of political ideas; mind and reality are two separate realms; America - a conservative country without any conservative ideology - appears before the world a naked and arbitrary power” (Mills 1954:28-31). Without ideology, a goal and a reason behind action, decisions and motivations become emptied of content and appear as power for the sake of power, a rationalised means that only falls back upon itself. If the powerful really are these heartless and ignorant beings, as Mills claim they are, they cannot be held accountable for their decisions that often are detrimental to public welfare.

Mills’ theory of power was used not merely as a sociological tool in pointing to the actual distribution of power but equally as a political instrument in order to make it clear to the reader, that this differential access to influence and decision-making was unfair and had to be rectified. Mills’ power studies are similar to what could be termed bottom-up investigations. He was a kind of whistleblower on those who thought themselves immune to public criticism and sociological scrutiny. He was also a spokesman for the masses against the mass
society and he therefore started to appear as an advocate for those struck by adversity and misfortune with his image of life as a trap (Mills 1968) and a reality going on behind people’s backs. Mills was clearly on the side of the downtrodden and the underdogs in society, the ordinary citizen so to speak - very much in the same critical way as his contemporary American novelist Nelson Algren who, in books like *Never Come Morning* (1942), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) and *Walk on the Wild Side* (1956), also pinpointed the more sinister side of the coin of the extremely self-confident and victorious American society in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s and depicted the hoodlums, pimps, the ludomaniacs and prostitutes in the new urban and industrial areas. Algren in many respects poetically described what Mills in sociological terms also focused on, namely the petite bourgeois self-delusion that everything is as it seems to be and that things were not all that bad. Let us now turn to some of these aspects of social reality and power that Mills also paid attention to, namely how power structures did not stop at national boundaries.

**Mills as an inverted elite theorist (III): Power and the international arena**

It was not only the local or the national level that interested Mills in his analyses of power and its obviously unequal distribution. Nothing was too big for him, as Wakefield (1971) noted in his memoir of Mills, and he therefore also looked to the international horizon to investigate how power made the world go around and he therefore decided to wrestle with the powerful on a larger scale. It is not premature already here to point to the fact that Mills deep down was an anti-imperialist if there ever was one.

Already in his books on *The New Men of Power* (1948a) and *The Power Elite* (1956) did Mills begin to contemplate the international aspects of power and how power is exercised on a trans-national basis. He noted: “To have peace and not war, the drift toward a war economy, as facilitated by the moves and demands of the sophisticated conservatives, must be stopped; to have peace without slump, the tactics and policies of the practical right must be overcome. The political and economic power of both must be broken. The power of these giants of main drift is both economically and politically anchored; both unions and an independent labor party are needed to struggle effectively” (Mills 1948a:261). He clearly saw the connection of the distribution of power on the national scene and the politics of war on the international arena and his analyses were clearly coloured by his own pacifist conscience. This was the backdrop against which Mills unfolded his understanding of history in which the military had played a crucial role in the formation of states and the internal as well as external stability of these states. In the post-World War II period this military interference with politics was more evident than ever. Especially due to the invention of the A-bomb had the power of the military in the decision-making process increased which also affected the civil-military relationship: “Peace is no longer serious; only war is serious. Every man and every nation is either friend or foe, and the idea of enmity becomes mechanical, massive, and without genuine passion” (Mills 1956:206). International affairs are, in his rather realist
view, run by warlords and warmongers who take no interest in the consequences of their staged conflicts and pantomime of power. Furthermore, they were not capable – or interested for that matter – in the personal consequences of their decisions on ordinary people who had to live with fear, anxiety and distrust. In Mills’ view the U.S.A. were just as responsible for the maintenance of this climate of anxiety and threat of mutual destruction as the East Bloc countries. With his focus on the imperialist tendencies of American foreign policy, as we shall return to below in our discussion of his polemical tour de force in *The Causes of World War III* (Mills 1958a), Mills was by many of the so-called sophisticated conservatives as well as many of the more right-wing oriented people seen as the traitor in the midst of American society which in the wake of World War II had begun to regard itself as the policeman or umpire of international conflicts. Mills’ overtly questioned this role with his writings, not only the role performed by the U.S.A. but by any super power, in which arbitrary and naked power was seen, not merely as illegitimate, but equally as an encroachment on and an injustice to humanity.

Mills’ illustration of power did not stop at the formal distribution of power on the more international level, but also dealt with more or less subtle aspects of how power was immanent in relations between people coming from different national and cultural backgrounds and how some strangers were regarded as intruders to American culture and marginalised economically as well as physically. In *The Puerto Rican Journey* (Mills, Senior & Goldsen 1950), which he co-authored with Clarence Senior and Rose Goldsen and which was a true product of his time at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, the theme was ethnic immigration and Mills’ highlighted the situation of the Caribbean immigrants in New York and how they had been lured to the U. S. A. with big promises about prosperity and a land of milk and honey, only on arrival to discover that their high hopes could not be realised and that they were condemned to a shabby existence at the bottom of the pyramid of power. The American dream was nothing but a Potemkin village to these people in need to whom a life of liberty and prosperity was as intangible as the celestial firmament: “While the tolerance of different ethnic life styles may be a good liberal doctrine, Mills and Senior suggest that the reality of the immigrant’s experience is something else. This is because, despite the officially espoused values of America as the land of the free, which provides a welcome to the outcast and the downtrodden, there remains a migration rhetoric, used by the press and some politicians, which defines the new arrivals, however they are, as a threat and as undesirably different. The reality of life becomes one where there are sharp ethnic conflicts and a struggle to survive at the margins of

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20 The book about the Puerto Rican community in New York actually caused much upset at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at the University of Columbia, primarily because Mills according to evil tongues supposedly was not equipped to carry out such a comprehensive empirical study and due to fact that the internal division of labour at the institute was violated with the study. However, the study also marked as sort of temporary truce with Paul Lazarsfeld, at least for a while, as Mills by taking on the study took a work burden off his shoulders.
society where the American dream of these immigrants is only an absurd fantasy” (Eldridge 1983:92). What a striking resemblance to the currently overheated and disproportional Danish debate on immigration and refugees! The significance of this work, which deals with power relations in connection to the ethnic dimension, goes well beyond its empirical and methodological considerations and is also a theoretically informed piece of scholarly innovation (Bhadra 1989:10).

The study consisted of 1113 interviews with Puerto Ricans, observation studies and statistical analyses of their economic situation regarding work, income, housing, status etc. and Mills’ own contributions as the senior responsible researcher was primarily to couple these with theoretical insights (Tilman 1984:81). Mills thus appeared as a critic of racial discrimination, already at a time when most American academics were not aware of the latency of this insidious problem, and as an anti-racist who viewed every man as equal and his humanism in this respect was boundless as he detested the conditions offered these new American citizens whose citizenship was nothing but a hoax: “The Puerto Rican journey to New York ends in the circumscribed worlds of Spanish Harlem and Morrisania. Neither these worlds, nor the economic transits to them, necessarily spur the migrants to take those identifications that form the classic pattern of American migration; it is as likely that they will continue to feel estranged, except for the few who gain solidarities with other thinned-out Latin American groups. In their slum dwellings, the migrants, especially those of Negro racial type, become pupils and victims of ethnic conflict. For the women particularly, models of adaptation to American life are not readily available or easily come by” (Mills, Senior & Goldsen 1950:156).

As Mills interestingly points out, even within the lower segments of an already stratified society there appears to be differences, inequality and marginalisation – something which even Marxist analyses did not focus upon at this particular time and which was not conceptualised until the appearance of Dahrendorf’s discussion of the existence of an underclass. American society, with its democratising notion of the melting pot and cultural pluralism is not capable, indeed not interested, in altering the conditions and the plight of these people.

Mills’ conclusion is basically that America is not what it appears to be on the surface - a representative of democracy, civilised behaviour, liberty, equality and prosperity. On the contrary, America is governed by the trinity of political upper-class, militant, plutocratic limpets whose only ambition is to stay in power and to be in control of national affairs as well as to set the international agenda and to uphold an asymmetrical relationship to the client nations particularly in the Spanish Caribbean (Eldridge 1983:90). These points were also stressed and repeated over and over again in different connections in his embellishment of the Cuban revolution (Mills 1960b) and his critique of the military metaphysics in the description of the drift, and sometimes also thrust, towards a world-wide catastrophe (Mills 1958a). But a state of cold war did not only exist in the real world, as it were, but extended well beyond the boundaries of this and into the more specialised academic realm of sociology in which Mills resided.
Students, as well as teachers it must be noted, of sociology often find *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959a) and its references to different paradigms within American sociology at that particular point in time, difficult to come to grips with and as a somewhat inaccessible and messy piece of scholarly ideas. Therefore the following will be an attempt to outline his argument as simple as possible without too many excursions or departures from the straight path he tried to develop. Before we move into the details of Mills’ sociological universe we, however, have to imagine ourselves being a social scientist in an environment dominated by solidified paradigms, stoic personalities and the presence of a power vacuum in sociology. On the political scene, American society was also at this time marked by consensus and a desire to maintain the *status quo* for whatever price had to be paid. It was in these stagnant waters of political McCarthyism and sociological obscurantism (Wilner 1985), that Mills decided to create some kind of critical sociological sensation and it was in these somewhat self-sufficient circles that the spectacle of the idea of a *sociological imagination* saw the light of day.

**The Sociological Imagination: The broken promise and the new vow**

The argument of the book is already outlined in its opening chapter on the *promise*. What social scientists are doing today in the 1950’s, in Mills’ opinion, is an insult to the demands the classical sociologists put on their work. The people claiming to be the avant-garde in sociology are failures in honouring the promise of the academic ancestors of sociology – Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, Veblen and others. What was the content of this promise? According to Mills, one of the main components contained in the promise was that the knowledge one discovers, which is the product of empirical research and theorising, appears to be relevant to people and society, that sociology is a discipline to which one can have certain expectations and demands. The major benchmark for measuring success or failure in respect to this promise is that people can see themselves in the work carried out by social scientists and that the picture that is painted has some resemblance to reality and is not a complete distortion. To Mills, however, the yardstick is not to be one of closeness or distance to *truth* understood as an absolute intellectual entity, which was the domain of many of the positivists (Jacobsen 1999), but was more directed at an enhancement of “*that quality of mind which fully perceives the intimate connection between the private and the public, between personal experience and the broader typicalities and specificities of this time and that place*” (Wrong 1976:21). To utilise ones’ sociological imagination, thus, can in a simplified manner be boiled down to the fact, that one is capable and indeed interested in seeing individual life in connection to social and structural properties while acknowledging that the interconnectedness of these is subjected to time and place, to history and
geography, that life is played out in a vertigo of relativity. Therefore a historical dimension coupled with comparative studies and an integrated agency-structure model is what is at the centre of this special type of imagination. To Mills it would be preposterous to claim that this sociological imagination could only be possessed by professionally schooled sociologists, and was it not for his refutation of this academic imperialism, a book of Mills’ calibre would hardly have caused a similar uproar in sociology as it actually did. *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959a) is, however, still a readable book, this cannot be stressed enough, but more so for its original prose and hard-core critical perspective than for its substantial and systematic approach to social science and coherent and logical argumentation.

Mills’ ideas about social science were of course already present in many of his earlier writings about power, pragmatism, alienation, the composition of social reality and immigrant workers but it was in *The Sociological Imagination* that the picture, however imperfect, was most explicitly painted. As we saw above, this imagination, that Mills claimed the classical theorists possessed and which had been lost in American sociology in his lifetime, contained the somewhat trained ability to look beyond the scope of one-dimensionality and to see things in relation to each other, to see them as existing in a sort of dialectical figuration. He put it this way: “That imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of human self – and to see the relations between these two” (Mills 1959a:14-15). In other words, it is the ability to understand that nothing exists which does not in some way or other influence other phenomena or is itself influenced by them. It is also a way of looking at the world in which one is capable of flexibility of observation, that one is not looking from the same perspective all of the time but, as a painter of a multidimensional phenomenon, moves around it, sometimes squatting and at other times standing on one’s toes, in order to grasp every single bit of information one can possibly obtain. Only in a perspective that pays tribute to such an understanding of social reality can the flow and change of society been analysed and adequately theorised. This is the broken promise that Mills wants to rectify and his avowal to reassert as the monumental raison d’être of sociology is at the centre of the rest of the book.

This book, which is the most popular among Mill’s numerous publications, reached a formidable position as runner-up to the honour as the best book in sociology this century (ISA Bulletin 1998:17) only second to Max Weber’s equally impressive *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The book, however, has a certain American flavour to it but was inspired by a European line of thinking and from a navel contemplating national angle, it is interesting to note that the upstart of his project on the development of a critical perspective to the social science studies, which culminated in the book on the sociological imagination,
actually took place in Denmark. The Danish connection, as we could call it, were some seminars held in an overtly positivist environment at the University of Copenhagen throughout 1957 (LEO-Group 1997:3), and Mills, although he perhaps after the seminars was more clarified about what and whom to criticise instead of being clear about his own critical position, still pays tribute to his Danish colleagues (Mills 1959a:227). In order to come around all the fascinating aspects of the sociological imagination, I will in the subsequent presentation follow Mills almost by the letter and eventually try and sum up what is to be understood as a sociological imagination\textsuperscript{21} and perhaps more importantly, what it does not entail. We can begin our journey by asking: Who has failed in utilising their sociological imagination, who have been foolish enough to let the founding fathers of their discipline down? Who have been so careless as to throw aboard the wisdom of the sociological wizards handed down from generation to generation? According to Mills primarily two camps in sociology were to blame, and therefore The Sociological Imagination is an angry book (Scimecca 1977:105), a book which had the purpose to debunk, criticise, castigate and provoke those traitors of the sociological imagination.

