

WHITE COLLAR REDUX

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WORK AND THE NEWER MIDDLE CLASSES

ONE OF MY ROOMMATES works at a small marketing company in mid-town Manhattan, while the other works at a popular retail clothing outlet on the Upper West Side. Both are university educated and in their early twenties. The director of marketing is on salary and, though she usually works 9-5, Monday to Friday, she sometimes works weekends; the retailer, an aspiring playwright in her spare time, is paid by the hour, but exactly when and how often she works is left to the employer, making it necessary to supplement her income (and craft) by tutoring kids in an after school program. The former has limited health insurance through her employer and the other has none. Neither of them has a pension plan nor any job security: if laid off they have no recourse for action, no severance package, and poor options for obtaining work thereafter. In an age of diminishing expectations for work, this reality is taken as a given, or at least that is how they and other twenty-something “white-collar” people frame the problem, if indeed they consider it a problem at all.

More than 50 years after it was first published and three years after being reissued to a post-9/11 world, C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951/2002) is still the most important book to be found on the subject of white-collar labor and politics and the standard by which we might address the foregoing concerns. In fact, this itself is something of a concern and suggests a real failure on the part of sociology to keep pace with the changes that affect white-collar people. The conclusion of this essay calls for a return to the type of multi-disciplined approach employed by Mills in his original study, even as we might effectively move beyond his analysis and consider new trends. The first part, however, demonstrates how *White Collar* speaks to the present state of things. In the second part of the essay, I focus on aspects of white-collar work that Mills did not anticipate or adequately address, namely, the decline of labor unions and the complicated relationship between would-be white-collar workers and the unions that would give them an alternative to the predicament many of them face.

Mills’s book begins as a history lesson on the rise of the large corporation and the subsequent transformation of the old middle classes, a period covering

the early 19th century up until the 1920s and 1930s. As Mills explains it, the centralization of property rights in the hands of a few against the many was marked by a shift from democratic to class property: "Democratic property, which the owner himself works, has given way to class property, which others are hired to work and manage. Rather than a condition of the owner's work, class property is a condition of his not having to work" (Mills 1951/2002: 14). On the consequences for labor, Mills adds: "The centralization of property has thus ended the union of property and work as a basis of man's essential freedom, and the severance of the individual from an independent means of livelihood has changed the basis of his life-plan and the psychological rhythm of that planning" (ibid.). Thus, small businessmen and free professionals who once worked for themselves and their families were turned into dependent managers, salaried professionals, sales people, and office clerks who worked for others. In addition, formerly independent farmers working mortgage-free land were influenced by competition to sell to big business with the choice to work the same land for wages or begin a new line of work.

By 1940, the old middle classes of small businessmen, free professionals, and independent farmers represented 20% of the labor force, down from 33% in 1870, and the new middle classes of managers, salaried professionals, sales people, and clerks made up 25%, up from 6% in 1870 (Mills 1951/2002: 63). The prime reason for the growth in the latter group and a decline in the former was the bureaucratization of big business, a necessary component to its expansion into other spheres and consolidation of smaller businesses into one "impersonal monopoly" (ibid: 21). To Mills the "proletarianization" of white-collar labor was imminent. As he argued then, white-collar people may perform mental rather than physical labor in offices and showrooms, not to mention dress neatly and tidily, but these distinctions masked another fact. In a matter of a few decades, many white-collar jobs, specialized and routinized, providing workers little to no autonomy, were not so discernable from those found on the shop room floor of the assembly line, plant, or mill.

In recent statistics, 60.4% of the U.S. labor force is white-collar, including 34.9% in management, professional, and related occupations and 25.5% in sales and office occupations, which totals approximately 84 million out of nearly 140 million workers (U.S. Department of Labor 2004). This number embodies Mills's typology of white-collar people, but the comparison requires further explanation. Mills observed a present, and imagined a future, in which "fewer individuals manipulate things, more handle people

and symbols” (Mills 1951/2002: 65). Writing in the midst of the dot.com boom of the 1990s, Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio (1994) elaborate the point for a new generation: “Today, knowledge rather than traditional skill is the main productive force” (14). That means the introduction of “new” professionals like graphic designers, web designers, and other information technology personnel to go along with the professionals that made up a significant part of Mills’s definition of white-collar people. As described in Andrew Ross’s *No Collar* (2003), a book written at the downturn of the boom, they are typically tee-shirt-wearing, young hipsters looking for workplaces that will fuel their creative energies. Such environments, in this case, Razorfish, the company that serves as the focus for Ross’s study, can be just as fickle as their employees, laying them off by the thousands if and when the bottom line is not met. In this way, Ross’s book deserves more than a passing reference, for it is a modern day tale that perfectly captures Mills’s critique of power in respect to the new middle classes: profits, not people, matter.

