

## **Cultural Diplomacy in Times of Trouble: The ‘Real Ambassadors’ of Cold War America**

**Key words:** Pan-African, cultural diplomacy, class, anti-imperialism, transnationalism, multiculturalism, Cold War, postcolonial, culture transfers

*This paper addresses the issue of cultural diplomacy and individual transporters of cultural beliefs, values and ways of thinking, in ‘times of trouble’ or international discord. From the case of Paul Robeson, African-American actor, writer and singer, we learn that the values which challenge national narratives or foreign policy are often perceived as threatening during ‘times of trouble’. In this case, Robeson’s work also represents a very real transnational exchange which outlived its Cold War encounters.*

The onslaught of the Cold War marked a turning point not only in American foreign policy, but the language of American national identity and questions of citizenship, constitutional rights, and ‘belonging’. A distinct ‘Cold War ideology’ was manifested institutionally and politically in the House on Un-American Activities Committee, which struggled during the 1950s to root out any individual, organisation or movement which it considered threatening to domestic security, to America’s international position, or the ideology underpinning its institutions. Growing ‘McCarthyism’ and the rise of HUAC in the 1950s created an environment of suspicion, finger-pointing and fear, in which individuals and groups who displayed symptoms of cultural, political or ideological resistance to foreign and domestic policies were labeled ‘Un-American’. Institutional McCarthyism in this way produced a side effect of the Cold War in which a nation policed its own territory in an attempt to secure a stronger and more unified society, pitted against that of the USSR.

Actor, singer and writer Paul Robeson, in the eyes of McCarthy, belonged to a group of young artists and diplomats, who had placed themselves outside of the ‘American experience’ and who, by returning to America, posed the strongest threat to a unified American society.<sup>1</sup> Not content with the limited opportunities which the would-be American ‘melting pot’ could offer a young African-American, Paul Robeson had allegedly gone against this society and country by defending his right to travel, work abroad, and to choose his political philosophies as he wished. This

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts From Senate Proceedings on Senator Joe McCarthy's Speech Relating to Communists in the State Department, West Virginia Archives and History, Division of Culture and History, *Congressional Record*, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, February 20, 1950.

society, however, was the society which Robeson had experienced in a very different way than Joe McCarthy- as oppressive, segregated, unequal- politically, culturally and legally. In a society in which race often determined class, Robeson represented the voice of discontent, which although it spoke often, was rarely heard at political levels.

In the Pan-African tradition of the generation which had moulded him, Paul Robeson echoed the pages of the *Crisis* and the *Messenger*; yet the Cold War backdrop against which his voice was heard shaped the many responses to his dissent; particularly to his self-fashioned image as a diplomatic for disenfranchised African-Americans. In June 1919, Robeson's speech at Rutgers College had marked the end of the First World War, evoking the hope felt by working-class African Americans before the Great Depression took hold. Robeson declared:

'To-day we feel that America has proved true to her trust...In the fulfilment of our country's duty to civilization, in its consecrating of all resources to the attainment of the ideal America, in the triumph of right over the forces of autocracy, we see the development of a new spirit, a new motive power in American life.'<sup>2</sup>

This speech demonstrated the way in which the First World War, in which many African Americans fought, was perceived as a collective experience which contrasted that of young white Americans of the 'tragic' Lost Generation. The freedom to travel and represent the nation, if only on the condition of military service, seemed to Robeson to be a social recognition of citizenship, as did the ability to defend, rather than submit to, one's nation.

