The Cultural Cold War : Recent Scholarship and Future Directions

Hugh Wilford

Abstract

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This paper is a survey of scholarship about the American effort in the “Cultural Cold War” (the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union for the ideological allegiance of the world’s intellectuals after World War II). It is principally concerned with the US’s main weapon, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an ostensibly independent liberal organisation that was in fact covertly funded by the CIA. First, the paper summarises the “revisionist” interpretation of the Cultural Cold War which depicted a successful conspiracy to colonise the consciousness of the world’s intellectuals. Second, the paper suggests that a “post-revisionist” interpretation has emerged which emphasises such responses to the American Cultural Cold War effort as collaboration, appropriation and resistance. Finally, the paper outlines an interpretative approach to the Cultural Cold War which recovers the critical orientation of the revisionists yet incorporates the post-revisionists’ sensitivity to complexity and contingency. It ends with some suggestions for future research in the field.

Résumé

La Guerre froide culturelle : recherche récente et perspectives à venir.

Cet article établit un bilan de l'historiographie de la Guerre froide culturelle. Il traite principalement de l’arme principale des Américains, le «Congress for Cultural Freedom», organisation apparemment indépendante de libéraux, que soutenait en secret la CIA. L'article résume l’interprétation «révisionniste » de la Guerre froide culturelle : il y a alors eu un complot efficace pour coloniser l'esprit des intellectuels. Puis il évoque l'interprétation «post-révisionniste » plus récente, qui met l'accent sur la collaboration, l'appropriation et la résistance comme réactions à la Guerre froide culturelle. En dernier lieu, l'article souligne le besoin d'une interprétation de la Guerre froide culturelle qui renouerait avec l'orientation critique du révisionnisme tout en incorporant l’intérêt des post-révisionnistes pour la complexité et la contingence, et signale quelques pistes de recherche ultérieures.

THE CULTURAL COLD WAR: RECENT SCHOLARSHIP AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

HUGH WILFORD*

This paper is concerned with a particular intersection of cultural history and international relations in the early Cold War period, the "Cultural Cold War." Let me begin by explaining what I mean by the phrase "Cultural Cold War." Following Christopher Lasch, who was the term's originator (Lasch 63, 114), I use it quite specifically to refer to the contest that occurred between the Soviet Union and the United States for the ideological allegiance of the world's intellectuals in the decades after the Second World War. On the Soviet side this mainly meant harnessing intellectuals' fears of a global thermonuclear war by appealing to the concept of "peace," holding peace rallies, denouncing the US as a warmonger, and so on — much as the Comintern had mobilised the Popular Front behind the slogan of "anti-Fascism" during the 1930s. The US's Cultural Cold War effort employed a similar front strategy but was based instead on the concept of cultural freedom, something allegedly available to intellectuals in the "free World," but denied them in the Communist bloc. As such, it was part of a much broader American propaganda offensive or "campaign" designed to win overseas populations to the western cause in the Cold War.

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The US's main weapon in the Cultural Cold War, and the subject of the 1968 essay in which Lasch coined the term, was an organisation called the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). Launched in 1950 at a rally held, significantly enough, in West Berlin, the CCF set up permanent headquarters in Paris (another symbolically freighted choice of location, the French capital being perceived as the citadel of Cold War neutralism), from where it co-ordinated a global programme of festivals, seminars and magazine-publishing, all explicitly or implicitly celebrating the cultural life of the western democracies, and protesting the regimentation of the intellect under Communism. By the end of the 1950s the CCF had succeeded in establishing a considerable presence in western European intellectual circles and was extending its operations both within the eastern bloc itself and the so-called "underdeveloped world," especially Africa and Latin America.

