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THE POWER ELITE—RECONSIDERED¹

DANIEL BELL

ABSTRACT

The Power Elite has had a wide emotional appeal because of its rhetoric and its tough-minded “unmasking” of naïve, Populist illusions about democratic checks on power. But a detailed, textual analysis of the book shows a loose and confusing use of terminology. Its conceptual scheme draws from European experiences which do not apply in American life. Its method is static and ahistorical. Power, as Mills defines it, is violence, but this avoids more problems than it illuminates. The book fails to deal with the nature of interests or to define the character of political decisions.

C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* is one of those rare books in recent sociology that deals with the “world of causality” as against mere description. Power is a difficult subject; its effects are more observable than its causes. Even the power-wielders often do not know what factors shaped their decisions. By seeing power through a peculiar configuration of elites, Mills provides a frame to locate the sources of behavior. It is, in addition, something else: a political book whose loose texture and powerful rhetoric have allowed different people to read their own emotions into it. For the young neo-Marxists in England (*vide* the group around the *Universities and Left Review*) and the old, orthodox Marxists in Poland (*vide* the reception by Adam Schaff, the party's official philosopher), it has become a primer for the understanding of American policy and motives. This is curious, since Mills is not a Marxist, and, if anything, his method and conclusions are anti-Marxist. But because it is tough-minded and “unmasks” the naïve, Populist illusions about power, it has won a ready response among radicals. Yet *The Power Elite* is not an empirical analysis of power in the United States, though many readers have mistaken its illustrations for such an analysis, but a *scheme* for the analysis of power; and a close reading of its argument will show, I think, how confusing and unsatisfactory this scheme is.

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented before the Faculty Colloquium of the Columbia University Sociology Department in May, 1958.

THE MOOD AND THE INTENT

The mood that pervades Mills's book, and most of his work, provides some clue to the response. In writing about labor (*The New Men of Power*), the white-collar class, and now the power elite, Mills is writing not a whole human comedy but one aspect of it, what Balzac called the *étude de mœurs*, “the comedy of morals.” Some of the Balzac method is there: Balzac sought to reconcile the discoveries of science with poetry and to build up visual effects by the massing of factual detail. Mills writes in vivid metaphors and surrounds them with statistic after statistic. But more than stylistic analogy is involved. Balzac lived at a time very much like ours—a time of upheaval when old mores were called into question, when for the first time individual social mobility was becoming possible, when Stendhal's Julien Sorel, the young man from the provinces, could seek to move into the world of the upper class. Balzac's heroes, Louis Lambert, Rastignac, and, most of all, Vautrin (a lateral descendant of Macheath, from John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*), begin as mobile men, seeking a place in society, but end by hating the bourgeois society they found. Their stance is that of the outsider, and their world (Vautrin's underworld is a countersociety to the upper world, as is Bert Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*) is built on the premise that the public morality, its manners and ideals, is all a fraud. It is interesting that Mills quotes with approval Balzac's dictum, “Behind every fortune is a crime,”

and sees it as a judgment which applies equally today. Mills, too, is an outsider.

But, whatever its initial impulse, Mills's book is molded by more direct intellectual progenitors. These are Veblen, from whom the rhetoric and irony is consciously copied; Weber, for the picture of social structure, not however of classes, but of vertical orders, or *Standen*; and, most crucially, Pareto, but not for the definition of elite, which is much different from Mills's, but the method. From Pareto is drawn the scorn for ideas and the denial that ideology has any operative meaning in the exercise of power. By seeing power as an underlying "combination of orders," Mills parallels in method what Pareto was doing in seeing social groups as "combination of residues." This leads, I think, despite the dynamism in the rhetoric, to a static, ahistorical approach.²

THE ARGUMENT

If one seeks to relate sequence to argument as it unfolds in Mills's opening chapter (the others are largely uneven illustrations rather than development or demonstration of the thesis), there is a perplexing shuttling back and forth on the key problem of how power is wielded. One can only show this by some detailed quotation, a difficult but necessary burden for exposition.³

Within American society, says Mills, major national power "now resides in the economic, political and military domains."

The way to understand the power of the American elite lies neither solely in recognizing

² My own masters, in this respect, are Dewey and Marx: Dewey, for his insistence on beginning not with structure but with problems; with the question of why something is called into question; why things are in change and what people did; Marx, for the interplay of ideology and power; for the emphasis on history, on crises as transforming moments, on politics as an activity rooted in concrete interests and played out in determinable strategies.

³ All italics, unless otherwise indicated, are mine. They are intended to underline key statements. All citations are from C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

the historical scale of events, nor in accepting the personal awareness reported by men of apparent decision. Behind such men and behind the events of history, linking the two, are the major institutions of modern society. These hierarchies of state and corporation and army constitute the means of power: as such, they are now of a consequence not before equalled in human history—and at their summits, there are now those command posts of modern society which offer us the sociological key to an understanding of the role of the higher circles in America [p. 5].

This power, to be power, apparently means control over the institutions of power:

By the powerful, we mean, of course, *those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it*. No one, accordingly, can be truly powerful unless he has access to the command of major institutions, for it is over these institutional means of power that the truly powerful are, in the first instance, powerful [p. 9].

