

Paul Robeson: The Quintessential Public Intellectual

by

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The following is a lecture presented at the Lafayette College (Easton, PA) 'Paul Robeson Conference', April 7, 2005, as a part of a three-day conference on the history and culture of civil rights and civil liberties.

In *The Last Intellectuals*, published in 1987, historian Russell Jacoby lamented the decline of the tradition of public intellectual expression and its replacement by a narrow and highly specialized academic culture. Jacoby argued persuasively that too many contemporary intellectuals, including many identifying themselves as progressive or Marxist, are comfortably ensconced in universities, where they typically dedicate themselves to narrow academic debates replete with esoteric jargon and minuscule professional audiences. He maintained that this process, which has intensified in the past 21 years, inhibits broader public discourse and redirects intellectual and political energy into increasingly remote forums.

Jacoby also identified many of the robust early and mid 20th century public intellectuals who wrote and spoke to large audiences of politically engaged and intellectually curious citizens. His list included people of different and opposing political ideologies, including H. L. Mencken, Lewis Mumford, Edmund Wilson, Philip Rahv, Paul Goodman, William F. Buckley, Susan Sontag, Betty Friedan, and many others. He also recognized some academics like Sidney Hook, C. Wright Mills, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Noam Chomsky, again among others. *The Last Intellectuals* makes an outstanding contribution to modern intellectual history, encouraging readers to reconsider the American public intellectuals whose cumulative efforts promoted the vigorous and contentious debate that any democratic society requires.

This tradition should also include the vast and still marginalized tradition of African American public intellectualism. Often ignored or slighted in traditional texts, African American intellectuals have regularly brought issues of race and racism to major public attention, all too often to a society reluctant to confront the oppressive and disgraceful treatment of millions of people of African descent.

Such figures as Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many more confronted America with its abysmal record of racism, combining powerful intellectual stature with vigorous and relentless progressive political activism. In recent years, notable academics like Cornel West, Henry Gates, Michael Dyson, Manning Marable, Patricia Williams, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and many others have continued this tradition of socially conscious intellectual expression in settings far beyond their university homes. Hundreds of Black poets, dramatists, novelists, visual artists, filmmakers and other creative figures augment this extensive record, revealing a more comprehensive and impressive history of African American intellectual distinction.

Among the giants of this tradition--arguably *the* giant--was Paul Robeson, whose decades of accomplishments as an athlete, stage and screen actor, singer, orator, and radical civil rights and political activist made him one of the most accomplished human beings in history. After decades of government-instigated obscurity, Robeson's stellar reputation has slowly re-emerged, ending generations of official silence and hostility resulting from his outspoken political radicalism and his disgraceful removal from the historical record during the era of postwar McCarthyism and anticommunist hysteria. In 1998, national and international celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of his birth generated widespread publicity in popular and scholarly venues. Books and articles about Robeson and his times proliferated, offering large audiences the opportunity to learn about the man and his place in American cultural and political history. Thousands of Americans, including college and university students, discovered for the first time the magnificent breadth and depth of Robeson's life and work. Even people who knew of Paul Robeson often discovered other, still hidden dimensions of his life. The belated issuance of a Robeson U.S. postage stamp in 2004 constituted an oblique public apology and stimulated others to explore his multifaceted artistic and political contributions.

The 110th anniversary of his birth affords a magnificent opportunity to build on the resurrection of the Robeson legacy and to expand public knowledge of his work and reputation. It enables scholars and laypersons alike to understand more fully how the foundation for all of Paul Robeson's stellar activities was his deep and lifelong commitment to learning, a quest for intellectual growth fostered and nurtured in early childhood. Everyone who has studied Robeson's life understands the powerful and durable moral, spiritual, and intellectual influence of his father, Rev. William Drew Robeson. A single father after the tragic death of his wife in a fire in 1904, Rev. Robeson inspired all his children to maximize their intellectual potential. For his son Paul, this led to a lifelong love of learning and his successful quest to combine intellectual development with political conviction and activism. In his 1958 memoir and political manifesto, *Here I Stand*, Robeson expressed his deep appreciation:

Reverend Robeson flatly rejected [Booker T.] Washington's concept that Negro education be limited to manual training; he firmly believed that the heights of knowledge must be scaled by the freedom-seeker. Latin, Greek, philosophy, history, literature—all the treasures of learning must be the Negro's heritage as well.

