

RESEARCH · FORM AND LINEAGE

# The Absent Presence: A Juxtaposition

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## ***TL;DR***

The pamphleteer form is the form of public sense-making outside the academy. C. Wright Mills proved it at mid-century from inside Columbia, wrote a trilogy on American power that the discipline could not absorb, and was buried by the academy for forty years for refusing to perform neutrality. He returns now because the captures he diagnosed have intensified to the point where the diagnosis is no longer controversial, and because the publishing infrastructure that buried him has been replaced by infrastructure that does not require his cooperation.

This paper is the meta-frame for the quartet on citizenship (time, ground, voice, currency) and the verification-infrastructure note alongside. Mills proved the form. Gramsci, Counts, Horton, Galeano, Lynd, Apple, and Paraskeva are part of the lineage already woven into the body of work. The South Coast is the position. The work is the work.

## I. The Court

You are sitting in a faculty meeting. The dean is presenting a strategic plan. The plan is wrong in ways that everyone in the room recognizes. No one says so.

The senior faculty know not to say so because they have what tenure gives them and intend to keep it. The junior faculty know not to say so because they are reading the room and the room is reading them. The dean knows she will not be challenged because the senior faculty have already let her know that she will not be. The meeting ends. The plan moves forward. Everyone files out and finds someone they trust enough to tell what they actually think.

The conversation is in the hallway. The decision was in the meeting.

This is what an institution looks like when it has stopped being able to think out loud. The institution still produces output. The output still gets credentialed. The credential still matters for some purposes. What the institution no longer does, with reliability, is generate the kind of thinking that arrives, plainly, at a public.

The room is a court. You are invited to it if you are aligned. You are left out of it if you are not. The rules are not written down because they do not have to be. Everyone in the room has been in enough other rooms to know how the rooms work. In the academy, you are rewarded for what you do not say. The article that names what no one will say in the meeting is the article that does not get cited. The colleague who says it out loud is the colleague who is no longer invited.

The performance is theater. The theater is the job.

This essay is about what happens to public thinking when its primary venue stops being able to host it, and what one mid-century American sociologist proved about the alternative.

## II. What Capital Did to Knowledge

The story of how American intellectual life lost its public is older than most participants in it remember.

Before the Second World War, the leading American thinkers wrote for the educated public as a matter of course. Dewey. James. Mead. Veblen. Mumford. Wilson. Lippmann. The university appointment, when it existed, was a base from which to address a wider audience. The audience existed. The trade press existed. The serious magazine existed. People read serious work because it was published in the venues people already read.

What changed was infrastructure.

The GI Bill expanded American higher education by an order of magnitude. The university, which had been a small confederation of relatively autonomous institutions, became a system. Systems need standardized currency. The currency was the peer-reviewed journal article and the university-press monograph, ratified through the dissertation-tenure-publish loop. By the early 1950s, the public intellectual looked like a fossil from an earlier era.

The funding shaped the field. Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie shaped what got studied. Cold War defense funding shaped which questions counted as serious. The "value-free" turn, in Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism and the broader scientism of postwar social science, did the work of making engagement with public political questions look like a category error. The discipline now had standing to police what counted as proper research. Anyone who wrote outside the rules was, by definition, not doing the work.

C. Wright Mills called the two failure modes Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism. Grand Theory was Parsons's project. Vast conceptual systems, too abstract to yield practical insight. Abstracted Empiricism was its opposite number. Meticulous accumulation of small-scale verifiable findings that, taken together, said almost nothing about the structure of the society that produced them. Mills argued in 1959 that the discipline he was nominally part of was doing both at once and very little else.

What followed was contraction. The 1970s thinned the tenure track. The 1990s metricized prestige through citation indices and impact factors. The 2000s corporatized the strategic plan. The 2010s adjunctified the labor force. By the 2020s, what remained was a credentialing service for the corporate order, a shrinking core of tenured positions, and a contingent labor market populated by people doing the work of thinking for poverty wages, with no expectation of public address.

The substrate had been hollowed for fifty years. The exoskeleton remained. The thinking, when it happened, happened in the cracks.

Mills diagnosed the situation at the beginning. He did not live to see the full unfolding. The work he produced before his death is the most accurate map we have of how it happened.

