Free-Market Socialists
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Paul Lazarsfeld’s approach to market research, which he shared with many of his students and colleagues at Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR or “the Bureau”)—the organization that grew out of the Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored Office of Radio Research—merged the quantitative methods of empirical social research with the psychological approach of motivation research. Yet among survey researchers and opinion pollsters in the 1930s and 1940s, Lazarsfeld came to be associated with psychological methods and the concept of the “depth interview,” which created serious interest but also skepticism and confusion among many market researchers. Some of those in the field, such as Henry C. Link, flatly dismissed the research value of the depth interview as he understood it. Link, whom Lazarsfeld had dismissed as a “radical” behaviorist, was the director of the Psychological Corporation, where Lazarsfeld had found an environment inhospitable to his ideas as a Rockefeller fellow in the early 1930s. There was no proof, Link maintained, that the depth interview could actually do what its name implied: to “dig deeper” into the respondent’s mind than an ordinary interview could. Link argued that the claims of the method’s proponents—that it could reveal unconscious motivations through a probing interview—was incorrect, because probing only produced more rationalizations on the part of the respondent. The more immediate response, which the subject gave without thinking, was actually closer to the truth and further from rationalization, Link believed. Link would only credit the depth interview method with producing a greater quantity and variety of information—but not a greater quality of information, relative to the standard survey questions he used. The main problem was the interviewer himself, who could not be trusted not to taint the responses of the subject through sugges-
tion. In Link’s view, this was an entirely unscientific method, and the rigorous market researcher would be better off designing a questionnaire which could produce “depth” results through its specific wording and sequencing, which the interviewer would then be obligated to follow precisely. For this reason Link preferred the term informal (not “depth”) interview to refer to the unstructured format, which was useful only as a preliminary step; this was in contrast to the formal interview, which, he believed, could arrive at the same results that the proponents of the “depth” approach proclaimed. Moreover, Link argued, the formal interview was much more amenable to tabulation and quantification, and was therefore more useful as a tool of market research.1

Ever eager to bridge the divide between qualitative and quantitative forms of social research, Lazarsfeld entered the fray in an effort to quell the “controversy” over “detailed” or, as he preferred to call them, “open-ended” interviews—“OI” for short. Such interviews could last an hour or longer. The interviewer would be equipped with a set of ten or fifteen questions which the respondent would be invited to elaborate on; if the interviewee should prove to be reticent, the ques-

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1 Friedman, Birth of a Salesman, 236; Link, “Experiment,” 267–79.
tioner was instructed to “probe.” This kind of questioning differed from the “straight poll” question which only required the respondent to answer “Yes,” “No,” “Don’t know,” or to make a choice among a very small list of options. By establishing a rapport between the researcher and subject, the aim of the CI was to permit the subject to elaborate on a response with qualifications that may later prove to be fundamental to understanding his or her motivations. Lazarsfeld saw the CI as useful principally at an early stage of a study for collecting a variety of impressions and experiences which the researcher could then assemble into a “picture” of some more basic motivation that could be generalized beyond the individual. Lazarsfeld acknowledged that the procedure could be slow and expensive, and that it might best be used as a first step in the design of an “interlocking” system of poll questions which could, through the cross-tabulation of results by the researcher, bring to light a pattern of motivations. Such poll questions could be applied to a larger study and later be subjected to statistical analysis to determine the distribution of motivations among various populations. Ultimately, Lazarsfeld sought a resolution to the problem through a combination of methods.2

Researchers at the Bureau continued to practice various interview methods, and they came upon a technique they called the “focused interview,” which was developed by Herta Herzog and Patricia Kendall (Lazarsfeld’s second and third wives, respectively) while working on studies of daytime radio serials and broadcasts of quiz-show competitions.3 The focused interview was a kind of investigation in which respondents were subjected to questioning by a researcher in reference to a particular concrete situation or media stimulus to which they had been exposed—such as an advertisement, a radio program, or a pamphlet. In preparation for the interview, the researcher would perform a content analysis on that particular text; from that analysis, he or she would develop hypotheses regarding its meaning and potential effects. The interviewer would then fashion an interview guide that would set out the major areas of inquiry. The interview itself would focus on the subjective experience of respondents with reference to the pre-analyzed situation or text, against which the investigator would test the validity of his or her hypotheses. Having already performed a content analysis, the interviewer would be equipped to distinguish between objective facts and the subjective definitions or “private logics” of the respondent.

The method of the focused interview differed from the typical “depth” interview which often lacked reference to such specific subject matter and was thus

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more difficult for the interviewer to direct and interpret. The “nondirective” approach of the depth interview had some advantages over the more direct approach of the standard polling interview—which did not usually permit respondents to express themselves freely—but it often resulted in unproductive digressions that the focused interview, because of its attention to a particular text or situation, avoided. Ultimately, the depth which was sought in a focused interview referred to a researcher’s interpretation of the ways in which a respondent’s previous experiences and predispositions affected their particular response to the stimulus material. The qualitative material produced by a focused interview could either precede a statistical study as a source of hypotheses, or it could follow a statistical study as a means of interpretation; in either case, its ideal use was in conjunction with a quantitative survey.⁴

The techniques of market research had applications beyond contract work for corporate clients. In fact, Lazarsfeld was, by the early 1940s, a major authority in the related field of public opinion.⁵ Lazarsfeld’s “panel technique” of survey research, which had been developed at the Office of Radio Research and was prominently used for the People’s Choice voting study of the 1940 presidential election, was a method for measuring changes in public opinion and behavior over time that was “unique in the field of public opinion” when it was introduced. It could be used to equal effect by both political pollsters and market researchers, and it was one of the methodological means by which Lazarsfeld attempted to make market research “acceptable” to sociologists. The essence of the panel method was simple: rather than taking a new sample for each poll, researchers would use follow-up interviews with the same group of people in a representative sample. Lazarsfeld claimed that the panel method could improve statistical reliability even with a relatively small sample, and he argued that there were a number of other advantages to the method. In the course of repeated interviews, researchers could gather knowledge about the habits and “personal characteristics” of respondents, which could supplement basic demographic information to provide a more complete picture of significant market segments. For example, researchers could relate respondents’ opinions and behaviors to their tastes in leisure-time activities and the types of magazines to which they subscribed. In the study of propaganda, where the intent was to

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⁴ Merton and Kendall, “Focused Interview,” 541–57; later elaborated as Merton, Fiske, and Kendall, Focused Interview.

