

# The High and Mighty

## John Barker

"What is U.S. Gov? It's a bunch of rich men playing golf. It's big business, big army and big government all visiting each other in company planes for the sole purpose of playing golf and talking money."

**Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street***

"At the centres of public decision there are powerful men who do not themselves suffer the violent results of their own decisions... Their public views and political actions are, in this objective meaning of the word, irresponsible: the social corollary of their responsibility is the fact that others are dependent on them and must suffer the consequences of their ignorance and mistakes, their self deceptions and their biased motives."

**C. Wright Mills, *The Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectual in Society***

C. Wright Mills was a tough-guy intellectual, a sociologist with a heart condition who died aged 46. He taught for many years and became a professor at Columbia University. His book *The Power Elite* was first published just over fifty years ago in 1956. Its original working title had been *The High and Mighty* and in the same year the book was published Wright Mills gained a factory diploma as a first class mechanic on BMW motorbikes. His book describes the emergence of an elite in the USA which began in World War II and developed through 'revolving doors' between military, corporate and political elites with the media functioning as an increasingly important component in the institutionalisation of the Cold War. *The Power Elite* is exemplary of the methods Mills described in his essay *On Intellectual Craftsmanship*<sup>1</sup>, an investigative how-to kit based on use of the file. In that pre-computer age cardboard folders or boxes were the places to collect material such as news clippings, excerpts from books, statistics, scraps of conversation, ideas or fringe thoughts and, most importantly, notes on follow-up ideas for the development of themes and to shift perspectives between them. These last functions were what Mills called the sociological imagination. In keeping with dialectical method, *The Power Elite* completed a trilogy of works examining different class perspectives in the United States. In his series, Mills grasped at the social whole, a philosophical concept he would defend against the charge of 'extremist exaggeration'. The same sense of investigative scope looks especially relevant today, when a variety of socio-political critiques appear to operate in parallel universes of stand-alone theory.

*The Power Elite* was written at a time when it was difficult to be optimistic about the challenge presented to the US working class. After its successes in the New Deal era, the radical optimism expressed by the GIs in Gertrude Stein's *Brewsie and Willie*<sup>2</sup> was chipped away by capitalist restructuring under the McCarthyite cloud that shrouded the country's politics in the aftermath of World War II. Mills' pessimism was not politically crippling however. His defence of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and opposition to punitive actions and sanctions against it, understanding that it was calculated to make the Cuban government more authoritarian, made him a busy public intellectual doing no good for his heart condition. If *The Power Elite* was pessimistic it was not defeatist. Mills was an early proponent of the role of the public intellectual in an era of revisionist history, sponsored by the likes of the Rockefeller family, and set along clear Hamiltonian lines by researchers and able writers like Alan Nevins, also at Columbia University. Mills also had no truck with the dominant theories of elites by the manifestly reactionary writers Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels whose analysis single-mindedly aimed to show the inevitability of elite power as a 'natural order of things'. The elite Mills describes is a particular

historical development in which the economic and political power of the military, the militarisation of politics and the dominance of finance capital come together in a formation which may be distinguished from more general understandings of classical oligarchy or the ruling class.

Fifty years on, Mills reads as remarkably prescient with his description of 'a military definition of reality'; the role of celebrity; the development of the 'opinion business'; the merged elite's monopoly claims on 'realism'; its reproduction; and the reduction of checks and balances on power to such a state of impotence that they are more effectively part of an ideological fantasy. On its publication *The Power Elite* was met with misrepresentation and vitriol from other professional sociologists whose careers depended on giving academic credibility to the fantasy of democracy and, above all, the Cold War view of the world. That 'one of their own' should do a necessary job of demystification was especially dangerous. At the same time, there was little enthusiasm from the Marxist – and at that time almost exclusively Leninist – left. Years later in the late 1960s when it was especially relevant, the book hardly figured at all in revolutionary critiques of capitalist society. I believe that was a loss, and there is a danger that the kind of analysis Mills offers is ignored by the refreshed anti-capitalist movement. I want to suggest why Mills may have become marginal to the left, but before anything else, given that the book described a situation specific in time and place, it's worth considering just how relevant his analysis is now.



### Dame Pauline's Illustrious Career

It is quite likely that the top, very rich managers of hedge funds or private equity outfits have no direct role in politics, but they are likely to depend on global political intelligence, and socialise with those who move freely through Mills' 'revolving doors'. In the UK, with its numerous public-private partnerships, think-tanks and other quangos, interchanges and professional transformations are greatly encouraged. The still evolving career of Dame Pauline Neville-Jones, now National

Security Adviser to David Cameron, leader of the Conservative party, is an instructive example.

As a career diplomat, in the 1990s she was Douglas Hurd's right-hand woman during the war in Bosnia, when their treatment of Milosevic as a moderate and necessary middleman was proclaimed – in true power elite style – as 'realism'. For a period, she was Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, as well as Foreign Affairs Advisor to John Major, and as Britain's senior negotiator of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 she argued energetically and successfully for an end to sanctions against Serbia. Very soon after as a managing director in NatWest Markets, and with Lord Hurd, she negotiated a lucrative privatisation deal with Milosevic. Her career with NatWest Markets continued until 2000 while she was also Vice Chair of Hawkpoint Partners, a semi-autonomous NatWest corporate finance advisory group, concentrating on governments and 'quasi-government' organisations as well as private equity houses in Europe.

