

Tom Hayden**Radical Nomad: C. Wright Mills and His Times.****With Contemporary Reflections by Stanley Aronowitz, Richard Flacks and Charles Lemert**

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Few academic sociologists have had as much influence on the politics and culture of the society outside the university as did C. Wright Mills. Young sociologists today are aware, of course, of Mills' famous critique of "abstracted empiricism" and "grand theory" in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) and his uncompromising analysis of the "power elite." Mills' example as a "plain Marxist" and Weber scholar was vitally important for the forging of a "conflict theory" and "critical sociology" in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, Mills' clear writing and the role he played as a public intellectual represents an important early example of precisely the kind of "public sociology" that Michael Burawoy argued for in his provocative American Sociological Association (ASA) presidential address "For Public Sociology" in 2004. But did Mills' work have any influence on the political activists and radicalism of the New Left generation of the 1960s outside the narrow circles of soon to be tenured academic radicals? Does his work speak to us today as we think about directions for Canadian sociology and society? The publication of Tom Hayden's MA thesis on Mills, written at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in the early 1960s, is an extremely useful document for scholars and activists interested in the history of radical and critical sociology, the question of public intellectuals, and debates about future directions for our discipline.

Hayden was one of the most influential political activists of the 1960s, having served as the national president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the most important organization of radical student activism in the United States. Hayden also co-authored the Port Huron Statement. This highly influential manifesto articulated more clearly than any other piece of writing the vision of the youth oriented radicalism that transformed politics throughout the United States in the 1960s under the broad category called the New Left. Skeptical of the traditional labour and worker oriented politics of socialists and communists (the Old Left), the New Left emerged in the United States when students got involved in fighting against racism in the American south, struggling over internal democracy in the highly authoritarian universities of the time, and protesting the Vietnam War.

Hayden was front and center in the activism of the period. He was active in the civil rights movement, witnessed and wrote about the Newark, New Jersey riots in late sixties after spending years organizing among the inner city poor there, and was arrested and put on trial as part of the Chicago Seven during the infamous violence around the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. He was once married to Jane Fonda (Hanoi Jane to her critics, because of a controversial trip she made to Vietnam with Hayden during the war), later worked with Fonda on economic justice and environmental issues, and went on to be elected to both the California Assembly and State Senate. He is now one of the most highly respected politicians on the left wing of the American Democratic Party and continues to be a highly vocal critic of the American war in Iraq. As a young man, however, he was deeply influenced by the writings of sociology's C. Wright Mills. Hayden's MA thesis on Mills along with the critical commentaries by Stanley Aronowitz, Richard Flacks and Charles Lemert and Hayden's recently penned introductory essay is an extremely useful document that shows some of the ways in which Mills' work shaped the politics of the 1960s outside the academy.

Written over forty years ago, Hayden's MA thesis shows him to have been an extremely insightful and ambitious 22 year old. He has useful things to say about Mills, both in his original thesis and his recently written introduction to *The Radical Nomad*. Hayden reviews the arguments contained in Mills' most important works such as *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), *The Power Elite* (1956), *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) and *Listen Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960). Hayden's political activism in the American student and the civil rights movements made him far more aware of the importance of anti-racist struggles in American politics in the 1950s than Mills himself was. In addition, Hayden is right to express a critical perspective on the "mass society" arguments that provided a framework for Mills' commitment to a radicalism based on the activities of intellectuals and students. Mills underestimated the possibilities of mass action from below in creating a new American left. Hayden detects the roots of this political error in the theoretical approach Mills absorbed from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the larger Weberian perspective he helped popularize in the United States.

Despite these insights, Hayden's text will not teach contemporary scholars and graduate students much, if anything, about contemporary political and cultural dynamics. The book is simply too dated, and too much part of the political polemics of its time. It is, however, an important part of sociology's history since one can see here how Mills' work helped shape and influence the thinking of some of the most important radical activists of the period and through him, the larger social movements of the era. For those of us concerned with thinking about a "public sociology" for today, Hayden's writings illuminates how a talented and passionate sociologist such as C. Wright Mills can, at least at a certain moment in history, shape debate outside the university. For scholars only familiar with the professional sociological work of Mills, Hayden's *Radical Nomad* opens up a historical lens to a different and more complex C. Wright Mills. For example, Hayden's introduction to his MA thesis argues convincingly that Mill's relative marginal status and identification with the underdogs was not simply due to his roots as Texas "outsider" but was also linked to his repressed Irish identity, something Hayden himself shared and came to understand after reflecting on his own life as a radical. Mills died too young to come to this issue on his own, but his relative blindness to racial and ethnic politics may have biographical as well as theoretical origins. Hayden today is particularly insightful about the gender blinders embedded in Mills' male macho version of intellectual radicalism, something he missed seeing the first time around. Hayden has added something new to the literature on Mills and he writes with honesty and modesty about his earlier radical self. More importantly, Hayden makes a good case for an approach to social analysis and criticism that is clearly written, does not make a fetish out of methods, leaves room for the micro level of cultural and social analysis, avoids politic dogma, and engages personal problems as social issues at the structural level. If Hayden is not a sociologist, he certainly is an excellent public intellectual like Canada's own Stephen Lewis or Naomi Klein, and is well worth reading on those terms.

