

# The Politics of Apolitical Culture

The Congress for Cultural Freedom,  
the CIA and post-war American hegemony

Giles Scott-Smith

Routledge/PSA Political Studies



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# The Politics of Apolitical Culture

‘This enjoyable, well-written book demonstrates impressive scholarship. It investigates the paradoxes of cultural and political policies, which often escape the aims of those promoting them, and provides a useful addition to work in several academic fields while being of interest well beyond the academy.’

Anne Showstack Sassoon, Professor of Politics, *Kingston University*

‘This book is a valuable addition to the Gramscian-inspired scholarship in IR and IPE, and sheds new light on one of the most significant formative eras in our history – a must-read for scholars interested in the construction of the post-1945 global political economy.’

Randall Germain, *University of Wales Aberystwyth*

‘*The Politics of Apolitical Culture* is a major new interpretation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, one of the most vital intellectual organizations of the Cold War period. Without undervaluing the Congress’ secret links to the CIA, Scott-Smith clearly demonstrates that the organization served the real interests of European and American intellectuals. Scott-Smith makes the provocative argument that members of the intellectual elite found a new role for themselves in forging an “Atlanticist” cultural consensus which served ultimately to entrench American political and economic hegemony over Western Europe. Skillfully interweaving history and theory, this book challenges us to re-imagine the Congress as a cultural counterpart to the Marshall plan.’

David Monod, Associate Professor in History, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

‘Giles Scott-Smith has written a vital – and provocative – book which puts culture at the centre of the Cold War. This is an essential study of the complex relationship between “America” and “Europe” after 1945.’

Scott Lucas, Head of American Studies, *University of Birmingham*

‘Giles Scott-Smith has produced a sophisticated and comprehensive analysis of the CCF and its role in the development of post-WWII hegemony. Scott-Smith’s well-researched book shows that the formation of the European–American transatlantic cultural axis was neither inevitable nor an accident of history. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the ways international organizations contribute to the development of hegemony.’

Kelly Kate Pease, Associate Professor, *Webster University*

**Giles Scott-Smith** is a post-doctoral researcher with the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, The Netherlands.

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### **The Politics of Apolitical Culture**

The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-war American Hegemony

*Giles Scott-Smith*

**For Christine and Joanne**

# Preface

This book is something of a 'crossover' text, covering political economy, Gramscian theory, intellectual history and archival analysis of a particular episode in the early Cold War period. It looks at the formation and consolidation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) by placing its history in the context of post-war US–European relations between 1945 and 1955. This was the period when there was a clear coalescence between the intellectual concerns and the political and economic interests of key groups on both sides of the Atlantic. By the mid-1950s, with the Atlantic alliance secured, the Congress began to turn its attention to relations with the Third World, a path that will not be followed here. The CCF can best be seen as a vital cultural–intellectual component to that Atlanticism, a 'normative' institution that linked with broader political and economic motives.

In order to explore these linkages between the political, economic and cultural realms, the CCF is viewed via the conception of hegemony put forward by Antonio Gramsci. To approach the Congress via Gramsci raises some important questions. If the CCF was to a degree a hegemonic instrument of American foreign policy, what were the ideas and cultural values that were being instrumentalised, and how did they link with the dominant political and economic interests of the time? What were the political and economic interests that led to this instrumentalisation of cultural activity in the first place? If it is accepted, as it should be, that these ideas and cultural values had their own semi-autonomous development aside from any instrumental political intervention that occurred, what was their importance in the cultural realm itself? One of the most important aspects to the Congress as a normative institution is that it made more explicit the cultural–intellectual concerns that were already present. Recognition of this fact, and the complexity that it involves, is necessary in order to better appreciate the CIA's role and the historical context in which these events occurred.

