

## C. WRIGHT MILLS AND THE RISE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLITERACY

Timothy Glander

Great works of social analysis and criticism, like great works of art generally, convey multiple layers of understanding and generate multiple forms of meaning to later generations of scholars who engage them. Certainly this is the case with C. Wright Mills's 1956 book The Power Elite, which accurately characterized many of the social and psychological trends which have come to prevail in post-World War II America: the permanent war economy; the increasing collusion of corporate, military, and national political interests; the distracting influence of vacuous celebrity; the narrowing of public discourse and political debate; the centralization of the means of power and the immorality and mindlessness of those who wield it.<sup>1</sup> With forty years of distance between today and the book's original publication date, it is now possible to begin to explore some of Mills's central concepts in historical context. For Mills, this context was shaped at Columbia University where he was an associate professor of sociology throughout the 1950s, and where he had a unique vantage point from which to observe the activities of this emerging power elite. Columbia University during the 1950s, and the Bureau of Applied Social Research in particular, was a virtual microcosm of this elite and its servants, and at least some of Mills's central concepts were based on his observations there. This explains, in part, the somewhat oblique nature of several of Mills's statements in this text, since political and professional pressures forced him to hedge on key points. This also helps to explain the significant connections between Mills's criticism of American society and his criticism of mainstream American sociology.

One such concept worthy of further exploration is that of "psychological illiteracy," which Mills thought was increasingly manifest as American society shifted from a community of publics to a mass society. Mills deals with the notion of psychological illiteracy in Chapter 13 of The Power Elite, entitled "The Mass Society." This

pivotal chapter is a slight reworking of a 1954 essay entitled "Mass Society and Liberal Education," which Mills wrote for the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, and it articulates a clear purpose for education given the kind of social and psychological changes Mills describes.<sup>2</sup> If psychological illiteracy represents the emerging condition of human beings in a post-modern, mass society, psychological literacy represents the desired educational goal. Yet, what is this "psychological illiteracy," where does it come from, what are its consequences, and how might it be ameliorated?

In Deweyan fashion, Mills points out that human experience is essentially problematic; all human beings face personal troubles and problems. We learn when we confront these problems, understand the true meaning and source of these problems, and endeavor to solve these problems. This is possible, however, only when social organization provides the avenues by which these problems can be clearly identified and solved. When social organization does not allow for the articulation and examination of real problems, a kind of psychological illiteracy develops; people are frustrated by problems but find no means to clarify the meaning of those problems or understand their origins. For Mills, then, a psychological illiterate lacks the ability to understand the problems in which he or she is engulfed; a psychological illiterate does not have a clear view of himself or herself or the social world in which he or she lives.<sup>3</sup>

According to Mills, the primary factor in the rise of psychological illiteracy, and the transformation of the community of publics to the mass society, is the mass media of communication:

... in a community of publics, discussion is the ascendant means of communication, and the mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate discussion, linking one primary public with the discussions of another. In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is the formal media, and the publics become mere media markets: all those exposed to the contents of the mass media.<sup>4</sup>

Although we continue to talk about public opinion being the outgrowth of autonomous discussion, as “the result of each man’s having thought things out for himself and contributing his voice to the great chorus,” in reality public opinion is manufactured by people in power, through the use of increasingly sophisticated persuasion and propaganda techniques, as well as newer communication technologies which invade privacy and “encroach upon the small-scale discussion, and destroy the chance for the reasonable and leisurely human interchange of opinion.”<sup>5</sup> Mills refers to four central dimensions which distinguish a democratic community of publics from a mass society: 1.) In a community of publics as many people speak as those who listen; people are more or less able to formulate opinions based on their own personal experience and to share and debate these opinions with others, many of whom are personally known. In a mass society, a few people are in a position to speak to many million nameless and faceless people and to legitimate a certain view of reality. 2.) In a community of publics people have the opportunity to “immediately and effectively . . . answer back any opinion expressed in public.” In a mass society, on the other hand, there is virtually no way for people to respond immediately and effectively to the opinions provided through the dominant communication outlets; 3.) In a community of publics effective action follows from discussion and debate, while in a mass society “the realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action.” 4.) In a community of publics no instituted authority infiltrates and aims to control public discussion and debate. In a mass society secret police, agent provocateurs, and informers are used to harass, blackball, and intimidate people who might consider speaking out.<sup>6</sup>

Mills acknowledges that the decline of the public and the rise of the mass society is to a considerable extent the consequence of forces largely beyond anyone’s control. Nevertheless, the mass media have enabled the power elite to increasingly control, manipulate and manage public opinion, fostering psychological illiteracy and shaping, among other things, our standards of reality, our self-iden-

