

**LEO HURWITZ**  
**NATIVE LAND 1943**  
**Exposing Oppressive Forces Against Labor Rights**

**By Sandra E. Cohen**

Leo Hurwitz's *Native Land* is a 1942 expose of repressive forces against labor organizing. The film is based on La Follette Civil Liberties Committee's (1936-1941) 65 volumes of testimony to the Senate on their investigation. The investigation's results couldn't be more troubling. The committee found that both Pinkerton and William J. Burns Detective Agencies sent spies to infiltrate labor unions and to report on members considered adversaries to the interests of business owners and corporations. What happened to those union members, who were only exercising their civil rights, is the subject of this film.

How did Leo tell such a story?

**He chose the right voice for the film.** According to Tom Hurwitz, Leo's son: "The first thing they knew was that they needed Paul Robeson...he had become the voice of the social progressive movement in America. When he spoke, when he sang, he spoke with the sound of America rising up ... His image and his quality was one of absolute rectitude and absolute support for the underprivileged and the lower classes ... Robeson's singing gives tremendous lift to the power of the film."

**He humanized the documentary material at hand.** Leo talks to Ingela Romare, Swedish director, cinematographer, and actress about how, with *Native Land*, he developed a new documentary form: "It was a film that was both documentary and enacted and it had a series of independent stories woven together within a framework of documentary material, which you return to all along...the derivation of the form came from the material itself. That is, here you have 65 volumes of testimony dealing with people here, people there, people then, people now, all over the United States."

*Native Land* is the story of those people – people being violently oppressed.

**First Enacted Story - Trouble On The Horizon**

*Native Land* begins as pro-American as it could be, showcasing The Bill of Rights – a promise that is both America's hope and the film's irony (given the soon-to-be-revealed repressive forces against it). We see people going about their daily lives in the city, their walk full of trust, anticipation, and apparent

freedom to pursue the American dream. But all too soon we witness the dark underbelly of the common workers' struggle. What they have to fight isn't pretty; it destroys trust and it's nothing short of murder.

A carefree boy runs through the fields excitedly calling for his Pa that some men have come to see him. One, a large man with a diamond ring, stands by his recently purchased car and then goes out of sight. The farmer's wife peels potatoes in the kitchen singing and happily preparing supper. Her husband comes through the door, asking about the men: "They wanted to know if you were the Mr. Hill who spoke up at the Farmer's meeting last night and I said, 'You bet!'" She's proud of him and naïve to the purpose of the men's visit. Mr. Hill goes out back to talk to them. Suddenly, the men run past the window and take off quickly in the big car. Mrs. Hill startles and runs out, across the fields, after her husband; barefoot and panicked, knowing something is wrong. She finds him - falling into the river, head bashed, dead.

We hear Robeson's voice: "A man's farm invaded. Liberty attacked. Right of free speech denied to an American. This happened in Custer, Michigan, September 1936. People never heard of it; 20 miles away in the next town, they didn't know what happened to one man a few miles away. Cleveland, Ohio, Spring Day, 1936, man dead. It happened again. They say he was a union man."

It was happening all over the United States, but for the most part no one knew. Innocent people, taking the Bill of Rights for granted and seeing no reason not to; just wanting ten cents more for their cotton or the like; unaware of powerful enemies. *Native Land* shows people going to work every day. There is a feeling of security - but that security was false.

### **Leo Hurwitz's Focus on Need**

This trouble for workers was the problem Leo felt he must expose. As his son Tom tells us: "Frontier Films (Paul Strand, President; Leo Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner, Vice Presidents) made *Native Land* "to use all the power of film to reach working people in the United States ... there was no television and ... the [real] news wasn't the same as what the owners of factories wanted people to hear. So this was a new movement to get out information about things people weren't hearing at all..."

If the American people weren't hearing the whole story, especially the story of repression, how would workers in the United States labor force get what was promised in The Bill of Rights? Leo tells Ingela Romare that these were the questions *Native Land* had to ask and answer: "How do we find our rights? How

do we struggle for our rights to get what we need - and [how do we] organize to get what we need?”

As Leo tells us: “*Native Land* became the culmination of how you make a film, that is not a fiction film, have the values and the tensions that are equivalent to a plot in a story but not superimposed from the outside ... one of the reasons why my films are free to move around from subject matter to subject matter [is] because underneath them is the flow of needs ...”

Need and the problem of need is what Leo wanted his documentary films to echo inside his audiences. His style has important links to psychoanalysis, a method that takes seriously the internal conflicts that block someone from getting emotional needs met. *Native Land's* various interwoven stories show the back and forth of trying to get reasonable basic needs satisfied and the backlash of forces against it.

### **Second Enacted Story - The “Rat”**

This is the story of Harry, a labor union spy; an informant posing as a union man and betraying those he’s underhandedly befriended.

The Great Depression was over and things had started to change. The idea of Unions took hold. Workers put The Bill of Rights into action and the film shows us a group of new pioneers. As Robeson’s voice tells us: “They were confident. *Over* confident...they felt their own power. They’d come out of The Depression. They had plans.”

But, we soon see the other side of the story, giving us a window into what happened to our farmer, Mr. Hill.

We’re in the offices of an “industrial audit service,” with its telephones and file cabinets. It looks like an ordinary business, but it’s not. It’s a front with a complete line of under cover men including stool pigeons, union traitors, and stooges: “Trouble is our business” and the Unions are trouble for big business and corporations.

