

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The international politics of truth: C. Wright Mills and the sociology of the international

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## Abstract

C. Wright Mills's critical work on international relations is well known, but is often dismissed as being unscholarly, reductionist, and overly polemical. However, seeing the work in the context of his earlier career can allow for a new perspective, with Mills's activist views on war and militarism shaped very clearly by his earlier theoretical and political commitments. Mills developed a distinctive political sociological understanding of international politics, theorising the state as a historically-situated structural determinant of international power: a network of elite power that was contextualised by the influence of the socially constructed realities of the international created by elites. Mills's crucial critical contribution was to see the role of the intellectual as criticising these realities through the imaginative reconceptualisation of the world, which he called the 'politics of truth'. The article argues the *international* politics of truth was not only Mills's distinctive theory of the international, but that it was clearly supported by his early theorisation of the international. A revised view of the importance of Mills's international relations work can help to situate Mills as part of a broader tradition of IR scholarship, a lost lineage of the critical historical and political sociology of the international.

**Keywords:** C. Wright Mills; Politics of Truth; Public Intellectuals; International Historical Sociology

## Introduction

If we as intellectuals do not define and re-define reality, who will?<sup>1</sup>

C. Wright Mills is well known as an important sociologist of the social stratification of the United States,<sup>2</sup> a critic of mainstream sociology and the social sciences of the 1950s,<sup>3</sup> and as a trenchant commentator on US politics. At the end of his short career, he also began to explicitly and popularly address the international dimensions of his critique.<sup>4</sup> Mills's late work addressing international topics was popular with a broader public, but its reception in academic circles was

<sup>1</sup>C. Wright Mills (1959), 'The decline of the left', in C. Wright Mills, *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Mills's three volumes on the changing structures of US society were especially important: C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1948); C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1951); and C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956).

<sup>3</sup>His 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press) has had a lasting influence in this regard.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1958); and C. Wright Mills, *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill and Ballentine, 1960).

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more varied. While *The Power Elite* and *The Causes of World War Three* – Mills's main substantive works dealing with international problems – were reviewed widely,<sup>5</sup> their specific claims about *international* politics did not have much of an impact within academia. Retrospectively, Mills scholars see the work on the international, at best, as an underdeveloped and rushed part of his sociology, and at worst, as an overly personalised form of attention seeking.<sup>6</sup> However, Mills's late work on international relations connects more deeply with his early writing – and is more theoretically substantial – than has been recognised.<sup>7</sup> While his late-career scholarly-activism is very important, it conceals his earlier politicised turn to the international, and the ways in which his conceptualisations of international relations relied on the development of an eclectic theory of the international, based mainly on traditions of European political sociology and a pragmatist sociology of knowledge.

The article makes the case that Mills should be seen as an important part of the development of a critical theory of the international post-Second World War. The overall argument of the article is situated in work investigating the intellectual history of the discipline of International Relations (IR).<sup>8</sup> However, a focus on a non-canonical figure also requires making a case for the inclusion of work that was not part of disciplinary international relations. First, Mills can be situated in a growing body of scholarship examining non-canonical thinkers and movements, which argue for seeing more popular or non-disciplinary work as being crucial for understanding the development of international thought.<sup>9</sup> Second, Mills had an influential public role as a writer, and his polemical, populist works on international relations were highly prominent, thus justifying the relevance of his work to a broadly conceived tradition of international relations. Finally, Mills's critical articulation of the international has ties with both contemporary tendencies and concerns, and lineages to present day international thought.

Mills's larger contribution to IR can be seen in his distinctive historical sociological position: that the analysis of the present needs to be embedded in the structures of the past, and that the analyst has the power to reframe reality in a pragmatist sense. Justin Rosenberg made the case for Mills as proponent of the 'international imagination' on these grounds but did not look more closely at his substantive work on the subject.<sup>10</sup> However, Mills explicitly focused on the dynamics of elite power in the state as being the fundamental driver of foreign policy and the interrelations between states, with a related emphasis on the intellectual as a purveyor of the 'politics of truth'. The politics of truth was embedded in Mills's pragmatist views on the nature of knowledge, seeing

<sup>5</sup>There is an extensive list of these reviews in the 'Bibliography of the writings of C. Wright Mills', in C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving L. Horowitz (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 635–41.

<sup>6</sup>Compare, for example, Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the New Left and American Social Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), ch. 6 and Irving Louis Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1983), ch. 13.

<sup>7</sup>For example, Brewer's otherwise important account of Mills on war and peace excludes discussion of his 1940s writings on these topics: John D. Brewer, 'C. Wright Mills on war and peace', in John Scott and Ann Nielsen (eds), *C. Wright Mills and The Sociological Imagination: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2014), pp. 183–202.

<sup>8</sup>For overviews, see Duncan Bell, 'Writing the world: Disciplinary history and beyond', *International Affairs*, 85:1 (2009), pp. 3–22; and Brian Schmidt, 'On the history and historiography of International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Beth Simmons, and Thomas Risse (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, UK: Sage, 2012), pp. 3–28.

<sup>9</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest give a similar argument for including non-canonical scholars in IR histories, focusing on Mills and Lewis Mumford: Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, 'The thermonuclear revolution and the politics of imagination: Realist radicalism in political theory and IR', *International Relations*, 32:3 (2018), pp. 255–74; see also Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought During the Thermonuclear Revolution* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016). For recent work looking at non-canonical figures and traditions, see Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>Justin Rosenberg, 'The international imagination: IR theory and "classic social analysis"', *Millennium*, 23:1 (1994), pp. 85–108.

truth determined by social context and human action. In this light, the ‘international politics of truth’ can be seen as the act of intellectual investigation and contestation over elite ideas of the ‘reality’ of international politics.

For Mills, this was most concretely played out in debates about nuclear strategy and super-power conflict: the politics of truth in this instance concerned the contestation by critical intellectuals of the ‘reality’ (the ‘crackpot realism’) of military necessity espoused by elite policymakers in the US (and beyond), and the espousal of utopian ideas about alternative possibilities for imagining the world. As Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest have argued, Mills can be considered a ‘realist radical’, whose critique focused both on the ‘realities’ of power, but also the necessity of transforming these realities.<sup>11</sup> However, more needs to be done to map out Mills’s theoretical foundations and substantive views on international relations. Mills’s substantive and theoretical concerns – while never turned into a developed framework for understanding IR – clearly advanced a historical and political sociology of IR which maps onto many present concerns of critical IR theory: that the focus of interstate relations should be on substantive historical practices rather than abstractions of the international; that hierarchies rather than ‘anarchy’ are the reality of IR; and, that the world is socially constructed, rather radically via a pragmatist theory of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The aim of this article is to not only show the relevance of Mills’s international work to the tradition of IR, but to also demonstrate that it was more substantial than has previously been acknowledged. In order to investigate the continuities in his international relations work, the article examines Mills’s key works on international relations – *The Power Elite* and *The Causes of World War Three* – in the broader context of his writings from the 1940s and early 1950s, to assess how the earlier work shaped the later work. The research draws on published sources (both academic and for periodicals and the ‘popular’ press), concentrating on a number of neglected pieces from the 1940s dealing with international issues, but also revisiting the broad corpus of his published work in order to draw out international themes.<sup>13</sup> Additional support is provided through Mills’s published letters<sup>14</sup> and key biographies and intellectual histories of Mills.<sup>15</sup> A clear picture emerges from the analysis: Mills’s work in the 1940s showed the development of a fairly robust – if eclectic – theory of international politics based on the European political sociological traditions he had become immersed in, combined with a pragmatist theory of knowledge. These early foundations carry over into his later work, even where they are not acknowledged explicitly in his writings. Making this connection can allow for a new perspective, with Mills’s activist views on war and militarism shaped very clearly by his earlier theoretical and political commitments.

<sup>11</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’.

<sup>12</sup>In an overview of historical sociology in IR, Hobson, Lawson, and Rosenberg draw specifically on Mills to frame their discussion: John M. Hobson, George Lawson, and Justin Rosenberg, ‘Historical sociology’, in Robert A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), pp. 3357–75. See also John M. Hobson, ‘The twin self-delusions of IR: Why “hierarchy” and not “anarchy” is the core concept of IR’, *Millennium*, 42:3 (2014), pp. 557–75.

