

Analytic Philosophy and McCarthyism: A New Look

How to explain the analytic turn in American philosophy? One controversial thesis, regularly discussed in the blogosphere, is that analytic philosophy's dominance is a product of McCarthyism. On this view, anti-communist repression forced philosophers to abandon socially-engaged, humanistic modes of inquiry, and to replace them with a technical, 'politically neutral' approach. John McCumber develops the theory in two of his books (2001; 2016) and the hypothesis recently resurfaced in publications by Christoph Schuringa (2025) and by Robert Hanna, who likens postwar analytic philosophy to "McCarthy-style anti-communist, big-capitalist politics" (2024).

Critics have pushed back hard. Richard Hudelson and Robert Evans argue that McCumber "fails to give a historically or philosophically coherent account" of the analytic turn (2003, 256), while E. J. Spode compares Schuringa's book to "A Turd in the Punchbowl" (Spode 2026). Some contend that the McCarthyist thesis ignores simultaneous analytic turns in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Hollinger 2002), such that it offers an "American explanation for ... a pan-Anglophone phenomenon".¹ Others point out that some of the best-known analytic philosophers of the period, Bertrand Russell and Rudolf Carnap (Reisch 2002; Spode 2026), were hardly the apolitical figures the thesis requires; while the most notorious anti-Communist witch-hunters, Arthur Lovejoy and Sidney Hook, were humanist philosophers who had studied with William James and John Dewey (Good 2003).

In this guest post, I discuss archival evidence that sheds new light on the question. In the last eight years, I spent much of my research time in archives for a book on the history of twentieth-century American philosophy, working through a wealth of material from the period: departmental records, diaries, correspondence, personnel files, and hundreds of newspapers and magazines. The book *Logical Positivism: An American History* (Verhaegh 2026) reconstructs how émigré positivists and their American students and allies rose to dominance at private and public universities; and it shows that the story about the analytic turn is more complicated than the McCarthyist thesis suggests. In what follows, I argue that the Cold War *did* play a role in the development of American philosophy, albeit in various unexpected ways ignored by proponents of the McCarthyist

¹ Charles Pigden, cited in "Charles Pigden (Otago) on John McCumber's 'silly' book on McCarthyism and 'analytic' philosophy", *Leiter Reports*, Dec. 14, 2016, <https://leiterreports.com/2016/12/14/charles-pigden-otago-on-john-mccumbers-silly-book-on-mccarthyism-and-analytic-philosophy/> (accessed Sep. 2026).

view. At the same time, I argue that it was not only factor, let alone a sufficient explanation, for the analytic turn.

The McCarthyist thesis

Before discussing the evidence, let us get clear about the explanandum. Though there seem to be as many variants of the McCarthyist thesis as there are historians who have written about the period, no one argues that analytic philosophy *itself* is a product of the Cold War. Proponents and opponents agree that the analytic tradition predates the McCarthy era, in Europe *and* in the United States, even if anti-communist pressures may have changed its character in the 1950s. The central question is not to explain analytic philosophy's *presence*. It is to understand its *hegemonic* position by the early 1960s, since American departments and journals of philosophy had been dominated by *non-analytic* schools and movements before the Second World War.

Naturally, it is difficult, if not impossible, to sharply define what does and does not count as 'analytic philosophy' (Glock 2012). Still, even a cursory look at the composition of American philosophy departments, curricula, and journals, as well as lists of APA presidents and Carus lecturers reveals that something changed in this period.² Nor is this an ahistorical projection. At the time, philosophers regularly observed and discussed the rapid transformation of their discipline (more on this below) (Verhaegh 2025a), even if it took a while before 'analytic philosophy' became the generally accepted label for the newly dominant approach.

Second, if we are to evaluate the McCarthyist thesis, we need to get clear about the supposed *victims* of anti-communist repression. Few people will deny that (former) communists and Marxist scholars were pushed out of the profession. The central question is the Red Scare also affected pragmatists, phenomenologists, and 'continental' philosophers more generally. McCumber (2001) and Schuringa (2025) answer in the affirmative, arguing that anti-communist pressures blocked out any alternative to the Cold War paradigm; Joshua Rayman (2010) and James A. Good (2003) deny that pragmatism was a target. George Reisch, finally, argues for the more subtle thesis that McCarthyism played a role but affected analytic and non-analytic philosophers alike. Whereas many logical positivists and their American allies had been politically engaged in the 1930s, they turned to the "icy slopes of logic" in the years thereafter (2005).

