Civil Rights in New York City

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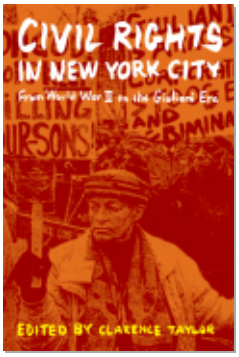

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The Dead End of Despair: Bayard Rustin, the 1968 New York School Crisis, and the Struggle for Racial Justice

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The loss of the dream
Leaves nothing the same.

Langston Hughes, "Beale Street"

On April 6, 1968, Bayard Rustin received the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) John Dewey Award, an acknowledgment by the New York City union of the civil rights leader's incalculable contributions to progressive social activism. A founder of CORE and close associate of Martin Luther King Jr., Rustin had helped invent the Freedom Rides and had organized the celebrated 1963 March on Washington. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, he was a leading American pacifist and shaped the theory and practice of nonviolence. As the protégé of black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, Rustin also championed the victims of economic inequality. "More than anyone else in the postwar era," comments the historian John D'Emilio, Rustin "was a bridge linking the African American freedom struggle, peace campaigns, and a socialist vision of economic democracy."[1]

As much as the UFT Dewey Award acknowledged Rustin's activism, it also signaled his estrangement from the movement he had done so

much to create. In the late 1960s, New York's white teacher unionists and black activists were locked in a bitter struggle over control of the city's mammoth school system. Black demands for "community control" followed a long, well-organized, and singularly unsuccessful campaign to integrate New York's schools, a campaign in which white liberal organizations, including the UFT, offered little support. As white resistance undermined black hopes of integrating education and achieving full participation in American life, black parents and activists turned to demanding power in running segregated schools. Whereas black activists saw community control as a prerequisite to democratizing school governance, eliminating racism in education, and opening school jobs to African Americans, teacher unionists saw it as a threat to due process, job security, and unbiased quality education. The conflict between black activists and white teacher unionists placed New York at the epicenter of America's racial strife.

Despite Bayard Rustin's long record at the forefront of the African American freedom struggle, in 1968 he distanced himself from black activists. The call for community control both reflected and propelled the growing power of nationalist ideas and ideals among African Americans across the United States. Blacks would gain more by aligning themselves with the labor movement, Rustin countered, than from protests reflecting their racial identity and particular concerns. Amid the rancor of the school conflict, this dual commitment to economic democracy and the integrationist ideal led Rustin to sever ties with old allies and become one of the UFT's few prominent black supporters.[2]

Rustin's arguments, grounded in decades of struggle, failed to stem the growing appeal of nationalist calls for Black Power and self-determination among school activists and the declining hopes for school integration among activists and policy makers alike. And yet, no less than advocates of community control, Rustin addressed the quandary that confronted all black activists once America's commitment to racial equality reached its limits and then began to recede.

The argument in this chapter that Rustin's estrangement from old allies reflected a profound shift in his politics and in the movements of the 1960s stands in contrast to much recent scholarship. Of late, historians have highlighted the essential continuity in Rustin's career and in the broader flow of recent American history. Their accounts have generated nuanced understandings of the interplay of integration and Black Nationalism in the African American struggle for social justice and of the enduring presence of both democratic ideals and racial inequality in American life.

John D'Emilio exemplifies the recent historiography. He portrays Rustin's politics as steadfastly grounded in "a bedrock optimism that the American political system was flexible and responsive enough to embrace change of revolutionary dimensions." This chapter, on the other hand, documents Rustin's growing pessimism that America would embrace full equality for its black inhabitants. Rather than a life of heroic continuity, Rustin's tragic recognition of American racism's enduring power led him to break with the allies and ideals that had shaped his life and to move toward racial accommodation.[3]

Not only does the heroic narrative fail to account for crucial elements of Rustin's biography, but it offers a poor guide to thinking about the choices activists must make: Militant protest or compromise coalition politics? Pacifism or pragmatism? Community-based politics or affiliation with organized labor? Bayard Rustin offered a sophisticated and compelling analysis of pedagogy, politics, and economic life, but one that black activists found increasingly unpersuasive. This essay examines that analysis, its sources, and its reception. Understanding the choices Rustin and other movement activists made and the social analysis that guided them can better equip us to make those choices we face.

Blacks, Schools, and the Civil Rights–Labor Coalition

As was befitting a talk to teacher unionists upon receiving an award named after John Dewey, Rustin attempted to synthesize pedagogical and social issues in his acceptance speech. Just as politics should address economic structures of inequality that transcend race, learning should focus on the search for universal truth. Rustin began by attributing to one of his own schoolteachers the expansion of childhood horizons circumscribed by "a home where there was no father" in a community where blacks were segregated. The role of the teacher, as of the political activist, he concluded, was not to affirm the particularities we inherit. Rather, where Dewey's democratic educational theory converged with "the creative labors of the American teacher," education had the possibility of "liberating one from the prison of one's inherited circumstances."[4]

Rustin based his assessment of teachers' work on the belief that all Americans could participate in a shared political life and culture. He discounted the notion that racism had created mutually incomprehensible and hostile worldviews that separated those outside the mainstream

from those inside it. Rather, by replacing "distorted, biased and ultimately racist" versions of American history with accounts that recognized the "notable contributions" of African Americans, teachers could "foster the ideal of communication and compassion among all the young people of our society," enabling them "to know the truth and to be free." The act of teaching was thus "an integral part of the effort to bring about social change and social justice in our society."[5]

