Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962) was one of the most influential radical social theorists and critics in twentieth century America. His work continues to have considerable significance. Here we focus on his connecting of private troubles and public issues; his exploration of power relationships; and his approach to 'doing' sociology.

C. Wright Mills was a formidable sociologist, social commentator and critic. Both his work and character aroused considerable debate. He has been described as an 'American Utopian' - committed to social change, and angered by the oppression he saw around him (Horowitz 1983). He is also probably the most influential American radical social theorist after Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) (Tilman 1984: 1). His legacy includes a series of classic books on power (1948; 1951; 1956); an important introduction to the work of Max Weber (edited with Hans Gerth 1948); contributions to popular debates on nuclear arms and Cuba (1958a; 1960); and the encouragement of a new generation of change-oriented sociologists via The Sociological Imagination (1959). C. Wright Mills put himself outside the mainstream of American social comment by his support for Castro and his critique of what he saw to be US imperialism. He was also critical of what passed for contemporary sociology. While he worked with some important strands of social thought from Europe, his 'rhetoric was distinctly in the American vein' (Aronowitz 2003) and he was indebted to intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey. He believed that knowledge, properly used, could bring about change and the good society. C. Wright Mills further argued that if the good society was not yet here, it was primarily the fault of intellectuals - people of knowledge (Wallerstein quoted in Horowitz 1983: 7).

C. Wright Mills - a brief biographical sketch

C. Wright Mills was born in Waco, Texas on August 28th, 1916. His father was an insurance agent originally from Florida, his mother - Frances Wright Mills - was Texas born and bred. In the 1920s the family moved to Dallas, with Mills graduating from Dallas High School in 1934. He then went on to Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College but soon transferred to the University of Texas at Austin (in 1935) to major in sociology. While still a student he met and married (in 1937) Dorothy Helen Smith. Dorothy was studying literature at Masters level having been a teacher. However she gave up her studies on getting married and found work in the Women's Residence Hall to support them both. She became known as 'Freya' (after the Norse goddess - a nickname originally used by a friend of Mills) (Mills and Mills 2000: 35). At the University of Austin Mills quickly showed his ability and outspokenness. The latter seems to have worked against him in the sociology department as he was refused a graduate assistantship. He decided to take his MA in philosophy and this, crucially, introduced him to pragmatism and brought him to the work of George H. Mead, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Pierce (Tilman 1984: 7).

In 1939 Freya and C. Wright Mills left Austin for Madison where Mills had gained a scholarship to enrol in a PhD programme in sociology at the University of Wisconsin. At the University he met, was mentored by, and became friends with, Hans Gerth. He studied under Howard Becker and, later, Selig Perlman (Tilman 1984: 7). The relationship between Freya and C. Wright Mills became tense: in part as she began to assert herself, in part because he had 'a continuing interest in sex outside the marriage' (Horowitz 1983: 28). They were divorced in 1940 and remarried in 1941. In 1943 they had a baby girl - Pamela.

C. Wright Mills gained his PhD in 1942 for his thesis 'A Sociological Account of Pragmatism: An essay on the sociology of knowledge' (which was published after his death in 1964). Having failed his physical examination owing to hypertension he did not serve in the military during World War II (Tilman 1984: 7). He gained a position in 1941 as an associate professor at the University of Maryland before moving on to Columbia University in 1945. Mills worked first as a research associate in the Bureau of Applied Social Research and then, just over a year later, as an assistant professor of sociology (Mills and Mills 2000: 344). Freya and C. Wright Mills separated again (they were divorced in 1947) with Charles moving to an apartment on the outskirts of Greenwich Village.

As Rick Tilman (1984) has commented, life in New York City appeared to have suited C. Wright Mills well: 'He led an extremely active intellectual life and published at a prodigious rate'. In 1946 From Max Weber: Essays in sociology appeared (translated and edited by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills). It proved to be a major contribution to an appreciation of Weber's work by British and North American sociologists. Over the following ten years he also published his influential trilogy exploring aspects of power in America: The New Men of Power (1946) looks at organized labour and labour leadership; White Collar (1951) examines the changing nature of the middle class in the United States; and The Power Elite (1956) studies what he saw to be the new ruling elite in the States. During this period, with Hans Gerth, Mills also wrote Character and Social Structure (1953).

