

Miguel Kumar

Professor Helmers and Professor Ermer

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McCarthyism at the Movies: The Effects of Hollywood McCarthyism on the American Public

Sirens screamed—sterile and crushing—as students hid under their desks. In seemingly safe suburban homes, families crawled through secret tunnels to newly built bomb shelters. At any moment, Communists could destroy the entire nation with the weapons they had been testing. Amid already unimaginable fear, US senator Joseph McCarthy howled on radio broadcasts another, even more worrying possibility: the “Reds” were slowly infiltrating the United States. In 1947, several senators and representatives published the first Hollywood blacklist; favorite screenwriters, directors, and producers were labeled traitors, their careers ruined. In the months to come, dozens of others were named “anti-American.” The same senators and representatives revived the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). While many Hollywood stars were cleared in closed-door hearings, their reputations were still stained red by gossip columns, newspapers, and radio broadcasters, like Walter Winchell, who made a name for themselves by promoting a tide of panic. All these events—Soviet weapons tests, Senator McCarthy’s speeches, blacklist publications, newspaper stories, and radio broadcasts—put the American public on edge. Hollywood became a place to publicly demonstrate the breadth of the communist grasp on daily American life, promoting the McCarthyist rhetoric of anti-communism. As Hollywood was under pressure to produce anti-communist films like *The Red Menace* at the government’s request, well-known stars like Lucille Ball were targeted to demonstrate that even the most recognizable symbols of American culture were compromised.

This mounting anxiety led people to look for tangible targets and “weak points” in the fabric of America: people of color, members of religious minority groups, and queer Americans. The fears of communist ideology and influence that rose during the early 1950s solidified an American cultural identity of anti-communism that extended exclusion to anyone perceived as aberrant.

The Cold War escalated as physical fighting ceased shortly after the US president, Harry Truman, authorized the use of atomic bombs on two of Japan’s islands toward the end of World War II. As the United States built up a massive weapons arsenal, the Soviet Union began heavily investing in the development of its own weapons of mass destruction to keep up. The victory of Allied forces in the Second World War gave the United States a sense of national pride but also uneasiness. The Soviet Union’s refusal of aid from the Marshall Plan—which almost all the rest of Europe was receiving to help with postwar reconstruction—was representative of mutual rising tensions (Schrecker 8). Former president Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s promise of postwar Soviet-American collaboration collapsed as Truman’s no-nonsense international policymaking strategy took over (Stone 1388). The United States and the Soviet Union entered an arms race to create nuclear weapons arsenals as a threat, making it clear to the public that the two countries had entered a state of mutually assured destruction if either decided to use their weapons. This fear led to nuclear threat drills and increased propaganda, which were used to shape communism into a political device.

Communism’s use as a political tool within the United States heightened this anxiety. Mostly anti–New Deal Republicans tried to frame the social services of the New Deal as communist ideology seeping into the politics of what was now considered the strongest nation in the world. Republican Party officials began campaigning with a Republican-versus-Communist rhetoric that won them control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1946

(Stone 1388–89). In an effort to continue to appear tough on communism to his Republican colleagues, Truman created a loyalty program for every federal employee, allowing for background checks and investigations with the help of the FBI into any communist political alignment, and also allowed HUAC to continue its investigative work (Truman). Simultaneously, the attorney general produced an ever-growing list of organizations that were “anti-American” (Stone 1392). Fears exploded in 1950 when McCarthy announced that the “State Department . . . [was] thoroughly infested with Communists” (McCarthy). This political stunt created a rise in anxiety that hadn’t been felt in recent memory and an opportunity for industries like Hollywood to align themselves with the “good guys” or be accused of Communist ties in a balancing act that required propaganda, bans, and PR stunts.