It is shared by only a few persons:

By the power elite, we refer to those political and economic and military *circles* which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques *share decisions having at least national consequences*. Insofar as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them [p. 18].

But these people are not the "history makers" of the time. The "power elite" is not, Mills says (p. 20), a theory of history. History is a complex net of intended and unintended decisions.

The idea of the power elite implies *nothing about the process of decision-making as such*: it is an attempt to delimit social areas within which that process, *whatever its character*, goes on. It is a conception of *who* is involved in the process [p. 21].

But decisions are made:

In our time the pivotal moment does arise, and at that moment small circles do decide or fail to decide. In either case, they are an elite of power . . . [p. 22].

Does the elite then make history? Sometimes it is role-determined, sometimes role-determining (pp. 24–25). But

it was no historical necessity, but a man named Truman, who with a few other men, decided to drop a bomb on Hiroshima. It was no historical necessity, but an argument, in then a small circle of men that defeated Admiral Radford's proposal to send troops to Indochina before Dienbienphu fell [p. 25].

If all this has a residue, it is that a smaller number of men than ever before, holding top positions in government, economic life, and the military, have a set of responsibilities and decision-making powers that are more consequential than ever before in United States history. This, in itself, does not tell us very much. But crucial to Mills's analysis are a set of operative terms—"institutions" (with which are interchanged freely "domains," "higher circles," and "top cliques"), "power," "command posts," and "big decisions"—and it is the rhetorical use of these terms that gives the book its persuasiveness. These are the key modifiers of the term "elite." What do they mean?

THE TERMS

a) *Institutions, domains, etc.*—In only one place, in a long footnote on page 366, among his notes, Mills tries to straighten out the confusions created by the profuse interchange of terms. He says that he defines elite on the basis of "institutional position" rather than "statistics of selected values," "membership in clique-like sets of people," or "morality of certain personality types." He wants to locate the structural power centers in society.

But, actually, the military, the economic, and the political, as Mills uses these terms, are not institutions, but sectors, or what Weber calls "orders," or vertical hierarchies—each with their inclosed strata—of society. To say that this sector or order is more important than that—that in some societies, for example, the religious orders are more important than the political—is to give us large-scale boundaries of knowledge. But surely we want and need more than that.

Nor do we obtain any clear idea of what

Mills means by an *institution*. Mills's usage of "the military," "the political directorate," etc., is extraordinarily loose. It would be hard to characterize these as institutions. Institutions derive from *particular, established* codes of conduct, which shape the behavior of *particular* groups of men who implicitly or otherwise have a loyalty to that code and are subject to certain controls (anxiety, guilt, shame, expulsion, etc.) if they violate the norms. If the important considerations of power are *what people do with that power*, then we have to have more particularized ways of identifying the groupings than "institutionalized orders," "domains," "circles," etc.

b) *Power.*—There is a curious lack of definition all the way through the book of the word "power." Only twice, really, does one find a set of limits to the word:

By the powerful we mean, of course, those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it [p. 9].

All politics is a struggle for power: the ultimate kind of power is violence [p. 171].

It is quite true that violence, as Weber has said, is the ultimate sanction of power, and, in extreme situations (e.g., the Spanish Civil War, Iraq, etc.), control of the means of violence may be decisive in seizing or holding power. But neither is power the inexorable, implacable, granitic force that Mills and others make it to be. (Merriam once said: "Rape is not evidence of irresistible power, either in politics or sex.") And is it true to say that *all* politics is a struggle for power? Are there not ideals as a goal? And if ideals are realizable through power—though not always—do they not temper the violence of politics?

Power in Mills's terms is domination. But we do not need an elaborate discussion to see that this view of power avoids more problems than it answers—particularly once one moves away from the outer boundary of *power as violence to institutionalized power*, with which Mills is concerned. For in society, particularly constitutional regimes, and *within* associations, where violence is

not the rule, we are in the realm of norms, values, traditions, legitimacy, consensus, leadership, and identification—all the modes and mechanisms of command and authority, their acceptance or denial, which shape action in the day-to-day world *without violence*. And these aspects of power Mills has eschewed.

c) *The command posts*.—It is rather striking, too, given Mills's image of power, and politics, as violence, that the metaphor to describe the people of power be a military one. We can take this as a clue to Mills's implicit scheme—that the military is for him the model of power. But little more than a metaphor, it still tells us little as to *who* has power. The men who hold power, he says, are those who run the *organizations* or *domains* which have power. But how do we know they have power or what power they have? This is taken simply as a postulate: (1) the organization or institution has power; (2) *position in it gives power*. How do we know? Actually, we can only know if power exists by what people *do* with their power.

What powers people have, what decisions they make, how they make them, what factors they have to take into account in making them—all these come into the question of whether position *can* be transferred into power. But Mills has said:

The idea of the power elite implies nothing about the process of decision-making as such—it is an attempt to delimit the social areas within which that process, *whatever its character*, goes on. It is a conception of who is involved in the process [p. 21].

