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Bayard Rustin: Out from the Shadows of History

Brian Ward November 1, 2005

Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin. Edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003. 350 pages. \$16.95/softcover.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when Bayard Rustin was a shadowy, barely discernable presence in most histories of the Civil Rights Movement and other social upheavals of the mid- to late-20th century. An occasional reference might acknowledge his role as an important advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. Sometimes he might garner a little more consideration as the co-organizer of the 1963 March on Washington where King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Occasionally, Rustin might even merit a mention not directly related to his association with King—as an avid proponent of black political organizing and progressive coalition building, as an impassioned voice against the Vietnam War and for nuclear disarmament, or as a consistent advocate of the rights of labor, or—late in his life—as a campaigner for gay rights and greater AIDS awareness.

Yet, although Rustin appears to have been everywhere, involved in just about every major social and political cause of the mid- to late- 20th century, historians initially seemed reluctant, unwilling, or unable to put flesh on the bones of the man.

That is changing. In recent years several biographies have shed increasing light on Rustin's contributions, and editors Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise now offer *Time on Two Crosses*, a thoughtfully compiled collection of some of Rustin's most important writings, speeches, and debates. The book's subtitle, "Collected Writings," is rather misleading since some of the entries were not writings at all.

It is a book that accepts the interpretive framework of an earlier biographer, John D'Emilio, who created a new model for understanding Rustin by arguing that Rustin's homosexuality was as important as his race in defining the trajectory of his public career as well as the contours of his private life. As the editors note early on, "It is impossible to understand the man—his ideological commitments, his political activism, his institutional affiliations—without considering his 'time on two crosses': that is, how his race and sexuality shaped his political life, nurtured and sustained his indomitable spirit, and helped him to conceive of civil rights as a struggle for 'the human family.'"

But reading Rustin's own eloquent, shrewd, passionate, and sometimes quite funny words in *Time on Two Crosses*, it is also clear that it is difficult to understand Rustin as man, philosopher, activist, or symbol without paying attention to the role of Quaker teachings in shaping his attitude towards his fellow human beings and fueling his commitment to social justice. While all of his recent biographers have dutifully acknowledged this aspect of his intellectual and moral education, none have really done justice to the myriad ways in which Rustin's exposure to the tenets of the Religious Society of Friends informed his sense of self, brotherhood, community, and duty, let alone to the ways in which his longstanding relationship with Quaker-based organizations such as American Friends Service Committee provided a crucial practical and ideological framework for much of his activism. Even when he departed from some of the more traditional Friends' beliefs—for example, when refining his views on the political value of pacifism in the mid-1960s to put more emphasis on the importance of defending democratic freedoms—his Quaker background was woven into the warp and weft of his private and public life.

Born to a young unmarried woman in West Chester, Pa., in 1912, Bayard Rustin was raised by his grandparents, only learning in adolescence that they were not his real parents. A member of the Religious Society of Friends, his grandmother was especially instrumental in conveying the core humanitarian values that would animate his entire career. Julia, who belonged to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and several other organizations devoted to "racial uplift," passed to her grandson a steadfast belief in the essential dignity and brotherhood of all humans, regardless of race, class, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Moreover, with Julia's personal example as a practical inspiration and the Quaker edict to "speak truth to power" as a philosophical mantra, Bayard inherited the moral imperative to confront and challenge social, economic, and political injustice wherever he found it.

"My activism did not spring from being black," he flatly stated. "Rather it is rooted fundamentally in my Quaker upbringing and the values instilled in me." Whether condemning individual or state-sponsored violence, working for peace, pursuing black rights

and economic opportunities in the United States, or campaigning for social justice, democratic representation, and economic rights for all peoples around the globe, Rustin invariably measured his world and determined the appropriate response to its shortcomings according to Quaker precepts.

The chapters in *Time on Two Crosses* are organized thematically into six categories: The Making of a Movement; The Politics of Protest; African American Leadership; Equality Beyond Race; Gay Rights; and Equality Beyond America. Although it would have helped if the editors had provided a note explaining the context and provenance of each entry (and an index!), the book offers a good introduction to the range of Rustin's preoccupations and a fascinating insight into the evolution of his social and political views. Along the way, it also offers clues as to why Rustin languished in the penumbra of movement history for so long.

Time on Two Crosses contains dozens of stimulating chapters. There is a gripping firsthand account of the chilling racial climate of Mississippi in the mid-1950s, and a famous 1964 essay on the future of black protest and politics, which ponders the likely consequences of restoring African Americans to the electoral process in the South: "It may be premature to predict a Southern Democratic party of Negroes and white moderates and a Republican party of refugee racists and economic conservatives," Rustin wrote, "but there certainly is a strong tendency towards such a realignment." One can also read his rather haughty and disdainful dismissal of the Black Nationalism and identity politics of the Black Power era as a meaningless distraction from the real business of political organizing and campaigns for full employment and a minimum wage. Conversely, there is much wisdom still in his shrewd analysis of the need to integrate affirmative action measures into a more broad-based program of social, economic, and educational reform in America. And there are some very perceptive critiques of U.S. policies and black attitudes towards Africa and Israel, written between the late 1950s and the early 1980s.

