

Poor Bedfellows:
How Blacks and the Communist Party Grew Apart
in the Post-War Era

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Culture and Society in Cold War America

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The decade following the end of World War II is characterized by the building of the Cold War consensus. Virulently anti-Communist in nature, this consensus poised the nation in a moral battle against the Soviet Union. With the 1948 arrest and prosecution of eleven Communist leaders under the Smith Act, as well as well-publicized investigations conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and later Senator Joseph McCarthy's Government Operations Subcommittee on Investigations, the government fostered the development of the second "Red Scare" in the twentieth century.

This decade also represents a complicated and challenging time within the historical context of the civil rights struggle. Many black veterans returned home from the war, only to find themselves shut out of veteran's organizations like the American Legion and, in general, the post-war American dream.¹ Until 1954 when the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, the civil rights movement was marked by small battles, successes and losses. Individuals and organizations struggled to define the movement within the new era and formulate a successful strategy to bring about significant change in the treatment of blacks in America.

The combination of these two environments – strong anti-communist sentiment and a factional civil rights movement – created a challenging situation for the Communist Party's relationship to the black community. Since the 1920s, the party had recruited heavily within the minority communities, viewing itself as linked to all oppressed groups including Jews and blacks. During the 1930s and 40s, a number of high-profile blacks joined or were linked with the Communist Party, including Paul Robeson, W.E.B.

¹ Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1990* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 197.

DuBois, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, although as historian Gary Gerstle points out, Communism attracted more Jews than blacks.² By the end of World War II, there were fewer than 2,000 blacks left in the Communist Party, as many turned away from the organization.³

Much of the current scholarship on the black civil rights movement at this time assumes a hostile atmosphere towards Communism, however few of these sources delve into the causes of this atmosphere. Additionally, in light of the many changes occurring within the civil rights movement at the time, other factors must also be taken into account, like the attractiveness of the Communist Party to blacks and the successes of other branches of the civil rights movement like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Thus while the atmosphere of the second Red Scare created a great deterrent from Communism in the late 1940s and 50s, it was not the only source of strain on the relationship between blacks and the Communist Party in the post-war era.

Within the context of this paper, I will standardize my language for greater understanding. Terms applied to both the Communist Party and African Americans have changed throughout the years based on the prevailing political and cultural thought. For this paper, Communist and Communism will refer to the Communist Party itself, for it is assumed that for this paper, the American Communist Party was the organization attempting to appeal to black Americans, not the broader theory of communism or Marxism. Additionally, I will use black Americans and African Americans interchangeably. This is the current socially accepted language, and therefore it is

² Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 248.

³ Hutchinson, 195.

important to employ this language in a modern scholarly work. The terms “Negro” and “colored,” currently out of favor in politically correct society, may find their way into this paper though, especially as primary documents from the mid-century are quoted. It is important that this language not be censored in light of political correctness, to offer a complete view of the time and origin of the source material.

Communist Approach to African Americans

From the time of its creation in 1921, the Workers or Communist Party of the United States was directly tied to the Soviet-dominated Communist International (Comintern) body. The American Communist Party was bound to accept decisions made by the organization, changing their party line to match their directives from Comintern. In 1928, the Sixth World Congress of Communist International defined the “Negro question in the United States” as that of “an oppressed nation, and the doctrine of self-determination was declared to be the principal part of the program of the Communist Party of the United States.”⁴ Though Marx, Engels, Lenin and, for the most part, Stalin, had all been silent on how to address the “Negro question,” their writings had helped to influence the policy. In particular, it was seen by the Comintern that blacks in America were “under the heel of an imperialist power,” though they met Stalin’s qualifications of a nation: “historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.”⁵

Drawing influence from the success of Marcus Garvey’s back to Africa movement in the 1920s, the Communist Party envisioned successfully rallying southern

⁴ Wilson Record, “The Development of the Communist Position on the Negro Question in the United States” *The Phylon Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1958): 320, *JSTOR*, JSTOR (18 November 2007).

