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Public Intellectuals: Academics and Movements

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An editor's grouping of books for review can be a significant act of political-intellectual creativity. That is the case here: I would not have thought to pair these books, but that pairing has led me to think about them, and about C. Wright Mills, in new ways.

Tom Hayden and Zweigenhaft-Domhoff take Mills in opposite directions: Hayden has no footnotes or citations of any kind even for direct quotations, and does not engage with the mass of Mills's empirical evidence, but is instead interested only in the theory, the conception of society advanced by Mills. Reading Hayden's intellectual biography of Mills, a reader might not recognize that Mills systematically collected and presented huge quantities of empirical evidence. Hayden has a bibliography, grouped by interest or topic, not in alphabetical order, that lists 275 items. In writing *Radical Nomad* he clearly read widely, but when he presented quotations he did not see it as necessary to provide the author, never mind the page number.

Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, on the other hand, replicate Mills's *Power Elite* empirical analyses with a focus on "diversity," meticulously and rigorously assessing the number of people from one or another group—Jews, women, blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, gay men and lesbians—who are identifiable as members of the power elite. The power elite is defined as all those who occupy certain specified positions in the corporate elite, the cabinet, the military elite, Congress, and the Supreme Court. What Zweigenhaft and Domhoff do is very clear, rigorous, meticulously researched, open to inspection by others who can verify or refute it, or advance alternative definitions. They go beyond what Mills did in creative ways, for example, in their blind rankings of the skin color of samples of African American and Latino members of the power elite. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff not only do head counts, but also provide individual narratives for many of the key players. This is valuable and engaging research, and the book is both a good read and an invaluable resource for capsule information and a list of sources

Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times, by **Tom Hayden**. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006. 226pp. \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 9781594512027.

Diversity in the Power Elite: How It Happened, Why It Matters, by **Richard L. Zweigenhaft** and **G. William Domhoff**. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 278pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780742536999.

about each of these "diverse" members of the power elite.

But there is a great deal the book does *not* do, and does not even attempt. Despite the book's sub-title ("how it happened, why it matters"), the authors have but a handful of timid pages that attempt to assess the meaning and significance of the diversification of the power elite. This diversification, they argue, was a result of external pressure (from the civil rights movement, and even more so from urban revolts), and primarily serves a legitimating function. Like elite theorists everywhere, they conclude that this diversification may have helped strengthen the power elite:

It often takes only a small number of upwardly mobile members of previously excluded groups, perhaps as few as 2 percent, to undermine an excluded group's definition of who is "us" and who is "them," which contributes to a decline in collective protest and disruption and increases striving for individual mobility. (P. 246)

Forestalling revolt by members of minority (or, in the case of women, majority) groups is undoubtedly one of the purposes of elite diversification. In addition, however, in America today it is difficult for people to see or deal with class differences; for the most part, we see class only when it coincides with race or gender. In America today vast inequalities of wealth and power are not seen as posing a pressing problem—but if

the power elite were exclusively white and male its fundamental unfairness would be dramatically more visible—and more subject to challenge.

A diverse power elite probably plays another important role. Michael Useem's *The Inner Circle* (New York: Oxford University Press 1984) argues that one of the most important functions of a corporate board is to provide an information scan, a way of learning about developments of significance from people who are themselves insider players. In today's world it may be that the corporate elite finds it useful to get a perspective, and reports of community developments—concerns, from even a thoroughly atypical (because elite) woman, African American, or Latino.

Zweigenhaft and Domhoff do not make a serious attempt to flip the question over and to ask: What parts of the power elite supported and opposed diversifying? Suppose we assess corporations, rather than this or that minority group: what are the characteristics of those corporations (or political groups) that *have* diversified, and what are the characteristics of the corporations (or political groups) that have *not*? To what extent has the power elite been successful in its diversification, that is, has the process accomplished its intended ends, or brought unforeseen benefits, or involved—what from the perspective of the power elite are—significant costs? Given that this diversification was a response to the pressure of the civil rights movement, is the power elite cutting back on its diversification, or has it become a self-reinforcing process? Are the current reasons, and motivation, and character of this diversification fundamentally different from those of a generation ago? (These last two questions are discussed briefly.) Moreover, it seems likely that if a modern-day Mills were addressing these issues, s/he would look beyond the borders of the United States. To what degree is the power elite diversifying in Britain, France, Germany, Brazil, India, or South Africa?

