Rosa Parks case study

This is a downloaded version of the material from Week 2 Section 5.

5.1 Introducing Rosa Parks

The United States of the 20th century was a hostile place for Black people, particularly its southern states, those that had pioneered and defended slavery. Public spaces and private businesses were segregated, with buses being a visible example. Black people had to sit at the back of the bus, so white people could sit at the front. However, when the white zone was full, white people were entitled to eject Black people from their seats. They could also eject Black people sitting in the same row, as sitting alongside one another could – in the minds of racist legislators and enforcers of the law – signal dangerous ideas of equality.

While racism is still common in the US (and UK), major breakthroughs made by the civil rights movement from the 1950s secured victories against white power holders. The fabric of US civil rights is woven from many threads, but one that stands out is the leadership of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott.

Figure 8 US civil rights leader Rosa Parks

In school, many of us are taught that Rosa Parks was an older, apolitical, church-going seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama, who, being tired one evening after a hard day's work, refused to vacate her seat on the bus and was arrested by police. This solitary, one-off act on 1 December 1955, we are taught, started a cascade of resistance, beginning with a city-wide boycott of buses by Black residents. The boycott lasted over a year, coming to an end when the Supreme Court ruled on the illegality of bus segregation. Along the way, the Parks story had inspired a nation to act against racial segregation. It is an inspirational story, one that appeals to people's sense of a universal goodness overcoming hate. However, the way the story is commonly told, with regards to Rosa Parks herself and the role of women in

the bus boycott, is usually wrong or partial in important ways, and understanding how and why can help unearth important dynamics of leadership.

5.2 Political Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks was politically aware, astute and active all of her adult life. At the time of her arrest she was 42 – not an older woman at all – and had already proved to be a capable activist and organiser. She was a prominent and active leader within the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the major civil rights organisation of the time. She took a particular interest in developing the political agency and education of young people, leading the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP's Youth Council (she would later embrace the Detroit Youth Council). This commitment to young people persisted throughout Rosa Parks' life, as she saw developing the knowledge and abilities of young people as essential for leadership to enhance justice and equity. Rosa Parks had also attended a two-week workshop on desegregation at the Highlander Folk School, a trailblazing organisation dedicated to developing leadership and organising skills for social change. The techniques and ideas she learnt there expanded her knowledge, contacts and nous.

Rosa Parks had been ejected from the bus in Montgomery before – for refusing to re-enter it at the back door, having paid for her ticket at the front. Other people had also resisted bus segregation. As stated by Theoharis and Burgin:

> Viola White [was] beaten and fined $10 [in 1944]; her case was still in appeals when she passed away 10 years later. In 1950, police shot and killed Hilliard Brooks, a World War II veteran, when he boarded the bus after having a few drinks and refused to reboard from the back door—and the police were called. Witnesses rebutted the officer's claims that he acted in self-defence, but he wasn't prosecuted.
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> (Theoharis and Burgin, 2015)

In March 1955, only nine months before Rosa Parks' protest, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old girl, was convicted for refusing to give up her seat to a white person earlier in the year. Many people in the civil rights movement wanted to start a boycott of the buses after Claudette Colvin's arrest. Rosa Parks herself worked for Claudette Colvin's cause as a fundraiser (Theoharis, 2015).

Rosa Parks never compromised on her belief in the possibility for radical change. After starting to work for Detroit congressman John Conyers in 1965, she dedicated herself to hands-on organising on behalf of local people while also encouraging young people to be bold enough to pursue militant action when necessary.

Her political outlook was both principled and pragmatic (Theoharis, 2015). She appreciated the legacy of love and non-violent resistance pioneered by Martin Luther King Jr., with the intention of appealing to the better angels of a majority of people in the US. However, she also believed in self-defence when necessary, embracing some of the ideas and ethos of the Black Power movement. She would pass on this belief in pragmatic and principled values to the young people she helped.

Theoharis equates Rosa Parks' politics to her skill as a seamstress making quilts:

> The faith that from small pieces would emerge a majestic whole, the ability to sew from many places and to see the value in new materials for the colour and texture of the quilt, informed her political life…[New swatches] would be sewn into the existing whole because she could see how [they] came out of other designs and helped give added dimension to the emerging pattern. Above all, the need for people to work together and not be divided, for people to be able to pitch in to assist the actions of others, was key to her philosophy: ‘In quilting maybe somebody would come in to visit, it might be a friend, and would just join in and help.’
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> (Theoharis, 2015, p. 219-220)

The experience and leadership ability of Rosa Parks meant that when she was told to vacate her seat, she could see the potential political significance of the moment.

5.3 Gendered leadership in Montgomery

Montgomery was generally a more patriarchal place than most, with formal leadership roles dominated by men. This was also the case within the Montgomery civil rights movement (Theoharis, 2015), where the most established figures were male church ministers. However, there was plenty of vibrant leadership from Montgomery’s Black women, which has been largely overlooked in white retellings of the story.