Still, Rustin reminded UFT members, teachers' pedagogical responsibilities were mirrored by their political obligations. Inadequate school funding and sterile bureaucracies discouraged poor minority students' academic success. Only "a coalition between teachers, trade unions, and parent groups," he told the UFT, could "make educational . . . bureaucracies and . . . authorities more accountable."[6]

Moreover, echoing Dewey, Rustin argued that students learn to the degree that they have the opportunity to use the knowledge they accrue. Civil rights movement victories over legally sanctioned segregation had not transformed the circumscribed lives of ghetto blacks, and the automation of industrial work was eliminating the jobs where blacks were concentrated. Only by eradicating "poverty and the problems it creates" would all students share the prospect of productive work and decent lives, which generates the will to learn. Only with such changes would teachers "achieve their full effectiveness and their full potential as professionals." Thus, the teachers' fate was inseparable from that of their dispossessed students; social reform would liberate them as well as their pupils.[7]

Rustin believed that changes in the American economy magnified the importance of educational reform. In an earlier age, he argued, immigrants with "a minimal public education" could "find jobs and become part of the productive system." At the time of the school crisis, however, the "automation revolution" left "no room for the uneducated or the semi-skilled." An awareness of this unprecedented need for education, Rustin maintained, "is why the schools have become a primary target of the ghetto activist."[8]

If school reform was the right issue for black activists, community control of curriculum and teacher employment was the wrong strategy. It gave "priority to the issue of race precisely at a time when," with the abolition of legally enforced segregation, "the fundamental questions facing the Negro and American society alike are economic and social." The allure of community control, Rustin argued, reflected the difficult political conditions that confronted black activists in the late 1960s. After

a period during which civil rights advances had fed black hopes, America's commitment to racial equality had lost much of its force. As "the pendulum of history" began "to swing downward" toward reaction, black expectations for racial justice shriveled into despair. African Americans responded with "a turning inward" heralded by calls for Black Power.[9]

Community control, in Rustin's eyes, exemplified this new "politics of frustration." Grounded in the "psychological" need for pride in black identity, it offered the illusion of "political self-determination in education" to those "so alienated that they substitute self-expression for politics." Like the earlier separatist movements of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, the Black Nationalist campaign for community control "derives not from liberal theory but from the heritage of conservatism. It is the spiritual descendant of states [*sic*] rights." When stripped of the militant rhetoric that "so often camouflages its true significance," community control institutionalized "one of the worst evils in the history of this society—segregation"—and legitimized "the idea that segregated education is in fact a perfectly respectable, perfectly desirable, and perfectly viable way of life in a democratic society."[10]

Even within the black community, Rustin argued, the separatist fantasy impeded social equality. Discounting working-class proponents of community control, Rustin charged that the leadership of "the fight for the Negro to completely take over the schools in the ghetto is not the working poor. . . . It is not the proletariat. . . . This is a fight on the part of the educated Negro middle class to take over the schools . . . not in the interest of black children, or a better educational system, but in their own interest."

Much like projects of ghetto-based black capitalism, community control "deepen[ed] the class conflict within the Negro community" and thus subverted the very community it invoked.[11]

Community control was ineffective as well as wrong. Relying on a lumpenized "black slum proletariat" that lacked the leverage of an industrial working class to exact concessions from society, Black Power invocations of anticolonial struggle in the ghetto could not "create the preconditions for successful, or even authentic, revolution. . . . Before we are permitted to impose our will on the majority of Americans we will be crushed." Community control, Rustin concluded, constituted "a giant hoax . . . being perpetrated upon black people by conservative and 'establishment' figures." It epitomized "the opposite of self-determination, because it can lead only to the continued subjugation of blacks."[12]

Educators and black parents alike needed to realize that a local school board without "real power, democracy, and the funds to carry out new programs" could not "substantially affect the educational system." And even real power and money would not be enough. "Unless there is a *master plan* to cover housing, jobs, and health, every plan for the schools will fall on its face."[13]

The resources needed to initiate such a master plan, Rustin added, could only be secured "by a unified black movement joining with other progressive social forces to form a coalition that represents a majority of the population." Because quality of life is determined by "the economic and social nature of our institutions," blacks needed to ally themselves with the group that most forcefully advocated the democratization of economic and social life—organized labor. Whereas advocates of community control echoed the rhetoric of segregation and the logic of class privilege, teacher unionists, according to a pro-UFT advertisement organized by Rustin, demanded "the rights that black workers have struggled and sacrificed to win for generations." These rights, due process, job security, and "the right of every worker to be judged on his merits—not his color or creed"—were "crucial to Negro advancement."[14]

Bayard Rustin and the African American Freedom Struggle

Rustin's powerful defense of the UFT and critique of community control estranged him from most black activists in 1968. For decades, though, he had helped shape the main currents of the African American freedom struggle.

