



The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture (Series Q)

Joseph Litvak

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In a bold rethinking of the Hollywood blacklist and McCarthyite America, Joseph Litvak reveals a political regime that did not end with the 1950s or even with the Cold War: a regime of compulsory sycophancy, in which the good citizen is an informer, ready to denounce anyone who will not play the part of the earnest, patriotic American. While many scholars have noted the anti-Semitism underlying the House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC's) anti-Communism, Litvak draws on the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Alain Badiou, and Max Horkheimer to show how the committee conflated Jewishness with what he calls "comic cosmopolitanism," an intolerably seductive happiness, centered in Hollywood and New York, in show business and intellectual circles. He maintains that HUAC took the comic irreverence of the "uncooperative" witnesses as a crime against an American identity based on self-repudiation and the willingness to "name names." Litvak proposes that sycophancy was (and continues to be) the price exacted for assimilation into mainstream American culture, not just for Jews, but also for homosexuals, immigrants, and other groups deemed threatening to American rectitude.

Litvak traces the outlines of comic cosmopolitanism in a series of performances in film and theater and before HUAC, performances by Jewish artists and intellectuals such as Zero Mostel, Judy Holliday, and Abraham Polonsky. At the same time, through an uncompromising analysis of work by informers including Jerome Robbins, Elia Kazan, and Budd Schulberg, he explains the triumph of a stoolpigeon culture that still thrives in the America of the early twenty-first century.

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