

PERMANENT STRANGER

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Daniel Geary. *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 296 pp. \$29.95.

"C. Wright Mills was one of the most fascinating personalities in recent American intellectual history," Daniel Geary observes in *Radical Ambition*. "However, a full understanding of his ideas and their historical significance has been obscured by a captivating caricature of him as a motorcycle-riding maverick, a lone dissident from the conservative complacency of the cold war era" (p. 1).

Geary is a good writer, a diligent researcher, and an honest scholar, all of which mark *Radical Ambition* as a departure. Mills has been the subject of *ad hominem* attacks, shoddy scholarship, and political simplification since his death in 1962. One has despaired of a decent study to argue over. Geary takes judicious measure of the historiography but builds his own portrait from letters, manuscripts, and autobiographical writings, published and unpublished. He offers assessments of Mills' major writings, giving special attention to his education at the Universities of Texas and Wisconsin as well as his later tutorials among European émigrés and New York intellectuals. And Geary makes an overdue case for Mills as a global thinker.

I have toiled in the same archives, grappled with the same sprawling oeuvre, and interviewed some of the same people. So believe me when I swear that emerging in such fine shape is no minor achievement. Mills is indeed "one of the most fascinating personalities in recent American intellectual history." He is also, by the same token, one of our most elusive subjects.

Radical Ambition is not the first book to challenge Mills' status as a radical icon, but it is the first to stand self-consciously beyond the New Left generation. Geary, a young historian who teaches at Trinity College, Dublin, argues against the image left by Stanley Aronowitz, Todd Gitlin, Tom Hayden, Russell Jacoby, James Miller, and other veterans of the 1960s. Their mythos may have been useful in the past, he says, but should be seen as a fiction in the clear-eyed present. "The common interpretation of Mills as a maverick traces the critical power of Mills's writings directly to his personal iconoclasm, his refusal to work within the parameters of the political categories or sociological

thought of his time. Yet Mills's thought was far more characteristic of his era than has been recognized. If we see his ideas as emanating primarily from his heroic personality, then we miss their grounding in larger cultural and political trends" (p. 3).

Geary wants to put Mills in his time and place not to undermine the power of his thought or example, but to strengthen them by showing the conditions under which they operated. He refuses to assign a neat and tidy ideological label ("disillusioned radicalism" is the closest he comes), and he sees the methodological continuity of the sociology of knowledge all through Mills' writings. How many smug critics have derided *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba*, as an instance of leftist psychopathology, evidence of anti-Americanism and totalitarian longing in the same measure? Geary has plenty of criticism for the book, but he still sees its origins in Mills' project on "the cultural apparatus." Here, as elsewhere, *Radical Ambition* refuses to take the cheap shot.

The argument itself is unconvincing, in part because the book is too short and its coverage is too uneven to sustain its premises. The first half, beginning in the 1930s and ending in 1948, traces the sources of Mills' mature thought, but leaves Geary with relatively little to say about the complicated dynamics of his popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, when relations between his thought, his personality, and his reputation took center stage. Geary disposes of *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination* in a nifty, thirty-five page chapter. All along he gives perfunctory accounts of Mills' health and personal habits, family relations, marriages, and friendships. "I leave the detailed study of Mills's personality to others in the hope that they recognize his rebellious personality as a carefully constructed persona rather than the full story of his life," he writes, lapsing into the snide voice of the debunker (p. 5). How can he be so sure the New Left made Mills into a "captivating caricature" if he declines to investigate the sources of the image on his own?

Geary continually erects, then collapses, distinctions between academic sociology and public sociology, and between liberal and radical social thought. In both respects, he argues, these distinctions lacked the vital difference to warrant Mills' reputation as an outsider. For the most part, Geary formulates and deploys these distinctions adeptly, but not always. "Mills may have portrayed himself as a lone critic of the discipline in *The Sociological Imagination*, yet several leading sociologists sympathized with his critique. More important, in spite of his scathing attacks on the discipline, Mills never gave up belief in what he called the 'promise' of social science" (p. 12). This formulation misfires on two counts, first by conflating social science with its disciplinary form, second by misrepresenting Mills' argument. Explicitly, he cast his criticisms from within "the classic tradition" in social science, citing as forerunners and exemplars John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Lynd, Karl Mannheim, William H. White, Arnold Toynbee, David Riesman, Joseph Schumpeter, and others.

Geary himself maintains that the language Mills used, and the concepts he developed, were embedded in mainstream sociological discourse. And "Mills's social analysis resembled . . . that of postwar liberals who discovered a broad consensus at the heart of American society. Indeed, his ideas often read as a curiously inverted version of the postwar liberals's [*sic*] optimistic notion of the 'end of ideology,' which praised the political, social, and intellectual accomplishments of the postwar period" (p. 9).

