

Cold War Contested Truth: Informants, Surveillance, and the Disciplining of Black Radicalism, 1947-1957

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Introduction

During the height of the era of McCarthyism, roughly 1947-1957, Black radicalism was surveilled, disciplined, discredited, and criminalized through a multitude of anticommunist technologies. These included “parallelism,” red-baiting, infiltration, and guilt by association. McCarthyism was constituted by a range of legislation meant to fortify the U.S. security state against the Communist threat, starting with the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, and including the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (commonly known as the Smith Act); the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 (often referred to as the Taft-Hartley Act); Executive Order 9835 of 1947 (the “Loyalty Order”) and its supersession by Executive Order 10450 in 1953; the Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations; and the Internal Security Act of 1950 (also known as the McCarran Act). It was under this legal architecture that scores of activists and scholars who defied Cold War statist pedagogy were indicted, deported, incarcerated, surveilled, and forced underground.

This paper uses the examples of the the Peace Information Center (PIC) the Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ), and the Council on African Affairs (CAA) to elucidate that career confidential informants, “stool pigeons,” and “turncoats” were instrumental to the Cold War state apparatus’s transmogrification of Black radicals committed to anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, antiracism, peace, and the eradication of economic exploitation into criminals and subversives. Black

radicalism can be understood as African descendants' multivalent and persistent praxis aimed at dismantling structures of domination that sustain racialized dispossession, exploitation, and class-based domination. Further, it imagines and strives to bring into being liberating possibilities for all oppressed people.

The experience of Shirley Graham Du Bois, who was affiliated with the PIC, the STJ, and the CAA, is instructive. While it is unclear whether Graham formally joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), she was undoubtedly a Black radical. Especially after the death of her oldest son during World War II, she moved increasingly to the left, promoting liberation for Black Americans, the decolonization of Africa, peaceful co-existence with China and the Soviet Union, and socialism as the only viable economic system. Such commitments were considered “parallel” to Communism, which made her either a sympathizer or fellow traveler, if not a card-carrying red—all of which were equally subversive based on Cold War logic. She had been accused of promoting “communist propaganda” since the early 1930s, and without any sound evidence, a confidential informant told the FBI that she had been a “staunch member of the CP” at least since 1944 or 1945. (Horne and Stevens 2009, pp. 100, 102) Indeed, based on information provided by career-informants, including Louis Budenz and Julia Clarice Brown (discussed below), Graham was subjected to relentless FBI surveillance as early as 1948.¹

To establish Graham's guilt by association, the FBI thoroughly documented her affiliation with a multitude of ostensible communist fronts, including the Jefferson School of Social Science, the American Labor Party, the Progressive Party, the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, and the National Council of Arts, Sciences, and Professions. She was also

scrutinized for her interactions with purported subversives, fellow travelers, and bona fide Communists, such as Benjamin J. Davis, Eslanda Robeson, Esther V. Cooper, and of course, W.E.B. Du Bois—all of who suffered the wrath of the Cold War state apparatus.² Starting in July 1950, Graham was the subject of an Internal Security investigation that resulted in the preparation of a security index card for her in 1951. (Horne 2000, pp. 115-116)

The Peace Information Center, Parallelism, and the “Turncoat” O. John Rogge

On February 9, 1951, Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was indicted under the Foreign Agent Registration Act of 1938 for operating as an “unregistered foreign agent,” and for failing to register the Peace Information Center (PIC). The Department of Justice filed these charges to determine “whether or not this organization acted as an agent or in a capacity similar to that of a foreign organization or a foreign political power.” It sought to uncover if the PIC used peace advocacy to act as an agent of the World Committee of the Defenders of Peace (later renamed the World Peace Council), which, according to the Attorney General’s List, was a communist front. (Du Bois 1995b, pp. 777-778) In effect, Du Bois, Elizabeth Moos, Kyrle Elkin, and Sylvia Soloff, as PIC officers, were accused of acting on behalf of the Soviet Union.³ The PIC was targeted because it circulated the Stockholm Peace Petition, also known as the “ban the bomb petition.” The document emerged out of an international consensus that called for the outlawing of atomic weapons, international controls to enforce the measures, and the treatment of any countries that use atomic bombs as war criminals that had committed crimes against humanity. (Lieberman and Lang 2009, p. 21; Horne 1986, p. 126) In the *New York Times*, Secretary of State Dean Acheson called the Petition a “propaganda trick in the spurious ‘peace offensive’ of the Soviet Union.” (Biondi 2003, pp. 160-161; Horne 1986, p. 41) The House Un-American

Activities Committee (HUAC) accused it of condemning the United States to national suicide, and of attempting to confuse and divide Americans. (H.U.A.C. 1951; Lieberman 1992, p. 212; Horne 1986, p. 132) The Petition was considered a ploy to undermine resistance to Communist aggression; the first step of Soviet infiltration and invasion; and a “hoax and fraud” meant to manipulate those “hungry for peace.” (Lieberman 1992, pp. 213-214) Thus, by circulating the Petition, Du Bois and the PIC were accused of threatening national security in the interest of the Soviet Union. (Ibid.)