<sup>13</sup>Mills’s major essays and reviews are collected in two overlapping collections: Mills, *Power, Politics, and People* (hereafter cited *PPP*); and Mills, *The Politics of Truth* (hereafter cited as *PoT*). Where possible, I have consulted the original versions of these works. The bibliographies of these two texts were invaluable in finding additional material that had not been compiled in edited collections.

<sup>14</sup>Kathryn Mills and Pamela Mills (eds), *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup>The most important book-length studies are Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); Geary, *Radical Ambition*; Tom Hayden, *Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and his Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*; Rick Tilman, *C. Wright Mills: A Native Radical and His American Intellectual Roots* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984); and Javier Treviño, *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012). One needs to add Gillam’s important and influential articles, especially Richard Gillam, ‘C. Wright Mills and the politics of truth: *The Power Elite* revisited’, *American Quarterly*, 27:4 (1975), pp. 461–79.

The article starts by outlining the main claims of Mills's later work on international issues – mainly found in *The Power Elite* and *The Causes of World War Three* – situating them in the context of Mills's ideas about the public role of intellectuals, the historical and institutional context in which he was working, and the contemporary reception of the work by scholars of international relations. It demonstrates that Mills's work needs to be considered more holistically, linking his substantive writings on international relations to his general critique of the social sciences in order to see his theory of the international in full view. The second section goes back to Mills's work of the 1940s and early 1950s to examine the lineages of his political sociology of the international, stressing the political engagement with international issues, but also the theoretical grounding in the work of several important political sociologists, especially Karl Mannheim, Franz Neumann, and Max Weber. It argues that Mills developed a substantive theory of international politics, mainly focused on the domestic elite power dynamics within states, that took as its starting point the concrete historical social structures of societies. The final section details his critical approach to the international, based on the 'politics of truth': the possibilities of contestation by intellectuals of the elite-given realities of international relations. The article demonstrates that Mills's later views on international relations were well supported by his early theorisation of the international, outlining a critical historical-political sociology of the international that was an alternative to predominant theories of the time.

### Mills and the critique of international relations

Mills's approach to the international coalesced in a series of writings in the 1950s, especially in *The Power Elite* in 1956 and *The Causes of World War Three* in 1958. While different in tone and scope, both works developed a deep critique of the militarism of the Cold War and how it had infected the US state at the elite levels (especially through the elevation of the military to the upper echelon of elite power). *Causes* further focused on the dangers and inevitability of nuclear war. Mills outlined the elevation of the power of military professionals, who helped create a skewed worldview – the 'military metaphysic' – that focused mainly on the 'necessity' of countering international military power.<sup>16</sup> He suggested that the concentration of power in an irresponsible elite – political, economic, and military – was disconnecting people from important decisions about their lives, contributing to a general sense of apathy amongst the population. Mills's activism concerning these issues was widely circulated and discussed and took on an international dimension in the late 1950s, when he first started travelling to Europe. His critical work on Cold War politics had a lasting influence on the international left, as well as the New Left student movement in the US.<sup>17</sup>

Political scientists and international relations scholars began to take more of an interest in Mills after the publication of *The Power Elite* in 1956. Though *The Power Elite* had some international implications, most of the focus from students of politics was on the particularities of Mills's theory of the US state,<sup>18</sup> while engagement with the specifically *international* dimensions of *The Power Elite* and *Causes* – from their publication to a few years after his death – was sporadic and quite narrowly focused.<sup>19</sup> There was some early interest in the military sociology of *The Power Elite*, which was cited in numerous pieces, both critically and in support of the cases being

<sup>16</sup>See especially, Mills, *Power Elite*, chs 8, 9; Mills, *Causes*, ch. 9.

<sup>17</sup>For overviews, see Geary, *Radical Ambition*, ch. 6; Daniel Geary, "Becoming international again": C. Wright Mills and the emergence of a Global New Left, 1956–1962', *Journal of American History*, 95:3 (2008), pp. 710–36; and John H. Summers, 'The epigone's embrace, Part II: C. Wright Mills and the New Left', *Left History*, 13:2 (2008), pp. 94–127.

<sup>18</sup>Most of the important debates around *The Power Elite* are collected in G. William Domhoff (ed.), *C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968).

<sup>19</sup>An exception can be found in Byron Fox, 'The emerging international sociology', in Irving L. Horowitz (ed.), *The New Sociology: Essays in Social Science and Social Theory in Honor of C. Wright Mills* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 476–90.

made.<sup>20</sup> *Causes* is likely the most coherent treatise on international relations Mills published, and despite its more polemical tone, it did ‘internationalise’ more extensively the arguments made in *The Power Elite*, providing a more substantively internationally focused argument. However, while *Causes* was reviewed quite widely in newspapers and periodicals, it was not taken very seriously as an academic text.<sup>21</sup>

In the time since, scholarship on the international dimensions of Mills’s work – despite a constant interest in his sociological writings – has remained a real gap in his legacy. The gap is likely partially due to the less scholarly tone of his more international writings. Mills himself referred to a number of his later works, including *Causes*, as ‘pamphlets’, noting that he did not consider them as scholarly works,<sup>22</sup> and contemporary Mills scholars have for the most part agreed, focusing mainly on their importance as political interventions.<sup>23</sup> Of the major biographies and overviews of his career, few detail his international texts extensively, and even those that do have been largely dismissive of them in terms of substance.<sup>24</sup>

However, the dismissal of his later, more popular works by many Mills scholars is mistaken. First, it does not do enough to link these popular works to Mills’s more scholarly work, while also minimising the importance of his popular writings in theorising the international. Mills’s ‘pamphlets’ and political writings in the ‘popular’ press might have lacked the more sustained scholarship of his previous works, but they were grounded in that work, as the references to his older texts made clear. Second, as is much noted in the intellectual biographies, Mills wrote these texts both out of a sense of urgency of the political situation and as a call for action, and their tone and form also need to be seen in the particularities of that context. Mills has noted that it was the Second World War that politicised him,<sup>25</sup> and it is necessary to see his work in the broader context of the possibilities of militarisation of the US state post-Second World War, and the prospects for nuclear war, which were the core focus of his works in the 1950s. His ‘international turn’ in 1956 also caused a shift away from just looking at the United States, and focusing more on nuclear weapons, militarism, and development globally.<sup>26</sup>

Mills’s move to more popular and political work was also connected to his shifting status in institutionalised sociology: while often seen as alienated due to his various battles within the profession, there was also a growing narrowness and specialisation within the discipline that Mills was out of sync with.<sup>27</sup> Mills wanted to simultaneously be a public intellectual and a professional

<sup>20</sup>For some interesting examples of substantive engagement, see Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel P. Huntington, ‘Cincinnatus and the apparatchik’, *World Politics*, 16:1 (1963), pp. 52–78; Edward J. Kolodziej, ‘Strategic policy and American government: Structural constants and variables’, *The Review of Politics*, 27:4 (1965), pp. 465–90; and Walter Yondorf, ‘Monnet and the action committee: The formative period of the European communities’, *International Organization*, 19:4 (1965), pp. 885–912.

<sup>21</sup>There were very few reviews in journals of IR or political science (especially when compared to the wide reviewing of both *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination*). For exceptions (both short, one positive, one negative), see D. G. MacRae, ‘The causes of World War Three by C. Wright Mills’, *International Affairs*, 35:3 (1959), pp. 343–4; and W. H. Pope, ‘The causes of World War Three’, *International Journal*, 15:2 (1960), pp. 169–70.

<sup>22</sup>Mills and Mills (eds), *Letters*, p. 263; Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup>Aronowitz, *Taking it Big*, pp. 199–202.

<sup>24</sup>Geary, *Radical Ambition*, ch. 6, esp. p. 199; and Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*, ch. 13. See also Andrew D. Grossman, ‘Revisiting C. Wright Mills on the militarization of postwar American society’, in Guy Oakes (ed.), *The Anthem Companion to C. Wright Mills* (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2016), esp. pp. 76–7. Hayden’s study, written in in the early 1960s as an MA thesis, does more to contextualise Mills’s work in the changing geopolitics of the Cold War; see, for example, Hayden, *Radical Nomad*, pp. 154–6.

