

The Threat of Conformism

HANNAH ARENDT

FEW Americans returning from Europe in recent years have failed to report with a certain bitterness the great prominence given in Europe to everything we have come to include under the name of McCarthyism. Americans are usually inclined to consider this emphasis altogether misplaced and are very likely, no matter where their sympathies lie, to look upon such experiences as demonstrations of the distorted image of America abroad.

One point here is often overlooked in this country. Experiences with totalitarianism, either in the form of totalitarian movements or outright totalitarian domination, are familiar to all European countries except Sweden and Switzerland. To Americans, these experiences appeared strange and "un-American," just as foreign as specifically modern American experiences frequently appear to Europeans. The standard reply to victims of Nazism and Bolshevism used

to be, and to an extent still is, "It can't happen here." To Europeans, McCarthyism appears to be conclusive proof that it can.

There are two possibilities. You can take the assumptions of the investigators at face value. You can believe with them, not that Soviet Russia constitutes the gravest problem of American foreign policy (which it obviously does), but that Bolshevism in the form of a domestic conspiracy permeates all levels of the population right up to the highest places in American government. In that case the conclusion is inevitable that it can very well happen here and that it does not thanks only to the activities of investigating Senators. On the other hand, if you do not believe in this myth of a top-to-bottom domestic conspiracy, it is very easy to detect in the methods of these committees ominously familiar traits, up to and including the traditional fabrication of a conspiracy myth. This

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line of reasoning is rather obvious, especially for Europeans. This reaction may be annoying and occasionally even offensive; it may hurt some feelings, but it will do no serious harm in the long run.

Much more relevant is another aspect of the same matter. In view of the prominence given the issue itself, it is curious to observe in Europe how little reported is the opposition to McCarthyism which is voiced in entire freedom in the United States. Even well-informed Europeans expect every American to have the same opinion on this matter, and the way in which they view this position, not as an opinion of individual American citizens, but as American opinion in general, is highly distressing. What comes to light here is a characteristically European expectation of encountering a kind of conformism which needs no threats or violence, but arises spontaneously in a society that conditions each of its members so perfectly to its exigencies that no one knows that he is conditioned. The conditioning of the individual to the demands of society was early considered a characteristic trait of American democracy. Indeed, it became perhaps the chief reason America could develop into the nightmare of Europe, even of a freedom-loving Europe, something Americans find hard to understand.

HISTORICALLY, the European conflict between the State and the individual frequently was solved at the expense of individual freedom. This fact was taken by Americans as proof of the sacrifice of human liberties to the State. By Europeans, on the other hand, the situation was viewed in terms of a conflict between State and society, so that the individual, even if his liberties were violated by the government, could always find a relatively safe refuge in his social and private life. Totalitarian domination, but no other government, not even absolute despotism or modern dictatorships, has succeeded in destroying this private social sphere, this refuge of individual liberty. Europe's fear with

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respect to American circumstances has always been that such a refuge in society could not exist here, precisely because they felt the distinction between government and society did not exist. The European nightmare was that under conditions of majority rule, society itself would be the oppressor, with no room left for individual freedom.

In Tocqueville's words, "whenever social conditions are equal, public opinion presses with [such] enormous weight upon the mind of each individual" that "the majority do not need to force him, they convince him;" the non-violent coercion of public disapproval is so strong that the dissenter has nowhere to turn in his loneliness and impotence, and in the end will be driven either to conformity or to despair. If we apply Tocqueville's insight to modern conditions, if we try to visualize present European thought in his terms, then we may say that Europeans fear that terror and violence may not be necessary in order for freedom to disappear in America. Europe's disquiet may be traced to the conviction that freedom can dwindle away through some sort of general agreement, in some almost intangible process of mutual adjustment. And this is something which up to now has not yet happened in any part of the Western world.

The danger of conformism and its threat to freedom is inherent in all mass-societies. But its importance has more recently been overshadowed by the horrors of terror when combined with ideological propaganda—the specifically totalitarian form of organizing great and unstructured masses of people. This method served as the instrument both to destroy the remnants of older class or caste systems, and to prevent the coming into being of new classes or new groups, which is the usual outcome of successful revolutions. Under conditions of an already existing mass society—as distinguished from the class disintegration whose processes are accelerated by totalitarian movements—it is not inconceivable that totalitarian elements could for a limited time rely on conformism, or rather on the activation of a dormant conformism, for its own ends. In the initial stages, conformism could conceivably be used to make terror less violent and ideology less insistent, thereby it would serve to make the transition from a free climate into the stage of a pre-totalitarian atmosphere less noticeable.

