

Who is afraid of the Cheerful Robot?
Revisiting C. Wright Mills on Politics and Culture (1958)

Nicolas B. Verger

Centre for Possibility Studies
Dublin City University, Ireland

Vlad P. Glăveanu

Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract

Who is afraid of the Cheerful Robot? This question echoes through the lecture of Dr. C. Wright Mills who invited his 1958 audience to reflect upon the danger and hubris of science as an engine for societal annihilation. In this commentary, we start by discussing the fears pointed to by Mills, going back and forth between the canvas of his time and the landscape of ours. Then, we highlight the societal status quo that Mills denounced in his lecture and the related challenges of environmental exploitation, rampant consumerism, and technological development that demonstrates rationality without reason. Finally, we open a discussion about the sociological solutions outlined by Mills, reflecting on his ideas in view of our numerous contemporary crises and the role played by creativity in creating and in solving these challenges. This commentary, much as the original talk, is an invitation to change our practices, to cultivate our reflexivity, and to move towards an ethos of “Creative Preservation”.

Who is Afraid of the Cheerful Robot?

Wright Mills feared that technological development would lead to a technological hubris that would be responsible for societal tensions. He, like most of his contemporaries, was afraid of the escalation of the conflict between the two hegemonic powers of his era: the USA and the USSR. He feared the outbreak of a World War III due to the ongoing struggle for conquest and dangers of imperialism. Power, indeed, depends upon competition for a limited number of resources, and those who rush and exploit most of their ability to extract and use energy at high rate eventually win the race (Heinberg, 2021). From such a power race perspective, the Cold-War period was a fertile ground for geopolitical tensions sustained by a never-ending race for innovation and, ultimately, by human creativity. Technological development—the Cheerful Robot—can ultimately replace human reason and self-limitation with automated processes and machines. Technology, in fact, serves the competition for power (Wolfe, 2013). Mills feared that society would reach a state where the machines we build, lacking reflexivity and a sense of morality over their actions, would aim to attain ideological ends by all means. He feared the acceleration of technological tyranny. The parallels with today's questions concerning the need to regulate tech giants, the effects of social media, and the release of Generative AI.

At its core, therefore, Mills anticipated the consequences of going too far into the design of powerful weapons and automatised artefacts (Beinsteiner, 2020; Illich, 1973; Samerski, 2018). The danger, as he discussed, was to blindly embed those functionally creative and technically clear-cut products into a framework of bureaucratic procedures. A framework that valorises efficiency over morality. The trap was to believe that those new gadgets constitute a rightful index of Human Progress. This occurred as a dangerous prospect that valorises the “over-developed” countries of the Global North over those in the

Global south, a vast region that has been expropriated, exploited, and left behind by the system that colonises resources in the race for artefactual accumulation (Arendt, 1969; Fraser, 2023). This process is the bedrock for the Cheerful Robot—the prerequisite for the escalation of violence which Mills feared.

One cannot decouple the technocratic system denounced by Mills from the capitalist, consumerist, extractivist systems on which they depend. Mills criticised this system which he viewed as a permanently violent economy. This aspect has been more recently discussed by Nancy Fraser in her analysis of ‘Cannibal Capitalism’, an institutionalised, societal order that devours non-economic systems, extract resources, expropriate communities, and exploits labour production in the service of general capital accumulation (Fraser, 2023). Indeed, firms, industries, and nations, maintain a strong belief in the imperative of increasing their production of sold commodities each year—regardless of whether these are needed or not (Hickel, 2020; Hickel et al., 2022). This system, thus, consumes resources and generates waste. The result is a systemic ecological damage for which we acutely feel the consequences.

Compared to the under-developed societies of the 60’s (what we call, today, the “Global South”), over-developed societies have overcome the state of creating routines for ensuring their surviving, their minimum comfort, or any real struggle to accumulate. These are all everyday modes of functioning, wherein the individual is occupied with industrial and economical operations. They operate through the pursuit and maintenance of things as exchangeable commodities. As Mills put it, our society is heralds ‘leisure as fetish’.

Technological prowess has, indeed, freed humans from their needs. Now, they are enslaved by their wants (Kerschner et al., 2018; Vetter, 2018). This is the economy of replacement based on a servile society where objects and people are transient

commodities. Certainty, creativity plays a key role in keeping this system going. Capitalism and neoliberalism valorise (and, in fact, very much need the valorisation of) novelty as a pivotal selling argument (Fraser, 2023; Guilford, 1950; Sternberg, 1999; Sternberg & Lubart, 1996). New products need to be introduced to the market to keep the system fuelled with new commodities that need to be bought as they replace items that are now marketed as outdated. Innovation should always be a step ahead (Kline & Rosenberg, 2009). With the promise of contributing to societal advances, it encourages us to think “outside the box”, to sell new products inside the same box. In a world that looks down on the old and the outdated, creativity keeps the system up-to-date.