<sup>25</sup>Mills and Mills (eds), *Letters*, p. 251.

<sup>26</sup>Geary argues persuasively that 1956 was a pivotal year for Mills in making his analyses and worldview more international, whereas previously much of his focus was on the US itself. Geary, *Radical Ambition*, ch. 6; and Geary, ‘Becoming international again’. See also Brewer, ‘War and peace’.

<sup>27</sup>Howard S. Becker, ‘Professional sociology: The case of C. Wright Mills’, in Ray C. Rist (ed.), *The Democratic Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994); see also David Paul Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008).



social scientist, and the dual role had become untenable at the time when he was writing. In the late 1950s he began to look for inspiration elsewhere – in the UK, in eastern Europe, in Latin America – and saw the road to political transformation through more public engagement. *Causes*, for example, was partially a response to Mills's involvement with peace activism, primarily through the US Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), but also in his links to the British New Left, who were closely associated with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).<sup>28</sup> He did not envisage his popular writings to be the end of his writing career – a combination of over-commitment and his untimely death (he died in 1962 at the age of 45) derailed more ambitious academic works that were in progress.

### **Mills and the 'international imagination'**

While Mills's substantive critique of IR had little influence on the discipline, his critique of social science was invoked by Justin Rosenberg in a wide-ranging critique of the field of IR in 1994. Rosenberg proposed a new approach to IR, drawing on the 'international imagination' as a way of overcoming the shortcomings of IR tendencies at the time; the piece also generated a response from leading figures in the discipline.<sup>29</sup> Drawing from Mills's arguments in *The Sociological Imagination*, Rosenberg argued that IR needed to be better grounded in substantive problems, be focused on historical understanding, see the social world as a totality, and foster a commitment to the ideals of reason and freedom. Especially important was Rosenberg's critique of the ahistoricism and abstraction of the mainstream of IR theory, which connected with the specific processes of international relations as seen by Mills: 'Imperialism, general crisis, cold war, revolution, capitalist development and social transformation – here are some of the processes which have made up the real content of international relations.'<sup>30</sup> In a revisiting of the article some twenty years later, Rosenberg noted that the charges still hold true, as does Mills's solution – though with retrospective doubts about how Mills would have viewed the reality of the international in terms of multiple interacting societies or worlds.<sup>31</sup> This use of Mills as an external critic is illuminating for the possibilities of a critical theory of international relations, and an entry point into thinking both historically and sociologically about IR. However, the account neglected two important elements: Mills's substantive critique of the system of international relations, and Mills's pragmatist sociology of knowledge.

Fred Halliday's intervention in the debate illuminated both these issues,<sup>32</sup> but through a critique of Mills's account of IR. Halliday made two key arguments. The first is a critique of Mills's 'internalism': that his conception of the international is entirely based on the actions of state-level elites, rather than comprising a realm in its own right.<sup>33</sup> The problem for Halliday is that this view does not recognise the importance of international interactions and competing value systems in forming foreign policy, or the interrelation between the domestic and the international.<sup>34</sup> This is a

<sup>28</sup>Aronowitz, *Taking it Big*, p. 200; Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 198; Sylvest and van Munster, 'Thermonuclear revolution', pp. 266–7.

<sup>29</sup>Rosenberg, 'The international imagination'; and the replies by Mervyn Frost, David Campbell, Fred Halliday, Steve Smith, and Mark Neufeld: Mervyn Frost, 'The role of normative theory in IR', *Millennium*, 23:1 (1994), pp. 109–18; David Campbell, 'Political excess and the limits of imagination', *Millennium*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 365–75; Fred Halliday, 'Theory and ethics in international relations: The contradictions of C. Wright Mills', *Millennium*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 377–85; Mark Neufeld, 'Who's afraid of meta-theory?', *Millennium*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 387–93; and Steve Smith, 'Rearranging the deckchairs on the ship called Modernity: Rosenberg, epistemology and emancipation', *Millennium*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 395–405.

<sup>30</sup>Rosenberg, 'The international imagination', p. 104.

<sup>31</sup>Justin Rosenberg, 'Confessions of a sociolator', *Millennium*, 44:2 (2016), pp. 292–9.

<sup>32</sup>The debate over Rosenberg's article focused much more on the then current state of IR theory than the specifics of Mills's ideas, and with the exception Halliday, none of the contributors looked beyond Mills's work in *The Sociological Imagination*, in terms of his actual substantive engagement with international relations.

<sup>33</sup>Halliday, 'Theory and ethics', p. 380.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 380, 385.

salient issue but misses instances where Mills clearly examines international interactions. For example, the problem of comparative development became central for Mills, which he began to discuss in detail in *Causes*. Chapter 11, on the ‘world encounter’ between the US and the Soviet Union precisely concerned the internationalisation of their respective development models; these ideas were also played out in numerous essays after 1958.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Mills’s consistent focus on substantive international processes, such as imperialism, were pronounced. In *Causes*, a whole chapter details the dynamics of imperialism as part of the broader problem of the ‘permanent war economy’, articulated as a crucial part of his general understanding of international relations as a process, and even if it is internally driven, the difference in the types of imperialism manifested by the US and Soviet Union are linked with concepts of development and underdevelopment.<sup>36</sup> The focus on development demonstrated engagement with how international interactions could create differential dynamics of international relations.

Mills was also aware of the problem of how to interrelate the domestic and the international. As he stated in a letter to the magazine *Commentary* in 1957, ‘the relations of domestic and international problems are most intricate; I do not know of an altogether adequate statement of them, but I have been and I am trying to confront such problems’.<sup>37</sup> Mills does not conceive of the international as an abstracted distinct realm, but a space of interaction, full of concrete processes. Not all of these elements are systemised in his work, but especially after 1956, they become more prominent in his analyses. For example, in a late interview from 1960, he noted concerning change in the Cold War: ‘it is impossible for one thing to happen, namely that the Soviet system and the capitalist system both continue just as they are now. We know that’s not going to happen. Both of them are going to change, in interaction with one another, and inside themselves.’<sup>38</sup>

Halliday’s second concern with Mills is his conception of an ethic of the international. Halliday argued that, like other radical critics of the Cold War, Mills’s focus on internal political dynamics ‘can provide no ethical guidance since it implies, basically, that all foreign and military decisions are corrupt and therefore foreign policy itself should be abandoned’.<sup>39</sup> While Halliday is correct in terms of Mills’s pessimism in works like *The Power Elite*, his ‘international turn’ transformed the possibilities of change for Mills.<sup>40</sup> *Causes*, for example, was inspired by Mills’s interest in the nuclear disarmament movement, and is full of concrete (if utopian) proposals for a new foreign policy for the US, based on international aid, a competent civil service, and increased internationalism.<sup>41</sup> But, more importantly, Halliday also leaves out the centrality of the pragmatist worldview for Mills’s overall social theory: the focus the ‘politics of truth’ as an ethic of responsibility.<sup>42</sup> Intellectuals, as Mills conceived them, were an important autonomous force and needed to take up their responsibilities to ‘define reality’ in an adequate fashion, especially as against the dominant discourses of those in power.

In this light, we can see *Causes* as part of a larger argument about the sociological imagination that Mills was making in the late 1950s: that one important aspect of the sociological imagination

<sup>35</sup>Mills, *Causes*, ch. 11. For further examples, see C. Wright Mills (1959), ‘Culture and politics: The fourth epoch’, in *PoT*; C. Wright Mills (1959), ‘On the problem of industrial development’, in *PPP*; Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, ch. 8; and Mills, ‘On Latin America, the Left, and the U.S.’, in *PoT*. Mills also had an unfinished but planned project on ‘Comparative Sociology’ that was meant to take these ideas much further. See Mills and Mills (eds), *Letters*, pp. 274–5, 283–5, 291. For more details on this project, see Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 187–8; and Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*, pp. 323–8.