Any analysis of political influence in the cultural realm can tend to undermine the actual legitimacy of the culture *as culture*, and the intricacies of the semi-autonomous, contingent development of cultural–intellectual activity. Arguments are often reduced to an emphasis either on the autonomy or the dependence of art, neither being particularly satisfactory for the broadening of

historical understanding. In relation to the CCF, the role of the CIA makes this issue all the more acute, for instance in the claim that the CIA acted as an 'unacknowledged facilitator to a broad range of creative activity, positioning intellectuals and their work like chess pieces to be played in the Great Game'.<sup>1</sup> It is true that the CIA's influence (and that of secret services in general) still needs to be fully acknowledged before a more credible understanding of the Cold War can be achieved. Yet a middle way that addresses the aspects of both autonomy and dependency in the CCF story can be found if it is placed within the broader historical context of post-war Atlanticist political economy.

Several accounts of the CCF have been written. Pierre Grémion considered the Congress as an important semi-autonomous transnational organisation that contributed a great deal to the major intellectual debates of its time, whatever the CIA role. Michael Hochgeschwender, while acknowledging the CIA, was principally interested in the CCF's intellectual impact in post-war Germany. Frances Stonor Saunders has written a forthright critique of the Congress's connection with the CIA, and interpreted it as a distortion of post-war cultural-intellectual life. Peter Coleman, an actual participant with the CCF in Australia, defended its intellectual and cultural merits while at the same time admitting at several points that there was a significant level of influence behind the scenes on Congress activities.<sup>2</sup> Yet, due to its scale and influence, there remains plenty more to be said in assessing the legacy of the CCF. As Michael Rohrwasser stated at a conference marking the CCF's fiftieth anniversary, the validity of the Congress's anti-totalitarian standpoint has largely been forgotten because of its connection with the CIA.<sup>3</sup> The fact that this organisation was dealing with the question of freedom on one side and the CIA on the other makes it a complex business to interpret it from a historical, political or cultural perspective. But it is exactly the complexities that also make the Congress a subject worth further consideration.



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# Abbreviations

ACCF	American Committee for Cultural Freedom
ACUE	American Committee on United Europe
ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AIF	Americans for Intellectual Freedom
CED	Committee for Economic Development
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organisations
CCF	Congress for Cultural Freedom
CMP	Committee for the Marshall Plan to aid European Recovery
EAG	Europe–America Groups
ECA	Economic Cooperation Administration
ERP	European Recovery Program
FTUC	Free Trade Union Committee
IACF	International Association for Cultural Freedom
ICD	Information Control Division
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IOD	International Organisations Division
NCFE	National Committee for a Free Europe
NCL	Non-Communist Left
NSC	National Security Council
OMGUS	Office of the Military Governor, United States
OPC	Office of Policy Coordination
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
OWI	Office of War Information
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
RDR	Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire
RPF	Rassemblement du Peuple Français
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationel Ouvrière
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USIA	United States Information Agency
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

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# Introduction

## Approaching the CCF: Gramsci, culture and the Cold War

The United States was paying the piper and it was always a great problem how loudly we could call the tune.<sup>1</sup>

With its Headquarters in Paris and its dozen or so periodicals, its frequent conferences and seminars, the Congress was supported by the CIA as part of that organization's covert activities, money being channeled through several existing foundations. This was kept a secret at the time ... Not that it would have been considered a matter of paramount concern by the key figures in the organization had they known, because at the time the sense of freedom under attack was so strong that help would have been accepted from just about any quarter.<sup>2</sup>

This book addresses the importance of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) as a cultural formation that had a decidedly *political* impact during the Cold War. It is argued that culture, and especially the autonomous, apolitical culture that the Congress ostensibly represented, was institutionalised by the US government (in particular the CIA) as an ideological force representative of the free society of the West from which it emerged. This determination presented such cultural activity in stark contrast to the cultural sterility that resulted from the doctrines imposed by both fascist and communist (i.e. totalitarian) regimes, but directly in relation to the Soviet Union. The Congress was, from its very beginnings, an institution created by and shaped by the political demands of the Cold War. Yet, importantly, it was also representative of cultural-intellectual concerns held by many in that same period.