Two characteristics of the US's Cultural Cold War effort demand particular attention. One was its secrecy: the CCF was secretly funded by the American government, specifically by its new intelligence and covert operations arm the Central Intelligence Agency, which disguised its subsidies as gifts from supposedly private charitable foundations. This arrangement, which was intended to preserve the impression that intellectual life in the West was free from state control, did not become public knowledge until 1966-67, when its revelation wrecked the credibility of the CCF and severely embarrassed the CIA. Another remarkable feature of the American Cultural Cold War effort was its targeting of intellectuals on the "Non-Communist Left" (or 'NCL' in official American terminology), a political formation that was viewed as holding the balance of power both in post-war Europe and elsewhere: hence the title of the next major study of the CCF after Lasch's essay on "The Cultural Cold War," Peter Coleman's *The Liberal Conspiracy.*[1]

1 Coleman, a former associate of the Congress in Australia, takes a far more positive attitude towards the organisation than Lasch, who was writing from a New Left perspective. Indeed, some reviewers thought Coleman's book overly apologetic. Readers wishing for a briefer yet authoritative account of the history of the CCF can

It was these two features of the Cultural Cold War that excited the most violent denunciation when details of the CIA's covert subsidies were divulged in the late 1960s. The involvement of NCL intellectuals in the elaborate deception, whether "witting" or "unwitting" (and much controversy revolved around the question of who knew about the CIA's patronage and who did not), helped reinforce many younger writers' suspicions that the previous intellectual generation of "liberal anticommunists" was ideologically bankrupt and morally corrupt. The fact that the government agency involved was the CIA, whose reputation on the New Left was not far short of satanic, only made matters worse. The storm of criticism set off by the "revelations" was most violent outside the US, in those countries that had been on the receiving end of the American Cultural Cold War effort, and who now saw themselves as having been the victims of a covert cultural intervention even more sinister than the post-war invasion of American "mass" culture. These various impulses — the reproach towards older, compromised intellectuals, the critique of US Cold War "imperialism" and especially the CIA, and the fear of creeping "Americanization" — converged in a brilliant essay by a young British researcher, Richard Fletcher, "How the CIA Took the Teeth Out of British Socialism," which argued that the CCF and other CIA-supported American groups suborned the post-war British left by deflecting the leadership of the Labour Party away from truly socialist domestic and foreign policies towards economic "revisionism" and Atlanticism. Fletcher's piece represented the apotheosis of what I've chosen to call the "revisionist" interpretation of the Cultural Cold War (Agee and Wolf 188-200).

Despite the lively start made by such revisionists as Lasch and Fletcher, scholars have been slow to undertake the task of documenting and interpreting the Cultural Cold War, preferring to concentrate instead on more traditional political and military

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go to Pells, 66-76. There is also a television documentary on the subject, *Hidden Hands: A Different History of Modernism*, (1995), London, Channel 4 Television.

dimensions of the superpower conflict.[2] It is only recently that diplomatic historians, reflecting a growing appreciation of the importance of culture and ideology generally in foreign relations, have begun examining the US Cold War "freedom campaign" and in particular the Cultural Cold War effort. Although the investigations of these researchers remain too diffuse and disparate to categorise them as belonging to a particular historiographical school, it is nonetheless tempting to identify a broad interpretative tendency in their findings that might be identified as, for want of a better term, "post-revisionist." That is, recent scholarship about the Cultural Cold War has tended to move beyond and, occasionally, challenge the revisionist interpretation, by emphasising such factors as complexity, contingency, and unintended consequences. What I intend doing in the remainder of this paper is, first, summarising what seem to me to have been the most interesting points that have emerged out of post-revisionist writing about the Cultural Cold War and, second, outlining a new interpretative approach to the subject which incorporates the insights of post-revisionism yet retains the critical orientation of revisionism. In other words, this paper is intended to serve as a review of existing scholarship about the Cultural Cold War and to provide some pointers to future research in the field.