Zweigenhaft and Domhoff are, of course, academics. Although they are far from typical academics—Domhoff is a significant public intellectual, author of some of the most widely read works of sociology—neither have they been major players in social movements. Tom Hayden, on the other hand, has

always been based in the world of politics and movements; since his student days he has made only cameo appearances at universities. *Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times* was Hayden's Master's thesis, written in 1964 and only now issued as a book. As an undergraduate, Hayden attended the University of Michigan, was editor of its student newspaper, traveling in the South, "documenting and helping the rising southern student movement" (as Dick Flacks notes on page 1 of one of the book's three introductory essays). After Hayden graduated in 1961, he joined the movement; not long thereafter he drafted the Port Huron Statement, became the national president of Students for a Democratic Society, and returned to Ann Arbor to found a chapter of SDS and to enroll in graduate school in political science.

As Dick Flacks, Stanley Aronowitz, and Charles Lemert remind us in their introductory essays, this historical context and the historical moment of writing need to be kept in mind. In the spring of 1964, Tom Hayden was writing prior to the major white northern student movement, but after SNCC and others had built a radical mass movement in the South. C. Wright Mills was the dominant American intellectual for students of the *early* New Left; of course, there weren't many other credible contenders for the position. Mills was not only a prolific radical thinker, but also a life style rebel—the cover of *Radical Nomad* shows Mills in leather and boots on his motorcycle. Mills died in 1962, and perhaps therefore, we should give him the benefit of the doubt—although it's also quite possible that his legacy is the greater because of his death at that time, before he could diminish his standing.

For the crucial reality is that Mills never connected to, nor took seriously, the civil rights movement. At the end of his life Mills was desperately searching for some force that could be an agent of change—but completely ignoring the force that already was that agent of change, and that launched a thousand other movements. Mills went to Cuba and celebrated Fidel Castro and the revolution—but Mills never went to the South to speak to the students (and others) who were creating what in many ways must be seen as an American revolution. This is, of course, in sharp contrast to Hayden, who both traveled in the South and joined its (mostly black) stu-

dent movement. Mills's explicit statements strongly rejected racism, but it is hard not to see a significant racial component to this white Texan's blindness to the movement arising around him. Almost all the white males of Mills's generation neglected issues of race and gender, but nowhere is this blindness clearer than in Mills's despair at finding any agent of change, any force capable of standing up to the power elite and shaking the mass society, at exactly the time such a movement was forcefully announcing its presence.

Hayden, like others of that early generation who idolized Mills, is gentle on Mills for his neglect of the civil rights movement, and of course Hayden himself was writing at a time (the late spring of 1964) when it was not yet clear that Freedom Summer, the civil rights movement, and Vietnam would help spark a northern (mostly white) student movement. Hayden focuses on Mills's theoretical position, his analysis of society, and the way that analysis relates to the possibilities of political movement. Although he presents a handful of (very) simple tables drawn from Mills, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on theoretical positioning, and the ways the work does or does not open up the possibility of a mass movement for change. It is as if Hayden and Zweigenhaft-Domhoff were writing about two entirely different people, each named C. Wright Mills.

Hayden's principal focus is on Mills's Weberian orientation, and Mills's insistence on the autonomy of three separate realms—corporations, politics, and the military. Hayden explicitly pushes for an analysis that draws more heavily on Marx, on the unity of the three realms, and on the priority of the economy. Hayden writes:

This continuity of social structure, reflected in the institutions of society, seems a more valid approach than Mills's view of separate institutional orders together articulating the social structure. This largely is because it permits a less mysterious manner of explaining an identity of interests among the separate orders. In Mills's conceptual framework, correspondence, coincidence, and convergence *happen* without human intention. (Pp. 123–124)

Hayden argued that rather than viewing the military elite as having independence, it would be better to view it “as an elite with ‘autonomy’ *within* the broad purposes of the political economy” (p. 132). Hayden praised Mills for moving beyond Marx's inadequate attention to the superstructure, but argued that Mills's notion of the power elite missed the “inherent *instability* in capitalist political economy” (p. 135).

