

The Cooties Effect

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During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, in what became known as “guilt by association,” simply being friends with someone suspected of being a Communist could ruin your career. Today that’s been extended to guilt by spatial proximity, which could appropriately be called the “cooties effect.” If you sit on the same board, have appeared on the same panel, or otherwise have been in close physical proximity to someone deemed undesirable, you therefore must have been infected by their politics or, at minimum, have no problems with things they may have done in their past.

Republican presidential nominee John McCain and his runningmate Sarah Palin have adopted such a strategy, which Hillary Clinton originated during the primary campaign. They have raised alarms over the possibility that Barack Obama may have picked up radical terrorist cooties from Bill Ayers, a professor of education at the University of Illinois in Chicago, who was active in the Weather Underground nearly 40 years ago.

Palin insists that Obama sees America as “being so imperfect, imperfect enough that he’s palling around with terrorists who would target their own country.” Similarly, a recently released McCain ad declared, “Obama worked with terrorist William Ayers when it was convenient,” a charge that Bob Shrum, a senior fellow at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, notes “all but alleges that the candidate was there planting bombs.” Palin defended such attacks on her Democratic rivals, arguing “We gotta start telling people what the other side represents.”

As investigated by The New York Times, Politifact and other media, the links between Obama and Ayers are so minimal that it defies rationality how — in the midst of two wars and the greatest financial crisis in generations — this became a major campaign issue just four weeks before the general election. But it did.

Though it’s easy to dismiss such attacks as absurd, as they certainly are, otherwise rational people can sometimes fall prey to such twisted logic. I know. During the past year, some colleagues of mine and I have been subjected to a remarkably similar smear campaign by some elements of the far left, who have effectively accused us of picking up imperialist cooties through similarly tenuous contacts. And I have seen the damage such accusations can have.

Sitting on the Same Boards

I serve as an academic advisor for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), a strictly nonpartisan, nonprofit educational foundation that promotes the study and utilization of nonmilitary strategies by civilian-based movements to establish and defend human rights, social justice, and democracy. ICNC maintains a strict policy of accepting no grants, contracts, or funding of any kind from any government or government-related organization.

A little over a year ago, however, a series of articles in Green Left Weekly and other publications began accusing ICNC of having links to the CIA. The basis of this allegation apparently came as a result of ICNC President Jack DuVall’s “connection to former CIA head James Woolsey.” In a remarkable parallel to the right-wing attacks over Obama’s service on the same nonprofit board as Ayers, DuVall’s “connection” to Woolsey, as it turns out, consisted of the two of them overlapping for less than a year back in 2001-2002 on the board of the Arlington Institute, a think tank. By all accounts, they were both present at the same time for only two meetings of that board and they never once engaged in a one-on-one conversation. There is not, nor has there ever been, any personal connection between the two of them.

The article also tried to discredit ICNC through one of its senior advisors, Shaazka Beyerle — a Canadian human-rights activist best known for her work in support of the Palestinian cause and of women’s rights movements — for having served alongside the now-World Bank President Robert Zoellick on the board of the European Institute, a public policy forum on transatlantic relations.

Australian blogger Michael Barker and other conspiracy theorists have also tried to demonstrate that ICNC is part of an imperialist plot because cofounder Peter Ackerman’s wife, Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, serves on the board of the International Crisis Group and thereby “rubs boardroom shoulders” with George Soros, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Wesley Clark, and Kenneth Adelman. Further alleged proof of imperialist cooties infestations of ICNC through Ackerman’s wife is that she serves on the board of both Human Rights Watch and the International Center for Journalists, which Barker accuses of having links to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which Barker then insists “maintains close ties with the CIA.” This illustrates, according to this theory, just how contagious this kind of infection can be: CIA cooties are contracted by the NED, which are then spread to Human Rights Watch, which are thereby picked up by board member Leedom-Ackerman, who passes them on to her husband, who then infects ICNC.

I responded by pointing out the absurdity of attacking ICNC and its work as a result of such tenuous connections. Having worked with both DuVall and Beyerle, I could state clearly that neither had picked up any imperialist cooties despite their having been in the same room as Woolsey and Zoellick.

The reaction was swift: John Bellamy Foster, editor of the Monthly Review, wrote a response that noted that Ackerman is a director of U.S. Institute of Peace, an ideologically diverse organization that Foster nevertheless labeled as “right-wing.” Foster then argued that USIP “is connected directly through its chair, J. Robinson West, to the National Petroleum Council, which includes CEOs of all the major U.S. energy corporations.” Foster told his readers that “if all of this isn’t reason to begin to ask searching questions” regarding “Zunes’s ICNC and its role in the U.S. imperial system, we don’t know what is.” As a result, he added that — despite my having been an outspoken anti-imperialist activist, writer, and scholar since the 1970s — I should decide “whose side” I am on in the struggle against imperialism.

