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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

ULY 13, 2018

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15.97.2018

The New McCarthyism: Is the Electric Chair Next for the Left?



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In a recent piece for *CounterPunch*, [Melvin Goodman](#) invoked the memory of Sen. Joseph McCarthy as a jumping-off point for a critique of the political situation in the era of Trump & company. He wrote, “it is no surprise that the past 17 years of warfare have been accompanied by a series of lost liberties; a revival of McCarthyism; and a belief in conspiracy theory that has afflicted the left wing (‘Deep State’) as well as the right (‘Drain the Swamp’).” He details Trump administration efforts to repress dissent in the name of national security.

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Goodman added, “Senator Joseph McCarthy’s vociferous campaign against alleged communists in the U.S. government and other institutions led to the term ‘McCarthyism’ to describe any campaign or practice that endorses the use of unfair allegations and investigations.”

McCarthy is cast as a fearful shadow, a warning as to what might happen if the current political crisis worsens. The invocation is provocative because the man and the reactionary campaigns he championed were far worse than the author suggests. Political repression during the post-WW-II era involved more than one man and the various positions he occupied in the Senate. It distinguished a powerful social force seeking to contain the new sense of possibility unleashed by postwar demobilization. But — and most important – McCarthy and McCarthyism were (temporarily) defeated.

For a decade-and-a-half, from 1947 to 1961, the Red Scare terrorized the nation, playing out on a number of fronts. During the post-WW-II era, U.S. society converted from war to peace, from 2nd-tier player to global superpower. In the post-WW-II era, international tension increased. First, the Soviet Union (SU), long considered a 2nd-rate state, was now the nation’s chief threat; it detonated its first atomic bomb on September 23, 1949. Second, on October 1, ’49, Mao Zedong’s communists achieved victory over the Kuomintang-led government in the long-drawn out Chinese civil war, a conflict that started in 1927. And third, the Korean War started in June 1950 and ended in stalemate in March ’53. Anticommunism was a major electoral issue in Richard Nixon’s ’46 Congressional campaign and McCarthy’s ’47 Senate campaign. Both Houses of Congress fought to prove that it was the most anticommunist.

The entertainment fields and, most notably, Hollywood, was a prime target. In May ’47, members of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) settled into Los Angeles’ Biltmore Hotel for a showdown with the movie industry. The first to appear before the committee were “friendly” witnesses, including actors Robert Taylor, Richard Arlen and Adolphe Menjou; they “named names” of actual or alleged communists. Among others who named names were Lee J. Cobb, Clifford Odets, Robert Rossen and Budd Schulberg. Studio head Jack Warner went so far as to identifying studio personnel he suspected of being subversives. In September ’47, HUAC served subpoenas to 43 film-industry personnel and, on November 25th, ten witnesses appeared at the hearings and refused to name names. They became known as “The Hollywood Ten.”

After WW-II ended, HUAC began targeting on-air radio talent. In response, NBC and CBS imposed loyalty oaths, requiring employees to sign or lose their jobs; ABC, the

smallest network, did not investigate alleged subversives. By 1947, according to one report, 12 of the leading 14 liberals broadcasting in the New York area were dropped while 24 of 25 conservatives remained on air.

The anticommunist blacklist took its toll on thousands of Americans throughout the country. Victims of the blacklist worked in numerous occupations, from factories, the waterfront, public school classrooms and the nation's leading research centers to the Broadway stage and radio announcers. The blacklist was formally established as the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations (AGLOSO), revealed in March 1947 under Pres. Harry Truman's Executive Order 9835. The Order required all federal employees be screened for "loyalty" and created the Loyalty Review Board to undertake the screening. However, the list had a long pre- and post-history as a form of censorship.

Lisa Sergio, a now all-but-forgotten '40s radio personality, is an illuminating blacklist victim. She immigrated to the U.S. in 1938, a repentant anti-Fascist who began her career as Italy's first female radio announcer and Benito Mussolini's English-language interpreter. Between '39 and '46, she was featured on WQXR's "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air"; during the war, she was NBC radio's "woman announcer" and filled in for Walter Winchell on his ABC radio show. However, in the '40s, she was listed on the FBI's Custodial Detention Index (CDI), a list of subversives who were to be considered for arrest in case of war.

