

Student Ambitions

The Education of a Social Scientist

Today Mills is often celebrated as a public intellectual whose insights gained power because he ventured outside the ivory tower. Yet he developed his major themes, ideas, and approaches in an academic context. The origins of his thought lie not in an early involvement in literary, bohemian, political, or journalistic circles, but in a university education in the social sciences. Mills's student years at the University of Texas at Austin (1935–1939) and the University of Wisconsin at Madison (1939–1942) established the foundation upon which his later work would build. In order to understand Mills, it is necessary to grasp the concerns that drove his thinking in these years. His early works in sociological theory have been either dismissed by critics as “impenetrable” or pigeonholed into a framework derived from his later intellectual trajectory. To do either, however, prevents us from understanding both the methodological basis of Mills's later work and the ways in which his ideas developed over time.¹

During his student years, Mills was already a singular personality, iconoclastic and remarkably self-confident. In this period, Mills described himself as an “impersonal egoist.” He explained the expression later in life: “impersonal because of the craft I cultivate; egoist because my ambitions far outrun my capacities.”² In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Mills dedicated his extraordinary ambition to social scientific education. He impressed his professors with his intelligence and drive and commanded the notice of prominent figures in the field.

By the age of twenty-five he'd already had articles accepted by the two leading professional journals of American sociology. But Mills was no careerist; his passion was always for crafting means of understanding the world, not for mere professional advancement. He sought to make a name for himself as a scholar, but, more important, to construct his own sense of the proper aims and methods of social research. Mills never lost the faith he cultivated as a student in the liberating potential of what he would famously call "the sociological imagination," a phrase he first used in 1942.³

Mills's early thought was steeped in the discourse of cutting-edge social science, particularly the disciplinary matrix of American sociology. Through his work in the sociology of knowledge, Mills assigned himself the ambitious task of making sociological inquiry more fruitful by investigating the social basis of knowledge. In particular, he identified with a younger generation of sociologists attuned to European sociological traditions. Indeed, Mills's early essays had important elements in common with the works of two of the emerging disciplinary leaders of the period, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. Mills's early writing style reflected his embeddedness in an almost purely academic discourse. Though he would later ridicule the use of sociological jargon in a well-known passage of *The Sociological Imagination*, in which he translated passages of Parsons into plain English, Mills's early works were difficult, specialized, and often abstruse. A peer reviewer for his first published paper commented that Mills's first draft "was the 'lousiest style' he had ever seen."⁴ In an autumn 1938 paper, reminiscing that he had once written a novel titled *The Lake of the Eyeballs*, Mills remarked, "Now it has been two years since anything but jargon and technicality has come out of me."⁵

Even though it emerged from within American social science, Mills's perspective was distinctive, largely because of the particular range of social scientific approaches he encountered at the University of Texas. There, Mills was exposed to intellectual traditions—pragmatism, Chicago School sociology, and institutional economics—that experienced declining influence in midcentury American social science, but which Mills helped keep alive over the course of his career. Drawing on these traditions, Mills formulated the deeply historicist and contextualist philosophy of social science that set him apart from most leading postwar figures in the human sciences, scholars who focused instead on developing a rigorous synchronic analysis of the social world.⁶ In particular, Mills's study of pragmatism offered him a vantage point quite different

from that of other sociologists. In the early 1940s, he became virtually the only American social scientist to defend Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, doing so on pragmatist grounds. Mills's unusual approach to the study of society culminated in his attempt at disciplinary self-critique, applying the methods of the sociology of knowledge to investigate the discipline of sociology and uncovering the unrecognized presuppositions that underlay sociological research.

At this point in his life, Mills was primarily interested in discovering a method for understanding the world, not a means of changing it. In a 1936 letter to his parents, Mills referred to political agitation at the University of Texas, writing that he was not interested in participating, but he was fascinated by the campus as "a laboratory for sociologists."⁷ Mills elucidated a methodological critique of American social science before he acquired an explicit commitment to radical politics. Yet as Alvin Gouldner once observed, "sociology may produce, not merely recruit, radicals. . . . it may generate, not merely tolerate, radicalization."⁸ The abstract methodological and philosophical commitments that Mills developed as a student contained latent political potential, which influenced his left-wing turn in the early 1940s. In the one instance in which Mills combined a methodological critique with a political one and merged sociological theory with concrete research in the sociology of knowledge, he produced a classic essay, "The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists," an important forerunner to the reflexive critiques of sociology later articulated by such prominent left-wing sociologists as Gouldner and Pierre Bourdieu.⁹

PRAGMATISM AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Mills was born in Waco, Texas, on August 28, 1916. For most of his childhood, his father worked as an insurance agent and was often away on business trips. The family moved frequently within Texas while Mills was growing up. According to the wishes of his mother, Mills was baptized a Catholic, but as an adolescent he broke with the Church and insisted on attending public school, graduating from Dallas Technical High School in 1934. One of Mills's favorite books as a teenager was the autobiography of Clarence Darrow, the socialist lawyer best known for pleading the cause of evolutionary science in the Scopes trial of 1925. In what was probably his first published piece, an August 10, 1934, letter to the *Dallas Morning News*, Mills refuted a fundamentalist minister's attack on science. Mills expressed his preference for a

science that “aims at truth” and is rooted in “observation and reason” over dogmatic religion that “begins with ‘the truth.’”¹⁰ Even in his youth, Mills saw the world in the classic terms of the Enlightenment.

At his father’s insistence, Mills initially enrolled at a university that provided a particularly unwelcome environment for a young man of his intellectual predilection: Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College (A&M), at the time a military school. In two remarkable letters to the school newspaper coauthored with his roommate, Mills criticized A&M’s hazing culture, excoriating the system of freshman obedience and deference to upperclassmen as a “society which has sprung up on a false basis and is sustained on false principles of human conduct justified only by ignorance and narrow thinking.”¹¹ Declaring that the “highest form of patriotism is criticism,” they called for the creation of a campus culture “free from sham, hypocrisy, and feudalistic customs.”¹² Strikingly, in criticizing A&M culture, Mills drew upon his coursework in sociology: “If this [performing chores and errands for upperclassmen upon demand] is leadership then my sociology text is very wrong—because this sort of control is based on nothing save force. Any social control which rests on force is wrong.”¹³

By the time Mills transferred from A&M after his freshman year, he had already developed a commitment to the ideals of reason and science, an intense dislike of traditional hierarchy, and a predisposition to studying social science. It was at the more cosmopolitan University of Texas, however, that Mills encountered the specific intellectual traditions that would shape his work. In 1939, Mills concurrently received his B.A. in sociology and his M.A. in philosophy. Mills’s work in the Texas philosophy department proved most influential to the development of his thinking, particularly his critical engagement with pragmatism, an influential philosophical movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose most prominent exponents included John Dewey, William James, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Sanders Peirce. As Mills commented in the fall of 1938, after three years of coursework at Texas, “My intellectual godfathers were pragmatists; when I first awoke I discovered myself among them.”¹⁴ Two young philosophers played crucial roles in introducing Mills to pragmatism. Both George Gentry and David Miller were products of the seedbed of pragmatism: the University of Chicago Department of Philosophy, where they had studied with Mead. Gentry received his Ph.D. in 1931, Miller in 1933. Miller helped edit a posthumous collection of Mead’s papers, *The Philosophy of the Act*, which bolstered

Mead's influence. Indeed, Miller made a career out of defending Mead's legacy and extending his insights.¹⁵ But Gentry, who published little, had the greater influence on Mills, directing his master's thesis. Mills would later write of Gentry, "Whatever else Texas can give a man . . . it can give him George Gentry on [pragmatist philosopher] C. S. Peirce. Get that. There is no better bases [*sic*] for any man in social science anywhere."¹⁶

Other scholars have noted Mills's debt to pragmatist philosophy. However, they have failed to grasp that during his student years Mills was interested in pragmatism for a very specific purpose: to aid the "methodologically confused social sciences."¹⁷ In this respect, it is significant that Mills's professors were representatives of the Chicago pragmatist tradition. Though professional philosophers in the first decades of the twentieth century increasingly viewed philosophy as a specialized discipline with its own technical issues, Chicago pragmatists had a much broader conception. They saw philosophy and social science as engaged in a common endeavor and eschewed rigid disciplinary boundaries.¹⁸ Thus, Gentry and Miller encouraged Mills's exploration of social scientific methodology in his philosophical work. The legacy of this Chicago pragmatist approach resonated throughout Mills's career. He never lost his strong sense that the human sciences were engaged in a common project, and he always opposed making sociology a specialized science sharply demarcated from other forms of social inquiry, a position that would distinguish him from such discipline-building sociologists as Parsons and Merton.