In January 1998 she was appointed a BBC Governor, and left at the very end of 2004. She had been chair of the BBC's Audit Committee ("value for money for the public") and was its International Governor. Dame Pauline's departure followed two instances in which her various roles were highlighted. This was because by then she had become the chair of QinetiQ (the privatised research arm of the Ministry of Defence) the history of which has become a known case of revolving door elites. But her BBC role had also become a subject for comment. The former Director-General, Greg Dyke, had singled her out as being a moving force behind his removal after the Hutton Report, having already taken an active role in criticizing news management of David Kelly's death, and undermining the dead man's expertise.

Dame Pauline is also on the Council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which is described as a "higher echelon opinion-maker". She has also been prominent in Ditchley Park seminars (described below) as well as being an invitee to an Intelligence Summit at Arlington USA last year along with various Israeli military think-tankers. She was also Chair of the Information Assurance Advisory Council (IAAC) another public-private think-tank/quango aimed at cyber infrastructure protection and with the intention of 'influencing policy development' and pursuing its own R&D. IAAC's 'Corporate Public Sector' consists mostly of police and defence outfits, while the private corporate world is represented by BAT and HSBC amongst others.

The QinetiQ story/scandal is well known: its part privatisation sale to the Carlyle Group (chaired by Frank Carlucci<sup>4</sup>) at a knock-down price on the day it landed a huge pfi contract with the MoD which has accounted for 20% of its income since then; its flotation in 2006 and the subsequent selling of Carlyle's stake all at a profit of some £350 million. Dame Pauline was Non-Executive Chair from 2002-5, during which the Carlyle sale took place, and the pfi deal is estimated to have made some £350,000 profit on a £50,000 original stake.<sup>5</sup>

This same QinetiQ recruited Sir Alan West, former Chief of the Royal Navy. The company was brazen about the role he will play "to develop the company's relationship with the defense establishment." He will, they said, "be recruiting other top defense experts to the advisory board." He is, in short, a man for hire and has now walked through another door to become Internal Security Minister of Gordon Brown's New Labour government while Dame Pauline will be an Advisor to the Opposition Party. In her individual career she has enjoyed prominence in *all* sections of the power elite.

## Characteristics

In a rare moment of modesty, former French President Charles de Gaulle said, "The cemeteries are full of irreplaceable people." Mills' analysis does not require or depend on 'irreplaceable people', only a continuum of people who believe they are irreplaceable at the time; in particular that they alone have a true understanding of reality, and a special talent for decision-making. Nor does it require conspiracies, but is rather concerned with the reproduction and evolution of a power elite. "It is not that our rulers 'believe in' a compact elite behind the scenes and the mass down below," Mills writes. "It is not put in that language. It is just that the people are of necessity confused and must, like trusting children, place all the new world of foreign policy and strategy and executive action in the hands of experts." Just now and then the language slips out of the bag when, for example, Peter Mandelson called Labour Party opposition to the Iraq invasion an "infantile disorder", perhaps unconsciously using the phrase Lenin used to defend the Bolshevik oligarchic trend against its communist critics in the early 1920s.

More common, Mills argues, is that "a reformulation of classical liberalism in the entirely unclassical age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... instead of justifying the power of an elite by portraying it favourably ... denies that any set of men, any class, any organization has any real consequential power."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to describe what members of the elite have in common. For one thing, they "cannot be truly thought of as men who are merely doing their duty. They are the ones who determine their duty, as well as the duties of those below them ... their circumstances make them independent of the good will of others, never waiting for anyone but always waited upon." Yet here, he reveals how partial the power elite's self-defined 'reality' actually is by pointing to essential characteristics of power; whether it be in rates of pay, queuing at buses, or those in Housing Benefit and Social Security offices, the time of the poor does not count. Being insulated from such temporal realities only reinforces the elite's view of the world.

Their insulation is more important than the specific class origins of the elite, although Mills does not duck the question of how the elite reproduces itself. The evidence he produced showed that class mobility, a crucial prop to the 'American Dream' and meritocratic ideology, was shrinking, as it is, in different forms, now. "[B]y the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is in some ways easier to transfer position and power to one's children than it was in 1900 and 1925 ... to pass on to children strategic positions in the apparatus of appropriation that constitutes the higher level of American private, free enterprise."<sup>7</sup> He backs this up with the statistic that: "Only 9% of the very rich of our own time originated in lower-class families, i.e. families with only enough money to provide essential needs and sometimes minor comforts."

Mills describes an education system as class-ridden as the UK's, where in specific circles "adolescent boys and girls are exposed to the table conversation of decision-makers, and thus have bred into them the informal skills and pretensions of decision-makers." Likewise, Maureen Duffy, writing from an English point of view in her novel *Capital*, talks of educated young people who "would have had a daily familiarity with the smell of power and money at their parents' dinner tables." In a more conscious manner Mills talks of how, "To exclude others enables the high and mighty to maintain a series of private worlds in which they can and do discuss issues in which they train their young informally for the decision-making temper".



## Lenny's Version

In the week of late October 1962, the scary ten days of the Cuban missile crisis, Lenny Bruce criss-crossed the USA with sharp-edged gigs some of which are reported verbatim by Don DeLillo in his novel *Underground*. Bruce started in West Hollywood on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

"The true edge is not where you choose to live, but where they situate you against your will. This event is infinitely deeper and more electrifying than anything you might elect to do with your own life. You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate. Dig it. These are guys from the eating clubs and the secret societies. They have fraternity handshakes so complicated it takes three full minutes to do all the moves. One missed digit you're fucked for life. Resign from the country club, forget about the stock options and the executive retreat ... Picture it, twenty-six guys in Clark Kent suits getting to enter a luxury bunker that's located about half a mile under the White House. ... Powerless. Understand, this is how they remind us of our basic state. They roll out a periodic crisis. Is it horizontal? One great power against the other. Or is it vertical, is it up and down?"

