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## **CULTURE, POLITICS AND McCARTHYISM: A RETROSPECTIVE FROM THE TRENCHES†**

Irving Louis Horowitz††

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; while for a younger generation, it is all too often an act of mythology. For example, the author of a fine biography of Kenneth Rexroth, in the midst of celebrating the 1953-1955 period, cannot avoid alluding to the pall of McCarthyism by referring to these culturally brilliant years as "The Silent Decade."<sup>1</sup> But if there are contradictions in social science preachments, so too are there lapses in anecdotal acts of memory recollection.

Despite the existence of a few genuinely brilliant works on the subject of McCarthyism,<sup>2</sup> the nature of the man and the period he presumably represented remains elusive. I suspect that this elusive nature 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. So much so that we find Democrats and Republicans, statists and libertarians, nationalists and regionalists, labor leaders and managerial moguls, Jews and Christians of the early 1950s all strongly aligned either with or against the Wisconsin senator. 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

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† This article is based on a speech given by Professor Horowitz at the Academic Freedom Symposium.

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1. LINDA HAMALIAN, *A LIFE OF KENNETH REXROTH* 225-37 (1991). In all fairness, the author does not deal with McCarthyism directly.

2. See, e.g., DAVID M. OSHINSKY, *A CONSPIRACY SO IMMENSE* (1983); RICHARD M. FRIED, *NIGHTMARE IN RED* (1990).

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—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 gist 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.<sup>3</sup>

McCarthyism having been thus mythified, it might be best to try to explain why he, 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 created on American society. I believe it was Solzhenitsyn who observed that in the Gulag Archipelago certain events and peoples are remembered and others are forgotten by virtue of the monopoly role of intellectuals who write the past. If we expand this 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 cultural media.

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3. Harold Brodkey, *The Last Word on Winchell*, THE NEW YORKER, Jan. 30, 1995, at 71, 77-78.

If Joseph McCarthy uniquely appreciated the role of the media and the academy in shaping an epoch, it was also the case that the media and the academy knew how to respond with authoritative words rather than raw power. And it 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 remarkable degree. I say this despite the fact that 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 recently pointed out in his research on a variety of campuses "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."<sup>4</sup> 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 had a circumscribed band within which it operated. Given its chilling effect, no more breadth 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, revealed a flowering of culture unmatched by any other decade of the twentieth century. Simply listing a few key figures is 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'Neil, all at the height

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4. David Riesman, *The State of American Higher Education (An Interview with Wilfrid M. McClay)* 8 ACADEMIC QUESTIONS 14-32 (1994).

of their achievement. 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 era was also a period of extraordinary contributions to American music, with figures like Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein and Walter Piston coming to the fore. In fiction, the work of Norman Mailer, John Updike, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, again to mention but a few, burst onto the post-war scene. The 1950s was the first decade in which television took on a cultural personality which realized the specifics of this media. 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 unravelled everything that 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 impacted not only their own generation, but have entered the American cultural mainstream. We must remember the enormous cultural fermentation of the epoch. Political repression at times, and not infrequently, gives rise to cultural nuance, not mechanically so much as a response to systemic evils.

One might say the same about the 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 come to prominence in the 1930s; in some instances even earlier. Figures like Edmund Wilson, Walter Lippmann, 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 creative cultural outburst in the McCarthyist period, and a strong element of liberalism outbursts, indeed radicalism was perhaps more typical of the age than one had a right to expect given public sentiments of the times. This

paradoxical environment of the age can escape notice only by those obtuse or by 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 clout and cultural openness. But if we look only at that field of endeavor I know best, namely 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, Peter Rossi in methods of urban research—just to mention a few—come readily to mind in this connection. It should be clear that all sorts of factors were at work—from a post-war demand for exact information in a wide variety of economic, political and social endeavors, to the smashing of barriers that prevented scholars from an earlier period in 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 during McCarthyism. What did take place was intense dialogue and even cleavage on the issue of communism in the 1950s as in the 1930s. 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 subject that either silenced or mobilized individuals in their attitudes toward McCarthyism.

The post-war ruthlessness of Stalinism, the quick reduction of Eastern European states like Poland, Bulgaria, Romanian, Hungary and, above all, Czechoslovakia, had a post-war impact on American consciousness similar to the 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 in whole from the economic and political rubble of the War. Furthermore, it was the socialists no less than the conservatives who 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*, 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 from 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 of its cultural purposes, what then did McCarthyism accomplish? My own answer, on overview, is that McCarthyism was able to sunder, to split, once and for the balance of the century, American culture from 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 Wilkie's *One World* might not be realizable. McCarthyism may not have defeated American culture, but neither was McCarthy defeated by this aforementioned cultural apparatus. His great victory was in giving populism a Rightist turn in an age of bureaucratic and political centralization.

It is only when McCarthyism sought bigger game to bag, or rather larger fish to fry, that its goals have 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 the United States political and military institutions, he and his followers elicited reaction from critical actors in the American process that forced a halt to and

eventually eliminated McCarthyism. The political establishment acted not as a 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 as Senator McCarthy—but as a political necessity, to defend the economic system and political process from the dangers of delegitimation.

