

A Misleading PBS Documentary **Where Did Paul Robeson Stand?**

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The myth of Paul Robeson, heroic defender of his people victimized by the racists ignores a substantial historical record, a record of Robeson's active support over a forty year period of Stalinism and its horrors.

HERBERT HILL, from the PBS cutting room floor

PAUL ROBESON'S TRAGEDY, WHILE NOT QUITE SHAKESPEAREAN IN SWEEP, still has the poignancy of a cautionary tale both for the left that was and the left that is still to be. For, if told honestly, this is an enormously appealing and no less equally disturbing drama of a towering figure of twentieth century cultural life brought low by all the poisons of reaction and racism that still infect the bloodstream of American politics. It is the story of a man who — unlike so many of his contemporaries — refused to temporize, to capitulate, or to apologize in the face of repression and who could answer the impertinence of his tormentors with words which will forever inspire admiration: "Because my father was a slave and my people died to build this country ... I am going to stay here and be a part of it just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?" But it is also the story of a man who could heroically face down racism and racist convention in his professional and personal life while at the same time freely compromising his critical faculties and revolutionary instincts by his unflinching devotion to a totalitarian cause utterly unworthy of his loyalties.

Sadly the two hour review of Robeson's career, on the 100th anniversary of his birth, aired by PBS in February 1999 as part of the "American Masters" series, largely contents itself with the history of the McCarthyite assault on liberty, of blacklists and enforced isolation. This documentary, directed by St. Claire Bourne and produced by Chiz Schultz, bears the ominous title of "Paul Robeson—Here I Stand," ominous, that is, because the adoption of the film's title from that of Robeson's own autobiography could only arouse suspicions of a somewhat less than fully balanced review. Such suspicions would be confirmed by the time devoted to the sentimental reminiscences of Ossie Davis, Pete Seeger, Howard Fast, et al., — whose folksy wisdom was redolent of the glory days of Popular Front

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Stalinism. But the task at hand for the honest historian and documentarian was neither celebration nor vindication. It is rather to braid two discomfiting truths: the truth about victimization and the equally important truth about the moral and political turpitude of American Stalinism; the truth about the provisionality of liberty under capitalist democracy and the truth about Communism's totalitarian betrayals. To do less is to relate a half-truth and a half-truth is unavoidably tantamount to a full apologia.

But the presence in the PBS documentary of Herbert Hill, a singular personality of the anti-Stalinist left, long familiar to the readers of these pages as a scourge of racist and reactionary trade union practices, suggested the possibility, however attenuated, of an honest debate and discussion. Hill, after all, established his credentials by championing the cause of black liberation not only against Stalinism, but against the shameful and self-serving impediments erected by anti-Communist and often ostensibly progressive trade union bureaucrats habitually accustomed to an ideological free pass from the left side of the Stalinist divide. Indeed, advance reviews quoting Hill's acerbic observation before the documentary was released that: "we have been given a sanitized myth of Paul Robeson.[*] What we get is the marvelous singer...the great actor, the man who stood up to the McCarthyites. What we don't get is the 40-year history of defense ... for a movement based upon terror and mass murder" — nourished the hope that the history of Stalinist deceptions and betrayals would not be conveniently swept under the rug.

Alas, the apologia mentality has, as it were, built-in defenses against broadening the discussion to include the anti-Stalinist left on an equal footing. This documentary proved no exception. Robeson is character-

