

REVIEW ESSAY

PHILADELPHIA POLITICS IN BLACK AND WHITE

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*M*atthew J. Countryman. *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. Pp. 432, notes, acknowledgements, index. Cloth, \$42.50; Paper, \$22.50.)

James Wolfinger. *Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. 318, illustrations, tables, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$49.95.)

On February 9, 1952, the African American-oriented *Philadelphia Tribune* heralded the appointment of labor activist James H. Jones to the city's new Commission on Human Relations (CHR). Established in 1951 as part of anti-discrimination provisions in Philadelphia's new charter, the CHR replaced the municipal Fair Employment Practices Committee, one of the first of its kind in the nation. A member of the local NAACP Executive Board as well as chairman of the CIO Anti-Discrimination Committee, Jones

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symbolized the promise of the interracial coalition that brought Democrats to power in municipal politics after nearly a century of Republican domination.¹ Liberal reformers were justifiably proud of the city's record on racial issues, and by the mid-1950s most of the city's segregated public accommodations had disappeared while a significant number of African Americans had gained access to better housing and jobs.

Despite Philadelphia's status as a national model of progressive race relations, however, the trajectory of the CHR also revealed the weaknesses in the city's liberal coalition. The commission was chronically underfunded, generally avoided public conflict with employers, and largely unable to challenge the structural inequalities faced by the majority of African Americans who still remained in slum housing, attended substandard schools, and had limited job prospects. Furthermore, from the very beginning many whites resented the influence, however limited, of African Americans in politics as well as their demands for equality in housing and employment. This led to the rise of more conservative politicians within the Democratic Party as well as a resurgence of Republicans, particularly in the suburbs, who tapped into this resentment. African Americans, too, became dissatisfied with the limits of liberalism as Black Power activists mobilized working-class residents and increasingly targeted the Democratic leadership itself as part of the problem. While Jones and others sought to maintain the interracial liberal coalition, by the early 1960s even he had begun to publicly voice his concerns about systematic discrimination within local trades unions that the CHR seemed powerless to challenge. "More pressure," he concluded, "will have to be exerted."² Under the weight of such pressure from both within and without, the liberal coalition in Philadelphia finally collapsed in 1972 with the election of conservative "law-and-order" candidate Frank Rizzo as mayor.

Taken together, two recent works, Matthew Countryman's *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* and James Wolfinger's *Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love* do an excellent job of mapping these changes from the formation of the liberal coalition in the mid-1930s through its triumph in municipal politics during the 1950s to its national decline in the late 1960s and 1970s. Countryman and Wolfinger point to the ambiguities inherent in the creation of the CHR as they provide solid evidence that both the militant struggle for structural changes to the racialized institutions of northern cities and the conservative backlash to those changes began long before the 1960s. As such, they fit into a growing literature that argues the civil rights struggle in the North should not be

seen as an auxiliary (or perversion) of the Southern movement, but as a related though distinct mobilization that began not with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision or the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but with the 1941 March on Washington and the creation of the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee, and extended through the rise of various forms of nationalism and the achievement of some degree of political power in the 1970s.³

Wolfinger's *Philadelphia Divided* tells the story of municipal politics from the early 1930s to the 1950s from the perspective of the "everyday lives" of the city's white ethnic and African American residents and the ways in which workplace and neighborhood interactions "informed their politics."⁴ Book sections cover the rise of New Deal liberalism, efforts to desegregate work and housing during World War II, and the fate of the city's nascent inter-racial coalition during the postwar years. Using case studies ranging from a 1936 tenement collapse in a black neighborhood of South Philadelphia to the 1944 strike by white workers of the Pennsylvania Transit Company to the creation of suburban Levittown, Wolfinger argues that "racial divisions fundamentally fractured the city's working class" allowing Republican leaders to "reconstruct their party as the champions of ordinary white citizens supposedly besieged by black demands and overwhelmed by liberal government orders."⁵

During the height of the Depression, class interests muted complaints about African American demands for some measure of equality in employment and housing. Party leaders understood "that the Democratic Party could not win without black support," a fact that "left Democratic leaders little choice but to treat African Americans fairly."⁶ Even by the 1940s, however, white racism threatened to destroy the fragile partnership even as the economic boom of World War II lifted many Philadelphians out of poverty. Through a skillful analysis of neighborhood and workplace politics, the author exposes the limits whites placed on liberalism from an early stage, while also exploring the genuine possibilities for an interracial working-class coalition. The arrival of tens of thousands of war workers placed strains on a largely segregated private housing market causing the same clashes between African and Euro-Americans seen throughout the urban North. Even as whites generally accepted the construction of new federally subsidized public housing for African Americans, this too was limited to those projects contained within the black ghetto. Despite postwar electoral success, Wolfinger concludes, "by the World War II era, the Philadelphia GOP had learned that race was the weak point in the Democratic Party's coalition of voters, and Republican candidates developed political appeals to exploit that vulnerability."⁷