The critique of grand theory

According to Mills, contemporary sociology was marked by two camps, or two styles of social scientific research, which both were almost impenetrable fortresses of sociological authority and oracular wisdom. These two styles, which Mills heavily criticised, were respectively the molecular and the macroscopic, where the former could be studies of, say, bus behaviour in Chicago to exclaim something about the nature of the entire spectrum of social reality, and the latter would be claims to universal truths through the construction of grand models such as pattern variables or AGIL schemes. Mills rejected both positions as insufficient in their scope and nowhere did this critique appear more fully and with poignant clarity than in his masterpiece The Sociological Imagination (Mills 1959a).

First, Mills flung himself mercilessly at the dominant figure in American sociology at this time, namely Harvard professor Talcott

\textsuperscript{21} Ever since the publication of Mills’ Sociological Imagination (1959) there has been a virtual dissemination of the concept of imagination to capture the core of the self-understanding of specific disciplines and illustrative examples can be found in the titles of books within the marketing world as in Oliver Williams’ The Moral Imagination, James White’s Legal Imagination in the sphere of law, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum’s Gothic Imagination in studies of literature and arts and within the fields of historical, political and anthropological studies utilisation of the word imagination in book titles has flourished. Imagination has a ring of mystery and the esoteric to it, something which Mills’ was well aware of when he chose it as the title of his academic masterpiece. The proliferation of the concept of imagination is noteworthy since Mills never really placed any substance in it. This was pinpointed by Tom Bottomore, who stated: “This notion of 'imagination', although it is evidently of crucial importance since it gives the book its title, is barely discussed and never elucidated” (Bottomore 1960:293). This is, perhaps, one of the major flaws in his masterpiece.
Parsons. Without going into detail with his work, Parsons’ main project was to create a coherent and encompassing frame for the understanding of social phenomena and his work can be seen as an attempt to overcome the Hobbesian problem of order – how is social order at all possible (Mills 1959a:44). In a rather passive fashion the concepts he developed were of a very general and universal character, with no ambition radically to change the world or to question the composition of social reality. He could thus be seen as a representative of the conservative approach in sociology, or what Mills (1972c) elsewhere identified as the social pathologists, who focused their attention on social problems and pathologies with maladjusted individuals or groups in order to create social cohesion, social regulation and control (Deutsch 1970:86). Sociology should therefore not stop short of an explanation of such phenomena but should equally try and look to the level of social systems in order to find out what was wrong and how it could be adjusted or rectified, not by radical reform or revolutions but within the present functioning social structure. Parsons although being a social pathologist was, however, not political but attempted to work out how society functioned and what were the prerequisites for social order. To Mills such a position was easily, almost too easily it appears, debunked as it was directed towards a reactionary approach to both sociology and to society contrary to the basic premises of Mills’ own stance. He termed this approach to social science grand theory, hereby referring in a mischievous manner both to the illusory grandeur of the project these sociologists fiddled with, the grandness of the scope of their theorising and their grandiose ambitions and aspirations they seemed to hold.

Mills’ attack on the macroscopic, structural functionalist grand theory of Parsons was of a twofold character. First, he attacked Parsons’ prose and second, he attacked Parsons’ theoretical angle. It was in the former that his surgical skills came to prominence in the almost anatomical dissection of Parsons’ sociological vocabulary and tortuous language - what has recently been termed one of the most entertaining and viperous symbolic executions in the history of sociology (Strandbakken 1996). Unfortunately, to go into this specific translation of Parsons’ language and Mills’ rather peripheral dissection of syntax and grammar, would take up too much space, however humorous Mills is capable of doing it. Suffice to say, that Mills is able in two and at the most three sentences to sum up what Parsons in an opaque fashion has to say in two or three pages and he notes: “I suppose, one could translate the 555 pages of ‘The Social System’ into about 150 pages of straight-forward English” (Mills 1959a:31).22 Mills’ devastating critique of the verbosity of structural

For the record, and in order to do justice to Parsons, it must be noted that Mills is not only
functionalist terminology is a very good illustration of how he himself regarded sociology as a discipline as a down to earth and humble attempt at understanding the nature of social reality and not as something deeply esoteric or overtly technical. Had he lived today, Mills would most likely have been beheading the heads, to use an apt phrase from the Italian author Italo Calvino, of contemporary sociology like Bourdieu, Baudrillard, Bauman, Luhmann and Habermas for making sociological theorising an insurmountable experience to ordinary people and the property of the few by sticking to their complicated arguments and suffocating prose.

Of much more interest to us here is therefore Mills’, equally head-on, critique of the substance of Parsons’ sociology. As we noted above, Parsons deals with the problem or order, or how it can be that men, who are basically nothing but civilised mammals, refrain from using fraud and violence in their quest for individual satisfaction and how is it possible that society does not fall apart from the pursuit of self-interests. Parsons’ theory is very detailed on this account and is scattered across several books, but his most general answer is, that society is capable of neutralising these instinctual habits in the creation of a coherent social order through the internalisation of shared values (Wrong 1976:25). In this way, biological and aggressive man is turned into passive and civilised social man. Mills’ basic critique centres around the fact that Parsons’ theory is too theoretical, as it were, and never is brought into discussions or illustrations of real life examples and therefore Parsons is not able to represent a real image of reality. Reality, according to Mills, is not necessarily characterised by conformity and consensus but contains the seed of potential conflict and antagonism particularly between those in power and those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Parsons simply misunderstands the true nature of social reality and social relations and mistakes his models of this with how things are out there in the real world – his fiction is turned into fact in a monstrous theoretical model of society and the many points of intersection binding it together. Mills criticised this type of sociology and the people practising it for dealing “with total social structures in a comparative way; their scope is that of the world historian; they attempt to generalize types of historical phenomena, and in a systematic way, to connect the various institutional spheres of a society, and them relate them to prevailing types of men and women” (Mills 1972d:554). Although this may have an echo to it of the ideal of a sociological imagination, as mentioned above, this is, however, not the case. The Parsonian macroscopic sociology imposes the institutional structures on their subject matter, the lives of men and women, instead of seeing them in relation to each other as analytical equivalents.

On the overall Parsons’ theory is criticised for being embedded within a conservative and reactionary frame of understanding (Bhadra 1989:20), and for
being a representative of a branch of sociology which takes pride in being overly formalistic and excessively preoccupied with theoretical and conceptual development. Therefore Mills’ has no sympathy for this kind of sociology, and their differences could not be solved, politically or theoretically. As Dennis Wrong rightly stated, “no true dialogue takes place between the two men, no dialectic of their ideas result – they succeed merely in negating one another” (Wrong 1976:27). Hereby, I am not intending to claim that a viable alternative, a dialectic and eclectic solution, to their positions cannot be imagined but merely that such a compromise is still found wanting in contemporary sociology; an answer to the question of how social order is possible without having to resort to power or indoctrination when it is potentially as well as actually undermined by conflicts and power struggles? This question will for now be left blowing in the wind, as it exceeds the scope of the present piece of work.

**The critique of abstracted empiricism**

Mills’ was not a man who was close-fisted with his criticisms and he therefore did not stop at the assault on grand theory but was equally determined and enduring, if not even more so, in his attack on another dominant paradigm within sociology, namely what he termed abstracted empiricism. So “while Mills reflects a certain lightheartedness about grand theory, he is deadly serious about abstracted empiricism” (Horowitz 1983:95). This attack, although not as viciously stated or personally directed as that of grand theory, may therefore well have been more hurtful as it was directed against one of Mills’ close colleagues, Paul Lazarsfeld, who was the leader of The Bureau of Applied Social Research where Mills worked, and Mills probably broke an unwritten rule in American sociology as well as anywhere else not to back-stab your superiors. Apart from this particular person, Mills implicitly also criticised the so-called natural science trend in sociology as promoted by amongst others neopositivist George Lundberg, who wanted to mould sociology after the criteria of the physical sciences (Jacobsen 1999). He wrote: “In our search for a general model of inquiry, we have usually seized upon the supposed Method of Physical Science, and we have often fetishized it” (Mills 1972d:553). In Mills’ view, such natural scientific attempts were incapable of understanding both the nature of society as well as the function of the social sciences.

Generally, his attack on abstracted empiricism can be summarised in three points. First, he was extremely critical of the inherent tendency to cultivate psychologism in all methodologies and therefore to focus on the individual level as something of a black box model, or what Martin Hollis (1977) termed the plastic man as someone who is merely reaction without reflection. That the individual is at the centre of attention, and that this individual is used as a point of departure for understanding the broader aspects of social reality misses out several important points. In connection to this point, there is also a touch of psychologism in the misunderstanding that the researcher is regarded as a knowledgeable and objective individual unfettered by interests other than those relevant in the research process and that science is not a collective but an
individual task. Second, that those practising abstracted empiricism, a term analogous to what Wendy Griswold termed *provisional positivism*, apparently were keen on making a fetish out of quantitative and statistical analyses and therefore would not be able to utilise theoretical concepts or frameworks into which their findings could be placed. And finally, that abstracted empiricism, due to its rooted nature in methodology and empirical research, would be an easy target for sponsored and guided research and interests based on officialdom, authority and top-down power. Abstracted empiricism can then become a practical inroad for specialised social interests into the realm of sociology, an *empirical-analytical interest of knowledge* in the Habermasian sense (Habermas 1971), as it were, and thus be used for purposes not in accordance with its intention.

Where the grand theorists to Mills appeared to be too obsessed with terminology and conceptual schemas, the abstracted empiricists were almost entirely preoccupied with the technicalities of mathematics and trivial calculations. Although he was clearly not satisfied with their general contribution to sociology as a discipline, he, however, did not blame them for their apparently perpetual struggle with mathematics and problem-solving and here he followed Weber who once stated: “No sociologist should think himself too good, even in his old age, to make tens of thousands of quite trivial computations in his head and perhaps for months at a time” (Weber 1948b:135). To Mills this was not something to point the finger of scorn at but instead something to be encouraged. However, he believed that much of the work carried out by these abstracted empiricists took this point a bit too far and fetishised methodology and epistemological considerations instead of pointing to answers within theoretical frameworks. Answers automatically leading only to new answers were of course a stimulating activity but if it appeared to be a circular process with no visible end result perhaps one’s time and efforts could have been utilised more productively. And if the answers were of no social relevance, why ask them in the first place and Mills thus stated that “it is evident that an empiricism as cautious and rigid as abstracted empiricism eliminates the great social problems and human issues of our time from inquiry” (Mills 1959a:73). Abstracted empiricism is not merely the domain of molecular narcissists but is equally the territory of socially ignorant researchers.

Where grand theory above was criticised for drawing too general and abstract a picture of the social world, abstracted empiricism was by Mills blamed for doing the exactly opposite; to focus on tiny details and fragments of the whole. He said of this latter tradition, that “if we break society into tiny ‘factors’, naturally we shall then need quite a few of them to account for something and we can never be sure that we have hold of them all” (Mills 1959a:86). Statistics and methods torn apart from theory, codings and calculations with no reference to concepts and more general frameworks, surveys with no basis in social reality and social structure are all emptied of content and are sociologically useless instruments. A similar critique was implicit, if not explicitly pronounced, in Mills’ lectures when he travelled around the world as when he during his visit to Denmark in 1957 agitated...
against the sociology of professor Kaare Halvor Svalastoga, which appeared as a mirror image of Lazarsfeld’s abstracted empiricism with an almost excessive preoccupation with methodology, theoretical statistics and a positivist manifesto (Falk & Madsen 1996:260). Mills, however, was also full of admiration for some of the aspects of Lazarsfeld’s metasociology: “This attraction for clarification and clarity of language is undoubtedly one of the dominant traits in Lazarsfeld’s intellectual personality. Even C. Wright Mills, who in his ‘Sociological Imagination’ is highly critical of Lazarsfeld’s work, concedes this point. He says, with a touch of admiration, that one has to acknowledge this as one of Lazarsfeld’s qualities: every proposition has a perfect clarity and he has probably never written a phrase which is not perfectly intelligible” (Boudon 1980:81). Mills’ own reconstruction of the language of Parsons, as we saw previously, was perhaps an attempt at gaining the same level of clarity and logical consistency as that of Lazarsfeld? In figure 6 below, I have tried to point to some of the perspectives in Mills’ critique of respectively grand theory and abstracted empiricism well knowing that the schematic account is by no means exhaustive for his more detailed account.

