

1950s American Ideology Witch Hunt and Art Censorship: Case of Black Celebrity Actor Paul Robeson*

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[Abstract]

The 1950s was a period of ‘Great Expectations’ for the United States, both politically and economically. Faced with a new phase of the world order called the Cold War, the US replaced Britain’s glory and position in the past and emerged as a representative and real power of Western Democracy. In addition, the 1950s was one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth in the US history. Accordingly, American citizens had a growing sense of pride that they ‘were’ the members of the world’s strongest and wealthiest nation. The 1950s is remembered as one of the best times in American history, and such optimistic sentiments were confirmed in the realms of reality as well as mass media of television dramas and magazines. On the other hand, American citizens turned into a silent generation insensitive to the problems in reality, and the United States turned to a conservative society dominated by the anti-Communist ideology of McCarthyism. In this regard, the 1950s America also tells a different story. This decade was the worst time for an American citizen

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Paul Robeson (1898-1976) who was a celebrity actor and activist. In the 1950s, this public figure met a reversal of fate especially in the face of the prevailing anti-Communist sentiment. His passport was cancelled, and this ‘American’ celebrity was classified as an ‘Un-American’ reactionary. This paper traces the case of racial and art censorship brought by American political ideology in the 1950s, focusing on the personal history of the African American artist Paul Robeson.

Key Words: Paul Robeson, McCarthyism, Ideology, Witch Hunt, Art Censorship

I. 1950s America, Best and Worst of Times

The 1950s, the first decade after World War II, was a period of ‘Great Expectations’ for the United States, both politically and economically. In the face of a new world order called the Cold War, the US emerged as a representative and real power of Western Democracy, replacing Britain’s glory and position in the past and claiming to be the World’s Police. Also, the US at the time was filled with great expectations for the economy. The revitalization of the domestic economy following the end of the wartime economic situation led to the smooth domestic circulation of capital and goods. The stabilization of the domestic economy led to an increase in corporate profits and household income and consumption, which in turn was reinvested to create additional profits and income growth, enabling a virtuous cycle of the economy. Among the American citizens was accordingly a growing sense of national pride and collective sentiment that they ‘were’ members of the world’s strongest and wealthiest nation and they ‘should be’ first-class citizens. These expectations were felt and confirmed in the realm of reality. For example, the 1950s was one of the

longest periods of sustained economic growth in the American history.

The stability of the household economy also brought about changes in the ideal, shape, character, and expectations of the family. As the husband's income alone made it possible for an average middle-class family to live, it was common for the husband to take full responsibility for the livelihood and for the wife to take charge of housekeeping and child-rearing without the burden of economic activities. In pursuit of quality of life, many families moved to quiet suburbs farther than busy city life, forming bed towns. As the workplace moved away from home, the number of automobile commuters increased. The distinction between work and rest became clearer as much as the distance between the workplace and home, and it became a natural routine for the whole family to travel in a family car during the holiday season. Economic prosperity contributed to enriching the emotional part of the family as well as the material aspects and lifestyles. The 1950s, in particular, was a time when social expectations for the value the family ties were greatly emphasized in the US, and the family was regarded as the symbolic and literal epicenter of social and national togetherness.

This image of the family was a staple in contemporary television dramas. A popular TV drama *Father Knows Best* (1953), which recorded the highest viewer ratings in the US at that time, demonstrates this social atmosphere. This drama deals with the everyday life of a family consisting of the husband who is an insurance company executive, his wife, and three children, and introduces the ideal model of a white middle-class family: hardworking and competent father, thoughtful and caring mother, good children who are faithful to school life. The husband helps his wife with the housework, and the whole family ends the day at the dinner table sharing their worries and thoughts. With common-sense and advice from the mother, her children's troubles are quickly resolved. The children enjoy social activities such as

prom nights and dance parties at school, and dream of a job and marriage after graduation.