Mills adapted the pragmatists' conception of science as a dynamic, continuous, nondogmatic process of inquiry and their emphasis on the close relationship between ideas and action. Pragmatists viewed science not as the discovery of timeless truths, but as a method for understanding and changing the present world. The pragmatists' suspicion of deducing truths from abstract schema and their appeal to empirical inquiry as a means of verification made them part of a broader "revolt against formalism" in early twentieth-century American and European thought.¹⁹ According to pragmatists, one gains knowledge not through the application of a formal system to a body of data, but by investigating a specific situation or problem. To Mills, the promise of pragmatism was its "drive toward empirical statement" in which "it would seem possible to define questions hitherto considered in exclusively formal and epistemological terms in such a manner as to make them answerable by concrete research."²⁰ Thus, early on, Mills was

suspicious of what he later termed “grand theory” in sociology, which applied universal laws to particular areas of research.²¹ Pragmatism also provided Mills intellectual ammunition for rejecting the dogmatic models of truth that he encountered in the hated Catholic schools of his youth.²²

In addition, pragmatism influenced Mills to recognize the significance of theory in sociological research. No naïve empiricists, pragmatists argued that facts make sense only when viewed from a particular conceptual framework. As a result, theory played an invaluable role in practice. Applying this principle to social science, Mills contended that sociological inquiry could become more productive through consciousness of its methods of inquiry. As Mills awkwardly explained, “through methodologic self-awareness reflection that is precise and firm is made possible.”²³ In his Texas years, Mills aimed to improve the practice of social science through philosophical reflection on its methods.

From the pragmatists, Mills also gained a deeply contextualist and historicist sense of the role of ideas. His interest in the sociology of knowledge grew out of the pragmatist quest to contextualize ideas by relating them to the broader social world. Pragmatists viewed inquiry as specific to a particular framework of problems in which ideas evolve through action. This may have been the first pragmatist principle that Mills grasped. In a paper written for a 1937 seminar on the philosophy of George Herbert Mead cotaught by Gentry and Miller, Mills followed Mead in arguing that “even the most abstract thought is definitely related to activity, not activity in some general way but to activity of a specific kind, and that it is further related to activity in specific situations, not the world in general but to specific aspects of the organism’s social environment.”²⁴

Though Mills’s student writings demonstrate his indebtedness to the pragmatists, many of his papers dealt with what he saw as the deficiencies of pragmatist philosophy. Even as he acknowledged the pragmatists as his “intellectual godfathers,” Mills noted that he was developing criticisms of them from “what I have come to call a ‘sociologistic’ corner.”²⁵ Mills’s scrutiny of the pragmatists contributed to his development of a perspective ultimately more focused on understanding the concrete dynamics of society rather than on epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge. Despite his strong early theoretical bent, Mills’s interests ran more to the sociological than the philosophical. While Mills found philosophical reflection to be an indispensable element of social scientific work, he ultimately perceived pragmatist philosophy

as lacking the kind of empirical analysis of social structures that only sociological work could provide.

Mills's master's thesis, "Reflection, Behavior, and Culture," was a "sociologistic" critique of Dewey. Though he gave Dewey credit as one of the first thinkers to "give an empirical and comprehensive account of mind and reflection," Mills argued that Dewey's attempt to locate inquiry in society was "formalistic and distressingly vague."²⁶ According to Mills, pragmatist philosophers seemed unaware that their conception of the process of thought derived from their own particular social contexts and might not be applicable elsewhere. Moreover, in failing to go beyond the general statement that ideas reflected social reality, pragmatists were unable to provide guidelines for explaining how the thought of particular individuals arose in specific social structures. For Mills, such models needed to be culturally and historically grounded. He argued that the root of Dewey's problem was his attempt to generalize methods of inquiry drawn from the natural sciences and apply them to the social sciences. In particular, Mills objected to Dewey's use of biological terms such as *adaptation* to account for social behavior. While such metaphors might work in the case of an individual immigrant adjusting to society as a whole, they could not explain how human behavior was shared by institutions and social structure.

For Mills, pragmatist principles remained too abstract until they were applied in concrete research that firmly located ideas in their social contexts. To a large extent, Mills's critique of pragmatism relied on pragmatist principles. He attacked pragmatists for failing to develop fully their own notions of empirical inquiry and of the deeply social nature of human activity. Mills's critique was also influenced by Chicago School sociology and Veblenian institutional economics. He encountered both of these intellectual traditions at Texas. While each reinforced the impact of pragmatist ideas on Mills, they also prompted him to criticize those elements of pragmatist philosophy that seemed inadequate for sociological inquiry.

The principal Texas sociologist to influence Mills was Warner Gettys. Gettys was chair of the Department of Sociology, which had been established as a separate department following his arrival at the university in 1927. Under Gettys's watch, faculty and students in the Department of Sociology maintained close relations with their counterparts in philosophy and economics, which encouraged Mills to pursue his interdisciplinary inclinations.²⁷ Mills's relationship with Gettys was particularly close during his early years at Texas. Gettys allowed

Mills to audit his advanced sociology classes during his first semester, nominated him to the sociological honor society, and drove him to at least one meeting of the Southwestern Social Science Association. When Gettys retired in 1958, Mills flew to Austin to speak in his honor.²⁸ Gettys's only book was a coauthored sociology textbook, yet he maintained an interest in sociological theory that no doubt influenced Mills. For example, Gettys was among the first to hail Talcott Parsons's *Structure of Social Action* as "an outstanding contribution to American sociological scholarship."²⁹ Perhaps it was also Gettys who exposed Mills to the notion that social science must develop its own methods separate from those of physical science. In his most important article, Gettys criticized certain elements of the ecological approach adopted by Chicago School sociologists such as Robert Park, claiming that they had failed to construct a coherent and persuasive theory of human ecology because they had uncritically imported hypotheses derived from biology.³⁰

Though skeptical of ecological theory, Gettys nevertheless operated within the Chicago School tradition; he had worked as an instructor in the sociology department at the University of Chicago in the early 1920s. Although the Chicago School did not have a single unified approach, as is sometimes supposed, sociologists in this tradition did share many ideas and practices. Though they made use of statistics, Chicago School sociologists were primarily known for their use of qualitative sources such as personal documents, interviews, first-hand observation, life histories, ecological analysis, and social mapping. Such an approach lent itself to the study of a particular community, and, indeed, many sociologists in this tradition treated the city of Chicago as their sociological laboratory.³¹ Mills's exposure to Chicago sociology likely reinforced the influence of pragmatism on his thinking. Like the Chicago pragmatists, with whom they were closely associated, Chicago School sociologists valued direct empirical investigation of society over more speculative and abstract approaches. As Andrew Abbott has argued, the fundamental insight of Chicago sociology was that "social facts are *located*," with the result that "one cannot understand social life without understanding the arrangements of particular social actors in particular times and places."³² Though Mills was attracted to the philosophical depth of the pragmatists, he built on his familiarity with sociological research in the Chicago tradition for his "sociologicistic" critique of Dewey. In his master's thesis, Mills contrasted Dewey's work with the best-known work of Chicago sociol-

ogy, the multivolume *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. “The ninety-page ‘Methodological Note’ to the research job of Thomas and Znaniecki,” Mills asserted, “is concretely and directly worth more to the sociologists than any thousand pages of Dewey’s writing; for it arose out of a set of researches under way, and the formulations and canons it contains have gone back in advisory capacity, into a dozen further researches.”³³

