

**Q&A with Michael Long, editor of *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters***

*Q: For those unfamiliar with Bayard Rustin, can you briefly tell us about him, and also address why there is, perhaps, a broader lack of knowledge about his life and accomplishments?*

Bayard Rustin was arguably the most important figure in nonviolent protest politics in twentieth-century America. Today he is best known for being the brilliant organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. But before he directed that pinnacle event in protest politics, he was one of the most important intellectual and tactical leaders of the civil rights movement. He schooled Martin Luther King, Jr., in nonviolence as a lifestyle and tactic, and advised him on numerous campaigns throughout the civil rights movement.

Rustin was an openly gay man with early roots in the Communist Party. These two factors—his gay sexuality and his early association with communists—gave rise to fears in civil rights leaders concerned about maintaining the credibility of the movement. With these fears in tow, they often sought to keep Rustin in the background of their activities. They wanted to use Rustin's vision and strategic thinking, but they were frightened that his gay sexuality, especially, would taint them in the eyes of the wider public.

Thanks to historians like David Garrow and John D'Emilio, Rustin has recently emerged out of the shadows of U.S. history. My hope is that this new City Lights book will shine a spotlight on his rich contributions to the cause of peace and justice in the United States and beyond.

*Q: How did you become aware of Rustin's role in the civil rights movement yourself, and what inspired you to begin the research involved in editing a collection of his correspondence? How much of the material you researched/read made it into this volume? What was the criterion for selection? Were there any surprises along the way?*

I first became aware of Bayard many years ago when I read David Garrow's brilliant book on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement. More recently, I decided to focus on him because he brings together, in one person, so many of my interests. Rustin was an African American, pacifist, socialist, and gay civil rights leader. Given my interest in these overlapping fields, he was the perfect storm! And what a stormy life he had. When I first read his prison letters, which detail his inner struggles with his gay sexuality, and when I first learned that King was frightened of being too closely associated with Rustin's sexuality, I was completely hooked on his life. Here was a man whose principled commitments sometimes ran far deeper than even King's.

*Q: Can you also address how the collection and analysis of an individual's personal correspondence tells their biography?*

I have file boxes full of Rustin letters that I tracked down in archives across the country. The time it took to complete the research was much longer than I had predicted, not just because of the number of letters I had in hand, but also especially because of their high quality. It was incredibly difficult to weed out those letters I really liked but that did not serve the purpose of putting together a publishable narrative of letters. And there are quite a few of those that are topically fascinating but not easily fitting for a narrative.

I chose letters with the following questions in mind: Do they tell us anything new about Bayard? Do they offer special insights into the history of nonviolent struggle? And can they serve my efforts to share Bayard's life in a chronologically tight way?

One of the most interesting parts of the collection is his use of code language when writing

about his love life from prison. In some of the letters, and for obvious reasons, he refers to his gay lover as a woman. These letters are especially painful to read because they reveal awful agonies over his sexuality—including his question of whether it would be good to develop a relationship with a woman who has declared her love for him.

Most surprising to me, though, was the letter in which he offered his support to the mayor of Philadelphia just after he bombed a house occupied by Move, the radical black liberation group. Although a pacifist, Rustin had long believed in the value of police action. But the fact that he supported the dropping of a bomb on Move seems out of character.

I find this book especially important because it allows us to hear Bayard Rustin in his own voice. It gives us the opportunity to hear Rustin speak for himself. In no way am I dismissing the value of interpretive biographies; in fact, my book uses interpretive introductions throughout. But there is incredible evocative power in hearing Rustin speaking more than two decades after his death, especially given recent events like the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement—the type of campaigns for human liberation that Rustin addressed so richly in his letters. Because this book offers Rustin in his own voice, readers can actually feel Bayard’s principled passion come to life, and enjoy the opportunity to learn from him directly about the best ways to achieve peace and justice.

*Q: This may be difficult, but based on your research, do you have a sense of how Rustin might have perceived Obama’s presidency?*

Rustin long hoped that civil rights activists would be able to move “from protest to politics.” While he recognized the value of street demonstrations, he also believed that there comes a

time when activists need to get off the street and move into the corridors of power, where hard decisions about the resources required for peace and justice are made. In this sense, Rustin applauded many African American politicians who sought political office; he saw these efforts as a move to become effective in political society—a requisite for moving toward peace and justice. I hasten to add, though, that he did not support Jesse Jackson in his bid for the presidency, primarily because he believed that Jackson lacked any appeal to voters beyond the African American community. Rustin was committed to coalition politics in the way that the current president seems to be.

*Q: Analyzing the current Occupy movement, is there any tactical advice you might be able to offer the participants gleaned from your studies of Rustin's lifetime of activism?*

Rustin occupied Washington, D.C., before the Occupy movement did. For a brief time, he even headed a key part of the Poor Peoples Campaign, during which poor folks of all colors set up Resurrection City, replete with makeshift tents, in Washington, D.C. Rustin's belief in the tactical value of occupation was also clear in his efforts to occupy the part of the Sahara where France ended up detonating its first atomic bomb. Rustin thought that entering and occupying that area would have precluded France from carrying their plans out. Although his tactics failed on some level—France eventually conducted an atomic explosion on African soil—he did draw the world's attention to that terrible injustice. Rustin's tactical advice often centered on timing and message: Choose a time when you will not contribute to a backlash, and keep your message centered on a unified and coherent theme. Beyond this, though, he warned those who applauded the use of police action to shut down protests. Beware, he said—The same military action you're applauding now would immediately turn on you, too, if you dare to stand up against injustices perpetrated by our government and business leaders.