Finally, we need to get clear about the *mechanisms* through which the Cold War reshaped American philosophy. Since only a few, relatively minor philosophers were *direct* victims of McCarthyite investigations (Schrecker 1984), proponents need a story about how the Red Scare affected the composition of journals and departments of philosophy. Most agree that anti-

² Strassfeld 2022; Verhaegh 2025b; Verhaegh et al. 2025; <https://www.apaonline.org/page/carus>; <https://www.apaonline.org/page/presidents> (accessed Sep. 2026).

communist pressures created “a “climate of fear” (Schuringa 2025, 154), stimulating philosophers, journal editors, and university administrators to self-curate to prevent public controversy. But some add that there were carrots as well as sticks: Analytic philosophers were showered with funding and cushy advisory positions at institutes like RAND Corporation. Lastly, McCumber believes that there are conceptual connections between analytic philosophy and Cold War ideology. He argues that while pragmatists dealt with context-dependent problems of men, analytic philosophers saw truth as a property of sentences independent of context, thereby echoing the absolutist modes of thinking that were dominant in the period (2001).

Analytic philosophy before the Red Scare

Let us turn to the evidence, starting with the state of American philosophy before the Cold War. Now, even if we accept that the McCarthyist thesis seeks to explain analytic philosophy’s *dominance*, not its existence or emergence, the timing is awkward: Analytic philosophy already had a solid foothold in the 1920s and 1930s. When Herbert Feigl, the first of the logical positivists to emigrate to the United States, arrived at Harvard in September 1930, it was already considered a flourishing “center” for logic-infused philosophy (Sellars 1927, 513; Palmer and Perry 1930; Morris 1935). Feigl found American colleagues developing ideas that were, in his words, “barely distinguishable” from the Vienna Circle’s scientific world conception, and he regularly attended meetings of a group of talented young philosophers, including W. V. Quine, Susanne Langer, and Nelson Goodman, writing that they were “almost always discuss[ing] logic” and it was “almost like in Vienna!”³

Harvard was not an isolated case. Even if American departments were dominated by non-analytic philosophers at the *professor level*, there is much archival evidence that the *new generation* had started to adopt the style of philosophy that was in vogue in Cambridge, Prague, Vienna, Warsaw, and Berlin. C. I. Lewis wrote that “logical posi[vi]sm easily takes the first place in the interest and the discussions of our students”.⁴ Cecil Currie was surprised how much the analytic movement had “caught on among the younger generation”, and an advisor for Princeton’s department wrote about “the trend which takes the students at this time to Wittgenstein and other positivists”.⁵ Even

³ Feigl to Moritz Schlick, December 6, 1930 and April 5, 1931, Moritz Schlick Papers, Wiener Kreis Archiv, Noord-Hollands Archief, 99/Fei-17 and 99/Fei-19.

⁴ Lewis to Moritz Schlick, December 14, 1934, Moritz Schlick Papers, Wiener Kreis Archiv, Noord-Hollands Archief, 107/Lewis-1.

⁵ Currie to Charles Hendel, May 31, 1944, Brand Blanshard Papers, Yale University Archives, Box 2, Folder 27; Ralph Barton Perry to Robert Scoon, April 24, 1947, Princeton University Archives, Office of the President Records: Harold W. Dodds, Box 134, Folder 20.

Kant-scholar Charles Hendel, who deeply opposed the trend, wrote that “we ‘older boys’ have to take cognisance ... of the enthusiasm and conviction of the younger logicians”.⁶

These historical eye-witness reports are supported by bibliometric studies. A network analysis of the most-mentioned philosophers in American journals in the 1940s, for example, reveals that the literature of the period can be divided into at least two, roughly equally-sized clusters of discussion: (1) a set of literature mentioning mostly émigré positivists, Cambridge analysts, and young American philosophers such as Ernest Nagel and Charles Stevenson; and (2) a cluster mentioning American professors who felt that the focus on “logical clarity is producing a kind of sterility that has largely destroyed [philosophy’s] cultural value”.⁷ The most striking difference between the two clusters is a demographic one: The median birth year of U.S.-based philosophers in what we would now call the ‘analytic’ cluster is 1899, whereas the median birth year of the U.S.-based philosophers in the second cluster is 1882— a difference of seventeen years!

