

NOTEBOOK

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On the Committee for Cultural Freedom

The recent revelations about secret CIA subsidies has brought to public attention the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international grouping of intellectuals, and its affiliate in this country, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. Notably missing in the discussions these last few months has been an effort to analyze politically the role of these groups during the years when the Cold War was at its height. Such an analysis did appear in the pages of DISSENT some twelve years ago; it was written by Michael Harrington; and it seems just as cogent now as it was then. We wish we had the space to reprint the entire article as it appeared in our Spring 1955 issue, but here, completely unchanged, is a significant portion of it.—Ed.

In practice the ACCF has fallen behind Sidney Hook's views on civil liberties. Without implying any "conspiracy" theory of history (or even of intellectual intrigue), one may safely say that it is Hook who has molded the decisive ACCF policies. His *Heresy Yes, Conspiracy No* articles were widely circulated by the Committee, which meant that in effect it endorsed his systematic, explicit efforts to minimize the threat to civil liberties and to attack those European intellectuals who, whatever their own political or intellectual deficiencies, took a dim view of American developments. Under the guidance of Hook and the leadership of Irving Kristol, who supported Hook's general outlook, the American Committee cast its weight not so much in defense of those civil liberties which were steadily being nibbled away, but rather against those few remaining fellow-travelers

who tried to exploit the civil liberties issue.

At times this had an almost comic aspect. When Irving Kristol was executive secretary of the ACCF, one learned to expect from him silence on those issues that were agitating the whole intellectual and academic world, and enraged communiqués on the outrages performed by people like Arthur Miller or Bertrand Russell in exaggerating the danger to civil liberties in the U.S.

Inevitably, this led to more serious problems. In an article by Kristol, which first appeared in *Commentary* and was later circulated under the ACCF imprimatur, one could read such astonishing and appalling statements as "there is one thing the American people know about Senator McCarthy: he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they

feel they know no such thing. And with some justification." This, in the name of defending cultural freedom! As someone remarked, the Committee might better have renamed itself the American Committee for Cultural Accommodation.

We are not, to be sure, dealing with a black-and-white matter. In a number of cases the Committee has acted within the United States in defense of freedom. It protested to Attorney General Brownell on the treatment of Chaplin and Arthur Miller; it was active in the Muhlenberg College case where some Chaplin films were banned; it criticized the procedure of the McCarthy investigation of the Voice of America. The Committee also claims to have done good work in ways precluding publicity, and there is no reason to doubt this claim. Currently, it is intervening in the case of Barry Miller, a former member of the Politics Club of the University of Chicago to whom the army refuses an honorable discharge because of his past (anti-Stalinist) associations.

But these activities do not absorb the main attention or interest of the Committee: its leadership is too jaded, too imbued with the sourness of indiscriminate anti-Stalinism to give itself to an active struggle against the dominant trend of contemporary intellectual life in America. What it really cares about most is a struggle against fellow-travelers and "neutralists"—that is, against many European intellectuals; but it fails to see that even in terms of such an objective, it could be effective only if it fought with vigor and passion against the violations of freedom that have mounted up in the U.S., instead of querulously

minimizing their extent and gravity.

One of the crippling assumptions of the Committee has been that it would not intervene in cases where Stalinists or accused Stalinists were involved. It has rested this position on the academic argument, advanced most systematically by Sidney Hook, that Stalinists, being enemies of democracy, have no "right" to democratic privileges and that, consequently, no threat to civil liberties or cultural freedom is involved when they are deprived of these privileges. But the actual problem is not the metaphysical one of whether enemies of democracy (as the Stalinists clearly are) have a "right" to democratic privileges. What matters is that the drive against cultural freedom and civil liberties takes on the guise of anti-Stalinism. Thus, for example, such an outrage as depriving the veteran anti-Stalinist radical Max Shachtman of a passport with which to travel in Europe—a State Department act one may assume the ACCF would not approve of—is made possible or at least much easier by the precedents created in prosecutions and persecutions of the Stalinists. Given such facts, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to defend civil liberties without clearly defending the civil rights of Stalinists (which has nothing whatever to do with [defending] spies or sabotage). And this the Committee has failed to do.

But it has gone even further. In December 1952 it published a "Memorandum on the Visa Problem." This document was concerned with the entry of foreign intellectuals, trade unionists, etc., into the United States. The cases which gave rise to the Memorandum were, of course, those of