<sup>36</sup>Mills, *Causes*, ch. 10.

<sup>37</sup>C. Wright Mills, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *Commentary*, 23 (June 1957), p. 581.

<sup>38</sup>Mills, ‘On Latin America’, p. 224.

<sup>39</sup>Halliday, ‘Theory and ethics’, p. 380.

<sup>40</sup>Geary makes the case quite strongly that Mills’s internationalism after 1956 made his work more hopeful of the possibility of change; see Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 195–6; 200. Also see Gillam, ‘C. Wright Mills and the politics of truth’, pp. 475–6.

<sup>41</sup>See especially, *Causes*, ch. 15, ‘Guidelines, I’. For more on the intellectual and political context, see Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 197–9.

<sup>42</sup>See C. Wright Mills (1955), ‘On knowledge and power’, in *PoT*. See also Mills, ‘The decline of the left’.

concerned connecting the everyday troubles of individuals to the broader structural problems of the world, in order to provide an opportunity for political action.<sup>43</sup> John D. Brewer explicitly argues for seeing *Causes* as a political and moral work that was an ‘opportunity to display the sociological imagination’, a form of ‘moral discourse’ on the human condition.<sup>44</sup> Van Munster and Sylvest have further argued for seeing Mills as a ‘realist radical’ (along with Lewis Mumford) – focusing on the realities of power in the world, but also noting ways in which this reality might be challenged via political action, especially through the political imagination (which was also shared with a set of ‘nuclear realists’: John Herz, Bertrand Russell, and Gunther Anders).<sup>45</sup> This view adds to Rosenberg’s account, giving it more historical and substantive weight, while also importantly situating Mills’s contributions in a broader intellectual context. However, while they note that a ‘politics of truth’ was shared with other realist radicals,<sup>46</sup> the distinctiveness of Mills’s position also derives from his pragmatist critique, which is a fundamental part of his vision of the international. As Daniel Geary notes, ‘Mills adapted the pragmatists’ conception of science as a dynamic, continuous, nondogmatic process of inquiry and their emphasis on the close relationship between politics and action. Pragmatists viewed science not as the discovery of timeless truths, but as a method for understanding and changing the world.’<sup>47</sup>

A large part of Mills’s analysis of international politics concerns the ‘military metaphysic’ and how it captures the problematic worldview of the groups that espouse it.<sup>48</sup> In essence, for Mills, it is a definition of ‘world reality’ that needs to be challenged. While Mills’s discussions of these concepts in these later works on IR are not explicitly embedded in a sociology of knowledge, Mills’s intent is quite clear: he suggests that reality is a historical and social construction, a possible worldview that skews the possibilities for action. As he sums up in *Causes*: ‘the viewpoints these elites hold, the definitions of reality they accept and act upon, the policies they espouse and attempt to realize – these are among the immediate causes of the thrust toward World War III.’<sup>49</sup> The military metaphysic, the ‘world reality’ of the elite, is what creates the logic of necessity so embedded in ‘realist’ strategic thinking, and this is what needs to be countered. However, the weight of the late writings can be improved by seeing them in connection with his early writings on international relations, all contextualised by his ongoing works of political sociology.

### Mills and the political sociology of the international

Mills’s first published academic articles concerned the sociology of knowledge, and was particularly a pragmatist defence of and reconstruction of the sociology of knowledge.<sup>50</sup> In the 1940s, Mills began to engage more deeply with European social theory – particularly German sociologists and theorists such as Karl Mannheim, Franz Neumann, and Max Weber<sup>51</sup> – which was

<sup>43</sup>Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, ch. 1.

<sup>44</sup>Brewer, ‘Mills on war and peace’, pp. 183, 189, 195.

<sup>45</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’, and van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*.

<sup>46</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’, p. 266; they further note that this view of ‘speaking truth to power’ was especially in opposition to the knowledge economy of the Cold War social sciences, and its focus on ‘rationality’ rather than ‘reason’ (Van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, ch. 1, esp. p. 33). As Gillam notes, this perspective was also shared by other ‘new radicals’ of the period, all of whom focused on versions of the politics of truth; Gillam, ‘C. Wright Mills and the politics of truth’, p. 463.

<sup>47</sup>Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup>This phrase is used throughout *The Power Elite* and *Causes*.

<sup>49</sup>Mills, *Causes*, p. 47.

<sup>50</sup>C. Wright Mills, ‘Language, logic and culture’, *American Sociological Review*, 4:5 (1939), pp. 670–80; C. Wright Mills, ‘Methodological consequences of the sociology of knowledge’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 46:3 (1940), pp. 316–30; and C. Wright Mills, ‘Situating actions and vocabularies of motive’, *American Sociological Review*, 5:6 (1940), pp. 904–13. Mills had already developed a substantial understanding of and contribution to the study of pragmatism in his 1942 PhD thesis, published posthumously as C. Wright Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Geary, *Radical Ambition*; Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*; and Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*.



crucial for shifting his political and analytical perspectives. From these theorists, Mills developed the building blocks of his political sociology, but they also shaped his views on international relations. While the influences on Mills's sociological approach have been much discussed, their impact on his international thinking has not. Examining his briefer pieces on international politics published in the 1940s, mostly in the shape of book reviews and shorter polemical essays, we can see an emerging shape to how he conceived of the international, which gave the overall identity to his later internationally focused work: a focus on the state and elite power as the key creator of international relations, a concern with the power of the military over foreign policymaking, and the link to ideology and a critique of 'realism' through the 'politics of truth'.

Mills's entry into international politics was through the concrete problem of war. His early reviews and essays on war and the problems of military power focused on how to reconcile existing accounts of war with the perspective of political sociology, mainly focused on applying sociological concepts to political phenomena, such as power, the state, and ideology. The nature of Mills's critique – and his core target – comes out strongly in a 1943 review of Quincy Wright's *A Study of War*, in *Partisan Review*.<sup>52</sup> Wright was the doyen of the liberal internationalist approach to international relations, based at the University of Chicago, and a key target of many of the postwar realists.<sup>53</sup> Mills was scathing of Wright's project, a two-volume study of war:

you can find almost anything except a clear conception of what has caused wars, the social compositions and recruitment of armies, the effects of war upon different classes and spheres of given social structures, the relations of the strategies used to the types of armies [fighting] and the political committees directing them, when and how military strata gain in civilian power and prestige during war, the ways in which armies are financed, and the motivations and ideologies of different sections of an army and of a society at war.<sup>54</sup>

Mills's upfront critique demonstrated an affinity with an approach to war that needed to be embedded in the study of the historical power structures of societies, and not confined to the study of motives or ideology.<sup>55</sup>

But how might this be done, and what were the consequences? A long 1942 review of Franz Neumann's book *Behemoth* (also in *Partisan Review*) showed a way forward.<sup>56</sup> Neumann, a legal theorist and associate of the Frankfurt School, published his book on the structure of the Nazi state in 1942, and in a revised version in 1944. It importantly argued that the Nazi state was not a coherent totality, but the product of competing spheres of influence, which rendered it a 'behemoth' rather than a 'leviathan'.<sup>57</sup> Mills applauded *Behemoth* not only for its analysis of the Nazi state, but also for its contribution to comparative analysis and social science more generally. Neumann's focus on four distinct power centres in the Nazi state, brought together by a

<sup>52</sup>C. Wright Mills, 'A bibliography of war: Review of *A Study of War* by Quincy Wright', *Partisan Review*, 10 (May to June 1943), pp. 301–02. The book reviewed was Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

<sup>53</sup>For useful overviews of Wright's project, see Trygve Throntveit, 'A strange fate: Quincy Wright and the trans-war trajectory of Wilsonian internationalism', *White House Studies*, 10:4 (2011), pp. 261–377; and Waqar H. Zaidi, 'Stages of war, stages of man: Quincy Wright and the liberal internationalist study of war', *The International History Review*, 40:2 (2018), pp. 416–35.

<sup>54</sup>Mills, 'A bibliography of war', p. 301.

<sup>55</sup>See also Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 'A Marx for managers', *Ethics: An International Journal of Legal, Political and Social Thought*, 52:2 (1942), pp. 200–15.

