

*Of G-Men and Eggheads:
The FBI and the New York intellectuals
John Rodden
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John Rodden is one of the foremost authorities on both George Orwell and the New York intellectuals, most particularly Irving Howe. He is the author and editor of a number of books on Orwell, and his *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St George' Orwell* (OUP, 1989) is certainly one of the essential studies of the man, his work and his impact. He has also edited a number of books on Irving Howe and has written widely on East Germany under Communist rule and other subjects. Over the years I have learned a great deal from his writing. Consequently I was looking forward to the publication of *Of G-Men and Eggheads* with considerable interest. Unfortunately, while certainly worth reading, the book is actually something of a disappointment.

It examines FBI surveillance of three New York intellectuals, associated at various times with the journal *Partisan Review*: Lionel Trilling, Dwight Macdonald and Irving Howe. As Rodden makes clear, none of these men were any sort of threat to US national security and yet the FBI put considerable effort into keeping them under surveillance. Lionel Trilling had an active file from the late 1930s through to the mid-1960s. His file was opened just as he ended 'his formal adherence to Marxism' and yet nevertheless he was the subject of active surveillance on a number of occasions. After he had become 'a leading American professor' – and any involvement with the Left was a decade behind him – he remained of interest. Even when he was the beneficiary of 'government-sponsored and –financed junkets to Europe, courtesy of Perspectives USA, a CIA-front publication', the FBI remained suspicious. As Rodden puts it, as far as US national security was concerned Trilling was as 'politically safe' as it was possible to be. But that was not enough for the FBI.

What of Irving Howe? FBI agents attended his lectures, opened his mail and reported on his everyday activities over a seven year period. His growing influence as an intellectual excited Bureau interest in the 1950s, his *Dissent* lectures at one point being viewed with considerable alarm in case they 'might lead to a socialist mass movement'. When the Vietnam War became a political issue, Howe involved himself in what he characterised as the 'moderate' wing – in effect the half-hearted wing of the anti-war movement. He could only see the war from a Cold War perspective. This seems to make him much more acceptable to Rodden than the third of his intellectuals, Dwight Macdonald.

Dwight Macdonald was a much more radical figure than either Trilling or Howe. He was a former Trotskyist (as was Howe) who went on to embrace an idiosyncratic brand of anarcho-pacifism. He then lapsed

into a political quietism that lasted until his political fires were rekindled by the Vietnam War. Although Rodden does insist, quite correctly, that Macdonald 'should still exert a claim on our interest and attention today' and that 'his best . . . was very good indeed', Rodden seems distinctly uncomfortable with Macdonald.

The Bureau's investigations showed a degree of ignorance of the politics of the people they had under scrutiny that is positively hilarious and professionally disgraceful. As the Bureau saw it, anyone on the Left, who had been on the Left, or had been in any sort of close proximity to the Left, was a 'communist'. Even Trotskyists were treated as part of the Soviet Union's apparatus in the USA. In Macdonald's case, his file had him down as having been a CP member in Washington DC in the late Thirties, using the name 'McCarthy', when he was actually a Trotskyist living in New York. He excited the particular animosity of J Edgar Hoover for publishing an article attacking the FBI in his journal *politics* (the journal title was always printed lower case). Hoover was incredibly sensitive about criticism and saw it as something requiring retaliation by the Bureau. The author of the article, Clifton Northbridge Bennett, was an anarcho-pacifist. He had recently been released on parole from prison, where he had done time for draft refusal and the Bureau tried (unsuccessfully) to have his parole revoked. (The FBI was particularly put out by Macdonald trying to secure entry into the USA for the veteran of the Russian Revolution, Victor Serge, then living in Mexico.)

Rodden criticises Macdonald for what he sees as a lack of consistency and for 'mercurial political enthusiasms'; but what seems to really excite his animosity is Macdonald's 1960s radicalism. His attendance at Lyndon Johnson's White House Festival of the Arts in June 1965 provokes completely disproportionate censure. At a time when the US War in Vietnam was getting underway, this event was always going to be something of an obscenity and many of those invited refused to attend. Macdonald, however, did attend and went round collecting signatures for a petition opposing Johnson's policy. He had a stand-up row with Charlton Heston. Rodden regards his disruption of this event as the height of bad taste and lack of judgement. Given the enormity of what was unfolding in Vietnam, surely those who refused to sign Macdonald's petition are more deserving of censure.

Macdonald, we are told, also had a 'blithe enthusiasm for the student radicals and counterculture faddists . . . for the student demonstrators who occupied professors' offices and closed down colleges'. Now how does occupying a professor's office weigh in the scales with the crimes the US committed in Vietnam or even with the killing of student protestors at Kent State (four shot dead) and at Jackson State (two shot dead)? Moreover we are told that Macdonald's misjudgement 'represented a political and moral surrender that has had long-term disastrous consequences', including 'multiculturalism' and MTV, 'postmodernism' and

soft porn; and, more generally, 'a zombie-like state of shallow thinking bereft of introspection'. All this is the fault of the anti-war movement!

Rodden makes the point that the FBI's surveillance of New York intellectuals was clearly an invasion of privacy and even a violation of civil rights; but, as he also points out, it pales in comparison with the excesses of the NKVD. This is certainly true but leaves out both the domestic and international contexts for the activities of the US secret state. There has been a long-standing – and whenever necessary – ferocious domestic hostility towards the Left in the United States. It was this that swept up the likes of Trilling into the FBI's web of surveillance. Other people were, of course, subjected to more severe measures in the 1950s – blacklisting, imprisonment and, in the case of the Rosenbergs, execution. While critics at home might have been treated mildly compared with how the NKVD would have dealt with them, the same cannot be said for many of the regimes the US supported in the name of the Cold War – a useful cover for the exercise of US Imperial power. Indeed, after Stalin's death, many of the regimes that the US installed or supported were far more brutal and murderous than the post-Stalin Soviet Union.

In his concluding 'Epilogue: The Orwellian Future?', Rodden appeals to George Orwell for support of the Cold War policy of containing, rather than rolling back, the Soviet Union. We have no way of knowing how Orwell's politics would have developed had he not died at forty-six. If we must speculate it is not so much his view of the Soviet Union which would have been of interest, but his attitude towards US Imperialism and US support for military dictatorships and repressive regimes across the world.

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A new edition of his *British Counterinsurgency*
has recently been published.