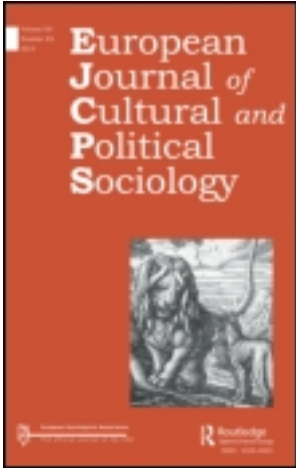


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Publisher: Routledge

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## European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recp20>

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Published online: 30 May 2014.

To cite this article: Peter Baehr (2014) The informers: Hannah Arendt's appraisal of Whittaker Chambers and the ex-Communists, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1:1, 35-66, DOI: [10.1080/23254823.2014.909734](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2014.909734)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2014.909734>

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## The informers: Hannah Arendt's appraisal of Whittaker Chambers and the ex-Communists

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*(Received 8 November 2013; accepted 26 March 2014)*

By the time that Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published in 1951, one totalitarian regime lay in ruins while another – Soviet Communism – stood newly reenergized. Stalin's prestige, burnished by victory, had never been greater. The cold war was re-dividing the world. And, in the United States, the fear of Communism was a pervasive feature of the political landscape. The revelation that the State Department and other government ministries, in the 1930s and beyond, had been penetrated by American Communists, prompted public outrage against the miscreants. It aroused corresponding curiosity about those who had once embraced the Marxist creed but who now publicly renounced it. One such person was Whittaker Chambers (1901–1961) – Communist spy, Communist defector, and key witness in the perjury trial of Alger Hiss. Into this imbroglio stepped Hannah Arendt. She was by turns suspicious and dismissive. Who were the ex-Communists? Why had they broken with Communism? How thorough or deep-rooted was their abrogation? On her account, Chambers and others like him had no understanding of democratic politics and of what it means to be a quotidian political actor. She also denounced 'ex-Communist' informing as analogous to the exposure practices of totalitarian regimes. This article evaluates the cogency of her analysis. It devotes particular attention to a problematic distinction Arendt draws between 'ex-Communists' and 'former' Communists. And it seeks to answer a question that Arendt left opaque: when, if ever, is informing against fellow citizens justified in a constitutional republic?

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt; Whittaker Chambers; Communism; informing; Arthur Koestler

### Introduction

While Hannah Arendt was visiting Munich in June 1952, a package arrived for her back home in New York containing a book that would soon become a literary cause célèbre. Written by the errant Communist Whittaker Chambers, it bore a

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title – *Witness* – as linguistically economical as it proved to be provocatively rich (Chambers, 2002/1952). In Arendt’s absence, her husband Heinrich Blücher read it first. He was discomfited:

There’s no doubt, really, that his allegations are correct. And unfortunately: this man couldn’t act any differently. He had to become an ‘informer.’ He made his decision during the Hitler-Stalin pact, and they [sic] were necessary decisions. From my standpoint that doesn’t make the book any less horrible and, politically speaking, quite damaging – but that, not out of ill will but out of ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

Arendt’s immediate response is unknown. On political matters, she and Blücher were typically in accord. But her view of Whittaker Chambers (1901–1961) was, or came to be, very different from that expressed in her husband’s letter. Chambers’ decision to inform on past friends and colleagues was not ‘necessary,’ Arendt affirmed. It was transparently wrong because it recapitulated, in the fight against Communism, a Communist method. More generally, Arendt voiced the strongest reservations towards that group of people who had once embraced Communism wholeheartedly but who were now publicly renouncing it. In a famous slap down, her friend Mary McCarthy urged Arendt to dispatch Chambers without compunction. *Witness* did not deserve to be treated, and hence reviewed, as a proper book; it was something else: part of the attempt by ‘this new Right ... to get itself accepted as *normal*.’<sup>2</sup> Tony Judt (2008/1997, p. 307) commends Arendt for ignoring such coarse advice but he underestimates the degree to which she followed it. Two essays are particularly relevant for our purposes: the first, a piece for the liberal Catholic journal *The Commonwealth* called ‘The Ex-Communists’ (Arendt, 1994/1953),<sup>3</sup> and a slightly earlier, unpublished, paper entitled ‘The Eggs Speak Up’ (Arendt, 1994/1951/2). While noting some of their peculiarities of style and emphasis, I treat both essays as threads of a single argument.

My argument is that Arendt’s appraisal of Chambers suffers from a kind of conceptual suffocation: a blanketing of Chambers’ particular history, and the complexities it raises, by her desire to make a bigger point through a distinction between ‘former’ and ‘ex’-Communists. That distinction, I will show, is theoretically flawed because it is insufficiently flexible; it is unable to handle the most vital post-Communist biographies. It subordinates a character to a typology. A salient issue that Arendt raises in her discussion – the danger of political informing in a constitutional republic – is an important one and the inquisitional context in which she made it during the early cold war lends it credibility.<sup>4</sup> But Chambers was not the best vehicle for Arendt’s rebuke of political informing because he was in no wise a typical informer. By failing to consider the peculiarities of his case, Arendt simplifies rather than clarifies the political stakes involved. She tends to elide the act of informing with totalitarian means or methods as such, thereby leaving no conceptual room to think about it as a legitimate if exceptional practice within a constitutional republic. Informing is something characteristic of

the police, she insists, never of the duties owed by citizens to each other and to the state that houses their relationships. That assertion flatly evades, or at least is unable to ask, the hardest question of our discussion: might political informing ever be justified and, if so, under what conditions?

### *Witness*

Arendt's article on 'The Ex-Communists' says little about Whittaker Chambers and nothing at all about the Hiss case, except by implication. Her contemporaries, close to the sensational events, needed no introduction or reminders. Some 65 years later, we do.

Published in 1952, Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* narrates an epic chronicle of disgrace, drama, and redemption. A Long Island childhood, mired in humiliations petty and brutal, is recorded in agonizing detail. So too is the story of Chambers' dysfunctional family, a morass of estrangement and mental illness that culminates in the suicide of a beloved brother. But the core of *Witness* turns not on the hero's youth but on a quite different passage; it tells how Chambers was first attracted to Communism, then, in phases, repulsed by it. A student at Columbia University, Chambers adopted the Bolshevik credo in 1925. Lenin's essays electrified him. Their unsparing diagnosis of bourgeois society, and the world it created, paralleled Chambers' own sense of impotence. Equally compelling was the Leninist notion that revolution, eventuating in social justice on earth, was mandated by the dialectics of history. As the United States lurched further into economic depression, and as the western powers feebly stood by as fascism grew ever stronger in Europe, Chambers became in quick succession a Party member, a writer for its organ, *The New Masses*, and then an agent of the Communist underground – a courier of US government secrets furnished by Communist insiders – before eventually breaking with the Party at the time of Moscow purge trials of 1936 and 1937. Once his defection was complete, in April 1938, Chambers and his wife believed sensibly they were in mortal danger of assassination by the GPU. Fleeing with their children, they disappeared. But in September 1939, a few days after the Nazi–Soviet pact was signed, Chambers was urged by the anti-Communist journalist Isaac Don Levine to tell what he knew of Communist penetration of the United States government to Adolf A. Berle, an assistant secretary of state in charge of security. That information lay dormant until August 1948.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Chambers had reentered the non-Communist world, settled his family, and taken up professional employment as a writer at *Time* (1939–1948), rising up the ranks to become a senior editor of the magazine.

No one who knew Chambers at this stage in his life could have described him credibly as a man at peace. His appetite for work, on the newspaper and on his farm in Maryland, raising milch cattle, was prodigious, his anxiety about the state of the world unrelenting. But Chambers was at least politically accountable to no one, a far cry from his days in the Communist underground. If he was unhappy, he was happily so (Lukacs, 2002, p. 4). Not for long. The climax of

*Witness* centres on the trials of Alger Hiss, an American lawyer and federal government official who was also a Communist spy.<sup>6</sup> When Chambers, testifying under subpoena in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)<sup>7</sup> in early August 1948, was asked whether Hiss was a Communist Party member while serving in government, Chambers said that he was; he also named Harry Dexter White, a former assistant secretary of the treasury, John Abt, a former Labor Department attorney, among others. Yet in order to save a former friend and comrade from total ignominy, Chambers denied that Hiss had engaged in espionage, a plain lie. So matters may have ended in their fashion. Being a member of the Communist Party was not illegal. The act of espionage in office was subject to a five-year statute of limitation. And Chambers' allegations were protected from slander and libel suits by being uttered in an investigatory committee convened under Congressional auspices. But when Chambers, provoked by hostile interlocutors on *Meet the Press*, a radio program, repeated the claim of Hiss's Party membership, Hiss brought a civil action against him and demanded that Chambers now prove his defamatory allegations. A chain reaction was unleashed. The gloves now off, fighting both for his reputation and to avoid a costly financial settlement, Chambers divulged Hiss's former espionage. The proof consisted, inter alia, of papers and microfilm of State Department provenance. Hiss was prosecuted for two counts of perjury of which he was found guilty in January 1950 and sentenced to five years in prison.

Such a *précis*, careless of nuance, makes Chambers' memoir seem little more than a tawdry tale of spies, informers, and Washington malfeasance. In fact *Witness* is, at root, an odyssey of the soul, a passion play animated by a riveting compositional style. John Fleming (2009, p. 269), a professor of literature at Princeton University, describes it as 'perhaps the greatest American masterpiece of literary anti-Communism.' Reviewing *Witness* for the *Political Quarterly*, the British socialist intellectual and Labour Party politician R. H. Crossman (1953, p. 397) went even further. Chambers was a writer of 'immense power' who 'can be compared for the intensity of his penitent's vision with John Bunyan, for his unbalanced insight into spiritual abnormality with Dostoyevsky, and for the macabre brilliance of his style with Edgar Allen Poe.'<sup>8</sup> For Arendt (1994/1953, p. 392) too, Chambers' 'articulatness and gifts as a writer' were never in doubt.

