

# The Sociology of C. Wright Mills

by Dr. Frank Elwell



## Note:

This presentation is based on the theory of C. Wright Mills as presented in books listed in the bibliography. A summary of this and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: Four Modern Theorists*, by Frank W. Elwell.



## C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

In all of his writings, Mills interprets the world through a theoretical perspective very much influenced by Max Weber.



## C. Wright Mills

Like the classical theory of the discipline, Mills' vision is a holistic view of entire sociocultural systems, this system is interdependent, and it has profound effects on human values, thought, and behavior.



# Rationalization

As a student of Max Weber, C. Wright Mills' main body of work centers upon the theme of rationalization.



# Rationalization

Rationalization is the practical application of knowledge to achieve a desired end. Its goal is efficiency, its means are total coordination and control over the social processes needed to attain that goal. It is the guiding principle behind bureaucracy and the increasing division of labor.



# Rationalization

We will begin exploring this overarching theme of rationalization with a quick summation of some basic assumptions Mills has about the nature of man and society.



# Basic Assumptions

Human beings, Mills asserts, cannot be understood apart from the social and historical structures in which they are formed and in which they interact.





# Basic Assumptions

While human beings are motivated by the norms, values, and belief systems that prevail in their society, structural change often throw these "vocabularies of motivation" into some confusion.



# Basic Assumptions

The number and variety of structural changes within a society increase as institutions become larger, more embracing, and more interconnected.



# Basic Assumptions

Consequently, the tempo of change has sped up appreciably in the modern era, and the changes have become far more consequential for all—for those who are in control of these enlarged organizations, and for those who are subject to them.



# White Collar

According to Mills, the rise of white-collar work is rooted in occupational change due to recent growth in bureaucracies, technological change, and the increasing need to market the goods of industrial society.



# White Collar

The central characteristics regarding white-collar workers in modern industrial societies are that they are unorganized and dependent upon large bureaucracies for their existence.



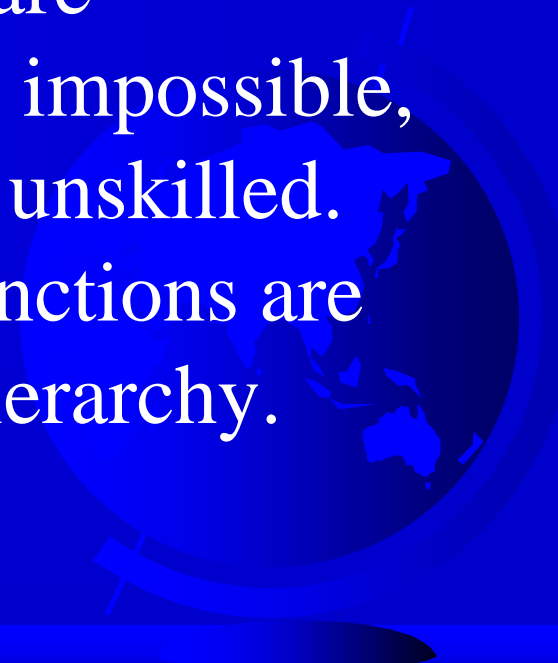
# White Collar

By their mass existence and dependence they have changed the character and feel of American life. By focusing on white-collar life, Mills believes, we can learn much about American character.



# White Collar

Jobs, Mills observed, are broken up into simple functional tasks. Standards are set in terms of pace and output. Where economically viable, machines are employed. Where automation is impossible, the tasks are parceled out to the unskilled. Policy making and executive functions are centralized and moved up the hierarchy.



# White Collar

With the automation of the office and the growth in the division of labor, the number of routine jobs is increased, authority and job autonomy become attributes of only the top positions. There is an ever greater distinction made in terms of power, prestige, and income between managers and staff.





# White Collar

The routinized worker is discouraged from using his own independent judgment; his decision making is in accordance with strict rules handed down by others. He becomes alienated from his intellectual capacities, work becomes an enforced activity.



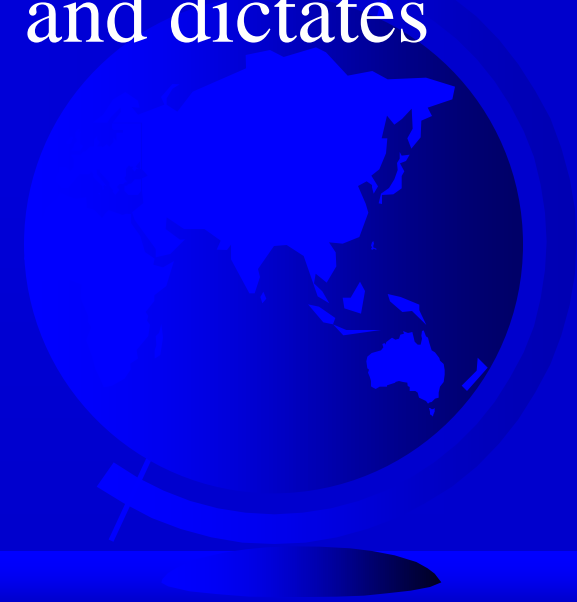
# White Collar

The rise of white-collar work has had a profound effect on educational systems in bureaucratic-industrial societies.