The flaw with *Radical Nomad* is that it does not go far enough in looking critically at Mills from a sociological perspective. Stanley Aronowitz, Richard Flacks and Charles Lemert are three of the most talented radical sociologists writing today, and their essays introducing the Hayden book are worth the price of admission. Each of the essays places the work of Mills and the activism of Hayden in the context of politics of the 1960s, and each uses his own finely tuned sociological perspective to unpack some of the insights and underline some of the blinders embedded in Mills' vision for a radical sociological imagination. From my perspective, however, they do not go far enough in critically examining what Randall Collins and Stephan Fuchs has called "the myth of the intellectual hero." Aronowitz and Lemert, in particular, read Mills through the lens of their particular

visions for “post-modern” radical sociology, an approach that not all of us will share. And Hayden himself is too close to Mills as the hero of his youth to give us a fully critical and coldly analytic account of him as a thinker and intellectual figure, although he makes a valiant and honest attempt. The book could have been edited in ways that offer a greater range of perspectives on the legacy of Mills for sociology and social criticism today.

The view of Mills presented here underestimates the extent to which Mills’ radicalism and intellectual insights emerged out of, not simply in opposition to, mainstream academic sociology. One could read this book and not learn the story of how a young Mills published extensively in mainstream American sociology journals like *The American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) and *The American Sociological Review* (ASR), and worked closely with Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld before writing the radical polemics against mainstream scholarship we know as *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills was such a creative sociologist partly because of his roots in mainstream sociology, the history of which is outlined in recent works by Jonathan Sterne (2005) and John H. Summers (2006). Aronowitz, Flacks, Lemert and Hayden give us a “public intellectual” and “critical” Mills to admire, more or less, despite Mills’ widely known personal and professional flaws. But the authors do not go far enough in suggesting some of the ways in which Mills’ own writing contributed to the excessive rejection of a left social democratic alternative that marred some of the politics of the 1960s, something that Hayden himself came to realize in his own later activism and political career.

For Canadian sociologists today who would like to see our discipline move in some of the directions Mills outlined for us and who would like a space in our society for social criticism, we will need to think analytically and in a more cold blooded way about the social origins of Mills’ “sociological imagination.” The roots of Mills’ unique combination of radical commitment and theoretical insight were linked far more to his complex relationship to mainstream academic training than this book suggests. An intellectually engaging and politically compelling version of what Michael Burawoy has called “public sociology” that speaks to contemporary issues of inequality and social justice will emerge and consolidate itself in Canada, I would suggest, only by linking itself and learning from empirically oriented academic sociology and **not** from rejecting American style social science in simplistic ways. The paradox is that C. Wright Mills was far closer to mainstream American sociology than many young Canadian scholars think. Hayden’s version of Mills still holds potential to inspire scholars today to move beyond the excessive levels of professionalism that leads academics away from public engagement on important social issues. And if one wants to have an influence on the world as a scholar as well as doing quality social research, the example of Mills holds both lessons and warnings. Looking more analytically at how Mills himself emerged out of mainstream sociology, moreover, will help us develop a vision for our discipline that is more realistic and sustainable than if it were built on some of the myths about C. Wright Mills promoted in *The Radical Nomad*. The vision that Mills offered us of a sociological imagination linking social analysis to moral critique is powerful and compelling enough to be able to stand on its own, without us needing to create inaccurate “origin myths” about how his perspective actually emerged and took root in sociology in the first place. Quality social criticism and engaged public sociology in Canada will grow and consolidate based on both conflict and engagement with mainstream sociological professionalism as the inspiring example of Hayden and Mills in the American case suggests. Mills was not a nomad, however, but a well trained and ambitious sociologist and intellectual who lived on the margins but also very near the center of American sociology and elite intellectual life in the 1950s.

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