

Questions of Gender, Class, and Politics in Philadelphia's Black Power Movement

I AM ENORMOUSLY GRATEFUL to Lisa Levenstein, Robert Self, and Joe Trotter for their thoughtful and incisive reviews of *Up South*. There is no greater compliment than to have colleagues seriously engage one's arguments, particularly colleagues whose own work at the intersections of urban, African American, and gender history I so admire. I welcome, too, this opportunity to respond to their questions about and criticisms of my historical analysis of the black freedom movement in Philadelphia. The history of African American activism and of racial politics in Philadelphia is complex and multilayered. But it is my hope that *Up South*, in conjunction with other recent and forthcoming studies of the African American freedom movement in the North and West, will open new realms of debate in important areas of post-World War II U.S. history—including, but not limited to, the life cycle and impact of non-electoral social movements, the role of racial politics in the shift from the welfare to the neoliberal state, and issues of gender and class relations within the civil rights and Black Power movements.¹

It is particularly gratifying to have three distinguished historians so

¹ I enjoyed the great benefit of long conversations with Robert Self as we were developing our respective monographs for publication. His study of race and place in Oakland, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), is already a classic in the field. Other recent important works on the black freedom movement in the North include Lisa Levenstein, "Hard Bargains: Poor Women, Public Institutions, and Poverty in Post-World War II Philadelphia" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2002); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York, 2004); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago, 2002); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York, 2006); and Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York, 2006). Finally, Joe William Trotter's classic study, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Champaign, IL, 1988), deeply influenced my thinking about the experiences of black working people in the urban North.

aptly summarize the arguments that I sought to put forward in *Up South*. For this reason I see little need to restate here the broad outlines of my book and will instead focus my comments on the important issues that these authors have raised. Joe Trotter raises key questions about the ways that intraracial class relations within the African American community played out within and shaped the development of the black movement in Philadelphia, questions that I was only able to address partially in *Up South*. As I argue in the book, middle-class domination of African American civil rights advocacy remained largely unchallenged until the mid-1960s. To the extent that labor and neighborhood activists sought to represent working-class voices and interests within civil rights organizations of the early postwar period, they did so without mounting a class-based challenge to the ministers, attorneys, and other professional-class leaders who traditionally dominated black leadership in Philadelphia. This was true whether these activists saw themselves as proponents of left-wing or Popular Front politics or simply as representatives of black workers and working-class communities. I don't think it's coincidental that a journalist and public school teacher, Joe Rainey and Goldie Watson respectively, were the most prominent African American proponents of the Popular Front in 1940s Philadelphia.

The one exception of course was the Nation of Islam, which since its inception had accused the black middle class, and in particular its well-educated professional-class leadership, of betraying working-class interests in its pursuit of racial integration. As a number of the Black Power activists I interviewed remembered, it was the Nation of Islam that in 1950s Philadelphia most effectively promoted the idea that there were divergent class interests in the black community. It is thus, I think, not surprising that when a class-based challenge to the professional-class leadership of the civil rights community did emerge in the mid-1960s, it came not from labor or left-wing activists but from advocates of black nationalism. Here I agree with Trotter completely when he points out that these emergent Black Power activists were not so much working-class activists as the upwardly mobile, college-educated children of the black poor and working class, a fact that points to the fluid nature of class relations within the black community. While I don't subscribe to the nostalgic view that segregation and ghettoization during the Jim Crow era created in black communities a kind of cross-class utopia in which people from every class status lived together and supported each other, I

do think that the contradictory nature of educational and economic opportunity for African Americans in the postwar era contributed to the growth of a generation of relatively well-educated sons and daughters of the black working class who rooted themselves in and sought to speak for "the ghetto." As one activist told me as he was discussing the Black People's Unity Movement's efforts to organize black high school students, the student government activists in predominately black high schools and the leaders of corner youth gangs in Philadelphia's black neighborhoods were often the same people.

