On Sunday, June 27, in the district of Beyoğlu, Istanbul, a remarkable con-juncture of events and images took place for me, a recent expatriate of the United States. Prior to my arrival, I had been brushing up on contemporary Turkish politics, and had read about Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, or “Gandhi Kemal”, affectionately called because of his apparent physical resemblance to the Indian anti-colonial leader, Mahatma Gandhi. “Gandhi Kemal” is the leader of the staunchly secularist opposition Republican People’s Party, or CHP. The CHP will challenge the party of Prime Minister Erdoğan in the upcoming elections, which is viewed by the secular establishment as somewhat too aligned with religious forces. To begin to understand the tension between Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the CHP, one must appreciate the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, and of his significance in making Turkey a fiercely secular nation. In any event, as we walked down the pedestrian through-fare İstiklal, away from Taksim Square, the contemporary cultural and social capital of this great city, we saw the image of “Gandhi Kemal” in several storefronts, and the legacy and significance of non-violent social protest was on my mind.

As we walked, we came upon a large and boisterous crowd that was waving rainbow flags and carrying protest signs. In an instant, the Gay Pride 2010 Istanbul marchers were before us. The rainbow colors and loud whistles seemed familiar enough, as did the dancing and music, but I did not recognize

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the language in which several of the protest signs were written, other than to realize that it was not Turkish. This writing, I learned, was Kurdish. I was struck by the protesters’ understanding of the relationship between two separate issues here in Turkey—gay rights and the ongoing Kurdish question, which continues to be the most controversial social issue here, particularly in light of the increasing violence between the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish military in the southeastern region of the country. In any event, in keeping with the Gay Pride protesters efforts to link histories and issues that might appear, at first glance, to have little to do with one another, I offer some thoughts about the history of an oppressed group in the United States, with hopes that it might serve to build similar bridges.

When we came across the Gay Pride protesters I was immediately reminded of the Civil Rights Movement and of Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the fight against “Jim Crow” – the social, political, and economic system of racial domination in the southern states that persisted from the 1890s until the mid-1960s. It is useful to recall one of King’s closest advisors: Bayard Rustin. Rustin is mostly a forgotten figure, although his role in the pursuit of racial equality was without equal. He is significant for many reasons: he was the first to bring Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence to the black freedom struggle, which ultimately became a central tactic of the movement, and he was also the principal organizer behind the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom during the summer of 1963, where King delivered his famed “I Have a Dream” speech, after which the last vestiges of Jim Crow came tumbling down. Although many people around the world are familiar with King, I would venture to guess that as many – if not more – are unfamiliar with Rustin.

Two questions arise from this brief sketch: Why is Rustin forgotten? And what is the connection between this history and the slogans I saw in Taksim? The answers to these two questions are closely related.

Rustin was a socialist and pacifist, and was passionately opposed to the US war machine, long before it became more acceptable to voice such opinions during the New Left movements of the late 1960s. Rustin was jailed for more than two years in a federal penitentiary from 1943 until 1946 for refusing to register for the WWII military draft. But this was hardly his most defining incarceration. In 1953, the year that the Civil Rights Movement was taking shape, he was convicted of “sex perversion” in Pasadena, California, after local police found him in the backseat of a parked car, where he was engaged in sexual activity with another man. This event defined Rustin in the eyes of the American public, led to his rupture with various civil rights organizations, and for which he was essentially written out of the history of the Civil Rights Movement.
Movement. In short, had Bayard Rustin not been openly gay, he would most certainly be a more recognized and celebrated figure in the pantheon of black history, and of the international history of freedom fighting.

Speaking in 1987, shortly before his death, Rustin remarked, "Twenty-five, thirty years ago, the barometer of human rights in the United States were black people. That is no longer true. The barometer for judging the character of people in regard to human rights is now those who consider themselves gay, homosexual, or lesbian." The fact that Rustin is largely a forgotten figure, despite his tremendous achievements, would seem to give support to his claim.

The current controversy surrounding the issue of gay rights is certainly not confined to Turkey. In the United States, Obama rallied the gay community and received their overwhelming support, but left many dismayed – if not infuriated – when he chose Pastor Rick Warren to deliver the customary prayer at his presidential inauguration. Obama has come under intense criticism since the first days of his presidency for failing do more to endorse various legislative initiatives concerning gay rights, particularly because he claimed he would act as a “fierce advocate” on their behalf once elected. Obama does not support the right of gays to marry, and has said so on several occasions. And neither does the American public, apparently, who has consistently regularly voted against it, most notably in the supposedly “progressive” states of California and Maine. Judging from the expressions on the faces of many onlookers I observed in Taksim, it will be a while before any such laws are passed here as well.