

Culture, Politics, and McCarthyism



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Defining McCarthyism has become something of an intellectual mini-industry among those who study contemporary American political history. For an older generation of scholars and writers, it is an exercise in memory retrieval, whereas for a younger generation it is all too often an act of mythology. For example, amidst a celebration of the 1953–1955 period in her fine biography of Kenneth Rexroth, Linda Hamalian cannot avoid alluding to the pall of McCarthyism by referring to these culturally brilliant years as “The Silent Decade” (Hamalian 1991, 225–37).⁰ But if there are contradictions in social science preachments, so too are there lapses in anecdotal acts of recollection.

Despite the existence of a few genuinely brilliant works on the subject of McCarthyism (Oshinsky 1983; Fried 1990), the nature of the man and of the period he presumably represented remains elusive. I suspect this is due to the appellation itself. We tend to think of “isms” in substantive, world historical, and ideological terms. But McCarthyism divides rather than unites informed opinion. This is so much so that we find members of various groups—Democrats and Republicans, statist and libertarians, nationalists and regionalists, labor leaders and managerial moguls, Jews and Christians—all strongly aligned either with or against the Wisconsin senator.

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⁰. In all fairness, one must note that the author does not deal with McCarthyism directly.

What is clear is the powerful emotive responses he generates, even in retrospect. Herein lies at least one essential element of McCarthyism: its ability to define the sentiments, the epochal spirit, while basically leaving untouched its structural characteristics.

While reviewing a recent biography of Walter Winchell—the radio broadcaster and newspaper columnist who unarguably was more widely listened to and read than any other media figure of the 1950s—the writer Harold Brodkey captured the soft, subjective underbelly of McCarthyism as a by-product of national politics in post-World War II America. To understand the Geist of the time, I can find no better introduction to the topic:

[M]oral cowardice and personal safety and corruption and self-doubt and unlimited greed became national characteristics and national virtues. No one knew how to act. It felt as if this were a country consisting entirely of recent converts, and everyone went on tiptoe. McCarthyism came—first it was an attack on the upper-caste white Protestants that Roosevelt distrusted, and then on show business figures, and then it became a move toward a popular coup. It was not an era of clear thought. Eisenhower tacitly backed McCarthy and then withdrew from him and then destroyed him. The veterans' right to have a McCarthy—to protect the Roosevelt legacy long enough for them to get rich from it, too—seemed appropriate, but that didn't make any of it bearable. It seemed to be a function of a semi-utopian mass society that it be unlivable. (Brodkey 1995, 77–78)

McCarthyism having been thus mythified, it might be best to explain why McCarthy, rather than other populist miscreants of the 1950s, became the hallmark of its politics. I suspect that his fame was largely a function of his unique ability to arouse academics, journalists, and entertainment figures into righteous wrath. Such opposition as well as the choice of those he assaulted reflected the selective rather than collective havoc McCarthyism wreaked on American society. I believe it was Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag Archipelago who observed that certain events and people are remembered and others are forgotten by virtue of the monopoly role of intellectuals who write about the past. If we expand this role to include people in the media as such, then the fame and infamy of McCarthy and his “ism” might be better understood.

There is no question that McCarthyism's greatest successes took place within the academic institutions and the cultural media. If Joseph McCarthy uniquely appreciated the role of the media and the academy in shaping an epoch, the media and the academy well knew how to respond with authoritative words rather than raw power. And they did so with remarkable success. From the halls of ivy to the burgeoning network television stations, McCarthyism rallied defenders of free speech. The 1950s were a period of academic insularity, to be sure, but also of academic solidarity to a remark-

able degree. I say this even though there were a few notable defections on the part of famous scholars who testified against friends and colleagues, and others who wrote sophistic philosophical tracts distinguishing legitimate dissent from illicit treason.