**FIGUR 6: CONTENT OF GRAND THEORY AND ABSTRACTED EMPIRICISM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GRAND THEORY</th>
<th>ABSTRACTED EMPIRICISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXPONENTS</strong></td>
<td>Talcott Parsons and the deductive structural functionalist theory</td>
<td>Paul Lazarsfeld and the inductive empiricist methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE IDEA OF SOCIAL SCIENCE</strong></td>
<td>Sociology consists of model-building and concept formation</td>
<td>Sociology consists of the careful gathering of empirical data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE IDEA OF SOCIETY</strong></td>
<td>Society is generally viewed as a system that is maintained through certain structures which perform specific functions</td>
<td>Society is regarded as the sum of people and the observable actions they are carrying out throughout their lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OTHER ASSUMPTIONS</strong></td>
<td>Sociology ought to paint a general picture with focus on the universally present features of social life</td>
<td>Sociology ought to try and assimilate to the natural scientific mode of scientific inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. WRIGHT MILLS’ CRITIQUE</strong></td>
<td>Grand theory is sociology emptied of empirical evidence</td>
<td>Abstracted empiricism is sociology emptied of theoretical considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grand theory is too verbose in its use of language</td>
<td>Abstracted empiricism is too technical in its use of methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Mills the sociology of the 1950’s had led down the great
expectations and failed to fulfil the promise given by classical and inter-war sociology to strive toward relevance and quality (Strandbakken 1996:277) and that particularly grand theorising and abstracted empiricism were the guilty parties. His general evaluation, thus, is that theory and research ought to be united instead of being torn apart by these camps or paradigms. Grand theorising and abstracted empiricism has taken these two specialised, and inseparable, areas to the extremes and thereby rendered apart the field of sociology as Mills illustrates by saying: “Like grand theory, abstracted empiricism seizes upon one juncture in the process of work and allows it to dominate the mind. Both are withdrawals from the tasks of the social sciences. Considerations of method and theory are of course essential to work upon our tasks, but in these two styles they have become hindrances: the methodological inhibition stands parallel to the fetishism of the Concept” (Mills 1959a:50). Thus, both grand theory and abstracted empiricism are incapable of presenting social reality as it, according to Mills, can be found somewhere out there and “they may [both] be understood as insuring that we do not learn too much about men and society – the first by formal and cloudy obscurationism, the second by formal and empty ingenuity” (Mills 1959a:75). Mills wanted to mend this mistake and to invoke a new sense of totality into social scientific research with a renascent interest in combining theory and research, ontology and epistemology, methodology and a practical concern with solving social problems instead of neutralising them within dogmatic and rigid research and reactionary social policies. He did this rather convincingly in his critique of Parsons and Lazarsfeld, but as we all know, it is easier to criticise than to pose a positive alternative theory and explanation, and, “it must be added...that Mills’ victory over both schools is scored somewhat too easily. Not all of the Grand Theory school and not all of the results of abstracted empiricism are quite as absurd or illogical as Mills makes out; if they were, their triumph in and hold over a large part of the academic community would not have been possible” (Aptheker 1960:100). So did Mills really pose something of lasting value to sociology instead of the debunked and massacred bogeys? Did he really contribute to the development of a unique perspective or was he merely a critic?

Re-imagining the sociological imagination

Mills actually linked the development and dominant position of respectively grand theory and abstracted empiricism with broader social developments and saw in them a danger of an increased bureaucratisation tendency: "It was Mills’ contention that the abstract empiricism of research technicians and the empty rationalism of speculative or grand theorists were each expressions of the bureaucratic ethos that has permeated the higher learning. These bureaucratic styles of research he characterized as either safe by trivialization or empty through formalization” (Hodges 1969:327). In this he was in line with both Weber and Veblen who had also pointed to this development on earlier occasions.
We previously presented the sociological imagination in some detail but will now try to go into some of the most central aspects that makes it particularly interesting to us today? To re-imagine the sociological imagination is to use a double optics on the subject of sociology – to deconstruct the already deconstructed. According to Mills the sociological imagination was something tangible and fundamental, not something esoteric or ethereal. As already the phrase *sociological imagination* indicates, we have to be imaginative in our work and our perspective on society. What does this entail? And if, as we saw above, the sociological imagination is highly critical to contemporary uses of theory and methods, what relation to these does it then focus on and what understanding does it itself propose?

Mills particularly writes about this important point: “Method has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. ‘Theory’ has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination” (Mills 1959a:120). As we can see, the sociological imagination is proposing an alternative to both grand theory and abstracted empiricism in that it rejects miniature methodology that merely concentrates on the latest fads in sociology as well as being too technical in its theoretical opacity in terminology and communication. Methodology is to pose the right questions and then to seek answers without being too preoccupied by how we are to arrive at these answers. Take as an example of this, Mills’ own more or less sporadic and indiscriminate utilisation of different research techniques without being too concerned with the proper combination or the usual procedure. Theory has to do with assigning the right concept to the right phenomenon and with being interested in using conceptualisations with a certain degree of generalisation. Take as an example of this, Mills’ own use of general concepts such as the *power elite* and *white collar workers*; these concepts are, although being almost neologisms, easy to engage in research, general in application but still refer to a specific historical and cultural settings. And because of his rough eloquence Mills was capable of constructing innumerable of such concepts that could be used directly in analyses of reality.

So what is the sociological imagination? Mills tries to capture the essence
in the possibly most famous phrase from his masterpiece, by saying that “the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” (Mills 1959a:5). In my own more humble words, the sociological imagination means that sociologists are sensitive to the fact that the life of individuals and the history of societies are inextricably linked to each other, and that this link is not always immediately visible. But if we are armed with the sociological imagination, this link will become crystal clear and we will be able to understand connections previously hidden or impenetrable and be capable of explaining to people their lives and their problems more fully and adequately.

Therefore one of the most central aspects of the sociological imagination has to do with the separation of troubles from issues (Mills 1959a:8-9), the public versus the private, and not just a separation but perhaps more importantly the ability to see the connection between the two. The former has to do with “the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others...a trouble is a private matter” (Mills 1959a:15). Troubles are concerned with how the inner lives of individuals are shaped by outer social structures and how this has an impact on this individual’s behaviour. Issues, on the other hand, are concerned with the structural level and how this is constructed and maintained: “Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of a historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter” (Mills 1959a:15). Mills’ own example of how the sociological imagination can be utilised is the case of unemployment, and he shows how what appears to be an individual problem and the cause of much private distress actually is linked to the broader structures of society, and equally how a structural economic problem like unemployment is simultaneously the reason behind depressing daily struggle for many people, how the individual’s life is intimately connected to processes beyond his own reach. When contemplating this we must be aware, something which Weber also recognised, that many troubles as well as issues have an economic cause and Mills stated that “both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the
society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals” (Mills 1959a:15). Issues are, in short, politicised troubles and troubles are the intimately felt repercussions of structural and economic changes in wider society. In this way, the sociological imagination appears as an early attempt at integrating the individual level with the structural level and create some kind of hybrid in the form of an undefined Giddensian structuration theory or Mertonian theory of the middle range. His attempt at integrating the individual and the collective level by focusing on their point of intersection in particular decisions of social importance, however, was criticised by William Spinrad, who stated that “his interest was in the ‘life’ and ‘death’ decisions, not the vast majority of political-economic-social acts that daily affect people’s lives” (Spinrad 1966:52). Mills’ megalomania made him focus on world events as the dynamic of social transformation and this meant that his focus on daily decisions was skewed in the direction of the big picture.

As we saw above, Mills wanted to instil in sociologists the desire to ask even the most trivial questions, to make them wonder about social reality and its constitution. Sociologists ought all to be inquisitive Toms, to whom nothing seemed too obvious and nothing appeared too obscure. Only by asking questions can problems – either understood as troubles or issues - be illuminated an eventually solved. Make their troubles your issues and vice versa could almost be the manifesto of the sociological imagination. It ought, however, to be an imperative for the sociologist to ask certain questions: “Whatever else sociology may be, it is the result of consistently asking: (1) What is the meaning of this – whatever we are examining – for our society as a whole, and what is this social world like? (2) What is the meaning of this for the types of men and women that prevail in this society? And (3) how does this fit into the historical trend of our times, and in what direction does this main drift seem to be carrying us? No matter how small-scale what he is examining, the sociologist must ask such questions about it or he has abdicated the classic sociological endeavour” (Mills 1972e:572). These are the central questions of respectively social ontology, social hermeneutics and social prognostics and are essential in a concrete utilisation of the sociological imagination and only if these questions are asked and answered the sociologist has done his job satisfactorily.

**Intellectual craftsmanship and how to be a good sociologist**

The above has indicated that to be a good sociologist is to use the sociological imagination and we saw examples of how this can be done. Mills uses the last chapter of his book to urge us to become sociological craftsmen and hereby avoid falling prey to the doupoly of either grand theory or abstracted empiricism. What is implied in the
notion of the sociologist as a craftsman, we may ask: Is he to be a plumber, a carpenter, a farmer or perhaps a semi-skilled worker? Well, actually all of these professions hold a bit of what Mills expects of a good academic artisan—a handyman who is both technical, precise, productive and hard working. Mills says: “Be a good craftsman. Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man become his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of the craft” (Mills 1959a:224). What is evident from this quotation is Mills’ overt sympathy for the idyllic craft practised by strong-minded and stout men working hard for a day’s living—this appears to be the backdrop for his view of sociologists as well. According to Mills a good craftsman will have to give an appropriate, and preferably non-mathematical solution to the formula: IBM + reality + humanism = sociology. In his view, what he terms the scientists, who are those practising grand theorising, only focus on the reality component in the formula and are therefore unable to solve it properly. On the other hand, the higher statisticians, who are the abstracted empiricists, place their weight too readily on the IBM component and are therefor also guilty in making an arithmetical error if the purpose is to become a sociological craftsman of high quality. Mills, however, with his stress on the humanism dimension, solves the problem (Mills 1972e). Sociology is a humanistic enterprise, as already Berger (1963) discovered, and not only in its choice of a subject matter but equally in its approach and desire to understand this subject matter. Therefore one’s subjective nature and one’s vocation as a scholar will inevitable melt together: “As a scholar you have the exceptional opportunity of designing a way of life which will encourage the habits of good workmanship. Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career; whether he knows it or not, the intellectual workman forms his own self as he works toward the perfection of his craft: to realize his own potentialities, and any opportunities that come his way, he constructs a character which has as its core the qualities of the good workman” (Mills 1959a:196). To be a good sociological workman is thus closely linked to being an imaginative person in general and having a well developed and strong character.

The sociological imagination—a title supposedly inspired by
Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* from 1950 (Weiland 1983:182) - and the idea of craftsmanship moreover also has a close resemblance to Weber’s notion of sociology as a vocation without which, sociology would be an endless drought: “Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider; without this passion...you have no calling for science and you should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion” (Weber 1948b:135). The ways of Weber and Mills, however, parted with Mills’ insistence that not only ought sociology be regarded as a humanistic vocation but it should also be a political past-time with political connotations in a fashion that would seem inappropriate to Weber’s idea of a value neutral sociological enterprise. The plea for a political sociology is evident when Mills says: “It is the political task of the sociologist – as of any liberal educator – continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals” (Mills 1959a:187). The sociological imagination is thus also a political imagination and to Weber, if he had been alive to confront him, Mills is going a bit too far on this account. As Aptheker (1960:112) concluded on Mills’ idea of a social scientist: “Mills sees three functions for the social scientist who wishes to contribute to human affairs: (1) himself to be the repository of power, i.e., the philosopher-king role; (2) to be the adviser of the ruler; (3) to remain independent, to do one’s work, to select one’s own problems but to direct this work at kings as well as to publics...Clearly, Mills has selected the third course for himself”, and in this way he appeared to remain true to the vocational role of sociologists as described by his intellectual ancestor, Max Weber. But as we shall see later, he diverged from the path of Weber when turning into a political and polemical personage in sociology, in his mixing of sociological objectivity and political normativity.

**FIGURE 7: HOW TO BE A GOOD SOCIOLOGIST**

<p>| Advice no. 1 | Be a good craftsman; Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the <em>sociological imagination</em>. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious craftsman and try to become such a craftsman yourself |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advice no. 2</th>
<th>Avoid the Byzantine oddity of associated and disassociated Concepts, the mannerism of verbiage. Urge upon yourself and upon others the simplicity of clear statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 3</td>
<td>Make any trans-historical constructions you think your work requires; also delve into sub-historical minutiae. Make up quite formal theory and build models as well as you can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 4</td>
<td>Do not study merely one small milieu after another; study the social structures in which milieux are organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 5</td>
<td>Realize that your aim is a fully comparative understanding of the social structures that appeared and that do now exist in world history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 6</td>
<td>Always keep your eyes open to the image of man - the generic notion of his human nature - which by your work you are assuming and implying; and also to the image of history - your notion of how history is being made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 7</td>
<td>Know that you inherit and are carrying on the tradition of classic social analysis; so try to understand man 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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice no. 8</td>
<td>Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problem that you take up for study</td>
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The figure above has tried schematically and by the exact wording of Mills himself, to illustrate his eight imperatives for the sociological craftsman. This kind of almost enumerating description of the desirable qualities of social scientists is not the exclusive mark of distinction of only Mills’ sociology and one can find contours of the intellectual craftsmanship in the writings of other great sociologists such as Howard Becker (1986), Peter Berger (1966), Pierre Bourdieu et al. (1991), Pitirim Sorokin (1998), and Max Weber (1948b) although the all diverge from the Millsian ideal of craftsmanship. Particularly striking equivalents, however, are portrayed in Berger’s idea of sociology as a past-time and Weber’s notion of sociology as a vocation – Mills’ version is merely flavoured with a hint of Paul Feuerabend’s later formulated
methodological anarchism according to which anything goes.

What then, apart from the above, characterises the good and capable sociologist? Which kind of qualifications can we expect to find in a person who spends his or her time and energy conducting social research? In craftsmanship practical reasoning and critical qualifications are essential as opposed to sheer philosophical insights and exergetic exercises and to him a priggish and disinterested attitude was simply an insult to one's discipline: “Mills considered it the vocation of a professor to profess” (Gerth 1980:73), and by profession was meant that one is willing to take a stand on social issues, to be involved and to actively contribute to the discussion. Although Mills was clearly fond of the idea of the intellectual as a sort of saviour for the calamities of society, he knew very well that intellectuals come in many disguises and not all of them were equally deserving for this cause. Particularly those schooled within grand theorising and abstracted empiricism were maladjusted both to profess as well as to enforce the sociological craft: “I have seldom seen one of these young men in a condition of genuine intellectual puzzlement. And I have never seen any passionate curiosity about a great problem...These young men are less restless than methodical; lessimaginative than patient; above all, they are dogmatic...They havetaken up social research as a career...Listening to their conversations, trying to gauge the quality of their curiosity, one finds a deadly limitation of mind” (Mills 1959a:105). Mills saw a rake’s progress in the minds of these students and scholars, which although it would make them ready to receive the seeds of wisdom and knowledge would also streamline them and make sure that the fertility of their academic soil will be of a mainstreamed, low quality and limited kind. If this was not rectified, sociology would for generations be short of scholars with a sociological imagination, and a willingness to use it. Mills therefore denounced the tendency to support the development of paradigms practising normal science when stating that “the function of the academic clique is not only to regulate the competition, but to set the terms of the competition and to assign rewards for work done in accordance with these terms at any given moment” (Mills 1959a:107). He was an enemy, if there had ever been one, of academic nepotism, backscratching and self-applauding attitudes and believed that if one did not officially turn against it, one was guilty of accepting as well as supporting it. In the words of Ulrikke Bader, one of the terrorists of
the Bader-Meinhof group, who noted in her diary: If you are not part of the solution to the problem, you are part of the problem. This was also his, admittedly radical, testimony on academic inner-worldliness as well as his vieda of the nature of social problems.