An article in the 1954 issue of *Reader's Digest*, a middle-class magazine, captures the expectations of American middle-class families in the 1950s. The article reads:

The average American male stood 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighed 158 pounds. He liked brunettes, baseball, bowling, and steak and French fries. In seeking a wife, he could not decide if brains or beauty was more important but he definitely wanted a wife who could run a home efficiently. The average female was 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 132 pounds. She preferred marriage to career, but she wanted to remove the word "obey" from her marriage vows. Both were enjoying life to the fullest and buying more of nearly everything. (Qtd. Berkin 637)

The article reflects the economic status and environment of the 1950s America, when all sectors of employment, wages, production, consumption, and profit creation were apparently active and abundant. Such economic stability led to the expectations for government and politics. In 1952, Republican politician Dwight David Eisenhower was elected as the 34th president of the United States, which put an end to 20 years of Democratic Party's rule and ushered in an era of conservative administration. Republicans hoped President Eisenhower would put a brake on the threat of socialism and communist forces. And most citizens did not doubt that the Republican-dominated congress would alleviate government intervention in the economy and society in general, and that the United States would lead the Cold War era to victory.

Likewise, the 1950s is remembered as one of the best times in American history. If the 1920s, first decade after World War I, was the 'Roaring Twenties', then the US in the 1950 witnessed another post-war golden age called the 'Time of Great

Expectation'. While enjoying the pervasive well-being and satisfactory environment in the present, most of US citizens especially young adults were soaked in optimism for the future and consequently insensitive or ignorant of the problems of reality. They became the Silent Generation who were keeping quiet and staying safe. This was in contrast to the post-war British situation where young people were upset by government and politicians who repeatedly failed in economic, social and welfare policies, and eventually became the Anger Generation.¹⁾

On the other hand, the 1950s can be an era of different stories for someone, and was the worst time at least for an American citizen. Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was an artist, lawyer, star athlete, and social activist. He was also a talented singer and actor. He was the first professional concert singer in history to use Black spirituals. Robeson was the first major African American actor to play the role of Othello, the tragic Moor in Shakespeare's play.²⁾ However, this celebrity actor who was gaining popularity and success, faced a reversal of fate in the 1950s, especially in the face of the anti-Communist sentiments of McCarthyism that prevailed in the US Congress and then throughout American society. The 'American' public figure came to be classified as an 'Un-American' reactionary. In August 1950, the US State Department canceled his passport. What happened to him? This paper examines the case of racial and art censorship brought by American political ideology in the 1950s, focusing on the personal history of African American actor Paul Robeson.

II. A Portrait of a Young Artist

Paul Robeson was born the fifth of seven brothers in Princeton, New Jersey, on April 9, 1898. His father, William Drew Robeson, preached as a minister of the

African Methodist Episcopal churches. He was a runaway slave who escaped from Virginia through the Underground Railroad at the age of 15. He then went on to higher education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. His mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, was born in one of the oldest black families in America. Also she was the daughter of a Quaker family who helped to abolish slavery. Having heard of the lives of parents and family ancestors and witnessing them, Paul Robeson naturally grew a deep sense of belongings to 'his' people and ancestry from childhood:

Here I was proud of my aunts, uncles, and cousins. I loved them, treasured them. They were strong and kind, descendants of our African forebears, wonderful representatives of the black and brown people of the world. (P. Robeson 1978: 315)

In 1915, 17-year-old Paul Robeson entered the Rutgers University with a full, four-year scholarship. He was the third black student in Rutgers history, and the only black during his stay at the school. Robeson was an extraordinary student in almost every field. Above all, he was a star athlete. He was twice named to the College Football All-American team, the first Black All-Americans in Rutgers history (Baraka 13). He graduated as valedictorian of his class at Rutgers in 1919. Shortly after graduation, Robeson moved to Harlem, New York, where he entered Columbia Law School. Since his father died in 1918, Robeson had been financing himself by working as a professional football player on the weekends and as a postal clerk. During these years Robeson met his future wife Eslanda Goode, the first black analytical chemist to work at Columbia Medical Center (Baraka 14). At Columbia University, Robeson was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s. During this period, Robeson made his first connection to theatre, and in 1921 he made his debut as a title role in a play produced by the Harlem YMCA.

