

The Spy Who Funded Me: Revisiting the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) and its Connections to the CIA

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Final session of Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) at Funkturm, Berlin (Source: cia.gov)

*In 1950, a group of intellectuals founded an organization called the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) with the aim of consolidating an anti-totalitarian intellectual community around the globe. Suspicions about the CCF's origins are as old as the organization itself. At its first event, the eponymous Congress for Cultural Freedom held in West Berlin in 1950, **Gerhart Eisler** — then a member of the Volkskammer (people's chamber), later in charge of the East German communications commission — called the delegates (among them **Arthur Koestler**, **Ignazio Silone**, and **Sidney Hook**) “literary apes” and “American secret police.”*

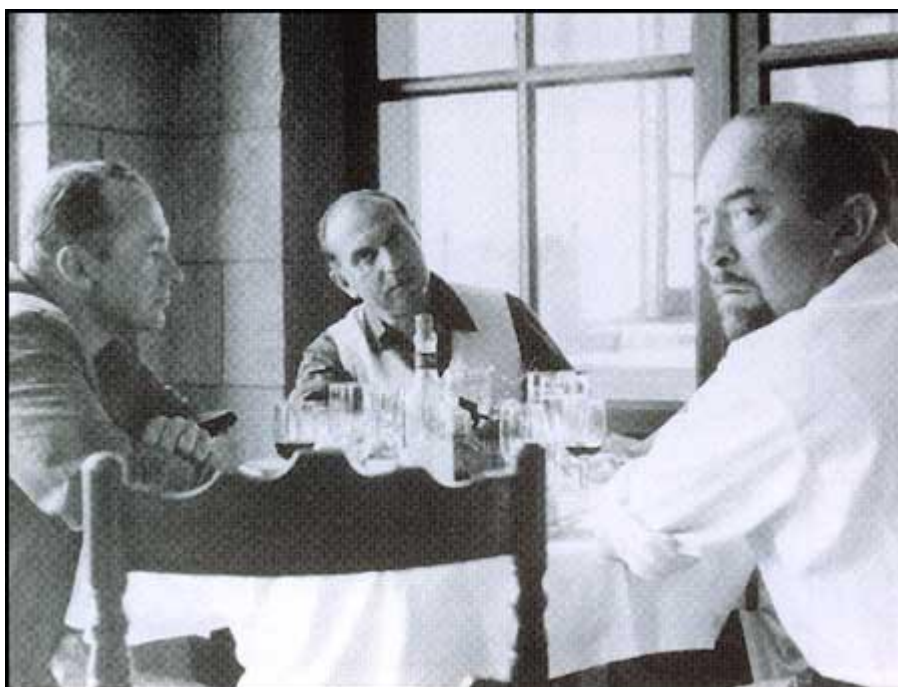
The CCF's connections with the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were definitively established 16 and 17 years later in reports by *The New York Times* and *Ramparts* magazine, respectively: the CIA, operating through a series of dummy foundations, had been instrumental in organizing and funding the CCF. Those revelations sparked new debates about the propriety of spy organizations sponsoring culture, which have waxed and waned in intensity ever since, but never fully disappeared.

One class of scholarship about the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the role of the CIA has been investigative and denunciatory; the other, analytic and skeptical. **Frances Stonor Saunders's** *Who Paid the Piper?* (1999) and **Joel Whitney's** more recent *Finks* (2015) belong to the former category: they argue that the CIA manipulated Cold War culture to the detriment of the global left. They understand the CIA as an instrument of the United States ruling class, and the CCF as its representative on the international intellectual field. But other scholars, without disputing the CCF's hegemonic intentions, are less sure about its actual impact. In his book *Cold War Modernists*, published in 2015, **Greg Barnhisel** found relatively little editorial interference by the CCF in the operations of its flagship English-language journal *Encounter*. **Hugh Wilford's** *The Mighty Wurlitzer* (2008) argues that even when the CIA tried to call the tune, it did not always get what it wanted. In my own book on the subject, *Neither Peace nor Freedom* (Harvard University Press, 2015), I argued that the CCF produced unexpected and contradictory effects in Latin America in its pursuit of intellectual hegemony, as when it helped **Fidel Castro** come to power in Cuba.

Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War, a new volume edited by **Giles Scott-Smith** and **Charlotte Lerg**, promises to go a fair way toward resolving these disparate views of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The CCF did all sorts of things: holding conferences and

concerts, subsidizing books and travel, even running a news service. But its core activity was to sponsor a large suite of magazines published on six continents, from Africa to Australia. *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War* brings together 15 examinations of CCF-affiliated journals, with each chapter written by an author with specific area or topic expertise. This permits the book to present a new level of detail about what the CCF's magazine projects published, how they interacted with CCF headquarters in Paris, and how they were received. Taken in combination, the chapters produce a somewhat contradictory picture. They suggest that there was indeed quite a bit of interference from Paris, that it sometimes didn't matter very much, and that when it did matter it frequently decreased the effectiveness and cultural influence of the magazine in question.

