C. Wright Mills and culture

These are just some rough notes on Mills’ intersection with the art world of his time. Mills knew Jacques Barzun and the art critic Meyer Schapiro, both of whom were involved in Columbia University, as it became a home for the ‘Frankfurt School’ and other émigrés as the emphasis on art shifted from Paris to New York. Barzun’s father was a member of the Abbaye de Créteil group of artists and had known Apollinaire and the Cubist painters including Albert Gleizes and Marcel Duchamp. With the literary critic, Lionel Trilling, Barzun was the founder of the cultural history as an academic speciality. Meyer too fostered an interdisciplinary approach and was part of the New School for Social Research (set up by Veblen), a founder member of Dissent Magazine and instrumental in the careers of Pollock and De Kooning (his students included Robert Motherwell, Hilton Kramer and Allen Kaprow). Schapiro’s (1978) Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society appears in various volumes and is available online. In some respects it is a critical response to ‘formalism’ and a move towards “a unified theory of the processes of social life in which the practical means of life as well as emotional behaviour are comprised” (Schapiro, 1978: 100).
But we can also talk about Mills interest in design and his writing on the unity or work and leisure, or his influence on the New Left; Mills expressed an opinion on modern art in ‘Listen Yankee’:

> We know well that all new cultural beginnings today must be part of world culture; that no truly intellectual life can occur if the mind is restricted; that no art can have genuine and everlasting value if it is not in a universal language. East and West. God knows there is enough restriction. Enough laziness of stereotypes. Smash them, we say to ourselves. And the only way to do that is to open up a true world forum that is absolutely free...It will be the seedbed of the future. It will be the climate in which new minds can form themselves and then solve problems we don’t yet even know about. (Mills, 1960:144-145)

By casting the social scientist in different roles Mills tried to bridge disparate cultural segments of society, this was a Mannheim-influenced sociologist-as-craftsman or as artist or scientists or intellectual. But Mills did not have extensive contact with American avant-garde art scene, although he did write for some of the key journals such as the *Partisan Review*; Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir published excerpts from ‘The Power Elite’ in their radical journal, *Les Temps Modernes*.

Mills met both of them in Paris and had a discussion on President Kennedy. Here Mills predicted JFK would be tested by the Power Elite.

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Sartre asked what the significance of the Kennedy administration was, how did Mills explain it in terms of his ‘Power Elite’? Mills continued:

It represents, I believe, the triumph of the political elite, during the Eisenhower administration there was a coalition of the economic and military groups, they made foreign policy, and internally they catered to the short-run needs of businessmen.

This he explained was just a schematic formulation, but again pointed at future likely trends (emphasis added):

…with the victory of Kennedy and his Liberal intellectuals, the military and the economic were subordinated. The intellectual advisors that surrounded Kennedy developed an elaborate rhetoric, and perhaps a vague long-range policy. There will be various tests for power. The businessmen do not have much confidence in intellectuals and may very well fight on certain issues. You might see this reflected before long on the stock market, and those businessmen and generals who cannot take orders from Liberal academicians, might very well join the crackpot Right, which is where they emotionally belong. But basically Kennedy’s policy will not differ noticeably from the Eisenhower/Dulles policy. The names will change, the rhetoric will be more elaborate but there will be no loosening, if anything defence spending will increase; at the same time the Liberal intellectuals will try to challenge the military. But you see I do not believe the three elites will have a basic falling-out: there will be minor contests over minor issues, but on foreign policy the intellectuals are if anything more fanatic and more doctrinaire and anti-communist than the businessmen and generals. Eventually they will reach an agreement, probably after certain tests of political strength. So you see I do not have much hope that Kennedy will, or can or wants to alter fundamentally the Cold War policy.

Mills’ work was one of the first to offer a serious model of power that accounted for the secretive agencies of national security—particularly with his ‘Letter to the New Left’. Part of this was his discovery of how secret state agencies were influencing the climate of opinion via the Congress for Cultural Freedom (who funded magazines like Partisan Review).
We can view his work as a development of the public intellectual escaping academic insularity influenced by the ‘Dreyfusards’ — a commitment by thinkers and artists to political or civic action. A Partisan Review symposium in 1952 called "Our Country and Our Culture," had Mills, Norman Mailer, David Riesman, Lionel Trilling, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., offering their observations on mass culture with Mailer stating: “Society has been rationalized, and the expert encroaches on the artist. Belief in the efficacy of attacking his society has been lost, but nothing has replaced the need for attack”.