Even within this rarefied realm, however, one must be careful to appreciate the limits of McCarthyism. David Riesman (1994, 15) recently pointed out that in his research on a variety of campuses, what he found “was that McCarthyism, now talked about as if it were a blight on the whole country, was actually restricted to the stratosphere—to the most prestigious, elevated institutions.” Riesman is largely correct. I would modify his point to note that it was extended to certain second-tier institutions (at the time at least) such as New York University, the University of Washington, and Reed College—to cite several well-known places where dismissals and suspensions occurred. Nonetheless, the impact of McCarthyism occurred within a circumscribed band. Given its chilling effect, no more may have been required. A single dismissal in a single discipline can go a long way to silence dissent. But some sense of proportion is called for.

Any fair-minded retrospective must start with an appreciation that McCarthyism presents us with a series of paradoxes and not a uniquely integrated body of thought and action. As evidence for such a position, one must point to the cultural productivity of the decade. Arguably the 1950s, especially the earlier part of that decade, witnessed a flowering of culture unmatched by any other decade of the twentieth century. Simply to list a few key figures is to present intimidating evidence of this period as one of creative energy of a high order.

In the legitimate theater we had Arthur Miller, William Inge, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neill, all at the height of their achievement. And few can doubt the radical, certainly not reactionary, thrust of their collective works. In American jazz there was the virtual revolution created by Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, to mention but a few major figures. This was also a period of extraordinary contributions to American music as such, with figures such as Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, and Walter Piston coming to the fore. In fiction the work of Norman Mailer, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Ralph Ellison, again to mention but a few, burst onto the postwar scene. The 1950s was the first decade in which television took on a unique cultural personality. The work of Rod Serling, Sid Caesar, and Edward R. Murrow not only gave “personality” to the media but did so with a sly cutting edge that ultimately unraveled everything the McCarthyists stood for. Finally, even in the realm of the politically as well as poetically tendentious, the 1950s boasted such figures as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac.

These figures not only influenced their own generation but entered the American cultural mainstream. We must remember the enormous cultural ferment of the era. Political repression at times, and not infrequently, gives

rise to cultural nuance, not mechanically so much as in response to systemic evils.

One might say the same about the sphere of higher learning. In the 1950s it became apparent that all manner of new fields were part of the academic experience. Old fields were being reinvigorated by new personnel—individuals from ethnic and religious backgrounds that could hardly be described as tweedy or Republican, and scholars who brought their wartime experiences to play in redefining American life and letters. True enough, many of the figures celebrated in the 1950s were continuing careers that had blossomed in the 1930s and in some instances even earlier. Figures such as Edmund Wilson, Walter Lippmann, and Max Lerner come readily to mind in this connection. Cultural achievement is not, after all, restrained by or limited to a single decade. Nonetheless, the American soil was hospitable to a creative cultural outburst in the McCarthyist period, and a strong element of liberalism, indeed radicalism, was perhaps more typical of the age than one had a right to expect given the public sentiments of the times. This paradoxical environment of the age can escape notice only by the obtuse or those interested in scoring empty political points.

An objection might be raised that many of the major figures herein cited were products of an earlier period and that while their careers remained strong in the McCarthy period, it would be difficult to claim any sort of functional correlation between political closure and cultural openness. But if we look at the field of endeavor I know best, sociology, it is apparent that the early 1950s witnessed an amazing outpouring of talent that provided the legacy from which the field still heavily feeds. Seymour Martin Lipset in political sociology, Howard S. Becker in social deviance, Erving Goffman in social psychology, Anselm Strauss in medical sociology, Charles Westoff in demography, Morris Janowitz in military sociology, James S. Coleman in social theory, E. Franklin Frazier in race relations, and Peter Rossi in methods of urban research are just a few examples. It should be clear that all sorts of factors were at work—from a postwar demand for exact information in a wide variety of economic, political, and social endeavors, to the smashing of barriers that previously had prevented scholars from gaining access to academic mobility ladders—that made McCarthyism an irritant rather than a fundamental force in the lives of American sociologists. I suspect that with little effort, a similar list can be readily compiled in allied social and behavioral sciences.