The PIC was only in existence from April 3 to October 12, 1950 due to unrelenting anticommunist pressure, but the trial proceeded even though the Center was disbanded before the indictment came down. (Horne 1986, p. 151) *U.S. v. Peace Information Center, et al.* proceeded in November 1951. The prosecution used anticommunist rhetoric, demonization of the Soviet Union, and the Korean War to discredit international peace activism. It called as its star witness O. John Rogge, a former Assistant Attorney General and founding member of the PIC. It was, Rogge’s home, in fact, that had served as the meeting place for the PIC’s formation. In his testimony, he claimed that the objective of the PIC was not peace, but rather to enact the Soviet Union’s foreign policy. He also argued that the purpose of the World Committee of the Defenders of Peace, for which the PIC was ostensibly an agent, was to focus international attention on the American use of the atomic bomb to distract the world from Soviet aggression in Korea. This was notwithstanding the fact that in August 1950, Rogge had signed a petition in Prague pledging his support to the World Committee and its peace program, and that he was one of the first signers of the Stockholm Peace Petition.⁴ The government intended to use this testimony to paint the PIC with the taint of a “Russian and Communist controversy” so that

“current popular hysteria could be aroused against [DuBois and the Center].”⁵ Its attempt to redbait Du Bois and the other defendants was evidenced in the insignificant witnesses called to testify against them, all of whom were either FBI informants or were well known for their anti-Soviet position, such as “Mr. Lissner,” a reporter from the *New York Times*.⁶

One of the primary techniques used by the prosecution to convict the defendants was “parallelism.” The latter was largely contingent on informant testimony, hearsay, and guilt by association. According to Bernard Jaffe, one of the PIC’s defense lawyers:

Somebody would be declared to be a Communist because the policies that he carried out were similar to those that were being advocated by Communists, and once you established that[,] one became a ‘follower,’ a ‘fellow traveler,’ or whatever it was and just as guilty as a Communist himself. So you established the evil of Communism; once you established that evil of Communism anyone who parallels the principles which are espoused by that evil spirit are themselves guilty. At the time the Du Bois prosecution took place, it was not an outlandish theory, and it had never before been rejected by a court during that period.⁷

Parallelism was a ubiquitous strategy used in McCarran hearings, and its use was rejected for perhaps the first time in the PIC trial. Thus, according to Elizabeth Moos, “Deprived of the use of parallelism, unable to confuse the issues with redbaiting, the case proved... ‘as thin as the broth made from the shadow of a homeopathic pigeon that had starved to death,’” and the PIC was acquitted of all charges on November 20, 1951.⁸

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice, Infiltration, and the “Stoolpigeon” Julia Clarice Brown

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ) was another radical organization whose demise was precipitated by “stool pigeon” testimony. Founded on September 9, 1951 by a national cadre of militant Black women, including Charlotta Bass (California), Alice Childress (New York),

Shirley Graham (New York), Dorothy Hunton (New York), Rosalie McGee (Mississippi), Louise Thompson Patterson (New York), Beulah Richardson (Mississippi), and Eslanda Robeson (Connecticut), the group sought to “rally Black women to defend their men” and to organize wives and mothers “of the legally lynched... of those imprisoned and threatened with prison... widowed by police brutality... [and] who mourn [their] sons dead in foreign wars.” They made the indelible connection between the insults, humiliations, and indignities of Jim Crow; the antiradical repression and violence meted out by the domestic police state; and the U.S. war machine that sent Black men to kill other racialized persons on behalf of a country that systematically devalued and disregarded Black life. In response, they organized a sojourn to the Department of Justice in Washington D.C. from September 29-October 1, 1951, during which they protested the lynching, beating, shooting, and unemployment of their men who, to add insult to injury, were “forced to become part of a Jim Crow army and go thousands of miles [to] Korea to war out war to other colored peoples.” (McDuffie 2011, p.160)