⁵ Record, “Development,” 321.

blacks in the “Black Belt” to form their own “Negro Black Belt Republic,” become the 49th state and secede.⁶ Though this program was seen by many as the work of Moscow, it did explicitly state the Communist’s commitment to blacks. It was suggested to white Communist leaders that if they were not ready to fight for the rights of blacks, they were no needed or welcome in the party. The plan was even reflected in the Communist Party’s 1928 presidential platform which advocated the end of segregation, anti-lynching laws, voting rights, and legal measures to “champion the oppressed Negro race.”⁷

The Communists soon found, however, that they did not have the kind of response from the black community as had been anticipated. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, the party line vacillated between Earl Browder’s revisionism policy which “called not for separation, but an integration of the Negro into the American nation as a whole on the basis that this [was] what the Negro wanted” and promoting the achievements of the black community as a nation.⁸

As the USSR’s global alliances changed in the 1930s and 40s, the policy on black Americans was also affected. As the American Communist Party was variously ordered to support anti-fascist movements (1934 to 1939), oppose the “imperialism” of World War II (from the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939 until the German attack on the USSR in 1941), and finally support the Allied causes, the demand for a black nation often was pushed to a backburner.⁹

By the end of the war, Party membership amongst blacks had dropped dramatically. The party asserted to have abandoned the policy of self-determination for

⁶ Record, “Development,” 325; T.H. Kennedy and T.F. Leary, “Communist Thought on the Negro” *Phylon* 8, no. 2 (1947): 117, *JSTOR*, JSTOR (18 November 2007).

⁷ Hutchinson, 55.

⁸ Kennedy and Leary, 118.

⁹ Record, “Development,” 326.

blacks, however it remained on the official Communist agenda. Despite this, the Party spent the post-war era trying to build connections with blacks and black organizations to improve their viability in the field of civil rights.¹⁰

Certainly, however, the Communist Party's work with black Americans was not limited to this policy of the formation of a black nation. Blacks were also seen as a vital force within the class system. Many were recruited into labor organizations by Communists, especially during the early 1940s. Black union membership rose from 150,000 in 1935 to 1.25 million by the end of World War II. Though occasionally faced with racist resistance, Manning Marable pointed out that "[e]ven in many southern cities black and white workers formed biracial unions and fought for higher wages and improved working conditions."¹¹ The collaboration of blacks and whites in the R.J. Reynolds plant in Winston-Salem, North Carolina is an often-cited example of such collaboration during the early 1940s.

Additionally, with their embrace of blacks in the late 1920s, the Communist Party became an organization in which it was possible for blacks to ascend to positions of leadership. Ben Davis, later one of ten Communist officials arrested and jailed under the Smith Act, was one such leader. Writing in 1947 in *Phylon*, a major black think magazine published by Clark Atlanta University, he explored what brought him into the Communist Party:

There are many approaches to answering the question of 'Why I am a Communist,' all of which are interconnected and which enter into my convictions. Obviously, one cannot go

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3rd ed. (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 14.

into the whole range of them here. For the purposes of this paper, I shall limit myself principally to explaining why, as a Negro American I am a Communist.¹²

Discussing his expectations and hopes as an American, Davis continued:

As a Negro America, I want to be free. I want equal opportunities, equal rights; I want to be accorded the same dignity as a human being and the same status as a citizen as any other American. This is my constitutional right. I want first-class, unconditional citizenship. I want it, and am entitled to it now....Out of my personal experiences as a Negro American and in quest of the liberty, freedom and equal rights proclaimed in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence, I, like thousands of other Negroes – and white citizens – joined the Communist Party.¹³

Thus the Communist Party did have a certain allure to some blacks like Ben Davis.

Though the positions taken by the party were, to large extent, very radicalizing, it was also seen as an avenue to achieving civil rights by some blacks.

Creating the Red Scare

Often when thinking about the Red Scare of the post-war era, Senator Joseph McCarthy's name comes to mind. After his infamous 1950 speech at Wheeling, West Virginia which alleged Communist infiltration of the State Department, the nation became gripped in a political, moral hegemony that juxtaposed a "good" America with an "evil" Soviet Union. Though eventually discredited in the spring of 1954, McCarthy's accusations frightened many.

Even before the Wheeling, West Virginia speech, however, members of the House Un-American Activities committee were busy fighting communism, especially in Hollywood. In 1947 the "Hollywood Ten" were called to testify before the Committee;

¹² Benjamin J. Davis, "Why I am a Communist" *Phylon* 8, no. 2 (1947): 106, *JSTOR*, JSTOR (18 November 2007).

¹³ Davis, 107-8.

all agreed to not answer questions about their current or former affiliation with the Communist Party, instead invoking their fifth amendment rights. This created a lot of attention the industry “proclaimed that no Communists or subversives would be employed in film making” and Ronald Reagan, then President of the Screen Actor’s Guild, led the organization to ban both Communists and those not cooperating in Congressional hearings. The Hollywood Ten were blacklisted, and many others were targets for similar discrimination.¹⁴

Though both of these examples targeted primarily white Communists, they still had a wide reaching impact on minority communities and America as a whole. Gary Gerstle noted that, “McCarthy made clear that America’s main enemies were not the Jews, Italians, or blacks, but a desiccated Protestant elite.”¹⁵ His focus was primarily on white, protestant men who he felt had betrayed the American cause for the Soviets. McCarthyism offered no immediate attack on civil rights or the black movement. And yet, it did have an impact.