If “no collar” described work of the 1990s, “any collar,” as in any collar will do, might best describe current prospects for work. It used to be that the new middle classes of the 1940s and 1950s, even with little in the way of decision-making power in the workplace, could decide in what workplace to spend their time and for how long, but that is hardly the case anymore. Education, once a likely step to upward mobility, does not improve the situation. The undergraduate of science, law, or education, instead of their profession, may in all likelihood find a job working retail or answering phones behind a desk. In fact, as Eduardo Porter and Greg Winter report in a May 30, 2004 article in *The New York Times*, “The days are long gone when a college graduate could expect to go to work for a paternalistic employer and spend an entire career there, with a generous set of benefits and a comfortable pension upon retirement.” And to those already in the labor force, security and benefit packages are easily rescinded by corporations that “downsize” or collapse altogether. The advantages in pay are also likely a thing of the past. Many white-collar people, including old and new professionals alike, earn no more than their blue collar counterparts and work as many hours depending on the job.

Mills maintained that “on a nation-wide basis, the majority of even the lower white-collar employees — office workers and salespeople — enjoy middling prestige” (Mills 1951/2002: 73). However, the factors upon which this statement was based, among them, type of work, consumption habits, and educational level, are not necessarily the privilege of white-collar people

anymore. Now with a majority of the entire labor force white-collar the prestige attached to most of these jobs is negligible. The proliferation of credit cards and the relative ease which banks, retail stores, oil companies, and other institutions grant credit, means that virtually anyone can purchase whatever products they desire. In the case of education, the issue is somewhat more complicated. While it is true that more people are graduating from high school and enrolling at college or university, many of the white-collar jobs available do not demand a high level of expertise. That access to education has increased and only then because it is a necessity in this credential society, diminishes its value as an indicator of prestige. In fact, the only legitimate claim for prestige of any kind may lie not in what kind of job white-collar people have but that they have a job at all.

Not all white-collar jobs are the same, a point that becomes abundantly clear along with technological changes in the workplace. For Mills, technology was the vehicle for bureaucratization. The office, in particular, was of interest to Mills, as it was there that machines first confronted administrative and clerical staff in a way that could be said familiar to what was long the case in blue collar labor. He studied the transition of the single-room office managed by the small businessman and his secretary who recorded every action on a form into an office that resembled an “enormous file” organized by multiple persons fulfilling different roles in multiple rooms. The interest in this development, however, was not in the size of the operation that unfolded, but the type. The assembly line had come to the office, turning it into what Mills called a “symbol factory” (Mills 1951/2002: 189). An “army of clerks” organized information, drafted reports, and interacted with clients (ibid: 192). The office was optimized for maximum supervision in the way it was designed to separate workers and keep them on task. Some work was eliminated and the rest was simplified. As the prevalence of machines increased, the less chance there was for the clerks to understand the whole operation to which they were apart. Over time, the office staff became estranged from one another, as well as the owners and managers they never met.

The “enormous file” that once represented the office now sits on a memory key the size of a thumb-print, office clerks man machine-automated phone and email message centers, and managers monitor surveillance cameras and keystroke counters that record the productivity and movement of workers. The office that Mills envisioned as a modern day equivalent to the 19th century factory is now just that, what with the impending persuasion of information technology looming as much in the foreground as in the

background. The effect is that machines displace scores of white-collar administrative personnel and clerks. This is not anything new, of course, and neither was it to Mills who accepted estimates that “at least 80 per cent of office jobs can be mechanized” (1951/2002: 193). Invisible was how Mills described white-collar people, though he used the term in a figurative sense; we may well use it in a real one. In this respect, at least, the cover for the new edition of *White Collar*, featuring a neat, but empty, shirt and tie is an appropriate representation of the American white-collar worker.