Similar attacks against me, ICNC and related organizations and individuals soon began circulating throughout the left-wing blogosphere, including Counterpunch, ZNet, Mathaba, MRZine, VenezuelaAnalysis and scores of other websites and list-serves. A number of speaking invitations I had scheduled were rescinded. As far away as Europe, word began circulating that I had sold out and was now working with the Bush administration’s “democracy-promotion” agenda.

One apparently does not have to be on a board to get somebody’s cooties. Just as Obama has been attacked for the fact that he and Ayers “appeared together at various public engagements,” my appearing on the same panel or speaking at the same conference of someone with alleged imperialist cooties can apparently lead to an infestation as well. For example, my relationship with Bob Helvey — a retired U.S. Army officer who has subsequently embraced nonviolent action as an alternative to war but has been falsely accused of plotting the overthrow of governments from Serbia to Venezuela — has been limited to twice being a speaker at the same conference. Nevertheless, the prominent leftist Canadian blogger Stephen Gowans insists that that somehow makes him “an associate” of mine.

Similarly, just as the upset over the \$200 contribution Ayers made in the spring of 2001 to Obama’s campaign for re-election to the Illinois State Senate is indicative of concern over the spread of cooties through money, it has recently been alleged that I have picked up imperialist cooties through a research grant I received nearly 20 years ago. Gowans has argued that since I once served as a fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, which

“receives funding from Congress, and has a board of directors appointed by the President . . . and [other] . . . advocates of the pursuit of U.S. corporate and investor interests abroad,” I therefore must be an apologist for U.S. imperialism. In reality, what made me a “fellow” is that I received a one-semester non-residential fellowship back in 1989 when I was a grad student in order to conduct research on the Western Sahara. My findings were highly-critical of U.S. policy and quite sympathetic with that country’s national liberation struggle led by the leftist Frente Polisario. Despite this, leftist blogger Gilles d’Aymery — who refers to me as a “neoliberal agent” as a result of my questioning Gowans’ assertions — insists that my receiving this grant from a congressionally funded institute “should tell anyone that the government approves of the work one does. When the United States Institute of Peace grants you some money, it says loud and clear that your work serves the elites.”

The ICNC and Nonviolence

The mission of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict is to help educate the global public on the history and ideas of strategic nonviolent conflict through video programming, books and articles as well as conducting meetings and briefings, co-sponsoring conferences, and making available articles and features to encourage international institutions, decision makers and activists to support civilian-based, nonviolent movements as an alternative to war. As a veteran of a series of nonviolent action campaigns here in the United States against imperialism, militarism, economic injustice and environmental destruction, I have been asked to play an active role in a series of ICNC-supported workshops in response to requests by activists groups from around the world to promote a better understanding of the history and dynamics of strategic nonviolent conflict. Over the past two years, for example, I’ve assisted in such workshops attended by Egyptians struggling against the Mubarak regime, Palestinians challenging the Israeli occupation, West Papuans resisting the Indonesian occupation, Maldivians struggling against their corrupt and autocratic government, Western Saharans challenging the Moroccan occupation, Burmese active in their country’s pro-democracy struggle, Guatemalan Indians struggling against violence and repression, and Mexican-Americans fighting for immigrants’ rights.

Unable to find anything wrong with the actual work of ICNC, however, far-left critics still insist that the cootie infestation must have somehow affected our work anyway. For example, Gowans warns readers of people like me, who “hide the pursuit of U.S. foreign policy objectives behind a high-sounding commitment to peace,” insisting that “genuine progressives and anti-imperialists should carefully scrutinize the backgrounds” of those who are as “tightly connected to Western governments and ruling class activist foundations as Zunes is.” Despite the bulk of ICNC’s international outreach efforts being with those struggling against regimes backed by the U.S. government, Gowans insists that what “the ICNC and Stephen Zunes are all about” is “nonviolent direct activism in the service of U.S. foreign policy goals” in support of opposition movements beholden to “U.S. and Western governments and Western ruling class foundations.” (As someone who has been listed by such prominent conservatives as Daniel Pipes, David Horowitz, and Sean Hannity as being among the most “dangerous” and “anti-American” left-wing professors in the country, such charges against me have more than a little irony.)