Sergio was one of the radio commentators HUAC targeted in '45 and, in 1950, Louis Budenz, a former *Daily Worker* editor and subsequent celebrity anticommunist spokesperson, named her as one of the 400 "concealed communists" that he claimed to know. In 1950, *Red Channels*, an anti-communist publication, listed her among 151 actors, radio commentators, musicians and other broadcast-industry personalities in its "Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television." She was dropped by the *Times* radio station, her professional career as a broadcast personality and public speaker was over; in 1953, the State Department refused to renew her passport. She retreated to Vermont to allegedly take care of her ailing mother and, only after her mother died and the Red Scare ended, did she move to Washington, DC, and resume a public life. On Saturday, August 7, 1948, HUAC convened a special hearing, "Regarding Communist Espionage in the U.S. Government," at the federal Courthouse in New York's Foley Square. Rep. Nixon presided and the key witness was Alger Hiss, the president of the Carnegie Endowment and a former senior State Department official, over his alleged communist ties.

A few months later, on March 4, 1949, a sensational media event shook the nation. The FBI arrested Judith Coplon (Socolov), a Justice Department employee, for passing secret information to the SU; following two drawn out trials and conviction, all charges were dropped. In '49, the Smith Act trials of Communist Party (CP) members begin in more than a dozen cities and dragged on until '58; all defendants were found guilty. Also, in '49, the Peekskill riots took place. They were two violent showdowns between supporters of pro-CP groups and the entertainer, Paul Robeson, against anti-communists and racist local residents, some reported to be members of veterans' groups and police forces. In '50, the State Department revoked Robeson's passport.

In February 1950, McCarthy announced in Wheeling, WV, "I have in my hand a list of 205 cases of individuals who appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party." McCarthy's list was never formally made public and he kept changing the number of alleged communist suspects depending on the audience he was addressing. The list appears to have been based on a list originally prepared some years earlier by FBI agent Robert Lee and known as the "Lee List."

Liberal intellectuals and publications felt especially threatened by the blacklist, fearful of being smeared by the anticommunist brush. So, they capitulated. In his classic tale, *Naming Names*, Victor Navasky found, "the majority of center liberals lived in the penumbra of the degradation ceremony [of naming names] and reinforced it by playing its game." *The New York Post* and *New Republic* refused ads with transcripts from the Rosenberg trials and "the *New York Times*, for example, chose not to write about what everybody knew."

Navasky singled out *Dissent* for standing up against the trend, arguing that while it found "Stalinism was an unqualified social evil, domestic Communists were entitled to the same rights and presumptions as the set of our citizens." Some leading liberals opposed HUAC and McCarthyism, notably Carey McWilliams, of *The Nation*, along with anti-Stalinist scholars like Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, Paul Goodman, C. Wright Mills and Erich Fromm.

On June 17, 1950, federal agents arrested Julius Rosenberg on suspicion of conspiracy to engage in espionage; two months later, on August 11, 1950, Ethel Rosenberg was arrested. The Rosenbergs' conspiracy trial — along with their co-defendant, Morton Sobell — commenced on March 6, 1951, at the U.S. Courthouse at Foley Square, now named after Justice Thurgood Marshall. The defendants were found guilty on March 29th and on April 5th Judge Irving Kaufman imposed the death sentence on the Rosenbergs

and a 30-year prison sentence on Sobell. Two-years later, on June 19, 1953, the Rosenbergs were executed at the Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, NY; they are the only civilians to be executed for treason and they were killed on their 14th wedding anniversary. One of the Rosenbergs' prosecutors was Roy Cohn. Following the Rosenbergs case, he served as McCarthy's principle assistant in his anti-communists witch-hunts. By the '70s, he was a Big Apple lawyer for big-money interests, including Yankees owner George Steinbrenner and Mafia boss Carlo Gambino. In '73, he met the young Donald Trump at Le Club, a Manhattan nightspot for the rich, famous and those on the make. He became the Trump family's *consigliere* and Donald's guide into the world of the movers-and-shakers. He represented Trump-senior in a case brought by the Justice Department charging his real-estate company with housing discrimination against black and other minority tenants at 39 sites his company owned around the city. Cohn was a closeted homosexual all his life and died of AIDS in 1986.

In September '52, Sen. Pat McCarran (D-NV) convened the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS). Analogous to HUAC, it held hearings at the federal court building in New York's Foley Square in an effort to expose communists in the city's public schools and colleges. Senators interrogated current and former Brooklyn College faculty, among others, who had been earlier called by the state's Rapp-Coudert Committee or otherwise identified as communists.

On February 18, 1953, the author Howard Fast was subpoenaed to testify before McCarthy's Government Operations Committee hearings regarding his work during WW-II with the Voice of America. In this showdown, Fast confronted McCarthy and the committee's aggressive chief counsel, Cohn. McCarthy queried Fast as to whether his books were published by different federal agencies, including Armed Service Books Project and the State Department, and his work for the Signal Corps. He also questioned Fast about his relations with Eleanor Roosevelt.