⁵ Lazarsfeld was so close to pollster George Gallup that the two made a friendly, if somewhat competitive, wager on the outcome of the 1944 presidential election. Lazarsfeld to Gallup, November 3, 1944, Rote Mappen, Biography II, Mappe 1/2, Paul F. Lazarsfeld Archiv, Institut für Soziologie, Universität Wien [hereafter, “PFL Vienna”].
measure the cumulative effects of a sustained media campaign, the panel method could isolate those individuals whose opinions were affected by the propaganda and those individuals who were resistant to it. In this way, even “slight tendencies” in public opinion could be detected. Furthermore, the method allowed researchers to differentiate between mutable and more fundamental, unchangeable traits and behaviors.6

The research methods of the Bureau, which combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to conduct and analyze its surveys and interviews, were summarized in Hans Zeisel’s *Say It With Figures*, a major work in social research methodology which would go through many editions. Lazarsfeld called it the “programmatic manifesto” of the Bureau’s work, and he saw it as representing the union of the psychological training—which he and Zeisel had received from the Bühlers at the Psychological Institute in Vienna—with the statistical methods of American social researchers. What interested Lazarsfeld and his Bureau colleagues was the problem of choice and the motivations that produced it; whether it occurred in the field of voting or buying was immaterial. Zeisel’s book demonstrated the ways that Bureau researchers used percentages, tables, indices, and other statistical methods to illuminate social behaviors and problems. They believed that quantification was a procedure which could be applied to any kind of data, including qualitative data concerning psychological phenomena. Although Zeisel did express some skepticism about the merits of motivation research, he laid out a similar procedure called *reason analysis*, which sought to transform “highly individual” reasons for decisions into “precise knowledge” about how people more generally make up their minds. This method, which he distinguished from the “depth” interview of motivation research, established causation through an interviewer’s cross-examination (a kind of *probing*) of a subject’s reasons for action; this was followed by the researcher’s cross-tabulation of responses to those questions. Statistical analysis began with *straight* tabulation, or the division of respondents into sub-groups on the basis of characteristics such as sex or economic status. The process of *cross* tabulation—whereby elements are juxtaposed on a multivariate table—could provide an *explanatory* function by demonstrating theretofore unknown correlations between variables.

The techniques developed in Lazarsfeld’s research bureaus would reveal

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their broader applications during the war years. The communications researcher Harold Lasswell—who would become known for his basic formulation of media studies, “Who says what to whom with what effects?”—wanted to study the impact of mass media content on public opinion, presuming that people could “harden” themselves against the effects of propaganda if they understood how it worked. These methods were mobilized by the US government, as in its Research Project on Totalitarian Communication, which greatly advanced the development of communications research. Laswell directed the government’s Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications, which studied enemy radio broadcasts and other mass media communications in foreign nations. Domestically, the US government studied native broadcasts from suspected subversives as well as the content of radio broadcasts and commentaries in domestic periodicals that were sponsored by the government.

Lazarsfeld, who had become a naturalized citizen of the US in 1943, worked during the war years as an occasional consultant for the Office of War Information. He used the Program Analyzer (discussed in Chapter 7) to study the effects of indoctrination films on American soldiers, and he also used the panel technique to study the effects of the US government’s war propaganda in mass magazines. He found among respondents a remarkable capacity to assimilate propaganda into existing systems of belief, which could produce the so-called “boomerang effect”: the reversal of propaganda to suit pre-existing prejudices. For example, an anti-Semitic respondent might interpret a pro-tolerance message as a license to express bigotry. Lazarsfeld advised that, in the interest of propaganda, mass media should be used in conjunction with social groups that exert influence through face-to-face contact, which had been a key finding from the People’s Choice study. The superfluity of mass media propaganda and advertising messages, finally, could lead Americans to become so skeptical that they may wonder if there was “anything left in which they can believe.”

Lazarsfeld advised that advertisers should be aware of the different media experiences of magazines versus newspapers, which were read by a broader range of socioeconomic groups. Magazines, even of the mass variety, were more specialized than newspapers, and because they were kept in the home for longer...
periods, they tended to advertise products that required long-range buying decisions. They also very often served as a kind of “extra-curricular” education for many people, particularly through their biographical sketches, the topic Leo Lowenthal had studied under Lazarsfeld’s direction. In general, educated people of a higher “cultural” level tended to prefer print to radio, and there was a larger percentage of these high-class individuals among readers of magazines than among readers of newspapers. A 1943 study of *Life* found that the photo-magazine clarified in pictures the abstract news of the week; it was an easy and enjoyable way for readers to get “culture.” The magazine was even aspirational for many, an expression of “better things,” believed to be read by a “higher class of people,” according to one respondent. But *Life*’s very large circulation justified it as worthy reading material: it had intrinsic value by virtue of being a mass publication.

Lazarsfeld and his researchers did studies for other major magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *American*, and *Time*. He made the case for a deeper analysis of audience characteristics, which “cut across” the traditional demographic categories of age, sex, and economic level. Other kinds of personality characteristics—such as an interest in politics or a belief that “a woman’s place is in the home”—were often more important to the advertiser looking for the right vehicle for their message. These categories were essential to the special medium of magazines, which were generally more specialized than other media: they paved the way for the segmentation of consumer markets. This kind of study required an understanding of *motivation*, which was, of course, one of Lazarsfeld’s main research interests.