<sup>56</sup>C. Wright Mills, 'Locating the enemy: The Nazi behemoth dissected', *Partisan Review*, 9:5 (1942), pp. 432–7.

<sup>57</sup>Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2009 [orig. pub. 1942/4]). For an overview of Neumann's thought, see William E. Scheuerman, *Between the Norm and the Exception: The Frankfurt School and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

shifting ideology, was very appealing to Mills.<sup>58</sup> While much of the review discussed Neumann's account of the Nazi state and especially his discussion of ideology, it was also noted that Neumann's work was meant as an account of the German state at war. As Mills argued, any account of the Nazi state must also account for its adventurous expansionism abroad, and he suggested that

such explanation cannot be performed by modern curse words (outmoded psychiatry), not by the finger being smugly pointed at bad gangs out for 'power', nor by reference to merely formal growth of 'bureaucracies'. It requires attention to the economic structure and its political apparatus that lead dynamically into war.<sup>59</sup>

A focus on ideology was ever-present in Mills's early essays, but it was not as clear as the other elements of his critique. While he thought ideology important in understanding 'political reality', he took time to find the way of expressing this as a problem of international relations. It was an issue he was grappling with in the Neumann essay, where he noted that

ideologies and social structures are seen conjointly, which is the only way to see either in accurate and telling focus. For in some situations nothing that is said can be taken at its face value, and it is more important to know meanings than to test for truth. Indeed, the way to political reality is *through* ideological analysis.<sup>60</sup>

While Mills's conception of ideology (and worldview) are drawn from Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which saw all ideas as the product of social context, with the intellectual's role as both objectively examining the production of ideas and subjectively evaluating their content<sup>61</sup> – an interest Mills shared with E. H. Carr<sup>62</sup> – Mills also put his own distinctive spin on the role of ideology.<sup>63</sup> Mills saw ideologies as pluralistic: they are the worldviews of different groups within societies that need to be connected to the concrete reality of social structure. As he notes in his review of Wright: 'such confusion of ideology and motives with the causal analysis of war obscures the simple fact that what men die for is not always what causes their death'.<sup>64</sup>

The focus on the ideology of militarism became more focused in his later work (for example in the 'military metaphysic' of *The Power Elite*), but there are strong signs of it in the 1940s as well. Concretely, it initially was focused on the problems of postwar planning. This focus came out both in the review of Wright, and an important essay on 'The Powerless People', published in Dwight Macdonald's new journal *politics* in 1944, where he argued that the 'new order' is being left to those best attuned to preparing violence: 'We move from individual to collective domination, as the nations which have shown themselves mightiest in organizing world violence

<sup>58</sup>Geary discusses the influence of *Behemoth* on Mills's work in more detail: Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 58–9. Neumann's early influence on Mills can especially be seen in the following piece, published the year after his book review: C. Wright Mills (1943), 'Collectivism and the "mixed-up" economy', in *PPP*.

<sup>59</sup>Mills, 'The Nazi behemoth', p. 434.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>61</sup>See especially Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1936); for a broad overview, see David Kettler and Volker Meja, 'Karl Mannheim and the sociology of knowledge', in George Ritzer and Barry Smart (eds), *Handbook of Social Theory* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2001).

<sup>62</sup>The influence of Mannheim on Carr is well known, and is explored in detail by Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 6; and Seán Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), ch. 3.

<sup>63</sup>For interpretations of the role of Mannheim in Mills's thought, see Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 33–7; and Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*, pp. 53–9.

<sup>64</sup>Mills, 'A bibliography of war', p. 302.

take on the leadership of the peaceful world.<sup>65</sup> In line with his views on the embeddedness of war in the social structures of the state, Mills was increasingly arguing that war preparedness was going to become a permanent part of the US state. In a polemical essay from 1945, on the possibility of permanent peacetime conscription in the US, Mills starts to put together these ideas to form the basis of a theory about war and the state. This piece is a forerunner to the arguments about ‘military ascendancy’ and ‘permanent war economy’ made more fully in *The Power Elite* in 1956, though here more a rough sketch and more suffused with Marxian language (such as ‘monopoly capitalism’), likely derived from Neumann.<sup>66</sup> Echoing Clausewitz, Mills argued that ‘if the current war is a continuation of politics by other means, as military realists insist, then the coming peace may simply be a continuation of war by its own means ... Warfare, as the basic instrument of national policy, becomes a continuous social institution.’<sup>67</sup> These views were taken further in Mills’s 1948 book, *The New Men of Power*, where he specifically discussed the ‘drift’ of the US towards a ‘corporate garrison state’ and a ‘permanent war economy’.<sup>68</sup>

The focus on elite power that would become prominent in his books on stratification, and especially in *The Power Elite*, can also be seen in these early works of the 1940s. In ‘The Powerless People’, Mills laid out the political stakes of this argument. While the central argument is both an appeal for the reinvigoration of the intellectual as a ‘political man’, and an investigation of why this has become so problematic in modern society, much of the essay also concerns a critique of international relations. Focusing on the problems of the irresponsibility of those in large organisations, and especially the possibility of world order after the end of the Second World War, he focused explicitly on the internal state dynamics of international relations:

discussion of world affairs that does not proceed in terms of the struggle for power within each nation is interesting only in the political uses now made of it by those in power. Internal power struggles are the only determinants of international affairs which we may influence.<sup>69</sup>

While clearly not denying that ‘world affairs’ might have other determinants, his focus was on those that could be changed, especially through the interventions of critical intellectuals. The role of intellectuals became an important theme in Mills’s work, and can be seen quite prominently again in a 1948 forum contribution to the *American Sociological Review*, which debated the ways in which sociologists could further contribute to the analysis of the problems of international relations. Here, Mills again argued that international relations are mainly the power struggles between elites of various political units, and in order to understand international relations, we need to understand how states are made up in terms of elite formations. Mills, as usual, put this in rather scathing, polemical terms, mainly targeting the prominent idea put forward by other contributors to the forum, that ‘international relations’ was really about cultural diffusion, or ‘intercultural adjustment’:

<sup>65</sup>C. Wright Mills, ‘The powerless people: The role of the intellectual in society’, *politics*, 1 (April 1944), p. 72. See also Mills, ‘A bibliography of war’, p. 302.

<sup>66</sup>C. Wright Mills, ‘The conscription of America’, *Common Sense*, Vol. 14 (April 1945), p. 16. Neumann used the term extensively in *Behemoth* (see esp. Part Two, ‘Totalitarian monopoly capital’).

<sup>67</sup>Mills, ‘Conscription of America’, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup>Mills, *The New Men of Power*, p. 233 and ch. 14. Mills quotes this work explicitly in the *Causes* chapter on the ‘Permanent war economy’, though gives no formal reference to the work; Mills, *Causes*, p. 62. Nelson Lichtenstein discusses the similarity with and influence of Neumann’s critique of the Nazi state in more detail: Nelson Lichtenstein, ‘Introduction to the Illinois edition’, in C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. xiv–xv and xxiv. See also Aronowitz’s discussion of these links, in *Taking it Big*, ch. 3.

<sup>69</sup>Mills, ‘The powerless people’, p. 72.

Simple notions of cultural diffusion ... do not seem to be very useful in a world of tight national boundaries. 'Peoples' do not 'adjust' to one another; their relations are determined by decisions on political policies by statesmen. The point is that culture today does not proceed by anthropological growth, as much as by power decisions made by national elites; culture has become an object of bureaucratic manipulation, and 'understandings between peoples' are merely public relations gestures made half seriously by competing statesmen.<sup>70</sup>

Both these early essays bring together the role of elite power in forming international relations and the necessity of intellectuals to critique this power.