### III. The Texan in Manhattan

The most useful American thinker on what comes next was a sociologist from Texas.

Charles Wright Mills was born in Waco in 1916. He went to public schools, took his BA at the University of Texas, and did graduate work at the University of Wisconsin under Hans Gerth. Gerth was a German émigré who had been Karl Mannheim's student. He gave Mills the European intellectual tradition in compressed form. Mills gave it back in vernacular English.

Mills arrived at Columbia in 1946. Over the next thirteen years he produced four books that constitute the most ambitious sustained American social analysis of the twentieth century.

*The New Men of Power* (1948) examined the labor leadership at the moment of its postwar power and asked whether it would forge an independent political bloc or be absorbed into the Democratic coalition. Absorption, Mills called the main drift.

*White Collar* (1951) traced the rise of the salaried professional and clerical strata. The new middle class. People whose work consisted, increasingly, of moving paper.

*The Power Elite* (1956) named the alliance of corporate, political, and military leaderships at the top of American institutional life. Not a class. An alliance. The decisions that mattered were made there, not at the ballot box.

*The Sociological Imagination* (1959) was the methodological summary. The discipline he was part of had stopped serving the public task it claimed to serve. It would have to be reformed or replaced.

He wrote pamphlets too. *The Causes of World War Three* (1958) was published by Simon and Schuster and reissued in 1961 as a Ballantine paperback for the educated public. *Listen, Yankee* (1960) was published by McGraw-Hill in hardcover and Ballantine in paperback the same year, defending the early Cuban revolution at the height of the Cold War. The "Letter to the New Left" (1960), in *New Left Review*, articulated the principles of participatory democracy that Tom Hayden carried into the Port Huron Statement two years later, which became the founding manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society and seeded the political language of the decade that followed.

Mills wrote on a manual typewriter. He rebuilt an old farmhouse himself in Pomona, in the Rockland County hills near Nyack. He rode a BMW motorcycle to Columbia. He grew a beard at a time when senior American academics did not grow beards. He was loudly disliked by the senior figures in his discipline and loudly admired by his students.

He died in March 1962, age forty-five, of his fourth heart attack. Two more major books were in active drafting. The work stopped where his life stopped. The compounding never came.

## IV. The Absent Presence

Stanley Aronowitz, who edited the three-volume collection on Mills published in 2004, named the pattern that followed.

Mills's books had been translated into twenty-three languages. They had been widely reviewed in mainstream media. They had shaped the student and antiwar movements of the 1960s in massive and lasting ways. He was read in Latin America with greater seriousness than anywhere else. By every reasonable measure, he was one of the most consequential American social thinkers of his generation.

He was also almost entirely absent from the American social science curriculum for the three decades following his death.

Aronowitz's word for the pattern is the right one: the absent presence. Every sociologist knew the name. Most knew the major claims. Almost none cited the work, taught it as foundational, or built on it. The discipline he was part of had folded around the place he occupied and pretended it had not been there.

The mechanism was not new. Mills had refused the trade. He refused to be safely tucked into the academy. He refused the protective coloration of value-free scholarship. He refused to write in the disciplinary jargon that signaled membership in the club. He wrote plainly, with a standpoint, addressed to a public the discipline had stopped trying to reach.

The discipline could not metabolize him. So it ate around him.

Most of his contemporaries knew the work was important. Citing it would have signaled alignment with a position the senior figures of the field had decided was outside professional respectability. The career cost of citing Mills was real. The career cost of not citing him was zero. The math was rational individually. Collectively it produced four decades of disciplinary amnesia.

Mills returned in the late 1990s. He returned faster after the 2001 corporate scandals and the 2008 financial crisis. He returned faster again after the 2016 political rupture. He returned because the captures he had diagnosed had become legible to a public that had previously preferred not to see them. The academy did not rediscover him. The public rediscovered him. The academy, slowly and grudgingly, was forced to acknowledge that the man it had buried had been right in nearly every particular.

The institution can bury a thinker for as long as the public is willing to accept the institution as the only legitimate venue for thinking. Once the public stops accepting that, the buried thinker returns. The institution loses its monopoly on legitimation in the same motion.

