

Bayard Rustin

The making of
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jochem Mud

Master Thesis History

Under guidance of prof. dr. A. Fairclough

By Jochem Mud s0362034

2017

CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| ❖ PREFACE | 2 |
| ❖ HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY | 5 |
| ❖ INTRODUCTION | |
| ○ I | 13 |
| ○ II | 18 |
| ○ III | 21 |
| ○ IV | 26 |
| ❖ RUSTIN'S IMPRINT | |
| ○ I | 32 |
| ○ II | 36 |
| ❖ RALLYING THE TROOPS | |
| ○ I | 55 |
| ○ II | 57 |
| ❖ CONCLUSION | 61 |
| ❖ SOURCES | 63 |

PREFACE

People sometimes say that behind every great man there stands a great woman, or in some cases another man. In the most platonic sense this was true for Martin Luther King Jr., at least during King's rise to power as the leader of the civil rights movement. The man behind the man in this case was an unlikely hero by the name of Bayard Rustin.

When researching the Civil Rights Movement as it emerged during the 1950's one's focus is easily directed towards Martin Luther King Jr. However, at the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott King was only 26 years old and fresh out of university. He had started working as a pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, while at the same time working on his doctoral studies, for which he received his Ph. D. in June 1955. The bus boycott started only a few months after that. Even though King's influence on the fledgling movement is undeniable, he did not work alone and he did not invent the method of nonviolent resistance practiced by the movement. When it comes to organization of the movement as well as creating a substantial philosophy to base the movement on, King had much help. Several different pacifist groups and organizations attempted to aid and influence the Montgomery movement through King by sending people down to Montgomery. Some were more influential than others. One of the most influential was Bayard Rustin. He met with King for the first time in late February 1956 and they stayed in contact over the following years.

Rustin was a pacifist and a proponent of Gandhian nonviolent protest. He was also an agitator, a Northerner and a socialist. Furthermore, he had already been actively protesting social and racial injustice for over a decade at the time of his first meeting with King. However, Rustin had also already fallen from grace more than once during his career.

In order to put the research of this thesis in a historiographical context, a historiographical essay precedes the main historical content of this thesis, in which I will discuss the most important sources that I have used for this thesis. The introduction is more or less a short bio of Bayard Rustin, which will focus on Rustin's background, education and other influential forces in his life in order to understand what kind of person travelled all the way south from New York to Montgomery to meet King in early 1956. In the following two chapters of this thesis, Rustin's influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. will be examined, using the following method:

(1) Each chapter examines an aspect of Rustin's influence on King: the first chapter examines Rustin's influence on the development of nonviolence as an ideology or way of life for King, the second chapter examines Rustin's influence on the practical, organizational aspect of the emerging movement; (2) each chapter consists of two parts, in the first part Rustin will be examined: who/what influenced him, and in the second part Rustin's influence on King will be examined.

Following these two chapters I will try to draw (a) conclusion(s) about the main research question of this thesis:

To what extent did Bayard Rustin specifically influence Martin Luther King, Jr. during his first years as leader of the Civil Rights Movement?

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Many different historians have written extensively about King as well as Rustin. Writing this thesis I have read and researched several biographies of both men as well as other source material: primary and secondary. In order to put this thesis in a historiographical context, I will introduce and discuss the most important of these sources here in chronological order.

In his book *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1971) Walton Hanes, Jr. describes meticulously how, he believes, King's ideas, strategies and nonviolent dogma's are formed. The writer is obviously a big fan of King's and although Walton mentions King's predecessors in the field of nonviolent resistance in the United States, these are to be seen as mere preludes to the man himself. Clearly disregarding the real world, the writer finds King's intellectual roots in great philosophers and gurus, completely disregarding the reality of the Montgomery situation, and the situation among Southern black leaders which, at least, contributed to King's rise to power within the movement. The lack of credit given to other black leaders as well as taking into account that King was guided not only from above, but also from much closer sources on which he relied and who sometimes (regularly) did the thinking and planning for him. However this book can be useful to paint a picture of how King was and is seen by most of the public and media.

The next book to be discussed in this bibliographical essay is *Down the Line* (1971) by Bayard Rustin. This book contains a collection of writings selected by Rustin and ordered chronologically. Overall these writings present a nice view of the history of

the Civil Rights Movement from Rustin's perspective. In the part about the fifties there is an article from *Liberator* magazine concerning the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which Rustin wrote in diary-style. Rustin reports on the spirit of the African American citizens of Montgomery and shortly mentions his presence become unwelcome towards the end of the journal, however he does not exactly connect the dots between this development and his departure soon thereafter.

Another collection of primary sources can be found in *My Soul is Rested, The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (1977) by Howell Raines. This is a unique collection of interviews carried out by Raines. In his book he has tried to establish a balanced record of all participants in the struggle for civil rights in the South from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. By presenting history solely through interviews, Raines forces the reader to be content with limited information, while at the same time providing an interesting opportunity to find out what these participants of these very well-known events were feeling and thinking.

An in-depth study of the formation of the SCLC can be found in Adam Fairclough's *To Redeem the Soul of America* (1987). The first chapter describes the origins of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, thereby giving an account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the rise of King to power as the leader of the civil rights movement and thus the ideal man to lead the SCLC. On page 23 Rustin is introduced and a short biography follows. On page 29 Fairclough shortly describes Rustin's influence on King and the founding of SCLC. Although he recognizes the influence of proponents of nonviolence, such as Rustin, Smiley and

Levison on King's development and coming to terms with the idea of adopting nonviolence as the main strategy of the movement, he also notes that it took King months to gradually accept the idea of nonviolence, and that the concept at first confused blacks in Montgomery, making it difficult for them to accept this new strategy. However, they had put faith in their new leader and supported him almost blindly, which made it a lot easier for King to implement the ideas provided by the pacifists.

In order to gain some perspective on the extent of Rustin's influence on King, I have also studied and made use of two biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Parting the Waters* (1988) by Taylor Branch and *Bearing the Cross* (1986) by David J. Garrow. Both works are very complete and thoroughly researched. However, they differ in approach. For example, in their treatment of the development of King's ideology of nonviolent resistance. Branch discusses the history of the church that King grew up in, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and in which his maternal grandfather had been the preacher, succeeded by his father. He then continues with King's formal education, putting an emphasis on the duality between the passionate, soulful Baptist upbringing King had enjoyed and the theoretical, scientific and intellectual approach of religion that King encountered at Crozer Theological Seminary. This duality would remain visible in King's speeches and writings throughout his life. When discussing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Branch mentions Rustin and Smiley and their attempts to instill the need for a strategy of nonviolence to King and the other leaders of the boycott. Branch, however, remains rather skeptical about the extent of King's belief in a nonviolent strategy. He argues that it would take years before King actually formulates his nonviolent strategy. Garrow, on the other hand,

uses a different approach. He limits his description of King's life to his active years as leader of the Civil Rights Movement. This automatically means that he treats the matter of King's intellectual development differently. Garrow seems to be more focused on events and facts, than on theoretical explanations of the ideas behind the events. In his treatment of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Garrow does discuss how Rustin, Smiley and later Levison try to get King to adopt an all-out nonviolent strategy, with matching tactics supported by theory or experience. However, Garrow is successfully trying to remain as objective as possible, and provides no opinion or statement about King's belief in nonviolence. He sticks to reporting what King and those trying to influence him have said or written about this, leaving it up to the reader to draw his own conclusions. When it comes to Rustin's influence on the organization of the new movement, Garrow and Branch agree that Rustin was of vital importance to the success of the movement.

Stewart Burns' *Daybreak of Freedom* (1997) contains collected primary sources concerning the Montgomery bus boycott. Rustin features in several of these. First of all Rustin is introduced in the overview on pages 20 – 23. On pages 26 and 27 Rustin's influence on the forming of King's ideas is shortly pointed out. On pages 28 – 30 is described how Rustin, even though now no longer physically at King's side is still able to help construct the ideas of complete social and racial reform instead of just attaining the right to sit in front of the bus. On page 37 no. 61 Burns shows Rustin's plans weren't always followed to the letter by King. On page 159 is described how Rustin got involved in Montgomery, supported by a letter on sending him there. On

pages 164 – 171 a copy of Rustin’s diary whilst in Montgomery is printed describing his thoughts and impressions. On pages 171 and 172 letters are printed which indicate the reasons for Rustin’s departure. On page 195 King’s transition from biblical non-violence, which did allow violence as a last resort in self-defense, to the more Gandhi-like complete rejection of all forms of violence. On pages 199 – 201 a report by Rustin is printed, which describes a meeting between him and King in Birmingham on March 7 1956. This report contains three basic uses of non-violence followed by a list of practical suggestions how to achieve these goals. On pages 204 and 205 two letters are printed showing leaders expressing doubts about the use of Rustin’s expertise publicly. Pages 207 – 211 show a report by Rustin on the Montgomery situation written for the War Resisters League. Pages 236 – 249 contain a letter from Rustin to King after his sudden departure from Montgomery, an article in Rustin’s magazine *Liberation* outlining the ideas of the American radical pacifist movement, and an article written by Rustin for King, which was printed after slight revision by King in *Liberation*. On page 255 A.J. Muste writes about the ways in which an “outsider”, like Rustin, might be able to assist the Montgomery movement. Pages 329 – 331 show a memo written by Rustin to King offering his views on the Montgomery situation and the formation of the movement. On pages 330 and 331 another meeting between Rustin and King at a banquet in Baltimore is described. On pages 335 – 341 several “working papers”, written by Rustin, were sent to King in order for him to catch up on the current status of organization of the movement outside of Montgomery.

The first biography of Bayard Rustin that I will discuss is *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (2000) by Daniel Levine. This

book differs in many aspects from the second biography of Rustin that I used and which will be discussed next, *Lost Prophet* by John D’Emilio (2003). First of all, it is a lot more concise, its pages numbering about half compared to D’Emilio’s tour de force. Therefore it feels as though Levine is sometimes rushing through events. In his treatment of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Levine seems to have mixed up dates and events, as he places Rustin in Montgomery twice. According to Levine, Rustin’s well recorded trip to Montgomery from 21 to 29 February 1956 was actually his second trip there. The first trip was supposed to have taken place in the days before Christmas in 1955. The events that Levine describes during this trip actually match the events of the second trip, and the timeline matches as well. According to D’Emilio, Rustin’s recollection of the events leading up to him going to Montgomery “was strikingly inaccurate.”¹ However, Levine adheres to Rustin’s account, which explains the inconsistencies. On the whole, Levine’s book might be considered a good place to start researching, keeping in mind that it is not always as accurate as one might expect. It provides a quick overview of the events of 1956 and 1957 and is useful as such.

