

**“Verbal Opposition ...  
Encouraged by the  
Powerful”:  
Private Philanthropy and  
the Cultural Cold War**

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## “Verbal Opposition ... Encouraged by the Powerful”: Private Philanthropy and the Cultural Cold War

On February 29, 1968, readers of the *New York Review of Books* would encounter a stirring indictment of the United States of America: In an open letter, titled “On Leaving America,” and addressed to Wesleyan University president Edwin D. Etherington, the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger publicly renounced a fellowship that sponsored his stay at the school. America’s activities in Vietnam made it so that Enzensberger could no longer accept the support from Wesleyan, while millions of Vietnamese suffered. Instead, the politically committed writer would take to Cuba to see if he could somehow contribute to its revolutionary transformation. “Verbal opposition is today in danger of becoming a harmless spectator sport, licensed, well-regulated and, up to a point, even encouraged by the powerful,” Enzensberger writes in conclusion. Supported by a respectable American institution of higher learning, Enzensberger felt disarmed in his opposition, adding that “the mere fact of my being here on these terms would devalue whatever I might have to say.”<sup>1</sup>

The article caught the attention of Enzensberger’s compatriot and fellow writer, Uwe Johnson, who was on an extended stay in New York at the time. Supported by a \$7,000 grant-in-aid from the Rockefeller Foundation, Johnson was preparing materials for his magnum opus, his four-volume novel *Anniversaries: From a Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl* (1970-83).<sup>2</sup> The novel tells the story of a full year of the single mother Gesine Cresspahl and her daughter Marie, who emigrated from Germany to New York, where they took residence at 243 Riverside Drive (Johnson’s actual address during his two years in Manhattan). With a chapter devoted to each day between August 20, 1967 to August 20, 1968, the novel is massive in scope as it narrates Gesine and Marie’s lives amid politically turbulent times. As an internal Rockefeller Foundation memo reveals, Johnson had chosen the timespan well in advance of the most dramatic events of this pivotal year.<sup>3</sup>

While much of the novel is told in retrospective accounts of Gesine's childhood and adolescence, first in Nazi Germany and then in the GDR, it turns a keen eye to contemporary events in late sixties' America. Chapters frequently open with an overview of the day's news, mostly excerpted from the respective issue of the *New York Times*. In the February 29, 1968 chapter, however, Johnson's narrator turns his attention to the shrill screed by Enzensberger, sarcastically dissecting numerous claims from the open letter as he feels the need to fend off claims that private patronage by American philanthropic institutions somehow regulated one's "Verbal opposition."<sup>4</sup>

The archival documents related to the making of *Anniversaries* open the next chapter in the ongoing study of the so-called "Cultural Cold War," an often surreptitiously fought struggle over the hearts and minds of artists and intellectuals in the early decades of the Cold War. The popularly most well-known example of the Cultural Cold War is the mostly clandestine support for abstract expressionist artists by the federal government of the United States. It sought to showcase the American avant-garde in an effort to counteract claims that the superpower was a cultural backwater that fed its citizens a steady diet of lowbrow mass-culture kitsch. Revelations by the *New York Times*, *Ramparts*, and other publications starting in 1966 revealed that many artistic and scholarly institutions of the Cold War era, like the internationally operating Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), had received funding by the CIA and other agencies of the American foreign policy apparatus. Disgraced by the revelations, these institutions soon faded from prominence, while scholars since the 1970s have taken a revisionist view of arts and letters during the Cultural Cold War. Did this secret government support signify that much of the postwar modernism that held the critics' attention had been artificially boosted? Recently, literary scholar Juliana Spahr has dramatically concluded that the claims to "autonomy" by these modernist tendencies were unwarranted because "[w]hen literature is instrumentalized by the government as the good form of protest and then used to suppress more militant dissent, it is not autonomous."<sup>5</sup>

Spahr's provocation necessitates that we revisit the various incarnations of this "Cold War modernism."<sup>6</sup> My dissertation is intended to contribute to these

ongoing revisionist efforts, especially as they relate to postwar literature. Following Greg Barnhisel's critique of the revisionist school, however, I argue that suggestions that writers were somehow compromised by the secret workings of Cold War agencies are overblown and disregard their independent aesthetic commitments that cannot be said to have been swayed one way or the other. Many of the writers to whom my dissertation turns, like James Baldwin or Saul Bellow, had identified themselves with the Trotskyist movement of the American left during the 1930s and 40s. Yet, their subsequent turn against Communism, toward a more moderate center-left socialism, was a near universal move to be observed among large swaths of the American left in the wake of revelations of Stalin's crimes and the general lack of freedom and economic dynamism in official Communist countries. Granted, Trotskyists had been critical of Stalin's reign from the get-go, but the still loyal Communist Party USA, too, had shrunk dramatically given these revelations. The influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts can easily be exaggerated when it comes to explaining this demise of the American left. While McCarthyism was mostly directed at former New Dealers in the ranks of the State Department and other agencies where officials with dovish views toward the Soviet Union could still be found, the American left had mostly lost its numbers independently of these goings-on. This right-ward shift, however, occurred outside the United States as well, and thus a study of European writers like the German Uwe Johnson or the Swiss writer Max Frisch, both of whom had received grants from American foundations, becomes necessary to widen the scope of our understanding of the Cultural Cold War.

