

Louisiana Law Review

Volume 17 | Number 1

Survey of 1956 Louisiana Legislation

December 1956

THE POWER ELITE, by C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956. Pp. 423. \$6.00.

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Repository Citation

Calvin Woodard, *THE POWER ELITE*, by C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956. Pp. 423. \$6.00., 17 La. L. Rev. (1956)

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE POWER ELITE, by C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956. Pp. 423. \$6.00.

Victorian England has been the object of much scorn and derision in the "enlightened" twentieth century. We laugh at the naïveté of the economist who said, in 1876, that in his profession "the great work had been done."¹ We are shocked by the cruelty of a society which would accept the view that "there is one right which man has generally been thought to possess, which I am confident he neither does nor can possess — right to subsistence when his labour will not fairly purchase it."² And we marvel that just over a century ago anyone would write: — "Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die / But leave us still our old nobility."³ Even with the wisdom of hindsight we have difficulty understanding such narrowmindedness. How, we wonder, could intelligent people be so blind to reality, so set in their ways, so sure of themselves — and so wrong?

But even as we ponder this phenomenon we ourselves accept, in the grandest Victorian manner, certain beliefs about our country. It never occurs to us, for example, to doubt that we live in a democracy; or that our country is run, if not by us directly, at least by those whom we elect to office; or that anyone who works hard enough and long enough can rise to the top irrespective of origin or background. Of course in subscribing to these beliefs we wink a bit (at segregation, for example) or make, in Jesuit fashion, a mental reservation or two (possibly about US Steel or closed shops), but we rarely question them. True, some of us boldly accept the "cosmopolitan" view that everything Uncle Sam does is *per se* stupid and/or wicked, but even this, I suspect, stems more from a personal desire to be identified with the "intellectuals" than a strong conviction that America is other than the Promised Land.⁴

1. Quoted in SCHUMPETER, HISTORY OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS 830 (1954).

2. 2 MALTHUS, ESSAY ON POPULATION 319 (6th ed. 1826).

3. Lord John Manners, in *England Trust*.

4. This "virtue by association" is the cheapest way to gain a reputation for enlightened broadmindedness — unless, of course, you are a Southerner living in the North, in which case you simply say you are an "integrationist." The rest follows "ergo" fashion.

C. Wright Mills, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Columbia, has detached himself from these known "truths" long enough to examine the unknown facts. And though the results do not, as did Darwin's, refute the words of the Bible, they achieve the same effect. For indeed Mr. Mills comes up with the conclusion that democracy, opportunity, and even freedom are very rapidly disappearing from America. Most of his readers will, I feel sure, experience a genuine Victorian shock. I certainly did.

Mr. Mills reaches these startling conclusions in a carefully documented book entitled *The Power Elite*. It is primarily a study of the "higher circles" of contemporary American society but it also represents the full development of many ideas expressed in *White Collar* (published in 1951). Thus *The Power Elite* is both supplementary and complementary to the earlier study of the middle classes and I strongly recommend that *White Collar* be read (or reread) in conjunction with it.

Mr. Mills concludes that certain "structural" changes have taken place in American society which invalidate many of our fondest beliefs. In *White Collar* he noted how America had been converted from a nation of property owners to one of job holders; and in *The Power Elite* he finds that its people are being transformed from an independent thinking public into a mass society manipulated by "commanders of power unequalled in human history."

A conjunction of "historical circumstances"⁵ are said to be the cause of the rise of this power elite: the discovery and development of methods of mass production brought the national corporation; the Cold War created a need for a strong "peace time" armed service; and the need to regulate the large corporations and to cope with the international situation resulted in Big Government. As a result, according to Mr. Mills, the corporations, the armed forces, and the government now dominate America.

As power becomes centralized in these three institutions their courses of action become more and more significant to more and more people. In fact Mr. Mills says the men who make decisions for those institutions are the *de facto* rulers of the

5. *The Power Elite*, p. 28.

country. And as the decisions of any one of these institutions will naturally affect the other two, it has become standard practice for the heads of the three to confer, to cooperate, to reach conclusions suitable to all. Given the situation, this is wisdom itself — but it is *not* democracy. For one of the great suppositions of American democracy is that conflicting powers will cancel out each other, making all relatively impotent. This “Theory of Balance,” as Mr. Mills calls it, is ineffective when powers cooperate rather than compete, leaving only the conscience of the cooperating parties to protect the public interest. If, as Lord Acton has said, “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely,” more safeguards are necessary when “the means of oppression and exploitation, of violence and destruction, as well as means of production and reconstruction, have been progressively enlarged and increasingly centralized.”⁶

If the corporate executives, military and naval brass, and government officials are the makers of decisions of national consequence, it is naturally relevant to determine who they are and how they reached their present positions. Mr. Mills confesses that he has not uncovered all the facts about the power elite for “much public information about their character and their activities is systematically misleading; and they are themselves busy and aloof and even secretive.”⁷ But he does show that they are not elected by the voting public. Mr. Mills calls Congress “the prime seat of the middle levels of power”⁸ which debate issues, large and small, while vital decisions are made behind the scenes. The growth of the administrative branch of the government and the rise of the *appointed* officials are key factors in this development.

Also he shows that the top men tend to be a type quite unknown to Horatio Alger. They are mostly Easterners who attended exclusive New England private schools and Ivy League colleges and are now members of swish metropolitan clubs. As Mr. Mills puts it, they have been “selected, trained and certified and permitted intimate access to those who command the impersonal institutional hierarchies of modern society.”⁹ As to

6. *Id.* at 23.

