

Bayard Rustin Challenged Progressive Orthodoxies

By James Kirchick - September 12, 2023
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Bayard Rustin, a trusted adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. and chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, was a towering figure in the fight for racial equality. Remarkably for a man of his generation and public standing, he was also openly gay. When Mr. Rustin died in 1987, obituaries downplayed or elided this fact. Emblematic of this erasure was [this paper](#), which made only passing mention of his homosexuality and obliquely described Mr. Rustin's longtime partner as his "administrative assistant and adopted son."

In the decade since President Barack Obama awarded him [a posthumous](#) Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, there has been a welcome resurgence of popular interest in Mr. Rustin's extraordinary life. He was [frequently invoked](#) in [commemorations](#) of the march's 60th anniversary last month and will be the subject of a feature film produced by Barack and Michelle Obama's company that will come out later this year.

Whereas remembrances of Mr. Rustin once evaded the issue of his sexual orientation, today, in accordance with our growing acceptance of gay people and awareness of the discrimination they have faced, such tributes are likely to center it. This past June, for instance, the PBS NewsHour aired [a segment](#) for Pride Month titled "The story of Bayard Rustin, openly gay leader in the civil rights movement." Other representative encomiums celebrate the ["gay socialist pacifist who planned the 1963 March on Washington"](#) and ["the gay black pacifist at the heart of the March on Washington."](#)

Mr. Rustin is today often extolled as an avatar of "intersectionality," a theoretical framework popular among progressives that emphasizes the role that identities play in compounding oppression against individuals from marginalized groups. While it's admirable that Mr. Rustin is being recognized for something he never denied ([according to one associate](#), he "never knew there was a closet to go into"), these tributes studiously ignore another aspect of his life: how, throughout his later career, Mr. Rustin repeatedly challenged progressive orthodoxies.

Mr. Rustin, who was characterized by The Times in 1969 as ["A Strategist Without a Movement"](#) and, upon his death, an "Analyst Without Power Base," would most likely find himself no less politically homeless were he alive today. A universalist [who believed](#) that "there is no possibility for black people making progress if we emphasize only race," he would bristle at the current penchant for identity politics. An integrationist [who scoffed at how](#) "Stokely Carmichael can come back to the United States and demand (and receive) \$2,500 a lecture for telling white people how they stink," he would shake his head at an estimated \$3.4 billion diversity, equity and inclusion industry that often prioritizes making

individual white people feel guilty for the crimes of their ancestors while ignoring the growing class divide. A pragmatist [who noted](#), “There is a strong moralistic strain in the civil rights movement which would remind us that power corrupts, forgetting that the absence of power also corrupts,” he would have no patience for social justice activists unwilling to compromise. And a committed Zionist — supportive of the state but likely critical of its government — he would abhor the Black Lives Matter stance on Israel and the recent spate of antisemitic outbursts by Black celebrities. Mr. Rustin’s resistance to party dogma is a neglected part of his legacy worth celebrating, an intellectual fearlessness liberals need to rediscover.

The origin of Mr. Rustin’s estrangement from the progressive consensus began with his belief that once federal civil rights legislation was achieved, the American left would need to turn its attention from racial discrimination to the much more pervasive problem of economic inequality. Four months after the march, Mr. Rustin was invited to deliver a speech at Howard University to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. [According to the Times account](#), Mr. Rustin “said that the civil rights movement had gone as far as it could with its original approach and that the time had come to broaden the movement, which, he said, faces the danger of degenerating into a sterile sectarianism.” To avoid this fate, he argued, it must “include all depressed and underprivileged minority groups if their own movement is to make another leap forward.” Deriding direct-action protest tactics as mere “gimmicks,” Mr. Rustin counseled the young activists that “Heroism and ability to go to jail should not be substituted for an overall social reform program ... that will not only help the Negroes but one that will help all Americans.”

Mr. Rustin expanded on this analysis in a [seminal 1965 Commentary magazine essay](#), “From Protest to Politics.” Published after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and several months before the signing into law of the Voting Rights Act, Mr. Rustin argued that the main barrier to Black advancement in the United States would soon no longer be racism but poverty. “At issue, after all, is not *civil rights*, strictly speaking,” he wrote, “but social and economic conditions” that transcended race. The problems facing Black America, therefore, needed to be seen as the “result of the total society’s failure to meet not only the Negro’s needs, but human needs generally.” A stalwart social democrat, Mr. Rustin argued that meeting these needs required a coalition of “Negroes, trade unionists, liberals, and religious groups” to push the Democratic Party to the left on economic issues.

Sectarian appeals based solely on race — whether from white segregationists or Black nationalists — threatened this aim. In May 1966 the moderate integrationist John Lewis was ousted from the chairmanship of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee by the Black Power radical Stokely Carmichael. Mr. Rustin responded with another Commentary essay, [“Black](#)

Power' and Coalition Politics.” Black Power, he wrote, was “simultaneously utopian and reactionary,” as it “would give priority to the issue of race precisely at a time when the fundamental questions facing the Negro and American society alike are economic and social.” At a time when the Democratic Party is losing the support of working-class Americans of all races, this component of Mr. Rustin’s legacy is as important as ever.

Committed to a political program that would improve the lives of the poor and working class regardless of their skin color, Mr. Rustin opposed racial preferences . In 1969, he called a proposal for slavery reparations “preposterous,” elaborating that “if my great-grandfather picked cotton for 50 years, then he may deserve some money, but he’s dead and gone and nobody owes me anything.” Worse than a point of personal pride was the way in which the call for reparations divided the multiracial working class. As a “purely racial demand,” Mr. Rustin contended, “its effect must be to isolate blacks from the white poor with whom they have common economic interests.”

