



Whiteness and Democracy in Philip Roth's

I Married a Communist

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Abstract

Philip Roth is one of the most well-known and prolific writers in contemporary America, and *I Married A Communist* is the masterpiece of his reflections on American society at large. Set against McCarthyism in the 1950s, *I Married A Communist* displays Roth's contemplation of the relationships among Communism, whiteness and American democracy, and especially that between the latter two. Whiteness, based on racial differentiation and exclusion, exposes the inherent contradiction of American democracy. On the one hand, American democracy strives for equality, liberty and individual rights for all its citizens, but on the other hand, whiteness reveals various inequalities and injustices. To some extent, whiteness is complicit with American democracy, and Communism makes that complicity explicit.

Keywords

Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist*, Whiteness, Democracy.

1. Introduction

I Married A Communist, which was not penned in revenge for *Leaving A Doll's House: A Memoir*, is mainly about Ira Ringold's private life, which is closely entangled with the American political life of the 1950s. Compared with the other two works of the American Trilogy, which are *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000), *I Married A Communist* has not sparked great interest in America or in China, although some American scholars are attracted by the background of the novel. Ross Posnock states that "the novel is meticulous and (largely) sympathetic portrayal of the enthrallingly sentimental, noble, and tawdry populist political culture of the forties and early fifties American Left,"

and Elaine B. Safer thinks that “an apocalyptic view is offered of the effects of the McCarthyism of the fifties.” Portraying Ira Ringold (also Iron Rinn) against McCarthyism, Roth explores the individual existence against particular historical backgrounds. As to Ira Ringold, “history had been scaled down and personalized, America had been scaled down and personalized: for me, that was the enchantment not only of Norman Corwin but of the times. You flood into America and America floods into you.”

2. Whiteness and American Politics

Political parties play significant roles in *I Married A Communist* as well as in the American political arena. They symbolize the development and progress of modern democracy because the disputes among political parties boost the development of American politics, economy and whole society. Steve Martinot points out that “of the several issues that drove politics toward party formation, slavery was the most important and contestatory.” Slavery, or race, has caused American political parties to become stuck in a paradoxical situation. Theoretically, those political parties do their utmost to convince voters that their political views will lead to the final resolution of racial problems completely, whereas in actuality, they go to great lengths to protect the interests of the white ruling class. As far as the two-party system is concerned, the form that political differences took during the moment of consolidation of the two-party system was based not on how to implement constitutional democracy but rather on how to organize white hegemony and how to structure white politics, for which black disenfranchisement was the necessary background.

Obviously, “Anywhere” in Nathan’s script not only refers to America but also indicates that racial problems are omnipresent. In *I Married A Communist*, race appears to be of the greatest importance in the presidential election, and it is also the cause of the internal split in the Democratic Party. As to the 1948 presidential election, Philip Roth makes fiction and fact merge into one. Like those before and after it, the 1948 presidential election is a significant and integral part of American politics, and it is also a critical moment for the competition between the two major parties and an opportunity for other minor political parties to elucidate their political views to win votes. After Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman becomes president of the United States.

3. Whiteness and Citizenship

Steve Olson states that democracy and racial oppression are intimately connected in the United States...This connection is sealed through citizenship. Citizenship is a political identity signifying equality in the public sphere and the shared enjoyment of rights and duties, including the all-important right to participate in governing public affairs.

Olson further points out that in the antebellum era, “whiteness became the political color of citizenship. The significance of racialized citizenship is not that only white persons could become citizens; it is that becoming a citizen effectively made one white.” Ira Ringold’s personal 134 Whiteness and Democracy in Philip Roth’s *I Married a Communist* .experiences of constructing his American identity show that even nearly 100 years after the Civil War, whiteness still means citizenship, and vice versa.