Still, Trotter is right to point out that of the many stories left untold in *Up South*, one of the most important is that of the day-to-day relations within movement organizations between activists who had the opportunity to attend college and those who had not. To what extent did those who lacked a college education remain rank-and-file participants in black struggles of the period? And in which organizations were they able to emerge as leaders in their own right? I find a partial answer to these questions in my discussion of organizations like the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO) and the Council of Organizations on Philadelphia Police Accountability and Responsibility (COPPAR), organizations in which black working-class women activists intentionally sought out middle-class (and predominately) white allies but very consciously reserved for themselves control over the group's agenda and strategy. And yet, the career of PWRO leader Roxanne Jones demonstrates how movement activism itself could act as an engine of upward mobility; a South Philadelphia welfare mother when she joined PWRO in 1967, Jones rose to become the state's most prominent antipoverty activist during the 1970s and later was elected to the state legislature.

I recognize too, as Robert Self so eloquently points out, that the term "liberalism" acts as a bit of a floating signifier in *Up South*. The dilemma, it seems to me, is that liberalism in the post-World War II era is in fact a slippery ideological phenomenon. Certainly, postwar American liberalism can be seen in the broadest of terms as a watered-down, procapitalist, and neoimperialist version of European social democracy. But in postwar Philadelphia, liberalism operated less as a coherent and consistent political ideology than as a marker of a particular social and class location—white (with the exception of a small slice of the city's black elite), Protestant, well educated, and from relatively to fabulously wealthy. And while Self is correct to point out that liberal reformers held political power in

Philadelphia only for a brief time (from Joseph Clark's election as mayor in 1951 to Richardson Dilworth's resignation from the mayor's office to run for governor in 1962), I would contend that liberal domination of elite social and cultural networks in the city—including the city's leading educational and cultural institutions, its most prestigious residential neighborhoods, and even significant sectors of the business community—was the most important political feature of postwar Philadelphia, at least until Frank Rizzo's election as mayor in 1971.

My point here is that the political commitments of Philadelphia liberals were tied more to process than they were to ideology. Philadelphia liberals valorized public service over the pursuit of private interests and shared an instinct for a particular mix of technocratic government, gradual top-down reform, and managed negotiation of competing interests within the city. Thus, Philadelphia's liberals—white liberals, in particular—could and did see themselves as simultaneously allied with, but never fully of, the city's Democratic machine, local labor leaders, and the black freedom movement. It was precisely the ideological fluidity of Philadelphia's liberals—not to mention their tendency to convey the belief that they and only they possessed the necessary combination of technical know-how and moral clarity to govern the city well—that made them the perfect foil for populist resentments within the city's black and white working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods. That said, I do agree with Self's final point that "the black activists, critics, and organizers in *Up South* [were] at the leading edge of a profound engagement . . . with liberalism's promise, contradictions, elisions, and fault lines." Black Power activists "broke" fundamentally with the middle-class paternalism of white liberals. Disengaging from the liberal politics of individual rights and state-based antipoverty programs, however, proved much more difficult.

Finally, Lisa Levenstein criticizes *Up South* for not giving sufficient credit to the role that women neighborhood activists played in Philadelphia's civil rights movement and, in particular, in the development of the city's Black Power movement. I certainly agree with her that African American women activists from postwar Philadelphia's black working-class and poor neighborhoods deserve "a rich and complex intellectual, political, and social history of their own," a history that Levenstein's dissertation has begun to lay out to great effect. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s and into the 1960s, women played leading roles in neighborhood-based community activism in black Philadelphia's working-

and lower-middle-class neighborhoods, organizing block clubs and anti-tavern campaigns as well as staffing settlement houses and church-based social service programs. To the extent that women (with the notable exceptions of Goldie Watson and Sadie Alexander) were largely excluded from the leadership roles in the city's civil rights organizations during the postwar period, they were clearly overrepresented at the community level—so much so that we might talk about there having been a rigidly gendered division of labor in Philadelphia's black community leadership during this era. Civil rights advocacy was men's work, while neighborhood concerns were largely, though not exclusively, women's concern.

