

Why Should the Left Trust the Government?

In 1960, as a graduate student in history, I decided to pick up some work as a census-taker on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. At the training session (at the Henry George School), the instructor said, "you're paid by the head, and [smirk], nobody's going to make any trouble if you find a couple of two-headed people." (At that time I was still a Good Boy, and didn't find any such.)

But this trained me in some skepticism about the census, which stayed with me when, as historian, I used old census records. And the continuing collapse of civil liberties under Obama further reinforces other doubts, about confidentiality. Why should we trust a government that spies on our emails, etc.?

Nonetheless, still a little bit of a Good Boy and recognizing the positive value of the census, I filled out and returned the form. But all this made me recall that there is a tradition of census resistance in this country, going back to the first census (1790), opposed and refused by Baptists who based their resistance on a biblical passage which they read as opposing counting the people. (At that time, there remained established religions in some states, in effect taxing Baptists for their support.)

As I write this, I think about a larger issue: expressions of anti-government sentiment in 2010 seem to be the monopoly of the right. What in the world has become of such expressions, which have been part of important Left traditions?