On the 29<sup>th</sup> he was back in New York, doing a midnight show at Carnegie Hall:

"We're not going to die. Yes, they saved us. All the Ivy League men in those striped suits and ribbed black socks that go all the way to the knee so when they cross their legs on TV we don't see a patch of spooky white flesh between the sock and the pants cuff. ... They saved us in their horn-rimmed glasses and commonsense haircuts. They got their training for the missile crisis at a thousand dinner parties. Where it's at, man. This is the summit of Western civilization. Not the art of the schlocky museums or the books in the libraries where bums off the street infest the men's rooms. Forget all that. Forget all that. Forget the playing fields of Eton. It's the seating plan at dinner. That's where we won. Because they toughed it out. Because they were tested in the cruelest setting of all. Where tremendous forces come into play and crucial events unfold. Dinner parties, dig it, in the Northeast corridor. Your mother used to say, Mix, sweetheart. There was anxiety, a little hidden terror in her voice. Because she knew. Mix or die. And that's why we won. Because these men were named and raised for this moment. Yes, tested at a thousand formative dinners. It started in adolescence. Seated next to adults, total strangers, and forced to make conversation. What a sadistic thing to say to a kid. Make conversation."

## 'The Wise Men'

A more reverential and detailed account of the elite described by Mills and Bruce comes in *The Wise Men*, published some 30 years later in 1986.<sup>8</sup> Their heyday was the Truman Presidency during which the Cold War became an almost self-generating dynamic. The dominant figure was Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who rotated between politics and corporate law. Also

figuring are: George Kennan, the administration's ideologue; John McCloy Jr., who moved in an out of the Defense Department and ended up as chief counsel to what were then the Seven Sisters dominant oil corporations; Robert Lovett, also in and out of the Defense Department and corporate America; and Averell Harriman, a multi-millionaire corporate chief shareholder and geo-political busybody.<sup>9</sup> These people, the authors say, "were free to pursue what they really cared about, service to the country..." because "they did not have to worry too much about the daily chore of child care, or about their wives' careers, or about paying the mortgage." They were all making money when they went out of the revolving door for periods back in Wall Street and were exactly the sort of people whose "circumstances make them independent of the good will of others." In *The Wise Men*, however their position is not contrasted to people who have no insulation from 'daily chores', but rather with "the careerists who now populate the official bureaucracy, or the grasping opportunists who value a sub-Cabinet post primarily as a springboard to a lucrative job with a government contractor."

Mills' critique embraces both types, refusing the romanticized elitism of these 'wise men'. With the exception of McCloy, they came from well-off families and went to Groton School and Yale or, at the very least, Harvard Law School. They were people who, as Mills says, "have bred into them the informal skills and pretensions of decision-makers." At Yale, Lovett, Harriman and their mentor, war time Defense Secretary Henry Stimson, had all been members of an elite secret society, The Order of Skull and Bones. More recently, the current President George W. Bush and his 2004 opponent, John Kerry, were also members. This is not conspiracy theory, there is no suggestion that these 'Bonesmen' are the secret government of the USA or anything of the sort, but it exists with a specifically elitist way of looking at the world, and shows an extraordinary continuity in one of the various channels in which the power elite reproduces itself.<sup>10</sup>

## Narcissistic Capitalism

This perpetuation of advantage is an important phenomena described in *The Power Elite* and an empirical reality that could hardly be ignored. This is increasingly the case when the scale and institutionalisation of the elite is noticed by the largely excluded middle class of the Western world. However, the reproduction of the elite does not preclude people 'of merit' like James J. McCloy joining from an unprivileged position. By university funding, Scouting, think tanks and all kinds of private-public set-ups, recruitment takes place. What the already advantaged and those newly admitted have in common is making a fetish of 'the decision-making temper' and their unique competence within a capitalist world. Consequently, the main thrust of Mills' book becomes a multi-pronged attack on capitalism's fantasies. First at an ideological level Mills takes on Schumpeter's version of capitalist self-idealization. Schumpeter, he argues, "combines a theory of capitalist progress with a theory of social stratification to explain, and indeed celebrate the 'creative destruction' of the great entrepreneurs." The villainous Robber Baron is transformed into the Ayn Rand type hero of perennial innovation. But to do this Schumpeter has to be "rather free and easy with his moral evaluations, believing that only men of superior acumen and energy are lifted to the top by the mechanics they are assumed to create and focus." Mills instead brings out "the objective structure of opportunities" which he details in the manner of Marx, noting the systematic confusion between technological gain and financial manipulation. On this basis he

is able to point out both the tautology implicit in capitalist self-idealization, and the inherent relationship between elitism and exploitation. As Mills says: "To use the acquisition of wealth as a sign of ability and then to use ability as an explanation of wealth is merely to play with two words for the same fact: the existence of the very rich."

Mills shows that it is not and never has been usual for great fortunes to be made by nursing small businesses into large ones. Equally, men do not become very rich by rising through corporate bureaucracies but do so by financial manipulation in what are anything but 'open' markets. Mills talks of *economic politicians* who have been able to accumulate information and contacts "permitting them to appropriate for personal use out of the *accumulation of advantages*." Their accumulation invariably involves holding strategic positions as investment bankers for example, a concrete form being to "speculate in the promotion and manipulation of securities with no or very little risk." Indeed the rise of 'follow the money' investigative economics by researchers like R.T. Naylor further underlines Mills' observations making them even more specific to the subsequent rise of neoliberalism internationally.