The members of the Department of Sociology at Columbia reads like a roll call of US sociology during the 1950s and 1960s: Daniel Bell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Robert Merton were all members of faculty. It would be fair to say that they did not get along with Mills. They began to dislike him personally and for his methodological and ideological orientations. The feeling appears to have been mutual. However, there were others whom he respected including Robert Lynd and, outside the department, Jacques Barzun and Meyer Schapiro (an art historian and radical who had a particular emphasis upon style as craft - Horowitz 1983: 88).

In 1947 C. Wright Mills married Ruth Harper (who was a researcher on the project that became White Collar). She brought particular expertise in terms of the statistical side of his work, and to the editing of his writing. In 1951 they bought an old farmhouse in Pomona, New York - and rebuilt it. Some four years later their daughter Kathryn was born (1955). Ruth and C. Wright Mills separated in 1957.

In the mid-1950s Mills travelled extensively in Europe and he was, for a time, a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Copenhagen. He had begun to develop his interest in Marxism (which resulted in The Marxist published shortly after his death in 1962). He also got to know a number of key UK figures on the left including Tom Bottomore (1920-92), Ralph Miliband (1924-94) and E. P. Thompson (1924-93). It was during these travels that much of The Sociological Imagination (1959) was written. As Irving Louis Horowitz (1983: 88) has commented this book 'helped to make possible the penetration of the field by a new generation of social scientists dedicated to problems of social change rather than system maintenance'. In many respects it was a settling of accounts with his colleagues (other than Lynd) in the Columbia Department of Sociology.

In 1959, C. Wright Mills married Yaroslava Surmach and moved into a new home in Rockland County with Kathryn. Yaroslava had grown up in New York and studied at Coopers Union Art School (Mills and Mills 2000: 264-5). A talent artist and illustrator, she had also taught art and
many of the new jobs were alienating; and the relative lack of political consciousness in the USA.

As can be seen from the above, three themes stand out – the rise of mass society and the power of corporate society; the extent to which self; expropriated of individual rationality, and politically apathetic – these are the new little people, the unwilling vanguard of modern society.

Estranged from community and society in a context of distrust and manipulation; alienated from work and, on the personality market, from culture and mass society, and became more pessimistic about the possibility of effecting significant political change. This judgement was

Labour leaders and the labour movement

The New Men of Power (Mills 1948) was a report of research that had been under way with Helen Schneider and others since 1941. Focusing on the backgrounds, activities and disposition of labour leaders, and the publics that limit and condition their behaviour, Mills and Schneider demonstrated the relative conservatism of much of the leadership. They also revealed the extent to which leaders rejected structural change and political organization in the form of a labour party (such as the one in power in Britain at the time) in favour of achieving some material advantage for their members. C. Wright Mills believed that the unions should pay considerably more attention to forging its own power bloc. The subsequent failure to do so, especially in the years since 1973, can be seen as extracting a heavy price (Aronowitz 2003).

The research reported in White Collar had begun some five years before and focused on what he described as the new middle class – white collar people on salaries. The rise of white collar employment was highly significant, Mills argued, both in terms of upsetting the nineteenth-century expectation that society would be divided between entrepreneurs and workers; and by their mass way of life. This mass way of life had ‘transformed the tang and feel of the American experience’ (Mills 1951: ix). Certainly the book spoke to a particular moment and caught something of the mood. It, along with David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950) and William H. Whyte’s The Organization Man (1956) shaped the debates around the coming of age of the new middle class (Horowitz 1983: 226).

As can be seen from the above, three themes stand out – the rise of mass society and the power of corporate society; the extent to which many of the new jobs were alienating; and the relative lack of political consciousness in the USA.
Mass society. ‘The transformation of a community of publics into a mass society is’, C. Wright Mills wrote in an article first published in 1954, ‘one of the keys to the meaning of modern life’ (Mills 1963: 353). For him it was a structural trend that had led to many of the psychological and political problems that confronted Americans (op. cit.). While not being altogether a mass society, the balance had shifted in America with the rise of mass media and changes in economic organization. As John H. Summers (2006) characterized Mills’ position, ‘For the first time in history… the territories of the United States made up a self-conscious mass society. If the economy had once been a multitude of locally or regionally rooted, (more or less) equal units of production, it now answered to the needs of a few hundred corporations’.