The heart of *Philadelphia Divided* is a pair of chapters on an August 1944 strike by white workers of the semi-public Philadelphia Transit Company in response to a federal order to allow black workers access to jobs as drivers. While the strike was broken after a week by the intervention of federal troops, many whites felt betrayed by the Roosevelt Administration and the local Democratic politicians who seemed all-too-willing to cater to the demands of African Americans. Consequently, the growing dissatisfaction of white ethnics with the increasing linkages between Democratic politicians and African Americans provided an opening for a conservative cross-class coalition. In the face of Democratic electoral success, as early as the late 1930s, the still-powerful Republican leadership in Philadelphia desperately cast about for a way to attack their rivals. While red baiting failed to elicit sufficient response, racist pamphlets worked, particularly as the mass defection of African Americans from the GOP made it less necessary to temper such appeals. During the transit strike, Wolfinger explains how anti-union management and Republican mayor Bernard Samuel fanned the flames of white racism to craft a “racialized politics that paid attention to, even promoted, white grievances, and they did so in 1948, not 1968.”⁸

The book concludes with a discussion of politics in the postwar city. On the one hand, liberalism in Philadelphia seemed ascendant with the antidiscrimination clause in the city’s 1951 Home Rule Charter and the creation of the CHR. However, the interracial partnership within the Democratic Party continued to fray as African American demands for equal opportunity in housing and employment angered white ethnics concerned about maintaining their position in the face of postwar deindustrialization. Increasingly, too, white workers voted with their feet by moving to the segregated suburban communities that formed the political base for the conservative backlash of the 1970s. Here he builds from an expanding literature of suburban political and social history that includes Robert Self, Lisa McGirr, Matthew Lassiter, and others, while arguing that the development of racialized Republican politics that rhetorically linked liberal government with support for African Americans at the expense of whites happened very early in the North as well as the South and West.⁹

While Wolfinger emphasizes the growing relationship between African Americans and the city’s Democratic leadership, however, Matthew Countryman highlights the failure of the postwar liberal coalition in enacting substantial changes to existing patterns of housing and employment

discrimination. For some black Philadelphians in the middle class, the early postwar period held out the opportunity to take advantage of desegregated public accommodations and, at least fleetingly, integrated neighborhoods. The majority of the city's black residents, however, remained trapped in substandard housing, were unemployed or stuck in menial jobs, and were forced to send their children to overcrowded, all-black schools. By the end of the 1950s, Countryman concludes, the inability of the gradualist model of postwar liberalism to substantively resolve racial inequalities within labor markets, neighborhoods, and schools led many in Philadelphia's black communities to "question the efficacy of government action in the struggle for racial equality."¹⁰

It is in the city's working class and poor neighborhoods that Countryman finds the genesis of a grassroots revolt in the form of a turn to the self-help doctrines of the black nationalist tradition. Throughout the 1950s, campaigns for selective patronage (boycotts) of retailers unwilling to hire black workers suggested that a growing segment of Philadelphia's black community was unwilling to wait for the city's antidiscrimination bureaucracy to investigate individual complaints on a case-by-case basis. As African Americans became increasingly disenchanted with the seeming intractability of racism, even within the governing Democratic coalition, activists shifted from an emphasis on "race-blind" integration to calls for economic development and independent political mobilization within the black community itself. Leaders such as Leon Sullivan of the 400 Ministers coalition adopted an explicitly black nationalist approach that, unlike the concurrent civil rights movement in the South, was not aimed at gaining support from white liberals but rather focused on building intraracial solidarity within the city's black neighborhoods.

This change in strategy was highlighted most dramatically by the election of Cecil Moore to the presidency of the Philadelphia NAACP. Moore was a pivotal figure, who was able to tap into growing disillusionment among Philadelphia's black working-class in order to launch a highly visible protest campaign primarily targeting not private employers, but city government. In 1963, the NAACP under Moore carried out a protest against the construction of the city's new Municipal Services Building by a segregated workforce where blacks only served as unskilled workers. These protests, and the mayoral election that followed, signaled the fragmentation of the liberal framework that, according to Countryman, had dominated postwar politics in Philadelphia.¹¹

Led by working-class and poor residents as well as SNCC and CORE veterans of the southern civil rights movement, by the late 1960s civil rights activists increasingly rejected liberalism in favor of “community-based leadership, participatory democracy, and racial self-determination.”¹² *Up South’s* final chapters trace the legacy of Black Power first within the city’s schools and later in state and local politics. In contrast to previous treatments of the Black Power movement that tended to focus on national figures, Countryman instead roots the movement in the particular context of the limited impact of liberal desegregation efforts within urban neighborhoods. His case study of Black Power in the schools makes especially good use of oral history (including interviews with his parents) to flesh out complicated issues during a period of social upheaval that reveals the ways in which Black Power in Philadelphia “challenged the decision-making structures that controlled public and private investment in the city.”¹³