Throughout his life, Paul Robeson took this injunction with the utmost seriousness. During his undergraduate studies at Rutgers University from 1915 to 1918, he distinguished himself academically even while compiling one of the greatest athletic records in American collegiate history. Despite his remarkable accomplishments as an All-American football star and varsity letter winner in baseball, basketball, and track, his overriding commitment involved his intellectual efforts. As Martin Duberman reported in his magisterial biography *Paul Robeson*, young Paul dominated the classroom as well as the athletic fields. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa as a college junior and excelled in oratory and debate; these skills served as the genesis of his lifetime of public political advocacy. For his undergraduate thesis, he wrote about the effect and implications of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. This early student focus on race and civil rights would in time become more radical and militant, but it too served a valuable foundation for his subsequent life of dramatic public intellectualism. And he consistently read widely, including the works of Marx and Engels that would inform his worldview until his death in 1976.

Robeson's decision to enter law school after graduating from Rutgers also contributed to his broad intellectual vision. Initially convinced that legal training would facilitate his interest in advancing the economic, social, and political life of his African American people, he began to lose interest in law and performed somewhat indifferently in his studies. Still, when he entered Columbia Law School, the legal profession remained a "learned" profession and many lawyers retained a strong commitment to broad and extensive reading beyond their own professional training, especially in history and public affairs. Many lawyers at the time were genuine intellectual generalists who combined visions of lifelong learning with their technical expertise in law. Paul Robeson likely shared that perspective even as he moved away from law into his life of stunning artistic accomplishment. This fusion of legal education and broader intellectual vision has largely dissipated in the early 21st century. With a few conspicuous exceptions, law schools are increasingly little more than high level trade schools, producing well-trained technicians to enter and support corporate hegemony in an advanced capitalist and global economy.

The story of Robeson's entry into theatre, the film industry, and the concert stage is well known. Likewise, scholars have amply documented his multifaceted accomplishments in all three areas. The overwhelming consensus is that Robeson was a magnificent stage actor, most dramatically in his groundbreaking performance of Shakespeare's Othello. As a film actor, he brought his powerful personality and magnetic presence to large audiences, establishing him as a pioneering African American figure in American and British film history. He later abandoned his film career because he realized that the industry would continue to emphasize demeaning and stereotypical images of members of his race, in violation of his personal desire to express images of dignity.

And his vocal performances throughout his professional life, both as a concert singer and as a recording artist, were incomparable. Arturo Toscanini's comment about Marian Anderson, that she had a voice that came along "once in a hundred years," is equally applicable to Paul Robeson. Many thousands who heard him either in live performance or on records would remember his stirring singing voice for the rest of their lives.

Underlying his artistic genius was both his profound quest to excel through careful and systematic study and a strong desire to achieve massive distinction in several fields, most notably as a performing artist. Both features reflect major dimensions of his towering intellectual stature. In preparing for Othello, for example, Robeson meticulously read and researched Shakespeare's work and his times. He perfected his use of language for that great tragedy and he brought an impressive intellectual foundation to his dramatic efforts in all his stage performances. Similarly, he prepared with equal seriousness for his motion picture engagements, ensuring that his acting joined with the same commitment to learning that he derived from his father in early childhood.

His long career as a vocalist, however, brought out the fullest meaning and expression of his public intellectualism. In hundreds of concert performances, Paul Robeson did much more than merely to entertain his audiences. He viewed the concert stage as a powerful educational opportunity, a forum to share his growing knowledge of music and foreign cultures with thousands of fortunate listeners. Above all, he used the concert stage to inform and reinforce his audiences' commitment to social commentary and criticism. His concerts were veritable musical tours of the world, offering audiences a first-hand glimpse into the lives, hopes, and aspirations of millions of other people.