### **Post-Communists**

Chambers was a Communist who became self-consciously an ex-Communist. What did that entail? Ex-Communists, he says, are not to be confused with pariahs of Bolshevism such as Trotsky who no longer accept the tactics and strategy of the Party, or such as Tito who refuse to obey a Russian dominated organization. These individuals remain Communists; while they disagree on the road map they share a common destination: the Communist utopia. Nor are ex-Communists that large body of 'spiritual vagrants' who drift in and out of the movement

looking, without ever finding complete fulfillment, for a substitute to rationalist desiccation. Nor, again, are ex-Communists men and women who leave the Party believing they were cheated by it and who then, in the guise of ‘honest dupes,’ turn on it in fury; such people tend to forget that ‘it takes two to make a swindle.’ Nor, finally, are ex-Communists individuals who break with the politics of the Communist ‘vision,’ but not with the vision itself; the reason they are unable to effect a full rupture is that such folk, as sincere as their revulsion now is, appear never to have grasped that Communism ‘is wrong because something else is right.’ When faced with the choice between *God or Man*, ‘they continue to give the answer: *Man*.’ They do not understand that ‘the soul has a logic that may be more compelling than the mind’s’:

By an ex-Communist I mean a man who knew clearly why he became a Communist, who served Communism devotedly and knew why he served it, who broke with Communism unconditionally and knew why he broke with it. Of these there are very few – an index to the power of the vision and the power of the crisis. (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 12)

Why do people make the break? The paths out of Communism are many; each bears the idiosyncratic signature of the person who leaves. A person who identifies himself as a Communist is one who accepts that ‘Terror is an instrument of policy, right if the vision is right, justified by history, enjoined by the balance of forces in the social wars of this century.’ But at some point the Communist who makes his escape hears what Chambers describes as ‘screams’ too penetrative and unnerving to bear. Those screams may come audibly from the sub-arctic labour camp, from the Lubianka torture chambers, from men torn from their wives during a midnight arrest, from children separated from their parents, and from many other chaotic scenes of horror. Or they may come silently as the Communist justifies to comrades the latest volte-face of Soviet foreign policy or develops another reel of microfilm to be sent off to his Kremlin masters. In each case something uncanny occurs that no amount of ratiocination could anticipate: the scream emitted and registered is an act of communication between one soul and another. That identification is at once the supreme evidence of a common humanity and of a common God. And how did Chambers break with Communism? ‘My answer is: Slowly, reluctantly, in agony’ (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 15). The haemorrhage occurred in phases, many of which are only half-recognizable in hindsight. Yet Chambers is convinced that ‘every sincere break with Communism is a religious experience.’<sup>9</sup> The rupture is a response to a ‘stirring he has felt’ within himself for years, months or days before the final shattering occurs. Its stakes are a choice between ‘irreconcilable opposition: God or Man, Soul or Mind, Freedom or Communism’ (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 16).

It is striking that Hannah Arendt simply ignores Chambers’ delineation of the ex-Communists. Instead she jumps straight into a rival account that distinguishes between ‘*ex-Communists*’ and ‘*former Communists*.’ Her approach is categorical

rather than existential. *Former* Communists, she tells us, are of two dissimilar types. The first consists of individuals of many countries who once ‘belonged to a totalitarian movement, as party members, as fellow-travellers, as sympathizers’ but who knew little about Communism, and had no real political significance other than burnishing the movement with prestige derived from another field. Her example is Picasso, ‘a great painter who happens to have fallen for Communism.’ Were he to paint for the sake of Communism, his integrity would be destroyed just as it was for those artists who embraced socialist realism (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 391).<sup>10</sup> If Picasso were to leave the Party, he would then be a former Communist.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside this grouping is a cognate set of *former* Communists for whom politics was their principal identity; ‘Communism played a decisive role in their lives.’ Moreover:

Among their common characteristics is that they left the Party early; they were sufficiently informed to sense, if not to know articulately, the stages by which a revolutionary party developed into a full-fledged totalitarian movement, and they had their own criteria to judge this. These criteria may not appear sufficient in the light of what we know today; they were enough then. Important among them were the abolition of inner-party democracy, the liquidation of independence for the various national Communist parties and their total submission under the orders of Moscow. The Moscow Trials [of 1936/1937], which in many respects are the turning point in this whole history, concluded the process. (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 392)

Such *former* Communists, Arendt adds, are a heterogeneous grouping with no subsequent common denominator. They took up various occupations; they assumed right-wing and left-wing affiliations or none at all; they ‘disappeared into public and private life’ (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 392).<sup>12</sup> ‘Decisive is that their Communist past remained an important biographical fact, but did not become the nucleus of their new opinions, viewpoints, *Weltanschauungen*. They neither looked for a substitute for a lost faith nor concentrated all their efforts and talents on the fight against Communism’ (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 392).

Summing up, we can say that *former* Communists of this second designation are people characterized by their *timing* (‘they left the Party early’), *unobtrusiveness* (they ‘disappeared into public and private life’), and by a *poised*, measured, non-compensatory attitude towards post-Communist life (they neither adopted new dogmas nor channeled their energy into active anti-Communist partisanship). *Former* Communists do not publicly renounce Communism; they simply leave it without fanfare and bombast. To this Arendt adds that *former* Communists are much more numerous than ex-Communists and that, contrasted with the latter, *former* Communists stand at a moral disadvantage; once confession becomes the dominant register of authentic opposition to Communism, the non-confessor appears ‘less decent, less honest, less convinced of the dangers of Communism’ (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 393).



So who and what are *ex*-Communists, the type to which former Communists are contrasted?<sup>13</sup> *Ex*-Communists comprise Americans and non-Americans alike who have ‘escaped from the totalitarian world’ and who publicize their escape; for Arendt’s purposes it makes ‘little difference’ if this totalitarian world is ‘represented by a government in power or a movement fighting for power’ (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 273).<sup>14</sup> Having stayed in the Communist Party longer than *former* Communists, they share the moral unease and plain embarrassment of explaining to their new anti-Communist allies why they did not leave earlier. The Polish philosopher and regime opponent, Leszek Kolakowski (2010/1974, p. 10), once remarked on an ignoble oddity of many *ex*-Communists: their horror of Communism ‘only emerged when they saw [fellow] communists being slaughtered.’ The killing of non-Communists had left them unmoved. Arendt makes a related point while qualifying it. One did not require the standards of ‘normal’ society to judge early on what was wrong with the Communist Party. Nor did one need to wait for the liquidation of the right- and left-wing deviationists in 1930. All one required was the open eyes of a person who, still willing to make independent judgments, observed how the party’s own trajectory negated freedom at every turn, from the suppression of inner-party democracy onwards. ‘In a largely moral, but not only moral, sense one might say that it is still the ghost of Rosa Luxemburg who haunts the consciences of the *ex*-Communists of the older generation’ (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 275).<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, it was not simple obtuseness that impeded a humanistic vision and humane sensibility among Communist initiates. It was the entrenchment of a way of thinking, itself nested in a group of reinforcing metaphors; all of them validated human destruction. To believe in the objective guilt of dying classes; to believe that future justice requires human sacrifice now; to believe that history is something to be made: such merciless grandiosity echoes the vulgar proverbs that ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs’ or, alluding to carpentry, ‘From planing comes shavings.’ Once such clichés become wedded to a revolutionary ideology, objections to violence are easily dismissed as mere squeamishness, a cowardly reluctance to serve the long-term good of humanity. By the same token, Communists with moral scruples against violence feel perversely indecent for having them (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 277). Stalin’s grip on his flock lay not merely in the terror he commanded but in the consistency with which he embodied the instrumental credo. It is this that the *ex*-Communists have so much difficulty explaining to the non-Communist world as well as to themselves.

Yet the totalitarian notion, shared by Communists and Nazis alike, that history can be made and that the political actor is the person who makes it, is both erroneous and anti-political.<sup>16</sup> It is erroneous because actions are never isolated or linear; they are enfolded in other actions that deflect the original project in unpredictable ways. We never *fully* know what we are doing because what we do has no terminus. To act is to initiate; we are free as human beings to begin something new. We are not free to end what we commence. Being mortal, we will never see the conclusion of an action we begin, even assuming, improbably, it has a conclusion.

In this respect, action is fundamentally different from the creations of work. *Homo faber* designs a plan and executes it, turning living into dead matter. The process of work has a demonstrable terminus. A building is erected. Articles of clothing are manufactured. Works of art come into being. By contrast, the realm of politics is governed by the indeterminacy of action. So is history, the collision and occasional synchronization of multiple actions and interactions, ‘a story with many beginnings but no end.’ To apply the craftsman’s model of fabrication to history is to attempt to stabilize and complete what is forever elusive and transitory. Such stabilization is only possible through violence, a force able, momentarily, to freeze action according to the template of the master builder (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 397).<sup>17</sup>

Arendt grants that the distinction between *former* and *ex*-Communists is blurred in real life. That does not stop her, however, from constructing ‘a type of *ex*-Communist.’ Its epitome is Whittaker Chambers. *Ex*-Communists share a bundle of characteristics. First, they are people who have paid a small price for their political departure. To be sure, they suffer some public mortification. But this guarantees them public prominence; it saves them from the quiet burdens endured by *former* Communists who change professions and who are thereby demoted to the unglamorous life of the average citizen. Moreover, the fact that *ex*-Communists were once Communists *bona fide* lends them a cachet of expertise. ‘Who could know better the methods and aims of the enemy than those who have just escaped from the enemy’s camp?’ (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 272). Perhaps, though information about the inner workings of totalitarian organization is no longer a monopoly of insiders. A bigger problem is whether ‘these *ex*-Communists know our own methods and our own aims’ – that is, those of a constitutional republic (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 272).

Arendt doubts they do. The counsel they dispense with such certainty mirrors the Manichean mental set of their antagonists. They tell us: just as the battle against capitalism was total and demanded total sacrifice, so the battle against Communism requires a similar emotional commitment. ‘The advice to use totalitarian means in order to fight totalitarianism is justified by the *ex*-Communists by pointing to the special historical circumstances’ (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 395). The *ex*-Communist sees ‘no plurality of forces in the world; there are only two’: freedom versus tyranny, one faith pitted against the other. But these faiths ‘spring from the same source.’ The *ex*-Communists are Bolsheviks reborn, Communists ‘turned upside down’ (1994/1953, p. 393). Both groups – Communists and *ex*-Communists – assume that the credulous must be led by an enlightened vanguard. And because *ex*-Communists, like their previous incarnation, resolve the world into a simple antinomy, they treat those who acknowledge ambiguity and ambivalence with contempt. Such is the *ex*-Communists’ attitude towards American liberalism, which is upbraided as muddled, limp, pusillanimous.

