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INTRODUCED BY  
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The Politics of Truth  
*Selected Writings of*  
*C. Wright Mills*

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mills, C. Wright (Charles Wright), 1916–1962.

The politics of truth : selected writings of C. Wright Mills

/ selected and introduced by John H. Summers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-534305-2 (hardcover)—ISBN 978-0-19-534304-5 (pbk.)

I. Social sciences. I. Summers, John, 1971—. II. Title.

H83.M493 2008 301.092—dc22

[B] 2008011427

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

THIS WAS AN ADDRESS before the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado, on June 28, 1958. “Social Forces and the Frustrations of the Designer” was the theme. Afterward, in a letter to Richard Hofstadter, Mills reported that he “had a fine time with designers, architects, city planners, artists, and other disgruntled types. I still think I ought to have been an architect. But since it’s too late I am going to theorize for them! God they are a confused but good willing lot. They now confront all the problems the political intellectuals grappled with in the thirties; amazing really.”

“The Man in the Middle” was published in *Industrial Design* in November 1958.



The American designer is at once a central figure in what I am going to call the cultural apparatus and an important adjunct of a very peculiar kind of economy. His art is a business, but his business is art and curious things have been happening both to the art and to the business—and so to him. He is caught up in two great developments of 20th-century America: One is the shift in economic emphasis from production to distribution, and along with it, the joining of the struggle for existence with the panic for status. The other is the bringing of art, science and learning into subordinate relation with the dominant institutions of the capitalist economy and the nationalist state.

Designers work at the intersection of these trends; their problems are among the key problems of the overdeveloped society. It is their dual involvement in them that explains the big split among designers and their frequent guilt; the enriched muddle of ideals they variously profess and the

insecurity they often feel about the practice of their craft; their often great disgust and their crippling frustration. They cannot consider well their position or formulate their credo without considering both cultural and economic trends, and the shaping of the total society in which these are occurring.

I want briefly (1) to define certain meanings and functions of the cultural apparatus, and (2) to indicate the economic context in which the designer now does his work. It may then be useful (3) to invite you to reconsider certain ideals for which the designer might stand in the kind of world in which Americans are coming to live.

### *Our Worlds Are Second-Hand*

Our images of this world and of ourselves are given to us by crowds of witnesses we have never met and never shall meet. Yet for each of us these images—provided by strangers and dead men—are the very basis of our life as a human being. None of us stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact. No such world is available: the closest we come to it is when we are infants or when we become insane: then, in a terrifying scene of meaningless events and senseless confusion, we are often seized with the panic of near-total insecurity. But in our everyday life we experience not solid and immediate facts but stereotypes of meaning. We are aware of much more than what we have ourselves experienced, and our experience itself is always indirect and always guided. The first rule for understanding the human condition is that men live in a second-hand world.

The consciousness of men does not determine their existence; nor does their existence determine their consciousness. Between the human consciousness and material existence stand communications and designs, patterns and values which influence decisively such consciousness as they have.

The mass arts, the public arts, the design arts are major vehicles of this consciousness. Between these arts and the everyday life, between their symbols and the level of human sensibility, there is now continual and persistent interplay. So closely do they reflect one another that it is often impossible to distinguish the image from its source. Visions whispered long before the age of consent, images received in the relaxation of darkness, slogans reiterated in home and in classroom, determine the perspective in which we see and fail to see the worlds in which we live; meanings about which we have never thought explicitly determine our judgments of how well and of how badly we are living in these worlds. So decisive to experience itself are the results of these

communications that often men do not really believe what they “see before their very eyes” until they have been “informed” about it by the official announcement, the radio, the camera, the hand-out. Communications not only limit experience; often they expropriate the chances to have experience that can rightly be called “our own.” For our standards of credibility, and of reality itself, as well as our judgments and discernments, are determined much less by any pristine experience we may have than by our exposure to the output of the cultural apparatus.

For most of what we call solid fact, sound interpretation, suitable presentation, we are increasingly dependent upon the observation posts, the interpretation centers, the presentation depots of the cultural apparatus. In this apparatus, standing between men and events, the meanings and images, the values and slogans that define all the worlds men know are organized and compared, maintained and revised, lost and found, celebrated and debunked.

By the cultural apparatus I mean all those organizations and milieux in which artistic, intellectual and scientific work goes on. I also mean all the means by which such work is made available to small circles, wider publics, and to great masses.

