

The “Union of the Power and the Intellect”: C. Wright Mills and the Labor Movement

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In his “Letter to the New Left” of 1960, C. Wright Mills attacked the “labor metaphysic” that held out “the working class” of the advanced capitalist societies as *the* historic agency.¹ Mills’ letter marked the completion of his shift from Old Left to New Left thinking. At the heart of this shift was the question of agency, of what group the left identified as its vehicle for social transformation. Old Left intellectuals believed that allying with labor was the best strategy for rectifying the U.S.’s persistent injustices and inequalities. By 1950, however, many left intellectuals saw labor as hopelessly embedded in the dominant political order and began to seek other movements with the potential to enact their social critique. In 1960, as Mills altogether dismissed the political potential of organized labor, he placed his hopes on the New Left—a “young intelligentsia” consisting of the emerging student movement and Third World revolutionaries.

Most of the New Leftists whom Mills addressed in his “Letter” were probably unaware that Mills himself had once been a firm believer in the labor metaphysic. The image of Mills that the New Left constructed remains dominant today: a motorcycle-riding maverick who dissented from the complacent 1950s in his classic works *White Collar*, *The Power Elite*, and *The Sociological Imagination*. This captivating caricature of Mills has long overshadowed the significance of his involvement with the labor movement in the 1940s. For a number of years, culminating in his publication of *The New Men of Power* in 1948, Mills was heavily engaged with labor’s cause and deeply drawn to labor’s promise. His later disillusionment with labor profoundly shaped the nature of the radical social critique for which he became famous. As with many other leftists of his era, Mills’ connection with labor played an important role in his intellectual development.

Scholars have only recently begun to explore labor’s influence on intellectuals in the postwar years. For example, Daniel Horowitz has demonstrated that Betty Friedan’s involvement with unions as a labor journalist in the 1940s and early 1950s helped shape her commitment to feminism. The lack of a vibrant labor-centered social movement in the postwar years limited the work that made Friedan famous: without an analysis of the issues facing working-class women, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) had diminished relevance for those who were not white, suburban, middle-class housewives.² However,

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¹“Letter to the New Left,” in Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *Power, Politics, and People* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1963), 256. Originally published in *New Left Review* (Sept./Oct., 1960).

²Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).



FIG. C. Wright Mills.

there remains little mention of labor in the massive scholarship on the New York intellectuals. Yet, many New York intellectuals were intensely interested in the leftist potential of the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s. The lack of a vibrant labor movement in the postwar period is a neglected cause of their famous deradicalization.³

While intellectual historians are only now discovering the importance of the labor movement for shaping postwar social thought, labor historians have long recognized that the second half of the 1940s was a watershed for labor and U.S. politics. The years following World War II saw a reinvigoration of the labor movement from its wartime dormancy. Never before and never since has a greater percentage of U.S. workers

³Even Alan Wald's, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), the most insightful and detailed account of the political trajectory of the New York intellectuals, does not fully explore the significant impact that labor's postwar shift had on this group of thinkers.

belonged to unions. Throughout the war, labor's rank and file had demonstrated its militancy in a series of wildcat strikes. When the CIO put an end to its no-strike pledge after the war's conclusion, many labor leaders were quick to exploit that militancy. Indeed, the postwar strike wave of 1945–1946 constituted the most massive work stoppage in U.S. history.

In the immediate postwar period, many labor leaders and their labor-liberal supporters were drawn to social-democratic ideas. Though wartime government agencies like the War Labor Board (WLB) and the Office of Price Administration (OPA) had rendered many disappointing decisions for labor, their existence nevertheless raised expectations for significant labor influence at the highest national level through tripartite structures for economic planning. Prominent figures within labor's orbit pondered the prospect of a labor party, speculating that the CIO's Political Action Committee would either transform the Democratic Party into a labor party or provide the nucleus for a third party. The CIO's Operation Dixie organizing campaign in the South sought to gain power in a region of the country that had stymied labor's national agenda and it held out the promise of civil rights gains for black workers. Given the broad social-democratic agenda of ambitious union leaders and the signs of militancy in the rank and file, labor's progressive supporters had good reason to hope that unions would play a pivotal role in shaping the postwar political order.⁴

The ability of labor to attract intellectuals to its cause was an indication of its postwar potential as a social movement. While unions have always employed the services of a number of staff intellectuals, other intellectuals have been drawn to labor only when it has promised a wider political transformation that could utilize and advance their social critique. It was this vision of a "union of the power and the intellect" that attracted left intellectuals like Mills to labor. In the immediate postwar years, Mills shared his enthusiasm for the labor movement with a number of different groups that he was in contact with: New York intellectuals such as Irving Howe and Daniel Bell; the Inter-Union Institute for Labor and Democracy, a consortium of labor officials and intellectuals headed by the long-time labor journalist J. B. S. Hardman; the Trotskyists in Max Schachtman's Workers' Party; and intellectually sophisticated union officials such as Nat Weinberg of the United Automobile Workers (UAW). While each of these groups had a different political agenda, they all believed in labor's promise as a vanguard social movement.

But if Mills' case demonstrates the enthusiasm with which many left intellectuals viewed labor in the immediate postwar years, it also reveals how their later disillusionment with labor significantly shaped their depiction of the postwar U.S. Ultimately, labor's bid for a more progressive social order in the postwar period faltered on anti-communist politics, internal divisiveness, the entrenchment of the labor leadership,

⁴A number of excellent studies have been written about this period. The most significant ones include: Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 122–152; Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?", *ibid.*, 185–211; Robert Zieger, *The CIO: 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 212–293; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1–82; David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 173–255; George Lipsitz, *A Rainbow at Midnight* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Barbara Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988).

and a determined business counter-attack. Despite the promise that it raised for a dominant role for labor in U.S. society, labor became a pluralistic interest group, forced to operate within the mainstream of Cold War politics, instead of the vanguard that left intellectuals had hoped for.

Labor's postwar transformation from social movement to interest group brought about the loss of Mills' vision of an alliance between intellectuals and labor. In addition to Mills, intellectuals such as Daniel Bell, Dwight MacDonald, Irving Howe, and Harvey Swados became disillusioned with the labor movement in the 1940s. Labor's failure to move in a more radical direction in the postwar period had a profound effect on left-wing intellectuals who had considered labor the only force able to counteract the power of corporations and the state. With no identifiable agent for social transformation, intellectual radicals of the 1950s pessimistically viewed the U.S. as a consensus society that had effectively suppressed opposition, and they tenuously held on to the intellectual's responsibility to dissent from that society as the left's last hope.