Many of these themes about the organisation of international politics developed in the 1940s were brought together in Mills's co-authored (with Hans Gerth) book from 1953, *Character and Social Structure*, in the broad context of its core focus: the ways in which macro-institutional orders create social roles.<sup>71</sup> As this work was started in 1941 with Gerth, it is an interesting account of their joint interests over a longer time period, and it certainly reflects Mills's intellectual influences, both from pragmatism and his developing interest in European social theory. As Guy Oakes has argued, the main framework from the book's third section on 'social structure', was a reworking of Weber's sociological analysis (seeing sociological categories as embedded in typologies, that can then be elaborated in specific historical contexts), and it was the backdrop of Mills's analytic framework in *The Power Elite*.<sup>72</sup> Particularly important here was Chapter VIII dealing with political, military, and economic orders, which would all play an important role in *The Power Elite* – especially with the idea of an independent role for the military within the social order.<sup>73</sup> In the final section of the book, Gerth and Mills note that one of the main historical trends has been militarisation: 'the co-ordination of political, economic and military order' required by the 'enormous range and destructive capacities of modern weapons'.<sup>74</sup>

Mills's view of international relations therefore can be seen to have drawn on the political sociological traditions that he was working with at the time. The links to Weber are clear in the framework of *The Power Elite*, with its tripartite focus on politics, the military and the economy (and the overall focus on bureaucratisation), and Neumann was also heavily influenced by Weber in his analytical scheme in *Behemoth*.<sup>75</sup> While Neumann's influence has been noted by a number of scholars in terms of Mills's analysis of the US state in *The Power Elite*, there were also overlaps with how Neumann viewed foreign policy and international relations. As recounted by David Kettler and Thomas Wheatland, Neumann believed that 'the foreign policy of states powerful enough to execute their own policy must be understood above all in terms of the state's historically distinct internal structure and dynamics rather than by reference to some general theory of international relations'.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup>C. Wright Mills, 'International relations and sociology: A discussion', *American Sociological Review*, 13:3 (1948), pp. 271–2.

<sup>71</sup>Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1953).

<sup>72</sup>Guy Oakes, 'Mills as ethical theorist: The military metaphysics and the higher immorality', in Oakes (ed.), *Anthem Companion to C. Wright Mills*, pp. 104–05; Aronowitz makes a similar argument, see *Taking it Big*, pp. 160–2.

<sup>73</sup>Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, ch. 8. The importance of the framework of *Character and Social Structure* was also noted by Mills, as there were numerous references to the text in *The Power Elite*; see, for example, the discussion of theoretical foundations in *Power Elite*, p. 384, fn. 2; p. 386, fn. 9.

<sup>74</sup>Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, p. 457; cited by Oakes, 'Mills as an ethical theorist', p. 104.

<sup>75</sup>See the argument in Peter Breiner, 'Translating Max Weber: Exile attempts to forge a new political science', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 3:2 (2004), pp. 133–49.

<sup>76</sup>David Kettler and Thomas Wheatland, "Has Germany a political theory? Is Germany a state?" The foreign affairs of nations in the political thought of Franz L. Neumann', in Felix Rösch (ed.), *Émigré Scholars and the Genesis of International Relations: A European Discipline in America?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2014), p. 105. See also Neumann's discussions of German imperialism in *Behemoth*, esp. Part 1, chs V and VI.

The parallels become even clearer when linking Mills's views to more concrete dynamics of international relations, particularly found (like with Neumann) in processes of imperialism. There are similarities between Mills's views and Weber's writings on international politics and imperialism: Mills would have been quite familiar with these writings, as co-editor with Hans Gerth of the translated collection of essays where they first appeared in English.<sup>77</sup> The descriptions of the dynamics of imperialism in *Behemoth* clearly have resonances in Mills's early formulations of international relations as well. For example, Neumann's views on the causes of the Second World War, cited by Mills, were that 'it is the aggressive, imperialist, expansionist spirit of German big business unhampered by consideration for small competitors, for the middle classes, free from control by the banks, delivered from the pressure of the trade unions, which is the motivating force of the economic system.'<sup>78</sup> Such views were expanded on in other essays in the 1940s, such as a co-authored piece on the managerial society. Here, Gerth and Mills argued that 'the Nazi drive to war is not nihilism, but imperialism, an old phenomenon in a streamlined form. Factors which are not a part of the hypothetical managerial society but are intrinsic to the structure and power grouping of the real world are needed to explain war.'<sup>79</sup> As noted above, Neumann's analysis clearly influenced Mills in *New Men of Power*, and the discussion of imperialism in *Causes* echoes a briefer discussion in *Character and Social Structure*, where Gerth and Mills cite key theorists of imperialism such as Hobson, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Schumpeter.<sup>80</sup>

Overall, Mills's distinct sociology of the international, focused on elite power in the state and the elite's enactment of state power in the world, was clearly embedded in the work that he started in the 1940s. While not fully articulated, the seeds of his core 1950s work on international relations can be seen in his earlier writings: his engagements with key political sociologists such as Weber, Mannheim, and Neumann, and his collaborations with Hans Gerth. Especially important was his distinctive focus on the hierarchies of the international, especially in terms of the emphasis on imperialism, but also in the discussion of 'collective domination' in postwar planning. Furthermore, the focus on a political sociology of power also stressed their historical dimensions. However, Mills's analyses of elite power and the problem of war were also embedded in a form of critique focused on the role of intellectuals as mediators of reality, where the independent intellectual as critic could be instrumental in making changes to the 'realities' of power.

### The international politics of truth

Mills's political sociology of the international was embedded in both a critique of ideology and an emphasis on the role of the critical intellectual. These conceptions of the intellectual as critic were also rooted in his early work on the sociology of knowledge. As noted above, his debt to Mannheim was quite clear in this regard, and a key and controversial part of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge was the role of the social scientist as an evaluator of ideology, and of the social situatedness of the production of knowledge itself. Mannheim had argued for the role of the 'relatively classless' 'socially unattached intelligentsia' in performing such a critique.<sup>81</sup> The focus on intellectuals was also premised on the importance of the possibility of political action, and here Mills drew on the pragmatist tradition, both philosophically and through its practical politics, focusing on a unity of theory and action.<sup>82</sup> For Mills, the theory of society must also propel

<sup>77</sup>See, for example, Weber, 'Structures of power' (esp. the subsections 'The prestige and power of the "great powers"' and 'The economic foundations of imperialism'), in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>78</sup>Neumann, *Behemoth*, p. 354; cited in Mills, 'The Nazi behemoth', p. 434.

<sup>79</sup>Gerth and Mills, 'A Marx for managers', p. 213.

<sup>80</sup>Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*, pp. 204–05.

<sup>81</sup>Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 137; see also Aronowitz, *Taking it Big*, pp. 33–4; Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 31–7.

<sup>82</sup>Tilman argues that Dewey's influence was especially important; Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*, pp. 131–7; see also Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 42–3.



active plans to reshape the world, and Mills saw the responsibility for this through public intellectuals, and more broadly in the social sciences itself.<sup>83</sup>

The focus on intellectuals as mediators of truth and the source of critique came out strongly in his 1944 essay, 'The Powerless People'.<sup>84</sup> Here, he saw the importance of vigorous debate and contestation in domestic politics, as a means of countering the organised irresponsibility of the elites. The role of the intellectual as critic was also important in his early conceptions of international relations. As Mills argued in his forum piece on sociology and international relations in 1948, 'is it not our political job, as social scientists, alerted to world affairs, to refuse to capitulate, as experts, to frozen political alternatives which lead to war, and to address ourselves to a third camp of the intellect, to project its image of world culture and to seek ways by which it might be constructed?'.<sup>85</sup> From the outset of his academic career, he had seen the link between intellectual life and politics, as conveyed in an unpublished final section to his 1943 essay 'The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists': 'You cannot escape the realities of politics even though academic sociologists in America have done their courageous best', and social scientists needed to 'squarely face the problems of power'.<sup>86</sup>

For the critic of international relations, the focus needed to be on the decision-making that would lead to war. While Mills developed an ideological critique of war and war planning in his 1940s writings, by the 1950s this work had taken more shape, propelled by the new world of nuclear weapons, and particularly focused on 'realism' as a worldview. He dubbed this worldview 'crackpot realism': though never well defined, it symbolised an ideology of military power that created its own logic of necessity.<sup>87</sup> As he described it, the crackpot realists 'had "sold" a believing world on themselves; and they had – hence the irony – to play the chief fanatics in their delusional world'.<sup>88</sup> In the realm of military power, this amounted to the development of a state skewed towards the military, a form of elite power that had taken ascendancy in the US state post-1945. As Mills analysed the situation in *The Power Elite*, the 'warlords' 'are both a cause and a result of the definitions of reality that prevail'.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, he claimed this sphere to be fundamental for understanding international relations: 'only when diplomacy and war threaten international order, do generals and admirals, come to be recognized for what at all time they are: indispensable elements of the order of power that prevails within and between the national states of the world'.<sup>90</sup>

What was Mills's alternative to crackpot realism? It mainly comes out in his conception of the 'politics of truth'.<sup>91</sup> For Mills, the politics of truth was more than just 'speaking truth to power' (concerning the uncovering of objective truths), but about putting forward alternative realities that could replace the corrupted reality of the 'crackpot realists'. As he argued in 'On Knowledge and Power': 'the intellectual does not have any one political direction ... his politics, in the first instance, are the politics of truth, for his job is the maintenance of an adequate definition of reality'.<sup>92</sup> This involved both critically spelling out the 'real' dynamics of power

<sup>83</sup>Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 94.

