

**McCarthyism's Ghosts of Empire and The Coming War at Home; Strategies for Defense**  
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It's always a fool's errand to try and answer "what's next?" It is simply too difficult to know what comes next for empire—everything is crazy right now. As Trump dismantles vital arms of empire like USAID, while accelerating extra judicial killings and increasing an already insane military budget—we don't know if this just means he will use the military more domestically than abroad. Maybe it means that American empire will rely more exclusively on hard power, but we don't know how long Wall Street will let Trump's instability reign, so for me—all bets on American empire abroad are crap-shots at present. While the future of empire's periphery are unclear, I think we can more clearly see the plan for empire's core, as basic public services and outlets of critical voices are gutted and dismantled. So my end of empire visions are focused more internally (within the US) than external; beyond the predictable visions of this being China and BRICK's century, my Magic-8 Ball says "American Empire's Outlook Hazy."

During Trump's first term I published an essay titled "Trump Era Physical Sciences Approaching Social Science Marginal Status." I argued that Trump's policies ignoring all scientific research reporting things Trump didn't want to hear (on climate change, etc.), had finally allowed the physical sciences to catch up with how anthropology or sociology's research on capitalism's impacts on have been treated for all of our lifetimes. We now know his first term was nothing compared to what's happening now.

But it is disasters like the present that make me think I haven't wasted the last 30 years researching American political surveillance, McCarthyism, and the weaponization of

anthropology. I think the ghosts of McCarthyism have more to teach us about the present than any other specters from our past: Attacks on academic freedom, new speech codes, red bating, and even Hollywood blacklists are back in style (Paramount now has one for people whose spoken out against Israeli genocide).

With archival research, and tens of thousands of page of FBI files released, I pieced together the stories of dozens of anthropologists victimized by the FBI and McCarthyism's public attacks staged in legislatures and university campuses. These witch hunts by cynical anti-intellectual reactionaries targeted progressives fighting systemic American discrimination. Because a lot of the present oppression comes out of McCarthyism's playbook, this history has a vital importance. Anthropologists were not unique victims, and similar stories can be told of union organizers, social workers, social justice priests, K-12 educators, people forming public utilities, community organizers, pretty much anyone doing activism for racial equality were targeted, regardless of real or imagined links to Marxist organizations, in ways parallel to this month's claims that "Antifa" is an international terrorist organization.

I learned 5 important lessons from McCarthyism's attacks on anthropologists, that seem to have relevance in the hauntings of this present moment:

1. Activism matters. It matters so much that this was really what determined who was targeted far more than real or imagined Communist Party membership. It was activist anthropologists who were targeted, in fact I found FBI files showing the FBI really didn't care if someone was a literary Marxist, what they cared about was if someone (with or without communist links) was part of an organized activism campaign fighting things like American racial segregation.

2. Professional organizations like the AAA investigating accusations of improper firings or other penalties can make a huge difference.
3. McCarthyism didn't have to make examples of many people for it to work. It broadcast messages of fear, and anthropologists in the 50s learned to stay away from activism.
4. Most academics have rarely used their academic freedom, and they kept their distance when others come under attack. (Don't do that.)
5. McCarthyism changed what anthropologists did. It made us disengaged and dumber for a while, focusing less on inequality and social activism.

Not to go all Structural-Functionalist on you, but, its worth considering what the “functions” of McCarthyism were—or more specifically, how it functionally aligned with the development of the American Cold War? One of the answers to this is: McCarthyism quite effectively used “degradation ceremonies” to silence voices objecting to the hi-jacking of the American economy for a new military industrial complex, that moved us away from one that might otherwise have been organized more like a Nordic welfare state. A move creating such catastrophic debt that we couldn't have nice things like universal health care. Like most structural-functionalism, this is far too simplistic & tautological, but that's OK, (in my 9-minutes) it helps us consider how such demonizations silence those who might otherwise sound alarms.

Before doing something really messed up, a society needs to lant, marginalize, and silence dissident voices. If you do this to just a few people, most others will learn to shut up even while the most atrocious acts are committed in the name of freedom, liberty, and the safety of the Republic. That's the ghosts who are visiting us now...

Given the realities of climate change, whatever damage Trump and those who follow inflict will come back to haunt us all in the short and long term. As university departments housing those who spent careers studying the social construction of inequality are under attack, we must be vigilant in our confrontations of the elitist nonsense justifying these attacks; some of us have already been fired, more are coming.

And while it's a real shit-show, whatever comes next as the old empire crumbles, there's things we can do, so I have three brief suggestions on "What is to be done"

### **What is to be done?**

1. First, as members of a professional association, the most important lesson from the ghosts of McCarthyism is that organizations like the AAA can be effective in tracking, investigating, and intervening when our members are attacked. This can be like trying to drink out of a firehose, but if professional associations like the AAA aren't going to at least do the following three steps, I don't know why we have them. The AAA needs to do the following:

- a. First, Track and monitor attacks on anthropologists on a cases by case basis,
- b. Second, have a standing academic freedom committee investigating individual attacks on anthropologists (but learn from the McCarthy period to not have it literally chaired by an FBI informer). Thinking that this can just be outsourced to groups like the AAUP or ACLU would be a huge mistake.
- c. Third, need to not cower when confronting fascist attacks; silence will not save us.

2. Second, lots of anthropologists need to learn to do some of our work without funding: I'm not joking. I did it for over 3-decades, published a half dozen books in-part criticizing the funding regimes that would not fund such work. Money is drying up, but our pens don't have to.

3. Finally, learn how to operate under more overt forms of oppression. We need to take a lesson from the great Iranian film maker **Jafar Panahi**, who continues to thumb his nose at oppressive governmental censors by skirting the edge of what is legal and allowable in creative ways.

While the temptation to hide the politics of what we're doing to disengage from activism is tempting (and I attended several sessions at these meetings where this was explicitly being recommended as a safe course of action), it can destroy the promise of anthropology. Rather than hiding out and hoping fascists won't notice our discipline has a long history of antifascism, we need the AAA to protect the academic freedom and rights of those countering the tyranny of this moment.