In 1952, STJ organized a conference for members on the Eastern seaboard to mobilize against a government that appropriated astronomical sums “for the destruction and enslavement of other peoples,” but that provided “no protection to the homes and persons of Negro citizens... [and] refuse[d] passports to Americans who speak the truth.”⁹ Members urged that as long as the United States continued to wage war, racialized people throughout the world would continue to be targeted, dominated, and oppressed, and anticommunism would continue to be a means of silencing and subjugating those who rejected the capitalist, imperialist, and racist warmongering of the U.S. Cold War state apparatus. STJ held that, when considering the destruction and devaluation of Black life, one could not separate racialized terrorism, like the bombing murder of

Harry and Harriet Moore on Christmas Day 1951; state terrorism like the wrongful conviction of the Martinsville Seven and Willie McGee; and imperial terrorism like conscripting Black men into an unjust and unnecessary war.

Given their militant position, the FBI insisted that all of the organization's officers were either in the CPUSA or "front organizations;" that STJ was "Communist Party sponsored;" and that it followed the Communist party line. In other words, it used red-baiting and guilt by association to rationalize its surveillance and infiltration of the organization. These spurious claims were given credence by Julia Clarice Brown who, according to the John Birch Society's Truth About Civil Turmoil Committee (TACT) , spent more than nine years under cover in the Cleveland, OH chapter of the Communist Party to reveal the ways that the latter planned to use Blacks as "cannon fodder' in their program of racial agitation."¹⁰ She claimed that it was Communists who convinced Black Americans that they were "no better off than slaves," to "promote race consciousness and resentment," to engage in demonstrations and protest marches, and to demand massive federal intervention. Because STJ utilized all of these strategies, they were indelible linked to the Communist Party. By characterizing all forms of militant antiracism as Communist-inspired, Brown was construing all persons and organizations who engaged in these forms of activism as subversive, dangerous, and abettors of the Communist plot to sew dissent among Americans.

Brown, who was one of the founding STJ members for Cleveland, OH, claimed that the Communist Party had created and manipulated the organization with the aim of involving more Blacks in its activities and objectives. She insisted that that Communist Party dissolved STJ

when it became dissatisfied with the organization's demand to remain all-Black, and its deviation from the Party line. She furthered her claim that STJ was a Communist-controlled organization by identifying several members of STJ, including Margaret Wherry, Beulah Richardson, and Myrtle Dennis, as members of the Communist Party.¹¹ Additionally, she provided the FBI with a vast array of information, including who attended STJ meetings and spoke at events; the home addresses of members; and internal debates and disputes. She also provided detailed information on ostensible communist fronts and subversives affiliated with STJ, including the National Negro Labor Council, the Civil Rights Congress, the Progressive Party, Paul Robeson, Vicki Garvin, William Patterson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Claudia Jones.¹²

The Council on African Affairs and the “Red-Baiter” Max Yergan

The Council on African Affairs (known as the International Committee of African Affairs until 1942) was founded in 1937. The CAA was one of the most forceful antifascist and anticolonial African-American organizations with international influence, and for that reasons it was named a “communist front” organization in 1943. (Lynch 1978, p.17; Brock 1998, p. 357) It was initially founded by a coalition of liberal, progressive, and radical Blacks, however many of the liberals and progressives, including Ralph Bunche, resigned due to pressure from the House Un-American Activities Committee given the organization's close association with the Communist Party and communist-leaning organizations like the National Negro Congress. With the resignation of the liberals, the CAA adopted a militant, anti-imperialist, anticapitalist internationalism that emphasized the political independence for African nations, advocated for improved economic and social conditions on the Continent, and began lobbying the U.S. government for African decolonization. (Von Eschen 1997, loc. 471-476) The CAA linked the

fight for Black rights in the U.S. to liberation movements in the Caribbean and in Africa, (Robeson 1978, p. 224) and published extensively on trade union and political organizing throughout Africa. Especially in the 1940s, the CAA was increasingly focused on labor and political economy. (Von Eschen 1997, loc. 1290-1397)

