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C. Wright Mills Would Have Loved Occupy Wall Street

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C. Wright Mills, the radical Columbia University sociologist who died 50 years ago (March 20, 1962) at age 45, would have loved Occupy Wall Street. In the 1950s, when most college professors were cautious about their political views and lifestyles, Mills rode a motorcycle to work; wore plaid shirts, jeans and work boots instead of flannel suits; built his house with his own hands; and, in a torrent of books and articles, warned that America was becoming a nation of "cheerful robots," heading toward a third world war and was being corrupted by an economic elite.



C. Wright Mills. (Image: Jared Rodriguez / Truthout)

In three books published between 1948 and 1956 - "The New Men of Power," "White Collar" and "The Power Elite" - Mills challenged the widely held belief that American society, having triumphed over the fundamental problems of the 20th century (depression, war and fascism) had become a model of economic success, political democracy and social well-being. At a time when social scientists and journalists were extolling America's post-World War II prosperity, Mills warned about the dangers of the growing concentration of wealth and power.

Mills' most influential book, "The Power Elite," published in 1956, challenged the predominant view that America was a classless society and that all segments of society - farmers, workers, middle-class consumers, small business and big business - had an equal voice in its democracy. Instead, he described the power structure created by overlapping circles of business, military and political leaders whose big decisions determined the nation's destiny, including war and peace.

The academic and media establishment attacked Mills' caustic critique of what he called the "American celebration." His was a lonely voice among academic sociologists, but his books sold well, suggesting that at least some Americans were not happy with the postwar status quo. His writings eventually struck a chord with a significant segment of the American public and with the small but growing radical movement on college campuses. In a 1961 article, "Who Are the Student

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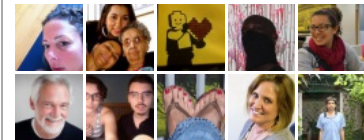
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Boat-rockers?" in *Mademoiselle* magazine, student activist Tom Hayden listed the three people over 30 whom young radicals most admired. They were Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington and Mills.

Many of Mills' ideas, considered radical in his day, are now taken for granted. His phrase "power elite" - criticized by conservatives and liberals at the time - is widely used today by the mainstream media. Public opinion today has now swung in Mills' direction. Even many Americans who don't agree with Occupy Wall Street's tactics or rhetoric nevertheless share its indignation at outrageous corporate profits, widening inequality and excessive executive compensation side by side with the epidemic of layoffs and foreclosures. Most Americans now recognize that the biggest corporations and the very wealthy have disproportionate political influence. A Pew Research Center survey released in December found that most Americans (77 percent) - including a majority (53 percent) of Republicans - agree that "there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations." Pew also discovered that 61 percent of Americans believe that "the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy." A significant majority (57 percent) think that wealthy people don't pay their fair share of taxes.

Whether they refer to the elite as the "establishment," the "power structure" or the "top 1 percent," Americans understand that this concentration of power subverts democracy. They see the revolving door among corporate board rooms, top military brass and the cabinet - exemplified by men like Robert Rubin, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, John Snow, Tim Geithner and John Bryson who served in the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. They know that corporate campaign contributions buy access and influence and tilt the political playing field toward big business interests, made worse by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling in 2010 that individuals and corporations can exercise almost unlimited "free speech" through political donations. The current wave of SuperPACs dominating our elections, funded primarily by millionaires and billionaires, reflects the corruption of democracy by big money.

Growing up in a middle class family, Charles Wright Mills graduated from Dallas Technical High School in 1934. After a year at Texas A&M University, he transferred to the University of Texas, graduating with a degree in philosophy in 1939. He earned his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Wisconsin, where he focused his research on social psychology and social theory. After a brief stint teaching at the University of Maryland, he arrived at Columbia in 1945 to work at the university's new survey research center and teach sociology. He remained at Columbia until he died of a heart attack in 1962.

At Columbia, Mills mastered the techniques of social research, particularly the skills of conducting interviews and doing large surveys, which he used to carry out several projects that his senior colleagues suggested. But Mills was restless. He wanted to use his academic perch to reach outside academia, influence public thinking and help build a progressive movement.

