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Anti-communist politics of the Second Red Scare and how it affected Hollywood and the types of movies being made

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ANTI-COMMUNIST POLITICS OF THE SECOND RED SCARE AND HOW IT AFFECTED
HOLLYWOOD AND THE TYPES OF MOVIES BEING MADE

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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During the Second Red Scare from 1947 to 1957, anti-communist sentiment was rampant and affected Hollywood and the types of movies being made. This was due to governmental agencies—as well as non-governmental institutions and people—being suspicious of and investigating anyone who was suspected of having communist ties. This caused a level of fear that affected what was shown in the content of the movies and who could make them. It is important to examine how the movies and film industry was influenced by the Second Red Scare. This is because Hollywood was strongly affected not only at this time but also years into the future. People's lives were directly impacted by the paranoia that was rampant during this period, whether because they had a communist past or if they were only indirectly associated with communists.

In this paper, I will focus on why movies during this time had either blatant or subtle anti-communist themes. I will be researching movies from this period to get a sense of the types of messages being portrayed. They will be split into four categories: propaganda, subtle anti-communism, liberal opposition, and movies that are interpreted to be both anti-communist and anti-Red Scare hysteria. I will also be looking at the people in the film industry, some participating in the anti-communist sentiment, and some being in opposition to it. Lastly, I will be looking at whether this era of paranoia was even necessary.

Before I started my research, I expected to find the movies made during this time to have underlying themes of anti-communism that result from the sentiment of the era. Some of these themes may not be noticeable on the surface and can only be understood through knowing the politics and attitudes of the era. The motion pictures were considered to be influential, and this was a big reason officials felt there needed to be a cleansing of Hollywood. This means that if a movie even had a slight communist feel not only would it not get made, but the people

responsible would get in trouble. Something else that needs to be considered is that movies are mainly made to be for entertainment. It could potentially be seen that too much was read into the people who made the movies that caused a whole uproar that was unnecessary.

Literature Review

Official Anti-Communism

In the 1940s and 1950s, the United States government took measures to root out any suspected communists or communist sympathizers from Hollywood. The most well-known effort to investigate suspected communists was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). This committee was formed in 1938 but came back with a force during the Cold War. It became permanent—rather than needing to be renewed every year—in 1945 due to the supposed need to expose Hollywood. HUAC’s members were suggesting that it would be a mistake not to fire the subversive actors, filmmakers, and writers. John Rankin (D-MI) noted, “you need a house cleaning, and you need it very badly” (Ceplair 2008, 407). This suggests that the committee, and the government as a whole, was more than a little forceful in their suggestion that suspected communists should be gotten rid of. Ceplair (2008) also mentions that this led to the blacklist since the movie companies did not want to be censored or boycotted during and after the filmmaking process. They thought that refusing to cooperate would lead to censorship laws, and they figured that they would be better off just cooperating with HUAC and the American government.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was also involved in investigating suspected communists or communist sympathizers. The FBI had begun to create a big dossier on alleged communists in Hollywood and would share these findings with HUAC (Ceplair 2008). Their big

concern was that communists were infiltrating not only government posts but also positions of power within Hollywood. Sbardellati (2008) notes that the FBI viewed the film industry as being a great influence upon the minds and culture of the United States as well as the rest of the world. This means that if communists were able to infiltrate this influential system, communism would probably spread. They did not consider, however, that most of the people being investigated were not at the top in Hollywood and could not influence the type of content being released even if they wanted to.

The offense by those being investigated was not so much that they once belonged to the party—if at all—but rather that they refused to comply with the government’s demands that they testify about their thoughts and beliefs (Alwood 2007, 146). This person would then become a controversial personality whether or not they had any communist ties. This would cause the movie studios to want to get rid of said actor, director, or other industry worker to avoid any public backlash (Alwood 2007, 146). This demonstrates how influential an accusation, especially from a government agency, was in getting an individual fired and blacklisted from the movie industry.

Unofficial Anti-Communism

The American public also had anti-communist sentiments that affected the movies and whether they would be successful or not. Gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper, used her column to promote anti-communist campaigns during the Cold War (Frost 2011, 84). Her fans would write to her and sometimes would offer their own information about filmmakers and their supposed communist ties. Frost (2011) also discusses how Hopper used her celebrity to promote her pro-America and anti-communist ideals. Her readers would have “red lists” where they wrote down actors or filmmakers that had communist ties, which would affect which movies they would be

willing to see (Frost 2011, 102). This is similar to the blacklist made by movie executives, but on a more personal level.

