

Old & New Mccarthyism: Fear of Russia, China in the American Mind

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It has become almost cliché to compare the current atmosphere of Russo-Phobia in US politics to the 1950s “Mccarthyism.” The sometimes open and sometimes subtle demonization of alleged Chinese influence in Hollywood has drawn similar parallels. While the anti-Russia, anti-China atmospheres of the 1950s and today are very different, in some ways they are quite similar. The commonalities between the two episodes point to certain truths about the psyche of the American people, especially certain demographics, and what those demonizing the two Eurasian superpowers are really afraid of.

An Inner-Party Purge

The opening of Mccarthyism in the USA, much like the current “Russia Investigation” was a fight within a major US political party. Though Mccarthyism eventually moved toward Republicans calling Democrats “soft on Communism,” the period opened with the Democratic Party purging its own ranks of a distrusted element.

Prior to the Second World War, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had often stood up to his own party in order to transform the United States. Democrats who opposed him had formed the “American Liberty League” in the 1936 Presidential election. Prominent Democratic leader Al Smith urged opposition to Roosevelt saying that the USA “can have only one capital, Washington or Moscow!” This was, of course, a not so subtle recognition of the fact that Roosevelt’s mass movement of supporters had many outspoken Communists and Socialists in its ranks. Though Roosevelt died 1945, after the war, the leftist political army that had backed him remained intact.

In 1946, when Truman’s Cold War crackdown began, this network of labor unionists, intellectuals, and African American community leaders still had a large amount of influence among the Democratic Party’s activist base. Vito Marcantonio, a close ally of the Communist Party, represented Harlem in the US House of Representatives. Many Roosevelt Democrats had a very positive opinion of the Soviet Union and the role it played in defeating fascism.

Many of these urban based Roosevelt Democrats had no objection to aligning with the Communist Party and its larger political milieu on local issues. Democratic Party Labor Unions like the United Auto Workers, the International Longshore Warehouse Union, the National Maritime Union, and the United Steelworkers of America, had large pro-Communist factions among their leaders. Many Black ministers were associated with the National Negro Labor Congress and other civil rights groups linked to the Communist Party.

The period known as “Mccarthyism” began with the Democrats actively suppressing this pro-Soviet, left-wing populist faction within their own party. The first targets of the

Mccarthyist witch-hunts were figures like Alger Hiss, a State Department official who had been key in establishing the United Nations. Hiss was subject to demonization by both Democrats and Republicans, who accused him of being a Soviet agent. He was eventually imprisoned for perjury.

In response to this purge of Roosevelt Democrats, Henry Wallace, Vice President from 1940 to 1944 broke with the Democrats to form the “Progressive Party” and run for President against Truman in the 1948 elections. Wallace, once the Vice President, was maligned as a traitor and Russian agent because he dared challenge Cold War politics. His Presidential campaign served to rally the remnants of Roosevelt’s army against Truman’s anti-labor and militaristic trajectory.

Today, the “Russia Investigation” is also very much a fight within a single party, however, this time, it is the Republicans. Establishment Republicans like Lindsay Graham, John McCain, and Marco Rubio are sounding the alarm, and hoping to squash the emerging, isolationist, right-wing populist, “America First” wing of the GOP. Like the Democrats once did against Henry Wallace’s supporters, these establishment Republicans are reaching across the aisle to attack a distrusted wing of their own party’s base.

The fact that the hysteria in both periods took place within major parties, shows that its not simply partisan political theatrics. The issue is not one major party accusing the other of being soft on Russia. The issue is a deep divide about how to relate to the largest country in the world.

China & Hollywood Hysterics

As Mccarthyism escalated in the early 1950s, the focus shifted from the Roosevelt wing of the Democratic Party, to Hollywood. The House Un-American Activities Committee began investigating screenwriters and film stars, alleging that they had “Un-American” political views and were using their platform in cinema to advance Soviet and Chinese geopolitical positions.

Today, the alarm bells about “Communists in Hollywood” have rung once again, with the target this time being Wang Jianlin, the Chinese billionaire who owns AMC theaters. When Wang announced that he intended to purchase a Hollywood Studio, the press went into an uproar. As reports from National Public Radio, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal revealed, the fears of “Chinese influence” in Hollywood extended well beyond Wang Jianlin’s financial empire.