The CCF had a kind of default political position, best represented by what it considered its most important magazine, the London-based *Encounter*. That magazine was urbane and combative, culturally modernist (even as modernism was losing its subversive edge), and aligned politically with the moderate social democracy of the right wing of the British Labour party. Co-edited by the poet **Stephen Spender**, *Encounter* published **Bertrand Russell**, **W. H. Auden**, **Mary McCarthy**, **C. P. Snow**, **Nancy Mitford**, and **Isaiah Berlin**, among others. It sided with the United States in the Cold War, of course, but was critical of specific United States policies and of McCarthyism. In style and in its imagined ideal community, the model was basically *Partisan Review* of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Indeed, the New York intellectuals cast a long shadow over CCF operations as the sort of people and the sort of culture it thought the rest of the world needed. While *Partisan Review* itself was never a full-fledged CCF magazine, it was one of several that the organization helped support during the Cold War years by making bulk purchases, guaranteeing it a stable revenue stream.



[John Clinton Hunt](#), [Michael Josselson](#) and Melvin Lasky. (Source: [Spartacus Educational](#))

Michael Josselson, the CIA's primary representative within the CCF, was equally loyal to the CCF as an institution as he was to the CIA; his papers show that he didn't want the organization used for covert espionage and was reluctant to interfere too directly in *Encounter's* day-to-day dealings. The number of documented cases of Josselson truly spiking content in *Encounter* can be counted with the fingers of one hand. (The most notorious was "America! America!," a caustic essay about United States culture penned by

Dwight Macdonald. Axed by *Encounter*, it was later published by the CCF's Italian magazine, *Tempo presente*, which shared Macdonald's dim views of the merits of United States culture.) *Encounter* was unusually successful for a CCF magazine: its circulation peaked around 30,000 copies, it lost only a third of those subscribers after the CIA scandal, and published into the 1990s, long after the CCF had ceased to exist in any form. A few of the other magazines also outlived their patron: *Minerva*, which focused on science and society, is still extant; so is *Quadrant*, Australia's most prominent conservative magazine.

But those exceptions aside, the one thing that emerges consistently from these portraits is that the CCF's magazines were generally poorly managed and dependent on their subsidies for their very survival. Nor were they held to a very strict ideological standard: even if they consistently irritated or ignored the Paris secretariat, they could still sometimes bumble along for years. *Cuadernos*, the CCF's first Spanish-language effort, is a case in point: it was distributed in Spain and Latin America from 1953 until 1965. Edited throughout most of its lifespan by a Spaniard living in exile, it was frequently tone deaf and reactionary. It defended not only military coups in Latin America but even the Spanish conquest; and its argument that Latin America was a part of the West failed to attract much of an audience among left-leaning intellectuals. The Mexican satirist **Jorge Ibargüengoitia**, in one of his short stories, describes *Cuadernos* as having "a decidedly anti-Communist air; but on studying it carefully, I began to suspect that it was just the opposite; that is, an apparently anti-Communist magazine, made by the Communists, to discredit the anti-Communists." Even people sympathetic to its basic political project did not regard the magazine highly. Unlike with *Encounter*, Josselson meddled constantly with *Cuadernos*, but his interventions did not improve the situation.

Other publications trundled on for years without ever pleasing Josselson or finding an audience. *Science and Freedom*, the predecessor of the more enduring *Minerva*, became the personal project of **George Polanyi**, the son of the chemist and philosopher of science **Michael Polanyi** (who is the brother of political economist **Karl Polanyi**). Josselson and his deputies tried to shape *Science and Freedom* by sending books for review and suggestions for articles, but they were usually ignored. Josselson wanted the magazine to focus on threats to science in the communist world, while George Polanyi was more interested in threats to academic freedom in the West, and even printed an article comparing the situation of Chinese academics under Mao favorably to the situation of those in non-communist countries. But if that article infuriated the Paris headquarters, they might have consoled themselves that circulation remained vanishingly low. Despite all of the problems, however, *Science and Freedom* lasted seven years.

Other publications also failed to approach the success and the model of *Encounter*. Austria's *Forum* and Australia's *Quadrant* both developed a conservative anti-communism, rather than the lightly socialist version that Josselson personally favored and considered essential for outreach to intellectual elites. *Forum* was also sharply critical of United States culture, which undermined the CCF's goal of producing a transatlantic intellectual community. Other publications, like Japan's *Jiyu*, Italy's *Tempo presente*, and India's *Quest*, were too tied to the particular visions of their editors, or the particular fortunes of minor political movements to exert any broad influence over the culture in their countries.

