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The Politics of Apolitical Culture. The CIA and the Congress of Cultural Freedom,

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The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Political Economy of American Hegemony 1945–1955

Giles Scott-Smith

London and New York: Routledge, 2001 | 233 pages

In 1966 and 1967 shocking revelations about CIA having coopted a number of cultural organizations, including the Congress for Cultural Freedom, made headlines in the American press. The Congress, an institution created and shaped by the political demands of the Cold War, had been founded in 1950 with the objective to defend cultural and intellectual freedom while solidifying and maintaining an anti-communist consensus amongst the Western intelligentsia. Many of the period's foremost intellectuals and artists directly collaborated with the CCF. The question that has been the main focus of attention for most of the books on the subject^[1] is the extent to which these artists and intellectuals were unsuspecting participants in the CIA's covert cultural operations or eager collaborators. Giles Scott-Smith, in his first book on the subject of the cultural cold war – *The Politics of Apolitical Culture*.

The Congress of Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-War American Hegemony – paints a rather more interesting and nuanced picture tracing political, cultural and ideological complexities largely neglected in other studies of the CCF.

Interpreted via the framework of hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, Scott-Smith traces the connections and influence of transnational, primarily trans-Atlantic social elites recovering in the process more or less hidden linkages between the political, economic and cultural-intellectual realms. The author moves beyond the popular argument regarding the instrumentalisation of culture and intellectuals by the CCF and focuses on the dynamic relation between the state and private institutions and individuals in order to unravel the processes through which CCF reached a rather coherent intellectual standpoint.

The obsolete category of 'traditional intellectuals'

The CCF was founded at a time when autonomous critical thinking appeared to be under threat by the forces of totalitarianism. Its objective was precisely to safeguard the identity of the traditional independent intelligentsia and yet, by doing so, as Scott Giles-Smith points out, it

contributed to the setting of 'boundaries of freedom' directly in line with the interests of American hegemony.

Scott-Smith argues alongside A. Showstack Sason who has pointed out that in response to the growing complexities of capitalism from the late nineteenth century onwards the state undertook new tasks in order to maintain social consent and to expand the forces of production. In the process civil society had to be radically transformed while "if traditional intellectuals wanted to maintain their influence, they had to change their way of working and become organizers." In the process, "they are "assimilated into the capitalist project as their old role [as traditional intellectuals] becomes anachronistic".^[2] The expansion of state activities combined with the voluntary organization of intellectuals led to their professionalization and standardization. Scott-Smith maintains that the CCF should be considered a prime example of this development.

The new power elite, trans-Atlantic networks and the state-private sector partnership

Following the war in Europe, communist parties in France and Italy and elsewhere routinely polled as high as thirty percent of the vote. Parties of the left were everywhere polling at all-time historic highs making the ruling elites in Europe as well as the USA extremely nervous. If the Cold War was not the major engine of the great postwar global economic boom, as Hobsbawm has argued,^[3] the recognition on the part of the United States that the rapid growth of their competitors was politically urgent led to massive economic assistance programs such as the Marshall Plan. Due to the fear of communism, American policy-makers did not merely focus on aggressive economic expansion, but took a longer view leading to almost three decades of unparalleled growth. In Hobsbawm's words: "The Golden Age of capitalism would have been impossible without this consensus that the economy of private enterprise ('free enterprise' was the preferred name) needed to be saved from itself to survive."^[4]

At home, as Scott-Smith explains in *The Politics of Apolitical Culture*, the European Recovery Program (ERP) was promoted with the help of the Committee for the Marshall Plan to Aid European Recovery (CMP) – a coalition of corporate and labor interests and a liberal elite closely linked to the internationalist foreign policy establishment – which included individuals such as Acheson, Allen Dulles, banker Winthrop Aldrich and Frank Altschul, General Electric president and chief executive officer Philip Reed and union leader David Dubinsky, to name only a few. In Europe the political and economic establishment alongside the European socialist parties aligned towards a form of welfare state-managed capitalism while breaking up in the process the wartime anti-fascist coalitions and excluding the communists from power. In Greece it would take a civil war and direct British and American military intervention.

The postwar efforts to export the American model and programmatically create civil societies as imaged at the headquarters of institutions like the Carnegie, Rockefeller or Ford Foundations, for instance, were apparently not always welcomed. The reimagining of Western civilization

according to the American consumerist model was met with great resistance, especially by the left intelligentsia. From William Blake, to Victor Hugo, Hegel and Baudelaire, who described America as "a great hunk of barbarism illuminated by gas," Europeans had traditionally sneered over a society that appeared to them as rootless, a-historical and deficient in the marks of sophistication and erudition.^[5] Skepticism, if not outright anti-Americanism in face of greater political and economic intervention was presenting the postwar program in Europe with great challenges that had to be dealt with. The projection of American values abroad while articulating in the process a culturally seamless Atlanticism called for a rather more systematic and aggressive cultural diplomacy.