Much of the communications research done at the Bureau was sponsored by the big mass magazines and commercial advertisers of the day. This “combination of commercial data and academic analysis” gave the Bureau its “characteristic imprint,” as Lazarsfeld said. He was proud of his “alliance” with Frank Stanton, a man from the communications industry as CBS research director and later president. Lazarsfeld did not believe in the sanctity of “pure research” that was not “contaminated by contact with applied problems and by the use of data which were collected for commercial purposes.” Rather, he was always looking and waiting for a new commercial contract that would allow him to pro-

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duce an interesting study, without which his Bureau would not exist. He scoffed at sociologists who insisted on only “basic” research, which rarely had the scope or raised the kinds of interesting social questions that inevitably arose in his commercial studies. Even Lazarsfeld’s major study of voting behavior, *The People’s Choice*, had been sponsored by *Life* magazine, which had secured the rights to publish the results after the 1940 election. Being director of a commercially-oriented research bureau at a university suited Lazarsfeld perfectly because, while he enjoyed bargaining and competition, he needed, psychologically, to be part of a bureaucracy, a secure institution. He enjoyed the competitive work that he had to do to get commercial contracts: giving speeches, publishing articles, and making pitches with his endless examples. At the same time, he demanded the safety of a stable organization. He had nothing against business, per se, but he could not handle the insecurity of being a free agent in the free market. “I was in the game of free enterprise, because I could go on getting contracts, making money, or occasionally or very often making deficits,” Lazarsfeld said. “I had the full game of the market, without personal risk, and also without the excessive rewards. I have always known that that was a very important part of my enjoying the directorship so much.” 12

Although it was not the path that Lazarsfeld would choose for himself, it was not long before many of the émigré market researchers who were trained at Lazarsfeld’s research centers began to enter the world of corporate market research. In 1943, for example, Zeisel and Herta Herzog joined the research department of the McCann-Erickson advertising agency, hired away for their expertise in radio research. One of the more enterprising, and controversial, of Lazarsfeld’s fellow émigré researchers was Ernest Dichter, who popularized the practice of motivation research—albeit with a Freudian twist and without Lazarsfeld’s methodological rigor—in the 1950s.

Some of Lazarsfeld’s colleagues in social research increasingly began to worry about the implications of their style of research and the ways in which it was being applied by commercial interests. Lazarsfeld’s chief sponsor at Columbia, Robert Lynd, tended to view the “whole world” as “an immoral conspiracy,” remembered Lazarsfeld. He began to feel “very uneasy” about the Bureau after the war due to its contracts with big corporations and media companies. Increasingly, Lynd developed a “critical socialist position” which led him to dislike the commercial ties of the Bureau. Lazarsfeld’s success actually worked against him

in the mind of Lynd, who always preferred underdogs because he believed that American society was morally inverted, so that success, according to prevalent values, was nothing more than a demonstration that “you are the wrong fellow.”

But while Lynd grew increasingly skeptical, he still remained generally—or at least officially—supportive. This would not be the case for another of Lazarsfeld’s colleagues, C. Wright Mills, whom Lazarsfeld had brought to Columbia, having heard that he was a “clever and initiative boy,” but who would become Lazarsfeld’s bitter enemy. The hostile feeling would become mutual. “Mills says we have to save the world,” said Lazarsfeld in an interview conducted only a few months before Mills’s death in 1962. Lazarsfeld said that Mills lived on his “leftist political engagement” and “the books he can sell on it,” but had “never done any decent piece of research.” “I find what Mills writes, you see, just ridiculous,” he said. Although Lazarsfeld agreed with Mills’s critiques of power, he found it to be “contemptible, disreputable, that he says it” because that was not the job of the sociologist, in his view. “Nothing he wrote had any respectability,” Lazarsfeld said. Lazarsfeld had very good reason to question Mill’s capacities as a social researcher. 13

Mills started out working part-time at the Bureau in 1944, and he would become full-time by 1945. He had been strongly supported by Daniel Bell, who was then a writer for the leftist “little magazines” of the New York Intellectuals, and who would later join Lazarsfeld on the sociology faculty at Columbia. Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, associate director of the Bureau, had even gone so far as to woo Mills by throwing “parties with pretty girls.” 14 Though Mills worried that he might be perceived as “selling out” at the Bureau, he nevertheless became engaged in the work. As a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Mills had studied under the German émigré sociologist Hans H. Gerth (himself a student of Karl Mannheim), who introduced him to the more structural approach that was typical of the Continental style of sociology. But Mills was also interested in the empirical techniques used at Lazarsfeld’s Bureau, which, he believed, could produce a better understanding of social stratification. 15

Lazarsfeld and Merton promptly sent Mills on a research trip to Decatur, Illinois to conduct a study funded by a magazine publisher, MacFadden, known for its pulpy True Story and other sensational titles. The study was meant to examine the extent of media influence and the role of personal influence and “opinion leaders” in affecting individuals’ decisions. Lazarsfeld had discovered

14 Horowitz, C. Wright Mills, 77.
15 Geary, “C. Wright Mills,” 141–47.
the importance of such “horizontal” influence in the *People’s Choice* study on the decision-making process of voters in the 1940 presidential election. He wanted to employ a method of “snowball sampling” to trace chains of influence by interviewing opinion leaders and their followers. MacFadden was interested in sponsoring the study partly because a previous Bureau study for *Time* magazine had shown that that magazine’s readers were only influential within their own horizontal social stratum. This was not at all the result that publisher Henry Luce had been seeking for his newsweekly, and the magazine attempted to suppress the study but had already agreed to let the Bureau publish it. (This was, for Lazarsfeld, evidence that the sponsor of the study could not pervert its results, and that his studies were free of any taint from their corporate sponsorship.) MacFadden believed that they could finance a study to prove the existence of “the influential low-class person,” likely a reader of their publications, who had previously been dismissed as irrelevant and certainly not an influential “opinion leader,” like the presumed reader of *Time.*

