

## The Cheerful Robots of Academia: Intellectual Craftsmanship and the Neoliberal University

J. Todd Ormsbee  
*San Jose State University*

### THE CONTRADICTIONS OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY HIGHER EDUCATION

During the spring of 2016, the California legislature considered two versions of a bill that would guarantee students in the 23-campus California State University system a bachelor's degree in four academic years. This overlapped with existing legislation that mandates target graduation and retention rates and per-student budgeting, and impelled, I would argue, a series of miseducative institutional decisions within the CSU system. These three legal constraints serve as a nexus of social control that works through an efficiency calculus and a concomitant rationalized bureaucracy, which in turn directly contradicts other CSU-wide institutional goals of student-centered learning and student success.<sup>1</sup> This contradiction stealthily divorces university institutions from student learning, and remarries them to graduation and retention rates, classroom failure rates, and now the metric of time to graduation, which, as workers within the academic labor force, faculty are obliged to respond to in substantive ways in their pedagogy. Administrators now instruct faculty to advise students to take as many credits as possible, follow pre-determined “roadmaps” to graduation, avoid taking classes outside of those roadmaps, and to incur extra expense by taking intercession courses (which in the CSU system cost on average twice as much as regular session courses). The reduction of student learning to an efficiency calculus is nothing new and, by this point, an expected feature of the neoliberal university.

In the mid-20th century, philosopher and social scientist C. Wright Mills envisioned academic work as a *craft*, that is, as intellectual craftsmanship to act as a guiding value for intellectuals, academics, and teachers within the 1950s context of an emergent white-collar class and its corporatization of social structures—that is to say, at the beginning of the neoliberal order. Dis-

cussing the realities of mid-twentieth century labor and class stratification, Mills gave an idea of what craft might be, which I have adapted for present-day knowledge laborers: 1) the hope of good intellectual work, and pleasure in that work; 2) the connection of the worker to the work, that is, control over one's intellectual work; 3) control over time and method of pursuing one's intellectual labor; 4) developing one's intellect as a means of developing one's self; 5) the connection of work and play; and 6) because one's work is *meaningful* to the self (not because it's required or necessary), work is a fully integrated part of one's whole life.<sup>2</sup> Like Mills, I use *intellectual craftsmanship* as a *value*, or in John Dewey's language, as an *end-in-view*,<sup>3</sup> to evaluate both the current experience of being a university professor and to critique the institutions that constrain and enable that experience. A second look at Mills' value proposition serves as a deepening critique of our own work within universities and as a possible loadstone for a changed pedagogy and shared governance of universities. If Mills' theory was opposed to the labor order of his day, how much more so against the neoliberal university.

### MILLS' POST-WAR SOCIAL ORDER AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NEOLIBERALISM

By the 1950s, social stratification, the organization of the flow of inequality and power, had changed dramatically within the United States. A process that had begun in the late 19th century with the rise of the modern corporation had come to fruition in the 1950s, changing the social order of the nation. In "On Knowledge and Power," Mills argued that society had so dramatically transformed during that period that our old ways of thinking about society and, importantly, about democracy no longer worked. Indeed, Mills argued that liberalism had already collapsed intellectually by the 1950s, despite remaining rhetorically ascendant in the political order. "As a proclamation of ideals, classic liberalism, like classical socialism, remains part of the secular tradition of the West. As a *theory* of society, liberalism has become irrelevant, and, in its optative way, misleading, for no revision of liberalism as a theory of the mechanics of modern social change has overcome the trademark of the

nineteenth century that is stamped upon its basic assumptions.” The “political vocabulary” of liberalism has been “stretched beyond any usefulness” precisely because it no longer describes the actual social conditions we are living in.<sup>4</sup>

As Mills argues in *White Collar*, the middle classes were the location of the most thoroughgoing transformation, having moved and expanded from the old middle classes—property-based and entrepreneurial—to the new middle classes—salary-based, white-collar employees. This transformation in the meaning of “middle class” disrupted the previous status system; status could no longer be located firmly in possession of property, as the middle classes had come to be defined by their occupations. Consequently, as one of the primary means of distributing social power, a status located in one’s occupation came to be inextricably connected to one’s education, which, by the 1950s, had become the qualification necessary for obtaining a white collar job.<sup>5</sup> This leads to what Mills calls *status panic*, where social prestige had become highly unstable and precarious, tied as it was to the vicissitudes of the job market and the quality and worth of one’s educational accreditations, and where *recognition* of those bona fides was never guaranteed.<sup>6</sup>

