

# The CIA reads French theory: on the intellectual labor of dismantling the cultural Left - Gabriel Rockhill



Notwithstanding its limitations, an interesting historical look at the state's utilisation of academia and the cultural sphere in the struggle to discredit Marxism. First published 28/02/17 in 'The Philosophical Salon' of the 'LA Review of Books'.

It is often presumed that intellectuals have little or no political power. Perched in a privileged ivory tower, disconnected from the real world, embroiled in meaningless academic debates over specialized minutia, or floating in the abstruse clouds of high-minded theory, intellectuals are frequently portrayed as not only cut off from political reality but as incapable of having any meaningful impact on it. The Central Intelligence Agency thinks otherwise.

As a matter of fact, the agency responsible for coups d'état, targeted assassinations and the clandestine manipulation of foreign governments not only believes in the power of theory, but it dedicated significant resources to having a group of secret agents pore over what some consider to be the most recondite and intricate theory ever produced. For in [an intriguing research paper](#) written in 1985, and recently released with minor redactions through the Freedom of Information Act, the CIA reveals that its operatives have been studying the complex, international trend-setting French theory affiliated with the names of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes.

The image of American spies gathering in Parisian cafés to assiduously study and compare notes on the high priests of the French intelligentsia might shock those who presume this group of intellectuals to be luminaries whose otherworldly sophistication could never be caught in such a vulgar dragnet, or who assume them to be, on the contrary, charlatan peddlers of incomprehensible rhetoric with little or no impact on the real world. However, it should come as no surprise to those familiar with the CIA's longstanding and ongoing investment in a global cultural war, including support for its most avant-garde forms, which has been well documented by researchers like Frances Stonor Saunders, Giles Scott-Smith, Hugh Wilford (and I have made my own contribution in [Radical History & the Politics of Art](#)).

Thomas W. Braden, the former supervisor of cultural activities at the CIA, explained the power of the Agency's cultural assault in [a frank insider's account](#) published in 1967: "I remember the enormous joy I got when the Boston Symphony Orchestra [which was supported by the CIA] won more acclaim for the U.S.

in Paris than John Foster Dulles or Dwight D. Eisenhower could have bought with a hundred speeches.” This was by no means a small or liminal operation. In fact, as Wilford has aptly argued, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), which was headquartered in Paris and later discovered to be a CIA front organization during the cultural Cold War, was among the most important patrons in world history, supporting an incredible range of artistic and intellectual activities. It had offices in 35 countries, published dozens of prestige magazines, was involved in the book industry, organized high-profile international conferences and art exhibits, coordinated performances and concerts, and contributed ample funding to various cultural awards and fellowships, as well as to front organizations like the Farfield Foundation.



The ‘Apparat’ in Paris: CIA Agent and Head of the CCF Michael Josselson (center) in a Working Lunch with John Clinton Hunt and Melvin Lasky (right)

The intelligence agency understands culture and theory to be crucial weapons in the overall arsenal it deploys to perpetuate US interests around the world. The recently released research paper from 1985, entitled “[France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals](#),” examines—undoubtedly in order to manipulate—the French intelligentsia and its fundamental role in shaping the trends that generate political policy. Suggesting that there has been a relative ideological balance between the left and the right in the history of the French intellectual world, the report highlights the monopoly of the left in the immediate postwar era—to which, we know, the Agency was rabidly opposed—due to the Communists’ key role in resisting fascism and ultimately winning the war against it. Although the right had been massively discredited because of its direct contribution to the Nazi death camps, as well as its overall xenophobic, anti-egalitarian and fascist agenda (according to the CIA’s own description), the unnamed secret agents who drafted the study outline with palpable delight the return of the right since approximately the early 1970s.

More specifically, the undercover cultural warriors applaud what they see as a double movement that has contributed to the intelligentsia shifting its critical focus away from the US and toward the USSR. On the left, there was a gradual intellectual disaffection with Stalinism and Marxism, a progressive withdrawal of radical intellectuals from public debate, and a theoretical move away from socialism and the socialist party. Further to the right, the ideological opportunists referred to as the New Philosophers and the New Right intellectuals launched a high-profile media smear campaign against Marxism.

While other tentacles of the worldwide spy organization were involved in overthrowing democratically elected leaders, providing intelligence and funding to fascist dictators, and supporting right-wing death squads, the Parisian central intelligentsia squadron was collecting data on how the theoretical world’s drift to the right directly benefitted US foreign policy. The left-leaning intellectuals of the immediate postwar era had been openly critical of US imperialism. Jean-Paul Sartre’s media clout as an outspoken Marxist critic, and his notable role—as the founder of *Libération*—in blowing the cover of the CIA station officer in Paris and dozens of undercover operatives, was [closely monitored](#) by the Agency and considered a very serious problem.