So we find ourselves stymied. *Who* depends upon position? But position, as I have argued, is meaningful only if one can define the character of the decisions made with such power. And this problem Mills eschews.⁴

Mills says further that he wants to avoid the problem of the self-awareness by the power-holders or the role of such self-awareness in decisions: "The way to understand the power of the elite lies neither in recognizing the historic scale of events or the

personal awareness reported by men of apparent decision behind the men and the institutions" (p. 15). But if the power elite is *not* the history-maker (p. 20), as Mills sometimes implies, *then what is the meaning of their positions as members of the power elite?* Either they can make effective decisions or not. It is true that many men, like Chanticleer the Cock, crow and believe that they have caused the sun to rise; but, if such power is only self-deception, that is an aspect, too, of the meaning of power.

So far we have been accepting the terms "command posts" and "power elite" in Mills's own usage. But now a difficulty enters: the question not only of *who* constitutes the power elite but of how *cohesive* they are. Although Mills contends that he does not believe in a conspiracy theory, his loose account of the centralization of power among the elite comes suspiciously close to it. (It is much like Jack London's *The Iron Heel*—the picture of the American oligarchs—which so influenced Socialist imagery and thought before World War I.

We can only evaluate the meaning of any centralization of power on the basis of what people do with their power. What *unites* them? What *divides* them? And this in-

⁴In his extraordinary story of policy conflicts between the Army, Air Force, and Navy on strategic concepts—policy issues such as reliance on heavy military bombers and all-out retaliation, against tactical nuclear weapons and conventional ground forces for limited wars, issues which deeply affect the balance of power within the military establishment—General James Gavin provides a striking example of the helplessness of some of the top Army brass against the entrenched bureaucracy within the Department of Defense. "With the establishment of the Department of Defense in 1947," he writes, "an additional layer of civilian management was placed above the services. Furthermore, by the law, military officers were forbidden to hold executive positions in the Department of Defense. As a result the Assistant Secretaries of Defense relied heavily on hundreds of civil service employees, who probably have more impact on decision-making in the Department of Defense than any other group of individuals, military or civilian" (*War and Peace in the Space Age* [New York: Harper & Bros., 1958], reprinted in *Life*, August 4, 1958, pp. 81–82).

volves a definition of *interests*. To say, as Mills does, that “*all* means of power tend to become *ends* to an elite that is in command of them. And that is why we may define the power elite in terms of power—as those who occupy the command posts” (p. 23)—is circular.

What does it mean to say that power is an end in itself for the power elite? If the elite is cohesive, and facing another power group, the maintenance of power may be an end in itself. But is the elite cohesive? We do not know without first coming back to the question of interests. And the nature of interests implies a selection of values by a group, or part of a group, over against others, and this leads to a definition of the priorities of importance of values, of the distribution of particular privileges, etc.

Certainly, one cannot have a power elite, or a ruling class, without *community of interests*. Mills implies one: the interest of the elite is in the maintenance of the capitalist system as a *system*. But this is never really discussed or analyzed in terms of the meaning of capitalism, the impact of political controls on the society, or the changes in capitalism in the last twenty-five years.

But, even if the interest be as broad as Mills implies, one still has the responsibility of identifying the conditions for the maintenance of the system and the issues and interests which attend these. Further, one has to see whether there is or has been a *continuity of interests*, in order to chart the cohesiveness or the rise and fall of particular groups.

One of the main arguments about the importance of the *command posts* is the growing centralization of power which would imply something about the nature of interests. Yet there is almost no sustained discussion of the forces leading to centralization. These are somewhat assumed, and hover over the book, but are never made explicit. Yet only a sustained discussion of these tendencies would, it seems to me, uncover the *locales* of power and their shifts. For example: (a) the role of technology and increasing capital costs as a chief factor in

the size of enterprise; (b) the need for regulation and planning on a national scale because of increased communication, complexity of living, social and military services, and the managing of the economy as forces in the federalization of power; and (c) the role of foreign affairs. (Curiously, Soviet Russia is not even mentioned in the book, although so much of our posture has been dictated by Russian behavior.)

Since his focus is on *who* has power, Mills spends considerable effort in tracing the social origins of the men at the top. But, in a disclaimer toward the end of the book (pp. 280–87), he says that the conception of the power elite does not rest upon common social origins (a theme which underlies, say, Schumpeter’s notion of the rise and fall of classes) or upon personal friendship but (although the presumption is not made explicit) upon their “institutional position.” But such a statement begs the most important question of all: *the mechanisms of co-ordination among the power-holders*. One can say obliquely, as Mills does, that they “meet each other,” but this tells us little. If there is a “built-in” situation whereby each position merges into another, what are they? One can say, as Mills does, that the new requirements of government require increased recruitment to policy positions from outside groups.⁵ But, then, what are they—and what do they do? At one point Mills says that the Democrats recruited from Dillon-Reed; the Republicans, from Kuhn-Loeb. But the point is never developed, and it is hard to know

