

Red Scare Revisited:
An analysis of anti-socialist rhetoric of
American conservatives during the Obama administration

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Abstract

Accusations of socialism have been present in American politics since the 19th Century, and the anti-Communist movement hit its peak in the two decades after World War II under Sen. Joe McCarthy. Present throughout the Cold War and into the 21st Century, anti-socialism has again risen to the forefront of political discourse as some conservatives accuse President Barack Obama of socialist or communist behavior. This paper will explore the anti-socialist accusations during the Obama administration and the community-building effects of Obama-as-socialist rhetoric, through the lens of Ernest Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis and the adaptation of the rhetorical vision for digital communication.

Throughout the presidency of Barack Obama, there has been a popular anti-socialist narrative among many conservatives. From high-ranking politicians within the Republican Party to conservative pundits, the allegations of Obama's socialism have been rampant since his candidacy in the 2008 Presidential Election, and have continued in the debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

These allegations of socialism or communism bring back reminders of the Cold War Era and the more than four decades of anti-Soviet propaganda in the United States, and elicit an emotional response of fear and enmity towards Obama and his policies, thus encouraging those who oppose Obama to rise up and act in opposition to him.

In this essay, I will look at anti-socialist rhetoric of those who oppose Obama, framed within the context of Cold War-era anti-Soviet rhetoric through the lens of Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis.

I will look at vernacular discourse of the everyday American to see the effect of the anti-socialist fantasy theme on Obama's opposition. This will be done through a content analysis of stories and opinion pieces on political websites and the comments on those stories.

Fantasy Theme Analysis and Obama-as-socialist rhetoric

I will look at Obama-as-socialist rhetoric in online communication through the lens of Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis (within the

greater framework of symbolic convergence theory). Fantasy theme analysis (hereafter FTA) was first introduced in a 1972 essay in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* titled “Fantasy and rhetorical vision: The rhetorical criticism of social reality.” Bormann looked at FTA within the paradigm of American anti-Soviet propaganda during the Cold War in 1996’s “An expansion of the rhetorical vision component of the symbolic convergence theory: The Cold War paradigm case,” in *Communication Monographs*.

Fantasy theme analysis looks at the development and strengthening of group consciousness through the development of common beliefs and social realities. First, a rhetorical vision, comprised of the elements *dramatis personae* (or persons involved in the visions), plotlines, scene and sanctioning agents that legitimize visions, is created, thus creating a shared identity. Then, this rhetorical vision can be brought up or alluded to in face-to-face interaction, in speaker-audience transactions, in mass media, in online communication and in all other communication settings, “and spark a response reminiscent of the original emotional chain.” (Bormann 1972, p. 398) As Duffy (2003), explains:

SCT is a general theory of rhetoric in which groups create and share fantasies about the group and outside groups and thereby build a shared identity. The theory provides an accounting for the creation, raising and maintenance of group consciousness through communication. Through stories and rituals the members of a group create a common consciousness—a shared understanding of the group and what it means to be a member. (p. 293)

Fantasy theme analysis has been successfully used to look at the communication of online social groups because of its focus on narratives,

which are better explored via virtual communication. Fantasy themes are played out “in a setting removed in space and time from the here-and-now transactions of the group” (p. 397). Additionally, Bormann explains that:

The . . . main task in making a fantasy theme analysis is to find evidence that symbolic convergence has taken place, that groups of people have shared a fantasy. When similar dramatizing material such as wordplay, narratives, figures, and analogies crop up in a variety of different contexts, such repetition is evidence of symbolic convergence. (quoted in Simmons, p. 121)

These repeated analogies and narratives are easily explored in social networks, as evidenced in Duffy (2003), Simmons (2014) and Greer (2008), to name a few.

Fantasy Theme Analysis in Obama-as-socialist rhetoric

The rhetorical vision is a vital part of fantasy theme analysis, and it is comprised of several parts: the actors involved in the rhetorical vision, the plotline, the scene, the meanings behind the rhetorical vision and the rhetorical community or structure.

