

The Stratification Trilogy

The New Men of Power (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956) constitute C. Wright Mills's stratification trilogy, or those studies dedicated to analyzing the American class structure and power system. These studies attempt to relate the psychological characteristics of certain groups and their individual members—labor leaders; white-collar workers; and the political directorate, the chief executives of large corporations, and the warlords—to the stratified American milieu of the 1940s and 1950s. These three volumes, which marked Mills as a scholar of the first rank, “stand relatively alone as a comprehensive corpus of social criticism in the decade following the Second World War” (Jamison & Eyerman, 1994, p. 16), and through them Mills is able to express a unique vision of America at mid-century, a time when social science readily accepted the pluralist understanding of class and democracy, and subsequently attempted to blur all social divisions.

Mills (1959b), in strong autobiographical tones, explains his motivations for producing the three-volume series on social stratification:

I wrote a book on labor organizations and labor leaders—a politically motivated task; then a book on the middle classes—a task primarily motivated by the desire to articulate my own experience in New York City since 1945. It was thereupon suggested by friends that I ought to round out a trilogy by writing a book on the upper classes. (p. 200)

Simply put, in each of these books—which are self-consciously written in a new literary style, “sociological poetry,” characterized by “an uneven mixture of empirical social science and radical political analysis” (Geary, 2009,

p. 28)—Mills is chiefly concerned with power and the powerful: the elites, exploiters, and policy makers. Concomitantly, and to a somewhat lesser extent, he is also interested in the issue of powerlessness and in powerless populations. For example, in *The New Men of Power*, Mills analyzes the inability of labor leaders to exert power; while in *White Collar* he describes the essential powerlessness of the middle class; and in *The Power Elite* he examines the powerlessness and political acquiescence of mass society, which includes the bulk of the American people.

The New Men of Power

Based on a dozen or so articles on trade unions and their leadership that Mills wrote between 1945 and 1949, his interest during the 1940s was clearly with organized labor in the United States. The culmination of a research project on the characteristics of American labor leaders on which he had been working since 1941, coupled with the research he conducted as head of Columbia's BASR Labor Research Division, resulted in the publication of *The New Men of Power* (1948), the first volume in Mills's analysis of how the structure of power and stratification is maintained in U.S. society and how the ideology of liberalism legitimizes it. Here Mills focuses on the American labor movement and explains the ascendancy of union leaders and their role as a new elite. *The New Men of Power* is a study of the character of America's labor leadership—the positions they occupy, their career lines, and the traditions and anxieties that motivate them. In this monograph, which was the result of empirical studies conducted on 500 of the most powerful labor leaders in America, Mills maintains that the union leaders, by virtue of their occupation, and the prestige attached to it, had been recently thrust into positions of power.

Mills examines the values and background of the leaders of American labor and concludes that due to their similarity in occupation, class, status, and power, they could be expected to manifest a sameness of personality. However, given that their income was not high, an important distinction emerged between them and other powerful elites. Thus, while they were not members of the money elite—that is to say, labor leaders did not belong to the elite of class or prestige—they were nonetheless members of the elite of power. The labor leaders' power was bound up with the power of the union that they led; this power was based primarily upon the number of workers organized under them. In other words, labor leaders wielded power by virtue of their position in the union as representatives of the rank and file. As a consequence, and most regrettably to Mills, they became political

opportunists wanting to realize small goals in short order. Hence, it was not political programs or ideologies that governed the decisions of the leaders of American labor; it was expediency. Labor leaders could not wait; they wanted the payoff of their policies to become immediately visible to the workers of limited memory and high expectation. Labor leaders, therefore, displayed the type of political mentality that lacked the capacity to develop a long-range substantive, economic, and political program, but that made many short-term demands in an agitated manner. Mills (1948) charges that, unfortunately,

[s]uch piecemeal agitation is now the political substance of American liberalism. Like liberals in general, the labor leaders do not connect specific demands with general images of the kind of society they want, nor do they integrate immediate demands and general principles into programs. (p. 160)

Endeavoring to relate a type of social role to a particular social structure, Mills is interested in labor leaders not as individuals but as a social type formed by the roles they played in a political economy that was changing from *laissez-faire* to monopoly and a state capitalism with many corporate features. Accordingly, Mills attempts to paint a representative portrait of the “average” American labor leader, whom he sees as at once being an army general and a parliamentary debater, a political boss and an entrepreneur, a rebel and a disciplinarian. Mills finds that a negative image of union leaders prevailed in the mass public’s view. The people interviewed by Mills believed that, in general, labor leaders lacked a social conscience and a sense of social responsibility—this, despite the fact that the public was largely unfamiliar with most of the leaders of trade unions. Moreover, several other sources, including the rank and file and the officials in both the unions and the corporations, also held certain images of the labor leader. Thus, according to Mills (1948), “[t]he labor leader acquires new mirrors in which to appraise his image from the angle from which others see him, and perhaps to conceive new images for himself” (pp. 105–106).

Composing a collective portrait of labor leaders led Mills to place them inside or outside one or both of the two big agglomerates of American unionism: the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). (At the time Mills was writing, the AFL and CIO were two separate union blocs; they became one unified organization a decade later.) Both affiliations helped their member unions in strike situations by supplying them with money and organizational talent. Mills, however, contends that the split between the two houses of labor ran deep: It divided different types of labor leaders. According to Mills, the two main

differences between the leaders of the AFL and the CIO, and the two that are the most decisive and that carry heavy implications for other personal and opinion characteristics, were age and education. Simply put, young men (average age of 43) ran the CIO and older men (average age of 57) ran the AFL. In regard to education, the CIO leaders' median grade of formal schooling was 12.5 years; that of the AFL leaders was 9.3 years. Mills clearly prefers the younger, better-educated leaders in the CIO for one major reason: Ideologically, they were further to the left.

The Main Drift

Working from the premise that U.S. economic conditions since the Great Depression had been racked by the cycle of slump and war and boom, Mills's concern is with the **main drift**: those historical and structural forces that were moving American society toward "rationality without reason," or the use of rational means in the service of substantively irrational ends. As Mills sees it, the main drift in the postwar United States was toward the building of a war-oriented economy drawn into the bipolar Cold War conflict. Given the state of monopoly capitalism in the United States, unless there was a buildup to a war with Russia that brought profits to American businesses, the fiscal conditions during peacetime would result in an economic slump. Mills was well aware of the connection between slump and war, and the kind of social structure that prevailed. He knew full well that the two world wars had served to pull the United States out of economic slumps. Thus, Mills believed that those who monopolized the means of production (the business elite) and those who monopolized the means of violence (the military elite) had many interests in common. They, in effect, intended to "solve" the problems of slump with war, or by instigating a militarized form of capitalism.

Mills's thesis in *The New Men of Power* is that only the powerful force of labor unions as agencies of protest could stop this country's drift toward an expanding war economy, an economy that required spending large sums on munitions and other military items. As members of a strategic vanguard and the only potentially liberating mass force, the leaders of American labor—the new men of power—along with the labor intellectuals (i.e., the unions' lawyers, editors of the unions' newspapers, economists, statisticians, and research directors), could form an alliance of power and intellect to combat the social trend—the main drift—that was establishing the United States as a corporate garrison state.

Mills is also interested in the relationship of the labor leaders to the politically alert publics, or those groups that, to one degree or another, have

the power to influence policy concerning labor–management relations. The distinct view each of these groups held of labor and of labor leaders helps Mills classify them as being on the political right, center, or left. While he identifies six such political “publics,” our concern here is only with those four that Mills singles out for special consideration: (1) the liberal center, (2) the Communists, (3) the practical right, and (4) the sophisticated conservatives.

In social makeup, the *liberal center* was mainly middle class. It included salaried professionals, especially teachers and journalists, as well as many trade union officials. Because they identified labor with “the people,” liberals were pro-labor. They saw trade unions as occupational and industrial pressure groups rather than as class organizations. The liberals generally believed that the labor leader was following a safe and sane policy, and they accepted the trade union status quo; that is to say, liberals would not use the unions for radical purposes. Finally, the liberals were the public that most reliably supported the policies pursued by the labor leader.

Not enough was known about the social makeup of the American *Communists* for Mills to describe them in detail. Suffice it to say that the Communists were the most important minor party in the union world and had already formed powerful cliques in several unions. Similar to the other political publics, the Communists also saw the unions as instruments for their aims. A mere 12% of the labor leaders holding general office in the unions were members of the American Communist Party (Mills, 1948, p. 196).

The *practical right* consisted of small businesspeople and constituted a well-organized segment of the Republican Party. The practical conservatives were the largest, most effectively organized, and the most respected of the political publics. They championed venture capitalism, and their goals were to make more money in business and to put down the labor leaders, the Communists, and other radicals who got in their way. The practical right was vehemently antiunion and fought labor because they resented labor’s encroachment on their managerial activities. Mills contends that the apathetic masses, the politically passive people, were most aware of the political struggles between the liberal center and the practical right.

Lastly, the *sophisticated conservatives* were a shadowy group composed of the leaders of big business and finance capital who did not create political clamor, nor did they attempt to arouse the indignation of the mass public behind whose back the main drift was taking place. They left this task to the practical right. Instead, the sophisticated conservatives stealthily worked in and among the power elite, namely certain politicians, the chief executives of large corporations, and the military elite. As such, they tied in strongly with what Mills refers to as “the industry-armed forces-State Department axis.” Believing that the main drift was in their favor, the sophisticated conservatives

steered the nation toward a military economy as a way of avoiding an economic slump. In order to do this, they had to cunningly manipulate, and thus control, the labor unions and their labor leaders. They did so, first, by convincing labor unions that they were a stabilizing force and encouraging them to act as a counterforce against radical movements. Second, sophisticated conservatives took in the labor leaders as junior partners and used them as a front. In other words, they co-opted the labor leaders by having them join their personnel and public relations departments and, at the appropriate time, dismissed and replaced them with someone they perceived as more reliable. The object was to use the labor leaders to de-radicalize the workers, or to keep the Communists and other leftists away from them. The sophisticated conservatives reasoned that if they could handle the labor leaders and use their unions to keep the rank and file acquiescent, they could maintain their own until the war came again. In short, Mills sees the sophisticated conservatives and the practical right as strategic agents of the main drift.

Mills envisions the politics of American society in the middle of the 20th century as an engagement between the sophisticated conservatives and the liberal center, with the former getting the upper hand. This is the reason why Mills (1948) considers labor leaders to be part of a strategic elite. He believes they are the only ones who lead mass organizations that, during an economic slump, could organize the public and spark the beginnings of an egalitarian society built on the principles of immediate freedom and security. This would be a democratic society “in which everyone vitally affected by a social decision, regardless of its sphere, would have a voice in that decision and a hand in its administration” (p. 252). Ideally at least, such a society would be an arena in which politics would become so much a part of the lives of the workers, so connected with their daily work and their social routine, that political alertness would be part of their human consciousness as social beings.

As a way of achieving this society, Mills advocates that labor formulate democratic and egalitarian goals resulting in workers’ control and social ownership of the economy. As such, he proposes a radical program of workers’ control of industry that would halt the main drift toward the militarization of American culture. This program presents three alternatives: (1) shop-floor democracy, (2) economic planning, and (3) the formation of an independent labor party.