However, Mills—who would earn a reputation as something of a renegade academic—did not perfectly carry out Lazarsfeld’s carefully prescribed quantitative methodology for the study. Although Mills reported “fascinating material” to Lazarsfeld based on his interviews in Decatur, in Lazarsfeld’s view he “completely messed up” the sampling aspect and the questionnaire part of the study. Lazarsfeld had dreamed of a more sophisticated kind of *Middletown* study, or an update of the Marienthal study; it would be a “new era in social research where you would have both sampling and careful interviewing and then this more microscopic assessment of the community.” Although Mills had done a good job on the “Lyndian” aspect of the study—the qualitative interviews—he had “completely neglected” the technical, survey aspects of the study. In the view of the mathematically-minded, quantitative researcher Lazarsfeld, this was the most important part. “It became a miserable tussle because I couldn’t give in on wanting a decent sample,” Lazarsfeld recalled. Though he had wanted to do “chain interviewing” to trace personal influences, Mills completely failed to follow through with the procedure. Around 1946, Mills went to Reno to get a divorce, and he wrote to Lazarsfeld that he had dispensed completely with the tabulation machinery, which to him made “no sense,” and that he wished to stay in Reno for two months to write the manuscript without it. This so angered Lazarsfeld that he immediately dismissed Mills from the Bureau. Lazarsfeld was

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horrified at the idea of not delivering the study to the client, the publisher Mac- 
Fadden. Nevertheless, Mills’s contract dictated that he would remain on the so-
 ciology faculty for at least another year. 17

Despite this unpleasant beginning to their relationship, Mills was successful 
in persuading Lazarsfeld to establish a Labor Research Division, which Mills 
would lead while staying on in the sociology department at Columbia. He coex-
isted incongruously with Lazarsfeld, who observed Mills’s unorthodox style with 
a “mixture of respect, envy, resignation and interest.” Lazarsfeld would occasion-
ally visit Mills at his bohemian apartment in Greenwich Village, and even though 
there was tension—“do I hate him, does he hate me”—the two were able to share 
their work with each other and appreciate each other’s intellects. Mills suggested 
a number of books to Lazarsfeld that he had never read, and he also took a great 
interest in some of Lazarsfeld’s research on relating classical political theory to 
modern research, as well as a study on social-democratic planning in Norway, 
which he called “the most magnificent research on relating social research with a 
significant problem I have ever seen.” Lazarsfeld admired Mills for his sociologi-
cal ideas, which he found “utterly stimulating.” He also appreciated Mills’s knack 
for well articulating a “position of a modern leftist” that their ideological allies like 
Lynd had failed to produce. Lazarsfeld was surprised when, in 1948, Mills, appar-
ently feeling guilty about how the Decatur study had turned out and that he owed 
Lazarsfeld something, volunteered to do a Bureau study on Puerto Rico, which 
was successfully published in 1950 as The Puerto Rican Journey.

Nevertheless, Lazarsfeld found their respective styles so drastically different 
that it appeared to him to be a “mere historical accident” that he and Mills had 
ended up in the same department. Although he had always collaborated with 
people very different from him, and had indeed sought out such collaborations, 
the clash with Mills would become too much for him. Lazarsfeld was offended 
at some of Mills’s actions and his “exploitativeness,” ruthlessness, and irrespon-
sibility. Mills’s behavior made him “academically unacceptable” in the depart-
ment, and Lazarsfeld found him to be “utterly immoral and repulsive,” moti-
vated only by a “ruthless egotism.” He had “some episodes” with a few female 
staff members that “hurt him very much,” and he married one “who then ended 
in an insane asylum, so that certainly from my side contributed to the difficul-
ties,” said Lazarsfeld. Although he had a tenured position in the college, Mills 
“was never accepted” in the graduate department, and Lazarsfeld presided over 
a committee that issued a negative report on his performance and collegiality, 
deliberately blocking his career. “So in the end Mills was quite justified in feel-

17 Lazarsfeld, interview by Joan Gordon, COH, August 26, 1962, Rote Mappen, PFL Vienna.
ing that I persecuted him,” Lazarsfeld recalled. “I had made up my mind that he was utterly unfair.” Although Lazarsfeld felt that he may have been at times “too rigid” with Mills, since their conflict occurred at the peak of his commitment to quantification, he also deeply resented Mills’s using his popular writing as a “weapon” against him and the department. ¹⁸ Their conflict would become so legendary that it was even fictionalized in a 1959 novel called False Coin by Mills’s friend Harvey Swados. ¹⁹

Mills ended up using the interviews from the Decatur study, along with material from another Bureau study on “Everyday Life in America,” as the basis for his broad analysis of bureaucracy and social organization in the American middle classes, published in 1951 as White Collar. ²⁰ Lazarsfeld noted that the Bureau had paid for many of the interviews Mills used, most of which were done by staffers and graduate students, and he was “horrified by the irresponsibility” with which Mills had used the material. ²¹ The book was grand in its ambitions, tracing a great cultural and economic transformation from nineteenth-century individual craftsmanship to mid-twentieth-century corporate organization, but Mills’s polemical prose and shaky methodology did not win universal praise among sociologists. ²² Nevertheless, White Collar would become a classic of mid-century American sociology, establishing Mills as an important social critic, and Lazarsfeld would later reluctantly cite it positively for popularizing an idea of social stratification. ²³ Privately, however, Lazarsfeld was not impressed with the book, which he found to be impressionistic and ultimately “very dumb,” because Mills had mixed up interviews from a variety of respondents in very different social categories. In his mind, it was a poor analysis and bastardization of the Bureau-sponsored studies that had spawned it. But by the time it was published, Lazarsfeld had stopped paying attention to Mills. “Instead of debating or fighting it,” he recalled, “I just wrote him off. I made slowly at one point and then definitely up my mind: this is a man with whom you cannot live.” When Mills died, Lazarsfeld did not go to the funeral or write his wife;

¹⁸ Lazarsfeld to Mills, November 2, 1948, Blaue Mappen 38, Correspondence 1966–1976, mixed dates, Mappe 1/6, PFL Vienna. Lazarsfeld could not deny the popular impact of Mills’s book White Collar, and he uncritically referred to its findings in some published writings—see, for example, Barton and Lazarsfeld, “Some Functions,” 321–57. Geary, “C. Wright Mills,” 147; Lazarsfeld, interview by Joan Gordon, COH, August 26, 1962, Rote Mappen, PFL Vienna.

