

Cold War and Wright's 1948 Paris speech : Such Is Our Challenge

Sunday 12 January 2020, by [McLEMEE Scott](#), [WRIGHT Richard](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2020).

This reprint of Richard Wright's 1948 Paris speech appeared in the fourth print issue of the revolutionary arts journal *Red Wedge* [1] in 2017. Richard Wright (1908-1960) was an acclaimed author and novelist whose works are regarded as some of the most important on themes of race and racism in America. Scott McLemee's introduction, which puts the speech in biographical and political context, has been revised and somewhat expanded for *Against the Current*.

Introduction to Richard Wright's Forgotten Speech

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION of Richard Wright's address to the Revolutionary Democratic Assembly in Paris in December, 1948 seems to have escaped the notice of the biographers and literary scholars who have otherwise been extremely thorough in documenting the author's life and work.

That neglect is all the more remarkable given the speech's substance. A major defense of radical political and cultural principles at a moment when the Cold War was turning downright arctic, it is also a credo, a statement of personal values, by the preeminent African-American literary artist of his era.

"My body was born in America," Wright declares, "my heart in Russia" — a tribute to the spirit of the October Revolution, with its potential to realize a fuller measure of democracy and equality than the United States had claimed in even its grandest promises.

But the corruption of the best gives rise to the worst. Wright's speech, while expressing an ongoing commitment to struggles for liberation, was also his own declaration of independence.

Some points of biographical and historical information may be of value to the 21st century reader who knows Richard Wright mainly for his novel *Native Son* (1940) and his memoir *Black Boy* (1944). Between the publication of those works, he broke with the Communist Party.

While retaining an affinity for Marxism, he soon developed a strong interest in existentialist thought, with its emphasis on alienation, freedom, and self-creation. These had been major themes of his writing all along, of course, but only in the mid-1940s did word of existentialism as a philosophical school begin to interest the American literary public.

Wright's fascination involved a shock of recognition: When the Marxist historian and theorist C.L.R. James noticed Wright's collection of writings by Søren Kierkegaard — the 19th-century Danish theologian whose work defined the basic existentialist concerns with anxiety, authenticity, and the crushing burden of social myths — Wright responded that, as a Black man living in America, he'd understood Kierkegaard even before reading him.

Wright in France

In 1946, Wright accepted an invitation to visit France. Finding a welcome contrast with American mores, especially concerning race, he moved there with his family the following year. He knew Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir from their visits to New York.

Translations of his work began to appear in their journal *Les Temps modernes*. His memoir *Black Boy* was serialized across several issues in 1947, at the same time as it was running chapters of Sartre's major statement *What Is Literature?*

In criticizing the limitations of bourgeois literary culture, Sartre cited to Wright's work as embodying the tension of writing that addresses both sides of an oppressive social order. During this period Wright joined the editorial board of another important literary and political journal, *Presence Africain*, which also had connections with the Sartrean milieu.

And so it seems almost a matter of course that Wright would be drawn, like others in the orbit of *Les Temps modernes*, to the *Rassemblement Democratique Revolutionnaire* when it emerged in 1948. Reflecting dissatisfaction with the status quo on the French left, the RDR sought to be — as one account put it — “more democratic than the Communists and more revolutionary than the Socialists.”

Besides the involvement of Sartre, Beauvoir and others in their circle, RDR had a close relationship with *Franc-Tireur*, a left-wing newspaper with a circulation of 370,000. (The title means “Free Shooter,” with connotations of guerrilla combat.)

The idea of an independent left movement — one appealing to dissidents in the established groups as well as unaffiliated radicals — met with a warm reception at first. RDR events drew large audiences, and organizers were initially confident of growing to a membership in the tens of thousands.

It cannot have hurt that 1948 happened to mark the centennials of a wave of revolutions that started in France and spread throughout Europe, and also of the publication a certain manifesto by Marx and Engels.

But as Ian Birchall explains in the chapter on the RDR in his book *Sartre Against Stalinism* (2004), the Socialist and Communist parties soon proved hostile, while the Trotskyists and other small revolutionary groups regarded the RDR as a distraction at best. And as one East European country after another turned into so called “people's democracies” (i.e. extensions of the Stalinist political and social system), the RDR came under enormous pressure to “choose the West” as the lesser of two evils.

At its peak in 1948, the RDR had a few thousand members. Before the end of 1949, most of them voted with their feet. And by 1950, it barely existed at all, except as a memory of the hope for an alternative to the standoff between the United States and the USSR.

Wright delivered the speech reprinted here during one of the high points of the RDR's activity: a mass meeting in early December 1948 that drew an audience of 4000 people, with another 2000 turned away. Andre Breton and Albert Camus also spoke.

Wright's Paris Speech

Wright delivered his speech, originally written in English, in a translation by Simone de Beauvoir (so indicated by Arnold Rampersad in the biographical timeline appearing in the two *Library of America*

volumes of Wright's work). Franc-Tireur published the French version of Wright's presentation under the title "Humanity is Greater than America and Russia" in its issue dated December 16, 1948.