<sup>84</sup>Mills, 'The powerless people', p. 72. See also C. Wright Mills (1946), 'The intellectual and the labor leader', in *PoT*; and C. Wright Mills (1948), 'Sociological poetry', in *PoT*.

<sup>85</sup>Mills, 'International relations and sociology', p. 273.

<sup>86</sup>Mills, 'Methodological consequences: Three problems for pathologists', cited in Geary, *Radical Ambition*, p. 42.

<sup>87</sup>Mills used the phrase 'crackpot realism' throughout the 1950s, and it is never clear to whom or what the exact reference is. It is reasonably clear via his discussions of the 'military metaphysics' in the *Power Elite* that it is about military strategy, but there is little reference to realist IR scholars, so broader connections are hard to find. The phrase appears to be first articulated in an essay on Thorstein Veblen in 1953: C. Wright Mills (1953), 'Thorstein Veblen', in *PoT*.

<sup>88</sup>Mills, 'Thorstein Veblen', p. 65.

<sup>89</sup>Mills, *The Power Elite*, p. 186

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>91</sup>The phrase appears to be first mentioned in the 'Powerless people' essay, pp. 71, 72. Summers notes in his introduction to the essay that the original title of the essay was likely 'The politics of truth'; see *PoT*, p. 13. The idea is expanded upon in detail in the 1955 essay, 'On knowledge and power'.

<sup>92</sup>Mills, 'On Knowledge and power', p. 134.

structures as well as a critique of realism itself as an ideology: and furthermore, ‘it is connection with the legitimations and the representations of power and decision that the intellectual – as well as the artist – becomes politically relevant.’<sup>93</sup> As he noted in a 1957 essay, responding to the criticisms of *The Power Elite*: ‘Whether he wants to or not, anyone today who spends his life studying society and publishing the results is acting politically. The question is whether you face that and make up your own mind or whether you conceal it from yourself and drift morally.’<sup>94</sup>

Part of the politics of truth was the projection of alternatives to present realities, which Mills initially discussed in terms of the ‘imagination’, as something that would enable people to overcome the problems of contemporary society.<sup>95</sup> Mills used the concept of imagination repeatedly in *Causes*, and in his set of ‘guidelines’ for intellectuals, he argued that ‘the passion to define the reality of the human condition in an adequate way and to make our definitions public – that is the guideline to our work as a whole’, and furthermore that ‘we must release the human imagination, in order to open up a new exploration of the alternatives now possible for the human community.’<sup>96</sup> Van Munster and Sylvest refer to this as the ‘politics of the imagination’, which was shared with other ‘realist radicals’ of the time.<sup>97</sup> As they note, ‘in confronting the thermonuclear revolution, realist radical voices provided a critique of the power structures and ideological skewers that produced specific conceptions of the real, while offering a constructive plea for nurturing the human imagination and its utopian dimensions.’<sup>98</sup> Mills certainly fit this description well. In one of his most fiery speeches, given to a conference of Christian clergy in Toronto in 1958, he demanded an engagement with politics as a concern of the moral imagination:

World War III is already so total that most of its causes are accepted as ‘necessity’; most its meaning as ‘realism’. In our world ‘necessity’ and ‘realism’ have become ways to hide lack of moral imagination. In the cold war of the politicians and journalists, intellectuals and generals, businessmen and preachers, it is above all else moral imagination that is most obviously lacking.<sup>99</sup>

This essay, included as a chapter in *Causes*, further developed his analysis of the ever-encroaching military worldview into a moral critique of the military metaphysics, and the necessity of developing a moral imagination. As he argued in *Causes*, ‘the first task of those who want peace is to free their imaginations from their own immediately powerless situation, in order to consider how that situation itself might be changed.’<sup>100</sup>

While appearing as a critique of ‘realist’ thinking about international relations, Mills’s critique had affinities with the developing postwar realism of IR. The purely intellectual overlaps between the postwar realists and Mills were clear: Mannheim and Weber were both touchpoints for realists in IR, especially the German émigrés, such as Hans Morgenthau and John Herz.<sup>101</sup> While Mills did not cite any of these figures, E. H. Carr (whose debt to Mannheim was noted above) was

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>94</sup>C. Wright Mills (1957), ‘*The Power Elite*: Comment on criticism’, in *PoT*, pp. 143–4.

<sup>95</sup>Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup>Mills, *Causes*, p. 139.

<sup>97</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’; and van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, ch. 5.

<sup>98</sup>Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’, p. 256.

<sup>99</sup>C. Wright Mills, ‘A pagan sermon to the Christian clergy’, *The Nation*, 186 (8 March 1958), p. 199.

<sup>100</sup>Mills, *Causes*, p. 117. See also van Munster and Sylvest, ‘Thermonuclear revolution’, pp. 264–6.

<sup>101</sup>On Morgenthau and Weber, see William E. Scheuerman, *Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), esp. pp. 94–100. On Herz and Weber, see Caspar Sylvest, ‘John H. Herz and the resurrection of classical realism’, *International Relations*, 22:4 (2008), p. 447. On Morgenthau and Mannheim, see Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 76; and Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, ‘Introduction’, in Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Concept of the Political*, ed. Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, trans. Maeva Vidal (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2012), esp. pp. 43–5.

discussed prominently in a number of his works, with Mills referring to *The Twenty Years' Crisis* as 'the best sociological statement of international relations'.<sup>102</sup> However, the substantive focus on the problems of nuclear weapons also brought Mills together, in spirit, with other realists of the time. Morgenthau, Herz, and Carr all had visions for global reform that necessitated a transcending of the nation state.<sup>103</sup> While varied in their origins and conclusions, in their globalism, they have overlaps with Mills's proposals in *Causes*.<sup>104</sup>

However, despite the overlaps with realists in intellectual and substantive concerns, and the other 'realist radicals' and 'nuclear realists' discussed by van Munster and Sylvest, Mills's distinctive approach was to tie the imagination to the 'politics of truth'. His realism came from his political sociology and the radicalism through his linking of imagination to political action, reading the 'classic tradition' of sociology through a pragmatist lens. While references to pragmatism vanish in his later writings, the links to his earlier ideas are still clear.<sup>105</sup> Mills's PhD and early work on the sociology of knowledge are his most explicit engagements with pragmatist thought – in the main with Mead and Dewey – but while he was quite engaged with the ideas around knowledge and praxis in pragmatism, he was highly critical of both its sociological analysis and its liberal politics.<sup>106</sup>

The focus on pragmatism brings two useful elements for situating Mills's approach to IR. First, it gives a more distinctive intellectual basis for his adoption of the 'politics of truth' and his approach to the imagination, providing a critical position on the possibilities of political change.<sup>107</sup> Second, it allows us to contextualise Mills's work in the context of pragmatist progressive approaches to international politics.<sup>108</sup> Mills was highly critical of pragmatism's progressive politics, breaking from the liberal traditions of progressivism by arguing that there needed to be a more clear-headed analysis of power and conflict in modern society, and especially its post-Second World War consensus liberalism.<sup>109</sup> Irving L. Horowitz notes that Mills's later work is devoted more to a journalistic, muckraking version of pragmatism, more interested in seeking out the difficult truths of corrupted institutions than a dedication to liberal consensus. In essence, Mills still worked from a pragmatist position in thinking about the world, but abandoned its versions of progressive politics for more radical alternatives.<sup>110</sup>

This critique of consensus liberalism is what led Mills to the politics of the imagination, which became tethered to what he described as a 'utopian' vision of politics, that would be in opposition to the reigning crackpot realism (conceptions likely inspired by both Mannheim and Carr).<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup>C. Wright Mills, 'IBM plus reality plus humanism = sociology', *The Saturday Review*, 37 (1 May 1954), p. 55.

