Naming Names

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A Note on Vocabulary

THE COMMUNISTS AND SOME LEFT LIBERALS called them "informers" and "stoolies" and "belly-crawlers." The investigating committees and American Legionnaires called them "patriots" and "courageous." Sometimes they called themselves "friendly" or simply "cooperative" witnesses.

Certainly many of those who named names resisted the informer label. Consider the exchange between the Committee and the writer-director Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul* [1947], *All the King's Men* [1949], etc.), who in 1951 refused to name names but appeared again in 1953 ready to go through the name-naming ritual. "I don't think," he told the congressmen, "after two years of thinking, that any one individual can even indulge himself in the luxury of individual morality or pit it against what I feel today very strongly is the security and safety of this nation." Congressman Clyde Doyle of California tried to paraphrase Rossen's position: "In other words, you put yourself, then, in a position as a result of your patriotism or patriotic attitude toward your nation, which you came to subsequent to January 25, 1951, where you were willing to be labeled a stool pigeon and an informer, but you felt that was perhaps the privilege rather than a disgrace?"

MR. ROSSEN: I don't feel that I'm being a stool pigeon or an informer. I refuse—I just won't accept that characterization.

CONGRESSMAN KIT CLARDY: Well, Mr. Doyle means—

MR. ROSSEN: No; no. I am not . . . disagreeing with Mr. Doyle, but I think that is a rather romantic—that is like children playing at cops and robbers. They are just kidding themselves, and I don't care what the characterizations in terms of—people can take whatever positions they want. I know what I feel like within my-

self. Characterization or no characterization, I don't feel that way.[1]

Thus did the terminological terrain constitute a real, if obscure, battlefield of the cold war. Typically, J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, ever-vigilant against enemy inroads on the semantic front, leaped into the fray. Writing in *Elks Magazine* in 1956, he denounced those who "indulge in sabotage by semantics":

> They stigmatize patriotic Americans with the obnoxious term "informer," when such citizens fulfill their obligations of citizenship by reporting known facts of the evil conspiracy to properly constituted authorities. It would require very little time for these critics to pick up a dictionary. Webster's unabridged volume specifically states that an "informant" is one who gives information of whatever sort; an "informer" is one who informs against another by way of accusation or complaint. Informer is often, informant never, a term of opprobrium.[2]

Although it may not do as a technical definition, for present purposes—and in accordance with what I understand to be popular usage—I define an informer as someone who betrays a comrade, i.e., a fellow member of a movement, a colleague, or a friend, to the authorities. Given this definition, and taking the objections of guilt-by-connotation into account, I think it is useful, when context permits, to call those who named names by their rightful name—informer. For the idea of "playing the informer" was part of what made the decision whether to name or not to name names so painful. The agony of a Larry Parks or even the delayed decision of a Robert Rossen was an acknowledgment that, however they behaved, in their hearts and minds they preferred *not to play the role of the informer.* Even the director Elia Kazan, who took out an ad in 1952 urging others called before HUAC to name names, conceded the presumption against playing the informer when he told a television interviewer in 1972 that although he doesn't feel called upon to apologize for what he did, his decision was not without ambivalence, since "there is something disgusting about naming things, naming names."[3]

By calling people informers, I do not mean to convert the presumption against naming names into an absolute prohibition. In principle, there may be circumstances where informing is the right thing to do, even as there may be circumstances where lying or murder (in self-defense, for instance, or in fighting a just war) is the right thing to do. If there is any

literary strategy intended in my choice of vocabulary it is not to denounce by negative labeling but to reflect as accurately as possible the way the act was perceived at the time by "namers," "namees," and interested onlookers.

The writer-director Abraham Polonsky, a former Communist who was an unapologetic Fifth Amendment–invoking witness, explains the actor John Garfield's refusal to name names in terms that make clear the importance of the informer or stool-pigeon label. "He said he hated Communists, he hated Communism, he was an American. He told the Committee what it wanted to hear. But he wouldn't say the one thing that would keep him from walking down his old neighborhood block. Nobody could say, 'Hey, there's the fucking stool pigeon.' You see, that's what he was fighting against: He should be a stool pigeon because he can only gain from it, yet he can't do it because in his mind he lives in the street where he comes from and in the street he comes from you're not a stool pigeon. That's the ultimate horror."

