

Naming Names: The Social Costs of McCarthyism--by Victor Navasky

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The social costs of what came to be called McCarthyism have yet to be computed. By conferring its prestige on the red hunt, the state did more than bring misery to the lives of hundreds of thousands of Communists, former Communists, fellow travelers, and unlucky liberals. It weakened American culture and it weakened itself.

Unlike the Palmer Raids of the early 1920s, which were violent hit-and-run affairs that had no long-term effect, the vigilante spirit McCarthy represented still lives on in legislation accepted as a part of the American political way. The morale of the United States' newly reliable and devoted civil service was savagely undermined in the 1950s, and the purge of the Foreign Service contributed to our disastrous miscalculations in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and the consequent human wreckage. The congressional investigations of the 1940s and 1950s fueled the anti-Communist hysteria which eventually led to the investment of thousands of billions of dollars in a nuclear arsenal, with risks that boggle the minds of even those who specialize in "thinking about the unthinkable." Unable to tolerate a little subversion (however one defines it) if that is the price of freedom, dignity, and experimentation--we lost our edge, our distinctiveness. McCarthyism decimated its alleged target--the American Communist Party, whose membership fell from about seventy-five thousand just after World War II to less than ten thousand in 1957 (probably a high percentage of these lost were FBI informants) but the real casualties of that assault were the walking wounded of the liberal left and the already impaired momentum of the New Deal. No wonder a new generation of radical idealists came up through the peace and civil-rights movements rather than the Democratic Party.

The damage was compounded by the state's chosen instruments of destruction, the professional informers--those ex-Communists whom the sociologist Edward Shils described in 1956 as a host of frustrated, previously anonymous failures, whose "fantasies of destroying American society and harming their fellow citizens, having fallen out with their equally villainous comrades, now provide a steady stream of information and misinformation about the extent to which Communists, as coherent and stable in character as themselves, penetrated and plotted to subvert American institutions." Specific error can harm individuals, but the institutionalization of misinformation by way of the informer system may have contributed to the falsification of history. "As a rule, our memories romanticize the past," wrote Arthur Koestler. "But when one has renounced a creed or been betrayed by a friend, the opposite mechanism sets to work. In the light of that later knowledge, the original experience loses its innocence, becomes tainted and rancid in recollection.... Those who were caught in the great illusion of our time, and have lived through its moral and intellectual debauch, either give themselves up to a new addiction of the opposite type, or are condemned to pay with a life-long hangover."

Our lawmakers relied on, our media magnified, and our internal-security bureaucracy exploited and reinforced the images of Communism unleashed by the most sensational and therefore often least reliable of the ex-Communists. (Thoughtful if embittered men like Koestler were heeded in the academy but passed

over in the popular press in favor of the Crouches, Cvetics, and Matusows.) Americans' political perspective was therefore distorted, their ability to distinguish myth from fact fatally compromised.

It is no easier to measure the impact of McCarthyism on culture than on politics, although emblems of the terror were ever on display. In the literary community, for example, generally thought to be more permissive than the mass media (a book can be produced for less than a fraction of what it costs to make a movie or a television show, and is harder to picket), the distinguished editor-in-chief of the distinguished publisher Little, Brown & Co. was forced to resign because he refused to repudiate his progressive politics and he became unemployable. Such liberal publications as the *New York Post* and the *New Republic* refused to accept ads for the transcript of the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Albert Maltz's short story "The Happiest Man on Earth," which had won the O'Henry Memorial Short Story Award in 1938 and been republished seventy-six times in magazines, newspapers, and anthologies, didn't get reprinted again from the time he entered prison in 1950 until 1963. Ring Lardner, Jr., had to go to England to find a publisher for his critically acclaimed novel *The Ecstasy of Owen Muir* didn't find a major publisher here until the 1960s, when it was reissued as part of a series of "classics" by New American Library.) The FBI had a permanent motion-picture crew stationed across the street from the Four Continents Bookstore in New York, which specialized in literature sympathetic to the Soviet Union's brand of Marxism. How to measure a thousand such pollutions of the cultural environment?

Sylvia Jarrico, former wife of the blacklisted Paul Jarrico, who was fired from her job as an editor with *Hollywood Quarterly* because she refused to sign the University of California loyalty oath, says simply, "We lived with the constant sense of being hunted." There is no knowing what intellectual losses were suffered by the widespread insistence on loyalty oaths, but George Stewart, reporting on the impact of the loyalty oath, wrote that his colleagues exhibited "worry depression, fatigue, fear, insomnia, drinking, headaches, indigestion, failure to function well, worsening of relations to colleagues, suspicion, distrust, loss of self-respect." In May 1952 *The New York Times* reported intimidation of librarians across the nation by Legionnaires, by Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, by Minutemen in Texas and California. School texts showing city slums, UNESCO material, all books by such threats to the free world as Howard Fast were purged from school libraries. Even the world of sports was not immune to the terror and the absurd assumptions it bred. The sportscaster Bill Stern observed over the Mutual Broadcasting System as late as October 6, 1958, that the lack of interest in "big time" football at New York University, Chicago, Harvard, and City College "is due to the widespread acceptance of Communism at the universities."