If such extremism is something to be deplored, even worse, says Arendt, is the *ex*-Communist’s receptiveness to informing. In a police state, informing is demanded as a public duty. Under totalitarianism ‘those who have the privilege

to be the informers and those who are dominated by the fear of being informed upon,' compose two unstable categories, for the roles are constantly changing as new enemies are manufactured. 'It is the old story: one cannot fight a dragon, we are told, without becoming a dragon; we can fight a society of informers only by becoming informers ourselves' (1994/1953, pp. 394–395). But in a liberal or republican state, informing is the object of principled anxiety. We are fearful to fight like dragons lest we become monsters ourselves. The *ex*-Communist has no such misgiving. Communist methods are mandatory because only such ruthlessness will prevail against an even more brutal predator. If an urgent objective requires unsavoury means to achieve it, then that is a price worth paying. Unrecognized in such a stance, Arendt declares, is the fact that bad deeds done for good causes prompt further bad deeds; conversely, good deeds done for a bad cause contribute to a better society. Decency is infectious; as it spreads it becomes steadily harder to impede (1994/1953, p. 396).<sup>18</sup> That is why members of totalitarian movements make a virtue of pitiless objectivity and why kindness is downgraded to a spasm of sentimental self-indulgence.

Once he broke with Communism, Chambers' conscience demanded that he inform on those who had once been his friends and colleagues. Arendt is appalled. Loyalty in personal relations was among her chief principles (Baehr, 2001). But here her explicit emphasis falls on the notion that justice requires impartiality towards individuals. If law ever becomes a means to 'trap a bad man,' it is 'the beginning of the end of civil liberties for all (1994/1953, p. 399). A 'net of informers,' she writes elsewhere, is one of totalitarianism's most salient characteristics. In tyrannies, the informer is little more than a 'professional agent in the pay of the police.' But under totalitarianism the informer is omnipresent, entrapping friends as well as enemies, and constantly eliding the distinction. The *ex*-Communists' penchant to inform is one more legacy of a system they claim to have renounced (Arendt, 1972/1969, pp. 149, 154).

Whittaker Chambers understands none of this, Arendt protests. His convulsive aversion to politics as action is evident from his attraction to the Communist underground where commands are given and obeyed, and where the allure of secrecy is preferred to the workaday public demands of citizenship. Chambers' self-dramatization leads him to imagine that he is a maker of history rather than just a man who, like others, acts politically. 'It is against these makers of history that a free society has to defend itself, regardless of the vision they harbor' (1994/1953, p. 397). Here Arendt evokes the spectre of the Dreyfus affair, but it is not Captain Dreyfus himself to whom she refers. It is to Arendt's hero and Dreyfus's champion, Georges Clemenceau. Clemenceau felt no particular warmth towards Jews. His actions in defence of Dreyfus were not motivated by abstract humanitarianism. Instead, Clemenceau acted out of solidarity, insisting that what applied to one French citizen applied to all of them, and that Dreyfus had been denied justice. Where the French General Staff sought to undermine the Republic by 'picking out a man with whom no one sympathized,' Clemenceau acted on the basis that the 'law is impartial towards both good and bad,' and that the law in Dreyfus's case had been corrupted (1994/

1953, p. 398). While Arendt's general point is explicable and noble, its implication for the Hiss case is not entirely clear. She presumably did not mean to say that American citizens should feel solidarity for Communist spies. She seems to have meant that the practice of sacrificing individuals to a putative greater good ruptures solidarity by creating a society in which civil liberties are not respected and fellow citizens become objects of mistrust.

The cumulative danger the ex-Communists pose for a decent society is obvious. Their claim to prominence

is based on the fact that they once have been Communists and therefore are trained in totalitarian thinking. Their aim is to apply this training to a new cause after the old cause has disappointed them. Their methods have, in some instances, consisted in arrogating to themselves the role of the police and almost always result in sowing mistrust among citizens whose 'friendship,' *philia*, according to Aristotle, is the surest foundation of political life. (Arendt, 1994/1953, p. 399)

'The Ex-Communists' culminates with a peroration in which Arendt sheds the role of political writer to don judicial robes. The change in persona is a rhetorical device to suggest that Chambers is no longer the witness. He is the man in the dock whose trial has just concluded. His judge interprets the evidence and gravely pronounces a verdict. Speaking in the Olympian voice of the first person plural, Arendt declaims

We know that this century is full of dangers and perplexities ... We know that some of the best of us at one time or another have been driven into the totalitarian predicament. Those who have turned their back on it are welcome; everyone is welcome who has not become a murderer or a professional spy in the process. We are anxious to establish friendship wherever we can, and this goes for former fascists or Nazis as well as it goes for former Communists and Bolshevists. The fact that one was formerly wrong should carry with it no permanent stigma. (Arendt, 1994/1953, pp. 399–400).

But, Arendt continues, 'We cannot accept your claim, your aim, and least of all your methods.' Your claim is that dragons must be fought by dragons. Your aim is to make democracy an ideological cause. 'Your methods, finally, are the justified methods of the police, and only of the police ... No private citizen has any right to arrogate to himself these highly specialized and limited functions.' Accordingly, 'much as we desire to establish friendship with you, much as we are in sympathy with your experiences and frequently with your personalities,' we must warn against you so long as you 'insist on your role as ex-Communists' (Arendt, 1994/1953, pp. 399–400). When you do so, you endanger free societies by encouraging totalitarian thinking and the currents that feed on it.

### **The background to Arendt's complaint**

By the time Arendt wrote the *Commonweal* article, Whittaker Chambers' anti-Communist cause seemed overripe to many of her contemporaries. In the early

1950s no American citizen who was not a conservative could claim to be living in an age of Communist appeasement. Disillusion with Yalta was ubiquitous. The inauguration of the Marshall Plan in 1947, the promulgation in the same year of the Truman Doctrine which committed the United States 'to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures,' the Berlin airlift (1948–1949), the formation of Nato (1949): all attested to a muscular US stance towards the Soviet Union. Granted there was still plenty to be worried about. The victory of Mao's forces in China in 1949 gave the Soviet Union a populous new Asian ally. Central and Eastern Europe were fast losing any residual autonomy the Russians had promised. And, as of 1949, the Soviets possessed nuclear weapons. All were serious events; all were grist for the mill of conservatives who believed Truman's government was soft on Communism.<sup>19</sup>

A more local danger, many argued, was overreaction to Communism. Since Truman's Executive Order 9835 of March 1947, government loyalty programmes were in full swing. The McCarran Internal Security Act became law in 1950; it required the registration of all Communist organizations. Trials of Communist leaders, under the provisions of the anti-sedition Smith Act (1940), and deportations of Communist members proceeded apace. And, in 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy's sway was reaching its acme. The elevation of informers to public heroes – keys to the city (Louis Budenz in Boston), special days in their honor (Matt Cvetec Day, Herbert Philbrick Day), banquets to laud them (Donner, 1954, p. 299)<sup>20</sup> appeared to many liberal Americans a stain on the country's legal traditions and the rule of law. Arendt shared that view. She further considered suspect the growing post-war popularity of identifying Communism with 'totalitarianism' – not because that equation was false when applied to the Soviet Union but because it was gratuitous when hurled at American dissenters. The United States possessed no totalitarian movement. Foreign and domestic politics were being needlessly concatenated resulting in a climate of menace, as if the powers-that-be really were 'threatened by a domestic conspiracy, which, however, stubbornly fails to materialize' (1994/1951/2, p. 271). Later, Arendt told Mary McCarthy that Chambers' testimony was too detailed to be credible; he was likely coached by the FBI; indeed half the Communist Party probably consisted of FBI members. This claim was a topos of the critical commentary of the time and while in Chambers' case it was false, elsewhere it was plausible.

Domestic worries also intruded into Arendt's considerations. Her husband was a former member of the German Communist Party who, in 1941, had failed to acknowledge that fact on his US immigration papers. It was a lie, or at least an omission, that might be exposed in the ongoing investigatory orgy. Deportation was a prospect that hung over many foreign-born Communists like a tightening noose: between 1946 and 1966, around 15,000 'subversive aliens' were investigated (fewer than 2% were actually deported). Moreover, a Supreme Court decision of 1893 exempted deportation from criminal proceedings, which meant that due process was attenuated in these cases; the authorities could, if they so

wished, detain foreign-born Communists indefinitely while the case for their deportation proceeded (Schrecker, 2002, p. 54). Blücher was frantic. He was not presently a Communist, foreign born or otherwise. But he had been and if his past were exposed the authorities might suspect him to be one still. To make matters worse, his citizenship application had stalled. 'I can't curse away my fury,' he wrote to Arendt in July 1952, 'and it is horrible to have to swallow everything without saying a word.' American citizenship, even when granted, might be snatched away, a person expatriated on 'the basis of a simple denunciation.' At this rate, the republic would soon be cultivating a 'Born American' master race.<sup>21</sup> When, a month later, Blücher became an American citizen neither he nor Arendt could fully relax. Both feared that he was still vulnerable to deportation. For this reason, Arendt's *Commonweal* review was, says her biographer, a 'measure of her courage' (Young-Bruehl, 1982, p. 274). It drew attention to her – and to her husband – on an especially thorny matter. Chambers' friend, the journalist Nora de Toledano, was one person to quickly pick up the Blücher connection. The author of 'The Ex-Communists,' Toledano wryly remarked, 'is married to a man whose ex-ness is in a very dubious state.'<sup>22</sup> Toledano might have more accurately said 'former-ness,' for it is clear that *former* Communist was the category into which Arendt placed her husband and, possibly, for whom it was devised. Blücher left the Communist Party of Germany early on – in 1928 (though he had then joined the tiny and ineffective anti-Stalinist Communist Party Opposition); in the US he remained unobtrusive, published nothing; and no radical substitute emerged to compensate for his previous militant commitment.