Some civic organizations held anti-communist views and acted on them. Some examples of these are the American Legion, Knights of Columbus, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Boy Scouts of America, and the American Bar Association. The members of these organizations—who were mostly conservative—thought it was their patriotic duty to expose communists by cooperating with all levels of government (Ceplair 2008). They would do this by collecting information and sending reports to the FBI. This was a way for everyday Americans to be able to do their “patriotic” duty and help the government to expose those who were suspected of having far-left leanings.

Types of Movies

Movies being released at this time consisted of both blatant anti-communist propaganda as well as films with more subtle anti-communist themes. It was not common, but there were also some movies released that criticized the Red Scare hysteria. All of these types of movies were received by different audiences differently. An average American moviegoer might view a film one way while an organization that has political aims might have an opposite—or even stronger—opinion.

Propaganda

The U.S. government was never in the position to dictate what kind of movies could or could not be released. They had to keep up their “free media” claim. However, Shaw (2007, 136) notes that distinguishing “us” from “them” was a powerful way for the government to put pressure on filmmakers. While the government could not explicitly ban movies that criticized

America and the government's policies during the Cold War, there were plenty of restraints that caused filmmakers to not dare tread in the territory—such as HUAC investigations and the potential of ending up on the blacklist.

There was a decent amount of pro-FBI movies, such as the 1952 thriller *Walk East on Beacon*, which is about a federal agent who tracks down atomic secrets that were leaked and brought to light communist subversion. *Walk East on Beacon* is an example of a film that can safely be considered propaganda. Shaw (2007, 57) notes that the senior corporation personnel who worked on the film “were able to draw on their extensive propaganda experience.” It is no surprise that this movie had pro-FBI themes that tried to convey to the audience that the FBI was there to protect them, considering J. Edgar Hoover wrote it. Hoover had a history of investigating and surveilling suspected communists long before the McCarthy Era. Starting in the 1940s, for example, he ordered the surveillance of newspaper labor activists to “monitor domestic subversion,” which was helped along by the cooperation of journalists who wanted to purge communists from their leadership roles in the Newspaper Guild (Alwood 2007, 137). This collaboration between the FBI and Guild members contributed to the political climate of the 1950s that made it dangerous for individuals to challenge McCarthy or the tactics he and others used in their investigations (Alwood 2007, 138).

Another anti-communist propaganda film made during this time was the cautionary drama *My Son John* (1952). The plot explored how a family could split due to the son ultimately being revealed to be a communist. When John came home to visit his parents, they started to notice the pro-communist tendencies that he repeatedly denied but was eventually found to be lying. When his mother follows him back to his home, she threatens to turn him in instead of letting him “poison” the minds of the graduates he was supposed to give a commencement

speech to. Although John ends up repenting, he is shot down by communist agents. He had recorded a warning against the seduction of communism before he died, which the FBI played at the commencement he was due to speak at before his death.

The ending of the film has sure signs that it was made with a political aim, and the audience was reminded of this throughout the entire movie. It showed that even if someone repents, there will be consequences to getting involved with communists. The consensus on the film was largely negative due to the overly anti-intellectual tone (Doherty 1988, 22). Because the average American tends to want to go to the movies to escape and be entertained, they did not appreciate being hit by the obvious anti-communist propaganda over and over again in this movie. There was a portion of the population that praised the film, however. The American Legion was pleased with the blatant anti-communist themes, and some of the motion picture businesses also rallied behind it (Doherty 1988, 22). While the American public failed to like the film, a discussion was still generated due to the timely manner of the anti-communist sentiment. The main downfall of the movie was that the propaganda was too obvious and overwhelmed the storyline (Doherty 1988, 24).

American audiences did not appreciate when the propaganda was too obvious and took over the movie. Because economics was not the main reason for making films with obvious propaganda goals, the movie studios considered them a cost of doing business (Doherty 1988, 25). The studios had to prove their loyalty to the United States and democracy by making these films, but the American people did not have to like the movies made in response. *Walk East on Beacon* and *My Son John* were both box office flops, mainly due to their being blatant propaganda that the public did not find appealing.

