

and individual grievances into a collective consciousness of systematic oppression. Mass meetings seem to have served a similar function. They also created a context in which individuals created a public face for themselves, which they then had to try to live up to. In his heart, Reverend Such-and-Such may not feel nearly as militant as the speech he gives at the mass meeting, but once he gives it, he has created an image of himself that he will not want contradicted. After playing the role he has defined for himself for a while—and getting patted on the back for it—he may find that the role becomes natural. Before you know it, he may be shaking his head at how rabbit-hearted these other ministers are. What God can cowards know?

Depending on the situation at a given moment, it might be very easy or very difficult to get people to come to mass meetings. When necessary, canvassers went door to door, passing out handbills. Most people seem to have come initially out of sheer curiosity. The meetings were something new, the regular speakers, including Mrs. Hamer, Medgar Evers, Dick Gregory, and Aaron Henry, could hold an audience, and sometimes the speakers were nationally known celebrities.

Then, too, there was the music. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the music of the movement. The changing fortunes of the movement and the morale of its participants could have been gauged by the intensity of the singing at the meetings. Music has always been a central part of the Black religious experience. Ministers knew that a good choir was a good recruiting device. In the same fashion, many who came to meetings came just to hear the singing. Bernice Reagon calls the freedom songs “the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets.” She tells of an incident in Georgia in which a sheriff and his deputies tried to intimidate a mass meeting by their presence. “A song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew we were there. We became visible, our image was enlarged, when the sounds of the freedom songs filled all the space in that church.” When things were hopping in Greenwood, SNCC’s Worth Long sometimes brought people over from Little Rock or Pine Bluff to help on the weekends. The mass meetings he saw in Greenwood were different from the ones in Arkansas. Greenwood had more of a singing movement, and the meetings had more of an emotional tone; it was like comparing a Holiness church to a Methodist church. He tried to take some of that feeling back to Arkansas with him.

People in Greenwood were similarly enlarged by the singing and the emotional intensity of the meetings. Among their other talents, Hollis Watkins, Willie Peacock, and Sam Block were all songleaders. Arance Brooks, recalling the period when meetings were always packed, says, “I loved it. I just felt so much better when everybody would go. Looked like I slept better. The singing and everything. I just loved it.” In spite of threats to his life, the Reverend Aaron Johnson, during a particularly tense period, opened his church for a meeting after the church that was supposed to have it backed down. People were afraid to come in at first, but when they did “We rocked the church. We rocked that church that night. Ha, Ha, Ha. I said, ‘Well, if I die, I had a good time tonight. I had a *good* time tonight.’”

The music operated as a kind of litany against fear. Mass meeting[s] offered a context in which the mystique of fear could be chipped away. At one Greenwood meeting, a speaker noted with satisfaction that at a recent demonstration where it looked as though things might get out of hand, Police Chief Lary was visibly scared; Lary’s voice had trembled as he asked demonstrators to break it up. Even

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the police chief is human. At another meeting a boy who had spent thirty-nine days in jail with Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes talked about how jail was not as terrible as most people thought. He had kind of enjoyed it, actually. The community sent them baked chickens and pies and cakes and things, so they just sent the jail food on back.

Much of the humor at mass meetings was an attack on fear. A song could bring the Citizens’ Council down to size. To the tune of “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” they might sing:

Jesus loves me cause I’m white.
Lynch me a nigger every night. Hate the Jews and I hate the Pope,
Jes’ me and my rope.
Jesus loves me, The Citizens’ Council told me so.

“We Shall Overcome” could become:

Deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall keep the niggers down
They will never be free—eee—eee
They will never be registered,
We shall keep the niggers down.

Mixtures of the sacred and the profane, the mass meetings could be a very powerful social ritual. They attracted people to the movement and then helped them develop a sense of involvement and solidarity. By ritually acting out new definitions of their individual and collective selves, people helped make those selves become real. Informed and challenged by the speakers, pumped up by the singing and the laughing and the sense of community, many of those who only meant to go once out of curiosity left that first meeting thinking they might come once more, just to see.

Challenging the Politics of Spokesmanship

CHARLES M. PAYNE

Ella Jo Baker died in 1986. Her entire adult life was devoted to building organizations that worked for social change by encouraging individual growth and individual empowerment. . . . Few activists can claim a depth and breadth of political experience comparable to Ella Baker’s half-century of struggle. She was associated with whatever organization in the Black community was on the cutting edge of the era—the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the forties, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the fifties, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the sixties. . . .

. . . Exactly how she first became involved in organizing is not clear—she says she left college with conventional notions of personal success—but it is clear that the smorgasbord political environment of New York intrigued her. . . . Subsequently, the economic dislocations of the Depression played an important part in

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her rejection of "the American illusion that anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead."