⁵ One key theoretical point, for Marxists, which Mills, surprisingly, never comes to, is the question of the ultimate source of power. Is the political directorate autonomous, or the military independent? If so, how come? What is the relation of economic power to the other two? Mills writes: “In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the enlarged and military state, that clue becomes evident in the military ascendancy. The warlords have gained decisive political relevance, and the military structure is now in considerable part a political structure” (p. 275). If so, what is one to say, then, about the other crucial proposition by Mills that the capitalist system in the United States is essentially unchanged (see below).

what he means. One could equally say that in the recruitment of science advisers the Democrats took from Chicago and Los Alamos; the Republicans, from Livermore—but if this means anything, and I think it does, one has to trace out the consequences of this different recruitment in the *actions* of the different people. Mills constantly brings the story to the point where analysis has to begin—and stops.

d) *The big decisions.*—Mills says that the power elite comes into its own on the “big decisions”; only they can effect them. Those who talk of a new social balance, or pluralism, or the rise of labor, he says, are talking, if at all correctly, about the “middle levels” of power. They fail to see the big decisions. But, curiously, except in a few instances, Mills fails to specify what the big decisions are. And, when he does, they seem to be a few—namely, the steps leading to intervention in World War II; the decision to drop the atom bomb; the declaration of war in Korea; the *indecisions* over Quemoy and Matsu; the hesitation over Dienbienphu.

It is quite striking (and it is in line with Mills’s conception of politics) *that all the decisions he singles out as the “big decisions” are connected with violence.* These are, it is true, the ultimate decisions a society can make: the commitment or refusal to go to war. And, in this regard, Mills is right. They *are* big decisions. But what is equally striking in his almost cursory discussion of these decisions is the failure to see that these decisions are not made by the power elite, either. They are the decisions which, in our constitutional system, are vested specifically in one individual who must bear the responsibility for the decision—the President. And, rather than being a usurpation of power, so to speak, this is one of the few instances in the Constitution in which such responsibility is specifically defined and accountability is clear. Naturally, a President will consult with others. And, in the instances Mills has cited, the President did. Richard Rovere has supplied a detailed analysis of the decisions which Mills has named⁶

and refuted the notion that a “power elite” was really involved—certainly, as Mills defines this elite broadly. Rovere points to the few persons other than the President involved in these decisions: on the atom bomb, Stimson, Churchill, and a few physicists; on Korea, a small group of men like Acheson and Bradley, whose counsel was divided; on Quemoy and Matsu, specifically by Eisenhower; and on Dienbienphu, the military and the Cabinet—and, in this instance, “the” power elite, narrowly defined, were for intervention, while Eisenhower alone decided against it, principally, says Rovere, because of public opinion.

Now it may well be that crucial decisions of this importance should not be in the hands of a few men. But short of a system of national initiative and referendum such as was proposed in 1938–39 in the Ludlow amendment, or short of reorganizing the political structure of the country to insist on party responsibility for decision, it is difficult to see what Mills’s shouting is about. To say that the leaders of a country have a constitutional responsibility to make crucial decisions is a fairly commonplace statement. To say that the power elite makes such decisions is to invest the statement with a weight and emotional charge that is quite impressive but of little meaning.

In this preoccupation with elite manipulation, Mills becomes indifferent to the question of what constitutes problems of power in the everyday life of the country. This is quite evident in the way he summarily dismisses all other questions, short of the ones described above, as “middle level,” and presumably, without much *real* meaning. *Yet are these not the stuff of politics*—the issues which divide men and create the interest conflicts that involve people in a sense of ongoing reality: labor issues, race problems, tax policy, and the like?

THE EUROPEAN IMAGE

The peculiar fact is that, while all the illustrations Mills uses are drawn from

⁶ *The Progressive*, XX, No. 4 (June, 1956), 33–35.

American life, the key concepts are drawn from European experiences; and this accounts, I believe, for the exotic attractiveness—and astigmatism—of the power elite idea.⁷

Having defined politics and power in terms of an ultimate sanction of violence, Mills then raises the provocative question: Why, then, have the possessors of the means of violence—the military—not established themselves in power more than they have done in the West? Why is not military dictatorship the more normal form of government?

Mills's answer is to point to the role of status: "Prestige to the point of honor, and all that this implies, has, as it were, been the pay-off for the military renunciations of power" (p. 174).

Now, to the extent that this is true, and I think as a general statement it can stand, this fact applies primarily to the *European* scene. But does it to the United States? Where in the United States have the military (the Navy apart) been kept in check by *honor*? The military has not had the power—or status—in American life for a variety of vastly different reasons: the original concept of the Army as a people's militia; the Populist image of the Army man, often as a "hero"; the "democratic" recruitment to West Point; the reluctance to accept conscription; the low esteem of

⁷ This is a refractory problem which has distorted much of American sociological thinking. Through the 1930's American intellectuals constantly expected that United States social development, particularly in the emergence of fascism, would inevitably follow that of Europe. To a great extent this was a product of mechanical Marxism which saw all politics as a reflex of economic crises and postulated common stages of social evolution. Even as late as 1948, Laski would write that "the history of the United States, would, despite everything, follow the general pattern of capitalist democracy in Europe" (Harold Laski, *The American Democracy* [New York: Viking Press, 1948], p. 17). And even so brilliant an observer as Joseph Schumpeter, in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, could, with sleight of hand, mix American experiences with European concepts to achieve his gloomy predictions.

soldiering so against moneymaking; the tradition of civil life; etc.

