A Roundtable Discussion of Matthew Countryman’s
Up South


With this issue, the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography launches an occasional series of roundtable discussions on topics of great importance to the region’s history. Matthew Countryman’s book, _Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia_, is a major contribution to the still-developing scholarship on the history of the black freedom struggle in the North. The winner of the 2006 Liberty Legacy Prize of the Organization of American Historians, _Up South_ demonstrates the centrality of Philadelphia in the history of the civil rights and Black Power movements nationwide. Through richly developed biographies of key leaders such as Cecil B. Moore and Leon Sullivan, Countryman sheds light on the tense but often productive relationship between black grassroots activism, liberal politics, and black radicalism. Spanning the period from World War II through the early 1970s, Countryman breaks from the narrow chronology that has defined most important histories of the struggle for racial equality. One of the most important books on race and modern American history to be published in the last several years, Countryman’s _Up South_ is a fitting volume for what we hope will be the first of many lively forums on these pages.

Tamara Gaskell Miller
WHEN WE THINK OF IMPORTANT CITIES in the modern civil rights movement, Philadelphia rarely comes to mind. However, in his important new book, *Up South*, Matthew Countryman deftly establishes the city’s centrality to the postwar history of the civil rights movement and changes our understanding of the twentieth-century African American freedom struggle. Countryman’s rich social, political, and intellectual history explores the evolution of two traditions of African American protest: African Americans’ efforts to claim their “Americanness” and achieve equality under the law as well as their attempts to celebrate their distinct heritage and control independent institutions. Like many of the best recent works on the civil rights movement, Countryman resists the tendency to portray the movement as either assimilationist or nationalist. Rather, he illustrates how postwar activists frequently incorporated parts of both traditions into their work and how the balance between the two shifted as the movement evolved from a liberal one advocating integration, equal opportunity, interracial alliances, and government activism, to a more nationalist one focused on fostering racial pride, African American solidarity, and community control of institutions.

Countryman begins his study in the 1940s and 1950s, a period in which liberal civil rights activists achieved many important victories. In 1948 Philadelphia was one of the first cities in the country to establish a fair employment practices law, and in 1951 a coalition of civil rights activists and liberal reformers succeeded in incorporating clauses explicitly banning racial discrimination in municipal employment, services, and contracts into the new city charter. By the mid-1950s, most of the city’s segregated public accommodations had disappeared and a significant sector of the African American population had gained access to decent jobs and housing. However, for the majority of Philadelphia’s African Americans, who still lived in slum housing and still faced limited employment and educational opportunities, the civil rights activism of the 1940s
and 1950s inspired a great deal of frustration because it failed to substantially improve their lives.

In the 1960s, the Black Power movement substantially changed the landscape of civil rights activism in Philadelphia by focusing attention on the city’s most vulnerable citizens. Countryman emphasizes that Black Power in the North was not just empty slogans, a publicity ploy, or a mimicking of southern activism. Rather, the movement represented activists’ conscious decision to move beyond the strategies and ideologies of the liberal activists who had been unable to improve the lives of the majority of working-class African Americans. Black Power activists sought to involve working-class people in the civil rights struggle and launched campaigns to improve their educational and job opportunities and gain greater autonomy and community control over institutions. Countryman highlights an important difference between civil rights activism in the North and the South by emphasizing that the trajectory of the Philadelphia movement turns our understanding of the southern “organizing tradition” on its head: while the southern civil rights narrative frequently describes an initial emphasis on the empowerment of ordinary people and voting giving way to calls for “Black Power,” in Philadelphia it was Black Power leaders who introduced a strong commitment to indigenous community mobilization into the civil rights struggle and developed sophisticated electoral strategies.1

Although other scholars have made similar arguments about Black Power ideology and activism, Countryman is uniquely adept at illuminating how movement leaders’ ideas about social change and racial justice changed over time in response to their everyday experiences and organized political campaigns.2 His melding of social, political, and intellectual history is useful for studying all social movements, but is particularly important for a study of Black Power because the movement is so frequently portrayed as driven purely by emotions instead of a carefully considered political ideology. By closely analyzing how and why leaders’ ideas about racial justice changed over time, Countryman has provided Black Power with a rich and sophisticated intellectual history, deeply contextualized in material reality.