This is indeed curious, but what is so surprising about it? If Mills and his interlocutors in sociology and politics had not shared major premises and a common language, they could not have fought in the first place. His enemies were real enough.

Geary, to his credit, recognizes pragmatic social psychology as Mills' major interest. But he is so eager to integrate him into the respectable centers of academic professionalism and liberal social thought that he neglects to develop a social psychology of his own. He relies on the very dualism of insider and outsider that Mills refused. "The intellectual, I believe, is to be fruitfully thought of as a *professional* and *intentional marginal man*," he wrote in his 1939 master's thesis.¹

Every sociology student in these years could trace the "marginal man" to three sources. The University of Chicago's Robert Park used it to understand the cultural consequences of migration among mestizos in Mexico, South African blacks, Anglo-Indians, American mulattos, and other mixed-bloods and cultural-hybrids.² Thorstein Veblen explored the idea in "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe" (1919), where he viewed the European Jew as "a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man's-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon."³

Behind Park and Veblen stood the German sociologist Georg Simmel and his pioneering essay, "The Stranger" (1908). Simmel portrayed the stranger not as a fixed character type, but as the embodiment of a definite and specific mode of interaction. He said "the stranger is near and far *at the same time*," a member of the very group from which he is estranged, a participant in society who brings to its interactions qualities which are not indigenous to it.⁴ Neither insider nor outsider, the stranger occupied an intermediate position, profaning sacred symbols, receiving confessionals and confidences, trampling piety and precedent, and attaining, by these means, a sliver of objectivity.

Before Mills and Gerth translated any of Max Weber's writings, they worked on Simmel's "The Social Psychology of the Metropolis" and "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Geary mentions the connection not at all (and gives only passing mention to Veblen). Yet Simmel's social psychology is especially useful for biographers because it abolishes the false dualisms of wandering and at-

tachment, indifference and involvement, remoteness and closeness. Mills forged from it a conscious method, as he suggested in his thesis. "Not only does he typically 'participate' in a plurality of cultures and is not fully a member of any one of them, but he intentionally seeks out disparities between different traditions, both intellectual and general-cultural."⁵

The idea illuminates both the ease with which Mills made contact with foreigners and the difficulty he had in sustaining close relations at home. It also illuminates his consistent refusal to choose between available roles. "So far as political position goes," he wrote in his *Soviet Journal*, "there are some societies in which I should probably be an anarchist, in others I should be quite leninist."⁶ Six months later, he complained that a Mexican interviewer had miscast him. "In the version you sent they have me practically saying that I am a 'Leninist.' Of course I have never been and am nothing of the sort."⁷ Two months after that, he aligned himself with L. T. Hobhouse's *Liberalism* (1911). Speaking as sociologist, satirist, and prophet, as Texan and New Yorker, as American and anti-American, as leftist as well as critic of leftism, he addressed himself squarely to the anxiety that modern man might become "a permanent stranger" in history.⁸ This was not a creed, but a condition. "Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt/ From all affection and from all contempt."⁹

Geary makes Mills seem typical, then complains of his typicality. "The most significant flaw was his inattention to issues of gender and racial equality," he writes. "Although Mills was committed to challenging oppression, he ignored institutionalized racism and patriarchy as crucial sources of hierarchical power in the modern world" (p. 8). Geary's accusation is mitigated, somewhat, at the conclusion. "Since Mills died in 1962, his neglect of issues of gender and race was more excusable" (p. 216).

Is "inattention" a political or sociological flaw? What, exactly, should Mills have written to avoid the charge? Does he need an excuse? If so, who is entitled to excuse him?

Observing that Mills did not make race and gender overt themes should be a point of departure, not an end point. Geary could have asked whether his thought was flexible enough to address these issues, in spite of the apparent silence. He might have mentioned Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*, a Millsian study of "emotional work" in the training of airline stewardesses. It begins with an epigraph from *White Collar* and rests substantially on the model of social psychology in Mills' and Gerth's *Character and Social Structure*.¹⁰

"Not surprisingly," Geary writes of *Listen, Yankee*, "Mills failed to grasp the crucial racial dimension of the Cuban Revolution and of the anticolonial struggle more generally" (p. 210). How the book would have been different if Mills *had* grasped the racial dimension, he does not trouble to say. Nowhere, in fact, did Mills deny the possibility that his readers might grasp the racial

dimension. Stokely Carmichael (unmentioned here) read the book in a Mississippi prison with a sense of irony missing from Geary's analysis. "You know how dumb them crackers are?" he told a *Village Voice* reporter after his release. "In jail they took away all my books—stuff by DuBois, King, Camus. But they let me keep Mills's book about Castro, *Listen, Yankee*, because they thought it was against Northern agitators."¹¹