Hollywood found itself in a precarious position in the late 1940s and early 1950s—some of its biggest names were being accused of communism. The industry felt pressured to produce anti-communist propaganda films following the 1947 publication of the first blacklist produced by HUAC that named ten individuals who were to be investigated for supposedly creating communist propaganda. The film industry also felt public and governmental pressures to align itself with “Americanness” (that is, anti-communism) after several movie producers testified before HUAC that even Hollywood, one of the most visible American institutions, had communists within (Stone 15). Soon after these scares within Hollywood, the mass production of anti-communist material began (Lucini 20). The films were often blunt in their message, portraying communists as unpatriotic.

A classic example of propaganda films, *The Red Menace* portrays communism as the antithesis of Americanness. In the movie, communism is presented as an immigrant issue: one that dissatisfied immigrants try to bring to the United States (*Red Menace* 00:13:10, 00:16:45).

The film also imagines communism as a cause for the rebellious youth (during this time there was a “rebellious youth” panic), inserting the disapproving commentary of parents about their Party-member children; this is further accentuated by a portrayal of communism as being opposed to both religion and American exceptionalism (00:28:20, 00:40:30, 00:43:40, 01:01:00). By the end of the film, the viewer is given to believe that communism appeals to people who have mental illnesses, taking one of the main characters as an example, and is layered with the mystery and evil that the extreme emphasis on dark shadows suggests to the audience (01:20:00). *The Red Menace*, although unique in its attempt at verisimilitude through the narrative voice of a Los Angeles city councilman, follows conventions of propaganda that Hollywood was pressured to use. The film closes with a rendition of the song “Let Freedom Ring” while fading out into the logo of Republic Pictures—an eagle—in an attempt to banish any doubts about the company’s patriotism (01:26:51). Although Hollywood continued to produce anti-communist propaganda, big names in the industry were still targeted due to the compelling stories those accusations could create for gossip columns, newspapers, and radio shows as well as for the mass ideological stir that was created among the American public.

One of the most prominent figures accused was Lucille Ball. Nearly three-quarters of the US population watched her show, making her a perfect target for persecution, and she knew it. Still, the star was stunned, because two closed-door HUAC hearings and an FBI investigation had cleared her. The 21 April 1953 *Look Magazine* cover says it best: the front cover has a yellow-red color scheme (colors often used in communist symbolism), and the cover stories are about what the GOP must do to stay in control of the House and Senate, the hydrogen bomb, and Ball and her family (Ball 188). Communism was, simply put, on everyone’s mind. Although Ball had been cleared, her name recognition made her a perfect example of someone everybody

thought they knew from her show—a prime example of Americanness—who had been subject to government investigation; the accusations against her made communism seem much closer to citizens' everyday lives. Gossip columnists frequently tried to decode what they interpreted to be pro-communist propaganda in films, and they became a major source of “education” for Americans who wanted to keep up with the “red takeover” of America (Frost 5). In her columns, which reflect many other newspapers and gossip column styles of the era of the Second Red Scare, Hedda Hopper stated, “The Commies are trying to destroy the faith of the American people in the institutions and principles of the United States. They make subtle attacks upon our government and upon free enterprise. Their aim is to destroy our confidence in our system of government [and] our system of economics” (Frost 6). This kind of increasingly common proclamation during the late 1940s and early 1950s made the public uneasy but intrigued. Some of the anxiety stemmed from largely real, rational fears. KGB documents from the Soviet Union did show records of spying, and perhaps one of the most compelling stories for Americans was that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the first US civilians executed for espionage. This mix of real and false accusations made it difficult for people to understand how serious the gravity of the threat of communism was.

To make matters even more confusing, radio announcers and gossip columnists used any stories about communist infiltration that could sound compelling and often embellished them to make a name for themselves. Winchell, for example, changed his public political beliefs several times throughout his career according to what he believed would make him more popular; he soon became an avid supporter of McCarthyist policies (Robinson). Ultimately, gossip radio broadcasters continued to focus on Hollywood due to the high listenership it brought them, a reflection of the interest the public had in Hollywood stars such as Ball.