Dramatis Personae

The *dramatis personae* are the actors that make up a rhetorical vision, serving as heroes and villains. In the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical vision, Obama obviously serves as the primary villain, and other Democratic leaders – U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada), former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-California) – act as secondary villains. Media sources that are considered liberal or left-

leaning, derisively known by members of the rhetorical community as the “mainstream media,” act as both a villain and as a scene for the rhetorical vision, as members of the rhetorical community often consider it a tool of Obama and other rhetorical villains that serves as a counterplot to the plot created by members of the rhetorical community.

Serving as heroes are conservative leaders, both political and cultural, and conservative members of the public (including those who are members of the community that acts out the rhetorical vision). Conservative pundits Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity and the cable news network Fox News serve as common political heroes. Recent cultural rhetorical heroes include Phil Robertson, a cast member on the reality television show *Duck Dynasty*, whose show faced possible cancelation and other repercussions after he made controversial remarks about members of the LGBT community, and Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher who stands in the middle of a debate between state and federal sovereignty over the use of public lands (Reifowitz).

Political leaders, pundits and news personalities often act as intentional rhetorical heroes, speaking on behalf of the members of the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical community, and often presenting and reifying the plots and scenes developed in the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical vision. In contrast, some cultural heroes are unintentional members of the rhetorical vision, whose situations rise to national attention (often by intentional rhetorical heroes) as a scene or plot device manipulated to fit within the rhetorical vision.

Plotline and Rhetorical Meanings

The origins of the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical vision are two-fold. First, the rhetoric of the Cold War and the threat of Communist infiltration of the United States, and second, the changing cultural and social landscape. Members of the rhetorical community utilize both Cold War-era and current references when creating the plot for their vision.

Cold War rhetoric

Thus, we would fight the Cold War, not with guns and bombs, but with words and propaganda. The Cold War represented a struggle for the hearts and minds of people. (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, p. 2)

With the end of World War II came the end of the temporary U.S. alliance with the Soviet Union. The two nations had battled against the common foe of the Germans and Japanese, but now that the war had been won, what remained were two major world powers with vastly different political and economic perspectives. The development and use of the atomic bomb and the ability of both sides to cause mass destruction meant that the battle between the U.S. and its allies in the West and the U.S.S.R. and its allies in the East would not be fought on a battlefield; it would be a “cold” war of words and beliefs rather than a “hot” war (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, p. 3).

So how would the U.S. convince its people and its allies of the “evils” of the Soviet Communists? As explained by Bormann, Cragan & Shields, it was through propaganda and fear:

At the height of the Cold War rhetorical vision, most Americans believed that an international communist conspiracy, with its master plot line to overthrow the free world, provided the major obstacle to world peace. The scenario of the Cold War presented a monolithic movement directed from within the walls of the Kremlin. The vision depicted Communist

conspirators' infiltrating, corrupting, and finally overthrowing democratic institutions. (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, p. 2)

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The villain was not an obvious one, but someone who would “pose as peace-loving,” appearing to work with allies while secretly moving towards revolution against capitalism and freedom.

The transition of evil from the Germans to the Soviets was quick and powerful. By the end of the 1940s, most Americans already believed that the U.S.S.R. wanted to expand its influence of godless Communism by any means possible, even war. The height of the fear of subversive plots came during the second Red Scare in the late 1940s and the 1950s. During this time, under the influence of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the House Un-American Activities Committee, hundreds of politicians, celebrities and regular citizens were accused – many with fabricated evidence – of secretly

working with the Soviets in some sort of plot to take down the United States from the inside.

That paranoia and propaganda remained intact for the remainder of the Cold War, though not as obvious as time went on and fear of Soviet invasion lasted until the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1991.

Current cultural landscape

America's sociopolitical landscape is continuously changing. We've elected our first black president: same-sex marriage bans are being challenged across the country and the national Defense of Marriage Act has been shot down; debates over the right to bear arms and freedom of religion are drawing questions about the sovereignty of states' rights over federal legislation and the U.S. Constitution; there is a continued debate over the legality of abortion; marijuana is now legal in multiple states; and the so-called socialized medicine of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is causing controversy across the country.

