

C. WRIGHT MILLS, MEDIA, AND MASS: ONLY MORE SO

Anthony M. Cinquemani

Timothy Glander's account "C. Wright Mills and the Rise of Psychological Illiteracy"¹ of Mills's Power Elite as having a subtext in Lazarsfeld and context in Columbia University is interesting in a particular way, though one imagines that observation, in the Columbia of the Fifties, of the nearly Trappist isolation of department from department, and colleague from colleague would have led Mills to some sort of monastic model. A rereading of *The Power Elite*² suggests less the need to know its occasion or provenance (reductive concerns) but rather to recognize its larger significance, especially Mills's prescience and the astuteness of his formulations (and maybe the need for certain refinements of his ideas and terminology, not least the need to replace the rather silly term *psychological illiteracy* with something in plain, though necessarily abstract, English: *incapacity for critical judgment*, perhaps. Certainly not *inopia*, the inexpressibility of a thought, for thought is not evident in the mass. Used in the non-judgmental sense, *stupidity* might do, as *the condition of being in a stupor*.)

I would zero in on some of the same passages that interest Professor Glander, especially those concerning the media. Mills's observation, as early as 1953, that "In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is the formal media, and the publics become mere media markets" is strikingly accurate and wanting only in consciousness of the degree to which the media would become pervasive, no: intrusive, no rather: constitutive.

I remember being impressed, reading Freshman English exit examinations in the early Seventies, with the definition of freedom proffered by one student—"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose"—until this definition reappeared in a dozens of other

papers I read later in the day. “The intrusive power of the media,” I thought (once I learned it was a Janice Joplin lyric). Then it occurred to me that most of the student writers were incapable of stipulating a definition of freedom, in part out the long lying-fallow of their brains, in significant part because the media had preempted thought. Further, they probably had little understanding of the lyric’s meaning. They were merely reporting a mediated slogan, an expression of the *Zeitgeist*, like that modern apothegm, “Shit happens.” To recover Mills’s “public” man, capable of formulating opinions, we would have to salvage whatever is left of him after he is stripped of MTV, CNN, and <http://www.>, whose Italian translation, *ragnatela mondiale*, is useful in conveying the sense “spider-web” and therefore the suspicion that we may be flies.

This is where refinement of Mills is necessary. In Mills’s much-to-be-desired public,

(1) virtually as many people express opinions as receive them. (2) Public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion (3) readily finds an outlet in effective action, even against—if necessary—the prevailing system of authority. And (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operations.³

The fact of the present, setting aside the question of numbers, is that not only do people not express opinions: the *thought* upon which opinion must be based is preempted by a sort of media-determined taxonomy. Items (2) and (3) above might be thought to be served by media “interactivity” (phone-in polls, e-mail responses, faxes to CSpan); however, anyone attentive to such responses recognizes them as derivative from media discourse and confirming media formulae.

Most seriously, training in thought, especially in the liberal arts where post-modernism reigns, is now a matter of the clever for-

mulation (that is, the relentless mediation) of texts whose autonomy is denied. The irony here is that (4 above) critics posing as exponents of an autonomous public, and dismantling the constructions of evidently authoritative institutions (by, let us say, decentering the subject, or denying the autonomy of the text), offer themselves, a sort of zero-sum readers, as necessary mediators in the experience of reading. The direct experience of people, phenomena, and books gives way to “virtual reality” and other forms of mediated experience: Larry King, Ricki Lake, and Stanley Fish.

When Mills’s *public* is turned into a mass more gelatinous than he imagined, “knowledge does not. . .have democratic relevance in America” (353). The mass thickens.

State University of New York, New Paltz

ENDNOTES

1. Timothy Glander, “C. Wright Mills and the Rise of Psychological Illiteracy,” *Educational Change*, (Spring 1996), pp. 51-62.
2. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, (reprinted 1968; New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
3. Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 303-304.