In New York City, he met a widening circle of radicals and rebels, like novelist Harvey Swados, critic Dwight McDonald and labor activist J.B. S. Hardman, who expanded Mills' political horizons. He quickly became what today we call a "public intellectual," writing essays for progressive and left-wing opinion magazines like the *New Republic*; *The Nation*; *New Leader*; *Partisan Review*; *Dissent*; and especially *Politics*, which criticized America's warfare state and sought ways to invigorate grassroots democracy.

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The country Mills wrote about had overcome the Depression, triumphed over fascism in World War II and was in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom. The gross national product and the standard of living increased rapidly in the postwar decade. A growing number of American families were able afford to move to the suburbs, buy homes, install air conditioners, purchase a new contraption called a television, pay for a new car every few years, take a yearly vacation (and stay at a new phenomenon called a "motel") and even fly on an airplane. They could send their children to college and save money for a comfortable retirement.

The postwar prosperity was fueled by big government initiatives - a massive national highway-building program; huge subsidies and financial aid to expand the college and university system; federal insurance to increase home building and home buying; and, most importantly, an immense defense budget. All this government spending boosted employment and put money in people's pockets, stimulating the consumer demand that provided America's businesses with record profits.

Business, political, religious and academic leaders justified all this government spending as critical to winning the cold war. Russia, Japan, Germany and the rest of Europe had been destroyed - economically and physically - by the war. The United States, in contrast, was the dominant economic and military superpower in the world. American businesses were able to produce goods - cars, cameras, TVs, movies, blue jeans and sodas - that would sell at home and around the world.

But most business and political leaders warned, all this could end unless the United States was ready to stop the spread of Communism, especially in Europe and the poor nations of the world. American schools and universities had to train the next generation of skilled workers, corporate managers, school teachers and scientists, particularly to compete with Russia, which launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957. We even had to be prepared, if necessary, to fight a war with the Soviet Union.

The vast defense budget - what some called a "permanent war economy" - paid for expensive new weapons systems; military bases around the world; and millions of American civilians and troops employed by the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and private military contractors. At home, the fear of Communists and other radicals led to the hysteria called McCarthyism, led by business groups worried about stronger unions and higher taxes and by politicians who got into office by scaring voters about the Red Menace taking over the public schools, unions, Hollywood and universities.

Mills rebelled against this conventional thinking. In his first few years at Columbia, Mills joined a network of academics who provided research to help union leaders understand the major social and economic changes facing their members. A wave of militant strikes across the country after the war and an increase in union membership gave radicals hope that the labor movement would be in the forefront of progressive change. Mills' ties to the labor movement led to the first of his major books on what he called the "main drift" of American society - "The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders," published in 1948.

When Mills was writing the book, union membership had increased fivefold in the previous decade and represented one-third of non-farm workers. He believed that unions could be a bulwark against America's drift toward "war and slump" by pushing to convert the war economy to civilian uses, improving workers' incomes and job security and giving ordinary Americans a voice in government to challenge big business power.

At the core of "The New Men of Power" is Mills' survey of 500 labor leaders. He

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discovered that blue-collar workers' route to the middle class was more likely to occur via better union contracts than by being recruited into the ranks of corporate management. He found that CIO union leaders were more progressive than their AFL counterparts, that many were open to the idea of a third political party based in the labor movement and that an astonishing 69 percent of industrial union leaders believed that the potential for fascism was a real threat in the United States. Mills was particularly impressed with Walter Reuther, who had just been elected president of the United Auto Workers, and other progressive union leaders whom he hoped would move the labor movement leftward.

Mills examined the other major segments in American society contending for political power. He warned that moderates in big business and conservatives among small business, both well-entrenched within the Republican Party, as well as mainstream business-friendly cold-war liberals within the Democratic Party, could marginalize or even co-opt the labor movement. He dismissed the far left (particularly the Communist Party) and the far right as too small and isolated to be influential.

Mills' chapter, "The Program of the Left," outlined a labor-based radical agenda that was really an expansion of the New Deal plus a call for halting the arms race and the war economy. It reflected bits and pieces of the views of Norman Thomas' Socialist Party, Walter Reuther's UAW and what would later that year become former Vice President Wallace Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for the White House. It included proposals for consumer cooperatives, neighborhood committees to monitor business practices (including the continuation of war-time price controls) and workplace democracy.