Shop-floor democracy requires increased union membership and solidarity so that workers could exert greater control over the social processes of their work. This means that in every workshop, plant, or office, the union workers would be involved in an independence of labor action, a self-regulation, which

is to say that they would take over the tasks performed by owners of industry and their appointed managers and there would be no encroachment on shop organization by the state. The keystone of the democratic aim of unions, therefore, is control from below. The trade union would become the immediate political community of the workers, and within it issues directly affecting their daily lives would be posed for argument and decision.

Economic planning refers to the nationalization of the means of production and distribution in conjunction with the socialization—that is, the democratization—of the concrete organization of work. In Mills’s view, socializing the means of production would further the humanization of the workers themselves. For it is in the workshop, more than in the electoral district, that the “new man” of a free society was to be developed.

The formation of an independent labor party is important to Mills for two reasons. First, the American labor movement had, since the 1930s—as a consequence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s implementation of the New Deal programs designed to promote economic recovery and social reform—had its political power greatly restricted. Second, and related, without adequate political power, the alternative programs of shop-floor democracy and economic planning could not be implemented. According to Mills, the labor union had confined itself primarily to the role of mugwump (political independent) and lobbyist, pressuring the Republican and Democratic parties to guarantee labor’s gains and secure more economic freedom. Thus, a labor party unaligned with either of the two major parties—that is, a party independent from the practical right and the liberal center—was needed to counteract the sophisticated conservatives’ desire for a war-oriented economy. Labor’s party would try to initiate, enlarge, and focus human autonomy beyond the sphere of production and the labor unions. It would be an agent in turning a collection of unions into a labor movement. For Mills, it was through the interlocking of the labor party and the union as a community that the political consciousness of the U.S. worker could be aroused. In sum, it was through these three programs—shop democracy, economic nationalization, and the creation of a labor party—that the trade unions would be taking political and economic action against the main drift.

The Economics of Cooperation and the Politics of Compromise

As Mills saw it, the labor leaders were tied to the structural changes occurring in American society, the sophisticated conservatives aligned themselves with the military, and America headed toward a social structure at

once military and industrial that was integrated through the process of coordination. It will be recalled that in *Character and Social Structure* (Gerth & Mills, 1953), Mills views the coordination of the political, economic, and military orders as a master trend of postwar American society.

Labor leaders were caught between the drift toward a militarized capitalism and the oncoming of a complacent mass society. How the labor leaders would act in the face of these trends was the question Mills hoped to answer. According to him, a conflict arises when union leaders—despite professing a pro-labor ideology—increase their salary, change their lifestyle, gain prestige, and thereby go beyond the realm of their original reference group. These changes particularly affected their political behavior. What is more, labor leaders accepted the “rhetoric of liberalism,” or the language common to political, business, and labor spokespersons that ensured their success. The liberal rhetoric, as applied to business–labor relations, has as its key word “cooperation.” It states that if only labor and management manifested goodwill and showed intelligence in their dealings with one another, there would be no contradiction of interests but only cooperation, a sort of natural harmony between business and labor. This cooperative stabilization of the productive relations of the entire industry within the national economy implied a mutual goal for business and labor: to profit economically. Such success required compromise; that is to say, it necessitated adapting to the stability of commercial contracts and business deals. In short, the labor–management relationship was based on the economics of cooperation and the politics of compromise.

The formulaic chant of business leaders and union leaders was that, unless labor and management cooperate in the actual process of production and in the conduct of the monopoly economy as a whole, the Communists would take over. And while the mass public in the know-nothing atmosphere of the 1940s knew little or nothing about the Communists, they were nonetheless against them in the same way that they were against any radical or “un-American” idea, movement, or institution. The negative images of the Communists held by the mass public were obtained largely from the practical conservatives. Thus, in their cooperative efforts with business leaders, the labor leaders did not want to be stigmatized as Communist by their co-negotiators. Mills was convinced that the “coincidence of forces” between business and labor was the driving force behind the main drift.

Mills views the cartel-like arrangement between business and labor—a collaboration that was legitimized under governmental auspices—as being fueled by the slum–war–boom cycle and as leading the United States into a corporate form of the garrison state. The labor leaders did nothing to halt what Mills considered to be the coming establishment of a corporate state

presiding over a permanent military economy. If anything, they had been taken in and misled by the liberal ideology and its rhetoric. Regrettably, “the liberal ideas which now prevail so widely are capable of leading those who take them seriously into a perilous adventure. Liberalism today often looks like a mantrap whose victims might well be collected in the hunting trips of the sophisticated conservatives” (Mills, 1948, p. 132). In order to counter the main drift, the union leaders would have to organize the white-collar workers into a coalition with the working class. Together they might arrest this trend toward a militarized economy.

Labor unions in the United States emphasized what Mills terms “business unionism.” According to him, there was a basic affinity between business unionism and other types of established monopoly industry. Both had as their chief goal to do as well in a business way as they could. American labor unions were in the “business” of selling labor. As Mills (1948) sees it,

the business unionist pursues his particular narrow interests with no thought for the interests of society or even for his own industry, much less for workers as a class. He has always been ready and willing to co-operate with some businessmen against other businessmen, other workers, and the community. (p. 117)

In Mills’s view, the trade unions and their leaders were not politically radical at all. Rather, the labor leaders, as individuals and as a group, desired only to stabilize their power and position. Much to Mills’s dismay, labor leaders were too conservative politically and too inhibited intellectually to seek the egalitarian, democratic society. Instead, labor leaders, bent on getting a larger cut of the economic pie, were quickly becoming absorbed into the national power system and had thus relinquished any aspirations for structural change in American society. The unions had been partly integrated into the new corporate-government complex as a junior partner due to certain structural shifts that had occurred in the economy.

Mills further believed that “bossism” and corruption within the unions had increased their tendency to engage in policies that were opportunistic. He voices concern about the growing authoritarianism and corruption in the ranks of organized labor since bossism and graft had made considerable inroads into trade union politics. Moreover, labor racketeering—in the form of embezzlement, bribery, and collusion with businesspeople—was used by labor leaders to improve their business position. These labor leaders, whom Mills (1948) calls “business unionists,” were trying to make a bigger business out of the unions in the same way that the robber barons had made bigger businesses in 19th-century America. “The racketeering

business unionist . . . will reward his personal friends in a personal pecuniary way, and he will punish his individual enemies in an individual way, by withholding from them the monetary fruits of business–labor co-operation” (p. 131).

To the business–labor partnership was added the influence of politics, thus forming a tripartite relationship of mutual benefit to all three sectors. At the local level, the machine politician provided legal protection in return for money from the union treasury and jobs for the political machine members provided by the labor leader. In addition, the businessman provided more money for the labor leader and for the machine politician. For Mills, the local business–labor–political cartel was the backbone of labor racketeering. In short, labor’s political development as an independent force had been inhibited by both external changes that integrated it into the corporate–government complex and by internal changes that weakened its capacity for independent action. Mills holds that labor had been co-opted into a collaborationist policy with business and government, and this served to pave the way for the development of a corporate type of political economy.

Similarly, and on a scale beyond the municipality, Mills’s argues that the nationwide cooperation between labor unions and business enterprises had come under governmental control. Thus, contrary to the liberal theory of the state, the government was not a neutral umpire using its impartial wisdom to effect a fair balance; instead, the federal government had become the regulator of the national labor force. Mills assumes that the federal government would outlaw strikes and compel arbitration of various kinds. Under such conditions, strikes would become more political than ever. Free collective bargaining would become less a contest between the economic powers of business and labor and more a contest between political pressures and influences.

Ultimately, the political program of the sophisticated conservatives, which treated everything as an object of profit, had global ramifications. Mills posits that the sophisticated conservatives were planning a program that amounted to the New Deal on a worldwide scale operated by big business. This “new” New Deal would be a war economy rather than a welfare economy, although the sophisticated conservative’s liberal rhetoric might put the first in the guise of the second. Simply stated, the New Deal global plan for saving capitalism meant that instead of raising wages at home to give workers purchasing power, the plan was to subsidize capitalistic countries such as Japan, Germany, and Great Britain with politically guided loans paid for by the American people so that during a time of economic slump, U.S. business could control all investments. The end result would be that when confronted with the governmental encroachment upon labor–business

relations, whether at the local, national, or global levels, the economic power of the unions would be drastically reduced.

Mills's Disillusionment With Labor

Mills had little confidence that the leaders of American labor would brook any opposition to the main drift. Indeed, he did not believe that they were politically alert to it. They had power but were not entirely certain what to do with it. Mills also accuses labor of lacking long-range comprehensive plans for social reconstruction. Thus, instead of being levelers for historical change, the labor leaders and their unions had become a conservative force as they take on the “the strategy of maximum adaptation,” which is to say, they reacted more than they led. The labor union movement had become bureaucratized—politically and economically incorporated into the system—and there was little that ideologically distinguished the union leaders from those leaders in the political, corporate, and military spheres. What labor wanted was not an egalitarian society but an emulatory one in which it could adopt the consumption patterns of the money elite. This meant that the union leaders' chief function was to obtain higher wages and more benefits for its rank-and-file workers so that they could emulate the consumption patterns and lifestyles of the upper class. Mills attributes the labor leaders' craving for status and respect to a strong undercurrent in their personal lives. He believes that this craving stemmed from the fact that, compared with business leaders, most labor leaders had been “self-made men,” were less well educated, and their incomes did not approach that of the business executive. They therefore felt socially inferior to the businessmen and less secure in their jobs. Furthermore, the labor leaders believed that, relative to the unions, business was more influential in national affairs because of the money it possessed. Thus, owing to their anxious character as well as to the tradition of the organizations they led, labor leaders initiated the standard middle-class businesslike mode of living. They thought that they could gain status only if they could securely hold power and class superiority.

The bottom line for Mills is that business unionism was not concerned with the underdogs—those who get the least of what there is to get—and he faults labor for not paying more attention to the problems of those who were poorly paid or unemployed and who were not members of unions nor eligible for their benefits. In short, labor had no utopian vision of the union community. The major tendency of the union leader, as an organization man, had been to move from the ideological program of political ideas that gave long-run answers to major political questions, to the expediency of

practical politics based on short-run decisions. Similarly, the labor intellectual moved from ideas to career. Thus, as a consequence of their long-term pursuit of the short term, labor leaders and labor intellectuals had become active participants in the main drift.

As he examined more closely the inner workings of labor, Mills by the late 1940s began to lose faith in its ability to participate in a political movement and historically transform American society. He saw organized labor, in its opposition to the practical right, as being insidiously drawn into a political alliance with the sophisticated conservatives. In Mills's view, the liberal New Deal reforms were partly to blame, since they offered labor a place among the coalition of pressure groups and consequently destroyed its independent political action and radical activity. Indeed, Mills holds that of all the spokespeople, Franklin D. Roosevelt (at that time the major party politician of the 20th century) was the most expert with the liberal rhetoric. For Mills, the relation of the New Deal to labor was opportunistic. As such, it had left no durable instrument for liberal, much less radical, activity. The New Deal's effects had been to strengthen further the bossism of union leaders and to destroy labor's chances of engaging in independent political action.

