

Students' podcast transcript:

The Power of the Spectacle, Rosa Parks and The Montgomery Bus Boycott

Holly: Hello, and welcome to our podcast 'The Power of the Spectacle, Rosa Parks and The Montgomery Bus Boycott'. I'm Holly.

Hallam: I'm Hallam.

Katie: And I'm Katie and we will be your hosts for today, discussing the civil rights movement in America, and specifically the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Holly: The term 'civil rights *movement*' dedicates the core of the struggle not just to the iconic individuals, and moments, but to the 'breadth of its vision, leaders, strategies and struggles'.

Hallam: Today we will explore this through the idea of historical consciousness, as 'the area in which collective memory, the writing of history; and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge' to create Rosa Parks as an icon, and mythologise her and her contributions.

Katie: Additionally, we will examine how modern historians are trying to challenge and change this historical consciousness; through moving away from the 'Great Man' narrative, a historical theory that key men or heroes are the propellers of historical change. Accordingly they are placing at the forefront other individuals like Claudette Colvin who were marginalised, as well as organisations such as the Women's Political Council, that played a pivotal role in campaigning for civil rights.

Holly: The civil rights movement is a widely taught and well known subject in schools, especially at A Level, so why is exploring new historiography necessary?

Hallam: Jeanne Theoharis has identified that histories of community action, and identifying the forces of justice can be both challenging and empowering to young people. They indicate that they do not have to be heroic figures like Rosa Parks to have an impact.

Holly: That sounds complex! Let's start with a brief overview of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the role of Rosa Parks.

Hallam: On December 1st 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery Alabama, and was arrested and charged, leading to the profoundly impactful protest 4 days later.

Katie: The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted for over a year, ending on December 20th 1956, 90% of the black population of Montgomery refused to take any public transport to protest the segregated seating.

Hallam: The boycott ended with the passing of Browder vs Gayle in 1956, which declared segregated seating unconstitutional as it violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and soon after, similar states followed suit.

Katie: The boycott and the ending of transport segregation also had the effect of projecting Martin Luther King Jr's status as a leader of the civil rights movement.

Holly: Due to her actions, Rosa Parks has since been given the title 'mother of the civil rights movement', taking on a legendary status. So, how has she been mythologised?

Hallam: The mythologisation of individuals, such as Parks, refers to the process of creating a heroic and monumental narrative; deifying events, and elevating them beyond their historical context. Focusing on these legendary figures can create its own challenges, marginalising other important individuals who don't receive the same recognition.

Holly: But why did her success have longevity?

Katie: Sina Kramer argues 'Parks's success as a political agent in this instance is arguably based on the lasting national narrative of her as taking a largely non-political action'.

Hallam: This narrative transformed her from a political subject into a political object, obscuring her history as an activist fighting for equality and freedom. It's this representation of her actions that has contributed to the production of her mythologisation.

Holly: These narratives of Rosa Parks have been reified in collective memory, often using media to reinforce certain narratives, and this public history has been the focus of recent historiography.

Holly: So what tools have created this mythologisation?

Hallam: Memory, especially collective memory, is a powerful historical tool, that can be defined as a shared conception of events which shapes or often distorts reality. This makes it instrumental in mythologising the roles of figures in social movements both at the time and in the present day.

Katie: Institutionalisation further molds memory into a digestible and simplified format which erases controversies and disagreements to create a consensus collective memory.

Hallam: This consensus collective memory has been widely adopted within the civil rights movement, exemplified by Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat. Her transformation into an icon immediately following this act was solidified through the interplay of public memory and institutionalisation.

Holly: What other factors influenced public memory?

Katie: Media plays a crucial role in maintaining a social movement's power and impact. For example, both films and documentaries often blur memory and history, amplifying the heroization of figures and moments.

Hallam: This is evident in contemporary photos and modern documentaries, such as Julie Dash's 'The Rosa Parks Story'.

