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‘Here I Stand’: Paul Robeson on Adult Education as Cultural Work, Pan-Africanism and Socialist Persuasion

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Keywords: Paul Robeson, cultural work, Pan-Africanism, socialism

Abstract: This paper explores adult educational dimensions of the work of Paul Robeson the acclaimed athlete, singer, actor, linguist and political activist.

In the discourse surrounding influential African American adult educators the name of Paul Robeson is surprisingly absent; surprising because, as a respected contemporary of W.E. DuBois (and acknowledged by DuBois as an important peer) Paul Robeson was one of the towering Black public intellectuals of the twentieth century. Philip Foner (1978) notes that Robeson’s emphasis on racial pride, racial unity, the connection between civil rights organizing in the USA and anti-colonial struggles across the globe, and the importance of mass action and collective unity amongst African Americans, means he must be considered the intellectual brother and forerunner of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. In his willingness to use popular culture to raise questions of race and racism with the larger White population, Robeson also anticipates the work of organic intellectuals such as Cornel West. Robeson’s influence on US affairs was tempered by his commitment to Socialism (which grew concurrent with the advent of the cold war) and his refusal to disavow the Soviet Union, even after Khrushchev’s 1956 address publicizing Stalin’s repression. When the State department confiscated his passport as he faced the House on Un-American Activities committee he was, in effect, an exile in his own country.

My own interest in Robeson stems from the frequent visits Robeson made to the United Kingdom. Growing up I knew the Robeson of “Old Man River” and “Othello”, but I also knew of Robeson the supporter of the Soviet Union who was the target of the House on Un-American Activities Committee. Robeson had strong ties to the UK. He was a friend of and frequent fundraiser for the British trade union movement and when the State Department’s confiscation of his passport barred him from leaving the US, he sang to the Welsh workers’ Eisteddfodd festival over the transatlantic phone line. He famously declared that it was in England that he became an African, chiefly as a result of his study of languages at the London School of Oriental Languages. It was also in England in 1939 that he made the film that he always felt best represented his cultural and political vision: *The Proud Valley*, a celebration of the Welsh miners trade union with Robeson playing the part of David Goliath, an American worker who finds himself working in the Welsh coal mines. It was no surprise that in 1957 his friends in England formed the National Paul Robeson Committee to lobby for the return of Robeson’s passport by the US State Department. This committee included 27 Members of Parliament and artistic luminaries such as composer Benjamin Britten, actress Flora Robson and novelist Kingsley Amis.

What right do I, a White Englishman, have to write about Robeson and to regard him as an important and courageous adult educator? First, I should make it clear that I am not speaking for Robeson. My skin color precludes me from the visceral, experiential knowledge of racism that Robeson lived with every day. I am speaking only for how he affects and speaks to me. I

am drawn to Robeson for the heroically steadfast independence of thought he displayed, despite the considerable cost to himself. Essentially his commercial (though not artistic) career as a singer was completely destroyed by his commitment to Socialism and his refusal to abandon his support of the Soviet Union. In contrast to the ideological trajectory of many artists and intellectuals who begin as radicals and then temper their convictions as they ‘mature’ and enjoy success, Robeson went in the opposite direction. The more success he gained, the more he realized how the White power structure was trying to use that success to demonstrate that true equality of opportunity existed in the USA. The more he achieved personal wealth and fame, the more he allied himself with the labor movement, anti-colonial struggles and the Soviet Union’s efforts to create a socialist, non-racist state. One important dimension of leadership is demonstrating conviction – a reasoned conviction borne of personal experience and intellectual analysis - that holds firm even as one risks loss of prestige, livelihood and friends. It is the conviction of Martin Luther King to militant non-violence, even as other Black leaders grew impatient with this strategy, to the extent of fully expecting to die for its practice. It is the conviction of Nelson Mandela to be ready to spend most of his life in prison rather than live in compromised bondage under the condescending patronage of White supremacy, and then to be ready to open negotiations with F.W. De Klerk against the wishes of many of his ANC colleagues. It is the conviction of Malcolm X whose life’s journey caused him to break with Elijah Muhammad even as he knew it probably meant his assassination. Robeson’s convictions meant he faced internal exile, loss of livelihood, death threats, and condemnation from Blacks and Whites who regarded him as a dangerous radical, a servile tool of the Soviet Union.