Subtle Anti-Communism

Some films were more subtle in their anti-communist messaging, including many of the science fiction movies made during this time. In science fiction movies, there are plenty of metaphors representing the Red Scare that were more appealing to moviegoers while still getting their message across. Films like *Them!* (1954)—where ants are mutated from atomic tests into giant man-eating monsters that threaten civilization—taught the public to be wary of atomic power (Watts 2014, 65). The message of this movie that atomic power would only cause disaster was especially effective because of the real fear of atomic weapons and the possibility of annihilation from a potential atomic war with the Soviet Union. Like how *Walk East on Beacon* had a message that the FBI was there to protect their citizens, *Them!* does the same, but with the military. The military in the movie is there to protect the citizens against the new atomic threat. The message of protection from the communists by the military is not there outright, but it is an underlying message that the audience is cued into consciously or subconsciously.

Another science fiction movie that uses this ideology subtly is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). It includes some characteristics that are common to movies during this period: conformity, paranoia, and alienation (Watts 2014, 65). The movie is about a doctor who notices that his fellow townspeople are being slowly replaced by emotionless imposters. While on the surface this movie is about aliens taking over the bodies of humans, it is a metaphor for communists taking over people's loved ones. It is an invisible enemy that is invading the family structures as well as the heart of American society (Hendershot 1998, 30-31). There was a common fear during this time that people could get "corrupted" by the communists, and like the aliens in this movie, would become emotionless robots. Moviegoers were able to relate to the message, which in turn fueled anti-communist sentiment, even if only subconsciously.

Liberal Opposition

While there were many anti-communist movies during this era, there were also some films that opposed the conservatism that was rampant as well as the “pro-America” sentiment. These films—and the filmmakers making them—were not necessarily “anti-America,” but they made films that critiqued America at a time that to have any views that might be considered “anti-American” was to be communist. During the trial of the Hollywood Ten, there were some “films that seriously questioned some of the basic tenets of American society” (Shaw 2007, 137). A few of these films were *All the King's Men* and *The Lawless*, which were both 1949 films that were made by the communists that analyzed the nature of political and social oppression. Charlie Chaplin's 1947 film *Monsieur Verdoux* and Abraham Polinsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) “suggested that corruption, greed and murder were at the core of Western society” (Shaw 2007, 137). Frank Capra also made the political comedy *State of the Union* in 1948 which critiqued American conservatism as well as supporting internationalism. Capra was the only one who was still free to work in Hollywood by 1952, while the rest were either blacklisted or had left the industry.

An example of a science fiction movie that criticized nuclear weapons and the message that outsiders are automatically suspicious is the 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The producer—Julian Blaustein—produced this movie as a call to end war as well as reversing science fiction's tropes by making the aliens the peaceful ones rather than the ones causing the trouble (Ceplair 2009, 257). The movie appealed to audiences because the moral behind the story was not too obvious, unlike the propaganda films made during this time. It was also different from other films at this time because it portrayed pacifist intellectuals sympathetically (Shaw 2007, 142). At this time, pacifist intellectuals were usually seen as communist-leaning and un-American because of their more typically liberal views. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* the

alien befriends a scientist who is portrayed as being much more open-minded and trustworthy than the military leaders who are portrayed as ignorant and arrogant (Shaw 2007, 143). This is different from other movies made during this era which usually showed the military as one of the first lines of defense protecting the American public.

In 1956, *Storm Center* was released. This movie is about a librarian who refused to remove a book from the library that the town council considered to be anti-American propaganda. She is then betrayed by those she trusted and loved while sticking to her moral high ground which was to keep the book available in the library. The main message of *Storm Center* is that censorship is worse than any political leaning. While the film was being shot, Julian Blaustein told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that the story is a dramatization of the “blight that comes on a community—this community—when civil liberties are tampered with successfully” (Ceplair 2009, 269). Even if the librarian disapproved of communism—which she did—she believed that the right to access information in the library is important and censorship of this knowledge is a violation of civil liberties. This message was a threat to the anti-communist idea that any access to communist material is a problem.

Both Anti-Communist and Anti-Red Scare Hysteria

Some movies were being made during this time that could be interpreted as either being anti-communist or as criticizing the Red Scare hysteria. One such movie is the 1952 western *High Noon* starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. The film’s writer, Carl Foreman, intended “Gary Cooper's lone marshal combatting some dangerous outlaws in a small town—where no one wants to support him—as a parable for the Committee's onslaught on Hollywood, and for the timidity of the community there” (Sayre 2001). This was an unpopular view that eventually forced him to testify and ultimately landed him on the blacklist. Foreman himself noted that

when he was writing the screenplay he drew on his own experience of “growing alienation among the Hollywood film community due to his communist past” (Wallin 2017, 111).