Paul Tillett, the Princeton political scientist, in a study of McCarthyism, concluded:

While it would be difficult to prove and probably inaccurate to say that loyalty purges as they affected Hollywood and television and the other performing arts created the vast wasteland that is American popular entertainment, the anti-Communist hysteria in cultural matters does put the quietus effectively on one branch of the argument for commercialism in culture. The repression of Communists--near, crypto and won't tell varieties--destroyed the notion that commercialism was a more effective guarantee of diversity than state-owned and -directed cultural enterprise.

When the question was raised, the moguls of Hollywood and Madison Avenue came to heel at the behest of a congressional committee without formal authority over them as meekly as the most obedient member of the Soviet cultural committees under Stalin and Khrushchev.

It is simplistic to single out the blacklist, as its victims did at the time, as sole cause of the decline of American movies in the 1950s. Too many other factors complicated the picture and the pictures: the European market, which until then had subsisted on a diet of American films, had begun to discover its own filmmakers, so American films lost some of their overseas market; after World War II, general economic

conditions in the film business had deteriorated; and the Supreme Court's ruling in 1948 that many distribution and exhibition practices were illegal meant that studios no longer had guaranteed distribution for their product. "The situation in which it was impossible to make a flop turned completely around," recalls Michael Gordon, who remembers a cost-cutting meeting at Universal where it was explained that all but two of the studio's twenty-four films were in the red. Then there was the installation of the coaxial for television in the late 1940s, which brought with it the first network television on a nationwide basis. Dalton Trumbo told me, "Even though we attributed the great box office decline, which began in 1948 and reached its nadir in 1952, to lack of us, that wasn't true. It was the rise of television." And, to make matters more difficult, the currency freeze in Great Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany under which a studio could spend credits in these countries but not take all of its earnings out of them eliminated the margin of profit on most films; this contributed to a sense of alarm.

We do not, of course, know what we have lost in the way of movies unmade, ideas un-hatched, scripts not written, talent undeveloped, careers abandoned, consciousnesses unrevised. And we cannot verify the belief of the screenwriter Paul Jarrico, who saw "a direct relation between the blacklist and the increasing emphasis of the Hollywood film on pro-war and antihuman themes. We have seen more and more pictures of violence-for-the-sake-of-violence, more and more unmotivated brutality on the screen as the blacklist grew." (One difficulty with his argument is that after the blacklist died the violence continued to escalate.)

Was the blacklist, as John Howard Lawson and others contended, a form of thought-control? Did it succeed, as Mark Jacobson, writing in the mid-1970s, claimed, in smashing "the hopes of the New York crowd for a cinema of ideas in this country"? The screenwriter Ian McClellan Hunter said yes: "We really felt that sooner or later the Louis B. Mayers and the other studio people would die off and we would be able to make more provocative films.... The blacklist stopped us right in our tracks." Perhaps in the absence of the blacklist the political culture of the 1930s and 1940s would have given birth to a newly experimental cinema in the 1950s. Perhaps *Salt of the Earth* (1954), product of the blacklist underground, which, whatever its limitations, anticipated both the feminist and independent film-producing movements by more than a decade (not to mention its premature concern for the Chicano), is but a crude specimen of what might have been. Or perhaps not. The point is that we will never know. We will also never know how many of the taboos that have beset commercial television in the United States since the late 1940s--when its habits, values, assumptions, and basic perspective on the world were being shaped--were determined by the blacklist atmosphere.

For a while it was fashionable to downgrade the talent of the blacklisted. Murray Kempton wrote an entertaining chapter in *Part of Our Time* (1955) listing the trash films that some of these people had committed. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued that they tithed by night to make up for their hackery by day. But as we have already seen the blacklisted won too many delayed awards to be collectively discounted as hacks. Michael Wilson was right when he observed that a majority of them were younger writers who were just beginning to come into their own, as the subsequent careers of men like Lardner and Salt would seem to prove. "As to other of the so-called no-talent writers, well, it's true their talents do get rusty after fifteen years without employment, and if they've turned to other ways of life and other kinds of jobs, it doesn't mean they never had talent, it means that they never had a chance to develop or prove it."