II

Recent work on the American freedom campaign has challenged the revisionist scenario of the CIA's conspiratorially colonising the consciousness of the world's intellectuals in a number of ways. First, it has suggested that in many places US cultural intervention was positively welcomed by indigenous intellectuals who shared the anticommunist and Atlanticist outlook of the American Cultural Cold Warriors — thus

2 The obvious exception to this rule is the sizable body of literature that exists on the official export of American art, in particular Abstract Expressionism, in the early Cold War period. The classic "revisionist" account of this phenomenon is Guilbaut. An interesting "post-revisionist" riposte is provided by Burstow.

echoing the argument of post-revisionist diplomatic historians that US political preponderance in post-war Europe was to a certain extent (in Geir Lundestad's famous phrase) "empire by invitation." As is constantly illustrated in Coleman's *Liberal Conspiracy*, the Congress for Cultural Freedom was very much a collaborative effort: in every country where the organisation operated there were native intellectuals who actively supported it because they sympathised with its aims, such as Minoo Masani in India, Stephen Spender in Britain, and so on. Even in France, the focus of Pierre Gremion's richly detailed 1995 work *Intelligence De L'Anticommunisme*, anticommunists like Raymond Aron and the Swiss François Bondy provided a strong local base of support (see Gremion). In other words, the Cultural Cold War might usefully be viewed as, to borrow Reinhold Wagnleitner's description of America's "cultural mission" in post-war Austria, "a classic case of self-colonization" (Wagnleitner 2).

As well as ignoring the role of *collaboration* in the American Cultural Cold War effort, the revisionist account failed to reckon with the possibility of appropriation. As Coleman's book documents, CCF operations varied widely in character between different locations: for example, explicit anti-Soviet pronouncements were far more common in western Europe than in Asia. This variation was in part tactically inspired, arising from a desire not to offend local political sensibilities. However, it also reflected a tendency on the part of intellectuals to appropriate the US Cultural Cold War apparatus for domestic purposes. As John McLaren has shown in a recent study of literary politics in post-war Australia, *Writing in Hope and Fear*, anticommunist cultural conservatives employed the CCF magazine *Quadrant* as a weapon for waging culture war on radical literary nationalists of the Australian left. Similarly, Alan Sinfield's *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain* portrays Modernist Bloomsbury *literati* such as Stephen Spender, editor of the Congress' principal English-language organ *Encounter*, using the patronage of the CCF to consolidate their cultural authority in the face of challenges from new,

provincial and nationalist literary impulses like the Movement and the Leavisites.

In these instances, appropriation did not necessarily interfere with the ultimate aims of the US Cultural Cold War effort. Indeed, in countering nationalist cultural movements it arguably served them. However, this was not always the case. Writing in 1956 after a CCF-sponsored tour of "Third World" countries, American novelist and anticommunist James T. Farrell violently criticised Indian intellectuals for believing their best policy was "to flirt with Communists, insult us and perhaps get more money out of us" (Lasch 79). Despite the chauvinism of his tone, Farrell had correctly identified a major problem for the American Cultural Cold War effort: the habit of intellectuals in countries where funding for the arts was scarce literally to appropriate CCF (that is, CIA) money for local cultural projects that had little or nothing to do with the struggle against Communism. Indian intellectuals might have used the language of cultural freedom; but, as Margery Sabin argues in a stimulating article, "The Politics of Cultural Freedom: India in the Nineteen Fifties," in their mouths it acquired a rather different meaning. For writers like Nissim Ezekial, editor of the CCF-subsidised Indian magazine *Quest*, it meant the right "to criticise established authority within the state." Indeed, according to Sabin, Ezekial employed *Quest* for a specifically Indian project of internal "opposition to authority." It was not just that this project bore little relation to the American Cultural Cold War effort; it was also that Indian intellectuals sometimes turned the discourse of cultural freedom back on "those Western liberals who seemed overeager to endorse indigenous Indian traditions when they seemed to serve their anti-Communist politics" (Sabin 50, 59-60).