Mills was also influenced by University of Texas economist Clarence Ayres. Although Mills did not enroll in a class with Ayres until his final year, he audited previous classes and became close friends with Ayres’s graduate students.³⁴ Another product of the University of Chicago Department of Philosophy, Ayres was a gifted teacher with extraordinarily wide-ranging interests who did not easily fit into conventional intellectual or political categories. Ayres’s willingness to speak his mind created conflict with university administrations at successive institutions. An unconventional scholar, Ayres had previously served as associate editor at *New Republic* and as director of the consumer division in Franklin Roosevelt’s Department of Labor.³⁵ It is not difficult to speculate that both as a social scientific generalist and an outspoken iconoclast, Ayres provided a role model for Mills. Through Ayres’s influence, Mills first encountered the intellectual tradition of institutional economics. With its roots in the thought of Thorstein Veblen, institutional economics shared pragmatism’s hostility to formalistic systems of thought, in this case classical economics. Rather than constructing mathematically rigorous models, institutional economists sought access to the real world of economics, which they saw as inextricably linked to other aspects of a society. Under the leadership of Wesley Mitchell, institutional economics became more quantitative and professionalized during the interwar years.³⁶ However, Ayres remained closer to Veblen’s original vision, stressing historical study and critique of social institutions.

Though Ayres certainly believed that Veblenian economics was compatible with Deweyan pragmatism, institutional economics placed a greater emphasis on the role of institutions and social structure in shaping human behavior than did pragmatist philosophy. In particular, institutional economists were more concerned with the location of social power in American society. Though this issue did not occupy Mills’s full attention until after he left Texas, the institutionalist influence led him to make one of his few criticisms of pragmatism during this period with a political flavor. In a paper written for Miller, Mills

used the institutionalist perspective to criticize the pragmatists' tendency to relate ideas to society as whole, thereby ignoring the social divisions that shaped the development of knowledge. For example, Mills alleged that pragmatists naïvely claimed that scientific progress served society as a whole when in fact it benefited big business the most.³⁷ Neglecting such social divisions, Mills claimed, pragmatists failed to adequately locate ideas "within contemporaneous fields of socio-politico-economic values."³⁸ In this statement, Mills expressed a budding interest in the questions of power, social structure, social stratification, and elite dominance that would come to define his best-known work.

Mills's first published article, "Language, Logic, and Culture," accepted for publication in the spring of 1939 while he was still a student at Texas, revealed how his exposure to pragmatism and other American intellectual traditions shaped his early forays into the sociology of knowledge. Mills began by complaining that the argument that ideas reflect social reality was often made in too abstract and formalistic a manner. While Mills concurred with the general principle that ideas reflect social reality, he believed that most scholars failed to show exactly *how* they did so. According to Mills, not only the pragmatists, but also Marxists and even more sophisticated proponents of the sociology of knowledge such as Karl Mannheim, lacked "understanding and clear-cut formulations of the *terms* with which they would connect mind and other social factors."³⁹

Mills offered two hypotheses to demonstrate how sociologists of knowledge could connect ideas to social factors. The first hypothesis drew upon Mead's social psychological concept of the "generalized other." Mead's pioneering argument about the "social self" viewed individuals as continuously involved in an internal dialogue with other members of society. According to Mills, Mead implied that social factors were not an extrinsic influence, but were instead intrinsic to all thought. However, Mills argued, Mead's formulation of the "generalized other" was too abstract, positing an "individual" shaped by a "society" but failing to provide a framework for grasping the specific historical and sociological context in which ideas arose. Thus, Mills suggested modifying Mead's concept to account for the concrete social forces at work in the formulation of particular ideas. Mills saw all thought as a form of conversation that took into account the specific values and interests of those to whom it was directed. Whether or not the thinker was conscious of it or not, his ideas responded to "prob-

lems' defined by the activities and values of his audience."⁴⁰ Thus, Mills suggested that research could establish the social context of thought by examining a thinker's audience, thereby connecting larger social and historical forces with the individual's social psychology.

Mills's second hypothesis in "Language, Logic, and Culture" was that the sociologist of knowledge should investigate the meaning of the language that a thinker used. Here, Mills built on Peirce's insight that logical rules of reasoning rely upon the consent of those who employ them. Instead of assuming that language was a neutral tool for expressing ideas, Mills pointed to recent research that had described even scientific language as value-laden. "Socially built and maintained," Mills wrote, language "embodies implicit exhortations and social evaluations."⁴¹ Language was thus one of the principal means by which social factors were embedded in thought. The sociologist of knowledge could proceed by investigating which words a thinker used, what they meant by them, and how their language related to that used by others. For Mills, the linguistic turn among pragmatists during the interwar years represented a promising approach to social scientific methodology. In that period, Kenneth Burke, Grace de Laguna, Charles Morris, and Edward Sapir built on pragmatist concepts to study language as a symbolic system.⁴² Seeing language as inherently determined by culture, Mills found this linguistic turn in pragmatism promising, since it did not arbitrarily impose concepts drawn from the physical sciences to the study of social phenomena. When read closely, "Language, Logic, and Culture" also reveals an undercurrent of interest in how power relations in society shaped the production of knowledge. Here, Mills drew on his critique of the pragmatists that owed much to his absorption of institutional economics; he specifically credited Ayers for suggesting to him how the changing meaning of the term *capital* reflected changing economic relations.⁴³ At one point Mills asserted the need to explore the "class bias" of ideas.⁴⁴ At another point, he argued that sociologists of knowledge should expose the "institutional and political coordinates" of ideas.⁴⁵ In time, this theme would come to the forefront of Mills's thought.

"Language, Logic, and Culture" was an impressive achievement for its young author. The article demonstrated Mills's growing mastery of the scholarly literature in the social sciences, conveying a familiarity with both American and European social theory. Though the article was a highly technical contribution to a specialized field and suggested

“precise hypotheses” for future research, it also articulated a deeply contextualist and historicist approach to the study of ideas and laid out an ambitious research program for the sociology of knowledge. For Mills, the sociology of knowledge involved much more than the determination of how the conscious interests of thinkers affected their ideas, because at all levels, including those that thinkers and their audiences failed to recognize, knowledge was culturally determined. It was not merely that social considerations dictated the problems that thinkers addressed. The process of thought was social at its core.

THEORY FOR A DISCIPLINE IN DISARRAY

Given the promise he displayed as a student at Texas, it was natural that Mills applied to doctoral programs. Turning down an offer to study philosophy at the University of Chicago, he instead elected to study sociology at the University of Wisconsin.⁴⁶ Although Wisconsin’s fellowship offer was undoubtedly a factor in his decision, sociology was also a good match for the young and ambitious Mills. Philosophy by this time had become a highly specialized discipline, but sociology remained a relatively open field of study in need of theoretical definition. The acceptance of “Language, Logic, and Culture” by one of the discipline’s leading journals, the *American Sociological Review*, was a clear sign that sociology was a promising outlet for Mills’s talents.