7. *Id.* at 363.

8. *Id.* at 256.

9. *Id.* at 15.

their individual qualifications he says they are "not representative men; their high position is not a result of moral virtue, their fabulous success is not firmly connected with meritorious ability."¹⁰

In the course of the book Mr. Mills touches on and gives a plausible explanation to some of the most characteristic aspects of modern American life. He convincingly links political apathy and the seeming lack of direction of large portions of the population to those favorite whipping boys — radio, movies, and TV. Also his discussion of "structural immorality" is particularly relevant in a period when the difference between tax avoidance and tax evasion is often academic; expense accounts frequently smack of embezzlement; and politicians find it necessary "to rise above principle."¹¹ And he has contributed perhaps the most detailed analysis of the American millionaire now available. In short, this is a timely book which is both instructive and thought provoking.

Mr. Mills says in his acknowledgment that the lack of tight proof should not preclude him from publishing the result of his studies of the power elite. For, as he says, "by asserting what we can under such conditions, we may engage them and their agents in controversy and thus learn more."¹² While I do not quibble with this, I do object to a trace of bias and confusion that runs throughout the book. Mr. Mills purports to examine impartially the "higher circles" while he in fact indicts them. And the indictment is both vague and unclear.

Mr. Mills clearly shows that our country, our ideals and our most cherished institutions are in danger. And in *The Power Elite*, as its very title indicates, he points an accusing finger at the upper class. But for what? He himself says that "historical circumstances" — impersonal forces — are responsible for the rise of the power elite while he repeatedly exonerates the individual members from charges of conspiracy.¹³ And though he alleges that their rise to power may not have been "firmly connected with meritorious ability" he does not seriously argue,

10. *Id.* at 361.

11. *Id.* at 257.

12. *Id.* at 363.

13. See, for example, his statement that "the conception of the power elite does not rest, as I have repeatedly said, primarily upon personal friendship." *Id.* at 287.

and certainly does not prove, incompetence.¹⁴ In fact the worst he proves is the strong likelihood that they attended schools and colleges that are generally conceded to be the best — academically as well as socially.

If the purpose of the book is to blame some group or class for the current crisis I think he should be more specific in his charges. He should distinguish more sharply between the consequences of impersonal forces and those of individual volition and his complaint should be framed accordingly. If history is the culprit, the “higher circles” should not be accused by innuendo; if the power elite is to blame, charges of incompetence and malfeasance should be made and proved. When Marx wrote of historical forces, he added the following explanation for his treatment of individuals:

“I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My stand-point, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.”¹⁵

Mr. Mills would have done well to have followed this example.

This tendency to condemn the “higher circles” for consequences which he concedes to be beyond their control is most revealing. It is, I believe, a clue to the cause of Mr. Mills’ dire pessimism which manifests itself in both *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*. In the latter, for example, he morbidly concludes that the upper classes have “succeeded within the American system of organised irresponsibility.” He is obviously unhappy with the system and he has little respect for those who go along

14. Mr. Mills does assert that American executives do not “read books, except books on ‘management’ and mysteries” (p. 130); and that a characteristic of the higher circle is “intellectual mediocrity.” (p. 354) But he himself says this does not reflect lack of intelligence. As he puts it: “It is rather a matter of the type of intelligence, of the quality of mind that is selected and formed. It is a matter of the evaluation of substantive rationality as the chief value in a man’s life and character and conduct.” (p. 354) Thus it is the system which determines the types of persons that “succeed,” the system which puts the power elite up top, that is at fault. Surely therefore the remedy is to change the system — not to blame those who are trained in it for adhering to it.

15. MARX; CAPITAL, The Modern Library ed., p. 15.

with it. But why is he so unhappy with it? I suspect the answer is that the actual structure of society, as revealed in this book, refutes the basic tenets of American ideals, beliefs, and institutions. Mr. Mills himself believes the American story so strongly that he can see no hope for a society in which everyone works for a large corporation rather than tills his own farm, and watches TV rather than discusses politics around a potbellied stove. Dejected and disappointed he looks for *someone* to blame for these structural changes — as one gets little satisfaction from attacking “history.” The boys up top are fair game for such purposes.

One hates to see Mr. Mills interlard original research with sour grapes. If, as he says, we are a nation of employees we must seek democracy for employees — not for property owning farmers. We must modify our beliefs to meet reality; we must redefine the meanings of freedom, and we must rediscover the proper relationship between the individual and society. The work of Mr. Mills shows this need so forcefully that it is curious indeed that he should so despair that the old beliefs do not solve the problem. In this sense despite his objective research Mr. Mills is, as the rest of us, Victorian — for he has showed America in 1956 to resemble the England of 1848 of which Sir Ernest Barker wrote:

“[A] modification of the old philosophy of action, if not an entirely new philosophy, was an urgent necessity, if social progress was not to be checked by a social creed.”¹⁶

The practical danger of Mr. Mills' pessimistic interpretation of the current situation is that his readers will concentrate on answering his prejudicial assertions rather than ponder the results of his really formidable research. This would be unfortunate for *The Power Elite* is too good a book and contains too much original data to come and go the way of an ordinary polemic. Surely our need for constructive thought is too great for us to lose sight of any study that sheds light on social reality.

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16. BARKER, POLITICAL THOUGHT IN ENGLAND, 1848-1914, 3 (1915).

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