Partisan Review was known for its ‘Trotskyite politics and literary despair’, Mills’ focus addressed intellectuals and mass culture arguing that it:
(a) Deprived the individual of a fantasy life
(b) Was routinised
(c) Emptied creative possibilities

He also added that mass culture created a deference to the status quo in terms of:
(a) Forming opinions
(b) Expressing them
(c) Trying to realise them

Mailer also added: "The writer does not need to be integrated into his society, and often works best in opposition to it," and the literary revival of American arts and letters was "with almost no exception a literature of alienation and protest, disgust and rebellion. The writer had a sense of his enemy and it could nourish him". This is similar to Mills’ injunction that:

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John Filo (1970) Kent State Massacre

Jurgen Habermas’ would go on to use Mills’s key distinction between “publics” and “masses” in support of his analysis of the deterioration of the public sphere in contemporary society in his first major book (1962) The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Mills’ understanding of mass society owed much to Walter Lippmann’s analyses of the 1920s. Mills was also one of the first writers to discuss the emergence of a “post-modern” epoch — his concerns were that the Enlightenment idea of unified progress of reason and freedom and the ideologies of liberalism and socialism had virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves.

Mills’ work also points to how we can use our imagination, our ‘sociological imagination’ — anyone can use a certain ‘quality of mind’. We are able to see beyond the limitations of our own experience and understand the historical and social forces that shape that experience. We can compare the pragmatists and John Dewey’s ideas of ‘Art as Experience’ the viewer finds it impossible to experience things as they really are because they employ stereotypes and don’t see ‘integral wholes’. Mills’ ‘self-reflective habits’ and imaginative linking of unconnected phenomena ask us to consider what he termed ‘intellectual craftsmanship’: keeping a journal and ‘developing self-reflective habits’ we can keep our inner world awake’. This phenomenological approach means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and this “defines your capacity for future experience” (Mills 1959: 196).
In ‘Art as Experience’, Dewey contrasts a ‘live creature’ with a ‘cold spectator’ who is more open to having ‘an’ experience:

…in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one’s own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world: at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. (Dewey, 1958: 19)

Mills set out the work of the classic social analysts in terms of the questions they asked which he described as:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period— what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of ‘human nature’ are
is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of ‘human nature’ are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for ‘human nature’ of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Here, he argued, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society.

Mills was critical of the ‘anti-communist socialists’ and “NATO intellectuals” who perpetuated the cold war. Much of his work represents an attack on the liberal thinkers at Columbia University where he worked: the New York Intellectuals, the herd of independent minds. His critiques have been compared to political cartoons from ‘The Masses’ magazine which from 1911-17 (until it was banned by the government and its editor Max Eastman put on trial) aimed to educate the working people about art, literature, and socialist theory. Thomas Nast or Art Young’s work depicted bloated plutocrats and corrupt politicians largely based on Daumier, Gustav Dore and Goya. Mills was a liberating dissenter in a time of a disquieting government monitored ‘consensus.’

When Mills began his process of recuperation after a heart attack, the Batista mafia in Miami filed a $25 million defamation lawsuit, according to FBI calculations, against Mills and the publishers of *Listen, Yankee*. The FBI admitted that the US government tried to interfere and impede Mills’ defence team from mounting a proper defense. The strain of all this probably killed him.

American intellectuals became convinced that part of the effects of mass culture on the general population were that the exploited class had become indifferent to its fate and apathetic to all political matters — and for the elites politics had become an exercise in “manufacturing consent” as Lippmann described it. ‘Out of Apathy’ was the title of a book that E. P. Thompson put together that Mills responded to in his ‘Letter to the New Left’. With his writing on (intellectual) craftsmanship Mills sought to reclaim an ethical and existential dimension for intellectual activity. For Mills, intellectual craftsmanship and use of the sociological imagination would lead the way to socio-political agency becoming identified with personal creativity: craftsmanship involved the ownership of public intellectual work much like an artist’s inspirational identity through their cultural praxis: to provide social science was, first of all, to practice the politics of truth and the re-assertion of the personal in politics.

Mills returned to Mannheim’s work on the sociology of knowledge and idea of sociology as a form of consciousness that enabled the understanding of social life in its ‘totality’. This returns to Mannheim’s (1917) ‘Soul and Culture’ which in some sense was an overview of Lukács’ Sunday Circle’s concerns that tried to articulate a shared ethical purpose. Such a cultural ‘regeneration’ would prepare the way for the new culture by making the old one comprehensible, not in producing more and more perfect objects: it would bring culture to life.

Mannheim’s elites were defined according to:

Organizing elites — political, bureaucratic, economic

Cultural elites — intellectual, artistic, religious

His diagnosis was the perpetuation of the rule of a minority on the ignorance of the majority. Mannheim’s ideas of utopia, intelligentsia, and elites provide an influence for T. S. Eliot, particularly with his (1948) ‘Notes towards the Definition of Culture’, that acknowledged his debt to Mannheim. He quotes Mannheim as saying:
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A sociological investigation of culture in liberal society must begin with the life of those who create culture, i.e. the intelligentsia and the position within society as a whole.

This breaks down elites into overlapping circles much like Mills’ Power Elite. Eliot questioned Mannheim on the problem of the formation, preservation and development of an elite and the problem of the details of the transmission of culture the elite favour — this too we find in Mills’ work.

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Mills’ FBI file can be found here http://scatter.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/c-wright-mills-fbi-file.pdf

On culture and art, Mills’ The Man in The middle’ was an address to an International Design Conference in 1958.