With this summary of Arendt's argument and its background completed, it is time to move to evaluation. Two areas will concern us: the distinction between *former* and *ex*-Communists on which the critique of Chambers pivots; the discussion of political informing and Chambers in that context.

### **On the cogency of the former/ex-Communist distinction**

A funereal dirge sounds through the pages of *Witness*. Its binary, apocalyptic view of modernity verges occasionally on the occult. Chambers is a man who has 'lived close to the making of history,' in touch with 'secret forces working behind and below the historical surface' (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 331). Echoing Walter Krivitsky, the former Soviet intelligence officer and defector, Chambers insists that Communism and fascism can 'be fought only by the force of an intelligence, a faith, a courage, a self-sacrifice, which must equal the revolutionary spirit that, in coping with, it must in many ways come to resemble.'

No one knows so well as the ex-Communist the character of the conflict, and of the enemy, or shares so deeply the same power of faith and willingness to stake his life on his beliefs ... In the struggle against Communism the conservative is all but helpless. For that struggle cannot be fought, much less won, or even understood, except in terms of total sacrifice. (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 462; cf. p. 449)



Yet, incongruously, Chambers is also a defeatist, convinced that the West lacks the will and the faith to prevail over Communism, a diabolical movement that sedulously attracts the tormented and compassionate. All of the above validates Arendt's objections. Yet much in her account remains odd and unsatisfactory for a writer of diamond-point punctilio.

Fundamental to political thinking, Arendt counsels, is the identification of uniqueness. And integral to that identification is the art of making distinctions. Distinctions allow us to think rigorously. They help us avoid conflating dissimilar things – the mortal sin of the social sciences (Baehr, 2010) – carelessly eliding the otherness of existence. Armed with this conviction, Arendt's work unfurls a series of ideas that enable us to see the peculiarities of, and dissimilarities between, earth and world, labour and work, justification and legitimacy, guilt and responsibility, action and behavior, power and violence, politics and domination. These terms are no mere flags of convenience; they signal concepts that in turn disclose irreducible aspects of reality. What, then, is the logical status of the distinction between *former* and *ex-Communists*? Arendt (1994/1953, p. 391) says both that the line between such persons 'can theoretically be easily drawn and grasped' yet she owns that the characterological reality is more complex. For a Weberian sociologist, both parts of that judgment are reasonable in principle. *Former* and *ex-Communist* can be regarded as ideal types, against which a person like Whittaker Chambers is measured. But Arendt rejects Weberian heuristics, ideal types and neo-Kantianism in general, so the sociologist's option is blocked to her. Let us put the problem less technically. If 'words can be relied on only if one is sure that their function is to reveal and not to conceal' (Arendt, 1972/1969, p. 163), what, we are bound to ask, does the distinction between *former* and *ex-Communists* reveal? The answer is: directly, almost nothing. But it conceals much that is important.

Consider first a basic question: when she invokes *former* Communists and *ex-Communists* *who*, aside from Chambers in the latter camp, is Arendt thinking of? She gives examples of neither category in her article for *The Commonweal*. I have suggested that her husband Heinrich Blücher is the model *former* Communist; for obvious reasons, she was reluctant to say that. To find illustrations of *ex-Communists* other than Chambers, we must pry into her letters and comb for clues in 'The Eggs Speak Up,' a posthumously published dress rehearsal for 'The Ex-Communists.' And what does such foraging divulge? It reveals that *ex-Communists* are a motley lot. The largest group consists of individuals attracted to a 'powerful organization' that offers an exciting, open career. These 'are all the little boastful self-confessed Soviet spies or GPU agents who have "turned professional informers"' (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 273).<sup>23</sup> Examples are Elizabeth Bentley, Louis Budenz,<sup>24</sup> Walter Krivitsky<sup>25</sup> and Hede Massing.<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, someone who is not an *ex-Communist* on her account (even if she might seem to suggest otherwise)<sup>27</sup> is the Italian novelist and political intellectual, Ignazio Silone.<sup>28</sup> Silone left the Italian Communist Party early, in 1930 – nine years after helping form it. He had not, subsequently, veered towards the right, but remained a stalwart socialist. Silone disdained the *ex-Communists*, a term

he explicitly reviled. Their fanatical sectarianism, bereft of even a connection to the working class, was repugnant to him. ‘The logic of opposition at all costs has carried many ex-Communists far from their starting points, in some cases as far as Fascism’ (Crossman, 2001/1950, p. 113). But if these facts, unmentioned by Arendt but available from the historical record, debar Silone from being an ex-Communist, does that make him a *former* Communist? The answer must be no. Silone did not disappear ‘into public and private life.’ He was a vocal auto critic of Communism. He announced his disillusionment in the most high profile anthology of anti-Communist memoirs to appear in the early cold war, *The God that Failed*.<sup>29</sup>

Occupying a more ambiguous position in Arendt’s strictures, but not in her contrast, is Margarete Buber-Neumann; she is invoked specifically as an ex-Communist in ‘The Eggs Speak Up.’ Arendt considered *Under Two Dictators* (1951) – Buber-Neumann’s wrenching memoir of incarceration by both the Soviet and Nazi authorities in Karaganda and Ravensbrück respectively – to be ‘outstanding in this whole genre of literature’ save in one lamentable respect. Buber-Neumann’s experience was, to be sure, remarkable, agonizing. One might have thought it would issue in some new or weighty insight, touched by ‘moral passion and philosophical consideration.’ Instead, she offers ‘pious’ platitudes. Emerging from the pit of hell, Buber-Neumann appears only to have rediscovered the maxims she rejected 20 or 30 years before. ‘The triteness of the human response is surprising’ in both moral and political terms.

What is frightening ... in the ex-Communists’ return to the ‘normal’ world is their easy and unconsidered acceptance of its normalcy in its most banal aspects. It is as though they tell us every day that we have no other choice but that between totalitarian hell and philistinism ... This does not mean that these ex-totalitarians who have discovered their love of respectability are philistines themselves. Their very fervor indicates only too clearly that they are really idealistic extremists who, having lost their ‘ideal,’ are on the lookout for substitutes and so carry their extremism into Catholicism, liberalism, conservatism and whatnot. (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 280)<sup>30</sup>

For Arendt, the response of ex-Communists to the modern era, their rediscovery of truisms, is worse than trite. It is also a stumbling block to fresh thinking, to the urgent task of seeking ‘new concepts in political philosophy as well as new solutions to our political predicaments.’ Instead, the reflex of ex-Communism is to rush to the bosom of conservatism. Yet it is one thing to ‘love the past and to revere the dead; it is another to pretend that the past is alive in the sense that it is in our power to return to it, that all we have to do is to listen to the voices of the dead’ (1994/1951/2, pp. 281–282). We moderns are charged with the responsibility of grasping our own time and the unique demands it makes on us. Because the ex-Communists continue to think in ways that are either extreme or banal; because they are now missionizing on behalf of democracy with the same zeal that they proselytized for Communism; because they have



embraced a kind of conservatism that, like liberalism, has shown itself utterly powerless to withstand the force and dynamism of totalitarian ideology; for all these reasons, the *ex*-Communists are utterly incapable of helping us chart a path out of the ruins.

We are left with this puzzle: *why in the published article* entitled ‘The Ex-Communists’ does Arendt restrict her promising examples to Chambers alone? Why do we have laboriously to search elsewhere to locate whom Arendt was referring to? Why is she more illustrative in unpublished lectures and in her correspondence than in the *Commonweal* article? Let us grant the possibility that Arendt found it uncongenial to name names; that was just the sort of thing that HUAC was then doing. A roster of examples would be grossly imitative, coarse. Perhaps, then, Arendt’s evasiveness was no more than simple propriety. Still, it is hard to grasp the coherence of an *ex*-Communist type that, in Arendt’s other writings, encompasses Russian spies such as General W. G. Krivitsky – head of Soviet Military Intelligence (Fourth Bureau of the Red Army) for Western Europe, American professional witnesses such as Louis Budenz who testified 33 times over 12 years to US investigatory committees (Ceplair, 2011, p. 132), and Europeans such as Margarete Buber-Neumann who languished in totalitarian camps. One would think that Buber-Neumann, for instance, is better understood as part of a brutalized *ex*-Communist family that includes the Swiss writer Elinor Lipper, author of *Eleven Years in Soviet Prisons and Concentration Camps* (1951), and the Spaniard Valentin González, a Communist officer during the Spanish Civil War whose nom de guerre was ‘El Campesino,’<sup>31</sup> and who later endured Vorkuta, the NKVD administered Siberian camp. I venture that the reason why Arendt’s *former* and *ex*-Communist boxes are, in the *Commonweal* article, largely bereft of illustrations, is that once filled with real people, their categorical limitations would become immediately evident. It is not even clear whether a necessary condition of being an *ex*-Communist is that the person is a political informer. Presumably not, but since Arendt provides only one example of the *ex*-Communist in the essay of that name – Whittaker Chambers – we are prompted to suppose the identification.

The most prominent European *ex*-Communist of the time was the Hungarian born, British naturalized Arthur Koestler. Like the Italian Silone, he had just offered a spectacular account of his apostasy in *The God that Failed*; Koestler’s was the lead and longest essay of the anthology. *Darkness at Noon*, Koestler’s novel depicting the inner collapse of a seasoned Bolshevik under the pressure of his own ideology,<sup>32</sup> was published nine years earlier; by 1953, its French translation, *Le Zéro et l’infini*, had sold over 400,000 copies, and prompted Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s infamous defense of Stalinism, *Humanisme et terreur* (1947).<sup>33</sup> Where does Koestler fit in Arendt’s schema? He is not mentioned in ‘The Ex-Communists.’ Yet recall her criticism of the hackneyed moral conclusions of Margarete Buber-Neumann’s memoir. If Buber-Neumann was guilty of cliché so, by his own admission, was Koestler. The ‘lesson taught’ by his own spell of confinement in Spanish prisons, waiting to be shot, ‘when put into words,

always appears under the dowdy guise of perennial commonplaces: that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction ... that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility,' and so forth. True enough, such statements appear trivial. Even so, Koestler adds, every one of them is 'incompatible with the Communist faith which I held' (in Crossman, 2001/1950, p. 68). If banalization is an ex-Communist trademark, then that may have been enough to damn Koestler in Arendt's eyes.