In contrast, the anti-Soviet and anti-Marxist atmosphere of the emerging neoliberal era diverted public scrutiny and provided excellent cover for the CIA’s dirty wars by making it “very difficult for anyone to

mobilize significant opposition among intellectual elites to US policies in Central America, for example.” Greg Grandin, one of the leading historians of Latin America, perfectly summarized this situation in [\*The Last Colonial Massacre\*](#): “Aside from making visibly disastrous and deadly interventions in Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Chile in 1973, and El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s, the United States has lent quiet and steady financial, material, and moral support for murderous counterinsurgent terror states. [...] But the enormity of Stalin’s crimes ensures that such sordid histories, no matter how compelling, thorough, or damning, do not disturb the foundation of a worldview committed to the exemplary role of the United States in defending what we now know as democracy.”

It is in this context that the masked mandarins commend and support the relentless critique that a new generation of anti-Marxist thinkers like Bernard-Henri Levy, André Glucksmann and Jean-François Revel unleashed on “the last clique of Communist *savants*” (composed, according to the anonymous agents, of Sartre, Barthes, Lacan and Louis Althusser). Given the leftwing leanings of these anti-Marxists in their youth, they provide the perfect model for constructing deceptive narratives that amalgamate purported personal political growth with the progressive march of time, as if both individual life and history were simply a matter of “growing up” and recognizing that profound egalitarian social transformation is a thing of the—personal and historical—past. This patronizing, omniscient defeatism not only serves to discredit new movements, particularly those driven by the youth, but it also mischaracterizes the relative successes of counter-revolutionary repression as the natural progress of history.



Anti-Marxist French Philosopher Raymond Aron (left) and His Wife Suzanne on Vacation with Undercover CIA Operative Michael Josselson and Denis de Rougemont (right)

Even theoreticians who were not as opposed to Marxism as these intellectual reactionaries have made a significant contribution to an environment of disillusionment with transformative egalitarianism, detachment from social mobilization and “critical inquiry” devoid of radical politics. This is extremely important for understanding the CIA’s overall strategy in its broad and profound attempts to dismantle the cultural left in Europe and elsewhere. In recognizing it was unlikely that it could abolish it entirely, the world’s most powerful spy organization has sought to move leftist culture away from resolute anti-capitalist and transformative politics toward center-left reformist positions that are less overtly critical of US foreign and domestic policies. In fact, as Saunders has demonstrated in detail, the Agency went behind the back of the McCarthy-driven Congress in the postwar era in order to directly support and promote leftist projects that steered cultural producers and consumers away from the resolutely egalitarian left. In severing and discrediting the latter, it also aspired to fragment the left in general, leaving what remained of the center left with only minimal power and public support (as well as being potentially discredited due to its complicity with right-wing power politics, an issue that continues to plague contemporary institutionalized parties on the left).

It is in this light that we must understand the intelligence agency’s fondness for conversion narratives and its deep appreciation for “reformed Marxists,” a leitmotif that traverses the research paper on French theory. “Even more effective in undermining Marxism,” the moles write, “were those intellectuals who set out as true believers to apply Marxist theory in the social sciences but ended by rethinking and rejecting the entire tradition.” They cite in particular the profound contribution made by the Annales School of

historiography and structuralism—particularly Claude Lévi-Strauss and Foucault—to the “critical demolition of Marxist influence in the social sciences.” Foucault, who is referred to as “France’s most profound and influential thinker,” is specifically applauded for his praise of the New Right intellectuals for reminding philosophers that “‘bloody’ consequences” have “flowed from the rationalist social theory of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment and the Revolutionary era.” Although it would be a mistake to collapse anyone’s politics or political effect into a single position or result, Foucault’s anti-revolutionary leftism and his perpetuation of the blackmail of the Gulag—i.e. the claim that expansive radical movements aiming at profound social and cultural transformation only resuscitate the most dangerous of traditions—are perfectly in line with the espionage agency’s overall strategies of psychological warfare.

The CIA’s reading of French theory should give us pause, then, to reconsider the radical chic veneer that has accompanied much of its Anglophone reception. According to a stagist conception of progressive history (which is usually blind to its implicit teleology), the work of figures like Foucault, Derrida and other cutting-edge French theorists is often intuitively affiliated with a form of profound and sophisticated critique that presumably far surpasses anything found in the socialist, Marxist or anarchist traditions. It is certainly true and merits emphasis that the Anglophone reception of French theory, as John McCumber has aptly pointed out, had important political implications as a pole of resistance to the false political neutrality, the safe technicalities of logic and language, or the direct ideological conformism operative in the McCarthy-supported traditions of Anglo-American philosophy. However, the theoretical practices of figures who turned their back on what Cornelius Castoriadis called the tradition of radical critique—meaning anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist resistance—surely contributed to the ideological drift away from transformative politics. According to the spy agency itself, post-Marxist French theory directly contributed to the CIA’s cultural program of coaxing the left toward the right, while discrediting anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, thereby creating an intellectual environment in which their imperial projects could be pursued unhindered by serious critical scrutiny from the intelligentsia.