¹⁹ Horowitz, C. Wright Mills, 228. The character modeled on Lazarsfeld, Victor Vollbauch, is described as “a leading figure in a new kind of sociology apparently more interested in finding out new ways of measuring human behavior than in coming to conclusions about it.” Swados, False Coin, 8.

²⁰ Mills, White Collar; Geary, “C. Wright Mills,” 151.

²¹ Lazarsfeld, interview by Joan Gordon, COH, August 26, 1962, Rote Mappen, PFL Vienna.

²² Horowitz, C. Wright Mills, 227–53.

²³ Lazarsfeld, “A Sociologist Looks at Historians,” 56.
he simply refused to have anything to do with him. “That is to say,” he said, “I never regretted whatever harm I might have done.”

Lazarsfeld was ultimately able to salvage the material from the Decatur study. His analysis was published in 1955 as *Personal Influence*, which was truer to his original intentions for the project. It became the most successful book that the Bureau had ever published, selling some five hundred thousand copies each year. Historian Jean Converse has called it “a dogged effort by the Bureau to wrest social theory from market research.” The book, co-authored by Elihu Katz, who did an “outstanding piece of analysis” according to Lazarsfeld, emphasized the limits on the effective power of mass media, the messages of which were “refracted” by the “personal environment of the ultimate consumer.”

It was a seminal work that would establish the “limited effects” paradigm in communications studies; indeed, the sociologist and historian Todd Gitlin has called it the “founding document of an entire field of inquiry.” The study would depart from a prevalent style of media and communications studies that did not fully consider the social context in which messages were received, interpreted, and distributed. The presumption that media messages operated on a more direct stimulus-response mechanism would be retroactively referred to as the “hypodermic” model, and a challenge to such a model had the effect of ameliorating concerns about the absolute power of mass media. In the view of critics like Mills and Gitlin, however, the “administrative” approach to research practiced at the Bureau had become so entwined with its corporate and government backers that it was effectively neutered, incapable of executing a real social criticism that might consider longer-term influence. The Bureau’s strictly empirical approach may have eased Lazarsfeld’s way into the American social science scene relative to the critical theorists in Horkheimer’s circle, for example, but it would tarnish his standing among more radical scholars later on.

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26 Lazarsfeld, interview by Joan Gordon, COH, August 26, 1962, Rote Mappen, PFL Vienna.
29 Gitlin, “Media Sociology,” 205–53. Historian Neil Verma has a different view of the effect of Lazarsfeld’s style of research, which, he contends, did little to interrogate the producers of messages in the media of mass communications. He argues that Lazarsfeld’s empirical method reduced the listener to the passive position of a mere “container of opinions and allegiances.” Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 122. Jefferson Pooley has pointed out that the study’s findings were embraced because the “limited effects” model—which had been intended more as technical advice to would-be influencers—had the convenient effect of lending ideological support to an intellectual defense of American popular culture in the context of cold-war liberalism. Pooley, “Fifteen Pages,” 130–56.
By the time *Personal Influence* appeared, Mills’s relationship with Lazarsfeld was broken beyond repair, and neither made much effort to conceal his contempt for the other. The purist Mills was horrified that Daniel Bell had gone to work for a “capitalist” Luce publication, *Fortune*, and he famously eviscerated the quantitative sociology practiced by Lazarsfeld as “abstracted empiricism” in *The Sociological Imagination*, which was published in 1959. Six months before the book appeared, Mills shared the sections pertaining to Lazarsfeld with him to see whether he had any comments, yet at the same time he was absolutely unwilling to change a word. In the book, Mills argued that Lazarsfeld’s empirical method lacked the proper historical and structural framework through which to interpret its results, and that it could not address theoretical problems such as class and status consciousness. Empiricists could say nothing about society unless it had been through the “fine little mill” of “The Statistical Ritual,” which manipulated infinite facts as its raw materials. Lazarsfeld, whom Mills placed “among the more sophisticated” of the empirical practitioners, was still more interested in the philosophy of science than in the study of society itself. Because the empirical studies were so expensive, they usually had to be sponsored by some corporation or institution—certainly this was the case at the Bureau. The inherent interests of the client would, argued Mills, inevitably taint the study, and the researchers would necessarily assume the politics of their bureaucratic “chieftains.” Not only did this require the codification of procedures and the use of “technicians,” but—most problematically for Mills—it destroyed the practice of social science as an “autonomous” enterprise.

Yet Mills’s principled opposition to Lazarsfeld’s willingness to take commercial contracts for market research was not without its practical downsides, and it revealed his insensitivity to Lazarsfeld’s background. In Vienna, Lazarsfeld ran his research center with only a vague, unofficial university affiliation and without university funding, partly because his Jewish heritage precluded full status at the university. And while Mills dismissed Lazarsfeld as an employee of the sensational pulp magazine *True Story*, Mills’s refusal to take commercial work sometimes put him in awkward position. “Do you know anywhere I can get two or three thousand dollars for this summer and fall in order to continue my work,” wrote a desperate Mills to Lazarsfeld in 1959, after having been denied grants from government, foundations, and the university.