Born in 1911, Rustin was raised by his grandparents in West Chester, Pennsylvania. As a child, he was both immersed in black politics and culture and exposed to the most tolerant segments of white American society. His grandmother was a community leader and an early member of the NAACP. W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Mary McCloud Bethune were among the prominent black activists who stayed at Rustin's childhood home when passing through West Chester. The town was also home to many Quakers, and elementary school field trips included visits to buildings that had once served as stations in the Underground Railroad.[15]

As a young man in the 1930s, Rustin moved to Harlem. Like the West Chester of Rustin's childhood, Depression-era Harlem exposed Rustin to the cutting edge of black political and cultural life and to the segments of white America most receptive to racial equality. Rustin acted

with Paul Robeson and sang with Josh White. Through philosopher, progressive educator, and Harlem Renaissance luminary Alain Locke, he met such literati as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Locke moreover was a role model for Rustin, a gay man who did not advertise his homosexuality but made no effort to deny it. In New York, Rustin taught English to the foreign born at Benjamin Franklin High School, a center of progressive pedagogy, cultural pluralism, and antiracist education under the leadership of renowned educator Leonard Covello.[16]

Rustin's politics fused commitments to pacifism, socialism, and black equality. In the 1930s, when the Communist Party led the fight against racism, Rustin organized a Young Communist League campaign against racial discrimination in the military.[17] Then, following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Party backtracked on its commitment to antimilitarism and racial equality. Disillusioned with the Communists, Rustin began working for black socialist labor leader A. Philip Randolph, whose Harlem offices were, in Jervis Anderson's phrase, "the political headquarters of black America."[18]

After Randolph introduced Rustin to the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Rustin wedded the philosophy of nonviolent direct action to his analysis of race and class relations. He helped found CORE, and even after the United States entered World War II, Rustin crisscrossed the country proselytizing nonviolence. Convicted of resisting wartime military conscription, Rustin led direct-action protests against segregation within federal prisons.[19]

In the years that followed, Rustin was among the most militant and uncompromising agitators of the peace and civil rights movements. He helped direct Randolph's 1941 and 1948 campaigns against discrimination in war industries and the military and then castigated Randolph for agreeing to a compromise that stopped short of complete victory. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rustin emerged as an influential advisor to Martin Luther King Jr., and in the late 1950s he helped organize a series of school-integration demonstrations that drew thousands of protestors, in ever-larger numbers, to Washington.[20]

Rustin's organizing career climaxed with the 1963 March on Washington, which he directed. The 1963 march echoed the school-integration demonstrations of the 1950s in several ways. It simultaneously confirmed the vital role of unionized black workers in the African American freedom struggle and marked the eclipse of organized labor's leadership of the movement. The growing role of churches, community

groups, and liberal white organizations suggested that the achievement of racial equality was a moral rather than an economic problem. The protests thus expressed both the utopianism and moral transcendence of the nonviolence movement and heralded the eclipse of demands for economic justice.[21]

And yet, for all its continuities with earlier protests, the 1963 march signified a turning point in Rustin's relationship to black activism; even as the movement attracted an increasingly broad coalition of supporters, Rustin became increasingly convinced of the need to move beyond demands for civil rights. By 1963, he argued, the "legal . . . foundations of racism in America" had "virtually collapsed." Civil rights victories, however, could not address crucial aspects of black oppression. With economics replacing race as the most fundamental determinant of blacks' lives, black unemployment and de facto segregation in northern communities were growing, and the living conditions of the "great masses of Negroes in the north" were getting worse.[22]

In the face of these changes, Rustin's proposal for the 1963 march had focused solely on economic demands. Although these concerns were honored in the Washington protest's official demand for jobs as well as freedom, class issues faded from prominence during organizing. Martin Luther King Jr. and many other black leaders, together with liberal white organizations, were committed to the call for civil rights legislation, and civil rights inspired mid-1960s protestors far more than industrial policy. Moreover, march organizers included few unionists who might have seconded Rustin's efforts. Although the UAW supported the march, AFL-CIO president George Meany and eighteen of twenty AFL-CIO executive council members refused to endorse it, and when two hundred activists met to plan the protest, no AFL-CIO representative attended.[23]

Even though the March on Washington failed to highlight class politics, Rustin remained convinced that a progressive coalition could be built upon black demands for full inclusion in American life and labor's demands for economic justice. The African American freedom struggle, he reasoned, "may have done more to democratize life for whites than for blacks. . . . It was not until Negroes assaulted de facto school segregation in urban centers that the issue of quality education for *all* children stirred into motion." Moreover, in their own interest, unions would recognize that "capital is too strong for labor alone." Organized labor could not "hold its own in a reactionary society without embracing the interests of the minority groups."[24]

As Rustin hoped, the African American freedom struggle did flourish in the North in the 1960s. Instead of embracing coalition political activity, however, the northern movement adopted the disciplined, nonviolent protest approach of the triumphant southern one. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans in northern cities participated in a series of school boycotts from the fall of 1963 through the spring of 1964. Of these, far and away the largest took place New York City. Confronted with the monumental task of organizing the protest, boycott leader Rev. Milton Galamison called on Rustin to coordinate the action. More than 400,000 New Yorkers participated in a one-day February 3, 1964, boycott of segregated schooling. New York's newspapers were astounded both by the numbers of black and Puerto Rican parents and children who boycotted and by the complete absence of violence or disorder from the protestors. It was, as a sympathetic newspaper account accurately reported, "the largest civil rights demonstration" in American history. Rustin prophesized that the boycott was "just the beginning of a massive popular movement against the many forms of segregation, discrimination and exploitation that exist in this city."[25]