"The New Men of Power" was cautiously optimistic about the labor movement's potential. But in 1947, while Mills was writing the book, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act over President Harry Truman's veto, which weakened unions' ability to organize. Mills was also disappointed when, in the 1948 elections, the AFL and CIO unions (including the UAW) endorsed Truman over Thomas (whom Mills voted for). In that political climate, few major union leaders were inclined to challenge the cold war, the arms race and the attacks on radical dissent. Indeed, most unions would soon purge themselves of their radical leaders as part of the Red Scare hysteria. Mills drifted away from working with progressive labor activists as his confidence in the labor movement gave way to skepticism.

Having examined the blue-collar working class, Mills' next book, "White Collar: The American Middle Classes," published in 1951, explored the social conditions and psychology of the growing strata of Americans in the professions and middle management, living in urban neighborhoods and suburbs and exemplifying the "American way of life" that the nation's leaders contrasted with the drab and compliant life in Communist Russia.

Based on interviews and surveys as well as analysis of popular culture, Mills concluded that many middle-class Americans were socially, intellectually and politically stifled, trapped working in offices in large business bureaucracies over which they had no control (including no union representation). Instead of finding pleasure and pride in craftsmanship at work, they pursued happiness and status by buying things they didn't need and living without much purpose. He coined the phrase "cheerful robot" to decry the unthinking conformity of much of America's middle-class culture.

In a speech in England, Mills described what he meant: "We know that men can be

turned into robots - by chemical means, by physical coercion, as in concentration camps and so on. But we are now confronting a situation more serious than that - a situation in which there are developed human beings who are cheerfully and willingly turning themselves into robots."

Mills believed that such conformity was an aspect of what he called "mass society" - a condition of widespread political apathy that allowed business and political leaders to pursue the arms race and the potential for a nuclear war without much opposition.

Mills' critique was not unique. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, there were other indications that many Americans were coming to question the nation's moral and psychological condition. The novel (1955) and film (1956) "The Man in the Grey-Flannel Suit" disparaged the lifestyle of middle-class managers. J.D. Salinger's popular 1951 novel, "Catcher in the Rye"; the 1955 film starring James Dean, "Rebel Without a Cause"; and Paul Goodman's 1960 book, "Growing Up Absurd," all depicted the alienation of middle-class youth, raging against "phonies." Best-selling books by sociologically oriented journalists - William H. White's "The Organization Man" (1956) and Vance Packard's "The Hidden Persuaders" (1957) and "The Status Seekers" (1959) - expressed alarm during the height of the Eisenhower administration at the influence of corporate employers, advertisers and suburban developers in shaping the daily lives of American families. Arthur Miller's 1949 play, "Death of a Salesman," struck a similar chord. In 1952, two left-wing writers, William Gaines and Harvey Kurtzman, launched MAD, a comics magazine of political and social satire that became an instant sensation with the baby-boom generation. It poked fun at middle-class suburbia, the cold war and advertising. Its slogan, "What? Me Worry?" was intentionally ironic because many Americans were quite worried about the escalating arms race, the proliferation of fall-out shelters and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Malvina Reynolds' 1962 song "Little Boxes" poked fun at the look-alike housing developments in postwar suburbs and the complacency of the people who lived in them.

"The Power Elite," published in 1956, was the most radical, controversial and widely read of Mills' three major books. It caused a firestorm in academic and political circles. America has a ruling elite, Mills wrote, and its most active members - top corporate executives - have little sense of social responsibility. Rather, they work collaboratively with the top military leaders and their allies in Congress and the White House (former Gen. and World War II hero Dwight Eisenhower was the Republican president at the time) to shape the nation's major priorities based primarily on greed and self-interest. The various interest groups that could contend for power - farmer organizations, labor unions, big-city mayors and others - fought over crumbs left over after the big spending decisions, particularly the military budget, had already been decided.