All this Mills sees and knows. But if "honor" and "violence" are not meaningful in our past, why *conceptualize* the problem of the military in terms of *violence* and *honor* as a general category when the problem does not derive from the American scene in those terms? Unless Mills assumes, as many intellectuals did in the thirties, that we shall, yet, follow the European experience.

A similar pitfall can be found in the treatment of prestige. Mills says: "All those who succeed in America—no matter what their circle of origin or their sphere of action—are likely to become involved in the world of the celebrity." (The celebrities are the names that need no further identification.) He says:

With the incorporation of the economy, the ascendancy of the military establishment, and the centralization of the enlarged state, there have arisen the national elite, who, in occupying the command posts, have taken the spotlight of publicity and become subjects of the intensive build-up. *Members of the power elite are celebrated because of the positions they occupy and the decisions they command* [p. 71].

Are the relationships of celebrity, prestige, status, and power as direct as Mills makes them out to be? Glamour, celebrities, etc., are the concomitants, or the necessary components, *not* of an elite, but of a *mass-consumption* society. A society engaged in selling requires such a system of lure and appeal. But why assume that positions of power involve one in this system of glamour?

One reason, perhaps, is that the usages by Mills stem from older, European conceptions of prestige, whereby prestige was identified with *honor* and with *deference*.⁸

⁸ Mills, like E. A. Ross of Wisconsin, drew much of this from the classic study of L. Leopold on prestige. Ross even went to the extent of writing: "The class that has the most prestige will have the most power." How many readers of the *Journal* could quickly identify the presidents and board chairmen of the top ten corporations on the *Fortune* magazine list of the five hundred largest corpo-

Those who held power could claim honor and deference. This was true in Europe. But has it been so in the United States? When Lasswell first attempted in the late thirties to use deference as a key symbol, it already had a false ring. Mills, in effect, substitutes glamour or celebrity for deference, but it is doubtful if, in the mass-consumption society, the notions of celebrity, glamour, and prestige and power have the kind of connotations, or are linked, as Mills suggests.

HISTORY AND IDEAS

If one is concerned with the question about changes in the source and style of power or in the synchronization and centralization of power, one would have to examine the problem historically. Yet, except in one or two instances, Mills ignores the historical dimensions. In one place he speaks of a periodization of American history wherein political power has replaced economic power. But this is too loose to be meaningful. In another, the only concrete discussion of social change in historical terms, he cites an interesting statistic:

In the middle of the nineteenth century—between 1865 and 1881—only 19 per cent of the men at the top of government began their political career at the national level; but from 1905 to 1953 about one-third of the political elite began there, and in the Eisenhower administration some 40 per cent started in politics at the national level—a high for the entire political history of the U.S. [p. 229].

Even in its own terms, it is hard to figure out the exact meaning of the argument, other than the fact that more problems are centered in Washington than at the states and that for this reason more persons are drawn directly to the national capital than before. Surely there is a simple explanation for much of this. During World War II,

the top-ranking members of military staffs (e.g., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the head of the Army, the Naval Chief of Operations, Air Chief of Staff, General of the Strategic Air Command, etc.), or the members of the Cabinet?

with a great need both for national unity and for specialists, more outsiders were co-opted for Cabinet posts and the Executive Branch than before. And, in 1952, since the Republicans had been out of top office for twenty years, they would have fewer persons who had a career in government, and they would bring in a high proportion of outsiders.

But what is interesting in the use of these kinds of data is the methodological bias it reveals. In using such data—and variables like lower or national levels—there is a presumption that, in the different kind of recruitment, one can chart differences in the character of the men at top—which may be—and that therefore the *character of their politics* would be different too. Mills seems to imply this but never develops it other than to say that, today, the *political outsider* has come into the ascendant.

As a counter methodology, it would seem to me that one would start not with recruitment or social origins but with the *character of the politics*. Has something changed, and, if so, what and why? Is the change due to differences in recruitment (differential class and ethnic backgrounds) or some other reason? But, if one asks these questions, one has to begin with an examination of *ideas and issues*, not social origins.

But Mills, at least here, is almost completely uninterested in ideas and issues. The questions in politics that interest him are: In what way have strategic positions changed, and which positions have come to the fore? *Changes in power, then, are for Mills largely a succession of different positions*. As different structural or institutional positions (i.e., military, economic, political) combine, different degrees of power are possible. *The circulation of the elite*—by which Pareto meant the change in the composition of groups with different “residues”—is transformed here into the *succession of institutional position*.

