

Rod Bush and the quest for justice

When one typically is asked to review the life's work of another, some might think in terms of a definite start and finish. Born in 1945. Died in 2013, it may include mention of his major works to include. ...The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line (Temple University Press, 2007) and We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 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. As I consider the work of Rod Bush, I am inclined to think of in terms of a relay race, where Rod has passed on the baton. And I remember most of all 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 was not only worth the effort but were obtainable. But for Rod Bush, it was still more about the journey than the destination. And for Rod that journey 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, perhaps considering Rod's quest for social justice might be not only instructive but encouraging, and as we do so let us not forget his smile.

Rod's journey for justice is best understood as a quest for both understanding and remedies. Critical of the navel gazing sociologists that frequently gather to sip wine and bemoan the darkness, he chose to interrogate that darkness and reveal the praxis of change. This praxis for change involves what Bush articulates as a black Nationalist consciousness...that appears to most whites as a great ideological transformation, and a quite unfathomable transformation at that. But it should not be a mystery. Black nationalism has been a significant component of black consciousness for over 200 years, varying in intensity over time, place and circumstance." Perhaps it has been such a mystery, particularly among sociologists who have a penchant for oversimplification, historical conservatism, and ideological reductionism. While treating race, class, gender, sexuality individually, and asserting a value neutral position we invariably find ourselves not unlike the hamster on the treadmill or sisyphus pushing the intellectual boulders up the hill(writing, publishing,

and pimping the problems) just to watch it fall back down again. No wonder so many in our trade, especially ideologues (you name your flavor-Marxist, weberian, or structuralist), becomes disenchanted, jaded or is it gelded. Perhaps, they forgot the basic reasons many outs were attracted to the field of sociology -the quest for social justice. Reading the work of Rod Bush is refreshing in this regard, for he neither lost his passion nor his focus, he stayed the course and ran the race.

How did Bush stay on course? Perhaps through what he called "the long March". All too often, we tend to have historical myopia or amnesia when we think off black and the struggle for justice. Hence, there are those who wonder at the sudden explosions that mark the 1960s, and fail to link this to the continuous revolutionary struggles that started with the first slave rebellions on the first slave ships as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean, over 400 years ago. The problem, as explained by bush, is that we often cut and dice the various explosions -Nat turners rebellion, shays rebellion, Haitian revolution, African-Seminole wars, the genocide and displacement of Native Americans, las Amsted and the Civil war, African, Middle eastern and Indian colonialism, the Chinese Exclusions and Japanese internment, which all led up to the 1960 civil Rights movement. Episodic examinations fail to demonstrate the links, trends, and processes of both revolutionary struggle and change. Hence, the frustration as one misidentifies the end of the movement, misunderstands what appears as the retrenchment and rearticulation of the system, and misinterprets the lull in the quest for justice. The "long march" helps by showing the continuity between events, the structures that support changed, and the processes which invest the struggles with energy, purpose, and direction especially during moments of rest. Consider body building, where one works their 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. 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, your 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 bodyparts, must itself have rest days free from the demands of

weight training. If the nervous system doesn't get that rest, it will soon burn out and training will be severely impacted.

Therefore, the "long march" helps us understand that those episodes of rest in social movements 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 and the geoculture or commonsense in which people understand their relationship to one another. This means the development and elaboration of a set of stratification processes based on race, with Blacks on the bottom and Native Americans (or indigenous people) next. This stratification order was elaborated into a system of world white supremacy, which replaced the religious-based competition of the pre-capitalist world."

What this suggests is that black nationalism is part, or should be viewed as a part of a much wider set of processes, interconnected and intertwined. This greater set of processors positions national struggles within a global context. And rightly so. For it was global imperialism and capitalism which created a world system of exploitation based on race and gender stratification. It was this observation that allowed Bush to see past the false dichotomy many confuse between race and class or race and gender. Identity politics, so necessary for the organization impetus associated with various civil, social and human rights struggles is both a benefit and liability. Identity politics can be either a bridge or a barrier to such struggles. Thus, Bush concluded that the politics and programs of Louis Farrakhan was both conservative and a hindrance to not only Black Nationalism, but also justice struggles. He also rejected the Marxist claims of a generic proletariat un-bifurcated by race and nationality (22). Bush viewed the cooperation and marginalization of black labor fostered by Cold War

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liberalism, and the repression of the left in the immediate post-World War II period, African-American social insurgency became “the central force for a just and egalitarian social order within U.S. borders” (155).

And perhaps this is where the baton has been passed. For Bush highlights the necessity of reimagine black workers and their organizational struggles and understand 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 world view, using 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. And recognizing this, Rod could smile. Thanks my brother for the vision, the journey, and the smile.