By the mid-1950s, Mills's disillusionment with labor as an agent for radical change had reached fruition. He no longer saw the labor leaders as players in the higher circles of power. "[T]he current crop of labor leaders," he wrote in 1956, "is pretty well set up as a dependent variable in the main drift with no role in the power elite. Neither labor leaders nor labor unions are at the present juncture likely to be 'independent variables,' in the national context" (p. 265). Mills ends *The New Men of Power* (1948) on a pessimistic note as he acidly remarks, "Never has so much depended upon men who are so ill-prepared and so little inclined to assume the responsibility" (p. 291).

White Collar

His disenchantment with the leaders of labor unions notwithstanding, Mills remained steadfast in his search for agents of left-wing social and historical change. In the last chapter of *The New Men of Power* (1948), he begins to shift his attention from the labor movement of the working class to the white-collar professionals of the new urban middle class: "the crucial middle groups who hang in the balance and whose interests are one with the workers', but who are psychologically hard to win" (p. 277). Mills reasons that the labor intellectuals' failure to raise the workers' level of political awareness in order to fight the main drift had left middle-class leftward

intellectuals—that is, college professors, journalists, and research technicians—as the last hope for American society to achieve a genuine democracy. Mills, therefore, continues his inquiry into the alliance of power and intellect, his exploration of the intellectuals' role in the stratification system that led him to investigate middle-class life in the great metropolis.

In Mills's view, the intellectual center of American culture at mid-century was New York City. It was there, he believed, that the important intellectual debates of the time, the main currents of political and cultural life, were being discussed. Mills had been an active participant in the intellectual circles of New York even before he arrived at Columbia University (indeed, since shortly after moving to Maryland in 1941). To be sure, his second major work, *White Collar*, was motivated by his desire to articulate his own experience in New York City. This book, which soon after its initial appearance in September 1951 became a huge commercial success, selling about 1,000 copies a month, exhibits a distinctive autobiographical tinge. The work clearly reveals Mills's attempt to forge a fusion, advocated through intellectual craftsmanship, between his personal and professional life. If read between the lines, *White Collar* is partly an account of how Mills's life experiences fed his sociological work; more generally, it is "the story of a Texas boy who came to New York" (Wakefield, 1971, p. 68). In the book, Mills quite obviously displays his great disdain for the all-pervasive distrust and self-alienation so characteristic of New Yorkers and other metropolitan people.

Quite beyond that, *White Collar* is a social psychological study of the new middle classes and their white-collar world: their place within the social structural context of mid-20th-century America. As such, the book covers many of the same themes previously examined by Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and that were later developed further by Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956). In this, the second volume of his stratification trilogy, Mills strives to uncover how the economy's rationalization and bureaucratization affects the psychological character, the social biographies, and the social roles of the white-collar workers of the new middle class. Five years before it was published and with the manuscript still very much in progress, Mills described the book on white-collar workers as being a "book for the people":

It is all about the new little man in the big world of the 20th century. It is about that little man and how he lives and what he suffers and what his chances are going to be; and it is also about the world he lives in, has to live [in], doesn't want to live in. It is, as I said, going to be everybody's book. For, in truth, who is not a little man? (as quoted in K. Mills & Mills, 2000, p. 101)

An Occupational Shift

Mills begins with the historical premise that the most decisive social transformation in the 20th century had been an occupational shift that began to take place in the class structure of the United States during the 19th century. Before the Civil War, business was composed of moneylenders and bankers, controlled by powerful vested interests in eastern urban centers. These early self-employed enterprisers also included merchants, speculators, shippers, and “cottage” manufacturers. Further down the occupational ladder was the worker who was apt to be a mechanic or journeyman and who looked forward to owning his own shop; or a farmer to whom manufacturing was a sideline, carried on sometimes as a cottage industry. Later, the industrialization of America, especially after the Civil War, gave rise to the captain of industry: the businessman who was an active owner of the business he had created and then managed. This was the era of classic liberalism, of *laissez-faire*, and of expanding capitalism. At this point in time, economic life was largely decentralized.

However, as American society became increasingly bureaucratized during the 20th century, and as corporate power became more centralized, the “old” middle classes of the small entrepreneurs that owned the property that they worked (i.e., free enterprisers such as small farmers, shopkeepers, independent professionals, and so forth) began to diminish in numbers and importance. As small business became smaller and big business became bigger, that is to say, as the United States was transformed from a nation of small proprietors to a nation of hired employees, the captains of industry (such as Andrew Carnegie, William H. Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, and the like) and other owner-operators gave way to different types of businessmen—what Mills refers to, in the manner of the ideal type, as the Manager, the Absentee Owner, the Corporation Executive, and the New Entrepreneur.

In addition, changes in the distribution and type of property affected the way the old middle classes lived, thus making the self-sustaining property owner increasingly rare. Liberalism’s ideal for the domain of small “democratic” property that the owner worked was quickly being replaced by the “class” property that others were hired to work and manage. In the countryside, the old middle class that had consisted of small farmers became part of what Mills refers to as the “rural debacle,” the polarization of the rural middle class into two factions: subsistence cultivators, wageworkers, and sharecroppers on the one hand, and big commercial farmers and rural corporations on the other. At the time that Mills was writing *White Collar*, the family-sized farm was quickly becoming a thing of the past.

In brief, the numerical decline of the old middle classes, both urban and rural—and their vanishing liberal heroes, the small businessmen and the

small farmers—marked the decline of property and the emergence of occupation as the primary basis of stratification. Occupation rather than property was becoming the source of income for those who received any direct income. The possibilities of selling their services in the labor market, rather than of profitably buying and selling their property and its yields, began to determine the life-chances of most of the American middle class.

These structural and occupational changes—namely, bureaucratization and centralization as well as the consolidation of property holding—not only ended the union of property and work as a basis of people’s essential freedom, it also signaled the incipient demise of the independent entrepreneur of the old middle classes. By the mid-20th century, bureaucratization and centralization had brought agribusiness to the countryside, and in the cities these structural changes made for the subsequent rise of a world of big organizations inhabited by the **new middle class**, or those propertyless white-collar workers involved primarily in sales and management and whose work situation was increasingly bureaucratized by the “command hierarchies” of business and government.

Mills notes that major shifts in occupations since the Civil War had assumed one industrial trend: As a proportion of the labor force, fewer individuals manipulated things, and more manipulated people and symbols. This shift in needed skills was another way of describing the rise of the white-collar workers, for their characteristic skills involved the handling of paper, money, and people. They were expert at dealing with people transiently and impersonally; they were masters of commercial, professional, and technical relationships. In short, the white-collar workers of the new middle class—which constituted about one-fourth of the labor force at the time Mills was writing—did not live by making things; rather, they lived off the social machineries that organized and coordinated the people who did make things. As propertyless, dependent employees, they planned, administered, recorded, distributed, and managed for others.

As a class of workers, the new middle class included corporate managers, clerical workers, and bureaucratic professionals such as salespeople and public relations specialists who were needed to manage, design, sell, and keep account of production. For them, as for wage workers, the United States had become a nation of employees for whom independent property ownership was no longer a viable option. Labor markets, not control of property, “determined their chances to receive income, exercise power, enjoy prestige, [and] learn and use skills” (Mills, 1951, p. 63). By the middle of the 20th century, the new middle class was becoming the dominant reality in American life, and the image of the big businessman as master builder and profit maker, as was previously the case with the captain of industry, no longer held. This generational shift in occupations, from free entrepreneur

to dependent employee, is illustrated in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Wilson, 1955), when the antihero, Tom Rath, informs his grandmother that he has applied for a job as a public relations expert with the United Broadcasting Company:

“I’m thinking of going into business.”

“Your grandfather was very successful in business,” she said. “At one time he owned a fleet of twenty-eight vessels. Are you going into shipping?”

“No,” Tom said. “This will be different, Grandmother.” (pp. 20–21)

The rationalization, and more specifically, the bureaucratization, of Western civilization that Max Weber had foreseen, had centralized property ownership, producing a shift from independent property holding to dependent job holding. In other words, in the course of three or four generations, the United States had been transformed from a nation of free and independent small capitalists to a nation of employees hired to work in large corporations. The U.S. economy had become a bureaucratic cage in which bureaucratic types of organization men (and women) emerged.

Cheerful Robots

As previously discussed, Mills, in *Character and Social Structure* (Gerth & Mills, 1953), had explored what he regarded as one of the master trends of modern times: the psychological aspects of bureaucracy, by which he meant that white-collar workers working in large firms experienced feelings of frustration, despair, anxiety, and insecurity. Thus, much like Marx had found the proletariat, the industrial wageworkers of the mid-19th century, so Mills finds the new middle class, the white-collar professionals (e.g., salaried specialists of the clinic, junior partners in the law factory, captive engineers of the corporation) of the mid-20th century, to be powerless and alienated. They had become this way because, unlike the free entrepreneurs of the old middle classes of the 19th century, the white-collar workers of the new middle classes could not realize themselves in their work, for work had become a set of skills sold to another, rather than something mixed with their own property. For example, Mills contends that as the organization of the market becomes more formally rational, salespeople lose autonomy. They sell the goods of others and have nothing to do with the pricing. They are alienated from price fixing and product selection. Further, the last autonomous feature of selling—the art of persuasion and the accompanying sales personality—becomes expropriated from the individual salesperson.

Moreover, as the locus of power shifted from the propertied class to the hierarchies of large-scale institutions, explains Mills, the form of power concomitantly shifted from explicit authority to impersonal manipulation through management. Management took the form of subtle manipulation through an impersonalized and anonymous system of control. In this case, exploitation became less material and more psychological:

Management is something one reports to in some office, maybe in all offices including that of the union; it is a printed instruction and a sign on a bulletin board; it is the voice coming through the loudspeakers; it is the name in the newspaper; it is the signature you can never make out, except it is printed underneath; it is a system that issues orders superior to anybody you know close-up; it blueprints, specifying in detail, your work-life and the boss-life of your foreman. Management is the centralized say-so. (Mills, 1951, p. 80)

These transformations of power stripped the white-collar workers of any control over their work. They lacked a sense of craftsmanship, of creating their own product. Just as the worker of 19th-century society did not own the machine but was controlled by it, so the middle-class person of the middle 20th century no longer owned the enterprise but was controlled by it. Indeed, the enterprise had come to seem autonomous, with a motive of its own: to manipulate everyone and everything in order to make a profit. The white-collar managers, clerks, and bookkeepers were cogs in a business machinery that had routinized greed and made aggression an impersonal principle of organization. They had become bureaucrats, professionalized occupants of specified offices and specialized tasks. Mills asserts that the white-collar salaried professionals were forced to accept the meaninglessness of their working life. In Marx's terms, they became alienated from power, work, and self.