In his biography of Bayard Rustin, *Lost Prophet* (2003), John D’Emilio extensively discusses the relationship between Rustin and King in the early years of the movement, 1956-’57. D’Emilio is strongly convinced that Rustin’s influence on King was of great importance and that it played a decisive role in the development of King’s style of nonviolent resistance. In chapter eleven of his book, D’Emilio states that “Rustin left a profound mark –on the unfolding of the Montgomery boycott as a national story, on the

¹ John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet* (New York, 2003), 213

evolution of King's role as a national leader, on the particular association of nonviolence with Montgomery and King."² However, this statement is rather difficult to prove, because "finding Rustin's imprint is not easy"³. D'Emilio points out that Rustin's role has often been overlooked, neglected or ignored by others describing this period, contemporaries and historians alike. According to D'Emilio this is caused mainly by Rustin's sexual orientation and the 1953 conviction after the Pasadena incident, which involved Rustin's homosexuality. He argues that "Rustin affected a pose, his own version of the mask that gay men of this era wore"⁴ and that "his skill at concealment was a concession to the dangers to which his sexuality exposed both him and the movements he cared about."⁵ D'Emilio seems to attribute Rustin's behind the scenes role at the start of the Movement in 1956 solely to anti-gay prejudices and the fear among fellow activists that Rustin's activity in support of the Montgomery Bus Boycott might be counterproductive or even damaging if information about him and his background would become public knowledge. D'Emilio also argues that Rustin's acceptance of this role was not by choice, but "in these post-Pasadena years, working in the shadows was forced on him."⁶ This focus on Rustin's homosexuality is typical for *Lost Prophet*. Throughout the book D'Emilio is making the point that Rustin was a victim of homophobia. By looking at Rustin from this particular perspective, D'Emilio sometimes overlooks, neglects or ignores other factors at play. In

² Ibid, 212

³ Ibid, 213

⁴ Ibid, 213

⁵ Ibid, 213

⁶ Ibid, 213

the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, by putting the emphasis on homophobia as the main reason for Rustin to leave Montgomery, D'Emilio leaves little room for other factors that might have contributed to Rustin leaving, for example Rustin's association with the communists and other radical socialists, or the simple fact that Rustin was a Northerner, which in itself was suspicious in the eyes of many Southerners, black and white alike. However, D'Emilio does provide a detailed and in-depth look into the relationship between Rustin and King as it developed over 1956-'57.

The third and last Rustin biography to be discussed is *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer* (2009) by Jerald Podair. This book is even more concise than Levine's, but it has a completely different approach. Little more than halfway through the book Podair is done with his biography and fills the remainder of the book with documents written by Rustin, which are meant to support the conclusions at the end of the biography. This is an interesting approach, which provides a new way of looking at Bayard Rustin and a different way of writing history. In his treatment of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Podair remains factual and distant.

I Must Resist (2012) collected and edited by Michael G. Long is another collection of primary sources. Its subtitle is *Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* and it contains an interesting collection of primary sources. The letters are mainly written by Rustin, but there are also ones he received, or ones that concern him. I was able to use this collection to find many useful primary sources.

INTRODUCTION

*...Bayard was like a brick wall. He was tough, but he was the greatest person to recite classical poetry I've ever heard!*⁸

I.

Bayard Rustin was born in West Chester Pennsylvania in 1912 to the sixteen year old Florence Rustin, who was often called Cissy⁹. Because of Rustin's mother's young age and his father abandoning her when she was still pregnant, his grandparents adopted him as if he were their son, albeit reluctantly at first. One of Bayard sisters recalled:

At first my mother [Julia "Ma" Rustin, Bayard's natural grandmother] said, 'Oh, I'm just going to let Florence raise that baby by herself.' But one day when she looked down at him in his crib, he smiled up sweetly at her. She decided then and there that Florence could not be a suitable parent, that she would take the baby and raise him properly.¹⁰

"Ma" Rustin's ideas and the way that she acted on these ideas were of great influence on the development of her son's activism. She believed that through protest she could achieve change. She

⁸ Video footage of an interview with John Rodgers, one of Rustin's teammates from his high school football team, in the documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (2001), Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer [13:09-13:18]

⁹ Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, 2000), 7

¹⁰ Devon W. Carbado, ed. and Donald Weise, ed., *Time on Two Crosses* (New York, 2015), 11

joined the fledgling NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1910 and during Bayard's childhood the Rustin home was visited by many prominent figures of the African American community, who were also frontrunners in the struggle for racial equality, like W. E. B. Du Bois¹¹.

The other element of "Ma" Rustin's upbringing that was of great influence is the Quakers, also called the Society of Friends, is a form of Protestantism that is based on the idea that all people are equal and related in one "human" family. Quakers are therefore mostly pacifist, because they believe that humans should not attack or kill each other. This idea forms the basis for Rustin's pacifism and ideas of nonviolent protest. In a speech at a protest rally later in his life Rustin proclaims:

I am not ready to die. I want no Negro to die. I want no human being to die or to be brutalized, because I thoroughly believe that this struggle can be won without brutalization.¹²

Rustin went to an integrated high school in West Chester. However, being integrated at school did not mean West Chester was not segregated. Outside the school grounds the children were forbidden to mix with children of the other race. All public places were segregated and according to Rustin in a speech he held at his hometown later in life, he was not allowed to enter and eat at even one of West Chester's restaurants. Rustin recalls:

I once went into the little restaurant next to the Warner Theater and can you believe it? There

¹¹ Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 11

¹² Video footage of a speech by Rustin in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [00:30-01:00]

was absolute consternation. That was the first occasion on which I knew West Chester had three police cars. They surrounded the place as if we were going to destroy motherhood!¹³

In the early twentieth century racism was institutionalized in the North as much as in the South, even though the South was still home to the largest concentrations of black population.¹⁴ Perhaps the absence of African Americans in the North even fueled the racist ideas of the white population, simply because they were not used to having African Americans around. While in high school Rustin excelled in academics as well as sports and music. He ran for the track team, which competed all over the region. Sometimes it was necessary to stay overnight in order to compete in a certain event, but this was problematic for Rustin and another black teammate because most accommodations did not accept black clientele.

One example of Rustin's early willingness to protest against racial discrimination is his refusal to run at a state track contest in Altoona, unless he and the other black teammate were housed in the same hotel as their teammates. Eventually they got their way and both won first prizes.¹⁵

The other sport Rustin excelled at was American football. One of his former teammates refers to the duality in Rustin's character, being both a scholar and a jock:

¹³ Video footage of a lecture or speech given by Rustin in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [06:23-06:50]

¹⁴ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 18

¹⁵ Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 12

I first met Bayard on this field. He played left tackle and I played right guard and in the practice games it was my job to take Bayard out. We never made any yardage on my account, because Bayard was like a brick wall. He was tough, but he was the greatest person to recite classical poetry I've ever heard. And on the field he'd knock somebody, he'd knock them half-dead – he'd get up and say a little poem for them, while they were coming to.¹⁶

This comment can also be seen as an early manifestation of the idea of using physical presence and strength as a powerful weapon in the struggle for civil rights. In a lecture later in his life Rustin says:

Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable. The only weapon we have is our bodies and we need to tuck them in places, so wheels don't turn.¹⁷

However, it should be noted that even though in some cases in those early years Rustin evidently protested the racial segregation and second-class treatment of African Americans, in general he did not seem to suffer too much oppression in high school. Even so, some of his former classmates described the situation in and especially around the school as hostile. One of Rustin's former classmates, Mary Thomas, recalls: "We were just a clan, holding on to each other, and surviving this racist atmosphere."¹⁸ In spite

¹⁶ Video footage of an interview with John Rodgers, one of Rustin's teammates from his high school football team, in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [13:09-13:18]

¹⁷ Video footage of a lecture given by Rustin in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [03:19-03:48]

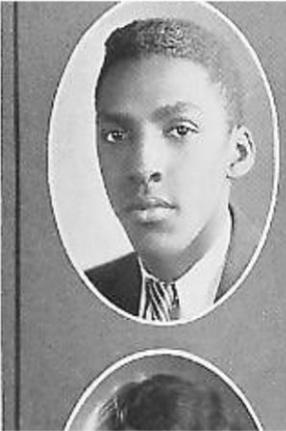
¹⁸ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 15

of this seemingly constricting environment Rustin was able to fully spread his wings and participate unhindered in every aspect of school life, including sports, drama, speaking and writing contests, and music. The fact that Rustin's high school experience differed from those of his fellow African American students, can perhaps be attributed to him being placed in a special class for gifted children, having shown great intellectual and academic promise. This class followed the traditional classical curriculum including Greek, Latin and (Classical) literature, but at the same time focusing on science and mathematics.¹⁹ Astonishingly Rustin excelled in every curricular and extra-curricular activity he undertook. It is therefore more fact than opinion to conclude that Rustin's school career was an overall success. Rustin apparently excelled in all topics; he was a valedictorian of his graduating class in 1932 and many of his peers expected nothing but greatness from him. Contributing to this idea of great expectations, the editors of Rustin's high school yearbook wrote in 1932, the year that Rustin graduated:

Yes, Bayard, "*thou art a hero on many a field*", rising to the sublime in all because of determination to be the best and to give the best. Here's to your success in college and in later life.²⁰

¹⁹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 15; Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 12

²⁰ Quoted from photocopy of Rustin's high school yearbook, <http://wcborodems.org/2012/02/18/historys-people-remembering-bayard-rustin>

| | | |
|--|----------------------|--|
| GENERAL | BAYARD TAYLOR RUSTIN | INDIAN |
| <i>"Veni; vidi; vici."</i> | | |
| <p>Football, X, Varsity, XI, XII; Track Varsity, X, XI, XII; Asst. Mgr., Basketball, XI; Sec. Boys' A. A., XII; Capt. Indian Division, XII; Coop. Council, XII; Class Lieut., X, XI, XII; Monitor, XI, XII; Perf. Attendance, X, XI, XII; French Club, X, XI, XII; Class. Club, X, XI; Hist. Club, X, Vice Pres., XI, XII; Science Club, X, XI; Dram. Club, X, XI, XII; Hi-Y Club Sec., X, Pres., XI, XII; Chorus, X, XI, XII; D. Webster Meredith Speaking Contest, X, First Prize, XI, Second Prize Auto Essay, X; First Prize Essay, XI; Hon. Mention Essay, XII; Medal for Gorgas Essay, XI; Athletic Award, XII; Honor Roll Pin, X; Honor Point Letter, XI; Christmas Entertainment, X, XI, XII; Honor Speaker Commencement Exercises, XII.</p> <p>Yes, Bayard, "thou wert a hero on many a field", rising to the sublime in all because of determination to be the best and to give the best. Here's to your success at college and in later life.</p> | | |
| | |  |

Photocopy of a page from Rustin's high school yearbook, 1932: the year of his graduation. For the source see footnote 20.

