

Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson

The Artist as Revolutionary

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Contents

1. “The Best Known American in the World”	1
2. Rising Star	19
3. Rising Revolutionary	41
4. From Moscow to Madrid	59
5. “The Tallest Tree in Our Forest”	79
6. “Black Stalin”?	99
7. Robeson: Primary Victim of the “Blacklist”	121
8. Britain Beckons	143
9. Triumph—and Tragedy	168
10. Death of a Revolutionary	190
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	238

“The Best Known American in the World”

Paul Robeson—activist, artist, athlete—experienced a dramatic rise and fall, perhaps unparalleled in U.S. history. From consorting with the elite of London society and Hollywood in the 1930s, by the time he died in 1976, he was a virtual recluse in a plain abode in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia.

What helps to explicate this tragic arc of his life is a fateful decision he made when fascism was rising: he threw in his lot with those battling for socialism and decided to sacrifice his thriving artistic career on behalf of the struggle against Jim Crow—or U.S. apartheid.

He was a forerunner of the likes of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, one cannot begin to understand the lives and trajectories of those two men without considering Robeson. Like Malcolm, he was a militant: a turning point in his dramatic fall was when he confronted President Harry S. Truman face-to-face in the White House, berating him because of the lynching of African-Americans and Washington’s lassitude in confronting same. However, because Robeson was multilingual and lived abroad for years, he was able to develop a global appeal that dwarfed what the Muslim Minister only sought to accomplish in the final months of his life. Like Dr. King he had a mass appeal among African-Americans. But, unlike this Nobel Laureate, Robeson was not only an artist whose performances stirred emotions and fealty worldwide, he was also allied with a then rising socialist left and allied trade unions (both of which too had global ties), providing this performer with a reach that even Dr. King at his height found difficult to match.

The argument of this book is that you cannot fully appreciate how the Jim Crow system came to an end without an understanding of

Paul Robeson

the life of Paul Robeson. Robeson pioneered the struggle against Jim Crow throughout the 1930s and 1940s. It was only with Robeson's fall that King and Malcolm could emerge as they did; the undermining of Robeson created a vacuum that these two leaders filled.

* * *

It was early 1952 and legions from Nelson Mandela's African National Congress were on the march in Johannesburg. But what struck the journalist covering this anti-apartheid demonstration was the singing voice pouring forth from loudspeakers, as thousands strode forcefully: it was Paul Robeson's.¹ This was an act of defiance in that the authorities there had banned his recordings as early as 1949.² "They sing their songs of protest," chortled Robeson then, "including some of mine, may I modestly add."³

The novelist Howard Fast wrote with accuracy during this era that "there is no child in Eastern Europe who cannot sing you one of the favorite songs of Paul Robeson . . ." ⁴ Yet another journalist striding through Jerusalem a few years later was struck to hear Robeson's voice emerging from the window of a sidewalk abode.⁵ In 1957, Robeson's wife commented that "his records are played regularly by popular demand over [the BBC] . . . over national networks and in public places in Europe, the Soviet Union, China, in Asia and Africa. A friend told us only a few days ago that he had been in a supermarket in Mexico recently and heard Paul singing 'Ol' Man River.'" ⁶ Two years later, Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda ecstatically told Robeson that "the whole people of Chile love you" but his homeland was not alone since "Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil" were of a like mind. "Everywhere you are admired," he insisted.⁷

Less than a decade later in 1968 Robeson's birthday was celebrated widely in China and, it was said, deemed to be "an event of major international significance," not simply because of his socialist beliefs but because his artistry ranked him alongside "Caruso and Chaliapin as a singer . . ." ⁸

Born in 1898, Paul Leroy Robeson, a descendant of enslaved Africans in the U.S., was globally renowned—not just as a singer but as an actor and athlete and political activist. As a singer and actor,

“The Best Known American in the World”

he was as celebrated as Michael Jackson and Denzil Washington would be; as an athlete, he was as illustrious as Mario Balotelli; as an activist, he carried the moral weight of Nelson Mandela.