*Of course, corporate America had in 1988 already underwritten a sanitized celebration of Paul Robeson's life sponsored by, among others, the American Express Company, General Electric and Phillip Morris. Pepsi-Cola celebrated Black History Month not long ago by naming Robeson as one of the ten "great black pioneers" and offering free posters of him. And why not? Popular Front Stalinism, the era in which the influence of the American CP had reached its zenith, posed no real threat to American capitalism so long as the latter was aligned with Russia against Hitler. It was the CP under Earl Browder that declared Communism to be "twentieth century Americanism" and added that the party was "continuing the great American tradition, ...carrying on the work of Jefferson, Paine, Jackson and Lincoln." Did not the *N.Y. Daily Worker* time and again preach the opinion that "the employers have a right to a reasonable profit; have a right to manage their own plants; have a right to make contributions to the war program out of their own experience; have a right to press their point of view"? (January 17, 1942). Toward that end, the Communists struggled for no-strike pledges in the unions and demanded the purge of socialist militants from union ranks; they broke strikes; called for speed-ups on the assembly lines and forced unions under their influence to sign miserable labor contracts; they supported the National Service Act to conscript labor — all in the interest of "winning the war," i.e., defending Stalinist Russia in WW II. Since this is the period when Robeson earned his political reputation, it is little wonder that the behavior of Stalinist stalwarts can now be remembered with such fondness by a grateful American corporate community.

ized, virtually from the outset, as an ideological romantic, whose understandable, if misplaced devotion to Stalinist Russia had no broader implications. Such loyalties, all too human frailties in the "world of relative evils," merely rendered Robeson a convenient target of reactionaries. This treatment is all the more remarkable at this late date. For it denies by implication what should be the most self-evident of propositions: that the consistent defense of democratic values against such loyalties concerns the most fundamental problem of socialist political and moral life. To pursue this course of inquiry is to foreclose any illumination as to how proximity to Stalinism debased, twisted and corrupted the ideals of socialism with the authority stolen from the Russian Revolution and to evade how, in particular, this taint disfigured Robeson's political career.

That, however, would require a credible account of the American Communist Party, under whose auspices and — if current accounts from the CP's *People's Weekly World* are to be believed — inspiration Robeson operated. It is to take Manning Marable's assertion that "we should honor Robeson, because of his radical political vision" as a challenge. The oft-asked question must again be raised: was an association with the CP, a party wholly dominated by the political imperatives of Stalinist power politics, compatible with an "unshakeable commitment" to civil rights? This is precisely the issue that this documentary dodges and was the very point of Hill's intervention.

We can skip the effect that Stalin, acting as Mussolini's quartermaster in his invasion of Ethiopia, had in thinning the ranks of black party members disgusted by the hypocrisy of the Communist International. At about the same time, the search for a "Democratic Front" with Roosevelt, prior to the Stalin-Hitler pact, led in effect to the virtual disappearance of the "Negro Question" from the public facade of the movement. Of course, during this period Robeson was marveling over the broad democratic vistas opened by the Russian Constitution and touting the virtues of the purges in neutralizing the danger posed by these "counter-revolutionary assassins." When the Stalin-Hitler pact was signed, blacks were rediscovered and radical remediation demanded. This, of course, lasted until the Nazi invasion of Russia. But this zig-zag foreshadowed what was to become a common pattern in this as in all other political and social questions. The CP recognized the evils of American racism — of American capitalism — when Stalinism was on the opposite side of the military and political equation. But when Stalinism had need of the services of American capitalism all those same evils would be soft-pedalled. And Robeson demurred not once from this gyrating orientation.

What did this mean concretely for the CP and its hangers-on during World War II? The Stalinists and their supporters in the National Negro Congress endorsed the Secretary of the Navy's Jim Crow policies, but opposed the March on Washington Movement and the Double V Campaign (victory against Hitler abroad and Jim Crow at home) of black self-

mobilization against American apartheid. Benjamin Davis, a leading black CP leader and close comrade of Robeson's, stated in the *Daily Worker* that "Communists were disturbed by the increasing struggle of Negroes for jobs in defense plants...Many of the Negro groups and newspapers are not clear on the international situation." Those who pressed for fair employment practices, with real teeth, were calumniated as "disruptive," "endangering the unity of the American people." The CP demonstrated its fearless devotion to Southern equality by dismantling its branches in the South for the duration of the war. Lynchings were no longer condemned as an integral means by which the system of Southern plantation capitalism was maintained, but as acts of "conscious" "sabotage and interference with a domestic phase of the military program." It was not the appeasement behavior of the Roosevelt Administration which, in its dependency on the Southern Dixiecrat machine, gave the lie to this being a war for democracy. No, it was blacks such as A. Philip Randolph, who as "saboteurs" of the war effort were openly equated with the Ku Klux Klan and Hitler. Blacks were asked, in effect, to relax their opposition to racism, to poll taxes, to employment discrimination and to segregation merely because their continued oppression and humiliation were required to maintain the Roosevelt coalition and thereby sustain Stalin's war effort.