She intimated as much elsewhere. Reviewing for *Commentary* Koestler's play 'Twilight Bar' and his collection of essays *The Yogi and the Commissar*, Arendt (1946) applauds Koestler's skill as a vivid and sensitive reporter but taxes him for 'bad novels' that aspire to be 'serious.' Pseudo profundity also spoils his political interventions. While Koestler describes individuals and situations with a heightened sensitivity to milieu, his bravura writing is nonetheless flawed by 'superficial brilliance and naïve sophistication (Arendt, 1946, p. 95).' Arendt's oxymoron-packed judgment could not be more qualified or, its target must have thought, more condescending: the man is a good journalist but a bad novelist and a poor intellectual.<sup>34</sup> Put to one side the contentiousness of that judgment. The more important matter for our purposes is that if *ex*-Communists are identified by the totalitarian mindset they transfer to a new ideology, and by a continued subordination of means to ends, then Koestler is not an *ex*-Communist. Nor was he a police informer. By the time *Darkness at Noon* was published, Koestler's days seeking political certainty were over. He is emphatic that unlike erstwhile comrades who embraced the church or an alternative political ideology, Koestler (2005/1954, pp. 478–479) found 'occupational therapy' in becoming a professional writer. He just as firmly abjured an absolute end to which individuals must be sacrificed, the Bolshevik credo.

A final issue closes this section and it is among the more curious discussed so far. Arendt is the foremost modern theorist of the public realm, the locus of politics. Politics occupies a public space: public in the senses of being visible to actors and of constituting a common 'world' that relates and separates them at the same time. In the light that politics throws on human affairs, people discover that they have more than private needs, more than private desires, to protect or advance. As Arendt (1958, p. 50) put it a few years after her article on the *ex*-Communists was composed, 'public' signifies

First, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences.<sup>35</sup>

We saw that a salient feature of *former* Communists, in Arendt's characterization, is their lack of visibility, their discretion. They *withdraw* from public life or if they stay in it do not advertize their Communist past or strike ideologically intransigent poses. In contrast, she says, *ex*-Communists seek publicity. They boast of their past transgressions to demonstrate the sincerity of their contrition and to burnish their credentials as Communist hunters. Arendt recoiled from such behaviour. So did one of her sources:

If informers must be employed, which seems inevitable, let them operate behind the scenes, away from the encouraging Klieg lights of grossly ignorant, headline-hunting Congressional committees. Let them tell their stories to the FBI, in a proper manner. Let their stories be sifted, tested and reviewed, to eliminate such obviously pernicious nonsense as Budenz's allegations about the Wallace mission. And then, where necessary, let appropriate action be taken by the proper authorities, without fuss, without publicity, without clamor or glamour. (Alsop, 1951, p. 122)<sup>36</sup>

Alsop and Arendt detested the public face of informing: the grandstanding, the self-serving conceit, the claim to arcane knowledge. Such biting censure hits home. Yet it fails to distinguish between post-Communists who sought fame in notoriety and those, like Chambers, who dreaded the investigatory proceedings: he appeared in front of HUAC as the result of that committee's subpoena; and during the HUAC hearings of December 1948 he attempted suicide by rat poison. Alsop's harangue also effaces a more important *political* difference: between publicity that is reducible to vulgar self-promotion, and a public articulation that arises from matters about which fellow citizens have every right to be informed.<sup>37</sup> Arthur Koestler grasped the matter well. In his review of *Witness*, Koestler (2003/1950) cites a letter he had recently received implicating Chambers as 'the real villain [of the Hiss trials] because he didn't keep his mouth shut about things past and done with.' Alger Hiss, the letter writer guessed, had probably changed his mind about Communism by the time he was tried; and the harm he had done the United States was in any case doubtful. At a cocktail party in New York, Koestler heard a variant of this complaint, this time aimed at him personally. Its gist was "that people who had once been Communist should shut up or retire to a monastery or a desert island instead of going 'round "teaching other people lessons".' Koestler's response was that if Chambers had acted with the decorum demanded of him, if, to use Arendt's lexicon, he had behaved according to the lights of a *former* Communist, [this is my interpolation, not Koestler's] 'the public would never have learned certain facts which it was essential for it to learn,' among them that members of the American government had betrayed it to a totalitarian power. Silence would mean 'persistence in crime' (Koestler, 2003/1950, quotes respectively at pp. 50, 52, 54). Diana Trilling (2003/1950, p. 48) made a similar observation. Without Chambers and, yes, without the despised HUAC as well, 'Hiss's guilt might never have been uncovered.' Since Arendt was never prepared to acknowledge that probability, she was never able to reflect on its implications for political ethics, the subject of the next section of this paper.

If a *former* Communist knew *what Chambers knew*, would it be politically responsible *not* to answer truthfully HUAC's questions?

My criticism, in brief, is not that the *former* and *ex*-Communist distinction has no validity at all. As a general typology it is broadly recognizable. Nor am I claiming that the two types are defective because they are exaggerated.<sup>38</sup> I am saying that Arendt's contrast between *former* and *ex* is theoretically flawed. It fails to offer examples of *former* Communists. And it inclines to parody by clustering markedly different cases of *ex*-Communist into one basic type. When, then, is a distinction theoretically powerful? When it displays features of the world previously unnoticed or that are hard to notice, when it is sufficiently robust to apply to complex cases rather than to easy ones.<sup>39</sup> Alas, the *former* and *ex*-Communist contrast possesses neither of these powers. The distinction cannot even be saved by turning *former* and *ex*-Communist into ideal types against which actual examples might be measured for their degree of conformity to, or deviation from, the model. As noted, this was not a move that Arendt allowed herself. We are left with a distinction that is clumsy, uninformative and tendentious.

### What kind of informer was Whittaker Chambers? When is informing a legitimate civic duty?

In light of Arendt's condemnation of Chambers' informing and ideological Manicheanism,<sup>40</sup> it is sobering to recall the views of other critics whose liberal credentials are not in doubt. One looks in vain for consensus on specifics. But nuance was plentiful both in regard to the man himself and what Rebecca West (2003/1952) called the 'dervish trial' of Alger Hiss.<sup>41</sup> Consider two writers who knew Chambers personally but not well, who saw something in him without liking him. For the literary critic Lionel Trilling, a fellow student at Columbia, Chambers was a 'tragic comedian of radical politics.' His 'apocalyptic pieties' and 'sodden profundities' would have been downright comical if they had not also been somewhat deranged. But Trilling was also disturbed by the hatred Chambers attracted from 'people of high moral purpose.' Breaking with the Communist Party 'had been an act of courage and had entailed much suffering.' And even the deed of informing, done reluctantly, was consistent with Chambers being a 'man of honor' (L. Trilling, 2002/1947).<sup>42</sup> Hannah Arendt's *bête noire*, Sidney Hook (2003/1952, pp. 78–79) offered a similar opinion to Trilling's. *Witness* offers no 'intelligent guide to victory' against Communism. Its hunger for absolutes is repellant. Nor do Chambers' pangs about the victims of the Moscow Trials escape the suspicion that his conscience erupted at the very same time his own life was in danger. Even so, Hook sees *Witness* as a testament to the 'magnificent courage' of a man who 'refused to die to please Stalin, who built a new life, threw it away to atone for his past, and found it again.'

No such ambivalence mutes Arendt's asperity. Nor is her portrait of Chambers factually scrupulous. (As if by osmosis, even her normally meticulous biographer, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1982, p. 274), mistakes Arendt's remarks on *Witness* for

*Cold Friday*, a book published shortly after Chambers' death.)<sup>43</sup> Earlier we saw Arendt's (1994/1953, p. 393) contention that the 'public humiliation of a spectacular confession' by an ex-Communist 'is compensated by the advantage of an unbroken public career'; the 'public humiliation spares one the private humiliations implied in having to change one's profession.'<sup>44</sup> To the contrary, Chambers' testimony for HUAC torpedoed his job as senior editor with *Time* magazine and the large salary that went with it. Financially, the sales of *Witness* notwithstanding, he never recovered from the blow until, late in life, he sold some of the farmland he worked with his family, and the properties on it. But by then his career as a journalist was long over. Moreover, his involvement in HUAC and in the grand jury exposed Chambers to a tremendous personal risk: exposure by Hiss's legal team of a period of frenzied, opportunistic homosexuality during the mid-1930s; he wrote down the details for the FBI when they pressed him to divulge the worst kind of information his enemies might find trawling for dirt. In the 1950s, that revelation alone – his wife remained innocent of the truth – was enough to brand Chambers a pervert and destroy his credibility as a witness (Tanenhaus, 1997, pp. 344–345).<sup>45</sup>

Just as Whittaker Chambers furnished an explicit depiction of the ex-Communist, so he also described the role of the informer. His account, a classic of the genre, was even harsher than Arendt's, something that should immediately give us pause: for a man does not condemn himself without good reason. If Sam Tanenhaus (1997, p. 469) is right that Arendt fails to 'meet Chambers on his own ground,' what might that ground be?

'To be an informer ... Men shrink from that word and what it stands for as from something lurking and poisonous.' Spies take physical risks. They are monsters to the enemy, heroes to the country served.