However, due to the popularity of the film at the time, conservatives twisted the meaning to make it seem like the lone marshal was a metaphor for the United States fighting the communists. Because of the tradition of westerns as being more conservative and pro-America, this interpretation has stuck and is still around today.

The Industry

The People

The Second Red Scare was the era of the Hollywood blacklist, which kept people in the film industry out of work if they were associated—even slightly—with communism. The FBI also contributed to the identification of potential subversives by releasing information to committees—such as HUAC—which were obtained from illegal break-ins at communist offices and party members’ homes (Alwood 2007, 138). This ultimately led to the hearings of the “Hollywood Ten” who ended serving up to one year in jail. These were the first ten people to be called to testify before the committee in 1947. It was no mistake that these ten people called were one-time members of the Party (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, xvi). This gave HUAC legitimacy in their hearings since they could point at their involvement in the Communist Party. It also allowed them to be able to expand their criteria on who to call to testify, such as people who associated with former Party members or had communist leanings.

While most people would assume that the U.S. government at the time was the sole cause of the blacklist and censorship in Hollywood, it was ultimately left up to the studio bosses to follow through with the blacklist as well as limit the storylines of their movies. Compliance

mainly happened because Hollywood wanted to survive (Watts 2014, 61). As noted previously, there was no economic strategy for propaganda films, but rather it was considered to be a cost of business to produce films that attacked communism as well as those who were accused of being communists. These studios did not want to be associated with communists or communist sympathizers, both because they did not want to be censored by an outside source and because having these people was bad for business.

Women in the Fight Against Hysteria

While most of the focus on the blacklist and the Red Scare during this time was on men and their experiences, women were also both fighting against and being victimized by it. A reason women are not heard about as much in discussions about the HUAC hearings is that they were expected to be intimidated into submission—since men thought that they were supposed to be of superior intellect and had much more authority than the “weaker sex”—and if they were not, then HUAC would label them as unfriendly but would not take them too seriously (Barranger 2008, 7). An example of this is when Barbara Parker continued to criticize HUAC and called the men a bunch of fools, the FBI still only “considered her a harmless crank” (Barranger 2008, 133). Even though she should have been considered a threat, she was a woman who did not have much influence which allowed male leaders to dismiss her as harmless.

Another actress that was affected by and fought the blacklist was Marsha Hunt. She was not an A-list star who attracted a lot of attention but was still able to aggravate HUAC by herself (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, 306). She had a stint as a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) board member, and she “crossed swords” with the SAG founder—who was deeply conservative, and therefore anti-communist—Robert Montgomery (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, 306). She also flew along with prominent members of the Committee for the First Amendment—which

included big names such as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall—to support the individuals being brought before HUAC. The original reasoning behind this was that they would show the public that the movies were not filled with propaganda, but when they returned to Hollywood, members such as Bogart called the trip “ill advised” due to pressures from Warner Brothers (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, 307). Hunt did not make a public apology, however, which resulted in her being what Victor Navasky in *Naming Names* would classify as “a guilty bystander” (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, 307). Her movie career was not necessarily ruined, but she decided to leave when the blacklist started costing her jobs. Hunt even notes that she was never a figure of public controversy—most likely due to her being more of a B movie star—she just quit working (McGilligan and Buhle 2012, 308). This is another example of a woman not being able to make enough controversy to bring attention to the problem.

A woman who might have been able to make a difference was Lauren Bacall, but she—along with her husband Humphrey Bogart—succumbed to the pressures to apologize and denounce communism in order to save their careers and the studio’s reputation. This exemplifies the dilemma of this period. While most women were not considered threats by the FBI or HUAC, the ones that were might not have used their power to defend those being questioned. This brings back the idea that women were expected to be submissive, so even if Bacall did not want to apologize, she had to in order to keep her career. Lauren Bacall claimed to have been duped by the communists and retracted her support for those who were testifying. She might have *actually* believed that she was mistaken in her original support, but she might also have been just trying to save her reputation. Her notoriety—as well as her apology and submission to anti-communist ideals—allowed her to keep her career and fame as long as she continued to denounce communism and refrained from making such a “mistake” again.