Where I disagree with Levenstein is in her argument that the activism of poor and working-class black women in Philadelphia constituted a "prehistory" of Black Power. As committed as the community activists of the 1950s and early 1960s were to strengthening their neighborhoods, they were not in my view movement builders. Nor were they inclined to challenge traditional middle-class leaders for control of Philadelphia's civil rights organizations—even when they criticized those leaders for failing to address the day-to-day problems of life in the city's black neighborhoods. That challenge would come from the Black Power generation, younger activists whose roots lay in the southern student movement and in local black nationalist organizations. As I detail in *Up South*, these activists combined their commitment to black nationalism and their critique of the black community's middle-class leadership with a commitment to the community organizing and bottom-up leadership-development strategies popularized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

My central point is that social movements must be seen as greater than the sum of grassroots activism or resistance to racial oppression.² Social

² This is not to suggest that traditions of resistance to racial oppression, such as those so ably documented by Robin Kelley, are not important to the history of Black Power and other African American social movements. But traditions of resistance alone cannot explain how the black nationalist analysis of the constitutive nature of racism within American society moved so rapidly from the margins to the center of African American movement politics during the first half of the 1960s. My approach to studying social movements draws heavily on Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), and Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (New York, 1996), 2–4. For a different perspective on the relationship between traditions of resistance and mass movements, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994), 8, 77.

movements emerge when activists develop the ability to mobilize large numbers of people to participate in sustained campaigns that seek fundamental changes in the prevailing social order. The Black Power activists who embraced community organizing recognized that there already existed in Philadelphia's black working-class neighborhoods well-established networks of community activists. What was new about the Black Power approach was the belief that poor and working-class neighborhood activists should be at the center of, not marginal to, the black freedom movement.

It would be going too far to suggest that this commitment to community organizing led Philadelphia's Black Power activists to consciously seek out and promote the leadership of women activists from poor and working-class neighborhoods. Black Power in Philadelphia, as elsewhere, was a deeply masculinist project, committed to the proposition that white supremacy had emasculated African American men and that the emergence of a new generation of unapologetically muscular male leaders was essential to the liberation of the race. But as committed as Black Power activists were to the reinscription of patriarchal power within their own organizations, their efforts to promote poor and working-class neighborhood leaders had the unexpected impact of opening space for poor and working-class women activists to emerge as citywide black leaders in their own right. And, as Rhonda Williams has shown in her study of African American women activists in Baltimore, some of these women community activists embraced the black nationalist logic of Black Power, while others sought to reinvest the call for an interracial movement of the poor with new meaning and power.³

Let me clarify here as well that it was not my intent to argue that the maternalist rhetoric used by some working-class women activists as they organized for welfare rights and against police brutality meant support for the black nationalist notion of gender complementarity.⁴ Certainly, the maternalist claims of the PWRO could not have differed more from the patriarchal myths of the Black Power movement. PWRO's maternalism was a class-based claim to the same social and cultural support for

³ Williams, *Politics of Public Housing*, 187–91.

⁴ On the black nationalist concept of gender complementarity, see E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2 (spring 1990): 73–97.

mothering that white middle- and upper-class women took for granted.⁵ What I am arguing is that the maternalist claims of some working-class women activists made them appear less threatening to Black Power's masculinist project than would the more explicitly feminist claims made by black women activists during the 1970s.

Let me again thank Professors Levenstein, Self, and Trotter for their insightful commentary on *Up South*. Much remains to be explored in the history of African American urban communities in the post-World War II era. *Up South* is only a partial telling of the first part of a much longer history of urban America in the late twentieth century, a story that must be told if we are to come to grips with our nation's current racial predicament.

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⁵ On the maternalist politics of the welfare rights movement, see Felicia Kornbluh, "To Fulfill Their 'Rightly Needs': Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement," *Radical History Review* 69 (fall 1997): 78.