In 1953, at the height of McCarthyism, B.R. Brazeal’s commencement address at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina was republished in *Phylon* under the headline, “Some Action Imperatives for a Democracy.” Though Brazeal spoke primarily about the need to end segregation practices in the south, he also referenced McCarthy’s actions as part of a broader anti-communist movement. “In this country there are influential persons who are planning to gradually deprive many Americans, regardless of race, color, creed, national origin or sex, of the fundamental freedoms and other civil

¹⁴ David A. Horowitz, *America’s Political Class Under Fire: The Twentieth Century’s Great Culture War* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 118-9.

¹⁵ Gerstle, 252.

rights behind the cloak of attacks on Communism.”¹⁶ Additionally, Brazeal suggested that, “[s]upporters of McCarthyism are fundamentally against a constructive, creative type of interracial, inter-cultural and inter-religious cooperation that will result in this country achieving greater functional unity.”¹⁷

Thus Brazeal proposes that in a time of great political conservatism, great harm is still being done to the black community and the civil rights movement, though they are not directly targets of McCarthy’s anti-Communist crusade. The anti-Communist witch hunt promoted by Senator McCarthy served as a distracting force, taking the attention of Congress and Americans away from the pressing needs of the disadvantaged and socially oppressed blacks:

In this country while we have been concerned about chasing subversives, many of whom McCarthy has not been able to name, Congress has been blocking or reducing the coverage of legislation that would help the masses, thereby causing them to further realize that they should support democracy because of its benefits. Advocates of liberal democracy must increasingly realize that McCarthyism is not an isolated phenomenon....It is against civil rights and minority groups; it fosters isolationism, anti-organized labor legislation and economic exploitation of the masses. Under McCarthyism what has become of our interest in low-cost housing units and slum clearance projects?

It is interesting to note that these statements were made in a commencement address by Brailsford Brazeal, then dean at Morehouse College. In fact, the Red Scare was felt in many areas of life, including on black college campuses. Coursework was

¹⁶ B.R. Brazeal, “Some Action Imperatives for a Democracy” *Phylon* 14, no. 4 (1953): 429, *JSTOR*, JSTOR (18 November 2007).

¹⁷ Brazeal, 430.

often moderated, and in some cases faculty members tied to the Communist Party or other militant groups were fired.¹⁸

In a similar vein, though the civil rights movement was not directly attacked as part of McCarthyism, there was a fear within the government that black political organizations like the NAACP were supported and funded by communist forces. Similarly, the racist assumptions of many Americans associated the gains made by blacks, including the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, with “communist-inspired plots.”¹⁹ David Horowitz notes that this jump was made as people related the state intervention in such cases to communism. As the *Brown* decision was handed down by the Warren court just weeks after the McCarthy was discredited, those opposed to integration challenged that “[b]y creating the conditions for extended federal authority, ... the Warren tribunal was preparing Americans for the tyrannical invasions of Communist dictatorship.”²⁰ Though in historical retrospect this assertion seems completely off-base, it is indicative of the divisiveness of the civil rights movement, as well as the political atmosphere at the time which allowed unpopular policies and decisions, especially of an interventionist framework, to be labeled as “communist.”

It should be noted, however, that blacks were not completely safe from the reaches of anti-Communist prosecution by the government. As previously mentioned, New York City councilman Benjamin Davis was one of eleven top Communist Party leaders convicted in 1949 for conspiring to overthrow the government. Also tried at the same time was another black man, Henry Winston. Prosecuted alongside their white

¹⁸ Marable, 27.

¹⁹ Douglas Field, *American Cold War Culture*, ed. Douglas Field (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 88.