Some members of the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical vision see these changes as a challenge to "traditional" American values and long for the "good old days" of the past decades. They make a connection of the perceived current threat to the values of the past with the threat of Soviet-style Communism that occurred in those past decades and extend the theme of a socialist threat to the United States in both situations. The Soviet-style socialism that threatened American livelihood during the Cold War is assumed to be continuing in the current era and the perpetrators of that threat are the supposed anti-religion,

big government liberals. The fact that Democrats tend to be more secular and more supportive of federal over states' rights – just like the Soviet Union was anti-religion and focused on a large, strong central government – further strengthens the belief that Democrats are like the Communists our country faced during the Cold War.

Considerable research has been conducted on both pro- and anti-Obama rhetoric during his administration. While opposition to Obama can obviously come from disagreement with his political leanings, multiple researchers have argued that it is fear of his status as a black man – and the country's first black president – that drives the most passionate oppositional rhetoric (Enck-Wanzer). The most overtly racist criticisms of Obama compare him to a witch doctor, ape or thug. Others combine both a racial and religious "Otherness" – using the frequent claim that the president is a Muslim – and portray him as a terrorist, most often Osama bin Laden (Joseph). However, in our supposed postracial society, overt discussion and criticism of Obama's race are considered taboo. Enck-Wanzer describes it best, saying anti-Obama posters and cartoons "serve to mark Obama as a threatening, uncivilized, racialized Other without invoking the term 'race' and while hiding behind the justification of 'policy disagreements'" (p. 26).

Scene and Rhetorical Community

The rhetorical vision is played out in multiple spheres, both physical and virtual. The mediated scene consists of radio and television pundits creating rhetorical plots that can be extended in informal scenes, including protests and

online communication. Within the online scene, participation can take place in the comments sections of web stories from news sites, in online forums and on social media, including Twitter and Tumblr.

Digital social groups

While social groups were previously bound by geography, now people can connect with strangers from around the world based on interests. While this means Internet users are able to take in a much wider and more diverse amount of information than in a non-online world, it also can allow users to choose far more niche-oriented groups and partisan information sources, focusing instead on only things that resonate with them (Warner & Neville-Shepard; Baum & Groeling).

This niche-oriented news collection enables users – whether knowingly or unknowingly – to intake only information that they previously perceived as accurate, strengthening their pre-existing attitudes. The Internet is essentially a breeding ground for extremist, polarized and even completely fictionalized political ideologies and beliefs. Theories that would have previously been dismissed as false conspiracies now have an opportunity to be heard among the masses, thanks to blogs, alternate news websites and social media, and those whose perceptions are open to these theories will grasp on and continue to spread them, moving those marginalized beliefs into the mainstream. Sensationalist, fictionalized theories that strengthen emotional responses – often fear-based responses – can breed extremism, hatred and motivate action (Warner & Neville-Shepard).

This fear can be based on the perceived “evil” actions of an opposing force, whether it’s a politician or political group, or on the media. Many of those who oppose Obama, Joseph argued, believe that the traditional “mainstream” press are biased towards him, and perceive any news or story that portrays him positively as biased and not based in fact. Because the Internet allows them to only intake news that resonates with them and that backs up their previously-conceived notions, these beliefs are strengthened.

#tcot

On Twitter, users who participate in the rhetorical vision utilize the hashtag #tcot, an abbreviation for “Top Conservatives on Twitter” (“tcot”) which is full of slogans and news stories from a conservative (often Republican, Tea Party and libertarian) perspective. It can serve as a tool for congregation or for dissemination of the rhetorical vision.

Fantasy Theme Creation and Perpetuation

As Bormann explains, this emotional recollection of something that happened to the group in the past – the Cold War – can be considered a fantasy theme. Members have bought into a social reality “filled with heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes,” with Obama-as-socialist serving as villain and developing a perceived need to save the United States from the “evils” of Communism that draws from that same attitude that was common during the Cold War.