Mills pointed out that the corporate, military and political elites were not separate spheres, but overlapping groups at the "command posts" of society. Top corporate executives (such as Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense, former General Motors CEO Charles Wilson) were recruited to serve in the cabinet and on numerous committees providing advice to the White House and Congress. Retired generals and admirals (whom Mills called "warlords") went to work for major defense corporations, using their influence to argue for bigger military budgets, new weapons systems and government contracts for their new employers. Corporate executives and Pentagon leaders lobbied Congress to increase the military budget, pointing out that it would create jobs in defense plants and military bases in their districts.

Mills was particularly concerned that few newspapers, academics or religious leaders spoke out against this concentration of power. Instead, most went along with the power elite's ideology - a stance Mills called "crackpot realism," which involves dangerous, irresponsible ideas that the public accepts as normal. One such idea was "mutually assured destruction" - that a world war could be averted if both the US and Soviet Union had enough weapons to destroy each other. Mills hated Soviet totalitarianism, but he thought the US and USSR could cooperate to avoid a costly arms race and a possible nuclear holocaust.

Mills' critique of America's power structure was dramatically at odds with the prevailing view of American democracy taught in high schools and colleges at the time. This idea - "pluralism" - viewed government as a neutral umpire among contending interest groups of roughly equal power. But Mills' view found unlikely validation in President Eisenhower's farewell address on January 17, 1961, which warned about the "unwarranted influence" of the "military industrial complex," an idea very similar to the power elite. During the 1960s and 1970s, "The Power Elite" (along with Floyd Hunter's "Community Power Structure," a study of Atlanta published in 1953) inspired hundreds of studies by academics that examined the overlapping networks of corporate influence on local and national politics. Community organizing groups, unions, and other activists learned how to conduct power structure research in order to expose its web of relationships and find ways to challenge its influence and hold it accountable.

By the time he wrote "The Power Elite," Mills had given up hope that a resurgent labor movement could revitalize American democracy. He seemed oblivious to the burgeoning civil rights movement that had erupted in Montgomery in 1955. (In fact, he was oblivious to issues of race throughout his writings.)

But Mills' books, particularly "The Power Elite," resonated with the growing mood of discontent in the nation, particularly on college campuses. For example, its influence can be seen in the "Port Huron Statement," the founding manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), written in 1962. The "Statement's" principal author, Tom Hayden and other SDS leaders, like sociologist Dick Flacks, greatly admired Mills. The "Statement's" analysis of power and its call for "participatory democracy" echoed Mills' views.

During the last few years of his life, a few trends - the rise of student activism in the United States and Europe; the Cuban revolution in 1959; and the awakening of anti-colonial movements in Africa, Asia and South America - gave Mills a new sense of hope. Energized by these movements, he quickly wrote two short books - which he called "pamphlets" - that he aimed for a wide audience. "The Causes of World War Three" (1958), an impassioned plea for an end to the nuclear arms race, sold over 100,000 copies. "Listen, Yankee" (1960), a sympathetic look at the Cuban revolution from the viewpoint of a Cuban revolutionary, sold over 400,000 copies. In the fall of 1960, he published a "Letter to the New Left" in the British journal New Left Review, encouraging young radicals around the world.

Mills' writing combined analysis and outrage. He was a meticulous researcher, but he did not wish to be what he called a "sociological bookkeeper." He wrote about the fundamental questions facing American society and he had strong opinions. "I try to be objective," Mills wrote, "I do not claim to be detached."

Toward the end of his life, the mainstream media began asking Mills for his views on

major issues of the day. In December 1960, he was invited to appear on the NBC television show "The Nation's Future" to debate A.A. Berle, a spokesperson for the newly elected Kennedy administration, about US policy in Latin America. On the eve of the program, Mills suffered a heart attack and had to cancel the debate. He never fully recovered his remarkable energy. A second heart attack on March 20, 1962, was fatal. He didn't live to see the emergence of the student and antiwar movements that his work helped inspire.

Few Occupier Wall Street activists have probably heard of Mills or are familiar with his work. But Mills' breakthrough ideas - especially his notion of the "power elite" - resonate today with the growing recognition that too much wealth and power in the hands of the superrich undermines democracy.

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