# White Collar

Educated intelligence, in the traditional sense of the word, become penalized in white-collar work, where job performance and promotion are based on routinized work and following the bureaucratic rules and dictates of others.



# White Collar

As a result, Mills says, American education has shifted toward a vocational focus. High schools, as well as colleges, have become the training grounds for the large bureaucracies of government and industry.



# White Collar

While the aim of 19th century American schooling was the creation of the "good citizen" of democracy, in the middle of the 20th century it has become the creation of the successful man in a society of specialists.



# Power & Authority

For Mills, there are three forms of power. The first is coercion or physical force. Mills writes that such coercion is rarely needed in the modern democratic state. While such power underlies the other two, it is only used as a last resort.



# Power & Authority

The second type of power Mills characterizes as "authority." This is power that is attached to positions and is justified by the beliefs of the obedient.



# Power & Authority

The final form of power, Mills writes, is "manipulation." Manipulation is power that is wielded without the conscious knowledge of the powerless. While bureaucratic structures are based on authority, Mills saw such authority shifting toward manipulation.





# Power & Authority

Manipulation is not based on terror or external force, although the police powers of the state under gird its authority. Human organization that depends on the constant use of force and intimidation to discipline its members is extremely inefficient and ultimately ineffective.



# Power & Authority

Rather, the power of manipulation is founded upon the ever more sophisticated methods of control given us by science (including social science) and technology. The truly efficient organization, in a society dominated by large bureaucracies, is based on the techniques and technologies of manipulation.



# Power & Authority

As modern management becomes the reigning ethos of the age, the shift from explicit authority relationships to more subtle manipulation becomes the preferred form of power.



# Power & Authority

Part of the shift from authority to manipulation is enabled by the new technologies of mass communication, part of the shift is due to the new ideologies of management and the advances in the social sciences. But these technological advances (and advances in techniques) merely allow the shift to occur.



# Power & Authority

The cause of the shift is the centralization and enlargement of political power itself.

Authority has need of legitimation to secure loyalty and obedience. Manipulation arises when such centralized authority is not publicly justified, and when those in power do not believe they can justify it.



# Power & Authority

In the shift from coercion and authority to manipulation, power shifts from the overt to the covert, from the obvious to the subtle. Exploitation becomes a psychological process.



# Power & Authority

Among the means of power that exist today is the power to manage and manipulate the consent of men. Because the power of manipulation is hidden it deprives the oppressed from identifying the oppressor. This power effectively removes the check of reason and conscience of the ruled on the ruler.



# Power & Authority

White-collar people subject to the manipulations and control of their superiors, lose both freedom of action and creativity on the job. Such individuals will learn to seek satisfactions elsewhere.





# Power & Authority

Emptied of all other meanings and legitimations, jobs are emptied of any intrinsic meaning. Money, in order to build a life outside of work, becomes the only rationale for work itself.



# The Power Elite

In The Power Elite, Mills made explicit his belief that the American doctrine of balances of power is an ideal showing less vigor today than was true in the past.



# The Power Elite

Historically in the West, the means of violence has greatly increased, and the degree of organization has enlarged, centralized, and become ever more efficient.



# The Power Elite

According to Mills, there is a power elite in modern societies, an elite who command the resources of vast bureaucratic organizations that have come to dominate industrial societies.



# The Power Elite

As the bureaucracies have centralized and enlarged the circle of those who run these organizations have narrowed and the consequences of their decisions have become enormous.



# The Power Elite

According to Mills, the power elite are the key people in the three major institutions of modern society:

- Economy
- Government
- Military



# The Power Elite

The elite occupy the key leadership positions within the bureaucracies that now dominate modern societies, the positions in which the effective means of power are now located. Thus their power is rooted in authority, an attribute of social organizations, not of individuals.



# The Power Elite

The bureaucracies of state, corporations, and military have become enlarged and centralized and are a means of power never before equaled in human history. These hierarchies of power are the key to understanding modern industrial societies.