In short, academic and cultural agencies were by no means reduced to ashes by McCarthyism. What did take place in the 1950s, as in the 1930s, was intense dialogue and even cleavage on the issue of communism. The wartime consensus about cultural matters broke apart as the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West replaced the common front against fascism. But this ideological struggle took place among those who fancied themselves of the political Left. Defenders of McCarthy were few and far between even in the early 1950s. The conservative Edward A. Shils was no less

vigorous in his opposition to McCarthyism than the radical C. Wright Mills—indeed, probably a good deal more so. The real split, the key schism, was the threat, actual or alleged, posed by communism. It is the decision on this question that either silenced or mobilized individuals in their attitudes toward McCarthyism. The postwar ruthlessness of Stalinism, the quick reduction of Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and above all Czechoslovakia, had a postwar impact on American consciousness similar to the earlier subjugation of Western Europe by the National Socialists. The war aims of the democracies were thwarted by the consequences of the peace. Europe was redivided into free and totalitarian portions rather than resurrected whole from the economic and political rubble of the war. And the socialists no less than the conservatives sensed the threat of the Soviet Union to free societies. The work of Phillip Rahv and William Philips on *Partisan Review*, Irving Howe and Lewis Coser on *Dissent*, Julius Jacobson on *New Politics*, and Irving Kristol and Melvin Lasky on *Encounter*, to mention just a few figures who gave body to the decade, is revealing in this connection. Whatever their differences, these figures led the struggle against the authoritarian Left, and would have done so with or without the intervention of the senator from Wisconsin. To be sure, their collective task would have been far simpler without McCarthy. Critics of totalitarianism on the Left were forced to trim their sails in order not to be condemned as McCarthyites themselves.

Having failed utterly in its cultural purposes, what then did McCarthyism accomplish? My own answer on overview is that McCarthyism was able to extend further the already dangerously enshrined split between American culture and American politics. If culture is the source of ultimate ideals, politics in its pure form is the conduct of quotidian realities. McCarthyism tapped into a reservoir of doubt, fear, and concern that the struggle of America for Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and Wendell Willkie's One World might not be realizable. McCarthy may not have defeated American culture, but neither was he defeated by the aforementioned cultural apparatus. His great victory was in giving populism an extremist, albeit marginal, turn in an age of bureaucratic and political centralization.

Only when McCarthyism sought bigger game to bag, or rather larger fish to fry, were its goals stymied. When McCarthy and his cluster of supporters shifted gears from a consensual struggle against communism to a populist struggle against capitalism and went after America's political and military institutions, he and his followers elicited reaction from critical actors in the political process that forced a halt to and eventually eliminated McCarthyism. The political establishment reacted not in moral opposition to McCarthy with respect to the threat of communism; President Eisenhower was every bit as aware of the real dangers of Soviet expansion. It did so as a political necessity, to defend the economic system and the political process from the dangers of delegitimation.

In this larger political context, crucial figures including Presidents Truman and Eisenhower and such key policymakers as George Marshall and Dean Acheson were in a position to halt the spread of McCarthyism from the cultural apparatus to the political fabric. The Army-McCarthy hearings may have been a media event, but they were also the occasion for a fusion of political and military forces against the sort of encroachment that held putschist implications. And Eisenhower, as an incarnation of both the political and the military processes, stood at the head of the procession to halt and eventually destroy McCarthyism.

I state this perhaps in sharper terms than actual events warrant, to avoid any ambiguity on the vital issues and thus to permit some movement toward a realistic appraisal of this blight on the American landscape that neither dismisses the McCarthyist phenomenon as such nor exaggerates its claims to importance. The key, in short, is that McCarthyism was a limited, quasi-populist ideology of anticommunism that had its greatest success in its assault on American cultural agencies and individuals, and ultimately failed at the hands of American political leaders who had grown weary of reductionistic and simplistic approaches to the art of governance and the practice of politics. Both appointed and elected government officials banded together in a rare display of unity to overcome a totalitarian menace. The United States was still too close to the struggle against fascism and Nazism to fall easy victim to nativist rumblings.