The informer is different, particularly the ex-Communist informer. He risks little. He sits in security and uses his special knowledge to destroy others. He has the special information to give because he knows those others' faces, voices and lives, because he once lived within their confidence, in a shared faith, trusted by them as one of themselves, accepting their friendship, feeling their pleasures and griefs, sitting in their houses, eating at their tables, accepting their kindness, knowing their wives and children. If he had not done those things, he would have no use as an informer ... Because he has that use, the police protect him. He is their creature. When they whistle, he fetches a soiled bone of information. (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 454)

The informer, Chambers continues, shares a common assignment with the police but he is never their equal. The police can choose to do or not do what they will with the informer's information. The informer has no such option; his very decision to inform has made him 'a slave.' He has lost his humanity. 'He is free only to the degree in which he understands what he is doing and why he must do it. On his road, 'it is always night' (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 456).<sup>46</sup>

Let every ex-Communist look unblinkingly at that image. It is himself. By the logic of his position in the struggles of this age, every ex-Communist is an informer from

the moment he breaks with Communism, regardless of how long it takes him to reach the police station. (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 454)

If Communism is the prosecution of ‘warfare’ against non-Communist societies, then the ex-Communist is a ‘deserter’ who remains a combatant against conspiracy. All moral and political logic dictates that conclusion. A failure to fight against Communism would show that a person acquiesced to it. The reluctance to harm old friends, to destroy old trusts, is ‘honorable and valid.’ But

in the end, the choice for the ex-Communist is between shielding a small number of people who still actively further what he now sees to be evil, or of helping to shield millions from that evil which threatens even their souls. Those who do not inform are still conniving at that evil. That is the crux of the moral choice which an ex-Communist must make in recognizing that the logic of his position makes him an informer. (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 456)

This is not a moral choice that Arendt took seriously. Nor did Chambers’ own memoir help her to do so. ‘One does not come away from Stalin easily,’ he quotes Walter Krivitsky remarking sadly; ‘in our time, informing is a duty’ (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 463). That seems vindication enough of Arendt’s (1994/1953, p. 395) claim that the ‘advice to use totalitarian means in order to fight totalitarianism is justified by the ex-Communists by pointing to the special historical circumstances.’ Yet, examined more closely, one sees a more nuanced story emerge about Chambers and, with it, similarly complex questions about the political ethics of informing.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt had said virtually nothing about an informer apparatus.<sup>47</sup> Later, she remarked briefly on its twofold role. First, informers are an instrument of direct control; the ‘totalitarian ruler ... needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers’ help provide it. Second, informers facilitate such control by undermining personal relations of trust and solidarity; the informer network of surveillance contributes to the decomposition of moral bonds. ‘This atomization – an outrageously pale, academic word for the horror it implies – is maintained through the ubiquity of the informer, who can be literally omnipresent because he no longer is merely a professional agent in the pay of the police but potentially every person one comes into contact with’ (Arendt, 1972/1969, p. 154).<sup>48</sup> This totalitarian experience led Arendt to see Chambers through a totalitarian prism even as she believed that the United States was in no danger of becoming a totalitarian society itself.<sup>49</sup>

The analogy was loose at best. Chambers never advocated using *totalitarian means* in the fight against Communism. Nor did he actually use them in the Hiss case. The reason Arendt suggests otherwise is because she trades on a very general notion of informing that in ‘The Ex-Communists’ shuffles between totalitarian unmasking and what she calls ‘the justified methods of the police’ (1994/1953, p. 400). That confuses what needs most to be clarified. The totalitarian informer was part of a machinery of lies. Innocent citizens were transfigured into



enemies of the people as the movement pressed on inexorably to find more categories of individuals to destroy. Secret informers acted as *agents provocateurs* and were planted by the secret police. Some had long careers as informers, as did the Ukrainian agent named ‘Kvitko’ who worked for more than 30 years within the metamorphosing organs of the GPU-NKVD-MGB-KGB in the Kyiv region, Zaporizzhia, and the Donbass.<sup>50</sup> Mark Zborowski (aka ‘Etienne,’ ‘Mack,’ and ‘Tulip’) is another example of embodied totalitarian means. He was the GPU agent who penetrated Trotsky’s Fourth International unit in Paris during the 1930s. His job was to help Stalin acquire information so he could kill his enemy (Patenaude, 2009, pp. 112–113). Or consider the *Informanten* used by the Stasi. During the 1980s, to take just one decade, the Stasi created six categories of persons each tagged by a peculiar abbreviation (IMS, FIM, IME, GMS, IMB, IMK) but divided essentially into two functions: ‘the first five types of informant were individuals who monitored society in some fashion, whereas the last category (IMK) represented an individual who provided his house keys to the Stasi so that a case officer could meet his informant away from the informant’s work or home, in return for a token monetary sum or perhaps a coal delivery’ (Bruce, 2010, p. 82).<sup>51</sup> Informers – in both totalitarian and pluralist states – are people who either give information casually and ad hoc or are tasked to give information, compensated to give it, give it in secrecy and protected in giving it.<sup>52</sup>

Police informers have police handlers; Chambers had none.<sup>53</sup> Police informers typically inform in real time; Chambers informed years after the fact. Police informers are often on the police payroll; Chambers was not. Police informers, if criminals themselves, are offered some immunity or reduction in sentence; neither applied to Chambers. Police informers have their identities hidden by the police; Chambers was highly visible. Police informers that become visible, and whose testimony is deemed particularly important, are given witness protection, a post-HUAC development of which Chambers could not avail himself. These are specific police ‘methods.’ Arendt mentions none of them when lassoing Chambers, a man who appeared in front of HUAC unwillingly, and who initially concealed Hiss’ espionage, committing perjury by so doing, until Hiss upped the ante with his libel action against Chambers.<sup>54</sup> The most damaging reproach to Chambers’ behavior is not that he informed reluctantly on people who had engaged in espionage but that he himself had been fully involved in the self-same enterprise. In any event, a serviceable distinction can be drawn between, on the one hand professional or ‘kept witnesses,’ – people like Budenz, John Lautner and Harvey Matusow who testified regularly, often for pay, against Communists because they were Communists; and, on the other, ‘espionage exposers,’ notably Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers (Navasky, 1980, pp. xxi–xxii).<sup>55</sup> Victor Navasky (1980, p. xxi) no champion of Chambers, properly observes that, to the extent that his and Bentley’s allegations were true, ‘it would be dubious indeed to attack them as betrayers without honoring them as espionage-exposers.’

I have been suggesting that Arendt's critique of Whittaker Chambers is defective in its failure to make distinctions. A final problem remains to be considered. Arendt (1994/1953, p. 400) insisted that 'no private citizen has any right to arrogate to himself [the] highly specialized and limited functions [of the police, of the informer].' Is she correct? Is there really no case when civic informing is legitimate in a constitutional republic? These questions prompt at least two kinds of reply. The first turns on the rights of the accused, the second on the duty of the citizen. Alger Hiss was a member of the Communist Party who, while employed in the State Department of the American Republic, leaked state documents to the Soviet Union, at that time led by Josef Stalin. In the nature of things, such action was meant to be secret and it was a secret of a special kind: it hid deception (Hiss pretended to be a loyal member of the US government) and that deception was treason.<sup>56</sup> Did Hiss have any right to be protected from informing, from the accusation of another citizen, an insider of his organization? The question answers itself.<sup>57</sup> Hiss' action was not a private or domestic matter to be protected from snooping. Nor was it a matter of diplomacy that required public discretion. Nor was it a minor impropriety. It was an act of treachery towards a duly constituted republic whose security he was sworn to uphold. This is assuredly a matter of public interest. Hiss 'perjured himself in the interests not merely of a foreign government but of one of the most oppressive and terroristic regimes in human history, whose aims called for the destruction of his own country' (Hook, 1987, p. 290).

Now suppose that the police knew nothing about this betrayal, and that a citizen did know about it. What is the latter's duty? Chambers could not go to the organization concerned – the Communist Party – to correct its odious behavior because the Party was the vehicle of the malfeasance; its Ombudsman, so to speak, was the head of the GPU. Instead Chambers disclosed part of what he knew about the Communist underground to A. A. Berle, a member of the government. That revelation some years later brought Chambers to the attention of the FBI and HUAC to which, in phases, he divulged almost all he knew. The British Labour Member of Parliament, John Strachey (1962, p. 36), by no means an uncritical supporter of Chambers, was adamant: Chambers 'had to inform.' He was obliged, as a citizen, to tell what he knew about Communist penetration of the American state because it was not up to him to weigh whether such Soviet activity was dangerous or not; it was enough that he had knowledge of it. The responsibility to assess the information, to decide on its seriousness, and to act or not act upon it, lay with the government.

A wise and self-confident government may conclude that the dropping of a few men from a few committees and the unexpectedly early retirement from government service of a few others, is all that is needed: that to do more than this will do much more harm than good. But that must be the government's responsibility. The individual must supply it with the facts. Only men and women who have never taken Communism seriously, however closely they may have been associated with it, can doubt that it is the duty of an ex-Communist to inform his government of activities, such as espionage, or the penetration of its armed forces or administrative



apparatus by party members ... The failure of many liberals, however amiable, to comprehend this fact of contemporary political life is a symptom of the failure to comprehend what have been the tragic necessities of the first half our century. (Strachey, 1962, p. 36)<sup>58</sup>

In the American case, Chambers' position was particularly troubling because the government initially seemed none too eager to pursue the leads Chambers gave it before the war or, with the exception of the FBI, HUAC and a section of the American press, even after it. President Truman famously called the brouhaha about internal subversion 'a red herring.' The Justice Department dragged its feet and was at one point considering prosecuting Chambers himself for perjury.<sup>59</sup> It did not help Chambers, either, that liberal journalistic opinion ranged so solidly against him, with the few exceptions I noted previously.

## Conclusion

'The piece seems to me very unjust, the premises largely flimsy, and the conclusions largely preposterous. What did I ever do to her? I never set eyes on her': Whittaker Chambers to Nora de Toledano, 19 March 1953, on Hannah Arendt's review of *Witness* (Chambers & Toledano, 1997, p. 109).

In a letter to the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, written two months after the publication of the *Commonweal* article, Arendt expanded on her critique of Chambers as an ex-Communist informer. The proliferation of investigative committees in the US, she said, was creating a kind of 'parallel government.' Even when these committees weren't 'sticking their dirty noses' into other people's pasts, they were spreading a climate of fear and inducing self-censorship in civil society at large, the universities included. In response, people were desperate to look innocent. 'Of major importance is the role of the ex-Communists, who have brought totalitarian methods into the thing (not methods of government but methods used within the party).'<sup>60</sup> Because no one can know for certain whether former Communists remain ones at heart, informing is at a premium. Denouncing others offers proof positive that the denouncer's rupture is genuine and the individual penitent, even if the names submitted include those who some time ago sympathized with Communism for understandable reasons and who are at heart 'really good people.'<sup>61</sup> As a result, the number of ex-Communists continues to grow.