Sociology has always been the most general and the least defined of the social sciences, but the late 1930s was a period of particular disciplinary confusion. As Robert Bannister has noted, “Sociology remained imperfectly professionalized during the interwar period: uncertain of its boundaries, sensitive to attack, and a tempting target for any group that wanted to promote a new paradigm.”⁴⁷ Though the Chicago School was hardly a hegemonic group in the profession, it was clearly the most recognizable, and the University of Chicago Department of Sociology housed both the American Sociological Society (ASS) and its journal, the *American Journal of Sociology*, until 1936. In the 1930s, an eclectic group of sociologists challenged the prominence of Chicago sociologists in the ASS. Leading the revolt were the objectivists, who, in contrast to the Chicago School, argued that the discipline could become scientific only by modeling itself on physical science, that is, by confining it to the predominantly quantitative study of observable human behavior and strictly insisting upon the ethical and political neutrality of the social scientist. In 1936, this revolt led to the establishment of another

journal, the *American Sociological Review*, and the severing of formal ties between the ASS and the University of Chicago. Yet this attempt to reorganize the discipline along objectivist lines failed, and professional sociology remained divided at the time Mills entered graduate school at Wisconsin.⁴⁸

While many bemoaned the chaotic state of the discipline, the absence of any overriding research paradigm was precisely what attracted Mills, since it allowed for diverse views within the discipline and required theoretical work to clarify research aims and methods. Regardless of which disciplinary camp they adhered to, leading sociologists in the late 1930s agreed that the state of the discipline was a problem and argued that sociologists required a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of their practices. Sociological theorists agreed that theory should provide a clear sense of sociology's mission and develop more rigorous methods for sociological research. As Talcott Parsons wrote in 1938, "There is a widespread feeling that we must settle the deepest current controversies before we can do *anything*."⁴⁹ In addition to Parsons, a number of important sociologists, including Herbert Blumer, George Lundberg, Robert Lynd, and Robert Merton, addressed the problem of disciplinary consensus in the late 1930s.

Though influenced by the Chicago School, Mills identified with a younger generation of theorists who were reevaluating the discipline's purpose and methods. One of these theorists was Howard P. Becker, who played an instrumental role in the publication of "Language, Logic, and Culture" and served as Mills's graduate advisor at Wisconsin. Becker received his Ph.D. from Chicago, though he also participated in the ASS rebellion of the mid-1930s. Becker quickly disappointed objectivist friends by insisting that sociologists address theoretical issues. Having studied in Germany during the 1920s, Becker played a key role in importing German sociological thought to the United States as book review editor of the *American Sociological Review*.⁵⁰ Another member of the editorial board ascribed the journal's tendency "to run anything and everything of German origin" to the influence of "that nazi Becker."⁵¹ In many respects, Becker was a poor choice as advisor for Mills. Although they shared an interest in the sociology of knowledge, Becker aligned himself with German sociologists such as Leopold von Wiese, who were hostile to the Mannheimian program that attracted Mills. Their differences later became apparent in conflicts over the scope of Mills's dissertation. According to one account, the gulf between them became so great that at the end of Mills's dis-

sertation defense in 1942, Becker told Mills, "Go to hell," to which Mills replied, "After you, sir."⁵²

Nevertheless, Mills shared with Becker a common sense of the requirements of sociological theory, as can be seen in their similar reactions to George Lundberg's objectivist tract *Foundations of Sociology*. Perhaps their reactions were so similar because Becker got his ideas from Mills. In April 1940, Mills mentioned to Robert Merton that an article on Lundberg coauthored by Becker and Mills was forthcoming. Yet at the December 1940 meeting of the ASS, Becker delivered a paper on Lundberg under his own name. One of Mills's friends wrote him that the plagiarism had made him "sick double sick." Mills confirmed that Becker had stolen his ideas.⁵³ Indeed Becker's published article on Lundberg, "The Limits of Sociological Positivism," shared almost all of its main points with an unpublished manuscript of Mills's.⁵⁴ No doubt this incident soured the relationship between Mills and Becker. However, Becker's willingness to put forth Mills's ideas as his own also indicates that their perspectives had much in common.

Lundberg was one of the few proponents of a straightforwardly positivist program for sociology. Though he attracted few adherents in the discipline, Lundberg's work was a convenient touchstone for other sociologists seeking to define their own programs for sociology. Lundberg argued that social science should explicitly model itself on physical science. To develop a universally valid set of verifiable propositions, social science would have to limit itself to those hypotheses it could "operationalize." In exchange for greater rigor, Lundberg was willing to accept reductionism, limiting social science to the study of perceivable and quantifiable behavior. Values were not a proper subject for scientific study, and man could be understood just as any other object, subject to the same general laws.⁵⁵

Rejecting Lundberg's positivism, Mills raised several key points that Becker echoed in his article. First, there was no adequate universal scientific method: "What all scientists think in common is only a dozen platitudes known to bright children who have teachers in the Deweyan tradition."⁵⁶ Mills argued that humans could not be adequately understood as objects like any other: "Nothing in its purely physical dimension interacts like persons." Social science should investigate how humans defined their own situations, accounting for the interest and values of its human subjects. Thus, sociologists needed to adopt methods appropriate to the study of social material, not apply an abstract model drawn from physical science. Moreover, sociological theory

needed to arise out of concrete practice: “The rules for sociological method that are genuinely applicable to social materials arise from sociological inquiry.”⁵⁷

Mills’s reaction to Lundberg exemplifies how his earlier immersion in pragmatist theories of science shaped his sociological theory. However, not only Becker, but also most other sociological theorists of the time, would have agreed with Mills’s main criticisms of Lundberg. An adequate sociological theory would bear a close relationship with research; would develop its own methods adequate to dealing with the distinct realm of social phenomena, for which physical and biological categories alone would not suffice; and would account for the values and meanings of its human subjects. In adopting these principles of sociological research, Mills displayed his debt to Chicago sociology. Indeed, the leading spokesperson for Chicago sociology in the late 1930s, Herbert Blumer, then editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*, was a significant source of support and encouragement for Mills during his years as a graduate student. Blumer endorsed Mills’s critique of Lundberg, writing, “You have made an illuminating and telling criticism on Mr. Lundberg’s point of view and needless to say I distinctly share your ideas.” Blumer also had high praise for “Language, Logic, and Culture”: “I am glad to see you have carried your thinking much further than I have.”⁵⁸ A leading critic of the post–World War II ascendancy of structural functionalism in American sociology, Blumer would remain an admirer of Mills’s sociological work throughout his career.

Even though Mills owed much to the Chicago tradition, he also hoped to introduce something new to American sociology. In particular, he saw himself as aligned with “a few of the younger men in American sociology [who] are becoming tired of the paste-pot eclecticism and text-book tolerance which have characterized much of their tradition.”⁵⁹ In the late 1930s and 1940s, Mills’s sociological work shared a great deal with the work of figures who would become his chief adversaries in the postwar period. In particular, his position had aspects in common with the most significant statement of sociological theory in the late 1930s, Talcott Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action*, a work that Mills cited in both “Language, Logic, and Culture” and a later article, “Methodological Consequences of the Sociology of Knowledge.”⁶⁰ Like Mills, but nearly two decades earlier, Parsons learned institutional economics from Clarence Ayres as an undergraduate, when he was at Amherst College. In the 1920s, Parsons studied in

Germany, and in 1930 he published a translation of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The publication of *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937 established his reputation among sociological theorists.⁶¹ In this work, Parsons made a number of arguments similar to those advanced by Mills. For instance, he asserted that theory was necessary as a program for research and as a conceptual frame of reference, without which facts were meaningless. Parsons was also motivated to find methods adequate to the study of social phenomena. Much of *Structure* was designed as a critique of positivist and behaviorist views. Parsons later described it as a volley in "the 'war of independence' of the social sciences *vis a vis* the biological."⁶² His "voluntaristic theory of action" accounted for the elements of subjective meaning and volition in human life while maintaining that it was possible to study these matters scientifically. Both Parsons and Mills were involved in a long-term trend in twentieth-century social science toward developing a distinct approach to the understanding of society that stressed that humans could not be adequately understood solely in terms of biological categories such as heredity and environment, nor in terms of the rational actor theory drawn from economics.⁶³ Whatever differences Parsons and Mills had—and these would grow more apparent in future years—they always shared this basic sociological perspective.