Robeson graduated from Columbia Law School in 1923 with honors, and worked for a law firm in New York for several months. However, due to racial discrimination, he had difficulty finding a job. Eventually he gave up his career as a lawyer, and his choice was to design a second life in the field of theatre and music where he could demonstrate his artistic talents. In 1922, Robeson took his first step as a professional actor by appearing in the stage production of Augustine Duncan's play *The Taboo*. In 1924, he joined the Provincetown Players troupe in Greenwich Village, where he starred in Eugene O'Neill's play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. By that time Robeson had completely stopped his lawyer career. He then appeared in several plays including *The Emperor Jones* (1925), *Black Boy* (1928), *Porgy* (1928), *Show Boat* (1928), *Othello* (1930), *The Hairy Ape* (1931), and *Stevodore* (1935). He also appeared in 11 films including *Body and Soul* (1924), *Borderline* (1929), *Song of Freedom* (1937), and *Proud Valley* (1939). In 1925, Robeson expanded his career as a singer, and his concert in New York was a big hit. In 1928, he settled with his wife in London for several years, where he built up his career as artist. In particular, the acting of *Othello* at the Savoy Theatre gave him an international acclaim and recognition.³⁾

The 1930s, after he settled in London, was a significant turning point for Robeson. During this period Robeson embraced his historical, cultural, and spiritual homeland Africa. Accordingly he developed self-consciousness about the African heritage that led to the scene of the African-American diaspora. On the contrary, he rejected the white supremacy. This led to the process of growing into a perception of the violence of power suppressing the universal value of humanity. Traveling the world and continuing his performances, Robeson began to reveal himself as a social activist, speaking out for worker's rights, racial equality, and peace. For instance, he criticized the Nazi's abuse of Jews in Europe.

In 1934 Robeson visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of the film director Sergei Eisenstein. It was a moment when Robson faced a turning point that would lead to political moves and completely change his fate and future. This visit gave him a basis for deep love and friendship for this ‘land of socialism’ that had been the ideological enemy to the United States. Robeson stated that he felt “like a human being for the first time” in the Soviet Union and that he was “not a black, but a human being with full human dignity” in this country (Schlosser 76; Seton 94-95; Evans 1987; King 2011).

I hesitated to come, I listened to what everybody had to say, but I didn't think this would be nay different from any other place. But—manbe you'll understand—I feel like a human being for the first time since I grew up. Here I am not a Negro but a human being... Here, for the first time in my life I walk in full human dignity. (P. Robseson 1978: 94-96)

In 1937 Robeson joined the Spanish Civil War against the fascist dictator Francisco Franco. At an anti-fascist rally, he addressed, “the artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative” (Brookfield 219; P. Robeson 1988: 52; S. Robeson 60).

The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of the capitalist era is characterized by the degradation of my people: despoiled of their lands, their true culture destroyed... denied equal protection of the law, and deprived their rightful place in the respect of their fellows. (S. Robeson 60)

III. Ideological Witch Hunt and Censorship

During World War II Robeson supported the United States' war effort, which is understood in the same context of the anti-fascist position he expressed during the Spanish Civil War. However, the anti-communist sentiment that prevailed in the US was rather disadvantageous to Robson and brought him a difficult time. He was watched by the FBI for his previous visit to Soviet Union and his pro-Soviet remarks there. His progressive attitude and actions resulted in his being branded as a 'subversive'. Accordingly, a campaign to silence and discredit Robeson was launched. Especially, his 1934 visit to the Soviet Union began to raise the suspicion that he was involved in the organization of the Communist Party in the US. The suspicion of 'pro-communist' followed him like a tag and his image of star athlete and entertainer was severely hurt. Through the late 1940s and the 1950s his life as a public figure and celebrity was almost ruined.