Below we will once again turn to the role of the intellectual on a more concrete level with the sociologist as a partisan in international affairs. However, after this presentation and evaluation of his sociological magnum opus, we shall now turn to the final years of his career, in which he changed his interest from the scholarly to the more urgent public issues of the day. He changed from a critic of his own discipline to a critic of the world that surrounded this and which clearly was guilty of creating an environment in which grand theory, abstracted empiricism and what he termed a crackpot realism thrived.

7. The later years and polemical sociology

After the publication and stupefied reception of his *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills took on new assignments and decided to develop and cultivate rather different aspects of his craftsmanship than before and with this gradual transformation he actually turned from the golden boy of sociology into its ugly duckling. Mills, who even had to accept that his position was labelled *post-modern* (Peck 1959), simply because he wanted to transgress the abyss between rigid formalism and abstracted empiricism and since he termed the present period of time the *post-modern phase* or the *Fourth Epoch* (Mills 1959a), became a post-modern radical or a radical post-modernist. It has been claimed, primarily by vicious tongues, that Mills in the final years of his career turned excessively polemical and almost appeared as a comic figure in sociology. This was noted after his death, when Edward Shils, one of Mills’ perpetual enemies and critics, concluded that Mills became “a demagogic simplifier...he had a singularly incurious mind...[he wrote] vigorous and cloudy rhetoric. Now he is dead and his rhetoric is a field of broken stones, his analysis empty, his strenuous pathos limp. He was a victim of his own vanity and of a shrivelled Marxism which will not die and which goes on requiring the sacrifice of the living” (Shils 1963:21-22). It is true that Mills changed his route from the late 1950’s and the beginning of the 1960’s and many of his works from this period are as inspiring and provocative from a political point of view, as they are surprising and frustrating from a sociological perspective. Mills became a journalistic sociologist in one part of his writings and continued to be the vintage sociologist in the other, a genuine incarnation of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in sociology. He was already early in his career aware of the problems of the polemical posture: “The professor of social science, for example, is not very
likely to have as balanced an intellect as a top-flight journalist, and it is usually considered poor taste, inside the academics, to write a book outside one’s own field” (Mills 1951:131). But nevertheless that was the enterprise he started upon in the later years of his sociological career.

Radical sociology and polemical politics
The label that appears must precise in its description of Mills’ writings was that of the radical sociologist – radical in his vision of the sociological imagination, radical in his political orientation and radical in his critique of others. It was noted that, “happily, Mills himself represents a continuation of the radical current in American thinking, and in this he is a very welcome and by no means unique phenomenon; nor is he, in this position, by any means alone – or without influence – in contemporary America” (Aptheker 1960:198). So although Mills’ was a unique person in the landscape of sociology in this period he was not alone or completely isolated and some of the people with whom he shared a common radical orientation were of course Lionel Trilling, Robert S. Lynd, Hannah Arendt and protagonists of several left-wing civil rights movements. Albert Szymanski (1970) defined radical sociology as the perspectives offered by amongst others C. Wright Mills, Franz Fanon, Gunnar Myrdal, John Horton, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, and as such we can see that this is a loosely defined group of people who perhaps shared many sympathies but equally were extremely different. However, three themes seem to unite their differences, as the figure below illustrates.

**FIGURE 8: WHAT IS RADICAL ABOUT RADICAL SOCIOLOGY?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A concern with social stratification within capitalist societies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A concern with economic stratification and exploitation between different areas of the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>A desire for the intellectual to take his social responsibility seriously and actively contribute to practical problem solving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning the first point about the social stratification between different groups in capitalist societies, Mills, as we saw above, was one of the pioneers in pinpointing how stratification appeared on a variety of levels; among different working class factions and their representatives (Mills 1948a), among the middle-class people (Mills 1951), among the masses and the power elite (Mills 1956) and between different ethnic communities (Mills, Senior & Goldsen 1950). In short, Mills’ radical perspective was extremely nuanced and
combined into a multi-facetted picture of the causes as well as consequences of social inequality on a detailed as well as broader level. To him, the reason behind social equality in capitalist societies was not merely of a political, economic, cultural or religious character but a subtle mixture of these which were mutually reinforcing each other. This led to people becoming exploited, dependent and constrained and incapable of seeing their way out of this trap. His answer to the problem is fundamentally freedom - and here Mills was a protagonist of a rather sophisticated notion of freedom which has its academic twin in that formulated by Zygmunt Bauman (1988); freedom could be obtained if people became democratically enlightened and engaged and were willing to confront their personal troubles and transform them into public issues. Mills defines freedom in the following fashion: “Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them – and then, the opportunity to choose” (Mills 1959a:174). In political science, a distinction between positive and negative conceptions of freedom is often utilised. Whereas the latter is primarily defended by the liberals and libertarians, who focus on freedom from, the former is the domain of participatory socialists and radical sociologists, who instead focus on freedom to. Mills clearly belongs to the camp of the participatory socialists and radical sociologists in this respect, and he believed that the problems of inequality could be solved through active participation and suffering could be alleviated if we were able openly to address the issues of the day. Freedom, however, without some degree of equality and enlightenment was not worth its name and merely a shallow replica of the real thing.

On the second mark of distinction of radical sociologists, Mills was also in accordance with the perspective that inequality existed on the international scene and did not stop at national borders or continental boundaries. He, however, did not present a theoretical perspective in which Uncle Sam was the great sinner and communism the mighty saviour. Mills was aware, as we shall see below, that exploitation was not a one-sided phenomenon and that capitalism was not alone in its imperialist quest for domination and world control. In this respect, he agreed with some of those radical sociologists, who were not entirely biased by a Marxist understanding and who also cherished more liberal values: “Radical sociologists reject both capitalist and communist social order and seek a society with no profits or Gulags....Thus, they have an interest in creating a society based on the ideals of equality from the socialist tradition and liberty from the anarchist” (Menzies 1982:88). Mills combined a
respect for liberal values with a socialist understanding of how societies always tend to turn into stratifying mechanisms both internally as well as in their external relations, and he had a flavour in his writings of the terminology of Emmanuel Wallerstein’s dependency theory about the centre and the periphery of the world system. The only major difference was that Mills believed that the Soviet Union itself belonged to this system and supported its existence, whereas Wallerstein saw socialism and communism as a viable alternative to the capitalist world system. Mills was therefore not looking into the details of exploitation on the global scene and was rather indiscriminate in his analytical comparisons of the practical relevance and impact of ideologies, i.e. national socialism, capitalism or communism, in the lives of individuals or in the larger struggle for world domination. Despite his alleged sympathy for the singular human being and his/her problems he was throughout his career unable to comprehend the logical backdrop of his own theorising and the human suffering behind the master plan of the global power elites such as that of the totalitarian Nazi Germany or the Stalinism of Soviet Union: “He regarded the murder of six million Jews as one of the terrible things that can happen when reactionaries take over and nation-states go to war. Nothing more. For him Stalinism in its turn was contemptible not for what it was doing to national minorities, to workers and peasants, to millions languishing in Siberia, but for its political vulgarity and intellectual emptiness” (Swados 1963:41). So although what characterised many radical sociologists was their sophisticated analyses of power relationships nationally as well as internationally, Mills was not always of the same calibre in his own work on international politics and world ideologies. He regarded the general drift of history as a ubiquitous development towards rationalisation and bureaucratisation regardless of the differences, disjunctions and discontinuities locally.

On the final point in figure 8 about the merging of interests of radical sociologists, Mills was a bigwig. To him the role and

Richard Gillam has claimed, that Mills was a critical social scientist with a so-called critical ideal according to which "scholars in the 'right state’...must critically confront great issues of their age. Responsible intellect would always, in some measure, be adversative and political” (Gillam 1977-78:70). Mills was an intellectual as opposed to specialists, experts and professionals who would normally support the Establishment and the men of power. Therefore he was capable of remaining critical, political and polemical without fearing the repercussions of such a position.
participation of the intellectuals, as we saw above, was of central importance to a change in national inequality and international exploitation. In this way he envisaged the real intellectuals as comparable to those Antonio Gramsci termed organic intellectuals, as a descriptive term for active and outgoing academics. The problem was that most intellectuals were not inclined to act or to instigate action, as they belonged to the camp of the status quo and agitated for the ideals of the capitalist liberal democracy and its supreme virtues of liberty, free competition and political pluralism: "In the United States today, intellectuals, artists, ministers, scholars, and scientists are fighting a cold war in which they echo and elaborate the confusions of officialdom. They neither raise demands on the powerful for alternative policies, nor set forth such alternatives before publics. They do not try to put responsible content into the politics of the United States; they help to empty politics and keep it empty" (Mills 1959a:183). To Mills the vast majority of the intellectuals were right-wing conservatives, either in the form of grand theorists or abstracted empiricists, with no interest in a radical re-direction of politics or social science and who were satisfied with the way things were. Instead of looking toward the old partially contaminated intellectuals of conservatism he saw a glimmer of hope in parts of the younger generation of the New Left who intellectually matured throughout the 1950’s (Clecak 73:53), although, as we saw above, he was aware that many of these new kids on the block of academia would follow in the footsteps of their retrograde ancestors.25 His general dissatisfaction with these academics became evident in his participation in the end of ideology debate (Eldridge 1983), that flooded and raged in American sociology in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, in which he came up against the prominent likes of Daniel Bell, Seymour Lipset and Edward Shils who all took a more right-wing position than that of Mills.26 Mills, although being a radical, did

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To Mills the responsibility of the intellectuals did not lie merely in the hands of the individual person but equally within the domain of the professions of social science. Rose Goldsen, one of his previous collaborators, remarked that Mills’ vision of and demand to the profession of sociology could be summed up as follows: "Anyone who studies the workings of power in today’s social structures finds over and over again that the wielders of power are perpetrating injustices and endangering the safety, dignity and even the human-ness of humanity" (Goldsen 1964:89). To Mills it was an imperative that the sociologists paid attention to the misuses of power and tried to hold politicians accountable for the injustices and calamities they supported either tacitly or explicitly through their actions and decisions.

The end of ideology debate focused attention on the thesis of the demise of ideology, the death of political philosophy and the convergence of perspectives which previously mobilised people for different ideological causes due to the emergence of a consensus over practical politics in American society. The debate, which was primarily sparked off by the publication
not want to create any upheavals or revolutions but was equally sceptical about the democratic process and the silent majority of scholars as well as people in general: “To appeal to the powerful, on the basis of any knowledge we now have, is utopian in the foolish sense of that term. Our relations with them are more likely to be only such relations as they find useful, which is to say that we become technicians accepting their problems and aims, or ideologists promoting their prestige and authority” (Mills 1959a:193). If the intellectuals did not pose any real alternatives to or became strong counterparts of the powerful, change would simply not take place and social inequality, economic stratification and cultural deprivation could not be meliorated. So any reference to a communicative relation to these people at the top of the hierarchy in which rationality will prevail and a solution to the problems will be arrived at appeared to Mills completely utopian. Mills himself has been described as an American utopian (Horowitz 1983,) but he was still highly critical of the too utopian positions as in his critique of the utopian socialists or the various utopian publics either of the right of the left of the political spectrum.

The depiction of him as a radical utopian therefore often focused on the fact that he was utopian “in the broad sense that he continued, against all odds, to believe that social theory must contain a moral edge, and that such an edge was locked into the primal belief that change in human beings can be for the better and not just random...Indeed, as his work became more strident, losing sight of the distinction between analytical research and journalistic blandishment, the turn toward the utopian became even more manifest...Anyone attempting to bite the world whole, rather than to be content with chewing at one small piece, represents, by that effort, something of a utopian” (Horowitz 1983:7-8). Mills wanted to have his cake and eat it – and preferably in one big mouthful. His problem was that he often choked on the piece he was chewing as he often took on analyses on a very large scale and always had a tendency to focus on the major events instead of the more mundane aspects of life. In this way his whole project was utopian and almost unrealisable. His utopianism was perhaps more aptly described as value-orientation, in the belief that a social science emptied of moral and normative content was of no use and no value. He clearly was an insurgent radical sociologist but he was equally critical of the Left and their supposed counter-culture to the Establishment and his radicalism of Daniel Bell’s (1960) The End of Ideology, entailed many contributions and twists and turns many of which can be found in Waxman (1969) where both protagonists as well as antagonists of the thesis are represented.
was more prevalent than his Leftish orientation: “Opposition to established culture and politics often consists of scattered little groups working in small circulation magazines, dealing in unsold cultural products...Sometimes, such ‘Left’ establishments have been as confirming in their values, as snobbish in their assignment of prestige as any national establishment. In fact, they may seem more restrictive because of their usual pretensions not to be; and because dogmatic gospel is frequently needed more by minority circles than by those who are secure in major institutions and who readily borrow prestige from indubitable authority...In our time, there is no Left establishment anywhere that is truly international and insurgent – and at the same time, consequential” (Mills 1959c:5). To Mills sociological intellectuals should be vigilant of those in power and vindicate the rights and conditions of the powerless without disrupting the entire structure of society and without dismantling the authority and respect of their own profession. The utopian aspect of radical sociology in general and in Mills in particular was also noted by Leslie Sklair who critically commented: “Now ‘radical’ sociology is best understood in terms of a relatively unrealizable utopia precisely because the social order towards which it points has no scientific basis as such. All talk about disalienating mankind, restoring human dignity, putting an end to inequalities and misery without reference to the particular forms of economic exploitation characteristic of societies in which labor and capital (private or state) are in antagonistic relations, is indeed more or less utopian” (Sklair 1977:64). He continued his description of the radicals by saying, that “radical sociology neither considers itself to be nor acts as if it were a scientific sociology” (Sklair 1977:63). Mills, however - as would probably all the other radical sociologists - claimed to be as scientific as those he combated within the field of sociology and as veracious and honourable as those he battled with in society.