## V. The Lineage

Mills is one figure in this lineage. The others are already cited across the quartet and *Acting in the Cracks*.

Antonio Gramsci spent more than ten years in Fascist prison and died there. He wrote thirty-three notebooks of political theory in his cell. The distinction he drew between the *war of maneuver* (direct contest for state power) and the *war of position* (slow accumulation of counter-power in civil society) structures the argument of *The Last*

*Currency*. Mills's work was a war of position conducted from inside the academy. He understood, as Gramsci understood, that the cultural infrastructure of legitimation is the terrain on which political outcomes are eventually decided.

George Counts asked in 1932 whether the school could build a new social order. He answered that it would either reform itself to do so or be replaced by institutions that would. Myles Horton founded the Highlander Folk School the same year, in the Tennessee mountains. Highlander trained Rosa Parks. Highlander trained the leaders of the civil rights movement. None of that work happened inside an accredited institution. It happened in a parallel space that took ordinary people seriously when the universities would not.

Michael Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990) and João Paraskeva's *Conflicts in Curriculum Theory* (2011) carried the line forward into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mapping how curriculum encodes capital relations and how educational institutions reproduce or resist them. Their work is part of the formative reading underneath this body of work.

The blockchain registry and the open-API records system are the contemporary descendants of the folk school. Same operation. Different decade.

Eduardo Galeano gave us the image of utopia as the horizon. You take ten steps toward it. It moves ten steps away. The point of the utopia is that it keeps you walking. Applied to academic life, the same image diagnoses something most participants in the academy will not say out loud. The retirement they walk toward is the date on which they will finally be free to write what they always meant to write. The date does not arrive. The horizon does not move closer. By the time it does arrive, they have become the machine they once meant to reinvent. They voted with their feet. The vote was silent.

Robert Lynd asked the foundational question in 1939. Knowledge for what? It was a challenge to the discipline's drift toward technical neutrality and toward service to corporate and state funders rather than to the public. Mills carried the question forward. The quartet carries it forward again. Each of the citizenship papers is, in part, an answer to Lynd's question for one precondition of citizenship in turn.

Karl Mannheim, by way of Gerth, gave Mills the concept of standpoint. Knowledge is produced from a position. The position infuses what is produced. Pretending otherwise is itself a position, generally one aligned with the existing distribution of power. Mills refused the pretense. The quartet refuses the pretense. Acknowledging standpoint is not a confession of bias. It is an honesty the discipline that buried Mills could not afford.

Mills was the American carrier of a tradition that came largely from elsewhere. Weber's Germany. Mannheim's Hungary. Mosca's Italy. Veblen's Norway-by-way-of-Wisconsin. He gave them an American voice, an American audience, and an American argument. The work survived him because the lineage survived him. The lineage surfaces again whenever the conditions warrant.

## VI. The Publishing Reversal

Mills wrote in the last decades of an era when the academy and the trade press were the only legitimate venues for serious public sense-making. The peer-reviewed journal and the university-press monograph were the high-prestige formats. The Ballantine paperbacks Mills used for *The Causes of World War Three* and *Listen, Yankee* were the low-prestige formats. The mass-market trade paperback was the closest thing his time had to the open web. Mills was unusual among senior academics in his willingness to use it.

What is happening now is a publishing reversal. Same shape as the Bretton Woods reversal described in *The Last Currency*.

The legitimating infrastructure of the postwar academy was top-down. Editors gatekept journals. Reviewers gatekept publication. The professoriate ratified what counted. The infrastructure was designed in private, by elites, and presented to the public as a fait accompli. The public could read the output. The public could not contribute to its production.

The current infrastructure is bottom-up. A canonical URL with a date and a public author is sufficient legitimation for serious readers. PDF download links provide citation-readiness without institutional intermediation. Hyperlink citation networks function more responsively than citation indices. The cost of distributing a four-thousand-word research paper has collapsed to near zero. The audience is global. The intermediating institutions are optional.

Same Gramscian war-of-position logic. Each paper that reaches readers without going through the academy is a small claim that the academy was not necessary for the work. The claims accumulate. They build, slowly, a different common sense about where serious public thinking happens, who does it, and what it requires.