In other words, appropriation could sometimes amount to opposition. This leads the discussion onto a third response to the US freedom campaign besides collaboration and appropriation that revisionism failed to note, namely resistance. Resistance to the American Cultural Cold War effort was rife throughout the world, not only amongst neutralist intellectuals in non-aligned

parts of Asia but even amongst anticommunists in western-alliance European countries. One example taken from my own research into the Cultural Cold War in Britain is illustrative. Bertrand Russell was both an Honorary Chairman of the CCF and titular President of its British affiliate. This represented a significant coup for the American Cultural Cold War effort, as not only did Russell's name command immense prestige internationally, his (occasionally wavering) commitment to pacifism made him also susceptible to co-optation by the Soviet peace campaign. However, the British philosopher did not stay on-side for long. His association with the CCF was punctuated by a series of ugly public rows, most relating to the issue of cultural freedom in America, which Russell viewed as being under serious threat from excessive anticommunism. He eventually resigned his Hononary Chair in 1957 following a particularly nasty confrontation with the Congress' American affiliate, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, over his characterisation of the US as a police-state similar to Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia (Wilford forthcoming). Fear of a third world war, reluctance to declare unconditional support for either side in the Cold War, a reflexive cultural anti-Americanism: all these factors inclined non-American intellectuals to resist the US freedom campaign, and meant that the CCF could not even take the loyalty of its own figureheads for granted.

Finally, recent research has suggested that the American freedom campaign of which the Cultural Cold War effort was part was itself a much more complex phenomenon than was previously supposed. Tony Carew's article about links between the CIA and US trade unions, "The American Labor Movement in Fizzland," is a case in point. It shows us that the relationship was "far from the commonplace caricature of a labor movement in the pocket of the CIA" (Carew 25). The main unionists involved — Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown — had been engaged in secret anticommunist activities long before the CIA came on the scene and consequently often sought to dictate terms to Agency officers. The relationship was further

complicated by internal divisions in the labour movement, between the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the opposition of conservatives within the CIA, who objected to the Non-Communist Left strategy of collaborating with intellectuals and unionists. In other words, covert Cold War labour operations were based on a partnership of public officials and private citizens in which the latter sometimes sought to dominate the former and neither side was monolithic or unanimous.

Although relations between the CIA and NCL intellectuals still await the kind of detailed exposure Carew has achieved for labour, early indications point towards a similar picture. The CCF was not just a CIA covert operation. It was also, in part at least, the creation of anticommunist intellectuals in New York spontaneously mobilising themselves in response to the Soviet peace offensive (Longstaff, Wilford 1994). Moreover, such New York Intellectuals as Sidney Hook were not slow to criticise US officialdom when they perceived it to be acting with insufficient resolution in the face of Communist provocation. Indeed, the sabre-rattling rhetoric of the New York-based American Committee for Cultural Freedom was to prove somewhat of a tactical embarrassment to its far more reticent parent organisation, the CCF, as during the Russell affair (Coleman, chap 9). In short, the revisionist imagery of a puppet-on-a-string relationship with intellectuals mechanically obeying every command of their CIA pay-masters is a long way from the truth.

III

Yet it is not altogether untruthful. For the CIA's covert patronage of the CCF clearly did involve a breach of the principle of cultural freedom to which the organisation claimed it was dedicated. Margery Sabin, at the same time that she argues that Indian intellectuals succeeded in appropriating both the apparatus and the rhetoric of the American Cultural Cold War effort for a project of internal cultural resistance, also

recognises that the duplicity involved had a constraining, if not contaminating, effect on Indian intellectual discourse (Sabin 50). For all its simplification and exaggeration, the revisionist interpretation of the Cultural Cold War nonetheless had a valuable critical dimension which the post-revisionist, with its emphasis on complicity, contingency and complication, sometimes seems to lack. The challenge facing the historian of the Cultural Cold War is how to recover the critical orientation of revisionism and combine it with post-revisionism's sensitivity to historical specificity.

