Do the writings of C. Wright Mills, largely published in the 1950s, have anything to offer to the discussion about the condition and possibilities of egalitarian democratic politics during a period of conservative and corporate domination in the United States? In the last decade interest in the work of Mills, who died in 1962 at age 45, has revived. In 2000 a collection of his letters and unpublished writings was published in a volume edited by his daughters Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills, offering a fresh and vivid portrait of Mills’s character, politics, and intellectual development.¹ The New Men of Power (1948), White Collar (1951), The Power Elite (1956) and The Sociological Imagination (1959) were republished in new editions with essays by prominent scholars Nelson Lichtenstein, Russell Jacoby, Alan Wolfe, and Todd Gitlin, respectively. New Left activist Tom Hayden’s MA thesis on Mills has been published in book form, with contemporary reflections by sociologists and activists Dick Flacks, Stanley Aronowitz, and Charles Lemert, as well as by Hayden himself.² Even the New York Times Book Review published a respectful article on the importance and relevance of The Power Elite.³

Mills was best known for his studies of the American power elite and the new middle classes, and as a champion of a “sociological imagination” that linked individual experience to historical process. But underlying all of Mills’s work, in my view, is a normative vision of radical, egalitarian democracy. As his friend Ralph Miliband put it, Mills’s “political point of reference … was the need for democratic participation at all levels and at all points of decision making, industrial as well as political, on the job as well as in the polling-booth.”⁴ While Mills was increasingly interested in Marxism, and his last book was about The Marxists,⁵ his democratic views were rooted in an American radical tradition and influenced by figures such as Thorstein Veblen, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead.⁶ As political theorist

² Tom Hayden, Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
³ John H. Summers, “The Deciders,” New York Times Book Review, May 14, 2006. Summers notes that in 1968, six years after his death, Mills was identified by the CIA as one of the most influential New Left intellectuals in the world.
James Miller wrote, “Rereading him, it is striking how consistently he hammers away at a handful of motifs and themes, almost all of them linked to a sense of America’s lost democratic promise. This political vision is absolutely central for any appreciation of Mills’s real importance.”

C. Wright Mills was a controversial figure among American intellectuals when he died in 1962. Intense personal feelings about Mills affected evaluations of his work. Mainstream sociologists were capable of snide innuendo and disparagement, as illustrated in a review of *The Sociological Imagination* published in *Encounter* by the Chicago sociologist Edward Shils:

> Imagine a burly cowpuncher in the long, slow ride from the Panhandle of Texas to Columbia University, carrying in his saddle-bag some books which he reads with absorption while his horse trots. Imagine that among the books are some novels of Kafka, Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, and the essays of Max Weber. Imagine the style and imagery of the cowboy student and his studies. Imagine also that en route he passes through Madison, Wisconsin, that seat of a decaying populism, and that on arriving at his destination in New York, he encounters Madison Avenue, that street full of reeking phantasies of the manipulation of the human will and of what is painful to America’s well-wishers and enjoyable to its detractors. Imagine the first Madison disclosing to the learned cowpuncher his subsequent political mode, the second an object of his hatred. The end result of such an imaginary grand tour would be a work like *The Sociological Imagination*.

In a 1961 survey of American sociology Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil Smelser wrote of Mills in a similar vein:

> In any article discussing major trends in American sociology designed for publication in England it is clearly necessary to discuss C. Wright Mills for he seems to have become an intellectual hero to a youthful section of the British political community. It must be reported, however, that he has little importance for contemporary American sociology, although his books are bestsellers outside the field and are widely hailed in certain political circles…. But if Mr. Mills cuts himself off from the sociological fraternity he retains important outlets of expression from a more popular and commercial media and thus manages to influence the outside world’s image of sociology.