If education had traditionally been seen as the key to effective and full participation in the public sphere, over an approximately 70-year period, it had become the key to middle-class status. In “Mass Society and Liberal Education,” Mills argues that the classical liberal ideal of a “community of publics,” where educated citizens deliberate, debate, and cooperate to solve collective problems in face-to-face interaction, had not only disappeared, but also had been rendered impossible, as the *public* had been transformed into *the mass*.<sup>7</sup> Massification had been studied and theorized in various ways before Mills (most notably by the Frankfurt School), but Mills’ reading of his historical moment offers a particularly salient critique of education. Mills argues that the *mass* are, by definition, receivers of opinion generated and distributed in a mass-produced media environment; individuals within the mass *choose among opinions* presented to them by the media without the possibility of answering back in any meaningful, deliberative, dialogic, or indeed, public way.<sup>8</sup> By definition, in a mass, there are far fewer opinion givers than the mass of receivers,

with *publics* transformed into *media markets*.<sup>9</sup> Problematically, we still use the term “public” as if it has any meaning or relevance to the way we function in a massified society, where “‘the public’ is [now] composed of the unidentified and non-partisan in the world of defined and partisan interests. It is socially composed of well-educated, salaried professionals, especially college professors; of non-unionized employees, especially white-collar people, along with non-employing, self-employed professions and small businessmen. ... What the public stands for, accordingly, is often a vagueness of policy (called open-mindedness), a lack of involvement in public affairs (known as reasonableness), and a professional disinterest (often known as tolerance).”<sup>10</sup>

It is within this massified society, with the possibility of real democratic publics almost completely eclipsed, that Mills sees our modern educational conundrums. Recently, David Labaree has traced the history of the transformation both of the *public* value of education and of the *social and economic* value of education, arguing that the latter has taken over the ways that we talk about, reform, organize, and structure educational systems and institutions nationwide.<sup>11</sup> Further, Wendy Brown has given a thorough description of the ways that human capital theory has been deployed to restructure the very meaning of higher education from within our current neoliberal order.<sup>12</sup> As a social scientist, I prefer a parsimonious usage of the label “neoliberalism,” to denote the structures of late capital and post-Fordist production, and particularly the ways that rationalization (i.e., efficiency calculus and quantification of human economic behavior) has been intensified and expanded into every aspect of the economy, including education, which is now thoroughly imbricated within the *economic order* as the source of white collar qualifications.<sup>13</sup> Historically, there is little, or indeed anything, new or different about neoliberalism from the Fordist, pre-World War II industrial- and finance-capital social organization. Rather, neoliberalism is best seen as the *intensification of rationalization*, including the bureaucratization of human relationships and the reduction of human personality to social roles within the production regime.<sup>14</sup>

SOCIAL ORDER, PERSONALITIES,  
AND THE EDUCATIONAL SPHERE

Importantly, Mills and sociologist Hans Gerth created a meticulous theory of the connection between social structure and individual personality in *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions*.<sup>15</sup> Their work focuses our attention on what kind of person—characteristics, personalities, perhaps what today we would call subjectivities—are created by this social system of the *mass*, characterized by individuals playing out white-collar roles and suffering from an ongoing and irremediable *status panic*. For us, the question becomes what role is education playing in this process? Much historical and critical work has been done about education as a kind of training, a form of social control, at least as early as Aristotle, and perhaps most famously in the Marxist tradition, Althusser's ideological state apparatus. For their part, Gerth and Mills argue that education constitutes one of the *social spheres* that cut across institutional orders as systems of social behavior. Education, then, is a set of social practices that, in a complex urban, mass society, are necessary helps for individuals adjusting themselves into political, kinship, economic, military, and religious orders.<sup>16</sup>

These social orders and social spheres work together to channel and shape individuals into their social roles, which in turn demand that the individual be (or become) a certain kind of person in order to carry out their roles—this is what Gerth and Mills term *personalities*. Social roles are interconnected in such a way that you can identify a person's social role through the corresponding *personality type*, by understanding the role that the person must occupy. Javier Treviño describes this as the *psychic structure* created by the social structure; that is, the social basis for the character structure of the individual.<sup>17</sup>