Robeson’s support of the Soviet Union caused the White press either to delete his presence entirely from the cultural-intellectual landscape of the USA or to portray him as an unpatriotic, un-American, communist subversive. As Duberman (1988) notes, by 1960 “his image (was) converted by a now hostile establishment from public hero to public enemy ... an outcast, very nearly a nonperson” (p. xiii). Popular culture has also framed the early biography of this freedom fighter as a Minstrelian entertainer, a singer of sanitized show tunes such as ‘Old Man River’ from *Showboat*. Robeson constantly fought against this stereotyping. One small example of this is his changing the verse in concert of “Old Man River” from “Tote that barge, lift that bail, you get a little drunk and you land in jail” (which portrayed Negro laborers as human oxen and seeking solace in drink) to “Tote that barge, lift that bail, you show a little grit and you land in jail” (which emphasized the laborer’s refusal to buckle under capitalism and the white supremacist power structure). Typical of the White press’ treatment of Robeson was their portrayal of his involvement in the Peekskill ‘riots’ of 1949 (in fact disturbances caused by Whites attempting to stop Robeson performing) as evidence of his dangerous agitation. In England, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, however, he was honored as a courageous educator trying to educate both Blacks and Whites about racism, Socialism and the deep traditions of African culture. In India the All India Peace Council called for the American State Department to return his passport, and he frequently sent taped messages to conferences such as the Asian-African conference in Indonesia.

Four adult educational dimensions are evident in Robeson’s work, the first of which is his work with popular culture. Beginning as a singer Robeson expanded his activities to include film and theater (he starred as ‘Othello’ at Stratford on Avon in the United Kingdom). For him art was always politically charged and he famously declared at a rally in support of the anti-fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War “the artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative” (Robeson, 1978, p. 119). He

tried to work in the commercial studio system to develop race pride by providing historically accurate representations of Africans in films such as *Sanders of the River*. After disavowing the film as “a total loss” (Robeson 1978, p. 121) he declared “the big producers insist on presenting a caricature image of the Black, a ridiculous image, that amuses the white bourgeoisie, and I am not interested in playing their game” (1978 p. 126). He did not lose confidence in film as a medium of social change, however, arguing in Gramscian mode that film “is the medium through which to express the creative abilities of the masses” and that “only on the screen can the Negro’s real place in the building of the United States be properly shown” (Robeson, 1978, p. 39). In 1937 he complained (Robeson, 1978, p. 120) that “things were twisted and changed and distorted” whenever he worked with film and said again in 1942 (regarding *Tales of Manhattan*) “I thought I could change the picture as we went along but in the end it turned out to be the same old thing – the Negro solving his problem by singing his way to glory. This is very offensive to my people. It makes the Negro child-like and innocent and is in the old plantation tradition” (1978, p. 142). He targeted members of labor unions as an audience, believing that the common economic interests of poor working class Whites and Blacks could create a viable working class movement. He elevated the singing of Negro spirituals to the status of serious, socially committed art, believing that it was one way to educate African Americans and Whites of the rich heritage of African culture. Robeson viewed popular culture as a powerful medium through which millions of adults outside formal education could be reached.

The second adult educational contribution is his work in political persuasion. This work comprised two dimensions – political persuasion of White and African-American workers and also of establishment opinion leaders such as Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. In Gramscian mode Robeson worked to convince White and Black workers of their shared interests and the importance of building multiracial alliances in which Blacks held leadership roles. In this he anticipates the work of Angela Davis, another African American activist who believed social change could only occur within the context of Black-led multiracial alliances. He urged African Americans to join the CIO and stood against separate unions based on race. He characterized those who refused to join labor unions as “scab labor Negroes” (1978, p. 135) arguing that “the best way my race can win justice is by sticking together in progressive labor unions” (1978). Robeson also used his public profile to work successfully to influence Presidents such as Franklin Roosevelt (whom he greatly admired) and Harry Truman (whom he criticized for his refusal to move on enacting anti-lynching laws) as well as supporting the progressive party movement of Henry Wallace.

The third adult educational project of Robeson was his exploration of, and education about, Pan-Africanism. Like DuBois, Robeson believed that a commitment to Pan-Africanism and a commitment to Socialism were compatible. While in London he studied at the School of Oriental Languages and learned a number of African languages such as Swahili and Tivi. Increasingly he became a passionate advocate of African Americans learning about the rich heritage of African culture, believing that lack of knowledge of their culture meant they were denied a potent source of race pride. As early as 1934 he declared that “in my music, my plays, my films I want to carry always this central idea: to be African” (1978, p. 91). The next year he declared that “for the rest of my life I am going to think and feel as an African – not as a white man To me it seems the most momentous thing in my life” (1978, p. 91). In common with the contemporary Africentric turn away from Eurocentrism he maintained “it is not as imitation Europeans, but as Africans, that we have a value” (1978, p. 92).

In the pursuit of an authentic Africentrism he urged an educational campaign to make American Negroes aware of their African roots. The following statement, made in 1934, is typical of this: “the dances, the songs, and the worship perpetuated by the Negro in America are identical with those of his cousins hundreds of years removed in the depths of Africa, whom he has never seen, of whose very existence he is only dimly aware. His peculiar sense of rhythm alone would stamp him indelibly as African” (1978, p. 90). What was particularly frustrating for Robeson was the fact that American Negroes shared the White supremacist stereotypes of Africa that viewed Africans as uncultured savages lacking even language. A major educational project he pursued through his studies of African language and folk music was “to dispel this regrettable and abysmal ignorance of the value of its own heritage in the negro race itself” (ibid. p. 87). His decision to sing only Negro spirituals in concert, to charge low admission prices to his concerts, and to make independent films financed outside of the studio system, were all manifestations of this project. Robeson consistently linked the fight against White supremacy in the USA to the anti-colonial struggle in Africa and Asia. In his view “we cannot afford to tolerate the advocates of white supremacy in South Africa, any more than we can agree to the activities of the Klu Klux Klan in Georgia or Mississippi” (1978, p. 196).