However, in 1950 Robeson, after touring the UK, Europe and Soviet Russia as an actor and singer, was targeted by the House on Un-American Activities Committee as a proponent of communism, of subversive culture; in other words, a danger to the image of America abroad. As a result, Robeson's passport was revoked, and his ability to find employment altered by the accusations. In 1952 the State Department submitted a brief to the Court of Appeals hearing which claimed that Robeson's passport had been revoked on the basis of his alleged Communist affiliations, and not his race, yet also attacked his connection to 'anti-imperial' networks:

'even if...the passport was cancelled solely because of the applicant's recognized status as spokesman for large sections of Negro Americans, we submit that this would not amount to an abuse of discretion in view of appellant's frank admission that he has been for years extremely active politically on behalf of independence of the colonial people of Africa.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Robeson, "The New Idealism." Rutgers College Valedictory Address, June 10, 1919, in *The Targum*, vol. 50, 1918-19, p. 570

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 64

In 1958, eight years after his passport had been revoked by the, Paul Robeson finished writing *Here I Stand*, a reaction to his Cold War experiences. Robeson described his confrontations with the State Department, the courts of justice and other state institutions, ironically highlighting that their members claimed to protect and serve ‘the free world’ in which democracy, equality, and economic freedom were accessible to all- in theory if not in practise. Robeson controversially stated ‘our country is much less democratic in 1957 than it was in 1847’, portraying the State Department’s confiscation of passports as ‘a return to slavery’ which reverted the position of the African-American citizen to a politically and socially subjugated status.<sup>4</sup> In questioning the right to prevent the individual, regardless of race or class, from travelling, Robeson challenged what he saw as the State Department’s unjustifiable breach of individual rights, which was secondarily upheld by the U.S. courts system. A lack of evidence connecting Robeson to ‘Communist’ organizations, or exposing him as anything other than a spokesperson for Pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism, meant that the State Department were forced to restrict his travel on the grounds that he posed a domestic threat to US ‘race relations.’ African-American support for African nationalism in countries which were allegedly in danger of ‘falling’ to Communism could, they purported, divide American society and weaken the national Cold War effort. The developing Cold War ideology, underpinned by McCarthyism, supported a growing suspicion of anti-imperial organizations (such as the League Against Imperialism) and developments in colonial Africa.

On appearing before the House on Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, Robeson struggled to explain the distinct differences between supporting African nationalism and acting as an ambassador for the USSR, to a committee which embraced McCarthy’s idea of the ‘enemy within’ at the peak of its influence. Using evidence from FBI investigations, the House pinpointed what it perceived to be a risk to internal security, including ‘cultural’ threats to foreign policy which often converged with the preoccupations driving domestic policy. Feared for their Communist blacklists, the House fell from grace only when its unpopularity reached the media in connection to the Women’s Strike for Peace, which became their target in 1962. Baker of the *New York Times* declared they had emerged from the incident ‘covered with foolishness’, commenting wryly that ‘if the House Un-American

Activities Committee knew its Greek as well as it knows its Lenin, it would have left the women peace strikers alone.’<sup>5</sup> However, against the Cold War backdrop even the ‘National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’ were loathe to oppose HUAC and defend the alleged Communists, fearing they would be labelled or investigated in the same manner.

Robeson, still struggling to regain his passport after six years, invoked the Fifth Constitutional Amendment at one HUAC hearing and refused to sign an affidavit stating that he was not a Communist, which the House took as evidence of guilt. Robeson later stated that his refusal to sign the affidavit did not imply his guilt, but rather was a gesture of defiance against the violation of Constitutional Rights ‘involved in the making of such inquiries.’<sup>6</sup> His move outraged the HUAC council, as the Fifth Amendment could not be used to infer guilt in a criminal proceeding and, as Robeson put it himself, had ‘nothing to do with criminality.’<sup>7</sup> However, this hearing did expose the racial prejudice influencing the proceedings, which broached the question of equality and justice in the mechanisms of state institutions set up to root out ‘Un-Americanism’. Indeed, it revealed the very problem of race, citizenship, and ‘belonging’ in American debates which Cold War ideology had redefined. When tackling Francis Walter, Chairman of the Committee at the hearing, Robeson accused him of passing racist immigration legislation (in reference to the Walter-McCarran Immigration Act passed by Congress after the war) to which Walter replied ‘We are trying to make it easier to get rid of your kind, too.’<sup>8</sup> The evidence from the hearing raises certain questions about the impartiality of the Committee towards racial minorities, particularly individuals such as Robeson who repeatedly questioned their authority and appealed to the Courts to overturn their decisions.