But machines are just one force white-collar people have to negotiate in the new work environment. Mills’s analysis did not have to consider the ramifications of globalization and outsourcing. As an article in *USA Today* from August 5, 2003 reported, “Almost any professional job that can be done long-distance is suddenly up for grabs.” Everything from technical support, information administration, and office oversight can be done in a country far removed from the one in which a company is ostensibly based. The potential for work the world over is a good opportunity for progress and in the right hands offers better global distribution of jobs. But outsourcing used to punish white-collar workers at home and then again to exploit further workers abroad rejects this possibility out of hand, while inciting nativist and protectionist rhetoric from the left and right that borders on racism. As it stands, white-collar people in America must compete for jobs with people halfway around the world willing to work for much less and under worse conditions than American labor standards will rightly allow. It is not a competition that they can win over the long run without the help of unions to instill regulatory policies to ensure fair and safe labor practices for everyone, and not just white-collar Americans.

Those that organize files and answer phones or, more likely, push buttons so that machines can do these things for them, are but one segment of the white-collar population affected by technology. The old and new professional strata are also affected, though in different ways. Whereas technology for administrative personnel and office clerks can mean less work or sometimes no work at all, for these white-collar people it can mean the exact opposite. For them, the struggle for the working day is now a struggle for the working life. Business executives, doctors, lawyers, and other white-collar workers in web and graphics design and information technology face tremendous demands, not in spite of the progress of technology but because of it. Technology encourages what Jill Andresky Fraser (2001) in her study *White Collar Sweatshop* calls, “job spill,” the overlap of work into leisure time that is an unsaid expectation. Laptop computers, mobile phones, and

other handheld devices all equipped with wireless internet technology make work possible anywhere, anytime, adding a new twist on a tired cliché, no rest for the weary: today, there is no rest for the wireless.

Many salaried professionals, notably, those in financial management and services, report overwork as a factor inhibiting quality of life. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (1999), no group reports more instances of stress than white-collar people. The standard of overwork combined with the need to prove oneself in order to keep a job contribute to these results and unwittingly promote burnout, a fact not historically linked to white-collar work but that has developed as a common experience. Raising a family, particularly for women, as Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003) shows in *Second Shift*, is an added burden. If a recent study reported by the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (2004) is true, the white-collar workers Mills called “cheerful robots” are anything but happy compared to blue collar workers who claim to have less stress, greater happiness, and better health. Mills was correct in asserting that neither “the compulsion to relieve anxiety by working hard” (Mills 1951/2002: 230) nor spending money on “the machinery of amusement” (ibid: 258) is fulfilling.

In the introduction to *White Collar*, Mills referred to white-collar people in the following way: “Like political eunuchs, they themselves are without potency and without enthusiasm for the urgent political clash” (1951/2002: xviii). By the end, Mills settled on calling them “rearguarders,” and by this he meant that events happened to them rather than their having an impact on events (ibid: 353). He reached this judgment by virtue of their apparent acquiescence to the interests of big business. Still, he was suspect of theories of consciousness that suggested people would band together against the corporation and government if only they were made aware of the transgressions of each. Even as he attributed apathy and indifference to blind conformity, he also thought such feelings were not without cause, as if there was some element of consciousness to the false consciousness of white-collar people. “Political indifference,” Mills argued, “does not necessarily involve a collapse of political expectation... Nor is political indifference necessarily irrational” (ibid: 327). In this way, his conception of political indifference was dynamic, involving an appreciation for the effects of mass media, historical context, and the structure of political institutions. He accepted that political indifference served utilitarian ends, in which white-collar people traded allegiance to the status quo in exchange for occupation, salary, and prestige.

Mills saw the apprehension on the part of white-collar people to organize in

defense of themselves as a failure of intellectuals, unions, and political parties to entice them along the path of enlightened resistance. While that may have been true for the time, some trends of late demand at least a reassessment of that analysis. He thought of white-collar people as the rear-guard, always a step behind, though happily trudging along. But today's white-collar workers, particularly, the new and aspiring professionals, make up a vanguard, but one of a different kind than the revolutionary one Mills wanted. At work, in the home, and on vacation, the white-collar workers of today are the same people Mills so aptly described years ago, save for one difference that sociologists have yet to fully grasp or even entertain: they know they are slaves to capital and somehow accept it. The decisions they make all but reinforce the status quo which, by immediate assessment, appears to be fine by them. Granting some exceptions, of course, they accept the conditions of work set down by their employers, accept the consequences of that work, and accept, finally, that there is nothing they can do about it.