New York Intellectuals and the Idea of a Labor Party

In the 1950s, Mills would remember his period as a labor intellectual in these terms: "When I wrote *New Men of Power* I was being the Wobbly [*sic*], about 10 or 12 years later than most."⁵ Indeed, unlike most left-wing intellectuals of his time, Mills had little connection with the labor movement in the 1930s. Many of the New York intellectuals, who played a predominant role in the left-wing thought of the 1930s and 1940s grew up as members of youth socialist organizations who matriculated to City College, where they participated in sectarian debates in the school cafeteria. Mills, on the other hand, was born in Texas in 1918. Rising to maturity in the Lone Star state, Mills was far removed from the charged political environment experienced by other young intellectuals of the 1930s.

It was not until the early 1940s, while completing his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, that Mills became politicized and the nature of the labor movement became a salient issue for him.⁶ After taking a post at the University of Maryland in 1941, Mills came into contact with a number of New York's anti-Stalinist intellectuals, and began publishing reviews and articles in political magazines such as *Partisan Review*, *New Leader*, and *New Republic*. Following the lead of the New York radicals, Mills came to rest his political hopes above all on the formation of a labor party, believing that only a broadly based labor movement able to form its own political organization could challenge the increasing power of big business in the U.S. state.

In 1942, Mills published an article in the *New Leader* in which he attacked the increasing coziness of corporations and the Roosevelt administration, lamenting that "business and 'government' are increasingly becoming one." However, Mills failed to identify any means for countering this trend. Indeed, the historian cum labor official Broadus Mitchell took Mills to task for this oversight, criticizing him for failing to consider the possible role of labor.⁷ Apparently, Mills took Mitchell's suggestion to

⁵"For 'Ought,' " *Sept.* 19, 1953, Charles Wright Mills Collection, Center for American History, Univ. of Texas, Austin (henceforth referred to as "UT"), Box 4B 390.

⁶On the development of Mills' interest in politics, see Richard Gillam, "C. Wright Mills: An Intellectual Biography, 1916-1948" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1972), 76-84, 127-156. As Gillam points out, Mills' politicization was evident in his dissertation, *A Sociological Account of Some Aspects of Pragmatism*, completed in 1942. Gillam's dissertation remains without question the best account of Mills for the period that it covers.

⁷"Collectivism and the 'Mixed-up' Economy," in *Power, Politics, and People*, 185. Originally published in *New Leader*, Dec. 19, 1942.

heart, for in 1943 Mills wrote that "The chief social power upon which a genuine democracy can rest today is labor."⁸ Just months later, Mills was defending the right of the United Mine Workers under John L. Lewis to strike in defiance of the government's "Little Steel" formula, even though the strike outraged many by threatening the war effort. In defending Lewis, Mills criticized the CIO for maintaining its wartime no-strike pledge and for tying its political program too closely to the Democratic Party.

Even as Mills accepted the necessity of a labor party, he predicted that "it won't come into being at all in the foreseeable future."⁹ The war years did not inspire hope in those who wanted to see unions push the country in a leftward direction, since the need for organized labor to subordinate its agenda to winning the war limited its ability to play the role of a vanguard social movement. Indeed, just when Mills accepted the need for a labor party, many on the anti-Stalinist left began to wonder whether it was a real possibility.

By the end of the war, two of Mills' closest friends among the New York intellectuals, Daniel Bell and Dwight MacDonald, were becoming skeptical about the political direction of the labor movement. In "The Coming Tragedy of American Labor," which appeared in the March, 1944 issue of *politics*, Bell argued that, in the "nightmarish" postwar order, labor would accept a position of "junior partner" to U.S. business. Labor, Bell argued, would be forced to play a dependent role in the making of a postwar order, as an unimaginative labor leadership tied to the Democratic Party would be unable to "draw the conclusion of the political logic, which means playing an independent role and beginning the formation of a national labor Party."¹⁰

One of the reasons that MacDonald founded *politics* in 1944 was that he saw a new potential in labor. In one of the magazine's first issues, he confidently predicted that "regardless of what the CIO leadership thinks or does now, *some* kind of third party, mostly based on labor, seems in the cards in the next two years."¹¹ But hope quickly turned to disappointment. The former Trotskyist dismissed the postwar strike wave as exciting only to those "Old Believers in the class struggle doctrine."¹² In his seminal "The Root is Man," part of the *politics* "New Roads" series, MacDonald concluded that the "modern labor union" was just another "bureaucratized mass-organization which simply extends the conventional patterns of society into the working class and has little significance as an expression of a specific working-class consciousness."¹³

There were many, however, who disagreed with MacDonald. In the pages of *politics*, Lewis Coser and Irving Howe lambasted "The Root is Man," and maintained that it was still both necessary and possible for labor to serve as the backbone of a movement for leftist social transformation. Even Daniel Bell continued to hold out social-democratic hopes for labor in the postwar years.¹⁴ During the war, the left-wing intellectuals' faith in the labor movement had seemed to be cracking under the strain of labor's close

⁸"The Political Gargoyles: Business as Power," in *Power, Politics, and People*, 75. Originally published in *New Republic*, April 12, 1943.

⁹"The Case for the Coal Miners," *New Republic*, May 24, 1943, 697.

¹⁰"The Coming Tragedy of American Labor," *politics*, April, 1944, 37-42.

¹¹"The MCF: A New Third Party," *politics*, April, 1944, 66; Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight MacDonald and the politics Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 14.

¹²"Rebellion?—or Reconversion?," *politics*, March, 1946, 78.

¹³"The Root is Man," *politics*, March, 1946, 107.

¹⁴Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 165-171.

relationship to the state, and the question of labor's potential would divide leftist intellectuals after the war. With the coming of postwar militancy, however, hopes in labor would rise again, and this time Mills would be an active participant.

Labor and Nation: The Labor Leader and the Research Intellectual

After the conclusion of the war, there were many signs that labor was on the move again. The end of the wartime no-strike pledge allowed the CIO's leaders to support independent and militant action at the point of production. Indeed, a massive wave of strikes swept the nation in 1945 and 1946. A series of wildcat strikes, which began during the war, and a handful of general strikes and mass walkouts in 1945 and 1946, pointed to a new militancy among the rank and file. At the same time, there was more talk in labor circles about forming a third party, as Truman did little to win the same loyalty from labor that Roosevelt had.¹⁵ With a labor party now a distinct possibility, left intellectuals like Mills developed a more optimistic view of labor's potential. For Mills, personal developments abetted his intense involvement with labor in the postwar years. In 1945, Mills moved to New York City after landing a post at Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR), allowing him to finally be at the center of the action.

One development that signaled the new enthusiasm of intellectuals for labor in the postwar environment was the publication of *Labor and Nation* beginning in August, 1945, a magazine that put intellectual analysis in the service of the labor movement. The magazine was the principal project of the Inter-Union Institute for Labor and Democracy (IUI). Mills joined the IUI in 1946 and became a contributing editor to the magazine in April of that year.