If we combine what I've covered so far, we have a detailed description of the *social and psychic effect of the educational sphere* on society and social stratification. First, the social structure consists of a sort of feedback loop, where the very social structure that demands education and occupation for status simultaneously renders status unstable and ambivalent, creating the status panic that can only be assuaged through meeting the terms the social structure sets

out. Status is a promise always unfulfilled in the new middle classes, thereby ensuring that people will continually seek to stabilize their status through education and occupation. Second, education creates individuals whose personalities match their social roles across various social orders, creating characteristics within the individual that allow the individual to fit into their social slot within the rational order. Finally and perhaps most importantly, Gerth and Mills argue that an individual's social role and status can be identified through their *vocabularies of motives*; that is, the language of values they use to describe their function and place within the social structure. These motives are historical and flexible, changing with the various social orders that produce their concomitant social roles, and individuals adapt accordingly.

#### VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVES WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL SPHERE

From Mills' theory, I would argue that the *motives* of both professors and students generally fall into three basic categories: job qualification, status panic, and idealized counter-values. Both professors and students come into the classroom already imbricated in and implicated by the social stratification system before any kind of teaching or learning occurs. These three motive vocabularies, indicative of the current and aspirational social roles of both student and professor, produce and are produced by the concomitant educational practices in the interactional moments of teaching and learning.

Professors are themselves part of the white-collar middle classes, marked by their qualifications; in other words, the professorial *personality* emerges within the system, having already gone through the education process itself, and now participating in the social sphere that produces new members of the economic social order. Students come to the university classroom either aspiring to enter the white-collar middle classes or to replicate the position of their parents. This is no shock to anyone who teaches in higher education, as the motives of students are clearly and constantly articulated in a multitude of ways in and out of the classroom, and supported by administrative and even

legislative means. Students' status panic is clear in their motives to gain the occupational qualification; whereas professors' status panic may be hidden by our idealized counter-values. But a real and forthbearing value, I would argue, must make professorial status panic explicit, in order to counter it. If Mills is correct in *White Collar*, the status of the professor depends almost entirely on the recognition of his or her qualifications to be a professor. This recognition can be denied at all social levels—by students, by administrators, by baristas, by colleagues and peers, by neighbors, by political opponents and candidates, by family, etc. This creates a motive vocabulary based on, implicitly or explicitly, status panic, which shapes teaching, service, and scholarship around acquiring and maintaining an always threatened, always unstable and fleeting recognition. So professors share role and status motive vocabularies with their students, albeit from different positions in their biographies.

However, no social sphere is a clean break from the past. Educational roles also often produce motive vocabularies that echo older educational values, notably the idea that education can be the proving ground for democratic citizenship and membership in the democratic public. A second echo can be heard in Mills' observation that: "Everyone seriously concerned with teaching complains that most students do not know how to do independent work. They do not know how to read, they do not know how to take notes, they do not know how to set up a problem, nor how to research it. In short, they do not know how to work intellectually."<sup>18</sup> Here, education is valued as a training in and practice of a certain kind of knowledge production. This is what Mills called intellectual craftsmanship, where the intellectual skills of the academic are ends-in-themselves—that is, valuable in themselves—and where they become means for challenging and disrupting the social order. Intellectual craftsmanship, that is, as a process of individually guided and controlled creative work, can potentially function as a particular kind of intervention into the waning (if they still exist at all) democratic publics. Notice the ways that Mills layers values in a Deweyan mode: intellectual craftsmanship is both an end-in-view and an end-in-itself at the same time, depending on the role it is playing in context.

## CHEERFUL ROBOTS VS. CRAFTSMANSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the effects of education, if not one of its explicit goals, is to create compliant and flexible participants in the economic social order. For Mills, these *cheerful robots*<sup>19</sup> make compliance itself a *style of life*, a way of *being* in a fully rationalized social structure. There is a deep psychic split between the compliant lifestyle and the status panic, both inherent in the rationalized system, even within Mills' own theory of education: both professors and students are simultaneously cheerful and panicked. For example, students are panicked as they lack the credential promised by a university degree; but they are also cheerful, lacking as yet the skills and self-awareness to know they are panicked. Recalling the two prominent echoes of older values in our vocabularies of motive, we find in our panicked cheerful robots that the lack of scholarly skills and knowledge, of learning itself, is secondary and un(der)valued; and if we follow Mills' way of thinking, preparation for democratic citizenship is already irrelevant in a world structured around the mass distribution of rarefied opinions.