Between 1929 and 1932, she was on the editorial staffs of at least two newspapers, the *American West Indian News* and *Negro National News*. During the Depression, she became national director of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, which established stores, buying clubs that encouraged poor people to pool their purchasing power, and other cooperative economic ventures in Black neighborhoods. During the same period, she worked with a variety of labor organizations in Harlem, including the Women's Day Workers and Industrial League, which focused on the problems of domestic workers. . . .

Her organizing work in Harlem brought her to the attention of some people active in NAACP circles, and in 1941 she applied to the NAACP for a job as an assistant field secretary. The job involved extensive travel throughout her native South, raising funds, memberships, and consciousness, trying to get people to see the relevance of the organization to their lives and trying to help them work through their very real fears about being associated with the NAACP. She spent about half of each year organizing membership drives and new chapters in the South—Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia—thus becoming exposed to a wide variety of leadership styles and organizational structures while making innumerable contacts with grassroots leadership, contacts that would become important in her work with the SCLC and SNCC.

In 1943 she became the NAACP's National Director of Branches. In what seems to be the pattern of her life, she was more in the organization than of it. She was a critic—not always a gentle one—of that organization's style of work. By 1941, she was calling the program "stale and uninteresting." She thought the leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, overly oriented to a middle-class agenda, unaware of the value of mass-based, confrontational politics, not nearly aggressive enough on economic issues, and too much in the hands of the New York office. She was particularly critical of the organization's tendency to stress membership size without attempting to involve those members more meaningfully in its program. She saw the organization as the victim of its own success. It was successful enough with its program of attacking the legal bases of racial oppression that its very success blinded the organization to its shortcomings. The legal emphasis meant that the huge mass base of the NAACP—400,000 by 1944—could not play a meaningful role in the development of policy and strategy.

She urged the organization to recruit more low-income members by, for example, sending organizers into pool rooms and taverns; her experience had been that some people would join up out of sheer surprise. The branches, she argued, not the national office, should be the focal point of struggle. . . . While many of her recommendations were ignored, she was able in 1944 to initiate a series of regional leadership conferences. The conferences, one of which was attended by Rosa Parks, were intended to help local leaders search for more effective ways to attack local problems and at the same time see how local issues were, inevitably, expressions of broader social issues.

She left the national office in 1946, partly as a result of having accepted responsibility for raising a niece and partly as a result of her conflicts with the organization's viewpoint. She worked for a while as a fund-raiser for the National Urban

League and continued to work with the NAACP at the local level, becoming president of the New York City branch which, in her phrase, she tried to "bring back to the people" by moving the office to a location where it would be more visible to the Harlem community and by developing a program in which Black and Hispanic parents actively worked on issues involving school desegregation and the quality of education. . . .

In the mid-1950s, with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, she helped organize In Friendship, an organization that offered economic support for Blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South. This same group helped develop the idea of a mass-based organization to continue the momentum that came out of the Montgomery bus boycott. From that idea, developed by several groups almost simultaneously, grew the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. . . .

Levison and Rustin felt that the fledgling SCLC needed an experienced organizer and were able to talk a reluctant Ella Baker into taking the job. In 1957, she went south, intending to stay only a few weeks. She wound up staying two and a half years, becoming the first full-time executive director. At the beginning, she used to joke, SCLC's "office" was her purse and the nearest phone booth. She was responsible for organizing the voter registration and citizenship training drives that constituted the SCLC program during this period. She did this largely by exploiting the network of personal contacts she had developed while with the NAACP.

As with the NAACP, she had trouble getting her own thinking reflected in the programs of the SCLC. She tried to get the leadership to go into some of the rural counties where Blacks were not voting at all. Prophetically, she tried, also without success, to get the organization to place more emphasis on women and young people, the constituencies that would soon carry much of the movement. Miss Baker's emphasis on women reflected her sense of how southern Black organizations worked. "All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking place, on women, not men. Men didn't do the things that had to be done and you had a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott. They were the people who kept the spirit going [the women] and the young people." Being ignored was hardly a surprise to her: "I had known . . . that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. . . . The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to . . . the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership."

Despite the difficulties, her association with SCLC put her in a position to help create and shape one of the most significant organizations of the sixties, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When the sit-in movement among Black college students first began, Ella Baker, like several other adult activists, used her extensive contact list to help it spread. The sit-in phenomenon at the time was essentially a series of disconnected local actions. Feeling that the movement might be more effective with some coordination, Ella talked SCLC into sponsoring a meeting of activist students on the campus of her alma mater, Shaw University. From that meeting, held Easter weekend, 1960, evolved SNCC.

Adult civil rights organizations sent representatives to the organizing meeting with hopes of co-opting all that youthful energy. Three organizations—SCLC, the NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—wanted in on the action. . . . Miss Baker preferred that the students remain independent. Indeed, at one point

she walked out of a staff meeting where strategies to bring the students into the SCLC were discussed. In Raleigh, she reinforced the feelings of those students who saw traditional adult leadership as too accommodating and unimaginative; and SNCC remained independent.

