# Liberal conspirators

*by Louis Greenspan*

Peter Coleman. *The Liberal Conspiracy: the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Post-War Europe.* New York: The Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1989. Pp. 333. US$22.95.

PETER COLEMAN'S *The Liberal Conspiracy* is an absorbing account of the rise and fall of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. An organization of intellectuals opposed to communism, the Congress played a vital role in forming the political *zeitgeist* of the western world in the fifties and sixties. Few educated people coming to maturity at that time could have escaped the influence of its authors or its ideas. Twenty years later the Congress is usually remembered as one of the relics of the cold war, an organization that lost its credibility when the *New York Times* revealed that it was funded by the CIA.

The title of this volume is perhaps ironic, because its most important message to the reader is that the Congress was not a conspiracy. Coleman, an Australian journalist and a former editor of one of the Congress journals, the *Quadrant*, was one of those taken by surprise by the revelations concerning the connections between the Congress and the CIA. In this work, the product of ten years of research, Coleman examines the Congress in all of its facets, including the role of the CIA. He dismisses the widely held view that its leading figures were compromised by the CIA connection. He argues that the Congress was formed by intellectuals of impeccable integrity in response to a genuine need and that it declined because of the complexity of the political challenges of the



late sixties.

Coleman's story begins at the end of the Second World War when a few intellectuals, especially Melvyn J. Lasky and Arthur Koestler, were convinced of the need "to save Western Civilization". By this they meant the need for a counterattack against the communist domination of the arts and letters. The chosen battlefield was the network of forums of academic and intellectual exchange—academic conferences, writers' congresses, and journals—forums that they discovered had been successfully infiltrated before and during the war by Soviet apologists, fellow-travellers and hard-core Party members. The belief that whoever controls academia controls the world may seem odd to the layman, but it became a powerful conviction after World War II when policy makers impressed by the achievements of atomic physics and Keynesian economics hurriedly adopted Bacon's famous aphorism that knowledge means power. Coleman gives a rousing ringside account of the "wars of the festivals" and the people who fought them. He traces the campaigns to every corner of the globe. The Congress mobilized many of the most important intellectuals in the arts and social sciences, it sponsored many of the leading journals of the time, such as *Encounter, China Quarterly* and *Soviet Affairs*, and it arranged seminars that brought scientists and scholars together as a community against communism. It was more like a counter-reformation than a conspiracy.

The Congress took care to distinguish itself from the religious and right-wing crusades against communism that swept post-war America. The intellectuals of the Congress were of the left. They were connected with the trade unions and socialist parties of the western world. They distanced themselves from the religion of anti-communism, from those who were preparing themselves for Armageddon between communism and Christianity, and even the intellectual right as represented by the journal *National Review* was beyond the pale. Their goal was a truly scientific socialism that was to be free of the pretensions of ideology. They were not bold enough to proclaim the end of history, but like many democratic socialists they were prepared to announce an end to ideology.

Coleman argues that the Congress succeeded in creating an intellectual world beyond ideology. Thus he emphasizes the Congress's intellectual openness. He contends that the "end of ideology" seminars, convened by Daniel Bell in the late fifties, were the Congress's finest achievement. These seminars, Coleman insists, created a community of social scientists, in which different individuals and groups of individuals were able to disagree profoundly without calling for purges, new phases of the class struggle and all of the ideological *sturm und drang* that accompanied disagreements in the communist bloc. Such seminars were the culmination of a debate that plagued the Congress from the beginning. The debate was between Arthur Koestler, who thought that the Congress should emphasize its mission as a great crusade, and Silone, who was convinced that the Congress would defeat communism by creating an alternative, thoughtful approach to problems, treating each singly and carefully. In later years some were hopeful that the destalinization in the late fifties was leading to an erosion of ideology in the east, towards convergence between the societies of the east and the west. Others thought not. Finally some thought that the New Left that made its appearance in the early sixties was a new enemy, others that attempts should be made to bring the

New Left into dialogue.