By the 1970s, Black Power had reached a dead end in terms of attracting attention and social spending from liberal politicians. With the rise of political conservatism, first on the national level and then in Philadelphia itself, many activists, including welfare rights organizer and future state senator Roxanne Jones, instead turned from protest to politics in an effort to wrest control of the levers of government.¹⁴ However, even as Philadelphia elected its first black mayor, W. Wilson Goode, deindustrialization had created a hollow prize, with the Goode Administration largely unable to enact substantial changes to the city’s poor and working-class neighborhoods.¹⁵ Indeed, Countryman concludes that the failure of Black Power’s “urban political strategy was as much the product of urban decentralization and of suburban antitax politics—historical developments that can be directly traced to post-war liberalism’s policy making—as it was the result of a white working-class backlash against the ethnic political strategies of Black Power.”¹⁶

It is in this discussion of the simultaneous creation of a politics of black nationalism and a white conservative backlash that *Up South’s* framework overlaps most explicitly with that of *Philadelphia Divided*. At several points in the later chapters, Countryman focuses on the rise of Frank Rizzo, first to police commissioner and later to mayor, as a sort of parallel to the success of Cecil Moore, which “signaled and escalated the racial, ethnic and class tensions that were eroding the electoral coalition that had kept the Philadelphia Democratic Party in power since 1951.”¹⁷ While Countryman uses Rizzo’s career to emphasize the conflict within the Democratic Party, however, Wolfinger highlights the ways Republicans, at a very early stage, saw race as

the weak link in the liberal coalition and sought to exploit it either through explicit appeals to racism, or increasingly, via coded attacks on public housing and the overreach of the federal government. In this analysis, "Rizzo and other so-called law-and-order politicians of the 1960s built on a politics of race that Pennsylvania Republicans started honing some thirty years earlier."¹⁸

Countryman's narrative style with its thick description, depth of detail and theoretical sophistication differs from Wolfinger's emphasis on accessibility, brevity, and breadth of analysis.¹⁹ Partly as a result of this differing approach, *Up South* has received a good deal of positive attention, while *Philadelphia Divided* may leave some scholars dissatisfied with the under-development of several key areas, as well as a lack of sufficient background development of the grassroots activists and workers introduced throughout the narrative.²⁰ Wolfinger does an excellent job of highlighting the tensions with the liberal coalition and simultaneous rise of a conservative backlash, but it is not fully clear how the overtly racist message of conservatives in the 1940s and early 1950s eventually translated into the electoral successes of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan several decades later. The text hints at the ways in which the issue of race became incorporated into coded attacks on government bureaucracy and welfare spending, but his analysis would have benefitted from a more explicit discussion of recent scholarship on "color-blind conservatism" by scholars such as Matthew Lassiter, Kevin Kruse and David Freund.²¹

In the end, *Up South* and *Philadelphia Divided* place the experiences of Philadelphia residents squarely within the expanding scholarly literature on the civil rights movement in the North. This new narrative, which treats the North not as an auxiliary (or perversion) of the southern struggle, suggests a new periodization beginning with the 1941 March on Washington and the creation of the federal Fair Employment Practices Committees. Countryman and Wolfinger provide solid evidence that both the struggle for structural changes to the racialized institutions of northern cities and the conservative backlash to those changes began long before they achieved national attention in the 1960s.

NOTES

1. "Commission Member Staunch Union Man," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 9, 1952, 3.
2. "Jim Crow's Sweetheart Contract," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 26, 1963, 4. See also, J. Donald Porter, "Phila. Schools Support Biased Unions, Labor Leaders Charge," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 6, 1963, 1.

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3. For examples of this historiographical trend, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jeanne Theoharris and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).
4. James Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 50.
7. Ibid., 87.
8. Ibid., 173.
9. Self, *American Babylon*; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
10. Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 1.
11. As both Countryman and Wolfinger acknowledge, "liberalism" is a slippery term that is forced to carry a major (and at times contradictory) analytical load throughout both texts. In many ways, this is indicative of the difficulty in writing about the breakdown of a "liberal" coalition that from the very outset exhibited seemingly mutually incompatible goals. For Wolfinger, "liberalism" as a class-based interracial political ideology reached its peak in 1936, with conservatives in Philadelphia able to begin a race-based counter offensive as early as the 1943 mayoral election. In Countryman's narrative, even though liberals really only held political power for a brief time during the postwar period, liberalism as an ideology that emphasized gradual and cooperative institutional reform remained the centerpiece of interracial relations at least through the early 1970s. For a comparative case study, see William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). On the role of liberalism in shaping postwar culture more generally, see Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).
12. Ibid., 9.
13. Countryman, *Up South*, 256.
14. For a more detailed examination of the role of black women activists in Philadelphia, see Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
15. On the role of deindustrialization in urban politics, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Howard Gillette, *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
16. Countryman, *Up South*, 9.
17. Ibid., 179.

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18. Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided*, 242.
19. Its length coupled with a clear, engaging narrative that introduces readers at key points to broader historiographical issues both in the text and notes would make *Philadelphia Divided* an excellent addition to undergraduate urban, political or Pennsylvania history courses.
20. The October 2006 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, for example, featured a special roundtable discussion of *Up South* with essays by Lisa Levenstein, Robert Self, and Joe Trotter.
21. Lassiter, *Silent Majority*; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007).