These events coincided not only with the early Civil Rights Movement, but with the Cold War international jazz tours of Louis Armstrong and his band; famously funded by the U.S. State Department in order to promote the image of the ‘melting

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (London, 1988), p. 69

<sup>5</sup> Amy Swerdlow, ‘Ladies’ Day at the Capitol: Women’s Strike for Peace Versus HUAC’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982), p. 505

<sup>6</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 39

<sup>7</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of U.S. Passports*, 84th Congress, Part 3, June 12, 1956; in Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968* (New York, 1971), p. 770.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*.

pot' underpinning the American identity and counteract the international media's growing portrayal of the U.S. as segregated and scarred by social inequalities. Armstrong's improvisation of the 'Real Ambassadors' musical selected by the State Department caused some concern among the diplomatic and administrative officials with whom he travelled:

I'm the real ambassador!  
It is evident I was sent by government to take your place,  
All I do is play the blues and meet the people face to face;  
I'll explain and make it plain I represent the human race,  
And don't pretend no more!  
Who's the real ambassador?  
Certain facts we can ignore;  
In my humble way I'm the USA!  
Though I represent the government,  
The government don't represent  
Some policies I'm for!

Although many white Americans were also targeted by the House on Un-American Activities Committee and were dispossessed of their passports, HUAC often targeted movements and organisations whose membership was made up of individuals from racial minority groups. Echoing Senator McCarthy's 'guilty by association' ideology, HUAC condemned many organisations which were guilty by association to communism through race alone, against the backdrop of the global Cold War. The first indications of 'redbaiting' were to be found in the 1948 election campaign, during which Truman took on 'reds, phonies, and parlor pinks', making 'guilt by association' a viable political weapon.<sup>9</sup> In 1947, HUAC condemned the Civil Rights Congress of which Robeson was a member, declaring it a 'Communist front organisation'<sup>10</sup> despite having very few openly Communist members. In the same year, they 'identified the SCHW as one of many Communist fronts'<sup>11</sup> even though it

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<sup>9</sup> William Issel, *Social Change in the United States 1945- 1983* (London, 1985), p. 194

<sup>10</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The radical roots of civil rights 1919-1950* (New York, 2008), p. 435

<sup>11</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (North Carolina, 1990), p. 225

had emerged after the war as a ‘more seasoned black civil rights organisation’<sup>12</sup> with little or no Communist connections.

HUAC investigations were used by politicians to brand movements which they considered to be Un-American as ‘communist’, even when there were no distinct connections, such as Republican Senator Goldwater’s ‘campaign against creeping socialism.’<sup>13</sup> This, according to C. Vann Woodward writing in the 1950s, was a reaction to Cold War Soviet propaganda which ‘made a strong, powerfully organised and concerted- if somewhat blundering- drive to alienate the Negro from his faith in American institutions, to destroy his hope for justice under segregation, and to win over his allegiance to the revolutionary cause.’<sup>14</sup> Whether this was the case or not, this claim was echoed in President Eisenhower’s reaction to the 1957 Little Rock School crisis, demonstrating that both the Government and the President were aware of their international audience. As Eisenhower stated, ‘our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our nation.’<sup>15</sup> Coinciding with HUAC’s allegations of a surge of Un-Americanism in US society (Robeson being proof of its threat), a flare of anti-Americanism emanated particularly from the medias of African colonial states, increasing Washington’s fear that these new states would ‘fall’ to communism. The *West African Pilot* newspaper observed in 1953: ‘We know no more about Communism than what its American and British detractors have pushed across to us as propaganda. We feel that all this talk of the so-called “free world” and ‘iron curtain’ is a camouflage to fool and bamboozle colonial peoples.’<sup>16</sup> Deeply disturbed by the lack of international support for U.S. foreign policy, the Government redirected its attention to its international reputation in a bid to regain its status as the ‘defender of democracy’, apparent in the funding of the Jazz Tours in the 1950s and 1960s.