Though Mills concurred with other sociologists that the study of society needed a theoretical coherence and rigor that it presently lacked, unlike his contemporaries, Mills did not prioritize the establishment of sociology as an autonomous discipline. Becker argued that sociology should be "regarded neither as the mistress nor the handmaiden of other sciences, but as their sister."⁶⁴ Parsons's attempt to provide a charter for the discipline that would establish it as "a special analytical science on the same level as economic theory" was the most influential.⁶⁵ In Parsons's formulation, sociology was one of three action sciences that studied events in time. Parsons claimed that sociology, distinct from politics and economics, focused on the phenomenon of "common value integration," by which he meant the integration of those cultural values that enabled the social cohesion of freely choosing individual actors. Parsons's approach achieved a more concrete definition of the discipline at the expense of restricting sociology's subject matter. Limiting sociology to the study of events in time from the perspective of common value integration marginalized the study of political structure and class analysis and downplayed the significance of social conflict.⁶⁶

Operating against the drive to carefully delineate an autonomous field of study as outlined by Parsons and others, Mills decried arbitrary distinctions of subject matter within the field of social science. In a 1939 unpublished paper, "A Note on the Classification of the Social-Psychological Sciences," Mills examined the frequent attempts of social psychologists to delineate a clearly bounded field of study. Mills believed that the drive to delimit an autonomous discipline was due to institutional considerations and was detrimental to developing the best methods for the study of society. He complained of the "confusion of the methodological and institutional dimensions of the issue in which, members of departments, apparently arguing over the domain of social-psychological sciences, in reality are contending for a section of students with attendant increased funds."⁶⁷ Mills recognized only one legitimate intellectual distinction: between the physiological perspective, which studied the human organism using biological techniques, and the social perspective. Mills thus offered a definition of the study of society that was considerably more expansive than Parsons's definition of the field of sociology. "We are explaining behaviors socially," Mills wrote, "when we utilize social, economic, [and] political structures and processes in constructing the allegedly necessary conditions of that behavior."⁶⁸ Throughout his career, Mills retained this belief that the social sciences and humanities were engaged in a common endeavor and could not be separated by clear boundaries. As Mills wrote to a friend in 1941, "Woe unto those who stand at junctures in science, at the academic fence . . . and wag their fingers. It is from such surprising, 'confusing' borders that our genuine problems and new constructions emerge."⁶⁹ Consequently, Mills was attracted to interdisciplinary fields of study that allowed him to integrate his wide range of philosophical and social scientific interests. One such field was the sociology of knowledge.

'IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA' IN AMERICA

Mills's position in the debate over Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* further distinguished him from Parsons and other leading sociologists. The reception of works from Germany played a key role in the theoretical discourse of American sociology during the late 1930s. Karl Mannheim's *Ideologie und Utopie* sparked a methodological controversy when it was published in Germany in 1929. The publication of the English-language *Ideology and Utopia* (a revised version of the

German work that included two additional chapters) in 1936 ignited a similar methodological debate among American social scientists.⁷⁰ The controversy centered around two interconnected issues: Mannheim's epistemological perspective and his expansive program for the sociology of knowledge.

Mannheim argued that the sociology of knowledge emerged from the concept of *total ideology*. He distinguished *total ideology* from the *particular conception of ideology*, which was used to discredit ideas by demonstrating how they arose from their thinker's particular social situation. According to the particular conception of ideology, it was possible to "refute lies and eradicate sources of error by referring to accepted criteria of objective validity."⁷¹ In contrast, the total conception of ideology recognized that all ideas were inseparable from the overall worldview and social position of their advocates. Consequently, no truth was possible "independent of an historically and socially determined set of meanings."⁷² All ideas were thus subject to an ideological analysis that revealed their connection to social factors; Mannheim considered not only the class position of thinkers, but also such factors as education, status, and generation. According to Mannheim, it was the task of the sociologist of knowledge to subject all perspectives—including his own—to such an ideological analysis. The sociology of knowledge, he argued, emerged as a distinctive form of inquiry in the modern world because of the proliferation of competing ideas and the loss of common social values. Mannheim claimed that the test of an idea was its appropriateness to its epoch and its ability to synthesize elements of different contemporary ideologies. Thinkers should thus strive to be "unceasingly sensitive to the dynamic nature of society and to its wholeness."⁷³ The group that Mannheim hoped would achieve this holistic understanding was the "free-floating intelligentsia," which lacked roots in any particular interest-bound social group.

Mannheim distinguished between two varieties of the sociology of knowledge, each of which he advocated. The nonevaluative conception of ideology entailed the scholarly study of the relationship of ideas to social factors without the imposition of value judgments by the scholar. Had Mannheim stopped here, he would have provoked no controversy, but he also advocated an evaluative conception of the sociology of knowledge that was considerably more expansive. Under the evaluative conception, the sociology of knowledge was an ambitious program for cultural change, central to the rehabilitation of the Enlightenment project of integrating reason and politics. Exactly how they were to

be reconciled was never entirely clear, but Mannheim offered at least three suggestions. The sociology of knowledge could serve as a means for eliminating biased and partial viewpoints in social science, as an educational tool for political parties, and as a method for allowing people to recognize the unconscious determinants of their behavior and thus exert rational control over them.⁷⁴

Mannheim's hope that scholars in the United States would prove receptive to his ideas was largely disappointed. German intellectuals played a key role in attacking Mannheim's ideas in the United States. Hans Speier, a refugee from Nazi Germany at the New School for Social Research, argued that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge was applicable to "promotive" thinkers intent on effecting social change, but not to "theoretical" thinkers who sought universal, timeless truths.⁷⁵ A different and more influential critique, however, came from the German sociologist Alexander von Schelting. Von Schelting's review of *Ideologie und Utopie*, solicited by Howard Becker, was published in 1936 in the *American Sociological Review*. Because the review appeared before the publication of the English translation, *Ideology and Utopia*, it set the terms of the American debate. Von Schelting's critique of Mannheim rested on a neo-Kantian perspective, which he attributed to Max Weber. According to this position, values were relevant for determining what questions a social scientist would ask, but the validity of research results was wholly independent of value judgments. Von Schelting believed Mannheim had confused the motives of the social scientist with the results of his work: "The nonsense first begins when one believes that factual origin and social factors . . . affect the value of ideas and conceptions thus originated."⁷⁶ To von Schelting, the danger of Mannheim's relativism was that it treated social science like any other ideology and thus undermined the scientific status of sociological knowledge. Von Schelting's position was endorsed by leading American sociologists. In the same issue of the *American Sociological Review* in which von Schelting's review was published, Parsons reviewed von Schelting's own *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*. Parsons agreed with von Schelting that the problem with Mannheim was his claim that "theories, especially those of social science, are relative to their social basis, not only on the genetic level, but also in their logical and methodological foundations."⁷⁷ Citing *Ideology and Utopia's* "close relations to certain concepts of thought associated with pragmatism," Parsons worried that Mannheim's ideas might find a following in the United States and recommended von Schelting as the necessary antidote.⁷⁸

The connection between pragmatism and Mannheim's ideas was noted by virtually all contributors to the American debate over *Ideology and Utopia*. Though Mannheim's epistemology was complicated and often contradictory, he did share with the pragmatists an active and dynamic conception of knowledge, a strong sense of the inter-relatedness of social phenomena, and a desire to transcend the false dichotomies between subject and object, empiricism and idealism, and fact and value that had plagued earlier thinkers. In order to enhance his reception in the United States, Mannheim instructed his former student Hans Gerth to announce at a December 1937 meeting of the ASS that Mannheim accepted pragmatism's instrumentalist view of truth as his own.⁷⁹

