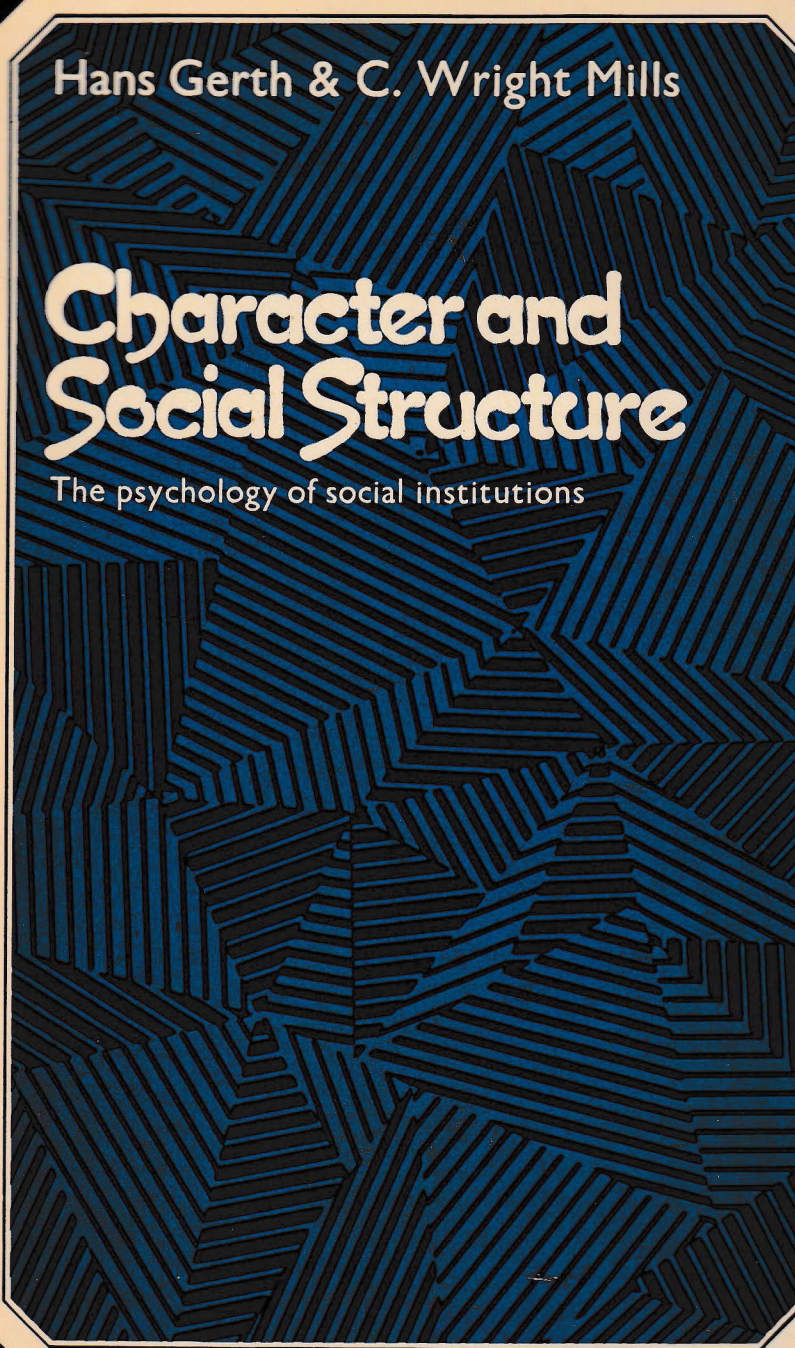


Hans Gerth & C. Wright Mills

Character and Social Structure

The psychology of social institutions



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Foreword

NEW findings and new ideas in a field of knowledge, especially when they come rapidly, generally produce numerous efforts to work out new theoretical formulations. Various perspectives develop, each differing in its view of the central problems of the field and the major conceptions that illuminate these problems. This is plainly the dynamic and hopeful condition of social psychology today.

Among this varied array of perspectives on social psychology, there is one which, while acknowledged to be important, has been greatly neglected in systematic expositions. This approach considers not only the psychological nature of social interaction but also, and primarily, the psychological nature of the major social institutions that constitute the historically significant forms of such interaction. It is the chief objective of this book to present a systematic statement of just this approach, one in which political, economic, military, religious, and kinship institutions, and their historical transformations, are connected with the character and personality, with the private as well as the public lives, of those living in the society. This book might therefore be described as an historically oriented psychology of social institutions.

Of late general works of social psychology have paid scant attention to the historical changes of social institutions. This has happened, it seems, not so much by design as by inadvertence: the emphasis—quite understandably—has been upon experiment, direct observation, and statistically controlled comparisons of behavior. This book should help restore the balance. Whether use of the book precedes, accompanies, or follows intensive study of the short-run present in the laboratory, field, and clinic, it should broaden the horizon of the student who generally comes into social psychology

either through the gateway of psychology or of sociology. It should help him cultivate his powers of observation and analysis to understand the behavior of men, not merely in small groups literally before his eyes, but also in relation to the larger institutional structure, with all its complexity and historical meaning. And the wide range of comparative materials included in this book should do much to curb any tendency on the part of the student toward the provincialism of thinking in terms only of his own society or his own time.

For all their emphasis on the shaping of character by the social structure, the authors avoid dogmatism. They refuse to be drawn into the position, rapidly grown archaic, of maintaining that *everything* about human conduct must be explained by the organization of social institutions, or of assuming that even differences in the native endowment of men must be denied as a fact in order to lend seeming support to the sociological approach as an idea. On occasion, the authors do examine, compactly and fairly, some of the theoretical controversies which have raged in the field—for example, the long-lived debate over the use of instinct as an explanatory concept. In this way a new generation of students becomes acquainted with these early victories of the mind and is kept from unwittingly resurrecting some of these controversies in the mistaken belief that they have come upon a genuine intellectual problem. As the authors remind us, such spurious problems are usually solved by being outgrown.

Any book with a theoretical focus must select its materials and problems in terms of that focus, and selection of course involves omissions as well as inclusions. Omissions, therefore, do not necessarily constitute defects. The important thing is to inquire whether an omission is the result of careless and faulty thinking or of a considered judgment that the material is not directly germane to the logical structure of the book. The omissions in this book are of the second kind. On some matters, treated at length in other books of social psychology, the authors maintain deliberate silence; on some matters, found not at all in other books, they expound at length. Thus, if they make only passing reference to the experiments on social factors in perception, to learning theory, or to recent studies of voting behavior, they pay close and systematic attention to the comparative psychology of political and military life, of religious institutions, social stratification, and business enterprise. And they make use of every species of social psychological data.

The authors lay no claim to having achieved a fully rounded synthesis which incorporates all the major conceptions of psychology and sociology that bear upon the formation of character and personality in the context of social structure. Such a goal, they make it clear, is still a distant objective rather than a currently possible achievement. Nevertheless, they have systematized a substantial part of the field and have provided perspectives from which to examine much of the rest.

But perhaps above all else this book has the merit of giving the reader a sense of the intellectual excitement that comes from using the trained imagination to study the psychological meaning of social structures. In the world of social psychology as we know it, this is no small accomplishment.

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