In 1946, Robeson was called before the congressional committee, where he expressed his position on the investigation committee's suspicion of his involvement with the Communist Party organization in the US. Regardless of his explanation, a full-scale censorship of his artistic activities was followed. In 1947, his concert in Peoria, Illinois, was banned, and a contract to use a local mosque as performing venue was abruptly cancelled. Robeson planned the show again at Peoria City Hall, but the mayor refused it. Another performance scheduled for next month at a high school auditorium in Albany, New York, was also cancelled after the local board of education rejected the approval. 1949 was the year that the campaign against Robeson reached its climax. On June 20, while traveling to Europe, Robeson gave a speech at the World Peace Conference in Paris. Here, he declared:

We in America do not forget that it was on the backs of the white workers from Europe and on the backs of millions of Blacks that the wealth of America was built. And we are resolved to share it equally. We reject any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone. Our will to fight for peace is strong. We shall not make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union. We oppose those who wish to build up imperialist Germany and to establish fascism in Greece. We wish peace with Franco's Spain despite her fascism. We shall support peace and friendship among all nations, with Soviet Russia and the people's Republics. (P. Robeson 2001: 142-143)

Robson's anti-war rhetoric in this statement was largely distorted and misquoted by US newspapers. His Especially the wording 'we shall not make war on the Soviet Union' caused reactions "raging from surprise to shock to anger" among the press and media (Beeching 341). The *New York Times* commented that Robeson was suffering from "twisted thinking" (Cygan 90; Perucci 19). Columnist Earl Brown called Robeson "just plain screwy" (Duberman 343; Perucci 19). Robeson was blacklisted as a dangerous person in American mainstream media. The US State Department came to doubt his loyalty as a US citizen. While Robeson was in Europe, the US government imprisoned suspected communist members, including Robeson's acquaintances, artists and social activists. Robeson was banned from visiting his family home in Enfield, Connecticut. He denounced the government's oppressive measures through human rights organizations, such as the Council on African Affairs that he had helped to found, and the Civil Rights Congress where he was vice-chairman. These two organizations were immediately subject to surveillance and investigation by the US government and were subsequently classified as 'subversive' groups.

Despite the oppression, Robeson continued the concerts. However, his concerts were attacked by white mobs while the police at the venue just watched it without

any action. Two outdoor concerts at Peekskill, New York, are the good examples. The first concert, scheduled for August 27, 1949, was intended as a tribute to African-American and Jewish unionists. A group of American Legion members and local anti-communists threw stones at the crowded audience and the event was canceled. The concert was rescheduled on September 4, and this time over 25,000 people from New York City and the northeastern regions crowded to hear Robeson's songs. During the concert, some 2,500 trade unionists and veterans formed a protective guard to block the agitators while Robeson was singing. However, after the concert, the audience on their way home was assaulted by the mobs. The police refused to intervene this time again, and rather assisted the attackers. Obviously both concertgoers and protesters acted in the belief that they needed to defend American values. What was contested in Peekskill was nothing but "the very nature of American democracy" (Walwik 71).

After the Peekskill concerts and the riots, the organizational move to suppress and intimidate Robeson became even more severe. Both civilian and public organizations participated in this campaign. The press and media censored Robeson's words and actions. For instance, New York's *Herald Tribune* reproached the violence in Peekskill by saying, "American cannot be defended by aimless violence or riotous demonstrations" as "Communists thrive in such an atmosphere of chaos." The *Evening Star's* coverage was full of negative references of the Peekskill riot such as "subversive," "Communist front," and "Russia-loving Negro" (qtd. Walwik 79). All major concert halls across the country closed their door to him. His recordings were blacklisted and quickly disappeared from the stores.

IV. Deprivation of Citizenship and Life

In 1950, Robeson's passport renewal was denied. The US State Department asked him to sign an affidavit confirming that he was not a Communist himself and would be loyal to the nation as a US citizen. Robeson rejected it and filed a lawsuit in the federal court. In August of the year, a federal judge ruled that the US State Department has the legal rights to refuse to renew Robeson's passport. Unable to travel abroad, Robeson had to cancel all overseas performance contracts, and his income, which reached 104,000 dollars in 1947, dropped to 2,000 dollars in 1950.