Testifying before Congress in 1974 against affirmative action, Mr. Rustin said: “Everyone knows racial discrimination still exists. But the high rate of black unemployment and the reversal of hard-won economic gains is not the result of discrimination,” but of the same, general economic conditions that affected the white unemployed. Contrary to contemporary “antiracism” advocates who claim that the existence of racial disparities necessarily constitutes evidence of racism, Mr. Rustin asserted, “That blacks are underrepresented in a particular profession does not by itself constitute racial discrimination.”

Another major source of tension between Mr. Rustin and the progressive left concerned American foreign policy. Briefly a member of the Young Communist League in the 1930s, Mr. Rustin followed the path of many a disillusioned ex-Communist by becoming a staunch anti-Communist. Although an early opponent of American military involvement in Vietnam, Mr. Rustin could not, as he wrote in 1967, “go along with those who favor immediate U.S. withdrawal, or who absolve Hanoi and the Vietcong from all guilt. A military takeover by those forces would impose a totalitarian regime on South Vietnam and there is no doubt in my mind that the regime would wipe out independent democratic elements in the country.”

In his role as chairman of Social Democrats, USA, the more hawkish faction to emerge from a split within the Socialist Party of America over the Vietnam War, Mr. Rustin was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union and international Communism. He declined to endorse Democratic Senator George McGovern’s antiwar presidential candidacy in 1972 and joined other hawks in forming the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, an initiative to oppose the Democratic Party’s leftward lurch, becoming its vice chair. In the 1976 Democratic presidential primary, Mr. Rustin supported Senator Scoop Jackson of

Washington, whose decades-long career combined strong support for civil rights and social welfarism at home with robust anti-Communism abroad.

Mr. Rustin's evolution from absolute pacifist (epitomized by the two years he spent in a federal penitentiary during World War II as a conscientious objector) to Cold War liberal dismayed many of his allies on the left, who accused him of betraying the principles of Gandhian nonviolence he had brought to the civil rights movement. But Mr. Rustin's transformation was born of long deliberation and genuine conviction; according to one biographer, Mr. Rustin repeatedly said that if he had been aware of the Holocaust during World War II, he most likely would not have become a conscientious objector.

If Mr. Rustin's erstwhile comrades considered him a sellout, so too was he disillusioned with a political camp that posited a moral equivalence between the United States and its Soviet adversary. "Whereas I used to believe that pacifism had a political value, I no longer believe that," Mr. Rustin stated flatly in 1983. "It is ridiculous, in my view, to talk only about peace. There is something which is more valuable to people than peace. And that is freedom."

Yet another source of antagonism between Mr. Rustin and the left was his outspoken opposition to antisemitism within the Black community and fervent support for the state of Israel. "So far as Negroes are concerned," he wrote in 1967, responding to an eruption of antisemitic statements by radical Black activists, "one of the more unprofitable strategies we could ever adopt is now to join in history's oldest and most shameful witch hunt, antisemitism." The following year, in an address to the Anti-Defamation League, Mr. Rustin condemned "young Negroes spouting material directly from 'Mein Kampf.'" In 1975, as the United Nations General Assembly was preparing its infamous resolution condemning Zionism as a "form of racism," Mr. Rustin [assembled a group](#) of African American luminaries including A. Philip Randolph, Arthur Ashe and Ralph Ellison into the Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC). "Since Israel is a democratic state surrounded by essentially undemocratic states which have sworn her destruction, those interested in democracy everywhere must support Israel's existence," [he declared](#).

A descendant of slaves who was himself a victim of brutally violent racism, Mr. Rustin never let his country's many sins overshadow his belief in its capacity for positive change. His patriotism was unfashionable among progressives while he was alive and is even more exceptional today. "I have seen much suffering in this country," he said. "Yet despite all this, I can confidently assert that I would prefer to be a black in America than a Jew in Moscow, a Chinese in Peking, or a black in Uganda, yesterday or today."

For his heresies against progressive dogma, Mr. Rustin was derided as a "neoconservative." (Indeed, he was one of the first political figures to be branded with this epithet, coined as a term of abuse for members of the Social

Democrats, USA by their more left-wing rivals.) But while Mr. Rustin may have taken part in various neoconservative initiatives and counted individual neoconservatives as friends and allies, he was not himself an adherent of this ideological persuasion. Unlike most of the thinkers and activists associated with neoconservatism, Mr. Rustin never abandoned his social democratic convictions, nor did he endorse Ronald Reagan. On the contrary, [he wrote](#) that “insensitivity and lack of compassion increasingly are becoming the hallmarks of the Reagan administration’s domestic program” and [stated](#) that the Black poor “have been victimized by years of Reaganism.”

Mr. Rustin’s life offers a sterling example of moral courage and personal integrity. Resisting the temptations of tribalism, standing up for one’s beliefs even when it angers one’s “side,” advocating on behalf of the least among us — Mr. Rustin embodied these virtues to an uncommon degree. And undergirding it all was a bedrock belief in our common humanity. Asked to contribute to an anthology of Black gay men the year before his death, Mr. Rustin [respectfully declined](#). “My activism did not spring from my being gay, or for that matter, from my being black,” he wrote.

Rather it is rooted, fundamentally, in my Quaker upbringing and the values that were instilled in me by my grandparents who reared me. Those values are based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal. Adhering to those values has meant making a stand against injustice, to the best of my ability, whenever and wherever it occurs.

I am heartened to see a new generation of Americans belatedly acquaint themselves with Bayard Rustin’s life and work. If we truly wish to honor his remarkable legacy, we should begin by recognizing him as he would have wanted: for his ideas, not his identity.