The most embracing and the most specialized domain of modern society, the cultural apparatus of art, science and learning fulfills the most functions: it conquers nature and remakes the environment; it defines the changing nature of man, and grasps the drift of world affairs; it revivifies old aspirations and shapes new ones. It creates models of character and styles of feeling, nuances of mood and vocabularies of motive. It serves decision-makers, revealing and obscuring the consequences of their decisions. It turns power into authority and debunks authority as mere coercion. It modifies the work men do and provides the tools with which they do it; it fills up their leisure, with nonsense and with pleasure. It changes the nature of war; it amuses and persuades and manipulates; it orders and forbids; it frightens and reassures; it makes men weep and it makes men laugh, go numb all over, then become altogether alive. It prolongs the life-span and provides the violent means to end it suddenly. It predicts what is going to happen and it explains what has occurred; it helps to shape and to pace any epoch, and without it there would be no consciousness of any epoch.

The world men are going to believe they understand is now, in this cultural apparatus, being defined and built, made into a slogan, a story, a diagram, a release, a dream, a fact, a blue-print, a tune, a sketch, a formula; and presented to them. Such part as reason may have in human affairs, this apparatus, this put-together contraption, fulfills; such role as sensibility may play in the human drama, it enacts; such use as technique may have in history

and in biography, it provides. It is the sect of civilization, which—in Matthew Arnold’s phrase—is “the humanization of man in society.” The only truths are the truths defined by the cultural apparatus. The only beauty is experiences and objects created and indicated by cultural workmen. The only goods are the cultural values with which men are made morally comfortable or morally uneasy.

### *From Production to Distribution to “Merchandising”*

As an institutional fact, the cultural apparatus has assumed many forms. In some societies—notably that of Russia—it is established by an authority that post-dates capitalism: it is thus part of an official apparatus of psychic domination. In some—notably the nations of Western Europe—it is established out of a tradition that pre-dates capitalism; it is thus part of an Establishment in which social authority and cultural prestige overlap. Both cultural tradition and political authority are involved in any cultural Establishment, but in the USA the cultural apparatus is established commercially: it is part of an ascendant capitalist economy. This fact is the major key to understanding both the quality of everyday life and the situation of culture in America today.

The virtual dominance of commercial culture is the key to America’s cultural scope, confusion, banalization, excitement, sterility. To understand the case of America today, one must understand the economic trends and the selling mechanics of a capitalist world in which the mass production and the mass sale of goods has become The Fetish of human life, the pivot both of work and of leisure. One must understand how the pervasive mechanisms of the market have penetrated every feature of life—including art, science and learning—and made them subject to the pecuniary evaluation. One must understand that what has happened to work in general in the last two centuries has in the 20th century been happening to the sphere of artistic and intellectual endeavor; these too have now become part of society as a salesroom. To understand the ambiguous position of the cultural workman in America one must see how he stands in the overlap of these two worlds: the world of such an overdeveloped society with its ethos of advertisement, and the world of culture as men have known it and as they might know it.

However harsh its effects upon the nature of work, the industrialization of underdeveloped countries must be seen as an enormous blessing: it is man conquering nature, and so freeing himself from dire want. But as the social and physical machineries of industrialization develop, new purposes and

interests come into play. The economic emphasis moves from production to distribution and, in the overdeveloped society, to what is called “merchandising.” The pivotal decade for this shift in the USA was the Twenties, but it is in the era since the ending of World War II that the new economy has flowered like a noxious weed. In this phase of capitalism, the distributor becomes ascendant over both the consumer and the producer.

As the capacity to produce goes far beyond existing demand, as monopoly replaces competition, as surpluses accumulate, the need is for the creation and maintenance of the national market and for its monopolistic closure. Then the salesman becomes paramount. Instead of cultivating and servicing a variety of publics, the distributor’s aim is to create a mass volume of continuing sales. Continuous and expanding production requires continuous and expanding consumption, so consumption must be speeded up by all the techniques and frauds of marketing. Moreover, existing commodities must be worn out more quickly for as the market is saturated, the economy becomes increasingly dependent upon what is called replacement. It is then that obsolescence comes to be planned and its cycle deliberately shortened.

