



## THE FBI FILES ON BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

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*From 1945 onwards, J Edgar Hoover's FBI  
spied on Camus and Sartre.*

*The investigation soon turned into a philosophical inquiry...*

I was leafing through some FBI files on French philosophers when a new candidate for occupancy of the populous Grassy Knoll in Dallas leapt out at me. To the massed ranks of the CIA, the Mafia, the KGB, Castro, Hoover, and LBJ, we can now add: Jean-Paul Sartre. FBI and State Department reports of the 1960s had drawn attention to Sartre's membership of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, of which Lee Harvey Oswald was also a member. And—prophetically?—Sartre had “dismissed the US as a headless nation.” Naturally I rushed around trying to work out exactly where Sartre might have been on 22nd November 1963. Could he, after all, have been the Second Shooter? Suddenly all the pieces started to fall into place.

But subsequent references in the main Oswald file showed that the FBI, although generally perturbed by the “Leftist tendencies” of Sartre, and his association with Communists, Castro, and Bertrand Russell, were specifically concerned that he was now—in addition to protesting against US involvement in Vietnam—threatening to “take an active part in the French Who Killed Kennedy Committee” (according to an article in the Washington Post of 14th June 1964). The FBI was wedded to the Lone Gunman theory. The emphasis of

their interest in Sartre, then, was not on whether he had participated in any conspiracy, but rather that he was a believer in conspiracy theory and “supported the position that Oswald was not the true assassin of President Kennedy.”

The FBI had been keeping an eye on Sartre from as early as 1945. Soon after, they began to investigate his contemporary, Albert Camus. On 7th February, 1946, John Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, wrote a letter to “Special Agent in Charge” at the New York field office, drawing his attention to one ALBERT CANUS, “reportedly the New York correspondent of *Combat* [who] has been filing inaccurate reports which are unfavorable to the public interest of this country.” Hoover gave orders “to conduct a preliminary investigation to ascertain his background, activities and affiliations in this country.” One of Hoover’s underlings had the guts to inform the director that “the subject’s true name is ALBERT CAMUS, not ALBERT CANUS” (diplomatically hypothesizing that “Canus” was probably an alias he had cunningly adopted).

The irony that emerges from the FBI files on Camus and Sartre, spanning several decades (and which, still partly redacted, I accessed thanks to the open-sesame of the Freedom of Information Act) is that the G-men, initially so anti-philosophical, find themselves reluctantly philosophizing. They become (in GK Chesterton’s phrase) philosophical policemen.

Hoover needed to know if Existentialism and Absurdism were some kind of front for Communism. To him, everything was potentially a coded re-write of the Communist Manifesto. That was the thing about the Manifesto—it was not manifest: more often it was, as Freud would say, latent. Thus FBI agents were forced to become psychoanalysts and hermeneuts—drawn into what the historian Carlo Ginzburg neatly called the “cynegetic paradigm” (a brotherhood of clue-hunting detectives in which he includes Freud and Sherlock Holmes). Thus we find intelligence agents studying scholarly works and attending lectures.

But the FBI were “philosophical policemen” in a second sense: in tracking Camus and Sartre (surveillance, eavesdropping, wiretapping, theft) they give expression to their own brand of philosophical investigations. In particular, the FBI philosophy files reveal how the agency became so dogmatically anti-conspiratorial.

Sartre had been invited to the US, towards the end of World War Two, as part of a propaganda campaign overseen by the Office of War Information (OWI). In the face of FBI scepticism as to wheth-

er the author of *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* was capable of coming up with decent propaganda on behalf of anyone, Sartre had at least one stout supporter: Archibald Macleish, Under Secretary of State, and assistant director at the OWI. Macleish is now best-known as the author of the classic formulation of the modernist aesthetic: “A poem should not mean/ But be.” He was a poet in Paris in the 1920, and went on to become Librarian of Congress and Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard. But during the war he was a founding figure of the “Research and Analysis Branch” of the Office of Strategic Services—precursor to the CIA, the more international intelligence service (and thus rival to the FBI) that Hoover tried to abort and undermine.

In an interview published in *France-Amérique* in March 1945, Macleish asked his interviewer “not to forget to inform Sartre, whose talent he loved so much, that he was rejoicing in advance over his visit.” Meanwhile, from the FBI point of view anyone who had been in the Resistance (whether actively—Camus—or more marginally—Sartre) was automatically under suspicion. Especially journalists and philosophers. And even more so when another French writer, based in the US, Geneviève Tabouis, was busily denouncing them as Communists. (Sartre wrote an article denouncing her as a spy for the State Department, something she vigorously denied, even while reporting it back to the State Department.)