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tity, and diminishing our sense of political belongingness. This occurs because the mass media are “organized around stereotypes” by the power elite, and these stereotypes displace direct, personal events of experience as being the most significant way in which people encounter the world. Therefore, the mass media, with the power elite at the controls, work to entrench a psychological disposition in mass society which “is not attuned to the development of the human being. It is the formula of a pseudo-world which the media invent and sustain.”<sup>7</sup> The stereotypes embodied in the mass media instill in people a predisposition or bias toward that content with which they are exposed: “People tend strongly to select those media with which they already agree. There is a kind of selection of new opinions on the basis of prior opinions.”<sup>8</sup> Since there is no genuine competition among different media (and much less so today) all mass media seem to embody the same general content, with only slight variation. The only hope of resisting the homogenizing effects of the mass media, and the psychological illiteracy which they foster, is through an interpretation of the “experience of meanings,” the process of uprooting stereotypes so “that an individual sees things freshly in an unstereotyped manner.”<sup>9</sup>

Mills’s conceptualizations of the community of publics and the mass society are, of course, Weberian “ideal types”; they have not existed anywhere at anytime in pure form. Nevertheless, they provide a valuable means of understanding the major social and psychological changes which have transpired in the United States. Yet it is clearly the case that Mills is no relativist or neutral observer in his analysis here; the democratic ideal of the community of publics is more conducive to the positive development of human being than the mass society. The community of publics is premised on the belief that people can understand their worlds with sufficient reason to actually address the problems with which they are confronted. Mills writes:

The knowledgeable man in the genuine public is able to turn his personal troubles into social issues, to see their

relevance for his community and his community's relevance for them. He understands that what he thinks and feels as personal troubles are very often not only that but problems shared by others and indeed not subject to solution by any one individual but only by modifications of the structure of the groups in which he lives and sometimes the structure of the entire society.<sup>10</sup>

Yet this is precisely what a psychologically illiterate person is unable to do. Glued to the television screen or the radio receiver the person in the mass society is not in a position either to articulate clearly the source of his or her troubles and anxieties nor to determine whether these troubles are shared by others and perhaps have structural relevancy. Although the mass media provide a glut of information and news about the world,

they do not often enable the listener or the viewer truly to connect his daily life with these larger realities. They do not connect the information they provide on public issues with the troubles felt by the individual. They do not increase rational insight into tensions, either those in the individual or those of the society which are reflected in the individual. On the contrary, they distract him and obscure his chance to understand himself or his world, by fastening his attention upon artificial frenzies that are resolved within the program framework, usually by violent action or by what is called humor.<sup>11</sup>

Psychologically illiterate persons cannot transcend their personal milieu; they are unable to get a view of the larger structure of society, nor to understand how this structure shapes their life experiences. The ultimate consequence of the rise of psychological illiteracy in a mass society is that people will continue to be mired in problems for which they will have little hope for resolution.

Educational institutions, from Mills's perspective, are subordinate institutions which in the twentieth century have been used pri-

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marily to provide vocational training and indoctrinate nationalist loyalties. Understood as such, educational institutions are best regarded as simply another mass medium. However, Mills does not preclude the possibility that educational institutions could be “hospitable frameworks” for political debate. As such, “the task of liberal education would be: to keep the public from being overwhelmed; to help produce the disciplined and informed mind that cannot be overwhelmed; to help develop the bold and sensible individual that cannot be sunk by the burdens of mass life.”<sup>12</sup> Mills was not optimistic about the likelihood of educational institutions averting this trend toward psychological illiteracy and the mass society, although he continued to sound a warning up until the time of his death in 1962. “Above all,” he wrote in 1956, “we must recognize that ‘the common sense’ of our children is going to be less the result of any firm social tradition than of the stereotypes carried by the mass media to which they are now so fully exposed. They are the first generation to be so exposed.”<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that Mills’s concept of psychological illiteracy closely parallels his views of mainstream American sociology, which from his view was largely reductionistic, ahistorical, and pedantic. Like the “knowledgeable man in the genuine public,” the systematic social scientist must possess a transcendent view of the social order. As such, the social scientist must recognize the absolute centrality of history in social inquiry. In what might be the most concise statement on the importance of history in understanding human being, Mills writes:

Social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their interactions within social structures. . . . The problems of our time—which now include the problem of man’s (sic) very nature—cannot be stated adequately without consistent practice of the view that history is the shank of social study, and recognition of the need to develop further a psychology of man that is sociologically grounded and historically relevant. Without use

of history and without an historical sense of psychological matters, the social scientist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought now to be the orienting points of his studies.<sup>14</sup>

This is a central and recurring theme in Mills's work; it is at the very cornerstone of what he defines to be the sociological imagination; and it provides the basis by which he can begin to explicate this notion of "psychological illiteracy." Human beings cannot be adequately understood independent of the social roles they play within modulating institutions and social structures. Historical forces of great magnitude transform these institutions and social structures and, in turn, transform the external biographies and internal psychological characteristics of human beings. The perennial objective for the social scientist, as it is for the truly *human* human being, is to have a deepened awareness of this relationship, and, as far as possible, to guide it in a rational and purposeful way.