The fears that the aforementioned radio broadcasters, gossip columnists, blacklist publications, HUAC hearings, and Soviet weapons tests created starting in 1947 continued strongly for the next seven years. Afterward, however, when McCarthy was officially censured by the Senate for taking his accusations to the military, some fears dissipated; still, the anxiety that communism created had entered the American cultural canon. Aided by Truman's announcement that the United States would unwaveringly support any nation threatened by communism, the United States was established—through public sentiment and international and national policy—as a decidedly anti-communist nation. To be a good American became synonymous with being a supporter of capitalism and a defender against communist ideology.

As fears of communism rose, the defenders needed someone to blame. There needed to be tangible communist groups to point at (Pontikes 3). The first groups targeted were those who might feel betrayed by America—that is, people of color, members of religious minority groups, and queer Americans. With regard to race, it appeared to many that the early seeds of what became the civil rights movement were rooted in interpretations of *equality* and *social harmony* similar to those communism offered. These fears and accusations were similarly extended to religion. Christianity was the religious norm in the United States, and Jewish Americans were heavily targeted for possible communist connections; this was further exacerbated by the conviction of the Rosenbergs, who were Jewish, and made it seem that communism was for religious “undesirables.” People of color, members of religious minority groups appear in *The Red Menace* as contributors to the Communist Party, their identities being repeatedly pointed out and accentuated.

Of these targeted groups, anti-communist policy took an unprecedented stance against gay Americans. Communism imagined as an ideology for “sexual deviants” was proposed by

McCarthy himself. In one of his many statements on how to identify communists, he (in his signature unfiltered speaking style) labeled anyone who questioned his tactics “egg-sucking phony liberals [whose] pitiful squealing . . . would hold sacrosanct those Communists and queers” who had made China into a “red” (and therefore atheist) country (Stone 1395). This linking of queer America and anti-religious sentiment, coupled with pro-communist principles, became a common way of establishing communism as anti-American. Furthermore, queer Americans were seen as a threat to national security, as they could be blackmailed into finding government secrets out of fear that their sexuality could be revealed. This led to mass firings and more waves of hysteria. This hysteria, in part, is what led to ever-growing liberation movements.

During the Cold War, which lasted until the early 1990s, the civil rights and gay liberation movements took place, which both sought to end discrimination. These movements rose out of dissatisfaction with the way in which Black Americans and queer Americans, respectively, were treated during that era. The same way in which America had come to be defined as an anti-communist, anti-Soviet nation, it came in some spheres to be defined as an intolerant nation. Any sign of communism, no matter how improbable, was to be exterminated.

In Hollywood, actors were asked to change their names to be more Anglo-sounding, gay actors were forced into “straight” relationships in front of cameras, and actors belonging to religious minority groups were asked to not speak of faith, diminishing the amount of visibility that those “aberrant” groups had. That same conception of what an American is persists now; similar movements to counter that understanding of culture in the United States have arisen in the twenty-first century, including the Black Lives Matter movement and increased visibility in lawmaking and in social media for queer Americans. This increased visibility is what brought about the end of the sodomy laws that until 2003 essentially made it illegal to be gay in some

states. Though the continuation of these movements for broader equality are relatively young, they are a clear response to the United States as an anti-communist, and therefore intolerant, country.

Fear is powerful. The anxiety that rises out of fear can become hurtful, as exemplified during the implementation of McCarthyism in Hollywood during the Second Red Scare. As the USSR and the United States built massive weapons arsenals large enough to destroy the earth many times over and diplomatic tensions rose, the United States' domestic anti-communist policies became harsher. "Witch hunts" of anything remotely "red" occurred, especially with Hollywood "big names"—the most recognizable symbols of America—being accused of communist ties. The mounting fears created by McCarthy's accusations produced an American cultural identity of anti-communism and defended a culture that views Christian, white, straight men as the standard of Americanness. The climate of fear during the Cold War extended disapproval to anyone who was seen as close to communism—people of color, members of religious minority groups, and queer Americans—reinforcing an American culture of intolerance.

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