We should recognize the importance of Leo Strauss's observation that repression may stimulate cultural creativity. This is true even of milder forms of repression such as McCarthyism. Out of the search for an appropriate language of resistance emerges subtleties of language and symbols that may escape notice in more open societies. The history of Western culture is dotted with illustrations of this proposition. Perhaps no epoch in human history equaled the French Enlightenment. Yet Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, Helvetius, Holbach, and countless others emerged during the *ancien régime*, a period of political decadence and repression that was awful enough to hurt ordinary people but hardly severe enough to curb cultural outpourings of the greatest nobility.

Despite the name-calling and repression in select cultural spheres, the 1950s were a time of enormous cultural energy in the United States. The essential mark of the period was intense criticism and scrutiny, albeit cloaked in careful ethical terms. That one needs to be reminded of this is a tribute to the ability of mythology to overwhelm reality. Even the famed "Hollywood Ten" for the most part went on producing plays and film scripts, admittedly with severe impediments such as working under pseudonyms. This observation is not an argument for repression; it is a statement of fact. Even under the most awful murderous repressions of Stalinism, and faced with far direr threats to life and limb than anyone experienced in the McCarthyist period, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Kabalevsky, and Katchaturian went on producing masterworks. The assignment of labels to describe the climate of a historical

period obscures the profound disjunction between the realms of politics and culture.

A key element in the ultimate demise of McCarthyism was its exaggeration of the dangers posed by opposition. This was hardly something that started in the 1950s. Indeed, it had solid roots after World War I no less than after World War II. These alarms and asides generated mirthful rather than frightened responses to the various claims by reactionaries and super-patriots. Comics like Lenny Bruce and Mel Brooks in particular had stock anti-McCarthy caricatures in their humorous routines.

Such developments suggest a highly differentiated climate of American opinion, one far from conformity or contrition. Events following a major war had enormous consequences for the structure of economic and political organizations worldwide. America could hardly return to the simplistic models that fueled America First in the prewar decade. Nonetheless, a complex set of circumstances prevailed in the decade following the two major involvements in European affairs: nativism, fear of excessive involvement in the affairs of decadent powers, and concern that the brush fires of revolution would flame up on American shores. I do not want to dismiss the differences between the Palmer raids and the McCarthy hearings, but it should be clearly appreciated that larger forces were at work that made McCarthyism viable while limiting its threats and name-calling out of a far more potent sense of legal restraints on charges of un-American activities. These same forces diminished McCarthy and ultimately dispatched his "ism" in relatively short order.

Left and Right shared mutually exclusive fallacies: The Left simply refused to understand that there was a communist conspiracy that represented a serious incursion into the Western political systems and posed a genuine threat to America in particular. Every document now released from KGB and STASI files reveals the authenticity of this threat. The Right refused to understand that McCarthyism was a serious assault on the Western political system and that its antidemocratic aspects posed a genuine threat to the political system. Indeed, ultimately this awareness elicited the vigorous and unyielding response that brought McCarthy down.

McCarthyism is another term for intolerance backed by power. As such, as Ronald Radosh (1993) has shown, it is at home in the Left in the 1990s as it was in the Right in the 1950s. The level of intolerance is a near constant. The intolerance of the presumably tolerant has been too well documented in the struggle over political correctness to require further elaboration in this specific context.⁰ Hence the struggle now, as then, is against the forces of antidemocracy, against the forces of fanaticism and intolerance. The problem now is much greater than in the 1950s. Then the incursion was extrinsic; now it is intrinsic. The political assaults of McCarthy on the aca-

⁰ For a sober and chilling outline of political correctness within the academy and especially its most sensitive areas, the sciences, I recommend Gross and Levitt (1994).

demic world served to unite that world against intolerance. The political assaults are now from within the academy, and hence serve to bitterly divide the academic world against itself.

Worse yet, the assaults come from quarters that confuse the public as to fundamental civil rights. Thus, we find on campus after campus assaults on free speech in the name of human rights! The simplistic formula is that any statement that stimulates hate should be forbidden. In a nutshell, alleged minority rights preclude the free expression of ideas. In such a conformist environment under the umbrella of putative human rights, just about any controversial position or light-hearted jibe can be viewed as a slur and a slander. A bitter, humorless totalitarian Left, operating under the full protection of university administrations too frightened to assert the claims of the First Amendment, has created a climate far more dangerous to the conduct of free inquiry than any dangers ever posed by McCarthyism. Its consequences for the expansion of knowledge are grave; its impact on the norms of discourse have already been disastrous.