It is clear that Mills thought, however, that most social scientists were not up to this task. Moreover, Mills was aware that mainstream American social scientists were increasingly becoming servants to the power elite by developing the propaganda techniques and theoretical justifications necessary to control the mass society. While at Columbia University in the 1950s he crossed paths with Paul Lazarsfeld, the founder and director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) and the chair of the sociology department. Lazarsfeld was heavily involved in the creation of propaganda, advertising and public relations techniques, and government intelligence and military funding "made up more than 75 percent of the annual budget" at BASR. BASR was, in Christopher Simpson's words, one of several "important U.S. centers of postwar communications studies (which) grew up as de facto adjuncts of government psychological warfare programs."<sup>15</sup> Personal Influence is Lazarsfeld's most important book and is widely considered to be the first academic expression of the famed dominant paradigm in communication research—the two-step flow of communications.<sup>16</sup> As a young soci-

ologist, Mills actually conducted some of the field work for Lazarsfeld's Personal Influence during the early 1950s.<sup>17</sup> But Mills became increasingly critical of Lazarsfeld and the Bureau's activities by the time he wrote The Power Elite. The mass media of communications are "among the most important of these increased means of power now at the disposal of elites of wealth and power," he wrote. "Some of the higher agents of these media are themselves either among the elites or very important among their servants." Without mentioning Lazarsfeld explicitly, Mills went on: "Alongside or just below the elite, there is the propagandist, the publicity expert, the public relations man, who would control the very formation of public opinion in order to be able to include it as one more pacified item in the calculation of effective power, increased prestige, more secure wealth."<sup>18</sup> After discussing how the propagandist has had to change his approach to meet the growing distrust of the population, Mills implicates Lazarsfeld's Personal Influence as a book central to the work of propagandists, but again does not mention Lazarsfeld's name. Mills understood, perhaps more clearly than anyone else, the objectives behind the "two-step flow of communications"—the conceptualization of "personal influence"—on which Lazarsfeld worked so diligently to perfect. The propagandists, Mills wrote, have learned "to accept the principle of social context."

To change opinion and activity, they say to one another, we must pay close attention to the full context and lives of the people to be managed. Along with mass persuasion, we must somehow use *personal influence*; we must reach people in their life context and through other people, their daily associates, those whom they trust: we must get at them by some kind of 'personal' persuasion. We must not show our hand directly; rather than merely advise or command, we must manipulate. (Emphasis added)<sup>19</sup>

Mills's position at Columbia gave him an insider's view of the kind of work which was being conducted within the Bureau. It is unfortunate that Mills did not name Lazarsfeld directly since much of subse-

quent confusion about the nature of his work, and about the field of mass communication research generally, could have been avoided. Still, Mills's observation that propagandists had become concerned with "personal persuasion" and "personal influence" in a social context is a clear allusion to Lazarsfeld's Personal Influence.

And yet it is only a secret to historians of mass communication research that Lazarsfeld and Katz's 1955 text Personal Influence is essentially an attempt to refine the means by which propaganda could be aimed at "opinion leaders;" these historians continue to argue that Personal Influence represents an attempt to understand the larger social effects of the mass media.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the evidence is overwhelmingly against this view. Edward L. Bernays thought that Lazarsfeld had stolen the idea of the "opinion leader" from him, although Lazarsfeld argued that he had given this notion a new twist by maintaining that "opinion leaders" could be found in all social strata and not just within the educated class as Bernays had maintained.<sup>21</sup> Lazarsfeld himself spoke freely of the commercial and ideological applications of the two-step flow of communications research.<sup>22</sup> And the United States Information Agency, among other organizations, noted its practical utility and trained USIA officers how to locate these opinion leaders and how to devise ways to influence them.<sup>23</sup> Like other work Lazarsfeld and the Bureau conducted for commercial and governmental organizations, the dominant paradigm of "personal influence" had its origins and reason for existence in the applied needs of the propagandist.