In 1956, Robeson was summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). The committee was created in 1938 at the US House of Representatives to investigate disloyalty and subversive activities on the part of private citizens, public employees, and those organizations suspected of having Fascist and Communist ties. The committee's investigations led to a massive campaign to ferret out alleged communists in the United States from 1950 to 1956. These anti-Communist investigations, often associated with those of US Senator Joseph McCarthy, were called 'Communist Witch Hunt' or 'McCarthyism', reflecting a growing fear of Communism spreading through America, known as the 'Red Scare'.

Robeson was also not free from the witch hunt. At the hearings of HUAC, he refused to reveal his political affiliations based on the Fifth Amendment. When asked why he had not remained in the Soviet Union if he had affinity with its political ideology, he replied, "because my father was a slave and my people died to build the United States, and I am going to stay here, and have a part just like you" (S. Robeson 205). And he added, "whether I am or not a Communist is irrelevant. The question is whether American citizens, regardless of their political beliefs or

sympathies, may enjoy their constitutional rights” (“Pastors” 631). Finally, Robeson pointed out the unfairness of the committee by saying, “you are the real un-Americans and you ought to be ashamed of yourself” (P. Robeson 1978: 433).

Subsequently Robeson’s passport to travel overseas was revoked. During the years of ‘internal exile’, he cannot accept invitations to perform abroad until his passport was restored in 1958.⁴) However, even in this unfavorable situation, he did not stop the move. He planned telephone concert. He sang for the audience in London and Wales via the transatlantic telephone cable. He stated, “We have to learn the hard way that there is another way to sing” (Howard 2009). After his passport was restored, Robeson moved to Europe and lived there for five years. During the years, he spent his time giving public lectures on world peace. In 1958, he published his autobiography entitled *Here I Stand*, where he recalled the circumstances and reasons why his lifelong mission to win the freedom of black people became the subject of hatred and fear in his home country. However major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* refused to review the autobiography. In 1960, Robeson went on his final concert tour to New Zealand and Australia. In 1963, he retired from public life due to health deterioration. On July 23, 1976, Robeson died in Philadelphia, at age of 78.

V. Conclusion

The cancellation of Robeson’s passport in the 1950s was evidence of the harsh reality facing a promising artist. Deprived of the freedom to travel and the rights as a citizen, Robeson had to live as a non-American, or ‘Un-American’ public enemy. Although his passport was later restored, his life as artist and celebrity had already

been destroyed to an irreversible level. His income dropped from many hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to 3,000 dollars. He had to sell his family house. The case also uncovers the uncomfortable but undeniable truth that the infringement of individual human rights by group values and ideology can be justified. In addition, the case of Robeson, who is one of the greatest yet “most unknown figures of the 20th century” (Rhodes 235) underscores the contradictory structure of American society in which and ‘Great Expectations’ were celebrated while the genuine patriots like Paul Robeson were covered by the censorship and, consequently, the worst life coexisted and was tacitly agreed and concealed by the hegemony of ‘The Best of Times’. On the other hand, Robeson’s life and work suggests a model for “peacebuilding” and embodies “civic courage” to articulate and advocate a vision of civil society through social activism (Fernekes 110). Robeson’s life-long stance like this was outlined in his Rutgers valedictory address: “We of the younger generation especially must feel a sacred call to that which lies before us. I go out to do my little part in helping my untutored brother. We of this less favored race realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands” (P. Robeson 1978: 64).

Notes

- 1) British playwright John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) represents the anti-government sentiment that prevailed in his home country. It depicts the commoners’ disgust and resentment against the chronic social evils which include the deep-rooted class system, the unemployment of highly educated people, the failure of the government’s welfare policies, and the fall of the British empire on which the sun never sets. This play gave Osborne the nicknamed ‘Angry Young Man’, and he became the icon for the British angry young generation of the post-Second World War period.
- 2) Since *Othello* launched in 1604, for more than two centuries, the title role of the tragic Moor had been typically played by white actors beginning with Richard Burbage (1567-1619), the leading actor of Shakespeare’s own company King’s Men, and then Edmund Kean (1787-1833) in the age of Romanticism. In the 19th century, Ira Aldridge (1807-1867) appeared to become the first major actor of African descent to play Othello.