²⁰ Horowitz, 159.

colleagues, they received similar convictions. At the trials, they were faced by both white and black witnesses, some of whom included “[s]ome of the Party’s oldest black recruits turned into agents for the government.”²¹

Additionally, some attention must be paid to the influence of Paul Robeson, the noted Shakespearean actor and singer. Though very resistant to revealing the nature of his affiliation with the Communist Party, Robeson was very outspoken on the cause of civil rights for blacks and openly supportive of the USSR and the American Communist Party since the 1930s. In a 1949 address at the Paris Peace Conference, he alleged similarities between the U.S.’s policy towards Africa and that of Hitler and Goebbels, the reaction to which was resoundingly negative in the U.S.²²

In response to Robeson’s statements, HUAC called Jackie Robinson, the first black Major League baseball player, to testify before the committee. Robinson claimed to support the civil rights movement strongly, however he also stated, “we can win our fight without the Communists and we don’t want their help.”²³ Robeson offered a response, addressing a news release to HUAC in July: “The loyalty of the Negro people is not a subject for debate. I challenge the loyalty of the Un-American Activities Committee. This committee maintains an ominous silence in the face of the lynchings.... Those who menace our lives proceed unchallenged by the Un-American Activities Committee.”²⁴

While HUAC’s treatment of Paul Robeson seems to lack the severity of, for example, the Hollywood Ten, they were involved in a significant discussion about the role of Communism in the black civil rights movement. Both very public figures, Paul

²¹ Marable, 28.

²² Marable, 22.

²³ Hutchinson, 198.

²⁴ Philip S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974* (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1978), 218.

Robeson spoke freely despite the closed political climate, while Jackie Robinson offered well-publicized, official counter to Robeson's claims. While Robeson's career did suffer as a result of his outspokenness, he nonetheless spurred the dialogue about how the civil rights movement should proceed – with or without the Communists. His passport was eventually revoked in 1950 by the U.S. government and he was prevented from entering Canada, in an attempt to quiet Robeson.²⁵

Additionally, black Americans were not as lucky. Two professors at the predominately black Fisk University were subpoenaed by HUAC, one in 1949 and another in 1954. Both invoked their fifth amendment rights, however they were both subsequently dismissed, despite an outcry from students and faculty. Within the broader context, however, this treatment was not afforded to these professors due to their face, but rather because of their Communist ties.

An Alternative to the Communist Party

While the Communist Party struggled to find its niche within the post-war civil rights movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been growing in both numbers and influence since the 1930s.²⁶ Founded in 1910 by W.E.B. DuBois, the organization was very different from the Communist Party, as it sought to enact change through an approach *de jure*. Using the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the organization sought to change the laws through the courts, and, ideally, bringing a legal end to segregation.

²⁵ Marable, 26.

²⁶ Marable, 21.

Under the leadership of Walter White, the organization was solidified ideologically. He distanced the organization as far from the Communist Party as possible. Though the two had collaborated during the 1930s in defense of the black men charged in the Scottsboro case, the tenuous relationship had fallen apart and, in fact, the NAACP rejected all subsequent offers from the Communist Party to develop a partnership. In 1947 the group passed a resolution preventing any Communists from joining the NAACP.²⁷

Having supported Harry S. Truman's candidacy for President over the Progressive Party candidate backed by many Communists, the NAACP continued to ally itself with the administration after Truman took office. When the state of blacks in America became a source of a great deal of Soviet propaganda, the NAACP threw its resources, name and expertise into combating these charges.²⁸

In fact, the success of the NAACP and other like-minded organizations including the Committee on Racial Equality and the Urban League in achieving legal victories made it more difficult for the Communist Party to play a significant role in the civil rights movement of the post-war era.²⁹ Instead, the Communist Party poised itself against many of these methods advocated by groups like the NAACP, such as education and anti-discriminatory legislation. They did not carry the same idealism of the Communist Party, and so were "denounced as being naïve, futile, half-hearted, and essentially pessimistic."³⁰ So while groups distanced themselves from the Communist Party, the

²⁷ Hutchinson, 126.

²⁸ Carol Anderson, "Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948-1952," *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 94.

²⁹ Kennedy and Leary, 120.

³⁰ Kennedy and Leary, 120.

Party itself was concerned with distancing itself from methods they felt were not productive enough.

Black Response to the Communist Party

As mentioned previously in this paper, the Communist Party had lost a lot of members by the end of World War II. This turn away from the Communist Party may be related to a number of factors. Among these could be the intense vacillations in party line during the war, the neglect of the civil rights commitment in the face of the war itself, or the anti-Communist sentiment building at the end of the war. It is quite conceivable, as well, that while there was a definite trend away from the Party, members left for different reasons.

One of the most obvious themes to suggest the loss of membership is the tightening of the political hegemony in the United States after the war and the building of the Cold War consensus. In a society where association is seen as morally traitorous, a number of former Communists certainly saw the necessity of turning their back on the party. Max Yergan offers a perfect example of this, moving from a stalwart leader within the progressive left and Communist Party to vocally expressing his anti-Communist sentiments in 1948. While Yergan was certainly influenced by the anti-Communist hysteria and scared from his previously hard line positions, his testimony in the Alger Hiss case was very widely discussed in the media.³¹ With the very public loss of such leadership, as well as the publicity of other Communists-turned-government witnesses, it is likely that those who felt a need to save themselves from anti-Communist prosecution would be inspired to act as such.