Considering this generational divide, it is much less puzzling that analytic philosophy boomed after the Second World War. In the 1930s, analytic philosophy was already popular among students and junior scholars. But this was not reflected in the hiring of the period. American universities faced severe budget cuts due to the Great Depression (in the 1930s) and the War (the 1940s), so there was little space to hire analytic philosophers. Only when departments could expand in the 1950s, they had the opportunity to catch up. Coincidentally, this is exactly the period when the older generation, educated in what they called “the Golden Age of American Philosophy” (the 1900s and 1910s), retired (Frankel 1960). In consequence, it was the new, more analytically-minded generation that could steer American philosophy in a different direction, a period when the U.S. student population grew from 2.7 million to 8.0 million in two decades. A study of the growth of eleven prominent philosophy departments estimates that they increased from 6.3 to 17.3 faculty on average, meaning that there was much space for new hires (Strassfeld 2020, 850).

Appointments in the McCarthy era

Even if the timing and the swiftness of the analytic turn are partly explained by a generational shift and a fifteen-year dip in the job market, this does not entail that McCarthyism played no role in the process. So let us turn to academic hiring in more detail. Now, if the anti-communist climate of fear was an important factor in the analytic turn, one would expect deans, department chairs, and university presidents to reflect on the risks involved in hiring pragmatists, humanists, and existentialists *irrespective* of the candidates’ political ideas and activities. Yet, in my archival

⁶ Hendel to Blanshard, May 11, 1951, Brand Blanshard Papers, Yale University Archives, Box 17, Folder 382.

⁷ https://app.vosviewer.com/?json=https%3A%2F%2Fdrive.google.com%2Fuc%3Fid%3D1O_IdNjNfzQeDlMSuJZwzN6_k4j2a621e (accessed August 2026); Cory, cited in Blanshard et al. (1945, 201).

research on the hiring procedures of ten departments of philosophy, including both private (Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale) and public universities (UC Berkeley, UMich, UMN, UIowa, and UPenn), I have not found a single example of a philosopher or administrator raising doubts about a candidate because of their *philosophical* affiliation.

Of course not every meeting is recorded. Moreover, it is well-known that repressive environments can be governed by tacit agreements on how to avoid public controversy. Yet it seems unlikely that the supposed political risks involved in appointing a pragmatist or a phenomenologist did not leave a single trace in thousands of pages of dossiers about possible hires, particularly since administrators often *did* voice concerns about other ‘liabilities’ involving race and religion. When Yale considered hiring Paul Weiss, the head of department openly shared his worry that he would be a risk because he was likely to have some of the “deficiencies that Jewish people labor”, most notably a “lack of social discretion”.⁸ And when Princeton was searching a new full professor, the president was openly warned not to appoint a Catholic because members of “the Roman hierarchy” could not “avoid being illiberal”.⁹ While the records show that some candidates were considered a liability because of their race or religious affiliation, I have encountered no discussions of potential hires who were considered a risk because they were pragmatists or phenomenologists.

Second, it is important to note that all these departments kept hiring non-analytic philosophers. In some cases, it was even an explicit criterion that a position should be filled by a pragmatist or continental philosopher. Jacques Barzun, provost at Columbia, urged the philosophy department to establish “a balance between ‘analysts’ and ‘humanists’” and when Princeton could appoint two full professors, the president and the department agreed that one of the appointees had to be “broadly humanistic in his philosophical orientation” and that the other should be “logical and scientific in his outlook”.¹⁰

Naturally, these conclusions do not apply to philosophers who were suspect because of their *political* activities. Irving Copi’s personnel file at the University of Michigan contains a letter from William Frankena, defending the former Trotskyite because he had “entirely renounced his questionable connections, opinions, and activities”.¹¹ And when the University of Minnesota refused to renew the contract of Forrest Wiggins in 1951, the department’s first Black instructor

⁸ Hendel to Seymour, October 2, 1945, Yale University Archives, President of Yale University Records: Charles Seymour, Series 1. Correspondence and Subject files, 1917–1954, 1937–1950, Box 127, Folder 1077.

⁹ Robert Cumming to Nagel, May 16, 1960, Ernest Nagel Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, Box 1, Folder 20.

¹⁰ Ledger Wood to Harold W. Dodds, January 17, 1955, Princeton University Archives, Office of the President Records: Harold W. Dodds, Box 134, Folder 3.