As the state and corporation threaten to coalesce into one force, the one legitimizing the actions of the other, and together manipulate and control the lives of citizens, so white-collar people as citizens must feel empowered to organize. Yet only when white-collar people see directly that the traditional paths to success and prestige are thwarted, so that nothing they do can alter their position in the social hierarchy, does resistance in the form of union organizing enter their minds. In a few instances, white-collar unions are not viewed strictly as a means to fixed ends like status and pay, either, but are avenues to changing the course of their lives. No-collar game developers and graphic designers at Electronic Arts who work 80-100 hours a week are not after more money or promotion, but time away from work so that they can pursue personal and family relationships (Stross 2004). The hundreds of thousands of women employees at Wal-Mart who fought unlawful discretionary practices (and won) were after respect, as much as an affirmation of their case and the possibility of career advancement (Head 2004). Teachers in British Columbia, Canada, who voted to affiliate with the British Columbia Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress, although they were already part of a teachers federation, did so not because they wanted increases in salary, but in order to develop solidarity in response to perceived threats to democratic governance and the privatization of government services (British Columbia Teachers Federation 2003).

These attempts at resistance are worthy, but they are too often the exception and not the rule. The reluctance of white-collar people to join unions,

however, needs explanation. First, there are the deep-seated feelings and attitudes of some white-collar people towards unions. Obsessed with the present and none too interested in the distant future, few white-collar people engage in union activity unless provoked. Instead, they believe that the jobs they have today will be theirs tomorrow, regardless of stories that question this bit of common sense. Outside of administrative personnel, office clerks, and some members of the professional strata, like teachers — groups that offer obligatory union membership upon hiring — salaried professionals and free-lance workers in information technology services and other areas seem less interested in collective struggle than they are in appeals to rugged individualism. They seek independence from third party organizations like unions that would negotiate the details of work on their behalf. This is, of course, a recycling of the American Dream; yet the assumption that unions cannot but hinder the quest of achievement is indicative of a major reworking of its most trenchant assumptions. The union job of the past represented upward mobility, at least to blue collar people; for some white-collar people today, it is the obstacle.

There is certainly reason to question whether white-collar people want unions themselves, but it is equally valid to ask if unions want them, which is part of a larger question about the direction of the labor movement as a whole. Mills suggested unions were the answer to what ailed white-collar labor, and all of labor, generally. However, he might be surprised to learn that union membership, instead of increasing, as he predicted it would, has actually declined, to the point that just 12.5% of the labor force in the U.S. is unionized, down from roughly 35% in the 1950s and 1960s (U.S. Department of Labor 2005). The same study reports 36.4% of the public sector is unionized. By contrast, only 7.9% of the private sector is unionized, about half of what it was in 1983. If there is a silver lining, it is that over 6 million of those unionized are white-collar. The 6 million white-collar union members represents somewhat of a tipping point for union organization. After a long absence, the AFL-CIO (2003) argues, white-collar people are again interested in unions, once given up as the chief domain of blue collar labor. In its own study, the AFL-CIO admits that nearly half of its membership is white-collar, by all accounts a major accomplishment.

But any mention of a “Rising Tide,” the title given to the AFL-CIO’s study, must be held in check. Labor has always received criticism from those outside of it, Mills being one of many, but now it is receiving heavy criticism from members within, notably, Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Stern recognizes a need to reshape

the labor movement and laments that “big labor” does not share his view. In *The New York Times Magazine*, Stern is quoted as saying, “Our movement is going out of existence, and yet too many labor leaders go and shake their heads and say they’ll do something, and then they go back and do the same thing the next day” (Bai 2005). His argument is for fewer but stronger unions in the U.S., each aligned with a particular industry. These unions would, in turn, be connected to unions elsewhere in the world, making up an international labor movement to rival the global march of big business. The failure to implement his plan because it does not mesh with the old way of doing things is a major reason why he thinks unions are losing ground to multinational corporations who better understand the global — also referred to in the article as the Wal-Mart — economy.