Further, the more the middle classes experienced their life as one of powerlessness, the more apathetic and indifferent they became to politics of any kind. They were neither radical, nor liberal, nor conservative, nor reactionary. They were *inactionary*, that is to say, strangers to politics, and history was being made behind their backs. This state of affairs—which Mills believed was at the heart of the political malaise of the time—threatened the democratic and liberal spirit of the American past, which assumed that once given political rights, the individual citizen would naturally become politically alert and would act on his or her political interests. Only by breaking through the political indifference of the white-collar *salaried* (the class of workers receiving salaries) could their power be mobilized to promote the development of a peaceful industrial society. Unfortunately, this was not

going to happen. Mills (1956) explains that “[t]he white collar middle classes do not form an independent base of power: economically, they are in the same situation as propertyless wage workers; politically they are in a worse condition, for they are not as organized” (p. 262).

Lacking what Marx called class consciousness—feeling that they belong together or that they can best realize their rational interests by combining—the middle classes have no awareness of their political means and ends. And because they possess no class consciousness they will not, indeed cannot, pose a significant challenge to the power structure of the economic elites. In short, says Mills, middle-class white-collar workers have become **cheerful robots**, a mass of confused and unfocused automatons adrift in a bureaucratic world not of their own making. Mills’s implication is that middle-class America was drifting toward a bureaucratic age of organized irresponsibility.

The Managerial Demiurge

Mills sees the white-collar people as occupying the most ambiguous social positions in the stratification hierarchy of the United States. The images that members of the upper and lower strata had of the different occupational income levels was of big business at the top with labor at the bottom, and everyone else was thrown together into a vague “middle class.” Indeed, there is no clearly identifiable middle class. These classes are diversified in social form, contradictory on material interest, dissimilar in ideological illusion, and there is no homogenous political base among them. White-collar people could not be adequately defined along any one possible dimension of stratification—skill, function, class, status, or power. Because they were generally in the middle ranges on each of these dimensions and on every descriptive attribute, their position was more definable in regard to their relative differences from other strata than in any absolute terms. Mills subdivides the new middle class into four occupational subcategories: office workers, salaried professionals, salespeople, and managers. According to him, these formed the ambiguous mass of white-collar employees.

Mills notes that as the means of administration were enlarged and centralized, there were more managers in every sphere of modern society, and the managerial type of person became more important in the total social structure. What Mills refers to as the **managerial demiurge** consists of those executives, “the new entrepreneurs,” whose power is given and circumscribed by the hierarchical corporation for which they work. The new entrepreneurs are very much at home in the less tangible of the business services—commercial research and public relations, advertising agencies, labor relations, and the mass communication and entertainment industries. The new entrepreneurs are agents of the bureaucracy they serve, and they

compete for the goodwill and favor of those who run the system. They do not usually stay within one corporate bureaucracy; their paths are within and between bureaucracies, in a kind of uneasy but calculated rhythm. They make a well-worn path between big business and the regulatory agencies of the federal government, especially its military establishment and political parties. The new entrepreneurs are “fixers” who use their own initiative and wile to create something where nothing was before. The power of the new entrepreneurs rests upon their personality and upon their skill in using it to manipulate the anxieties of the corporation chieftain. The new entrepreneurs’ success or failure is decided by the personal anxieties and decisions of intimately known corporate chief executives.

The managerial demiurge involved not only business but also the professions, and in *White Collar* Mills maintains that in practically every profession—including the ministry, medicine, law, and the professoriate—the managerial demiurge worked to build ingenious bureaucracies of intellectual skills. Examining how the managerial demiurge operated in the academy, Mills contends that persons of brilliance, energy, and imagination were not often attracted to college teaching. He charges that the specialization required for successful operation as an academician is often deadening to the mind that would grasp for higher culture in the modern world. To make their mark, professors must specialize. Thus, a college faculty of several members is split into several departments, each autonomous, each guarded by the established or the almost-established professors who fear encroachment or consolidation of their specialty. According to Mills, academe has also produced its own new entrepreneurs. The new academic entrepreneurs further their careers in the university by securing prestige and small-scale powers outside of it. Above all, they are able to set up on the campus a respectably financed institute that brings the academic community into contact with people with a declared interest in political and social affairs, thus becoming the envy of their more cloistered colleagues and are looked to by them for leadership in university affairs.

In the chapter of *White Collar* entitled “Brains, Inc.,” Mills examines that most far-flung and heterogeneous of all middle-class groups, the intellectuals. As people who specialize in symbols, the intellectuals produce, distribute, and preserve distinct forms of consciousness. They are the immediate carriers of art and of ideas. Intellectuals qua intellectuals live *for* and not *off* ideas. Mills, however, observes that after World War II, American intellectuals came to be affected with the malaise of a spiritual void. Indeed, the prosperity after the war, in which intellectuals shared, had become for them a time of moral slump. Attempts to reinstate the old pragmatic emphasis on the power of people’s intelligence to control their own destiny had, by the 1950s, not been taken up by American intellectuals, racked as they were by

new worries and anxieties. According to Mills, in order to understand what had been happening to American intellectual life, we have to realize the effects on intellectuals of three deep-lying, long-term trends of modern social and ideological organization. These three trends are part of the managerial demiurge.

First is the general trend that limits independence of intellect as it transforms the free-floating intellectual into a bureaucrat, a commodity of the large company. As the new bureaucracies—of state and business, of party and voluntary association—developed, they needed intellectuals to run their technical, editorial, and communication machinery. Thus, the new bureaucracies became the major employers of intellectuals and the main customers for their work. Involved in opinion molding, the communications intellectuals (idea persons, technicians, administrators) at the top of the bureaucracy blended with the managerial demiurge in more concrete businesses. This meant that the styles of work and life of intellectuals and managers, as well as their dominating interests, coincided at many points. More significantly, it meant that intellectuals, as hired employees in the information industry—namely in publishing and entertainment—were no longer free to speak their minds in dissent. As Mills puts it, the freedom of the freelance intellectuals is minimized when they go to market, and if they do go, their freedom is without public value.

Mills also sees the trends limiting independence of intellect at work in the large universities. The real restraints on the professors' academic freedom, says Mills (1951), do not involve obvious external prohibitions such as firing; instead, they are more insidious and involve "manipulative control of the insurgent by the agreements of academic gentlemen" (p. 151). As a consequence, there developed a vague general fear that led to self-intimidation and that finally turned into a kind of voluntary censorship that academic intellectuals unconsciously imposed on their own teaching and research.

Second, the recent bureaucracies had an ideological demand for the creation and diffusion of new symbolic fortifications for the new and largely private powers these bureaucracies represented. Acting as the mouthpiece for the corporation, the intellectual's job was to compose myths—that is, acceptable ideas, attractive modes of statement of interests, passions, and hatreds—that would be disseminated among the mass publics and that would serve the vested interests of the bureaucracy and those who work in it. Further, Mills posits that since the middle classes were filled with anxieties and the need for new opinions of the new world of bureaucracies making irresponsible decisions, or for diversion from it, it was the intellectuals' task to divert the middle classes and keep them oriented to an appropriate manner despite their deep fears and anxieties.

The third social development (and one that Whyte, in *The Organization Man* [1956], was to explore in greater detail some 5 years later) that Mills believed placed constraints on the intellectual's freedom has to do with the victory of the technician over the intellectual. As Mills sees it, intellectuals have become administrators, idea persons, and goodwill technicians working in big companies and joining the expanding world of those who live off, rather than for, ideas. The intellectual, remarks Mills, is becoming a technician, an idea person, rather than one who resists the environment, preserves the individual type, and defends himself or herself from death-by-adaptation. Mills (1951) says the following about the intellectual-turned-technician:

In class, status, and self-image, he has become more solidly middle class, a man at a desk, married, with children, living in a respectable suburb, his career pivoting on the selling of ideas, his life a tight little routine, substituting middle-brow and mass culture for direct experience of his life and his world, and, above all, becoming a man with a job in a society where money is supreme. (p. 156)

These three trends of the managerial demiurge—the bureaucratic context, the ideological demand, and the rise of the technician—which lead to the constraint and rationalization of intellect, also defeat and make powerless the intellectuals. “The defeat of the free intellectuals and the rationalization of the free intellect have been at the hands of an enemy who cannot be clearly defined” (Mills, 1951, p. 160).

Character and Personality

Mills is at his sociological best when he analyzes and dissects the white-collar workers' style of life. In so doing, he identifies several character types found within the white-collar strata of the new urban culture who are involved with selling (making up “The Great Salesroom”) and with the handling of people (understood in terms of the “personality market”). As the shift in the direction of business from production to sales continued to take place, and as the gap between mass production and individual consumption widened, the art of selling had become a lifestyle that turned the country into a great salesroom where its corporate executives were driven by an intense obsession with selling all sorts of commodities.

Mills states that the “new society” of the postwar era had not only transformed itself into a fabulous salesroom, but it had also become the biggest bazaar in the world. He asserts that in this new society of employees, selling was a pervasive activity where everyone had become a salesperson. In the business world, the sales hierarchy consisted of several levels. At the top are the “Prima Donna Vice-Presidents” of corporations who boast that they are

merely salesmen. Next in the hierarchy are the "Distribution Executives" who design, organize, and direct the selling techniques of sales forces. Close to them are the "absentee salesmen" who create the slogans and images that spur sales from a distance by mass media. At the bottom of the sales hierarchy are the five-and-dime-store "salesgirls" who work part-time for several months before leaving their jobs for marriage.

Mills introduces the reader to a lively panorama of salesgirl social types who work in the large department stores of big cities. These types of salesgirls (actually, they were women, between 18 and 30 years of age) are "The Wolf," "The Charmer," "The Ingénue Salesgirl," "The Collegiate," "The Drifter," "The Social Pretender," and "The Old-Timer." While these typologies describe different sales personalities, most of the social types have one thing in common: They attempt to identify and borrow prestige from customers. This attempt usually fails for three reasons. First, most customers are strangers, so the contact with them is brief. Second, class differences are frequently accentuated by the sharp and depressing contrast between home and store, customer, or commodity. Third, being "at their service" and "waiting on them" is not conducive to easy and gratifying identification with the customers. The result is that the salesgirl ends up seeing the customer as her psychological enemy, rather than the store as her economic enemy. At bottom, the salesgirls experience a feeling of powerless depression and an intense hatred of their customers.

Mills next pays closer attention to the psychological aspects of white-collar work. He states that in the new society of hired employees, people first of all sell their services on the labor market. The employers of many white-collar jobs, especially sales work, not only buy the employees' services but also their social personalities, and thus they produce that most decisive effect and symptom of the great salesroom, *the personality market*.

