

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