

Radical Americas

Book review:

Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960 by Carol Anderson

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Book Reviews

***Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* by Carol Anderson (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 372pp.**

Carol Anderson opens her latest study by recalling a conversation she had with Gerald Horne at the Library of Congress. She tells how Horne, after hearing of her plans for a research project that would explore the anticolonial activism of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), responded jokingly: ‘Well, that’s going to be a short book!’ (p.1).

It is telling that Anderson opens with this anecdote. *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* represents a direct response to the work of historians such as Horne and Penny Von Eschen, who have produced ground-breaking studies tracing the anticolonial activism of African Americans throughout the twentieth century.¹ It is Anderson’s contention that, by focusing predominantly on the actions of the black left, this scholarship has produced an historical ‘orthodoxy that has reigned for more than forty years’ – unfairly elevating those who embraced a Marxist-informed critique of colonialism and imperialism in the historical narrative (p.1). Focusing on the stinging anti-imperial critiques of W.E.B. Du Bois and black radicals such as Paul Robeson, Claudia Jones and William Alphaeus Hunton, Anderson argues that historians have often overlooked the important anticolonial work carried out by African American liberals. She stresses the need to ‘de-centre’ W.E.B. Du Bois when thinking about the anticolonial activism of African Americans in this period, arguing that the NAACP’s international activities did not simply cease when Du

Bois acrimoniously split with the association in 1948. In making this claim, *Bourgeois Radicals* persistently reminds readers that embracing anticommunism did not automatically result in support for colonial rule. By shifting the lens away from the African American left, Anderson skilfully documents the NAACP's sustained and, at times, militant opposition to colonialism and white supremacist rule beyond the borders of the United States. Pointing to the organization's involvement in anticolonial struggles in South Africa, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Indonesia, she concludes that the militant anticolonial outlook of the NAACP 'survived the Second World War. It even braved the Cold War, and, most important, it did not stop at the water's edge' (p.331).

Bourgeois Radicals provides a fascinating insight into the development of NAACP's anticolonial agenda during and immediately following the Second World War. Chapter One, 'Rising Wind', establishes the NAACP's commitment to the struggle for self-determination. Anderson documents the organization of the Association's Colonial Conference, held in New York City on April 6, 1945, that brought together forty-nine delegates from ten colonies, including Ghana, Nigeria and Burma. The event saw the NAACP leadership strongly condemn white minority rule, arguing that the natural resources and profits of a country should be used 'primarily for the welfare of the natives of that colony'. Delegates also demanded that a fully representative international body should be 'established to oversee the transition of peoples from colonial status to such autonomy as colonial peoples themselves may desire' (p.58). Ultimately, Anderson demonstrates how the findings of the Colonial Conference underscored the two main anticolonial principles of the NAACP – the need for any administering power to meet basic standards of human rights and the insistence on 'international accountability' (pp.69–70). She also notes that, while Du Bois was the driving force behind the conference, it was in fact NAACP Executive Secretary (and Du Bois's long-term rival) Walter White who embraced a broad and more collaborative vision of colonial liberation at this time. In contrast to Du Bois, who at this time problematically assumed that black America would lead the colonial world to freedom, White repeatedly stressed the importance of indigenous leadership in the struggle for self-determination (p.60).

Significantly, *Bourgeois Radicals* also details how NAACP leaders sometimes confronted anticommunist smears designed to discredit those who condemned colonialism. As Chapter Two demonstrates, the Association risked considerable political damage in its efforts to prevent the annexation of South West Africa (now Namibia) by the Union of

South Africa in the aftermath of the Second World War. Anderson uses the close relationship between the NAACP and the white Anglican minister Rev. Michael Scott to emphasize this point. A representative of Herero Chief Hosea Kutako, Scott played an important role in lobbying for Namibian independence at the United Nations. The NAACP actively supported this work, petitioning the State Department in an attempt to secure Scott's visa, providing him with office space and secretarial support as well as making important political introductions in an effort to secure an audience for the priest at the United Nations. Even when Scott was accused of being a 'communist agitator' the NAACP held firm, dismissing the charges as 'ridiculous'. As the Cold War escalated and the politics of anticommunism were used to stifle calls for race equality and silence anticolonial critics, this represented a dangerous and politically principled stance. This chain of events also shows how the NAACP was able to advance an anticolonial agenda from within an anticommunist political framework. As Anderson concludes: 'The NAACP risked the wrath of powerful governments, the destruction and ostracism that came with the "epithet" Communist and Communist sympathizer, and their respectable status in society to ensure that the atrocities of the apartheid regime would not go unnoticed' (p.131). The anticolonial campaigns fought by the NAACP into the early 1950s suggest that African American liberals, despite facing severe obstacles, were genuinely committed to the struggle for colonial liberation. Anderson demonstrates how, at a number of key moments, the political savvy of leading NAACP figures, such as Walter White and Channing Tobias, ensured that the calls of anticolonial activists in Asia and Africa would not go unanswered.

