

Matthew Countryman's *Up South* and *Urban Political History*

MATTHEW COUNTRYMAN'S *UP SOUTH* arrives at just the right time. Historical interpretations of the civil rights movement are undergoing a profound shift. Urban history is enjoying a renaissance. And political history is again receiving its due. Countryman sits astride all of these developments and contributes in ways both remarkable and subtle to an emerging historiography of race and politics in the post-World War II United States. His study of the "Philadelphia movement," as he calls the city's civil rights and Black Power politics, traces an arc from the Popular Front of the immediate postwar years through the civil rights liberalism of the 1950s to the nationalist insurgency of the 1960s. He argues for a political continuum that no longer privileges the national movement and does not presume that a *liberal* civil rights coalition was natural and inevitable. Instead, Countryman shows that the Philadelphia movement was shaped by a decades-long battle over liberal strategies to achieve racial justice and the tension between rights-based reform and communal or group interests. The result is a marvelous book that extends Aldon Morris's observation that the civil rights movement was in fact a series of linked "indigenous" movements that emerged in specific local contexts and institutional environments.¹

Countryman organizes his argument around a periodization of the civil rights movement that historians increasingly associate with the North and West. This periodization begins with the New Deal-era idea that the state could both protect individual rights and subsidize group advancement. Inspired by that spirit, black Americans grasped the significance of the federal government's Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) during World War II and made extending the FEPC into the postwar period a political priority. The wartime and postwar Popular Front alliance between civil rights advocates, trade unionists, progressives, leftists, and liberals pushed for laws guaranteeing equal

¹ Countryman quotes Morris on page 7. See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 282.

opportunity in employment and housing and backed those demands with protest and political organizing—even as the left and liberal wings differed over strategy. Southern power in Congress forced that alliance toward state and local politics to advance what was an increasingly broad economic and social agenda in the late 1940s. However, by the early 1950s cold war anticommunism had marginalized the left, discredited protest, and valorized a centrist, gradualist, and legalistic civil rights liberalism. The successful passage of fair employment and housing ordinances and laws across the country nevertheless inspired black hopes. But the failure of such remedies to change patterns of black disadvantage in the 1950s and early 1960s, coupled with the dramatic reorganization of American cities around white suburbanization, radicalized the movement. That radicalization occurred initially within a liberal framework but relatively quickly gave way to various forms of nationalism and Black Power and ultimately to an ethnic politics strategy that by the 1970s was ascendant among African Americans in major cities.²

As Martha Biondi, Gerald Horne, Komozi Woodard, and others have shown, the periodization sketched above varied from city to city and state to state. Philadelphia was not New York or Chicago. Oakland was not Detroit. Indeed, Oakland was not even Los Angeles. But the fact that no single periodization precisely describes every locale should not forestall efforts to identify patterns and parallels among them. The larger significance of this literature is its reworking of the triumphant narrative of progress toward civil rights between *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In *Up South*, Countryman joins a scholarship that sees the urban North and West as places where African American organizing confronted not a de facto racial segregation that was de jure Jim Crow's weak cousin but a complex and embedded structure of laws, social practices, public policy, municipal political machines, and spatial history that produced ferocious racial and class inequality. Efforts to dismantle that structure were not contained solely within the *Brown-*

² For important articulations of this periodization, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Jeanne Theoharris and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York, 2003); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003). For discussion of African American urban politics in different local contexts, see David R. Colburn and Jeffrey S. Adler, eds., *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City* (Urbana, IL, 2001); Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).

to-Selma story. A more accurate periodization, suggested though not made explicit by Countryman, would place the FEPC in 1941 at one end and the Gary, Indiana, meeting of the National Black Convention Movement in 1972 at the other. In between, the modern urban black political agenda was forged.³

Countryman's extensive contributions to our understanding of the making and fate of that agenda will assure *Up South* a wide audience. In the space remaining, I will turn briefly to those contributions and conclude with a problematic that *Up South* raises but does not fully resolve. Countryman has done a masterful job of situating the Philadelphia movement in terms of (1) its relationship to the liberal trope of color-blind legal equality and to the liberal institutional environment of American politics and public policy, and (2) the internal conversations and debates within what Michael Dawson has called the "black public sphere."⁴ These were the key dialectics that drove the movement and made it so consistently dynamic. Countryman shows that shifts in strategy, alliances, and programs between the 1940s and the 1970s emerged from different approaches to the promise (and failure) of postwar rights liberalism to open the economy and spaces of the metropolis to equal access. But he also shows—through a judicious and at times brilliant use of personal biography, as well as a close study of numerous grassroots groups—that those same strategies and alliances were products of class differentiation within the black community and the always-present tension between integrationist, radical-progressive, and nationalist impulses. By paying attention to class (with more than lip service), Countryman paints as full and varied a portrait of the terrain of postwar urban black political life as we have.