The fact that the Chinese Communist Party censors and approves films shown on the mainland has greatly influenced major studios, who seek to make revenue from China’s expanding film market. The Communist Party does not allow films featuring homosexuality, vampires, zombies, or demonization of the People’s Republic to be shown in the country. Fearing that they may lose access to such markets, Hollywood’s production decisions have certainly been affected.

In the 1950s, talk of Communism in Hollywood involved accusations that it was promoting sexual promiscuity. The feeling was that Soviet and Chinese Communists were not Christians, and therefore, would seek to destroy the morality of the American public with sexually explicit movies. However, today, Chinese influence is blamed for asserting a more socially conservative agenda. China’s Communist Party maintains certain aspects of

traditional culture, and if Hollywood is to appease them, it must be less sexually explicit, and more friendly to the traditional family. Also, Hollywood producers have noticed that Chinese audiences tend to really favor films with Chinese actors.

The fear that perhaps China's leaders could influence movies smacks with hypocrisy. Over 1800 Hollywood movies have been sponsored by US military intelligence agencies. Pentagon and CIA officials frequently consult with Hollywood about what films to make. American movies, which are shown all over the world and influence millions, if not billions of people, are subtly crafted to advance US foreign policy [goals](#).

The fear isn't that Hollywood is becoming political, it always has been. Rather, the fear is that perhaps another government could influence Hollywood's political messaging, and the US government will lose its virtual monopoly over cinematic politics.

Middle Class Mobilizations To Defend The Establishment

In 1954, the US Congress censured Joe McCarthy for his behavior. Dwight Eisenhower was President. Stalin was dead. Edward R. Murrow and other media voices had shifted public opinion away from the anti-Communist hysteria.

But a small section of the US public kept going. While the Republican President, and the leaders of both parties, were urging the American people to "cool down" with the anti-Russia hysteria, a certain sector of the public refused. When Joe McCarthy died after being discredited politically, he continued to maintain a group of admirers who said that he was a misunderstood hero.

The forces that eventually became the John Birch Society, and believed that America's drinking water was being contaminated by a Communist conspiracy, and that Communists had taken over both the Democratic and Republican Parties, continued to move ahead with Russophobia. Many blame Republican candidate Barry Goldwater's loss in the 1964 election on these elements, which most of the US public viewed as unstable. Eventually, the Republican Party disavowed the Birchers, with William F. Buckley banning them from the Conservative Political Action Conference.

The John Birch Society was made up of the middle class strata that had been the backbone of McCarthyism at its height. The fear of communism had struck a cord with them. These doctors, shopkeepers, and lawyers had their little piece of property, their own practice, their own store. To them, the Communists represented a mob of inferiors, "the rabble" coming to seize it away from them, and reduce them to being workers like everyone else.

In post war fiction, Ayn Rand's dystopian novel "Anthem" and George Orwell's "1984" we hear this petty bourgeois fatalism being echoed. The "individuality" of the middle class was being threatened from both ends. Both the powerful big business interests of western capitalism and the socialism of Russia and China threatened the middle class, and its hope for being "independent" of "the mob" of ordinary people.

Oddly, the anti-Trump movement pushing "Russia-gate" despite coming from the liberal wing of American politics, has roughly the same constituency, and roughly the same fears. The Rachel Maddow watching, New York Times reading, NPR listening, white, middle class American liberal sees Donald Trump as a "demagogue." He is rallying "the working class" to make trouble.

Among “Russia-Gate” promoting Anti-Trump liberals, the crowd of Trump supporters is presented as people who believe “conspiracy theories” and don’t understand that the USA is benevolent democracy that is doing just fine. Hillary Clinton explained that Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan was wrong because the country had never stopped being great. Paul Krugman lambasted Trump’s inauguration speech, claiming he painted an inaccurate, dismal view of the United States.

To the middle class, college educated, east coast dwelling, doctors, professors, lawyers, and banking executives, Trump represents “the rabble” who are “making trouble” and threatening the comfortable, independent life they enjoy.

Who are they really afraid of

In both the 1950s and today, when it gets down to it, the Americans who cling to Russophobia, hatred for China, or fanatical anti-Communism, are not really afraid of anything in Eurasia.

In reality, they are afraid of other Americans. Americans who “think wrong,” and with their “wrong thoughts” might be compelled to take action.