One possible answer lies, it seems to me, in the concept of hegemony. By this I do not mean hegemony as the term is sometimes used by historians of international relations to describe a simple state of dominance on the part of one nation and subordination on the part of others. Clearly, such a concept is inadequate to the task of comprehending the full complexity of the Cultural Cold War. Instead, I am referring to Antonio Gramsci's far more subtle and powerful theory of hegemony, which actually attempts to explain how it is that dominant groups within a society establish their leadership of other groups in the first place. There are several respects in which Gramscian hegemony is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the Cultural Cold War. First, there is the importance it places specifically on intellectuals as apologists for and ratifiers of the dominant group's leadership. Indeed, Gramsci's concept of "traditional intellectuals," who "put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group" yet who in fact function as the "dominant group's 'deputies'," might almost have been invented with the kind of American "liberal anticommunists" who supported the US Cultural Cold War effort in mind (Gramsci 7). Second, the Gramscian notion of hegemony not as the exclusive domain of the dominant group, but rather as a broad alliance or "historical bloc" of various groups all engaged in the mediation of the hegemonic ideology, enables us to theorise the private-public networks which underpinned the US Cold War freedom campaign, that is the CIA's covert

partnership with anticommunist intellectuals, unionists, and various other private American citizens. Finally, the relationship between the CIA and **non**-American intellectuals during the early Cold War period might also be conceptualised as hegemonic in the sense that it involved contradiction and contestation — collaboration, resistance and appropriation — yet ultimately served to reinforce American ideological dominance. Gramscian hegemony, then, provides us with a theoretical framework capable of accommodating both post-revisionism's emphasis on complication and revisionism's insistence on the ultimate success of the American Cultural Cold War effort (see Scott-Smith).

Finally, what specific aspects of the Cultural Cold War require further research? First, the relationship between the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the CIA remains shrouded in mystery, due to continuing official reluctance to declassify the relevant secret records. However, as the work of Tony Carew — and, most recently, of Frances Stonor Saunders — has shown, judicious interviewing of former CIA officers and enterprising use of private papers can yield some valuable data.[3] Another dimension missing from many existing accounts of the US Cultural Cold War effort is information about the Soviet peace offensive which it was designed to counter: this is rather like trying to reconstruct a dialogue when you can only hear one side of the conversation. In other words, future studies of the Cultural Cold War would do well to utilise Soviet as well as American records.[4] The involvement of private groups generally in the US freedom campaign represents a rich research field for diplomatic historians. Recent studies by such young British historians as Nathan Abrams and Helen Laville, of the role of the American Jewish community and women's groups respectively, promise very well (Abrams, Laville,

3 The only information about the Cultural Cold War the CIA has released to date is an article by one of its historians (see Warner). However Saunders throws some very revealing light on the subject.

4 Hixson has blazed this particular trail in his excellent study of the effects of US cultural propaganda behind the Iron Curtain.

Lucas). The impact of the Cultural Cold War on specific countries is another potentially fruitful avenue for research. Some impressive work has already been done on Germany (Hochgeschwender) and France (Gremion), and I am currently researching an extended study of Britain. Nonetheless, considerable scope for individual country studies remains. Lastly, there has been a surprising tendency in the scholarship undertaken so far to concentrate excessively on the organisational history of the CCF and neglect analysis of the numerous intellectual texts produced in the course of the Cultural Cold War. The language of the conflict, for example, its characteristic rhetorical tropes and strategies, remains largely unexamined. Several commentators have remarked on the heavily gendered nature of the imagery employed by Cultural Cold Warriors, which coded the defence of freedom as a heroically masculine activity, and derogated a concern with peace as essentially feminine. Apart from this, however, the task of working out the ways in which Cultural Cold War discourse privileged and naturalised certain concepts and positions at the expense of others has barely begun. The Cultural Cold War represents a rich and largely unmined seam of cultural history and international relations.

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