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31 Lazarsfeld, interview by Joan Gordon, COH, August 26, 1962, Rote Mappen, PFL Vienna.
The Mills drama was, however, atypical for the Bureau, which was governed more by methodology than by personality. From its inception, Lazarsfeld had seen the Bureau, like his other research institutes, as a kind of “Boy Scout affair” through which he could develop protégés through a program of practical training, whereupon he would “send them out into the world.” Lazarsfeld said that the Bureau was so “custom tailored” to his needs that it must have felt like a “straight-jacket” to everyone else involved. Though he remained constantly involved in its activities and would stay on as an associate director, Lazarsfeld relinquished the directorship of the Bureau to Kinsley Davis in 1948. The Bureau became somewhat less of an extension of Lazarsfeld’s personality, with a Board of Governors composed of “leading representatives of the social sciences” at Columbia. In 1951 it had a staff of roughly seventy-five research associates and assistants, typically younger scholars with advanced degrees as well as advanced graduate students, and it maintained four programs: Communications and Opinion Formation, Political Behavior, Comparative Urban Research, and the Sociology of the Professions. Lazarsfeld became the chair of the Department of Sociology, a position he believed would give him the leverage to convince the Columbia administration to provide more financial support for the Bureau. Along with Merton and Davis, he believed that the greater availability of government grants would allow them to “reduce drastically” the Bureau’s commercial studies. Indeed, the commercial work of the Bureau had begun to wane significantly by this time.

Lazarsfeld had begun to travel to Europe more frequently in the postwar years, participating in the reimportation of “American” quantitative methods that had actually originated in interwar Europe. He lectured in his beloved

Jonathan Sterne has pointed out the irony that Mills’s practice of “critical” sociology was only made possible by the tiresome “administrative” work—the empirical research—he did under Lazarsfeld’s direction at the Bureau. Sterne, “C. Wright Mills,” 65–94.

34 Lazarsfeld complained in 1951 that Davis was a “very bad director” of the Bureau and an “inefficient leader” of research. Lazarsfeld to Edmund de S. Brunner, May 16, 1951, Rote Mappen, about bureau II, PFL Vienna.


city of Paris in the summer of 1948, and in the fall he served as a visiting professor at the University of Oslo, where, for the first time, he said, he began to feel like an “American.” He lectured and worked to establish an institute of social research, which was old-hat for him by this point. He also got to know a socialist economist, Ragnar Frisch, a “great man,” according to Lazarsfeld. Frisch, an academic who became an economic planner for the Labour-party government in Norway, seemed to reinvigorate Lazarsfeld’s interest in socialist politics. He was fascinated by the fact that, in Scandinavian countries, stringent economic controls had evolved in harmonious coexistence with complete political freedom. “In America, we tend to assume that economic laissez-faire and political liberty go together,” Lazarsfeld later reported to an American audience. He called for the study of the “independent development” of the two principles. Before their falling out, Lazarsfeld would even admit to his nemesis, Mills—who was nevertheless an ally on the left—that he had been “quite seduced” by the policies of the Norwegian labour party. He even expressed sympathy for the idea of the “corporate state,” which, he said, had been an idea that was appealing to leftists when it was detached from its unfortunate “historical tie-up” with Italian fascism. At the same time, Lazarsfeld saw no reason why an “intelligent” capitalism could not become a stable system.

Lazarsfeld returned to Central Europe, too, visiting a devastated Frankfurt with Max Horkheimer in 1951. When he returned to his hometown of Vienna as a representative of the Ford Foundation with the mission of developing Austrian social research, he was disheartened to discover that the practice barely existed. But he was proud that his “Columbia group” had a nearly “legendary reputation” in social science circles abroad. Lazarsfeld also worked for a time in Santa Monica, California, where he was employed as a researcher for the RAND Corporation. There, he enjoyed socializing with the many European refugees who had made careers in Hollywood. He became

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38 Lazarsfeld to Stoughton Lynd, October 6, 1948, Blaue Mappen 18, Bio-2 (Biographie 1947–1960), Mappe 1/2, PFL Vienna.
39 Lazarsfeld, “Prognosis,” 487.
40 Lazarsfeld to Mills, November 2, 1948, Blaue Mappen 38, Correspondence 1966–1976, mixed dates, Mappe 1/6, PFL Vienna.
known in the US as a mass-media expert, and he testified before a Senate subcommittee in 1953 on whether TV crime and violence were causing juvenile delinquency. (He reported that more study was necessary to draw any firm conclusions.)

Lazarsfeld would solidify his academic credentials as chair of one of the top sociology departments and later as president of the American Sociological Association.

Yet, in 1954, in the midst of McCarthyism, Lazarsfeld became the subject of an investigation by the International Organizations Employees Loyalty Board, part of the US Civil Service Commission. His case came to the attention of the agency in the course of his attempt to get a security clearance required for a post with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Lazarsfeld expressed astonishment that even his close friend and colleague Samuel Stouffer, “an old Republican from Iowa,” had been, for a time, refused a security clearance on the basis of his association with certain “Harvard professors.”

Lazarsfeld was accused of actions and associations that created a “doubt” concerning his “loyalty” to the government of the US.

The charges against him, prefaced by the passive construction “it has been alleged,” were enumerated: he attended sessions of the American Writers Congress in 1943 at the University of California, Los Angeles, sponsored by the Hollywood Writers Mobilization, an organization with alleged communist ties; he appeared on a “free speech forum” with Earl Browder, a “former Communist Party functionary”; he spoke at a meeting of the Greenwich Club of the Communist Political Association in 1945; he canceled a summer teaching appointment at the University of California in 1950 in protest of a loyalty oath; he chaired a committee on radio for an organization charged with being a front for communist propaganda; and he discussed confidential information with an “unauthorized person” while employed by the Office of War Information in 1942. The Board also questioned Lazarsfeld about his association with his former wife Marie Jahoda, who was alleged to be an “adherent to Communist ideology,” and about his use of an alias, “Elias Smith.” The interrogatory concluded, bluntly: “Are you now or have you ever been a member of, or in any manner affiliated with the Communist Party, U. S. A.?” Lazarsfeld wrote, simply, “No.”

In fact, Lazarsfeld had invented the pseudonym “Elias Smith” while directing the Newark Research Center to disguise the fact that he had a very small staff and had to write many of the articles himself. He responded “no” to the question about using an alias on the questionnaire because he presumed that, in that context, it meant for political purposes. That was the response that got his case flagged by the FBI. Lazarsfeld was eventually able to resolve the situation and get his clearance, but the invasion into his personal affairs shocked him. “I’m sure they had a dossier on the naturalized,” he remembered. “I suppose my Socialist background was known.”