Arguing that "the movement to integrate the schools will create far-reaching benefits" for teachers as well as students, school boycotters had counted heavily on the UFT urging members not to cross picket lines. On December 18, 1963, Milton Galamison appeared before the UFT Executive Board to urge that the union join the boycott or ask teachers to respect picket lines. The union, however, promised only to protect from reprisals any teachers who participated. When militant protestors announced plans to follow up the February 3 boycott with a second one on March 16, the UFT refused even to defend boycotting teachers from reprisals. Later, at the time of the 1968 school crisis, Brooklyn CORE leader Oliver Leeds and African American Teachers Association president Al Vann would cite the UFT's refusal to support the 1964 integration campaign as proof that an alliance between the teachers' union and the black community was impossible.[26]

New York teachers, almost all of whom were white, were not the only professed allies of the civil rights movement who boycotted the boycott. The protest, with its demand for complete integration of the city's schools—a demand that would require white children to attend schools in black neighborhoods—severely strained the alliance between black integrationists and white liberals. White reaction in turn led to a split among boycott leaders. In a letter to black labor leaders, Rustin

accused Galamison of extremism and, together with the national leadership of CORE and the NAACP, he left the boycott coalition. Meanwhile, militants blasted civil rights leaders for capitulating to the white establishment.[27]

Together with the civil rights moderates, Rustin made one last effort to promote school integration through mass protest. Coming in the wake of the boycotts, the May 18, 1964, March for Democratic Schools represented a move toward moderation in both its program and its form. White labor officials addressed the May marchers and representatives of established mainstream civil rights organizations, rather than the leaders of New York's grassroots black school-reform groups, who had directed protestors during the boycotts.[28]

Unlike the boycotts, with their demands for complete desegregation, the May action called for no more than "maximum possible" integration. This goal was to be achieved through such modest programs as the construction of larger schools and the replacement of junior high schools with middle schools. "Our purpose," demonstration organizers professed, was to "separate white people of good will from those who would camouflage their prejudices under the slogan, 'neighborhood schools.'" In response, such groups as the Jewish Labor Committee and the United Federation of Teachers, which refused to endorse the boycotts and their demand for complete integration, endorsed the May rally.[29]

For the upcoming rally, which came on the heels of a segregationist rally that had drawn 15,000, Rustin promised to attract at least as many. Instead, only four 4,000 protestors showed up, and the Board of Education was no more responsive to the conciliatory May demonstration than to the earlier, more confrontational boycott. Racial protest had reached a dead end; moderation, needed to win white allies, immobilized black activism.[30]

The school protests reinforced the impact of the March on Washington on Rustin's thinking. Community-based black activism had dismantled the legal apparatus of segregation and won southern blacks their civil rights, but such a strategy could not complete the struggle for equality once citizenship had been won. The "lessons of 1964 [were] clear: public protest alone will not wring meaningful innovations from the Board." The concerns of enfranchised blacks dictated the invention of new forms of activism and a move "from protest to politics." School reformers needed "a silent partner in this effort—the teachers' union."[31]

The American Federation of Teachers and its New York local, the UFT, had much to recommend them to Rustin. The union had actively

challenged racial segregation of the schools and racism within the labor movement. Even before the 1954 *Brown* decision, the AFT had expelled segregated southern locals while the rival National Education Association maintained them well into the 1960s. When the UFT went on strike in 1967, it demanded changes in educational policy along with improved wages for its members. Although some activists claimed that UFT proposals would increase teachers' authority at the expense of black students' rights, when the strike concluded, Rustin argued that teacher unionists had achieved what black protestors had not, "a historic breakthrough in the area of parent-teacher participation in programs to improve our school system."[32]

Still, as a civil rights activist, Rustin seemed as much to have become a silent partner as to have found one. Whereas before 1964 Rustin had operated under the aegis of peace groups and black civil rights and labor organizations, after 1964 he headed the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Conceived by Rustin and social-democratic leader Max Shachtman, the black activist's new organizational base depended financially on the AFL-CIO and the UFT. In February of 1968, UFT organizer Sandra Feldman met with Randolph Institute staff to plan a conference of black teacher unionists. Although the UFT role was to be kept hidden, the conference's "ultimate goal," according to Feldman, was to get the union "some vital black leadership and loyalty." In the midst of the 1968 strikes, the Randolph Institute announced plans to move its offices into the UFT building, where it would be the union's only tenant.[33]

In his effort to build a civil rights–labor coalition, Rustin was caught between the demands of the grassroots activists he hoped to lead and the white allies he sought to nurture. Rustin, argues the historian Taylor Branch, "chafed under demands from new union employers" and "pleaded for leeway to salvage his ties with the civil rights movement." Meanwhile, many of New York's unions demonstrated hostility to racial equality. The building trades were particularly notorious for their exclusionary practices. No blacks or Puerto Ricans, for instance, were among the four thousand members of Pipefitters Union Local 638 working in 1963. Of the more than sixteen hundred members of New York's Metal Lathers Union Local 46, two were black.[34]

Efforts by black New York City activists to win economic concessions had constituted a dress rehearsal for the school boycotts. At the precise moment when the March on Washington celebrated the dream of a civil rights–labor coalition compelling federal support for integration, labor and government in New York had united against black economic and

political demands. Black workers there were virtually excluded from construction jobs at a number of public and semi-public projects. In Queens, activists targeted Rochdale Village, a mammoth cooperative housing development that a number of unions were building, in cooperation with New York's municipal government. In Brooklyn, jobs protests focused on the massive Downstate Medical Center. While the project employed white construction workers who commuted from as far away as Pennsylvania, many black World War II and Korean War veterans living in Brooklyn and trained as surveyors and bulldozer operators were refused employment.[35]