The Cold War and a world waiting at the verge of extinction

In the following two parts of this introduction, I will outline the main arguments of two of Mills’ last publications and more polemical and obscure writings, namely his Listen, Yankee!: On the Revolution in Cuba (Mills 1960b) and The Causes of World War III (Mills 1958a). Seen separately these works do not appear to serve a sociological purpose in Mills’ general authorship and could be regarded as mere excursions, but actually they are typical of the kind of sociology he wanted us to practice – the polemical, radical and almost journalistic kind of investigation. Especially in a time and place where the lack of sociological imagination and social conscience was at its culmination, at least according to Mills, this kind of perspective was in high
demand: “Few tears will be shed for the Fifties. Cynical, materialistic, selfish, the decade made the rich richer, the poor poorer. To the advanced countries of the West it brought unprecedented prosperity, achieved largely at the expense of the vast and growing proletariat of Asia and Africa” (Aptheker 1960:36). In a decade throughout which the American way of life had been solidified nationally and internationalised to many different locations on the face of the earth and not only restricted to the Western hemisphere, its decadence and self-righteousness had to be questioned.27 It has been noted of Mills in this period of his authorship that “one of the most striking things about C. Wright Mills was his combativeness; he seemed to be constantly at war...He seemed to have fought with and against everyone and everything...Mills was an outsider and he knew it...Mills, of course, was not only at odds with people; he was also at odds with American society” (Ritzer 1992:211). With the publication of his two books dealing with America and its relation to the Cold War and the potential for international conflicts, he came directly from the ashes into the burning hot fire, from a trench war with America to a direct confrontation on the political battlefield. In Listen, Yankee! (1960b), which was the follow-up to his first publication on Latin-American culture The Puerto Rican Journey (Mills, Senior & Goldsen 1950), as we discussed above, Mills’ ambition was to illuminate the process of organised dependency that existed between the U.S.A. and Latin America and how the former benefited from the asymmetrical relationship with the latter in an exploitative manner (Eldridge 1983:90). Whereas the first book was clearly an academic study, this one was more openly a political manifesto for the Latin Americans and especially Cuba where a revolution had just taken place, an invitation to break off the client relationship with the patron and indeed patronising U.S.A. Mills stated, that the aim of the book, which really is more of a pamphlet, was “to present the voice of the Cuban revolutionaries as clearly and emphatically as I can” (Mills 1960b:8). In this way, he became the mouthpiece and spokesman for the underdogs in the conflict that existed between Fidel Castro on the one hand and the general American opinion on the other. The empirical foundation for his book was a few weeks of observation and interviewing, with amongst other Castro himself and Ché Guevara, in Cuba and therefore his method can hardly be said to be either

A very good, however fictive, description of American society and morality throughout the 1950’s is Jon Katz’s film from 1998 titled Pleasantville in which we witness life in a small mid-Western city that suddenly finds itself torn between the traditional and virtuous values of conservatism and the new emerging Beatnick generation with a more relaxed and subservient attitude.
specifically substantial or a very suitable basis for generalisation. The pamphlet, which consists of so-called letters in which Mills gives voice to the Cubans, was aimed at conveying to the American public how the Cuban population understood themselves, their country, their revolution and their relationship with the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union as an alternative to the picture presented in the American media which, according to Mills, was an utterly distorted and hostile image of Cubans as uncivilised and bellicose enemies. This image had been cultivated throughout the 1950’s and particularly by the anti-communist crusade of foreign minister John Foster Dulles and senator Joseph McCarthy on the internal stage.

Mills overtly admired the Cuban revolutionaries on many accounts. First of all because they were intellectuals and not savages who had seized weapons and fought their oppressors in the Batista regime: “Mills apparently found empirical confirmation of his long cherished idea: the intellectuals as an agency of sociohistorical change...The Revolution, suggested Mills, is an indigenous one, successfully launched and accomplished by the intellectuals” (Bhadra 1989:13). In the pamphlet he shows how the revolution is an outcome of the joint forces of the peasants, the wage labourers and the intellectuals in Cuba – not a revolution from above but one stemming from below (Mills 1960b:46). Second, that he, with his predilection for constructing and erecting ideas and seeing them materialise, thought that the new Cuba was an interesting social and political project containing many possibilities for the development of the good society. Third, because the Cubans had dared to dissent and to be non-conformists and confront not only the local military army and militia but equally the presence of a more mighty and powerful force of American soldiers. Fourth, since he saw the Cuban demand for autonomy and freedom as a direct repetition of American history which had also been marked by struggles for independence and liberty. And finally, because he seemingly regarded the charismatic leadership of the revolutionaries, and here I believe he is mainly thinking of Castro and Ché Guevara, as role-models for politicians and intellectuals alike and clearly identified with their position (Horowitz 1983:293). All these points permeated the pamphlet and combined to draw an overall positive picture of a revolutionary success in Cuba which America would liked to have been without in its immediate sphere of interest.

In Listen, Yankee! he overtly took the side of the Cuban revolutionaries, an utterly unheard of position in an America devoted to imperialism and anti-communism, and hereby Mills also became an early exponent of the so-called dependency theory, which held the perspective that industrial countries in imperialistic fashion exploited the Third World, as when he spoke of the First World as over-developed societies instead of mentioning, as did modernisation theory, the Third World as underdeveloped. Dependency theory had a flavour of
rebellion and left-wing sympathy to it, while modernisation theory was more of a rat’s nest of right-wing and capitalist perspectives and dependency theory, although the term suggests otherwise, was a grouping of scholars wishing for the independence of the previous colonies and freedom from external oppression. It has been noted, that “the ideology which emerges in ‘Listen, Yankee!’ is first and foremost a faith in popular Marxism; a polycentric vision of socialism breaking away from all orthodoxies...In this way, the Cuban revolution confirmed not only the end of American imperialism but the end of Soviet hegemonic control” (Horowitz 1983:295). This radical stance in dependency theory clearly appealed to Mills, although he was vividly aware of the potential danger that lied in a conflict between Cuba and the U.S.A., a conflict that culminated in October 1962, the year of Mills’ death, with the nuclear warheads conflict between respectively the U.S.S.R, Cuba and the U.S.A and to which Mills only saw the top of the iceberg with the failed exile Cuban invasion in 1961. His friend, Harry Swados, noted that “in his last months Mills was torn between defending ‘Listen, Yankee!’ as a good and honest book and acknowledging publicly for the first time in his life that he had been terribly wrong” (Swados 1963:42). Mills may have had his regrets about the Cuban revolution had he lived to experience the subsequent Soviet iron grip on the economy and political freedom of action of the small island state.

In his general understanding of world politics and particularly the relationship between the two super powers throughout the Cold War, that was implicit in Listen, Yankee!, Mills differentiated between the concepts of drift and thrust in describing the development of events in international affairs and social history. The former, drift, is associated with events that are guided and determined by fate, as it were, almost appear free floating, and are therefore also beyond the control of the individual person or collective nation. So when he speaks of the drift toward certain features of society or on the international arena, these are often not intentionally sought out by people but are happening behind their backs and are basically out of control. Contrariwise, the latter, thrust, is utilised by Mills when he is describing the consequences of actions planned, choreographed and orchestrated by people, institutions or countries. Mills clearly regarded the Cold War as an outcome of both drift and thrust, as a combination of something that was not intended and coincidental and something which was the outcome of social engineering and carefully planned policies (Eldridge 1983:100). And being a social scientist with an appetite for illumination and enlightenment, Mills saw it as his mission to point to the devastating
consequences of the drift towards disaster and the thrust towards destruction: “Enlightenment was to help man overcome the blind drift of events in a disenchanted world” (Gerth 1962:7).

Today, at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, we are living in the shadow of a sense of endings – that the world as we know it is coming to an end either rapidly or slowly. Mills envisaged this back in 1959, when he noted, which I have decided to quote at length, that: “We are at the end of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch. The ending of one epoch and the beginning of another is, to be sure, a matter of definition. But definitions, like everything social, are historically specific. And now our basic definitions of society and of self are being overtaken by new realities. I do not mean merely that we feel we are in an epochal kind of transition, I mean that too many of our explanations are derived from the great historical transition from the Medieval to the Modern Age; and that when they are generalized for use today, they become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing. And I also mean that our major orientations – liberalism and socialism – have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves” (Mills 1959b). He was unfortunately rather vague about what brought about these changes in historical epochs, but it is clear that the radical change from a decisively modern to a post-modern phase is played out on the world scene with the construction of a bipolar power structure in which NATO on the one side and the Warszaw Pact countries on the other side are battling out a compulsory mental as well as semi-physical test of endurance. To Mills neither of these power blocs are preferable to the other, and are fundamentally two sides to the same coin of power obsession: “In both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., as the political order is enlarged and centralized, it becomes less political and more bureaucratic; less the locale of a struggle than an object to be managed. Within both, most men are the objects of history, adapting to structural changes with which they have little or nothing to do” (Mills 1959c:12). His critique was therefore not only directed at the American political system and capitalist economy and like Milovan Djilas he was therefore highly critical of the Sovjet system and its tendency not to overcome what Karl Marx termed the dictatorship of the proletariat and to realise the promised kingdom of freedom. This critical stance was also evident in another polemical piece of work on international affairs which had been published two years prior to Listen, Yankee! and which equally caused an uproar in America.
The other book in Mills’ polemical line of production was equally provocative and informed by a cultural pessimism and catastrophic vision equivalent to that of for instance Oswald Spengler or Lewis Mumford. His 1958 publication *The Causes of World War III* was largely ignored inside the academic field and only recently reissued. However, outside social scientific circles the book almost reached cult status and had an effect similar to the mass tumult following the imaginary alien invasion of the planet in Orson Welles’ radio broadcasted *War of the Worlds* in 1938. American society in the 1950’s was excessively obsessed with theories and images of destruction, the end of the world and mutual extinction of the super powers, and Mills’ book landed in the midst of this panicky and alarmist climate as yet another indicator of the unstable and tense state of affairs.

Notwithstanding the polemical importance of *The Causes of World War III*, compared to the seminal sociological relevance of *The Sociological Imagination*, it faded as did Immanuel Kant’s *Zum Ewigen Frieden* compared to *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* or as Zygmunt Bauman’s *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* did compared to for example *Postmodern Ethics*. Perhaps this is the natural law governing the written outpourings of sociologists or philosophers, that their publicly relevant works pale in qualitative comparison to their academic writings, that their attempts at dealing with more light and popular material causes them to oversimplify matters that are in demand of more thorough analysis? Nevertheless, Mills’ book *did* contain interesting insights and the typical razor sharp analysis of our contemporary condition so characteristic of his work from the beginning of his career was also present. His main concern in the book was to investigate the power structure of the two super powers, the U.S.A. and the Sovjet Union, in order to find out who were responsible and eventually accountable for the thrust towards insecurity and instability. In this respect, the book was a globalised follow-up to *The Power Elite* (Mills 1956) which was released two years earlier in its focus on the structure and composition of those in the top positions in society and it started out by saying: “This is an explanatory essay in which I am trying to find out how, within the history of our immediate epoch, World War III is coming about. It is an attempt to determine whether or not any identifiable group of men and women can do anything about it and, if so, who they are and what they must do if there is to be peace. It is addressed neither to power elites nor to people in general, but to those who are generally aware of what is going on, who have thought about the preparation of World War III and who are becoming uneasy about it” (Mills 1958a:15). So from the beginning the reader is informed that the target group is the intellectuals, who are also those whom Mills’ places the
responsibility on if World War III is to be prevented and atomic annihilation is to be avoided.

To Mills war was increasingly becoming a structural feature of both the West and the East and his main contention was that neither the mighty in the Sovjet Union nor those in the U.S.A. were very different from each other when it came down to it: “Small ruling circles in both superstates assume that military violence and the whole supporting ethos of an overdeveloped society geared for war are hard-headed, practical, inevitable, and realistic conceptions. There are many other points of convergence and coincidence between these two countries, both in dream and in reality, and as the Sovjet industrial complex is further enlarged the parallels will become more pronounced. In surface ideology they apparently differ: in structural trend and in official action they become increasingly alike. Not ideology but industrial and military technology, geared to total war, may well determine that the dreams of each will in due course be found in the realities of the other” (Mills 1958a:18-19). A convergence of the features of both societies is apparently taking place and to Mills this process is detrimental to the protection of peace and disarmament and generally against the interests of humanity. This is also a very instructive quotation marking his dissatisfaction with both liberalism and Marxism as two separate ideological lines of thinking and his plea for a unification of the best of the two. To Mills a society based on the ideals of liberalism and Marxism would supposedly be capable of withstanding the thrust towards war. Such a society would not be anything like the U.S.A. or the Sovjet Union, as one might have expected, as both these countries are utilising brutality, tyranny, violence or the threat of these in order to obtain their objectives (Eldridge 1983:98).