The head of the IUI was the venerable labor journalist J. B. S. Hardman. From 1925 to 1944, Hardman edited *The Advance*, the official organ of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Mills would later dedicate *The New Men of Power* to Hardman, writing that "He will not be in agreement with many of the conclusions, but without his aid I should not have reached them."¹⁶ Indeed, though Hardman played a pivotal role in shaping Mills' thoughts on labor, his politics were more moderate than those of the anti-Stalinist intellectual circles that Mills had recently placed himself in. Though Hardman had a radical past, by the 1940s he was a good example of the social-democratic thinking that flourished in labor and liberal circles for a brief period in the postwar years. Hardman believed that a politicized labor movement had a real opportunity to push the U.S. in the sort of direction that European nations were headed. He advocated a left Keynesianism that would include centralized economic planning to ensure full employment and he supported corporatist institutions like the wartime WLB and OPA that had tripartite structures allowing business, labor, and the public voices in how economic planning would be conducted.¹⁷ Though Mills came to advance a more radical program for labor, he and Hardman both agreed on the need for a labor movement more intellectually aware of its direction and more willing to play a determining role in U.S. politics.

¹⁵George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 100–152, David Brody, "The Uses of Power II," *Workers in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 221–226.

¹⁶C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1971), 295.

¹⁷Hardman obituary, *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1968, 38. For the clearest expression of Hardman's views during this period, see "State of the Movement," in Hardman and Maurice Neufeld, eds., *American Labor* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 52–84. On labor-liberalism and its social-democratic manifestations in this period, see Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining."

The IUI itself was not so much an organization of like-minded individuals as a forum where men of different shades of the left (communists excluded) could discuss the state of the labor movement. This was the rationale behind *Labor and Nation*, which was intended to “air differences” and “clarify thinking.”¹⁸ Because it solicited a number of perspectives, the contributors to the magazine were an eclectic group. Labor leaders and politicians such as Philip Murray, Walter Reuther, William Green, David Dubinsky, William Leiserson, and Henry Wallace contributed pieces in 1946. The heart of *Labor and Nation*, however, was a group of staff intellectuals who typically served in their union’s education, research, or economics departments, represented on the editorial board by such men as Solomon Barkin and Broadus Mitchell. The group of contributors was rounded out by a number of left-wing New York City academics and intellectuals, including Robert Lynd, Ben Seligman, Eli Ginzburg, Henry David, Nathan Glazer, Waldo Frank, and Mills himself. Less inclined to be interested in the nuts and bolts of day-to-day union politics, this third group tended to offer a broader perspective. More radical than the other contributors, they often exhorted labor leaders to play a more active role in leftist politics.

While one of the main goals of *Labor and Nation* in bringing labor leaders and intellectuals together was to create a more educated and nationally aware labor leadership, it also hoped to foster a group of dedicated intellectuals “in the service of labor,” as the title of an IUI-planned collection of essays on intellectuals in the labor movement put it. Mills viewed the IUI as a “Fabian-like” organization in which union officials and thinkers could work together “for the benefit of working people.” He predicted that an alliance with labor would give intellectuals a new sense of purpose: “What some of them really want is to connect their skill and intelligence to a movement in which they can believe; they are ready to give a lot of energy to an organization that would harness these skills in the service of the left. And the left, to most of them, means labor.”¹⁹ More ambitiously, however, Mills hoped that intellectual involvement could push labor in a more politically radical direction.

Mills grappled with the question of “The Intellectual and the Labor Leader” in an address to the IUI on January 18, 1946, which later appeared in substantially revised form as “What Research Can Do for Labor,” published in the June–July, 1946 issue of *Labor and Nation*. In this essay, Mills argued that the intellectual played a critical role in making a collection of labor unions into a progressive labor *movement*: “The free-lance intellectual is often the political gadfly of the trade union leader. He generalizes the economic fight between workman and employer in a given trade or industry into a larger and broader battle, and he explicitly takes up the political aspect that this purely economic struggle sooner or later always comes to have.”²⁰ In assuming that the presence of intellectuals in the labor movement would help it move in a more politically radical direction, Mills borrowed on a strong tradition of thought about labor. For instance, Wisconsin School theorist Selig Perlman (with whom Mills had taken classes as a graduate student) attributed the existence of labor radicalism to the influence of intellectuals. Perlman famously attacked the “onrush of overpowering social mysticism” that leftist intellectuals felt when imagining labor’s potential role in society.²¹ Reacting against the job-conscious unionism that Perlman supported, Mills

¹⁸ *Labor and Nation*, Aug., 1945, 2–3.

¹⁹ “The Politics of Skill,” *Labor and Nation*, June–July, 1946, 35.

²⁰ “What Research Can Do for Labor,” *Labor and Nation*, June–July, 1946, 18.

²¹ Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1928), 281; Leon Fink, “Intellectuals versus ‘Workers’: Academic Requirements and the Creation of Labor History,” *In Search of the Working Class* (Urbana, IL: “University of Illinois Press, 1994), 201–235.

and others at the IUI thought the influence of intellectuals essential in helping labor play a broad political role.²²

But how could intellectuals like Mills influence the political stance of labor leaders? Because he felt that the practical experience of individual unions could no longer be the basis for long-term strategy, Mills felt that the labor leader would eventually have to “lean on the intellectual” if he wanted to “be in the know about the big scene.”²³ Yet, as Mills was acutely aware, the intellectual could not expect to influence labor leaders through the “sheer magic of his speech.” Unlike the Leninist third-party organizers whom he discussed, the “free-lance intellectual” had no power base with which to influence the decisions of labor leaders. Thus, Mills pointed to a number of concrete goals that the free-lance intellectual could help the labor leader achieve. He argued that research could contribute to labor unity by trying “to orient each [leader] to what other labor unions are doing at any particular time.” Since so much of the public’s information was biased against labor, objective research could itself help labor’s cause, such as by disproving the false impression that most labor leaders were foreign-born.²⁴ Finally, intellectuals could help with labor organizing by using market research techniques to survey the “market” for union membership, which could help organizers develop effective strategies for the “current southern drive” and for organizing white-collar workers.²⁵

For someone who first became interested in labor unions as the only potential force in society able to prevent the emergence of an undemocratic corporate-dominated society, these were modest goals indeed. Moreover, there was little in “What Research Can Do for Labor” that staked out a position for Mills more radical than that advanced by labor-liberals. It was Mills’ expressed hope that, by winning the confidence of labor leaders through performing concrete tasks, the intellectual could later advise them on “over-all plans and very big strategy.” Nevertheless, “What Research Can Do for Labor” seemed to propose a necessarily subordinate role for the intellectual with regard to the trade union leader. As he wrote in the first draft of the essay, the labor leader “has a good right to ask such a powerless man: ‘Just what good are you intellectuals to me right now?’” And Mills had added in the margin: “that’s just the way the leader will ask it; he has the power to ask it that way; and the free-lance intellectual has just got to get used to it.”²⁶ Though this sort of relationship threatened the critical independence of intellectuals that Mills so cherished and left unresolved the question of how exactly intellectuals were to infuse the labor movement with left-wing ideas, the fact that Mills was willing to commit himself to these relatively mundane tasks in the service of labor showed how much he had come to identify labor’s goals as his own.