But how does this apply to people? Are people—character, ideas, values—determined by their *positions*? And, if so, in what

way? More than that, to see political history as a shift in the power position of "institutions," rather than, say, concrete interest groups, or classes, is to read politics in an extraordinarily abstract fashion. It is, at first point again, to ignore the changes in ideas and interests. This is one of the reasons why Mills can minimize, in the striking way he does, the entire twenty years' history of the New Deal and Fair Deal. For him these twenty years were notable *only* in that they fostered the centralizing tendencies of the major "institutions" of society, notably the political.

In this neglect, or even dismissal, of ideas and ideologies one finds a striking parallel in Pareto's explanation of social changes in Italy. For Pareto the rise of socialism in Italy was a mere change in the "derivations" (i.e., the masks or ideologies), while the basic combination of residues remained (No. 1704).⁹ In effect the shifts of temper from nationalism to liberalism to socialism reflected shifts in the distribution of Class II residues (i.e., the residues of group persistence). Thus changes in the political class were simply the circulation of sociopsychological types. All ideologies, all philosophical claim, were masks "for mere purposes of partisan convenience in debate. [They are] neither true nor false; [but] simply devoid of meaning" (No. 1708).

Similarly, for Mills, changes in power are changes in combinations of institutional position; and this alone, presumably, is the only meaningful reality.

Except for the unsuccessful Civil War, changes in the power system of the United States have not involved important challenges to basic legitimations. . . . Changes in the American structure of power have generally come about by institutional shifts in the relative positions of the political, the economic and the military orders [p. 269].

Thus the extraordinary changes in American life, the changes in the concepts of property, managerial control, responsibility of government, and the changes in moral temper created by the New Deal become "reduced" to institutional shifts. But have

there been no challenges to basis legitimations in American life? Let us take up the question of the corporation.

THE CONTINUITY OF POWER

If, in his analysis of politics, Mills draws from Pareto, in his image of economic power he becomes a mechanical Marxist. Mills notes:

The recent social history of American capitalism does not reveal any distinct break in the continuity of the higher capitalist class. . . . Over the last half-century in the economy as in the political order, there has been a remarkable *continuity of interests*, vested in the *types* of higher economic men who guard and advance them [p. 147].

Although the language is vague, one can only say that an answer to this proposition rests not on logical or methodological arguments but on empirical grounds. I can only outline the kind of answer necessary.

The singular fact is that in the last seventy-five years the established relations between the systems of property and family, which, Malthus maintained, represented the "fundamental laws" of society, have broken down. The reasons for this breakdown are fairly obvious: the growth of romanticism, the high premium on individual attachment and free choice, the translation of passion into secular and carnal terms—all worked against the system of arranged marriage. The emancipation of women meant, in one sense, the disappearance of one of the stable aspects of "bourgeois" society. But it also meant the breakup of "family capitalism," which has been the social cement of the bourgeois class system.¹⁰

Capitalism is not only, as Marx saw it, an economic system with employer-worker relations and classes formed on strictly economic lines but a social system, wherein

⁹ V. I. Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935). The numbering follows the notation system used by Pareto for his paragraphs. The sections cited here can be found in Vol. III (pp. 1146-56).

¹⁰ For an elaboration of this argument see my note, "The Break-up of Family Capitalism in America," *Partisan Review*, Vol. XXIV (Summer, 1957).

power has been transmitted through the family and where the satisfactions of ownership lay, in part, in the family name (e.g., X & Sons) by which the business enterprise was known.

The social organization of the family rested on property and the “dynastic” marriage. Property, sanctioned by law and reinforced by the coercive power of the state, meant power; the “dynastic” marriage was a means through inheritance laws of transmitting property and preserving the continuity of the family enterprise. Through the fusion of the two institutions, a class system was maintained: people met at the same social level, had similar educations, mingled in specific milieux—in short, created a distinctive style of life.

Beyond the emancipation of women, there are reasons more indigenous to the economic system why the mode of family capitalism has given way. Some are general: the decline of the extended family or clan narrowed the choice of heirs competent to manage the enterprise; the increasing importance of professional techniques placed a high premium on skill rather than blood relationship.

In the United States, however, one can point to even more specific factors. The breakup of family capitalism came, roughly, around the turn of the century, when American industry, having overextended itself, underwent a succession of crises. At this point the bankers, with their control of the money and credit market, stepped in and reorganized and took control of many of the country’s leading enterprises. The great mergers at the turn of the century, typified by the formation of United States Steel, marked the emergence of “finance capitalism” in this country. By their intervention the investment bankers, in effect, tore up the social roots of the capitalist order. By installing professional managers—with no proprietary stakes in the enterprise and therefore unable to pass along their power automatically to their sons and accountable to outside controllers—the bankers effected a radical separation of property and family.

In time, however, the power of the bankers, too, declined. Important was the enforced separation, by the New Deal, of investment and banking functions, which limited the investment bankers’ control of the money market. More recently, the tremendous growth of American corporations enabled them to finance their expansion from their own profits rather than by borrowing on the money market, and so the managerial groups have won a measure of independence.

Mills says: “In general . . . the ideology of the executives . . . is conservatism without any ideology because they feel themselves to be ‘practical’ men” (p. 169).