Although his vision of a utopian world order was at the top of his agenda, he still offered more reformist initiatives to the prevention of war and his solutions were as radical as his position in general: demilitarisation, increased diplomacy and contact between the citizens of various countries, increased world-wide education and a changed role for science and the scientists, an embargo on all arms shipments to certain areas of the world, a recognition on behalf of the U.S.A. of China and all other communist states, and a unilateral decision to stop all nuclear production and testing (Eldridge 1983:101 and Spinrad 1966:56). If this is carried out the world will be a much safer place for people to live in and he says towards the closing parts of the book, in a rather emphatic and utopian fashion, that “the goal and the means of world industrial development, and so of peace, are to replace the permanent war economy by a permanent peace economy. All private profit must be taken out of the preparation for war in the U.S. economy. The economic waste of war must be taken out of the world economies. Military personnel and the military mentality must be firmly subordinated to civilian and political men and purposes. Inside the U. S. A. we must become political again” (Mills 1958a:121). His pacifism
here and appeal for peaceful co-existence was striking and the main point in the book was to say that war is evil and peace is good and by making this clear cut distinction Mills was hoping for people, particularly the powerful people, to become aware of the new holocaust they would create if war was not avoided and peace not secured. The way *The Causes of World War III* was written, thus, made other scholars wonder whether he presented an argument or an analysis? (Howe 1959, Muste 1959).

The polemical nature of the book pointed in the direction of an argument and his use of often very vivid language to describe the international state of affairs is evident in his reference to *NATO intellectuals* who employs a *military metaphysics* and who are really *crackpot realists* etc. This underscored the notion of Mills as a master of metaphors and argument and he also showed his versatility and foresightedness when he wrote on the role of mass media, that although these were not as developed and comprehensive in extent as today, he was still able to present a post-modern like nightmare vision of them in their ignorance and incapability of constructive contribution in serious affairs. According to him, "they are polite, disguising indifference as tolerance and broadmindedness; and they further buttress the disfavour in which those who are ‘against things’ are held. They trivialize issues into personal squabbles, rather than humanize them by asserting their meaning for you and me. They formalize adherence to prevailing symbols by pious standardization of worn-out phrases, and when they are ‘serious’, they merely get detailed about more of the same, rather than give close-ups of the human meanings of political events and decisions" (Mills 1948a:335). He was suspicious of the distorted picture the media had a tendency to advance and the hollow content they presented the public with, and already back in his early career he had stated a clear mistrust,  

Irving Howe, who was both skeptical as well as an admirer of Mills’ *The Causes of World War III*, noted that Mills did not pay enough attention to ideological matters in connection to the emerging international conflict between East and West and instead put an excessive emphasis on the exercise of raw power (Howe 1969:193). This critique permeates many other discussions of Mills’ work.

Mills was also more philosophical about the nature of the media and their relation to the lives of people, as when he noted that all our knowledge about reality is some sense is mediated information from so-called second-hand worlds that we have not encountered personally but only through the filters and lenses of other agencies. He therefore stated about our relation to the world: "The first rule for understanding the human condition is that men live in second-hand worlds. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect...Their images of the world, and of themselves, are given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and shall never meet...Between consciousness and existence stand meanings and designs and communications which other men have passed on...For most of what he calls solid fact, sound interpretation, suitable presentations, every man is increasingly dependent upon the observation posts, the interpretation centers, the presentation depots" (Mills 1972i:405-406). It is evident that Mills
not merely of the mass media but equally their forerunners, and of how certain “skill groups, such as poets and novelists, specialize in fashioning and developing vocabularies for emotional states and gestures; they specialize in telling us how we feel, as well as how we should or might feel, in various situations” (Mills & Gerth 1953:56). Since the media of whatever form could not be trusted, the politicians were more or less dilettantes at best or elites at worst, and the New Left was almost as bureaucratic as the Old Left, who could we turn to in order to prevent war? As I mentioned above, he called upon the intellectuals to form a pacifist palladium against war, violence and oppression and if possible try to take control of the media and divert them into a more useful tool for the agitation against war: “What we, as intellectuals, ought to do with the formal means of communication – in which so many now commit their cultural default – is to use them as we think they ought to be used...we should write and speak for the mass media on our own terms” (Mills 1958a:141). The Vietnam generation of intellectuals and young pacifists, only a decade after Mills’ untimely death at the age of forty-five, perhaps finally realised that his warning against international overheating and the invasion of super powers of small and fragile states were no laughing matters conjured up by a disturbed Leftish intellectual but the reality of the day envisaged by a foresighted and concerned social scientist with an ethical responsibility.

It was particularly in these years with the publication of Listen, Yankee! and The Causes of World War III that he became something of a charismatic cult figure with a growing following of sensitive and critical Americans who sensed that the nation was going in the wrong direction: “They were responding, in that unlovely decade, the fat and frightened fifties, to one who refused to compromise or to make the excuses that other were making - excuses mislabelled descriptions or analyses - for what was happening to their country. They sensed correctly that, faulty and flawed as it was, the vision of Wright Mills cut through the fog and lighted their lives for them” (Swados 1963:40). Also others hailed his contribution to a more nuanced public as well as professional discourse on the practical problems and dilemmas facing people and the nation as a whole: “Criticized by many of his own generation who had reduced politics to New Deal liberalism and anti-communism, Mills’ work helped to inspire a new political generation in the sixties, contributing to a new left politics: anti-bureaucratic, politicizing issues of technical rationality; rehabilitation of the social individual, connecting emotion, ethics, knowledge and action; and politicizing ideas which flourished for a time in the social sciences and philosophy” (Alt 1985-86:15). It is often argued that Mills’ success coincided with a rapid deterioration of the quality of his work. This is utterly wrong and a
result of a distortion of the real picture of Mills, who, although being a turncoat in some respects, always remained true to the sociological discipline in one way or the other.

8. An academic on the run - the beginning of the end

The perpetual quarrels and trench wars with colleagues and critics eventually caught up with C. Wright Mills who in the end became a victim of his own muckraking and provocation. As Robert Friedrichs, one of the prominent analysts of the sociological tradition, noted on Mills’ contribution to his own academic - and eventually also physical - demise: “The paradigmatic fire that Mills kindled clearly warmed the sociological imagination of many of his confreres. It may, however, have served to consume him as well. The polemical nature of his later works, the squandering of his sociological talents on ideological outbursts...” (Friedrichs 1970:48). But before he was totally consumed by this fire, he was still able to write interesting and academically stimulating material and his last years were not merely marked by polemical outbursts and quarrels but equally by a desire to return to his roots, to rediscover his own academic ballast and to become absorbed in issues dealing with the sociological tradition and heritage. Some claim that Mills’ sociological credentials deteriorated rapidly in his later years and gave room for more polemic and down to earth evaluations about the social world. However, in his last years Mills returned to the mark of distinction that also characterised his early sociology when he wrote about the sociological tradition.

Rethinking the image of man in sociology

In Images of Man (Mills 1960a), which was a collection of readings, Mills became enmeshed in a discussion of the relevance of the classics to analyses of contemporary society and it marked the completion of a lifelong project that in retrospect appears almost as a trilogy consisting of Character and Social Structure (Mills & Gerth 1953) and The Sociological Imagination (Mills 1959a) in which Mills had devoted his energies to more substantial theoretical matters. His admiration for the classical tradition was evident as when he in a previously published piece of work had stated: “I believe that what may be called classic social analysis is a definable and usable set of traditions; that its essential feature is the concern with historical social structures; and that its problems are of direct relevance to urgent public issues and insistent human troubles” (Mills 1959a:28). To Mills the classics within his discipline contained all that was good about sociology, all that was to be strived for by the new generations of sociologists, and they served as an emporium of original ideas and practical guidelines. Imminent in the book was a critique of the mediocrity
of the present people functioning as sociologists and their inability to be as great as their academic ancestors. He did not believe the classical sociologists to be infallible in their conclusions or methods, far from it, but basically believed that their contribution to the discipline was of lasting value and of more value than that of contemporary thinkers. He wrote the following about them: “But how, it may be asked, can these men be so often wrong and yet remain so great? The answer lies, I think, in a single characteristic of their work: their ‘great ideas’ consist of what might be called ‘models’, in contrast to specific theories or detailed hypotheses...In short, the classic sociologists construct models of society and use them to develop a number of theories...The models can be used for the construction of many theories” (Mills 1960a:3). To Mills, the classic sociologists – and here he primarily meant the work of Marx, Weber, Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel and the neo-Machiavellians – opened up the social sciences instead of making it a watertight enterprise and they would never have conspired into what Mills termed Brains Inc., a sort of secluded and isolated ivory tower, as the present social scientists represented (Mills 1951). With their models they created frameworks for others to work within, paths to follow and monolithic and monumental conceptualisations and understandings up against which one could pose alternatives or new interpretations. But although the title of the book was Images of Man, Mills himself did not present any such images but merely models of society (Press 1978:135), and this is also where he sees the crisis of individualism – that there is no longer, even within the social sciences, any obvious connection between the individual and society, between images of human beings and models of social structure. It is exactly here that he locates the current crisis in sociology. Without an adequate conception of the human being, emptied of images of man, the social science would become incapable of realigning and combining private troubles and public issues – the aforementioned great insight from The Sociological Imagination (Mills 1959a).

In the book Images of Man he presented the writings of a multitude of social thinkers both from the classical European tradition and from the more contemporary American tradition and he hailed and valorised them as much as he poses critical questions to them. To him they were very capable theoretical and empirical sparring partners, perhaps because they were unable to answer him back! However, he believed that we could learn an immense amount of the link between sociology and social problems from these people and their works and he stated that the “reading of sociology should increase our awareness of the imperial reach of social worlds into the intimacies of our very self” (Mills 1960a:17). Previously, he had made it clear, that the classical tradition, which we must by any means available keep alive and kicking, did not fall prey to the pitfalls of either grand theory or abstracted empiricism, but was capable of linking the micro with the macro, the intimate with the social, and hereby zooming in on the essential intermediary level of substantive social problems:
“Classic social science, in brief, neither ‘builds up’ from microscopic study nor ‘deduces down’ from conceptual elaboration. Its practitioners try to build and to deduce at the same time, in the same process of study, and to do so by means of adequate formulation and re-formulation of problems and of their adequate solutions...The classic focus, in short, is on substantive problems” (Mills 1959a:128). The purpose of the classics were to open our eyes and widen our horizons to the undiscovered landscapes of social problems and how they could be solved by sociology.

With his focus on the classical tradition at a time where innovation and the new line of thinking of the orthodox consensus was about to precipitate in and colonise the entire field of social science, Mills not only stood for a decisively politically incorrect sociology but equally a sociology out of touch with the majority of sociologists at the time and his flavour for the classics made him appear not merely as a radical, but a conservative radical: “There was something of the radical conservative in Mills, the forward-talking but backward-looking intellectual. If this netted Mills some strong criticism, it also enabled him to pick up support from an odd assortment of populist types. But that support must have been as disturbing and unnerving to Mills as lack of support from the critics he had come to depend on” (Horowitz 1983:292). Being a critical and radical social theorist, without ever being associated with the Frankfurt Institute of critical theory, he was abreast of his own present while at the same time being stuck in the past but his backward sympathies for the classics did not, however, colour the last projects he worked on by the time of his death where his drawers were full of unfinished manuscripts, sketches of grand ideas and thoughts and contours of new books and publications.

The demise of the anti-American dream
It has been noted that “even as an anti-American, Charles Wright Mills was an all-American” (Press 1978:13) and he was clearly caught between an admiration for American civilisation and his detest for what it did to people and society. This ambivalence was also spotted by Saul Landau who wrote: “His personality, his whole being, had an American stamp...He hated the United States, its politics, its culture, its ‘high immorality’. But he did not fit anywhere else, and he did not want to be anywhere else than in his own house. It would be painful to be in the United states and read The New York Times, and face law suits, and petty professors writing personal attacks” (Landau 1965:53) but he decided to stay where he was but stay while staying disloyal. Especially his fierce attacks on the American foreign policy throughout this period put him in the limelight of the FBI and in recently published material it is disclosed that Mills was in fact targeted by agents and declassified FBI files show that he was regarded as a threat to national security (Mills & Mills 2000:xii). This owes perhaps as much
to his open-mouthed approach to his disciplines’ potential as problem-solver and his appetite for polemical attacks on the top of the power pyramid as to the real weight of the content of what he actually said.

Mills was a very extrovert sociologist compared to many of his contemporaries when it came to defining social problems and he did not limit his scope merely to comply with those who believed that certain issues were hands-off for sociologists or taboos not to be broken. This openness was amongst other places proved in his articles on women and prostitution and his desire to provoke as well as to enlighten was evident. Mills belonged to the avant-garde among male sociologists when it came to theorising gender. In an article with the memorable title Women: The Darling Little Slaves (Mills 1972b), he presented a critical reading of Simone de Beauvior’s combined existentialist and psychoanalytic position on the unequal construction of gender and stated that “de Beauvoir’s solution to the man-woman problem, put in its briefest form, is the elimination of woman as we know her...and the elimination of man as we know him” (Mills 1972b:345). To him her position appeared too idealistic and unrealisable, and he did not regard her work as contributing to an actual liberation of women from their middle-class or working-class dread. And in articles dealing with prostitution in America, equally with the sparkling title of Plain Talk on Fancy Sex (Mills 1972a), or on prostitution among the native population in a Latin American country in The Sailor, Sex Market and Mexican (Mills 1943b), he dealt with the economic causes and human consequences of the fact that women had to sell their bodies. In the former, he in almost Simmelian fashion differentiated between certain types of prostitutes in the U.S.A. – the old-line prostitute, upper-class prostitutes and the expense-account girl – and how, although their destinies and working conditions were rather different to each other, they were all the visible outcome of the same personal ambitions of wealth and career driven obsession characteristic of middle-class America. In the latter article on prostitution in Latin America he used the same optics, which were also utilised in his general discussions of international relations, and regarded prostitution in terms of client-patron relations. His conclusions, however, were not at all novel as when he spoke of a legalisation of prostitution around military bases or that the posted military person or navy sailor due to his status abroad was not subjected to the conventions and social morality regarding the purchase of sex (Horowitz 1983:66-67). Although the topic of illicit sexual relations only occupied a footnote position in Mills’ more general theoretical framework, he still returned to discussions of it from time to time, as when he once stated that “each day, men sell little pieces of themselves in order to try and buy them back each night and weekend with the coin of fun” (Mills in Cotgrove 1967:153). Thus he, on the overall, saw a subtle connection between the labour market and the night market, between the presence of U.S. military and the creation of and rise in prostitution in certain regions of the
world, between women’s private ambitions and the choice to sell their bodies. These were merely some of the things that interested Mills throughout the last year of his life apart from the more mainstream topics we have scrutinised above.