Parsons need not have worried that Mannheim's affinity with pragmatism would enhance his American reception. Virtually the only American social scientist to defend Mannheim from the pragmatist perspective was Mills, who argued, "Mannheim's view overlaps the program that Dewey has pursued since 1903, when he turned from traditional concerns and squabbles over the ubiquitous relation of thought in general to reality at large to a specific examination of the context, office, and outcome of a type of inquiry."⁸⁰ In "Language, Logic, and Culture," Mills criticized Mannheim's inadequate social psychology. Yet, as he later wrote to Robert Merton, Mills believed that despite Mannheim's flaws, "the guy has a very *suggestive* idea which . . . although blurred and loose and all becomes something really fine when one weds it to, interprets it not from the neo-Kantian view, but from the standpoint of American pragmatism."⁸¹

In "Language, Logic, and Culture," Mills had argued for the social nature of knowledge, describing it as rooted in a thinker's engagement with an internalized audience and his use of socially constructed rules of logic and language. In "The Methodological Consequences of the Sociology of Knowledge," published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in November 1940, Mills extended these arguments to challenge Mannheim's critics, who, he alleged, would "restrict the object matter and implications of the sociology of knowledge."⁸² Contrary to Speier, Mills contended that it was not only thinkers consciously seeking to influence social outcomes whose thought was socially determined, but also those who believed they were uncovering timeless truths. Responding to von Schelting, Mills conceded that in a scientific system of verification, the genesis of an idea did not affect its validity. However, he claimed that it was foolish to assume that this settled

the matter, for the genesis of ideas was deeply social and went beyond the simple matter of an individual's motivations for seeking answers to questions. A scientific system of verification was itself historically and culturally specific: Mannheim and others had shown how closely connected it was to its bourgeois and Protestant origins. Mills wrote, "There have been and are diverse canons and criteria of validity and truth, and these criteria, upon which determinations of the truthfulness of propositions at any time depend, are themselves, in their persistence and change, legitimately open to social-historical relativization."⁸³ Interestingly, on a few occasions, Mills referred to these "diverse canons of validity and truth" as "paradigms," two decades before the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn popularized the term in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.⁸⁴

Mills argued that the most important consequences of the sociology of knowledge were methodological; the examination of ideas in their social context could allow social scientists to reflect on the methods and aims of their research. Because it was empirical and not speculative, the sociology of knowledge offered a means of reflection that relied upon actual social inquiry and thus avoided imposing an abstract and formalistic schema on the study of social science. For instance, Mills suggested that sociologists of knowledge were well positioned to address the questions of when and how values entered social scientific research and to what degree social scientists should adopt methods similar to those used in the physical sciences. Mills concluded by calling for the "detailed self-location of social science," a task he later undertook in his article "The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists." Nevertheless, though Mills's acceptance of Mannheim's historicist and contextualist epistemology distinguished him from other sociologists, he shared with many of his sociological peers his stated goal for the sociology of knowledge: "detection of errors in methods," "sounder paradigms for social research," and "precise definition of issues that are now vague."⁸⁵ As with Mannheim, Mills's more expansive program for the sociology of knowledge included a call for the improvement of social scientific research with which disciplinary specialists could agree.

The most interesting reaction to "Methodological Consequences" came from Robert Merton. A Harvard Ph.D. who had studied with Parsons and Pitirim Sorokin, Merton was one of the young scholars who had turned to sociological theory in the late 1930s. Merton played a crucial role in introducing the ideas of French sociologist

Emile Durkheim to an American audience. A rising star in the discipline, Merton became chair of the Department of Sociology at Tulane University before the age of thirty, and in 1941 he received an appointment at Columbia. At the time Mills first encountered him, Merton was connected to left-wing intellectual circles, having written for the Anglo-American Marxist journal *Science and Society*. Like Mills, a Texan and former Catholic, Merton had a background that was unusual for an American sociologists at the time. Born in 1910, Merton was of Jewish origin (he had changed his name from Meyer Schkolnik to the very Anglo-sounding Robert King Merton), and he had been a gang member while growing up in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia.⁸⁶

Having written his first book on the development of science in seventeenth-century England—a path-breaking work in the sociology of science—Merton was keenly interested in the emerging field of the sociology of knowledge. Like Mills, he was invested in the reception of Karl Mannheim’s work. Though Merton accepted von Schelting’s critique, he believed that if Mannheim’s followers abandoned philosophical pretenses, they could expand upon his valuable suggestions for substantive research in the sociology of knowledge.⁸⁷ Merton considered Mills’s “Language, Logic, and Culture” a promising step in this direction, since Mills had recognized that “wissensoziologische analysis requires a formulated set of postulates, definitions, and theorems.”⁸⁸ Merton was less enthusiastic about “Methodological Consequences.” He objected that Mills’s defense of Mannheim’s epistemology failed to provide an adequate basis for scientific knowledge, since it implied that it was “simply a matter of taste as to which criteria we adopt.”⁸⁹ Indeed, given the Nazi advance across Europe, Merton saw this relativism as containing “an irreducible element of . . . nihilism.”⁹⁰ To Mills, however, Merton had simply misunderstood the issue: “What you and Speier and von Schelting and the rest of those with, after all, neo-Kantian orientation . . . do not see is the problem of the actual derivation and function of what I have called paradigms.”⁹¹

At stake in this exchange was the issue of the limits of the sociology of knowledge. Merton articulated the general consensus among sociologists that Mannheim’s epistemological relativism and expansive program for the sociology of knowledge blurred the lines between philosophy and sociology and undermined their project of bolstering the autonomous scientific status of their discipline. While Merton confined the sociology of knowledge to a clearly defined subdiscipline within

sociology, Mills wanted it to be an expansive endeavor that drew from and had implications for philosophy, social psychology, economics, and political science. For Mills, the sociology of knowledge was a method of investigating and challenging the fundamental presuppositions of contemporary social science. Rather than seeing Mannheim's approach as a threat to social science, Mills believed it bolstered the significance of social science by stressing how deeply "social" the production of knowledge was. Here are the beginnings of an argument that Mills would carry on with the sociological profession in the 1950s, a debate in which leading sociologists, including Merton, sought to limit sociology's boundaries to ensure that its conclusions would be as rigorous as possible while Mills rejected such restrictions. However, the differences between Mills and Merton, especially during this period, should not be exaggerated. Despite Merton's claim that Mills had fallen into a nihilistic impasse in his epistemological outlook, Merton stressed their shared goal of promoting sound studies in the sociology of knowledge and suggested that their differences might be mostly semantic.⁹² Merton respected Mills's work enough to play an instrumental role in getting Mills jobs at the University of Maryland and Columbia. Even if other sociologists did not always agree with Mills, they recognized his perspective as valuable and offered it a hearing. Mills's views were distinctive, but they were situated within, not outside, the discourse of academic social science.