¹¹ William Frankena to Hayward Keniston, September 22, 1948, University of Michigan Archives, William K. Frankena papers, 1927–1991, Box 13, Folder: “Correspondence: 1934, 1939, 1941, 1943–1953”.

publicly announced that it was because his “Communist line” had cost the university money in the state legislature.¹²

Cultural momentum

Finally, let us turn the broader cultural conversation about philosophy. The standard focus on McCarthyism is rather one-sided because it has led historians to overlook other important elements of America’s cultural moment. The 1950s were not just marked by Cold War anxieties. It was also a decade of cultural optimism about science and technology. Science had not just helped the United States win the Second World War. It had also improved the life of average Americans through the introduction of new medical treatments such as polio vaccines, synthetic antibiotics, and ultrasound monitoring; as well as exciting consumer products such as portable television, credit cards, and long-playing vinyl records.

In order to understand the analytic turn, in particular the success of logical positivism, one has to incorporate this cultural optimism about modern science. Today, logical positivism is often associated with the dark sides of science and technology. Positivism is equated with the value-free conception of science that helped universities justify research that was used to sow death and destruction in Vietnam. But it is important to realize that these associations only emerged in the late 1960s, when the protest generation identified positivism as the ideology of the military-industrial complex. In the 1950s, logical positivism was still widely regarded as a model of *modern scientific thinking*, even in popular newspapers and magazines. Wallace David, a minister and gay rights activist, could note that we live “in a scientific age” and describe himself as a member of the “school of ‘logical positivism’”.¹³ An Alabama newspaper could positively comment on a proposal to add logic to the state school curriculum, noting how comforting it would be to “listen to sermons or to political speeches and be able to say with the logical positivists that they fall short”.¹⁴ And a political columnist could praise John F. Kennedy’s actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis because he displayed “a harshness of which the intellect only of the logical empiricist intellectual is capable”.¹⁵ None of these references reflect any real engagement with positivist views or arguments. But it does provide a window on analytic philosophy’s cultural momentum: logical positivism came to exemplify a modern scientific attitude in a period when ninety-four percent of U.S. citizens felt that science was making their lives “healthier, easier, and more comfortable” (Davis 1958, 186)

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¹² “Professor Charges ‘U’ Drops Him Because of ‘Red’ Views”, *Star Tribune*, December 13, 1951.

¹³ “A Minister and his Conscience”, *One Magazine*, June 1954.

¹⁴ “Logic in High School”, *The Anniston Star*, March 15, 1957.

¹⁵ “Observer’s View: Cuba-Indian-China”, *The Times Argus*, December 3, 1962.

Pragmatism, meanwhile, often got negative press, in particular during the Sputnik crisis of 1957. After the USSR successfully launched the first satellite, American media were quick to blame the school system, noting that Russian children spent much more time studying science and mathematics. And some of them held the pragmatists responsible considering their outsized influence on American education. E. F. Hutton commented that the Russians “make their kids study!”, noting that Americans did the same “before John Dewey and his followers said children should never be made to do anything”.¹⁶ Admiral H. G. Rickover agreed, proposing to replace Dewey’s idea that “the school is primarily a social institution” with a new, more rigorous “education process” centering on the collection of “factual knowledge”.¹⁷ Analytic philosophy was considered new and exciting and pragmatism old-fashioned and outdated, even if pragmatist ideas and perspectives still played an important in shaping the views of analytic philosophers like Hilary Putnam, W. V. Quine, Ernest Nagel, and Richard Rorty.

McCarthyism is real and severely affected the lives of Marxists and (former) socialist philosophers. Yet it played a very limited role in the development of American philosophy. Anti-communist witch-hunts may have led philosophers to be more careful in their political pronouncements. But there is no evidence that the Red Scare significantly impacted the composition of departments of philosophy. At the same time, it would be a mistake to conclude that Cold War *culture* was not a factor in the analytic turn. Although analytic philosophy had been on the rise since the 1920s, demographic and economic developments had halted its representation in philosophy departments. When analytically-minded philosophers finally had the opportunity to reshape the profession, the conditions were ideal: higher education was growing, the job market was booming, and the American public celebrated science, professionalism, and ‘neutral’ expertise.

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¹⁶ “E. F. Hutton: Reds Tried Dewey, Junked Him”, *The Houston Chronicle*, February 23, 1958.

¹⁷ H. G. Rickover, cited in “Dewey is Blamed for Scientist Shortage”, *Omaha World-Herald*, March 24, 1958.

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