Edward Shils returned to the attack in 1963, a year after Mills’s death, maintaining that Mills had become

> 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

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stones, his analysis empty, his strenuous pathos limp. He was a victim of his own
avanity and of a shrivelled Marxism which will not die and which goes on requiring
the sacrifice of the living.\footnote{Quoted in Tilman, C. Wright Mills, op. cit., p. 11.}

In 1964 Newsweek carried an article on this “Legend of the Left,” and found Mills’s
“attitude toward the democratic process ambivalent” and his portrait of American society
grossly distorted, lacking in proof…. In his adulation of Castro’s Cuba, Mills proved
embarrassingly naive, and in his rejection of America, unnecessarily harsh. Yet he wrote
what many left-wing intellectuals, particularly in Western Europe, wanted to
believe. As a result, Mills, who craved public attention, won a worldwide reputation.\footnote{“Legend of the Left,” Newsweek, May 11, 1964, pp. 91–92.}

Others found merit in the Mills legacy. The 1962 Port Huron statement of
Students for a Democratic Society, which urged the creation of “participatory
Mills was appraised in terms of radical democratic theory by James Miller, for
whom Mills was “perhaps the most influential American left-wing intellectual of
this century.”\footnote{Miller, “Democracy and the Intellectual,” op. cit., p. 83.} and by Cornel West, who has assessed Mills’s “attempt to keep
Mills was identified as a prominent representative of the vanishing breed of
“public intellectuals” in Russell Jacoby’s The Last Intellectuals. Discussing Mills
and his Columbia University colleagues Richard Hofstadter and Lionel Trilling,
Jacoby states, “Their differences, however, should not obscure what they shared:
they saw themselves not so much as professors but as intellectuals addressing a

Mills influence extended outside the United States. In his first major book,
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), the German philosopher
and social theorist Jürgen Habermas commented very favorably on Mills’s key
distinction between “publics” and “masses” and stated that it supported his
analysis of the deterioration of the public sphere in contemporary societies.\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, translated Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 249. In his “Introduction” to One-Dimensional Man, Marcuse wrote, “I should like to emphasize the vital importance of the work of C. Wright Mills.” Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. xvii.}
In Britain Mills formed personal ties with a number of leaders of the emerging post-1956 New Left, especially Ralph Miliband, and contributed a much-discussed “Letter to the New Left” to *New Left Review* in its first year of publication in 1960.\(^ {17}\)

Contemporary academic political theory has appropriated the work of thinkers like John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In my view C. Wright Mills is an equally admirable spur to reflection on US democracy. In this essay I will describe the normative foundations of Mills’s democratic ideals, link Mills’s analysis of the American power structure to his perception of the diminishment of democratic politics in the postwar period, discuss his critique of US militarism and Cold War policies, and assess Mills’s views on how participatory democracy in America might be revived.

**Democratic Values**

Mills held a classical view of public activity as essential to human wellbeing. He maintained that democracy, free of domination and manipulation, was necessary for the realization of human freedom. As Miliband recalled, “For Mills, the point of reference was the vision of a society where men might achieve control of their fate by the use of knowledge and reason, and where men’s social and institutional setting would encourage self-cultivation and craftsmanship.”\(^ {18}\) To the extent that contemporary society encouraged privatism and indifference among its citizens, a whole dimension of human experience was rendered unavailable. As Mills wrote, “If we accept the Greek’s definition of the idiot as an altogether private man, then we must conclude that many American citizens are now idiots.”\(^ {19}\) Depoliticization, for Mills, resulted in passivity and alienation:

we are now in a situation in which many who are disengaged from prevailing allegiances have not acquired new ones, and so are distracted from and inattentive to political concerns of any kind. They are strangers to politics. They are not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it.\(^ {20}\)

Mills’s concept of democracy rested on an ideal-typical distinction between “publics” and “masses” that pervades his work. Public opinion, in the democratic sense of the 18th century, should be based on “face-to-face groups” in which “anyone is allowed to speak at will, and everyone interested does.” Under these conditions, the “possibilities of angering back, of forming autonomous organs of public opinion, of realizing opinion in action, are automatically established by the institutional possibilities of democratic society.” An active, deliberative public presupposed “a conception of authority by discussion, based formally on the theory that truth and justice will somehow come out of society as a great

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\(^ {18}\) Miliband, *op. cit.*, p. 82.


apparatus of free discussion.” In this democratic society, “Parliament, as an
institution, crowns all the primary publics; it is the archetype for each of the
scattered little circles of face-to-face citizens discussing their public business.” 21

Mills was an intense student of philosophy before he became a sociologist and
his democratic ideals were shaped by the American pragmatic tradition of Peirce,
Dewey, James, and Mead, the subject of Mills’s 1942 dissertation. 22 From the
pragmatists Mills derived an emphasis on the social nature of the self, dialogue
and communication, and the power of critical intelligence to guide human affairs.
In a 1944 article on “The Social Role of the Intellectual” Mills wrote:

Knowledge that is not communicated has a way of turning the mind sour, of being
obscured, and finally of being forgotten…. For only through the social
confirmation of others … do we earn the right of feeling secure in our knowledge. 23

In contrast to a democratic formation of the general will, public opinion in
“mass society” is generated without free dialogue and deliberation and stands in a
subordinate relationship to elite decision makers. Under the modern media,
“competition goes on between the crowd of manipulators … and the people
receiving their communications…. ‘Answering back’ by the people is system-
atically unavailable.” Such conditions presuppose a view of the public as “merely
the collectivity of individuals each rather passively exposed to the mass media and
rather helplessly opened up to the suggestions and manipulations that flow from
these media.” 24 In a mass society the real determinants of personal experience are
removed from general awareness and the democratic articulation of public issues is
thereby limited. Mills thought that America had become a “mass society,” not
because of an irrational “revolt of the masses” posited by conservative thinkers, but
through the historical development of a new system of power and politics.

Power and Politics in America

Mills came to maturity amidst the upsurge of American liberalism represented
politically by Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and intellectually by
pragmatism. Yet Mills was sharply critical of mid-century liberalism, from a
radically democratic point of view. According to Miliband, Mills thought that
liberalism “had gone flabby and conservative. It had become a rhetoric of apology,
a way of masking reality, a means of clouding issues, an obstacle to understanding
and significant action.” 25

Steven Lukes has argued that a commitment to liberal values does not
necessarily entail a commitment to the individualist and capitalist forms of social
organization with which they have been linked historically. “Taking equality and

21 Mills, Powers, Politics, and People, op. cit., p. 579. See also C. Wright Mills, The Causes of
Dewey, see Rick Tilman, “Reinhold Niebuhr and C. Wright Mills as Convergent Critics of
John Dewey and American Liberalism,” Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society 37:4
23 Mills, Power, Politics, and People, op. cit., p. 300.
24 Ibid., pp. 581–582.
25 Miliband, op. cit., p. 87.
liberty seriously implies seeking to ascertain the conditions under which they can be realized, maintained, and increased,” writes Lukes.\textsuperscript{26} Mills did not reject liberal, humanist values. Rather he thought that contemporary liberalism had become disembodied, failing to specify the social, political, and institutional conditions that would make possible the realization of liberal, democratic ideals. In an often quoted passage he stated:

Liberalism, as a set of ideals, is still viable, and even compelling to Western man. That is one reason why it has become a common denominator of American political rhetoric; but there is another reason. The ideals of liberalism have been divorced from any realities of modern social structure that might serve as the means of their realization. Everybody can easily agree on general ends; it is more difficult to agree on means and the relevance of various means to the ends articulated. The detachment of liberalism from the facts of a going society make it an excellent mask for those who do not, cannot, or will not do what would have to be done to realize its ideals.\textsuperscript{27}

Mills contended that the prevalent understanding of power in America on the part of liberal intellectuals masked more than it revealed. He found the concept of pluralism and countervailing power among political scientists to be wanting:

Instead of justifying the power of an elite by portraying it favorably, one denies that any set of men, any class, any organization has any really consequential power. American liberalism is thus readily made to sustain the conservative mood.\textsuperscript{28}

Liberalism was no longer oppositional. Rather than spurring democratic activism, the dominant interpretation of liberalism served as the ideology for the interweaving of state and economy in a new form of organized capitalism. Where others saw only progressive reform, Mills also saw incorporation, depoliticization, and deradicalization, as “administration replaces electoral policies; the maneuvering of cliques replaces the open clash of parties.”\textsuperscript{29}

Mills’s analysis of the US power structure was deeply at odds with self-congratulatory interpretations of American democracy. His critique of liberalism differed from that of conservatives because it was rooted in egalitarian democratic values and because it made clear the close relationship of the post-New Deal liberal state to the sophisticated wing of the corporate business community. In The New Men of Power Mills differentiated “sophisticated conservatives” from “practical conservatives,” a distinction he also employed in White Collar.\textsuperscript{30} In The Power Elite he described these two tendencies within the business community:

In the higher circles of business and its associations, there has long been a tension, for example, between the “old guard” of practical conservatives and the business liberals’ or sophisticated conservatives. What the old guard represents is the outlook, if not always the intelligent interests, of the more narrow economic concerns. What the business liberals represent is the outlook and the interests of the new propertied class as a whole. They are “sophisticated” because they are more

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[27] Mills, Power, Politics, and People, op. cit., p. 189.
\item[29] Mills, The Causes of World War Three, op. cit., p. 29.
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\end{footnotesize}
flexible in adjusting to such political facts of life as the New Deal and big labor, because they have taken over and used the dominant liberal rhetoric for their own purposes, and because they have, in general, attempted to get on top of, or even slightly ahead of, the trend of these developments, rather than to fight it as practical conservatives are wont to do.31

Along with the military leadership and the higher reaches of the federal state, the corporate elite formed part of the triumvirate of power that was hegemonic in US politics. The labor movement, which Mills thought to be the only barrier to slump and war in the late 1940s, had largely entered into a strategic alliance with the corporate liberals, who in contrast to the business conservatives, preached cooperation and accommodation. Mills saw this relationship as a “blind alley” and a threat to the ability of labor to formulate an independent political and economic program.32 Oppositional space was being conceded.

For Mills the power structure functioned in such a way as to shrink the democratic public sphere, as public discourse was manipulated by elites and colonized by the market. The complexity of civil society and the quality of public discussion were being reduced. The relegation of citizens to spectatorship, and the obscure nature of power’s operation, led to a “moral insensibility” in which “the individual becomes the spectator of everything but the human witness of nothing.”33

In the years after it was published Mills’s analysis of the US power structure was subject to a wide-ranging debate across the political spectrum, including on the left.34 Among its positive offspring was an empirically and theoretically rich body of power structure research that has specified more clearly the relationship of the power elite to the corporate and financial community and the processes through which ruling class political consensus is reached in the United States. G. William Domhoff, the foremost scholar of power structure research, has argued:

Today, Mills looks even better than he did 50 years ago in his characterization of the benefactors of American capitalism as a corporate rich led by the chief executives of large corporations and financial institutions, who by now can clearly be seen as the driving force within the power elite. His analysis also remains right on target as far as the nature of the political directorate, who circulate between corporations, corporate law firms, and government positions in the same way they did 50 years ago (and well before that, of course).35

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33 Mills, The Causes of World War Three, op. cit., p. 78.


Liberals and progressives often underplay the implications of this analysis in their accounts of contemporary American politics, clouding the sources of growing inequality and perhaps understating the obstacles to reform. At this writing the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama has excited much of the left, for very understandable reasons. But at the least Mills would encourage us to take into account Obama’s campaign contributors, key advisers, and actual policy statements, along with his populist and reformist appeals, in order to have a realistic view of what kind of changes an Obama presidency would and would not bring.

**Militarism and the Cold War**

Mills addressed global and international issues with growing intensity in the late 1950s. This of course was signaled by his “pamphlets” *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen, Yankee* (1960), which challenged the Cold War with the Soviet Union and argued for solidarity with the Cuban Revolution. Mills’s book on Cuba followed a visit to the island in 1960, where he met with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. *Listen, Yankee!* sold over 400,000 copies and played an important role in the opposition to US intervention in Cuba. After its publication Mills received an anonymous threat of assassination on his next visit to Cuba. An FBI memo of November 29, 1960 noted that

Mills indicated he would not be surprised if this were true since he does not doubt that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other similar United States organizations do not approve of his activities. Mills has made several inquiries in regard to purchasing a gun for self-protection.

International Relations scholar Justin Rosenberg has argued that Mills, among his other contributions, provides the basis for an alternative to the realist school of international relations, based on “grounding in substantive problems, the use of an historical and comparative depth of field, the perception of social totalities, and the commitment to the ideals of freedom and reason.” Mills included the military elite as part of the tripartite power structure in the United States, and thought that the

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37 I find more value in these books than does John Judis, who writes that “to the benefit of Mills’s reputation, [they] are no longer available in bookstores, except perhaps in Havana.” Judis, *op. cit.*, p. 82.


ruling circles in both the Soviet Union and America were possessed by a “military metaphysic.” While I accept criticism that Mills over-emphasized the autonomous power of the military, his claim was based on the correct view that the post-war power elite was shaped by America’s changing, hegemonic international position, and that a culture and politics of militarism helped to support that position. As Carl Boggs explains, “The Pentagon stands at the center of a vast web of military, industrial, political, and global structures tied to complex bureaucracies, weapons systems, base facilities, communications networks, job and contract structures and a labyrinthine network of armed forces branches.”