When he performed African American spirituals, always a staple in his concerts, he taught his audiences about their deeper significance in the historic Black quest for freedom in America. Frequently, Robeson provided substantial historical insights about these spirituals as well as many personal observations about his own childhood in the black church. In addition, his comprehensive studies in musicology emerged in his prefatory remarks about his concert selections. His songs from other lands allowed him to use his extensive multilingual background to illuminate the struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the globe: Welsh miners, Russian peasants, Czech freedom fighters, Irish revolutionaries, Jewish concentration camp prisoners, and many more. His topical political songs addressed themes of both specific and general significance, from the Spanish Civil War to the eternal pain and suffering of poverty, racism, and other forms of social distress and misconduct. Like those who saw him as he tragic Moor in Othello, few would ever forget a Paul Robeson concert performance.

His decades of artistic excellence revealed a consummate commitment to intellectual breadth and depth. Unlike most talented human beings, he always sought excellence in several fields. His remarkable work in three fields of performance art and the profound knowledge base underlying these efforts made him a Renaissance person of the very highest order. He was comparable to such historical luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Benjamin Franklin, and a very few others in human intellectual history. More modest language about Robeson would be inaccurate and unfair.

This record of great intellectual accomplishment in many fields contrasts strikingly to the more limited stature and impact of most contemporary academic intellectuals. As Russell Jacoby and several other critics of specialized academic discourse have noted, many intellectuals in university settings confine their debates to relatively narrow disciplinary circles and settings. Their controversies, moreover, are frequently limited to their fields of expertise. Suspicious of those who transcend their disciplinary boundaries, they use pejorative labels like “dilettante” and “superficial” to distinguish less “professional” colleagues as well as intellectuals functioning outside of conventional academic environments. They use language to shield themselves from wider public debate and often smugly confine their operations to well understood and defended boundaries of hyperspecialized discourse.

Paul Robeson would doubtless have decried and scorned this development. His view (and more important, his actual practice) was that scholars should push relentlessly in whatever directions their curiosity moved them—and refuse to be constrained by arbitrary boundaries, whether called academic disciplines or anything else. For him, it meant a lifelong quest to discover the historical roots and contemporary implications of his artistic vision and political commitments. His father’s inspiration pervaded his life and career. Early on, Paul Robeson recognized that knowledge was personally liberating and politically compelling. He came to understand that artificial limitations to this quest would do nothing to advance the causes he believed in fervently. Indeed, his own intellectual journey stands in dramatic contrast to those whose aspirations are geared more to careerism and professional success than to social and political criticism and change.

Robeson’s extraordinary learning and his multifaceted achievements qualify him superbly as a major intellectual figure of the 20th century. Above all, however, his public intellectualism led him to express deeply felt political positions on civil rights, colonialism in Africa, war and peace, the rights and dignity of labor, the ethical superiority of socialism, and numerous other issues throughout his life. Like his artistic record, his political commitments have also been well documented. Indeed, his close association with the U.S. Communist Party and his long friendship with the Soviet Union were primarily responsible for his disgraceful postwar blacklisting, the ban on his travels abroad, the removal of his voice from public affairs, and the erasure of his overall accomplishments from U.S. history.

Even now, many people still believe that Robeson's pro-Communist attitudes and actions constituted the major focus of his political life. That view understates his far more extensive career as a politically engaged public intellectual. The deepest root of his politics was always his identification as an African American living in a racist society. His early encounters with racism in high school, at Rutgers University, at Columbia Law School, in legal practice and elsewhere formed the emotional base and moral foundation of all his political efforts throughout his life. In the author's foreword to *Here I Stand*, he pointedly revealed how his racial identity shaped his life and work:

I am a Negro. The house I live in is in Harlem—this city within a city, Negro metropolis of America. And now as I write of things that are urgent in my mind and heart, I feel the press of all that is around me here where I live, at home among my people.