It isn’t clear whether followers of the Obama-as-socialist theme truly believe Obama is a socialist intent on bringing down the United States from the inside or whether they use anti-socialism rhetoric as a means of subconsciously covering up

another reason for disliking Obama – race-related reasons, fear of social change or simply political opposition – but Bormann argues that motivation doesn't matter; the existence of the Obama-as-socialist rhetoric and its community-building effect is what is important.

I will look at the Obama-as-socialist rhetoric through terms and ideas present in Cold War-era anti-Soviet rhetoric that appear again in current Obama-as-socialist rhetoric. Some devices use just the idea of Communism or socialism itself to instill fear while others use the specific anti-Soviet ideas of subversive plots to overthrow the U.S. from within; collectivism; secularism or anti-religious behavior; a big central government; and others to imply a socialist or Communist motivation.

Obamacare, religious freedom and the socialist threat

For my investigation, I will look at discourse surrounding the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (hereafter ACA), colloquially known as ObamaCare, which is the biggest overhaul to the U.S. healthcare system since Medicare and Medicaid were established in the 1960s. The ACA is the most controversial piece of legislation enacted during Obama's presidency and the most criticized by opponents as being "socialist." Despite being enacted in 2010 and confirmed as constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2012, many still question the legality of the ACA, and it remains a popular topic in American politics.

More specifically, I will look at discourse surrounding the *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* and *Conestoga Wood Specialities Corp. v. Sebelius*

cases , which will decide whether a for-profit corporation can deny the coverage of contraceptives granted under the ACA to its employees based on religious objection by the corporation's owners .

I have chosen stories based on these cases because they focus on several aspects of anti-socialist propaganda: religious freedom and a strong federal government, both when looking at nationalized healthcare and at whether the federal government has power over the state or a business.

I will look at vernacular discourse surrounding the cases, focusing on comments on articles posted on conservative websites and Twitter discourse by the public. My sources for this investigation are The Blaze, Fox News and Twitter.

The Blaze

The Blaze was launched in 2010 by conservative pundit Glenn Beck. In a note written on the website at its launch, Beck wrote of difficulty finding “a place that helps me make sense of the world I see,” saying “mainstream media outlets” distort facts and ignore important stories (Urbanski). The site contains both original stories and those curated from traditional news organizations like the Associated Press and Reuters, and topics usually offer a conservative slant, with stories criticizing the Obama administration and its policies.

The story “Rights of Religious Employers at Center of Birth Control Battle Headed to Supreme Court,” was published by the Associated Press and is located under the “Faith” category.

Comments supporting the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical vision come despite a raw news story from a neutral organization that expresses both sides of the argument. There is no prompting for these arguments beyond the introduction of the topics of the ACA and religion, yet the emotional reaction typical of those described in Bormann's fantasy theme analysis appears and phrases typical of Obama-as-socialist discourse arise.

Fox News

Fox News is one of the nation's largest and most popular news organizations, with content crossing multiple media types. Although the level of bias depends, Fox News typically offers typically conservative viewpoints critical towards the Obama administration (Baum & Groeling). Content covers a wide range of topics, both news and opinion.

The article "Supreme Court to take up ObamaCare contraceptive mandate in landmark case," was published under the "Health Care" section on March 25, and had already gathered more than 400 comments in a matter of hours. The author of the article is not listed, but it says that the Associated Press contributed to the report. The content of the article is nearly identical to the content in the article published on The Blaze.

Because Fox News is such a large news organization, the demographic of people who visit is much broader than in a more niche site like The Blaze. Commenters on the FoxNews.com story offer a more diverse perspective, creating arguments and conflicts among commenters. This feeling of conflict within the board further strengthens the community-building effect among

participants in the Obama-as-socialist theme group. They must face not only the villain of Obama and liberalist policies, but also people with whom they disagree. Those who follow the Obama-as-socialist rhetoric must team together against opposition on both levels.

