

The Politics of Responsibility

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As technically strong a sociologist as America has produced, Mills was stronger yet as a polemicist. No writer had nearly his influence on the generation that produced the sit-in movement, the Peace Corps, and the first crop of New Leftists.

*The following selection is a compound of two extracts, the first taken from the 1960 edition of his book, *The Causes of World War III*,¹ and the second (in which he reproduces an extensive passage from that book) from a later pamphlet, "Letter to the New Left." Taken together, the two extracts perfectly strike the mood which, when he was writing, had hardly been heard of in America but which has since become general on the campuses; and with faultless accuracy, they lay out an agenda for thought and action which today has only acquired a still more piercing relevance.*

WHAT I HAVE BEEN trying to say to intellectuals, preachers, scientists—as well as more generally to publics—can be put into one sentence: drop the liberal rhetoric and the conservative default; they are now parts of one and the same official line; transcend that line.

There is still a good deal of talk, so fashionable several years ago, about the collapse of "Right" and "Left"; about "conservative" and "radical" being no longer viable as intellectual and political orientations. Much of this talk, I believe, is part of the default of intellectual workmen, a revelation of their lack of imagination. As a political type, the conservative, in common with the indifferent, is generally content "to be like other men

¹ New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960.

and to take things as they are," for he believes that the status quo has been built slowly and that as such it is as beneficent an arrangement as can fairly be expected. In brief, and in the consistent extreme, the conservative is a man who abdicates the willful making of history.

The radical (and even the liberal) is a man who does not abdicate. He agrees that many human events, important events at that, may indeed be the results of so many little acts that they are indeed part of fate. But he also sees that more and more events in our epoch are not matters of fate; that they are the results of decisions made and not made by identifiable men who command the new means of decision and of power.

Given these means of administration, production, violence, it seems clear that more and more events are due less to any uncontrollable fate than to the decisions, the defaults, the ignorance—as the case may be—of the higher circles of the superstates. To reflect upon the present as history is to understand that history may now be made by default. Understanding that, we no longer need accept as "necessary" the lesser evil. We no longer need to accept historical fate, for fate is a feature of specific kinds of social structure, of irresponsible systems of power.

These systems can be changed. Fate can be transcended. We must come to understand that while the domain of fate is diminishing, the exercise of responsibility is also diminishing and in fact becoming organized as irresponsibility. We must hold men of power variously responsible for pivotal events, we must unmask their pretensions—and often their own mistaken convictions—that they are not responsible.

Our politics, in short, must be the politics of responsibility. Our basic charge against the systems of both the United States and the U.S.S.R. must be that in differing ways they both live by the politics of irresponsibility.

In East and in West, nowadays, the idea of responsibility is in a sad condition. It is either washed away in liberal rhetoric, or it becomes a trumped-up bloody purge. But we must hold to it; we must be serious about it; we must understand that to use it requires knowledge and inquiry, continual reflection and imagination.

Those who decide should be held responsible to those men and women everywhere who are in any grievous way affected by decisions and defaults. But by whom should they be held responsible? That is the immediate problem of political power.

In both East and West today, the immediate answer is: by the intellectual community. Who else but intellectuals are capable of discerning the role in history of explicit history-making decisions? Who else is in a position to understand that now fate itself must be made a political issue?

No longer can fate be used either as excuse or as hope; neither our hopes nor our fears are part of anything inevitable: we are on our own. Would it not be elementary honesty for the intellectual to realize this new and radical fact of human history and so at least consider the decisions that he is in fact making, rather than to deny by his work that any responsible decisions are open to him?

Democracy requires that those who bear the consequences of decisions have enough knowledge to hold decision-makers accountable. If men hope that contemporary America is to be a democratic society, they must look to the intellectual community for knowledge about those decisions that are now shaping human destiny. Men must depend upon knowledge provided by this community, for by their own private experience they can know only a small portion of the social world, only a few of the decisions that now affect them.

Yet leading intellectual circles in America as elsewhere have not provided true images of the elite as men in irresponsible command of unprecedented means of power. Instead, they have invented images of a scatter of reasonable men, overwhelmed by events and doing their best in a difficult situation. By its softening of the political will, the conservative mood of the intellectuals, out of which these images have arisen, enables men to accept public depravity without any private sense of outrage and to give up the central goal of Western humanism, so strongly felt in nineteenth-century American experience: the audacious control by reason of man's fate.

Nowadays, there is much generalized anguish because there were Causes in the Thirties but not any more. What all this means, I think, is that in the Thirties the Causes were all set up as programs and little intellectual or moral effort was required to focus them, to pursue them. At present, the social energy to develop such Causes does not seem to be available. As a result there is the often-bemoaned dreariness of the recent cultural scene and the obvious international fact of the political default of cultural workmen of the West. This complaint and this default rest upon the unmet need to specify private troubles out

of the vague uneasiness of individuals; to make public issues out of indifference and malaise; and to turn uneasiness and indifference themselves into troubles, issues, and problems open to inquiry.

