

# The conflicting theories for social order sociology essay



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With his conflict theories and an ardent critique of the social order, C. Wright Mills promotes the concept of the sociological imagination throughout his work. Wright Mills felt that sociologist intellectuals had a lot to offer the world and that these intellectuals were not doing enough to bring about social change. He returned again and again to the subject of power and as Aronowitz points out, power was a central category which permeates Mills' social thought, especially the mechanisms used by the elites in economy and social institutions (Aronowitz 2003). '... the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the political order, that clue is the decline of politics as genuine and public debate of alternative decisions' (Mills 1956, 274). There has never been a better time to examine the central themes of C. Wright Mills work or, indeed, his theories on the 'power elite'. This is a time in Irish politics, but especially a time in the Irish economy, when the theories of Wright Mills can be brought to bear in an arena that is indicative of the 'power elite' he described in his book. This essay will address the theories of C. W. Wright Mills using the current Irish political and economic state of the country as contemporary examples, as well as some reference to global contemporary issues. In his books 'White Collar' (1951) and 'The Power Elite' (Mills 1956), he identifies three elites in American society, Economic, Military and Political. Although his theories were mainly focused on American society, his pessimism might be allayed if he were alive today to see the way his theories have played out in the global contemporary social world. Throughout Mills' writings, he makes his work accessible as he does not use complicated academic language, believing that sociology had a major part to play in life, therefore, it needed to be understood by those outside sociological circles. He also believes that we should learn from our history

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and use it to make a better life as what happens in the world affects us all. ' Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (C. W. Mills 1959, 3).

When people cherish some set of values and do not feel any threat to them, they experience well-being. When they cherish values but do feel them to be threatened, they experience a crisis - either as a personal trouble or as a public issue. And if all their values seem involved, they feel the total threat of panic (C. W. Mills 1959, 11).

Sharing his outlook with that of Max Weber on the subject of bureaucracy and rationalisation, Mills uses Weber to argue for a more politically and morally engaged society.

In his book *White Collar* (1951), Mills argues that organised labour was depoliticised and too passive with white collar workers becoming more automated. With the growth of the division of labour, the number of routine jobs for the middle class white collar workers increased with a lot more workers answering to a reducing management structure. White collar work was just as dull and repetitive as blue collar work, where as blue collar workers have their unions; the white collar workers were becoming unorganised and dependent on the substantial bureaucracies and the higher levels of management for their existence. So, ' instead of the new middle classes serving as carriers of a revitalised agenda of social reform, Mills thought that they would become a depoliticized mass controlled by bureaucratic elites and a profit-driven consumer culture' (Seidman 2008, 95). The growth of the affluent, or at least comfortable, middle class was to

bring with it a stability and easing of class conflict, however, for Mills this brought with it a loss of autonomy, ' a society of happy robots unaware that they are tumbling into a social hell' (Seidman 2008, 95). As Mills himself writes,

Estranged from community and society in a context of distrust and manipulation; alienated from work and, on the personality market, from self; expropriated of individual rationality, and politically apathetic - these are the new little people, the unwilling vanguard of modern society. These are some of the circumstances for the acceptance of which their hopeful training has quite unprepared them (C. W. Mills, *White Collar. The American Middle Classes* 1951, xviii-xix).

One only has to look at the rise of the ' Celtic Tiger' era in Ireland for a perfect example of this theory. When things were good in the country the people just went with the flow, getting caught up in the new money, higher earnings, more leisure time and better lifestyles than their parents had before them. They carried on automatically voting the same party back into power, each time losing another piece of their autonomy. The people's choice was concentrated on the trappings that came with the increased earnings and they did not question, then, complete shock when the economy collapses and the people do not know what to do. They do not know who to blame and when they eventually start to blame the government, they forget that it was them who put them into power either by voting or even worse, by not voting at all. Unlike previous generations where people worked up to white collar work, it became the norm to get a white collar job here in Ireland and the blue collar workers had to be drafted in from other parts of Europe.

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An interesting fact to arise from all of this is that for the first time in the history of the state, Irish parents are better off than their offspring.

Throughout the history of our state, the children having been in receipt of good educations and getting higher paid jobs than their parents had so subsequently, were always in a better financial position during the leaner times and times of recession. Now, it is the children that are worse off while the parents have the means for a slightly more comfortable life. The workers were being sold the idea of a consumerist society that in turn sold the illusion of freedom and choice, by the rise of mass society and the ever increasing power of a corporate society. These ideas were sold by the elites who control the companies and institutions, what Mills refers to as 'The Power Elite'.

Mills saw the emergence of three types of elites in society and these were the economic elite, the military elite and the political elite. He was writing post World War II and the military had become the nation's security blanket, but he saw the elites as being interchangeable. Those in power, had power not only in military positions, but also in the corporate world and in the political world. Those who had gained power in the military throughout the war and those who had gained power from the economy of the war were now those who took to the political arena. Those who had power kept it among themselves and controlled the now depoliticised masses.

Political decentralization gave way to consolidation in the twentieth century.

The growth of big business greatly stimulated the concentration of wealth; technological advances, colonial expansion, World War I, and the Great

Depression promoted the enlargement of the federal government.