In many ways, however, the most fascinating and revealing pieces in the book are those from very early and late in Rustin's career. The collection starts with a couple of 1942 essays, steeped in the language and values of Gandhi, the Religious Society of Friends, and the black church, that explain the potential of nonviolent protest as a technique of African American struggle. This was some 13 years before the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott brought the tactic to popular attention and 18 years before the student sit-ins made nonviolent direct action the preeminent strategy of the southern Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing that one major consequence of all the recent attention on Rustin has been to reclaim him as perhaps the single most important strategist of the nonviolent direct action campaigns that destroyed statutory segregation and disenfranchisement in the American

South. This tactical emphasis, honed through his involvement with AFSC and other pacifist organizations, was anchored to a basic Quaker abhorrence of violence. But it was also tethered to a practical sense that while moral suasion and good example—the idea of conviction—could stir even the most slovenly of consciences into recognizing and responding to injustice, it helped to have laws that outlawed discrimination and restrained the actions of those who were slow to recognize, let alone do, the right thing. Throughout his life, Rustin fused a keen appreciation of the power of power—economic, ideological, political, and social—to constrain the freedoms and opportunities available to people with a firm belief that mass action could be used to change existing and oppressive power structures.

By the time the Montgomery Bus Boycott began in December 1955, Rustin was not just a sophisticated theoretician of nonviolent protest, but also a seasoned practitioner. In 1947, he had been on the Journey of Reconciliation, an integrated bus ride through the upper South organized by the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation to protest segregation on interstate transportation. Rustin's chronicle of his experiences on the journey, which served as the model for the 1961 Freedom Rides, is included in *Time on Two Crosses*.

So, too, is a compelling account of the time he spent on a brutal North Carolina chain gang as a consequence of his presence on this pioneering ride. What is most striking about Rustin's recollection of his sojourn on the chain gang is his refusal to allow his self-respect and, just as significantly, his respect for others to crumble in the face of cruel verbal and physical abuse. Again, it is hard not to see the imprint of his Quaker upbringing. Even in the most oppressive and demeaning of circumstances, Rustin insisted on recognizing the basic humanity of his fellow inmates and jailers alike.

Rustin wrote many of King's most important early statements on the boycott and its emerging philosophical commitment to nonviolence, including an influential article entitled "Our Struggle" that appeared in the progressive *Liberation* magazine. Even more crucial was the speech Rustin wrote for King to deliver to a mass meeting at the First Street Baptist Church on February 23, 1956, shortly after the arrest of dozens of the boycott's clerical leadership. The following day, the speech was featured on the front page of the *New York Times*. King's address, with its insistence that the boycott was "not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice," and calls for "compassion and understanding for those who hate us," dripped with Rustin's Quaker conscience and concerns.

Clearly Rustin's presence was proving both instructional and inspirational for King and the Montgomery movement in general. Yet, within a couple of weeks he was compelled to leave town. Not for the first time, forces hostile to black rights had seized on his homosexuality and

his radical political background in an effort to discredit the movement; not for the last time, forces within that movement had capitulated to the pressure of those bigots and ushered Rustin into the shadows, from where he continued to advise and ghostwrite for King.

When the boycott ended in victory over bus segregation in Montgomery, Rustin secretly helped King to write much of *Stride Toward Freedom*—his autobiographical account of these events. The book systematically ignored Rustin’s own role in defining the nonviolent agenda of the protests, in facilitating King’s emergence as the nation’s foremost civil rights leader, and as the primary architect of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization formed to continue the nonviolent struggle against Jim Crow.

Although hardly a shy, retiring, or especially humble man in many ways, Rustin put the civil rights cause above his own celebrity and was thus complicit in the partial erasure, or obfuscation, of his many contributions to the movement. As a consequence, when early civil rights historians read King’s published accounts of the boycott and his path to nonviolence, they did not find much evidence of Rustin’s influence, simply because Rustin agreed that it would be perilous to the movement for his role to be acknowledged publicly.

This theme emerges strongly in a series of statements and interviews in *Time on Two Crosses* drawn from the mid- to late-1980s. This was the period when Rustin first began to talk openly about his homosexuality and the impact it had upon his political and social activism. In addition to making sensible points about the linkages, parallels, and differences between the struggles for black and gay rights in America, Rustin acknowledged that his own homosexuality had circumscribed his role in the Civil Rights Movement in various ways. Because he was gay, some of his contemporaries refused, or felt unable, to work with him; and many of those who did work with him often felt compelled to downplay the extent, or even deny the existence, of any such association.

Perhaps inevitably, there is a bittersweet quality to reading Rustin’s appraisal of how homophobia, alongside racism and anti-radicalism, stymied some of the opportunities he might have had to work for peace and justice in the United States and abroad. Yet, in the end, the wonder is that he was able to contribute so intelligently, creatively, and decisively to such a variety of humanitarian and progressive causes despite those impediments, not that he could not do more. *Time on Two Crosses* is a good place to start exploring the range of those contributions.

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