For many decades, Paul Robeson was an ardent civil rights activist. His growing international reputation as an actor and singer propelled him to positions of visible leadership and authority in the American civil rights movement. A fuller appreciation of Robeson's multifaceted accomplishments refutes the popular but foolish perception that the civil rights movement began and ended with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—a view that Dr. King himself would have found preposterous and appalling. This movement, in fact, began when the first African woman, man, or child resisted captivity. It continues in the contemporary battles to retain affirmative action, to oppose the prison-industrial complex, and to afford genuine social, political, and economic opportunity and equality for millions of African Americans.

In the long and honorable struggle for civil rights, Paul Robeson is fully comparable to some of the leading figures of African American militancy: Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, and scores of others. Some highlights of his civil rights activities reveal the breadth and depth of his commitment to the African American cause. In 1943, for example, Robeson led a delegation to Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis and the major league baseball owners, calling upon them to end the ban against Black players in the major leagues. Although it would be four years before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robeson's earlier political agitation helped to establish the foundation for this groundbreaking racial development in professional athletics.

His powerful oratory, a major if not universal feature of public intellectual stature, led him to speak at numerous civil rights rallies. His words invariably galvanized audiences to continue the struggle to implement the entire civil rights agenda. Paul Robeson spoke frequently about gaining federal assistance in opposing the barbarous spectacle of lynching, ending Jim Crow laws and practices, enacting Fair Employment Practices legislation, and many other political changes that would help his people attain the rights and dignity that the United States Constitution formally required. His 1946 confrontation with President Harry Truman about using the influence of the White House to stop lynching propelled him to even greater civil rights notoriety in America and throughout the world.

Paul Robeson also gave numerous interviews about racial justice, wrote many articles and letters about the African American quest for dignity and equality, and participated widely in civil rights demonstrations, picket lines, and similar agitational activity. He regularly performed concerts for civil rights and related causes, employing his talent and reputation to raise money and generate publicity. By the early 1950s, public opinion properly recognized him as one of the most important Black leaders in American history. His multifaceted and effective civil rights record augmented his exemplary stature as a politically committed artist/intellectual. Until massive political persecution effectively reduced his public role, Paul Robeson's name was synonymous with progressive Black struggle.

His highly visible commitment to African liberation and his relentless opposition to colonial domination augmented his public efforts for racial justice in America. Long before most other politically conscious American intellectuals, he linked African American issues to the African motherland, establishing him as a major figure in 20th century Pan-African thought and action. During his extended residence in London, he socialized with future African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and others. He also studied African languages, history, and culture, creating the foundation for his lifelong identity as an African and his tireless efforts to bring African affairs to the forefront of both intellectual and political consciousness.

Among other activities, he assumed with W. E. B. Du Bois a major leadership role in the Council on African Affairs, which, as Martin Duberman indicated, was the most important American organization dealing with Africa in the post-war world. Likewise, Paul Robeson showed an early concern about conditions in South Africa, long before others brought the plight of millions of Blacks in that land to international attention. His commitment to African independence movements pervaded his political life and thought, adding further to his legacy as one of the great progressive activist/intellectuals of his time.

Similarly, Paul Robeson's vision of political responsibility extended to his vigorous support of the labor movement in the United States and elsewhere. Like most leftist intellectuals, particularly those with a Marxist orientation, he regarded the labor struggle as fundamental to political transformation and the creation of an equitable social order. Robeson implemented that vision with decades of concrete supportive action, much more so than the majority of his colleagues in progressive intellectual and creative communities.