Culture, of course, is a problematic research topic due to its lack of a uniform definition. As Samir Amin states, 'there is no generally accepted definition of the domain of culture, for the definition depends on the underlying theory of social dynamics that one adopts'.<sup>3</sup> Culture has often been considered at best secondary and at worst irrelevant for an understanding of political processes, with one scholar even remarking that 'culture and international relations easily appear to be mutually contradictory terms'.<sup>4</sup> Despite an increasing interest in cultural matters in recent years, with some valuable research on the history of cultural relations,<sup>5</sup> approaches have on the whole remained general and on a meta-theoretical level.<sup>6</sup>

For this study, two broad outlines of culture are made use of. First, the sociologist Raymond Williams referred to two interlocking interpretations of culture: as a broad 'informing spirit' of a people from a religious, national or ideal perspective, and as the 'active cultivation of the mind' that involves the arts and the expressions of the intellect. As Williams said, these two levels 'coexist, often uneasily ... to indicate the "whole way of life" of a distinct people or other social group'.<sup>7</sup> Second, and interlocking with the above, there is the introduction of the cultural-political connection by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. For Said there is no culturally neutral space – the aesthetic 'arts of description, communication, and representation' are always associated, however much at a distance, with ideas of nation, tradition, history and identity. Whereas culture can therefore be seen as 'a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage each other',<sup>8</sup> the more cogent linkages between culture and power are more relevant here:

Culture serves authority, and ultimately the nation state, not because it represses and coerces but because it is affirmative, positive, and persuasive. Culture is productive ... It is a historical force possessing its own configurations, ones that intertwine with those in the socio-economic sphere ...<sup>9</sup>

It is not just the promotion of an elite or high culture and its linkage to broader socio-cultural belief-systems that is at issue in this book. It is also how this process connected to power relations in the political and economic spheres in the West in the early Cold War period. In short, it is an attempt to deal with the complexities of a part of what has become known as the cultural Cold War.

In recent years the analysis of post-war US-European relations has diversified away from a simple treatment of overwhelming American power towards a greater understanding of the European input into Western political culture during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> The 'orthodox' approach was to emphasise American political and military capabilities, so that if cultural issues were dealt with at all, it was in the context of the export of US mass culture and the process of so-called 'Americanisation'.<sup>11</sup> While the study of early Cold War politics does now acknowledge the contribution of the Europeans towards the forging of a political-economic-military Atlanticism in alliance with the USA, the formation of a similar Atlanticist outlook on the cultural-intellectual plane remains to be fully explored. Yet it was exactly in the cultural-intellectual realm of activity, the realm of 'high culture' as it were, that considerable efforts were made to legitimise Euro-American Atlanticism, a prime example being the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The Congress is therefore understood here (as it was by its founding personnel) as the cultural-intellectual equivalent of the political economy of the Marshall Plan, its goals in the sphere of culture and ideas being complementary with the Economic Recovery Program's socio-economic and political aims.

In order to understand these connections more fully, the CCF is interpreted via the framework of hegemony as put forward by the influential theorist of

political economy and base–superstructure relations, Antonio Gramsci. Building on his work in the *Prison Notebooks*, it is possible to examine the linkages between the political, economic and cultural–intellectual realms through the connections and influence of transnational social elites. In particular, Gramsci's main contribution comes from his elucidation of culture as a complex set of norms in the domain of ideas, and how such norms are solidified through the influence of specific elite networks operating in the interests of a ruling group in the economy. In terms of the CCF, Gramsci's conception of hegemony thus offers a way to achieve a broader understanding of the Congress's historical context and cultural–intellectual purpose. While there was a clear instrumentalisation of culture (and 'cultural personnel' – the intellectuals) via the Congress for political purposes, it is claimed here that there was a more complex process of ideological alignment going on between key elites in the political, economic and cultural realms, and on an international scale. This is similar to what Scott Lucas has referred to as the development of 'State–private networks'. Lucas puts this framework forward not as a means to find the cause of Cold War political activity, but to enable a greater understanding of the cohesion of public–private interests and the effects this had on the conduct and outlook of political and civil society.<sup>12</sup>