Since the United States lacked an official department of culture, it would fall to private institutions like the Rockefeller or Ford Foundations to boost the cultural appeal of the nation in the face of its systemic enemy. Similar to Spahr's indictments, Eric Bennett has cast a skeptical eye on the influence of these foundations on post-War American letters, arguing that the views expressed by Rockefeller and Ford Foundation officials largely aligned with those of the cold warriors in the State Department or CIA.<sup>7</sup> In studying the aesthetic commitments of diverse writers like Baldwin, Bellow, Frisch, or Johnson, all of whom were grantees by the two big private foundations, we will have a representative set of postwar literary voices as they navigated the murky waters of the Cold War era. Our findings, in turn, will help to complicate the rather simplistic views presented

by Spahr and Bennett. What shall emerge is the fact that the cultural politics of this literary epoch revealed a broadly liberal, cosmopolitan ethic that allowed criticism of American racism and foreign belligerence as well as the totalitarian suppression of artistic autonomy to the east of the Iron Curtain. In many ways, this was possible *because* these writers insisted on their own aesthetic autonomy in working on their novels.

It is undeniable that foundation officials held on to patriotic views that broadly aligned them with the idealist goals of American foreign policy, but this did not stop especially conservative politicians in Congress from feeling hostility to a body of institutions they found too un-American for their taste. By supporting the efforts of parts of the Civil Rights Movement, the Ford Foundation had also drawn the ire of the segregationists of the Southern Citizens' Councils. What emerged was an opposition between a nationalistically-oriented conservatism on the right and the foundations' liberal-humanist cosmopolitanism on the center. As Ford Foundation Humanities and Arts official W. McNeil Lowry put it in 1958, these foundations were "chartered so broadly as to embrace the advancement of human welfare," using their money as a consequence "to advance the progress of individuals and other institutions toward objectives which at least a large segment of mankind will call beneficent." As he adds in a notable afterthought to these idealistic reflections, "This kind of foundation cannot safely allow the potential reaction of the public to be a cardinal influence upon its separate decisions."<sup>8</sup> Especially when it came to the arts, in other words, a field so deeply contested by conflicting tastes and political sentiments, the foundations would take the function of a disinterested judge allocating funds to promote developments that may not have won yet the approval of mass audiences. "Human welfare," as it came to be advanced by the artists themselves, required support precisely because they were literally *avant-garde*, i.e. ahead of their times, so that success on the literary or art market could not be counted on yet to grant them their free and independent unfolding.

With an eye on these realities, the Ford Foundation finally began supporting creative writers with grants-in-aid in 1958-9. A typical news release announcing the latest winners of these grants would state that they "will enable the recipients to extend their professional experience and increase their familiarity with current

work in their field through travel, observation, and study.”<sup>9</sup> Since many of the writers would take up the opportunity to familiarize themselves with literary developments across the world through travel, these grants would necessarily give their works a cosmopolitan aura, thus fulfilling the foundations’ high-flung idealism to promote “human welfare.” Once exposed to the cultures of other nations, the underlying idea seemed to go, potentially narrow-minded nationalisms could be outstripped and a community of minds established beyond the borders of the various nation states.

Among the first batch of writers to be granted this aid were James Baldwin and Saul Bellow. Their communications with Ford Foundation officials reveal that both perfectly fit the mould of desired grantees. Already well-traveled before receiving his grant, Baldwin, for example, sought after the foundation’s support to justify further travels—this time to the American South. Going to where slavery had happened, he hoped, he would:

find that something still remains, in the air, in the people. And I will have to take this ‘something’ and squeeze out of it every drop it has to give. I will try to follow [Henry] James’s advice: ‘Strive to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost’. I will keep my eyes open - and my mouth shut.<sup>10</sup>

Revealed here is an affirmation of a realist aesthetic (especially in reference to James), where the novelist understands his function to lie in being a disinterested observer, not a writer whose political concerns would take priority in choosing his subject matter and presenting it appropriately. Baldwin explained that *Another Country* (1962), his novel project at that time, would explore “what it means to be an American,” though the answer was most likely going to be an affirmation of the belief that “Americanness” is not defined by blood and soil; instead, the French character Vivaldo would discover his own American identity, which he would henceforth fashion in the melting pot of American society. We can observe a notable interest in the nature of American identity in these words, but this is not to contradict the cosmopolitan streaks of Cold War modernism, since this definition of Americanness rests on the presumption that American society itself was rooted in cosmopolitan ideals. A return to this complicated mid-century

subject matter gains obvious urgency when read against attacks on “globalism” in our present age.