I find this somewhat puzzling—particularly in the light of a whole slew of books in recent years to establish an ideology for managers as a moral justification of their role. The older property capitalists had a theory of “natural rights” as a philosophical sanction. The newer managers could not claim this foundation. But power requires legitimation, and rules and authority have to be invested with a sense of “justice.” The fact that the new managers have lacked a class position buttressed by tradition has given rise to a need on their part to justify their enormous power. In no other capitalist order, as in the American, therefore, has this drive for an ideology been pressed so compulsively. As we have had in the corporation the classic shift on the economic level from ownership to managerial control, so, on the symbolic level, we have the shift from “private property” to “enterprise,” as the justification of power.

THE COMMUNITY OF POWER

In his summation of economic control, Mills paints an extraordinary picture:

The top corporations are not a set of splendidly isolated giants. They have been knitted together by explicit associations within their respective industries and regions and in supra-associations such as the NAM. These associations organize a unity among the managerial elite and other members of corporate ranks. . . . They translate narrow economic powers

into industry-wide and class-wide power; and they use these powers first on the economic front, for example, with reference to labor and its organizations; and second, on the political front, for example in their large role in the political sphere. And they infuse into the ranks of smaller businessmen the views of big business [p. 122].

This is a breathtaking statement more sweeping than anything in the old TNEC reports or Robert Brady's theory of *Spitzenverbände* (or peak associations) in his *Business as a System of Power*. That there is some co-ordination is obvious; but co-ordination of this magnitude—and smoothness—I would doubt and certainly would like to see any evidence.

Mills speaks of "their large role in the political sphere." But against whom are the members of the power elite united, and what kinds of issues unite them in the political sphere? I can think of only one issue on which the top corporations would be united: tax policy. In almost all others, they divide. They are divided somewhat on labor. There are major clashes in areas of self-interest such as those between railroads, truckers, and the railroads and the airlines; or between coal and oil, and coal and natural-gas interests. Except in a vague, ideological sense, there are relatively few issues on which the managerial elite are united.

The problem of *who unites with whom on what* is an empirical one, and this consideration or clues to it, is missing from Mills's work. If such co-ordination as Mills depicts does exist, a further question is raised as to how it comes about. We know, for example, that, as a consequence of bureaucratization, career lines within corporations become lengthened, and as a consequence there is shorter tenure of office for those who reach the top. Within a ten-year period, American Telephone and Telegraph has had three executive officers, all of whom had spent thirty to forty years *within* the corporation. If men spend so much time *within* their corporate shells, how do members of the "elite" get acquainted?

The use of the term "elite" poses another

question about the utility of its limits on discussing powers. Why use the word "elite" rather than "decision-makers" or even "rulers"? To talk of "decision-making," one would have to discuss policy formulation, pressures, etc. To talk of "rule," one would have to discuss the nature of rule. But, if one talks of an "elite," one needs only discuss institutional position, and one can do so only if, as Mills assumes, *the fundamental nature of the system is unchanged*, so that one's problem is to chart the circulation at the top. The argument that the fundamental nature of the system—i.e., that of basic legitimations, of continuity of the capitalist class—is unchanged is a curious one, for, if power has become so centralized and synchronized, as Mills now assumes, is this not a fundamental change in the system?

Yet, even if one wants to talk in terms of elites, there have been key shifts in power in American society—the breakup of family capitalism (and this is linked to a series of shifts in power in Western society as a whole). Family capitalism meant social and political, as well as economic, dominance; the leading family used to live in the "house on the hill." It does so no longer. Nor is there any longer, if once there was, America's "Sixty Families." Many middle-sized enterprises are still family owned, with the son succeeding father, and many towns, like St. Louis and Cincinnati, still reveal the marks of the old dominance by families. But, by and large, the system of family control is finished. So much so that a classic study of American life like Robert Lynd's *Middletown in Transition*, with its picture of the "X" family dominating the town, has in less than twenty years become history rather than contemporary life. (Interestingly enough, in 1957, the Ball family, Lynd's "X" family, took in professional management of its enterprises, since the family lineage was becoming exhausted.)

Two "silent" revolutions in the relations between power and class position in modern society seem to be in process. One is a change in the *mode of access* to power inso-

far as inheritance alone is no longer all-determining; the other is a change in the *nature of power-holding itself* insofar as technical skill rather than property and political position rather than wealth have become the bases on which power is wielded.

The two “revolutions” proceed simultaneously. The chief consequence, politically, is the breakup of the “ruling class.” A ruling class may be defined as a power-holding group which has both an established *community* of interest and a *continuity* of interest. Being a member of the “upper class” no longer means that one is a member of the *ruling group*. The means of passing on the power which the modern ruling groups possess, or the institutionalization of any specific modes of access to power (the political route or military advancement), is not yet fully demarked and established.

THE TYPES OF DECISIONS

If one wants to discuss power, it seems to me more fruitful to discuss it in terms of types of decisions rather than elites. And, curiously, Mills, I would argue, ultimately agrees, for the real heart of the book is a polemic against those who say that decisions are made democratically in the United States. Mills writes:

More and more of the fundamental issues never came to any point of decision before Congress . . . much less before the electorate [p. 255].