The Congress for Cultural Freedom was initiated at a conference held in West Berlin from 26–9 June 1950 and lasted until its dissolution in 1979, its name having been changed in 1967 (due to the revelations of its funding by the CIA) to the International Association for Cultural Freedom. The initial gathering in Berlin, organised by private individuals with the support of the CIA and the US military authorities, represented in many ways a 'grand coalition' of individuals and viewpoints from a wide cross-section of post-war intellectual life, and the intention from the beginning was to solidify and maintain an anti-communist consensus amongst the Western intelligentsia. The catalyst for the formation of the Congress had been the efforts of the reinvigorated Cominform to influence European public opinion against the Marshall Plan and against American involvement in European affairs in general. In terms of occupations, those present in Berlin were mainly philosophers, historians, writers, editors, politicians and union leaders.<sup>13</sup> Those attending included former communists and members of the anti-fascist resistance, émigrés/refugees from the Soviet bloc, and European federalists. There were also several intellectual refugees who had fled Nazi Germany during the 1930s and who now returned from either Britain or, especially, the USA in order to renew contact with their homeland. One hundred and eighteen invitees represented twenty-one nationalities, including sizeable American, German, British, French, Swiss, Russian, Italian and Austrian contingents. Only two delegates, Kesha Malik from India and German Arciniegas from Colombia, came from beyond Europe. From a sociological angle, the Congress reinforced an important post-war intellectual axis between the USA and Europe, and specifically between New York, Berlin and Paris, which had already existed but which was now to be given a much higher profile. Politically, the dominant outlook was liberal-social democratic, although some

prominent delegates were certainly more to the right, reflecting the cross-section of political interests that the Congress represented in the beginning. This also gave the gathering a favourable polyphony of voices rather than a deliberate unanimity.<sup>14</sup>

Through 1950–1 the Congress was established as a permanent institution, with a headquarters in Paris. Over the coming years, through its prominent journals, large-scale conferences and seminars, and sometimes lavish festivals, it was to proclaim consistently (and, one might say, insistently) that freedom of the intellect and of culture in general was a prerequisite for any assessment of a progressive democratic society. In other words, no intellectual or cultural activity worth its name could be carried out, and no claim to cultural excellence could be made, without the assurance of complete independence from political interference. While this was intended as a direct refutation of the claims of Soviet logic that the West was ruled by a militant, decadent and doomed bourgeoisie, the contradictions were all too apparent when the CIA involvement became public knowledge in the late 1960s. Despite the continuation of the Congress under an altered name and new personnel, the legitimacy of this organisation and the credibility of what it stood for was irreparably damaged.

### **Gramsci, intellectuals and hegemony**

An important element of Gramsci's explorations in the theory of political economy is his extension of the sense of the political, building on Marx's secondary treatment of politics to put forward a wider, more practical interpretation.

[A]ll men are political beings ... Every man, in as much as he is active, i.e. living, contributes to modifying the social environment in which he develops (to modifying certain of its characteristics or to preserving others); in other words, he tends to establish 'norms', rules of living and behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

This determination of politics as involving far more than the simple machinations of state power can be usefully explored when looking at the Congress. How ideas become transformed, or, better, institutionalised and presented as norms of social thought and behaviour (and which ideas become norms in this way), is therefore a fundamental question. This involves looking at the state–civil society relationship, since it was in the realm of civil society that the cultural formation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was intended to have its political impact as a cultural formation. The CCF was part of the 'politics of apolitical culture': an organisation representing the connection between semi-autonomous cultural–intellectual developments and political intentions. For Gramsci, the 'bridge' between political and civil society (which was, as he fully admitted, necessarily an abstract distinction for the purposes of theoretical understanding) was provided by the alliances of leading groups, and the coordination of their interests, in the political, economic and cultural realms. The result, in certain specific historical

periods, can be referred to as the hegemony or 'intellectual-moral leadership' of a particular social group based upon a 'historic bloc'. This, clearly, is a step beyond simple notions of base-superstructure relations. Above all, Gramsci considered that this concept of hegemony depended on the transformation of sectional interests, via influence and compromise, into a 'general interest' for society as a whole that could overcome conflicting interpretations of the world. Hegemony thus operates as a kind of 'umbrella of interpretation' and not as a simple integrated system. The complexities involved in achieving any level of 'intellectual and moral leadership' by means of consent in a democratic society make hegemony necessarily a multi-layered, multi-faceted coalition of social forces, its components and alliances changing through time.