The pamphleteer form returns because the burial mechanism no longer reaches the audience. Mills was buried by a discipline that controlled the legitimating infrastructure of his time. A pamphleteer working today cannot be buried in the same way. The discipline does not control the infrastructure. The infrastructure has decentralized along with everything else this body of work has been mapping.

The academy has not lost. The academy has lost its monopoly on legitimation. It will continue to credential. The credential will continue to matter for some functions, particularly the technical and professional ones for which the credential was originally designed. For the work of public sense-making, which Mills called sociological imagination and which Lynd called knowledge-for-what, the academy is no longer the only venue. It is increasingly not the most legible venue. The pamphleteer form returns to fill the gap the academy stopped filling fifty years ago.

## VII. The South Coast Position

I write from Newport County, on the South Coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The Portuguese fishing fleets that have worked these waters for four centuries call this stretch of coast the Basque region of New England, because the coastline and the kinship structures rhyme. From here the institutions look smaller. From here the institutions are smaller. The town committee is the federal government compressed to a room. Once you have seen the same operation at the scale of a town, you cannot unsee it at the scale of a nation.

Not a stranger to the academy. BA in philosophy and information systems from Salve Regina. MPA from Roger Williams. Two years of doctoral coursework in higher education administration from UMass Dartmouth. Sat in the seminars. Wrote the lit reviews. Know the room. The doctorate was not finished. The seat the doctorate was preparing for and the seat the writing comes from now are not the same seat.

The lineage in the region is older than these credentials. My grandfather served in the Massachusetts State House for twenty-four years. My father practiced law in this region for over forty. The institutions they worked inside, public service and the bar, are among the institutions whose legitimating capacity this paper is mapping. They worked from within them at a time when those institutions still did most of the work the public expected of them. The work now comes from outside the same institutions, at a time when they do less of that work, and when the work has begun to relocate to surfaces the institutions do not control. The relocation is what this paper is about. The lineage is what makes the relocation legible from where the writing sits.

The pencil routine, described elsewhere on this site, is the practice underneath this writing. At six years old, at Westport Elementary, fifteen cents bought a pencil from the school secretary every day. The pencil was not the point. The pencil bought two minutes of walking alone through a quiet hallway while the rest of the class lined up. The system was the point. A small reliable structure that earns the right to walk at one's own pace while everyone else is in line. Built at six. Still building at fifty.

The writing happens alongside the building. The real estate practice is a daily test of whether land remains the substrate of belonging or has been reduced to a financial instrument. The Long Family Archive ([longfamilyarchive.com](http://longfamilyarchive.com)) is a verification-infrastructure project for genealogy in a county where the same families have lived and worked for centuries, with an arc that runs back through England and Ireland to the South Coast settlement. These are not illustrations of the argument. They are the argument, conducted at the scale of practice. The pamphleteer form returns through writing. The civic infrastructure returns through building. Same operation at two abstraction levels.

The South Coast is the position from which this body of work is written. It is not the only position from which work like this can be written. It is the position that determines what becomes visible, and what becomes visible can be checked against what people who have lived here for generations have always seen.

## VIII. The Quartet's Method

The four citizenship papers are not arbitrary. They name the four preconditions for being a citizen rather than a subject. Time of one's own. Ground under one's feet. Voice that reaches others. Means of value exchange that one controls.

Each was captured by a specific combination of institutions over the last two hundred years. Each is being returned, partially and contestedly, by technology shifts that arrived in the hands of ordinary people before the institutions could metabolize them.

*The Time Problem* maps Aristotle's 2,500-year-old question about whose hours are free for citizenship. It answers it from the position of an AI transition that has begun, for the first time in industrial history, to return time to ordinary workers rather than redirect it to capital.

*The Last Ground* maps the federal-state-local capture of citizenship infrastructure. It argues that the local level is where the recovery has to start, because the upper levels are too captured to contest.

*The Voice* maps the consolidation and decentralization of the press. It names the new venues (X, Substack, podcasts, YouTube, TikTok) as the actual press of 2026. It argues that the question is no longer whether ordinary citizens can speak. The question is whether they will organize what they say into something durable.

*The Last Currency* maps the postwar monetary order. It names the Bretton Woods reversal happening through stablecoins and on-chain finance. It argues that citizens are in the strongest position they have held against capital in eighty years, possibly longer.