Hayden argued as well that the problem in assessing Mills's analysis compared to Hayden's own, was that (up to that point) “the elites *have not been profoundly challenged*. Likewise, it is impossible to gauge the effect that ‘radical leadership’ might have on popular consciousness because such leadership has not appeared” (p. 143). The test of these theories, then, would be a profound challenge to the elite, combined with radical leadership of a movement. Dick Flacks argues that “Hayden's effort to find coherent interconnections and contradictions between economic and military power was theoretically and practically richer than Mills's mid-fifties emphasis on their analytic independence” (p. 9), and I wholeheartedly agree. Mills's most significant contribution to elite analysis—his insistence on the co-equal status and independence of the military—seems totally wrong and has not had a significant impact on later studies of power in America.

Hayden's analysis, for the points discussed above and much else besides, seems to me consistently more powerful than Mills's own analysis. That is of course in part, but I would say only in part, because Hayden had the benefit of writing eight eventful years after Mills published *The Power Elite*. More important, I would argue, was that Mills wrote from the isolation and despair of a period of stability, while Hayden was infused with the insight that comes from participation in struggle. Hayden is wrestling with issues that, over the next few decades, have been important to the New Left and its successors. Hayden wrote before the revived left's serious engagement with Marx, and obviously before the development of feminist thought and attempts to simultaneously engage race, class, and gender; these factors limit his analysis. It is clear, however, that Hayden could have been a leading intellectual, a social analyst of significance.

In the Marxist tradition, the leading political activists have also been the leading theorists: Marx himself, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Gramsci. In the New Left, on the other hand, there has been a split: for the most part, the leading political activists of the 1960s have not left a body of social thought of significance, certainly not one written in conjunction with their activism. To better understand our world, or even the character of the day's struggles, people do not read Bob Moses (Parris), John Lewis, Ella Baker, Tom Hayden, or Abby Hoffman. The feminist movement produced more of a unity of theory and praxis. Some white New Leftists—Dick Flacks, Todd Gitlin, Bob Ross—produced academically serious work, but for the most part that was done in a subsequent life as academics, not in the heat of struggle. People still read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, but not for its social theory. I am not sure why we have this divide—or perhaps the question should be why and how Marxists have had the remarkable ability to simultaneously be major contributors to both theory and practice, and to do so in ways where each informs the other. Hayden poses this question, since he was a political leader, and as *Radical Nomad* demonstrates, had the (never realized) potential to simultaneously be a major theorist.

One possible explanation is the increasing importance of the university itself. As Rebecca Solnit points out (*The Nation* April 3, 2006), in the early 1960s, in the space of two to three years, three key books came out that shaped subsequent movements: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mys-*

tique (1963). Each of the three books was a major intellectual contribution, and each was also a decisive political intervention. The authors, the books, and the movements were (in some ways) benefited by the fact that at that time America's colleges and universities de facto excluded women. Marx talked of the proletariat as doubly "free": free of [that is, removed from] any material means of support [land, access to the commons], and free to engage in wage labor [since they were removed from feudal obligations]. So too, in the early 1960s women were doubly "free": freed from occupying positions in academia, and thus free to write books freed from the straightjacket of academic conventions. At least these women thus became more important public intellectuals, and had a larger impact on world history, than any sociologist of their time.

Tom Hayden is and was a leading activist, and he wrote an intellectually significant work. But he wrote it as a student, as a master's thesis, in an academic style (the absence of footnotes aside), and it reached no significant public audience, not even within the New Left Movement. Richard Zweigenhaft and Bill Domhoff have written a more engaging and accessible book, one that is based on meticulous scholarship, crammed with facts, and nonetheless is a good read. I might well use it in my courses, but would be shocked to find it sitting on the shelves of a bookstore, never mind on a best seller list. And I'd be even more shocked to find activists using it as a guide to practice. As Michael Burawoy has argued, we need to rebuild a public sociology—and I would add, re-create the scholar-activists that characterized Marxism at its height.