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# John Brewer on C. Wright Mills

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**Nigel Warburton:** *C. Wright Mills was one of the most important sociologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He believed that sociology could change people's lives, and that sociologists, far from being neutral, should help bring about such change. After his early death in 1962, his ideas would fuel '60s counter-culture. John Brewer teaches at Queen's University, Belfast, and is a passionate admirer of Wright Mills.*

**David Edmonds:** John Brewer, welcome to Social Science Bites.

**John Brewer:** Thank you very much.

**David Edmonds:** The topic we are going to talk about today is C. Wright Mills and his importance for sociology. Can you start by telling us a bit about C. Wright Mills and his life?

**John Brewer:** Well, he was born in Texas. His grandfather was a rancher. He comes from a relatively uneducated and poor family, something, of course, of which he is very proud. He goes to a university in Texas, to a military university, but he achieves very highly, and then eventually moves to Columbia and then lives in Greenwich.

**David Edmonds:** So, influenced both by his Texas upbringing, and his life on the East Coast?

**John Brewer:** Absolutely. You can see a clash in Mills' work between two biographical spaces: rural, underprivileged Texas, and downtown New York; and he lives on the edge of both, and I think the clash between these two social worlds gives him, I think, particular insight into the nature of American society. He comes from a poor background, he knows what poverty is.

**David Edmonds:** And he's subject to a lot of snobbery in his life?

**John Brewer:** Absolutely, I mean he's ridiculed for his Texan origin; he's ridiculed for what we would now call his lack of cultural capital. [Edward Shils](#), one of the best sociologists of his day, refers to him as driving up to Greenwich with books in his saddlebag which he'll rarely read. Interestingly, we now know that Shils was being funded by the CIA, and would have seen C. Wright Mills as a very dangerous character.

**David Edmonds:** He's now known, of course, as one of the great sociologists of the twentieth century. In what does his greatness lie?

**John Brewer:** Mills is distinguished by two main features. The one is his attention to American society. He wrote three excellent books which really reflect the changes in America's class structure; but he was also interested in American foreign policy. He wrote two books that were highly critical of American foreign policy in the Caribbean, and of course he wrote that book, *The Third World War*, which is very critical of America's problematic relationship with the Soviet Union. So, he's noted primarily as a radical critic of American society, but the other thing for which he is most well-known is his radical critique of sociology.

**David Edmonds:** And what did that consist in?

**John Brewer:** He wrote this book called [The Sociological Imagination](#), published in 1959 but written when on sabbatical in Europe. That is very significant because it shows the imprint of European sociology on his understanding of the sociological imagination. The characteristic of European sociology is that it emerges out of moral philosophy, and it's primarily a diagnosis of the modern social condition. American sociology at the time was heavily influenced by two dominant traditions: a tradition of abstract theory, and a tradition of what Mills called abstract empiricism: an emphasis upon general theory, an emphasis upon the scientific method. When in Europe, however, Mills crafts a view of sociology that places it firmly in the European tradition.

**David Edmonds:** So, he's fighting against the trend, what, that individuals should be seen merely as data in a big abstract picture?

**John Brewer:** Absolutely. This is where we see the impact of him living between two worlds, on the edge of these biographical spaces, rooted in Texas but living in downtown Greenwich Village. He's very concerned to capture the lived experience, the daily life of ordinary men and women, and he's convinced that sociology should have a normative role: it should function both to diagnose that social condition, and to ameliorate it. So he crafts sociology as an attempt to improve the social conditions, to change the lives of ordinary men and women; so he refuses to see men and women as either abstract categories in a general theory, or abstract statistical categories in abstract empiricism.

**David Edmonds:** You say that he writes about the lived experience of individuals. Give us an example of the aspects of their lives that concerned him.

**John Brewer:** In his work on America's changing class structure, he places a great deal of emphasis upon the emerging new middle class, the 'organisation man', and of course we are talking of men in those days. The man who is employed by the company, whose life is dictated by the company, whose loyalty is to the company, and he talks about this emerging new middle class as neutered, constrained, unable to grasp the social situation in which they are locked, unable to grasp the big social structural processes that impact on their ordinary lives, and what Mills tries to do through his notion of the sociological imagination, is to emphasise the way in which sociologists are under the normative obligation to turn ordinary people's private troubles into public issues, to try to help them understand the structural forces that impact on their lives so that they can better themselves, engage in mobilisation, engage in political action that changes their social condition.

**David Edmonds:** And what was his methodology for identifying what those structural forces were? Was it analysis of statistics, was it ethnography in some form, was he there with a clipboard and observing how they lived their lives? How did he go about identifying the forces that were placed upon them, about which they might be ignorant?