The legacy of McCarthyism is thus two-fold: one side opposes democracy in politics and freedom in culture; the other inspires successful resistance to such constraints. Moreover, the McCarthy period was one of cultural flowering such as we have not known since. This is hardly a cause for smug self-satisfaction or a moment for triumphalism. McCarthyism is not a monopoly of reactionaries or a curse to revolutionaries, but, as Neil Hamilton (1995) has so persuasively argued, it is a common property of those for whom democratic values as such are anathema. And in the hands of those with fanatical ideological agendas, it serves to weaken the democratic foundations of American society as such.

The situation that greets us in the fin de millennium—forty years and two generations removed from McCarthyism—has been well captured by Peter L. Berger (1995, 16–17). One could do worse than listen to his concerns and respect his formulation.

Contemporary American culture suffers from two (possibly, but not necessarily, related) pathologies. One is based on the so-called underclass. It is the one that is most prominent in public opinion. It includes crime, drugs, illegitimacy and a chaotic breakdown of moral order. The other pathology, arguably much more serious because much more difficult to contain, is grounded in the elite culture (or if you prefer, the New Class). It is animated by an assemblage of more or less demented ideologies derived from the 1960s that have now completed their “long march through the institutions,” debasing the educational system from top to bottom, politics and the law, the communications media, and increasingly the very fabric of everyday life.

If my analysis is correct, then we are obligated to carry the discussion of McCarthyism one step further into the realm of social theory. If culture is

relatively autonomous from politics—at least in democratic states—then what are the sources and limits of such a dualism? A variety of theories suggest themselves. First, there is a Durkheimian view that in a universe of extreme division of labor and tasks there will be multiple tracks responding to multiple needs that do not always move in concert. Second, there is a Marxist view that the relation of economic base to cultural superstructure is uneven and imperfect, that while in the long run the culture reflects the ideological needs of state and economy alike, culture may bloom independently of the state for short periods. Third, there is the Straussian view that culture flowers best when there is an external need for subtlety of expression, and such sophistication is most likely to appear under conditions of relatively mild repression.

There is a fourth, disquieting view, which I admit to leaning toward if not entirely accepting. It is more a vision than a view, one that perhaps owes more to Machiavelli and Hobbes than any postmodern figure, but it cannot be ruled out. In contemporary society, culture is permitted to flourish even when the political atmosphere is less than hospitable, because culture serves to defuse rather than stimulate potential opposition. The relatively small percentage of a population, even in a democratic society, linked to the cultural apparatus is self-contained and relatively harmless with respect to larger currents of the political process. So why bother to engage in acts of repression unless they are absolutely necessary? In such a scenario, the repressive mechanisms of fascist and communist states are counterproductive, making heroes and heroines out of a deracinated segment of the population. Of course, such a vision presumes an able political leadership that itself may be influenced by cultural brilliance.

Some clever wags can and no doubt will multiply theoretical combinations and permutations of this dualism of politics and culture in democratic states. And in truth, it would take us far afield from the topic of the day to arrive at even a tentative set of propositions, much less a general theory. Nor am I remotely suggesting the ludicrous idea that we arrange for controlled experiments in little bits of McCarthyism to “test theory.” Without the help of social scientists, we have running rampant enough authoritarian personalities who would be kings. But we do need to recognize realms of political freedom as well as degrees of repression if we are to seriously and vigorously defend the former and oppose the latter in future assaults on a democratic polity.

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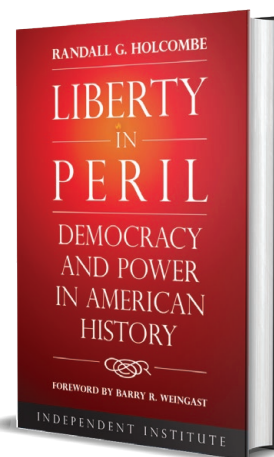
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