As a child, Ira grows up as “a loudmouth kike outsider” in an Italian community. Before World War II, the Jews were not whites because of cultural and religious differences and limited class mobility, so they couldn’t be regarded as American citizens. They were excluded both by the white ruling class and poor whites like Italians. Whiteness has stratified American society, and this stratification has been solidified. A “little guy” as he is, Ira cannot resist “the lure of the underdog,” and “the struggle of the disinherited up from the bottom was an irresistible lure.” Ira Ringold is a representative American figure who travels around, takes any job no matter how hard it is, and most importantly, moves upwards along

the social ladder through his hard work. Philip Roth has endowed Ira Ringold with individuality, which has been cherished long in the United States, and the determination of self-transformation.

Ira's personal contradictions reflect the national contradictions between freedom of political beliefs and the witch-hunt McCarthyism which robs people of that freedom as well as the contradiction between racial equality and whiteness. Ira's new white identity is not stable at all, because when Eve Frame discovers that Ira has betrayed her and has had affairs with Sylphid's friend Pamela and also his masseuse, she discloses Ira's Communist affiliations in her ghost-written biography *I Married A Communist*. Ira Ringold is on the list of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which is supposed to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities on the part of private citizens, public employees, etc. Communists are thought to be both disloyal and subversive, so anyone who is suspected of being a Soviet sympathizer or Communist will be investigated thoroughly.

4. Whiteness and Class Struggle

In Murray's hearing, the members of the House Un-American Activities Committee raise a series of questions like how can you be paid by the taxpayers' money when you are obliged by your damnable Communist oath to teach the Soviet line? How in God's name can you be a free agent and teach what the Communists dictate? Why don't you get out of the party and reverse your tracks? I plead with you-return to the American way of life!

The conflation of Communism and ethnic minorities has effectively blocked the overall joining of American working classes, and they who are organized by their respective unions have to struggle for their own benefits through non-violent means rather than aim to overturn the rule of the white Capitalists. Take Ira's union for example. Most often, the union meetings held regularly are mainly about "routine business like proposals for a new contract, the problem of absenteeism, a parking-lot beef, discussion of the looming war...racism, the wages-causes-prices myth." Another consequence of the conflation between Communism and ethnic minorities is that it convinces the working class that Communism is to solve racial problems, and the resolution of racial problems will enable ethnic and black workers to enjoy equal rights, which is bound to do harm to the interests of white workers. Abraham Lincoln, personated by Ira Ringold, is popular among ordinary people, and "Lincoln's" viewpoints of supporting price controls, condemning the Smith Act, and defending workers' rights seem to enjoy popular support, but Americans are unwilling to vote for Henry Wallace's Progressive Party which is supposed to be in line with "the founding ideals" upheld by Abraham Lincoln, mainly because the Progressive Party strives for equal rights between white and black.

5. Conclusions

Philip Roth integrates Ira Ringold into Rousseau and Thoreau's tradition of individuality by the two-room shack, and he also integrates Ira Ringold into the political forces of his time, which once again stresses the inseparability of individual and history. Everyone is both inside and outside the history of his time. Derek Parker Royal comments, "in American Trilogy, what he has done is to write the individual subject into the fabric of history, and in doing so he illustrates that identity is not only a product of, but also a hostage to, the many social, political, and cultural forces that surround it." Ira's construction of a new white identity is not only a product of the political forces, which require the participation of ethnic minorities or even black people to be in line with American democracy, but also a hostage to the same political forces, which are aimed at protecting the privileges for white people within American democracy.

I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made on a white basis. I believe it was made for white men, for the benefit of white men, and their posterity forever. I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men...instead of conferring it upon Negroes, Indians, and other inferior races.”

The existence of racial problems not only negates American democracy, but also reveals that whiteness is actually in the nature of American democracy. Fundamentally, on the one hand, whiteness robs non-whites of their equal participation in national and public affairs, and on the other, whiteness splits the working class to eliminate the threat to the existing political system and Capitalism. Communism is the focus of the globe and American political arena, and McCarthyism consolidates the rule of whiteness in the name of anti-Communism. As a result, *I Married A Communist* is Philip Roth’s reflection on that particular historical period and contemplation of whiteness and American democracy. Whiteness, which signals privileges, is inevitably in conflict with democracy, and the complicity between them has blocked America from becoming a democracy in real sense.

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