

The Power Elite Revisited

By Laurence S. Moss*

The revolutionary spirit of C. Wright Mills remains to be recaptured. From his major living disciple, Irving Horowitz,¹ we have received a prolific collection of articles and papers that attempt to clarify the ideas and sources upon which Mills' analysis of American society was based. But nowhere in the academic tones of Horowitz, or in the countless array of Millsian-inspired articles, do we encounter that same unique power to "set things straight", that rare ability to expose and educate, that characterize Mills' work. The starting point for the libertarian thinker must be the Power Elite.² This study, which commands the attention all scholarly research deserves, overcomes

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1. Irving Louis Horowitz's contributions have appeared in the form of introductions to books by Mills and about Mills. See The New Sociology, Horowitz ed. (Oxford University Press, 1964), and Power Politics and People, (Ballantine, 1962). Horowitz has written several books all of which display the great influence of Mills; witness the title of his 1963 work, The War Game: Studies of the New Civilian Militarists. Of especial interest is Horowitz's "Commentary" on The Power Elite entitled C. Wright Mills' The Power Elite published by Study Master (New York, 1966).

2. C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite, (Oxford University Press, 1959).

the contemporary preoccupation with trivia by tackling a subject that transcends the locale of a Middletown, or the inconsequential machinations of some street-gang in Chicago -- the maintenance and practice of "power" in American society. For it was self-evident to Mills, as it is obvious to us, that the perpetuation of the American monolith with its de facto ability to declare war, to bomb cities, and to interfere with the struggles of other peoples, stands as the foremost threat to the whole of American civilization--perhaps, human civilization.

The course of history over the past twelve years (since the first edition of the Power Elite appeared) has served to corroborate Mills' diagnosis. The fears and concerns that Mills expressed in the 'fifties are the fears and concerns that we have inherited in the 'sixties. With increasing alarm we find that the political decisions affecting our destinies have been snatched out of the hands of the mass of American citizens and into the tailored pockets of a small group of "policy makers". No matter what the imprecision Mills faced when defining the "power elite" and delimiting it from the rest of the populace, one fact remains clear; the common man is "represented" by a small group of policy makers, while the same common man, stilled by his impotence and beguiled by public school myths, is made to bear responsibility for decisions that he has not made (and probably would never have made, if given the choice). The "power elite" is real precisely because the country is divided up into the privileged who make the major decisions and the pillaged who work all of their lives to butter the others' bread.

Thus, the purpose of the Power Elite was to answer the important questions, "who in American politics are making the crucial decisions?" and "what types of human beings are these decision-makers?" Mills' classified his work as "sociology", though his analysis of the problem served to throw light on another question asked by political scientists; "What types of decisions are being made?" The implications of the Power Elite are indeed profound.

Mills found that the members of the "power elite" are recruited from three primary sources of power--the military establishment, the modern corporation, and the state itself. This existing elite is characterized by the fact that those Americans seeking to gain access to the upper circles of the power pyramid must be privileged. They must possess wealth, ivy-league educations, proper social affiliations and above all a certain kind of saleable

personality. These requirements can be fulfilled by only a few; and it is only a few who ever become the kings in the American game of political chess. Mills found no Horatio Algers in modern American politics because the "power elite" has ascended to a position where it can regenerate itself! Not through purity of the blood, as it was for the Pharaoh; not through noble patronage, as it was in pre-revolutionary France; but by patronizing institutions that are geared to mold a certain type of human being who they themselves deem fit to rule. Attendance at select schools, membership in the "correct" social clubs, belief in the Protestant ethos, all act to create the type of specimens the elite will sort out from the rest of the populace to inherit their reign. Whether it be the President of the United States, or the selection of a military advisor, the individuals are recruited from only one pot -- a pot that contains only one blend of soup.

Whatever the differences between the policy makers' personalities, habits, and interests; Mills argued that they cease to matter when it comes to the exercise of political power. The implication of his analysis is as subtle as it is poignant; if the decision-makers are all of one type then the decisions that they reach will also be of one kind. Clearly not the kind that the ordinary man is likely to make. It is extremely doubtful that the bombing of Hiroshima or the war in Viet Nam would have succeeded if put to a general referendum. Where is the representative democracy we learned about in high school? No where else but in the books!

A more important observation (one that Mills neglected to make) is that if the taxpayer were free to refuse his taxes, if the soldier were free to decide what to do with his life, where would the vital resources for these monstrous efforts come? How long could the elite survive with stale bread? - Or, even more likely, no bread at all?

As an analysis of the distribution of power in American society, the Power Elite made no attempt to suggest a viable alternative to the corporate-state capitalism we experience today. Mills' work was dedicated to an analysis of the problem of power, rather than to a plan for political reconstruction. We might conjecture as to what type of social arrangement Mills preferred. There is some evidence to suggest that Mills favored a competitive market economy coupled with a limited and decentralized Federal govern-

ment.³ But Mills did not advocate this program because he believed that such an arrangement of affairs was no longer "technologically" possible.⁴ Such an ideal belonged to an earlier age.

