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Rod Bush and the Quest for Social Justice: Beyond the Binary Constructs of Race and Class

*It should not surprise us that the Right is coming to the fore
The rise of the Right and the virulent racism which it practices
make it absolutely essential that we grapple anew with the politics
of racism.*

—Rod Bush, 1981/82

I. Introduction

One would think that the above quote was written to characterize the recent election of Donald Trump and the current ascendancy of the Alt-Right. Actually, it was written almost 36 years ago. Therefore, this phrase is both a testament to Rod Bush's analytical skills and what can only be termed his prophetic vision. For it was Bush who helped us to understand that the rise of the far right and racial hostility typically follows the important progress made by "millions of exploited and oppressed people, not only in the United States, but around the world." (Bush 1981/82). Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the resurgence

of the far right and Trump are also a response to the success of the Black Lives Matter movement in this country. Ironically, the rise of nationalist and far-right parties in Europe follows similar progressive movements (Chakelian 2017).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the prophetic vision of Rod Bush was captured in his quest for social justice. This prophetic vision and quest for social justice was a lifelong project.

The central mechanism by which Bush articulated his vision was that he understood the historical links between race and class. These links, consistently viewed through the theoretical lens of Marxism, aimed at understanding, motivating, and pursuing social justice. Reviewing this journey, one cannot help but mention Bush's major works such as *The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line* (Temple University Press, 2009) and *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), and dozens of articles and book chapters, public appearances, talks, hundreds of students that he mentored, and the literally thousands of lives that he touched with his scholarly insights, probing questions, and thoughtful analysis.

Bush repeatedly demonstrated that race and racism were ideologies associated with the rise and expansion of European and North American capitalism particularly in non-European areas of the world. Consequently, both race and racism were ideological justifications not only created but also required to justify the creation of racial hegemonic states. Moreover, if white supremacy is the glue and moral justification for Euro-North American world hegemony, then the path to freedom and justice for racialized, oppressed populations requires alternative visions and strategies. North American Blacks, both historically and contemporarily, would play a central role in laying the foundation for what Rod Bush hoped would be one of humanity's greatest achievements (Bush 2005). The movement for social justice has its structural and ideological roots in Black internationalism.

Black internationalism, dating to the 17th century, found a dispersed group of slaves successfully pursuing justice both within

and external to the borders of the United States. Wherever European hegemonic oppression surfaced, the response of people of color was organization, protest, and revolution. For as remarked by Du Bois, the problem of the 20th century was indeed the problem of the color line (Du Bois 1903). Historically, this problem has been situated in the paradox of nations, such as the U.S., that espouses democracy while practicing racialized class oppression. In addition, as pointed out by Bush consistently, the problem with most leftist critiques is that they fail to understand and appreciate how class is raced.

Too many progressives, in their presumptive critical stance, confound race and class. The problem with these approaches is that quickly we get into binary constructs where we argue which is most significant, and by definition which must be addressed in order to provide sustainable, realizable, and substantive change. Bush found such debates not only meaningless but problematic. Race has no meaning without class, and one cannot effectively understand class without an understanding of race. Simply put, race and class are interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent.

Specifically, Bush points out how radicalism of the post-World War I included subordinate populations from around the globe. These insurrectionists mobilized to challenge both the racial chauvinism of the white left and the right. Thus Blacks in the western world joined Swadeshi in India, and Sinn Fein in Ireland. Similarly, decolonization in post-World War II period linked movements among U.S. blacks as well as radical liberation movements in China, Cuba, Algeria and Ghana (Bush 2005:5). The resurgence of the right, in the 1980s globally served to reverse these trends as the white Left went in full retreat (Bush 2003). Into this vacuum black feminists stepped forward to fill the void. Such feminists as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Kimberly Crenshaw, and Rose M. Brewer began to articulate an uncompromising break with white male hegemony. Thus was born intersectionality, and a much more nuanced paradigm that challenged white male hegemony (Bush 2005:7).

An intersectional approach that challenges white male hegemony is not only transformative but serves to produce resilience and resistance.

