

# Introduction to: Kathryn Mills: C. Wright Mills Through his Letters – His Time in Innsbruck and the Making of *The Sociological Imagination*

Helmut Staubmann<sup>1,\*</sup> with A. Javier Treviño<sup>2,\*\*</sup>

1 Dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Innsbruck, Austria

2 Professor of Sociology, Wheaton College Massachusetts

\* Helmut.Staubmann@uibk.ac.at

\*\* jtrevino@wheatonma.edu

In March 2018, the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Innsbruck had the great pleasure to host Kathryn Mills for a talk on her father C. Wright Mills where she revealed hitherto unknown but important facts about the circumstances of his writing of one of the most famous books in the history of 20th century sociology: *The Sociological imagination*.

It was in June of 2017 when Kate Mills first contacted us. A. Javier Treviño, an American sociologist who published the introductory textbook *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills*, put us in touch. He is also a personal friend who has come to Innsbruck during the past few years to teach jointly a modular course on systems theory. Particularly – and from the perspective of our topic one should say “ironically” – the course is on Talcott Parsons.

Now, Kate Mills is the editor of a volume entitled *C. Wright Mills. Letters and Autobiographical Writings* first published in 2000 by the University of California Press. I learned that she and her family spent the summer and fall of 1957 here in Innsbruck together. Her father returned to New York in December but she and her mother remained in Innsbruck until the following May. Parts of her father's most important sociological work, *The Sociological Imagination* were written here. Kathryn's inquiry to me, however, was a private one. Although she was only two years old by then and does not have direct memories, the family episode in Innsbruck left many traces that became important to her: The photos, her mother's stories, and her father's letters about the time in Innsbruck. All these left vivid impressions, some of which referred to people she had encountered at the time. Kate asked me if I could locate some of them. It was not an easy task but my research assistant, Veronika Riedl, did excellent detective work and found at least one person of special importance to Kate. Thus, I am glad that we could

be of help and hope that her trip to the past, as it were, added new good experiences and encounters. When I announced her upcoming lecture to colleagues and students I got the impression that awareness of C. Wright Mills's significance has somewhat faded. Thus, we want to briefly summarize a few of his main achievements and his status in the history of social thought.

To begin with, it is difficult to overestimate the impact that Mills had on social thought and on world political affairs during the middle of the twentieth century. A leading critic of post-World War II America, Mills was the most influential radical sociologist of his time. He and Parsons, each in their own way, were regarded as the undisputed titans of American sociology.

Born 1916 in Waco, Texas, Mills studied at the University of Texas, Austin, where he received bachelor's degrees in sociology and in philosophy. Afterwards he decided to go to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his PhD.

Mills's first appointment as sociology professor was at the University of Maryland, College Park in 1942. It was exactly 50 years later that I had an appointment there as a visiting scholar. His presence was still palpable as there was (and I guess still is) a C. Wright Mills Library with a huge photo of him. When I told my Maryland colleagues about my project on Talcott Parsons they would refer to their Mills tradition and appeared amazed that even after Mills's critical verdict on Parsons's theory someone would still invest time and effort in dealing with Parsons's work.

In 1945, Mills was appointed a research associate at Columbia University and later promoted to a professor position which he held until his premature death due to heart problems in 1962.

With his critique of capitalist society and its power structures Mills became a kind of mastermind of the New Left movement. His 1960 “Letter to the New Left” inspired young activists like Tom Hayden and other leaders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the leading radical organization that was formed at the University of Michigan. SDS members were attracted to Mills’s theory of power, his promotion of participatory democracy, and were animated by the fact that he regarded the young intelligentsia as positive agents of social change.

Mills devoted three volumes to analyzing the US class structure and power system. The first book, *The New Men of Power*, published in 1948 dealt with union leaders, describing them in the sense of the German expression *Arbeiteraristokratie* – workers aristocracy – who instead of pursuing the interests of the working class arranged themselves within a capitalist society. *White Collar*, which appeared in 1951, is a social psychological study of the new middle classes and their place within the social structure of mid-twentieth century America. *The Power Elite*, published in 1956, follows up the topics of power and inequality by analyzing the interweaving of political, military, and economic elites and the mechanisms they rely on to keep their status.

A lesser known work but one with greater contemporaneous significance was *The Causes of World War Three* which appeared in 1958. Written at the height of Cold War tensions between the US and the USSR, Mills calls on intellectuals to take a moral stand on the issue of nuclear disarmament. *The Causes* was an offshoot of Mills’s engagement with the international peace movement.

Another of Mills’s bestsellers was written about his trip to Cuba in 1960, a year after the movement around Fidel Castro finally succeeded. *Listen Yankee*, which is the title of the book, sold more than half a million copies at the time. The Cuba trip, his meetings and interviews with Castro and the political reactions in the US, including an investigation by the FBI are well documented in a volume published recently by Treviño entitled *C. Wright Mills and the Cuban Revolution*.

The sub-title of Treviño’s book is: *An Exercise in the Art of Sociological Imagination*, which brings us to the last work of C. Wright Mills that we want to mention: *The Sociological Imagination*, which appeared in 1959. In 1997 this book was voted the second most influential sociology text ever published. It is a critique of the established conception of sociological theory and the praxis of empirical research of the time. One chapter is titled, “Grand Theory,” a term established in the sociological discourse to denote the work of Talcott Parsons, and another chapter is titled “Abstracted Empiricism,” which refers to an isolated and incomplete exploration of social reality. What Mills called the “sociological imagination” should overcome both, empty theorizing and futile data collection.

To sum up: C. Wright Mills accurately took the pulse of his time. He did so in both theoretical terms and practical political terms. He was, I contend, a central node in the network of influential and critical intellectuals of the time. One of his personal encounters I want to mention was with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. All three of them, being intensely interested in the Cuban Revolution, met one day in Paris to discuss its future prospects. Although Mills died early in the 1960s he shaped the political-ideological movements of the decade. Michael Burawoy’s public sociology can be regarded as a kind of contemporary version of the legacy of C. Wright Mills. Indeed, Burawoy credits Mills for gesturing toward the idea of public sociology—the sociologist talking to publics and at kings. Another legacy, this one in the form of a commemoration of his search for a sophisticated understanding of the individual and society, is the prestigious C. Wright Mills Award made annually by the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

While we in Innsbruck did absolutely nothing to contribute to Mills’s achievements, we nonetheless feel rather honored that he spent some time here and proceeded with such an important work. Kathryn Mills’ following essay, based on her talk she delivered for our Faculty, is an important contribution to understanding the context of her father’s work and thus a valuable document for the history of social thought.

## Authors

Helmut Staubmann is professor for social theory and cultural sociology and dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Innsbruck. He was visiting scholar at UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and Harvard University and was visiting professor at several European, Asian, and American universities. His research focuses on conceptual foundations of action theory (*Rationality in the Social Sciences*, ed. with Victor Lidz, Springer 2018) and the sociology of culture. He edited and translated (with A. Scott) Georg Simmel’s *Rembrandt*, Routledge 2006 and edited a volume on The Rolling Stones. *Sociological Perspectives*, Lexington 2013.

A. Javier Treviño is professor of sociology at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, USA. He is past president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the author and editor of several books including *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems*, 2 volumes; *C. Wright Mills and the Cuban Revolution*; *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills*; and *The Anthem Companion to Talcott Parsons*.