

Treviño, C. *Wright Mills and the Cuban Revolution*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1469633107. Paperback 23.08.

A. Javier Treviño's book deals with the relationship between one of the U.S.'s leading public intellectuals and the event that most shaped mid-20th century geopolitics in the Americas: the Cuban Revolution. While his earlier volume, *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills* (2012), focuses on Mills's ideas, this book uses those ideas. It focuses squarely on the production and impact of his polemical, epistolary book, *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960). Though Cubanists will find the large portions of the text dedicated to transcriptions of Mills's hitherto unpublished interviews of interest, Treviño does not make a big contribution to Cuban studies. The book is a Millsian sociology of Mills the sociologist. Readers will be rewarded with an enriched appreciation for Mills—the intellectual, the scientist, and the valiant person who, in his words, tried “to be objective” but not “detached.”

Chapters 1 and 2 follow directly from Mills's methodological playbook, focusing on biography and history, respectively. Focusing on Mills's interest in Cuba, Treviño recounts, among other things, how the Fair Play for Cuba Committee convinced Mills to go to Cuba and organized his trip. Focusing on the moment in history, Treviño strikes a reasonable balance between concision and chapter-length comprehensiveness. Chapter 3 provides an overview of some of Mills's key concerns: individuals, intellectuals, and interviewing.

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Mills made one 16-day research trip to Cuba in August 1960. During that time, he worked long days touring the island and conducting interviews. By returning to transcripts of Mills's interviews, Treviño's main concerns are to determine whether Mills actually interviewed people "close to the events," and whether he accurately portrayed the views of "the Cuban revolutionary," as he claimed. This is immensely important since many have questioned the relationship between Mills's views and the views of the composite Cuban revolutionary featured in *Listen*. In effect, Treviño asks and answers the question, did Mills present *his* views or the views of *Cuban revolutionaries*? (The question could equally have been put the other way around: as a *revolutionary*, how accurately did Mills portray Cubans' views of the Revolution?) In other words, did Mills write mere propaganda? Treviño concludes that Mills did, indeed, speak with Cubans close to the events, and that he honestly portrayed their perspectives.

In chapter 4, Treviño focuses on Mills's interviews with Cuban government officials. He discusses and presents transcriptions of interviews with his interpreter (Juan Arcocha; Mills did not speak Spanish) and with Rebel Army officers (including Isabel Rielo and Dermidio Escalona). Chapter 5 covers three interviews Mills conducted with Cuban civilians: a clinical psychologist (Franz Stettmeier), a professor of domestic economy (Elvira Escobar), and a peasant (Elba Luisa Batista Benitez). At different points in several of these interviews, Mills presses questions about whether the guerrilla organization that made the Revolution—the July 26th Movement—was the equivalent of a political party,

about the problem of personnel for the revolutionary state, and about the USSR-aligned Popular Socialist Party's role on the government at present and in the future. In addition to answering his questions, his respondents impressed upon Mills the righteousness of their cause and the importance of Fidel Castro in the revolutionary process.

Chapter 6 covers Mills's time with Fidel. Castro read Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) and discussed it with his comrades in November 1958, just before taking power. After travelling extensively with René Vallejo, Fidel's aide-de-camp and doctor, Mills travelled for a short time with Castro. They spent 18 hours together conversing in a hotel room. Mills needed no convincing about the perils of the U.S. empire. Treviño makes a convincing case that Fidel and Mills struck up a friendship. He offers several points of comparison between the two men, discusses Mills's concern with the concentration of power into this charismatic leader's hands, and suggests that Mills was transfixed by Cuba, in part, because he longed to be a man of action.

Chapter 7 examines *Listen's* publication history. The book sold about half a million copies in English—making it one of the best-selling books ever written by a sociologist—and was translated into six other languages despite its being addressed specifically to U.S. readers. Chapter 8 discusses public and state reactions to the book and implies that stresses stemming from liberals in and out of the John Kennedy administration and from the FBI may have exacerbated Mills's worsening heart health, the cause of his death in March 1962 at the age of 45. Despite the attacks, Mills stood by his analysis and retained his beliefs. He

even asked his students why they did not take to the Rocky Mountains with arms (see also *Listen*, p. 166)—offering to teach the students to use them—and mimic the Cuban revolutionaries. Meanwhile, *Listen* had an abiding impact on the development of the New Left.

Treviño's book deserves praise and recognition as a Millsian sociology of Mills. But it is not without its shortcomings. First, this book is fundamentally about a sociological master craftsman successfully navigating the context of discovery, but it does not distill the outlines of a method or even a series of relevant insights. Treviño shows that Mills did sound research. (He opines that Mills introduced an angry tone into *Listen* not found in the interviews but that he may have encountered elsewhere, though it is not clear that the text actually has an angry tone, as opposed to a direct one. And he observes that Mills failed to include the voice of Cuban peasants and workers, though he does not claim to.) He notes that Mills "depict[s] quite accurately the thoughts and actions of the Cuban revolutionary" (p. 136). He also includes an appendix comparing quotations from Mills's interviews to passages in *Listen*, further supporting this conclusion. Given *that* Mills did a good job, we could learn something from him about *how* to produce good sociopolitical research on topics about which we may have strong views.

Second, in several passages, Treviño employs psychological speculation to shore up political views inconsistent with his evidence. He recounts that Mills was drawn to and supported the Cuban Revolution largely out of visceral revulsion to the U.S. political establishment (pp. 125-26) and insists that Mills

was in no way a communist (pp. 173-74 *et passim*). He also downplays the facts that Mills continued to support the Cuban Revolution after Cuba aligned with the Soviet Bloc (p. 157), and that he acted on his long-standing desire to travel to the USSR after publishing *Listen* (p. 170). Mills's interest in rigorous sociology and in pressing political problems evidently drove him towards an interest in Marxism and actually-existing socialism (p. 160). And it seems most plausible—given his ability to understand complex situations quickly and accurately and given his extensive theoretical knowledge of power, bureaucracy, and social change—that Mills understood what he was getting himself into (although the Cold War certainly made his positions tricky to maintain and to interpret). Thus, Treviño's evidence suggests that Mills knew well what he was doing and did so anyways. But he endorses the view that, to the contrary, Mills suffered from cognitive dissonance (p. 158). These criticisms, however, should not dissuade readers from engaging with this important book.

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