In 1946, Mills set out to demonstrate what research could do for labor. In the spring of that year, he managed to get himself appointed head of the new Labor Research Division at the BASR. Given Mills’ increasing participation in the IUI, this was a fortuitous opportunity. Now Mills began using the tools of statistical sociology and public opinion research pioneered by his boss at the Bureau, Paul Lazarsfeld, to provide useful information to U.S. labor leaders. Though Mills had conducted a survey

²²See, for instance, Robert Lynd, “We Should be Clear as to What Are the Essentials and What Are the Historical Trappings of Democracy,” *Labor and Nation*, Feb./Mar., 1946, 33–39.

²³“What Research Can Do for Labor,” 4.

²⁴Mills had done this himself in a statistical study on “The Trade Union Leader: A Collective Portrait,” published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer, 1945.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 17–20.

²⁶“The Intellectual and the Trade Union Leader,” UT Box 4B 339, 9.

of labor leaders in 1944 while still a professor at Maryland, he now had the resources to do a much larger study. Upon taking his new position, Mills got to work, and in May of 1946 he sent out his first questionnaires to a number of AFL and CIO leaders. This survey would eventually provide the quantitative element of *The New Men of Power*. Later that year, Mills also embarked upon a “pilot study on the psychological resistances which people in white-collar work have against unionization,” in order to “develop more systematic devices to overcome them in unionization drives,” preliminary research for what would later become *White Collar*.²⁷

Mills intended his work at the Bureau to serve the purposes of the IUI. As early as November, 1945, Hardman and Mills had discussed the possibility of a series of polls on various labor issues, and the IUI supplied a sizeable portion of the funding for the BASR survey. Beginning with the November–December, 1946 issue of *Labor and Nation*, Mills wrote a regular column, “What the People Think,” designed to analyze the accuracy and significance of labor polls and which he used to present some of the findings of the BASR survey.²⁸ Overall, Mills found his work in the service of labor exhilarating: when a friend asked when he might drop by the Bureau for a visit, Mills replied that it was best to send him a note beforehand, because “sometimes at night or day I’m out with the proletariat.”²⁹

New Hopes for Radicalism

In a column appearing in the May–June, 1947 issue of *Labor and Nation*, Mills examined “Five Publics the Polls Don’t Catch.” He distinguished between the “politically passive” mass of people and a number of “politically alert” publics that were actively engaged in politics and had consistent viewpoints. Mills divided the politically alert into five publics—the far left, the independent left, the liberal center, the practical conservatives, and the sophisticated conservatives—and he examined the expectations that each had of labor leaders. The most important elements of “Five Publics the Polls Don’t Catch” were Mills’ description of a far left bloc, which marked his increasing involvement with the Trotskyist Workers Party, and his identification of an emerging group of sophisticated conservatives who posed a subtle threat for U.S. labor.

A strong anti-communist, Mills nevertheless downplayed the political power of the Communist Party, relegating it to a faction of the liberal center. To Mills, the far left consisted of a small number of Trotskyist sects with a clear and consistent program of “capitalism smashed and socialism with ‘worker’s control’ triumphant.” Though he did not name any groups, Mills was thinking of the Workers Party headed by Max Shachtman and the Socialist Workers Party headed by James Cannon. Unlike liberals, who primarily saw unions as economic interest groups, far leftists grasped labor’s political potential. Unlike the independent left of anti-Stalinist intellectuals, who wanted to believe in the radicalism of the rank and file, but lacked the “labor metaphysic that is required,” the far left saw unions as potentially radical. Thus, labor leaders were judged according to the extent to which they brought about a “real left-wing movement”; non-radical labor leaders were “really mis-leaders of the laboring class,” a bureaucratic caste that suppressed grass-roots radicalism.³⁰

²⁷Letter from Mills to Paul Lubow of UOPWA–CIO, 13 Nov., 1946, UT Box 4B 368.

²⁸*The New Men of Power*, 295, 300; Mills, “Memo to Lazarsfeld Re: Labor Research Division,” UT Box 4B 368.

²⁹Mills to Wilbert Moore, 9 April, 1946, UT Box 4B 395.

³⁰“Five Publics the Polls Don’t Catch: What Each of These Think of and Expect from the Labor Leaders,” *Labor and Nation*, May–June, 1947, 26.

Mills' inclusion of the far left among his political publics reflected the increasing connections that he was making with Shachtman's Workers Party. The Workers Party was formed in 1940 after splitting from Cannon's Socialist Workers Party over the question of the class nature of the Soviet Union. While the Cannonites maintained that the Soviet Union was a degenerated workers' state, the Shachtmanites claimed that Stalinism represented a new form of "bureaucratic collectivism." A similar critique of bureaucratic entrenchment marked the Shachtmanite's position on labor. Several of Mills' friends, including Dwight MacDonald and Harvey Swados, had been involved with the Workers Party at the beginning of the decade.³¹ In 1947, Mills gravitated toward the Shachtmanite position on labor as he became increasingly supportive of workers' control and increasingly critical of entrenched labor bureaucrats for stifling rank-and-file radicalism. Mills addressed the party in January of 1947 on "The Defeat of Socialism 1920–47 and the Need for Reorientation." As of 1947, Mills read and clipped articles from the party's newspaper, *Labor Action*, and acquired a number of party pamphlets. While the Workers Party's position on labor had a marked influence on Mills, he was never in as close contact with the Shachtmanites as he was with the IUI and with other New York anti-Stalinist intellectuals.³²

The most significant insight of "Five Publics the Polls Don't Catch" was the identification of a new conservative bloc: the "sophisticated conservatives." Unlike the practical conservative, the sophisticated conservative was no union-buster. Rather, he wanted to put the union to use for conservative ends. The sophisticated conservative believed that "unions are a stabilizing force against radicalism and should be encouraged and aided as a counter-force to radical movements and changes." In this scheme, labor leaders would become "junior lieutenants of the captains of industry," cooperating with business to suppress the radicalism of the rank and file. Pointing to the example of Steelworker staff intellectuals Clinton Golden and Harold Ruttenberg, who in *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* argued for the need for labor unions to discipline their own radicals, Mills saw sophisticated conservatism as a real danger for the labor movement: "Labor may, in fear of the practical right, and in order to hold their organizations together, be ever so grateful to accept the lure set forth by cooperative big business with its liberal front that is abuilding."³³ Indeed, recent events seemed to point Mills toward his conclusions. The Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 contained much of the logic of sophisticated conservatism. While the law recognized the legal right of unions to exist, it circumscribed the role that unions could play and gave more responsibility to labor leaders to quash discontent among the rank and file.³⁴

Though he feared the rise of sophisticated conservatism, 1947 was the high-water mark of Mills' faith in the radical potential of the labor movement. In that year, he attended the UAW convention in Atlantic City at the request of Nathan Glazer, then

³¹Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 163–192.