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Yet while one of the strengths of Countryman’s work is its careful documentation of the origins of Black Power, his account is missing a crucial piece of the story. Indeed, there is another “pre-history” of the Black Power movement that has very little to do with the failures of liberal civil rights leaders and involves the activism of ordinary residents of Philadelphia’s working-class African American neighborhoods. Although Countryman sometimes nods to this history and briefly acknowledges working-class campaigns against taprooms in the 1950s, he does not analyze working-class activism in the broad and nuanced way that he explores the political campaigns engaged in by civil rights leaders. As a result, his account portrays Black Power strategies constituting a sharp break from the past and does not capture the important continuities between African American community organizing in the immediate postwar period and the Black Power activism that came later. Throughout the 1950s, mostly through block groups and often in conjunction with settlement houses or other social service agencies, working-class African Americans collectively fought against the decline of their neighborhoods—constructing playgrounds for children, cleaning their streets, clearing abandoned lots, and petitioning the state for street lights, stop signs, public housing, taproom laws, and increased police protection at night. These efforts combined demands for assistance from the state with a deep commitment to cultivating autonomy and building community institutions, foreshadowing many of the goals adopted by 1960s Black Power activists.

If Countryman had sought out working-class initiatives in the immediate postwar period, he undoubtedly would have come across women in important roles. As it stands, Countryman’s discussion of women and gender issues is largely confined to a single chapter that examines the masculine bravado of several male Black Power groups and the 1960s campaigns for improved services from welfare and the police engaged in by two groups of working-class African American women. Although Rhonda Y. Williams has shown how Black Power’s rhetoric of community control and racial pride sometimes bolstered women’s demands to participate in the administration of state programs, Countryman’s account of welfare rights organizing provides little evidence or analysis of the rela-

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tionship between local women and Black Power; he expects us to take on faith his argument that it was the ideology and strategies of the Black Power movement that enabled these women to become central players in 1960s protests. Such a portrait misses the way that women’s 1960s organizing addressed grievances that they had expressed for decades through their neighborhood organizing and interactions with the state about the inadequacy of government social welfare services and police protection. Throughout the 1950s, working-class women played major roles in local efforts to secure cleaner and safer neighborhoods and to obtain increased services from the government. They also struggled to utilize government institutions like welfare, public housing, public schools, and public hospitals to secure financial support, protection from sexual and domestic violence, health care, education, housing, dignity, and privacy.

Since Countryman does not explore the evolution of ordinary working-class African American women’s ideology and activism, his account affords too much credit for their activism to Black Power and does not grant local women a rich and complex intellectual, political, and social history of their own.

Countryman’s interpretation of the goals of working-class women’s 1960s activism would similarly benefit from a deeper understanding of their struggles. Most notably, in his efforts to convince readers that women welfare activists were indeed part of Black Power, Countryman errs in interpreting their “maternalist” rhetoric, which emphasized their rights as mothers, as complimentary to male Black Power activists’ insistence on their rights as breadwinners. In fact, for decades, working-class African American women had insisted that their status as single mothers should not impede their abilities to claim dignity and financial support for their carework, a position that put them at odds with many male civil rights leaders who advocated traditional gender relationships.

Broadening our accounts of the northern freedom movement to include the struggles of ordinary working-class people will likely produce

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a portrait of the trajectory of civil rights that underscores more continu-
ities than Countryman currently acknowledges with respect to African
Americans’ community organizing and activism, their relationship to the
state, and their search for dignity and respect. It will also result in a
narrative that acknowledges the failures of the earlier generation of
prominent activists to address not only issues of class but also of gender,
and one that enables us to better understand how Black Power activists
did not just mobilize but also frequently built upon—and perhaps learned
from—ordinary people’s everyday struggles within their communities.

Fortunately, Countryman has provided us with an important model of
how such a broader account might be constructed. With his close atten-
tion to the dialectical relationship between ideology and activism, he has
given us a valuable framework for studying social movements on a local
level. Countryman’s account significantly challenges conventional wisdom
about African American organizing in the North and the South and the
relationship between the liberal civil rights tradition and Black Power
activism. After engaging with Countryman’s rich and insightful work,
historians will no longer be able to consider either Philadelphia or Black
Power tangential when they seek to document the achievements of the
modern struggle for African American freedom.

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