After Mills published The Power Elite in 1956, he found it increasingly difficult to find sources of research funding.<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Lazarsfeld on May 6, 1959, Mills wrote:

The N.S.F. [National Science Foundation] has turned down my research proposal . . . So has the Ford Foundation, the Health Department, and Columbia's own Council of Social Research. The N.S.F. rejection is going to make it tough on half time pay for the sabbatical year but

I think I can manage that somehow.”<sup>25</sup>

Mills went on to ask Lazarsfeld if he knew where he might find “two or three thousand dollars to hire a part-time secretary.” Lazarsfeld’s response to Mills does not remain in Lazarsfeld’s papers. Nevertheless, it appears that Lazarsfeld, despite having easy access to large research funds, did not go out of his way to help Mills. On July 9, 1959, Mills wrote a second, highly sarcastic, letter to Lazarsfeld:

Thanks, anyway, for helping me with the money-bags. Never mind, I’ll write books in long-hand. And anyway, why the hell should you help — what’s in it for you?<sup>26</sup>

The ideological and methodological differences between Mills and Lazarsfeld were well known; yet one suspects that the differences between Mills and Lazarsfeld went well beyond the criticism of Lazarsfeld’s “abstracted empiricism” which appeared in Mills’s The Sociological Imagination.<sup>27</sup> Lazarsfeld could accept this kind of criticism, and in fact he encouraged it by reprinting Mills’s methodological critique in an anthology he published several years after Mills’s death.<sup>28</sup> What Lazarsfeld may not have been able to accept, however, was criticism which held the very nature of his work up for moral scrutiny, and this is precisely what occurred in Mills’s The Power Elite. After all, the upshot of Mills’s thinly veiled commentary on Lazarsfeld’s book Personal Influence was that Lazarsfeld’s research into propaganda facilitated the development of psychological illiteracy.

One might consider Mills as an exemplar of the kind of “knowledgeable man” in a community of publics who he writes about, attempting to translate his personal troubles into social issues—to understand the relationship between his personal milieu and the larger social structure. Of course, Mills’s milieu was a unique one and it gave him rare insight into the power elite and mainstream American sociology, and the growing relationship between them during this period of cold war. Mills’s personal biography intersects with the

history of the United States during a period of enormous social and technological change, and he wrote about the consequences of many of these changes with great sensitivity. Yet he was marginalized for doing so. A study of his marginalization may tell us much about the social and academic worlds we have inherited.

*Nazareth College of Rochester*

### ENDNOTES

1. C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
2. C. Wright Mills, "Mass Society and Liberal Education." In Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills. Edited by Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 353-373. It is interesting to note that Mills used the term "technological illiteracy" instead of "psychological illiteracy" in this earlier essay, perhaps wanting to emphasize the impact of communication technologies.
3. For an insightful discussion of Mills and the concept of alienation see: Ernest Becker, "Mills' Social Psychology and the Great Historical Convergence on the Problem of Alienation." In The New Sociology: Essays in Social Science and Social Theory in Honor of C. Wright Mills. Edited by Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964): 108-133.
4. Mills, The Power Elite, 304.
5. *Ibid.*, 299 & 214.
6. *Ibid.*, 302-304.
7. *Ibid.*, 314.
8. *Ibid.*, 313.
9. *Ibid.*, 312.
10. *Ibid.*, 318.
11. *Ibid.*, 314-315.
12. *Ibid.*, 319.
13. *Ibid.*, 313.
14. C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 143.
15. Christopher Simpson, Science of Coercion: Communication Research & Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960 (New York: Oxford University

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- Press, 1994), 6.
16. See Todd Gitlin, "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm" Theory and Society 6, no. 2 (1978): 205-253.
  17. Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1955).
  18. Mills, The Power Elite, 315.
  19. *Ibid.*, 316.
  20. See, for instance: Jeffrey L. Bineham, "A Historical Account of the Hypodermic Model in Mass Communication," Communication Monographs 55 (September 1988): 230-246. Jesse G. Delia "Communication Research: A History." In Handbook of Communication Science, edited by Charles R. Berger and Steven Chaffee, 20-98. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc. 1987). And most recently: Everett M. Rogers, A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, Inc., 1994).
  21. Paul F. Lazarsfeld Oral History Project, Columbia University, The William E. Wiener Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee, February 21, 1975 - April 19, 1975, 123-124.
  22. See for instance, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Some New Advances in the Behavioral Sciences,," November 28, 1956" Paul F. Lazarsfeld Papers, Columbia University Archives, Box 20: Subject File L, Folder: Subject File - Lectures (Speeches, Interviews, etc.) # 4.
  23. See United States Information Agency, "Prestige, Personnel Influence, and Opinion" in The Process and Effects of Mass Communications, ed. Wilbur Schramm (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1954), 402-410.
  24. Barbara H. Chasin, "C. Wright Mills, Pessimistic Radical" Sociological Inquiry 60 (Fall 1990): 337-351.
  25. "C. Wright Mills to Dr. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, May 6, 1959," Paul F. Lazarsfeld Papers, Columbia University Archives, Box 15, Subject File: BSS-CH - Columbia University (1), Folder: Departmental.
  26. "CWM to Paul, July 9, 1959" Paul Lazarsfeld Papers, Columbia University Archives, Box 15 - Subject File: BSS-CH - Columbia University (1), Folder: Departmental.
  27. C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
  28. C. Wright Mills, "Abstracted Empiricism," in Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1972), 428-440.