In '53, McCarthy targeted his anticommunist crusade at more mainstream intellectuals. Operating through the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, he undertook hearings into the worldwide U.S. Information Libraries system and the allegedly subversive works it distributed; simultaneously, the State Department ordered the removal of all books by suspected communists from the shelves of U.S. foreign libraries. Hundreds of books were removed, some reportedly burned.

In '54, the liberal Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-MN), who had backed the 1950 Internal Security Act, introduced the Communist Control Act that sought to suppress the party.

McCarthy's downfall had been building since 1950 but came to a head on June 9, 1954, at what became known as the McCarthy-Army hearings. In '50, McCarthy charged that the State Department and its Secretary, Dean Acheson, harbored "traitorous" communists. In '52, he began attacking other government agencies, including a two-month investigation of the Army.

On June 9th, McCarthy had a now-legendary showdown with Joseph Welch, special counsel for the Army. The two clashed in an exchange over a young Army attorney, Fred Fisher, who had been a member of a Communist-linked lawyer's group in his youth. As Welch declared, "We know he belonged to the Lawyers Guild ... Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" ABC-TV was the only network to broadcast the hearings live, thus causing the McCarthy-Welch to become a national scandal. McCarthy, a notorious alcoholic, died in '57.

Unfortunately, after McCarthy's death, McCarthyism persisted. In August 1956, the FBI established COINTELPRO designed "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" groups and individuals it categorized as subversives, opposed to the national interest." By '59, more than 400 New York FBI agents were assigned to fighting "communism." By the early-60s, the agency expanded its intelligence mission to neutralize civil rights, antiwar and other "radical" groups, arguing that they were "communist front organizations." Hoover was insistent, arguing: "Communists have been trained in deceit and secretly work toward the day when they hope to replace our American way of life with a Communist dictatorship. ... They utilize cleverly camouflaged movements, such as peace groups and civil rights groups to achieve their sinister purposes. While they as individuals are difficult to identify, the Communist party line is clear."

In 1960, the FBI established a parallel program, the Communist Infiltration Program (COMINFIL), that sought to prevent radicals from infiltrating "legitimate mass organizations" like the Boy Scouts and the NAACP. Under COMINFIL, the FBI investigated the Socialist Workers party (1961), "White Hate Groups" (1964), "Black Nationalist Hate Groups" (1967) and the "New Left" (1968). Anyone questioning, let alone challenging, federal government policy was suspect; thus, the national security state was incubated.

Simultaneous to the 1950s anticommunist witch-hunt, the federal government led a campaign against the alleged threat posed by homosexuals. The threat could be a political

smear, like the alleged homosexuality of public figures ranging from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and McCarthy as well as Senator and presidential-candidate Adlai Stevenson (D-IL). In Washington, D.C., local vice squad publicly estimated that there were some 3,500 “sex perverts” – i.e., homosexuals – working in the government, 300 to 400 in the State Department alone. Between January 1947 and November 1950, some 574 civilian employees were investigated for allegedly being perverts.

In 1951, Pres. Harry Truman’s Executive Order 10241 barred prostitutes, paupers, the insane as well as ideological undesirables and homosexuals from government employment. In ‘53, Congress passed — and Pres. Dwight Eisenhower signed — the now-infamous Executive Order 10450, “Security Requirements for Government Employment,” legalizing the firing of federal employees for committing “any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, sexual perversion.” As a result, between May 1953 and June 1955, 837 investigations of alleged sex perverts took place.

The purging of a demonized population went far beyond the halls of Congress and the Executive Branch. In ‘54, U.S. military established the Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board to investigate alleged homosexuality among service personnel. The agency’s sole purpose was to weed-out “deviants” from the (nearly) all-male military. During the ‘50s, the number of men (and some women) in uniform were discharged for homosexuality skyrocketed. Whereas in the ‘40s, such discharges averaged annually about 100 cases, in the ‘50s they topped 2,000 per year.

Is Trump the new McCarthy and is the U.S. reliving an era of new McCarthyism? The U.S. is confronting a new world order, globalization, and a “threat” from a long-time “2nd-rate” country, China. The U.S. remains dominant but stagnant as the world economy shifts east. Politically, the 1 percent is consolidating control over the nation-state, particularly at the state level. Militarily, innumerable failed confrontations have been restricted to the periphery of the empire. And the security-intelligence apparatus is monitoring everyone, turning “privacy” into a fond memory, like the horse-drawn carriage.

The military-political-corporate system needs an enemy. Establishment media needs it to deflect from the bitter truths of gripping the U.S. today. U.S. military engagements since WW-II have been failures; wages have been stagnant since the 1970s; and political democracy, citizen participation, is being gerrymandered as the rich gain more financial control over the electoral process. While Trump is not McCarthy, the two politicians share a common associate, Roy Cohn. His shadow links the two eras of political crisis.