**John Brewer:** Here we get to the very paradox of C. Wright Mills, because although he lampoons abstract theory, he tends to draw very heavily on secondary data - not to undertake ethnographic studies, not to undertake statistical studies, he tends to draw on secondary data - and in that way, his model is Max Weber. There's no clipboard in Max Weber, there's no social survey in Max Weber,

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there's no in depth qualitative interview in Max Weber: it's primarily reliant upon secondary data, secondary sources, which are put together to form an analytical narrative, and so in many ways Mills is like the abstract theorists that he criticises. The difference is that the sociology that Mills advances is shaped by substantive, real life issues: the changing class structure in America, and American foreign policy, its attacks on Cuba and its attacks on the Soviet Union.

**David Edmonds:** And in deconstructing American society, he thought it was significant that you understood history, that you understood how America had got to where it had got, that you couldn't just take a snapshot of American society?

**John Brewer:** This is why I describe Mills, in one sense, as the most European of American sociologists, because he does recognise the importance of history, he recognises the importance of politics, he recognises the importance of individual biography, and this special imagination that sociology has, this promise of the discipline that, as he describes it, is one that tries to blend an emphasis upon individuals, and their biography and lived experience upon the social structure, and upon history. In that sense, he is very, very European. C. Wright Mills had a love-hate relationship with America. In Europe, and he's writing letters back to his friends in the States, his letters are full of home-sickness for America. He comes to realise, in fact, by living in Europe, that his problematic, his interest, his drive is actually the analysis of American society, and that's where he needs to be. So, you get this love-hate relationship. He loathes its social structure, he loathes its politics, and yet he cannot live anywhere else but in the States.

**David Edmonds:** And he wants to change America, and you said that there was a vital normative dimension to his work. Did he believe that a social scientist who didn't have a normative agenda was somehow failing in his or her role?

**John Brewer:** Well, he never put it in those terms, but you're absolutely right. The promise of sociology, as he describes it in that book, *The Sociological Imagination*, is one where sociologists are obliged to have a normative commitment to improving the lives of ordinary men and women, and it's for that reason, I suggest, that Mills becomes popular. Some years after his death, in the late 1960s, when the emergence of this counter-culture, this almost anti-science in the 1960s, makes Mills the spokesperson for that generation, even though he died in '62. So, the people on the barricades in the Civil Rights Movement, the people articulating the Summer of Love, drew upon Mills.

**David Edmonds:** He was clearly a man of the left, and I understand he came to the attention of the FBI. Did he think it was impossible to be a right-wing sociologist? A right-wing sociologist might also have a normative agenda.

**John Brewer:** That's a very good question. You'd have to consult Mills' letters for the answer to that. In Mills' letters, there's a brusqueness and a roughness that's absent from his sociological writings. There's a vitriol that comes from him believing that these, in fact, are confidential and private, and he is very critical of two groups. He is very critical of, what he would call, the unreconstructed left, the romantic left, but he's also critical of branches of sociology that disengage, that are not, deliberately not, focused upon capturing the lived experience and using sociology to improve the lives of ordinary people.

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**David Edmonds:** It would be remiss if we spoke about C. Wright Mills and didn't mention the fact that he's a beautiful stylist, and that may, in part, explain his influence.

**John Brewer:** Absolutely right. Mills is a popularist. He's a popularist in two senses. One sense, he wanted sociology to be popular because he felt that sociology gives a special insight that enables people to change their own lives; but he's a popularist in another sense in that he writes in a popular fashion. He ridicules sociologists' tendency to jargon, so there's wonderful passages in his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, where he reproduces pages from Talcott Parsons' general theory of social life, and reduces it to a few sentences, and although he doesn't use the word 'bullshit,' we know that's what he meant. So he was a populariser, he wanted sociology to be able to appeal to ordinary men and women, he wanted sociology to give ordinary men and women insight so that they could be politically engaged, as politically engaged as he was.

**David Edmonds:** How would you sum up his legacy?

**John Brewer:** Well we come now, I think, to the paradox of C. Wright Mills. Mills did not anticipate some significant changes that quickly emerged in American society after his death. He died in 1962, he did not anticipate, for example, the rise of the civil rights movement. His work does not mention gender, he does not mention race. He did not anticipate the emergence of the student generation that, in Mills' name, would be manning the barricades.

Another feature that he did not anticipate, he did not anticipate that America would emerge as the last great superpower standing. He did not anticipate the demise of the Soviet Union, and this is because I think that Mills was very, very much a sociologist of his time. He was heavily influenced by the conditions in American foreign policy, in American social structure, as they existed in the late 1950s. He was unable to anticipate how that would radically change, and so his work on the changing class structure, his work on American foreign policy is virtually neglected today. He is most well-known as being the radical critic of sociology, and so the book for which he is most well-known is *The Sociological Imagination*, and indeed the International Sociological Association did a poll amongst sociologists some years ago, asking them to list their favourite book. Weber's *Economy and Society* was first, C. Wright Mills was second. *The Sociological Imagination* became the bumper sticker, it became an icon of a generation of sociologists that wanted to radically critique the nature of sociology, and it's that for which he is now most well-known. For my generation, C. Wright Mills will always be the star that they follow.

**David Edmonds:** John Brewer, thank you very much indeed.

**John Brewer:** Thank you.