Up South argues that civil rights liberalism, embedded in an individualist model of society, could never fully address the range of structural barriers to black advancement, especially of the broad and growing urban black working class. Nor was liberalism a sufficient underpinning for black identity, because it promised merely atomization in the face of the white supermajority. But liberalism's protection of individual rights was

³ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation*; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA, 1995); Self, *American Babylon*. For other interpretations that challenge the centrality of the Brown-to-Selma narrative, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

⁴ Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago, 2001).

nonetheless an essential starting point. These are by now well-rehearsed points in the historiography, but Countryman uses them to especially good effect. As the Garveyite Louis Sullivan's selective patronage campaigns in the early 1960s gave way to the proto-nationalist Cecil Moore's construction site protests and to the Black People's Unity Movement (BPUM) in the middle 1960s, Philadelphians struggled constantly with the DuBoisian dilemma. How best to advance the cause: by claiming space for individual black success in the American urban maelstrom or by insisting upon communal identity and power? And if the two were not mutually exclusive, how best to combine them ideologically and strategically? Using this framework, Countryman shows, for instance, that the height of the southern movement's optimism about liberal reform, 1963–65, marked the Philadelphia movement's nearly full break with liberalism. And he documents in extraordinary detail that the shift to Black Power in Philadelphia after 1965 brought with it a deep and committed engagement with grassroots organizing, not, as narratives of nationalism often have it, a resort to charismatic leaders and "cultural" politics.

Up South is a book of enormous accomplishment. It challenges historians to rethink the periodization of the civil rights movement, and, like Biondi's book on New York, forces us out of the southern success/northern decline framework for understanding movement politics. Its embrace of liberalism as an organizing conceit is crucial to the book's insights, but it also raises questions not fully resolved by Countryman. He begins, for instance, with "the optimism of mid-century liberalism" and its potential to protect individual rights and encourage social mobility (p. 4). Out of this emerged a "civil rights" liberalism that promised a "colorblind society" based on formal legal equality (p. 5). Countryman is right about this, but he overemphasizes "colorblind" as a black political idea and downplays New Deal liberalism's embrace of economic rights and group advancement and the way both concepts were consistently embedded in all but the most elite black political thought. By the middle chapters of *Up South*, liberalism has lost much of the complexity Countryman ascribes to it in the introduction. *Liberalism* moves through the text as the foil, the stricture from which activists are "breaking" or of which they are offering "critiques"; some of these breaks and critiques, Countryman notes, were "implicit" (p. 120). But the fact that civil rights liberalism seemed to adhere in such a small political formation for a relatively short period of time suggests that it was always unstable,

especially at the grassroots, loosed from the dictates of the national grand alliance. The breaking-with-liberalism paradigm can lose its analytical purchase in local case studies like Countryman's, because the moment of ascendant liberalism was so brief.

Rather than "breaking" with a coherent and monolithic liberalism, the black activists, critics, and organizers in *Up South* seem to me to have been at the leading edge of a profound engagement not only with liberalism's promise, contradictions, elisions, and fault lines but with the political structures of the nation, with the state itself. One may object that this is a distinction without a difference. But liberalism represents too many things in *Up South*: legal equality, alliances with whites, elite bargaining rather than protest, individual as opposed to group remedies, securing rights as opposed to consolidating power, a colorblind society rather than a racially progressive one. It is not that Countryman is wrong about any of this. Rather, once liberalism dons so many guises, it assumes a kind of generic shape that weakens its analytical utility. *Up South's* protagonists were engaged along multiple axes: alliances with whites; interclass differences; protest, political, and bargaining strategies; levels of state power; formal politics and cultural politics. Amidst all of this, I was struck by the extraordinary syncretism of black politics, the partialness of all the "breaks" with liberalism, and the sometimes audacious and creative, as well as futile and disastrous, ways that nationalist and liberal impulses were combined. While Countryman notes those subtleties, they too often get lost in the failure/limits-of-liberalism framework. As both Dawson and Charles and Dona Hamilton have observed in different contexts, the main currents of black political thought and action in the twentieth century formed something that was neither analogous to "white" liberalism nor altogether synonymous with nationalism. The quest for that "something" seems to be at the heart of *Up South*.⁵

In the end, *Up South* takes us closer to a synthesis of the histories of political ideology, grassroots organizing, and formal politics than almost anything in the existing literature. Its introduction alone is as thoughtful and clear a description of the new civil rights and urban political history as I have yet read. Coming on the heels of the aforementioned book by Biondi, as well as my own work along with Robin Kelley's *Freedom*

⁵ Michael Dawson's *Black Visions*, for instance, identifies at least six major black political ideologies, each of which incorporates varying degrees of traditional liberalism. See Dawson, 10–23. See also Dona Cooper Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York, 1997).

Dreams, Nikhil Singh's *Black is a Country*, and Robert Korstad's *Civil Rights Unionism, Up South* confirms a new periodization of the modern black rights struggle that starts earlier (1930s/40s) and extends later (1970s) and chronicles the movement's evolution alongside, and embedded within, the trajectory of the liberal state. The combination of southern congressional power and American federalism made states and cities crucial political cauldrons of the postwar black rights struggle. As *Countryman* shows, these were not sideshows to the more central national drama, nor were they "secondary" to the southern struggle. In many ways, they were the places where the movement itself was constituted and where its greatest political and ideological experimentation was possible.⁶

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⁶ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*; Singh, *Black is a Country*; Self, *American Babylon*; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003). Much of the literature on the southern movement has also been moving in the direction of a broader historical time frame in which to evaluate the trajectory of the modern black rights movement. In addition to Korstad, see Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, IL, 1993), and William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana, IL, 2005).