### *Silly Designs for Silly Needs*

There are, I suppose, three kinds of obsolescence: (1) technological, as when something wears out or something better is produced; (2) artificial, as when something is deliberately designed so that it will wear out; and (3) status obsolescence, as when fashions are created in such ways that consumption brings disgrace or prestige in accordance with last year’s or with this year’s model, and alongside the old struggle for existence, there is added the panic for status.

It is in this economic situation that the designer gets his Main Chance. Whatever his esthetic pretension and his engineering ability, his economic task is to sell. In this he joins the advertising fraternity, the public relations counsel, and the market researcher. These types have developed their skills and pretensions in order to serve men whose God is the Big Sell. And now the designer joins them.

To the firm and to its products he adds the magical gloss and dazzle of prestige. He plans the appearance of things and their often fraudulent packaging. He lays out the interiors and decorates the exteriors of corporate businesses as monuments to advertising. And then, along with his colleagues, he takes the history of commercial fraud one step further. With him, advertising is not one specialized activity, however central; with his capitalist

advent, the arts and skills and crafts of the cultural apparatus itself become not only adjuncts of advertising but in due course themselves advertisements. He designs the product itself as if it were an advertisement, for his aim and his task—acknowledged by the more forthright—is less to make better products than to make products sell better. By brand and trademark, by slogan and package, by color and form, he gives the commodity a fictitious individuality, turning a little lanolin and water into an emulsified way to become erotically blessed; concealing the weight and quality of what is for sale; confusing the consumer's choice and banalizing her sensibilities.

The silly needs of salesmanship are thus met by the silly designing and redesigning of things. The waste of human labor and material become irrationally central to the performance of the capitalist mechanism. Society itself becomes a great sales room, a network of public rackets, and a continuous fashion show. The gimmick of success becomes the yearly change of model as fashion is made universal. And in the mass society, the image of beauty itself becomes identified with the designer's speed-up and debasement of imagination, taste and sensibility.

### *The Growth of the Star System*

The cultural workman himself, in particular the designer, tends to become part of the means of distribution, over which he tends to lose control. Having "established a market," and monopolized access to it, the distributor—along with his market researcher—claims to "know what they want." So his orders—even to the free-lance—become more explicit and detailed. The price he offers may be quite high; perhaps too high, he comes to think, and perhaps he is right. So he begins to hire and to manage in varying degree a stable of cultural workmen. Those who allow themselves to be managed by the mass distributor are selected and in time formed in such a way as to be altogether proficient, but perhaps not quite first-rate. So the search goes on for "fresh ideas," for exciting notions, for more alluring models; in brief, for the innovator. But in the meantime, back at the studio, the laboratory, the research bureau, the writers' factory—the distributor is ascendant over many producers who become the rank-and-file workmen of the commercially established cultural apparatus.

In this situation of increasing bureaucratization and yet of the continual need for innovation, the cultural workman tends to become a commercial hack or a commercial star. By a star, I mean a producer whose productions are so much in demand that he is able, to some extent at least, to make dis-



tributors serve as *his* adjuncts. This role has its own conditions and its own perils: The star tends to be trapped by his own success. He has painted this sort of thing and he gets \$20,000 a throw for it. This man, however affluent, may become culturally bored by this style and wants to explore another. But often he cannot: he is used to \$20,000 a throw and there is demand for it. As a leader of fashions, accordingly, he is himself subject to fashion. Moreover, his success as a star depends upon his playing the market: he is not in educative interplay with a public that supports him as he develops and which he in turn develops. He too, by virtue of his success, becomes a marketeer.

The star system of American culture—along with the commercial hacks—tend to kill off the chance of the cultural workman to be a worthy craftsman. One is a smash hit or one is among the failures who are not produced; one is a best seller or one is among the hacks and failures; one is either absolutely tops or one is just nothing at all.

As an entrepreneur, you may value as you wish these several developments; but as a member of the cultural apparatus, you surely must realize that whatever else you may be doing, you are also creating and shaping the cultural sensibilities of men and women, and indeed the very quality of their everyday lives.

### *The Big Lie: “We Only Give Them What They Want”*

The mere prevalence of the advertiser’s skills and the designer’s craft makes evident the falseness of the major dogma of the distributor’s culture. That dogma is that “we only give them what they want.” This is the Big Lie of mass culture and of debased art, and also it is the weak excuse for the cultural default of many designers.