We hear Paul Robeson’s voice again: “Behind the front of everyday business is a conspiracy against the lives of innocent men.” Those innocent men are the union organizers and the members of the unions standing up for their rights.

We’re introduced to Harry, the stooge. He’s very much “in” with the family of the union president, Mack, who trusts Harry so much that he shows him the

membership book. In fact, Harry is so trusted that, knowing there are dangers around, Mack thinks the book is safer with Harry and asks him to hide it for a few days. Harry cunningly agrees: “It’s safer with me.”

Harry knows exactly what he’s doing to his “friend” and we see him in conflict. He’s not completely heartless. Knowing he’s been trusted, he tries not to give the membership book to his shrewd boss. His boss challenges him: “Which side are you on, Harry?” After all, Harry is paid good dollars for his treason.

The boss and Harry come up with a plan, making it seem that Harry has been beaten and the membership log stolen. The union men are loyal friends; they nurse Harry back to health. We hear Robeson’s voice again: “Harry: bought and paid for. One spy in a key position; one act of betrayal.”

For a stooge: “Loyalty is the best policy.” But, we see that Harry is loyal to the wrong side. If he wants out, he’s threatened with death. Do what you’re told: it’s the Mafioso of big business against labor.

We hear Robeson’s voice in another voiceover, letting us know the extent of a spy’s betrayal and a corporation’s repression of worker’s rights: “Union members with families are blacklisted and fired. Never to be hired again, month after month without a job. Where was the right to organize? Where was The Bill of Rights?”

### **A Vicious Cycle Of Oppression**

People can be resilient and determined. Yet, so are the powers against their constitutional rights. *Native Land* goes on to tell the story of a difficult time for the labor force in American history. There’s the rising up to fight for rights such as better pay or the freedom to organize and speak out. And, then, there are repressive forces that won’t allow for even reasonable needs to be met. The cycle repeats, again and again. (It’s repeating now in 2017.)

After the blacklisting, workers found their power. They fought the blacklist. Union members marched in the street and they won back the right to organize. There were no more meetings in the dark. Larger numbers of men joined the unions every day.

As Robeson’s voice wisely says: “You can’t blacklist a whole people. The auto union started with 30,000 members. In a year they had 400,000 ... millions of little people gathered together to protect each other.”

Yet, there is no certainty when there are fascist forces living in the shadows of a democratic society (or, as psychoanalysts know — lurking in the unconscious mind). And it all starts again: they kill one man; they threaten others; they break up unions. There is a rampage of killings after a peaceful demonstration: “If anyone talks about Rights, they slap them down.”

We see an image of the Klu Klux Klan (November 30, 1935). Leaders of the modern Democratic Party are released into the arms of the Klan and killed. It's not just black men the Klan murders. It's white men, too. Robeson's voice tells the truth: “There is fascism in America. They hated one thing — the practice of democracy.” La Follette Civil Liberties Committee pieced together evidence of widespread repressive methods.

Robeson's voice continues: “They begin to add up the techniques of terror; the arithmetic of fear; a conspiracy backed by millions of dollars and the biggest corporations.” This conspiracy entangled the whole United States but was kept secret until the Senate committee revealed the spies and secret wars in every union: an \$80 million payroll, armed vigilantes (the steel company possessed 500 revolvers); strike breakers paid by private corporations with private arsenals of tear gas and shotguns for ammunition.

The La Follette report empowered the American people to win again — and they did: this time, unemployment insurance and collective bargaining. In *Native Land*, it is now Memorial Day 1937 and we see babies and families. We hear Paul Robeson's voice: “What do people want out of life? Not too much — to pay the rent and have some kind of future.”

That doesn't seem too much to ask, but in every decade and every generation there are forces against democracy. We see this today, in 2017. We have Trump as President, his anti-constitutional actions, the rise of Hate crimes, and the threat to bring hard won freedoms down. Worse is the fact that sometimes those forces against freedom pose as “caring friends.”

### **Need Is Genuinely Human**

Ingela Romare, listening as Leo discusses the making of *Native Land*, says to him: “It's really important to find what's genuinely human because that's the heart of it.” Leo nods: “That's exactly right.” His films do just that. They recognize essential human needs and stand for human freedoms. They show the truth when people's needs are brutalized and their rights compromised. As a psychoanalyst, I can personally relate to what Leo says about making a documentary that takes seriously what people need:

*“I developed a theory that the structure of the film ought to be based on need. You have to create a sense of need that is inherent in the subject matter not placed upon it from above ... and that need then plays itself out in the world of conflict by and large: what is in the way of that need, how is that need developed, where is it joined by other needs, and so forth, and you have a developing structure ... a breathing film that ... develops the needs in the audience, the audience feels them ...”*

In practicing psychoanalysis I too identify the needs of my patients - also not from above or from a theoretical assumption. I listen for what is hidden in their thoughts, their fantasies, and their feelings. I feel along with them. The mind, too, can develop oppressive forces and I help my patients with what blocks their needs from being met.

We all have needs, and if we are sensitive we empathize with the needs we see. This is what Leo creates for us through his structure of need. We feel the needs of others deeply in *Native Land* and the film’s last image brings it home:

A wife is holding her young daughter, crying. She collapses as she tries to place a flower on her husband’s newly dug grave. Her last words are the message: “He was the kind of man who stood up for his rights, we don’t forget that.”

Let’s keep these words close to our hearts. We mustn’t back down or forget to take a stand against oppression. Ever.