He was “probably the most famous living Negro” said the tribune of the U.S. elite, *TIME* magazine in 1943.⁹ No, said an admiring reporter in 1964, upping the ante, as he termed him “the best known American in the world.”¹⁰ The more reserved Nobel Laureate, Linus Pauling, called him simply “one of the greatest men of the twentieth century”¹¹ The more reserved *New Statesman* said in 1936: “he is one of the most impressive actors alive.”¹² Coretta Scott King, the widow of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was among those acclaiming him upon his death in 1976, calling him “one of the finest artists, most brilliant minds and greatest champions of human rights that has lived in this century.”¹³ The Trinidadian intellectual, C.L.R. James, who collaborated with him on a remarkable play in London about the Haitian Revolution, asserted in 1983, “I do not believe that any human being in the twentieth century . . . achieved the world-wide fame and recognition that Paul Robeson did.”¹⁴

The top [American] football coach, Lou Little, said of Robeson, “there has never been a greater player in the history of football”¹⁵ Robeson’s skills on the gridiron were so advanced and involving, as it did, hand-to-hand combat and fancy footwork, that he was seriously approached to fight then heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Dempsey.¹⁶ An acquaintance of Gene Tunney, the man who had bested Dempsey in the ring, recalled his saying that the next heavyweight boxing champion of the world could be, “if he wanted it, a young man named Paul Robeson.”¹⁷

The razor-sharp reflexes of the burly 6ft 3ins Robeson, whose weight was well above 230 pounds, convinced boxing promoters that he would have acquitted himself well in the ring. Similar qualities he possessed—cat-like quickness combined with muscular brute force—also allowed Robeson to state credibly and modestly, “I was pretty good at basketball.”¹⁸

Yet, it was left to Robeson’s comrade—the Father of Pan-Africanism, W.E.B. Du Bois—who in the 1950s, called Robeson “without doubt” the “best known American on earth” in that “his voice is known in Europe, Asia and Africa, in the West Indies and South America and in

the islands of the seas. Children on the streets of Peking and Moscow, Calcutta and Jakarta greet him and send him their love.” Yet, with all this, there was a reigning anomaly: “only in his native land is he without honor and rights.”¹⁹

The reason was simple: after U.S.–USSR relations plummeted post-1945, Robeson refused to join the consensus. His view was that just as the two powers collaborated against the ultra-right from 1941–45, this engagement should continue thereafter in pursuit of the apartheid backers at home and abroad and the colonialists too, while Washington did not agree.

But Robeson was part of a larger African-American consensus. His nineteenth-century African-American predecessor as a pre-eminent tragedian and interpreter of Shakespeare—Ira Aldridge (who fled the U.S. and became a British subject)²⁰—also felt more comfortable in Russia: it was his “second homeland”, says his biographer, probably because like Eastern Europe generally, where he too spent a considerable amount of time, there “they were not interested in perpetuating the vestiges of [African] slavery”,²¹ the normalized pattern in the U.S.

The intersection of U.S. “Jim Crow laws”—or apartheid—with Robeson’s globetrotting, which introduced him to sharply diverging realities, also played a role in his persecution. “Typical of American artists,” he observed in 1963, “I had to go abroad to really make it on the ‘big time’” and it was abroad that he encountered a new world. “I found little color prejudice in Spain, in the Scandinavian countries and none at all in the Soviet Union. Naturally this freedom from color consciousness attracted me and still does,” but this attraction infuriated many in his homeland where finding anything positive to say about Moscow was seen as being not only improper and immoral but, perhaps, a sign of mental derangement.²²

Moreover, Robeson refused to cut his views to fit prevailing fashion. “I’m a Marxist,” he told a New Zealand journalist in 1960.²³ “I’m a convinced socialist,” he informed an Australian questioner during that same year.²⁴ “I am a radical,” he said earlier, “and I am going to stay one until my people get free to walk the earth.”²⁵ More to the point, his close comrade, William Patterson,²⁶ declared, “Paul Robeson was a revolutionary,”²⁷ determined to deploy his immense

talent on behalf of constructing a socialist commonwealth—not just in the U.S. but worldwide.

