

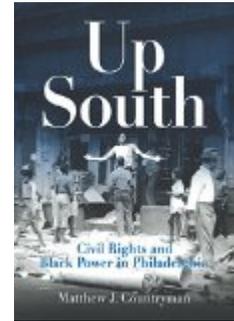
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Matthew Countryman. *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 432 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3894-5.

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From Interracial Liberalism to Black Power

In the last twenty years historians have examined race relations and the African American experience in Detroit, Chicago, New York City, and other American cities.[1] These studies have helped revolutionize our understanding of the black experience in the urban North in the post-World War II period. Despite this flourishing body of academic work, Philadelphia has remained a largely neglected site. Matthew Countryman's new book, *Up South*, helps fill this historiographical gap, but does much more. In his study of black politics in the city of brotherly love, Countryman demonstrates how African Americans moved from liberal politics in the late 1940s and '50s to black power in the late 1960s. In so doing, Countryman challenges scholars to rethink the roots and development of black power and to move Philadelphia and similar northern cities closer to the center of postwar African American history.

While Countryman primarily focuses on the 1950s and '60s, he begins *Up South* by covering the Depression and World War II eras to set the context for the development of the civil rights and black power movements in the decades to come. In the 1930s, Countryman demonstrates, black Philadelphians, mirroring the behavior of hundreds of thousands of African Americans across the country, shifted to the Democratic Party. Franklin Roosevelt and most of the New Dealers were often ambivalent allies to black Americans, but the New Deal state offered at least some access to jobs and housing. To many African Americans, liberal Democrats were the best allies they could find and they became loyal party

supporters. As such, many African Americans accepted the liberal view of the nation (best expressed in Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, 1944): that the United States had fundamentally fair and enlightened rules and the exclusion of blacks was a moral blind spot, an often personal failing as opposed to an indictment of the overarching system. Black Philadelphians who accepted this view worked with white liberal allies to fight for their rights. They campaigned for Democrats, worked to establish a local Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and participated in interracial organizations such as the Fellowship Commission that worked with so-called people of good faith to try to break down Jim Crow barriers in Philadelphia.

To an extent, this liberal politics worked into the 1950s. Countryman shows how activists secured passage of fair employment and fair housing laws, and used the city FEPC to break through the color barrier at Bell Telephone and Center City department stores (pp. 58-59). But despite modest gains, the limits of liberalism quickly emerged. The FEPC had little legal power, could only act on behalf of individual complainants rather than pursuing group claims, and ultimately had to rely on education and moral suasion to secure a handful of jobs for black complainants. At the same time, thousands of jobs were leaving the city as employers moved their factories to northeast Philadelphia, surrounding suburban counties, or the South. Hardening residential segregation further limited black employment prospects and cemented the

boundaries of the city's largest ghetto in North Philadelphia. The weakness of liberal tools such as the FEPC and the larger systemic problems of industrial decline and residential segregation exposed liberalism, Countryman argues, as an empty vessel for securing black rights.

Increasingly disenchanted with liberal strategies, many African Americans turned to community-based activism that sought to use mass mobilization to obtain racial equality (p. 83). These new leaders had not abandoned the liberal belief in interracial activism, but by the late 1950s they turned from pursuing abstract legal rights through administrative means to using the power of organized ordinary black Philadelphians to obtain equal rights. It was a matter, Countryman argues, of shifting from "questions of equal opportunity to ones of socioeconomic equality" (p. 112). Leon Sullivan and other church leaders formed an organization called the 400 Ministers that led "selective patronage" campaigns (essentially boycotts) against discriminatory employers such as Tastykake, Gulf Oil, and others. Sullivan also formed the Opportunities Industrialization Center to give African Americans the training they needed for skilled work in the city's industries. This approach secured at least a handful of jobs, but much like the interracial liberal organizations before them, Sullivan and the 400 Ministers learned their strategies could not overcome the obstacles before black Philadelphia.