The academic swan song of C. Wright Mills primarily consisted of three unfinished manuscripts and these three incomplete projects of Mills were respectively a book on the power structure in the USSR, a book on the comparative task of sociology, and a bible for the New Left, a kind of third way between American conservative liberalism and Soviet orthodox Stalinism (LEO-Group 1997:7-8). The first unfinished project, provisionally titled Soviet Journal: Contacting the Enemy, was rather similar in form to Listen, Yankee! (Mills 1960b) and was composed of interviews, this time not with Cuban revolutionaries, but with people from the Russian intelligensia. Mills here wanted to investigate how these people occupying important positions within the political, educational and cultural sphere viewed the Soviet Union and the communist ideology; how the realities of life in a Stalinist country were compared to the ideal of the official ideology. The initial interest was to produce a picture of the Soviet society and then to compare it to America, but he never came down to this and his writings were primarily a series of scattered observations. In these, however, it was obvious that Mills’ sympathy for these Russian apparatchiks was only somewhat lukewarm and that he saw them as narrow-minded and uninterested in learning the principles of other types of social structure and development: “If you attack Stalin, they will defend him. If you assume changes in principle, they will deny it...the one thing no one will criticize is the Party – it may make mistakes, but it is in their view self-correcting” (Mills in Horowitz 1963:7). This self-confident and uncritical attitude, allegedly an outcome of a false socialist consciousness, was to Mills similar to that of the Americans refusing to criticise their own liberal democracy, and the entire volume was intended as an analysis of the parallels of these two entirely different countries with two entirely different ideologies. He saw in both

The more personal aspects of the last period of Mills’ life, which was one marked by recurring illness but certainly not a lack of appointments and projects, is documented by Mills’ former assistant Saul Landau (1965), who presents a very sympathetic description of the last six months prior to Mills’ death. In this period Mills, amongst other interesting encounters, met with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in Paris and discussed the state of affairs in Cuba, went through Poland to end up in the Soviet Union and interviewed party officials and finally also visited the U.K before returning to the U.S.A. in the beginning of 1962.

In William Warde’s (1961) discussion of Who Will Save the World? he analyses Mills’ position in connection to the New Left and presents the similarities and differences between the position of Mills and that of the organised New Left.
of them the same foundational ideology resting on the ideas of development, progress and conquest and “in both countries economic development has become a fetish. Each is dominated by a power triad representing the bureaucracies of industry, government and military” (Hodges 1969:334). It here becomes obvious that there is a certain continuity in Mills’ writings and that he had not entirely put his project on the power elite behind him but instead sought to expand its explanatory abilities outside the U.S.A. to the international scene.32

The second unfinished writing dealt with a well-known faction in society to Mills and was simply intended to be titled The New Left. Here he was trying to follow up his long-standing interest in social stratification in America and how the intellectuals were a part of this, how sociology and socialism could be integrated in order to put an end to social inequality and injustice. The purpose of the book was to offer the framework for a Leftish political sociology interested in and concerned with solving acute practical problems of society. As such the book was not directed to the New Left of American intellectual life, which according to Mills was not ready for or receptive to such a perspective, but more to those germinating New Left groupings in Asia, Africa and Latin America who needed some substantive theoretical input in order to be able to analyse their situation and act based on those analyses. To Mills the Old Left of the industrial countries had failed miserably in their missions and only if an entirely new politically informed position could be erected would a solution to the problems of the day be found: “We have become tired before we have done anything and before anything was done to us by an enemy we could make explicit. We’ve really never declared war as a truly American left. There is no American left” (Mills in Horowitz 1963:11). So while the book was dedicated to the New Left it was still critical of how the Left in America generally was passive and unimaginative. So in a time when it has once again become fashionable to speak of middle-ways in sociology - take as an illustrative example Anthony Giddens’ (1999a) recent book on the third way to social democracy as a narrow path between liberalism and socialism – Mills was again at the forefront of events. He had already published a so-called manifesto for the New Left a couple of years before his death (Mills 1960c) in which some of the

32 Not only between the two power blocs led by the U.S.A. and the Sovjet Union did Mills see developments leading to convergence as well conflict. Actually he was in this case more of a convergence theorist in line with the likes of Rostow than a conflict theorist. However, he did see potential for conflict but not, as one keeping his The Causes of World War III in mind would have believed, immediately between the power blocs: “In his uncompleted manuscripts Mills notes that the great contest between American capitalism and Russian communism is likely to be decided in favor of the latter, but that a still greater contest is taking place between the Second and Third Worlds” (Hodges 1969:339) which are equivalents to the Communist countries in Eastern Europe and the Sovjet Union on the one hand, and on the other hand the poor under-developed countries on the African, Asian and South American continents.
points intended for the aforementioned unfinished volume appeared and he actually also criticised the Old Left in an article first to appear some years after his death (Mills 1968). *The New Left* was probably the one of Mills’ unfinished writings which was closest to completion and which should have appeared around the time of his death.

The third remaining project was initially titled *Comparative Sociology* and was intended as a six to eight volume account aimed at raising social theory into a comparative science. The volumes were supposed to be trans-structural comparisons of societies all over the world and contributing to a sociological world history of the past, present and future of social relations nationally and internationally. This was to be done by a comparison of more than 100 nations in a longitudinal study over two phases. Being an extremely ambitious project, Mills never really got into it and never finished any chapters or merely sentences that could point to the actual theoretical backdrop of the study. This is one of the many secrets Mills took with him into the grave. Finally Mills, being a busy man in these years, was also working on a project which he termed *The Cultural Apparatus* and which appeared in a fragmentary article form some years later (Mills 1972i). In this he wanted to draw a picture of the relation between intellectuals - his favourite topic in these years – their ideas, the social structures surrounding them and the impact of their thinking. He wanted to show how the intellectuals could come to occupy a pivotal position in the shaping of society if they would only become aware of this potential. He wrote: “*The consciousness of men does not determine their material existence; nor does their material existence determine their consciousness. Between consciousness and existence stand meanings and designs and communications which other men have passed on...These received and manipulated interpretations decisively influence such consciousness as men have of their existence*” (Mills 1972i:405). To Mills the intellectuals had to wrestle with the powerful, who at present controlled these meanings, designs and communications, and make people aware that the image they hold of the world was influenced by, and merely a reflection of, the social structure under which they live their lives. To Mills this was to be the prime objective for intellectuals.

We started this monograph by comparing C. Wright Mills with the character in Hermann Hesse’s *The Prodigy* (1957), and Mills’ own final destiny is rather similar to that of the student Hans Giebenrath, who eventually succumbs to the external pressures of the surrounding society, his friends, foes and fellow students, is caught ill and dies a tragic death. This scenario is almost equivalent to how Mills’ career ended with his second heart attack, as a unique yet tainted person finally giving in to both bad health, the hurry-scurry of life at on academic centre stage and the continuous struggles with established cliques of his discipline. Mills himself noted on the climate of academic culture that “*the
world of cliques is not all there is in the academic world. There are also the unattached, who come in many varieties indeed and whose work is also varied. From the standpoint of a leading clique, the unattached may seem as friendly or at least neutral about the cliques’ school...To the extent that their work is attracting favourable attention or they are judged to be of merit, use, or worth, members of the clique may seek to attract them, to show them the way, and eventually to recruit them. Celebration that is merely mutual celebration – by, of, and for clique members – that is not enough...But among the unattached there may also be those who don’t play the game, won’t cash in the prestige claims. Of these some are merely indifferent and absorbed in their own work, and some are downright hostile. They are critics of the school’s work. If it is possible, the clique will ignore them and their work” (Mills 1959a:111). Mills would probably characterise himself as one of these hostile heroes, the unattached workmen within sociology, and the destiny outlined here is also illustrative of what happened to Mills’ own work, which although it was difficult to ignore even for the prestigious and powerful schools of grand theory and abstracted empiricism, his flow towards more polemical postures contributed to a certain ostracism of his work and person as being non-house trainable. C. Wright Mills took his critique of America with him into his grave and although he had influenced a few colleagues and students and had left his stamp on their future contributions to sociology, his own more prolific critique vanished and did not appear again until the early 1970’s with the upheavals against the Vietnam War and with the more critical climate of the sociology of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

9. What can we learn from Charles Wright Mills?

It is never advisable for a sociologist always to hang his coat on the same old theoretical hatstand and never to seek new solutions to the novelty of arising troubles as well as old recurring problems. The good sociologist, C. Wright Mills would agree, never stops short of a thorough understanding and explanation of a phenomenon, is never satisfied with a one-sided perspective and never accepts an answer as the expression of some ultimate truth. Therefore a good sociologist, we can learn from Mills, is an intellectual craftsman, who knows his tools and, even more importantly, how to use them. The problem with Mills, though, is that we never really know whether these tools are supposed to be utilised in a constructive or a destructive fashion. There is little doubt that Mills throughout his writings often used his methods and theoretical perspective in a very constructive manner, as when he focused on unexplored taken-for-granted aspects of reality or supplied sociology with a new armoury of
neologisms and theoretical insights, but equally often his perspective was a not so obtuse weapon against his enemies and contemporaries of the orthodox consensus in politics and social science. In other words, he wanted his sociology to make a difference. As the political historian Conor Cruise O’Brien once stated: “I would like at least that my own intellectual activity should not make things worse or more dangerous...and, preferable, that it would make things, by a tiny margin a little bit better, a little bit clearer, a little bit more rational, even a little bit more compassionate” (O’Brien in Marx 1997:102). Although Mills belonged to a political orientation very different from that of the originator of this quotation, he probably would have saluted most of this as his own view of social science, although I doubt he would hail a further rationalisation of an, in his view, already excessively rationalised society. Let us try and sum up respectively the aforementioned positive as well as more negative insights we can gain from reading Mills without giving in to the either the excessively hallelujah attitude or the manifestly critical evaluations of his writings. Initially I believe that it is possible to see three somewhat solidified stages in his academic development and this is shown in the figure below.
Throughout these stages we see both an intellectual maturation as well as ... From the early years of philosophical investigations of the nature of the social world, the psychology of social institutions and the role of the intellectuals to the later years of polemical writings on the Cuban revolution, the causes of a war that never happened and personal attacks on fellow sociologists. Indeed a twisted intellectual and academic trajectory marked by variation and diversity.

The pros and cons of C. Wright Mills
Trying to sum up the perspective and credentials of Mills is an extremely difficult task to set oneself, as he often – although being very much to the point in his arguments - appears to be placed betwixt and between various positions. This is especially because his contradictory role as an intellectual was somewhat difficult to grasp, even to himself (Lasch 1986).\(^3\) However, in the following I have tried to outline what I, from the point of an admittedly personal and very subjective evaluation, believe to be of lasting value and importance in his sociology.

First and foremost, as a positive mark of distinction, he was not afraid – afraid that he stepped on the corns of officialdom in the spheres of politics or social science. Like Alvin Gouldner, who was later designated to the position of an outlaw Marxist - and who in his own work was heavily inspired my Mills’ type of sociology - Mills could equally be termed a radical outlaw. What characterises a true radical outlaw is that he by virtue of his actions or utterances exists beyond the protection of the community - and Mills neither craved or desired this hollow protection of either consensual sociology or liberal

Lasch goes on to suggest that Mills’ difficulty with adherence to any one solidified conception of the intellectual stemmed from the incorporation of so many conflicting roles in one person ranging from the par fait to the outlaw sociologist: ‘It was Mills the rebel, the James Dean of left-wing sociology, who appealed to the new left and became a new-left legend: the iconoclast, the motorcyclist, the Wobbly, the admirer of Castro. But Mills was also a Marxist of sorts’ (Lasch 1986:103), and the role as the clown of the sociological circus did not always fit well with the ambition to be taken seriously as a profound thinker and
democratic politics. Moreover, his insistence on a practically oriented and ethically guided social science appears as something for present day sociologists to comply with and in this lies also his desire in reasserting the role of the politically informed intellectuals (Jacobsen 2001); something which caused a clash with the present situation of his own lifetime in which “the political intellectual is, increasingly, an employee living off the communicational machineries which are based on the very opposite of what he would like to stand for. He would like to stand for a politics of truth in a democratically responsible society. But such efforts as he has made in behalf of freedom for his function have been defeated” (Mills 1944:72). Mills wanted the intellectuals, and preferably in the shape of sociologists, to be practical and political in their aspirations and abide by the lesson from Marx who once noted, that science ought not to be an egoistic pleasure and that those who are fortunate enough to dedicate their lives to scientific enterprise ought to be the first ones to utilise their work in the service of mankind. The intellectuals, thus, were not to escape their obligation to orient themselves to the practical realities of life, to private troubles and public issues. Furthermore, he was an extremely foresighted person, as many of his analyses proved, and the fact that he advanced, almost single-handedly, the conflict perspective in the stagnant mere of sociological consensus also speaks to the benefit of his position. Finally, and on a more personal note, to read, as well to teach about, Mills’ sociology is mostly a thought-provoking and entertaining enterprise for a lecturer to undertake. His vocabulary easily catches the attention of the reader and the student alike (as well as the lecturer himself) and he comes alive obstreperous and flamboyant in ways that for example teaching on Parsons, Habermas or Giddens hardly ever can claim to do during lectures or seminars. If Mills was not afraid, we ought to follow this stance, but one thing is the wish to do something with Mills, quite another thing is to dare do it.