The Ministers' Committee for Job Opportunities for Brooklyn rallied thousands of protestors and led hundreds in civil disobedience. In negotiations with New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, Milton Galamison and other ministers abandoned protesters' demands that blacks and Puerto Ricans get 25 percent of construction jobs and settled for the promise that the state would enforce existing antidiscrimination laws. Brooklyn CORE, which had initially led the protests, accurately predicted that the settlement would fail to produce jobs for blacks, and it denounced the ministers as ''sell outs'' and ''Uncle Toms.'' Milton Galamison traced his militancy in the school boycotts in part to the bitterness with which he recalled his attempt at moderation in the Downstate campaign. For him and the thousands of activists who received their political apprenticeships demonstrating at New York construction sites, unions and white liberal officials were as likely to be targets of black protest as they were to be allies.[36]

The evolving racial stances of black and white Americans also threatened Bayard Rustin's dream of a civil rights–labor coalition. Rustin's publicly expressed optimism about the potential of a civil rights–labor coalition masked deep private concerns about the growing threat to progressive social reform posed by Black Nationalism and white backlash. He sensed the difficulties that activists faced as heightened movement expectations for black freedom hit up against the limited willingness of white America to allow it: ''Negroes have been put in a desperate situation, and yet everyone—myself included—must urge them not to behave with desperation but politically and rationally.''[37]

The full, tragic implications of the need to face racism ''politically and rationally'' became manifest in the summer of 1964. After a white police lieutenant killed a black ninth grader on his way to summer school, Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant exploded. Rustin witnessed the police riots that left hundreds of black New Yorkers bloodied, and he personally

attended to the wounded. When he urged blacks to disperse and to resist with nonviolence, they spat at him and shot back, "Uncle Tom! Uncle Tom!" Rustin could have responded that common sense rather than the accommodation of racism recommended against unarmed blacks confronting brutal police. Instead, he answered the jeering crowd from a sound truck, "I'm prepared to be a Tom if it's the only way I can save women and children from being shot down in the street, and if you're not willing to do the same, you're fools."[38]

Behind the scenes, in protracted negotiations with New York mayor Robert Wagner Jr., Rustin adopted the same accommodationist approach. The son and namesake of one of the principal architects of the New Deal liberal coalition that had shaped American politics since the 1930s, Wagner responded to the unrest by condemning "mob rule" but not police brutality. Unable to convince the mayor to address the politically explosive issue of police violence, Rustin settled for Wagner's promise to seek ten million dollars from Washington for a jobs program. Fearful that New York's hotheaded black leaders would exacerbate tensions and block any settlement, Rustin recruited Martin Luther King to lend legitimacy to negotiations. The riots, like the school boycott, confirmed the limits that circumscribed black dreams of freedom and, Rustin told Urban League leader Whitney Young, left him "terribly depressed."[39]

Even as he implored black New Yorkers to avoid violent confrontation with the police, Rustin distanced himself from nonviolence both as a strategy to transform white consciousness and as an expression of utopian hopes for creating a just society. "Despite thousands and thousands who have gone to jail, despite bombings of churches and people, despite the millions of dollars tied up in bail and the millions paid in fines," he explained in a speech to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, "no breakthrough has occurred in the South and in the North Negroes are being increasingly pushed to the wall." Blacks were turning to violence, he argued, because the nonviolent "tactics that have been advocated and used [were] inadequate for dealing with the objective needs." No longer would he "tell any Negroes that they should love white people," Rustin concluded. "They don't love them, they have no need to love them, no basis on which they can love them."[40]

Before 1964, Rustin had imagined that civil rights activism would drive segregationists out of the Democratic Party and thus move the party and the labor movement to the left. The school protest failures, the Harlem riot, and the increasing visibility of white backlash in national

politics forced him to reconsider. Repudiating his party's traditional racial values, Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater actively appealed to violent southern segregationists, at the same time that segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace attracted significant support among Democratic voters in northern primaries. Rustin and other moderate civil rights leaders feared that the Harlem riot would cost the civil rights movement crucial white political support. ''New York City is the center of the Negro struggle for equality,'' Martin Luther King explained. ''What happens here affects the whole country—from the share croppers of Mississippi longing for freedom to the followers of Barry Goldwater hoping to discredit liberalism.''[41]

Together with NAACP leader Roy Wilkins, Rustin drafted a telegram to major civil rights leaders, arguing that ''the tragic violence in Harlem'' and Goldwater's nomination ''may produce the sternest challenge we have yet seen.'' In response, they called for a moratorium on demonstrations during the 1964 presidential election campaign. Rustin himself severed ties with the peace and civil rights activists and organizations with which he had been associated for twenty years.[42]