Important in this regard is Chambers' book, which played a key role in the election campaign here. Biographical research plays a role here quite similar to the one that ancestral research did in German. (But there is no trace of anti-Semitic or other kinds of racial influence here. On the contrary, the Jews are playing a prominent role in the whole mess simply because they make up a major percentage of the intelligentsia.) The great danger that the ex-Communists represent at the moment is that they are introducing police methods into normal social life. Because, without exception, they name names, they make police agents of themselves after the fact, as it were.

In this way, the informant system is being integrated into the society. (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, p. 211)

Those who take the Fifth Amendment, Arendt adds, are considered guilty by the very fact they take it, thus negating the purpose of the law. Those who don't take the Fifth Amendment have to name names or lie. Arendt believed that while their current significance was unlikely to last long, 'the ex-Communists are playing a sorry and key role in the process of disintegration.' Making things worse was the passivity or acquiescence of intellectuals who should know better. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, for instance, should be leading the resistance to the methods of investigatory committees. Instead its voice is stilled by the sheer force of public opinion. 'As you can see, I feel that we're looking at developments that are all too familiar. Naturally – or, rather, not so naturally at all – in totally different forms and under totally different circumstances' (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, p. 213). Arendt's letter to Jaspers, complete with its awkward phrasing and hesitant qualifications, shows two things plainly: that the analogy between informing and totalitarian methods was no casual association or throwaway line of 'The Ex-Communists'; that as soon as Arendt compared US conditions with totalitarian ones she quickly recoiled from a parallel she knew to be strained.

When *The Commonweal* sent him the tear sheet of the 'The Ex-Communists' with an invitation to reply, Chambers ignored the offer. He had no intention of dignifying Arendt's article with publicity thereby elevating it to an importance it in no wise deserved. He dismissed her critique as absurd; her intensity reminded him of 'an electric motor that is about to shake loose from its base.'<sup>62</sup> He doubtless also imagined himself to be the superior thinker. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* appeared in 1951, the year before *Witness*, and was instantly acclaimed a major book. But few Americans in 1953 would have deemed Arendt a more significant intellectual than Chambers, a past editor of *Time* magazine whose articles were read by millions and whose new book was an ideological lightning rod. Today, the situation is reversed. Arendt's reputation is at its zenith, while Chambers' standing has sunk to an historical footnote of the cold war and the McCarthy era. The result is that we are more likely to read Arendt than Chambers and to take her remarks on him and the ex-Communists as authoritative.

Yet 'The Ex-Communists' is a rare case in which Arendt's forensic skills failed her. Instead of examining a man, she coined a typology. Instead of reviewing a book, she sketched a tendency. Instead of delineating a post-Communist spectrum, she settled on a duality. She could not know where Chambers' last decade would take him. Intriguingly, however, it also up-ended her view of ex-Communist sclerosis. Chambers changed. Despite his affection for the young firebrand William Buckley Jr., Chambers was slow to join *National Review* and, when he did eventually join the journal, resigned shortly thereafter. He criticized Senator McCarthy's salvos as reckless and damaging; the man was a 'raven of disaster'

(Tanenhaus, 1997, p. 492). Chambers came to accept the New Deal as an inescapable reality to which, he warned, conservatives must adapt if they desired to remain relevant. He savaged Ayn Rand's dystopian libertarianism.<sup>63</sup> He supported Khrushchev's goodwill visit to the US and his meeting with Ike.<sup>64</sup> These are the positions of an idiosyncratic conservative, closer to a pragmatic Disraeli than a doctrinaire de Maistre. Whatever one calls them, they are not the caged ravings of an inverted Bolshevik.

### Acknowledgements

A shorter version of this essay was delivered as a speech in Copenhagen, in May 2013, to the *Danish Institute for International Studies*. I am grateful to Johannes Lang and Robin May Schott for organizing the event and to the *DIIS* for sponsoring it. I also thank Judith Adler, David Chambers and the reviewers of *EJCS* for their comments and suggestions.

### Funding

Part of the research on which this article is based was generously supported by a Fellowship in the Humanities and Social Sciences funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Committee [grant number: PF14A1].

### Notes

1. Blücher to Arendt, 14 June 1952 (Arendt & Blücher, 1996, pp. 189–190).
2. Mary McCarthy to Hannah Arendt, 2 December 1952 (Arendt & McCarthy, 1995, pp. 11–12).
3. The *Commonweal* article was reprinted twice, almost verbatim: first, in the *Washington Post* on 3 May 1953, B3, as “‘Ex-Communists’ Remain Totalitarian at Heart”; next in *Aufbau* (on 31 July 1953, p. 19; 7 August, pp. 13, 16), an organ of German-Jewish opinion published in New York, under the title ‘Gestern waren Sie noch Kommunisten ...’ (‘Yesterday They Were Still Communists ...’). The subtitle reads: ‘Zur Erkenntnis einer gefährlichen Zeiterscheinung’ (‘On the Knowledge of a Dangerous Contemporary Phenomenon’). The article appears in its entirety online in the *Aufbau* archives of the Leo Baeck Institute, <http://www.archive.org/stream/aufbau1819531953germ#page/n525/mode/1up>
4. Yet contrast Arthur Schlesinger's (1998/1949, p. 204) account of ‘the reckless accusations and appalling procedures’ of the House Committee on Un-American Activities with Rebecca West's (1953) laceration of ‘the witch hunt’ cliché. See also Rollyson (2005, pp. 62–72).
5. Berle did consult with Dean Acheson and Felix Frankfurter, but Chambers heard nothing until the FBI called on him in 1943 when he was working with *Time*.
6. For a lucid distillation of the Chambers–Hiss drama, see Nixon (2008). Nixon, a chief investigator, exposed Hiss with devastating brilliance. For a more personal account of how Nixon experienced the affair – it was a huge gamble for the 35-year-old Congressional freshman – see his *Six Crises* (1962, pp. 1–71). Nixon believed that his support for Chambers was decisive in his losing the presidential election of 1960.
7. HUAC is the standard designation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

8. However, Crossman (1953, p. 403) also likened the book's defamation of liberalism, conspiratorial outlook, 'volcanic *Weltanschauung*,' and prophetic gait to *Mein Kampf*, an analogy favored also by Kingsley Martin (2003/1952, p. 106).
9. For a contrary explanation, see Hitchens (2010, pp. 406–412).
10. She extrapolates this argument to poetry in Arendt (1968/1966).
11. Note that Arendt gives no examples of actual former Communists, only an example of a hypothetical one (Picasso remained a Party member). I return to this anomaly below.
12. The phrasing is infelicitous. Since public life is, for Arendt, the space of appearance par excellence, it is curious that people can 'disappear into' it as opposed to disappearing from it.
13. A Marxist type Arendt considers elsewhere is the 'anti-Stalinist,' but while someone can be against Stalin, they may be for Trotsky instead and hence still part of the Communist totalitarian movement. For that reason, 'anti-Stalinists' are a different species from *ex* and *former* Communists. The principal weaknesses of 'anti-Stalinism' as a catchword, concept, and political position are discussed in Arendt (1994/c. 1948).
14. It is tempting to read the title of this essay – 'The Eggs Speak Up' – as a rebuke to Walter Duranty, the *New York Times*' Moscow Bureau Chief. Writing about Soviet collectivization he had remarked – 'to put it brutally, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs,' <http://www.nytc.com/company/awards/statement.html>. More generally, however, Arendt argued that the Marxist commitment to 'making history' implied such destruction. Stalin modified this proverb to be: 'You can't break eggs without making an omelette' (1994/1951/2, p. 275).
15. In this essay, Arendt presents the loss of freedom as a post-Lenin development. Elsewhere (1972/1969, p. 124, n. 38) she is emphatic that 'it was Lenin who emasculated the soviets and gave all power to the party.'
16. The argument that follows became the leitmotif of *The Human Condition* (1958).
17. Also: 'The moment man defines himself no longer as *creatura Dei*, he will find it very difficult not to think of himself, consciously or unconsciously, as *homo faber*' (1994/1951/2, p. 283).
18. Also Arendt (1994/1951/2, p. 281): 'In the simplicity of everyday life one rule reigns supreme: Each good action, even for a "bad cause," adds some goodness to the world; each bad action even for the most beautiful of all ideals makes our common world a little worse.'
19. On the political context, see Schrecker (2002); Walker (1993, pp. 59–82); Tanenhaus (1997, pp. 284, 416–417).
20. Donner's *Nation* article was simultaneously published as a pamphlet.
21. Blücher to Arendt, 5 July 1952 (Arendt & Blücher, 1996, p. 200).
22. Nora de Toledano to Chambers, 22 March 1953 (Chambers & Toledano, 1997, p. 112).
23. Arendt is quoting, without complete accuracy, the journalist Joseph Alsop's article 'Miss Bentley's bondage' (Alsop, 1951).
24. The two figures cited by Alsop.
25. Mentioned in Arendt (1994/1951/2, p. 277).
26. Mentioned later, in Arendt to McCarthy, 7 June 1957 (Arendt & McCarthy, 1995, p. 50).
27. Silone is mentioned in Arendt (1994/1953, p. 393), but not as an example of the ex-Communist breed; she is citing a quotation in *Witness* (p. 462) that Chambers presumably derived from Silone's contribution to *The God that Failed* (Crossman, 2001/1950, p. 113). The full quotation, which Chambers misunderstands by taking it seriously is: "The final struggle," I said jokingly to Togliatti recently, "will be between the Communists and the ex-Communists." In the next paragraph, Silone goes on to say why he is *not* an 'ex-Communist.' In 'The Eggs Speak Up,' Silone appears once more (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, pp. 279–280) but in a context that supports Arendt's argument about the moral triviality of ex-Communists.