The problem for Robeson was that his homeland was at the tip of the spear during the Cold War and felt compelled to repress vigorously those like Robeson who refused to accede. Nobel Laureate and long-time Londoner Doris Lessing observed that “even the worst time of the Cold War” in Britain was “mild compared to the United States . . . no British Communist was ever treated with the harshness the American government used towards Paul Robeson and some other American Communists.”²⁸ Pete Seeger, the famed folksinger who too was persecuted in the U.S., told Robeson directly that “you have been the most blacklisted performer in America . . .”²⁹

Like many African-American artists—before and since—Robeson attained widespread popularity in Europe, then leveraged this lionizing back home, and then worldwide. “Negro artists have always gained a fine [and] welcome an appreciation in Europe,” said the Jamaican writer Claude McKay, “and especially England” rather “than the United States . . .”³⁰ What catapulted Robeson to prominence, first as an artist, then as a politico, was a lengthy sojourn in London, which began in the 1920s and may have lasted to his dying days but for the onset of war in 1939 (though he visited frequently thereafter). It was in 1960 that he informed an inquiring New Zealander that “so, for any views I have, Britain must take the responsibility. Not America and not Russia.”³¹

Robeson was alluding to the fact that a turning point in his life occurred in London in 1928 when he met—and was influenced by—Shapurji Saklatvala, a Parsi born in Bombay [Mumbai], and one of the first Communists to be elected to Parliament.³² He learned about socialism not from Maxim Gorky, the famous Soviet writer, but George Bernard Shaw, the famous British writer. “My whole social and political development,” he confided in 1958, “was in England and I became as much a part of English life as I now am of American.”³³ “You’ll have to blame Britain for my political views,” he reminded an interviewer in Melbourne, since it was there that “I became an advocate of socialism.”³⁴ He learned about the devastation of colonialism in London too, from similarly impeccable sources as he and his spouse befriended the leaders of the liberation movement

of British India. It was in 1931 that Eslanda Robeson conferred with M.K. Gandhi; “he said he felt the Negro and the Indian had a lot in common,”³⁵ was her apt summary.³⁶

What was true for Robeson was similarly true for many of his U.S. counterparts. That is, in a dialectical fashion Britain had become a leading colonizer and imperialist nation and simultaneously produced some of the sterner critics of these systems of exploitation. It was in 1936 in Manhattan when Robeson’s close comrade, the black Communist Ben Davis—who was to be elected subsequently to the New York City Council representing Harlem—encountered his good friend: Robeson was splayed across the bed reading a foundational work by the British Communist intellectual, Emile Burns.³⁷ It was true that he read Marx and Lenin in German and Russian and that he was impressed with a Soviet Constitution that pledged anti-racism³⁸ but the fact is that Robeson (and a good deal of the U.S. left) were heavily dependent upon the insight and research of their U.K. counterparts, including Rajani Palme Dutt,³⁹ whom Robeson deemed to be “one of Britain’s leading Marxist thinkers”⁴⁰ This lengthy list also included Maurice Dobb,⁴¹ Maurice Cornforth,⁴² J.D. Bernal,⁴³ J.B.S. Haldane,⁴⁴ Christopher Caudwell,⁴⁵ Christopher Hill,⁴⁶ Harry Pollitt,⁴⁷ et.al. This is not to mention premier intellectuals from British colonies, e.g. Eric Williams of Trinidad,⁴⁸ nor the British who migrated to the U.S. and became leaders of the left, e.g. the “Dangerous Scot,” John Williamson.⁴⁹ Indeed, though Robeson denied more than once that he was a member of the U.S. Communist Party, his closeness to London comrades raises questions—rarely asked, hardly answered definitively—as to whether he was ever a member of the party in Great Britain, more of a likelihood than U.S. membership.