An article by David Moberg in the March 14, 2005 edition of *The Nation* expands on the tensions precipitated by Stern’s proposals. As Moberg explains, there are many in the labor movement who will disagree with Stern and his designs on a revamped labor movement, and rightly so. To threaten to leave the AFL-CIO unless certain demands are met, as Stern and the SEIU have done, does not exactly engender good faith or a willingness to work through differences. Moreover, there is the viability of the plan presented by Stern. To model unions after the multinational corporations that threaten its very existence seems more than romantic. It says nothing of the likelihood that the unions in the framework of big business will become just as impersonal, exploitative, and coercive in its own efforts to “represent” the individual union member. By his own admission, though, Stern is being provocative, if only to shake the foundations of this establishment. The “lightning rods for sharp dispute,” as Moberg calls them, are deliberate, which is not to say that Stern is simply being rhetorical. He means what he says. On that score, we might applaud Stern’s efforts. For if anything in the near future is going to change it may well come at the expense of the ego and pride of the old guard. This does not guarantee, mind you, that the new guard will have all the answers, all the time. But it does mean an opening up of the conversation. “At least there is a debate,” argues Moberg. The debate, all will agree, is long overdue.

Aside from strategies to cope with a Wal-Mart economy emboldened by the wisdom of cost-cutting, outsourcing, and monopoly control of the market, labor will also have to talk about the attitudes of its incoming class. It remains to be seen what the labor movement will make of the next generation of workers and there is scant evidence that they have considered the topic at all, though there can be no doubt that the not far off future rests

on whether they do. Chances are these new workers, either entering college or just finishing, will hold down white-collar jobs, perhaps a number of such jobs over the course of their lives. The trouble, at least early in their careers, however, is finding just one job. Aronowitz and Difazio's "jobless future" is this generation's jobless present. In mid-2003, nearly 10% of young workers 18-30 years old were unemployed, double the national average for all workers (Boushey and Schmitt 2003). In March 2004, as reported in a briefing paper published by Dēmos titled, "Generation Broke," the number of unemployed college graduates was 1.17 million. The title of this paper points to another factor afflicting this generation: debt. Credit card debt for 25-34 year olds has jumped 55% between 1992 and 2001, to \$4,088. For those ages 18-24, the rise in credit card debt over the same period is up 104%, to an average of \$2,985. Moreover, the average college senior graduates with \$18,900, while the graduate student is left with \$45,900.

In spite of the dismal trend of no jobs, no money, and no security, this next generation of workers have ambitious plans for work that suggest strong affinity with the ideals of the labor movement. Called "twixters" in *Time*, 71% of 18-29 year olds surveyed consider job security essential in finding a job, 63% consider health benefits essential (though only 54% of them have insurance through their employers), 60% consider interesting work essential, and 56% consider a good salary essential (Grossman 2005). Further, they hold unions in high esteem, which is a blessing for a labor movement desperate for rejuvenation. A survey conducted by a research group for the AFL-CIO and reported in *The New York Times*, "found that 58 percent of young workers, those 18 to 34, would vote to be unionized if given the chance" (Ellin 2002). The numbers are promising but, again, only if the labor movement acts accordingly. First it will have to acquaint itself with this demographic, meaning that it will have to come up with new methods to entice a very temperamental and demanding group that some have argued are not quite ready to grow up. But grow up they must; the labor movement depends on it.

The ambivalence of white-collar people to unions, along with the decline of unions in general, makes for a particularly complex set of circumstances. The mix of young pro-union and rugged individualists is a challenge to the labor movement, not to mention a challenge to its legacy. However, it is also a challenge to social science research, which is where I want to leave off. For all the descriptions of white-collar labor and practices, sociology has few answers as to why, in spite of increasing threats to quality of life, tenuous job security in the midst of technological change, and little to no

benefits, some white-collar people reject unions outright while others embrace them. In the years since Mills passed by in 1962, sociology has splintered into so many areas as to make it difficult to get a full description of what is happening to white-collar people at the opening of the 21st century.

In order to attend to the present problems, which are peculiar to our time, Mills is an important starting point. In addition to his keen insights, he gives us a methodology for understanding the malaise associated with white-collar people. In an academic climate that turned intellectuals into technicians of specific areas of study, Mills was a generalist in the best sense of the term. His study of white-collar people is special in that it used a range of methods and theoretical precepts and reflected an incredible depth of understanding across multiple fields and disciplines: from art to literature, quantitative to qualitative analysis, psychology to sociology, philosophy to political science. Today, this sort of study is more difficult to construct, let alone define, than it was for Mills. Yet that does not detract from the necessity to accomplish it. Moreover, it cannot, that is, if we want to go further than Mills took us in the first place. A next step will be to develop a social theory of white-collar labor that attempts to understand the social and political forces that inform the decisions of the white-collar people that Mills had yet to encounter.

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