*Acting in the Cracks* is the verification-infrastructure note alongside the four. It names the operating practice. The parallel system rises in the gaps where institutions stop serving the people who built them. The bridge between the parallel system and the institution is a consulting practice. The desire path is what the community is already walking. The work is paving it.

This paper, *The Absent Presence*, is the meta-frame. It names the form. It names the lineage. It names the position from which the body is written.

The method is Mills's method, applied to a different axis, in a publishing environment that no longer requires the discipline's permission. He counted up to power. The quartet counts down to citizenship. Inverse symmetry. Same form. Both arguments are structural. Both are cumulative across multiple books rather than compressed into one. Both are written for a public the discipline has decided is not its audience.

The audience is the audience. The work is the work.

## IX. The Risk

The honest version of this paper has to include the risk.

The platforms can be re-captured. Substack is owned. The major social platforms are owned. The open web depends on infrastructure that can be regulated, throttled, deplatformed, or simply outcompeted by the next wave of consolidation. Trade publishing followed this trajectory in the second half of the twentieth century. Five conglomerates now control most of what gets published in mass-market format. The same trajectory is possible for the open web. The timeline may be shorter than it looks.

The academy can also re-absorb the form, and probably will. The most likely mechanism is professionalization of the open web. AI-generated research papers flood the zone with content that looks like serious work and is not. Verification matters more than form. Verification mechanisms favor institutions that can credential. The same capture logic that produced peer review and the citation index can produce something analogous for self-published work, and when it does, it will favor the institutions that can fund the verification infrastructure.

The Mills lesson is the cautionary one. He worked from inside the institution that buried him. We work from outside. The outside is not safer than the inside. It is differently exposed. Mills had the protection of tenure. Writers working in the open web have the protection of audience, which is more responsive than tenure. Audience is also less stable. An audience can be redirected. A platform can be deplatformed. A search algorithm can be tuned against work it had been deciding to surface.

The hedge is the same one *The Last Currency* names for the monetary domain. New strategies should get one slot until proven over multiple cycles. No one should put more in any unproven system than they can afford to lose. The body of work should be diversified across surfaces, anchored on a canonical URL that the author owns, and structured for portability if any individual surface fails. The references should be solid. The standpoint should be acknowledged. The verification should be paveable into the desire path readers are already walking.

This is not pessimism. The structural diagnosis is confident. Mills was buried for forty years and the work survived him. The lineage from Counts and Horton through Mills and forward is the lineage of work that survives institutional erasure because the work was useful enough to be remembered by communities the institutions did not control. Those communities exist now, online and off, and they are the audience this body of work is for.

The work is for them. The work is the work.

## X. The Work Is the Work

The press did not die. The ground was not lost. The time has begun to return. The currency follows. The form returns.

The pamphleteer form returns because the conditions return. The academy that buried Mills has lost its monopoly on legitimation. The publishing infrastructure that kept the form marginal for fifty years has been replaced by infrastructure that does not require the discipline's permission. The lineage Mills carried, from Gramsci and Mannheim and Counts and Horton, is the lineage that surfaces whenever an institution stops being able to do the work it was built to do and ordinary people decide to do it anyway.

Knowledge for what, Lynd asked in 1939. For the public, was the answer Mills gave through twenty-three languages and four heart attacks and a body of work the discipline pretended it had not noticed for forty years. For the public is the answer this body of work gives, in plain English, from the South Coast, citation-ready, in the open.

The Texan in Manhattan was buried for forty years. The work survived him. It always does. The absent presence was the institution's name for what it could not absorb, not the writer's name for himself. The writer was always present. The institution looked elsewhere.

The institution can look elsewhere again. The work will be present anyway.

The work is the work. The work is what you do.

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## ABOUT THE WRITER

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verification infrastructure ([longfamilyarchive.com](http://longfamilyarchive.com)). The writing sits at [johnlong.io](http://johnlong.io) as the canonical surface for the body of work on citizenship and its material preconditions.

The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with **The Periscope** as the catalyst essay, **The Map** as the compressed survey, **The Absent Presence** as the meta-frame, and **Acting in the Cracks** as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

Reader correspondence is welcomed; see [On Correspondence](#).