Why States Need Enemies: a Modern Appreciation of Cold War Politics

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> Those groups that effectively used Cold War arguments did more than simply advance their own interests. They participated in a process that coerced their opponents into relative silence.[1]

These words were chosen by Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse to explain the power dynamics after the Second World War. The world, it seemed, was torn between two giant empires, and politics amounted to crude juxtapositions of communism and capitalism. In reality, Stalin's totalitarianism was hardly a workers' paradise, and Canada (with its networks of elite cronyism) was no bastion of free enterprise. Nevertheless, a culture of paranoia gripped our society, despite the relative weakness of domestic communism. But why did anti-communism grip the public's imagination? Some might suggest this was a case of clever politicians duping ill-informed citizens, but I think a more sinister logic was at play. Anti-communism had a productive (even functional) role to stem the growth of radical left politics which had made an impact in the previous two decades. Therefore, the lesson I draw from the Cold War is one that also holds true today: for their very survival, states need enemies.

The rule of Maurice Duplessis's Union Nationale demonstrates how this works in practice. As Whitaker and Marcuse explain, Duplessis was obsessed with the imminent threat of communism, and often for reasons that even made supporters cringe. In 1948, a bridge collapse was blamed on bolshevik saboteurs.[2] Eight years later, Duplessis lamented that trade agreements between Canada and Poland would compel Quebecers to eat "communist eggs".[3] Such words sound like the rantings of a madman but, seen

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[1] Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1947-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.24.

[2] Ibid., p.296.

[3] Ibid., p.296.

through the historical experience of Quebec as a Catholic, French-speaking society (settled by peasants uneasy with France's revolutionary transition), anti-communism made a great deal of sense. Duplessis could curry favour with English-speaking business owners, and appeal to the religious piety of French-speaking voters. Even if it was far-fetched, he could warn about communist plots against Catholicism -- pointing to the anti-religious encroachments of reds in Hungary and Poland was enough. With that precedent, he could then lob accusations of bolshevism against all political foes -- union organizers, dissident journalists, even Liberal Party politicians. Duplessis's climate of fear was so intense that few dared to resist his claims.

Of course, some might take issue with the case I make here. States, they might argue, don't need enemies, enemies present themselves. Canada's Cold Warriors were right to worry about a red menace; given the experience of the Winnipeg General Strike (1919) and On to Ottawa Trek (1935), it was clear that domestic communism was no idle force. These (and other) moments made plain that communist organizers held deep respect in many corners of our society, espousing doctrines which rejected the our parliamentary traditions. That seditious reality necessitated a swift and earnest response from Canadian state officials.

And yet, that response (through the Padlock Law, and the Defense of Canada Regulations) undermined very principles our democracy purports to uphold: freedom of expression and habeus corpus were casualties in the hunt for the red menace. The federal government's ham-fisted approach to the Gouzenko Affair, if anything, proved that. Any genuine democracy must face existential threats without succumbing to authoritarianism. That is the Cold War's lesson for today.

Bibliography

Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1947-1957.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.