Rustin further distanced himself from movement activists at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. In the months leading up to the convention, the focal point of the civil rights movement had been Mississippi, where blacks excluded from the segregated regular Democratic Party had organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). MFDP representatives petitioned the Democratic Party, seeking to replace the all-white Mississippi delegation in Atlantic City. ''How could we not prevail?'' Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist John Lewis would still wonder decades later. ''The law was on our side. Justice was on our side. The sentiments of the entire nation were with us.'' President Lyndon Johnson, however, opposed the activists. Seeking to appease segregationists, the Democrats refused to seat the integrated and integrationist MFDP delegation. For Lewis and countless other activists, Atlantic City was ''the turning point of the civil rights movement. . . . Until then . . . the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen.''[43]

Whereas Democratic Party actions at Atlantic City drove many young activists to a more radical stance, the realization that white America—even at the moment of the federal government's greatest commitment to civil rights—would not grant blacks full and equal citizenship drove Rustin away from radicalism. He worked to get the MFDP delegation seated but also discouraged demonstrations that might alienate ''[the Negro's]

friends in the labor movement and Democratic Party.'' For his efforts, Rustin earned the thanks of President Lyndon Johnson and vice presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey. On the other hand, militant organizers and grassroots activists were enraged. In the eyes of civil rights leader Bob Moses, Rustin had ''flip-flopped'' and thereafter remained steadfastly on the ''conservative side.''[44]

For Rustin, the 1965 Watts riot intensified the political quandary of 1964. The riot ''had brought out in the open the despair and hatred that continue to brew in the Northern ghettoes.'' There, ''a truly hopeless and lost generation . . . can see the alien world of affluence unfold before them on the TV screen. . . . Mistreated by the local storekeeper, suspected by the policeman on the beat, disliked by their teachers, they cannot stand more failures.'' Although Rustin condemned senseless destruction by black rioters, decades confronting southern segregationists had left him unprepared for the hostility of Los Angeles officials. The two political alternatives Rustin could offer—coalition politics and moral witness—both depended on the goodwill of liberal whites. Watts rendered them equally implausible.[45]

Blacks, Rustin lamented, were ''in a situation similar to that of the turn of the century, when Booker T. Washington advised them to 'cast down their buckets' (that is to say, accommodate to segregation and disfranchisement).'' The extent of Rustin's retreat from the quest for black equality and freedom was manifest in a 1966 debate with militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist Stokely Carmichael. In response to Carmichael's critique of individual white prejudice and institutional racism, Rustin argued that blacks needed to align themselves with a white majority committed to progress. Pushed by Carmichael as to why he had supported the Democratic Party in 1964, Rustin said that President Johnson ''was the lesser of two evils.'' Coalition politics, which had once offered Rustin the promise of promoting black liberation, was reduced to making more palatable an immoral society.[46]

Bayard Rustin acknowledged the reasons why his endorsement of coalition politics was so tepid. ''It took countless beatings and twenty-four jailings—and the absence of strong and continual support from the liberal community,'' he noted, ''to persuade [Stokely] Carmichael that his earlier faith in coalition politics was mistaken, that nothing was to be gained from working with whites.'' And beyond political betrayal by white liberals, white liberalism itself offered no adequate solution to life in America's ghetto ''dead ends of despair.''[47]

Finally, political analysis was not the only reason Rustin distanced himself from ideologies of racial identity and from the peace and civil rights movements. Being black in white America circumscribed Rustin's life and shaped his politics, but just as America refused to accommodate fully black demands for equality, the peace movement and black community refused to embrace Rustin fully. He was gay, and for his homosexuality, he suffered the scorn of movement comrades as well as the taunts of Dixiecrats.[48]

A. J. Muste loved Rustin like a son but considered the embarrassment caused by what one peace activist labeled Rustin's "personal problem" grounds for dismissing him from a position at the Fellowship of Reconciliation. When Rustin was convicted of having sex with two white men in 1953, he dutifully resigned from the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Scandalized by Rustin's homosexuality and Communist past, black ministers squelched Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts to hire him at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, at a time when Rustin, almost fifty, was counting on King for a regular salary. When Adam Clayton Powell, embroiled in a political dispute with King, threatened to tell reporters that King was having an affair with Rustin, King broke off all contact with his advisor.[49]

Earlier, New York's anonymous streets had offered Rustin a setting in which, despite occasional police harassment, he did not feel a need to hide his homosexuality. Still, he did not conceptualize cruising as an act of living the truth analogous to freedom riding. Then, his 1953 arrest and the reaction of movement comrades to it convinced Rustin of the need to stay in the closet. If one wanted to be an activist, he concluded, "sex must be sublimated." Homophobia thus provided Rustin with a dress rehearsal for racial accommodation.[50]

As Rustin cut his links to the peace and civil rights movement, longstanding personal, intellectual, and political ties with social-democratic activists blossomed. Social democracy embraced the Marxist concept that the means of production determined social organization but stressed the gradual achievement of industrial democracy through constitutional means. Theorizing that politics reflected universal laws rather than cultural particulars, social democrats argued that racial discrimination reflected class relations and should be addressed through the class struggle. In the famous phrase of Eugene Debs, "The Socialist Party is the Party of the whole working class, regardless of color," and therefore had "nothing special to offer the Negro." Efforts to promote working-class

solidarity often reflected and contributed to assimilationist cultural values. Social democracy was particularly attractive to union officials, and its adherents dominated the leadership of the UFT.[51]

Bayard Rustin discounted neither the impact of racism on American life nor the rich cultural traditions created by African Americans. He was fully convinced that "freedom in America applies to all but Negroes," that "in a million quiet ways, the majority of white Americans go about insulting the manhood of Negroes every day."[52] An accomplished singer of black spirituals as well as of opera, he had "preached the dignity of black skin color" and taught "Negro history" long before such things became popular.[53]