The closest that the CCF came to publishing truly influential cultural journals on the model of *Partisan Review's* glory days came through its efforts to overhaul its "Third World" operations during the 1960s. There, magazines like *Mundo Nuevo* (published in Paris for

Latin America), *Ḥiwār* (Beirut, Lebanon), *Black Orpheus* (Nigeria), and *Transition* (Uganda) all tapped into important local currents and supported truly enduring works of fiction and poetry. *Mundo Nuevo* published several authors of the boom in Latin American letters: Mexico's **Carlos Fuentes** was interviewed in the first issue, and a prepublication chapter of **Gabriel García Márquez's** *One Hundred Years of Solitude* appeared in the second. **Chinua Achebe** and **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's** anti-colonial novels *Arrow of God* and *A Grain of Wheat* had their original publications in the pages of *Transition*, as did **Alex La Guma's** anti-apartheid novel *The Stone-Country* in *Black Orpheus*; both were important publications in the cultural renaissance associated with a rapidly decolonizing Africa.

Even in these relatively successful cases, though, the influence of the CCF's agenda should not be exaggerated. *Black Orpheus* had no contacts with the CCF until 1962, five years after its creation, when support from the Nigerian government dried up. *Mundo Nuevo*, which began in 1966, was mostly funded by the Ford Foundation, which meddled far more directly than the CIA ever did. The aims of these magazines were only partially linked to those of the CCF or the CIA; all of them were swimming in existing cultural currents, not creating them. And while they were literary successes, it's less clear that they were political successes for the CCF. As **Unsī al-Ḥājj**, a contributor to *Ḥiwār*, put it in a 1966 article responding to the revelations of CIA involvement with the CCF:

“Who sees himself laughing at the other in this game, the Marxists who got the CIA to spread their ideas, or the CIA who made Marxists write in an ‘American’ journal?”

What, then, does it all amount to? The preponderance of evidence that emerges from this book and other recent work on the CCF suggests that its history cannot be reduced to one of CIA interference. The magazines that were effective in consolidating an intellectual community did so because underlying conditions produced groups of people receptive to the outlooks they represented. And what could make a magazine more important, like *Preuves* in France, was not its inherent quality but having its positions and prejudices confirmed by events, such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.



Congress for Cultural Freedom, conference in Berlin 1960. Third from the left: Willy Brandt, at that time reigning mayor of Berlin. (Photo: Cmacauley / Wikimedia)

None of that means that the CCF's efforts were irrelevant to Cold War politics. They would not have existed without them. But its project of replicating the political and moral community of the New York intellectuals was not one that was likely to survive the multiple acts of cultural and linguistic translation that it would require. There is no reason to believe that it should have been otherwise. Artistic modernism and United States-aligned liberal anti-communism had a small natural constituency in a world that, by and large, had other concerns.

In a way, it is comforting to know that the CCF's project was self-limiting, that state power can only go so far in setting the agenda for intellectual culture. *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War* shows that the liberal anti-communist position would have had a hard time sustaining itself without its CIA backing. The CCF represented a serious investment in

culture and intellectual life on the part of the CIA, but the layers of distance required to maintain secrecy and relative organizational autonomy made it more difficult to realize its objectives. (This may have been part of the plan all along, but its cunning should not be overstated.) Most CCF magazines did not find audiences and were not influential. Those that did were not necessarily so because of the CIA, nor did they singlehandedly shift the center of gravity for the world's intellectuals. And whatever the fate of the global left during the Cold War, its struggles had more to do with the contradictions of actually existing socialism than the force of the magazines and conferences arrayed against it. Giles Scott-Smith and Charlotte Lerg's *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War* provides good evidence that something similar could be said for liberal anti-communism, whose limitations became increasingly clear in spite of the magazines and conferences arrayed on its behalf.

But even if it is possible to overstate the success and influence of the CIA, the CCF continues to demand our attention, 50 years after the *Ramparts* scandal put an end to its ability to be considered a serious participant in intellectual debate. Why should that be? No one frets much about the United States Information Agency's magazine *Problems of Communism*, even though it published some of the same writers as *Encounter*. The reasons are probably multiple. Perhaps the history of the CCF inspires a form of jealousy from today's intellectuals, who would like to imagine a golden age when people like them were important enough to be co-opted by the powerful. Perhaps it provides a ready explanation to the (correct) observation that artistic and literary recognition is unfairly distributed. It certainly raises questions about what it means that the CCF's form of moderate social democracy could have been supported by the same organization that overthrew governments in defense of capitalist imperialism.

All of this would be moot if the CCF's magazines and other output had lacked all merit. But the output was high enough in quality, independent enough, and important enough to the intellectual history of the 20th century that the moral problems raised by the CCF remain fascinating and partially unresolvable. Its history suggests that the midcentury intellectuals whose work filled the pages of these journals, brilliant though they were, should not have their status inflated to the point of distortion. Ironically, the same thing that made them important — their ability to participate in a seemingly world-historic conflict of ideas — was what compromised their integrity.

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