Customers, therefore, come to know the salesclerk not as a person but as a commercial mask, a stereotyped greeting and appreciation for patronage. Kindness and friendliness become aspects of personalized service or of public relations of big firms, rationalized in order to make a sale. With anonymous insincerity, the successful salespersons make an instrument of their own appearance and personality. Loyalty to the anonymous organization requires that salespeople be friendly, helpful, and courteous at all times. The smile behind the sales counter is a commercialized lure. In *White Collar*, Mills shows great contempt for the world of the cheerful robot's painted-on smiles where everyone pretends interest in others in order to manipulate them. From *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Wilson, 1955), we learn something about this world's rationalized, artificial politeness:

“Mr. Hopkins is busy,” the gray-haired woman said to Walker, and smiled. Everybody in this building smiles, Tom thought—even Ogden managed a thin little twinge of the lips whenever he spoke. It must be a company rule. (p. 40)

The imposition of a sales personality upon the employees, Mills argues, not only stifles their creativity, it also contributes to their estrangement. For example, contrary to the classic heroes of liberalism, that is, the small businessmen and small farmers, the salesgirls of the new society cannot form their character by promotional calculations and self-management. Consequently, in the normal course of her work, because her personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose, the salesgirl becomes self-alienated.

Alienation and Status Panic

Mills (1951) further describes the white-collar workers’ alienated world as **the enormous file**, an impersonal administrative hierarchy consisting of an army of clerks and a cadre of managers, divided according to specialized and standardized tasks performed in various divisions and units. The enormous file, with its extreme form of human mechanization and social rationalization, is most graphically illustrated by multiple offices with rows of identical desks within the skyscraper where “the paper webwork is spun; a thousand rules you never made and don’t know about are applied to you by a thousand people you have not met and never will” (p. 189).

As a result of the alienating conditions of modern work—the bureaucratic routinization of productivity, management’s subtle manipulative grip over the employee, the managerial demiurge, the rise of personality markets, and the growth of the enormous file—for the mass of employees, work had a generally unpleasant quality. And because there existed a separation between the product and the processes of work, white-collar professionals had never acquired a sense of craftsmanship—of meaning and gratification—from their jobs. Indeed, one of the most crucial psychological implications of the structural decline of the old middle classes was that the Protestant ethic, the work compulsion, of the old middle-class entrepreneurs had not deeply gripped the new middle classes. For them, work had no intrinsic meaning and provided no gratification. According to Mills, the white-collar personnel of the enormous file, that uniform mass working in a soundless office or salesroom where the day itself is regulated by an impersonal time schedule, sought instead to derive meaning and gratification from their leisure time.

In the society of employees, the Protestant work ethic had come to be replaced by a leisure ethic. Thus, the white-collar people relentlessly pursue

pleasure outside work only to be bored at work and restless at play. Mills (1951) baldly describes the modern workers' dilemma: "Each day men sell little pieces of themselves in order to try to buy them back each night and week end with the coin of 'fun'" (p. 237). The cycle of work and leisure gives rise to two quite different images of self: the everyday image, based upon work, and the holiday image, based upon leisure. The leisure of the white-collar middle classes diverts them from the restless grind of their work with the absorbing grind of passive enjoyment of glamour and thrills. To the modern worker, leisure is the way to spend money; work is the way to make it. When the two compete, says Mills, leisure wins hands down.

Succinctly put, Mills's main thesis in *White Collar* is that by the middle of the 20th century, occupation, which involves the selling of services on the labor market, had come to replace property as the source of income for the white-collar worker. However, because the income of the salaried white-collar workers was not significantly higher than the wages of the lower-class blue-collar workers, in order to distinguish their social position, the former became dependent on *status*, or prestige. Mills contends that the white-collar workers, as they find themselves in their propertyless class situation and as their situation relative to that of the working class became more indistinct, were suddenly struck by a panic for status. He argues that by the 1950s, status had become even more insecure than before, and psychologically the white-collar employee was transformed into "the little individual scrambling to get to the top" (p. 309).

According to Mills, the enjoyment of prestige was often "disturbed and uneasy" because its basis, expression, and gratification were subject to strain that often took the form of a virtual "status panic." As a consequence of the status panic, the white-collar strata frantically sought to *borrow* prestige. It did so in three ways: (1) by associating with those of higher status: entrepreneurs, supervisors, and other higher-ups in the managerial cadre; (2) from the firms and the companies for which they worked (in the case of the salesclerk, the prestige source included the merchandise itself as well as the store); and most significantly, (3) by attaining a relatively high level of education. Thus, for the white-collar salariat, formal, and sometimes expensive education in high school and "business college" became the primary vehicle for upward social mobility. "For the new middle class," Mills (1951) writes, "education has replaced property as the insurance of social position" (p. 245). Whereas the object of schooling during the 19th century was to turn out "the good citizen" that could participate in a "democratic republic," in the new society of the mid-20th century, the goal of education was to produce "the successful man" in a "society of specialists with secure jobs" (p. 266).

The New Little Man

This bleak and pitiful portrait of the postwar American middle classes that Mills paints in *White Collar* is aptly depicted on the book's black-and-white dust jacket. In this photo, which was taken by Mills himself, we see toward the bottom a solitary white-collar man—representative of the new middle class—in his long overcoat and fedora, dwarfed by the big-city landscape as he hurries past the National City Bank on Wall Street. Four years later, when *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* made its appearance, Tom Roth muses,

I really don't know what I was looking for when I got back from the war, but it seemed as though all I could see was a lot of bright young men in gray flannel suits rushing around New York in a frantic parade to nowhere. They seemed to be pursuing neither ideals nor happiness—they were pursuing a routine. For a long while I thought I was on the side lines watching that parade, and it was quite a shock to glance down and see that I too was wearing a gray flannel suit. (Wilson, 1955, p. 272)

Mills (1951) contends that by examining white-collar life, something can be learned about what is becoming more typically “American.” We can “understand better the shape and meaning of modern society as a whole, as well as the simple hopes and complex anxieties that grip all the people who are sweating it out in the middle of the twentieth century” (p. xv). In order to comprehend the diverse, quite often Kafkaesque, white-collar worlds of the new middle class, we have seen that Mills pictures society as a great salesroom, an enormous file, an incorporated brain, a new universe of management and manipulation. The “new little man,” the product of these impersonal white-collar worlds, declares Mills, “seems to have no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a center. . . . Perhaps because he does not know where he is going, he is in a frantic hurry; perhaps because he does not know what frightens him, he is paralyzed with fear” (p. xvi). Tom Roth is exemplary of the new little man who works along unnoticed in somebody's office, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand:

I'm just a man in a gray flannel suit. I must keep my suit pressed like anyone else, for I am a very respectable young man. . . . I will go to my new job, and I will be cheerful, and I will be industrious, and I will be matter-of-fact. I will keep my gray flannel suit spotless. I will have a sense of humor. I will have guts—I'm not the type to start crying now. (Wilson, 1955, p. 98)

In the final analysis, despite its phenomenal success and its rich descriptive detail concerning the American middle classes, *White Collar* is not a

book of high theoretical value. As Horowitz (1983) points out, “*White Collar* is more interesting for the ways in which it reveals the ethos of the early 1950s than for its explanation of that ethos” (p. 253).

The Power Elite

In his most famous and controversial book, *The Power Elite* (1956)—a social psychological study of stratification focusing on a tripartite ruling stratum in America—Mills continues discussing the issues that he had previously raised in *The New Men of Power* and *White Collar*. The book’s central theme is that, as the institutional means of decision, information, and power became more centralized and efficient, and as the public became more politically uninformed, there had arisen a national group made up of a governing triumvirate, a **power elite**, with tiers and ranges of wealth and power of which people in the rest of society knew very little.

Before entering into a detailed discussion of Mills’s assessment of this ruling stratum, it is important to point out his personal prejudices against the elite of power. “Ever since I can remember,” he states candidly and straightforwardly, “I have had a constitutional inability to sympathize with the upper dogs, and a temperamental distrust of all of them” (as quoted in K. Mills & Mills, 2000, p. 250).

Mills (1956) identifies these upper dogs, the power elite of U.S. society, as constituting “those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences. In so far as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them” (p. 18).

Put another way, the power elite are that often inaccessible small group of individuals and families who possess more than others do of what there is to possess, which generally includes money, power, and prestige, as well as all the lifestyles—that is, the experiences, privileges, and trainings—which these resources provide. These families, as members of the upper stratum of a capitalistic society, are quite insulated from the economic jolts and lurches felt by members of the other social classes. Since Mills defines the power elite in terms of institutional position, he sees them as occupying pivotal positions in the three major hierarchies and organizations of modern society—namely, (1) the machinery of the state, (2) the big corporations, and (3) the military establishment. Accordingly, as members of the *political directorate*, the *corporate rich*, and the *high military*, the U.S. power elite are selected, trained and certified, and permitted to preside over the strategic command posts in the structure of American society. They

command the dominant institutions of a dominant nation and are in a position to make decisions of enormous consequence for the underlying populations of the world and to determine the course of events. The public often does not know that these decisions are being made until well after the fact. Mills (1956) relies on a Weberian view of power when he refers to the power elite as “those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it” (p. 9). In short, the power elite are people of power within the coordination of political, economic, and military decision.

Mills makes it clear, however, that the American power elite do not constitute a secret club of personal friends with a permanent membership and fixed and formal boundaries. Nor does he believe that they form one monolithic structure. Instead, he sees the power elite as a complex set of variously related and often antagonistic cliques: unified only on certain coinciding points and mostly during periods of crisis. For Mills, the American power elite is not a bloc of conscious and malicious conspirators most of the time, for that is unnecessary. Instead, he argues that a community of interests, a commonality of values, and control of basic social institutions enable the power elite to coordinate policy without planning and plotting in smoke-filled rooms in the wee hours of the morning. Nevertheless, despite the fact that their continued association is marked by common beliefs and social congeniality, Mills refers to the power elite as involving an “uneasy coincidence” between the big three domains of power: the political, economic, and military orders.

Their uneasy coincidence notwithstanding, the power elite does tend to form a coherent kind of grouping, with an anonymous “inner core” made up of select individuals who interchange commanding roles at the top of one dominant institutional order with those in another. For example, the military chief of staff becomes a corporate chairman of the board, and the chief executive officer of a major business corporation also functions as a member of the president’s cabinet. The unity of the American power elite, therefore, consists of the ease of interchangeability of personnel within the political, economic, and military institutions. This is especially true of the movement of representatives of the corporate world into and out of top political positions. Consider, for instance, that Donald Regan of Merrill-Lynch became Ronald Reagan’s Chief of Staff and Robert Rubin of Goldman Sachs became Bill Clinton’s Secretary of the Treasury. Moreover, Dick Cheney, Vice President in the George W. Bush administration, had previously been Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Halliburton, the oil-field services contractor used by the U.S. government during the Iraq conflict; and Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama’s Chief of Staff from 2008 to 2010, had previously been an investment banker with Wasserstein Perella.

Additional examples of this interchangeability in the bureaucracies of power and decision include the following secretaries of defense who served during the Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations, and their influential involvement in the corporate arena subsequent to leaving political office:

- Melvin Laird led the Pentagon under President Richard Nixon and sat on the boards of Science Applications International and the IDS Mutual Fund Group.
- James Schlesinger, Nixon's second defense secretary, was a senior advisor at Lehman Brothers and a trustee of the Mitre Corporation.
- Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense under Presidents Ford and George W. Bush, was an investment banker with Forstmann, Little; an advisor to General Instrument Corp., and a director of RAND Corporation.
- Harold Brown, defense secretary during the Carter administration, after leaving office served as director of IBM and as a partner in the venture-banking firm Warburg Pincus.
- Casper Weinberger, defense secretary under Ronald Reagan, was a counsel with the law firm of Rogers and Wells, representing major corporations.
- Frank Carlucci was Secretary of Defense under Reagan and afterward served as a key executive with the Carlyle Group, a merchant-banking firm backed by the Mellon family, and sat on the board of the Kaman Corporation and Westinghouse.
- Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense under President Obama, has been a member of the board of trustees of Fidelity Investments, and on the board of directors of NACCO Industries, Inc., Brinker International, Inc., and the Parker Drilling Company.