Alienation. C. Wright Mills argued that one of the characteristic features of contemporary American social structure was ‘its systematic creation and maintenance of estrangement from society and selfhood (1951: 340). In building his argument around the conditions of modern work he drew upon Marx – and upon American writers such as Thoreau. He contrasts traditions of craftsmanship (which at work had become the preserve of miniscule groups of professionals, and in leisure had been trivialized into ‘hobbies’) with the routinized activity of modern work. As tool becomes machine, man is estranged from the intellectual potentialities and aspects of work; and each individual is routinized in the name of increased and cheaper per unit productivity. The whole unit and the meaning of time is modified. ... The introduction of office machinery and sales devices has been mechanizing the office and the salesroom, the two big locales of white-collar work. ... None of the features of work as craftsmanship is prevalent in office and salesroom, and, in addition, some features of white-collar work, such as the personality market, go well beyond the alienating conditions of wage-work. (Mills 1951: 226-7)’ C. Wright Mills’ analysis of the extent to which salaried work had come to mirror the alienating features of waged work broke new ground.

Lack of consciousness. In an argument that was later to be echoed by Kenneth Galbraith (1992) and others, C. Wright Mills suggested that people experiencing a history of increasing and uninterrupted contentment ‘are not likely to develop economic resentments that would turn their political institutions into means of ideological conflict, or turn their minds to political forms’ (Mills 1951: 340). For Mills indifference was the primary factor in the lack of political consciousness he found amongst the new middle class – and American society generally. US politics were ‘anchored in the economic sphere’ (Mills 951: 343). As such, activity was centred around gaining and securing limited economic, rather than political, ends. It had ‘seldom involved more than immediate material profits and losses’ (op. cit.).

White Collar was a significant contribution to debates but was subject to some sharp critique (the arguments are summarized in Horowitz 1983: 244-54). Perhaps the most significant of these came from David Riesman (1952). Riesman questioned C. Wright Mills’ lack of attention to the ‘ethnic coloring of attitudes to white collar work’; his portrayal of the mass media (i.e. they were less exploitative than he suggests); and his judgement around the impoverishment and drabness of white-collar life. There is some merit in these criticisms – but they do not in the end harm in any substantive way the central lines of his analysis. There had been a profound change in American society with the emergence of a large, salaried, middle class, but the conditions under which it laboured were surprisingly similar to those experienced by wage earners.

The power elite

Within the ‘power trilogy’ there were changes in style and broad approach – and these can be seen with some force in The Power Elite. In this book C. Wright Mills both wrote directly and, at times, beautifully. Similarly Mills’ understanding of the nature of power relationships in US changed from the first to the third book in the trilogy. As John H. Summers (2006) has again put it, Mills ‘argued that the “sociological key” to American uneasiness could be found not in the mysteries of the unconscious or in the battle against Communism, but in the over-organization of society’. The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet in these rounds of job, family, and neighbourhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. ‘Great changes’ are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power (Mills 1956: 3)

Mills argued that a small group of men within the political, military and corporate spheres - the power elite - made ‘the decisions that reverberated into all areas of American life’ (Summers 2006). Within American society, ‘major national power now resides in the economic, the political and the military domains’ (Mills 1956: 6). Within each institution units had got bigger, became administrative and, ‘in the power of its decisions, ha[d] become centralized’ (op. cit.: 7). In the economic sphere he charted the rise of large corporations; in the political the move to more centralized executive establishments. In addition the military, in his words, had become ‘the largest and most expensive feature of government’ (ibid.). In each of these institutional areas, the means of power at the disposal of decision makers have increased enormously; their central executive powers have been enhanced; within each of them modern administrative routines have been elaborated and tightened up. As each of these domains becomes enlarged and centralized, the consequences of its activities become greater, and its traffic with the others increases. (Mills 1956: 7)

As might be expected from the book’s title Mills looked to the discourses of elite theory that had been pioneered by Pareto (1935) and Michels (1949) (see Bottomore 1966 for an overview of elite theory). C. Wright Mills was dismissive of notions such as ruling class - which he described as a ‘badly loaded phrase’ (Mills 1956: 277). For him the theory underpinning the idea of a ‘ruling class’ did not give enough autonomy to the political order. In making sense of this we can see the influence in The Power Elite of Max Weber (not unexpectedly given the work that he and Hans Gerth had undertaken). The unity of the elite for Mills rested, ‘upon the corresponding developments and coincidence of interests among economic, political and military organizations (op. cit.: 292). It also rests upon the similarity of origin and outlook, and the social and personal intermingling of the top circles from each of these dominant hierarchies. This conjunction of institutional and psychological forces, in turn, is revealed by the heavy personnel traffic within and between the big three institutional orders, as well as by the rise of go-betweens as in the high-level lobbying. (Mills 1956: 292)

The book’s controversial analysis both found a wider readership, and stimulated considerable and sometimes angry debate (Summers 2006). There were questions around the degree to which the analysis of power relationships held up (particularly with regard to the role of the judiciary and political parties) and to the concept of power employed. According to Parsons (1964: 199-225) power for Mills was a zero-sum concept (either you have it or you don’t) and failed to attend to way it is generated within social systems. However, as John H Summers (2006) has commented, the historical value of The Power Elite seems assured: It was the first book to offer a serious model of
The Power Elite" abounds with questions that still trouble us today. Can a strong democracy coexist with the amoral ethos of corporate elites? And can public argument have democratic meaning in the age of national security?

