Charles Wright Mills
(1916–1962)
Mills was an American sociologist. Among other topics he was concerned with the responsibilities of intellectuals in post-World War II society, and advocated relevance and engagement over disinterested academic observation.

Life and work
Mills graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1939 and received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1941. In 1946 he took a faculty position at Columbia University, which he kept, despite controversy, until his untimely death.

*White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951) contends that the titular workforce is politically conservative because members tend to identify with the companies they work for.

*The Power Elite* (1956) describes the relationship between political, military, and business leaders, noting that such individuals are often graduates of certain universities, are members of the same exclusive social and country clubs, and usually intermarry with other elites.

*The Sociological Imagination* (1959) describes a mindset—the sociological imagination—for doing sociology that stresses being able to connect individual experiences and societal relationships.


Outlook
According to the basic shape of any "intellectual portrait" of Charles Mills, his essays - as published in his anthology "The Sociological Imagination" (Oxford University Press, 1961) - are of very interest. The appendix "On Intellectual Craftsmanship" gives an impressive insight view on what a sociologist as a social scientist whenever working creatively (like an artist) is able to work out. Insofar C.Wright Mills reminds us on the very beginning of modern scholarly thinking: Substance and appearance are by no means identical; moreover, whenever substance and appearance are looked upon as identical there is no need for science, scientists, and scholars at all. Given this setting, Charles Mills was indeed, as Irving L. Horowitz told us, a social scientist sharply contrasting the bulk of any mainstream (sometimes called "bullsh*t") sociology. When G.F.W. Hegel once stated: "The most reasonable thing children can do with their toy is to break it to pieces" (Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften
In Grundrisse, part III) this might express the attitude of C. Wright Mills whenever looking on mainstream concepts of contemporary sociology at his time. In a specific double-sense Charles Mills was a traditional Marxist:

i) he of course knew what Carl Marx & Frederick Engels stressed: "It is not the consciousness determinating the every-day-life but it is the very life (pre)determinating the consciousness" (The German Ideology, 1st part, on Feuerbach); and

ii) against any individualistic, reductionist, and obscure images of what "society" constitutes C.Wright Mills knew for sure what Marx fundamentally detected and clearly expressed: "Any society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of relationships [and] conditions that the individual actor is forming to each other" (Grundrisse, 2nd chapter)

Critical conflict theory
Mills thought it was possible to create a good society on the basis of knowledge and that people of knowledge must take responsibility for its absence.

Mills argues that micro and macro levels of analysis can be linked together by the sociological imagination, which enables its possessor to understand the large historical sense in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. Individuals can only understand their own experiences fully if they locate themselves within their period of history. The key factor is the combination of private problems with public issues: the combination of troubles that occur within the individual's immediate milieu and relations with other people with matters that have to do with institutions of an historical society as a whole.

In modern society those centralization of power and that the men who head government, corporations, the armed forces and the unions are closely linked. The means of power at the disposal of centralized decision makers have greatly increased. The Power Elite is made up of political, economic and military leaders. Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex" gives a clear image of the entwinement of these bases of power.

Mills shares with Marxist sociology and elite theorists the view that society is divided rather sharply and horizontally between the powerful and powerless. He also shares their concerns for alienation, the effects of social structure on the personality and the manipulation of people by the mass media. At the same time however Mills does not regard property (economic power) as the main source of conflict in society.

Further reading