Finally, Robeson was a lifelong Socialist, an unwavering commitment that alienated him from much of mainstream American opinion in the 1950’s until his death in 1976. He believed that racism was structural, “a system of legal and extralegal force which violates and nullifies the constitution of the United States” (1958, p. 78). He constantly cited the Soviet Union as an example of a non-racist society that Black, Brown, Yellow and Red peoples the world over should look to as a model. For him socialism represented “an advance to a higher stage of life – that it is a form of society which is economically, socially, culturally, and ethically superior to a system based on production for private profit” (1958, p. 39). As with Angela Davis, bell hooks and Cornel West, Robeson believed that creating a society free of racism had to go hand in hand with abolishing capitalism. This is why so much of his educational work was with the labor movement. In meeting after meeting, rally after rally, interview after interview he urged African Americans to join the CIO, AUW, National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards, and so on. A labor movement educated against White supremacy and fighting for Socialist principles was, he believed, the best guarantor of an eventual dismantling of racism. Ossie Davis commented “Paul concluded, after much searching and searching, that Black Liberation would never come to his people short of Socialism ... that Socialism, and Socialism alone, was our hope and salvation. It was this conviction that governed all his choices” (1978, p. 20).

Given the political climate of the cold war era it is hardly surprising that Robeson should attract McCarthy’s attention. At a 1949 rally he declared that communists “were the first to die for our freedom and for the freedom of all mankind Their struggle is our struggle” (1978, p. 210). Departing from the Black Nationalist line, and much in the manner of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Robeson believed an alliance of Black and White was necessary to defeat White Supremacy. Both Negroes and the White working class suffered under capitalism and Robeson identified with both: “I know the Negro struggle intimately. I feel the guy down low, whether he knows it or not, has got to be on my side some day. So I will fight with the CIO and help the white workers or white liberals or any people” (1978, p. 181). Unlike King, and to some degree unlike Mandela, he was a committed Socialist, urging economic as well as cultural democracy and always linking economic and social struggle. He characterized American history as the struggle “somehow to see that the many, the many can take some kind of real share of

their labor, that the few shall not keep on controlling our land, that there must be an extension of this democracy to those who do not have it” (1978, p. 186).

Two dimensions of his commitment to Socialism are of particular interest. First is his commitment to the need for a political party to advance progressive interests. Although he constantly urged Negro unity and the importance of Black leadership of multiracial alliances, he equally consistently urged that this must go hand in hand with membership of a political party. As in the manner of Gramsci’s Modern Prince Robeson argued that “today the enemies of labor control the working apparatus of the state. They have to be removed This can only be done by seeing that we put into power those who represent a political party which has the deep interests of the people at heart” (1978, p. 189). This explains his support for the Progressive party in 1948.

Second, Robeson remained to the end of his life a steadfast supporter of the Soviet Union, refusing to abandon his faith in that country’s ability to fight colonialist expansion across the globe. He frequently contrasted favorably the respectful personal treatment he received in the Soviet Union with that received in the United States and sent his own son Paul to school in the Soviet Union. In the midst of World War II his statements supporting the Soviet Union were much in the mainstream of progressive opinion. In acknowledging the Soviet Union’s stand against fascism many people agreed with Robeson that, “this brave people ... can with our deep and lasting gratitude accept the honor of having (in great part) saved our civilization” (1978, p. 137). Five years later, as the chilly winds of the cold war began to blow, Robeson regarded the turn against the Soviet Union as a clear instance of ideological manipulation. In his view the campaign against the Soviet Union was emblematic of a wider campaign to keep colonial peoples, and African Americans, in a state of subjection. Hence, “the ‘Stop Russia’ cry really means – stop the advance of the colonial peoples of Asia and Africa toward independence; stop the organized workers of America from trying to hold their ground against their profit greedy employers; stop the Negro people from voting, and joining trade unions in the South. ‘Stop Russia’ means – *stop progress* – maintain the status quo. It means – let the privileged few continue to rule and thrive at the expense of the masses” (1978, p. 170).

Robeson often used two quotes in his speeches and interviews, both of which capture important elements of his personality and practice. The first is Frederick Douglass’ aphorism that power never gives up its control and authority voluntarily – it must always be confronted, opposed and resisted for any change to occur. Robeson loved to quote this in support of his urging the need for militant Black organizations and also Black participation in a radical trade union movement. It also explains his conviction that the artist must always use his or her position to advance the interests of subjugated peoples. The second is Marx’s comment on the US civil war that labor with a white skin can never be free while labor with a black skin is branded. This underscores his belief that a Black-White working class alliance, under the leadership of Black and White activists, represented the best chance for America to realize the democratic dream.

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