# The Power Elite

It is not a conspiracy of evil men, he argues, but a social structure that has enlarged and centralized the decision-making process and then placed this authority in the hands of men of similar social background and outlook.



# The Power Elite

In Mills' view, major national power now resides almost exclusively in the economic, political, and military domains. All other institutions have diminished in scope and power and been either pushed to the side of modern history, or made subordinate to the big three.



# The Power Elite

It is their similar social backgrounds that provide one of the major sources of unity among the elite.



# The Power Elite

The majority of the elite, Mills asserted, come from the upper third of the income and occupational pyramids. They are born of the same upper class. They attend the same preparatory schools and Ivy League universities. They join the same exclusive gentleman's clubs, belong to the same organizations. They are closely linked through intermarriage.



# The Power Elite

Some of the coordination comes from the interchange of personnel between the three elite hierarchies. The closeness of business and government officials can be seen, Mills asserts, by the ease and frequency with which men pass from one hierarchy to another.



# The Power Elite

Mills also asserted that a good deal of the coordination comes from a growing structural integration of dominant institutions. As each of the elite domains becomes larger, more centralized, and more consequential in its activities, its integration with the other spheres becomes more pronounced.



# The Power Elite

Of the three sectors of institutional power, Mills claims, the corporate sector is the most powerful. But the power elite cannot be understood as a mere reflection of economic elites; rather it is the alliance of economic, political, and military power.



# The Power Elite

Mills saw two other levels of power in American society below the power elite. At the bottom are the great masses of people. Largely unorganized, ill informed, and virtually powerless, they are controlled and manipulated from above.





# The Power Elite

The masses are economically dependent, they are economically and politically exploited. Because they are disorganized, the masses are far removed from the classic democratic public in which voluntary organizations hold the key to power.



# The Power Elite

Between the masses and the elite Mills saw a middle level of power. Composed of local opinion leaders and special interest groups, they neither represent the masses nor have any real effect on the elite.



# The Power Elite

Mills saw the American Congress and American political parties as a reflection of this middle-level of power. Although Congress and political parties debate and decide some minor issues, the power elite ensures that no serious challenge to its authority and control is tolerated in the political arena.



# The Power Elite

The positions of the elite allow them to transcend the ordinary environments of men and women. The elite have access to levers of power that make their decisions (as well as their failure to act) consequential.



# The Power Elite

To date, Mills fears, these leaders are acting (or failing to act) with irresponsibility, thus leading us to disaster. But this does not mean that it always must be so. The great structural change that has enlarged the means and extent of power and concentrated it in so few hands now makes it imperative to hold these men responsible for the course of events.



# The Causes of World War III

By 1958, Mills seemed much more concerned with the rise of militarism among the elites than with the hypothesis that many elites were military men. According to Mills, the rise of the military state serves the interests of the elite of industrial societies.



# The Causes of World War III

For the politician the projection of military power serves as a cover for their lack of vision and innovative leadership.



# The Causes of World War III

For corporate elites the preparations for war and the projection of military power underwrites their research and development as well as provides a guarantee of stable profits through corporate subsidies.





# The Causes of World War III

This militarism is inculcated in the population through school room and pulpit patriotism, through manipulation and control of the news, through the cultivation of opinion leaders and unofficial ideology.



# The Causes of World War III

But it is not just the existence of a power elite that has allowed this manufactured militarism to dominate. It has also been enabled by the apathy and moral insensibility of the masses and by the political inactivity of intellectuals in both communist and capitalist countries.



# The Causes of World War III

Most intellectual, scientific, and religious leaders are echoing the elaborate confusions of the elite. They are refusing to question elite policies, they are refusing to offer alternatives. They have abdicated their role, they allow the elite to rule unhindered.



# Social Problems

Mills identified five overarching social problems:

- ☞ Alienation
- ☞ Moral insensibility
- ☞ Threats to democracy
- ☞ Threats to human freedom
- ☞ Conflict between bureaucratic rationality and human reason.



# Social Problems: Alienation

Like Marx, Mills views the problem of alienation as a characteristic of modern society and one that is deeply rooted in the character of work.