We now look, in turn, at each of the three higher circles—the political elite, the corporate elite, and the military elite—and the social types of decision makers involved in each domain.

The Political Elite

The **political elite**, or the *political directorate*, consists of higher politicians and key officials of government but in particular the president, vice president, and the members of the cabinet. It also includes the White House staff as well as the most important appointed heads of major regulatory agencies and commissions. Indeed, the executive branch of government was far more influential at the time that Mills was writing than at any previous period in U.S. history, and there were no signs of its power diminishing. Mills attributes the political directorate's increased power to two factors: (1) the massive growth of the federal bureaucracy since the beginning of the

New Deal in 1933 and (2) the greatly enhanced role of the president in making foreign policy after 1939.

The political elite consists of politicians likely to have reached their positions through appointments rather than elections. Mills notes that the Eisenhower administration was largely made up of “political outsiders,” members and agents of the corporate rich and the high military who were appointed to their political posts and who had never before held office. Indeed, in that administration, 36% of the higher politicians had been elected, 50% had been appointed, and 14% had never before held any political office. Aside from occupying the executive command posts of the political order and forming the political directorate, the political elite are also the legal, managerial, and financial members of the corporate elite.

The Corporate Elite

The second group composing the triangle of power, the **corporate elite**, or *corporation chieftains*, consists of persons who occupy the top command posts in the giant corporations. The corporate elite also includes top-level management, the major stockholders, and the corporate lawyers representing the largest financial and industrial corporations in the country. At the very top stratum of the mid-century U.S. economy were the high-ranking executives, the “corporate rich,” who manage the corporate complexes and make the key economic decisions. These corporation chieftains receive fabulous salaries as well as bonuses, either in stock or in cash, and often in installments over a period of years. As such, they come to inhabit a corporate world of privilege and prerogative.

Behind this corporate wealth, there is that class of people that Mills calls “the very rich,” who are the actual owners of the corporations and the recipients of the greatest monetary rewards. Among the very rich during the middle years of the 20th century were men like H. L. Hunt and Hugh Roy Cullen, both of whom were worth billions. By that time, the very rich had become deeply entrenched in the higher corporate world of the American economy and were involved in such corporation activities as promoting and managing, directing and speculating. Indeed, all of the people and families of great wealth were by the 1950s identified with large corporations in which their property was seated. The corporate rich thus includes members of the big-city rich and the national rich who possess the great American fortunes, as well as chief executives of the major corporations. Most of the money that the very rich receive comes from corporate property: from dividends, capital gains, estates, and trusts. Mills (1956) maintains that no one can become or stay rich in America without becoming involved, in one way

or another, in the world of the corporate rich. Put another way, “all the rich are now corporate rich,” many of whom “possess far more money than they can personally spend with any convenience” (pp. 150, 161).

What is more, Mills states that the corporate rich have translated the power of corporate property into political use. To be sure, many of them have historically served as unofficial advisors to politicians. As the corporate world became more intricately involved in the political order, these executives became intimately associated with the politicians, and especially with the key politicians who form the political directorate of the United States government. In addition, as increasing numbers of corporation chieftains enter government directly, the result is the emergence of a new political economy at the apex of which are situated those who represent the corporate rich, the political elite.

The Military Elite

Finally, Mills argues that as military men became more powerful during the wars and during the warlike interludes between, they, too, joined the power elite. Consequently, the third sector of his ruling triumvirate is the **military elite**, or the *warlords* of Washington, who oversee the largest and most expensive feature of the U.S. government, the military order. At the top of the military order’s bureaucracy, just below the president and the secretary of defense, is the military board of directors, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Immediately below the Joint Chiefs there is a circle of generals and admirals presiding over the elaborate and dispersed military forces as well as the economic and political liaisons necessary to maintain those forces. Thus, alongside the corporation chieftains and the political directorate, the generals and admirals of the Pentagon have gained and have been given increased power to make and to influence decisions of the gravest consequence.

Mills points out that since 1939, the United States had become a militarized society as it had millions of personnel continuously under arms, supporting a huge and far-flung military apparatus, and often acting aggressively as a consequence. World War II and the protracted Cold War had greatly increased the power of the military, and the militarization of American society was due to the United States’ rise to international political prominence. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, along with the munitions contractors who supply them with weapons, comprised a new and potent force in making the key decisions regarding U.S. foreign policy and international relations. Indeed, the military and corporate elites became political insiders serving as the president’s most influential advisors. As politics gets into the army, Mills maintains, the army gets into politics. This movement of the warlords into

diplomatic and political circles is what Mills refers to as the “politicalization” of the high military.

As will be recalled, Mills in *The New Men of Power* (1948) argued that the United States was rapidly becoming a garrison state. Now, in *The Power Elite*, he again warns of a new corporatism—directed by the political, industrial, and military elites—that points to the main drift of the 20th century: the great structural shift of modern American capitalism toward a continuous war footing as a way of handling the slump–boom cycle. The merger of the corporate economy and the military bureaucracy—the economic–military alliance—first occurred during World War II as the warlords intervened in political and economic matters in a truly decisive way. Mills explains that given the nature of modern warfare, the warlords had to become politically and economically involved whether they wanted to or not, just as they had to invite the corporate chiefs into the military. For unless the military sat in on corporate decisions, they could not be sure that their programs would be carried out, and unless the chief executives knew something of the war plans, they could not plan war production. Thus, as generals advised corporate executives and as corporate executives advised generals, the economic and military hierarchies became structurally and deeply interrelated. The result is that the U.S. economy was being transformed into a permanent military economy.

Mills further contends that world reality is principally cast in the warlord’s terms. This state of affairs has led to the general adoption of a military definition of political and economic reality, a **military metaphysic**, where everything in the world situation is officially defined in terms of military necessity. The military metaphysic has not only resulted in the elite shifting its focus from domestic problems to “defense” and international affairs, but it has also resulted in the elite considering problems of war and peace, more completely than ever before, as political problems. In addition, Mills posits that the enlargement of the political role of the high military in key decisions threatens the democratic process in the United States in two ways. First, the pervasiveness of the military metaphysic is so strong that it does not permit free and wide debate of military policy. Americans have come to believe that international conflicts can be resolved only by force or the threat of force and that no further discussion on the matter is necessary. Second, Mills argues that information given by the military to the secretary of defense, the president, and his advisors is withheld from the general public. Such secrecy makes it difficult to have a politically informed citizenry.

On the lower echelons, the political, economic, and military elite fade off into the middle levels of power, into the pressure groups that are not vested in the power elite itself as well as a multiplicity of regional, state, and local interests. Further, as the executive branch of government becomes more

dominant, the legislative branch, Congress, as well as the judicial branch, the U.S. Supreme Court, are likewise relegated to the middle levels of national power. In fact, these middle levels—which also include the labor unions, all consumers, and all major white-collar groups—are really quite powerless. Mills considers them to be in a “semi-organized stalemate,” unable to link the top with the bottom. Furthermore, the bottom level of society is politically fragmented, increasingly powerless, and in danger of becoming a mass society that subverts democratic principles.

The subtle transformation into a mass society subject to elite control and domination is being accomplished behind people’s backs, declares Mills. By using the mass media, the power elite are able to persuade people into believing that, through the democratic process, they have made the key decisions, when in fact they have not. Rather, it is the power elite who determine the course of historical events. The decisions that the political directorate, the corporate chieftains, and the warlords make or fail to make carry more consequences for more people than has ever been the case in the history of humanity. This centralization of the means of power in the three interlocking and coordinated directorates—the machinery of the state, the big corporations, and the military establishment—makes for a trend toward a totalitarian state. Thus, Mills argues that political publics have every reason to hold the American power elite accountable for a decisive range of historical events that make up the history of the present. However, in the conservative mid-1950s, at the height of the Great Celebration of American society, and when Mills was writing *The Power Elite*, it was “fashionable” to suppose that there was no power elite.

The Higher Immorality

Much like he had done previously with the union leaders, Mills paints a collective, social psychological portrait of the elite of power. He posits that they constitute a similarity of personality types who hold the values and make the policies that they do because of the similarity of their origins; lifestyles; education; the bureaucratic institutions’ influence on them; as well as the intersection of the four dimensions of stratification: class, status, power, and occupation.

In the big cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and San Francisco, there flourishes a recognizable upper class of old and new wealthy families—the so-called “metropolitan 400”—from which the national power elite is derived. Chosen for their money, their family name, and their lifestyle, the members of these wealthy families are included in *The Social Register*, a listing of people who, by descent or social standing, are established in the

proper society of any particular city or cities. The elite of wealth are predominantly White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.

The processes of socialization and co-optation are important in understanding the power elite. According to Mills, since they are largely recruited from the upper classes, the power elite's socialization depends upon a network of upper-class wealth that supports private schools, elite universities, country clubs, and vacation resorts, which most of them experience before they are co-opted into the higher circles of power. The fashionable boarding or "prep" school becomes a training ground for the socialization of the children of the power elite. It is here that they are taught not only the proper style of conduct, but also how to acquire the upper-class character. To be sure, the prep school is the most important agency for transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes as well as for regulating the admission of new wealth and talent into the power elite. The same holds true for higher education and thus the corporation chieftains, for example, are likely to have graduated from the exclusive Ivy League colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. Similarly, many of the generals and admirals of the Pentagon have attended one of the two most elite training schools of the armed forces, West Point and Annapolis. Education at these military academies produces a commonality of outlook and an uncritical adherence to the military metaphysic.

Because they share certain psychological (mental and ideological) and sociological (demographic) traits, the power elite is a fairly homogenous group of individuals. Its members' similarities of social origin, nativity, and education are important to their psychological and social affinities; that is to say that the individuals who occupy the top positions in the state, the corporation, and the military establishment are broadly similar in social background and outlook, and this develops in them character of a specific type. Mills further posits that not only does the power elite rest upon the social and psychological affinities of its members, but it also coalesces around their personal and official relations with one another. Thus, more important than their social and psychological affinities are their shared codes and criteria of admission, praise, honor, and promotion. In other words, through their continued association with one another, they feel responsibility to each other. What binds the American power elite together, then, are an internal discipline and a community of interests.