Interestingly enough, Whittaker Chambers adopted the term "informer" when referring to himself in *Witness.* This was not because of any misapprehension about the word's dark connotations. Rather, Chambers, like HUAC, seemed to argue that informing was the inevitable hell through which the ex-Communist must pass on his road back to self-respect and redemption, and names were the bullets with which ex-Communists might slay the red dragon. According to Chambers, when he was still in the Communist Party in the 1930s and a friend urged him to break with it, he said: "You know that the day I walk out of the Communist Party, I walk into the police station." He meant, he later wrote, that the question which first 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."

In fact, says Chambers, his distaste for the idea of informing was so great that even after he broke with the Party, determined "to immobilize it, and if possible to smash it," he was not ready to become an informer. "Informing involves individual human beings, and neither then nor at any subsequent time were my actions directed against individual Communists, even when, perforce, I had to strike at the Communist Party as a political organization. I therefore decided to try first of all to smash the secret apparatus by myself."

It took him seven years, Chambers wrote, to realize he had no choice. Finally, he says, fearing that the Communists in government would give subversive policy advice, he flew to Washington, D.C., to tell all to A. A. Berle in the State Department. He recorded his thoughts, he tells us, at the time:

> To be an informer . . .
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> Men shrink from that word and what it stands for as from something lurking and poisonous. Spy is a different breed of word. Espionage is a function of war whether it be waged between nations, classes, or parties. Like the soldier, the spy stakes his freedom or his life on the chances of action. Like the soldier, his acts are largely impersonal. He seldom knows whom he cripples or kills. Spy as an epithet is a convention of morale; the enemy's spy is always monstrous; our spy is daring and brave. It must be so since all camps use spies and must while war lasts.
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> 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 that 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 these things, he would have no use as an informer.
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> Because he has that use the police must protect him. He is their creature. When they whistle he fetches a soiled bone of information. . . . He has surrendered his choice. To that extent, though he be free in every other way, the informer is a slave. He is no longer a man. . . . He is free only to the degree in which he understands what he is doing and why he must do it.
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> 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. . . .
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> I hold that it is better, because in general clarity is more maturing than illusion, for the ex-Communist to make the offering in the full knowledge of what he is doing, the knowledge that henceforth he is no longer a free man but an informer. . . . Those who do not inform are still conniving at that evil. That is the crux of the moral choice which the ex-Communist must make in recognizing that the logic of his position makes him an informer.

For Chambers, one was an informer not out of choice but "out of necessity." The question for the ex-Communist was not whether to inform but when and how. "On the road of the informer it is always night," he wrote in his inimitable, melodramatic way. "I who have traveled it from end to end, and know its windings, switchbacks and sheer drops—I cannot say at what point the ex-Communist must make his decision to take it. . . . If he means to be effective, if he does not wish the act merely to be wasted suffering for others and himself, how, when and where the ex-Communist informs are matters calling for the shrewdest judgment."[4]

One doesn't have to accept Chambers' apocalyptic perspective or his ideological baggage to understand why he used the word informer the way he did—not to condemn, but rather to signify a process of personal betrayal said to be necessary for the greater good of mankind and the redemption of his soul.* He incarnated the Informer Principle—an unwritten law that came to underlie and govern so many cold war situations that by the time HUAC announced its second round of entertainment investigations in 1951, naming names seemed less a taboo-ridden activity than a 1950s folkway.

Chambers, it should be noted, represents only one type of informer that emerged during the cold war years—we may call them, as they called themselves, the espionage-exposers. If people like Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley (who purported to identify a number of Washington spy rings) were telling the truth, it would be dubious indeed to attack them as betrayers without honoring them as espionage-exposers. As it

* Having said that, it is important to note that the occasion for Chambers' ruminations may not have involved informing at all. For his message to Berle fell far short of his subsequent message to the world. He named for Berle the members of what he alleged to be a Communist cell operating out of Washington, but, according to some scholars who have examined Berle's notes of the meeting, he made a point of denying what he later was to charge—that Alger Hiss was involved in espionage. If Chambers later told the truth when he laid the theft of the so-called Pumpkin Papers to Hiss, then on the day in question, with Berle, he was less an informer than a liar, for it would have been lying-by-omission to fail to report the Pumpkin Papers espionage. (And if he *later* lied, then he was never an informer vis-à-vis Hiss, merely a lying accuser.) Thus Chambers' willingness to be called an informer may be an act of penance or a grand strategy of obfuscation; to denounce himself as an informer lends credibility to his credentials as an accuser.