It is one of the minor ironies of the period that while HUAC found little evidence of Communist influence in films, Dorothy Jones, in her study for the Fund for the Republic, found considerable evidence of the impact of HUAC. From 1950 to 1952 there were fewer social-theme movies like the earlier *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), and *Naked City* (1948), and more "pure entertainment," war movies, and anti-Communist films, the latter including such duds as *The Conspirator* (1950), *Peking Express* (1951), and *Red Planet Mars* (1952). (In 1952 alone, thirteen anti-Communist films were released.) "Probably never before in the history of Hollywood," wrote Jones, "had such a large number of films been produced which the industry

itself doubted would prove really profitable at the box office. During the years 1947-52 only one major studio, Universal International, did not make any so-called anti-Communist films.

A short-lived publication sponsored by blacklistees and their friends, *Hollywood Review* (1955), took the trouble to try to trace the blacklist's effect on film content. An interesting article by Adrian Scott, one of the Hollywood Ten, reveals the methodological problems of such an enterprise. First, he listed distinguished films made by writers and directors who then were blacklisted: *Watch on the Rhine*, *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, *The Naked City*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, *The Talk of the Town*, and *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*.

Scott then compared the contemporary work of non-blacklisted writers and directors with their earlier films. He contrasted John Ford's early films such as *The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) with his more recent *The Quiet Man* (1952)--"stereotyped Irish quaintness"--and *The Long Gray Line* (1954)--"sentimentalized West Point." William Dieterle's early "tributes to the capacity of the human intellect"--films on *Pasteur*, *Zola*, and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940)--found no counterpart in *Elephant Walk* (1954), a romantic drama about white plantation owners. Scott juxtaposed William Wyler's *The Little Foxes* (1941) with his "watered down" *Carrie* (1951). He contrasted *Dead End* (1937) with *Detective Story* (1951)--the earlier film presenting "juvenile delinquency as a social problem requiring a social solution," while the later "dealt with police brutality wholly in terms of the personality of an individual ... without relation to social responsibility in how he wields his authority." Nunnally Johnson's screenplay for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) far overshadowed his later *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) or *How to Be Very, Very Popular* (1955). Scott also argued that the industry had ended a cycle of films about American race relations (*Home of the Brave*, *Intruder in the Dust*) which might have led to a new consciousness. Instead it inaugurated a campaign to glorify the businessman (*Executive Suite*, *Sabrina*, *Patterns*).

The change in the political climate could be seen, Scott wrote, in a content-analysis of the films of Elia Kazan. *Boomerang*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and *Gentleman's Agreement* were "excellent liberal films" contrasted with *Viva Zapata* ("theme: power corrupts revolutionaries"), *On the Waterfront* ("theme: courageous stool pigeon frees sheep-like longshoremen from tyranny of corrupt union") and *East of Eden* ("theme: good is really evil and evil really good in this hopeless, meaningless world).

Scott did not pretend to analyze the anti-Communist films--which were for the most part low-budget items made by second-rate talent. Looking at the best Hollywood had to offer, he concluded: "Few if any of the films made by these men and their colleagues since 1947 have dramatized the humanist, democratic, and antifascist values that illuminated their work in the Roosevelt era. Their talents remain, but the ideas to which they applied their talents have been eroded and forbidden." Thus "the blacklisting of other men was in reality the blacklisting of the liberals' own ideas."

Although Scott's somewhat mechanistic, ideologically culture-bound political aesthetic consigned clearly superior films like *Waterfront* and arguably superior ones like *Eden* to critical purgatory because he did not like their values, his catalogue if not his analysis usefully suggests the magnitude of our loss.

Even if it were possible to disentangle the effects of the various elements in the McCarthy period--the informer system, Hollywood division, the blacklist system, the congressional investigations, the larger repression, the international cold war--the prospect of quantifying the social cost of any one of them is overwhelming. Nevertheless, since institutions were transformed, content influenced, individuals injured, and vast public and private resources expended, it seems important to try separately to trace the effect of the informer alone, without whom the blacklist and many other aspects of the purge would not have been possible. To single out the informer is not to minimize the significance of the investigating committees

themselves and the entire internal-security bureaucracy as causal agents of repression; it is merely to affirm that without the informer--who was seen as the proximate cause of evil by many of the most visible victims--Hollywood's overnight disintegration could not have happened in quite the way it did.

The Greek word "stigma" originally referred to a bodily sign to indicate the bearer was "a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places." In this definition lies a clue to the nature of the treble damages inflicted by the informer--on his intended victims, on the collectivity, on himself.

SOURCE: <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/mccarthy/navasky.htm>