³²UT Box 4B 351.

³³"Five Publics the Polls Don't Catch," 26–27. Golden and Ruttenberg, *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942).

³⁴Brody, "The Uses of Power I: Industrial Battleground," *Workers in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 173–214. Howell John Harris has convincingly argued that the group of sophisticated conservatives (or "corporate liberals") was a distinct minority among business in the 1940s. However, Mills recognized that most businesses would still prefer the open shop, but argued that sophisticated conservatives, if forced to recognize unions and make concessions on wages and working conditions, would in return try to use labor leaders as a tool to repress rank-and-file discontent. Thus, Harris agrees with Mills on more points than it initially appears. See Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s*, esp. 177–199.

working as an editor at *Commentary*. Like many other leftists, Mills saw the UAW as the most progressive U.S. union. UAW president Walter Reuther's bold leadership, socialist background, and third-party inclinations made him an attractive figure for all those left of center. Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, for instance, hoped that the UAW under Reuther would "use its vast resource of energy and power to become a new social force in American life."³⁵ After Reuther won the union's presidency at the 1946 convention, Mills sent him a telegram: "Congratulations. We all expect the UAW under your leadership to become the center of progressive labor in the U.S."³⁶ With Reuther's re-election a foregone conclusion, the 1947 convention was not as inspiring as the previous year's meeting. Mills was nevertheless energized by what he saw.

In his *Commentary* article, "Grass Roots Union with Ideas," Mills expressed concern that the UAW might fall prey to the sophisticated conservatives, worrying that there might be an "unconscious temptation" for Reuther "to become a human engineer for some sort of state capitalism guaranteeing industry disciplined workers and in effect, by drawing the teeth of the rank-and-file, making them easy prey to an American variant of a corporative set-up."³⁷ Nevertheless, Mills argued that, with its militant membership and organic union intellectuals, the UAW could be at the forefront of a revitalized left-labor movement, embodying an ideal vision of "ideas in live contact with power." Though he was lukewarm on Walter Reuther himself ("He gets close enough to satisfy, for a moment and by contrast, your social emotions, but not your social intelligence"), Mills lauded the UAW rank and file, seeing them as possessing a collective spirit and a militantly democratic "wobbly" impulse: "these men are not only organized they are also unionized," he exclaimed.³⁸

While he praised the UAW's "vigorous rank-and-file democracy," Mills concentrated his attention on a phenomenon that he saw as new in U.S. unionism: the presence of "union-made intellectuals" within the UAW. Though Mills did not name any names in his article, he was thinking here of a specific set of men, including Francis Downing in the education department, Frank Winn, who edited the union's newspaper, and especially research director Nat Weinberg. These men helped Mills find his way around the 1947 convention, and Mills later sent a draft of his article to them for comments, joking with them that one of their tasks was to "make sure uninformed people like myself don't write up weird accounts of the UAW after one week of 'field' experience."³⁹ Mills found in these organic union intellectuals a refreshing counter-example to the New York intellectuals he mocked for embracing a politics of hopelessness. Moreover, union-made intellectuals were "intellectuals without fakery and without neuroticism," and they did not "compete with one another in the small ways common to so many academic and other circles."⁴⁰ Most significantly, they provided a crucial link between bread-and-butter unionists and the world of broad political ideas, thus making it possible for the UAW to be an "opinion leader." Mills thus argued that union-made intellectuals provided "the only guarantee that the UAW will be the

³⁵Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York: Random House, 1949), 290. Interestingly enough, Howe and Widick closed their book by quoting Mills's *New Men of Power* and asking of the UAW, "Will the power be welded to the intellect?"

³⁶Mills to Reuther, 27 April, 1946, UT Box 4B 368.

³⁷"Grass Roots Union with Ideas," *Commentary*, Mar., 1948, 246.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 243.

³⁹Mills to Weinberg, 1 Dec., 1947, UT Box 4B 339. The identical line appears in Mills' letter to Downing on the same date.

⁴⁰"Grass Roots Union with Ideas," 242.

vanguard union long enough to provide results, not only to its members, but to all those who hope for a radical shift in American politics.”⁴¹

Mills’ involvement with the UAW did not end with “Grass Roots Union with Ideas.” Weinberg knew that Mills was researching white-collar workers, preliminary work that would later find its way into *White Collar*. He thus asked Mills to make good his earlier claim that a research intellectual could help organize the unorganized, writing: “We might bring you out here to talk to some of the international reps on the organization of white collar workers. Maybe we could have a week’s seminar on the subject for those reps who are directly involved in organizing and servicing office workers. What do you say?” Mills agreed to the proposal, as long as he could fit it into his schedule and he could talk “with your best organizers in the field before I talk to the group of them.”⁴² There is no evidence that Mills conducted these seminars at the UAW, but he did put his sociological training to work for the union on another project. In the spring of 1948, Mills conducted a survey of the health needs of UAW workers, finding that “health, sickness, and age were becoming dominant concerns.” According to *Fortune* magazine, the poll helped shape UAW collective bargaining demands.⁴³

In his diary, Mills had written that the UAW provided “a complete chance to create a third camp, one that will be co-wage worker, anti-Commy and anti-capitalist,” appropriating the term “third camp” from Shachtman, who had used it since the early years of World War II to refer to the formation of an international socialist working class independent of any existing nations.⁴⁴ In an essay written with Irving Sanes and Lewis Coser entitled “A Third Camp in a Two-power World,” Mills elevated the U.S. labor movement to world-historical significance. Although advertised in the winter 1948 issue of *politics* as slated to appear in a forthcoming issue, the authors decided to withhold the piece. Despite attempts throughout the year to revive the essay, it was never published.⁴⁵

Coser, Mills, and Sanes were among those New York intellectuals who had not yet given up on the idea of a labor-based radicalism; thus, the article was written in part as an attack on Dwight MacDonal and the *politics* “New Roads” series. In “A Third Camp,” the authors hoped for a “political interlude in which people may act independently of the rival powers” and construct an alternative to U.S.-style capitalism and Soviet-style communism. With Europe decimated by the war, the authors concluded that the Third Camp would have to be constructed within the U.S. itself. Of course, it would have to be based on an independent labor party which could provide a link between left intellectuals and the labor movement: “Only within such a movement could an average level of political consciousness be achieved equally removed from the unpolitical practicality of the present labor movement and the unpractical politicizing of the intellectuals.”⁴⁶

Though the authors claimed not to write “of the chances for such forces to emerge, but of their necessity,” they did point to some encouraging signs within U.S. labor, such as Reuther’s rise and the increased talk of a third party in labor circles.⁴⁷ However, there were few indications that the non-communist leaders of organized labor were willing to challenge the Truman administration’s foreign policy: by the time this was

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 247.