<sup>103</sup>William E. Scheuerman, 'The (classical) realist vision of global reform', *International Theory*, 2:2 (2010), pp. 246–82. For more analysis of these positions, see Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003); Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to Global Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), ch. 9; and van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*.

<sup>104</sup>Mills, *Causes*, ch. 15.

<sup>105</sup>Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*, p. 123. See also Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*, esp. ch. 6.

<sup>106</sup>Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*, pp. 132–5.

<sup>107</sup>For further discussion of pragmatism and IR, see Molly Cochran, 'Pragmatism and international relations: A story of closure and opening', *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 4:1 (2012), pp. 1–23.

<sup>108</sup>For useful comparisons of substantive positions, see Cochran's account of Dewey's international politics and various exponents of 'progressive' IR in the interwar period: Molly Cochran, 'Dewey as an international thinker', in Molly Cochran (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 309–36; and Molly Cochran and Cornelia Navari (eds), *Progressivism and US Foreign Policy between the World Wars* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>109</sup>Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism*, esp. Part IV; Geary, *Radical Ambition*, pp. 46–7; Tilman, *C. Wright Mills*, ch. 8.

<sup>110</sup>Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*, p. 259. Gillam makes a similar claim about Mills's affinities with muckraking progressivism of the early twentieth century: Gillam, 'C. Wright Mills and the politics of truth', pp. 471–2.

<sup>111</sup>E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, UK: Macmillan, 1946), esp. Part I; Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. For discussions of the links between Carr and Mannheim in terms of 'realism' and 'utopia', see Jones, *E. H. Carr*, pp. 127–32; Molloy, *Hidden History*, p. 56. Van Munster and Sylvest further make the case for how the

This juxtaposition was repeated in *Causes*, where he contrasted a practical politics with the utopian: ‘what the powerful call utopia is now in fact the condition for human survival’.<sup>112</sup> In Mills’s programmatic statement calling for a ‘new left’, published in *New Left Review* in 1960, he declared that ‘“utopian” nowadays I think refers to any criticism or proposal that transcends the up-close milieu of a scatter of individuals: the milieu which men and women can understand directly and which they can reasonably hope directly to change.’<sup>113</sup> He further clarifies this in relation to left political action and agency: ‘if there is a politics of the New Left, what needs to be analysed is the *structure* of institutions, the *foundation* of policies. In this sense, both in its criticism and its proposals, our work is necessarily structural – and so, for us, just now – utopian.’<sup>114</sup>

The creation of new utopias would be up to the intellectuals: the academics, the scientists, the clergy, the students. Not only did they need to create new realities, they also needed to make individual moral choices and stand up to power. In the end, this was the crucial part of the politics of truth, as Mills noted: ‘Moral judgement, I suppose, is a matter of wanting to generalize and to make available for others those values you’ve come to choose. Foremost among them is the chance of truth.’<sup>115</sup> Finding new truths about international relations, embedded in the realities of historical structures of power, was core to Mills’s vision of international relations. The focus on imagination as a way to stimulate alternative futures became central to the ‘politics of truth’ for Mills, which was not just part of his general critique of sociology found in *The Sociological Imagination*, but key to a political and moral critique, fundamental to his ideas about international relations.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that Mills not only had a more deliberately developed theory of the international that came out of his engagement with international issues via political sociology in the 1940s, but also that his international work was quite consciously developed in terms of a ‘politics of truth’. This was based on the critique of the current ‘realities’ of the international projected as necessities by those in power, the elite groups that made the ‘big decisions’ of international relations. The intellectual foundations of Mills’s idea of the international, while not spelled out in detail by Mills, were consistent, and provided the foundation of the more elaborated views of his late career. The background of Mills’s conception of the international derived both from his early interests in the sociology of knowledge (mainly through Karl Mannheim and American pragmatism, especially George Herbert Mead and John Dewey) and through his work in political sociology, especially through the work of Mannheim, Franz Neumann, and Max Weber (and through his collaborations with Hans Gerth). Seeing the role of political sociology and pragmatism as foundational helps to reshape the view of Mills’s international politics as being undertheorised or polemical.

The importance of this analysis first lies in its links to the burgeoning work historicising IR theory in the context of broader trends in the postwar social sciences. While there are tendencies in this work to move away from the IR ‘canon’ and look at broader intellectual movements on the international, there is still a need to further explore other influential investigations of the international relations of the time. This is particularly true in the case of Mills, who was not only an important sociologist, but who also played a large role in the public critique of the Cold War in the United States and internationally. While Mills was not directly engaged in debates from

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focus on the imagination confounded the focus on the ‘real’ versus ‘utopian’ visions of politics; Van Munster and Sylvest, ‘The thermonuclear revolution’, esp. pp. 263–6.

<sup>112</sup>Mills, *Causes*, p. 94.

<sup>113</sup>C. Wright Mills (1960), ‘Letter to the new left’, *New Left Review*, 5 (September to October 1960), p. 21.

<sup>114</sup>Mills, ‘Letter to the new left’, p. 21.

<sup>115</sup>Mills, *The Power Elite: Comment on criticism*, p. 151.

disciplinary international relations, he shared common touchpoints with many leading scholars of the time, and especially with the emerging postwar political realism.

Second, Mills's theorising of the international as a form of political sociology gives further scope for engaging with present day sociological explanations of the international. Mills can be seen as an early exponent of an 'international political sociology', and especially regarding international historical sociology. While Mills has been recognised as a forerunner to present day historical sociology,<sup>116</sup> the preceding account has demonstrated that Mills was also practicing a form of *international* historical sociology (IHS). Mills's pragmatic sense of agency, seen in the 'politics of truth', could provide a different focus for an international historical sociology. While recent work in IHS has moved the debate on – from the focus on uneven and combined development,<sup>117</sup> to the probing of Eurocentrism,<sup>118</sup> to the emergence of a 'global' historical sociology<sup>119</sup> – Mills's exhortations for a sociological imagination encapsulating a pragmatist critique of IR is still relevant. With his focus on the international imagination via the politics of truth, we get a new way of linking the critique of the international to concrete processes.

Finally, Mills's substantive critique and theoretical roots are still of value. Revisionist historical investigation into canonical realist figures has noted their common concerns in international reform in the face of nuclear weapons, and Mills was part of this critical movement (and, one could argue, an especially publicly prominent critic). In this light, Mills can also be seen as providing an alternative to an IR focused on the problems of anarchy, and one more focused on hierarchies of the international system, concrete international processes, and seeing all of these as ways of connecting concrete problems to the everyday concerns of individuals. Mills focused on how the sociological imagination could provide for engaged publics that could understand their particular problems as embedded in bigger social structures, including that of international relations.<sup>120</sup> While drawing on a similar sociological and political tradition to IR realists, Mills saw the role of the social critic as engaging with the problems of the day in order to better understand them and change them. In doing so, Mills demonstrates the power of a critique of international relations through a committed historical and sociological investigation of the international.

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<sup>116</sup>Hobson, Lawson, and Rosenberg, 'Historical sociology'.

<sup>117</sup>See, for example, Justin Rosenberg, 'The "philosophical premises" of uneven and combined development', *Review of International Studies*, 39 (2013), pp. 569–97.

<sup>118</sup>See, for example, John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>119</sup>See, for example, Julian Go and George Lawson (eds), *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>120</sup>See also George Lawson, 'For a public international relations', *International Political Sociology*, 2 (2008), pp. 17–37.