The dominance of finance capital with its 'economic politicians' is conducive to an *ad hoc* power elite since it brings together a whole class of go-betweens. "The inner core of the power elite," Mills writes, "includes, the men of the higher legal and financial types from the great law factories and investment firms who are almost professional go-betweens of economic, political and military affairs. By the nature of their work, they transcend the narrow milieu of any one industry and so are in a position to speak and act for the corporate world." Because finance capital involves investment here, there, and everywhere, political economy intelligence is required globally. It is intelligence with potential consequences: whether it be stiffening a currency, dropping bunker bombs, weakening a currency, or debating the efficacy of torture, and these are precisely the areas where the power elite exerts its monopoly on decision-making. The cohesion this makes for is augmented by a relatively new 'opportunity' which Mills highlighted, namely how executives are given restricted options to buy stock at or below current market value, options made attractive by the 1950 tax law.<sup>11</sup> Over time these have created more ties and go-betweens with finance capital, as well as being instrumental in recent scandals of the Enron variety.

Most of all, in examining the 'military

definition of reality', Mills takes apart the self-idealization in which a free and independent capitalism chafes at the hindrances and costs of the state. Even in its self-proclaimed turn against Keynesianism, Western capitalism has had considerable dependence on state armaments contracts. US government contracts from World War II were institutionalised in the agreement between armament corporations and the military on the timing and rules of 'reconversion'. Mills is prescient in describing the sheer weight of the military in scientific research; the money the military invested in universities and the compromises with academic independence this involved. Similarly, in the raft of examples he gives of the 'crony capitalist' nature of the corporate-military revolving doors, he tells the stories of General E.R. Quesada of the H-bomb test team who became Vice-President of Lockheed, and General Jacob Evers who became technical adviser to the Fairchild Aircraft Corporation.

### The Military Definition of Reality

In 1961, five years after Mills' book was published, ex-General Eisenhower, who had been President when it was written, made a valedictory speech in which he talked of the need to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for this disastrous use of misplaced power exists and will persist." Typically, the warning was delivered when it was too late to matter; his second term had finished. It was Eisenhower who coined the phrase 'military-industrial complex' but according to his family he was uncertain about the sufficiency of the term. In talking about a definition of reality, one which benefited corporate profitability and is especially suited to power elites, Mills helps explain Eisenhower's inevitable uncertainty, on one hand, and the elusive nature of modern oligarchy, on the other.

The context of both Eisenhower's speech and Mills' book was a normalised Cold War. Of this Mills writes with what sounds like an uncannily apt description of 'The War on Terror': "For the first time in American history, men in authority are talking about an emergency without foreseeable end." Worse, when this view of reality is dominant, "Every man and nation is either friend or foe ... when virtually all negotiation aimed at peaceful agreement is likely to be seen as 'appeasement' if not treason ... in such a context the diplomat is replaced by the warlord." With nauseating glibness it is as if all diplomacy was inherently weak and unprincipled on the lines of the Munich agreement

with the Nazi government in 1939.

The power elite thrives in this situation because it demands that information be secret, and because it demands an anti-democratic allowance for the 'decision-making temper' in which it claims a monopoly. Daniel Ellsberg has described the seductive nature of secret information, the select few knowing the real stuff. We also now have bitter experience of how secret information can be censored and manipulated to suit power elite desires. Mills, many years ahead of David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, and the Vietnam War itself, indicated how freezing out of the State Department's China experts who had predicted the victory of the Chinese Communists in 1948, created a situation whereby the "impression grew" during the Eisenhower Presidency, "that it wasn't safe to report the truth ... about any foreign situation when the truth didn't jibe [chime in] with the preconceived notions of the people in Washington."<sup>12</sup>