⁴²Weinberg to Mills, 6 Dec., 1947, Mills to Weinberg, 10 Dec., 1947, UT Box 4B 339.

⁴³“The Autoworkers’ Blues,” *Fortune*, Nov., 1948, 210–215.

⁴⁴“UAW Diary,” UT Box 4B 412, 39–40.

⁴⁵UT Box 4B 363.

⁴⁶“A Third Camp in a Two-power World,” 8–9, UT Box 4B 363.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 10.

written, labor had wholeheartedly embraced the goals of the Marshall Plan. Coser, Mills, and Sanes were grasping at straws if they expected U.S. labor to single-handedly prevent the Cold War and reverse the direction of international politics. It was probably for this reason that the article was withheld; Sanes wrote Mills that their manifesto should be “held back” as it was “a little naive ... and not really too convincing.” Mills did not give up on the article easily, and was still sending drafts of it to friends as late as September of 1948.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he was beginning to have serious doubts about whether labor would be able to play the sort of radical role that he had once hoped for.

The New Men of Power

Mills was thinking within the framework of the “Third Camp” essay when he wrote his first book, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, a pioneering critique of the labor bureaucracy that influenced such writers as Harvey Swados, Sidney Lens, Stanley Aronowitz, and Staughton Lynd and is still cited in the labor historiography of today. On the first page Mills wrote: “What the U.S. does, or fails to do, may be the key to what will happen in the world. What the labor leader does, or fails to do, may be the key to what will happen in the U.S.”⁴⁹ Thus, Mills set out to answer the question of whether labor leaders were capable of halting the “main drift” towards war, slump, and the sort of undemocratic corporate society that Mills later described in *The Power Elite*.

The New Men of Power was an uneven work that alternated between the presentation of empirical data based on the BASR survey of labor leaders and broad political analysis of labor's position in U.S. society. Often, the empirical part seemed to have little to do with the main argument of the book. In part, this was because most of the statistical portions in the book had appeared in already published articles. In addition, “Five Publics the Polls Don't Catch” was incorporated into the book with minor revisions, and Mills expanded upon his discussion of the “union-made intellectual” from “Grass Roots Union with Ideas” in his final chapter on “The Power and the Intellect.” As early as the summer of 1947, Mills wrote Dwight MacDonald that he had finished a “pretty good draft” of the book, and he completed work on it in late 1947 and early 1948.⁵⁰ Marked by ambivalence, *The New Men of Power* contained aspects of Mills' prior and future thinking regarding labor and represented the mid-point in his trajectory from hope to disenchantment.

Though Mills spelled out the contradictory roles that labor leaders played in his introduction, he argued that they were increasingly coming to play one role: that of “junior lieutenant” to big business, thus falling for the “trap set by the sophisticated conservatives.” What he had perceived as a danger in “Five Publics the Polls Don't Catch” and “Grass Roots Union with Ideas,” he now saw becoming a reality. Labor leaders were buying into the “liberal rhetoric” which posited a natural harmony of interests between business and labor. While Mills applauded the recent CIO organization of industrial and semi-skilled workers, he saw the formerly insurgent organization becoming a “new aristocracy of labor.” Rather than attempting to organize the mass of unskilled workers at the bottom, the CIO was content representing the lower middle strata of U.S. society. Increasingly, labor acted as the interest group that liberals

⁴⁸Irving (Sanes) to Charlie (Mills), “Sunday,” UT Box 4B 463; B to Mills, Sept. 11, 1948, UT Box 4B 463.

⁴⁹*The New Men of Power*, 3.

⁵⁰Mills to MacDonald (probably July), Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills, eds., *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 107.

described it as, limiting itself to winning benefits for union members and ceasing to speak out on behalf of all U.S. workers. Labor leaders were thus drifting toward a policy of business unionism on a grand scale.

In one of his more famous insights of the book, Mills saw the labor leader becoming a “manager of discontent,” cooperating with management in the suppression of rank-and-file radicalism in return for union recognition and concessions on narrow economic ends. Labor leaders thus increasingly signed collective bargaining agreements that made the union responsible for loss of business due to unauthorized work stoppages. As a manager of discontent, the labor leader was not only failing to act as a radical, but was also exerting a powerful force on the side of conservatism: “In disciplining radicals and extremists, the labor leader is upholding the liberal goals of labor–management cooperation, his position in the world created by his rhetoric, his job in the union, and the position of the businessman in the American system.”⁵¹ Unions were helping to integrate their members into the work process, but as they were doing so under the impetus of management, the effect was to “rationalize production without socializing it.” Labor leaders were thus drifting toward racketeering on a grand scale, conspiring with business leaders at the expense of union members.

In the political sphere, the situation was equally discouraging. Mills reported survey data that showed that only 17% of AFL leaders and 45% of CIO leaders thought labor needed a broad political program. Mills predicted that this political shortsightedness would have “long-run political consequences which may be ignored only at the risk of destruction.”⁵² Labor leaders, the “last representatives of economic man,” seemed willing to settle for a role as “essentially a minority affair, which must balance its power against others, rather than as a potential majority movement with which to reorganize modern society.”⁵³ Labor leaders thus seemed “poor bets as far as political action is concerned,” incapable of serving as the vanguard force that “Grass Roots Union with Ideas” and the “Third Camp” manifesto had called for.⁵⁴

The situation looked bleak, but Mills had not abandoned his hope for radicalism altogether. Indeed, along with his essays of 1947, *The New Men of Power* represented a radicalization of Mills’s program for labor. He was now coming closer to the far left viewpoint associated with Shachtman’s Workers Party. In *The New Men of Power*, Mills advocated the position of workers’ control and wrote approvingly of the ideas of UK guild socialist G. D. H. Cole. For Mills, workers’ control meant that unions should expand their function at the shoproom floor beyond bargaining over wages and working conditions and move toward collective self-management: “Independence of labor action means continual workers’ control at the point of production, which means that the union would attempt to replace management function by workers’ control at every point where its power permits.”⁵⁵ For this program to work, Mills felt that labor would be forced to organize all workers. Politically, of course, Mills still favored a labor party, but here he adopted the Shachtmanite position that clearly distinguished a labor party from third parties that urged “capitalist reforms.”⁵⁶

As Mills advanced his most comprehensive and radical program for labor, his criticism of the existing labor leadership became more strident. Yet, he still entertained

⁵¹Ibid., 116.

