C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

Books include:

*White Collar* (1951): critique of white-collar workers
*Character and Social Structure* (1953, with Hans Gerth)
*The Power Elite* (1956): argued that America is dominated by a small elite of businessmen, politicians and military leaders
*The Sociological Imagination* (1959): introduced famous term, calling for link between personal troubles and public issues

Great opponent of American sociology, including structural-functionalism. His professional and personal life was also marked by conflict.

Didn’t read Marx until mid-1950s, but helped keep Marxian tradition alive in U.S. sociology

**Key ideas from “The Structure of Power in America”**

Power to make decisions is concentrated in political, military and economic institutions (as opposed to religion, education or family). These institutions are closely linked. Their leaders form the “power elite.” These leaders are from similar backgrounds and may move from one institution to another.

Groups in the “middle levels” of society engage in conflict over their piece of the pie. But these conflicts have little importance for issues decided at the top (e.g., international relations).

An example is organized labor: “In so far as it fights at all it fights over a share of the goods of a single way of life and not over that way of life itself.”

The image of democracy as the people freely formulating, discussing, and deciding between viewpoints is a “fairy tale.”
Conflict theory in the 1950s and 1960s

During the 1950s and 1960s, conflict theory was the main opponent to structural-functionalism.

Key figures: C. Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf.

Criticisms of conflict theory:

- Not enough familiarity with Marxism.
- Often seemed a mirror image of S-F, e.g., focused on same issues, looked at structures and institutions.
- Derivative and underdeveloped.
- Too ideologically radical.
- Can’t deal with consensus, order and stability.

However, conflict theory did lay the groundwork for Marxist sociology.

Marxist sociology became important in 1960s, ASA section created in 1977, has diminished in importance in 1990s.

Conflict- and Marxist-influenced sociological perspectives include:

- Feminist sociology.
- Critical theory.
- World system theory.
Zweigenhaft & Domhoff’s “The Ironies of Diversity”

“The movements that led to diversity in the power elite have succeeded to some extent, especially for women and minorities from privileged social backgrounds, but there has been no effect on the way the power elite functions or on the class structure itself.”

The successful assimilation of women and minorities is explained by four processes:

1. Identity management: Newcomers to the power elite must demonstrate they think and act like “straight Christian males.”
2. The importance of class: Women and minorities in the power elite tend to come from business and professional backgrounds.
3. The importance of education: “The women and minorities who make it to the power elite are typically better educated than the white males who are already part of it.” They also tend to have degrees from elite schools, which confer membership in elite networks.
4. The importance of color: Having dark skin is an impediment to joining the power elite. Blacks and darker-skinned Latinos are exceptions to the general trend that class is becoming more important than ethnicity. The existence of an “oppositional culture” that devalues education contributes to this problem, especially for black males.

“The impetus for greater diversity, as we have stressed, did not come from within the power elite but was the result of external pressures. Generally speaking, members of the power elite reluctantly accepted diversification as a goal for themselves only because they had little choice.”

Some ironies of diversity:

• Affirmative action was created by white elite males (in response to urban unrest) but is now defended by liberals and minorities.
• The addition of diversity to the power elite has strengthen it by giving it “buffers, ambassadors, tokens, and legitimacy.”
• Women and minorities who join the elite have values and perspectives similar to the white males who were there already. Diversification has not necessarily resulted in new perspectives “in the boardroom.”
• “The age-old American commitment to individualism, reinforced at every turn by members of the power elite, won out over the commitment to greater equality of income and wealth” that had been a rationale for the social movements that promoted it.