Both private uneasiness and public indifference rest upon an unawareness of imperiled values and of that which is imperiling them. What is needed is political thinking that is also culturally sensible. That this does not now exist is a result of the failure to assert the values as well as the perils. I cannot help but think that this failure represents another instance in the West of the ascendancy of the international hayseed.

There is a showdown on socialism, on its very meaning as well as its chances, going on in Eastern Europe, in Russia, in China, in Cuba.

There is a showdown on capitalism in Western Europe, in North America, in parts of the pre-industrial world.

But for those concerned with the politics of culture and the culture of politics, the most important showdown has to do with the problems that lie in the international encounter of the two superstates. This encounter involves not only two coexisting kinds of political economy; it poses not only the problems of how the world is to be industrialized. This world encounter is also an encounter of models of human character. For the kinds of human beings that are going to prevail are now being selected and formed in the United States and in Russia. And within both these societies there is coming a showdown on all the modern expectations about what man can *want* to become.

In America and in Russia—in differing ways but often with frightening convergence—we now witness the rise of the cheerful robot, the technological idiot, the crackpot realist. All these types embody a common ethos: rationality without reason. The fate of this ethos and of these types, what is done about them and what they do—that is the real, even the ultimate, showdown on “socialism” and on “capitalism” in our time. It is a showdown on what kinds of human being and what kinds of culture are going to become the ascendant models of human aspiration. It is an epochal showdown, separating the contemporary period from “the modern age.” To make that showdown clear, as it affects every region of the world and every intimate recess of the self, requires a union of political reflection and cultural sensibility of a sort not really known before. That union is now scarcely available in the Western or in the Soviet intellectual community. Within both world blocs, there

are attempts to achieve it and to use it. Perhaps these attempts are the showdown on human culture itself.

... The most important issue of political reflection and of political action in our time [is] the problem of the historical agency of change, of the social and institutional means of structural change. There are several points about this problem I would like to put to you.

First, the historic agencies of change for liberals of the capitalist societies have been an array of voluntary associations, coming to a political climax in a parliamentary or congressional system. For socialists of almost all varieties, the historic agency has been the working class—and later the peasantry, or parties and unions composed of members of the working class, or (to blur, for now, a great problem) of political parties acting in its name, “representing its interests.”

I cannot avoid the view that both these forms of historic agency have either collapsed or become most ambiguous. So far as structural change is concerned, neither seems to be at once available and effective as *our* agency anymore. I know this is a debatable point among us, and among many others as well; I am by no means certain about it. But surely, if it is true, it ought not to be taken as an excuse for moaning and withdrawal (as it is by some of those who have become involved with the end-of-ideology); and it ought not to be by-passed (as it is by many Soviet scholars and publicists, who in their reflections upon the course of advanced capitalist societies simply refuse to admit the political condition and attitudes of the working class).

Is anything more certain than that in 1970—indeed, at this time next year—our situation will be quite different, and—the chances are high—decisively so? But of course, that isn't saying much. The seeming collapse of our historic agencies of change ought to be taken as a problem, an issue, a trouble—in fact, as *the* political problem which *we* must turn into issue and trouble.

Second, it is obvious that when we talk about the collapse of agencies of change, we cannot seriously mean that such agencies do not exist. On the contrary, the means of history-making—of decision and of the enforcement of decision—have never in world history been so enlarged and so available to such small circles of men on both sides of The Curtains as they now are. My own conception of the shape of power, the theory of the

power elite, I feel no need to argue here. This theory has been fortunate in its critics, from the most diverse political viewpoints, and I have learned from several of these critics. But I have not seen, as of this date, an analysis of the idea that causes me to modify any of its essential features.

The point that is immediately relevant does seem obvious: what is utopian for us is not at all utopian for the presidium of the Central Committee in Moscow, or the higher circles of the Presidency in Washington, or, recent events make evident, for the men of SAC and CIA. The historic agencies of change that have collapsed are those which were at least thought to be open to the *Left* inside the advanced Western nations, to those who have wished for structural changes of these societies. Many things follow from this obvious fact; of many of them, I am sure, we are not yet adequately aware.

Third, what I do not quite understand about some New Left writers is why they cling so mightily to "the working class" of the advanced capitalist societies as *the* historic agency, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really impressive historical evidence that now stands against this expectation.

Such a labor metaphysic, I think, is a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic.

It is a historically specific idea that has been turned into an a-historical and unspecific hope.

The social and historical conditions under which industrial workers tend to become a-class-for-themselves, and a decisive political force, must be fully and precisely elaborated. There have been, there are, there will be such conditions. These conditions vary according to national social structure and the exact phase of their economic and political development. Of course we cannot "write off the working class." But we must *study* all that, and freshly. Where labor exists as an agency, of course we must work with it, but we must not treat it as The Necessary Lever, as nice old Labour Gentlemen in Britain and elsewhere tend to do.

Although I have not yet completed my own comparative studies of working classes, generally it would seem that only at certain (earlier) stages of industrialization, and in a political context of autocracy, *etc.*, do wage-workers tend to become a-class-for-themselves, *etc.* The *etceteras* mean that I can here merely raise the question.