³¹ David Henry Anthony III, *Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 230-3.

One of the common assertions made is about a disconnect with the Party. While some black Americans found the Communist Party to be the tool through which they could enact social reform, most of the black recruits to the party were middle-class intellectuals. In a 1956 article for *Phylon*, Wilson Record posed that “[s]ome of the failure of Communism to reach the colored masses may be attributed to a distrust, not only of the white men who led the Party, but also of the near-white men who served as its Negro show-pieces.”³² Though this assertion minimizes the importance of leaders like Ben Davis, it does recognize the divisions within the black community and the difficulty faced by the Communist Party in acting as a cohesive agent of the black people. Record’s assertion about skin tone is not that the Communist Party sought out individuals with lighter skin tones, but rather that the party drew from a segment of society that has been most able to advance into the middle classes due to lighter tones. This recognizes the stratification of the black community itself, a definite challenge to the Party’s attempt to speak for all blacks across America.

Another inhibiting factor that may have played a role in the demise of Communism as a leading organization in the civil rights movement is the decline in unions. Often seen as bastions of Communist support, these organizations were some of the first to feel the anti-Communist pinch immediately following the war. As the AFL and CIO expelled “Communist-dominated unions” from their ranks, other organizations, including black organizations, also sought to distinguish themselves from the Communist Party.³³ As Gerstle explained, “The fear of being labeled traitors did not deter blacks

³² Wilson Record, “Extremist Movements among American Negroes” *Phylon* 17, no. 1 (1956): 22, *JSTOR*, *JSTOR* (18 November 2007).

³³ Gerstle, 263.

intent on achieving racial equality, but it did lead many to winnow their discourse of prolabor and anticorporate themes.”³⁴

Finally, I would like to propose that religion played a factor in determining how blacks viewed the Communist Party in the post-war era. Whereas ministers had supported collaboration with Communists in the 1930s due to their civil rights platform, by the post-war era many black preachers denounced Communism “because of its philosophical atheism.”³⁵ Additionally, Gerstle notes that “By the mid-1950s, when Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as the charismatic leader of the black struggle, churches had replaced unions as the key institution of protest, and demands focused largely on ‘civil’ as opposed to ‘economic’ rights.”³⁶ This shift in the focus and organization of the civil rights movement was developing in the immediate post-war era. Though the Communist Party had positioned itself in support of rights for blacks, the organization’s philosophical basis was certainly more inclined toward economic rights than civil, a position that did not fit with this new shift in the movement.

It should also be noted that in the early 1960s John Kosa and Clyde Z. Nunn surveyed college students to determine their attitude towards Communism as part of a sociological study. They found that blacks, as a whole, were less tolerant of Communism than whites, however “the more religious, more aggressive, more alienated and less autonomous respondents are more likely to be intolerant to Communism.”³⁷ Though they advised caution in extending the results of this study to other segments of the population, it is interesting to note that there was a relationship between the religiosity of a

³⁴ Gerstle, 264.

³⁵ Marable, 19.

³⁶ Gerstle, 264.

³⁷ John Kosa and Clyde Z. Nunn, “Race, Deprivation and Attitude toward Communism” *Phylon* 25, no. 4 (1964): 342, *JSTOR*, JSTOR (18 November 2007).

respondent and their attitude toward Communism. From a historical perspective, this data might suggest that Communism was, in fact, not as attractive to blacks as the Party's dedication to civil rights. With the apparent success of other organizations at bringing about an end to discrimination, as well as a tightening of the Cold War consensus, blacks may have turned away from the Communist Party.

In short, the Communist Party and the black community proved to be imperfect bedfellows in the civil rights movement. Though originally drawn together by a dedication to civil rights, the party fell out of favor with blacks following World War II. Though it is popularly believed that the building of the Cold War consensus and the subsequent anti-Communist fervor that gripped the nation have played a role in this, historians should not overlook other factors that may have had a hand in this turn. The rise of other groups dedicated to civil rights such as the NAACP and a successful strategy of civil rights litigation helped to draw together an otherwise fragmented civil rights movement at the end of the war into the movement that emerged in the mid-1950s. Additionally, a sense of disconnect with the Communist Party, a need to protect oneself in the face of strong anti-Communism, and religious ideology all may have played a role. Either way, by the mid-1950s the Communist Party had ceased to be a persuasive force in the campaign for civil rights.

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