The work of the Women’s Political Council (WPC) was particularly important to the success of the struggle. Formed in 1946 by the academic Mary Fair Burks, the WPC was a political organisation that sought practical ways of fighting racism. As noted by Christensen (2008), the focus of the WPC was on educating Black people about rights and designing and organising protest actions and campaigns against segregation. Jo Ann Robinson succeeded Burks as WPC president in 1950, and by the time of the arrests in 1955, the WPC had grown to over 200 active members, mostly women scholars and educators (Brice and Taylor, 2020).

Under Jo Ann Robinson’s leadership, the WPC had the imagination to identify Montgomery’s buses as an important site for protest – after all, 70% of bus users were Black people, so a boycott action could cripple the service. By the time of Claudette Colvin’s arrest, the WPC had formulated a strategy for action. They had tried the more conventional tactics of writing to people in power locally and seeking meetings with them. This approach was unsuccessful, so the group would now pursue a more radical approach – a boycott. The WPC was overruled by the local clergy, however. When Rosa Parks was arrested, the WPC would not be outmanoeuvred again. It printed flyers announcing a boycott and distributed them around the Black areas of Montgomery. This act forced the hand of the church leaders, who felt compelled to support the boycott.

Montgomery’s patriarchal structure was further evidenced by the way in which Rosa Parks’ biography was presented to the country at large. While her activist roots were not concealed, it was her identity as a worker and modestly presented churchgoer that was presented to the public. The male leadership – and indeed the US population in general – were deemed not yet ready to embrace the cause of someone who was a worker, seasoned organiser *and* a woman.

After accepting the need for the boycott, the Montgomery ministers appointed as spokesman a certain Martin Luther King Jr., who was relatively unknown at the time. As noted by Fairclough (1986, p. 408), the selection of King 'a virtual newcomer…is perhaps the most revealing comment on the timidity of the local clergy'. King would be a useful scapegoat were the boycott to fail, allowing the ministers to revert to their preferred tactic of seeking slow, cautious change. As fate would have it, of course, King would become a great charismatic leader, whose speeches could electrify mass audiences.

But behind him, providing the infrastructure, know-how and initial vision for the boycott action, was a group of women leaders. These leaders included Rosa Parks. After her arrest, Parks worked tirelessly behind the scenes in Montgomery, answering phones and helping to co-ordinate the city-wide carpool, a service that was continuously and violently attacked by racist police officers and members of the public. Rosa Parks was an important figure in gaining support for the boycott around the US, touring the country as an effective and inspiring public speaker, yet she was never called to speak in Montgomery, which privileged male leaders.

Rosa Parks was arrested a second time during the boycott. The city found a law from 1903 that banned boycotts, and 115 boycott leaders were indicted on 21 February 1956. Because they did not want Martin Luther King to be isolated – and to show collective strength and solidarity – the leaders decided to turn themselves in, with Parks among the first to do so (Theoharis, 2015). This is where the famous picture of her giving fingerprints comes from. It was a deft leadership move, which further enhanced the dignified determination of the boycotters in contrast to the brutish city administration.

Figure 9 Rosa Parks being fingerprinted following her arrest in 1956

Rosa Parks experienced terrible hardships after her stand. She faced frequent death threats, public attacks, job loss and poverty. Her husband, Raymond, supported her by caring for her mother and tending to the home. This was a flipping of roles for the family, which defied the patriarchal norms of the times. The Parks family was continuously on the edge of financial ruin – both Rosa and Raymond were forced out of their jobs. The formal boycott leaders needed reminding to support the Parks family with occasional fundraising.

The poverty did not ease for the Parks family, who moved to Detroit after the boycott. They struggled through a series of low-paid, insecure jobs. A young aspiring Detroit politician, John Conyers, was taken aback – and in some awe – when Rosa Parks attended one of his campaign meetings unannounced. After he was elected in 1964, he employed her in his office, recognising her organisational skill and broad appeal and bringing her financial difficulties to an end. The two formed a formidable team. In testament to the ethical integrity of Rosa Parks, she once approached Conyers to ask for a reduction in salary, because she felt she was spending too much time making appearances and speeches in support of civil rights rather than working for his office. Conyers refused this suggestion. Regardless of her own poverty, Rosa Parks showed her steadfast commitment to the cause of equality. She used all the means at her disposal to effect change, always putting the cause ahead of her own material needs.

It is only more recently that the rich details of the life and achievements of Rosa Parks have gained wider public attention. Within her story lie countless others, stories of inspirational Black women who worked together to change the world – all of whom had to work through significant prejudice related to the colour of their skin, gender and social class. It is also a story in which management, command and leadership overlap and clash.