Mills's exchange with Merton pointed to a tension within his own perspective. On the one hand, Mills sought for the sociology of knowledge an expansive role that called into question the basic foundations of sociological knowledge. To claim that social scientists should use the sociology of knowledge to better consider their own role and position in society was also to imply the possibility of a more public and political role for the social scientist. On the other hand, Mills still shared his colleagues' belief in the superior rigor of professional social science. For instance, he defended the virtues of a more sophisticated and systematic social science against the insights of public intellectuals who were not properly trained. In a generally positive review of *Ideas Are Weapons*, by the well-known left-wing writer Max Lerner, Mills sharply distinguished between the speculations of cultural criticism and the demands of sociological analysis. Mills contrasted Lerner's "political journalism" with the more sophisticated perspective of the sociology of knowledge. If Lerner had more exposure to European sociologists of knowledge, Mills argued, he would not have mistakenly

assumed that the primary way that social factors influenced ideas was through the conscious interests of the individual thinker. The title of Lerner's book asked readers to think about how ideas serve as weapons on behalf of particular social and political groups, an idea suggested in Mills's work and that he would soon explore further. In this review, however, Mills, though recognizing the timely political purpose of Lerner's essays, chided him that ideas "may also be weapons in the research quest for analytic discrimination and in the discovery of subtle relations."⁹³

REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY

What was most distinctive about Mills's sociology of knowledge was the way he subjected social scientific knowledge to critical reflection. As the debate over *Ideology and Utopia* revealed, Mills was far more willing than his contemporaries to relativize the truth claims of social science in terms of social and historical context. Moreover, rather than focusing on establishing fixed theoretical principles for research, Mills's perspective entailed the notion that the methodology of the social sciences was always an open question, subject to constant revision. Indeed, much of the appeal of sociological theory to the young Mills was its ability to stimulate the sociological imagination. As he wrote to a friend in 1941, "All new things are 'up in the air.' If you stay too close to 'earth,' you can never fly over new regions. Theory is an airplane, not a pair of heavy boots; it is of the division of reconnaissance and spying."⁹⁴

Initially, Mills hoped that his dissertation would be a pioneering methodological work. His original outline divided his project into three interrelated parts: a critical examination of pragmatism as a theory of the sociology of knowledge, a methodological statement of the sociology of knowledge, and a detailed empirical account of pragmatism using the tools elaborated in the methodological section.⁹⁵ Yet Mills's attempt to combine empirical sociological inquiry with philosophical reflection and methodological prescription did not easily fit disciplinary norms. His advisor, Becker, objected to Mills's attempt to address theoretical issues through empirical study. Becker advanced the increasingly widespread notion that sociological theory and practice, while interrelated, needed to remain separate areas of study. Moreover, Becker worried that Mills's plan "intruded into a domain traditionally reserved for philosophers" and suggested his dissertation needed to be

a strictly empirical study if it were to remain unambiguously within the bounds of sociology.⁹⁶ Becker's opposition was not the only obstacle to Mills's ambition. He had to finish his dissertation hastily in 1942 in order to retain his new post as associate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. The final dissertation contained no introduction, no conclusion, and an appendix of self-criticism. One of his self-criticisms was that his substantive work in the sociology of knowledge was not "accompanied by *explicit* self-awareness both of detailed procedure and of larger epistemological concerns," an omission he attributed to "intellectually irrelevant considerations."⁹⁷

The dissertation, "A Sociological Account of Some Aspects of Pragmatism," interpreted the careers of three pragmatists: Peirce, James, and Dewey (a planned chapter on Mead was dropped due to time constraints). Mills had already developed many of the dissertation's arguments in his earlier work at Texas. The most significant new argument of the dissertation was Mills's critique of Dewey's liberalism, which owed more to his newfound political commitments than to his work in the sociology of knowledge. Mills examined the social backgrounds of each pragmatist to explicate their ideas. Peirce's work, for example, was understood in the context of his scientific experience and his status as an academic outsider. Mills was clearly attempting to tie the pragmatists' ideas to the broad social changes of their lifetimes—the rise of research universities, the emergence of the modern scientific outlook, and economic industrialization. Yet, as Mills acknowledged in his appendix, he failed to specify in a consistent and systematic way the connective terms in which pragmatism reflected social structural change. He attributed his omission of a "more concise *phraseology and developmental statement* of the course of the movement as a whole as it lies within a changing social structure" to his own limited knowledge of American history.⁹⁸

If, by his own judgment, Mills's dissertation failed to live up to its original promise, his 1943 article "The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists" successfully fulfilled Mills's earlier call for the "detailed self-location of social science."⁹⁹ To Mills, the best way to reconsider sociological methodology was through empirical research in the sociology of knowledge that ensured an interpenetration of sociological theory and practice. Because he advocated a sociology of sociology that used social scientific tools for disciplinary self-criticism, Mills may be seen as an early proponent of the "reflexive sociology" later advanced by such figures as Alvin Gouldner and Pierre Bourdieu. In Gouldner's

words, reflexive sociology offers a “distinctive awareness of the ideological implications and political resonance of sociological work.”¹⁰⁰

In “Language, Logic, and Culture,” Mills suggested that the sociologist of knowledge should closely analyze the concepts and methods used by a group of thinkers. In “The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists,” Mills examined the sociology textbooks that defined the field. In focusing on “social pathology,” Mills targeted sociologists’ preoccupation with crime and deviance. Mills found that the key concept of social pathologists was “adjustment.” In methodological terms, social pathology was characterized by its low level of abstraction. Rather than considering matters of total social structure, social pathology textbooks examined everyday problems on an individual, atomistic level. A paradigmatic case studied by social pathologists was that of the individual immigrant adjusting to American society. Mills’s article examined the underlying social factors that accounted for these characteristic aspects of social pathology. He contended that the attempt to provide systematic explanations in textbooks geared for undergraduate audiences led to “a taxonomic gathering of facts and a systematization of them under concepts that have already been logically defined.”¹⁰¹ However, he pinpointed the homogenous social background of the social pathologists. Mills’s data on authors of social pathology textbooks painted a clear picture of men with rural or small-town origins who followed similar career paths into the professional middle class during a time of economic growth and industrialization and who shared mildly reformist political sentiments and affiliations.

For Mills, the rural and small-town backgrounds of the textbooks’ authors explained how they classified individuals as “pathological.” Mills argued that social pathologists used the concept of “adjustment” not in a statistical or a structural sense, but in a normative one. Social pathologists classed large groups, especially in urban areas, as “maladjusted.” The social background of the authors led them to define social norms in terms of primary groups of small, homogeneous communities characterized by face-to-face interaction. Any behavior that failed to correspond to this ideal was then termed “pathological.” The concept of “adjustment,” according to Mills, was thus little more than “propaganda for conformity to those norms and traits ideally associated with small-town middle-class milieu.”¹⁰² At the same time that social pathologists’ backgrounds led them to adopt a backward-looking concept of adjustment, Mills argued, their own professional success in an industrializing American economy caused them to remain optimistic

that social problems could be solved without serious structural change. He tied the low level of abstraction in social pathology textbooks to the authors' reformist faith that social problems could be solved on an individual level, criticizing them for their "failure to consider total social structures."¹⁰³ Social pathologists did not question whether individual adjustment was in certain cases impossible without significant change in the social structure. Their low level of abstraction "did not rise to permit examination of . . . normative structures themselves, or of their political implications."¹⁰⁴ The mild reformism of social pathologists inhibited them from contemplating extensive social transformation. The sociological concepts exhibited in the professional discourse of social pathologists were thus not "usable in collective action which proceeds against, rather than well within, more or less tolerated channels."¹⁰⁵

"Professional Ideology," written after Mills's leftward turn of the early 1940s, hinted at a radical critique of the discipline. Nevertheless, it can hardly be interpreted as an attempt by Mills to disassociate himself from the field of sociology as a whole, and not only because Mills awkwardly tried to fit the article into the prevailing mode of value-neutral social scientific discourse with a disingenuous abstract that claimed that the article did not "explicitly evaluate the worth of these [social pathological] concepts."¹⁰⁶ Many of the sociological theorists that Mills was in dialogue with would have agreed that much of interwar sociological work was deficient, even if they would have avoided criticizing that work on explicitly political grounds. By indicating that earlier methods of American sociology were inadequate and needed to be revised by a theoretically informed viewpoint, Mills found himself in agreement with several of the discipline's emerging leaders, such as Parsons and Merton. Merton, for instance, argued that behavior considered deviant by sociologists was often functional for the group in question and not pathological.¹⁰⁷