Insofar as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the political order, that clue is the decline of politics as genuine and public debates of alternative decisions. . . . America is now in considerable part more a formal political democracy [p. 224].

Now, to some extent, this is true, but not, it seems to me, with the invidious aspect with which Mills invests the judgment.

In many instances even the “interested public” feels itself “trapped,” so to speak, by its inability to affect events. Much of this arises out of the *security* nature of problems, so that issues are often fought out in a bureaucratic labyrinth. The decision on the H-bomb was one such issue. Here we

had groups of scientists versus a section of the military, particularly the Strategic Air Command. Unless one assumes that everyone ever involved in decision-making is a member of the power elite—which is circular—we *have to locate the source of such divisions, for these are the central problems of a sociology of power.*

But another, equally important, reason for being unable to affect events is the onset of what one can only call, inaptly, “technical decision-making”—the fact that, once a policy decision is made, or once a technological change comes to the fore, or once some long crevice change has become manifest, a number of other consequences, if one is being “functionally rational,” almost inevitably follow.¹¹ Thus shifts of power become “technical” concomitants of such “decisions.” And the problem of a sociology of power further is to identify the kinds of consequences which follow the different kinds of decisions.

The fundamental policy issues which Mills talks about are primarily, as I pointed out before, decisions to be involved in war or not—or, more broadly, that of foreign policy. But how can one discuss this question—and Mills ducks completely the question of foreign policy—without discussing the cold war *and the extent to which our posture is shaped by the Russians!* United States foreign policy since 1946—or, more specifically, since Byrnes’s Stuttgart speech, which reversed our position on weakening Germany—was not a reflex of any *internal* social divisions or class issues in the United States but was *based on an estimate of Russia’s intentions.*

Nor was this estimate made, in the first instance, by “the power elite.” It was an estimate made by American *scholarly experts*, most notably by George Kennan and

¹¹ The elaboration of this argument which was made in the initial presentation would take too much space. The examples cited dealt with the “dual economy” and the forced expansion of capital plant after the Korean invasion: the shifts in economic and military expenditures and power created by new weapons and the role of the federal budget as an economic gyroscope.

the policy planning staff of the State Department. It was a judgment that Stalinism as an ideological phenomenon and Russia as a geopolitical power were aggressively, militarily, and ideologically expansionist and that a policy of containment, including a rapid military buildup, was necessary in order to implement that containment. This underlay Truman's Graeco-Turkish policy, and it underlay the Marshall Plan and the desire to aid the rebuilding of the European economy. These policies were not a reflex of power constellations within the United States. They were estimates of national interest and of national survival.

From the first decision, many others followed: the creation of a long-distance striking arm in the air (SAC), the establishment of a West European Defense Community (EDC), and, following its failure, NATO, etc. This is not to say that every strategic step followed inexorably from the first decision (after France rejected EDC, we had to rely more on Germany for military support) *but that the broad imperatives were clear.*

Once these broad lines were laid down, interest groups were affected, and Congress was used—often disastrously—to pass measures which gave pressure groups larger allocations of aid money (e.g., the Bland Act—pressured both by the unions and by the maritime industry—that 50 per cent of all Marshall Plan aid had to be carried in American bottoms) or to hinder the flexibility of the State Department (e.g., the Battle Act, which forbade trade with the Soviet bloc and, in effect, crippled Ceylon, when it was our ally, by threatening to stop aid of Ceylon-sold rubber to China).

To ignore the problems of this type of "imperative" decision-making is, it seems to me, to ignore the stuff of politics—and the new nature of power in contemporary society.

¹² See my article, "The Theory of the Mass Society," *Commentary*, XXII (July, 1956), 75–83.

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Much of Mills's work is motivated by his enormous anger at the growing bureaucratization of life—this is his theory of history—and its abettors; and this gives the book its enormous power and pathos. Many people do feel helpless and ignorant and react in anger. But the sources of helplessness ought to be made clear, lest one engage, as I think Mills does, in a form of "romantic protest" against modern life. (The Sorelian tones of Power as violence and the Populist imagery of power as closed conspiracy find disturbing echo in Mills's book.)

Complexity and specialization are inevitable in the multiplication of knowledge, the organization of technical production, and the co-ordination of large territorial areas of political society. That these should lead to "bureaucratization" of life is not necessarily inevitable, particularly in a society of growing education, rising incomes, and multiplicity of tastes.¹² More importantly, such ambiguous use of terms like "bureaucratization" and "power elites" often reinforces a sense of helplessness and belies the resources of a free society: the variety of interest conflicts, the growth of public responsibility, the weight of traditional freedoms (*vide* the Supreme Court, an institution that Mills fails to discuss), the role of volunteer and community groups, etc. Like the indiscriminate use by the Communists of the term "bourgeois democracy" in the thirties, or by Burnham of "managerial society" in the forties, or of the term "totalitarianism" in the fifties, *particular and crucial* differences between societies are obscured. This amorphousness leads, as in the case of *The Power Elite*, with its emphasis on "big" decisions, to a book which discusses power but rarely politics. And this is curious, indeed.

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