The members of Congress conducting the Russia investigation have confirmed again and again that no voting booths or ballot counts were tampered with. The election results were completely accurate.

The accusation is that somehow Russia influenced American minds. The same fear exists about China in Hollywood, using its growing market to influence American media, and thus, change American’s view of the world.

The essence of the middle class mobilizations against Russia and China, in both the 50s and today, is anti-populism. Russia is allegedly “stirring up” the common people. The danger is that the common people, if put into motion, will threaten the independence and sacred property rights of the middle class.

In the 1950s, this middle class phobia took on a racial connotation. The White Citizens Councils of the southern USA openly believed that the civil rights protests were a Communist conspiracy. These suburban white racists feared that the Communist Party was mobilizing Black people in order to create a revolution, and seize their property. While the fascists of the KKK were primarily from the ranks of the white working class, and operated by means of violence and terror, the middle class White Citizens Council moved through slick propaganda, backroom deals, and other maneuvers within the establishment to undermine the Civil Rights movement.

Russia, China & The American Working Class

In 2017, the USA faces a growing economic and political crisis. Among those who are dissatisfied, the biggest and most affected constituency is the working class. Young people stuck in short term, low wage jobs. Residents of communities and regions devastated by de-industrialization. Those who see police everywhere, drug addiction everywhere, repression everywhere, while opportunities and hope for the future is hard to find.

The working class in the USA is quite unhappy, and it isn’t because of Russia.

While the working class is unhappy, it is also deeply divided. The Black and Latino working class tends to live in urban areas and is associated with the Democratic Party. The white working class tends to live in southern and rural areas, and is associated with the Republican Party.

While the two groups vehemently disagree on issues related to police brutality, immigration, and affirmative action, elsewhere they tend to have a lot in common. They both think economic conditions are getting worse. They both think that police state repression is crushing their freedom. They both tend to be more socially conservative and religious than other strata. They both tend to feel that a shadowy ruling elite controls the USA, and that American democracy is a sham. They both tend to be critical of the US government's continued militarism, not accepting the various justifications for "humanitarian intervention" repeated in the media.

The values extolled by the governments of Russia and China are much more favorable to the underlying worldview of much of the American working class. Russia and China have state controlled economies where business is forced to work in the interests of the country. Though both countries have many millionaires and billionaires, the wealthy are controlled by the state. The state draws its support from a well organized, working class population, and often represses the wealthy people on their behalf. The people of Russia and China are much more socially conservative than those in western countries. They tend to emphasize family values, and the obligation of an individual to their country or their community.

The fact that the political messages of Russia and China, and the political ideas of the increasingly disenchanted American working class are similar, is not the result of a conspiracy or propaganda. It is simply natural. The working class and the middle class have different aspirations and different world views. The Russian and Chinese governments depend on a mass, well organized working class in order to maintain their power, in the context of a hostile relationship with capitalism, both domestically and internationally.

Russia, China, and the American working class all want the world to become more stable, and less filled with unpredictability, market turbulence, and chaos. They want the global standard of living to rise. Meanwhile, the Wall Street and London elite desperately want to maintain their global monopoly, and are working to spread chaos so no stable economic competitors can emerge. In a world increasingly connected by information technology, the American working class is more and more sympathetic to the working class values expressed by the governments of Russia and China.

In the aftermath of Obama's election, the middle class was mobilized into the Tea Party. This was mainly a movement aimed at opposing any expansion of the welfare state or popular economic reforms that Obama may have carried out. The "Stop Trump" movement mirrors the Tea Party. It is a middle class mobilization aimed at disciplining Trump, and ensuring that he does not carry out any of his isolationist promises.

As the middle class is mobilized in 2017, just as it was in the 1950s, to push back the emergence of populism and anti-establishment sentiments among the working class, one key difference is at hand.

In the 1950s, the Communist Party and the Roosevelt wing of the Democrats were shrinking amid a booming economy. McCarthyism destroyed them. But in 2017, populism of both the leftist and rightist character is rising. Working class sentiments are rising, and the gap

between defenders of the establishment and those who oppose it is also growing.

Furthermore, the American middle class is much smaller today than it was in the 1950s. The mobilization against working class unrest, done in the name of opposing Russia and China, is unlikely to be successful, in the context of a failing US economy, and the widespread availability of information.

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