II.

Having graduated high school with flying colors, Rustin enrolled in Wilberforce University in 1932. Wilberforce University, being named after 18th century British abolitionist, was one of the country's leading historically black universities. It was founded in 1856 by a collaboration of church leaders of the Cincinnati Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The college provided classical education and teacher training for black youth. It is located in the southwestern part of Ohio. Before the Civil War, this had been a region where freed slaves would settle after having crossed the Ohio River from the South. Wilberforce University used to function as a destination point of the Underground Railroad. After the Civil War Wilberforce University grew to become one of the nation's most

prominent black universities, hosting professors such as W. E. B. Du Bois.

Being a gifted singer, Rustin became a music major specializing in vocals. He sang in the Wilberforce Quartet and for a while he seemed happy. According to Rustin, the only thing that was really bad at Wilberforce was the food.

After two years Rustin was forced to leave Wilberforce under mysterious circumstances. According to Rustin in the PBS documentary *Brother Outsider*, “The food at Wilberforce ... , was very bad and I organized a strike to improve it and as a result of that I was asked to leave.”²¹ In the book *Time on Two Crosses* the authors offer not one but two different explanations.

Rustin left Wilberforce University after only two years - according to him - because he lost his scholarship for refusing to join the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. However, a former classmate offered a very different explanation: that Bayard left Wilberforce because he had fallen in love with the son of the college president.²²

Whichever is true is unclear. If the latter explanation is true, Rustin was lucky to get off with just being expelled from the University as homosexuality was still a serious criminal offense at the time. The bottom line is that Rustin's obstinate behavior - whether it was concerning his sexuality, his pacifism or his love for challenging authority - had gotten him in trouble again.

²¹ Voice over reading a quotation of Rustin in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [08:50-09:05]

²² Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 13

After the Wilberforce debacle Rustin went back home to West Chester feeling down and out. His biographer D’Emilio writes that “the door to the future seemed to close: when he left Wilberforce in the depths of the Depression and returned to West Chester with no prospects before him.”²³

However, as downtrodden as Rustin may have been over his leaving of Wilberforce, he seemed to realize that the only way to get anywhere in life was to move forward: he enrolled in Cheyney State Teachers College in September 1934. Rustin would eventually spend three years at Cheney, and this is where many of his later ideas and beliefs seemed to have taken shape. In contrast to Wilberforce, which was orientated to vocational studies, Cheyney State offered a wider array of studies to choose from. Rustin used this opportunity to study philosophy, besides continuing his musical career singing in the school’s chorus. Cheyney State was run by Dr. Lesley Pinckney Hill, a Harvard graduate and leading intellectual figure in the African American community and beyond. Dr. Hill had studied at Harvard at a time when famous philosophers such as George Santayana and William James were teaching there.²⁴ Hill was able to convey his love of philosophy and critical thinking to his students and especially Rustin, through the works of the masters that had inspired him all those years before. After reading *The Last Puritan*, the only novel Santayana ever wrote, which was his most accessible and most successful work, Rustin wrote to a friend: “I came to respect Santayana not only for his

²³ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 206

²⁴ *Ibid*, 29

prodigious mind and his contributions to thinking but also because he seems to defy being stamped or pigeonholed.”²⁵ This idea seems to have resonated well with Rustin, who later based his philosophy and strategy on nonviolent direct action. He did not believe in looking the other way, or ignoring injustice, wherever, whenever and however he encountered it. This resonates in the words of one of his fellow pacifists: “Our position was that racial injustice is violence and one should attack it wherever it exists.”²⁶

At the same time another major influence in Rustin’s development was rekindled: Quakerism. Cheyney State had been established by Quakers and was still very much influenced by Quaker ideas and ideals. Especially the pacifist aspect of the religion came into play in the second half of the 1930’s as Europe seemed to be heading for war with totalitarian regimes in fascist-Italy, Nazi-Germany and communist-Russia wreaking havoc within and across their borders. US politics had been focused on isolationism and staying clear of involvement in the Old World’s squabbles and intrigues. Many US citizens had not yet forgotten the horrors of the trenches of the First World War. Congress even enacted a number of neutrality acts which were supposed to prevent the US from being dragged into war.²⁷ Whether it was the strong presence of Quakerism on campus, or the influence of his grandmother, Julia Rustin, or the threat of an international violent

²⁵ Ibid, 29

²⁶ Video footage of an interview with Bill Sutherland, a colleague from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, in the documentary *Brother Outsider*, [12:47-12:57]

²⁷ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 30; Jerald Podair, *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer* (Lanham, 2009), 4

conflict which drove him towards religion, is hard to determine. However, the fact that something must have clicked for Rustin at that time and place is clear since he officially joined the Society of Friends in 1936, declaring himself a Quaker and embracing the idea of pacifism. By then pacifism was no longer just a Quaker ideal, but it had grown out into a national movement. Antiwar protests were sweeping across schools and college campuses and mass protests showed the public's antipathy towards militarism and territorial aggression.²⁸

III.

In late 1937 Rustin left Cheyney State to pursue his goals and ideals in New York. By then he had developed into an activist, spokesman and leader of the college antiwar movement. Earlier that year, Rustin participated on behalf of his school in a program called Institute of International Relations, which brought students and professors from all across the nation to Cheyney State to discuss the state of the world and the threat of all-out worldwide war, which seemed, at that time, to be imminent. An important conclusion of the Institute was that class-inequality and unregulated capitalism were, at least in part, to blame for the rise of militarism, nationalism and imperialism leading to the current instability around the world.²⁹ This realization marks the beginning of Rustin's move to the left towards socialism and even communism. During the summer of 1937 Rustin joined the Peace Brigade organized by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The Peace Brigade was an experiment which sent students to teach about peace and pacifism through immersion in

²⁸ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 31

²⁹ Podair, *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer*, 6

the life of a local community. Rustin was sent to Auburn in upstate New York where he spent the summer honing his skills in speaking, writing and teaching.³⁰ After returning from the Peace Brigade Rustin decided to move to New York, even though he only had to follow one year worth of classes to earn his degree from Cheyney State.

The reasons for Rustin to leave Cheyney this close to completion are unclear and different sources, several of them contradictory, only add to the mystery. In *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer*, Podair seems puzzled about Rustin's decision, because his career at Cheyney State had been successful so far and he seemed to be fitting in there. Podair suggests that Rustin's sexual escapades could once again be the source of his departure.³¹ This is supported, in an interview with Davis Platt, Rustin's long-term lover between the early 1940's and 1950's. Platt recalls there being an incident wherein Rustin was caught having sex with a boy from one of the leading, white families in town.

And Bayard and he had sex together in a public park, on the edge of a golf course, I'm not exactly sure. And they go caught. I forget what happened to Bayard, but it was very very unpleasant. Nothing happened to the white guy.³²

However, there is no evidence supporting or refuting these claims.

³⁰ Ibid, 6

³¹ Ibid, 6

³² D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 34

The fact that Rustin chose New York as his next destination is a lot easier to understand. Rustin had stayed there during his years at Wilberforce, living with his sister Bessie, who was actually his aunt. Bessie lived in Harlem, which was home to the largest, most concentrated black population outside of Africa.³³ Rustin later recalled visiting Bessie in Harlem: A totally exciting experience. I'll never forget my first walk on 125th Street.... I had such a feeling of exhilaration.³⁴

During the 1920's Harlem had grown out to be the center of a blossoming of African American culture. This period has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Even in the late 1930's Harlem was still the epicenter of African American culture. This inspiring and exciting environment was a strong pull-factor for Rustin, and the city seems to have retained its attractiveness as Rustin called this city home for the rest of his life.

In New York, Rustin's life continued to be based on the two pillars music and activism. The New York of the 1930's happened to be the national nexus of culture and political activism. During the Great Depression, the poverty stricken population of New York proved to be the ideal breeding ground for left-wing groups and organizations. Among the African American population the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) had the largest following. Their fervent support of civil rights had earned them serious credits among the black population. This was, however, not done out of idealistic support of racial equality, but as part of the larger strategy for North America, which was conceived by the Comintern or Communist International. This

³³ Ibid, 34/35

³⁴ Ibid, 29

political device provided strategic, tactical, military and economic support from the Soviet Union to communists around the world. The CPUSA stood under strict supervision of the Comintern and thus the Soviet Union. Therefore the American Communists always followed the exact party line as issued from Moscow.

The larger strategy for the USA entailed the creation of an alliance between the African Americans and the white working-class. The Communists believed that this alliance would be able to successfully challenge the nation's elite and bring about a Marxist revolution in the United States. To this end the African Americans and their struggle were just a means, but in order to gain their support the Communists were ready to combat racial and social injustice with all they could. And they were very successful in doing so.³⁵ For these reasons the CPUSA also appealed to Rustin, and he joined the Young Communist League (YCL) soon after arriving in New York. Rustin's life-long struggle was not just about racial injustice and inequality, but about injustice and inequality in general. A third factor was the aim to achieve peace, and thus to oppose war, which clearly has its roots in Rustin's Quaker upbringing and education.

For a while the American Communists seemed to offer the total package: they were actively fighting for the civil rights of the poor and oppressed, whether they were black or white; they were trying to combat the class differences within American society and they were opposed to American involvement in the inevitable upcoming conflict in Europe. At the same time the Soviet Union had formed a non-aggression pact with Nazi-Germany, which

³⁵ Podair, *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer*, 8

meant that the official party line dictated that the American Communists were supposed to try and steer the Americans away from involvement in Europe. This was the main reason for the communists to involve themselves in the struggle for civil rights, offering an alternative to American racism. However, as the war in Europe progressed and the Germans launched their attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the Communist leadership ordered the American Communists to change tactics and start supporting American involvement in the war. This meant playing down the cause of racial equality and civil rights. Many African-Americans who had joined or supported the Communists before this change of policy, left feeling abandoned by the Communist leadership. Rustin was among those leaving in 1941. Afterwards Rustin never again associated himself with the Communists, but his short-lived membership would prove to be grounds for mistrust and attack by opponents later on in the struggle for civil rights.