In 1947, Attorney General Tom Clark listed the CAA as a subversive organization, (Meriwether 2002, p. 80) and this precipitated a split between CAA co-founders Max Yergan, who had transformed into a Cold War liberal, and Paul Robeson, who remained a Black radical even as he became a persistent target of the Cold War state apparatus. Yergan betrayed the organization by fully cooperating with the FBI and attorneys general in their persecution and prosecution of Communists and radicals. (Brock 1998, p. 359) In an April 5, 1948 article in the *New York Post-Home News* it was reported that the anticommunist Yergan red-baited Paul Robeson by accusing him of taking part in a Communist plot to take over the Council on Affairs. He also accused Robeson and the other radicals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Alphaeus Hunton, and Doxey Wilkerson, of trying to push him out of the CAA because he was trying to rid the organization of Communist influence. (Meriwether 2002, p. 80) Robeson believed that Yergan was capitulating to reactionary forces and was determined to keep the CAA on a leftist course. (Meriwether 2002, p. 80) On April 7, 1948, the *Herald Tribune* reported that Robeson replied that “You can’t fight the struggles of Africa by being non-partisan or being a Red baitor [*sic*]—Someone has to point out that things are not beautiful here in America, in Africa and other parts other world. If that makes me a Communist, then I’m proud to be one.”¹³

On September 29, 1948, Yergan resigned from the CAA, (Meriwether 2002, p. 80) and continued to cooperate with the government to destroy his former organization and its members. The CAA was forced to disband in 1955 due in no small part to incessant harassment from the Subversive Activities Control Board, buttressed by the testimony and cooperation of former members. The latter also made it exceedingly difficult for Black radical CAA members like Alphaeus Hunton to find employment, and thus continue their work on behalf of African people. This red-baiting and anticommunist complicity resulted in social ostracism and alienation; as Dorothy Hunton lamented, “That’s how bad things were. Nobody wanted to associate with you. Nobody wanted to talk to you. It was the most devastating period of my life.”¹⁴ Her statement illuminates the ways that the Cold War state apparatus, with the help of “turncoats” and informants, discredited and destroyed the lives of Black radicals.

Conclusion

Ironically, despite the fact that the information provided by Julia Clarice Brown resulted in the incarceration, deportation, and immiseration of countless Black radicals, the TACT Committee claimed that it was *Brown* who was risking *her* life by exposing “Communist-led revolutionaries.”¹⁵ Such distortion elides the reality that, during the height of the Cold War, red-baiters, career informants, “stool pigeons,” and “turncoats” were instrumental in the surveillance, repression, and criminalization of Black radicalism. Their cooperation with the government facilitated the effective use of parallelism, infiltration, and guilt by association to discipline those who defied the pedagogy of the Cold War state. The use of violence against forms of activism

aimed at the eradication of racism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation was thus legitimated.

¹ File 100-370965, August 8, 1950, Federal Bureau of Investigation; File NY 100-87351, October 3, 1955, New York Federal Bureau of Investigation; File 66-35 Sub 264-SA, August 8, 1952; October 2, 1952; November 17, 1952, Cleveland Federal Bureau of Investigation.

² The Rosenberg Case: A Factsheet,” File 66-35 Sub 264-SA, October 23, 1952, Cleveland Federal Bureau of Investigation; James W. Ford to W.E.B. DuBois, December 7, 1954, DuBois Papers.

³ *New York Daily Mirror*, February 10, 1951; *Amsterdam News*, April 21, 1951.

⁴ Elizabeth Moos, “Report on W.E.B. Du Bois’s indictment and trial,” December 1951, W.E.B Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁵ “Rogge testifies for govt. in DuBois trial,” *National Guardian*, November 21, 1951.

⁶ Moos, “Report on W.E.B. Du Bois’s indictment and trial.”

⁷ David Levering Lewis, “Interview with Bernard Jaffe, Tape #17,” DLL papers.

⁸ Moos, “Report on W.E.B. Du Bois’s indictment and trial.”

⁹ “A Call to Negro Women for an Eastern Seaboard Conference of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice,” File 66-35 Sub 264-SA, May 14, 1952, Cleveland Federal Bureau of Investigation.

¹⁰ Julia Brown, “Please Don’t Help Glorify Martin Luther King,” (Belmont: TACT Committees, c. 1968).

¹¹ Committee of Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, *Communist Activities in the Cleveland, Ohio, Area, Part I*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962).

¹² File 66-35 Sub 264-Sub A

¹³ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations, “Paul Robeson, wa.: John Thomas,” Paul Robeson, Sr. File 100-25857, <https://archive.org/details/FBI-Paul-Robeson>.

¹⁴ David Levering Lewis, “Interview with Dorothy Hunton, Tape #21,” David Levering Lewis Papers (MS 827), Interview Transcripts, Special Collections and University Archives University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries (DLL Papers hereafter).

¹⁵ Julia Brown, “Please Don’t Help Glorify Martin Luther King,”