Personal troubles and public issues

C. Wright Mills argued that perhaps the most helpful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is that between personal troubles and public issues (Mills 1967: 395; Mills 1959: 8). For him troubles have to do with 'an individual's character and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware' (op. cit.). To describe those troubles and to resolve them, he argues, we must attend the individual's biography and the scope of their immediate milieux - what Mills describes as 'the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity' (Mills 1967: 395-6). A trouble is, thus, a private matter: 'values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened' (ibid.: 396).

In contrast, issues have to do with 'matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the limited range of his life' (Mills 1967: 396; Mills 1959: 8). He continues: They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of society as a whole... An issue is a public matter: values cherished by publics are felt to be threatened... It is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements.

This crisis can be seen in the experience of unemployment: When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. (Mills 1959: 9)

For much of the time governments tend to cloak or to present such public issues as private troubles: it is the fault of individuals that they cannot find work, rather than an outcome of structural or political arrangements. Furthermore, given the orientation of social workers and educators, when working with individuals or groups, it is all too easy to end up working with people around the immediate issue or trouble. In C Wright Mills' (1967: 534) words they can 'slip past structure to focus on isolated situations' and consider problems 'as problems of individuals'. We can confuse personal troubles with public issues. Indeed, this critique by Mills of the professional ideology of what he described as social pathologists (social workers who focus on individual adjustment rather than structural change) remains of fundamental concern.

On intellectual work

In an appendix of 31 pages to The Sociological Imagination (1959), C. Wright Mills provides us with one of the defining twentieth century statements concerning the nature of intellectual life - and the sort of qualities that we need to carry into our activities as practitioners. He begins the Appendix by making a point that many of us have learnt the hard way - 'the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such disassociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other' (ibid.: 195). This is a theme that appears time and again in Mills's work. It involves him in constantly looking to the relationship between the whole and the parts. By looking to the whole - and seeing the parts as elements of the whole - we are able to see the connections between things. To see how one element cannot exist in this way or that - without the presence of another. Mills wrote: 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 a good workman. What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work. (Mills 1959: 196)

In these words we can see sentiments that are familiar to informal and community educators. We have had to focus on our selves, to develop a particular character or way of being as workers, and to make a commitment to our craft. We have had to use our life experience, to reflect on encounters and feelings, to build theories and commitments about how we may act and live our lives.

Conclusion

C . Wright Mills was a controversial and larger than life figure. He was a vociferous reader, a superb writer - and was able to make a distinctive contribution to American sociological theory especially in the area of class, power and social structure. He was anti-authoritarian, flamboyant and individualistic. John Eldridge (1983: 112) has concluded that C. Wright Mills made a significant contribution in three areas.

First, 'his fusion of American pragmatism and European sociology did lead to innovative work in the sociology of knowledge'.

Second, he completed a substantial range of studies in what was a short working life. Each had its strengths and weaknesses but together they reflect a concern to 'understand American society and its place in world affairs'.

Last, he provided a considerable and lasting intellectual stimulus to others. We can see his mark in Tom Bottomore's (1966) exploration of elites and Steven Lukes (1973) seminal discussion of power, for example - and in the work of Alvin Gouldner.

For informal educators and those working in the social professions, his critique of the professional ideology of social pathology remains highly pertinent. But perhaps the best way of remembering his contribution is the advice he gives in the closing paragraphs of The Sociological Imagination: Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problems that you take up for study. Above all, do not give up your moral and political autonomy by accepting in somebody else's terms the illiberal practicality of the bureaucratic ethos or the liberal practicality of the moral scatter. Know that many
personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues - and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles - and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intimate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills 1959: 226)

Further reading and references
Cole, G. D. H. (1920) Guild Socialism Restated. London:

References

Acknowledgement: The picture of C. Wright Mills in his study at home (circa 1959) was taken by Yaroslava Mills. It is reproduced here with the permission of the estate of C. W. Mills. All rights reserved.