“I ‘discovered’ Africa in London,” said Robeson, which “profoundly influenced my life,” referring to his subsequent political commitments and his meeting there such leading figures as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria. “I spent many hours talking with them” and “studied” the languages of these nations, including “Yoruba, Efik,” and “Ashanti.” It was in London that he discussed Africa “with men like H.G. Wells and [Harold] Laski and [Jawaharlal] Nehru.” His interest was so intense

that “British Intelligence came one day to caution me about the political meanings of my activities”⁵⁰

But tellingly, his “discovery” of Africa in London was tied inexorably to his other preoccupation: socialism. “It was an African” in London, he noted later, “who directed my interest in Africa to something he had noted in the Soviet Union. On a visit to that country he had travelled east and had seen the Yakuts, a people who had been classed as a ‘backwards race’ by the Czars,” in a manner not unlike what had befallen Africans in e.g. North America. “He had been struck by the resemblance between the tribal life of the Yakuts and his own people of East Africa,” leading Robeson to think that socialism too could uplift Africa; “so,” concluded Robeson, “through Africa I found the Soviet Union”⁵¹

Robeson and Nehru met in London in the 1930s and the Indian leader was so moved by his presence that he penned an ode to him, informing readers that “you have been the voice of man . . . the song of germinating earth/and the movement of nature.” This homage was a reflection of the fact that Robeson’s signature song, “Ol’ Man River” was adapted into several South Asian languages with often the Mississippi River transmuted to the Ganges.⁵²

The British-Barbadian observer, Peter Blackman, was agog in describing the rapturous reception of Robeson before his forced departure in 1939: he

has always been popular in England. In 1939 I attended a meeting in a working-class district of London at which he sang; the crowds in the streets, an inspector of police told me, were bigger than any that used to turn out to see Edward VIII when that monarch was at the height of his popularity as Prince of Wales . . . Cabinet members bid discreetly for interviews, members of Parliament and hall porters [alike] jostle one another to shake his hand,

while “the bulk of the audiences [he entertains] are middle and working class folk”; yet “even with halls packed, thousands are turned away”⁵³ After the U.S. in the 1950s rejected his right to travel and sought to ruin his livelihood, Robeson fought an ultimately successful battle that led him to tell British readers in 1960, “it was

largely due to pressure from this country that I eventually got my passport. That's why I make my temporary home here."⁵⁴

There was a mutual love affair between Robeson and Britain, to the point where at one juncture he considered relinquishing his U.S. citizenship and adopting British nationality instead,⁵⁵ a path chosen earlier by Ira Aldridge and numerous other African-Americans in previous centuries and decades. As one analyst put it, "Robeson was adored in Britain. No other country in the world did so much to keep Robeson in the public eye during his long containment" by the U.S. authorities and "no other country did as much to protest his treatment."⁵⁶ In 1973, at a time when solidarity with Robeson was designed to bring a rebuke from Washington, Labour Party stalwarts who saluted him included Harold Wilson, Denis Healey, Tony Benn, Jim Callaghan and Roy Jenkins.⁵⁷

Robeson was popular in Britain—the springboard for his global acclaim—not least because he was deeply knowledgeable about British culture. Gaelic was among the many languages he studied. As early as 1938, *The Scotsman* reported that he had a "working knowledge of Gaelic."⁵⁸ But what made Robeson unique was that he strived to connect national streams of culture to an all-encompassing global culture. "When I was in Scotland," said Robeson, "I was reminded of how near the Gaelic folk songs are [close] to our own. When I sing them I feel that they express the same soulful quality that I know in Negro music. Indeed, they contributed no small part to the development of our music and the Gaelic speaking Negro was not uncommon in the Southern States two centuries ago . . ." Likewise, Robeson found a "close kinship between the Negro music" and "the music of Ireland . . ."⁵⁹ Thus, when interviewed by the *Glasgow Herald* in 1960, he sought to discuss the affinity between Hebridean songs and the Chinese, African and Hungarian folk songs, all of which were part of the "pentatonic mode."⁶⁰