What is absent from all too many analyses is an examination of these transformative processes and how they can be nurtured, maintained, and perpetuated. This is the vital work that Rod Bush's intellectual vision helps articulate.

II. Imperialism, Global Capitalism and White Supremacy: Intrinsically Interconnected

As Bush pointed out, global imperialism and capitalism created a world-system of exploitation based on race and gender stratification. As he articulates, “‘race or class’ is or should be a non-issue, that race and class are inextricably intertwined. ... We might learn from an analysis of those forces among the New Negro radicals of the early twentieth century ...” (Bush 1999). Put simply, western imperialism gave rise to global capitalism that utilized white supremacy as an ideological justification for the creation of the racial state. With this ideological justification, race and racism were imbedded within the capitalist structure.

The class system that came into being therefore was built not only on the backs of the African slaves and Indigenous Peoples, but also women. The trick that made this whole structure work was the invention of whiteness where lower status whites were duped into foregoing their European cultural heritage for the badge of whiteness. Along with this badge of whiteness came the presumption of white rights at the expense of persons of color and white women were needed to maintain the illusion of race. For now, let us consider how Black Nationalism, the first global, counter, intersectional movement came into being.

Black Nationalism represents a set of processes, positions, and national struggles within a global context. This means that radical Black Nationalism was not only a systemic attempt to understand the institutional contradictions and social dislocations associated with globalization and deindustrialization, but also became a means of organizing social movements of the oppressed. These radical Black Nationalist movements therefore provided a critical sociological analysis and articulation of liberal universalism. It was this observation that

allowed Bush to see past the false dichotomy many confuse between race and class or race and gender.

III. Identity Politics: Barriers or Bridges

Consequently, Bush was the one of the first to truly understand the relationship between “identity politics” and identity movements. This relationship is integral to a variety of social movements associated with various civil, social, and human rights struggles and functions as both a benefit and liability. Specifically, identity politics can be used as the glue for identity based movements.

Bush articulated these ideas as he shed light on how many white labor leaders were co-opted by Cold War liberalism on the one hand, and repressed by McCarthyism, on the other. It was under these circumstances that a more militant Black movement came forward in its attempt to force a more just and egalitarian social order within the U.S. (Bush 1999:155). This militancy was not new, however, but reflected anti-imperialist radical social movements dating back to at least the 1920s and ‘30s.

Bush demonstrated that Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) served to create a Black identity based social movement that was overwhelmingly working class and independent. This identity-based movement was both anticolonial and anti-imperialist as it linked grassroots nationalist traditions to the street corners of Harlem. Bush argued that Malcolm X, another Black nationalist, would use these same strategies to link and inspire a completely new set of Black, urban radicals.

Identity politics can be either a bridge or a barrier to such struggles. Thus, Bush concluded that the politics and programs of Louis Farrakhan were both conservative and a hindrance to not only Black Nationalism, but also to justice struggles. Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (NOI) represented an extremely narrow, almost fascist, form of social movement. Bush demonstrated several outcomes that led to these conclusions but none more glaring than the “strong-arm” tactics used by the NOI in inner-city projects as they were hired essentially as

a police force in the war against drugs (see for example Stevens 1988, and as commented on by Bush 2002:171). Farrakhan also rejected the Marxist claims of a generic proletariat un-bifurcated by race and nationality. Consequently, Bush argues that Farrakhan, with a vision of a Black nation within the Americas was at odds with what was happening among and between Black leaders within this country and what was happening across three continents in anticolonial struggles. Thus, “the rapports de force (the balance of power) had shifted decisively in favor of the colonized, semi-colonized and dependent zones of the world-economy occupied in the main by people of color” (Bush 2006).

Leaders such as Malcolm X and Dr. King, and organizations such as SNCC, SDS, and the Congress of Racial Equality began to look for ways to embrace and work in concert with anticolonial movements across the globe (Bush 2009:169). Transformative social movements are/were decidedly not national, but global in nature and at the heart of these social movements, we find endurance, patience, and humanism. For, social movements are not an event but a process.