Still, only a thin line separated attentiveness to the cultural heritage or particular history of African Americans and the reproduction of racist stereotypes. Rustin challenged the rationale of educational programs based on particular qualities or pathologies imputed to the black family, underclass, or culture. "A Negro coming out of Mississippi," he argued, is not "disadvantaged" compared to the masses of immigrants who came to American cities from Europe. The newly arrived white ethnics "did not know American culture; they did not know the language." But because American "society was prepared to use [their] muscle power," these earlier migrants found "jobs and become part of the productive system." By contrast, the blacks who populated America's deindustrializing ghettos in the 1960s remained outside the political, cultural, and educational mainstream "even though they [knew] the language and culture of the United States."[54]

Educational programs that sought only to remediate the deficiencies in ghetto youngsters mistook the cultural consequences of poverty for its economic causes. Drawing on social-democratic race-blind theory, Rustin argued that social and economic forces rather than the presumed attributes of black children explained the educational failures of African American youth.[55]

Social democracy provided a basis for Rustin's politics as well as his pedagogy. "Wearing my hair Afro-style, calling myself an Afro-American and eating all the chitterlings I can find," he maintained, "are not going to affect Congress." Confronted with the inability of black protest to address the economics of inequality and fearful of unleashing the vengefulness of America's white majority, Rustin found in social democracy theoretical justification for moderate, race-blind egalitarian organizing. At the same time, the social-democratic vision allowed Rustin to respond to and transcend his own multiple identities in his political work.[56]

"Until we face the need for a fundamental reordering of our priorities," Rustin reminded educators, school reforms would constitute no more than pseudo-solutions to the crisis of ghetto education. The years leading up to the New York school conflict, he noted, had witnessed the introduction of the middle school, pairing, open enrollment, community control,

> and more useless maneuvers, one after the other. Meanwhile the objective situation gets worse and worse. . . . Until we are prepared to eliminate slums . . . we are going to have inferior education for Negro children. If we turn the schools over to parents and community leaders, they will be no different. As long as we have slums, as long as we have the kind of housing we have, as long as people are not working, the schools will be inferior. It is amazing to me that anyone can think it possible to create an effective way of teaching a child who lives in a ghetto. He simply will not be educated, no matter what gimmicks you use. It's a matter of fundamental change here or nothing.[57]

Community control, in Rustin's analysis, only distracted African Americans from real reform.

Coalition Politics in Post-liberal America

Despite Rustin's social-democratic invocation of proletarian solidarity and "fundamental change," he recognized that revolution was not on the horizon in 1968.[58] Congress was no more concerned with economic democracy than it was with racial equality. What distinguished organized labor from militant black activism was not its power to secure full social justice for African Americans but rather its willingness to accommodate the domestic and foreign policy agenda of Cold War America. At a time when race relations and U.S. actions in Vietnam, rather than industrial conflict, were the defining issues of American politics, Rustin and other social democrats cloaked acquiescence to militarism and racial inequality in the mantle of working-class radicalism.

Rustin, for instance, condemned antiwar protestors, while urging Martin Luther King to be silent about Vietnam and improbably asserting that the government's unlimited resources allowed it to fund fully a real

war on poverty without cutting military funding. As the antiwar movement increasingly questioned the ideological underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy, Rustin became increasingly vehement in the anti-Communism that had been part of politics since he left the Young Communist League. Similarly, he fervidly denounced Black Nationalism while displaying little emotion in the face of racial bias in the labor movement. For Rustin, as for white social democrats, calls for blacks to align themselves with the labor movement marked an abandonment, not an affirmation, of radicalism. As Rustin became isolated from old allies, he ever more strongly allied himself with the very conservatism he denounced.[59]

Bayard Rustin was well aware of the limits that confronted the black freedom struggle and of the conflicts that separated black New Yorkers from teachers and the rest of organized labor. His efforts at coalition building had exposed the ambivalence with which white labor greeted black allies. Still, conditions in America and its cities, Rustin argued in his UFT award speech, left blacks no real alternative to alliance with organized labor.[60]

Rustin's attempt to build a civil rights–labor coalition in his John Dewey Award speech came at an inopportune moment. Days before he was to address the UFT, a white sniper assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, and for many black activists, hopes for integration died along with King. When Rustin was called to Memphis, Michael Harrington, a white social-democratic comrade, stood in for him at the Hilton Hotel, site of the UFT's award ceremony. As Harrington read Rustin's speech, protestors gathered outside the Hilton. They demanded that Rustin sever his ties with the UFT and condemned the union's opposition to community control, its "racist attitudes [and] policies against black and Puerto Rican children and communities," and its "refusal to oppose the racist war in Vietnam."[61]

The Hilton Hotel protestors were not alone in their hostility to the civil rights–labor coalition Rustin advocated. The conflict between white teacher unionists and black community organizers led to a series of three extraordinarily bitter teachers' strikes in the fall of 1968 that dominated racial politics and municipal affairs in New York. As the school conflict reached its climax, increasing numbers of black unionists, as well as educators, ministers, and community activists, opposed the UFT. Harlem Labor Council and UFT official Richard Parrish, who had worked with Rustin on the 1950s Washington integration rallies, was

among the black labor leaders who embraced community control. Parrish believed that by remaining in the UFT, black teachers could help heal the rift between the union and the black and Puerto Rican communities. Still, in a September 15, 1968, television interview, he labeled the UFT walkout over community control "a strike against the black community . . . a collusive action of supervisors, teachers and custodians against black parents and students."[62]