Robeson found a "great likeness of many of the African languages in mono-syllabic base, in use of tone, to the Chinese-Tibetan languages; the similarity in structure of many of the East African languages to the Hungarian-Finnish-Turkish-Japanese family of languages; also the likenesses of philosophical concepts, of concrete ways of thought, and in many cases, similar art esthetic" between and among diverse

language groups. He compared the “curve form of the Ashanti with those of the Chinese—and the basic aesthetic similarity . . .” He had the “pleasure and privilege to sing many of these lovely melodies in Scotland, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Perth, etc.” and was taken by the “likeness of the Hebridean chants and folk songs to Afro-American music—lovely Hebridean melodies such as ‘Kishmul’s Galley’, the ‘Skye Boat Song’, ‘Briskay Love Lilt,’” all exemplary of the “mutual influences of different musics upon the other,”⁶¹ which demonstrated the essential unity of the human race. For Robeson, language was not just a tool of communication, but also a way to forge a deeper connection with social—and political—consequence. The U.S. Embassy in Paris took note when in 1958 he informed a Communist journalist of the “singer’s belief that the different musical expressions of all countries are but so many inseparable links in the same chain—and he demonstrates this relationship vocally to ‘L’Humanite’s’ correspondent by comparing a Negro spiritual with a selection from Boris Godunov.”⁶²

“The film I was most proud to make,” he told the BBC in 1960, “was ‘Proud Valley’, the story of a Welsh mining village. Much of it was made in the Rhondda Valley and the Director was Pen Tennyson, a direct descendant of the great poet.”⁶³ “I was brought up on English ballads”, not Negro “spirituals” as was thought; “it was English ballads I used to sing,” initially: “I knew dozens of them . . . they earned me my first recognition as a singer . . .”⁶⁴

Decades of attention to the so-called “special relationship” between London and Washington notwithstanding, Robeson had tapped into a longstanding current of sympathy between African-Americans and Britain that stretched back to the founding of the U.S., when the enslaved generally sided with the redcoats, not least because of the gathering abolitionism in the U.K. and the slaveholding status of the victorious rebels.⁶⁵ This trend continued in the nineteenth century when leading U.S. abolitionists, e.g. Frederick Douglass, were frequently to be found in London, Dublin, Cardiff, and Edinburgh.⁶⁶ Robeson exemplified this trend when in 1958 he acknowledged openly that the “relentless, powerful, compelling [factor] is the pressure of world opinion against racism in the United States”; it

was “beyond the shadow of a doubt,” he thundered, “that the United States cannot afford to ignore the pressure that comes from abroad.”⁶⁷

It was in 1937 that the then affluent Robeson funded the Council on African Affairs (CAA), a U.S. based grouping that crusaded for decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean with the belief in large part that as this beleaguered continent and region were liberated, citizens there could then pressure Washington to liberate African-Americans in turn.⁶⁸ Repeatedly over the years, Robeson—according to his close friend and biographer, Lloyd Brown—adjudged the CAA “the one organizational interest among many with which he was identified and that was *closest to his heart . . .*”⁶⁹ [emphasis in original]. Robeson exemplified these bold words when in 1950 he collaborated with Patterson in filing a petition with the United Nations charging Washington with “genocide” against African-Americans.⁷⁰

Part of what made Robeson a revolutionary was his rejection of narrow nationalism and his uplifting of a radical internationalism and it was this—as much as anything else—that caused the tremendous persecution of him by the U.S. authorities since he was effectively eroding Washington’s sovereignty in pursuit of racial equality domestically and the socialist commonwealth globally that would guarantee it. Seamlessly, Robeson argued that as reflected in their art and culture and music particularly, humanity was one which undergirded why, he thought, humankind was destined for a unified socialist commonwealth. He paid a steep price as a result: His income dwindled from a hefty \$104,000 in 1947 to \$2,000 or so a year shortly thereafter,⁷¹ as the Red Scare deepened.

* * *

Paul Robeson was born on 9 April 1898 in New Jersey. A mere 48 hours after his birth, the U.S. moved to declare war on Spain and Cuba; Puerto Rico and the Philippines were seized from Madrid, and the Hawaii Kingdom was overthrown during this same period. This evolution of U.S. imperialism, this bringing under U.S. rule so many described as “colored”, exacerbated the white supremacy whose slaying became a preoccupation of the mature Robeson. His father, the Reverend William D. Robeson, was born in North