

Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 296, \$31.95. ISBN 978-0-520-25836-5.

I opened Daniel Geary's *Radical Ambition* with little prior knowledge of C. Wright Mills. I curiously read his "Letter to the New Left" but stopped there. As I put Mills to the side, he kept reappearing in the autobiographical accounts of 1960s radicals, held as heroic example and canonical reference. Geary's book would remedy my neglect for that genial American public intellectual.

From the introduction, Geary contradicted my thin priors, for according to him, Mills was neither American, nor a public intellectual. Unlike the journeying New York intellectuals, once socialists, then liberals, and later still turned conservative, Mills was a "public sociologist," radicalized by his academic research and making the insights of the discipline available to a wider public. Further, against conventional wisdom, he was not blending native traditions of radicalism, and was principally influenced by European Marxists and German social theorists. Geary's thesis is perhaps not very exciting: to show that "Mills's thought was far more characteristic of his era than has been recognized."¹ Geary belabors the connections between Mills and post-war liberal thinkers to show their agreement in describing American society, even if liberals celebrate it while Mills protests it. To achieve this end, the book offers us a tour of Mills' writings.

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In chapter one we are introduced to Mills' education at Texas and Wisconsin with some revealing cameos by Institutionalist economists Clarence Ayres and Selig Perlman, contributing to his intellectual and political development. His early writings were on the sociology of knowledge as he read Karl Mannheim, and his historicist approach seems so reasonable to an historian that Geary has trouble making this aspect of Mills engaging. The period of the Second World War is important, not because of war work, which Mills seemingly did little of, but on account of his discovery of Max Weber. Not soon after, Mills befriends the New York intellectuals and conceptualizes the ideal of a critical intellectual antagonizing power and the corporate elites through the "politics of truth." Chapter three of the book treats Mills' arrival at Columbia and at the Bureau of Applied Social Research. For the first time he is hopeful, envisioning an alliance between workers and intellectuals. His enthusiasm for quantitative survey research is cut short as he begins a feud with Paul Lazarsfeld. Mills' first important book is discussed in chapter four; *White Collar* is the piece that establishes his reputation. His

adoption of social psychology, and a focus on alienation, produces a sociologically informed and morally charged argument on middle-class America. Mills' two great books are reported on chapter five. While his former radical friends in New York turn towards liberalism to proclaim an end to ideology, Mills remains obstinate in his radicalism. *Power Elite* and *Sociological Imagination* are lucidly explained and contextualized by Geary. The chapter also studies the reception of these two works among the liberal thinkers, and I begin to understand why Mills was so dear to Sixties radicals.

A book on texts and their interpretation can at times feel enclosed, only the reader and Mills channeled through Geary's voice. In the reading, Mills can be angry, entertaining, and insightful, but Geary wants to tell us that in the background was a "disillusioned radicalism" verging on the hopeless. "In its final and sixth chapter, the book's mood changes. As we know Mills's death is approaching, the cloud lifts over us (and Mills) and we see him valued, appreciated, energized." Curiously, this happens when Mills travels to Europe to discover kindred spirits in the English Left: independent socialists and defectors from the Communist Party of Great Britain. We are offered a discussion of Mills' "political program" and his unpublished manuscript on the "cultural apparatus."

Radical Ambition poses puzzles that speak to the history of post-war economics as they do to post-war sociology. Geary challenges the myth of the lonely American maverick on his motorcycle by showing continental sociology, western Marxist, and liberal traditions flowing through Mills' ink. Yet, even as Geary fits Mills in these great intellectual frames, he allows him to float with regard to his discipline of sociology. Geary notes that as soon as Mills becomes radicalized, through sociological study, he becomes alienated from the discipline, before any of his major writings and research. He feels an outsider and so confesses it in private correspondence, but at every moment, until his death, he is not without appreciative colleagues taking his work seriously. Hence, the book repeats the trope that his next book finally pushed Mills beyond the pale of his profession, until we read another chapter when a new publication is said to finally do the same. Mills' outsidership is an horizon. And it is productive of new knowledge. Mills lived out the idea of becoming an outsider, which one might see as a performance he adopted from his early years of reading Mannheim and the sociology of knowledge. Economics at the time had similar performers.

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What is perhaps missing from Geary's book is Mills' community. Geary's focus on texts leaves us without resources on collaborations, friendships, fellowships, loves. The book is at its best when it pursues Mills into his emotive interactions with peers. When Mills' pen dries after his second heart attack, so abruptly ends the autobiography. Although *Radical Ambition* is about revealing a C. Wright Mills engrossed in the flows of his time, paradoxically, it is he as a lonely writer that gives the book its unity and its tone.

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