A hidden history of the intersection between this international stage and the national encounter between the State Department and Civil Rights Movement can be seen in the case of Paul Robeson. The use of ‘guilty by association’ tactics ultimately led to fears of being associated not only with international Communism but with the

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<sup>12</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 222

<sup>13</sup> William Issel, *Social Change in the United States 1945- 1983* (London, 1985), p. 194

<sup>14</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford, 1955), p. 133

<sup>15</sup> ‘Text of the Address by the President of the United States, delivered from his office at the White House’, Tuesday, September 24, 1957 (Seminar Documents- Civil Rights, Week 7)

<sup>16</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 37

‘Un-American’ element in US society. Witness to HUAC’s blacklisting and ‘redbaiting’, the NAACP were reluctant to get involved in Robeson’s case because of the association with communism, fearing that it would irrevocably damage their own international reputation. The association between socialism and Civil Rights was strongest in the inter-war period when the Communist Party was renowned for its African-American membership, especially in Harlem and Alabama. However, even in the 1930s, animosity was present between the NAACP and Alabama Communist Party, the former stating that ‘this radical organisation, in its march of destruction of the Social Order, knows no Color Line.’<sup>17</sup> This domestic struggle was manifested again during the Cold War, when organisations such as the Urban League and NAACP attempted to distance themselves from any associations with Communism and its supporters, who had ‘the taint of unreliability’.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Paul Robeson and his longstanding support for the global ‘Pan-African’ struggle, the Civil Rights organisations, caught up in a campaign to obtain legislation concerning urban desegregation, were reluctant to lend support to his personal crisis in the 1950s, fearing the association would lead to loss of vital presidential support on Civil Rights issues such as desegregation and voting rights. However, support for Robeson was shown within the pages of African American-edited newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which stated in 1956: ‘There is a great fear that he would embarrass the U.S. abroad in regard to the Negro question. This is sheer foolishness... What on earth could Robeson say that has not already been said about these sad affairs?’<sup>19</sup> Yet this inherently Cold War fear of showing support for an alleged Communist became symptomatic of what Martin Duberman calls ‘the politics of exclusion.’<sup>20</sup> This politics was, in the Cold War context, intrinsic to the idea of Un-Americanism which re-defined American national identity and citizenship. One historian concludes it was the ‘efficacy’ of Cold War ideology which led to the demise of socialism in post-war America; ideology which was ‘anchored in racist reaction, xenophobia...and the unmitigated use of legal and extralegal coercion.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 109

<sup>18</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Illinois, 1983), p. 314

<sup>19</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 43

<sup>20</sup> Martin Duberman, *Left Out. The Politics of Exclusion: Essays 1964-2002* (Massachusetts, 2002), p.

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<sup>21</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 227

Interestingly, the wave of victory culture which followed the Second World War was obscured in the 1950s by a growing fear that the ‘domino theory’ would become a global reality. Paul Robeson, active in the American Peace Mobilization which opposed entry into the Second World War, interpreted the war as a ‘western imperial war’ which was draining colonies of their resources. These pacifist tendencies were again manifested during the Cold War. In 1949, shortly after Mao consolidated Communist China, Robeson spoke out against the Cold War at the World Peace Conference in Paris, three years after being called to a legislative hearing in California in 1946 to testify that he was not a Communist. His speech in Paris led indirectly to HUAC labelling him a Communist and an ‘enemy within.’ Testifying before the Committee in 1956, Robeson attempted to clarify that in Paris he had not referred to ‘America’s negroes’ but to the ‘900 million other colored people [that] told you they will not go to war with the Soviet Union...The colored people are not going to die for anybody; they are going to die for their independence.’<sup>22</sup> This anti-imperial speech was used as proof of his alleged attempts to stir anti-American sentiment and encourage dissent among African-Americans at home and ‘colonial peoples’<sup>23</sup> abroad.

