The 2015 Paul Robeson Conference: 
“From Protest to Politics” – Then and Now
Conference Agenda

Friday, April 10, 2015:

6:00 PM: Doors Open; Dinner
Attendees arrive at Jerome Greene Hall at Columbia Law School, register for the conference by picking up name tags, and enjoy a casual Dominican-style dinner from Tropical Sensation.

6:30 PM – 6:40 PM: Welcome and Conference Overview
Ashok Chandran, Editor-in-Chief of the Columbia Journal of Race and Law, and Aurra Fellows, President of the Columbia Black Law Students Association, will welcome attendees to the Conference and quickly go through the structure and schedule of events.

6:40 PM – 7:00 PM: Opening Remarks
Professor Kendall Thomas, Nash Professor of Law at Columbia Law School, will deliver some opening remarks about Bayard Rustin's life and work, as well as the importance of “From Protest to Politics” in today’s world.

7:00 PM – 8:30 PM: Opening Round Table
Influential civil rights advocates today will speak to Bayard Rustin’s theories of social change, as well as the continued importance of protest politics in social and political change. The round table will seek to discuss a number of questions, among them: What made Rustin’s piece so different from other civil rights writing at the time? How can the strategies urged by Rustin inform our work today? What are the uses and limits of Rustin’s arguments for contemporary civil rights advocacy?

Discussants: Walter Naegle (Rustin's former partner), Robert Gooding-Williams (M. Moran Weston/Black Alumni Council Professor of African-American Studies at Columbia University), Lani Guinier (Bennett Boskey Professor of Law at Harvard Law School), and Carla Shedd (Assistant Professor of Sociology at Columbia University).

Moderated by Kendall Thomas, Nash Professor of Law, Columbia Law School.

Saturday, April 11, 2015:

8:30 AM: Late Registration; Continental Breakfast
Conference attendees are invited to enjoy a continental breakfast and coffee in Jerome Greene Hall before the panels for the day begin. Attendees who were unable to attend the Friday session will have the opportunity to register during this time as well.

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM: The Politics of Detention: Mass Incarceration and Immigration Reform
When Bayard Rustin wrote in 1965, he could not have imagined the extent to which issues involving mass incarceration and immigration would shape civil rights efforts today. Today, despite only accounting for 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. has 25% of the world’s prison population; this mass incarceration model
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of criminal justice has played out along severely racialized lines. Prison conditions, sentencing biases, and broken windows policing have traumatized communities of color. Immigration realities present similar problems. In 2011, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) held a record-breaking 429,000 immigrants in over 250 facilities across the country, many of which are nearly indistinguishable from America’s prisons. How can Rustin’s piece inform our thinking about these modern civil rights issues? For many prisoners, undocumented individuals, and others with limited political capacities, is protest the preferred form of addressing issues?

Panelists: Ekow Yankah (Professor of Law at Cardozo Law School), Mona Lynch (Professor of Criminology, Law & Society at University of California—Irvine), Marlon Peterson (Founder of Spread Mass Love).
Moderated by Susan Sturm, George M. Jaffin Professor of Law and Social Responsibility, Columbia Law School

Rustin’s thesis dealt with the idea of structural economic reform, but such overhauls did not become the focus of the Civil Rights Movement. Today still, we have not made much progress on this front. Instead, we live in a world defined by broken unions, gutted economic rights, and heightened neoliberal capitalism witnessed through measures such as NAFTA, WTO, and TRIP, which create a global class of economically marginalized people. What are the implications of this globalization on Rustin’s thesis?

Panelists: Suresh Naidu (Assistant Professor in Economics and International and Public Affairs), Biju Mathew (Co-Founder, New York Taxi Workers Alliance), Amin Husain (Editor of Tidal Occupy Theory magazine).
Moderated by Shan Khan, J.D. Candidate, 2015, Columbia Law School

11:30 AM – 12:30 PM: Protest and Politics: Voting Rights Reform and Electoral Politics
Recent legal developments in electoral law have caused many to question the traditional emphasis on participatory politics in American social movements. In a nation where campaign financing is increasingly deregulated and voter suppression is on the rise, historically progressive groups of voters—communities of color, young people, lower class persons—are playing an increasingly marginal role in mainstream politics, whether by exclusion or by political disillusionment. In this climate of voter suppression and voter apathy, what is the role and relative importance of protest politics? How do grassroots movements offer an alternative to—or potential reform strategy for—the existing political and electoral landscape?

Panelists: Tomas Lopez (Counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice Democracy Program), Julie Ebenstein (Staff Attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union Voting Rights Project), Leah Aden (Assistant Counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund Political Participation Group).
Moderated by Jessica Bulman-Pozen, Associate Professor of Law, Columbia Law School

12:30 PM – 1:45 PM: Lunch Break

2:00 PM – 3:00 PM: Social Equality: Access to Housing, Education, and Social Services
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In Protest to Politics, Bayard Rustin expressed doubt that the civil rights movement could be victorious without "radical programs for full employment, abolition of slums, [and] the reconstruction of our educational system." Fifty years later, many of the inequalities that Rustin rightly believed would only be undone by large-scale programs and a refashioning of our political economy still exist. Minorities still face bleak prospects in areas of housing, education, and access to healthcare. Schools are more segregated today than they were before the decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court threatens to dismantle the Fair Housing Act, and the rise of food deserts has led to skyrocketing levels of urban malnutrition. As a result, we must ask some difficult question. Can protests work to eliminate disparities in housing, education and access to healthcare? What is the state of civil rights advocacy in the aftermath of the weakening of legal reform efforts?

Panelists: Theodore Shaw (Julius L. Chambers Distinguished Professor of Law and Director of the Center for Civil Rights at UNC School of Law), Rob Robinson (Founder of Take Back the Land Movement), Mindy Fullilove (Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Professor of Clinical Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University Medical Center).
Moderated by Olatunde Johnson, Professor of Law, Columbia Law School.

Bayard Rustin has only recently become a nationally recognized figure for his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, largely as a result of his sexual identity. This exposes the ways in which mainstream racial justice advocacy has erased and marginalized other vectors of identity in its efforts for progress. Such erasure is, unfortunately, not merely a historical phenomenon. Many scholars and practitioners alike have pointed out the shortcomings of current measures such as My Brother’s Keeper in their failure to address the problems facing black women. Today, as we organize contemporary racial justice movements, we must ask who is being left out by our strategies. How can we build inclusive movements that do not reinforce patriarchal or heterosexist social structures?

Panelists: Alondra Nelson (Dean of Social Science and Columbia University), Che Gossett (Community Archivist at Barnard Center for Research on Women), Mandy Carter (Director of the Bayard Rustin Commemoration Project).
Moderated by Arielle Reid, J.D. Candidate, 2015, Columbia Law School.

4:30 PM – 5:15 PM: Closing Remarks
Professor Olatunde Johnson, Professor of Law at Columbia Law School, will deliver closing remarks to frame the lessons of the Conference for advocates in today’s civil rights movement.