Geary mentions Mills' review of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) in a footnote, but discussing it might have yielded something beyond a scolding. "I agree both with her cry and with its humanistic basis," Mills wrote. "But I cannot help but feel that she often confuses the conditions of woman with the generic human condition." De Beauvoir, he thought, mistook the particular problems of women for the universal problem of self-estrangement. "Mlle. de Beauvoir's solution to the man-woman problem, put in its briefest form, is the elimination of woman as we know her—with which one might agree, but to which one must add: and the elimination of man as we know him. There would then be male and female and each would be equally free to become an independent human being."¹²

Then again, de Beauvoir had anticipated this response. She had contended that inquiries into femininity, arbitrary though the category might look from the perspective of history, must begin by acknowledging women's distinct and concrete experiences. Men did not perceive their gender as an object of inquiry, assuming themselves to be the universal subject. In contrast, coming to awareness of femininity meant confronting a stigma of imperfection. What explained the subordinate position of women? How were gender classifications produced and sustained? Mills' review passed over these questions, draining *The Second Sex* of its political content but preserving its moral animus. His review moved in the same tortured spirit as Karl Marx's "On the Jewish Question" (1843): the suffering of a nettlesome social group gets kicked upstairs to a higher level of abstraction, in the fervent wish that history would carry it away.¹³

Such are the difficulties dogging a subject that few scholars or biographers have made transparent. "In my opinion Mills is a very unusual man," wrote Clarence Ayres, his teacher at the University of Texas, in 1939.¹⁴ Twenty years later, H. Stuart Hughes said the same in *Commentary*. "For the past decade C. Wright Mills has been a very special phenomenon on the American intellectual horizon. His ideas have been too important to ignore, yet no one—neither scholar nor publicist—seems to have known quite how to take him." Hughes called him "a poor man's David Riesman."¹⁵ Don Martindale, who met him in graduate school, concluded that "Mills was a dark star or a black hole absorbing the light from the surrounding stars."¹⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld joined Martindale in suspecting nihilism. "There's nothing to come to terms with,

there's nothing he says he believes in," Lazarsfeld said. "Everything Mills did or said I always had the feeling was done at the moment, at the mood, without any consistency, and was a ruthless egotism, so that no intellectual understanding was possible."¹⁷ Eulogists compared him to James Dean, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Morris, Lee Harvey Oswald, Charlie Parker, Theodore Roosevelt, and Emile Zola.

Radical Ambition does not dispel the air of mystery surrounding Mills, or give us "a full understanding of his ideas and their historical significance." But Geary has given us a fine short study, one that should spur discussion beyond the New Left and into the next generation.

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1. Charles Wright Mills, "Reflection, Behavior, and Culture: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge," master's thesis, University of Texas, June 1939, 113.
2. See, for example, Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology* 32 (May 1928): 881–93. Park's sociological papers on "the marginal man" were reprinted in *The Collected Papers of Robert Ezra Park*, vol. 1: *Race and Culture*, ed. Everett Cherrington Hughes, Charles S. Johnson, Jitsuichi Masuoka, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth (1950), 345–92. Also see Park's introduction to E. V. Stonequist, *The Marginal Man* (1937).
3. Thorstein Veblen, "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe" (1919), in *The Portable Veblen*, ed. Max Lerner (1948), 475.
4. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *Soziologie*, trans. Donald N. Levine (1908), 685–91.
5. Mills, "Reflection, Behavior, and Culture," 113.
6. Charles Wright Mills, *Soviet Diary*, 195, in my possession.
7. Charles Wright Mills to Fred Jordon, November 3, 1960, in my possession.
8. Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), 7.
9. Lord Byron, "The Corsair" in *The Works of Lord Byron*, vol. 3, *Poetry*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1966), 237, lines 271–72.
10. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983).
11. Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (1966), 107. Carmichael read *The Power Elite* in a study group at Howard University. Stokely Carmichael, with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution* (2003), 131.
12. See Charles Wright Mills, "Women: The Darling Little Slaves," in *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (1963).
13. Nor does Geary mention Mills' involvement with Betty Friedan's "Intellectual Resources Pool," which she formed in 1958 as an educational initiative in Rockland County, New York. Mills, one of the first persons Friedan invited to participate, spoke at Clarkstown High School on the theme of "Creativity: How It Functions in the Arts and Sciences." See folder 346, "IRP Programs, 1958–1960," box 9, Betty Friedan Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University; and Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (1998), 171–79.
14. Clarence Ayres to Professor Perry, February 9, 1939, box 3F291, Clarence Ayres Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.
15. H. Stuart Hughes, "A Politics of Peace," *Commentary* 27 (February 1959): 118.
16. Don Martindale, "The Monologue: Hans H. Gerth," *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology* 19 (January–April 1982): 105.
17. Joan Gordon, "Interview with Paul Lazarsfeld," August 26, 1962, Columbia Oral History, p. 368.