Hallam: Whilst this film does challenge the male centred narratives of the civil rights movement, it does not address the mythologisation of Rosa Parks or challenge the conventions of the civil rights film genre, but instead maintains and reinforces these narratives.

Katie: Ron Eyerman argues that “memory must be articulated and narrated in a compelling way before it can be transmitted to a wider public”. This is shown in the way organisations harnessed the power of the spectacle through their understanding of public mechanisms to mold and craft themselves to disseminate their narratives in response.

Holly: Do you have an example of this?

Hallam: Yes, photographs taken December 21st 1956, the day after the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, depict Parks sat in the former ‘white section’ of the bus. This recreation of her moment of defiance is one of the most well known photographs of the civil rights movement.

Katie: As Katharina Fackler has highlighted, it had a dual purpose of empowering her action and creating a nonthreatening image through her employment of the visual politics of respectability. This is created through a sense of feminine modesty, evident in her dress, pose, and humble demeanour.

Hallam: Whilst this photograph was circulated extensively, Parks’ mugshot remained in a Sheriff’s office basement in Montgomery until its discovery in 2004, exemplary of the narrative of respectability that the civil rights movement wanted to promote.

Holly: Ok, so memory has influenced and been influenced by media and institutions; and the impact of the resulting collective consensus memory has produced and sustained the iconization of figures like Rosa Parks.

Holly: Why was this mythologisation necessary for the civil rights movement?

Hallam: Rosa Parks’ mythologisation was necessary as she was a credible figure and an active member of the NAACP. Her dignified image appealed to the broad, diverse audience whilst avoiding controversy linked to her personal life.

Katie: Parks embraced this composed and dignified persona, leveraging it during the Montgomery Bus Boycott campaign to improve their public image. This tactic reflects a broader pattern throughout the civil rights movement; where individuals or small groups were elevated to be hailed as heroes, so that the wider movement had an icon to rally behind.

Holly: So for the movement, she was a figurehead who sacrificed her personal identity to become a symbol?

Hallam: Yes, that's right. It's exemplified in Ron Eyerman's argument that in order to attract a wider audience, a conscious suppression of certain narratives is often necessary to promote those perceived as more 'respectable', highlighting the visual politics of respectability.

Holly: Ah, so employing visual politics of respectability as a strategy fostered unity within the movement, made its goals more palatable to mainstream American society. This approach was particularly effective, as it countered stereotypes that were often used to undermine black activists.

Holly: What are the problems with mythologising icons?

Hallam: Timothy Kubal and Rene Becerra describe the effects of collective memory as a powerful cultural resource used to build active movement communities, shape public opinion, and influence institutional action.

Katie: Rosa Parks was not the primary direct force behind the integration of the Montgomery buses, as she was not even part of the Browder vs Gayle court case, but she still became an icon for the movement because of her respectable image with no potential of harmful connotations.

Hallam: However, the concept of respectability that placed Rosa Parks at the forefront of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is also the same power that marginalised all the stories of women who 'remain on the fringe of consciousness'. After all, Parks was not the first to refuse to give up her seat, nor the first to be arrested.

Holly: Can you give me any examples of this marginalisation?

Katie: Claudette Colvin is one. 9 months prior to Parks, Colvin, aged 15, refused to give up her seat on the bus. Her youth and darker skin, combined with her turbulent arrest and fractured upbringing, meant that Colvin was not viewed as aligning with the respectable image that the movement wanted to project. On the other hand, Parks became an icon of the movement because her image carried the required respectability, with none of the personal baggage that Colvin had in her youth.

Hallam: By introducing Claudette Colvin to civil rights courses, the aim is not to replace Rosa Parks, but rather to examine and include other aspects of the civil rights movement which have been marginalised due to the tendency to focus on the 'Great Man' narrative of key men, in this case a key woman, solely propelling historical change.

Holly: Colvin's story highlights the need for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the events and individuals that shaped the battle for civil rights.

Holly: How are modern historians challenging the 'Great Man' narrative?