This unsettling experience motivated Lazarsfeld to conduct a study on the effect of McCarthyism on the American professoriate, which was ultimately published with co-author Wagner Thielens in 1958 as *The Academic Mind*. The results were first published in the journal *Social Problems*. The report was based on lengthy interviews with 2,451 university professors in social science disciplines from 165 colleges. The study found that these professors, who largely supported the Democratic Party, felt that congressmen and businessmen would give them a “low prestige” rating. The professors tended to be more liberal or “permissive” than the population at large, though they were not a group of “Communist sympathizers.” The more liberal the professor, the more apprehensive he or she was about anti-communist crusading in the “difficult years” of the early 1950s. Professors at “high quality” colleges felt particularly vulnerable, and most withdrew from the larger community during these years, refusing to give speeches or write in general magazines on controversial issues.

The study used mathematical considerations to analyze manifest data and derive a “latent” sentiment. Lazarsfeld called this “Latent Structure Analysis,” a mathematical technique he had developed to make sense of sociological findings by revealing the underlying social dimensions that had a probabilistic relationship to certain behaviors. The idea attracted great interest from social psychologists. Lazarsfeld wanted to develop “a direct line of logical continuity from qualitative classification to the most rigorous forms of measurement” in order to “express the statistics of living processes in numbers.” For Lazarsfeld, qualitative social research was the work of turning social and psychological

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50 Lazarsfeld and Thielens, *Academic Mind*.
conceptions into “measures or indices by which large numbers of individuals or larger social units can be characterized.” He sometimes referred to this as sub-
struction: the procedure of finding the “attribute space” in which a given system of characterological types belonged. The problem with qualitative data was not so much that it was murky; the problem was that it was super-abundant. The purpose of Lazarsfeld’s mathematical tools and indices was, therefore, to “re-
duce the multiplicity of the original information into a smaller number of di-
mensions” in order to make it meaningful.\(^{55}\) The raw material of Latent Struc-
ture Analysis was the manifest data produced by subjects in interviews—that is, their responses to questions that had been designed to reveal an underlying trait, e.g., ethnocentrism. The task of the researcher was to arrange the manifest data as a quantifiable, probabilistic expression of an underlying, unexpressed trait. It was a kind of mathematical psychoanalysis—a way to access an uncon-
scious, social disposition through objectively identifiable characteristics.\(^{56}\) “He used numbers in a humanistic way,” remembered Robert Merton.\(^{57}\)

Despite its official status as a research institute at Columbia University, the Bureau relied entirely on outside funding for its first ten years of existence. From 1951 until the Bureau's dissolution in 1977, the Bureau received some fi-
nancial support from the University, but it composed only a very small percent-
age of its total budget. In the 1940s, the Bureau received most of its funding from businesses and foundations, and some from non-profit organizations. But by 1952, the Bureau received only 17 percent of its outside funding from these sources and 82 percent from government. By 1956, government funding had dropped to 18 percent of the budget, and business and foundation support had risen to 24 and 51 percent, respectively. From that point on, however, business and foundation funding would dwindle, while funding from non-profit organi-
izations peaked at 32 percent in 1961 and slowly diminished to zero by 1974. Government funding, meanwhile, steadily increased from 1955 until it com-
posed nearly all the Bureau’s budget in 1974.\(^{58}\)

These shifting sources of funding changed the Bureau’s research priorities, so that its market studies would progressively diminish. But as the Bureau reached the end of the period of its most intensive commercial contract work, it

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did a series of large studies for Ford Motor Company in the mid and late 1950s. In many ways, these studies are representative of the commercial work of the Bureau after Lazarsfeld’s departure as director. The giant automaker enlisted the Bureau as it prepared to launch its new mid-priced car, the Edsel. Ford first commissioned the Bureau to undertake a series of studies of the US car market in 1955 as it planned to introduce another line of automobiles, tentatively called “car E,” in the “medium-price” field. Over the next several years, the Bureau’s Ford and Edsel studies would lead to a series of miscommunications and misinterpretations between Bureau researchers and Ford executives, and the Edsel would famously flop with American consumers when it appeared in the fall of 1957. The episode also involved a conflict among managers over methodology and the very direction of the Bureau. The quality and scientific integrity of its applied studies was crucial to all Bureau work; in fact, it was the only thing that justified its commercial research. Yet, as one Bureau manager complained, the Bureau’s commercial projects were disdained by academics and, at the same time, resented by the Bureau’s “downtown competitors”—commercial market research firms—whom it undercut in costs due to the cheap labor of its researchers, many of whom were graduate students in sociology. After the disappointing outcome of the Ford studies, the Bureau would increasingly disengage from commercial market research.

The Edsel episode occurred at a turning point for the Bureau and for applied social research more generally, and it indicated that the clients sponsoring market research were often more interested in appeasing superiors than in attaining true, usable results. In the view of many Bureau researchers, this tendency would contribute to the progressive devolution of market research methods in the 1960s and 1970s. Much later in his career, Robert Merton would lament the fact that the Bureau’s careful development of the *focused interview* method had been bastardized to become known as the “focus group” by the 1970s, which lacked the quantitative element that was essential to all Bureau work as a means of demonstrating the distribution of findings from qualitative studies. According to Merton, the “focus group” was being misused for “quick-and-easy claims” for the validity of research without the time, expense, knowledge, and skill required to verify the findings. The *focused interview* could be conducted either individually or in group settings, but its inventors were keenly aware of the prob-

59 “Social Stereotypes of Automobile Makes (Report #1),” report prepared for Special Products Division, Ford Motor Company, June 1956, box 125, BASR Archive.
lems which could arise from group interviews—such as a few dominant participants stifling the views of others, and a more-or-less permanent corps of professional respondents who were not representative of the wider population. This did not much concern contemporary market researchers who, to Merton’s dismay, were more interested in impressing clients (with two-way mirrors at focus-group meetings, for example) than in proving results scientifically.  