Wilson Record, in *Race and Radicalism*, reviewing the historical evidence rightfully concluded that "(f)or most of the war [the Communist Party's] main activity was to stifle Negro protest and to urge black workers to get into line on the white man's terms, just as it urged unions to get on with the production job, on the bosses terms if necessary." He continued, "by late 1943 the party's Uncle Tomism had become so transparent that its leaders felt that at least a few gestures should be made toward advancing Negro rights. To that end the Communists used such organizations as the NNC (National Negro Congress) and the SNYC (Southern Negro Youth Congress) to launch occasional protests against racial discrimination in the military and in industry. Such objections, however, were feeble, and when some party project threatened to develop into strenuous opposition which might even remotely endanger production or military effectiveness, the Stalinists were willing to protest for the record and hastily call the whole thing off." When, for instance, wounded Black soldiers were left unattended at Fort Devens in 1945, four Black WACs stationed at the fort protested. For their efforts they were court-martialed. Protests from civil rights organizations, unions and churches eventually forced the Army to reverse itself. No thanks, however, was due to the CP. For *The Daily Worker* (April 8, 1945) admonished that "(t)he U.S. general staff has on many occasions . . . proved that they deserve the full confidence of the Negro people. We cannot temporarily stop the war until all questions of discriminations are ironed out."

When A. Philip Randolph declared in 1944 that he did not know "a

single Negro anywhere who believes that this war is being fought for democracy," he evidently did not have Robeson in mind. At "Defend America" bond rallies, in programs for the Office of War Information and the War Production Board he called, in the singularly recondite CP-like manner previously described, for the full mobilization of the black community. "(T)his is one of the great ends of this war," averred Robeson — "that the very concept of lower classes, colonial or backwards peoples, disappear(s) from our minds and actions. For fascism means degradation and inferior status. A people's war is fought for dignity and equality." Of course, the "peoples' war" was evidently a rather elastic concept. For it also encompassed Stalin's war, when still aligned with Hitlerite fascism, against Poland and Finland which Robeson hailed as "defensive," "freeing the Western Ukrainians and White Russians." It might also be noted that other black radicals, such as Claude McKay, who had previously rebuked Robeson for his somewhat, say — blinkered view of Stalinism, found "Stalin's attack upon Finland (to be)...as vicious as Crackers lynching Negroes..."

But — and this was the lost upshot of Hill's heavily edited and manipulated intervention — Robeson was a great "internationalist" and "freedom fighter" only in the service of lending Stalinist imperialism a free hand. It was not McCarthyite persecution alone that ultimately led to his tragic downfall, but his inability at length to free himself from being totalitarianism's intellectual prisoner. This and this alone sullies his reputation for posterity. And it is the obligation not only of the revolutionary left, but that of any honest historical accounting, to distance itself from Stalinism's disgraceful parody of socialism by insisting on an accurate portrayal of the CP's record. The real import of this cannot be captured merely by means of documentary footage. Robeson shaking hands with Russian officials or vacationing with CP hacks cannot substitute for an historical inventory of the breathtaking betrayals of the Communist Party. Worse still, it lends the imprimatur of dispassionate objectivity for what is, by this time, a hackneyed apologia — the enobilized victim of McCarthyism. The passivity and resignation with which the persecution of the CP was met during the 1940s and 50s stands in bold contrast to the solid wall of resistance erected by socialists, liberals and the organized labor movement during the Wilson and Harding administrations. The conventional explanation attributes this difference to a loss of nerve. This is not entirely without foundation. But such explanations are sorely insufficient. For they elude the central theme of this tragedy.