His study of American history convinced him that the passing of the laissez-faire economy dated from the mid-nineteenth century when technological development of large-scale production necessitated the break-up of the small competitive entrepreneurship and christened the evolution of the modern corporation.⁵ It was the economic power of the corporation that, according to Mills, added the third source of power to that of the military and the state. This coalition between the "corporate chieftains", the "warlords" and the "political directorate" marked the transition of a once basically individualistic economy to one ruled by the "power elite".

We might only add that Mills' pessimism might have been unwarranted. Mills' despair was based upon a popular but erroneous interpretation of American history.⁶ In the first place, Mills errs in assuming that there was once a time in history when "representative democracy" actually operated and the individual directed national policy. The inception of the American Constitution and the formation of the Federal government were the offspring of individuals hardly representative of the rest of the nation.⁷ At no time did "We the people . . ." describe the sentiments of the people

3. See The Power Elite, p. 260, and Robert B. Notestein, "The Moral Commitment of C. Wright Mills" in The New Sociology, pp. 49-53.

4. The Power Elite, pp. 259-60.

5. Ibid.

6. One source of this "popular" history of American society is E. H. Carr, The New Society, (Beacon Press, 1951).

7. A complete documentation of this position remains to be published. I have consulted the finished manuscript of Murray N. Rothbard on the period of colonial America where the author attempts to analyze the famous Constitutional Convention in terms of what actually happened rather than in terms of what many historians wanted to have happened. The manuscript is to be the first volume of a complete history of the United States. The still curious reader may consult with profit a small pamphlet by the libertarian-lawyer, Lysander Spooner, in which he argues that the American Constitution is "illegal". The argument

living in 1786.⁸ Furthermore, the history of the Federal government is a history not of balancing one pressure group against another, but a history of creating the very pressure groups that served to augment the state's mighty power. Thus a correct study of American history must assign the state a causative role in creating the other sources of power from which it nourishes.

A study of business legislation in the United States leads one to wonder how quickly laissez-faire would have died, in the absence of the spider web of tariff protection and subsidy privilege granted to business by the ever-expanding state. One modern historian⁹ has made such a study and holds the belief that most of the so-called "anti-trust" regulation did more to perpetuate the growth of the powerful corporation than to "reestablish" competition. Thus it was not so much the necessities of large-scale production that created the features of "corporate-capitalism" and made the corporation chieftains immune to ordinary market pressures, but the active support of the state itself. The marriage Mills describes between the state and the economy is real, but the evidence seems to indicate that the state has wedded its own son.

Furthermore, Mills has failed to prove that the market economy is impractical in our modern age. The Power Elite does not explain why economic power must necessarily become political power. In fact, Mills equates the two as synonymous while we must distinguish between these two types of power so that their differences remain. It is true that corporations can certainly grow large in size in the absence of state assistance. But economic power in a

is based on the idea that unlike ordinary contracts between living individuals, the Constitution was signed by some individuals and meant to be binding on all future generations of individuals -- thus, in what sense is the Constitution a "contract"? This is, of course, the immediate objection to Hobbes' "contract theory" of the state. It is necessary to mention that Spooner constructs several other objections to the legitimacy of the Constitution. See his No Treason No II The Constitution, 1867 (Boston).

8. No Treason, p. 5 and see also Beard's analysis of the backgrounds of the constitutional delegates, Charles A. Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, (Macmillan, 1962).

9. See Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism, (Free Press, 1963).

market economy is acquired and maintained in ways alien to that of state and military power. The power to sell is only as strong as another's willingness to buy; and when the consumers stop buying, the life of the mightiest corporation is dated by the time it takes for its assets to be liquidated. On the other hand, when the consumer stops "buying" the "services" of the state, he is jailed, humiliated, and ultimately murdered. The maintenance of political power involves the language of taxation, the language of conscription--the language of violence. Tongues all foreign to the market economy.

There is still another reason to relinquish the Millsian pessimism of the 'fifties--something that Mills did not live long enough to see. While today there still remains that awesome cleavage between the rulers and the ruled; the ruled are not as unaware of it as they were when the Power Elite was written. On college campuses and within certain minority movements, one individual after another is beginning to see through the opaque curtain of American politics. In the eyes of the New Left (a student movement influenced by Mills' work) and in some of the rhetoric of the "Negro revolution", the "power elite" is being exposed and held up to its proper ridicule.¹⁰ Whether these voices crying in the wilderness will be able to challenge effectively the American monolith remains to be seen. "Times are changing. . ." but not fast enough. The Johnsons will be reelected for many years to come as the Republican and Democratic parties monopolize the presidential privilege. For the present, the libertarian must become better equipped for the future, for if he some day succeeds in winning back the individual's freedom, it will be because part of his armour was fashioned by Mills' powerful Power Elite.

10. See Left and Right, Vol. III, No. 1., Winter 1967, editorial entitled, "SDS: The New Turn" and also, Rothbard's "The Negro Revolution" in New Individualist Review, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 1963) published at the University of Chicago.