After parting ways with the Communists, Rustin joined forces with A. Philip Randolph, a black socialist and union leader, who approached the struggle for civil rights in a context of class struggle. This meant that he was not afraid to team up with white socialists and unions. Randolph and Rustin were like-minded also when it came to non-violence. These similarities made it easy for Rustin and Randolph to form a successful partnership and they worked together on several projects.³⁶

At the same time Randolph introduced Rustin to A. J. Muste – the pacifist leader who broke with Rustin after the incident in Pasadena in 1953 – who had recently become the leader of the

³⁶ Ibid, 33

Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Muste transformed the FOR based on the idea of nonviolent direct action. He combined the ideas of civil disobedience of Henry David Thoreau, the social responsibility of the Quaker faith, and the mass protest tactics of Gandhi. Nonviolent direct action relies on public protests where protesters deliberately violate laws and practices in order to show their evil effects to the public. The protesters would then undergo the consequences and endure the punishments, thereby showing that they were protesting the rules, not the rule makers.³⁷ Muste's idea of nonviolent direct action spoke to Rustin and he joined FOR, which subsequently sprouted its secular counterpart: the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE) concerned with the civil rights struggle. With the CORE, Rustin's activist's talents really came to fruition until the Second World War brought this to a temporary halt. When Rustin refused to participate in the draft process as a conscientious objector, he was sentenced to three years in prison.³⁸

After prison Rustin resumed his activities in the FOR and CORE. However, these activities would get him in trouble again as he participated in an act of nonviolent direct action, which later became known as the Journey of Reconciliation. Inspired by the Supreme Court of the United States' decision in the case of Irene Morgan versus the Commonwealth of Virginia, which stated that segregation on interstate buses was unconstitutional, Rustin and 15 fellow CORE members journeyed to the Upper South to test whether this decision was being upheld. In his book *Down the Line* Rustin recalls the event.

³⁷ Ibid, 35

³⁸ Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 17

In 1947, after repeated reports that the various states were ignoring the Morgan decision, the Fellowship of Reconciliation set out to discover the degree to which such illegal separation patterns were enforced. In what has since become known as the Journey of Reconciliation, sixteen white and Negro young men, in groups ranging from two to four, traveled through North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee making test cases. It was on one of these cases that I was arrested. Finally, after the North Carolina supreme court upheld me thirty-day sentence, I surrendered and spent twenty-two days at Roxboro.³⁹

As a result of this arrest and the subsequent prosecution, Rustin was sentenced to thirty days on a chain gang. He was released after twenty-two days however on good behavior.

By 1949 he had become such a well-known pacifist and leader, that he was personally invited to attend an international pacifist conference in India led by Gandhi himself. However, Gandhi was assassinated before the meeting could take place. Nevertheless Rustin did travel to India to meet up with other important pacifist leaders. One young Indian intellectual recalls: “The Martin Luther King phenomenon had not yet started, but we got the very profound impression that Bayard was doing Gandhi’s work in North America.”

IV.

After his return from India, Rustin’s career reached new heights as he was now regarded as an international pacifist leader and although he remained based in America, Muste allowed Rustin to

³⁹ Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line* (Chicago, 1971), 26

travel to Africa in the hope of assisting several African leaders to free themselves from British colonial rule through Gandhian tactics. After a tour of West Africa, Rustin wished to return there to continue his work. However, before he would be allowed on a second trip – Rustin requested an assignment of a year in Africa to set up a center devoted to nonviolence and the teaching thereof –he was sent on several tours around the country lecturing and giving workshops for the FOR.⁴⁰ In January 1953 Rustin was sent on a tour of the West Coast which brought him to Pasadena, which brings the story back to its start, since it was after this particular meeting that Rustin decided to wander off into town where he was later arrested for performing sexual acts on two men in a car.

This ultimate low-point in the life of Bayard Rustin, it might have seemed like the end of the world, but it wasn't. Slowly, and with the help of the War Resisters League (WRL) Rustin was able to rise once again to the stature of civil rights leader. Although he would no longer operate on the foreground as much as he had before, which became evidently clear when in 1956 Rustin was sent to investigate a boycott of public busses in Montgomery Alabama, of which the organization was apparently being led by a young and yet completely unknown preacher by the name of Martin Luther King Jr.

In early 1953 Bayard Rustin's career and life as a political activist seemed to have come to an abrupt and bitter end. After having fought strenuously for the civil rights of African Americans for decades the Pasadena incident suddenly jeopardized everything

⁴⁰ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 171

Rustin had worked for. His reputation and career seemed damaged beyond repair.

In January 1953 Rustin, who had been on a lecturing tour of the American West Coast after having spent some time in Africa visiting African leaders fighting for freedom and independence, was the main speaker at an event sponsored by the American Association of University Women in Pasadena, California. Afterwards he spent the evening – well into the night – wandering the streets of Pasadena. In the early morning of the following day Rustin was arrested by county police while performing sexual acts with two local white men in the backseat of their car. This arrest resulted in a swift conviction and Rustin, along with his fellow defendants, was sentenced to sixty days in the Los Angeles County Jail.⁴¹

Another and much more damaging result of the arrest and conviction was the termination of Rustin as a staff member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the organization he had so vigorously been working for the years prior to this incident. According to Glenn Smiley, AJ Muste, Rustin's boss, friend and mentor, felt that Rustin had left the organization no other option saying: We have a real problem here because this has happened so frequently that I have given Bayard an ultimatum that if it happened again he would have to resign.⁴²

In an interview with *Open Hands* magazine in 1987, shortly before his death, Rustin recalls his fall from grace a little differently, saying:

⁴¹ Ibid, 190-191

⁴² Ibid, 192

It was amongst the Fellowship people that there was hypocrisy. [...] It was there that I found some of the worst attitudes to gays. [...] I experienced this personally after I'd been released from working with the Fellowship when I was arrested in California on what they called a "morals charge." Many of the people in the Fellowship of Reconciliation were absolutely intolerant in their attitudes. When I lost my job there, some of these nonviolent Christians despite their love and affection for humanity were not really able to express very much affection to me.⁴³

Having to spend time in prison for something other than his activism was very difficult for Rustin. David McReynolds, a member of the FOR, who went to visit Rustin in jail recalls: It broke him, it just broke him. To be in prison but not for something he believed in, but to be just in prison.⁴⁴

Rustin was clearly critical of himself. In a letter from prison he wrote:

In God's way of turning ugliness and personal defeat into triumph, I have gone deeper in the past six weeks than ever before and feel that I have at last seen my real problem. It has been pride in self. In the big ways I ways, I was prepared to give all ... But in the small and really primary ways I was selfish as a child.⁴⁵

Rustin had been struggling with his sexual orientation for a long time and felt guilty and conflicted about his feelings and actions.

⁴³ Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 326

⁴⁴ Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 70

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 70-71

Homosexuality was not only frowned upon, in the 1950's it was still illegal and described in terms of mental disorder. Certainly Rustin felt as though his behavior was problematic not just for him, but also for the movement and he blamed himself for that. In 1953 Rustin wrote about the incident: I know now, that for me sex must be sublimated if I am to live with myself and this world longer.⁴⁶

Later, in 1987, Rustin explains that he was struggling with the resistance to acceptance of homosexuality in the movement: I found that people in the civil rights movement were perfectly willing to accept me as long as I didn't declare that I was gay.⁴⁷ And in the African American community:

Well, I think the community felt that we have, as blacks, so many problems to put up with, and we have to defend ourselves so vigorously against being labeled as ignorant, irresponsible, shufflers, etc., there's so much prejudice against us, why do we need the gay thing too?⁴⁸

A third result of the incident was negative attention in the media, at least along the West Coast. This further damaged Rustin's prospects of continuing his promising career as his reputation suffered seemingly irreparable damage.⁴⁹

Indeed, for the first couple of months after Rustin had been released from jail it seemed hard to imagine him back on top as the

⁴⁶ Ibid, 71

⁴⁷ Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 325

⁴⁸ Ibid, 325

⁴⁹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 192

civil rights activist and leader had been and wanted to be still. After having worked the odd job in order to sustain himself for several months, Rustin was hired by the War Resistance League (WRL) in the fall of 1953. This group had close ties to the FOR, but saw itself as more of a political group than the religious FOR. However, the WRL's executive committee would not necessarily agree with the proposal to hire Rustin as two of its members were also the ones who dismissed Rustin from the FOR. The main problem was posed by AJ Muste, also the leader of the FOR, who vowed to resign his position if the WRL were to hire Rustin. According to the report on the discussion Muste spoke out vehemently against hiring Rustin. "[Muste] did not have sufficient confidence to feel that Bayard could now handle a WRL job without future embarrassment to the League and himself and possible risk to young people."⁵⁰

This did not put off WRL leader Roy Finch, who sought support from David Dellinger, a well-respected, veteran member of the League, who wrote:

I see no sense in trying to force on Bayard a Puritanical abstinence from the form of sex which apparently is natural to him, however unnatural it may be to some of the others who will be concerned with Bayard's positioning in the League... If a strong stream is flowing through a channel that it has cut out for itself over a number of years, you dam it only at the risk that it will break out, as it did in California, in another harmful more place. I always felt that the FOR insistence on rigid abstinence led to an impossible situation which was

⁵⁰ Ibid, 209

dangerously close to encouraging hypocrisy (on the part of both Bayard and the FOR), guilt feelings, and the explosion. [...]I can't think of anyone else who can approach Bayard. I know of no one who is a more inspirational speaker... Bayard is available for long-term service, with his exceptional talents and dedication. Further, the League has gone further downhill, to the point that unless it steps up its program and has an infusion of new life and imagination (such as I am confident Bayard can bring), it will not be a vital force in the world.⁵¹

This last point was a point well understood by the members of the both WRL advisory council and executive committee. Roy Finch, leader of the WRL, recalls: In a way we had nothing to lose. We didn't have the reputation.⁵²

In a way this provided Rustin with a fresh start and he was back on his way up in the world. Even though things seemed to look up for Rustin he still was a long ways away from being the leader he wanted and hoped to be.

However, in just two years' time Rustin would become instrumental in the rise of the most well-known and well-regarded civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. and instead of serving as civil rights leaders himself, Rustin would grow to be the most important man behind the scenes.

⁵¹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 209

⁵² *Ibid*, 209

RUSTIN'S IMPRINT

I.