At this point Scott-Smith turns to explain the role of the newly established CIA, trade unions and a number of organizations such as the Committee on United Europe (ACUE), the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE) or the Bilderberg Group which comprised of intelligence, big business personnel as well as top-level of government from the USA and Western Europe before turning to the founding of the Congress of Cultural Freedom. The belief that the manipulation of ideas and opinion was a vital aspect to the maintenance of order in capitalist democratic societies was becoming prevalent as Project TROY suggests. In 1950 at the State Department's request psychologists, information and communication researchers from Harvard and MIT drew up a plan to penetrate the Iron Curtain via various media, particularly radio, in order to undermine the Soviet Union from within. CIA would soon systematize those efforts with closely intertwined overt and covert operations undermining communist organizations and promoting moderate leftist social democratic movements, like in case of the Italian elections in 1948. An elite, often Ivy League educated network of 'enlightened liberals,' as Stewart Alsop a Washington journalist insider would profile the agency, would soon turn into "liberal advocates of hard anti-communism."^[6]

The CCF as counter-revolution?

Attended by leading intellectuals from the USA and Western Europe, including Karl Jaspers, John Dewey, Ignazio Silone, James Burnham, Arthur Koestler, Arthur Schlesinger, Raymond Aron, Melvin J. Lasky, Tennessee Williams and Sidney Hook, among many others the Congress of Cultural Freedom was established in June 1950 in Berlin, "the show window of the West behind the Iron Curtain." Two were its fundamental aspects, according to Scott-Smith; first, to represent postwar American and European intellectual interests and concerns as unified and second, to gather, institutionalize and organize the intellectual disillusionment with Soviet-led communism while giving it an identity and a role in the cold war struggle of ideas.

In the early years following the war the neglect of the cultural realm and the defense of cultural-intellectual values was a serious void in the American agenda for an Atlantic synthesis. By the late 1940s, however, it was becoming clear the need to foster a broad consensus in all areas of cultural and scientific activity that the very freedom to be an intellectual in the Western tradition

was now something that had to be openly and forcefully defended against the totalitarianism that Soviet Union represented. To stay outside this consensus would be a betrayal of the same intellectual-cultural tradition. Behind this lay the claim, implicit or not, that the space for this intellectual defense of freedom was being provided by American power while a European "Third Way" between American capitalism and Soviet communism, as argued by Sartre, was largely discredited. Yet, as Scott-Smith argues, an American hegemony had not only to protect the European cultural heritage but also to exhibit a certain cultural creativity for the new postwar society.

Great emphasis was placed on high-culture with the objective to challenge the Soviet bloc at a level on which it was understood to be most vulnerable – and in which the USA still had to prove itself – while targeting in the process the intellectual elites. Against a deep-seated fear of the masses amongst Europe's political, economic and intellectual elites the idea was, as Volker R. Berghahn argues in his book *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe*, to first sway intellectuals who would eventually draw in the rest of society. At its height the CCF published over twenty prestigious magazines, organized art exhibitions and high-profile international conferences, among other activities. High-culture was understood to be free of politics and divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian functions, a theoretical standpoint which though central it goes almost unaddressed in *The Politics of Apolitical*. Out of a vast array of programs and publications Scott-Smith chooses to briefly discuss *Preuves* and *Encounter*, two of the most influential magazines published in Paris and London respectively and what was called "The Festival of the Twentieth Century," a month-long agenda of orchestras, ballets, theatre, and literary events held in Paris in 1952, marking a turning point for the consolidation of the Congress.

Responses to the festival were mixed. Yet, the vision of its organizer Congress General Secretary Nicolas Nabokov to defend western culture against any form of totalitarianism appeared to appeal to the intellectuals invited. W.H. Auden would put it as follows: "Every revolution requires a counter-revolution which must be distinguished from reaction. The reactionary thinks that the revolution is not a revolution but a rebellion which can be crashed and the status quo reinstated. The counter-revolutionary realizes the essential point of this revolution and defends this revolution against its own excesses. Every revolution, if it was not betrayed, would wreck the world. Against excesses of concentration camps, our duty is to be counter-revolutionaries."^[7]

From anti-communism to the end of ideology

Francis Fukuyama's pronouncements of the inevitable triumph of liberal capitalist democracy and the 'end of history' – by which he meant that ideological evolution had come to an end with a confirmation of the inherent righteousness of laissez-faire economics and individual freedom, which democracy purportedly serves were long anticipated. Already in the 1950's the CCF was organizing a series of smaller scale seminars largely based on the belief that ideological

motivations had been exhausted and intellectual endeavors in the social and political sciences should be based on empirical and practical basis. The argument was that the political world had entered a new stage of development whereby distinctions between left and right were now meaningless. Leading intellectuals like H. Stuart Hughes, Daniel Bell, Seymour Lipset, Raymond Aron, and Edward Shils, who are discussed in the last chapter of the book, largely called for the end of the ideological age.

While capitalizing on the intellectual thought of the age the Congress of Cultural Freedom was able to give it shape, systematize and organize it into formal American policy, according to Scott-Smith's main argument. For the same reason its influence would wane in the 1960s, as a new wave of dissent would rise and a new political landscape would come into place. For as we are reminded in the end of the book, "cultural hegemony is not maintained mechanically or conspiratorially. A dominant culture is not a static 'superstructure' but a continual process. The boundaries of common-sense 'reality' are constantly shifting as the social structure changes shape."^[8]

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