The victims of this repression succumbed to persecution because they were, by the outset of the Cold War, neither respectable nor respected. No longer a reliable bulwark of American capitalism — on loan from Stalin — nor able to enjoy the support of the oppressed and exploited, whose cause they had only yesterday so fervidly abandoned, the CP and Robeson were easy prey for those who, for their own demagogic pur-

poses, wished to smear socialism with the stain of Stalinism and to forever fix in identity the two in the public eye.

RECOUNTING THE POLITICAL DEBACLE OF ROBESON'S CAREER, were it to have been done accurately, would have required an ongoing counternarrative and an historical contextualization which Hill's presentation, if honestly employed, should have provided. Instead, Hill's presentation was deliberately employed as an indictment against the anti-Stalinist left through the dishonest technique of amalgamating his condemnation of Robeson with that of HUAC, McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. This slander against the anti-Stalinist left denies in principle the right to defend dissent and civil liberties on a consistent basis, without the ritualistic rehearsal of the mythic "virtues" of the Popular Front which has become the method of choice among apologists. When built-in sensors fail to detect echoes of assent to this purpose, its self-defense mechanisms spin into overdrive to ward off by vilification other historical interpretations.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD REPORTEDLY INSISTED THAT THERE WERE NO SECOND acts in American life. He clearly did not foresee the afterlife of American Stalinism. For to do so directs one to the lamentable but inescapable conclusion that fellow-travelling seems fated to be a permanent component of modern radical thought. Contemporary fellow-traveling, however, is a unique phenomenon. The practitioners of this form of necromancy are distinguished from previous generations of enthusiasts in that they, in all likelihood, have never had any formal experience with the Communist Party or any front organization and therefore have never extended nor desired to extend any assistance to the "cause" in any direct or self-conscious capacity. And if it were a cardinal rule of faith for the veteran fellow traveler that the Soviet Union, whatever its limitations, was fundamentally a socialist society and, as such, a beacon of social progress, this belief has been discarded and supplanted in the worldview of the modern revisionist/apologist by the axiomatic contention that the historic American Communist Party, whatever its flaws, was at bottom the party of social justice and peace.

Stated differently, the reflected glow of the American CP for previous partisans was derived from the prestige of the Russian revolution combined with the breathless worship of Stalinist ruthlessness and the spectacle of a once immense world-wide movement grimly advancing under its steely direction. These are blandishments which hold little appeal to the modern partisan, who has excised from his/her worldview the connection between the American CP and the cause it so slavishly served. The new partisan, like his less evolved ancestor, having in the main no abiding commitment to revolutionary politics and thereby no burning need to struggle with the nature of the Soviet Union under Stalin, nevertheless rightfully recognizes the right-wing (but usually only the right-

wing) of the American Establishment as a bulwark of oppression, racism and militarism. By way of distinction however, the death of the Stalinist social system has widely failed to elicit any hidden nostalgia for the ugly realities of the gulag at least on the part of the modern apologist. We are thankfully spared the exculpatory dismissals of the "excesses" of Communism which characterized yesterday's fellow-travelling sophist. The two versions are related rather as a variation on a theme, than as the same chorus sung in different keys.

Sympathies for the historic CP, as victim of Establishment repression, have become an all-important barometer measuring the intensity of progressive revulsion with American reaction. In this drama the CP, perceived as having borne the brunt of capitalist repression, has been transformed into, and misrepresented as the unwaveringly defiant opponent of all that is rotten in American life. And conversely, this mindset remains stubbornly resistant to historic analysis for fear that a less fanciful portrait of American Stalinism could only signal a concession to the world-view of the American Establishment. What we are left with then is the distorted picture of the Stalinist as the direct successor to the 1920s' Palmer raid radical, persecuted by J. Edgar Hoover and McCarthy for an unswerving devotion to the cause of human liberation only incidentally corrupted by any overriding allegiances to totalitarian imperialism. It is part and parcel of an ongoing retro-rehabilitation project, which, if left unanswered and unchallenged, threatens the future well-being of the next revival of socialism.