Rethinking the Boundaries of the Modern Freedom Struggle

BY THE LATE 1990S, growing numbers of scholars lamented the dearth of scholarship on the northern and western arms of the modern civil rights movement.[1] Scholars of civil rights and mid-twentieth-century political movements have privileged the southern story. They have written eloquently about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock school desegregation cases, and the dramatic and usually violent confrontations between civil rights activists and segregationists in Greensboro, North Carolina; Philadelphia, Mississippi; and Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. Emphasis on the southern movement implies that the modern civil rights struggle had its primary roots in the Jim Crow South and that blacks in the urban North and West followed the lead of their southern brothers and sisters in making demands for their own rights. In recent years, however, an emerging body of scholarship on the North and West has broadened our understanding of the modern civil rights movement in African American and U.S. culture and politics.[2] Matthew Countryman powerfully reinforces this trend toward a fuller and more appropriate understanding of the modern freedom struggle.

Countryman provides a model urban case study of the northern African American freedom struggle in the years after World War II. In addition to addressing the prevailing southern bias in scholarship on the subject, Countryman also confronts certain unevenness in the gradually expanding body of scholarship on the urban North and West. Existing

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[1] Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York, 2003); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1233–63; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998), esp. chap. 10, "The Civil Rights Movement in the West."

[2] See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2004); Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton, NJ, 1998); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

studies focus on the better-known racial conflicts in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York—particularly the emergence of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, during the late 1960s, the Watts Riot of 1965, the violent white reaction to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as the southern movement hit the streets of Chicago in 1967, and the growing political influence of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Malcolm X in Harlem.

Up South ably responds to twin biases in prevailing civil rights and political historiography and makes an excellent case for Philadelphia as a significant site for research on the northern black freedom struggle. Philadelphia blacks participated in the wartime March on Washington Movement to end racial discrimination in defense industries and escalated their struggle for fair employment in the years after World War II. African American activists and their white allies secured one of the nation's earliest municipal fair employment practices committees in 1948; established the principles of antidiscrimination in the city's newly revised charter in 1951; and set up the city's Commission on Human Relations to combat racial discrimination in municipal services, contracts, and employment. According to Countryman, these racial reforms were the product of a black-white liberal alliance within the Democratic Party. As such, this study clarifies the link between the intensification of civil rights activism during the 1940s and 1950s and the emergence and spread of a new faith in liberalism unleashed by the politics of the New Deal state.

Growing numbers of postwar blacks and whites articulated a faith in the use of state power to protect individual rights and encourage upward mobility. They believed that "steady progress" toward "the goal of racial equality" (p. 1) in Philadelphia was not only possible but close at hand in the city's new charter. This vision of liberalism entailed support for New Deal social insurance programs like social security, the G.I. Bill, and small business loans. In scholarship and intellectual life, liberals also redefined the race problem in American society (particularly the lowly place of blacks in the political economy) as one of biased white racial attitudes and social practices rather than the biological inferiority of black people. At the same time, blacks and their white supporters channeled their vision for a just and colorblind society into a national movement for new federal, state, and local antidiscrimination legislation and enforcement machinery to ensure necessary social changes.

By the mid-1950s, black Philadelphians had expanded their access to better housing, jobs, and education, but such gains were nonetheless insufficient to curtail white privilege and erase the color line in the city's socioeconomic and political life. The city of Philadelphia not only failed to ensure fair employment and the promise of economic citizenship for black people, it also hampered African American access to a broad range of human services. As racial inequality persisted and even intensified in the urban political economy, rising numbers of black Philadelphians questioned the utility of state agencies like the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission for erasing the color line.

Up South charts African American activists gradual turn toward nonviolent direct-action strategies for social change during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Under the leadership of the Baptist minister Rev. Leon Sullivan and the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), African Americans in Philadelphia staged an escalating series of boycotts and mass demonstrations against discriminatory private firms, labor unions, and the municipal government itself. Such protests produced significant results at the national as well as the local levels. In addition to opening up jobs to blacks in new categories of skilled labor, the so-called "Philadelphia Plan" also provided a model for the U.S. Department of Labor's program to end segregation and discrimination in the construction industry nationwide.

Whereas the initial phase of black activism expressed faith in the efficacy of the liberal civil rights agenda, Countryman shows how such faith was relatively short-lived. Cecil Moore, Sullivan's successor as head of the NAACP, helped to expand the scope of black protests deep into the city's working-class and poor communities. Moore and his working-class constituents offered stinging critiques of the limits of both black elite and white liberal leadership. Countryman convincingly argues that, "were it not for the ability of Cecil Moore and his supporters to mobilize preexisting civic and social networks—from church women's groups and black-led trade unions to North Philadelphia youth gangs—to participate enthusiastically in the protest campaigns of 1963 and 1965, the victories of that period would not have been won" (p. 122).