Twitter

Twitter is a unique landscape for analysis of Bormann's fantasy theme analysis. It gives like-minded individuals a chance to connect via hashtags and create a common theme but also allows for debate with those on opposite sides of the Obama-as-socialist rhetorical argument. Members of the Obama-as-socialist fantasy group can team together both against the perceived foe of Obama but also the tangible foe of other tweeters, thus strengthening the group on multiple levels. With the Hobby Lobby debate, supporters have teamed up using the #ReligiousFreedomForAll hashtag, and Obama-as-socialist rhetorical examples are present.

Anti-religion

6666satan, FoxNews.com.

If you know world history you know that the socialists and communists always try to quash religion first.

6666satan, FoxNews.com.

religion is the biggest impediment to socialism

bildeacon, FoxNews.com.

Capitalism unrestrained by religion becomes fascism

A secular, anti-religious, amoral society is commonly associated with the Soviet nations during the Cold War. Posters within the rhetorical community cite God, Christianity and religion being under threat. On The Blaze, user

curmudgeon60 says, “When I was a kid there wasn’t a family in our neighborhood that didn’t go to a church and had respect for God and religion.” User barber2 mentions an alleged hatred of capitalism on behalf of the “atheistic radical Left.”

The natural tendency towards secularism associated with liberals in the United States furthers this anti-religious rhetorical device. Recent freedom of religion issues connected with the evolution versus intelligent design debate in classrooms and the legalization of same-sex marriage have brought the debate over a religious versus secular government to the forefront of American political debates.

Socialism, North Korea and the former USSR

llinde907, FoxNews.com.

Progressives should move to Russia. Putin will tell them what to do. LOL

@jjauthor, Twitter.com.

What is the difference between a DemocRAT, a Socialist, a Communist, a Liberal, and a Progressive? A: The spelling! #tcot

Marrapash, FoxNews.com.

Agree 100%. When Obama is through, North Korea will have more freedoms than America will have. And if we're lucky the icing on the cake will come from Hillary.

Simply mentioning socialist keywords, such as current or former Communist nations, can remind participants of the rhetorical vision and encourage participation. Using the words “socialism” and “Communism,” or “Russia” and “North Korea,” bring that rhetorical vision to forefront of the rhetorical vision community member’s mind.

Large Government

King Arthur, TheBlaze.com.

This isn't about women's rights or religious freedom. This is about government power and control through an illegal Marxist piece of legislation 2500 pages long, few have read and even fewer can understand. Government cannot force a business to provide a good or service, then force everyone to purchase it. Divide and Conquer. Engage them on their terms and you've already lost.

A longstanding point of contention between liberals and conservatives is the sovereignty of the state versus the federal government, and participants equate that strong central government both with the contention that has been around since the 18th Century and with the large central government that is a characteristic of socialist nations.

Subversion from Within

barber2, TheBlaze.com.

This is typical of what the atheistic radical Left has done to this country : divided the people over the phony 99% rhetoric and the Race Card , divided the states over their rights versus the federal government's control, and caused judicial hassles and gridlock with pot and gay marriage . Obama was droned in here to accomplish just that : To Divide and Conquer. (Leaker Snowden and KGB Putin must be so pleased to see a weakened and divided America .)

The idea of subversion from within stems from the Red Scare of the 1950s, when U.S. Sen. Joe McCarthy led a sort of witch hunt of politicians and celebrities, accusing hundreds (often falsely) of being secret operatives for the Soviet Union. This rhetorical tool is brought up in many situations, from debates over the legitimacy of Obama's election to the passing of controversial legislation, including the ACA.

Discussion

Bormann's fantasy theme analysis is successfully adapted to online communication, as evidenced by the rhetoric of opponents of Obama, using the themes of Soviet-era anti-Communist to bring emotional responses of fear and prompt action against Obama. Whether it's references to socialism or Communism itself or to themes present in anti-socialist rhetoric (big government, secularism, etc.), these responses trigger a sense of community and calls for action.

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