His labor record speaks eloquently for itself. He regularly walked on union picket lines and vigorously supported the CIO in its various organizing efforts. In 1941, he traveled to Detroit to support the United Auto Workers members in their dramatic conflict with Henry Ford, a daring public expression of his pro-labor sentiments. He was an honorary member of numerous unions and regularly expressed his solidarity with organized labor in his domestic and international travels. Most significant, he worked assiduously for racial equity in the American labor movement. His view, expressed with his customary vigor and eloquence, was that black and white workers must be united in their common struggle. Robeson believed that the labor movement should exert civil strong rights leadership, serving as a beacon for other protest movements and for society in general. He also regularly sang labor songs in hundreds of formal concerts and political rallies. Earl Robinson's provocative song "Joe Hill," a powerful tribute to the martyred IWW labor organizer, was a staple of Robeson's performances throughout the world.

Paul Robeson's most controversial political views concerned his closely linked vision about his support of the Soviet Union, his belief in the ethical superiority of socialism, and his advocacy of peace and opposition to war. Always socially conscious, he became more radical in the 1930s, resulting from his extremely positive reception in the Soviet Union and his increasing focus on dramatic international events. Nazi tyranny in Germany and Hitler's persecution of Jews affected him deeply. Like many prominent intellectuals, he was drawn to the support of the Loyalists in the bloody Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. This experience led him to journey to Spain in 1938 to meet Loyalist leaders and supporters and to sing to front-line troops in the fight against Francisco Franco's fascist insurrection. This solidified his favorable contacts with Communist and other leftist figures and catalyzed his anti-fascist values and identity for the rest of his life. Likewise, it informed and radicalized his overall intellectual vision.

Until illness forced his retirement from public affairs, Robeson promoted these values vigorously as an artist, organizational activist, and political orator. His pro-Communist sympathies precipitated the savage blacklisting and persecution that pervaded his final decades. His political activities in the post-war era are extremely well documented. Among many others, his support for the left-wing Progressive Party ticket in 1948, his proclamations for peace, especially his public comments at the Paris Peace Conference in 1949, and his frequent appeals for friendship with the Soviet Union caused huge governmental hostility and blacklisting.

For many years, moreover, the government withdrew his passport and he could not leave the United States, causing a major reduction in his income and international visibility. His courageous fight for the right to travel augmented his career as a politically engaged public intellectual. Throughout his ordeal, he maintained a consistent belief in the ethical superiority of socialism, a view that was independent of the increasing terror and oppression in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Robeson genuinely believed and fully articulated the view that capitalism promoted the most predatory features of human existence. He thought that capitalism fostered and exacerbated inequality, poverty, racism, and economic and social misery for millions of human beings. His moral vision about the superiority of a socialist transformation of society reflected the deepest humanistic features of Marxism—the Marxism that has a continuing vitality for life in the early 21st century in a global economy where transnational corporate domination continues to keep most human beings in seemingly irreversible bondage.

Paul Robeson's compelling and durable moral vision, far more than his problematic support for Stalinist policies, constitutes the core of his identity as one of the quintessential public intellectuals of the 20th century. Still, his pro-Soviet stance remains part of his intellectual legacy and deserves retrospective commentary and analysis. Few today would deny the appalling record of terror, corruption, anti-Semitism, and ethnic cleansing in the former Soviet Union. Only the most intractable apologists still believe that the Soviet system was compatible with the humane vision of Karl Marx and other socialist theorists. Like thousands of other intellectuals throughout the world, Robeson saw the Soviet dream as a practical fulfillment of the moral mandate to make life better for the overwhelming majority of the planet's inhabitants.

It is intriguing to speculate on why he and others found it difficult to criticize the Soviet Union. Psychologically, it is profoundly understandable that a magnificently talented artist like Robeson would respond positively to a Soviet society that treated him with dignity and acclaim, in contrast to a racist America that too often expressed disrespect and disdain. For him and other pro-Communist intellectuals, it may have been difficult to abandon the vision of the Soviet beacon, even in the face of powerful evidence of the growing gap between socialist ideals and Soviet practices. Politically, he may well have thought that public criticism of the Soviet Union would exacerbate cold war tensions, adding further to the threat of nuclear war and human annihilation.