The determination of “consumer wants and tastes” is one characterizing mark of the current phase of capitalism in America—and as well as what is called mass culture. And it is precisely in the areas in which wants are determined and changed that designers tend to do their work.

The merchandising apparatus, of which many designers are now members, operates more to create wants than to satisfy wants that are already active. Consumers are trained to “want” that to which they are most continually exposed. Wants do not originate in some vague realms of the consumer’s personality; they are formed by an elaborate apparatus of jingle and fashion, of persuasion and fraud. They are shaped by the cultural apparatus and the society of which it is a part. They do not grow and change as the consumer’s sensibilities are enlarged; they are created and they are changed by the process

by which they are satisfied and by which old satisfactions are made unsatisfactory. Moreover, the very canons of taste and judgment are also managed by status obsolescence and by contrived fashion. The formula is: to make people ashamed of last year's model; to hook up self-esteem itself with the purchasing of this year's; to create a panic for status, and hence a panic of self-evaluation, and to connect its relief with the consumption of specified commodities.

In this vast merchandising mechanism of advertisement and design, there is no inherent social purpose to balance its great social power; there is no built-in responsibility to anybody except to the man who makes the profit. Yet there is little doubt that this mechanism is now a leading fixer of the values and standards of American society, the foremost carrier of cultural sensibility, and quite comparable in influence to school, to church, to home.

This apparatus is now an adjunct of commercial establishments which use "culture" for their own noncultural—indeed anticultural—ends, and so debase its very meaning. These uses of culture are being shaped by men who would turn all objects and qualities, indeed human sensibility itself, into a flow of transient commodities, and these types have now gotten the designer to help them; they have gotten him to turn himself into the ultimate advertising man. When you think about it—if you do—it really is amazing: the old helpmate of the salesman, the Air Brush Boy, the corporal of retailing—has become the generalissimo of anxious obsolescence as the American way of life.

### *Craftsmanship as a Value*

I have of course been describing the role of the designer at what I hope is its worst. And I am aware that it is not only in the field of design that the American ambiguity of cultural endeavor is revealed, that it is not only the designer who commits the cultural default. In varying degrees all cultural workmen are part of a world dominated by the pecuniary ethos of the crackpot business man and also of a world unified only vaguely by the ideals of cultural sensibility and human reason. The autonomy of all types of cultural workmen has in our time been declining. I also want to make it clear that I am aware of the great diversity among designers and the enormous difficulty any designer now faces in trying to escape the trap of the maniacs of production and distribution.

The problem of the designer can be solved only by radical consideration of fundamental values. But like most fundamental considerations his can begin very simply.

The idea of the cultural apparatus is an attempt to understand human affairs from the standpoint of the role within them of reason, technique and sensibility. As members of this cultural apparatus, it is important that designers realize fully what their membership means. It means, in brief, that you represent the sensibilities of man as a maker of material objects, of man as a creature related to nature itself and to changing it by a humanly considered plan. The designer is a creator and a critic of the physical frame of private and public life. He represents man as a maker of his own milieu. He stands for the kind of sensibility which enables men to contrive a world of objects before which they stand delighted and which they are delighted to use. The designer is part of the unity of art, science and learning. That, in turn, means that he shares one cardinal value, that is the common denominator of art, science and learning and also the very root of human development. That value, I believe, is craftsmanship.

From craftsmanship, as ideal and as practice, it is possible to derive all that the designer ought to represent as an individual and all that he ought to stand for socially and politically and economically. As ideal, craftsmanship stands for the creative nature of work, and for the central place of such work in human development as a whole. As practice, craftsmanship stands for the classic role of the independent artisan who does his work in close interplay with the public, which in turn participates in it.

The most fundamental splits in contemporary life occur because of the break-up of the old unity of design, production and enjoyment. Between the image and the object, between the design and the work, between production and consumption, between work and leisure, there is a great cultural vacuum, and it is this vacuum that the mass distributor, and his artistic and intellectual satraps, have filled up with frenzy and trash and fraud. In one sentence, what has been lost is the fact and the ethos of man as craftsman.