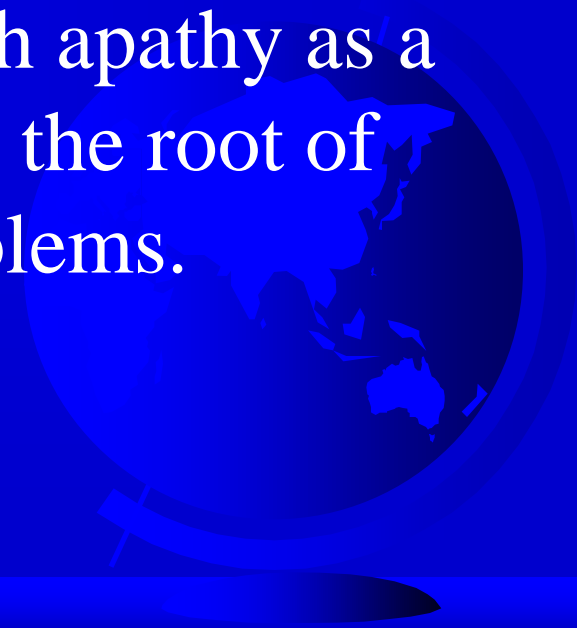
# Social Problems: Alienation

Unlike Marx, however, Mills does not attribute alienation to capitalism alone. While he agrees that much alienation is due to the ownership of the means of production, he believes much of it is also due to the modern division of labor.



# Social Problems: Apathy

One of the fundamental problems of mass society is that many people have lost their faith in leaders and are therefore very apathetic. Such people pay little attention to politics. Mills characterizes such apathy as a "spiritual condition" which is at the root of many of our contemporary problems.



# Social Problems: Apathy

Apathy leads to "moral insensibility." Such people mutely accept atrocities committed by their leaders. They lack indignation when confronted with moral horror, they lack the capacity to morally react to the character, decisions, and actions of their leaders.





# Social Problems: Apathy

Mass communications contributes to this condition, Mills argues, through the sheer volume of images aimed at the individual in which she "becomes the spectator of everything but the human witness of nothing."



# Social Problems: Apathy

Mills relates this moral insensibility directly to the rationalization process. Our acts of cruelty and barbarism are split from the consciousness of men--both perpetrators and observers. We perform these acts as part of our role in formal organizations. We are guided not by individual consciousness, but by the orders of others.



# Social Problems: Apathy

Thus many of our actions are inhuman, not because of the scale of their cruelty, but because they are impersonal, efficient. and performed without any real emotion.



# Social Problems: Threats to Democracy

Mills believed that widespread alienation, political indifference, and economic and political concentration of power is a serious all added up to a serious threat to democracy.



# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

Finally, Mills is continually concerned in his writings with the threat to two fundamental human values: "freedom and reason." Mills characterizes the trends that imperil these values as being "co-extensive with the major trends of contemporary society."



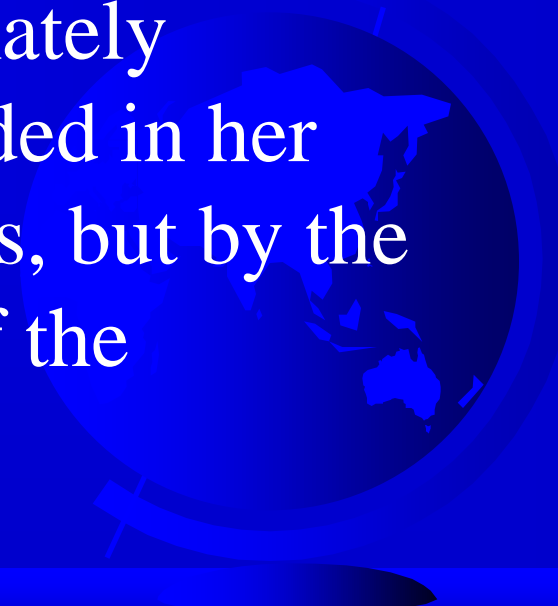
# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

These trends are, Mills states throughout his writings, the centralization and enlargement of vast bureaucratic organizations, and the placing of this extraordinary power and authority into the hands of a small elite.



# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

For the individual, rational organization is an alienating organization, destructive of freedom and autonomy. It cuts the individual off from the conscious conduct of his behavior, thought, and ultimately emotions. The individual is guided in her actions not by her consciousness, but by the prescribed roles and the rules of the organization itself.



# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

"It is not too much to say that in the extreme development the chance to reason of most men is destroyed, as rationality increases and its locus, its control, is moved from the individual to the big-scale organization. There is then rationality without reason. Such rationality is not commensurate with freedom but the destroyer of it."





# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

Like Weber before him, Mills cautions that a society dominated by rational social organization is not based on reason, intelligence, and good will toward all.



# Social Problems: Threats to Freedom & Reason

Further, it is through rational social organization that modern day tyrants (as well as more mundane bureaucratic managers) exercise their authority and manipulation, often denying the opportunity of their subjects to exercise their own judgments.