As we know from the research on the CIA’s program of psychological warfare, the organization has not only tracked and sought to coerce individuals, but it has always been keen on understanding and transforming institutions of cultural production and distribution. Indeed, its study on French theory points to the structural role universities, publishing houses and the media play in the formation and consolidation of a collective political ethos. In descriptions that, like the rest of the document, should invite us to think critically about the current academic situation in the Anglophone world and beyond, the authors of the report foreground the ways in which the precarization of academic labor contributes to the demolition of radical leftism. If strong leftists cannot secure the material means necessary to carry out our work, or if we are more or less subtly forced to conform in order to find employment, publish our writings or have an audience, then the structural conditions for a resolute leftist community are weakened. The vocationalization of higher education is another tool used for this end since it aims at transforming people into techno-scientific cogs in the capitalist apparatus rather than autonomous citizens with reliable tools for social critique. The theory mandarins of the CIA therefore praise the efforts on the part of the French government to “push students into business and technical courses.” They also point to the contributions made by major publishing houses like Grasset, the mass media and the vogue of American culture in pushing forward their post-socialist and anti-egalitarian platform.

What lessons might we draw from this report, particularly in the current political environment with its ongoing assault on the critical intelligentsia? First of all, it should be a cogent reminder that if some presume that intellectuals are powerless, and that our political orientations do not matter, the organization that has been one of the most potent power brokers in contemporary world politics does not agree. The Central Intelligence Agency, as its name ironically suggests, believes in the power of intelligence and theory, and we should take this very seriously. In falsely presuming that intellectual work has little or no traction in the “real world,” we not only misrepresent the practical implications of theoretical labor, but we also run the risk of dangerously turning a blind eye to the political projects for which we can easily become the unwitting cultural ambassadors. Although it is certainly the case that the French nation-state and cultural

apparatus provide a much more significant public platform for intellectuals than is to be found in many other countries, the CIA's preoccupation with mapping and manipulating theoretical and cultural production elsewhere should serve as a wake-up call to us all.

Second, the power brokers of the present have a vested interest in cultivating an intelligentsia whose critical acumen has been dulled or destroyed by fostering institutions founded on business and technoscience interests, equating left-wing politics with anti-scientificity, correlating science with a purported—but false—political neutrality, promoting media that saturate the airwaves with conformist prattle, sequestering strong leftists outside of major academic institutions and the media spotlight, and discrediting any call for radical egalitarian and ecological transformation. Ideally, they seek to nurture an intellectual culture that, if on the left, is neutralized, immobilized, listless and content with defeatist hand wringing, or with the passive criticism of the radically mobilized left. This is one of the reasons why we might want to consider intellectual opposition to radical leftism, which preponderates in the U.S. academy, as a dangerous political position: isn't it directly complicit with the CIA's imperialist agenda around the world?

Third, to counter this institutional assault on a culture of resolute leftism, it is imperative to resist the precarization and vocationalization of education. It is equally important to create public spheres of truly critical debate, providing a broader platform for those who recognize that another world is not only possible, but is necessary. We also need to band together in order to contribute to or further develop alternative media, different models of education, counter-institutions and radical collectives. It is vital to foster precisely what the covert cultural combatants want to destroy: a culture of radical leftism with a broad institutional framework of support, extensive public backing, prevalent media clout and expansive power of mobilization.

Finally, intellectuals of the world should unite in recognizing our power and seizing upon it in order to do everything that we can to develop systemic and radical critique that is as egalitarian and ecological as it is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. The positions that one defends in the classroom or publicly are important for setting the terms of debate and charting the field of political possibility. In direct opposition to the spy agency's cultural strategy of *fragment and polarize*, by which it has sought to sever and isolate the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist left, while opposing it to reformist positions, we should *federate and mobilize* by recognizing the importance of working together—across the entire left, [as Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor has recently reminded us](#)—for the cultivation of a truly critical intelligentsia. Rather than proclaiming or bemoaning the powerlessness of intellectuals, we should harness the ability to speak truth to power by working together and mobilizing our capacity to collectively create the institutions necessary for a world of cultural leftism. For it is only in such a world, and in the echo chambers of critical intelligence that it produces, that the truths spoken might actually be heard, and thereby change the very structures of power.