A free black man born in America, he spent most of his career in Europe. In the 20th century, Paul Robeson “assumed the Ira’s mantle by playing Othello” (Ross 2013). In 1930, he appeared on stage as Othello in London’s West End. The production on Broadway, which he starred in the 1943-44 season, remains the longest-running Broadway show of Shakespeare. After Robeson’s commercial and critical success, it became more common for black actors to take the role of Othello (Slights 48).

- 3) Robeson starred as ‘Joe’ in the London production of Jerome Kern’s American musical *Show Boat*, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1928. It was “the first musical to tackle themes as serious as racism and miscegenation in Deep South” (Duchen 2014). Robeson arrived in England in July 1958 again, after his passport restored, invited by the Royal Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford, to play the role of Othello for the opening of the 100th anniversary season. He visited England for the last time in 1963 (Carew 40-43).
- 4) In 1958, Supreme Court, ruling on the case of Kent vs. Dulles, found that “the Secretary of State had no right to deny a passport to any citizen because of his political beliefs” and that “the Passport Division had no right to demand that an applicant sign an affidavit concerning membership in the Communist party” (Duberman 463). As a result, Robeson was returned his passport and the rights to travel. Kent vs. Dulles was a landmark US Supreme Court case on the right to travel and passport restrictions as well as the first case in which the US Supreme Court ruled that the right to travel is a part of the ‘liberty’ of which the citizen cannot be deprived without due process of law under the Fifth Amendment.

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국문초록

1950년대 미국 이데올로기 마녀사냥과 예술 검열: 흑인 배우 폴 로브슨의 개인사를 중심으로

박정만

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2차 세계대전 직후인 1950년대는 미국에게 있어 정치적·경제적으로 희망과 기대의 시기였다. 냉전이라는 새로운 세계질서에 직면한 미국은 과거 영국의 영광을 대신해 서구 민주주의 진영의 새로운 실력자로 부상했다. 또한, 1950년대는 미국 역사상 최장기 지속 경제 성장이 구현된 시기였다. 그 결과 당대 미국 시민들 사이에 세계에서 가장 부강한 국가의 일원이라는 자부심이 팽배했다. 이처럼 1950년대는 미국 역사상 최고의 시대로 기억되며, 이러한 낙관적 정서는 텔레비전 드라마와 중산층 잡지를 비롯한 당대 대중매체 및 현실의 영역에서 확인되었다. 반면 경제적 안정과 안이한 낙관론 속에서 미국 시민들은 현실 문제에 둔감한 침묵의 세대로, 미국은 매카시즘이라는 반공 이데올로기가 지배하는 보수주의 사회로 변모했다. 이와 관련하여 1950년대의 미국은 또 다른 이야기를 들려준다. 이 시기는 유명 배우이자 사회운동가였던 미국 시민 폴 로브슨(Paule Robeson)에겐 최악의 시기였다. 스타 운동선수와 변호사 출신 인기 연기자로 승승장구하던 그는 1950년대 들어, 특히 이 시기 미국 사회에 팽배한 반공주의 환경과 정서에 직면하여 운명의 전환점을 맞았다. 그의 여권이 취소되었고, ‘미국적인’(American) 공인이었던 그는 ‘비미국적인’(un-American) 반동분자로 분류되기에 이르렀다. 본 글은 1950년대 미국의 정치 이데올로기가 초래한 인종·예술 검열 사례를 흑인 예술가 폴 로브슨의 개인사를 중심으로 고찰한다.

주제어 : 폴 로브슨, 매카시즘, 이데올로기, 마녀사냥, 예술 검열

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