*My activism did not spring from being black. Rather, it is rooted fundamentally in my Quaker upbringing and the values instilled in me by [my] grandparents... It is very likely that I would have been involved [in civil rights agitation] had I been a white person.*⁵³

Although Bayard Rustin seems to have been born with an innate capacity for organization, his ideas for bringing about social and racial justice, and his firm belief in nonviolent direct action as the way to achieve reform were not new or original. It is possible to distinguish between several major sources of influence on Rustin's ideological development.

The first and foremost influential figure in Rustin's early development was his adoptive mother, Julia Rustin. Being an activist herself, she instilled into young Bayard the importance of nonviolent social protest. She was an early member of the NAACP, hosted an integrated garden club, founded a community center for blacks and opened her home to prominent African Americans when they stayed in town.⁵⁴

Secondly, the ideology of socialism, personified in A. Philip Randolph, to whom Rustin was introduced during his first years in New York, provided important theoretical support as well as schooling Rustin in the practicalities of organizing protest. The

⁵³ Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 11

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 12

latter will be treated in the next chapter, *Rallying the Troops*. In 1942 Rustin was asked to come and work for Randolph, helping to draft plans, strategies and tactics, which greatly stimulated Rustin. Furthermore Randolph's decision to adopt nonviolent direct action (NVDA) as the main method and strategy for his March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in 1943 propelled the development of Rustin's concept of Gandhian nonviolence into strategy and tactics applying to the specifics of the American struggle against racial injustice.

The third important source of influence were the teachings of the Indian activist and freedom fighter Mohandas Gandhi and his nonviolent struggle for India's independence from Great Britain. Rustin read all he could find written by Gandhi and his followers. Gandhi's ideas, strategy and tactics are at the base of Rustin's ideology. In the October 1942 edition of the pacifist magazine *Fellowship: The Journal of the Fellowship of Reconciliation* Rustin describes the necessity for coming up with a strategy of nonviolent direct action in his article titled "The Negro and Nonviolence". Rustin refers to India and Gandhi's struggle for freedom multiple times using Gandhi's words to persuade the reader, as well as using the comparison between the ongoing struggle in India and the ongoing struggle for racial equality in America to create a sense of urgency by describing two movements gaining momentum.⁵⁵

The fourth influence is the Quaker religion, with its emphasis on trying to achieve equality and world peace through nonviolent

⁵⁵ From: *The Negro and Nonviolence*, an article by Rustin published in 'Fellowship: The Journal of Fellowship and Reconciliation' in October 1942, reprinted in Rustin, *Down the Line*, 10

protest, which was also the basis for Julia Rustin's ideas, and which Rustin rediscovered on his own through religious organizations as the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and later in a more secular form in the War Resisters League (WRL). The leader of the FOR, A.J. Muste was a mentor and father figure to Rustin, until the unfortunate incident in Pasadena in 1953, after which Muste severed all ties to Rustin. As an unintended consequence of this abandonment Rustin seemed to have been moving away from religion from that moment onward. Rustin biographer Daniel Levine notes that:

After 1953, it is very rare to find words like “God” or “Jesus” in Rustin’s speaking or writing” and that “in his hour of need, organized Christianity had failed him. After 1953, he became more and more a secular man.⁵⁶

On the other hand, fellow Rustin biographer John D’Emilio presents the relationship between Rustin and Muste as only temporarily interrupted by the 1953 Pasadena incident. He argues that by 1954 Muste and Rustin were once again working closely together, Muste as a member of the governing body of the WRL and Rustin as its executive secretary.⁵⁷ Apparently the earlier issues causing the rift between mentor and pupil had been resolved. According to D’Emilio, fellow FOR-members have provided different explanations for this peculiar relational recovery. Ralph DiGia recalls knowing that Rustin was hurt by Muste’s stance and therefore reasoned that Muste must have apologized to Rustin shortly after his appointment to the FOR’s governing

⁵⁶ Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, 75

⁵⁷ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 197

body. However, as D’Emilio points out, no evidence suggests an apology or retraction of his position by Muste. Another FOR-member who was present at the time is Dave McReynolds. He worked closely with Muste and Rustin for a decade and offers a more nuanced explanation. His explanation is twofold.

[Firstly,] those two men needed each other very badly. Bayard had a genuine ability to understand tactics that Muste never grasped. AJ had a very profound sense of the moral center of things.⁵⁸

Secondly, DiGia recalls Rustin explaining that Muste and he shared the experience of a life devoted to revolutionary change, which at some point had broken each of them. ”AJ was broken by the Trotskyist movement. He was disillusioned. And I’ve been broken partly by the physical beatings, but just by events.”⁵⁹ Which is Rustin’s way of referring to the issue of his sexuality, according to D’Emilio. All in all, the recovery proved successful and the two men worked together for the remainder of Muste’s life, who died in 1967.

The fifth source of influence is Rustin’s vast network, which provided, but at the same time was the result of the contact and cooperation with fellow activists Rustin engaged in during his long career. All the different parts of this network influenced Rustin to some extent. Because of its size and the number of different participants of Rustin’s network, it is impossible to map it all, let alone assess the amount of influence of individual members of the network on Rustin’s development. One can easily assume,

⁵⁸ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 197

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 197

however, that Rustin must have been influenced by his network – as would any man.

There were undoubtedly many more factors in Rustin’s life, which were of influence on his development as a driving force behind the Civil Rights Movement over the course of the twentieth century. However, a simplification of reality by focusing on these five sources of influence, and branding them the most important, helps to achieve a better understanding of Rustin’s most fundamental ideas and their origins, as many direct links to each of these four factors can be found in Rustin’s words and actions.

II.

*“Thank God I was in that struggle with him,” he said, “for like you, I will now be a footnote to history.”*⁶⁰

In early 1956 Rustin met Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first time. At the young age of 26, King could already look back on an astonishing academic career. He had finished Morehouse College in Atlanta, Crozer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Boston University. This would make him qualified to start teaching at a university or college, but instead King chose to pastor a relatively small Southern church, a choice that resulted in King becoming the national leader of the black Civil Rights Movement. He chose small but ended up larger than life. His education which had been a mixture of his roots in the folk traditions of the African-American Baptist Church and higher education at the seminary and university. This mixture combined with his inherited gift for oratory made him the perfect, well-educated minister with ambition reaching beyond the pulpit. The acceptance of a

⁶⁰ Howell Raines, ed., *My Soul is Rested* (New York, 1977), 53

pastorate in a segregated environment would not seem the most logical choice, but this would be the place where King's talent might be best put to use. In *Stride Toward Freedom* King explains his choice out of a feeling of moral obligation to share his knowledge and experience with the country that had been his home for so long, despite the evident disadvantages of living in the South.⁶¹

The bus company in Montgomery used segregated buses. In addition to this the Montgomery bus drivers had developed some rather nasty methods of harassing and intimidating their African-American clients. The black community leaders had since long been trying to fight these circumstances and a chief fair treatment by the bus company. As Martin Luther King Jr. accepted the pulpit of Dexter Avenue Church, Montgomery ministers such as Ralph Abernathy and lay activist E. D. Nixon had been trying to find the right case in order to start their battle with the city's bus company and government. Nixon was an active union-based protester, with a day job as a porter on the railroad. He had constructed a vast social among the African-American as well as the white community of Montgomery. He used these connections to aid fellow, black townsmen in need.⁶² He was also active in the local NAACP chapter where he had served as a president for five years.⁶³ His network gave him the power to reach certain parts of the Montgomery society that even the powerful black ministers were unable to penetrate and which would prove indispensable during the upcoming boycott. He was the one who set the wheels

⁶¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Towards Freedom* (London 1959), 19-20

⁶² Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters* (New York, 1988), 120-121

⁶³ *Ibid*, 124

in motion of the unstoppable machine the protest movement was going to become by calling the various actors together after the arrest of Rosa Parks. He would play a pivotal role in the selection of King as the leader of the Bus Boycott.

The second important player and influence on the development of King during the bus boycott was Ralph Abernathy. Abernathy was, just as King, a young minister, whose pastorate was the First Baptist Church: in earlier days this church had been the direct competitor of King's Dexter Avenue Church, which was originally established after an argument within First's congregation in 1877.⁶⁴ However in the 1950's the churches were no longer real rivals and in the short time King had lived in Montgomery before the Bus Boycott he and Abernathy had become friends, which they would stay and Abernathy would be one of King's closest advisors.⁶⁵

After the arrest of Rosa Parks the plans for a citywide protest against the Montgomery Bus Company could be set in motion. Parks provided the perfect starting point for a protest action. As Jo Ann Robinson, one of the founders of the idea of a bus boycott, recalls "We had planned the protest long before Mrs. Parks was arrested."⁶⁶ In reaction to hearing of the arrest Miss Robinson and some of her colleagues at Atlanta University assembled at the campus where they wrote a pamphlet announcing a citywide boycott of the buses. Nixon provided the local newspaper with

⁶⁴ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 2

⁶⁵ King, *Stride*, 43

⁶⁶ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, (New York 1986), 16

the story of an upcoming boycott⁶⁷ and all of the ministers agreed to support the protest in their sermons. The leaders of the black community had agreed to a meeting on Monday December 5 1955 to discuss the further course they were going to follow. After this meeting there was going to be a mass meeting at Holt Street Church where the course would be explained to the people. At the meeting the leaders of Montgomery's black community decided to form a new organization to guide and organize the protest: it would be the Montgomery Improvement Association (M.I.A.) and King is chosen as president. King recalls this event as taking him by surprise and does not go into detail about the how and why he was chosen.⁶⁸

Garrow largely follows King's accounts,⁶⁹ but Branch tells another story. Supposedly King arrived late at the meeting in the middle of an outburst of Nixon about the cowardly behavior of the ministers who wanted to keep their role as organizers of the bus boycott a secret. After hearing Nixon, King declared not to be a coward and this sparked the reaction of Nixon's great competitor as leader of the lay segment of the Montgomery civil rights workers, who immediately proposes King to be the president of the new organization. King accepts on the spot and is unanimously chosen. Rivalry between competing leaders in Montgomery, combined with the fact that since King was new he did not have a lot of enemies (yet) and on top of that he was a

⁶⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 133

⁶⁸ King, *Stride*, 54

⁶⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 22

gifted speaker, as many of the leaders had found out when King had delivered a thrilling speech at a NAACP gathering earlier.⁷⁰

In the evening of Monday December 5 1955 Martin Luther King Jr. as the newly elected president of the, only hours old, M.I.A. delivered one of his more memorable speeches at the Holt Street mass meeting. In this address King uses harsh words to describe the hardships African-Americans endure under the system of segregation and he is clear about his intentions regarding the protest, as he says:

We who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity [and] we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream...⁷¹

It is King's first performance as the new civil rights leader and it is interesting to see how he recalls this and his speech in *Stride Towards Freedom*. The literal text of this speech resembles the sermons of the African-American Baptist tradition. King uses the typology of the oppressed Hebrew people projected onto his own situation and people. Furthermore, in his book, King uses the knowledge he has gained about protest from the writings of Niebuhr and the actions of Gandhi to show a determined though not too aggressive attitude towards the situation. One has to keep in mind that King wrote the book years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended. By then King was the leader and spokesman of a nationally operating civil rights movement, which main strategy

⁷⁰ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 124

⁷¹Speech of Martin Luther King in Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom*, (North Carolina 1997), first page (not numbered)

was civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action, openly inspired on the Gandhian movement of the 1930's and '40's. The idea that King really based this speech on Gandhian principles seems highly unlikely at this point in time. King had not been in contact with any of the Northern pacifists who later came to his aid, and could therefore not yet have been influenced by any of them. Furthermore, the speech as it can be read in the book, differs from the actual speech King wrote in December 1955. In his book King tones down the words of his speech by saying that he warned the people that "our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion."⁷² In the original speech King had been more aggressive:

Standing beside love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we've come to see that we've got to use the tools of coercion.⁷³

Keeping the argument in mind that King was trying to reach a white audience with his book, and to convince them of the non-violent nature of the Montgomery protest, it is clear that King was trying to temper the fire of his own words in order not to scare white readers. On the other hand King was not yet decided on the right approach, strategy and tactics of the protest. How were he and his followers supposed to deal with violence aimed at them and their communities? King had definitely not yet developed a completely nonviolent strategy and many of his peers would carry weapons and King himself had armed guards when

⁷² King, *Stride*, 60

⁷³ http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/mia_mass_meeting_at_holt_street_baptist_church/ web link to a transcript of the original speech.

threats and actual attacks on his home took place in the course of the enduring Bus Boycott. This conflict, as evidenced in King's words and his thoughts as he put them on paper, is a result of the meetings and discussions King had with, among others, Northern Civil Rights activists Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley. They introduced King to a wealth of practical and theoretical material on the matter of nonviolence, as well as sharing the knowledge and experience they had gathered over the years.

As the Montgomery Bus Boycott proved to be a success, it started to gain more attention in the media. Northern activists such as Rustin kept a close eye on all race related news and events in the South. In the early 1950's the South had seen a sharp rise in the number of incidents involving acts of defiance and resistance to racial inequality. At the same time the nature of the protests was also changing. What had been sporadic acts of resistance by individuals, became a more collective enterprise.⁷⁴ Several boycotts of either public transport or white businesses in different Southern cities are testament to this development.

The increased number of race related incidents in the South during the early 1950's inspired the formation of a coalition of Northern activists, which would prove to be of great importance for the development of the Civil Rights Movement. This coalition consisted of Rustin, Ella Baker – a seasoned civil rights activist, who had been very active in the South as field secretary for the NAACP during the 1940's, and the third member was Stanley Levison – a lawyer and activist working for the American Jewish Congress. Among the three of them they could rely on a rather

⁷⁴ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 201

impressive network of activists, politicians, union leaders, pressure groups and liberal religious leaders.⁷⁵ They chose a non-threatening name for their group, 'In Friendship' and invited A. Philip Randolph to serve as chairman⁷⁶. The In Friendship group tried to support protesters and their groups financially, using its large network to fund this activity. Although the official goal of the group was economic in nature, the fact that Rustin was also still very active in the WRL – which was combining forces with Randolph – blurred the lines between the organizations.

After the houses of King and Nixon were bombed in consecutive attacks in January 1956, a meeting was held at Randolph's office at which the various groups were represented. Together they decided to send Rustin to Montgomery. Officially, Rustin travelled south under the banner of the WRL, and his trip was funded by a wealthy WRL contributor.⁷⁷ The official goal of the trip was to organize workshops on the subject of nonviolence. In a letter Rustin sent to an editor at Oxford University Press on February 21, he explained why he will not be able to meet with her in the following weeks, "since I have just been called to Alabama to consult with Negro leaders about the possibility of setting up a workshop, the purpose of which is to bring the Gandhian philosophy and tactic to the masses of the Negroes in the South."⁷⁹

The Northern leaders were afraid that the situation in Montgomery would escalate into a violent clash. So far, the violence had

⁷⁵ Ibid, 202

⁷⁶ Ibid, 202

⁷⁷ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 204

⁷⁹ Ibid, 204

only come from the ‘white’ side, but there were signs of escalation. After the bombing of King’s house “it could have been a riot, a very bloody riot. If that had happened I think the whole cause could have been lost, and it would have been very tragic for everyone,”⁸⁰ according to King’s wife, Coretta Scott King. D’Emilio describes how the sense of urgency for the need of nonviolent teaching had become even stronger by the time Rustin departed, because the news had reached him that an arsenal of weapons had been smuggled into Montgomery by ministers and porters.⁸¹ The possibility of an outbreak of all-out violence was something both sides feared. In his ‘Montgomery diary’ Rustin described in his entry for February 25 that even the white liberals in the South were afraid of what might happen, if the black population would return the violence inflicted upon them. So much so, that they were fearful of supporting the boycott in Montgomery.

For generations the status quo has been based on violence with the Negro as victim. A few whites have managed to be a liberal without feeling a direct threat to their social position. Now, as the Negroes reach the stage where they make specific, if minimum, demand, a new and revolutionary situation has developed. [...] Even the non-violence of the Negroes has not counterbalanced their horror of the violence which they fear will break out sooner or later. The result is that they are immobilized by confusion and fear.⁸²

In the next entry, February 26 (Sunday), Rustin recalled discussing the issue with King and his wife.

⁸⁰ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 17

⁸¹ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 204

⁸² Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 168

I asked King if he felt that the activities of the White Citizens Council would lead to further bombings and other violence and whether he felt some elements in the Negro community would return violence with violence. He said that he felt the behavior of the White Citizens Council could very easily lead to serious violence and that the results might be catastrophic.⁸³

Soon after arriving in Montgomery on February 21, Rustin found out that there was no considered nonviolent strategy behind the boycott.

Rustin quickly became convinced, however, that the religious spirit of the boycott would prove receptive to nonviolence. This represented a shift in his thinking. The idea that enduring hardship and pain in this earthly life would be rewarded in the hereafter, as King preached, was deeply rooted in the Southern Baptist tradition. In fact, Rustin had up to that point identified this religious dogma as a counterproductive force, crippling any attempt at organizing resistance. In 1942 Rustin wrote an article on this subject, in which he vented his frustration.

Certainly the Negro possesses qualities essential for nonviolent direct action. He has long since learned to endure suffering. He can admit his own share of guilt and has to be pushed hard to become bitter. He has produced, and still sings, such songs as "It's Me, Oh Lord, Standin' in the Need of Prayer" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." He follows this last tragic phrase by a salute to God - "Oh! Glory, Hallelujah." He is creative

⁸³ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 168-169

and has learned to adjust himself to conditions easily. But above all he possesses a rich religious heritage and today finds the church the center of his life.⁸⁴

D'Emilio points out that in contrast to Rustin's Quaker upbringing, where there was a heavy emphasis on social change in this world, the Baptist tradition was essentially focused on the rewards that awaited faithful Christians in heaven.⁸⁵

However, over the course of just days during his stay in Montgomery, Rustin became convinced that a change had occurred within the Baptist church, which could very well be a game changer. In a letter Rustin wrote to his WRL colleagues, Arthur Brown and Ralph DiGia, on February 25 he stated:

I am convinced that perhaps one of the really major results of Montgomery will be a revolution in the Negro church. The 'come to Jesus' approach that has almost degraded the Negro church since 1910 is now being replaced by a social action peace.⁸⁶

Rustin furthermore came to believe that for any civil rights organization to succeed in gaining mass support in the South, it would have to be based on Southern religious leaders. This is significant, because it represents a drastic change in Rustin's way of thinking about effecting social change in the South, and this concept lay at

⁸⁴ Rustin, *Down the Line*, 11

⁸⁵ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 203

⁸⁶ Bayard Rustin to Arthur Brown and Ralph DiGia, February 25, 1956, in Long, *I Must Resist*, 167

the heart of the formation of the SCLC, which shaped the Civil Rights Movement for a long time.

However, in 1956 Rustin also realized that the idea of nonviolence as presented by the Southerners “courses at this central religious core which these people respect and comprehend.”⁸⁷ This implies the absence of a real philosophical understanding of and belief in nonviolence as taught by Gandhi. As a result of this lack of conviction Rustin observed many conflicting situations during his stay in Montgomery. In a 1969 interview with T. H. Baker, Rustin claimed that King had no knowledge of nonviolent tactics when he first met King.⁸⁸ Baker continued by asking Rustin whether he saw himself as a mentor to King in these matters. Rustin agreed and supported his claim of King’s nonexistent knowledge of nonviolent tactics by describing how he and Bill Worthy, who according to Rustin was “a writer and did some things for the Post,”⁸⁹ visited the King residence for the first time. Rustin recalled that Worthy almost sat down on a gun which was on a chair, and used this incident to conclude that King permitted himself and his children to be protected by guns, which contradicted the ideas about non-violence and pacifism that constituted Rustin’s ideology.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Bayard Rustin to Arthur Brown, February 23, 1956 in Long, *I Must Resist*, 164

⁸⁸ Interview of Bayard Rustin by T. H. Baker in 1969, 20
http://web2.millercenter.org/lbj/oralhistory/rustin_bayard_1969_0617.pdf

⁸⁹ Ibid, 21

⁹⁰ Ibid, 21

Rustin continued to tell about an almost fatal incident, which abruptly changed King's perspective.

There was almost a near tragedy outside Dr. King's house because late one night a telegram was being delivered by a young kid. The two watchmen were there, and one of the watchmen almost shot the kid, thinking it was-. At any rate, that incident brought Dr. King up against the implications of these guns. We talked many, many hours about tactics and nonviolence. I presume that Dr. King may have learned something from those discussions.⁹¹

In this part of the interview Rustin clearly suggested that he was having an influence on King in terms of him becoming acquainted with the full extent of nonviolent protest. Of course, it is very difficult to claim that Rustin was King's biggest influence when it comes to the development of King's nonviolent ideas. However, it is possible to say that in the early days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the young reverend had not yet said farewell to the possibility of violence as a means of defense. That is why true pacifists such as Rustin tried to educate King and his fellow leaders in the ways of Gandhian nonviolence. They believed that would be the only way this movement was going to succeed. That is why Rustin was the perfect candidate with his specifically extensive knowledge of Gandhian methods. In the first days after his arrival he spent a lot of time at the King residence, speaking to both King Jr. and his wife, Coretta.