⁵²Ibid., 153.

⁵³Ibid., 237.

⁵⁴Ibid., 236.

⁵⁵Ibid., 255.

⁵⁶Ibid., 203.

thoughts that his radical program might be realized. Mills predicted that a “coming slump” would “implant the insurgent impulse into the American workers” and force the labor leadership to change its character. If labor offered a compelling response to the new depression, the public would rally behind it, as “broad and energetic action properly communicated to the public would greatly enlarge the sphere of union influence and support.”⁵⁷ If labor leaders placed their weight behind the insurgency or if new leaders appeared, labor could still emerge during the slump as a powerful force for the transformation of society.

If Mills’ belief that a slump could lead to a radical labor movement assumed a latent radicalism in the working class, it was also based on a faith in the labor intellectual. The coming slump would provide the opportunity for the “union of the power and the intellect” that Mills had long hoped for.⁵⁸ Always inclined to place a high value on ideology, Mills argued that in an economic downturn, power would shift “toward those who are ideologically and strategically prepared for it.”⁵⁹ The sophisticated conservatives and the left would emerge as the two groups with the most coherent programs and labor would be forced to choose between them. Under slump conditions, the intellectuals of the independent left, often “a powerless third camp of opinion, oscillating between lament and indignation,” could acquire new political relevance.⁶⁰ A radical labor movement was possible if slump conditions brought an insurgent spirit to the working class and labor leaders finally seized “upon the kind of experience that is available to the intellectual craftsman and join it to their own power and experience.”⁶¹

This scenario was perhaps not quite as far-fetched as it might seem in retrospect. The notion that another depression was likely was common in the postwar U.S., especially among the left, which, while developing theories of a “permanent war economy,” viewed capitalism as inherently unstable and prone to frequent crises. Mills’ image of a militant working class had recent historical precedents, not only in the labor upheavals of the Great Depression but also in the wartime wildcats and postwar strike waves. Of course, it is unclear whether the end result of a coming slump would be the radical program that Mills now advocated. What seems most significant, however, is the fact that Mills now placed his hope not in labor as it was presently constituted, but in external circumstances that might produce changes within the labor movement. He adopted a tone of frustration, seeing the resurgence of labor radicalism as necessary but increasingly impossible. Thus, *The New Men of Power*, which vacillated between hope and disenchantment, ended on a note of tragedy: “It is the task of the labor leaders to allow and to initiate a union of the power and the intellect. They are the only ones who can do it; that is why they are now the strategic elite in American society. Never has so much depended upon men who are so ill-prepared and so little inclined to accept the responsibility.”⁶²

The Labor Metaphysic and the Politics of Disillusionment

Even the limited optimism of *The New Men of Power* did not last long. Not only was Mills dead wrong that a slump would soon come, but the character of postwar

⁵⁷Ibid., 290.

⁵⁸Ibid., 291.

⁵⁹Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰Ibid., 17.

⁶¹Ibid., 281.

⁶²Ibid., 291.

industrial relations also became clear by the end of the 1940s, and it did not conform to the earlier hopes of the left. In the fall of 1948, at a meeting of the Columbia University Seminar on Labor, Mills expressed his fears about the direction in which labor was heading. He argued the need for analysis of the “unforeseen consequence of the specific decisions now making up the process of collective bargaining,” yet shrank from the task since his “own hunch about those consequences is so frightening to me that I want above all to check and re-check it.”⁶³ Collective bargaining was indeed moving in a direction that Mills feared. The new system was epitomized by the “Treaty of Detroit” signed by General Motors and the UAW in 1950, an agreement in which management offered higher wages and benefits, but the union renounced its claim to management prerogatives, relinquished worker protection from technological change, and ensnared grievance procedures in a bureaucratic haze, distancing itself from the rank-and-file concerns for worker power that had begun the sit-down strikes of the 1930s. As unions like the UAW won greater benefits for their members, their advocacy of political action on behalf of all workers became less vociferous.⁶⁴

As a number of drafts of an unpublished manuscript, “Notes on the Meaning of the Election,” make clear, the 1948 presidential election caused Mills to give up hope. Mills had already noted in *The New Men of Power* that Henry Wallace’s campaign, widely viewed as a Communist front, discouraged labor leaders from forming a third party. Now he argued that a Democratic victory would have been enough by itself to foreclose the possibility of a labor party. Since Truman won in large part because of the labor vote, labor leaders now seemed little inclined to start their own party. Mills found himself lamenting what might have been: Truman’s defeat could have caused a “general exodus of liberal and labor elements from the Democratic party into the ranks of the new party.” Mills imagined that: “Had the Democratic Party dissolved and a new, non-Communist labor party been founded, and had a conservative Dewey administration hung on long enough to confront another economic slump, the new party might have come roaring into the political arena with a voice that would make FDR’s [Roosevelt’s] New Deal seem lamb-like.” It was a long string of “what-ifs,” but for a series of opportunities whose time had already passed. It increasingly appeared to Mills that labor, like the farm bloc, was devoid of radical potential. Thus he argued that “we shall have to search outside of them, and indeed in opposition to them.”⁶⁵

In his final article for *Labor and Nation*, published in early 1949, Mills examined white-collar unionism. He originally sought to analyze white-collar workers’ reactions to unions in order to uncover information that would assist in labor organizing. By 1949, however, Mills had become so pessimistic about the state of labor that he argued that unionizing white-collar workers would not affect the wider political climate. Though he predicted that organization drives among white-collar workers would be more successful, he argued that their unionization would not improve the “possibilities of a broadly democratic political economy.” Mills maintained that “the larger meaning of unionism involves the question of whether the unions are to become a movement, or

⁶³Minutes of Second Meeting of Columbia Faculty Seminar on Labor (21 Oct., 1948), UT Box 4B 345. Mills was a member of the Seminar on Labor from the fall of 1948 up to 1950, but he does not appear to have been a consistently active participant. The Seminar included a number of Columbia professors from different ends of the political spectrum, along with a number of other men that Mills knew, such as Hardman, Francis Downing, and Henry David.

⁶⁴Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (New York: Verso, 1986), 108–112.