happens, there are so many unanswered questions of fact surrounding their charges that it is impossible to say with certainty who belongs to this class of informer-as-spy-catcher. But whether history reveals Chambers to have been liar or truth-teller—the debate still rages—it seems indisputable that he helped to bring about the metamorphosis of the informer's image from rat to lion, from stoolie to patriot. Chambers himself was originally an object of obloquy, and when he first appeared before the Committee he appeared disheveled, disturbed, mercurial. After his HUAC testimony in 1948, his espionage charges later in the same year, the conviction of Hiss in 1950 for perjury, and the publication of *Witness* in 1952, which was featured for eight weeks in the *Saturday Evening Post* and selected as a Book-of-the-Month, Chambers began to seem respectable, and so, by that time, did the informer as a social type. By their example, the espionage-exposers gave informing a good name, and undoubtedly the prestige that was conferred on them by the culture was not lost on those ex-Communists with no espionage to expose but nevertheless a subpoena to contend with. In addition, their revelations lent a tone of urgency to the political situation, which was invoked by others to justify the suspension of traditional personal and political loyalties.

A second type of informer was the so-called professional witness—a person who would move from tribunal to tribunal "exposing" Communists and Communism, often for a fee—men such as Louis Budenz, former editor of the *Daily Worker;* John Lautner, who was expelled in 1950 from the Party under suspicion of being an FBI informer (he wasn't at the time but became one later, out of bitter disillusionment at the Party's failure to heed his protestations of innocence); or Harvey Matusow, the former Young Communist Leaguer, who eventually informed on the informers. The testimony of these people resulted in the conviction of scores of Party leaders under the Smith Act, for "conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the government by force and violence." These men and women elaborated their stories before federal, state, and local legislatures as well as in private forums, and their accusations cost hundreds of citizens their jobs.

As a class these professional or "kept" witnesses, as the journalist Richard Rovere called them,[5] played fast and loose with the facts and in time returned to the informer his bad name. But the immediate effect of their scary reports on the anatomy of the red dragon was to confirm a secondary message—that the informer was a Saint George who could slay the dragon, and the culture would reward him for such work.

Third, there were those whom Mr. Hoover called "confidential informants"—anonymous folk planted in or recruited from the Communist Party (or other allegedly subversive organizations) by the FBI, who reported regularly to the bureau. These people were, for the most part, police spies and/or agents provocateurs, and when they filed their reports, it was less a matter of betraying a friend than of simply doing a job, dirty work though it may have been. Some of them, like Angela Calomiris and Herbert Philbrick, first surfaced to testify in the key 1949 Smith Act trial in Foley Square and then moved on to become professional witnesses. There is no reason not to call such operatives "confidential informants"—although some of them plunged so exuberantly into their double and triple lives that they made (and ended up having to betray) intimate friendships and consequently faced much the same dilemma as the nonprofessional informer—for they supplied much of the material used to build dossiers on their unwitting comrades. These people also, like the espionage-exposers, contributed to the growing myth of the informer as folk hero—through the publication in newspapers and books, serialization on radio, on television, and in movies, of their tales.*

Finally, there were the private citizens like Parks and Rossen, many of whom had left the Communist Party more than a decade before, who appeared as one-time-only informers before a congressional committee and, under (but not always because of) the threat of being blacklisted, named names. This book is focused on this last group of informers—many of them reluctant, in the sense that had it not been for a subpoena and/or the pressure, they wouldn't have done it.

The espionage exposers, the kept witnesses, and the confidential informants had in common that they were ultimately volunteers, enthusiasts of betrayal; nevertheless, to the extent that their betrayal was shown as the price of patriotism, they served as role models for reluctant informers in academe, the sciences, government, and, most visibly and volubly, the entertainment community. They were fixtures on the landscape, against which the citizens hauled before congressional committees and asked to name names measured themselves when deciding what to do. Most of these citizens thought of themselves as informers, and that is what I call them.

* Occasionally the categories overlapped. Thus Elizabeth Bentley was both a self-styled espionage-exposer and a professional witness. Leo Townsend named names before a congressional committee but also testified at a deportation proceeding. Philbrick was a confidential informant who graduated to professional witness. And so on.