Mills denounces this endless and mindless act of creation and consumption. It enslaves humanity, echoing similar critiques formulated by Ivan Illich in his description of non-convivial tools (Illich, 1973). These are tools that enslave our free will and self-determination. Mills opposes this development to the extent that it contributes to maintaining our ‘technological idiocy’, rather than developing our ‘independent intelligence’. Today as well, we ignore most of the functioning of the technology we use, let alone how to repair them—after all, each year comes with novel and increasingly sophisticated technologies (Vetter, 2018). Mills criticised how this system is managed by a select technocratic few who hold the keys to worldwide decisions; a world in which industrial monopolies and oligopolies enjoy the highest concentration of power.

The result is an alienation and servitude caused by the meaningless gadgets that we create and that contribute essentially to a non-convivial society. Tools that drain our self-determination and needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), our needs for being, having, doing, and interacting (Max-Neef, 1989), which we can express in a creative way (Verger, 2024). Our bond with nature (that is to say, our bond with the

milieu that keeps us alive) has been cut and taken out by what Mills described as “the Science Machine”. That is, the private economy based upon commercialised technological advances; a system that maintains the ethos of non-caring and non-curating what it generates (Bales, 2012; Tanggaard & Wegener, 2016; Wegener & Aakjær, 2016). Creators, therefore, are necessary for keeping alive this system of ongoing commercialisation of marketed novelty.

There is, here, an important call to reflect on what our discipline has contributed in societal terms and continues to contribute. Creativity researchers in the West have, for the most part, been proponents of novelty and radical innovation. Guilford (1950) defended the positive view of creativity as a source for economic growth and self-emancipation. Individuals (but not groups or communities) strive to be deserving of the most prestigious positions—power positions—based upon the social recognition and valorisation of one’s ability and effort (He & Warren, 2020; Sandel, 2021). In doing so, Mills argues that humans have the impression that they freed themselves from Nature, which has always been considered as an external object by “Enlightened” Western civilisations. The promise of creative technology, his argument goes, is to reach our full potential, to contribute to the common goods through technological advancements.

Was it our fate? Mills asks. Was it our fate to reach a global state where humans create entities too powerful for them? Mills reminds us that our human society is the result of actions *beyond* individuals, but which nonetheless affect our individual lives. Fate is what one usually calls the ‘unintended results of actions by individuals that ultimately take us beyond individual control’—the current AI revolution testifies to this dynamic. This state is the outcome of a society that, for long and up to today, has valorised the ascendancy of

over-specialisation and reliance on the 'natural' sciences whose conclusions are implemented in a social world that inventors and engineers might not fully understand.

This is one facet of the historical attempt to go beyond Nature. But by ignoring the long-term effects of our creations, especially on the world we all inhabit, we have effectively contributed to a Promethean fate that escapes us, and, indeed, could only escape us. Mills criticises the servitude imposed by the hegemony of innovation under the banner of rationality exposing the fact that it is a 'rationality without reason'. A rationality that pushes us to use tools of mass destruction like nuclear weapons, or, closer to our time, artificial intelligence systems that we don't quite understand, but nonetheless extensively use (White & Lidskog, 2022). This reflects tools that are created in societies which increasingly fall prey to the platitudes of political passivity. Mills denounced what he calls a 'lack of initiative by the democratic mass'; a mass of individuals that forgot to dream and envision new possibilities for themselves.

Mills defended the need for imagination, as a means for empowering individuals, minorities and entire societies, equipping them with the hope and ability to make a difference in the world to their own and others' benefit.

This lecture reminds us that even if the democratic mass forgot to dream and envision new possibilities, the only way to change the status quo is to start by creating and exploring new possibilities from the ground up (Escobar, 2023; Glăveanu, 2023). Mills, in other words, valorised everyday creative insights and imagination to emancipate oneself out of technocratic tyranny.

Today, we see a need to advance towards post-growth societies to re-structure our relationships to the tools we create, or chose not to create (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Kallis et al., 2018). We see a need to understand further how tools and technologies contribute not

only to destruction and renewal, but also to preservation and transformation. We see a need to question the “social recognition” of creative outputs that contribute to the destruction of our ecological milieu – are they really “meaningful” or “effective”, as the standard definition posits (Runco & Jaeger, 2012)?