Mills also thought that military spending had become established as a countervailing force to capitalist stagnation.

A change in US foreign policy required radical changes in the American political economy. But the lack of democratic debate over America’s global position, and the distortions induced by the news media, created “plain ignorance about what most of the world is up to.”

Mills was also critical of anti-communist socialists and “NATO intellectuals” whose support for the West perpetuated the cold war:

Some of the best of them allow themselves to be trapped by the politics of anti-Stalinism, which has been a main passageway from the political thirties to the intellectual default of the apolitical fifties … They use the liberal rhetoric to cover the conservative default.

This position led to rifts with some of his friends on the democratic left, such as Dissent editor Irving Howe. After 9/11 a number of liberal intellectuals fell into the trap identified by Mills, foolishly supporting the “war on terrorism” as an extension of the Cold War against communism and endorsing the war on Iraq as a form of humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion.

In Search of a Democratic Imagination

C. Wright Mills must have been one of the first writers to discuss the emergence of a “post-modern” epoch. Far from regarding the post-modern world as a delightful era of the endless subversion of codes, Mills was concerned that the Enlightenment belief in the unified progress of reason and freedom, along with the ideologies of liberalism and socialism, “have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and ourselves.”

This did not mean that Mills was fatalistic about American
democracy. He urged the re-creation of genuine publics and urged Americans to “take democracy seriously and literally.” What resources does his thought provide for this project?

Mills placed great importance on intellectual responsibility and was scornful of several trends among intellectuals in the 1950s. He denounced the “cult of alienation” as “a form of collapse into self-indulgence. It is a personal excuse for lack of political will. It is a fashionable way of being overwhelmed.”

As for the “tragic-view-of-life” perspective, Mills was equally caustic:

It is a way of saying to oneself: “We’re all in this together” . . . But “we” are not all in this together—so far as such decisions as are made and can be made are concerned. “We” are not all in this together—so far as bearing the consequences of these decisions is concerned. To deny either statement is to deny the facts of power, in particular the fact that different men hold very different portions of such power as is now available. Only if all men everywhere were actors of equal power in an absolute democracy could we seriously hold the “tragic view” of responsibility.

Mills held out the possibility of a more creative response on the part of intellectuals:

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity continually to unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us.

Mills made a well-known distinction between private troubles and public issues, and argued that the former may come to be perceived as the latter under certain conditions. Individual experience could be related to social structure by critical intellectuals, practicing the sociological imagination. From a radical democratic point of view, this allows many seemingly non-political matters to be raised to the level of public discourse. Feminists have long argued that the personal is political. Mills, who wrote a laudatory review of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, provided an approach that helps to redefine the boundaries of public and private and expand the concept of politics.

Mills once said that of the three great values of the French Revolution he was sympathetic to liberty and equality, but not to fraternity. Nonetheless he was concerned with the loss of communities and the privatism, indifference, and

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48 Quoted in West, op. cit., p. 129.
49 Mills, Power, Politics, and People, op. cit., p. 299.
spectatorship of the mid-20th century American character. He argued for a new public sphere that would prefigure in its own practices the quality of democracy it hoped to generalize:

Power won by election, revolution, or deals at the top will not be enough to accomplish this. In the day-by-day process of accumulating strength as well as in times of social upset, the power of democratic initiation must be allowed and fostered in the rank and file.52

Contemporary democratic discourse is full of well-meaning nostrums about rediscovering the values of community, deliberation, and civil society. Mills challenged his fellow Americans to think more clearly and critically about the real forces undermining democracy and what must be done to challenge them. For Mills a modern state required several conditions to be democratic: a public sphere in which real issues are debated; nationally responsible parties with clear positions; an engaged intelligentsia of genuine independence; a media of open and genuine communication; civic associations linking families and smaller communities and publics on the one hand with the state, the military, and the corporation on the other.53 Mills provokes us to “address the central issues of power and resource allocation that must be at the heart of public deliberation in a democracy.”54 Citizens who are committed to a more just, equitable, and participatory America would do well to consider the legacy of C. Wright Mills.

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