⁶⁵UT Box 4B 348 File: “Trade Unions and Political Parties.” I quote freely here from three different manuscripts on the election that Mills left.

whether they are going to become another vested interest, an agency of political regulation at an economic price.”⁶⁶ Convinced that the latter was the case, the organization of white-collar workers could only be a “unionization into the main drift: it will serve to incorporate them as part of the newest interest to be vested in the liberal state.” To Mills, the consequences of labor’s transformation were profound: “If the future of democracy in America is imperiled, it is not by any labor *movement*, but by its absence, and the substitution for it of a set of new vested interests.”⁶⁷ In 1951, Mills published his influential work on the new middle classes, *White Collar*. While Mills once expected that his research skills could contribute to a promising organization of white-collar workers, he now drew a bleak picture of conformist “little men” lacking individuality, autonomy, and the capability for collective action. Mills’ rejection of the “labor metaphysic” was thus complete by the beginning of the 1950s.⁶⁸

To be sure, Mills’ political hopes for labor had been extravagant. If there was a real lost opportunity for the labor movement in the postwar years, it seems to have been more along the social-democratic lines advanced by Hardman than the Trotskyist-influenced program that Mills came to advocate. Because Mills’ expectations had been so high, his later dismissal of labor was too extreme. In attributing labor leaders’ failure to move in a more radical direction solely to their entrenchment as a bureaucratic elite, Mills ignored the difficult political environment that labor leaders faced in the postwar years and the very real constraints they confronted, including anti-communist politics and a determined business counter-attack. His attack on the labor metaphysic did not take account of what labor had accomplished and of what it continued to aspire to. In the postwar period, unions played an important role in securing a decent standard of living for their members and protecting them from the arbitrary acts of management. The interest group pluralism that emerged from the labor struggles of the 1930s and 1940s was more of an accomplishment than Mills imagined, marking a significant departure from a U.S. legal tradition with regard to labor so conservative that one scholar has deemed it “feudal.”⁶⁹ Mills’ critique of labor also failed to recognize that some progressive unions continued to fight for a U.S. social democracy. The UAW, for instance, still pressed for a broader political role for labor and gave early support to the civil rights movement and the New Left.⁷⁰

While Mills failed to recognize that labor is always part social movement and part interest group, he was correct that the balance had shifted decisively in the postwar years. Mills dreamed of a union of power and intellect, but intellect can only follow when power leads. Though Mills’ vision for labor was more radical than that offered by the CIO’s social-democratic wing, such extravagant hopes could only be supported by the legitimate potential for progressive labor to play a leading role in U.S. politics in the postwar period. By the 1950s, even those unions that supported a broad political agenda found themselves trapped by larger political structures and their own desire to

⁶⁶“Notes on White Collar Unionism,” *Labor and Nation*, May–June, 1949, 19. Much of this essay was incorporated into *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951). See esp. 320–323.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁸Michael Denning has persuasively argued that Mills’ involvement with labor survived in his later work on craftsmanship and the cultural apparatus, amounting to a proposal for a sort of “workers’ control” for intellectual laborers. But this does not mean, as Denning contends, that Mills never truly abandoned the labor metaphysic. See *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1997), 110–113.

⁶⁹Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁷⁰Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*.

wield political power within that system.⁷¹ Even if Mills had taken into account the accomplishments and continuing aspirations of U.S. unions, it would have been difficult for him to identify a vanguard potential in organized labor. Thus, Mills' dismissal of labor as a "dependent variable" in U.S. politics contained a great deal of truth.⁷²

When labor became more of an interest group protecting its members than a social movement with the ability to implement a vision of political transformation, it no longer inspired the left intellectuals who once gravitated in its orbit. Those who continued to write about labor, like Harvey Swados, adopted an increasingly frustrated tone. For many New York intellectuals, such as Bell and MacDonald, deprived of the identifiable agency labor had provided, radicalism itself lost its lure. The diminished potential for labor radicalism contributed to Max Schachtman's turn to the right, a shift that eventually landed him in the Democratic Party.⁷³ Social democrats similarly saw their earlier hopes dashed. The last issue of *Labor and Nation* was published in January of 1952. The magazine was a casualty of labor's postwar transformation. It had relied upon financial backing from unions that supported its vision of union leaders and intellectuals working together to create a U.S. social democracy: by the early 1950s, this funding was dwindling.⁷⁴ Though the union-made intellectuals like Frank Winn and Nat Weinberg that Mills had earlier found so inspiring remained on the UAW staff until the 1960s, they became increasingly frustrated with the political compromises made by the labor movement.⁷⁵

Unlike many other intellectuals of his generation, Mills did not renounce left-wing politics. However, the decline of labor's potential had a powerful impact on the radicalism that he espoused in the 1950s and for which he is best known today. Mills' classic works of that era, *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*, were without programs and without agency, and contained little hope. Like other left intellectuals of the 1950s, stripped of their historic agency for social change, Mills perceived U.S. society as static, unchanging, and one-dimensional—an inverted version of the liberals' "end of ideology" that celebrated the postwar order as ending the necessity for radical social upheaval. Agency was a problem even for those intellectuals like Daniel Bell who had given up on radicalism. In his essay on "Work and its Discontents," Bell criticized the lack of meaningful work in U.S. society while lamenting the fact that no group, neither business nor labor, seemed inclined to do anything about it.⁷⁶

With no possibility of allying with the power of labor, left intellectuals like Mills stressed the intellectual's own responsibility to offer criticism of the existing society. Indeed, this attitude was captured perfectly by the one-word title of the magazine founded in 1954 by Mills' "Third Camp" co-author, Lewis Coser, and former *Labor Action* editor, Irving Howe: *Dissent*. Having given up on a union of power and intellect, Mills and others increasingly came to emphasize the autonomous power of intellect alone, for this was the only power that the isolated intellectual seemed to possess. In a

⁷¹*Ibid.*; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 271–419.

⁷²"The Labor Leaders and the Power Elite," in *Power, Politics, and People*. Originally published in *Roots of Industrial Conflict* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954).

⁷³Peter Drucker, *Max Schachtman and His Left* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 185–244.

⁷⁴"Our Story: Six Years of L & N," *Labor and Nation*, fall, 1951, 2–6, 50–54.

⁷⁵Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, 155.

⁷⁶"Work and its Discontents," *The End of Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 227–272.

1955 *Dissent* essay, Mills advocated a “politics of truth,” arguing that the intellectual, as the “moral conscience of society,” could “find out as much of the truth as he can, and ... tell it to the right people, at the right time, and in the right way.”⁷⁷ Yet, without a vibrant social movement to support, the politics of truth was a desperate stance that saw little chance of having the intellectual’s criticisms of society realized.

Mills finally found an alternative agency to labor in the “young intelligentsia” of the emerging New Left. Yet, Mills had lower expectations of what this new agency might achieve. Radical students and Third World revolutionaries held out less promise for Mills in 1960 than labor had in the 1940s. While Mills had once viewed U.S. labor as a potential mass movement capable of halting the main drift of U.S. society and providing the vanguard for far-reaching social change, he now simply hoped that the New Left could be a “radical agency of change” that was “possible” and “immediate.”⁷⁸ Labor’s postwar transformation would thus shape the politics of the intellectual left into the 1960s, defining the limits of the New Left.

⁷⁷“On Knowledge and Power,” in *Power, Politics, and People*, 611. The essay was originally published in the summer, 1955 issue of *Dissent*.

⁷⁸“Letter to the New Left,” 256.