Can we think about ways to reconnect professional creation to practices of preservation? Here, preservation does not mean sustainability in a destructive ecosystem which paints green even those destructive actions that endanger it (Arici & Uysal, 2022; Ogbeibu et al., 2020; Saleh & Brem, 2023). Rather, preservation means “keeping what is” and also “caring for what matters”. With Wegener and Aakjær (2016), can we open up new imaginaries of the possible, to document practices of creation, and those mindsets, attitudes, orientations, and implicit theories associated with a logic of creative care?

A recent develop has started to address these questions through the concept of *Creative Preservation* (Verger et al., 2024). Rather than destroying resources for producing new artefacts, creative preservation occurs as a proposition to develop an ethos of care for waste and used material – a transformative outlook that makes us think, and enjoy thinking, about the continuity with what most would throw away (Bridgens et al., 2018; Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010; Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2023). Bringing back the notion of dignity in waste items, creative preservation proposes itself to redefine the relation between animate and inanimate, between objects and humans (Gallagher, 2004; Szawarski, 1986).

Rupture and disruption—hallmarks of our contemporary views on creativity and innovation—are what Mills denounced as technological violence. The same violence which Hannah Arendt defines as the discontinuity of processes (Arendt, 1969). Creative preservation, on the contrary, entails a logic of care and continuity for those same processes

for the design of convivial tools that could foster autonomy and contribute to building cohesive and sustainable societies (Verger, 2024; Verger et al. 2024).

To achieve this, we would need to discover new affordances in our tools, to explore what those tools we initially designed can further do and make do. Creative Preservation offers a time-lapse response to Mills's lecture. It proposes a framework to think about our practices and explorations of possibilities associated with our tools and technologies, with their old and new territories of usage. This direction may help us scale down consumerist and extractivist endeavours, addressing the pressing need for the development of renewable materials and circularity in economics (Hickel, 2020). Creative preservation thus entails the cultivation of creative attitudes that abandon the logic of perpetual economic growth in the service of resource intensive technological prowess, and the transformation of Nature into market value and capital. As Kallis et al. (2018) proposed, there is a need for a radical political and economic re-organisation, a creative revolution that is in line with our ecological milieu, and dignifies it. This includes a need for a reduction in consumerism and productivism to reach a state of reduced resource use.

These societal and environmental pressures, then and now, should encourage us, scientists, practitioners and policy-makers, to study and develop new conceptualisations of creativity focused on the preservation, renewal and reuse of old materials. This does not entail a creativity that shies away from facing major crises, but precisely an engaged creativity of care—for ourselves, for others, and for the world we share with other species (Verger, 2024). That is, a creativity that helps us re-appropriate our agency and diminish the dominant stance of the Cheerful Robot, the spectre Mills feared and that we effectively ended up creating.

References

- Arendt, H. (1969). Reflections on violence. *Journal of International Affairs*, 23(1), 1-35.
- Arici, H. E., & Uysal, M. (2022). Leadership, green innovation, and green creativity: A systematic review. *The Service Industries Journal*, 42(5-6), 280-320.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2021.1964482>
- Bales, K. (2012). *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy, Updated with a new preface*. University of California Press.
- Beghetto, R., & Kaufman, J. (2007). Toward a broader conception of creativity: A case for mini-c creativity. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 1, 73-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/1931-3896.1.2.73>
- Beinstein, A. (2020). Conviviality, the internet, and AI. Ivan Illich, Bernard Stiegler, and the question concerning information-technological self-limitation. *Open Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 131-142. <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2020-0013>
- Bridgens, B., Powell, M., Farmer, G., Walsh, C., Reed, E., Royapoor, M., Gosling, P., Hall, J., & Heidrich, O. (2018). Creative upcycling: Reconnecting people, materials and place through making. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 189, 145-154.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.03.317>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PbLI1104_01
- Duymedjian, R., & Rüling, C.-C. (2010). Towards a foundation of bricolage in organization and management theory. *Organization Studies*, 31(2), 133-151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609347051>