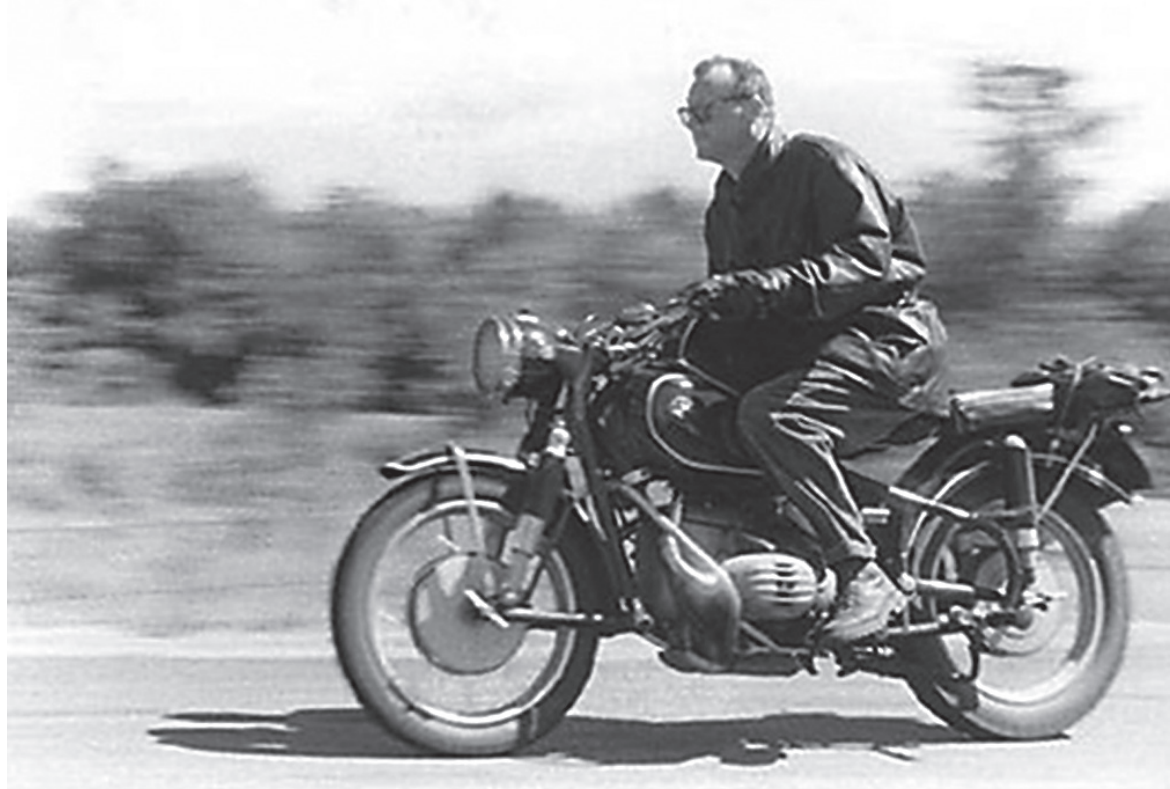
### Critiques at the time<sup>13</sup>

The attacks on Mills' book by Daniel Bell and Talcott Parsons, two intellectual stars of what Richard Barbrook calls the 'Cold War left' and who Mills himself called 'executives of the mind', rested, as indicated above, on a wilful avoidance of Mills' points about stock options, interlocking directorships, and the dominance of finance capital. His critics insisted that power was so diffuse that a power elite was impossible and asserted baldly that there were multiple centres of power operating within a general consensus on politics and economics. Bell pushes this a step further by accusing Mills of going for conspiracy theory. The bad faith of his attack is, as so often, revealed in the language. Bell writes: "Although Mills contends that he does not believe in a conspiracy theory, his loose account of the centralization of power among the elite comes suspiciously close to it." Ultimately for Bell it would be Mills, not an elite, that is the object of suspicion.

The Marxist Left of the time was almost exclusively Leninist: either 'Stalinist' or 'Trotskyist'. Its attack on the book was not on the grounds of the structural reproduction of a power elite, which would have been a substantive issue, but rather on the analysis of elites *per se*. It seemed as if such an approach was heresy even if Mills had turned elite theory against its proponents. Thus Robert Lynd argued that it "provides a glittering focus above common, troublesome things like capitalism and its class structure." In his more generous review, Paul Sweezy argued that a focus on elites "inevitably diverts attention from social structure and process, and leads to a search for external causes of social phenomena." But from this point of view what is 'internal' is in practice a narrow economic determinism, while Lynd's critique is simply unfair and carries with it a distinctly self-righteousness tone. In fact, as well as understanding the increased power of the media, Mills is clear about the function of 'glitter': "In part they [celebrities] have stolen the show for that is their business; in part they have been given the show by the upper classes who have withdrawn and have other business to accomplish." Surely this is an accurate description on the role of celebrity at the World Economic Forum at Davos, or as apologists and propagandists for the international financial institutions in Make Poverty History.

### ...and ever since

When it comes to conspiracy theory, we have every reason to be wary. Unfortunately when power is so secretive (promises of openness always running into 'business confidentiality', 'national security' and bureaucratic obstruction) it is a common morbid symptom. There are particular and real 'conspiracies' that have been uncovered, like the illegal arming of the Nicaraguan Contras by the



Reagan Administration. Conspiracy theory in contrast either bumps up an individual to being the hidden global string-puller, like Aristotle Onassis in the once popular Gemstone Files, or more recently in the case of the World Trade Centre attack of 2001 which the *Loose Change* fantasists and foolish egomaniacs like Michael Meacher who say, or imply, were really carried out by the Bush Administration under the wing of an omni-powerful Mafia. By association, wild suppositions like this discredit real investigative research and journalism.

Mills is not presenting any such conspiracy, and goes some length to show that this is not what he is doing. The Cold War was not planned by a small group of ruthless men. In a well known essay of 1970, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, Jo Freeman warned against the dangers of informal, unacknowledged elites in feminist organizations which were trying at that time something very different from Leninist-type organisation. "Elites", she noted "are not conspiracies. Very seldom does a small group of people get together to take over a larger group for their own ends." This text has become well-known again, fetishised even by a post-structuralist analysis with its 'gazes' and 'self-surveillances', while actual study of elite power tends to get shunted off the agenda.

One of the most famous radical critiques of capitalism and its power in the late 1960s that came from the Situationist International ironically follows the Cold War Left's assertion of the diffusion of power in modern capitalism. For the SI, this diffusion is found in the form of the 'spectacle', though in the later *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord becomes more concerned with secret sources of power. The net effect of the SI has been an ultra-leftist obsession with 'recuperation', and an emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of modern capitalism but such an approach risks confusing the issues of consumerism and the 'provisional identities' it may provide with the fluidity of elite networks. The phrase 'revolving doors' does not emphasise diffusion but suggests interchanges of power, the identification of which undermines the claim that representative democracy may periodically punish the political class at election times. Put simply the power elite are always on the move anyway.

A robust and probably the most useful empirical and theoretical work to refresh a Marxist critique of capitalism since then came from the Italian Autonomism. Whatever its origins, it theorized the working class militancy of the early 1970s in a way that placed working class agency as central to both the development of capitalism itself as well as the project of social liberation. It overthrew Leninist notions of 'economism' and 'workerism'. It also fitted another anti-elitist project, a rejection of history as that of great men and individual genius for the development of a history from below. It was, and remains, a crucial break with the vanguardist past. Of course it too can be rather problematically ideologized in a mix of class guilt, and a moralistic ultra-leftism obsessed with being in the right, and from this point of view one might even see the spotlight on the power elite as another betrayal of the non-elitist worldview.