The speech returned to English a few months later — circuitously, in the form of Mary Coleman's English translation, which is the version reprinted here. It appeared in the Summer 1949 number of *The Student Partisan*, the magazine of the Politics Club at the University of Chicago, and was soon reprinted under the title "Such Is Our Challenge" in the Fall issue of *Anvil: A Student Anti-War Quarterly*, published by the New York Student Federation Against War.

The editorial note accompanying the speech provides no information about the translator Mary Coleman. When this introductory note appeared in *Red Wedge*, I pointed out that someone by that name born in 1928 received her bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Chicago in 1950, worked with the Congress of Racial Equality throughout the 1950s, and went on to publish extensively on the neurology of autism.

Against the Current editor Alan Wald has confirmed that she was indeed the same Mary Coleman who translated the speech. Many of her papers in medical journals were published under the name Mary Bazelon, during her marriage to David T. Bazelon, a social critic who contributed to *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*, among other journals.

Perhaps the closest equivalent to the RDR on the American scene was the Independent Socialist League, known for the slogan "Neither Washington Nor Moscow, But the Third Camp of Independent Socialism" — a position substantially identical to that of Sartre, Wright and their comrades during the height of their involvement with the RDR.

Hence the evident enthusiasm with which ISL members and supporters working with *The Student Partisan* and *Anvil* must have greeted Wright's speech. The journals merged in 1950 and continued publication as *Anvil* through 1960 — an impressive achievement for any group of radical students, let alone one operating throughout the McCarthy era. [2]

Cold War Chill

But by the time Coleman's translation was available, the existentialist left in France was taking its distance from the RDR. One of the group's founding members, David Rousset, had begun to drift away from a Third Camp perspective, towards support for the U.S. bloc.

When the RDR held an "International Day Against War and Dictatorship" in Paris at the end of April 1949, the list of participants included the philosopher Sidney Hook and the novelist James T. Farrell — two American leftists turned Cold Warriors — who spoke in support of the military alliance that would soon be known as NATO.

Sartre, Wright and the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty submitted a statement to the conference but declined to participate. "We condemn," they said, "for the same reasons, both the more or less disguised annexations in Eastern and Central Europe by the USSR, and the Atlantic Pact. It is by no means certain that this pact will slow up the coming of war. It may on the contrary hasten it. What is certain, on the other hand, is that, a little sooner or a little later, it will contribute to make it inevitable."

In May 1949, the ISL newspaper *Labor Action* published "An Interview in Paris with Richard Wright on U.S. Politics" that affirmed support for the principles expressed in his speech a few months earlier, but with evident concern that the Cold War pressures were only worsening.

Wright scholars have been aware of the interview for some time; its text was reprinted in the volume *Conversations with Richard Wright* (University Press of Mississippi, 1993). It seems to rescue this other text — published by the same cluster of American radicals standing fast in hard times — from oblivion. It is a small part of his legacy, but as such worth reclaiming.

Scott McLemee

Such Is Our Challenge

MY BODY WAS born in America, my heart in Russia, and today I am quite ashamed of my two homelands. The American State of Mississippi gave me my body; the Russian October Revolution gave me my heart. But today these two giant nations — symbols of the nationalistic scourge of our times — rival each other in their efforts to establish projects for the debasement of the human spirit.

They are guilty of degrading humanity, guilty of debasing the culture of our times, guilty of replacing the value of quality by the value of quantity, guilty of creating a universe which, little by little, is revealed as the gas chamber of humanity.

These two nations, the American and the Russian, pretend to be the official representatives of human liberty and, between these two official pretensions, between the threats they hurl at each other, the human spirit finds itself crucified.

Men are afraid. They are unable to choose. They cannot plan. They cannot think of the next day. They tremble in the night from fear and dismay. The imperatives of military and industrial life have so obscured and enfeebled the instincts of men that they no longer even know that they are lost.

You know that is true. I know it. Then, why not admit it? Why not grant it as a point of departure which determines our words and actions?

Certainly, as conscious men, we ought to know that the crisis before us is more weighty in substance than the combat between America and Russia.

The truth is that those two nations make war on your spirit and my spirit, that contemporary spirit which books, culture and history have given us; that Dante, Shakespeare, Racine and Goethe have given us. Each step that America takes and each step that Russia takes brings us nearer to the point where free thought, free spirit and free action are not possible. We live in this vise.

America says that she alone is the champion of liberty; and Russia also says this. In fact, those two nations advocate ideals in which they really don't believe, which they even hate and despise. America is suspicious of you intellectuals; she has invented a whole terminology to express her disdain for the products of the human spirit: men who think, she scornfully calls Long Hairs, Pedants, Dreamers, Makers of Theory, Intellectual Bastards, Visionaries, etc.

And in Russia, what do they call you there? Monkeys, Hyenas, Chimpanzees, such are the names they hurled at T.S. Eliot, at Andre Gide, and at the best living writers, at the recent cultural congress held in Poland.

The Conquerors' War

Listen, writers and artists: the men who today lead the world have declared war on you! They have no need of you, they don't want you in the society they are trying to build. They think you are dangerous. They said it at Hollywood and they said it at Prague!