- Escobar, A. (2023). Welcome to possibility studies. *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1(1-2), 56-59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538699231171450>
- Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T., & Cosme, I. (2022). Exploring degrowth policy proposals: A systematic mapping with thematic synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 365, 132764. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132764>
- Fraser, N. (2023). *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet and what we can do about it*. Verso Books.
- Gallagher, A. (2004). Dignity and respect for dignity - Two key health professional values: Implications for nursing practice. *Nursing Ethics*, 11(6), 587-599. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0969733004ne744oa>
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2023). Possibility studies: A manifesto. *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1(1-2), 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538699221127580>
- Guilford, J. P. (1950). Creativity. *American Psychologist*, 5(9), 444-454. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0063487>
- He, B., & Warren, M. E. (2020). Can meritocracy replace democracy? A conceptual framework. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 46(9), 1093-1112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720948388>
- Heinberg, R. (2021). *Power: Limits and prospects for human survival*. New Society Publishers.
- Hickel, J. (2020). *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world*. Random House.
- Hickel, J., Kallis, G., Jackson, T., O'Neill, D. W., Schor, J. B., Steinberger, J. K., Victor, P. A., & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2022). Degrowth can work—Here's how science can help. *Nature*, 612(7940), 400-403. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-04412-x>
- Illich, I. (1973). *Tools for conviviality*. Marion Boyars.

- Kallis, G., Kostakis, V., Lange, S., Muraca, B., Paulson, S., & Schmelzer, M. (2018). Research on degrowth. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 43(1), 291-316.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025941>
- Kaufman, J. C., & Beghetto, R. A. (2009). Beyond big and little: The four C model of creativity. *Review of General Psychology*, 13(1), 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013688>
- Kaufman, J. C., & Glăveanu, V. P. (2023). The creativity ethos: A palette of benevolent processes and outcomes. *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1(3), 342-360.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/27538699231178154>
- Kerschner, C., Wächter, P., Nierling, L., & Ehlers, M.-H. (2018). Degrowth and technology: Towards feasible, viable, appropriate and convivial imaginaries. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 197, 1619-1636. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.07.147>
- Kline, S. J., & Rosenberg, N. (2009). An overview of innovation. In *Studies on Science and the Innovation Process* (p. 173-203). WORLD SCIENTIFIC.
https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814273596_0009
- Max-Neef, M. A. (1989). *Human scale development: Conception, application, and further reflections*. Apex Press
- Ogbeibu, S., Emelifeonwu, J., Senadjki, A., Gaskin, J., & Kaivo-oja, J. (2020). Technological turbulence and greening of team creativity, product innovation, and human resource management: Implications for sustainability. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 244, 118703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.118703>
- Runco, M., & Jaeger, G. (2012). The standard definition of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal - CREATIVITY RES J*, 24, 92-96.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2012.650092>

Saleh, R., & Brem, A. (2023). Creativity for sustainability: An integrative literature review.

Journal of Cleaner Production, 388, 135848.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.135848>

Samerski, S. (2018). Tools for degrowth? Ivan Illich's critique of technology revisited. *Journal*

of Cleaner Production, 197, 1637-1646.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.10.039>

Sandel, M. J. (2021). *The tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?* (1st edition). Penguin.

Sternberg, R. J. (1999). A propulsion model of types of creative contributions. *Review of*

General Psychology, 3(2), 83-100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.3.2.83>

Sternberg, R. J., & Lubart, T. I. (1996). Investing in creativity. *American Psychologist*, 51(7),

677-688. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.51.7.677>

Szawarski, Z. (1986). Dignity and responsibility. *Dialectics and Humanism*, 13, 2-3.

Tanggaard, L., & Wegener, C. (2016). Why novelty is overrated. *Journal of Education and*

Work, 29(6), 728-745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1040379>

Vetter, A. (2018). The matrix of convivial technology – Assessing technologies for degrowth.

Journal of Cleaner Production, 197, 1778-1786.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.195>

Verger, N. B. (2024). Transformational Creativity, Care, and the Common Good: Toward a Refined Definition?. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*.

Verger, NB, Duymedjian R., Wegener, C., Glăveanu, VP. (2024). Creative preservation

practices to decouple creativity from the hegemony of disruptive novelty. *Review of*

General Psychology, 28(3) 268–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10892680241256312>

Wegener, C., & Aakjær, M. K. (2016). Upcycling – A new perspective on waste in social innovation. *Journal of Comparative Social Work*, 11(2).
<https://www.ucviden.dk/en/publications/upcycling-a-new-perspective-on-waste-in-social-innovation>

White, J. M., & Lidskog, R. (2022). Ignorance and the regulation of artificial intelligence. *Journal of Risk Research*, 25(4), 488-500.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2021.1957985>

Wolfe, A. J. (2013). *Competing with the Soviets: Science, technology, and the state in cold war America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.