Paul Sweezy's criticism of Mills work was not put in these terms, arguing instead that *The Power Elite* sought "external causes of social phenomena". But this criticism, coming from a rather rigidly economic determinist variety of Marxism, implies an inaccurate separation of the internal and external to the workings of capitalism, one which is now being reproduced again in the form of "logic of capital" style of analysis. Capitalism does not have a singular internal dynamic in the compulsion to accumulate, it functions equally as a social discipline.

Capitalism is the system that accrues power to capitalists but this does not exist in an ahistorical vacuum. Only in the self-regulating market fantasy of bourgeois economics are politico-economic decisions not being made daily by institutional and



*ad hoc* groupings comprising individual members of the power elite. But this naivety is echoed on the left – perhaps from bitter experience of the inept opportunism of some Leninist groups/parties – when it is somehow naff to talk about powerful individuals and the consequences of their actions, that this is inherently populist and un-theoretical. It is true that empirically-based theory from Autonomists like Sergio Bologna and Feruccio Gambino some times spoke of capital's strategies or offensives in anthropomorphic style, but they also identified decisions made by identifiable decision-makers as for example in the case of 'Project Independence', by which successive American Presidents from Nixon onwards used the fantasy goal of US oil independence to hold up oil prices when necessary for domestic production and class control. Oil, access to it, manipulation of its supply and price has not been 'an external cause of social phenomena', it has been a crucial factor in class politics and geopolitical conflict in the last 35 years. Geopolitically it is intimately associated with the arms business which itself is a major source of corporate profitability and accumulation as well as in the transfers of surplus value from poorer parts of the world to richer.

The power elite described by Mills is in its element in the world of arms and oil business. It is a secretive world where decisions are made by those tempered in decision making: tough decisions which their own soft populations cannot make.<sup>14</sup> And that is also how it is presented from the inside. Through a conjunction of not unrelated circumstances such self-presentation has offered a huge lease of life to the consolidation of this power in the present. The 'neo-liberal' capitalist offensive of the 1980s and '90s, the resultant across-the-board growth of inequality, the increasing mismatch between financial claims and total surplus value, the rise of religious fundamentalisms, the logic of resource wars, and a variety of anti-humanist terrorisms, all these have created the conditions of "an emergency without foreseeable end" and "a military definition of reality" that Mills described. The logic has infiltrated the language and hence we now have wars on AIDS, on drugs, terrorism, cancer and – grotesquely – on poverty.

### Student Union Tough Nuts

At first sight it's hard to see any similarity between those East Coast aristocrats of the Cold War and the UK's New Labour leaders for whom the worst thing that ever happened was some other squirt challenging their role in student politics. When Jack Straw stood next to ex-General Colin Powell

in the theatrical lead-up to the war on Iraq, Straw looked like a man out of his depth. But years in power, a compliant media, and a cosy relationship with oil companies, armaments makers, corporate capital in general, have found New Labour taking its place through the sort of wholesale patronage of consultancies accused of 'plundering the public sector'. Mills described those who have been able to accumulate information and contacts "permitting them to appropriate for personal use an accumulation of advantages." Not all aspirants can have the breadth of connections of a Dame Pauline, but by sharing a mind-set they may try to make up for it. This is precisely what New Labour formalised within the British Labour movement. Both consultants and lobbyists are a new form of the 'intermediaries' Mills describes, as are think tanks, and similar groupings like the British-American Project for the Successor Generation, an outfit originating during the Reagan regime, worried that the best and the brightest in Europe might not stay loyal to Washington. Its members include Geoff Mulgan, formerly of the Cabinet Office strategy unit, lobbyist Julia Hobsbawm, and institutional 'player' Trevor Phillips. It is funded by various heavyweights of the corporate world – Coca Cola, Monsanto, Philip Morris, BP and others – having started with money from the Pew Foundation. Its prime mover – as they say in criminal conspiracy trials – is one Nick Butler formerly of BP and the Fabian Society. With no embarrassment, he describes how he wanted to bring in, "Bright people, in many different fields, who were likely to influence outcomes in those fields. People who were interesting."<sup>15</sup> There is the stink of elitism here but who would dream of questioning the idea of 'bright' and 'interesting' people being self-evidently qualified to do 'interesting' things, unless of course we ask in whose interests they act? Predictably many of these people who are likely to "influence outcomes" (and many are) are also "directly involved with US and UK defense establishments." Dr Madson Pirie of the Adam Smith Institute (which has an off-shoot organisation funded by British taxpayers to spread the message of privatisation in the Third World), is even more explicit: his target audience is not any old riff-raff, not the public, but a list of 660 powerful individuals, civil servants, journalists, politicians and professional businessmen.

In this world the seminar room has replaced DeLillo's golf course. There is also the Council for European Reform<sup>16</sup> and the Ditchley Foundation, in both of which Dame Pauline often appears. The Foundation organises and hosts conferences on a regular basis, and is involved both independently and with the Rand Corporation and US and UK defense establishments. It would be tedious to list all the 'great and the good' and the 'best and the brightest' who are trustees or board members of this outfit – diplomats, the military, journalists, politicians, and the representatives of big money – they can be seen, no conspiracy here, this is open elitism on an open website, at [www.ditchley.co.uk](http://www.ditchley.co.uk). For example, their programme for 2003 tells a story: February 21-23 'The Future Role of NATO', chaired by General Klaus Naumann; next up, March 7-9, 'Higher Education: the global future and value of universities in the information age'. The same Peter Mandelson who was to talk of opposition to the Iraq War as "an infantile disorder" a year later, chaired the next Ditchley Park conference entitled 'Legitimacy/Correcting the Democratic Deficit'. This democratic deficit was to be corrected by an invitation-only gathering of the elite, 'the best and the brightest', the ones who count. If satire were not yet outdone, the gathering took place in March 2003 as the invasion of Iraq got underway in the face of massive public opposition!