Despite the successes of nonviolent direct action and boycott campaigns, growing numbers of African Americans expressed dismay at the limits of prevailing civil rights strategies for social change. Countryman documents the emergence of two distinct but overlapping forms of black

self-help ideology during the mid to late 1960s. Amidst rising protests in Philadelphia, a significant coterie of blacks sought viable alternatives to "civil rights protest" and the shortcomings of the "desegregation agenda" (p. 2). Rev. Leon Sullivan and his black self-help advocates emphasized the virtues of individual and collective preparation for life and labor in the capitalist world. With equal rights laws and enforcement machinery in place, Sullivan argued that the primary challenge facing poor and working-class blacks "was to develop the skills and work habits" (p. 2) necessary for success in the free market labor force. Sullivan's ideas, which emphasized the so-called "hand up" instead of "hand out" (p. 3) approach to social change, gained organized expression in his Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC). Indicative of Sullivan's appeal to main-stream policy makers, President Lyndon B. Johnson modeled the self-help features of his own War on Poverty program on Sullivan's OIC. Republican President Richard M. Nixon also adopted Sullivan's brand of economic self-help as a deterrent against the spread of a second, more collectivist, revolutionary, and, presumably more threatening, nationalistic form of black self-help ideology.

A militant black nationalist form of self-help ideology emerged in Philadelphia nearly four months before the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist Stokely Carmichael popular-ized the phrase "Black Power." Formed in February 1966, Philadelphia's Black People's Unity Movement (BPUM) blended Malcolm X's call for a revitalized form of black socioeconomic, cultural, and political nationalism with SNCC's emphasis on community organizing and the development of grassroots black leadership. As such, BPUM advocated a form of black self-help that would strengthen the movement for black control over the material, spiritual, and political resources of the African American com-munity. BPUM not only pushed for black history and culture courses in secondary and postsecondary institutions, but also established the groundwork for black Philadelphia's sponsorship of the Third National Conference on Black Power and the rise of the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party.

Clashes between Black Power activists, police, and state authorities took center stage in the media's depiction of the city's Black Power move-ment, but Countryman convincingly argues that widespread grassroots commitment to Black Power unleashed a broad range of organizing activ-ities designed to broaden the base of black leadership in the city and give

voice to the black working-class majority. The Black Power movement claimed a pivotal place for black workers in the development of the city as well as their own communities. Countryman documents a variety of initiatives that brought huge numbers of poor and working-class blacks together to fight for greater access to the city's resources and to end racial and class inequality. Such activities included antigang programs for black youth, black history and culture activities like the Freedom Library, massive Black Power rallies, and especially mass demonstrations by predominantly black, poor, and working-class public school students to gain control of schools with predominantly black student bodies.

Unlike so many other treatments of black women and gender relations within the Black Power movement, Countryman shows that Philadelphia's black women gained extraordinary access to positions of influence and power within the movement. African American women gained such influence not because of the lack of gender bias and the absence of emphases on black masculinity and male empowerment in the City of Brotherly Love, but because of movement leaders' commitment to "the principles of community organizing and indigenous leadership development" (p. 260). As elsewhere in urban America during the period, the Black Power movement in Philadelphia aimed to place black men at the center of their families and communities as the principal decision makers and actors. But efforts to build local leadership for this and other community-building tasks catapulted women to the forefront of day-to-day activities. Women took center stage in a variety of actions, including the fight against police brutality and mistreatment of the poor, as reflected in the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO) and the Council of Organizations on Philadelphia Police Accountability and Responsibility (COPPAR).

By the early 1970s, *Up South* also shows how the Black Power movement demonstrated its capacity to bridge ideological differences among proponents of black nationalism. Fueled partly by efforts to gain control over the federal War on Poverty program and by the development of two new organizations (the Black Political Forum and the Black Women's Political Alliance), Black Power activists developed a rough consensus on the use of electoral politics as a strategy for social change. Black Power advocates of diverse persuasions agreed to help mobilize black electoral majorities to take control of municipal government and transform it into an instrument for the upward mobility of black people. Such efforts

produced fruit in the expansion of black local and state elected officials during the 1970s and established the foundation for election of the city's first black mayor in 1983. As such, Countryman concludes that Black Power activists "constructed a vital and effective social movement that remade the political and cultural landscape in American cities during the late 1960s and 1970s in ways that postwar liberalism could and did not accomplish" (p. 9).