Sartre expected to be spied on. But he was never undercover. He valued total transparency. Hence his scorn for the Freudian unconscious and his anticipation and appreciation of the role that visibility plays in celebrity culture. Sartre proved a mystery to the FBI: it was impossible to steal information from him because he was desperate to give it away. Even so, after a quarter century of puzzling over his work, noting his links with Che, Russell, the Black Panthers, and the anti-Vietnam War movement they had to conclude, in their 1970 synopsis of his oeuvre, that, on the one hand, he can be “described as pro-communist” (and “encouraged youth to believe in nothing spiritual”) while at the same time is “also described by some sources as anti-communist.”

Camus, following in Sartre’s footsteps in 1946, was held briefly by immigration owing to Hoover’s stop notice. In contrast to Sartre, Camus proposed an aesthetics of discretion and privacy. Whereas Sartre tended towards a maximization of information, to the point of obscenity, Camus believed that there can be such a thing as too much information.

Camus, like Sartre, had a supporter within the proto-CIA: Justin O'Brien, Professor of French at Columbia, and translator of the journals of André Gide. O'Brien was also chief of the French desk at the Office of Strategic Services during the war, which was tasked with "establishing intelligence networks behind German lines in France." In the course of the Occupation, he developed a fondness for the work of Eluard, Michaux, Vercors, "the poetic renaissance that marked the occupation," and Louis Aragon, who was explicitly Communist.

Once the war was over, the two intelligence services, the FBI and the CIA became locked into "a binary praxis of antagonistic reciprocity" (as Sartre would say). In other words, the FBI, specifically Hoover, hated first the OSS and then, after 1947, its avatar, the CIA. But there is more than just a turf war dividing the two agencies. There is a broad philosophical (and, it should be added, aesthetic) divergence.

Hoover's FBI was deeply suspicious of philosophers, especially foreign ones, virtually philosophic; but this does not stop the organisation from developing its own brand of philosophical thinking in response to Sartre and Camus—the FBI files on being and nothingness.

The FBI did not read Sartre or Camus in the original French. One of the agents, having stolen some notebooks and diaries ("obtained from the personal effects") in early 1945, complains that this "material [is] all in French" and translators were drafted in. Then the investigation proper could begin.


The FBI emerge from these files as neo-existentialists in the classic early Sartrean mould. They, like the early Archibald Macleish, take the view that people, not just poetry, "should not mean, but be." They don't like meaning—they are on the look-out for it, especially secret coded meanings, but they don't like it. They certainly subscribe to the "hell is other people" school of thought. And Hoover, in particular, would be greatly relieved if only everyone across the whole of the USA was an angst-ridden, anomic, introverted loner. In short, an Outsider. What they fear and object to is meaning, and finally, the plot—or narrative. They are anti-narrativists.

The FBI echo Sartre's classic modernist critique of narrative, in his novel *Nausea*. Hoover's FBI are quintessential existentialists in refuting teleological narrative—they would rather have contingency and chaos than telos. The FBI found Camus fundamentally their kind of guy: the Camus of the Absurd and the Outsider, according

to which the individual will never really make sense of the world, nor hook up, in any kind of long term way, with others.

We are apt to think of the FBI as the great conspiracy theorists. But the reality is quite nuanced: I am tempted to say they are not conspiratorial enough. They resist theory. They don't really want to believe in plots. Hence their primal attitude, their metaphysics, when it comes to the question, Who Killed Kennedy? Was the assassination of Kennedy a conspiracy? The FBI won't have it. They were, in their typically neo-existential way, intent on the Oswald lone-wolf story—or non-story. Oswald, in short, is just their kind of guy: a conflicted, anomic, disconnected loner. More Meursault than conspirator.

Narrative, philosophy, and espionage share a common genesis: they arise out a lack of information. Sartre's expectation of a world of total information would kill them all stone dead. There would be no need of the FBI, novelists, or French philosophers. Existentialism and Absurdism insist on an asymmetry between being and information. Agent James M. Underhill, who heroically pursued the elusive "Albert Canus," encapsulated the theory in a resonant phrase: "The file does not show the final disposition."

So where was Sartre on 22nd November, 1963? The FBI files have no record of him entering the country in that year. He was probably in Paris, where he was bringing out the second instalment of his autobiography in *Les temps modernes*. Camus's alibi is even more secure, since he died in a car-crash in January 1960. But was that a random accident or... a conspiracy? 

*This essay is based on a lecture given earlier this year at the Maison française, Columbia University, New York, as part of its centenary celebrations.*

***We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.***

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