IV. The Long Road toward Freedom

Episodic examinations that study isolated historical events rather than processes, or individuals rather than movements, fail to demonstrate the links, trends, and mechanisms of both revolutionary struggle and change. Hence, the frustration of many so-called social commentators who misidentify the end of a movement and misunderstand what appears as the retrenchment and rearticulating of the system. They misinterpret the lull in the quest for justice as an end, not a moment.

Rod states “There is now some talk among scholars and radical activists about a Long Civil Rights Movement, which extends the movement backwards in time from its traditional beginning with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. That is simply not long enough, not by a long shot” (Bush cited by Jacobs 2006). The long road toward freedom started with the first African that was forced to

board a ship to a distant land, continued as the first child was born in the belly of a slave ship, was heard in the hollers, grunts, moans, and laughter of families picking cotton. This road that shifts through the blues, jazz, spirituals, soul, hip-hop, and gansta rap, from sit-ins and marching, to riots and shouting, from boycotts and law suits, to work stoppages and letter writing. A long road that went from Mississippi fields to the gold mines of Ghana, from the Ivory Coasts to the concrete jungles, from Prison Cells to the White House. It is a road that we continue to tread.

The concept of the “Long March” demonstrates the continuity between events, the structures that support change, the making and shaping of individuals and movements, and the processes which invest the struggles with energy, purpose, and direction especially during moments of rest. An analogy might be fruitful.

Consider bodybuilding, where one works muscles through exercise, weight training and diet. We often think only of the active portion of this process, but what happens during those states of rest is just as important. The rest pause is used by professional body-builders as a means of maximizing their individual workouts. This technique not only helps fatigue the muscle fibers, but can also help break through challenging strength and growth plateaus. Similarly, muscles and the energy systems that fuel them need time to recover. In other words, even though individual body parts are getting rest days, the overall nervous system, which fuels training for all those body parts, must itself have rest days free from the demands of weight training. If the nervous system does not get that rest, it will soon burn out and training will be severely impacted.

Therefore, the notion of the achievement of social justice as a “long march” helps us understand that those episodes of what seem to be “rest” in social movement history are necessary to allow the community to recover, regroup, and consolidate the various victories of the specific revolutionary moment. As Rod Bush implies, we often confuse revolutionary minutes with revolutionary movements. Such confusion leads to the conditions of revolutionary fatigue, stasis, and ultimately personal withdrawal or defeat.

Taking Bush's Long March allows us to understand that Black radical politics are part of the fabric of U.S. life and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Why? Because the African slave trade and the displacement of the Native Americans was foundational in the establishment of the capitalist system.¹ Race and racial animus created this nation. The blood of slaves and indigenous peoples fueled the profits and the market system. These created a political culture that underlies the notions of "we the people" and capitalism. Only by understanding these racist roots can we understand the very essence of the structure.

This structure, which translates into a racial hierarchical system where Blacks and Native Americans are at the bottom, is neither a coincidence nor a necessity. As Rod informs us, "This stratification order was elaborated into a system of world white supremacy, which replaced the religious-based competition of the pre-capitalist world."² For unless we understand that the positionality of Black and Indigenous people in the modern world have their roots in this system, we cannot understand how it can be transformed. This work continues, as a new cadre of scholars begins the long walk began by Rod Bush.

V. Passing the Baton

Perhaps this is where the baton that has been passed for Bush highlights the necessity of reimagining black workers and their organizational struggles and understanding how African-American workers have experienced class identities historically, in ways that may diverge from ideological models. Such a view would recast Malcolm X seeing how he brought a message of both self-love and hope from the streets of Harlem to a national stage. It embraced black identity, Africa writ large, while also reaching out to a broader national agenda. The post-Mecca Malcolm recognized the politics of both struggle and cross racial, class and national coalitions. This worldview, using

1. <https://mronline.org/2006/09/25/its-not-race-or-class-its-race-and-class-an-interview-with-roderick-bush/>

2. *Ibid.*

Bush's term, recognized the "long march" toward both liberty and justice. It recognized that it is accomplished one-step, one election, one revolutionary moment at a time.