It is with this problem of agency in mind that I have been studying, for several years now, the cultural apparatus, the intellectuals, as a possible, immediate, radical agency of change.

For a long time, I was not much happier with this idea than were many of you; but it turns out now, at the beginning of the 1960's, that it may be a very relevant idea indeed.

In the first place, is it not clear that if we try to be realistic in our utopianism—and that is no fruitless contradiction—a writer in our countries on the Left today *must* begin with the intellectuals? For that is what we are, that is where we stand.

In the second place, the problem of the intelligentsia is an extremely complicated set of problems on which rather little factual work has been done. In doing this work, we must, above all, not confuse the problems of the intellectuals of West Europe and North America with those of the Soviet bloc or with those of the underdeveloped worlds. In each of the three major components of the world's social structure today, the character and the role of the intelligentsia is distinct and historically specific. Only by detailed comparative studies of them in all their human variety can we hope to understand any one of them.

In the third place, who is it that is getting fed up? Who is it that is getting disgusted with what Marx called "all the old crap"? Who is it that is thinking and acting in radical ways? All over the world—in the bloc, outside the bloc, and in between—the answer is the same: It is the young intelligentsia.

I cannot resist copying out for you, with a few changes, some materials I recently prepared for a 1960 paperback edition of a book of mine on war:

In the spring and early summer of 1960, more of the returns from the American decision and default are coming in. In Turkey, after student riots, a military junta takes over the state, of late run by Communist Container Members. In South Korea, too, students and others knock over the corrupt American-puppet regime of Syngman Rhee. In Cuba, a genuinely left-wing revolution begins full-scale economic reorganization, without the domination of U.S. corporations. Average age of its leaders: about thirty—and certainly a revolution without Labor As Agency. On Taiwan, the eight million Taiwanese under the American-imposed dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek, with his two million Chinese, grow increasingly restive. On Okinawa, a U.S. military base, the people get their first chance since World War II ended to demonstrate against U.S. seizure of their island; and some students take that chance, snake-dancing and chanting angrily to the visiting President: "Go home, go home—take away your missiles." (Don't worry, 12,000 U.S. troops easily handle the generally grateful crowds; also the President is "spirited out the rear end of the United

States compound"—and so by helicopter to the airport.) In Japan, weeks of student rioting succeed in rejecting the President's visit, jeopardizing a new treaty with the United States, and displacing the big-business, pro-American Prime Minister, Kishi. And even in our own pleasant Southland, Negro and white students are—but let us keep quiet: it really is disgraceful.

That is by no means the complete list; that was yesterday; see today's newspaper. Tomorrow, in varying degree, the returns will be more evident. Will they be evident enough? They will have to be very obvious to attract real American attention: sweet complaints and the voice of reason—these are not enough. In the slum countries of the world today, what are they saying? The rich Americans, they pay attention only to violence—and to money. You don't care what they say, American? Good for you. Still, they may insist; things are no longer under the old control; you're not getting it straight, American: your country—it would seem—may well become the target of a world hatred the like of which the easy-going Americans have never dreamed. Neutralists and Pacifists and Unilateralists and that confusing variety of Leftists around the world—all those tens of millions of people, of course they are misguided, absolutely controlled by small conspiratorial groups of trouble-makers, under direct orders from Moscow and Peking. Diabolically omnipotent, it is *they* who create all this messy unrest. It is *they* who have given the tens of millions the absurd idea that they shouldn't want to remain, or to become, the seat of American nuclear bases—those gay little outposts of American civilization. So now they don't want U-2's on their territory; so now they want to contract out of the American military machine; they want to be neutral among the crazy big antagonists. And they don't want their own societies to be militarized.

But take heart, American: you won't have time to get really bored with your friends abroad: they won't be your friends much longer. You don't need *them*; it will all go away; don't let them confuse you.

Add to that: In the Soviet bloc, who is it that has been breaking out of apathy? It has been students and young professors and writers; it has been the young intelligentsia of Poland and Hungary, and of Russia, too. Never mind that they have not won; never mind that there are other social and moral types among them. First of all, it has been these types. But the point is clear, isn't it?

That is why we have got to study these new generations of intellectuals around the world as real live agencies of historic change. Forget Victorian Marxism, except when you need it; and read Lenin again (be careful)—Rosa Luxemburg, too.

"But it is just some kind of moral upsurge, isn't it?" Correct. But under it: no apathy. Much of it is direct nonviolent action, and it seems to be working, here and there. Now we must learn from the practice of these young intellectuals and with them work out new forms of action.

"But it's all so ambiguous—Cuba, for instance." Of course it is; history-making is always ambiguous. Wait a bit; in the meantime, help them to focus their moral upsurge in less ambiguous political ways. Work out with them the ideologies, the strategies, the theories that will help them consolidate their efforts: new theories of structural changes of and by human societies in our epoch.

"But it is utopian, after all, isn't it?" No, not in the sense you mean. Whatever else it may be, it's not that. Tell it to the students of Japan. Tell it to the Negro sit-ins. Tell it to the Cuban Revolutionaries. Tell it to the people of the hungry-nation bloc.