28. To Blücher from Rome, 17 September 1955. 'I like him. He's not clever, but solid, very honest through and through. Incorruptible' (Arendt & Blücher, 1996, p. 272; also p. 333). She made a similar remark to Jaspers, 20 September 1955 (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, p. 268). The sentiments of these letters post-date the articles we are considering here, but in the fall of 1950, Arendt described remarks of Silone at a congress she was attending as 'very good and moving' (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, p. 157). Ironically, Silone stands accused today of being an informer for the Italian fascist police.
29. Crossman sought, unsuccessfully, to enlist Chambers to write for this collection.
30. These comments are an early indication of Arendt's concern with the role of banality in human affairs. Given that the 'banality of evil' would become so contentious later, it is intriguing to note that Chambers earlier identified a complementary phenomenon: he called it, less snappily, 'the ominousness of nonentity, which is peculiar to the terrible little figures of our time,' attributing this 'secret power mantling insignificance' to, inter alia, Heinrich Himmler and the German-American Communist leader Max Bedacht (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 275).
31. On Lipper and González's experiences, see Fleming (2009, pp. 251–252, 258–261; and on Buber-Neumann, pp. 241–244).
32. Arendt's (1953) depiction of ideology – as a remorselessly 'logical' form of consistency, of mental entrapment through deduction, and as a shield against empirical reality – is eerily reminiscent of Koestler's in *Darkness at Noon* (1968/1941, pp. 97–102, 112, 138, 151–153, 160, 180, 192, 222, 258–259, 262–263). The main difference is that Koestler's novel culminates in rupture: the 'grammatical fiction' of the first person singular – the reality of the individual person – breaks through 'the twisted ethics and twisted logic' of the doomed Bolshevik, Rubashov (pp. 247–266). See also Koestler (2005/1954, p. 480). The problem with Arendt's theory of ideology is that, unlike Koestler's, it does not explain how a totalitarian ideologist can become a non-totalitarian thinker.
33. The book was originally a series of essays published in *Les Temps modernes* under the rubric 'Le Yogi et le prolétaire.'
34. See also *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973/1951, p. 449, n. 147) where Arendt cites Koestler's description of 'conditions in French concentration camps' (i.e. Le Vernet, in the department of Ariège, close to the Pyrenean frontier) in *Scum of the Earth* (Koestler, 2006/1941, esp. pp. 97–145).
35. What else was *Witness* but a mode of storytelling that transformed a private life into a public tale?
36. That manikins were transformed into moral giants was a common objection of HUAC's critics. See, for instance, Martin (2003/1952, p. 101), and Chafee (1952).
37. 'Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs' (Arendt, 1972/1971, p. 6).
38. When Golo Mann criticized *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for its exaggerations, Arendt objected 'It's in the nature of thought to exaggerate. When Montesquieu says that republican government is based on the principle of virtue, he is "exaggerating," too. Besides, reality has taken things to such great extremes in our century that we can say without exaggeration that reality is "exaggerated,"' Arendt to Jaspers, 25 January 1952 (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, pp. 175–176).
39. A EJCPs reviewer adds that 'good theories' do other things as well. They may, for instance, be heuristically fertile or initiate other research programmes, even while the original theories are not themselves accurate. An example is *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 'which almost certainly misconstrued Eichmann's actual fanaticism as "banality," but engendered an enormous subsequent literature on the relationship between political evil and intentionality.' This makes 'good' theory tantamount to provocative or

- 'fertile' theory. The equation is plausible to a point, but we also have to wonder how much time and energy have been wasted on theories that after years of discussion are abandoned and discredited.
40. She had no time for Hiss either, believing him to be both a liar and a pedant. All in all, the Hiss–Chambers nexus was an 'Augean stable.' Arendt to McCarthy, 7 June 1957 (Arendt & McCarthy, 1995, p. 50).
  41. A seasoned reporter of treason and betrayal, few were better equipped to understand the trial than West. I return to some of her judgments on Chambers below. She once remarked of the organization of the Nuremberg trial that it was a 'business badly done, but it could have been done no better': 'Greenhouse with Cyclamens I (1945)' in West (1955, p. 46). Something of the same inevitability haunted the Hiss trial.
  42. For a more oblique appreciation of *Witness*, see L. Trilling (2009/952, p. 260): 'There is nothing shameful in the nature of these books [by ex-Communists] ... And clearly there is nothing wrong in wishing to record the painful experience and to draw conclusions from it.'
  43. The error persists in the second, revised edition (2004).
  44. Allen Weinstein (1997/1978, p. 461) notes the error. Sam Tanenhaus (1997, p. 469) is harsher: Arendt resorted to 'crudely caricaturing [Chambers'] role in the Hiss case.' Tanenhaus' unvarnished biography is a model of sympathetic detachment.
  45. Chambers renounced his homosexuality at the same time as he broke with Communism and became an impassioned Christian. As it happened, 'the Hiss defense ultimately decided not to raise the homosexual issue, lest it rebound on their client, who was also the subject of sexual innuendo' (Tanenhaus, 1997, p. 345).
  46. 'To a friend who, in 1938, was urging me, with some eloquence, to break with the Communist Party, I said at last: "You know that the day I walk out of the Communist Party, I walk into a police station". I meant, as he well knew, for he was an ex-Communist himself, that the question which faces every man and woman who breaks with the Communist Party is: "Shall I become an informer against it?" My answer stopped the conversation, for to my friend, as to me, "informer" is a word so hateful that when, years later, in testifying before a grand jury, I came to that word and my decision to become an informer, I could not at once go on' (Chambers, 2002/1952, p. 65).
  47. She did, however, write extensively in *On Revolution* and elsewhere about the violent nature of 'unmasking' – the attempt to reveal a person's true identity behind the veils of obfuscation. Unmasking is a larger idea and practice than informing because it often imputes motives to a person of which they are unaware. As such 'unmasking' became influential in the human sciences in the guise of the hermeneutics of suspicion. It is worth noting that in *Witness* and at the HUAC hearings, Chambers sought to explain the inherent plausibility of Communism for workers and for intelligent idealist intellectuals; he sought to disclose genuine human feelings rather than unmask a fraud, 'unmasking' being a salient Communist trope. Indeed, it is significant that not once in *Witness* does Chambers ever use the term 'unmask' to describe his informing; for a man of his literary gifts, and terminological sensitivity, this was no accident. The very notion of witnessing places the onus on the individual experience, while unmasking is always something done to others. On the unmasking problematic, and its impact on sociology, see Baehr (2013).
  48. Arendt never did provide a systematic account of the political ethics on informing, even in her (1972/1971) essay on the Pentagon Papers, 'Lying in Politics.'
  49. Carl Rollyson (2005, p. 49) points out that while 'HUAC was often criticized for humiliating witnesses and for making them "name names,"' it often 'already had the names. But as [Rebecca] West knew, HUAC was attempting to build a case



- that would not have to rely on [exposing] government security reports' that were kept secret lest they alert the Soviet Union to what American security knew about its spy network.
50. His story is told by Volodymyr Semystiaha (2001, p. 243).
  51. The Stasi's informant net was thrown over the entire society: every single one of the 217 districts of the GDR had a Stasi office. At the time the state collapsed in 1989, Stasi full-time employees numbered 91,015, their informants 173,000. For comparison: Canada, with twice the population of the GDR, has approximately 2500 full-time state security/intelligence employees (Bruce, 2010, p. 10).
  52. In reality matters are more complicated. Crimestoppers, a phone-call based crime detection initiative begun in Albuquerque, New Mexico, by Greg MacAleese in 1976, and since widely imitated internationally, does offer cash rewards to people able to provide information that leads to an arrest and an indictment (conviction is not a necessary condition of payment). A British study of the charity states that three kinds of informers are attracted to its practice of strict anonymity: criminals, family members of criminals, and members of the public who have no association with crime other than having information about it. See Griffiths and Murphy (2001).
  53. Once the Hiss trials got going, Chambers did have two FBI interrogators who also played the role of minders: Tom Spencer and Frank Plant (Tanenhaus, 1997, p. 340).
  54. On Chambers' reserve, see Rebecca West (2003/1952).
  55. Navasky adds to these types, *one-time-only informers*, like the actor Larry Parks and the writer-director Robert Rossen, and *confidential informants*, an anonymous group planted in the Communist Party, or recruited from it, by the FBI.
  56. I am drawing on Sissela Bok (1989/1983, pp. 210–229). Cf. Hook (1987, p. 292).
  57. Sidney Hook argued that while a liberal society must protect heretical ideas, including those of Communism, it cannot tolerate a Communist movement actively conspiring to destroy liberal society. 'Heresy, Yes – But Conspiracy, No' (1950), reprinted in Schrecker (2002, pp. 263–274).
  58. Diana Trilling (2003/1950, p. 44) spotted a related problem: 'It is the very essence of contemporary liberalism that it thinks so differently about reaction and about Communism.'
  59. Nixon (2008, pp. 54–55) argued sensibly that the administration's lack of enthusiasm displayed no pro-Communism or disloyalty. Rather, it exhibited complacency and a politics-as-usual attitude: no government, Democrat or Republican, wants embarrassing facts to be disclosed when an election is imminent. Instead of granting the seriousness of subversion, Truman's government inclined towards treating it 'like any ordinary political scandal.' (Truman, against all expectations, won the presidential election of November 1948; in the spring of that year, his popularity rating stood only at 36%).
  60. Arendt to Jaspers, 13 May 1953 (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992/1985, p. 210). 'It is more pleasant, less boring, and even more flattering to oneself, if one lives in this century, to be an enemy of Stalin in Moscow than a foe of Joseph McCarthy in Washington' (Arendt, 1994/1951/2, p. 272).
  61. Fleming (2009) offers a reconstruction of the appeal of Communism to intelligent and sensitive people. See especially, pp. 65, 83, 111, 134–135, 236. Similarly, see Chambers (2002/1952, pp. 191–197, 'The Outrage and the Hope of the World') for a cogent account of Communism's plausibility in an age of war, economic crisis, and political vacillation by the democracies. A trenchant alternative view is furnished by Rebecca West. It was mostly non-Communists, she argues, that were in the van of opposition to Fascism. See her (1951) scathing review of Alistair Cook's 'A Generation on Trial: USA v. Alger Hiss.'
  62. Letter to Nora de Toledano, 19 March 1953 (Chambers & Toledano, 1997, p. 109).

63. Chambers, 'Big Sister Is Watching You' (1957) in Chambers (1989, pp. 313–318).  
 64. 'I am on record as saying to Esther [Chambers' wife]: "Khrush is here for peace."' Letter to Buckley, 20 September 1959 in Chambers (1969, p. 259).

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