Coleman's account notes but does not explain sufficiently that not everyone thought that the Congress had reached a plateau above the cave of ideology. The Congress had to struggle to establish itself in the Third World and even in some parts of Europe. In India, in Latin America, and even to some degree in Britain, the Congress could not shake the reputation of being a front for agencies of the American government. Nehru was suspicious of its activities in India; Latin American anti-communists kept it at arm's length; and British intellectuals were also jumpy about whether the Congress loved truth more than it hated communism. One of the episodes that Coleman recalls is the events leading to Bertrand Russell's resignation over a conflict with the American branch. But Russell, as his archives show, believed that the Congress had a different standard in addressing abuses of freedom in the east and in the west.

Coleman's conclusions are too complex and indeed too novel to summarize easily. He reports that the CIA was not forthcoming with the evidence that it would allow him to peruse, thus obliging him to base his conclusions on speculation. But one of his most arresting findings is that the most hawkish of the Congress militants were not necessarily those who were in on the secret of the CIA connection. He describes a series of episodes in which the head office in Paris under a remarkable figure, Josselson, who was fully apprised of the CIA role in the Congress, tried to curb the excessive zeal of the American branch on a number of issues. Josselson was the CIA contact in the Congress, but, unlike the activists in the American branch, who had no connection to the CIA, he wanted to stop the execution of the Rosenbergs and wanted to criticize McCarthyism and American racism severely. Josselson, it turns out, was prepared to be more critical of America than his fellows who were completely unaware of the ties with the CIA.

Indeed Coleman seems to sympathize with the activists in the American branch. His sole criticism of the CIA, that the agency forced the Congress to retain a sterile leftist liberalism that prevented it from taking the step towards neoconservatism, will surprise many readers. I know of no other document that accuses the CIA of excessive sympathy for the left. This is also a puzzling conclusion in the light of the fact that many of the leading neoconservatives did indeed come from the Congress, and some will find it inconsistent with his praises for the Congress striving to be free of ideology.

But the most important conclusion of his investigation is that the CIA connection was greatly exaggerated and was not what killed the Congress. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, he maintains, was the victim of internal schisms during the sixties. The degree to which these had weakened the Congress became evident during a large, prestigious conference held at Princeton in 1968. This conference was a debacle as the Congress was paralyzed by disagreements over the Vietnam war and because its hesitations were in sharp contrast to the moral certainties of the New Left. In the light of this, the revelations concerning the CIA connection were merely a *coup de grâce.*

Much has happened since the demise of the Congress and indeed since Mr. Coleman's book was published. On one hand the suggestion throughout the book of an imminent communist victory in the west is exaggerated; on the other the left's announcement of the moral and political defeat of the Congress in the sixties was also premature. The story is mixed.



At the moment one cannot avoid speculating about the continuing influence of the Congress in the defeat of communism in France and Italy and finally in Eastern Europe. It is arguable that it had very little role at all. After the decline of the Congress in the mid-sixties there was a flowering of academic Marxism throughout the western world, and especially in the country that was meant to be immune from Marxism—England. Congress veterans must have been appalled to see respectable bookstores in London set aside whole sections for Marxist writers. The defeat of Marxism in France seems to have been the work of disenchanted New Leftists who had joined the insurrections in 1968 and then turned against communism—intellectuals who knew nothing of the Congress.

But it is also true that those humanists and anti-Stalinists who spearheaded the defeat of communism in Eastern Europe were groups whom the Congress had been cultivating or trying to cultivate and who agree with more of the Congress's views than many people of the left would like to admit. First of all their anti-communism, like that of the Congress, is the anti-communism of the new class, of intellectuals who regard themselves as technocrats beyond ideology. Even heroic figures such as Sakharov, and even Havel, seem to be closer to the Congress than to any comparable group in the west. Thus a balance sheet of the achievements and shortcomings of the Congress for Cultural Freedom awaits the unfolding of history. Mr. Coleman's work will remain an essential document for such a balance sheet.

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