Perhaps Mills's most trenchant critique of the most wealthy and powerful members of the United States' political, corporate, and military echelons is his insistence that they are engaging in what he terms the **higher immorality**. The higher immorality has to do with the "crackpot realism"—the unrealistic decisions and unethical and corrupt behaviors—of the power elite. It

involves the American system of organized irresponsibility that has produced a general erosion of the old middle-class values and codes of uprightness. The wealthy and powerful, says Mills, are irresponsible, predatory, and morally ruthless in their unprecedented use of power and in their pursuit of easy money and estate building. The only value that they hold is the value of money and of the things that money can buy. The power elite, according to Mills, is engaged in white-collar crime—smart rackets and shady deals—and in that which is “merely expedient.” Accordingly, it fails to produce people with an inner moral sense, a conscience, and personal integrity. Mills is struck by the fact that despite this structural immorality and the widespread corruption characteristic of the power elite, the mass public is not morally indignant. In fact, the complacent mass public couldn’t care less about the higher immorality.

The Power Elite is by far Mills’s most controversial book. It is the book that Fidel Castro told Mills, during Mills’s visit to Cuba in August 1960, that he, Castro, had studied during his guerrilla campaign in the Sierra Maestra (1957–1958). It may be said that, in sum, *The Power Elite* is principally concerned with the structure of power in the United States and the position of the power elite within it.

Diversity in the Power Elite

In 1956, Mills found a power elite that was largely, if not exclusively, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and male. These White, Christian men were principally recruited from “the upper third of the income and occupational pyramids” (Mills, 1956, p. 279). Half a century after Mills’s *The Power Elite* made its debut, social scientists Richard L. Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff (2006) examined whether the 1960s social movements for equal opportunity and affirmative action policies changed the power elite in regard to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and sexual orientation. And if so, what effects has this new diversity had on the functioning of the power elite and on its relation to the rest of society?

While it is the case that the power elite in the United States became more diversified in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) look specifically at Jews, women, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and gay men and lesbians to see to what extent these previously excluded groups now occupy positions in the political, corporate, and military elites. Although Mills did not see Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court as belonging to the power elite proper (but rather to what he considered the “middle levels” of power), Zweigenhaft and Domhoff examine Congress

and the Supreme Court for two reasons. First, and contrary to Mills, they consider Congress and the Supreme Court to be key institutions within the power elite. Second, they are keen to know if there is more diversity in the legislative and judicial systems than in the political, corporate, and military elite.

Jews

Jews in the United States have in the past few decades achieved full representation, even overrepresentation, in the power elite, Congress, and the Supreme Court. The successful assimilation of Jews into the highest circles of power is all the more noteworthy because of the widespread religious discrimination that persisted until the years following the publication of Mills's *The Power Elite* in 1956.

For example, in 2004, the percentage of Jews in the U.S. population was only 2.2%, yet they made up 11.1% of the corporate elite (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 22). Zweigenhaft and Domhoff found that Jews who were successful in the corporate world had been even more likely than other Jews to assimilate; they were less likely to see Jewishness as a salient part of their identity. For Jews at the top of the class hierarchy, class had come to supersede religious identity.

With the exception of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, who had no Jews in their cabinets, each presidential cabinet since 1956 has included at least one Jewish person. Jimmy Carter appointed four. Bill Clinton appointed five during his two terms in office. George W. Bush appointed one, to the newly created Department of Homeland Security. In 2009, Barack Obama appointed three Jews to cabinet-level positions: Secretary of the Treasury, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and White House Chief of Staff.

At the time that Mills published *The Power Elite* in 1956, there were only two Jews in the Senate. By 2009, the 111th Congress consisted of 45, with 13 in the Senate and 32 in the House. The steady increase in the number of Jews in Congress (8.4% of all members in 2009) means that their numbers are considerably higher than the percentage of Jews in the general U.S. population (2.1% in 2009). And as for the U.S. Supreme Court, since 1916, when Louis D. Brandeis was appointed associate justice, a total of eight Jewish justices have served the Court. In 2010, there were three Jewish justices on the Court.

The clear evidence of overrepresentation of Jews in all the higher circles of power reflects a dramatic reversal of the discrimination experienced by Jews in these arenas earlier in the century. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006)

identify a number of variables that seem to be important in understanding the successful entry by Jews into the power elite: They are predominantly White, and those who rise the highest are likely to have been born in relatively privileged circumstances; they have excellent educational credentials; and many of them are second- or third-generation Americans and thus have had time to become fully acculturated.

Women

The power elite depicted by Mills was exclusively a male preserve. He did not consider women in the corporate elite—which for Mills constituted only the top two or three positions in the top “hundred or so” corporations—because, at the time, there were none. Four decades later, in 1995, a study of *Fortune* 1000 companies revealed that 9.5% of the corporate directors were women. By 2003, the number had jumped to 13.6%. However, of the top five earners at these companies—those holding the titles of chairman, chief executive, vice chairman, president, chief operating officer, or executive vice president—only 5.2% were women (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 52).

In looking at *Fortune* 500 companies, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) found that there was only one woman CEO in 1977, two in 1991, and eight in 2005 (p. 60). By 2010, there were 15 women CEOs of *Fortune* 500 companies (*Fortune*, 2010, para. 1). But if we restrict ourselves to Mills’s rather stringent standard of the “hundred or so” corporations of the power elite, we find that, in 2008, only 5% of CEOs at *Fortune* 100 companies were women ($N=5$) (Jones, 2009, n.p.). Despite all the gains made by women in the corporate world, it is clearly the case that a glass ceiling blocking them from the highest ranks of U.S. corporations continues to exist.

When Mills’s *The Power Elite* appeared, only two women had served in presidential cabinets: Frances Perkins who was Roosevelt’s secretary of labor from 1933 to 1945, and Oveta Culp Hobby who was Eisenhower’s secretary of health, education, and welfare from 1953 to 1955. (Mills does not mention either woman in his book.) Clearly the percentage of women in cabinet posts has increased considerably since Mills’s time. When we look at posts in the “inner cabinet”—which includes the secretaries of state, defense, and treasury, and the attorney general—we find President Clinton’s appointment of Janet Reno as U.S. attorney general in 1993 and of Madeline Albright as secretary of state in 1997. In 2001, George W. Bush named Condoleezza Rice to be the first woman national security advisor, and then in 2005 Rice began serving as the first Black woman secretary of state. By late 2009, a full 30% of Obama’s cabinet positions were occupied by women (the highest percentage to date), which included Hillary Clinton as secretary of state.

As regards their socioeconomic status, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) found that most (14) of the 20 women who had served in cabinet posts between 1953 and 2005 “were born into economically secure families in which the fathers, or both parents, were well-educated professionals” (p. 65). Of the 20, only 4 were from middle-class backgrounds and the other 2 seemed to come from genuine working-class origins. It may perhaps correctly be assumed that a similar socioeconomic profile for female cabinet members has persisted to the present.

In 1956, there were no women among the military elite. In 1972 (the year prior to the shift from conscription to an all-volunteer military), women made up only 1.9% of the total military force on active duty. By 2003, that number had increased to about 15% (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 70). By 2008, it had dipped slightly to 14% (Swarnes, 2008, para. 8). To be sure, there have been tremendous increases in the numbers of women on active duty since 1973 and of their rise to the ranks of officer. Indeed, between 2000 and 2010, there were 11 female generals and two female admirals. However, to date, there have been no women among the highest-ranking military officers, the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

At the time Mills wrote *The Power Elite*, only one woman was serving in the U.S. Senate: Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. Prior to Smith, only a handful of women had ever been senators. Then, due in large part to the first and second waves of the women’s movement, between 1960 and 2006, no less than 27 women had served or were serving in the Senate, 16 of whom were Democrats. By 2009, of the 100 senators in the 111th Congress, 18 were women, 14 of whom were Democrats (Office of History and Preservation, Office of the Clerk, 2010b, n.p.). The presence of women in the U.S. House of Representatives has also increased dramatically since Mills’s day. In 1956, there were only 17 women in the House, 10 of whom were Democrats. In the November 2004 election, 65 women were elected or reelected to the House, 42 Democrats and 23 Republicans (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 76). Then, in 2007, Nancy Pelosi was elected the first female Speaker of the House, and by 2009, there were 78 women serving in the House of Representatives of the 111th Congress (18%) (Office of History and Preservation, Office of the Clerk, 2010b, n.p.).

Only four Supreme Court justices have been women: Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan. All of them graduated from prestigious law schools: Stanford, Columbia, Yale, and Harvard, respectively. In 2010, one-third of the Court was female.

Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) conclude their chapter on women in the power elite by stating, “A close look at the class backgrounds of those women who have made it to the top . . . demonstrates that the upper classes are overrepresented by a factor of ten or fifteen to one” (p. 80).

African Americans

The entrance of African Americans into the corporate elite came only after the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and in particular in the wake of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—the federal legislation that outlawed racial discrimination and ended racial segregation. By mid-1971, there were about a dozen Blacks on *Fortune* 500 boards, all with similar backgrounds that characterize them as a group: “[T]hey were highly educated, many were from families that were economically comfortable or even quite wealthy, and some had developed valuable political connections” (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 93). Indeed, the early 1970s saw the doors of corporate boardrooms open up more and more to African Americans. Thus, in 1973, there were 67 Black men and 5 Black women on the board of directors of slightly more than one hundred major U.S. companies. In 1981, there were 73 African Americans who held directorships in 112 companies (p. 99). In 1994, there were 34 Black men and women sitting on three or more corporate boards (called interlocking directors or “interlockers”). About 40% of those interlockers came from families that were economically comfortable, 25% were from solidly working-class backgrounds, and the remaining 35% came from poverty. What is more, they were all very well educated, as all but two were college graduates, and 31 of the 34 held postgraduate degrees (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 103). These advancements notwithstanding, Blacks continue to remain underrepresented on corporate boards. And when it comes to the very highest levels of corporate positions—chairman of the board, president, or vice president—one study found that Blacks were almost entirely absent (only 0.2%) during the fiscal year 1983–1984 (p. 100). However, by June 2005, there were 13 African American CEOs in *Fortune* 1000 companies (p. 109).

In *The Power Elite*, Mills (1956) contends that as a result of “the great cultural shift of modern American capitalism toward a permanent war economy,” there was “increased personnel traffic . . . between the military and the corporate realms” (p. 215). At the time that Mills wrote this, the armed forces had largely desegregated its troops; still, most African Americans served in support units and there were relatively few officers among them. Then, in 1989, the first African American—the retired four-star Army General Colin L. Powell—was named to the top of the military elite, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. To date, General Powell has been the only Black soldier to serve in that capacity. Despite having a Black general numbered among the warlords, in 2004 a mere 5.2% of men with general officer rank (the equivalent of one-star general or higher) were African American (p. 119).

Between 1964, the year of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and 1993, with the election of President Bill Clinton, only five Blacks had served in presidential cabinets. Clinton was the first president to appoint more than one African American to his cabinet. During his 8 years in office, he appointed a total of five. When first elected in 2001, George W. Bush appointed four African Americans to his initial cabinet. Of the total of 14 African American appointments made by presidents from Lyndon B. Johnson to George W. Bush, 9 came from relative privilege. All 14 went to college, 4 to prestigious “White” schools and 4 to prestigious “Black” schools. A total of 8 of the 14 went to law school, 1 went to medical school, and 3 completed doctoral work (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 118).