## Revolving Doors

Mills' revolving doors have become increasingly well-oiled in the Anglo-Saxon world. In the US, it is almost *de rigeur* from Treasury Secretaries, Democrat or Republican, to come out of Goldman Sachs. From the Vice-President downwards and taking in, for example, the authors of *Shock and Awe*, the 'military-industrial complex' is embedded in the political world more than ever. The same holds true for UK plc under New Labour. The cases of Sir (Lord) Alan West and Dame Pauline are brazen in this respect, but are not unique. Former UK Defence Minister Ivor Caplin resigned as an MP to be senior consultant with Foresight Communications (dig that name!) a lobbyist representing firms with defence interests like EADS. Lord Boyce, former Chief of the Defence Staff, has recently begun working with three companies<sup>17</sup> all which have involvement with UK defence contracts. Sir Robert Walmsley, the Ministry of Defence's former Chief of Defence Procurement, is now a director of two US defense firms. These moves are said to have been endorsed by Mr Blair as being in the 'national interest'.

The same closeness of this world has also been shown up by the relationship between BAE Systems (the major British arms company) and the British government – the 2006-7 investigation into bribery involved in the long running BAE-Saudi "al-Yamamah" arms deal was stopped in the interests of 'national security'; that's the story. It invited a fair deal of outrage, rightly so, even if scandal and outrage have, by themselves, little impact on power elite decisions. Much less was made of how useless the weapons in question were to the Saudis given the geo-political realities which they operate within; or why the president of Kazakhstan should recruit Sir Richard Evans, BAE Systems ex-chairman and still board member, as head honcho of its oil industry; or how and why Tanzania should have bought a military radar system it has no use for; or more recently, how it was that BAE infiltrated and spied upon the Campaign Against the Arms Trade; never mind the roles of our official government arms salesmen.

## 'Organized Irresponsibility'

Oscar Wilde, at his most subversive in *The Importance of Being Ernest* has a late-Victorian vicar preaching a charity sermon on behalf of The Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Classes. From the very beginning of its existence the urban proletariat and its 'underclasses' have been the main focus of social investigation and research; a spy job, as an old East Londoner described it. Real life photography, even from the best of motives, has followed the same pattern. Nowadays it's CCTV. The spotlight and the self-confidently nosey tone of investigation is hardly ever turned on the power elite, not unless they have chosen the spotlight, which is normally left to those in search of celebrity status. This is because, as Mills understood, a subservient media is part of the elite itself<sup>18</sup>, and because 'intelligent elitists', as Jo Freeman put it, will not seek visibility. Rather they will maintain a certain privacy through the command of legal and architectural resources. Lifting that curtain on individuals and networks is an important task but without a broad understanding of the democratic principals, which the power elite continually deride, vocal dissent can only add to the long list of apparently 'public' scandals.

However, the analysis provided by Mills is applicable to today's political economy of militarised neo-liberalism. The reality of revolving doors shows in graphic style how the anti-statist ideology of this neoliberalism is disproved by its political, economic and financial dependencies on the state, whether it be military contracts or central bank rescues. The existence of a 'global power elite' as represented by Peter Sutherland for example, the idea of which has got US ultra-nationalists like Samuel Huntington into hysterical mode, implies a different set of revolving doors. Even so, Sutherland sat on the board of ABB with the militarist and nationalist Donald Rumsfeld. This is not to argue against the existence of a global capitalist class, or capitalism as a global

mode of production, but to point to the flimsiness of neoliberal ideology. Equally, individuals are replaceable and scandal by itself changes nothing, but individuals of the power elite, both singly and collectively, are responsible for decisions which have consequences not for themselves but for millions of other people of whose lives they know nothing. They have never sat in waiting rooms, stood in queues, or gone hungry. Such basic but unstated apartheid is integral to the power elite's irresponsibility and unctuous inhumanity? Certainly, in the world of geopolitics this is what is nailed down in an exceptional newspaper article by former diplomat Carne Ross. Talking from bitter experience he describes the filtering of information to a very small group of decision-makers: "They make decisions based on abstractions many removes distant from reality. Even on the ground, the strictures of security prevent diplomats from all but the briefest contact with the everyday reality of Afghans and Iraqis."

Thomas Pynchon's fictional Mason in the novel *Mason & Dixon* warns 18<sup>th</sup> century Americans against the dangerous English ruling class who amongst other things, "will not admit to error." A minimum requirement of bourgeois democracy is that it should have the strength to prevent its leaders from making stupid and murderous decisions. When it came to the US-UK invasion of Iraq it failed to do the job. For the many considered and intelligent people who opposed the war, this has been a demoralising experience. Though there is a crowded bandwagon of wise-after-the-eventers, these, like the armchair Spartan Richard Perle, don't take any responsibility for what happened, standing by the invasion decision. There have been no admissions of error from its cheerleaders. 'Star' political writer of *The Observer*, Andrew Rawnsley, on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2003 praised Tony Blair for not 'pandering' to anti-war public opinion – pandering in other words to the stupid masses. At the 2006 Labour Party Conference, Blair himself said: "The British people will, sometimes, forgive a wrong decision. They won't forgive not deciding." This is the elite-speak of the political class in a representative democracy that has been hollowed out to such a degree that there is no need even for the pretence of a popular sovereignty. Blair's sheer cheek is hard to match. Rawnsley, who one would have thought would have had the good grace to shut up, thought it a "masterclass." This fetishizing of the power elite leadership, which has a long proto-fascist and corporatist lineage, is truly scary stuff.