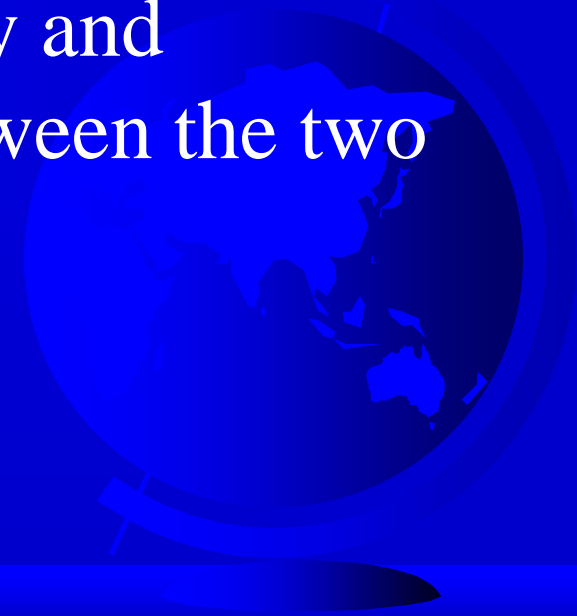
# The Sociological Imagination

Mills claimed that Sociological research has come to be guided more by the requirements of administrative concerns than by intellectual concerns. It has become the accumulation of facts for the purpose of facilitating administrative decisions.



# The Sociological Imagination

For Mills the difference between effective sociological thought and that which fails rested upon imagination. The sociological imagination is simply a "quality of mind" that allows one to grasp "history and biography and the relations between the two within society."



# The Sociological Imagination

To truly fulfill the promise of social science requires us to focus upon substantive problems, and to relate these problems to structural and historical features of the sociocultural system.



# The Sociological Imagination

These features have meanings for individuals, and they profoundly affect the values, character, and the behavior of the men and women who make up that sociocultural system.



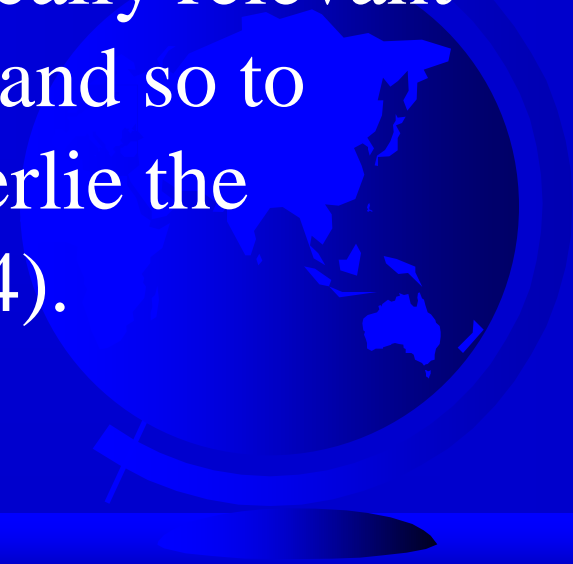
# The Sociological Imagination

The promise of the social sciences is to bring reason to bear on human affairs. To fulfill this role requires that we "avoid furthering the bureaucratization of reason and of discourse."



# The Sociological Imagination

"What I am suggesting is that by addressing ourselves to issues and to troubles, and formulating them as problems of social science, we stand the best chance, I believe the only chance, to make reason democratically relevant to human affairs in a free society, and so to realize the classic values that underlie the promise of our studies" (1959: 194).





# The Sociological Imagination

Mills set forth his own conception of how a social scientist should undertake the work. He conveys a sense of what it means to be an intellectual who concentrates on the social nature of man and who seeks that which is significant.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ First of all, a good scholar does not split work from life. Both are part of a seriously accepted unity.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Second, a good scholar must keep a file. This file is a compendium of personal, professional, and intellectual experiences.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Third, a good intellectual engages in continual review of thoughts and experiences.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Fourth, a good intellectual may find a truly bad book as intellectually stimulating and conducive to thinking as a good book.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Fifth, there must be an attitude of playfulness toward phrases, words, and ideas. Along with this attitude one must have a fierce drive to make sense out of the world.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Sixth, the imagination is stimulated by assuming a willingness to view the world from the perspective of others.



# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Seventh, one should not be afraid, in the preliminary stages of speculation, to think in terms of imaginative extremes.





# The Sociological Imagination

- ☞ Eighth, one should not hesitate to express ideas in language which is as simple and direct as one can make it. Ideas are affected by the manner of their expression. An imagination which is encased in deadening language will be a deadened imagination.



## Note:

For a more extensive discussion of Mills' theory, as well as a fuller discussion of its implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: Four Modern Theorists*. For an even deeper understanding of Mills' thought, read from the bibliography that follows.



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The End