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Additionally two successive wars and the evolution of a military-industrial complex helped to transform the military into a major social force in the United States. By the post war years, the concentration of economic wealth in corporate hands, of political power in the nation government, and of military power in the federal military establishment had evolved to a point where whoever occupied the top positions in these three institutions exercised enormous power (Seidman 2008, 95-96).

Mills argues that the elites, between them, dominate and control vast bureaucratic organisations in modern society. Contemporary examples of such elites and corporations are people like Rupert Murdoch, born in Australia holding US citizenship since 1985, owner of forty per cent of global media giant News Corporation, a company with interests in brands such as Fox News, Twentieth Television, Sky Television, Star television (China), myspace. com, Harper Collins publishers, a range of tabloid and broad sheet newspapers; or Silvio Berlusconi, an Italian media mogul who is, at this point in time, the Italian Prime Minister and owner of the Italian Fininvest media empire - which controls in excess of 50 companies, who also has other financial interests in the insurance and banking sectors as well as construction, food production and a department store (Devereux 2007, 103-104) and Bill Gates, founder of The Microsoft Corporation, which is controls a vast amount of personal computers and computer programmes in most homes and offices globally. These people control what people see or hear in the media, a very powerful and controlling means of communication today. With such power they can exercise their will against others and because they are part of the elite, are not challenged by the existing aristocratic class.

Whilst they operate and keep the power among themselves, this leads to a decline of politics as genuine public debate of alternative ideas.

The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences..... they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations, they run the machinery of state and claim it prerogatives. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centred the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy (C. W. Mills 1956, 3-4)

One only has to look at the Oireachtas (Irish National Parliament) to see a fine example of the ruling power elite in the way in which a large proportion of the sitting T. D.'s (Teachta Dála- elected representatives) are members of families who have being elected for generations. To start at the top with the Taoiseach, Mr Brian Cowen, his father before him served as a sitting TD, other family names that are in this Irish political power elites are, Hanaffin, Coughlan, Lenihan, Cosgrave, Childers, to name but a few.

Mills saw the social backgrounds of these elites, coming from higher income professional classes, native born Americans, urban and from the East of the U. S., mainly protestant and mostly college graduates, as a key factor of unity among the elite. They attend the same schools, Ivy League universities, go to the same exclusive clubs, belong to the same establishments and organisations, and are also linked through marriage.

Mills sees the unity of the elite was shown by ' the interchangeability of top

roles rests upon the parallel development of the top jobs in each of the big three domains' (C. W. Mills 1956, 288). For Mills these power elite are the top of other powers within society and are dangerous not only by the decisions they make but those they do not make. He also refers to other levels of power, a middle level and a bottom level of power in society. The bottom level are the masses who are unorganized, powerless, ill informed, apathetic and being controlled from above. Mills regarded this as the root of a lot of the problems in society. The middle level of power did not represent the masses or have any effect on the power of the elite, nor did they question elite policies and through this did not offer any alternatives.

The top of modern American society is increasingly unified and often seems wilfully co-ordinated: at the top there has emerged elite of power. The middle levels are a drifting set of stalemated balancing forces: the middle does not link the bottom with the top. The bottom of this society is fragmented and even as a passive fact, increasingly powerless at the bottom there is emerging a mass society (C. W. Mills 1956, 324).

This last quotation has a ring of truth to it in today's Ireland with the banking crisis, but even more so with the crises the Irish economy. Whilst the global financial crisis was triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in America in 2008, it also triggered a crisis in the Irish banking system, but the Irish crisis was aided and assisted by the collapse of the property sector. As Fintan O' Toole points out in his book *Ship of Fools* (2010), the levels of corruptness and cronyism in Irish politics contributed to the crash of the Irish economy and the collapse of the Irish banking system (O'Toole 2009).

O'Toole sees two big problems; Ireland acquired a hyper-capitalist economy  
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on the back of a corrupt, dysfunctional political system. The interesting point, which relates to Mills writings is that O'Toole's most recent book, *Enough is Enough* (2010), refers to the elite making all the decisions about the running of the country, but with nothing but disdain and contempt of the middle and lower classes in Ireland. Mills writes

We cannot assume today that men must in the last resort be governed by their own consent. Among the means of power that now prevail is the power to manage and to manipulate the consent of men. That we do not know the limits of such power - and that we hope it does have limits - does not remove the fact that much power today is successfully employed without the sanction of the reason or the conscience of the obedient (C. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* 1959, 41).

In today's time of crisis, with entire nations on the verge of collapse, Charles Wright Mills would be exonerated and celebrated for his sociological work and his sociological discourse . He was extremely pessimistic with the outlook for society and we must ask the question, if his pessimism was well founded?

For Mills, the sociologist must ask of themselves what the structure of this particular society is as a whole. He also questioned just where the society stands in human history and what varieties of men and women prevailed in the society or the period. He wished sociologists to be aware of social structures, as he believed they were in a position to be able to understand the links between these social structures and peoples lived experiences.

This, he believed, was using ones' sociological imagination and sociology's

role was to ' translate personal troubles into public issues (C. W. Mills, The Sociological Imagination 1959, 5).