⁹¹ Ibid, 21

Rustin's stay was to be short-lived however as the press got wind of his presence and an Alabama journalist claimed that Rustin had falsely presented himself as a correspondent for two European newspapers. As a result of this controversy Rustin was forced to leave Montgomery in a hurry. In an interview with Howell Raines in 1976, Rustin recalled that "that Dr. King whisked me out of town in a car, with a car in front and a car behind, to Birmingham."⁹²

The fact that King had Rustin taken to Birmingham, close enough to easily remain in contact, implies that King wanted to make further use of him. From his new base of operations in Birmingham Rustin kept in touch with King and other M.I.A. leaders. On March 7, King traveled to Birmingham to meet with Rustin. Rustin's notes of this meeting provide further evidence that King had wanted to retain Rustin's services, and that sending him away was merely for show.

However, he [King] is sensitive to the effort on the part of white people in general in the South and newspapers and vested interest in particular to give evidence to their feeling that New Yorkers, Northern agitators, and communists are in reality leading the fight.⁹³

In a letter Rustin wrote to King on 8 March 1956, he explained that the allegations against him were untrue. I [Rustin] called your wife [Coretta King] today and told her that I had gotten the matter

⁹² Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 55

⁹³ Excerpt from Rustin's notes of the meeting on March 7, 1956 in Long, *I Must Resist*, 171

cleared up with the Manchester Guardian. Actually, they had never offered any reward for my identification. In regard to Le Figaro, we are in process of getting that cleared up. For the record, at no time did I say that I was a correspondent for either of these papers. I did say that I was writing articles which were to be submitted to them and this is now in the process of being done.⁹⁴

This shows that Rustin was not about to give in to the harassing tactics of the opponents of the Boycott. On the other hand, it shows that anyone involved in leading the Boycott risked being targeted by its opponents. Rustin would be an easy target with his history and background, and the decision was therefore made to have him move to the background, from where he could play an advisory role. In his notes from the meeting with King in Birmingham on March 7, Rustin explains:

It was his [King's] view therefore that all communications, ideas, and programs that can be developed, as they directly pertain to activities in Montgomery, come through him or Mr. Nixon rather than directly to the Improvement Association. *It was agreed that this was a... necessary procedure.*⁹⁵

However short Rustin's time had been in Montgomery, the impact of his visit can be measured by the words of his contemporaries. In the book *I Must Resist*, the editor, Michael G. Long,

⁹⁴ Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King, Jr., March 8, 1956, in Stewart Burns, ed.; Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Paper of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vol. 3: Birth of a New Age: December 1955-December 1956* (Berkeley, 1997), 163-164 Hereinafter cited as *King Papers*.

⁹⁵ Excerpt from Rustin's notes of the meeting on March 7, 1956 in Long, *I Must Resist*, 171

quotes Homer Jack, a co-founder of CORE, who traveled to Montgomery shortly after Rustin's departure and reported in March:

Bayard Rustin of the WRL was there for two weeks ending March 7th. He seemed especially effective in counseling with the leaders of the protest during the crucial 2 weeks after the mass arrests for the boycott. His contribution to interpreting the Gandhian approach to the leadership cannot be overestimated.⁹⁶

Rustin may have been the first Northern activist to arrive in Montgomery, but he would not be the last. At the same time that Randolph and the WRL were discussing who to send to Montgomery, their colleagues at the FOR were doing the same. When hearing of the WRL's decision to send Rustin, the FOR leadership became worried that his presence would harm the movement more than help it. The FOR's chairman Charles Lawrence, and executive secretary, John M. Swomley, Jr., started warning people of the perceived danger of Rustin's presence in Montgomery, arguing that his history of getting in trouble with law enforcement because of his sexual behavior, made him an easy target for the local police. In a letter to FOR's southwestern regional secretary, Wilson Riles, Swomley voices these concerns by stating:

[Our chairman, Lawrence,] feels strongly that it were better if Bayard did not go south, that it would be easy for the police to frame him with his record in L.A. and New York, and set back the whole cause there. He [Lawrence] mentions frame-up though there could be an actual incident

⁹⁶ Long, *I Must Resist*, 171.

or dramatic effort in which he becomes the focal point.⁹⁷

When Rustin's position in Montgomery came under fire from malicious local reporters, Rustin's original backers became increasingly concerned about the wisdom of their earlier decision.

On February 27, Randolph held a meeting at his office to discuss how to proceed. Besides members of the WRL, Randolph had also invited the leaders of the FOR and the AFSC, and Arthur Brown, Rustin's roommate. At this meeting Lawrence and Swomley continued their anti-Rustin campaign, playing into the worries of others, such as Randolph. In a letter Swomley wrote to Glenn Smiley, who had recently arrived in Montgomery on the FOR's orders, that the group meeting at Randolph's office "felt that there were serious elements of danger to the movement there for Bayard to present."⁹⁸ Swomley also expressed the group's feeling that the local leaders were doing a good enough job, and that assistance from outsiders was not needed and even unwanted. Strangely, in the same letter, Swomley asks Smiley to continue his work there, thus implying that by 'outsiders', he had meant 'Rustin'.

Smiley, however, was no stranger to Rustin, as in both their already impressive careers they had had worked together before. Also, Smiley later admitted: "I don't forbid well."⁹⁹ Smiley was a

⁹⁷ John M. Swomley, Jr. executive secretary of the FOR to Wilson Riles, southwestern regional secretary of the FOR, February 21, 1956 in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 160

⁹⁸ John M. Swomley, Jr. to Glenn Smiley, February 29, 1956 in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 171

⁹⁹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 210

white minister from California who originated from Texas. He was as a Gandhian as much as Rustin had been and would serve from March 1956 to the end of the Boycott as one of King Jr.'s most trusted advisors. Smiley saw King Jr.'s potential as early as their first meeting. In a letter Smiley recalled:

God has called Martin Luther King to lead a great movement here and in the South [and] King can be a Negro Gandhi [.] Of his own free will, he has sought counsel from some of us older. May he burst, like fruit out of season, into the type of leader required for this hour.¹⁰⁰

Together with Rustin, Smiley helped shape King's strategy and tactics, and thereby the strategy and actions of the movement, which seemed to be forming around the Montgomery Bus Boycott. When asked about Rustin's role in Montgomery he recalled that he "continually depended on Bayard,"¹⁰¹ and that "Bayard has had a very good influence on King, wrote the much quoted speech of week, and was in on all the strategy."¹⁰²

All throughout the Boycott Rustin and King kept in contact. In a letter to Rustin written by King on 20 September 1956,¹⁰³ King reported on the situation in Montgomery at the time. Apparently Rustin had asked him several questions, which he answered systematically. The answer to question 4 is especially interesting as King refers to Rustin's teachings.

¹⁰⁰ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 163-164

¹⁰¹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 211

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 211

¹⁰³ Martin Luther King, Jr. to Bayard Rustin, September 20, 1956, in *King Papers* 3:375-378

4. What is the attitude of the people in the Negro community? The people are just as enthusiastic now as they were in the beginning of the protest. They are determined never to return to jim crow buses. The mass meetings are still jammed and packed and above all the buses are still empty. Every now and then we will hear a complaint, but the vast majority of the people are dedicated to sacrificing and sticking out to the finish. I think also there is a growing commitment to the philosophy of non-violence on the part of the Negro community. Even those who were willing to get their guns in the beginning are gradually coming to see the futility of such an approach.¹⁰⁴

It seems that by then King had not only embraced the idea of nonviolent resistance himself, but had also been spreading the idea, with success. Also in this letter King showed that by then the idea, that this bus boycott might be the springboard to a much broader movement, had started taking shape.:

We are hoping to instill within the minds of the people the great implications of the bus protest. We are seeking to show that it is much larger than a bus situation, but that it is just one aspect of the total question of integration in the south.¹⁰⁵

Further evidence of Rustin's influence and ideology can be found in an article King submitted to the magazine *Christian Century* in November 1956. The magazine ran with the article and published

¹⁰⁴ *King Papers* 3:376

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 3:377

it as the main story in an issue devoted to race relations.¹⁰⁶ The title of the article is “Nonviolence and Racial Justice”. In it King explained his views on the nonviolent resistance movement. After a short African American history lesson King compared the struggle for integration and equality for African Americans with the struggle against colonialism in Africa and Asia.

The determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from every form of oppression springs from the same profound longing for freedom that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. The rhythmic beat of deep discontent in Africa and Asia is at bottom a quest for freedom and human dignity on the part of people who have long been victims of colonialism.¹⁰⁷

With this comparison King gave body and meaning to the movement as part of the struggle for freedom in general and internationally. This had always been Rustin’s aim, which was broader than merely improving the situation for African Americans in the South. He also wanted to help workers, women and other minorities in an all-out struggle against inequality and injustice. Rustin often acted as ghostwriter for King, writing speeches and articles such as this one for King, which King would then have published. These speeches and articles are evidence of the direct influence of Rustin on King.

King also referred to the origin of his proposed method of nonviolent resistance. “The alternative to violence is nonviolent resistance. This method was made famous in our generation by

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 4:118

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 4:119

Mohandas K. Gandhi, who used it to free India from the domination of the British Empire.”¹⁰⁸

King's description of nonviolent resistance was remarkably devoid of religious references compared to the rest of the article. This shows Rustin's influence as it was mostly based on Gandhian principles, which are not Christian as Gandhi was not a Christian. However, in the last paragraph of the article King returned to Christian theology and applied the Gandhian principles by concluding that at the heart of nonviolent resistance lay the Christian idea of God's love for all men. As God loves all men, nonviolent resisters would have to love their oppressors in order to achieve a lasting solution to the problems facing the world. This shows how King was able to blend Gandhian nonviolent resistance and Christian theology, and formulate this into the successful ideology behind the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 4:120

RALLYING THE TROOPS

I.

