

The Cold War as Metaphor

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The election of Donald Trump to the presidency in November took place among widespread proclamations of a new Cold War between the United States and Russia. The proxy conflicts in Syria and the Ukraine and emails supposedly hacked from the Democrats' national headquarters with the participation of the Kremlin provided the immediate impetus for these pronouncements. At the same time, the election saw elements of domestic Cold War rhetoric return to public debate. A chief strategy of Trump's liberal opponents lay in proving not only his lack of qualifications for the presidency but his emotional unsuitability for office. As part of their news coverage, publications like The Huffington Post and The Guardian decried "the madness of Trump's ideas" and on the cover of its July-August issue The Atlantic promised an explanation of "How American Politics Went Insane", anxiously asking: "Is there a cure?"

The closest historical parallel to the latest election can be found in the candidacy of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, a millionaire businessman with a penchant for provocative statements, who unsuccessfully ran against Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Earlier that year, the popular magazine Fact had sent out a questionnaire to all registered psychiatrists in the country asking them to scrutinize Goldwater's



mental health from afar. Of the 2,417 that replied, more than half declared Goldwater psychologically unfit, offering diagnoses that ranged from paranoia to schizophrenia, megalomania to sadomasochism. The transfer of medical terminology from practicing psychiatrists to the mass media initiated by Fact in 1964 indicates that a more precise history lurks behind today's casual deployment of psychopathology. In a [recent book](#), I tell the story of how insanity came to play a prominent role in today's political and cultural debates. There it continues to function as an intellectual resource for policing the limits of dissent, evaluating the role of emotions in public discourse, criticizing the expansion of state power, and imagining the fate of the individual in bureaucratic society. One of the central claims in the book concerns the emergence of this cultural trope, which I trace to the domestic power struggles of the early Cold War and study in its manifestations across US diplomacy and psychiatry, social science and social movements, literature and popular film. The vocabulary varies considerably, reacting to changes in psychiatric nomenclature and exhibiting an increasing split between medical and humanistic conceptions of insanity. Different social actors appropriate often contradictory strands of thought to argue their point, instrumentalizing post-war Freudianism to condemn communism as inherently psychotic, or criticizing the "insane reasonableness" (Herbert Marcuse, then at the University of California) of the Cold War confrontation.

In a historical conjuncture that drew its name from a founding metaphor – neither hot nor frozen but moving on the political thermometer between regional conflict and partial stasis – cultural tropes had very



real effects. Throughout his famous "Long Telegram", George Kennan assumed the authority of a psychiatrist diagnosing a sick patient, who was thus robbed of any legitimate response. Kennan's stance, implicit in much cultural pathology but rarely presented with such certitude, opposed his own sanity and professionalism to the infantilized irrationality of the enemy. Here, political analysis claimed medical expertise, and disagreement turned disease. In the burgeoning Cold War of the late 1940s and early '50s, political psychopathology became a core element of US culture and, occasionally, foreign policy. At the armistice talks in Panmunjom at the end of the Korean War, a brief treatise titled *The Operational Code of the Politburo* and written by Nathan Leites, an analyst for the army think tank Rand, functioned as the chief guide to the enemy psyche. Communist elites all over the world were divorced from reality and driven by persecutory fantasies, Leites claimed. In this politicized psychology, peaceful coexistence could find no place because the man at the other end of the table lacked reason and, thus, legitimacy.

To this day, interpretations of Soviet communism as irrational and insane are common in certain strands of scholarship. As we saw in the example of Trump, the same holds true for contemporary US politics. Yet, the historical record paints an unflattering picture of the Cold War pathology that popularized these lay diagnoses. Anyone expecting pronouncements of madness to be directed at the Soviet Union with any historical specificity will be disappointed. Leites and other scholars of national character applied the same vocabulary not only to national socialism but also to American union organizers. Psychopathology's



greatest advantage therefore lies in its ability to clothe value judgments in pseudo-scientific objectivity.

Sweeping aside economic and ideological differences, its aura of medical authority allowed for the curt dismissal of dissent. After the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, co-authored by Theodor Adorno in 1955 during his exile in the United States, the historian Richard Hofstadter famously accused everyone opposed to a post-war liberal consensus of paranoia, including Joseph McCarthy, the aforementioned Goldwater, working-class Americans, the Beats, and the student movement. Not surprisingly, they returned the favor with gusto. In the following decade, a fresh wave of European thought crossed the Atlantic to add to the currents of Freudian and behaviorist psychology dominant in the US, this time arriving from France. In one example that became highly influential across the humanities and avant-garde arts scene, Gilles Deleuze and the psychiatrist Félix Guattari advocated schizophrenia as a revolutionary force. Some years later, surveying fate of the left after May 1968, Deleuze revoked his earlier assessment with horror.

Arising from a genuine attempt to provide psychological insight, political pathology rarely delivered. Unmoored from historical fact and medical science alike, diplomats and social scientists, philosophers and artists could not resist the temptation to denigrate ideological opponents on the cheap. Among the few exceptions, those who stand out today – including the emigré therapist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann – sought understanding across psychological divides. A refusal to pathologize madness in others



while enthroning their own sanity, they found, favored dialogue over diagnosis.

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