In a way, the support for European writers like Max Frisch and Uwe Johnson took even greater priority against the backdrop of the Cultural Cold War, since the very point of the conflict was to wrestle artists away from the grip of Soviet ideology. Anti-American prejudices on the old continent would prove a formidable obstacle though. It would help to combat them, the reasoning went, if these artists could experience America firsthand. What better way to disarm the nation’s critics? With a keen sense for her audience, Hannah Arendt had argued such in her supporting letters for Johnson’s application, explaining that the Rockefeller Foundation’s grant would be in the service of geopolitical stability, for the “great objective importance”<sup>11</sup> of a grant-in-aid would be felt with regard to “‘international relations’ on the highest possible level.”<sup>12</sup> Rockefeller Foundation officer Gerald Freund felt successfully persuaded by this case, seeing in Johnson a “morally concerned man” of “liberal” mentality with a “remarkable integrity” truly deserving of aid.<sup>13</sup> None of this meant, however, that *Anniversaries* portrayed American society through rose-colored glasses. In its vast attention to current events that take place in its year-long timespan, the novel will document assassinations, racial tensions, crime, the latest death tolls from Vietnam, all to paint a conflicted portrait of the nation. But in its critique of Enzensberger’s flight to Cuba, we also encounter in the novel a number of characters who would rather stand their ground and reveal grace under historic pressure. Enzensberger, Johnson implies, had attempted to withdraw himself from responsibility to retain a clear conscience, but contributed little to the improvement of American social life in the process. Here, too, the novel reveals a strange timeliness as political discourse today largely seems to circle around who gets to keep a cleaner vest than the other from accusations of moral and linguistic improprieties. How fitting, then, that *Anniversaries* received its first complete English translation in 2018 by New York Review Books Classics.

How do we evaluate the impact of private philanthropies on 20th century literary history? It is obviously impossible to disentangle the question properly: Did writers like Baldwin, Bellow, Frisch, and Johnson gain prominence based on the merits of their craft or did the generous institutional support they received play

its part? In a certain respect, the question is beside the point. Looked at the matter from the perspective of autonomy, Spahr's objections notwithstanding, the institutional context of an artwork's making has little to say about the meaning of the work itself. This is neither to defend nor excuse possible entanglements with the state-philanthropy nexus; but the latter had motives that were ulterior to the intentions of the writers themselves. Archival research can give us insight into these intentions, though the best place to look for them remains the finished text. Either way, Baldwin felt honored by the Ford Foundation grant and promised its officers that he "will do everything in my power to justify the Foundation's confidence."<sup>14</sup> The reflections above will hopefully have revealed what the source of this confidence has been: With cosmopolitan values under assault then as now, it has become a valuable undertaking to study this moment in American (and transatlantic) literary history, when these values received the broadest institutional support.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "On Leaving America," *The New York Review of Books* 10, no. 4 (Feb. 29, 1968):

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1968/02/29/on-leaving-america/>.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Uwe, 1967-1968, Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, SG 1.2, Series 300 Latin America - Series 833 Lebanon, Series 717: Germany, Subseries 717.R: Germany - Humanities and Arts, FA387B, Box 11, Folder 111, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Freund diary, Jan. 22, 1968, Johnson, Uwe, 1967-1968, Rockefeller Foundation records, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Uwe Johnson, *Anniversaries: From A Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*, Vol. 1. Translated by Damion Searls. New York: New York Review Books, 2018, p. 696.

<sup>5</sup> Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2018, p. 16. The classics of the revisionist genre are undoubtedly Serge Guilbait, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983 and Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The term is Greg Barnhisel's. See his *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*. Iowa City, Univ. of Iowa Press, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> W. McNeil Lowry, "The Role of the Foundation in America," Ford Foundation records, Office of Humanities and the Arts, Office of the Vice President, Office Files of Wilson McNeil Lowry, Series 200: United States; Subseries 200.R: United States - Humanities and Arts, FA582, Box: 26, Folder: 7, Rockefeller Archive Center.

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<sup>9</sup> “News from the Ford Foundation,” Ford Foundation records, Photographs, Series 3, FA738, Box 85, Folder 1409, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>10</sup> James Baldwin to W. McNeil Lowry, Jan. 12, 1959, Ford Foundation records, American Literary Manuscripts (ALM) collection, FA718, Box 1, Folder 1, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt to Gerald Freund, March 31, 1967, Johnson, Uwe, 1967-1968, Rockefeller Foundation records, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt to Gerald Freund, Jan. 17, 1968, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Freund diary, Jan. 22, 1968, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> James Baldwin to Joseph McDaniel, Feb. 19, 1959, Ford Foundation records, op. cit.