HUAC also used Robeson’s friendships with notorious communists such as Communist Party leader Benjamin Davis and the blacklisted Max Yergen, employing the ‘guilty by association’ psychology. Robeson’s pre-war decision to send his son, Paul Robeson Jr., to school in Soviet Russia, was also cited as ‘one of the reasons for why he was denied his passport.’<sup>24</sup> Although Robeson testified in 1946 that he was not a Communist and later stated in 1958 ‘I am not and never have been involved in any international conspiracy or any other kind, and do not know anyone who is’,<sup>25</sup> the damage to his international acting and writing career was perceptible; the media boycott of his autobiography when it was published in 1958 being only one example of the hearing’s long-term effects.

Contentious questions of citizenship, enfranchisement and national identity, not to mention other Civil Rights concerns, were directly at stake in Robeson’s case.

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<sup>22</sup> Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of U.S. Passports*, 84th Congress, Part 3, June 12, 1956; in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968*, Eric Bentley, ed. (New York, 1971), p. 770.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>24</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 36

Prioritizing 'race' over 'nationality' in the Pan-African tradition was unacceptable within the framework of American Cold War ideology, which integrated some aspects of foreign and domestic policies in a bid to secure a 'united front' that would ideally withstand Soviet propaganda's attacks on the idea of the American 'melting pot'. Robeson's speeches made in London, Moscow and Paris, appeared to the State Department to be an attack on the U.S. image abroad. In the eyes of the State Department, Robeson posed a threat to America's international reputation when he spoke publicly about the differences between living within the confines of a racial identity in 'Jim Crow America', and travelling as a professional actor in Soviet Russia. Confessing that he had been reluctant to return to America after living abroad, repelled by the racial discrimination and segregation which awaited him back in the U.S., Robeson also stated that he had returned to America because 'my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay right here and be a part of it, just like you.'<sup>26</sup>

Robeson represented a generation of 'undiplomatic diplomats' and Pan-Africanists, whose experiences of Cold War America combined with 'Jim Crow' legal discrimination led them to question the very systems and institutions which made up the governing body of the nation state. The philosophies of Marcus Garvey, who in 1920 stated that 'what we want is an independent African nationality, and if America is to help the Negro peoples of the world establish such a nationality, then we welcome the assistance'<sup>27</sup>, had not been completely forgotten. Yet this sentiment was temporarily replaced by an inclination to question what being 'African-American' meant, particularly with regards to the effects of American military intervention in developing states, even within Africa itself.

The Civil Rights' opposition to 'the politics of exclusion' which underpinned the American identity marked a new epoch for the 'Real Ambassadors' of Cold War America. Robeson was, after eight years, returned his passport in 1958, when the Supreme Court ruled that it was unlawful to restrict a citizen's right to travel.<sup>28</sup> However, Robeson's case is merely one of many which highlight the prejudice underpinning institutions such as the House on Un-American Activities Committee. In conclusion, it could be suggested that this institution was fundamentally self-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>26</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 48

<sup>27</sup> Marcus Garvey, 'Africa for the Africans' in *The Messenger*, September 1920, as reproduced in *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 84

defeating, as it damaged not only America's reputation of 'democratic liberalism' abroad, but the faith of citizens in the institutions framing their national justice and political systems. In the context of the Cold War, when two nations clashed on ideological grounds, 'the eyes of the nation' were on the 'Real Ambassadors', while the 'eyes of the world' were turned towards the nations in question. Robeson's claim that an African-American citizen could be treated with respect and equality in a country to which his own was opposed on moral grounds, was indeed not a reality which Washington wanted to project onto the screen of the Iron Curtain.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, p. 119

<sup>29</sup> Robeson states in *Here I Stand*, p. 48, that on his visits to the Soviet Union, he 'felt for the first time like a full human being- no color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington.'

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