

Views on Issues Raised in Two Recent Books

The Uses of Power

by Paul Mattick

C. WRIGHT MILLS' portrait of the top layer of America's power hierarchy ("The Power Elite" by C. Wright Mills) is as true and unpleasing as Sutherland's painting of Churchill. And just as the latter has reportedly been put out of sight, so Mills' portrait is deprecatingly called a caricature rather than a work of art. In both cases, however, the artist's object is a caricature. Mills' canvas, done with infinite care, cannot really be challenged. This is exactly how the decision makers look and how they operate; disturbing, perhaps, to those whose well-being depends on their rule and benevolence. The trouble with his work is that it is only a portrait, however well done. Within its limitations there is no need for criticism, but to get all its implications it is necessary to go beyond its frame.

Despite its many pages and exhaustive data the content of the book may be expressed in a single sentence: that highly centralized American capitalism and imperialist competition brought into being a power elite composed of corporation leaders, politicians and military men. This is not to say that this is an empty book, for the mere description of the power elite involves a consideration of the whole political and economic panorama of recent history. But it is a panorama—set up to be looked at—with no real clue to its conception and from which no moral is derived, save that which the reader forms himself.

There is, however, often great indignation. Mills makes clear that he does not like what he presents. It is obviously not lack of courage which prevents him from probing deeper and which lends his book an air of despair. Its limitations stem from the author's academic approach despite serious attempts to transcend it. Mills looks into the dwellings of the rich, the haunts of cafe society, the conference rooms of corporations, onto the golf-links of exclusive clubs and into the labyrinth of the Pentagon. He observes executives, lawyers, politicians, heirs, entertainers, admirals and generals, and is amazed at both their arrogance and ignorance. He finds unchecked power concentrated in irresponsible hands, in an elite representing none but themselves. And yet, these revelations with all their terrible allusions remain somehow a mere sociological study. This may be necessary these days to make critical observations acceptable, but it is also a way of dulling their impact.

ELITE theory, originally designed in support of the ruling classes—or at any rate to discourage revolu-

tionary attitudes by pointing to the inescapability of social class relations which, at best, only allow for the replacement of one elite by another—became a vogue with the rise of fascism and Bolshevism. The reduction of political democracy to a mere ritual, covering up the authoritarian rule of labor organizations, Big Business and government, make American proponents of elite theory appear as critics of current institutions. Their criticism appears in a further debunking of democratic illusions by way of descriptions of modern corporations and the inter-twining of politics and business. But they merely describe what is. To be truly critical their works would have to deal with the social dynamics that led to the present state of affairs and with future possibilities inherent in this situation. This, however, is rarely done.

Although Mills sticks close to his selected topic—the power elite—a definite and irrepressible Marxian undertone often lifts his work out of the narrow field of bourgeois sociology. But his criterion for the present is not the future but the past. The "higher immorality" of the ruling elite within "the American system of organized irresponsibility" is the final product of a long development. Historical circumstances and the centralization of the means of power created a situation wherein the decisions, or lack of decisions, of the existing elite involves "more consequences for more people than has ever been the case in the world history of mankind."

This is no doubt true, as it was true for the Nazi elite and as it is true for Bolshevism, or any other centralized power structure. Their control extends over always larger masses with the growth of populations, the increasing interdependency of world economy, imperialist expansion, and the polarization of society into a mass of ruled and a handful of rulers, as predicted by Marx a hundred years back. According to Mills there is not only an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the elite but also the deterioration of the elite itself, so that America "appears now before the world a naked and arbitrary power, as in the name of reason, its men of decision enforce their often crackpot definitions upon world reality. The second-rate mind is in command of the ponderously spoken platitude."

All this is so, but the question arises whether the world would be better off if first-class minds would constitute the ruling elite. After all, there are many first-rate minds around, as may be seen from various accomplishments in special fields. And yet these possessors of first-rate minds support and are controlled by the ruling mediocrity. Moreover, is Truman's decision to drop the atom bomb more irresponsible than Einstein's suggestion to produce it? Does Eisenhower's decision to quit the Korean war show less irresponsibility than Roosevelt's manipulations to enter the

second World War? Were there elites in history preferable to, or less disastrous than those that rule today? To raise such questions is to recognize that they lead nowhere; that an attack on the elite, or individuals representing the elite, though unavoidable and even necessary, accomplishes little unless widened into an attack upon the socio-economic system that gives rise to an elite, and in which all elites, regardless of their qualifications or lack of such, can only make decisions detrimental to the powerless of the earth and finally disastrous to themselves.

MILLS prefers the term power elite to that of ruling class, as in his view class is an economic term, and rule a political one, so that "the phrase 'ruling class' contains the theory that an economic class rules politically." This he finds no longer true because of the presence of "non-economic" men within the power elite. The "simple Marxian view which makes the capitalist the real holder of power," which Mills rejects is, however, not the Marxian view. Marx spoke of capitalism as a mode of production for the extraction of surplus-labor, enabling a ruling class and its retainers to live well and amass wealth and power. The distribution of surplus-value is a social phenomenon involving government decisions in the economic sphere and national power politics. What else could power concentration mean than the centralization of all forms of control, including that over the means of production, into the hands of a closely integrated group? This does not contradict but only verifies Marx's concept of class rule.

Whether capitalists, managers, financiers, politicians, generals, ideologists, or clowns, members of the elite personify capitalist class rule by performing, in order to perform at all, functions that secure the given system of labor exploitation. The division of functions between the top, the center, and the base of the controlling hierarchy does not alter the fact that it is the whole of the social power structure which confronts the powerless as a class. Like intra-capitalist competition and monopoly, the elite is a problem of the ruling class. For the ruled, however, it is the abolition of classes, and therewith of all further stratification within the classes, that really matters.

According to Mills, with all decisive power concentrated in a relatively small number of individuals, the powerless are no longer just the working classes but all people outside the elite. By mass society, Mills means a situation such as prevailed in Nazi Germany and still exists in Bolshevik Russia, in which ideology is centrally manipulated via the modern mass communication media. Whereas the more democratic past allowed for a variety of public opinions identifying different social groups, the growing totalitarianism leads to the political fragmentation and impotency of an amorphous conglomeration of controlled people facing an increasingly unified power elite.

THE rejection of the class concept implies more than just supposedly better description of prevailing social power relations. It is utilized in support of the idea of the "classless" Russian "socialism," as well as for that of the "classless" American "people's capitalism." As the need for centralistic controls are still generally acknowledged, the social problem becomes thus one of replacing bad with



better elites. Social aspirations limit themselves to getting rid of Hitler's elite, or Stalin's elite, or the a-social American power elite, even though the social dilemma consists in a social production and distribution based on the class appropriation of surplus-value. What at first sight appears a more precise description of reality is rather its further obscuration.

An undue concentration upon the power elite and the amorphous mass in an increasingly politically controlled capitalism tends also to an underestimation of the persistent economic contradictions of capitalism. In Mills' book they have all but disappeared, and the impression is created, if even unwillingly, that the temporary expediency of a militarized capitalist economy may be a permanent solution determining the structure and features of modern "mass society." However, this can be mentioned only in passing, as a fuller discussion of the matter would lead too far away from Mills' book, which, despite the reservations here expressed, remains a valuable contribution not only to the understanding of present-day American capitalism, but also in the struggle against it.