Among the cons of Mills’ sociology it could in hindsight be mentioned that he probably disfavoured himself and the perspective he wanted to promote so badly by clinging on to the overt polemical posture of his. Somehow one has the feeling that his sociological imagination, for example, could have had better chances of forming and shaping the conscience as well as consciousness of sociologists had it been but in less uncompromising terms and also his ill-concealed normativity appeared both as his greatest arsenal as well as his most severe disadvantage. Another problem with Mills is that he did not really follow his own prescriptions for sociologists in The Sociological Imagination (Mills 1959a) - he was hardly ever comparative in his orientation, he almost never worked in a particularly historical fashion, he, however unwittingly, became a theorist.
representative of dogmatism and orthodoxy himself, and his angry attitude often overshadowed his real objectives of creating a constructive counter-sociology to the orthodox consensus. As Dennis Wrong noted on Mills’ own sociology: “Mills’ gift is largely for synthesis, for sketching in the outlines of the whole, rather than for careful, close reasoning. His books are full of exciting vistas, imaginative suggestions pointing to overlooked connections in social life, but he invariably fails to follow up these in any rigorous fashion” (Wrong 1959:88).

The same has been observed by William Spinrad (1966:46) who remarked that “as the polemicist hammering home his points, he [Mills] tended to limit his material and oversimplify his observations. He seemed uninterested in details, as for instance, of politics, except as illustrations for some major connections. General assertions were frequently lacking in sufficient concrete illustrations, let alone proof. Facts contrary to his theses were relegated to the irrelevant and insignificant, or admitted and the ignored”. In this way Mills fell into the same pitfall as some of the contemporaries he himself criticised so heavily in his writings for being unimaginative and rigid. Although being extremely critical of American social science and society, he never offered a comprehensive alternative model to the deceitfulness of American liberal democracy he so mightily criticised, and his ideal vision was probably that of an intellectually informed public decision-making process contrary to the present state of affairs where “the ethics and politics of democracy center on decisions which vitally affect people who have no voice in them. Today, everywhere, such decisions are central to the lives of more and more people. A politics of organized irresponsibility prevails, and because of it, men in high places must hide the facts of life in order to retain their power...Never before have so few men made such fateful decisions for so many people whom themselves are so helpless” (Mills 1944:70). This organised irresponsibility is the main reason why democracy appears as a sham and as a cloak for specialised interests and elitist tendencies and Mills could have posed a more vivid and useful frame for a change to the better. However, he did propose certain guidelines and it must then be the task of other sympathetically informed sociologists to elaborate further on these.

Only very few sociologists and other commentators of social scientific enterprise have been capable of completely ignoring Mills; his sociology has this bad tendency to pop up when you least expect it and then it sticks to you whether you like it or not. This can be said of only a handful of those people we normally categorise as social thinkers or sociologists. Simply for this reason, we ought to take his sociology seriously and because “given the persistence of the structural constraints inherent in the exercise of the procession, which are partly rooted in the academic structure generally, the chance of another Mills arising in sociology is about equal to the chance of a Fidel Castro emerging in the State Department. Unless this structure changes profoundly, it is safely
predictable that the next generation of prominent sociologists will be just as bought as the present one is” (Nicolaus 1971:51). His position is as unique as it is challenging both on the personal as well as the professional level and the reader will discover that he either moderately disagrees or completely disagrees with Mills – it is simply impossible to get into step with him due to his insistent negation of everything we take for granted. As Mills’ spiritual mentor, Max Weber, once noted, and by which Mills lived: “If the professional thinker has an immediate obligation at all, it is to keep a cool head in the face of the idols prevailing at the time, and if necessary to swim against the stream” (Weber 1949:47). The type of sociologist personified by C. Wright Mills is the tonic as well as the salt of the social sciences although he did not entirely live up to his own idols as Jay Sigler remarked: “C. Wright Mills, as a post-Weberian and post-Marxist, modified and extended the theoretical work of those giants of social theory. Lacking the creative ingenuity of either of his predecessors Mills often employed their categories or refined them. Nevertheless, as an exponent of the classical tradition in social science, Mills examined problems which his fellow social scientists avoided or ignored. He was the outstanding recent exponent of radical-reformist social science” (Sigler 1966:46). He represented both the vintage of sociology as well as the most horrid aspects, simultaneously contained the best as well as the worst. Merely for this reason, he ought to be rediscovered by the discipline.

Swimming and drowning in the sea of sociology
The British sociologist Richard Jenkins recently noted in an introduction to the authorship of contemporary sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, that Bourdieu is good to think with. The same could indiscriminately be said of Mills, whose original insights - and admittedly often downright provocative and preposterous statements - are very constructive in putting things into perspective, and also into a distorted perspective it must be said. Mills, on the other hand, is not only good to think with but equally good to think against primarily due to the fact, that he often takes a very hard-nosed position either out of stubborn idealism or merely for the sake of argument. He was in many respects an outsider sociologist and, as Pablo Casanova wrote, “Mills’ portrait does not correspond to the stereotype of a sociologist. The stereotyped sociologist has no nostalgia. He either does not have or does not display any moral concern” (Casanova 1964:67). This could not be said of Mills and the main problem one encounter in his writings is the fact that Mills often found it hard to separate fact from fiction, science from morality, and on some occasions overemphasised the importance of those aspects of the reality he wanted to analyse.34 The kind of social

That Mills was a moral scientist with a moral conscience is reported by many and amongst
scientific enterprise advocated by Mills have long since been dead in contemporary sociology. Not that he took his vision with him in the grave – it survived in the works of Gouldner and others on the New Left but the environment in which such sceptical sociology could thrive became increasingly hostile to approaches that supported polemics over stringency, dialectic criticism over status quo, and insurgency over impartiality.

The primary legacy of C. Wright Mills to the discipline, he so much saw himself as a vanguard of, was his insistence and persistent attempts to integrate sociology with polemical journalism and insights from a left-wing political position - a farrago later to be known as radical sociology, as we discussed above. Whether one is sympathetic to this kind of sociological and intellectual wrestling with social problems and unveiling power structures or not, it nevertheless has to be recognised as a genuine attempt of making sociology relevant to the potential problems and calamities threatening modern as well as post-modern society. Jim Miller, writing on Mills’ polemics, stated: “To read Mills today is to be struck again by the rhetorical force of that doctrine. It is to be exhilarated by the artfulness of a muscular stylist writing in the grips of a sweeping political vision. It is to admire a clarity of purpose and an elegance of conceptualization. But it is also, finally, to recognize the limits to one intellectual’s perspective” (Miller 1986:97), and it was here that Mills faltered. Therefore, one of the main obstacles confronting this radical sociology, as I view it, is the problem of normativity versus objectivity - a problem only Max Weber was capable of solving adequately. For Mills it always proved troublesome to distance himself from the vertigo of normativity and to separate his positive from his normative statements: “Positive statements are about what is, was or what will be; they assert alleged facts about the universe in which we live. Normative statements are about what ought to be. They depend on judgements about what is good or bad, and they are thus inextricably bound up with our philosophical, cultural and religious positions” (Lipsey 1982:5). In the sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills no such dividing line between what was and what ought to be was visible and he blurred the distinction between sociological problems and social problems, twisting them both beyond recognition thereby turning sociology into some sort of evaluating and critical science.

In this way Mills paved the way for his own downfall as he plunged others Peter Christian Ludz who wrote of Mills: "Mills ist Moralist. Er hat die europäische Tradition der Montaigne, Diderot und Helvétius ebenso wie die der amerikanischen Liberalismus-Kritik der Dewey, Veblen und Bentley fortgeführt” (Ludz 1965:884). It is obvious that his moral dimension, as it were, was not a straightforward position but instead one that borrowed insights equally from pragmatism, utilitarianism and European conservativism. Therefore his moral mixture can easily be debunked as inconsistent and dubious. The strength of his moral crusade turned out to be its weakness as well.
himself directly into the pool of normativity and a critical posture - often a rather 
toxic cocktail of political involvement and personal strife - and swan directly 
against the norm of the days of non-normative and non-critical social science. 
Although he clearly was an unsurpassable sociological swimmer, he eventually 
found himself short of stamina and endurance, drowned and sank to the bottom 
of the sea of social science with his ideal of a sociological imagination. Now we 
can only await the resurfacing of this ideal.

**Suggested as well as suggestive readings**

As I have indicated several times above, the existing introductory 
literature on the sociology of C. Wright Mills are either excessively 
enthusiastic and panegyric evaluations or the exactly opposite, 
almost derogatory insults of his points of view. The circumstances 
leading to these polarised perspectives are probably due to the almost 
routine neglect of his writings in much of contemporary sociology 
which naturally limits the supply of possible inroads that objectively 
recognises his contributions that, as I have sought to render probable, 
amount to an inevitable exposition of sociological insight and 
originality.

For newcomers to the writings of Mills, it would be advisable to 
look at some of the more down to earth presentations of his sociology 
and academic credentials, and such can be found in respectively 
in a more lengthy and detailed study. Also in Herbert Aptheker 
(1960), which is the only piece of work on Mills written during his 
own lifetime, valuable thematically ordered insights on his major 
works can be gained while Bipul Kumar Bhadra’s contribution (1989), 
although it is accessible to most readers, is on a more advanced level 
as is also John Alt’s (1985-86) discussion and critical evaluation of 
central aspects of Mills’ sociology. If one is looking for more 
sympathetic and personal accounts of the life and intellectual 
development and maturation of Mills, especially the two introductory 
books by Irving Horowitz (1972 and 1983) can be recommended, 
where the former presents Mills’ own writings and the latter is a 
biographical *tour de force on Mills from birth to death*. More relatively 
objective and distanced biographical and sociological information 
about Mills can be found in Joseph Scimecca’s (1977) much acclaimed 
book as well as in Rick Tilman’s (1983) presentation which draws on 
more alternative sources that those usually referred to in conventional
literature on Mills. Also Howard Press’ (1978) lengthy discussion of Mills offers some promise but is still, like this present paper, heavily influenced by chronology (and it starts out with a rather detailed chronology of Mills’ life) and share many similarities when it comes to structure and themes discussed with Aptheker’s aforementioned piece of work. In Raymond Cuzzort (1969) an entire chapter, which is rather unusual, is dedicated to Mills’ sociology. Within the last couple of months an extremely interesting piece of work has been published with edited autobiographical writings and personal correspondence by Mills’ two daughters which highlights the more private aspects of the life of a great sociologist.

If one is eager to get immediately acquainted with Mills’ own work also a few pieces of advice can be passed on. Particularly his trilogy of The New Men of Power (1948a), White Collar (1951) and The Power Elite (1956) can be recommended as examples of Mills when he is at his best. In these three volumes one will encounter both theoretical depth and empirical substantiation of his perspective as well as the usual polemical and poisonous strokes of his pen, that make his writings both intellectually stimulating as well as provocative and humorous reading. For people not familiar with the field of sociology in general and Mills’ writings in particular, his masterpiece The Sociological Imagination (1959a) will probably be too big a mouthful as it demands quite a bit of insight and knowledge on the part of the reader of the composition of the field of sociology in the 1950’s and American society and politics in the same period. In the collected essays of Mills in Power, Politics and People (Horowitz 1972), which are tremendously fascinating fragments of his position, the reader will encounter Mills as a varied and nuanced writer with comments on and analyses of many different issues. Leaving these reservations aside, Mills is, however, generally not difficult to read – but he demands of his reader that he accepts the view of the world as it is presented by him and that this Weltanschauung is reality as we know it. This can be difficult to accept at times and will cause as much distress and protest as delight and smirks. We cannot demand more of the writings of sociologists. Finally I will endorse the words of one of Mills’ biographers, Herbert Aptheker, who wrote: “Whatever one may say of the world of C. Wright Mills, it cannot be said that his work is not stimulating...Mills is a writer with whom my disagreements, as I have striven to show, are profound; he is also, however, the kind of writer for whom one’s respect grows as one’s study continues” (Aptheker 1960:128). Enjoy the encounter with the sociological universe of the prodigious provocateur, C. Wright Mills.
Bibliography


New York: Oxford University Press.


Kennikat Press.


THE PRODIGIOUS PROVOCATEUR!

- An Inevitable Invitation to the Sociology of C. Wright Mills

ABSTRACT

In this paper an elucidation and compressed introduction of the core ideas of the work carried out by late American sociologist C. Wright Mills will be presented, aiming primarily at the introductory level for students of sociology. Mills never came to occupy the position as a key figure within mainstream sociology and therefore always led a rather sequestered existence at the outskirts of sociological theory. Today he is mostly regarded as a parenthesis in the history of the discipline and as an obscure hybrid of politics and social science antagonising established positions. In the subsequent paper this will be rectified and Mills’ contribution to sociology will be presented in its own right. Through a chronology of Mill’s authorship and writings the reader will encounter contours of a general perspective of the fascinating and often rather ingenious radical sociological position of a muckraking, provoking and precocious C. Wright Mills. In the following a critical appraisal of this position as an unavoidable perspective within the field will be outlined with the purpose of placing Mills’ position not as an obscure variant of Marxist sociology but at the centre stage of American sociological thinking particularly in the period ranging from the early 1940’s until the late 1960’s. Although Mills was never particularly popular amongst fellow colleagues, his work remained in the heart of many of the scholars and students of his generation and those to come. This paper is an attempt to rekindle the fire in sociology that was extinguished with his death.
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