The key participants in the elucidation of a 'general interest' were 'the intellectuals'. As with 'culture', problems of definition arise again.

Although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals ... Each man ... carries on some form of intellectual activity ... he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it ...<sup>16</sup>

By emphasising that the way to approach this group was via their social function and not via their individual characteristics, Gramsci was able to represent intellectuals as 'the entire social stratum which exercises an organisational function in the wide sense – whether in the field of production, or in that of culture, or in that of political administration'.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective the CCF therefore becomes an intervention in the cultural realm within civil society, organised with the intention of achieving a hegemonic, normative influence for a particular conception of the role of the intellectual and the direction of post-war thought. It provided a sense of consensus around certain shared values and interests, and therefore contributed towards achieving social stability. However, although presented as if they apply to and affect everyone equally, such values actually support a conception of society that continues to maintain specific hierarchies of power.<sup>18</sup>

However, referring to the formation of the CCF primarily as an intervention in civil society tends to undermine how far the Congress did address the actual concerns of those who considered cultural-intellectual values to be genuinely under threat at that time. Crucially, this observation points out why the CCF was relatively successful as a hegemonic institution. Sections of the post-war Euro-American intelligentsia actively teamed up with the Atlanticist political-economic elites because this gave their opinions greater effect. The CCF therefore represented more than just the ideological justification for Atlanticism. It is in this respect that Gramsci offers some valuable insights, since 'by clarifying the *political functions of cultural symbols*, the concept of cultural hegemony can aid intellectual historians trying to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures ...'.<sup>19</sup> In this way the concept of hegemony effectively transforms the critical appreciation of cultural activity.



Cultural work and activity are not now, in any ordinary sense, a superstructure: not only because of the depth and thoroughness at which any cultural hegemony is lived, but because cultural tradition and practice are seen as much more than superstructural expressions ... of a formed social and economic structure. On the contrary, they are among the basic processes of the formation itself and, further, related to a much wider area of reality than the abstractions of 'social' and 'economic' experience.<sup>20</sup>

The Congress for Cultural Freedom represented a notable attempt to normalise the view that the USA and Western Europe belonged to the same intellectual-cultural heritage, and that this heritage required a sustained defence. This tied in with the interests of elites in the USA and Europe who considered it a political, military, economic, and indeed cultural necessity that America adopt an internationalist position which would solidify its connection to and involvement in post-war European affairs. The cultural element to this process was therefore not superficial, but intrinsic. Thus in the words of Raymond Williams: "cultural practice" and "cultural production" are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution'.<sup>21</sup>

### **Gramsci on an international level**

Over the last twenty years the work of Antonio Gramsci has provided the basis for some important theoretical developments in the field of international studies, and a significant body of literature now exists that has been broadly inspired by his investigations.<sup>22</sup> For researchers of international political economy, Gramscian-influenced theory has been used to explain the formation and effects of social relations beyond the national level, such that the focus has been on how ideas, their solidification into norms, and their relation to material forces, have operated with a transnational scope.<sup>23</sup> Critiques of both orthodox interpretations of power and vulgar notions of hegemony as political-military dominance have pointed out how state-civil society relations involve a far more complex coalition of forces than previously presented.<sup>24</sup> Stephen Gill has noted that:

[t]he movement towards the extension of Gramscian ideas has [led to research] on the internationalisation of state and civil society, the international aspects of social hegemony and supremacy, transnational class and bloc formations and economic forces, the role of organic intellectuals and of international organisations and other issues which help to define the nature of global politics in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

Above all, this trend of thought has attempted to articulate a more complex understanding of the operation of power within social relations on an international level. Yet, despite the salience of much of the work that has been inspired by Gramsci's developments of Marxist-based theory, it is a mistake to assume