Rod Bush's journey for justice is best understood as a quest for social justice derived from his interrogation of imperialism, racism, and exploitation. He was critical of complacent sociology that frequently misdiagnosed social movements, misinterpreted social protests, and misunderstood how to bring about meaningful change. He proposed that the agency of change begins at the grassroots level and extends outward. Bush demonstrated that the sequence of events that produced the modern racial state were wrapped in the language of freedom and democracy, but were birthed out of the misery of black, red, brown, tan, and yes white laborers. This praxis for change represents a new consciousness, much like Black Nationalist consciousness that, according to Bush, "... almost always appears to most whites as a great ideological transformation, and a quite unfathomable transformation at that. However, it should not be a mystery" (1999:3). Rod's emphasis on radical Black Nationalism is to point out distinctive ways in which revolutionary change can come about.

Yet as I consider the work of Rod Bush, I am more inclined to think in terms of a relay race, where Rod has now passed on the baton. As I consider that race in particular, one of the things I will remember most is Rod's smile. A smile that through it all suggested a hope in the future, a faith in the possibilities of the struggle, and a confidence that the dreams of a socially just world were not only worth the effort, but obtainable. For Bush, the only way effectively to transform the system of race and class was to dismantle the corporate structure of worldwide capitalism.

For Rod Bush, it was always more about the journey than the destination. This journey for Rod was filled with wonder and promise, joy and determination, excellence and enthusiasm, and possibilities and opportunities. So, as we who yet remain in the race contemplate our next steps, considering Rod's quest for social justice will not only be instructive but encouraging, and, as we do so let us never forget his smile. A smile that suggested he knew where the road would lead, he

understood the nature of our struggle, and he had confidence that we would someday get to that “promised land.” Moreover, recognizing this, Rod could smile.

Thanks my brother for the vision, the journey, and the smile.

Abstract

This essay by Rodney D. Coates, titled “Rod Bush and the Quest for Social Justice: Beyond Binary Constructs of Race and Class,” is a chapter in the anthology *Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice*, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). Coates argues that Rod Bush’s journey for justice is best understood as a quest for social justice derived from his interrogation of imperialism, racism, and exploitation, to move beyond binary constructions of race and class. He was critical of complacent sociology that frequently misdiagnosed social movements, misinterpreted social protests, and misunderstood how to bring about meaningful change. He proposed that the agency of change begins at the grassroots level and extends outward. Bush demonstrated that the sequence of events that produced the modern racial state were wrapped in the language of freedom and democracy, but were birthed out of the misery of black, red, brown, tan, and yes white laborers. This praxis for change represents a new consciousness, much like Black Nationalist consciousness that, according to Bush, “... almost always appears to most whites as a great ideological transformation, and a quite unfathomable transformation at that. But it should not be a mystery.” Rod’s emphasis on radical Black Nationalism is to point out distinctive ways in which revolutionary change can come about.

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Rodney D. Coates is a professor in the Department of Global and Intercultural Studies at Miami University. He was born in East St. Louis, Ill., received his B.A. from Southern Illinois University, a M.A. in sociology and anthropology from the University of Illinois, a second M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago. Dr. Coates specializes in the study of race and ethnic relations, inequality, critical race theory, and social justice. He has a well-developed and highly productive research agenda oriented toward utilizing sociological insights to identify, research and pose solutions to real life problems. This focus has produced an important and significant body of scholarship, which informs and attempts to transform our social universe and has frequently garnered national recognition. His 2004 edited book

Race and Ethnicity: Across time, space and discipline (Brill) won the Choice award from the American Library Association. Dr. Coates has been recognized both nationally and locally—e.g., in 2007 Coates received the Joseph Himes Career Award in Scholarship and Activism from the Association of Black Sociologists. In 2010, he received the Edward Said Award for Public Sociology from Sociologists without Borders. This past year he received the Founders Award for Scholarship and Service from the American Sociological Association. As a professor at Miami University, he has won the Global Teaching and Learning Award (2013) and Distinguished Teaching Award (2014). Dr. Coates is an associate editor for *Critical Sociology*. Most recently, he co-authored *The Matrix of Race: Social Construction, Intersectionality, and Inequality* (Sage, 2018).

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