Whoever is the conqueror, you lose; you shall be reduced to servile dependence, to slavery to discs of a phonograph repeating the official doctrine. I ask you, you men of spirit: what is there for you to choose? Are you able to say yes, with all your heart, to those things that America symbolizes?

If you are able to say yes to one or the other of these points of view, that signifies something that has already died in you, that the battle which the Americans and the Russians wage for the conquest of your spirit is already won. If you are able to choose between them, that signifies that humanity is lost, that 2000 years of the history of man is ended, that the conception of man that we have is buried.

I cannot answer the question that I raise and I don't apologize. There are times in history when words alone cannot give an answer. There are times when action alone is able to answer. Such are our times. Acts, that is what you, intellectuals, must accomplish, acts with words, acts which express your needs, your wishes, your dreams.

Do you believe that I exaggerate the gravity of the problem? Listen and remember. There are two nations in the world today, where feeling has become politically suspect, where speaking of the subjective qualities of man is a crime, where the mere act of speaking about freedom is smeared and spied upon, where servility is made noble, falsehood worshiped, double-dealing sanctified, false testimony binding, spying patriotic, and where the scientific laboratory is guarded by bayonets.

These are not isolated cases which affect some dishonorable individuals. No, these are the official beliefs of governments that lead hundreds of millions of men. To oppose this flood of opinion is to risk a brutal death or to endanger your means of earning a living.

The war against man is declared and, if you don't know it, if you are not conscious of it, you will be unable to set an example for those who are caught in the situation, but who still don't know that it is almost too late.

What is Freedom?

Freedom of speech is not enough. Freedom of religion is not enough. Freedom from hunger and fear, they are not enough. A nation which is not able to give its citizens the right and freedom to exercise their natural and acquired abilities is founded on fraud. Man ought to have the freedom to remain a man.

Freedom is not negative, it ought to be not only the possibility "of" something, but to go freely "towards" something. It ought to let man create new values for life, otherwise it was not created for man.

America and Russia are full of machines which strangle living more than they protect. America and Russia are full of educational institutions for whom the goal is not the formation of independent individuals, but of standardized human types who are loyal to the State.

The intolerant, harsh nationalism of America and Russia deprive the millions of men who live in these countries of having normal human sentiments and they are forced to become propaganda projectors.

In America and Russia, the right to an individual destiny is sacrificed in the name of a compulsory national ideal. The hysterical political atmosphere, in America and in Russia, already has removed from man the means of objectively and reasonably resolving the problems of food and shelter.

The present nationalism, in America and in Russia, forces a man to abandon his human heritage. America and Russia pretend that their action is in defense of the lives of their people; but in truth, it kills the life of man on earth.

In rejecting all this, what can we do? Fortunately, the situation is not completely desperate. I believe that we still have a chance. It is not a question of our fighting these national giants on their own ground.

Our weapons are not their weapons. For us there still exists room for liberty, and that room is your spirit and mine, your ability to speak and write the words which hold attention and make men stop, look and listen.

For some time yet, we shall have this liberty; for how long? We don't know.

But that tiny space of liberty is surrounded by threats, ersatz culture (fed to the masses, and impoverishing the spirit), false values, governments of gangsters, books which confuse more than they clarify, crime which speaks the language of the revolution, and revolution which speaks the language of crime.

Nevertheless, we can make ourselves heard. And that ought to be enough for us. We have only a few allies. For centuries men like us have worked for the bosses, the lords, the masters. But that is ended. Today the masters are afraid of you; they no longer want you. From now on, you are alone and you are your own masters.

You must find a way of making your words a good to incite men to decide for themselves. You must find words and images which make men feel life in the most direct, most immediate, keenest way. Your words must drive man by powerful blows from passive existence to real life.

Your words must instill faith into men, but faith which is not based upon superstition. The strength of your words must empower men to escape their daily impersonal, big city routine and fill a new need of expressing themselves, of believing in themselves, of fulfilling themselves. Your words must stir up in man the desire to be a man.

Your words must be a prayer addressed to man for man. They must arouse a desire in man to remain human. I speak not of heaven or hell, but purely and simply of our sad and sweet earth, with its men who suffer and have their moment of bitter human triumph.

The great danger is that the threads of history, which we hold so feebly in our hands, may break asunder in our lifetime; that the past which has nourished us and the future which we seek should escape us and leave us in a barren present denuded of all human significance.

In order that our universe not escape us, a single man must speak with the tongues of ten, each of your acts must equal that of a thousand. Such is our challenge. If we fail, not only shall we lose our puny individual lives, but we shall lose all that is human in the world, all that history, however imperfect she is, has bequeathed us.

The world is greater than America or Russia. Humanity is greater than America or Russia. That is a fact. If we believe it, we shall conquer.

Richard Wright

P.S.

• Against the Current n°204, January-February 2020:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/204/intro-to-richard-wright/>

Footnotes

[1] www.redwedge.com

[2] All issues of Anvil are available for download at
<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/anvil/index.htm>