As things stand, it is only the ubiquitous shareholder pursuing his or her private interests who has the means to bring judgement on capitalist irresponsibility and its consequences. Presently this is the case with British Petroleum. This is grotesque. There is a job to be done by the anti-capitalist movement to act more broadly in the name of the public interest. It must take this ground to spotlight responsibility in the chains of sub-contractors, in the worlds of production, in torture and in the terrorism executed and legitimated by the state; and to pin down the *ad hoc* networks that function to willfully obscure causes and consequences of elite power. With his 'warlords', 'organised irresponsibility', 'crackpot realism', and so on, Mills offered a guide and a whole vocabulary for contesting the power of elites. What he could not fully confront was the inadequacy of the public intellectual as a substitute for the functions of a proper democracy.

## Notes

1. This is the final essay in Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* which has been wonderfully realized in multi-media form by Muhammed A. Asad at: <http://craftsmanship.asad.org>
2. The counter attack by American capital is described in detail by Feruccio Gambino, 'Class Composition and US Direct Investment Abroad'. *Red Notes*, 1975.
3. From the libertarian communist tradition, and writing at the same time as Mills' book, the Socialisme ou Barbarisme group did concentrate on the central importance of the power and nature of decision-making as did Mills, but it was difficult for them at that time to go beyond fairly abstract templates of workers' self-management.
4. Carlucci is a seriously heavyweight part of the power elite, one time Defense Secretary under Ronald Reagan,

and QinetiQ an exemplary power elite company. It owns various companies making munitions and equipment for the US military and has James Baker, George H. Bush and John Major on its books in a PR and Sales role. Carlucci himself started as a foreign service operator, complicit in the murder of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, the coup against the Goulart government in Brazil in 1964, and then the defeat of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-5 when he was US Ambassador. These successes lead him to government roles in the Nixon government along with Donald Rumsfeld, then Deputy Director of the CIA under President Carter, and Defense Department posts under Reagan. He walked through all these revolving doors as well as circulating through the board of influential think-tanks before becoming chairman of Carlyle which has resulted in "an expanded portfolio of defense industries." For more details see: [www.counterpunch.org/schorcarlucci.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/schorcarlucci.html)

5. She is mentioned in Hywel Williams book *Britain's Power Elite*, pub. Constable, 2006. It was also inspired by Mills but is, other than sharp comments on British politics, a disappointing book with no sense of the revolving doors or *ad hoc* coherence of that elite. In Dame Pauline's case he mentions only the Milosevic loan and QinetiQ roles.
6. Which doesn't prevent Talcott Parsons in his critique of the book – and using David Riesman to back him up – simply denying by assertion the existence of any real, consequential power in the USA. This during the Cold War. See his essay in *C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite: Essays*, compiled by G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard. Beacon Press, 1968.
7. The perpetuation of advantage is especially important now. A study on Intergenerational Mobility by The Centre for Economic Performance (supported by the Sutton Trust) in 2005 showed that this had decreased in the USA and even more so in the UK for children. This perpetuation is now being institutionalized by 'family offices'. Writing in the *Guardian* (17/4/06) James Meek describes them as the ultimate symbol of true wealth. There are 11,000 such offices worldwide. They consist of "a full-time team of lawyers and accountants dedicated to the sole aim of protecting and cultivating one's family wealth further into the future than most governments, let alone ordinary people would ever dream of." 100 years is advised which rather puts the Five Year Plan to shame. Reporting the phenomena has not stopped the newspaper from advertising such an 'office'. Lower down the ladder the perpetuation is being acted out in the housing market.
8. *The Wise Men*. Walter Isaacson and Ewen Thomas, Faber&Faber 1986
9. In another great Lenny Bruce riff he digs away at the exclusivity of elite names: Adlai, Averell, McGeorge.
10. This order of the Skull and Bones was formed in 1832 and as described by Suzanne Goldberg (*Guardian* 20/5/2004) "represented the pinnacle of prestige – or social exclusion depending on one's point of view. Each class of Bonesmen would take it upon themselves to perpetuate the distinction by grooming its successors." She is at pains to reject any conspiracy theory in the case of George W. Bush, though the connections helped him financially. What emerges instead is a collective belief in their entitlement to advantage.
11. In a method that has become standard, Daniel Bell's critique of the book simply ignores this crucial point and introduces instead an irrelevance to do with trade associations.
12. On this Mills cites Charlotte Knight writing that when one Scott McLeod became head of Security in the Eisenhower State Department, "the impression grew that it wasn't safe to report the truth to Washington about any foreign situation." More recently Sidney Blumenthal reports that in May 2006 as the Iraq situation worsened, "Condoleezza Rice told senior staff she wants no more reporting from the embassies. She announced in a meeting that people write memos only for each other, and that no one else reads them. She said she wouldn't read them. Instead of writing reports, the diplomats should 'sell America'."
13. All these included in G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard cited above.
14. See John Barker 'Armchair Spartans', *Variant*, issue 24.
15. *Guardian Weekend* (6/11/04)
16. Investigated by William Clark, one of the few people to have investigated these networks of *ad hoc* power. See articles in *Lobster*, and more recently at [www.nuclearspin.org](http://www.nuclearspin.org)
17. WS Atkins; Tricolom; Computer Sciences Ltd.
18. In *The Power Elite* he writes: "Entire brackets of professions and industries are in 'the opinion business'...and are among these increased means of power at the disposal of elites of wealth and power; moreover some of the higher agents of the media are themselves either among the elites or very important among their servants."