Like many of the recent attacks on Obama from the right about his alleged “links to terrorists,” there are some on the far left who are quite willing to simply make stuff up in a desperate effort to try to prove that the cooties effect is real. For example, Gowans — in his widely-circulated article Stephen Zunes and the Struggle for Overseas Profits — claims that ICNC has been “heavily involved in successful and ongoing regime change operations, including in Yugoslavia,” which he insisted was a revolution “Zunes and his colleagues assist[ed].” This charge comes despite the fact that neither I nor ICNC has ever been involved in “regime change” of any kind, including the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic, which took place two years prior to ICNC being founded

in 2002. Indeed, no one in ICNC's leadership had even been to that country at that time. Other bizarre fabrications in that article include the claim that "wherever Washington seeks to oust governments that pursue economically nationalist or socialist policies, you'll find Helvey (and perhaps Zunes as well) holding seminars on nonviolent direct action."

Even more strangely, because of the insistence that I and everyone else with ICNC has been infected with imperialist cooties, Gowans therefore assumes that I have never engaged in "training U.S...grassroots activists to use nonviolent direct action to stop the machinery of war" and that my work has been exclusively "directed outward, not on his own government, but on the governments Washington and ruling class think-tanks want overthrown." In reality, for more than 30 years I have been training American antiwar activists in nonviolent direct action, working with groups like Peace Action, War Resisters League, Movement for a New Society, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Ruckus Society, Direct Action Network, and Direct Action against the War. Of the more than 100 seminars, trainings, workshops, and related events designed to educate people on nonviolent action with which I have been involved, only three have primarily consisted of participants from countries with governments opposed by the United States, approximately a dozen have consisted primarily of those from foreign countries with governments supported by the United States, and the remaining 85% or more have been for Americans struggling against U.S. government and corporate policies.

Any look at my personal history, the books and articles I have written, and the speeches and interviews I have given demonstrates where I'm actually coming from politically, just as any similar examination of Obama's record disproves the current right-wing attacks. Despite this, ideologues of the far left and right argue that what is important is not what someone has actually done or said, but whether someone has — either directly or through several degrees of separation — had contact with someone with nefarious political viewpoints and actions, either now or in their past.

Prominent leftists such as Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn have tried to defend ICNC and other promoters of strategic nonviolent action. But rather than reconsidering their accusations, far-left conspiracy buffs simply raise the alarm that the cooties epidemic has widened to include them as well. For example, prominent British Green Party activist Richard Roper has claimed that it "poses the question where Chomsky, Zinn, Zunes, et al. actually stand. At the moment, unless they change their position, they stand with the forces of reaction, imperialism, and [the] drive for global domination." Similarly, leftist playwright John Stepling insists that my denial that ICNC and similar groups have imperialist cooties makes me an "apologist and a deeply compromised reactionary — and one wouldn't at all be surprised to find this creep on the State Department payroll." Lack of any evidence to support any of their charges of alleged ICNC involvement in various CIA intrigues is simply attributed to government secrecy. All the "evidence" that is needed, apparently, is from the cooties effect.

Ramifications

It's quite disturbing that a major party's presidential and vice-presidential nominees, along with many of their supporters, are now engaging in smear tactics and guilt-by-spatial-proximity in their attacks against Obama. Also troubling is that such attacks are being communicated as fact on the country's largest cable news channel and in a #1 best selling book, and are thereby being taken seriously by tens of millions of ordinary Americans.

It will be difficult to counter such desperate right-wing efforts, however, much less work for the more radical changes that are needed in U.S. policies at home and abroad, if elements of the left engage in similar tactics. In an era of all-too-real conspiracies emanating from the Bush administration, such attacks have led many well-meaning if uninformed leftists to buy into them.

Such attacks can have an impact. Although the vast majority of Americans haven't bought into the disinformation directed at Obama, many voters who otherwise would have supported him are now reluctant to do so out of concerns that the Democratic nominee really is closely associated with terrorists. Similarly, while dozens of civic and dissident groups struggling for rights and social justice still seek ICNC's assistance, the spurious accusations against ICNC have led a number of others engaging in strategic nonviolent action that could have benefited from the group's resources to distance themselves out of concerns for being seen as associated with an alleged CIA-linked group.

It's a sad testimony about that political discourse in both the presidential campaign and within the left has been essentially reduced to the level of schoolyard taunts about catching cooties from someone you don't like. Perhaps this is a reflection of the sense of powerlessness felt by people from across the political spectrum when so much feels beyond their control. Perhaps people are afraid to recognize the real hope represented by the Obama campaign nationally and the dramatic growth of nonviolent action campaigns globally (even though both may still fall well short of bringing about the more fundamental changes that are so desperately needed). Any chance of creating truly democratic and just societies will necessarily remain remote, however, until people are willing to reject defamatory accusations from ideologues, and judge individuals and movements objectively by their merit, real deeds, and sincere aspirations. http://www.fpif.org/articles/the_cooties_effect