Despite its ability to bridge ideological differences and increase black political representation, the Black Power movement failed to transform the material conditions of Philadelphia's black working class and poor. While the movement continued to face its own internal fissures and imprecise vision for the future of blacks in urban America, Countryman convincingly concludes that the movement's socioeconomic failures resulted fundamentally from the complicated impact of urban deindustrialization, suburbanization, and the persistence of white working-class resistance to the politics of Black Power. *Up South* not only locates the roots of white resistance in the early postwar years, but carefully documents the intensification of such resistance as African Americans escalated their demands for social justice during the 1960s. Specifically, Countryman shows how working- and lower-middle-class whites rallied behind the city's conservative and racially biased police department; they also helped to elect Frank Rizzo, the Italian American deputy commissioner of police, to the mayor's office (presumably to protect white neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces from the threat of Black Power) and short-circuited Philadelphia's black freedom movement.

This book makes substantial contributions to knowledge of U.S. and African American social and political history during the last half of the twentieth century, but certain aspects of the argument require closer scrutiny. While Countryman argues that the modern civil rights and Black Power movements built upon preexisting black institutions, he offers little systematic analysis of the precise ways that established black institutions—churches, fraternal orders, women's clubs, labor unions, and places of leisure—gave voice to new forms of black political expression during the civil rights and Black Power movements.

Because Countryman makes a claim for the centrality of black working-class and poor people in the transformation of the political landscape, somewhat greater attention to both the changing configuration of class and the shifting meaning of class within the black community seem

warranted. *Up South* offers splendid examples of college-educated children of working-class and poor families (John Churchville, Mattie Humphrey, Walter Palmer, and others) returning to the community with a resolve to develop programs that appealed to the black working class and poor. Countryman leaves unclear, however, the extent to which these young people (though engaged in activities designed to liberate the black poor) adopted the lifestyles and attitudes of an emerging new black middle class and elite in other aspects of their lives. We might very well ask to what extent these emerging highly educated members of working-class black families developed attitudes and behaviors that alienated them from as well as endeared them to the grassroots sentiments of their own communities of origin.

Since so much of what we know about black working-class activism during the industrial era is based upon actions and ideas developed quite informally (outside established institutional structures of power within and outside the black community) we might also ask—what was the precise relationship between changing informal modes of social struggle in Philadelphia (in workplaces, housing markets, and public spaces like buses, parks, restaurants, bars, and theaters) and the rise of such well-known organizational forms of Black Power as SNCC, BPUM, and the Black Panther Party? Closer attention to these issues might reveal a more complicated relationship not only between poor and working-class blacks and whites, but between African Americans and particular white ethnic groups (e.g., Jews and Italians) than Countryman allows.

Such queries about the class dynamics of the modern freedom struggle notwithstanding, *Up South* helps to revamp the usual chronological, geographical, and ideological boundaries of the modern freedom movement. Countryman shows that no less than the southern movement, northern black activism emerged out of the particular socioeconomic and political obstacles and opportunities that blacks confronted in Philadelphia and other northern cities. Compared to the southern movement, where blacks and their white allies protested the blatantly racist practices of the segregationist state, blacks in Philadelphia exposed the wide gap between the state's articulation of antidiscrimination policies and the implementation of such policies on the ground. The Philadelphia story shows that racism and civil rights activism were not confined to the segregationist South.

Countryman's book also helps us to reconceptualize the roots of the

Black Power movement and its influence on the modern civil rights movement, and on the reconfiguration of racial politics in urban America. Unlike much of the scholarship on the Black Power movement, which emphasizes its disruption of the civil rights movement (presumably by discouraging interracial and intraclass alliances between black workers, whites, and the black middle class), Countryman demonstrates that Philadelphia's Black Power movement was deeply anchored in the grassroots experiences of black poor and working-class people and offered a viable alternative strategy for addressing racial inequality in the urban political economy. Whereas the nonviolent direct-action phase of the civil rights movement defined racism as largely an aberration of otherwise democratic and equitable values and institutions, the Black Power movement defined racism as institutionalized constraints on the material, social, and political progress of black people.

Up South also challenges prevailing studies that cite the emergence of the Black Power movement as the pivotal force that not only undercut the success of the modern civil rights movement but also contributed to the demise of the Democratic Party's New Deal coalition. According to Countryman, as elsewhere in the urban North, white working- and middle-class conservatism had fueled resistance to the black freedom struggle long before the advent of black militancy during the 1960s.

Finally, by focusing on a plethora of black organizations that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, *Up South* deepens our understanding of the so-called "urban crisis" from the vantage point of significant segments of Philadelphia's African American community itself. As such, Countryman's book offers an excellent stating point for future community-based research on the civil rights and Black Power eras in U.S. and African American history.

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