Opinion

Photo of the Day



The Celtic All-Stars play at the Jorgenson Center for the Performing Arts on March 6, 2026. The show featured Celtic dance, bagpipes and improvised music. PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

How to Spot a Neo-McCarthyist

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While it is well known that the history of U.S. politics is fraught with anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-leftist sentiment, something that often goes overlooked is the prevalence that these ideas still hold today. Though the modern political climate is far from that of the mid-20th century, when even accusations of communist sympathies could result in persecution and imprisonment, the underlying narratives and rhetorical themes that helped drive this hostility are still alive and well today. This can be seen not only through the more obvious aspects — such as modern media's blanket condemnations of socialism and the attacks faced by prominent socialist figures like Zohran Mamdani — but also in the more subtle use of demonizing rhetoric against progressive and leftist movements through "anti-wokeism."

In order to better understand this modern sentiment, it's helpful to briefly explore the history of anti-socialist movements in the U.S. The most prominent period of anti-socialist hysteria took place during the Second Red Scare in the 1950s-1960s. During this period, prominent political figures like J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy led a wave of fear around leftist movements. This practice, which came to be known as McCarthyism, relied on a combination of conspiracy theories and generalizations surrounding leftist beliefs and organizations to drive hostility. These conspiracy theories would usually center around left-leaning institutions or marginalized groups like queer people, immigrant communities and racial minorities being involved in a leftist plot to subvert American society. This hysteria culminated in the creation of the House Un-American Activities Commission to seek out and persecuted anyone accused of being part of these baseless conspiracies. Eventually, as society grew less paranoid and Cold War tensions passed their absolute peak, public sentiment turned against McCarthyism and the era of political persecution came to an end for the most part.

This brings us to the modern iteration of McCarthyism, Neo-McCarthyism. While the central themes of scapegoating and conspiracy theories remain prevalent, there have certainly been changes over the years. Although echoes of the more blunt and direct accusatory rhetoric of the 1950s remain, Neo-McCarthyism has largely moved on to more subtle and discrete methods of demonizing leftist movements. In place of the adamant and direct accusations of subversive behavior against certain groups, the modern practice instead tends to lump all targeted groups, beliefs and movements under a nebulous umbrella term like "wokeism." This not only serves the purpose of granting plausible deniability against accusations of prejudice, but it also allows narratives to be tailored to any target audience by simply allowing them to make their own interpretation of what entities are included within that umbrella. If the goal is to drive anti-leftist hostility in a religious community, these umbrella terms could be interpreted to include exclusively members of another religion. If the target audience are citizens of border states or people in fields vulnerable to displacement to immigrant labor, the scapegoat could be immigrants.

This strategy even works to reach groups that would have previously seemed immune to reactionary rhetoric. Though terms like "woke" are generally ineffective in swaying liberal audiences, other narratives and blanket accusations have been used to great effect against progressive elements of the American left both by conservatives and moderate liberals. In these cases, the strategy remains the same, but the perspective shifts. Instead of associating progressive ideas and figures with traditional scapegoats like minorities or other feared groups, Neo-McCarthyist rhetoric attempts to tie them to conservatism. This can be seen in the attacks made against progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders by moderate liberals. Because of their broad appeal and tendency not to engage in distracting identity politics, they were branded MAGA sympathizers and accused of being conservatives in disguise. This occurs even beyond accusations and harmful labels against individuals as well. Notably, former Vice President Kamala Harris called President Donald Trump a "communist dictator," despite his actions and ideology in no way resembling communism or any adjacent ideology.

This is all part of an effort — conscious or unconscious — to harm leftist movements in the U.S. and across the world, and to prevent the global political landscape from moving beyond the current elite-serving status quo. There is much room for nuance and discussion around communism, socialism and many other leftist political ideologies, and this article is not intended to serve as an endorsement of any specific one. There are valid criticisms to be made towards past socialist projects, many of which subjected their citizens to extreme suffering, but the current state of discourse surrounding these ideologies serves no purpose in reaching a well-considered and balanced perspective. I encourage everyone not to simply pick a belief and engage in whatever disingenuous rhetoric required to defend it, but to look beyond the dishonest and deceptive narratives that surround leftist movements and draw your own conclusions on how to build the best future for everyone.

Comic



COMIC BY ALEXA PAPPAS, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

X-Men:



A scene from 'X-Men Apocalypse,' one of the films in Fox's X-Men franchise. These films were not as well received as Marvel films at the time. PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB

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"X-Men: Apocalypse" has overall not been well-received since it came out in 2016. Sometimes great films aren't appreciated because of the timing of their release; for "Apocalypse" this would include that it came after two of the best X-Men movies, "X-Men: Days of Future Past" and "X-Men: First Class," making it seem terrible by comparison. That is not to make the claim that "Apocalypse" should be considered great. There are a few important moments and fun scenes in it — such as the Quicksilver-centered scene — but overall, it's lacking in the core that made the prior X-Men films so great.

For one, it felt as though "Apocalypse" was trying to undo a lot of the romantic tension between Charles and Erik that existed in both "First Class" and "Days of Future Past" by bringing Moira back into the focus and really trying (and failing) to over-emphasize Charles's crush on her. They also introduced and (spoiler alert, but I mean, it's been 10 years; get on it) killed off Erik's wife and daughter, adding more easy trauma to pull from to give him a reason to turn a little evil briefly, only for him to be convinced otherwise by a gay montage of him and Charles. That scene is another fun one from the film, and worth watching the movie just to see. However, it seemed to have been negated by the rest of the romantic stuff they threw in to try to convince us (unsuccessfully) that Erik and Charles are not in love. The Charles and Moira dynamic was very reminiscent of Steve and Peggy in the Avengers movies, where there's truly no chemistry or logical reason for Steve to pursue Peggy when it's established over multiple films that his "friendship" (eyebrow raise) with Bucky is the most important relationship in his life.

The film also introduced a young Kurt Wagner, which added some light fun scenes between him and his peers. Along with that we get to see yet another example of Scott Summers having a terrible time, just like almost every other X-Men film. His backstory was worthwhile and fun to see, so overall I liked this movie for its inclusion of some character history and just getting to see more of student life at the X-Mansion.

Apocalypse as a villain, however, was lackluster. His powers were not clearly established, essentially allowing him to do whatever he needs to in the moment, with some limits arbitrarily assigned at random. His motives were also relatively simple, with him being in pursuit of the classic goal of being more powerful and essentially controlling the planet. Apocalypse is ultimately just some guy with no ties or connections to any of the characters we care about. By contrast, in "First Class," Shaw's history with Erik allows for interesting nuance in their dynamic. Similarly, in "Days of Future Past" Trask's motives are prejudice-based, which adds personal layers to the fight, making it important for exploring the characters and their dynamics as well as the issues that are core to the X-Men. These issues are largely absent from "Apocalypse," making the stakes feel lower. Despite the conflict being a potentially world-ending event, we don't have as much of the character-based drama that can be applied to our world, making it feel less grounded and interesting.

Overall, the film has some interesting scenes and is overall entertaining. However, it is not comparable in its importance and writing to prior X-Men films, which focused heavily on real world issues, characters and their dynamics. The established dynamics were not developed much further, particularly with Charles and Erik. Characters that were "reintroduced" in their younger versions were a mixed bag, with some being well-done and others not so much. As a result, "X-Men: Apocalypse" might just be as bad as people claim.