As mentioned in the last chapter, Rustin was influenced heavily by A. Philip Randolph in terms of providing theoretical and ideological support for the struggle for racial equality as well as schooling Rustin on the practical side of organizing protest movements and events, attracting media attention and connecting people and organizations in order to achieve higher goals. The latter, more practical side came to fruition during the early 1940's when Rustin seemed to be naturally drawn to Randolph and his organizations, especially after Rustin broke off his association with the American communists in 1941. Randolph, being a democratic socialist and thus an anti-Stalinist, had been clashing with the communists since the early 1930's. By the 1940's it became clear that the American communists were acting under close supervision and direct command of Moscow, which meant that the situation in Europe directly influenced and guided the policies of the American chapter. The invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi-Germany in July of 1941 resulted in a complete change of strategy for American communists. They immediately ceased their efforts in the struggle for equal rights for minorities and instead started to promote the idea of forming a united front against Nazi-Germany. They now actively supported American engagement in the thus far largely European Second World War. This meant that many African American communists felt betrayed by the organization, resulting in them terminating their memberships.

Rustin, who had been a member of the Young Communist League since 1939, was no exception. In 1942 he started working

for Randolph's MOWM (March on Washington Movement). Randolph was looking into the possibilities of nonviolence as a strategy. Rustin eagerly started working on formulating such a strategy. At a national convention of the MOWM in 1943, Rustin presented the results, detailing the range of tactics encompassed by nonviolence.¹⁰⁹ Randolph was impressed with Rustin's work and requested more of Rustin's time. The FOR's leader at the time, AJ Muste, granted Randolph's request, and Rustin was allowed to spend half of his time to work for Randolph. During this time Rustin honed and expanded his organizational skills to a remarkably high level, which would serve him well in later years, as it made his value often exceed the risks of working with such a controversial figure.

Besides his organizational skills, Rustin also possessed an enormous network of politicians, fellow activists, organizations, reporters and publishers, and other associates. The fact that he had held many key positions within a large number of organizations, made him into a nexus of activist activity. On top of that, in late 1955, Rustin formed the organizational supergroup 'In Friendship' with fellow activists Ella Baker and Stanley Levison, both of whom had large networks as well. Together they could provide all kinds of support: organizational, economic, financial, and ideological. Through the efforts of this group, Rustin was able to provide the necessary organizational support to the budding movement, making it possible for it to grow into a lasting, national movement.

¹⁰⁹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 60

II.

The increased number of race related incidents in the South during the early 1950's, which had inspired the formation of the In Friendship group, seemed to culminate in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in late 1955. Looking back on this time, Stanley Levison recalled that the Montgomery situation had the potential of finally creating a broad movement, whereas before "a handful of very brave people were ready to take their lives in their hands and go out onto the street in small demonstrations. But the mass of people were not involved."¹¹⁰ Most activists agreed that the only way they were really going to affect change was with a movement that commanded massive popular support. This is why the widespread support for the Montgomery Bus Boycott among the local African-American population was a sign for Northern activists to act. The members of In Friendship were looking for ways to support and aid the Montgomery protesters. The official goal of the group was to raise money for people who had suffered economic damage as a result of civil rights activity. Over the course of 1956 and 1957, however, the combination of Rustin, Baker and Levison in the In Friendship group would provide essential support to the budding Civil Rights Movement. Rustin seems to have been intrigued by the fact that the boycott in Montgomery was instigated and led by mostly religious leaders, instead of civil rights groups or other professional activists.

The absence of local activist groups is quite easily explained, because under the oppressive regime of institutionalized racism it had been virtually impossible to set up any form of organized resistance. Despite this, in many states the NAACP, being a large

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 203

nationwide organization, had been able to set up some form of resistance. However, in Alabama and Louisiana, the states' persecution of the NAACP had virtually suppressed the organization. Opposition to desegregation spawned private organizations called Citizen Councils or White Citizen Councils. These councils were put in place to preserve racial segregation and act against any and all resistance. In practice this meant that civil disobedience or defiance of the racial laws provoked a strong reaction from the authorities, often a violent one. In addition the family members of protesters were often targeted as well.

Violence, intimidation and economic pressure was in often effective. Yet something was different about the Montgomery situation, since this protest did not stop in the face of violence. The local government systematically used force, coercion and institutionalized violence against the protesters, supported by a nightly terror campaign by the KKK. However, the protest continued. For Rustin and King, this persistence clearly demonstrated the power of nonviolent protest.

The suppression of the NAACP in the South provided an opportunity for Rustin. Right after his arrival in Montgomery, he puts himself to work. First of all he arranged meetings with Ralph Abernathy and E.D. Nixon to discuss the situation and possible next steps, followed by a meeting of the M.I.A. committee in charge of coordinating the protest activities, in which three of Rustin's recommendations were accepted. This shows that Rustin's input was certainly appreciated. It also showcases Rustin's ability to perform a lightning fast assessment of a certain situation, after which he immediately was able to produce solutions to seemingly all imaginable problems in various scenarios. However, Rustin's talents

were not confined to strategizing alone. He also excelled in coordinating activities, as well as carrying out tasks himself. On top of all that, Rustin was a gifted and prolific writer, providing the leaders of the movement with articles, speeches and songs. In his letter to Brown and DiGia, Rustin reports:

Plans for the Monday night mass meeting are drawn up and two main speeches on nonviolence will deal with more specific aspects of its philosophy and practice. I am working tomorrow with the two men who will give these.¹¹²

Another example of Rustin's direct influence is his initiative to come up with a plan or strategy for spreading the philosophy of nonviolence. This shows that Rustin was not only trying to personally influence the leaders of the movement, but also mustering mass support for nonviolent protest, realizing that he alone would not be able to accomplish that. In his 'Montgomery Diary', Rustin reports, in his entry on February 23, that several proposals were accepted to spread the philosophy of nonviolence.¹¹³ One of these proposals concerned an essay contest for high-school students on the question why we use nonviolence in our struggle. In his letter to Brown and DiGia, Rustin proudly mentions that he was able to convince two businessmen to provide \$100 for 3 prizes for the best essay by a high school youngster.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Bayard Rustin to Arthur Brown and Ralph DiGia, February 25, 1956, in Long, *I Must Resist*, 167

¹¹³ Excerpt from 'Montgomery Diary' (February 23) by Bayard Rustin in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 167

¹¹⁴ Bayard Rustin to Arthur Brown and Ralph DiGia dated February 25, 1956, in Long, *I Must Resist*, 168

All these examples provide proof of Rustin's practical influence on the movement in Montgomery, especially when taking into account that he only stayed there for little more than a week.

After being forced to leave, Rustin was no longer able to provide the on the spot, hands on support that he had provided during his stay in Montgomery. However, this does not mean that Rustin was no longer able to provide any practical support. On the contrary, during his stay in Birmingham Rustin continued to discuss strategy and philosophy with King, providing intellectual support to the movement's leaders. At the same time, Rustin started to use his connections to raise money and awareness. Constant reports to his Northern colleagues and allies contributed largely to this goal. The 'Montgomery Diary', an article Rustin wrote for the April issue of 'Liberation', a pacifist magazine with nationwide coverage, became one of the most iconic texts concerning the Montgomery Bus Boycott. On top of that, Rustin used his connections at 'Liberation' and other magazines to publish articles by King. Most of these articles were in fact written by Rustin, but published under King's name, since he was the spokesman and figurehead of the movement.

Lastly, Rustin used his network, and especially his contacts from the In Friendship group, to introduce King to Northern leaders, such as AJ Muste and A. Philip Randolph. This provided King with a network of his own, which would serve the movement for the years to come.

CONCLUSION

With the help of Smiley and Rustin, King Jr. was able to apply nonviolent, Gandhian tactics and able to guide King Jr. to persevere in the face of growing violence by the frustrated white adversaries of the Bus Boycott, unable to get a grip on the situation and to stop the civil disobedience. Their influence becomes evident when King Jr.'s first speech, which used incendiary language, arousing the people to action, is compared to King Jr.'s address to a meeting at Ebenezer Church in January 1957, right after the ending of the Boycott in which King says that "we are convinced that the great majority of white Southerners are prepared to accept and abide by the Supreme Law of the Land. They like us want to be law-abiding citizens."¹¹⁵ Interestingly in this entire transcript the word protest never appears and instead of threatening talk of people no longer willing to bow to oppression he says that in reaction to violence and racism "we call upon them to accept Christian Love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil."¹¹⁶ He continues to talk about the nonviolent nature of his movement and trying to call on the morality of the nation to help end segregation. Now King Jr. has found the ideal way of speech which appeals to white audiences as well as call on the old typologies of the traditions of the African-American Baptists, which enabled King Jr. to gather the enormous following that he did in the 1960's. All the while Rustin remained active in supporting King, albeit from the shadows. This placed Rustin right back at the top

¹¹⁵ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 344

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 344

of the Civil Rights Movement. The hopelessness of Rustin's situation after the 1953 Pasadena incident seemed to have been successfully overcome, giving Rustin's career a new lease on life.

Rustin can be credited for at least partially providing the intellectual basis for King's policies and approach to the struggle for civil rights, which had non-violence at its core. In addition to this intellectual influence, Rustin applied his impressive talent for organization to the budding Civil Rights Movement, aiding the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as well as helping found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which became a spearhead of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. The non-violent approach, combined with a tightly-ran organization headed by a charismatic leader, transformed the struggle for racial equality. Rustin played a pivotal role in this bringing about this transformation.

SOURCES

- Anderson, Jervis. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.
- Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1988.
- Burns, Stewart, ed. *Daybreak of Freedom*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Burns, Stewart, ed.; Carson, Clayborne, ed. *The papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Vol. 3: Birth of a new age: December 1955-December 1956*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997.
- Carbado, Devon W., ed.; Weise, Donald, ed. *Time on Two Crosses*. New York: Cleis Press, 2015.
- Carson, Clayborne, ed.; Carson, Susan, ed. *The papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Vol. 4: Symbol of the movement: January 1957-December 1958*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000.
- D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.
- Fairclough, Adam. *To Redeem the Soul of America*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.
- Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986.
- Kates, Nancy and Bennett Singer, *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, 2001 (Documentary)

King, Jr., Martin Luther. *Stride Towards Freedom*. London: Harper, 1959.

Levine, Daniel. *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Long, Michael G., ed. *I Must Resist, Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012.

Podair, Jerald. *Bayard Rustin American Dreamer*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009.

Raines, Howell, ed. *My Soul is Rested*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977.

Rustin, Bayard. *Down the Line*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.

Walton, Jr, Hanes. *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971

<http://wcborodems.org/2012/02/18/historys-people-remembering-bayard-rustin> (website containing the photograph of Rustin's High School yearbook)

http://web2.millercenter.org/lbj/oralhistory/rustin_bayard_1969_0617.pdf (p.20-22) (Transcript of an interview Rustin gave to T. H. Baker in 1969 in which he tells about his relationship to King Jr.)