As the 1968 teachers' strike wore on, leading black and Puerto Rican unionists repudiated labor solidarity in favor of a racially defined notion of community. Late in October, two hundred labor leaders, including Parrish and Negro American Labor Council president Cleveland Robinson, identified the families of black and Puerto Rican workers, rather than teacher unionists, as "the victims of this vicious system." The group supported community control "as a means of ending this nightmare that for too long has existed in our communities without redress." Rather than advancing a civil rights–labor coalition, the actions of teacher unionists precluded it.[63]

The conflict over community control ended in a victory for the teachers' union and a defeat for black activists. A 1969 union-endorsed "decentralization" law gave the central board of education far-reaching control of textbooks, curriculum, school construction, and teacher hiring, and complete control over New York's troubled high schools. The law created between thirty and thirty-three "community" school districts with limited powers, each containing a couple hundred thousand residents and thus difficult to influence through community organizing. UFT president Al Shanker called the new law "a good piece of legislation," while Brooklyn civil rights leader Milton Galamison claimed, "We couldn't have gotten a worse bill in Mississippi."[64]

Designed to insulate the school system from black activists, the law's "Community School Board" elections worked as planned. In Ocean Hill–Brownsville, voter turnout fell from 25 percent in 1967 to 4 percent in 1970. In a school system where only a minority of students were white, whites formed a majority on twenty-five of thirty-two "community" boards, including that of Manhattan's District 3, where 19 percent of students were white, and Brooklyn's District 13, where only one student in twenty was white.[65]

The cost of allying the African American hopes to organized labor proved even greater than Rustin imagined. Although its triumph guaranteed the UFT a prominent role in school affairs and municipal politics, the defeat of community control left a residue of bitterness, alienation,

Bayard Rustin (*right*) and Albert Shanker (*center*). (Copyright © 2009 The New York Times)

and distrust that would poison New York and its schools for decades.[66] The 1968 conflict helped reshape New York's electoral politics. As the historian Jerald Podair has observed, the more conservative candidate has won almost every New York mayoral election since the school conflict; the city of LaGuardia, Wagner, and Lindsay became the city of Koch, Giuliani, and Bloomberg. More broadly, teacher unionists demonstrated how a standard of race-blind equal treatment could shift from justifying racial equality into a rationalization of white domination.[67]

Rustin's efforts foundered amid the very ghetto conditions and urban conflicts he hoped to address. Although he argued persuasively that the new urban conditions created by automation propelled black demands for equal education, Rustin ignored the need to rethink race relations and labor activism itself in light of economic changes.

Marjorie Murphy notes that at the very time when the newly founded UFT was winning concessions from the school system, black school activists, mobilizing as large a percentage of their constituency as the UFT had, "had little to show for their efforts." The contrasting results

of teacher organizing and black activism reflected the evolving conditions of urban and national life.[68]

From the 1940s through the 1960s, ''urban renewal'' and highway development projects such as the addition of a second level and new approach roads to the George Washington Bridge and the construction of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge destroyed hundreds of thousands of working-class New York homes while fostering real estate booms in New Jersey and Staten Island. Over two million New Yorkers—the vast majority white—moved to the suburbs, while the number of black and Latino New Yorkers grew in proportion to the number of whites who left the city. Meanwhile, the city's industrial job base declined steadily. In the garment industry, for instance, two-thirds of jobs disappeared in the second half of the twentieth century. Government responsiveness to the poor gave way to responsiveness to business interests.[69]

As white laborers, including the city's teachers, fled the city, it distanced itself politically, culturally, and indeed physically from alliance with the black freedom struggle.[70] This movement to the suburbs both reflected and propelled UFT's growing role in school politics and black activists' defeats. The very power of the UFT on which, in Rustin's view, blacks ought to depend was thus embedded in the racial inequality black activists confronted. Rustin's phantom of a black-labor alliance, no less than dreams of black separatism, constituted an accommodation with the persistence of racism as well as resistance to it.

The dilemmas that Rustin and his adversaries confronted in 1968—separatism versus integration in the black quest for racial justice, the relationship of race and class in American society, and the possibility of finding white allies in the quest for black freedom—were not new. At the same time, declining industrial production in American cities, declining support for liberalism in American politics, and the growing gulf between expanding white To ignore the break in Rustin's politics requires ignoring as well the thoughtfulness and courage with which he made that shift. And it requires ignoring the ever-evolving balance of democratic aspirations and social inequality in American life. Celebratory accounts of the movement can give us encouragement in arid times but they offer little guidance. To ignore the choices that Rustin made and the reasons he made them does him no honor.

The issues Bayard Rustin faced—about the relative power of race and class in shaping American life, about the quest for racial justice at a moment when historic victories in the struggle against racism led many Americans to conclude that white supremacy was a thing of the past—

continue to perplex Americans committed to social justice. Neither Rustin nor the advocates of community control he opposed offer an ideological role model or map. The very choices that Rustin and his adversaries made demonstrate that, despite the continuities of history, we must make our own consequential choices in the context of our own day.