

# Book Review: Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary by Gerald Horne

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*Alongside his fame as a singer, actor and athlete, Paul Robeson was a key political activist whose proclaimed socialism and fight against US segregation positioned him as a target of the US government. In **Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary**, Gerald Horne argues that Robeson shows the importance of internationalism in understanding the success of black liberation movements. However, while this book underscores the need to forge unity and solidarity amongst oppressed groups, it leaves unexamined Robeson's early politicisation within the USA and obscures the role of Eslanda Robeson and other women within the movement, finds **Sherese R. Taylor**.*

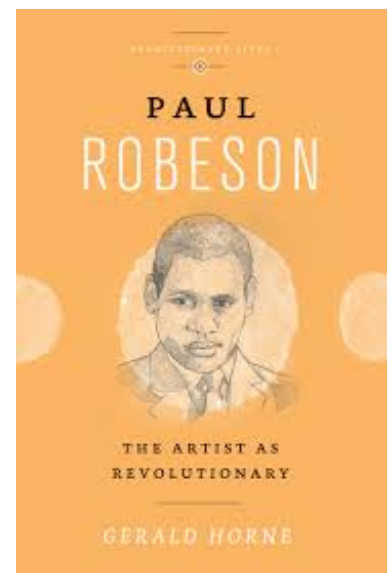
**Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary . Gerald Horne. Pluto Press. 2016.**

Find this book: 

*Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* presents ten chapters articulating the juncture of Marxism, black liberation movements and the field of black internationalism through the prism of the political life of singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson. To demonstrate the impact of the international community on the dissolution of Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation in the USA, Gerald Horne highlights and locates historical instances where black liberation movements united with other oppositional groups. This text is released at an opportune time as it diverges from previous models of black liberation movements that are alienated from other oppressed groups to instead present a current model based on a globalised world. With the presence of social media and movements like Black Lives Matter, uniting with oppressed groups internationally is becoming the rallying call for raising consciousness and terminating systems of oppression globally. Through this function, the text offers a framework for forging successful black liberation movements.

Paul Robeson was a former NFL athlete, singer, actor, linguist and political activist during the 1930s until his death in 1976. In this book, Horne highlights Robeson's artistry as the catalyst for Robeson's entrance onto the world stage and global politics. It is through this artistry that Robeson follows the radical tradition of African American migration to Europe as a remedy to racial apartheid in the United States. While in Europe, Robeson experienced pliant race laws that allowed a sense of distance from heavily oppressive regimes. It is in the intellectual hubs of Russia and London that he discovered theoretical paradigms used to strategise opposition to Jim Crow in the United States. Through a linear historical account from the 1930s through to the 1970s, Horne presents Robeson's allegiance with socialism and his connection with the international community as a threat to the Jim Crow era.

The text is grouped into two sections. The first half contains Robeson's rise to fame and international adoration, ending with the chapter, 'Tallest Tree in our Forest'. This chapter signifies the transition into the second section of the book where Robeson's ascription to socialism and communist theories brands him a national target of the US government.





**Image Credit: Inside Paul Robeson, Ol' Man River album (Piano Piano! CC2.0)**

Horne's account of Robeson's early political life in the United States is not fully developed, leaving the question of the genesis of Robeson's political awareness unanswered. Horne assumes the audience will simply connect Robeson's blackness with his initial politics; however, blackness does not automatically equate with political involvement and certainly not with a public condemnation of the US Government. Horne ultimately neglects Robeson's evolution within the United States and therefore creates a stunted version of Robeson before he is 'Europeanised'. This lack of a thorough analysis of Robeson's earlier years supports a hegemonic narrative of 'civilising the savage'. It is this underlying idea that the black body automatically develops once in contact with European ideas that one wearies of.

In the latter portion of the book, a key preoccupation with space emerges. Robeson is located both domestically and internationally, and also within black politics and socialism. Instead of dichotomising these spaces using a westernised epistemology, Horne uses a historiographical methodology that situates Robeson in a new geography where he can occupy dual spaces and theories of black liberation and Marxism. With his anti-racism and staunch opposition of Jim Crow, he is located within the black struggle and black politics in the United States. Robeson is also connected to the international community through his art and knowledge of socialism, where he enjoys the luxury of time, movement and language. Horne clearly communicates this equally weighted space with the use of arts, as he highlights the folk songs popularised in Europe and creates tension in recounting the possibility of the play *Othello* debuting in the Jim Crow south. Horne marries these struggles to support his assertion of a unified domain.

However, not only is a portion of Robeson's earlier political history denied, but Eslanda Robeson is also excluded entirely as a political participant. An anthropologist, author, actor and activist who married Robeson in 1921, in the book Eslanda and her diary, as well as a network of leaders, provide Robeson's life with connections and context; however, she is relegated to the role of either being a caretaker or a nuisance. This is an affront to a feminist perspective as it upholds patriarchal narratives of black liberation movements and denies any contribution from Eslanda herself. Instead of being fully developed, she is relegated to the background in an account of the life of a cisgendered black heterosexual male. This denial of Eslanda's role in Robeson's life and her wider political significance invalidates Horne's assertion of unity and solidarity amongst oppressed groups. It symbolically excludes a largely oppressed group and also never mentions Paul Robeson's support of, or ties to, women's groups.

This text contributes to understandings of black politics and black internationalism through its expansion of the role and power of the international community in the US. In a [previous text](#) written by Horne, he highlighted the condemnation of the international community and the impact this had on US reform. This text is no different: here, the international community is the catalyst for social change for black Americans. It therefore supports a radical account of black liberation politics through unity with other oppressed groups, while also continuing a hegemonic vision of solidarity by excluding women. During the reign of Paul Robeson there were multiple African American women political leaders who also contributed greatly to liberation movements. Works such as *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* by Barbara Ransby, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* by Elaine Brown and *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* by Katherine Mellen Charron offer radical renderings of the role of women in black liberation movements that are subsequently silenced in this text. By not providing a well-rounded vision of Eslanda Robeson, by relegating other women to the context of marital affairs and by obscuring the presence of women in oppressed solidarity, the book perpetuates a standard hegemonic narrative of black liberation politics.

Horne's writing is clearly from a Marxist perspective without being polemical, emphasising unity and solidarity amongst oppressed peoples as a means to destroy systems of oppression but foregoing the capitalist analysis. He provides clear support for his assertion that the international community aided in the dissolution of Jim Crow; however, the portions that he does not discuss, such as the pre-European interactions of Robeson, Eslanda Robeson and the role of women, greatly hurt the text. Nonetheless, this book offers a great example of black entertainers as responsible and ethical political leaders, and would find a welcome home within sociology, black politics or African American history courses. It would, however, fall short in the history and politics of African American women.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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