Whatever his reasons, his flawed silence about Stalinist oppression must be viewed in the deeper perspective of his powerful intellectual stature and monumental progressive political activism. Even when his positions were questionable, his efforts contrasted dramatically with those of many of his contemporaries. The timidity (and sometimes the complicity) of thousands of intellectuals, including academics, in the face of anti-leftist hysteria, Congressional investigations, blacklisting, and FBI surveillance of tens of thousands of law-abiding citizens remains an egregious blight on American intellectual and political history. Paul Robeson, in contrast, remained courageous and outspoken, at enormous personal cost. History's judgment on which stance is superior should be unambiguous: it is better to be active and occasionally mistaken than to acquiesce in evil.

Robeson's intellectual record is strikingly relevant even now, especially in comparison to that of many contemporary academic intellectuals. As Jacoby has argued, intellectual passivity remains a serious problem in the early 21st century. Far too many academics remain silent about contemporary problems, both globally and locally. They often disdain wider public debate about the pressing issues of the times, preferring to publish in professionally prestigious but publicly inaccessible journals instead of the popular press and electronic media. They regularly use remote and obscure language and haughtily dismiss intellectual colleagues who write clearly and address much broader public audiences. Even among some Marxist and other progressive academics, "popular," "journalistic," and similar appellations are exclusionary code words that reinforce professional hierarchy and hegemony. Too few academics have the inclination and talent to make strong and effective speeches on pressing political and social issues to public audiences beyond the academy.

More troubling, some academic intellectuals ignore persistent problems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and disgraceful institutional treatment of blue-collar and clerical workers on their own campuses. Meanwhile, they ironically object privately to colleagues and friends about conservative national policies in conversations in campus offices, hallways, and elsewhere. Sometimes, they use intellectual energy to pass resolutions about retrograde national policies in faculty meetings and professional conventions. None of this pseudo-political activity rises to the level of serious morally committed public discourse—the authentic kind that Paul Robeson practiced for most of his adult life.

Robeson's model of the engaged, risk-taking public intellectual is desperately needed in the perilous era of the new millennium. The administration of President George W. Bush has fostered the worst erosion of civil liberties and constitutional rights since the dark days of McCarthyism that destroyed the careers and even the lives of thousands of socially conscious, authentically patriotic citizens like Paul Robeson. Using terrorism as the contemporary equivalent of communism, the Departments of Justice, Defense, Homeland Security, the Central Intelligence Agency, and other agencies have trampled on the rights of American dissidents and suspicious foreigners alike. The ill-named Patriot Act, passed in the immediate aftermath and national hysteria of the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, is more suitable to the most repressive totalitarian societies of recent history and dangerously incompatible with the ideals of a constitutional democracy. Hovering over all these ominous developments is a grotesque war in Iraq, the opening of a seemingly protracted pattern of American imperial expansion and domination. Doubtless, Paul Robeson would assent to all these observations.

Racism and sexism persist throughout society and the economy and vile homophobic appeals pervade the political process. A narrow religious fundamentalism threatens to dominate public discussion about ethics and human values. Bush administration policies have intensified the distribution of wealth from the poorest citizens to the wealthiest individuals and corporations. Education, health care, and the environment continue to deteriorate as millions of Americans are reduced to third world existences.

Now, more than ever, we need artists and intellectuals like Paul Robeson to speak truth to power and to mobilize widespread political consciousness and resistance. Writing in 1966 during the escalation of the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky perceptively observed in "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" that intellectuals are positioned to expose governmental lies and to offer humane alternatives to official deception and social injustice. Those words, as vitally applicable now as they were more than 40 years ago, eloquently describes the long and majestic public life of Paul Robeson. It behooves us all to reflect on the wisdom of his final public statement in 1973:

Through ill health has compelled my retirement, you can be sure that in my heart I go on singing:
But I keeps laughin' instead of cryin'; I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'. And Ol' Man River,
he just keeps rollin' along.

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