Cecil Moore, the flamboyant leader of the NAACP in the 1960s, extended the mass-mobilization approach, particularly by leading demonstrations against discriminatory building trades unions. In protests at school construction sites and elsewhere, Moore put together protests that stopped traffic, prevented the delivery of materials, and generally halted work until city authorities and union leaders agreed to hear his complaints and act on them. Moore represented a shift, Countryman argues, from "passive" selective patronage campaigns to active picket lines and confrontations (pp. 122-123). In Moore's view, discrimination was not an act against individuals but a systemic pattern of behavior deployed against African Americans as a group. Proving a company discriminated did not require individual charges; the absence of black workers on a job site was proof enough that the company engaged in unfair labor practices (p. 137). Black politics had moved to a point where activists expected equal outcomes, not just equal opportunity. Such thinking set the stage for the well-known Philadelphia Plan, a set of federal regulations implemented and revised by Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon that required Philadelphia-area contractors

and building trades unions seeking federal contracts to submit plans demonstrating how they would take affirmative action to make the percentage of their black workforce match the surrounding community. This plan became the national model for government efforts to get the construction industry to increase its minority workforce (p. 123).

In Countryman's analysis, Moore represented a transitional stage between the interracial liberals of the 1950s and the more radical black power advocates of the late-1960s. Moore assailed liberals at every turn, charging that his leadership would end whites' treatment of the NAACP as a "plantation system" and demanding that an African American head the Philadelphia Council for Community Advancement, an organization that sought solutions for black poverty (p. 126). Moore saved his sharpest criticism for black liberals who he labeled "part-time Negroes and Uncle Toms." To Moore, Countryman argues, black liberals had sold out the interests of the larger black community in an effort to win concessions for the small black middle class (p. 150).

Although Moore's rhetoric and tactics separated him from postwar liberals, black power advocates represented the most radical stage of black protest in Philadelphia. In the final chapters of the book, Countryman demonstrates how, by the late-1960s, a radical critique emerged that viewed racism not as an anomaly in American society but as "constitutive of the American social structure" (p. 7). These activists, coming from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panthers, and elsewhere, were not simply the gun-toting nihilists of conservatives' nightmares, but instead ran free breakfast programs and medical clinics, and eventually put forward candidates for elective office. To be sure, they relied too heavily on the image of "the gun," in Countryman's terms, which helped legitimize white backlash and police repression that ultimately destroyed the Panthers and the black power movement. But, overall, black power advocates developed a coherent politics that united the black community around calls for a greater voice in the local government, school system, and job market. This strain of black power politics, Countryman convincingly demonstrates, was a logical response to decades of failed liberal policies. In the end though, black power, like previous liberal and mass-mobilization approaches, could not surmount the great systemic problems facing black Philadelphia.

While *Up South* has many strengths, especially in helping push the urban North to the fore of black rights

historiography and rethinking the roots of black power, it is not without flaws. In particular, Countryman at times overestimates liberal strength in the city which leads him to criticize liberals, black and white, too strongly. Countryman credits interracial liberal campaigns in the 1940s and '50s with securing a few legislative victories and a handful of jobs. But overall these politicians and activists come across as a myopic group, unable to recognize that their piecemeal efforts were miserably ineffective. But Richardson Dilworth, Joseph Clark, and other Philadelphia liberals never had consistent, strong backing from the city's white ethnic voters. These leaders knew that whatever New Deal coalition existed, and there was not much of one, was a fragile, contingent alliance that often and easily fractured along racial lines. Even more, the Republican Party exacerbated those fractures as it developed racialized arguments against government intervention in this era. Greater attention to liberals' constraints might have led Countryman to offer a more sympathetic treatment of liberal politics that would not excuse liberal failures but would show that in some ways they did the best they could given their limited power.

Up South could also help the reader with a greater discussion of national events that shaped Philadelphia's history. Countryman is clearly familiar with the pertinent literature, citing Thomas Sugrue, Charles Payne, Aldon Morris, and others, but as with many dissertations that become books, his analysis of his location is so fine-grained that readers may need more national context at times.[2] His discussion of the internal politics of the NAACP, for example, will engage scholars of the Philadelphia experience, but those readers interested in what this Philadelphia history says about the broader course of American history may want to see more on the

Cold War, Great Society, Vietnam, and right-wing "law and order" politics that all gave shape to the era.

In the end, these criticisms are minor compared to the contribution Countryman makes to our understanding of African-American history. *Up South*, part of the University of Pennsylvania Press's "Politics and Culture in Modern America" series, pushes historians to shift their geographical and chronological conception of the black rights movement. By analyzing the failures of liberal politics, it helps explain when and why black power arose in the urban North. Scholars of the postwar black experience, particularly those focusing on black power, will do well to pay careful attention to the arguments Countryman has advanced.

Notes

[1]. For examples of this literature, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[2]. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

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