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How to Recognize and Avert Mass Hysteria

Arthur Miller’s tragedy, *The Crucible*, reflected the public sentiment during the McCarthy Era (1950-1954) by comparing the fear felt during this time period to that of the lives of settlers in one of the first American colonies. Witchcraft accusations in the early American settlements of Massachusetts and Connecticut are compared to condemnation of people with Communistic viewpoints. Both those accused in the Salem witch trials and during the McCarthy hearings were found guilty with very little evidence. The public had developed a general feeling of fear during both of these periods and there was a constant threat over their heads that prevented them from rational thinking and forced them to gravely accuse others to lessen their own punishment. The overall causes, the public sentiment and fall of the Salem witch hunts (As they occurred during the 1600’s in puritan settlements) are similar to those experienced during the McCarthy Era (1950’s) in the United States.

Both the Salem witch hunts (Early 1600’s) and the McCarthy hearings were results of similar social conditions in the United States. The Massachusetts colonies continued to share many of England’s cultural beliefs even after their separation and existence across the Atlantic Ocean. These cultural beliefs that were passed on included the belief in witchcraft and its condemnation. Both the Christian religious courts and secular authorities believed that the Devil gave certain people (Witches) the power to harm or curse others living in their society with whom they held personal grudges (Old animosities between rival families had
grown hotter due to the shortage of firewood and farmland). The Devil, in return for this favor, forced upon these people their allegiance to him and their abandonment of the Puritan religious belief. Protestant reformers (Puritans) governed the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the mid 1600’s were no less superstitious than other Christians at the time. These settlers had long believed that the Devil sought to destroy their “City upon a hill,” their ideal pious sanctuary, in the New World. During this time, England’s rulers, William and Mary, began a war with France in the American settlements. This war, the King William’s War in America, brought terror along Massachusetts’s northern border with French Canada. French troops and their Native American allies marauded colonial settlements from the borders with Canada and Maine, killing, burning, and holding captives. Since King William’s War pitted Protestant England and its colonies against Catholic France and her Indian allies, the conflict raised fear in the New Englanders’ minds. They began believing that the Devil was turning his attention to them; it became very believable for them to be certain that the Devil was in league with the Catholic Church. New Englanders also believed that the Devil used Native Americans (Considered to be the lower class in society) as tools for spreading witchcraft throughout the Puritan colony. It was these wartime attacks and increased fear of Native American witchcraft practices that resulted in widespread anxiety in the colony.

Similar sentiments were observed in the early years of the McCarthy Era as the Second World War had ended five years earlier and uncertainty had risen regarding the inevitable Cold War as the United States’ capitalistic ideals opposed the communistic beliefs held by most of the Eastern Hemisphere. While the United States was engaged in World War II (1939-1945) and allied with the Soviet Union, the issue of anti-communism had been temporarily muted. But with the end of World War II, the Cold War began almost immediately. The Soviet Union began installing repressive Communist puppet régimes across Central and Eastern Europe to spread the Communist ideology. The Cold War was a period
of almost 40 years that involved a constant state of political, economic and social conflict between the world powers of USA and the USSR. Conservative politicians had been in the practice of accusing liberal reforms (Child care laws and Women’s suffrage) as “Communist” or “Red Plots.” This tendency had increased in the 1930s in reaction to the New Deal policies proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to recover from the Great Depression (1929-1930’s). Many conservatives had started comparing the New Deal with socialism or Communism, and saw its policies as clear evidence that the government was influenced by Communist policy-makers in the Roosevelt administration. This sentiment of fear caused by the 2nd World War and uncertainty regarding what might be considered extreme in the regards of the society led to the mass hysteria (Situations in which a large group of people exhibit the same kinds of mental and physical symptoms with no evident organic cause) during this period known as the McCarthy Era. Both of these periods in history occurred shortly after the end of a drastic war that impacted the emotional and spiritual state of much of the population. This period of political persecution during the 1950’s was led by US senator Joseph McCarthy during which public officials and private citizens were accused of possessing communist ideals or sympathy towards Communists. Any person who had been accused realized that they could lessen their punishment by simply accusing a criminal’s actions as communist; this led to a majority of suspected “Reds” being sex criminals or thieves.

The Salem witch hunts and the McCarthy hearings were both results of similar social conditions caused by war tensions (The King Williams War in America and the 2nd World War) and accusations based on personal and social grudges (Land disputes and “Criminal Red” actions).

The Salem Witch Hunts and the McCarthy Hearings are parallel also in their effect on American society and their inevitable end. Television became ultimately McCarthy's
downfall. McCarthy had been viciously interrogating suspects in public and private hearings for some time, but the American people witnessed his brutal methods firsthand when the Army-McCarthy hearings were broadcast on live TV in 1954. These broadcasts were made possible by President Eisenhower, who wanted the public to see McCarthy's misdeeds. When he interviewed Brigadier General Ralph Zwicker, a decorated veteran and hero in Normandy, he called him "a disgrace to the uniform he wore" on national TV. It was then that Joseph Welsh, the attorney for the U.S. Army, responded famously by saying, "I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?"

McCarthyism quickly fell in the eyes of the public and it shifted its opinion against the man who had insulted members of the Armed Forces. Similarly, the public opinion regarding the Salem Witch Hunts quickly dropped soon after the death of John Proctor; the public realized that the condition was getting out of hand as everyone was accusing someone else. It was when the greatest authorities were accused that people began to grasp the effects the Witch hunts had had upon them. The hearings and trials during two different periods in American History came to an end after arousing similar emotional states in the general public.

Their similar causes for occurrence, their effect on public sentiment and their cause for inevitable end makes the Salem witch trials and the McCarthy hearings two of the most infamous incidences of the spread of mass hysteria among a population group. It is important that the occurrence of such events is acknowledged and their causes understood so that future events of such tension can be prevented. It is vital that future practices of such kind are averter beforehand so that mankind can exist harmoniously in large populations of diverse religious, social, ethical, economical, political and cultural beliefs.

Works Cited/Bibliography