The first Black U.S. President, Barack Obama, made an initial appointment of four African Americans, the highest number so far, to fill the following cabinet posts: U.S. attorney general, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. trade representative, and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Of these only one was from a working class background; the others came from comfortable middle class backgrounds. All but one attended prestigious universities (Princeton, Columbia, Oxford) where they earned advanced degrees. One had an MA degree, one a PhD, and two had law degrees.

Since the 1940s, only four African Americans have served in the U.S. Senate, three of whom were Democrats. Blacks have fared much better in the U.S. House of Representatives. Indeed, in 2009, there were 41 African Americans in the House of the 111th Congress (9.4%) (Office of History and Preservation, Office of the Clerk, 2010a).

In looking at the Black men and women who were elected to the House between 1990 and 2005, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) concluded that they had come from less privileged backgrounds than those that had been appointed to *Fortune*-level boards of directors or presidential cabinets, that about 20% of them had grown up in economically comfortable backgrounds, that half were from stable working-class families, and that about one-third had come from real poverty (pp. 127–128). It may be safe to conclude that a very similar socioeconomic pattern held for African Americans in Congress in 2009.

Only two African Americans have served on the Supreme Court: Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas.

Latinos

While Mills did not identify the “very rich” as exactly the same people who occupied positions in the political, corporate, and military elite, he did

find considerable overlap between the very rich and the corporate elite (whom he called the “corporate rich”). However, notwithstanding the fact that there are several “very rich” Latinos, very few members of this ethnic group have become part of the corporate elite. Only 11 of the 75 wealthiest Latinos for 1995 sat on a *Fortune* 1000 board. In 2005, only 12 Latinos had been CEOs in *Fortune* 1000 companies (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, pp. 152–153). By 2010, Latinos had made some small gains, as they represented 3.28% of corporate board members and 2.90% of members of executive teams in *Fortune* 500 companies. Still, these individuals comprised only about one-fifth of the 15% Latinos represented in the U.S. population (Menendez, 2010, p. 4). Thus, while it is clear that some Hispanics are in the corporate elite, and that their numbers as directors and CEOs have increased in the last 50 years, they nonetheless remain very much underrepresented in the higher levels of the corporate world—this despite the fact that Latinos constitute a percentage of the total U.S. population that is increasing substantially.

When Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) analyzed the social, educational, and career backgrounds of Latinos who sat on corporate boards, they found that, like Jews, women, and African Americans, the majority of Latino corporate directors seemed to have been raised in at least middle-class circumstances. Many of them had had elite educations at the undergraduate and graduate levels and very few of them “could be considered genuine bootstrappers, making their way to the top of corporations without the benefit of family backing or an elite education” (p. 148). These background advantages were particularly prevalent with Latinos in the corporate elite who were of Cuban American background. Moreover, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff found that, as in the case of the African American corporate elite, the majority of the Latinos in the corporate elite tended to be light-skinned.

The first Hispanic to be appointed to a cabinet-level position was Lauro Cavazos, secretary of education in the Reagan administration in 1988. In addition to keeping Cavazos, George H. W. Bush appointed another Hispanic, Manuel Lujan, to his presidential cabinet. Bill Clinton appointed three Hispanics to his cabinet, as did George W. Bush. Obama’s Latino appointments numbered two in 2010 (one of whom was the first Latina, Hilda Solis). In all, there have been 10 Latinos in presidential cabinets, five Democrats and five Republicans.

Few Hispanics have made it to the rank of general officer in the U.S. armed forces. In 2007, Latinos constituted about 12% of the total military population. Yet, they represented only 1.3% of all flag and general officers. For several years, Lieutenant-General Ricardo Sanchez, who commanded coalition troops in Iraq for a year beginning in June 2003, had been the

highest-ranking Latino in the military. He had been 1 of just 8 Latinos ever to rise to the rank of General of the Army by 2003. With Sanchez's retirement in 2006, only three Latino generals were left on active duty (Schmal, 2009, para. 6).

When Mills wrote *The Power Elite*, there had only been one Hispanic elected to the U.S. Senate: Dennis Chavez, a Democrat from New Mexico. In 1964, Joseph Montoya, also a Democrat from New Mexico, was elected. There were no Latinos in the Senate until 2005 when Ken Salazar, Democrat from Colorado, and Mel Martinez, Republican from Florida, were elected. Then, in 2006, Bob Menendez, Democrat from New Jersey, became a senator.

Between 1956 and 2010, no less than 39 Latinos were elected to the House, only 5 of whom were Republicans. According to Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006), typically the Democrats have been Mexican Americans from Texas or California and Puerto Ricans from New York. Until 1996, none of the Mexican Americans had been from a well-to-do background. The five Latino Republicans (three of whom have been Cuban Americans from Florida) have tended to come from solidly middle-class or higher backgrounds (p. 163).

There had never been a Hispanic person on the U.S. Supreme Court until 2009 when Sonia Sotomayor was named the Court's first Hispanic justice and its third female justice. Sotomayor, who was nominated for the nation's highest court by President Barack Obama, is a Puerto Rican who grew up in poverty. When *The Power Elite* appeared in 1956, Sotomayor, then 2 years old, was living with her family in a housing project in the South Bronx, less than 10 miles from Mills's office at Columbia University.

Asian Americans

Asian American immigrants tend to be very highly educated, either in their country of origin, in the case of immigrants since 1965, or else in the United States. In 2004, a total of 96 Asian American men and women held 127 board seats in S&P (Standard and Poor's Composite Index) 1500 companies. This represented less than 1% of all directors. Fifteen of the 96 Asian American directors were of East Indian background. Of the remaining 81 directors, 54% were Chinese Americans, 25% were Japanese Americans, and 9% were Korean Americans; the other 12% were distributed among men and women born in Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 176). The most frequent path for Asians to take to become directors of *Fortune*-level companies is that of the immigrant entrepreneur, that is, to have started their own businesses or worked in businesses started by their parents or grandparents (p. 189).

There were no Asian Americans in a presidential cabinet until 2000 when President Clinton nominated Norman Y. Mineta, a Japanese American, to be secretary of commerce. George W. Bush named Mineta as secretary of transportation and Elaine Chao, a Chinese American, to be his secretary of labor (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 190). When Barack Obama took office in 2009, he appointed three Asian Americans (two of Chinese and one of Japanese ancestry) to his cabinet-level positions, making his cabinet 13% Asian American. These are Gary Locke, secretary of commerce; Steven Chu, secretary of energy; and Eric K. Shinseki, secretary of veterans affairs.

Prior to becoming secretary of veterans affairs, Eric K. Shinseki had retired as a four-star general and was Army Chief of Staff and thus a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As of 2004, there were six generals of Asian background in active service, five of them in the army and one in the air force. Among them were two Filipino immigrants (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006, p. 192).

In 2010, there were nine Asian Pacific Americans in the House of Representatives (two of Filipino background, three Chinese Americans, three Japanese Americans, and one Vietnamese American) and two in the Senate (one of Japanese and one of Chinese ancestry). Almost all are Democrats.

According to Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006), the wealthier and better-educated Asian immigrants, in this case Chinese Americans, tend to be corporate directors and appointees in Republican administrations. Asian immigrants coming to the United States from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, in this case Japanese Americans, are more likely to be elected officials (p. 196).

Gay Men and Lesbians

When it comes to gays and lesbians in the power elite, the picture becomes quite murky. As Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) point out, “Presumably, there have always been homosexuals in the power elite, but there is no way to know how many or who they are” (pp. 203–204). Indeed, very little can be said, by way of hard data, about gay men and lesbians in any of the higher circles of power. Based on the evidence that is available, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff believe that gay men and lesbians continue to encounter prejudice and discrimination in the corporate world. Moreover, there is reason to believe that the higher one moves in the executive ranks, the less likely it is for homosexuality to be acceptable. In addition, several studies indicate that the higher one rises in the corporate hierarchy, the more being open about one’s homosexuality serves as an impediment to one’s career. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff believe that those gay men and lesbians who start at large corporations and do manage to rise through the ranks are

likely to go off on their own at some point to begin companies or to work in more comfortable environments. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff assume that there are, and have always been, homosexuals in the power elite, but to stay there, they have to “manage” their image by not appearing too effeminate (in the case of gays) or too “masculine” in the case of lesbians.

The Ironies of Diversity

Zweigenhaft and Domhoff’s (2006) findings reveal that, compared to the 1950s when Mills was writing,

1. The power elite is now more diverse in regard to women and minorities. However, its core group continues to be composed of wealthy, White, heterosexual, Christian males.
2. With some exceptions in Congress, in general, it still takes at least three generations to rise from the bottom socioeconomic stratum to the top in the United States.
3. Class backgrounds, current roles, and future aspirations are more powerful in shaping behavior in the power elite than gender, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation.
4. Women, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and openly homosexual men and women are all underrepresented in the power elite, but to varying degrees and with different rates of increasing representation.
5. There is greater diversity in Congress than in the power elite, and a large percentage of minority elected officials are Democrats.
6. Although the corporate, political, and military elites have diversified, in general, the presence of more diverse members at the top has given the WASP power elite a way to feel legitimate by tokenizing minorities.

As an important and significant update to Zweigenhaft and Domhoff’s (2006) findings, we may add the following two characterizations. First, of the three top levels of national power that Mills identified, since the Obama administration, there has been much greater race/ethnic/gender diversity in the political elite—which includes the president, members of the cabinet, and appointed heads of major regulatory agencies—than in either the corporate or the military elite. Not only was Barack Obama the first African American to become U.S. president, only 43% of his cabinet in 2010 consisted of White men—almost all of whom were not WASPs.

Second, although Mills relegated both Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court to the “middle levels” of power, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006)

regard both of these institutions as integral to the higher circles of power. And while it is true that women and people of color have served in Congress in increasing numbers since the 1990s—and that very significantly, Nancy Pelosi was elected the first female Speaker of the House—they still constitute a minority in the legislative branch of government. The most diverse institution, however, is now the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2010, the Court's composition consisted of three women, one of whom was Latina, and one African American man. In addition, the religious background of the justices reveals that six are Roman Catholic and three are Jewish. For the first time in its 221-year history, there are no WASP males on the Court.

However all this may be, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2006) conclude that the men and women of previously excluded groups who have risen to the top of the power elite share the prevailing perspectives and values of those already in power. As a consequence, the diversification of the power elite actually reinforces the unchanging nature of the class structure, increases the tendency to ignore class inequalities, and therefore has had no effect on the way the power elite functions.

Conclusion

It is against the backdrop of the stratification trilogy, with its unflinching critique of the class structure and power system in the United States, that the following questions suggest themselves:

- How accurate is Mills's description of power relations in U.S. society given that he sees power strictly in zero-sum terms and does not consider pluralistic democracy?
- To what extent is Mills's understanding of the power elite based on the notion of conspiracy?
- How realistic is it for contemporary radical sociologists to look for agents of social change in various populations?
- Who really runs America today?

By the mid-1950s, Mills had achieved international acclaim for his radical or "critical" sociology largely on the weight of his immensely popular books on power and social stratification. The next chapter considers four works of his that have been largely ignored by the sociological community: his writings on Latinos and on Latin America.