Mills insists, however, on the cheerful-panicked contradiction, making it explicit in his theory in two important ways. First, Mills theorizes a means for professors to pass on their scholarly skills in a dialogic manner, not through rote instruction, nor systematic methodologies; rather, Mills argues, scholars should talk to students openly about *how* they do what they do, from beginning to end, and should do so in dialogue with other scholars also talking about how they do what they do.<sup>20</sup> This dialogue among scholars, inviting students to participate, talk back, and try out their own ways of knowledge-making flew in the face of formal, discipline-based methodology education of the time, and treated knowledge-making as a kind of *craft*. Indeed, Mills would eventually reject the social scientific construction of both Grand Theory and Methodology in his highly influential *The Sociological Imagination*, wherein he humanizes social scientific inquiry by insisting on accounting for the *biography* of the scholar and his subjects and the specific *history and context* of the phenomenon the scholar is studying.<sup>21</sup> For Mills, both theory and method are

quite simply “clarity of conception and ingenuity of procedure” making a scholar into a “self-conscious thinker, a man [sic] ready to work and aware of the assumptions and implications of every step he will take as he tries to find out the character and the meaning of the reality he is working on.”<sup>22</sup> Such self-consciousness becomes the ground out of which the craftsman-scholar can build useful contextual knowledge, which should be shared with students in a self-aware, dialogic manner.

Second, Mills’ idea of liberal education within a college setting maintains the possibility of constantly foregrounding the values that motivate us, putting teacher and students into constant contact with intellectual difference, real dialogue, and conflict with the social order. This stands in contrast to students and professors as cheerful robots. Like all those who are cheerful within the social order, they tend to segregate themselves based on their opinions and, I would argue, the aesthetics they choose from mass media or, conversely, that match their existing social role. “They do not, accordingly, experience genuine clash of viewpoint or issue,” which they consider unpleasant.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, “they are so sunk in the routines of their milieux that they do not transcend, even in discussion, much less by action, these more or less narrow milieux. They do not gain a view of the structure of their society and of their role within it.” Such robots can only interact with each other in terms of received stereotypes and unconscious prejudices, that is, within a mass-produced “pseudo world.”<sup>24</sup> Such robots have “no projects of [their] own; [they] fulfill the routines that exist.”<sup>25</sup>

Academics were one group of people Mills considered just enough outside the system to maintain a steady critique of the social structure and, significantly, to awaken students to their own positions and roles within that structure. Professors’ own status panic, then, could lead us in one of two directions: either to submit to the social order, bow our heads, and become the cheerful robots it demands; or to make the educational sphere, particularly the educational potential of the college classroom, a renewed context of democratic politics. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills imagines an intellectual process very familiar to those who have studied Dewey, where threats to cherished

values or issues or problems that arouse the student's and/or scholar's questioning become research *problems*. In the book's concluding chapter, "On Politics," Mills resurrects the very liberal concepts that he had already pronounced irrelevant, particularly freedom and justice, and places them in an ongoing chain of knowledge, where intellectual craftsmanship engages consciously with history, as a link in the historical chain, emphasizing human agency and the ability to create the history they are living.<sup>26</sup> Mills' theory of a politicized intellectual craftsmanship is complex and socially grounded. For my purposes here, I will summarize by saying that Mills acknowledges the organizations and flows of power within a rationalized, corporate, massified social order, but that he hopes intellectuals *might* have the ability to consciously enter and disrupt those flows of power.

Our neoliberal economic order creates a divided professorial personality, one that is at once implicated in and part of the social structure, as an agent of the educational sphere and as a white-collar employee, but also as a potential agent of disruption and change. If correct, the divided professor creates a divided classroom, where the relationship with students is marked by both the professor's own cheerful panic and, potentially, the professor's craftsmanship, which can lay bare and undermine the system creating passive, yet perpetually uneasy, subjects. Teaching becomes self-consciously and purposefully political. And all of the above is cut through by both the possibility that pedagogy and knowledge-making can be a *craft* rather than an occupation. I would extend this beyond the classroom to both our scholarly work and our administrative and committee work, and I would insist that this potential is wasted when we are unthinking, cheerful robots.

#### THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM, MILLS' VISION, AND THE BINDS OF THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

In "Mass Society and Liberal Education," Mills sees a truly liberal college classroom as one in which a different kind of personality is encouraged to grow—a personality that can resist and withstand the social roles that

university education channels both student and teacher into. “Its first and continuing task,” he wrote, “is to help produce the disciplined and informed mind that cannot be overwhelmed ... by the burdens of modern life.”<sup>27</sup> This can be accomplished by using the fact that our students are already adults when they come to us, capable of seeing and thinking about larger social problems and structures. This allows us to help students turn their “personal troubles and concerns” into “rationally open problems” that can be explored, studied, critiqued, and potentially solved.<sup>28</sup> In turn, this classroom project might resist massification and conditionally reconstitute a democratic, liberal public.