The NAACP's work in Africa and Indonesia traced throughout the text suggests that the organization viewed opposition to white supremacy in the US and around the world as a 'shared struggle'.² While Anderson does not explicitly engage with this political framework, *Bourgeois Radicals* might prompt scholars to rethink the trajectory of black internationalism during the Cold War. Black internationalism can be defined as the way in which people of colour around the world have engaged in conversations, exchanged information and collaborated in the cause of freedom. Much of the scholarly literature that deals with these historical connections in the twentieth century focuses on political networks forged by activists and organizations that directly challenged and were committed to moving beyond the dominant structures of the white nation-state. Anderson's intervention reminds us that the global struggle against race discrimination did not always involve an outright

rejection of the nation or the policies of the US government. Instead, she potentially challenges historians to think of black internationalism in more reformist terms. As *Bourgeois Radicals* demonstrates, African American support for anticommunism did not neatly translate into an implicit endorsement of either colonial rule or US imperialism. NAACP activists were capable of embracing both their 'Americanism' and a broader sense of black identity that resulted in political and cultural exchanges throughout the black diaspora.

However, while *Bourgeois Radicals* demonstrates the commitment of African American liberals to anticolonial politics during the early Cold War, the book is less sympathetic towards the black left. The efforts to 'de-centre' Du Bois are combined with a harsh criticism of his relationship with the Soviet Union. For example, Anderson traces how the Soviet Union, Britain and the US inserted a 'domestic jurisdiction' clause into the UN Charter, making it difficult for the international body to effectively challenge human rights violations. Anderson stresses that Du Bois deliberately ignored the Soviet Union's stance on this issue, noting that he 'was so blinded by his faith in the USSR that he could not see Moscow's complicity in erecting the very barriers that made attaining decolonization and human rights that much more difficult' (pp.65–6).

The Council on African Affairs (CAA), the radical anticolonial organization Du Bois gravitated towards after his break with the NAACP, also comes under fire in the text. This is most clear in Chapter Three, in which Anderson examines the NAACP's anticolonial work in East Africa. Here she documents the Association's bold defiance of US foreign policy in the post-war period through its efforts to oppose Italian trusteeship over Libya, Eritrea and Somalia. This is contrasted with the prolonged silence of council chair Robeson and the CAA on the Soviet Union's and the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) imperial ambitions in the region in the late 1940s. As the NAACP showed willingness to go against the US government, which in its desperation to prevent the election of a communist government in Italy was often reluctant to dismiss the idea of Italian trusteeship, the CAA would fail to break with the Soviet line and condemn these plans. The implication here is that the CAA chose to turn its back on the freedom dreams of those living under colonial rule in East Africa so as not to contradict Stalin's foreign policy goals. The council's chairman, the actor and singer Paul Robeson, is heavily criticized for this stance. As Anderson concludes: 'While Robeson and the Council tacked with the Soviet wind the NAACP would not be blown off course' (p.163).

Although this research sheds further light on the complex nature of anticolonial politics during the early Cold War, the reader is sometimes left with the impression that the extensive anticolonial work carried out by Du Bois, Robeson and the CAA was fundamentally compromised. In addition to this, and somewhat worryingly, Anderson occasionally casts African American leftists as blind followers of the Soviet Union. While it is important to acknowledge inconsistencies and gaps on the left, insisting that figures like Robeson were ‘mesmerized’ (p.139) by the Soviet Union overlooks the complex nature of the relationship between African American radicals, communism and the Soviet Union. The black internationalism of African American leftists was shaped by a genuine commitment to black self-determination in the United States, Africa and further afield. In addition to this, the Soviet Union’s rhetorical commitment to anticolonialism continued to offer a powerful counter-narrative to the foreign policy goals of the US and its imperial allies in the West for many African Americans. Dismissing the radical black internationalism of these figures also downplays the important acts of historical recovery that scholars such as Horne, Von Eschen and others have carried out by tracing the persistent and valuable anticolonial efforts of the black left. Historians should not overlook how the targeting of African American radicals during the Second Red Scare had a real and devastating effect on the global character of the black freedom struggle. Anticomunist politics stifled important critiques of the global hegemony of the United States and, as Anderson herself has pointed out in her previous work, made it difficult for African Americans to embrace a broad human rights agenda.³ The Cold War effectively stripped out much-needed economic critiques of the relationship between US capitalism, imperialism and racial exploitation around the world.

Having said this, *Bourgeois Radicals* remains a thoroughly researched and beautifully crafted book. It represents an important historiographical contribution in terms of thinking about African American activism during the Cold War and successfully shows how the NAACP refused to sacrifice its commitment to colonial liberation in the face of mounting anticomunist repression. In documenting the depth of the Association’s anticolonial activism, Anderson’s work suggests that it is perhaps time for historians to move beyond the old Cold War framework that pits leftists against liberals. These political divisions were certainly key, but it is nevertheless important to acknowledge how both camps mobilized to oppose colonialism and worked hard – often without much immediate success – to pressure the US government

to live up to its self-proclaimed democratic ideals both at home and abroad. In outlining the anticolonial activism of black liberals associated with the NAACP, *Bourgeois Radicals* represents an important step in demonstrating the political breadth of these efforts. However, Anderson's criticism of Du Bois, Robeson and the CAA plays down the political agency of African Americans on the left. Just as dismissing the NAACP as being supportive of colonial rule is limiting, suggesting that the silences of black leftists compromised their anticolonial stance is equally problematic. Instead, historians should aim to acknowledge both the political shortcomings and successes of black activists from across the political spectrum. There is a need to look at the range of responses to colonialism that characterized black protest in this period. This will surely allow for a better understanding of the state of anticolonial organizing in the early Cold War.

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Notes

- 1 Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986); Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 2 Anderson uses the phrase 'shared struggle' in both her introduction and her final chapter 'Regime Change'.
- 3 Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).