

Name

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Class

Date

Same Face, New Clothes: Mao and Trump

The fifty year gap between 1966 and 2016 is more than just a numbers game. The two dates form bookends for two “revolutions” in what at first seems entirely unrelated. In 1966, China’s Chairman Mao Zedong started the Cultural Revolution in China to preserve the “true” essence of China from what he believed was Western imperialism and corruption. In 2016, candidate Donald Trump is a forerunner for the Presidency of the United States. Trump’s “Make America Great!” campaign seeks to recapture the “American Way” that has seemingly been bogged down by subversive elements in U.S. culture and society. The two movements speak to an anthropological concept about the preservation of collective identity through the stigmatization of the “other”: racial and cultural scapegoats who are blamed for economic and political downturns.

In the 1960s, Mao Zedong sought to consolidate his power through the Cultural Revolution. He wanted to purge perceived corruption from the ranks of government, the Communist Party, and society in general. He believed that intellectuals, mostly in the form of Western political thought, were sabotaging the country’s progress. The resulting purge became a “grassroots” effort whereby officials eliminated competitors by blaming them for the lack of economic industrialization. This led to the destruction of libraries filled with foreign literature, the ruination of historical relics in the name of anti-bourgeoisie sentiments, and critics were sent to labor camps or otherwise liquidated.

Although the specifics may be different, Donald Trump's campaign mirrors Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in its essence. Anthropologists call what Mao did in 1966 the "scapegoat mechanism," whereby political leaders channel public angst and insecurity by blaming societal failures on others, usually minority groups who already have social stigmas set against them. Just as Mao blamed westerners for China's lack of progress in the 1960s, Trump sees American stagnation as a sign of over-political correctness and foreigners, such as Latinos who steal American jobs and Muslims (via Islamic extremists) who threaten American national security and interests abroad. His rhetoric especially appeals to whites who fear the "browning" of America and the cultural, social, and national "pollution" that will occur when whites are no longer the racial majority in the United States.

Trump has tapped into a larger social anxiety by channeling these grievances into anger and action. His campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again!" is an exclamation and a command, implying that America is no longer great and that only he can restore it to prominence. His own background, that of a celebrity, successful billionaire, and a "hard" persona with a sort of candid charm, reflect deep-rooted cultural values Americans share about individualism and free enterprise. His status as an outsider to politics shows that he can eschew the burdens of bureaucracy and inefficiency that have plagued Washington D.C. Trump's message is himself: since he embodies the principles which Americans value, they see him as a savior who can revitalize the nation. In return, Trump assures his supporters they are not to blame for the country's current problems. Instead, he energizes them by pointing fingers at marginalized minority groups who cannot defend themselves.

Trump's current success is not a new direction in American politics. The political parties have long pointed fingers at each other in hopes of building support. What Trump has done is

escalate the rhetorical discourse by exploiting the genuine grassroots anger, mostly whites, who feel that the Obama administration has disenfranchised them. This feeling of displacement is similar to what Mao Zedong had done with the Cultural Revolution. Both Mao and Trump believe they represent the “purity” of their respective societies and, therefore, are best equipped to bring their nations back to some past nostalgic glory. In doing so, Trump is an old face—that of the “American Way”—but dressed in new modern clothing that appeals to people wary of “politics as usual.”