As an analysis of earlier sociological work, "Professional Ideology" is a classic critique, still cited by sociologists today, yet it should not be read as a wholly accurate account of early twentieth-century American sociology. Mills neglected to include in his study key works of Chicago School sociologists, scholars to whom it would have been difficult to assign a rural or small-town bias and whose concepts were considerably more sophisticated than those of other sociologists he described.¹⁰⁸ Nor did he draw he draw any clear distinction between social pathology and sociology as a whole, thus leaving it unclear how far his critique of the discipline extended. Yet "Professional Ideology" was

significant less for its specific arguments than for the commitment it displayed to reflexive sociology. Unfortunately, the article left readers confused about the precise nature of the position Mills advocated. This murkiness resulted from the journal's decision to cut Mills's original article because of space considerations. The unpublished second part of the article, "Methodological Consequences: Three Problems for Pathologists," reveals that Mills's intention was that the article embody his vision of methodological reflection proceeding alongside empirical study of sociological inquiry, representing a close interpenetration of theory and practice.¹⁰⁹ In this unpublished section, Mills argued that his study of social pathology textbooks had important implications for the place of values in social science. According to Mills, it was misguided to ask whether values should be a part of social scientific inquiry. As the social derivation of the social pathologists' normative vision of adjustment showed, values would inevitably shape social science. Instead of attempting a "Great Repression of Value Judgments," social scientists should promote a greater consciousness of how values shape social inquiry and scrutinize how their own values shaped their work. All perspectives, especially the social scientist's own, needed to be subjected to ideological analysis. Mills argued that social scientists could gain rational control over their own concepts through ideological self-analysis: "Now what is required is that the epithets, concepts, and unintegrated facts which are used to *define* social problems be *themselves* made objects of scrutiny."¹¹⁰

From this, Mills drew two somewhat different conclusions. On the one hand, he suggested that the purpose of critical self-reflection was to take as many social scientific perspectives into account as possible and to correct for their biases. Social scientific objectivity, he suggested, lay "at the intersection of fully articulated perspectives."¹¹¹ Here Mills echoed Mannheim's call for an ideological analysis of all positions that sought to preserve what was valuable in each of them. Behind this notion was the suggestion that the self-critical social scientist, as part of Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia," could transcend particularistic viewpoints and achieve comprehensive knowledge of their society. On the other hand, Mills indicated that his purpose was more explicitly political, designed to expose the interests behind dominant ideas. After all, his critique of social pathologists was not simply that they failed to make their value judgments explicit; it was an attack on the social pathologists' value judgments themselves. Ideological analysis without a complementary examination of social structure was inad-

equate, Mills argued, because “ideologies are not merely beliefs, widespread throughout a milieu, they are legitimations of social structure.” Thus, Mills concluded, “You cannot escape the realities of politics even though academic sociologists in America have done their courageous best.” Social scientists needed, therefore, to “squarely face the problems of power.”¹¹² Mills did not call on social scientists to be agents of political change. Rather, he argued, any thorough self-reflection would reveal that social scientists lacked the power to solve political problems by themselves. What they could do was examine social problems and state the political implications and assumptions of their own work.

His first published sociological work reflecting a commitment to leftist politics, “Professional Ideology” suggested a latent political potential in Mills’s early work. Even though Mills lacked a developed political consciousness prior to 1941, the particular social scientific traditions that he absorbed while pursuing the rather abstract philosophical and theoretical questions of epistemology and methodology helped make him a radical. Pragmatism, for instance, offered Mills an inherent suspicion of received doctrine that clearly pointed in the direction of political reform. As James Kloppenberg has argued, the “radical theory of truth” put forth by American pragmatists and their European counterparts found a political complement in progressive and social-democratic movements promoting social welfare and greater democratic participation.¹¹³ Similarly, Robert Westbrook has demonstrated that Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy went hand in hand with a commitment to radical democratic politics.¹¹⁴ Even though Mills saw his own politics as more radical than Deweyan progressivism, he drew strength from the pragmatist notion that the social world was uncertain and contingent, and hence available to be remade by collective democratic action that could transcend past social arrangements. Indeed, for the first class that he taught at the University of Maryland, Mills selected the following Dewey quote to place at the beginning of his syllabus in order to emphasize the subversive nature of pragmatist epistemology: “Let us admit the case of the conservative: if we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends, and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril.”¹¹⁵

Perhaps most importantly, pragmatist philosophers presumed a significant public role for social science. In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey suggested the need for social scientific knowledge to create democratic publics. In complex, modern societies, individuals needed

knowledge of society as a whole in order to participate in decision making. Accordingly, Dewey argued that “a genuine social science would manifest its reality in the daily press, while learned books and articles supply and polish the tools of inquiry.”¹¹⁶ As Hans Joas has noted, “On the one hand, pragmatism’s social philosophy thus provided a complex of fundamental concepts for social scientific research and theory construction. On the other hand, it ascribed to these very social sciences an enormous moral and political importance. For they were supposed to . . . make a decisive contribution to promoting the solidarity of a universal human community that collectively recognizes, discusses, and solves the problems of humanity.”¹¹⁷ Thus, Mills’s pragmatist education suggested to him the key public and political role that the social scientist could play, even if his early work was more oriented toward polishing the tools of inquiry than reaching a larger audience in the daily press.

In large part through his detailed work in the sociology of knowledge, Mills became attuned to how power relations shaped the production and distribution of ideas. This theme, an undercurrent of Mills’s work in the sociology of knowledge from the start, culminated in the full-blown expression of reflexive sociology in “Professional Ideology.” Indeed, it was in “Three Problems” that Mills first used the term “power elite,” writing that sociologists of knowledge needed to be aware that ideas were often “the social weapons of the power elites.”¹¹⁸ Yet a more subtle but perhaps more fundamental element of Mills’s early work that portended his future radical turn was his methodological call for the detailed self-location of social science. What most distinguished the early Mills from his sociological contemporaries was his willingness to subject the basic presuppositions of social scientific inquiry to critique. Even before he became a political radical, Mills was a radical in the classical sense: his analysis went to the root of the matter. To Mills, part of the attraction of a radical political perspective must have been similar to the appeal of an expansive conception of the sociology of knowledge. Each allowed him to get outside the object studied and bring into question its fundamental values.

Whatever the latent political potential of his earlier methodological work, Mills’s recognition of the political element of sociological work made “Professional Ideology” a classic essay, one even more perceptive when read alongside its never-published methodological epilogue. The insights that Mills gained through his work in the sociology of knowledge were crucial to his later intellectual development. The meth-

odological implications he drew for social scientific inquiry remained a fundamental aspect of his sociological perspective, and his engagement with the sociology of knowledge left him with the problem that remained at the center of his attention for the remainder of his career: the connection between ideas and social structure, or, to put it another way, the relationship between intellect and power. Thus, in a sense, Mills remained a sociologist of knowledge for his entire life. Following "Professional Ideology," however, Mills moved away from the methodological work with which he had introduced himself to the social scientific world. This shift is evident in Mills's decision not to revise his dissertation for publication as a book, perhaps along the lines suggested in his original outline, a remarkable choice given Mills's dogged persistence in seeking publication for many of his graduate papers. In "Three Problems," Mills argued that sociologists should address questions of power and social structure. In the early 1940s, Mills came to believe that such issues needed to be tackled directly, not just through the attempt to explain the social derivation of ideas. He thus turned his attention away from the methodological consequences of the sociology of knowledge. Instead, he focused the formidable sociological ambition he had displayed as a student on the more explicitly political question of what was happening in the world.