Lazarsfeld’s work began to move in a more institutional direction by the 1960s. With the support of the Ford Foundation, he would attempt to organize social research and market research in American business schools. The Foundation was eager to bring about a “liaison” between the behavioral sciences and the business schools, and Lazarsfeld was, by his own admission, “one of the few sociologists who since way back have worked in this borderline field and advocated its respectability.” He believed that the business community lacked properly trained researchers, while social scientists tended to avoid business subjects. He wanted to reform the case studies used by Harvard Business School to better incorporate the insights and concepts of social science. 

Lazarsfeld was more of an analyst than a partisan, but he observed the lack of class consciousness among the American working class and its failure to see business interests as basic antagonists, as was the case in Europe. But his engagement with the business community made him vulnerable to an attack by some radical student activists in the late 1960s as a “henchman of the capitalists.” Lazarsfeld had been invited to the Sorbonne in Paris for the 1967–1968 academic year, and in the spring he found himself “commuting between two revolutions” in Paris and at Columbia. He left Paris just before the general strike in May of 1968, only to return to Columbia to find it in “complete disorganiza-

64 Lazarsfeld, “Political Behavior,” 178.
tion.” He found the turmoil at Columbia to be merely nonsensical and disruptive, and he fled to Paris to “liquidate” his affairs there.  

Beyond his visiting professorships, Lazarsfeld had been aggressively courted by the University of Chicago, but he remained at Columbia until his retirement in 1969. Around that time he was invited by his son-in-law, Bernard Bailyn, to write a memoir for an anthology that would be called The Intellectual Migration. Lazarsfeld recounted his early experience in the US, and his essay was paired with an account of the same period by Theodor Adorno. He occasionally taught courses as a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research, and he became a University Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Merton would leave the Bureau in 1971. Lazarsfeld kept an office at Columbia and remained the chairman of the board of the Bureau. He commuted to Pittsburgh, where he was developing a degree program in applied sociology supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. He got involved in a study on the psychology of smoking sponsored by the tobacco giant Philip Morris, in which he remained explicitly “neutral” on the health dangers of smoking and the anti-smoking campaign.

Lazarsfeld maintained his affiliation with Pittsburgh until the time of his death from cancer on August 30, 1976. The Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia dissolved a year later, and its operations were incorporated into the new Center for the Social Sciences at Columbia. Toward the end of his life, La-
Lazarsfeld expressed some regret for not studying the “inside” or production-side of the communications industry. He lamented the state of communications research in 1973, noting that, because the television industry was so successful, it had lost all interest in sponsoring research. But, sociologist James S. Coleman noted at the time of his death, if “research in mass communications had a single father, it was Paul Lazarsfeld.” Indeed, his renown was such that he was recruited in his later years to revive the studies of daytime serials in television, for which he had become famous in the 1940s through his studies with Herzog. Lazarsfeld was always most interested in studying the effects of media, and his commercial work was just one part of his total research agenda. He remained concerned about the “cultural and social dangers” of commercial advertising. Lazarsfeld, to the end, maintained his commitment to social science and the development of research methods.

Conclusion

The synthesis of qualitative and quantitative techniques was essential to the research methods practiced at Paul Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. Among other techniques, the Bureau standardized the practice of “motivation” research, which had broad application beyond the sphere of academia in business, government, and in the war effort. The “panel” method, “reason analysis,” and the “focused” interview were among the Bureau techniques that eventually made their way into standard market research practices. Hans Zeisel provided the consummate statement of the Bureau’s methods in Say It With Figures, which would become a standard handbook for many social researchers.

From its founding by Lazarsfeld, the Bureau had used its commercial contract studies to develop and practice research methods, train graduate students, test ideas, and fund its operations. The results, which were always published,


72 Lazarsfeld to William McGuire, March 5, 1973, Blaue Mappen 38, Correspondence 1966–1976, mixed dates, Mappe 1/6, PFL Vienna. Lazarsfeld presumed that, given the rapidly changing role of women in the context of Second-Wave Feminism, the content of daytime serials, as well as their role in the lives of women, would be very different. Lazarsfeld to Phillips Davidson, October 5, 1973, Blaue Mappen 20, Bio-4, Mappe 4/4, PFL Vienna.

73 Lazarsfeld to S. Friedman, November 15, 1971, Blaue Mappen 20, Bio-4, Mappe 3/4, PFL Vienna.
were useful both to the client and the community of social researchers, who could apply the methods to any kind of study. However, the Bureau would retreat from market studies in the late 1950s, partly as a result of a disastrous job for the Ford Motor Company that many felt had damaged its reputation. The “failure” of the studies seemed to have demoralized Bureau researchers and led to the further diminishment of commercial market research on their part. Increasingly, market research would serve a function within corporate bureaucracies, but it would no longer have the kind of general applicability that had come from the Bureau’s published reports. Moreover, commercial practitioners did not always adhere to the strict methods of the Bureau and, for that reason, the scientific quality of market research would diminish by the late 1960s.

Part of the reason why the Bureau moved away from market studies was that such studies were looked down upon by many academic researchers. Increasingly, many sociologists, notably Robert Lynd and C. Wright Mills, grew to see the commercial studies as an unacceptable compromise that tainted what they viewed as the progressive purpose of social research. Mills would eviscerate Lazarsfeld as a compromised researcher in his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, but Lazarsfeld thought that Mills was a very bad, sloppy sociologist and a contemptible person. He could not deny, however, that he was a successful writer. Mills’s book, *White Collar*, which he had derived from a number of Bureau studies, would become part of the canon of midcentury sociological literature, and Mills himself would be hailed as a hero of the New Left. Despite his socialist past and commitment to social democracy, Lazarsfeld, at least in the view of a new generation of sociologists such as Todd Gitlin, would be denigrated as a sellout who served corporations at the expense of ordinary people.