In America, the potentially dangerous consequences or by-products of equality of condition (i.e. of the absence of a class system which, much more than sheer numbers, is the outstanding trait of a mass society) have been remote, but will remain so only as long as the Constitution remains intact and the "institutions of liberty" function. In Europe, however, the old class system is disintegrating beyond repair, and even in a non-totalitarian atmosphere it is rapidly developing into a mass society. There the safeguards against the worst dangers of conformism which have

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protected America do not for the most part exist. Where they do exist, they have in part been imported from America, and on the whole they have not yet had the time to prove themselves nor have the people become educated in their use. Specifically European safeguards, on the other hand, such as customs and traditions, have already proved once to be almost useless in modern emergencies and predicaments. When Europeans see conformism in America, therefore, they are rightly alarmed; the specifically American safeguards against the dangers inherent in conformism are naturally less visible to them from the outside, and the European is quite correct in his judgment that without such safeguards conformism could very well be as deadly as other, more bloody forms of modern mass organization.

AMERICA has, of course, a much longer experience with conformism than Europe. In discussing the subject, Europeans will naturally adopt the attitude of "It can't happen here," just as Americans did when they first learned about totalitarianism. But in reality, whatever can happen in Europe can happen in America, and vice versa, because, all differences notwithstanding, the history of the two continents is fundamentally the same. Indeed, since Western civilization has spread its influence all over the globe, the moment is rapidly approaching when we shall be able to say that hardly anything can happen in any country that could not happen in any other. In this matter, however, as in the matter of atomic warfare, the point is that Europe feels herself much more exposed to the dangers of such a development than America. Just as she feels that her cities are more open to attack and more easily destroyed, so she also feels that her political institutions are less stable, less firmly rooted, and her liberties even more exposed to crises from within.

In reality, the process which Europeans dread as "Americanization," is the emergence of the modern

world with all its perplexities and implications. It is probable that this process will be accelerated rather than hindered through the federation of Europe, which is also very likely a condition *sine qua non* for European survival. Whether or not European federation will be accompanied by the rise of anti-American, pan-European nationalism, as one may sometimes fear today, unification of economic and demographic conditions is almost sure to create a state of affairs which will be very similar to that existing in the United States.

One hundred and twenty years ago the European image of America was the image of democracy. Though not all Europeans could love it, they had to come to terms with it because they knew quite well that it presented part and parcel of the history of the West. Today the image of America is modernity. It is the image of the world as it rose from the modern age which gave birth to both present-day Europe and America.

The world's central problems today are the political organization of mass societies and the political integration of technical power. Because of the destructive potentialities inherent in these problems, Europe is no longer sure whether she can come to terms with the modern world at all. As a result, she tries to escape the consequences of her own history under the pretext of separating herself from America.

The image of America which exists in Europe may not tell us much about American realities or the daily lives of United States citizens, but if we are willing to learn, it may tell us something about the justified fears of Europe for her spiritual identity and her even deeper apprehensions about her physical survival. And these fears and apprehensions are not specifically European, no matter what Europeans may tell us. They are the fears of the whole Western world, and ultimately of all mankind.

(This concludes a series of three articles by Miss Arendt, based on a paper recently given by her at Princeton.)

BOOKS

A Close Examination of Wisconsin's Junior Senator

MCCARTHY AND THE COMMUNISTS. By James Rorty and Moshe Decter. Beacon Press. Cloth, \$2. Paper, \$1.

By WILL HERBERG

TO write objectively about current affairs is not easy; to do so about McCarthy and "McCarthyism" would seem to be impossible. Yet James Rorty and Moshe Decter have accomplished something like the impossible in this

book. That does not mean that they are "impartial"; they could not write knowledgeably about the subject if they were. It does mean that they do not write out of partisan fury, but out of a sincere desire to deal with the man and the problem fairly and responsibly. And I do not think it is possible to deny that they have in a great measure succeeded.

"The intention of the book," we are told in the preface, "is clear:

to ascertain the facts about Senator McCarthy's campaign against Communism, to analyze its implications for American security, and to focus attention on constructive ways for supporting the national interest. The task is educational rather than political." The study does not neglect the earlier phase of McCarthy's career, but it deals primarily with the period after January 1953 when McCarthy became chairman