By craftsmanship I refer to a style of work and a way of life having the following characteristics:

(1) In craftsmanship there is no ulterior motive for work other than the product being made and the processes of its creation. The craftsman imagines the completed product, often even as he creates it; and even if he does not make it, he sees and understands the meaning of his own exertion in terms of the total process of its production. Accordingly, the details of the craftsman's daily work are meaningful because they are not detached in his mind from the product of the work. The satisfaction he has in the results infuses the means of achieving it. This is the root connection between work and art: as esthetic experiences, both involve the power "to catch the enjoyment that belongs to the consummation, the outcome, of an undertaking and to give to the im-

plements, the objects that are instrumental in the undertaking, and to the acts that compose it something of the joy and satisfaction that suffuse its successful accomplishment.”<sup>1</sup>

To quite small circles the appeal of modern art—notably painting and sculpture, but also of the crafts—lies in the fact that in an impersonal, a scheduled, a machined world, they represent the personal and the spontaneous. They are the opposite of the stereotyped and the banalized.

(2) In craftsmanship, plan and performance are unified, and in both, the craftsman is master of the activity and of himself in the process. The craftsman is free to begin his working according to his own plan, and during the work he is free to modify its shape and the manner of its shaping. The continual joining of plan and performance brings even more firmly together the consummation of work and its instrumental activities, infusing the latter with the joy of the former. Work is a rational sphere of independent action.

(3) Since he works freely, the craftsman is able to learn from his work, to develop as well as use his capacities. His work is thus a means of developing himself as a man as well as developing his skill. This self-development is not an ulterior goal, but a cumulative result of devotion to and practice of his craft. As he gives to work the quality of his own mind and skill, he is also further developing his own nature; in this simple sense, he lives in and through his work, which confesses and reveals him to the world.

(4) The craftsman’s way of livelihood determines and infuses his entire mode of living. For him there is no split of work and play, of work and culture. His work is the mainspring of his life; he does not flee from work into a separate sphere of leisure; he brings to his non-working hours the values and qualities developed and employed in his working time. He expresses himself in the very act of creating economic value; he is at work and at play in the same act; his work is a poem in action. In order to give his work the freshness of creativity, he must at times open himself to those influences that only affect us when our attentions are relaxed. Thus for the craftsman, apart from mere animal rest, leisure may occur in such intermittent periods as are necessary for individuality in his work.

(5) Such an independent stratum of craftsman cannot flourish unless there are publics who support individuals who may not turn out to be first-rate. Craftsmanship requires that such cultural workmen and such publics define what is first-rate. In the Communist bloc, because of official bureaucracies, and in the capitalist, because of the commercial ethos, standards are now not in the hands of such cultural producers and cultural publics. In both the mere distributor is the key to both consumption and production.

Some cultural workmen in America do of course remain independent. Perhaps three or four men actually earn a living here just by composing serious music; perhaps fifty or so by the writing of serious novels. But I am concerned now less with economic than with cultural requirements. The role of the serious craftsman requires that the cultural workman remain a cultural workman, and that he produce for other cultural producers and for circles and publics composed of people who have some grasp of what is involved in his production. For you cannot “possess” art merely by buying it; you cannot support art merely by feeding artists—although that does help. To possess it you must earn it by participating to some extent in what it takes to design it and to create it. To support it you must catch in your consumption of it something of what is involved in the production of it.

It is, I think, the absence of such a stratum of cultural workmen, in close interplay with such a participating public, that is the signal fault of the American cultural scene today. So long as it does not develop, the position of the designer will contain all the ambiguities and invite all the defaults I have indicated. Designers will tend to be commercial stars or commercial hacks. And human development will continue to be trivialized, human sensibilities blunted, and the quality of life distorted and impoverished.

As practice, craftsmanship in America has largely been trivialized into pitiful hobbies: it is part of leisure, not of work. As ethic, it is largely confined to small groups of privileged professionals and intellectuals. What I am suggesting to you is that designers ought to take the value of craftsmanship as the central value for which they stand; that in accordance with it they ought to do their work; and that they ought to use its norms in their social and economic and political visions of what society ought to become.

Craftsmanship cannot prevail without a properly developing society; such a society I believe would be one in which the fact and the ethos of craftsmanship would be pervasive. In terms of its norms, men and women ought to be formed and selected as ascendant models of character. In terms of its ethos, institutions ought to be constructed and judged. Human society, in brief, ought to be built around craftsmanship as the central experience of the unalienated human being and the very root of free human development. The most fruitful way to define the social problem is to ask how such a society can be built. For the highest human ideal is: to become a good craftsman.

### *Notes*

1. G. H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act* (Chicago, 1938), p. 454.