Willing Parties to Combat Communism

While there were plenty of individuals within the industry that fought against or were investigated due to suspected communist leanings, there were also those who believed that communism was a real threat that needed to be dealt with. One actor that was well known for his anti-communist leanings was John Wayne. He was able to move audiences and was willing to use his influence amongst moviegoers for political purposes (Shaw 2007, 205). Wayne was the model patriot during this time after having starred in many war movies, despite never actually having gone to war himself. He was able to combine his politics and his work more than other stars of the era, which allowed his movies to have more meaning than they might have otherwise (Shaw 2007, 207). An actor with as much influence as John Wayne was able to sway public opinion due to his outspoken rejection of communist ideology.

Another opponent of communism in the film industry was Leo McCarey, who wrote, produced, and directed *My Son John*. Unlike some other filmmakers during this time, McCarey was not being pressured by HUAC or the movie studios to produce an anti-communist movie, but rather he fully believed that communism posed a real threat to American national security (Shaw 2007, 44). This explains why he would want to write a film that was so blatantly anti-communist as *My Son John*, where the titular John died and had a preaching moment in the end about the dangers of being seduced by communism.

Both John Wayne and Leo McCarey were able to use their art to try and sway movie audiences toward their view that communism is dangerous and needs to be rooted out of American culture. While Wayne was more successful in his ability to convince, both put anti-communist rhetoric in their work as well as advocating against it in their personal lives.

Conclusion

The Second Red Scare affected both the movies being released as well as the workforce of the film industry. There were movies that were outright propaganda, some that had more of a subtle anti-communist theme, and some that were opposed to the blacklist as well as other aspects of the hysteria of the Red Scare. More propagandistic movies were not as successful with the American public. This was due to the overly obvious political aim that took away from the viewing experience. There were of course organizations and people who liked these movies and thought they were doing a public good, such as the American Legion or John Wayne. Because these films were not overly successful at the box office, they were considered to be a business expense by the movie studios. Even though audiences did not like them in general, the studios thought it was a good way to appease the anti-communist sentiment as well as keep them from getting censored by an outside source. Movies with more subtle themes of anti-communism were more successful, if only because they were less preachy and more entertaining. The entertainment factor of these films allowed there to be messages about the dangers of communism that did not immediately turn off moviegoers and allowed the message to be absorbed whether consciously or not.

There were, however, some films that defied this self-imposed censorship of the movies. I labeled this type of movie as “liberal opposition” because it was mainly people trying to critique the hysteria surrounding communism, which generally came from a liberal view. These movies critiqued the censorship of ideas as well as reversed science fiction tropes that usually showed the aliens as the enemies. While these movies might not have been promoting communism, they were arguing that people should be free to read what they want or should be weary of war.

While the types of movies released during this time is an important part of looking at the culture of this period, the actual people affected are also worth analyzing. The Hollywood Ten were a group of producers, screenwriters, and directors that were called before HUAC and refused to answer any questions related to communism. This group and their actions received mixed reactions ranging from support to disgust. Members of the Committee for the First Amendment—the First Amendment was the defense the Ten were using to justify their noncompliance—even flew down some prominent names in the business to support their peers in the movie industry. This, however, turned out to be a mistake on their part because the public interpreted the action as communist support rather than a reassurance that Hollywood was not filled with pro-communist propaganda like they intended. Important names—especially Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall—expressed regret for going in order to save their careers as well as the movie studio's reputation.

There were, however, people who were lesser known that were able to critique HUAC and its activities. A few mentioned above were Barbara Parker and Marsha Hunt. They were not taken seriously because they were women and of lower profile and therefore were not considered much of a threat. Their careers were still impacted, but they were able to get past it by either retiring from the industry or switching to theater.

It is equally important to recognize those individuals who played into the anti-communist hysteria and even helped it along. One such person was John Wayne who truly believed that communism was evil and that it was his American duty to fight it in his personal life as well as on film. He was a prominent and successful actor that was able to have politically charged movies that were still entertaining enough that the American public enjoyed and absorbed the messages.

American moviegoers did not enjoy movies that had political messages that were too obvious and got in the way of the entertainment factor. This means that films that were pure propaganda were not as successful, and the movie studios only made them to prove their loyalty and to avoid outside censorship. However, movies with only subtle themes—whether anti-communist or anti-hysteria—tended to be enjoyed by audiences more which allowed for the messages to be absorbed effectively. This shows how movies can be important when one has a political aim because any seemingly random storyline could be implanting ideas in people's heads and they might not even realize it. For example, a movie about aliens could be representative of outsiders such as communists. The overall message of the movie could impact what the viewers' personal opinions are on the matter, such as whether or not they are sympathetic toward outsiders. This can be important if the government or filmmakers have a particular agenda to push.

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