If neoliberalism is indeed an intensification of rationalization, and if higher education has come under the purview of the intensely rationalized neoliberal order, then the professoriate is subject to the same limits of occupation as those of all the other cheerful-yet-panicked robots. At this point, the neoliberal university is close to fully realized, where ends and means are bureaucratically controlled and assessed, with built-in incentives for compliance, and where statistical goals and evaluations of the learning process foreclose the possibility of professor and student engaging together in a crafts-like relationship of knowledge-making. Each of the six characteristics of the craft are either strongly discouraged or punished in the classroom, and often even in scholarship. There is a separation of the *product of intellectual labor* and the worker, the professor, where classroom content, pedagogy, even topics of research are constrained by outside forces. Both scholarship and pedagogy are now channeled through outside rationalities relating to status within the institution such as tenure and promotion requirements and procedures, which also soothe status panic at academic conferences and through publication. Both are tied to regimes of efficiency in the classroom. It was already doubtful in 1959 whether or not Mills’ vision of intellectual craftsmanship was even “in view” enough to be an “end.” Now, in our late neoliberal historical moment, students still come to us with occupational and status concerns, as they did in the 1950s, but are now often completely oblivious to any of the older value motives for education, and have been trained for nearly 20 years in how to function within an educational order structured by efficiency calculus. And so I balk at the notion

that we have the potential for the kind of transformative, resistant pedagogy and scholarship that Mills set out as a normative principle for higher education. At the risk of being overly pessimistic, in a university context in which everyone, from the state legislature, to the system Chancellor, to the University Provost, to the Dean, to the students themselves, structures their relationships to, practices within, and evaluations of their education on efficiency grounds, it becomes nearly impossible to imagine an education that can possibly disrupt, speak back to, and resist the neoliberal economic order through the creation of temporary publics and awakened robots in the classroom.

---

1 See “The Mission of the California State University,” <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu/Pages/mission.aspx>.

2 C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, [1951] 2002), 220-3.

3 See John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* [1939] in *The Later Works, 1925–1953: Volume 13: 1938–1939*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).

4 C. Wright Mills, “On Knowledge and Power” [1954], in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Kindle edition, loc. 1640.

5 Although the timeline of this transformation could be questioned, sociologists were remarking on this in the 1950s, and historically linking it to the transformation of both the high school in the early 20th century and the late-19th century evolution of professional schools and post-graduate degrees.

6 Mills, *White Collar*, 240, 254-8.

7 C. Wright Mills, “Mass Society and Liberal Education” [1954], in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Kindle edition.

8 *Ibid.*, loc. 1377.

9 *Ibid.*, loc. 1390.

10 Ibid., loc. 1415-22.

11 David F. Labaree, "Consuming the Public School," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4: 381-94.

12 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Boston: Zone Books, 2015).

13 For a detailed history and analysis of the social conditions of late capitalism and the rise of neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

14 The foundational work of Max Weber remains as relevant today as when it was published. Max Weber, "Bureaucracy" [1925], in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

15 Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Character and Social Structure: The Psychology of Social Institutions* [1954] (New York: Mariner Books, 1964).

16 Gerth and Mills had identified these orders as salient to American social stratification of the 1950s; we might have a conversation about whether or not these are still the salient social orders functioning in the early 21st century. In addition to education, there are three other social spheres: symbolic, technological, and status, each of which cut across the social orders, structuring and connecting them.

17 A. Javier Treviño, *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills* (Los Angeles: Sage Books, 2012), 48.

18 C. Wright Mills, "On Intellectual Craftsmanship" [1952], in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Kindle edition, loc. 539.

19 Mills, *White Collar*, 234.

20 See Mills, "On Intellectual Craftsmanship."

21 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition [1959] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

22 Mills, "On Intellectual Craftsmanship," loc. 559.

23 Mills, "Mass Society and Liberal Education," loc. 1494.

24 Ibid., loc. 1502.

25 Ibid., loc. 1509.

26 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 179-81.

27 Mills, "Mass Society and Liberal Education," loc. 1522.

28 Ibid., loc. 1530.