In this larger political context crucial political figures—from Truman to Eisenhower and military figures from George Marshall to 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 in fact a fusion of political and military forces against the sort of encroachment that held putschist implications. And Eisenhower, as a national emblem 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 phenomena as such, nor exaggerates its claims to importance. The key, in a nutshell, is that McCarthyism was a limited, quasi-populist ideology of anti-communism that had its greatest success in its assault on American cultural agencies and individuals. It ultimately failed at the hands of an American political system that 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 World War II struggle against fascism and Nazism to fall easy victim to nativist ramblings.

We should recognize the importance of Leo Strauss's observations in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* about the relationship of culture and oppression: that it may serve as a stimulant to creativity. This relationship 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

equalled the French Enlightenment. And yet Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, Helvetius, Holbach and countless others emerged during the *ancien regime*, 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 most noble sorts.

In short, despite its name calling and repression in select cultural spheres, the 1950s were a period of enormous cultural energy and productivity 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 with pseudonyms. This statement is not an argument for repression. It is a statement of fact that perfect conditions for cultural creation are very rarely, if ever, found in the political arena. Thus, even under the most awful murderous repressions of Stalinism, Shostokowich, Prokofiev, Kabalevsky, and Katchaturian went on producing masterworks—under far more dire threats to life and limb than anyone experienced in the McCarthyist period. The assignment of labels obscures the profound separation between the realms of politics and culture or at least the ability of each to operate in relatively distinct realms.

A key element in the ultimate demise of McCarthyism was its patent exaggeration of the dangers posed by radical opposition. This type of exaggeration is hardly something that started in the 1950s. Indeed, such magnifying and even demonizing of potential enemies, had solid roots in the post-World War I period, no less than the period 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. The result was to minimize very real threats and turn a searchlight on the accuser. These parodies suggest a highly differentiated climate of American opinion—one far from the imagery of conformity and/or contriteness.

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 pre-war 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 broad brush of revolution would extend to 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 threat 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 share mutually exclusive fallacies: The Left simply refused to understand that there was a Communist conspiracy, that it represented a serious incursion into the Western political systems, and that it 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 word for intolerance backed by power. As such, as Ronald Radosh has shown, it is as at home in the Left in the 1990s as it was in the Right in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The level of intolerance is a near constant. The intolerance of the presumably tolerant has been too well documented in the struggle around political correctness to require further elaboration in this specific context.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the struggle now as then is against the forces of anti-democracy, 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 academic world served to

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5. Ronald Radosh, *McCarthyism of the Left*, *PARTISAN REV.*, 677-84 (1993).

6. For a sober and chilling outline of political correctness within the academy and especially its most sensitive areas, the sciences, I recommend PAUL R. GROSS & NORMAN LEVITT, *HIGHER SUPERSTITION: THE ACADEMIC LEFT AND ITS QUARRELS WITH SCIENCE* (1994).

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 in campus after campus assaults on free speech in the name of human rights! The simplistic formula is that any statement which stimulates hate should be forbidden. In a nutshell, minority rights pre-empt the free expression of ideas. In such a conformist environment gathered under the umbrella of human rights, just about any controversial position or light-headed 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 been disastrous.

The legacy of McCarthyism is thus a double legacy: one against democracy in politics and against freedom in culture. But it is also a legacy of 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 was not a monopoly of reactionaries, or a curse to revolutionaries. But as Neil Hamilton has so persuasively argued, it was a common property of those for whom democratic values as such were anathema.<sup>7</sup> In the hands of those with fanatic ideological agendas, it serves to weaken the democratic foundations of American society as such.

The situation which greets us in the *fin de millennium*, or forty years and two generations removed from McCarthyism, has been well captured by Peter L. Berger. 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

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7. NEIL HAMILTON, ZEALOTRY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A LEGAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 374 (1995).

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.<sup>8</sup>

It behooves us to review calls for a new McCarthyism from the vantage point of the present—not to minimize or trivialize the evils of the past, but to somehow make certain that the future does not substitute a worse form of repression for a relatively contained epiphenomenon recorded under the label of the old McCarthyism.

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 for short periods in the short run. Third, there is the Straussian view, i.e., that culture flowers best when there is an external need for subtlety of expression, and such sophistication is most often likely to appear under conditions of relatively mild repression.

There is a fourth, disquieting view, which I admit I lean towards, if not entirely accept. It is more a vision than a view, one which perhaps owes more to Machiavelli and Hobbes than any post-modern 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 it serves to defuse rather than stimulate potential opposition. The relatively

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8. Peter L. Berger, *Immigration: The Solution Is the Problem*, FIRST THINGS, Feb. 1995, at 16-17.

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 absolutely necessary? In such a scenario, the repressive mechanisms of fascist and communist states are counter-productive, 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 will doubtless multiply theoretical combinations and permutations for 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 theorems, 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." We have enough authoritarian personalities who would be kings running rampant without the help of social scientists. 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.