Hallam: Historians are challenging the 'Great Man' narrative by examining the impact of the African American community itself and their role in the success of the boycott. Mcghee has explored the integral nature of the bus system to Montgomery, and found that half of its 44,000 black residents regularly used it for transportation.

Katie: It has been estimated that 90 to 95 percent of riders were black, and 90 percent of all riders boycotted the buses during the protest.

Hallam: Therefore, the 22,000 residents refusing to take the buses had a huge impact on the profitability of the bus service, and highlights the impact of community action.

Holly: Were there any other organisations or figures involved in the boycott?

Katie: Yes, the grassroots organizations actually set about organising the boycott and making it happen. Whilst Rosa Parks' arrest was the spark that inflamed the boycott, it was actually set up and driven by JoAnn Robinson and the Women's Political Council, who were waiting for an appropriate icon to inspire the movement and the community behind it. Black women were the organisers of action, formulated tactics, produced resources for the boycott and printed 52,000 fliers to circulate announcing the boycott.

Hallam: It was the organizations like the Montgomery Improvement Association that negotiated with the city of Alabama to try and secure jobs for black bus drivers, campaigning for funding to support the boycott and also provided other means of transportation for those participating in it.

Holly: Do you have any specific examples of this?

Hallam: After being fired from her job for involvement in the boycott, Georgia Gilmore began producing meals to sell to boycotters and at rallies through what she called the 'Club from Nowhere'. The proceeds of these sales were donated to the Montgomery Improvement Association to help sustain the boycott and provide a model for grassroots community support.

Katie: As Riche Richardson has described, 'At one level, it is important to view such public commemorations of Parks with skepticism and to critique them because the state has routinely appropriated the legacies of radical figures and framed them as national heroes without redressing the political concerns such figures championed'. This appropriation of icons is not restricted to Parks or the civil rights movement, but is prevalent in the lives of activists around the world.

Holly: So, this is a good reminder and way of understanding that it is a civil rights *movement* and there is a *network* of activists, rather than just one or two figures being responsible for the progress made.

Holly: So, to summarise, what have we learnt about mythologising and the civil rights movement?

Hallam: Rosa Parks' mythologisation wields a double edged sword, with both positive and negative consequences for the civil rights movement.

Katie: Absolutely, the harnessing of her simultaneous mythologisation and creation of her public image resulted in the appropriation of her as 'the mother of the civil rights movement'. This was a persona that Parks herself had agency in cultivating as a long standing civil rights activist; and happened both through media and the organisations themselves. This persona helped to sustain and unify the movement, giving ordinary activists an almost mythical set of role models to look up to, which helped to drive the campaign forwards.

Holly: What were the negative consequences of this mythologisation?

Hallam: It marginalised the activism of other groups and individuals, like Claudette Colvin, who was part of the court case *Browder vs Gayle* that ended bus segregation and JoAnn Robinson who led the Women's Political Council and put *Browder vs Gayle* in process. Furthermore, the organisations like the MIA campaigning for black bus drivers have been

sidelined, despite their role providing alternative modes of transportation and negotiating with the city of Alabama; the community of activists who made the boycott happen, who walked instead of using the buses, and ensured the boycotts success were also invaluable.

Holly: So to conclude, in producing this podcast, we hope to provide an update to public consciousness surrounding Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Activists like Rosa Parks are getting the acclaim that they deserve, with the first full body statue of Rosa Parks as an African American in the US Capitol being unveiled in 2013. Whilst these gestures strengthen the place Parks and female civil rights protestors hold in public memory, they also demonstrate how narrow the focus of public history is, as figures like Colvin and JoAnn Robinson are largely invisible in modern collective memory.

Holly: There are figures that have previously been marginalised that were crucial in triggering events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but whose voices are drowned out by the 'Great Man' narrative. Claudette Colvin is only one such example, but there are hundreds of others who have made invaluable contributions to the movement. It's important that we tell their stories, so that we can have a broader understanding of the organisation, which can have implications on the world we live in today.

Holly: There is a list of resources attached below this podcast if you wish to further explore the topic. Thank you all for listening, we hope you enjoyed it.