By this time, Miss Baker had been working in the South on and off for almost twenty years. In its early years SNCC, like SCLC previously, had her contact network at its disposal. . . . By 1961 SNCC had become the kind of organization that Ella Baker had been trying to create for some years. It went into the rural areas that other groups were reluctant to enter, it was far more open to the participation of women and young people than the established civil rights groups, and it disdained centralization and bureaucracy and insisted that leadership had to be discovered and developed at the local level. . . .

Miss Baker continued to work with a variety of groups through the sixties and well into the seventies. With SNCC, she helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (FDP), a vehicle to give the poor of that state some political voice. . . . She was involved with attempts to reform urban schools, with South African support groups, with Third World women's organizations, and attempts to organize poor whites in the South. Hers was a wonderfully eclectic style. Whatever the form of the injustice, she was willing to oppose it.

The ideas which undergirded her long activist career do not seem to have changed substantially since the 1930s. If there is one idea that seems central to her approach, it may be the idea of group-centered leadership rather than leader-centered groups. "I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people." In contrast to the more traditional conception of leadership as moving people and directing events, hers was a conception of leadership as teaching, a conception that changes the nature of what it means to be successful. How many people show up for a rally may matter less than how much the people who organize the rally learn from doing so. If the attempt to organize the rally taught them anything about the mechanics of organizing, if the mere act of trying caused them to grow in self-confidence, if the organizers developed stronger bonds among themselves from striving together, then the rally may have been a success even if no one showed up for it. As she said, "You're organizing people to be self-sufficient rather than to be dependent upon the charismatic leader." If growth toward self-sufficiency is the point, then there may be times when people will have to be allowed to make "wrong" decisions, since making decisions and learning from the consequences are necessary to such growth. That was why Ella Baker tried to avoid exerting too much influence on the decision making in SNCC, for example. "Most of the youngsters had been trained to believe in or to follow adults. . . . I felt they ought to have a chance to learn to think things through and to make the decisions."

It follows that she had a poor opinion of centralized leadership, even if skillful and well intentioned.

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture

that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

From her perspective, the very idea of leading people to freedom is a contradiction in terms. Freedom requires that people be able to analyze their own social position and understand their collective ability to do something about it without relying on leaders. "Strong people," she said in one interview, "don't need strong leaders." "My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. . . . People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves."

Whether people develop a sense of their own strength depends partly on the organizational context in which they are working. Ella Baker had misgivings about the common assumption that the bigger the political organization, the better, as well as the parallel assumption that rapid growth is always a sign of organizational vitality. . . . It is easy to forget that during most of the time when SNCC was at the forefront of the southern movement, the organization had only a few hundred very dedicated members. Part of what made that dedication possible, no doubt, was the organization's ability to generate a strong sense of community among its members in the early years. Its scale helped make that community possible, just as it helped each member of the organization to feel that his or her contribution mattered. It also seems that the decline of the organization was related to the sudden growth in the size of its membership after 1964. . . .

Group-centered leadership is leadership in which the ego needs of leaders are placed beneath the developmental needs of the group. It requires leaders who can deal nondestructively with their own need for recognition. Ella Baker held a special fear of the need of leaders for some sort of recognition from the larger society, seeing it as part of the pattern by which initially progressive American movements have traditionally been routinized.

Among Blacks she saw it as a distorting factor across several generations of leadership and across various ideological lines. Black radicals as well as Black moderates have allowed the desire to be recognized to blunt the thrust of their activism. Thus, in the NAACP of the forties and fifties, Ella Baker thought the thirst for recognition was one of the factors leading to accommodationist politics at a time when many of the members were ready for a more militant program. The thirst for recognition was also a problem for the radicals of the late 1960s, some of whom became so enamored of the coverage they were receiving from the press that they began performing for the press. As she saw it: "I think they got caught up in their own rhetoric. . . . To me, it is a part of our system which says that success is registered in terms of, if not money, then how much prestige and how much recognition you have. . . . So these youngsters with their own need for recognition began to respond to the press." It is not difficult to imagine what media recognition must have done to the egos of the leaders involved or how it must have poisoned their relationships with other, less-recognized activists who were working just as hard, risking just as much, as the handful of media celebrities.

The distorting potential of media recognition underscores again the case for groups not being too dependent upon leaders. Part of the reason Ella Baker is not a household name is her conviction that political organizers lose a certain kind of effectiveness when they allow themselves to become media stars. . . .

Miss Baker seems to have viewed the press as more useful in the process of mobilizing than in the process [of] organizing. The distinction between mobilizing and organizing was crucial for her. Organizing, according to Ella Baker, involves creating ongoing groups that are mass-based in the sense that the people a group purports to represent have real impact on the group's direction. Mobilizing is more sporadic, involving large numbers of people for relatively short periods of time and probably for relatively dramatic activities. What SNCC did in rural Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia was organizing. Activists went into a community committed to staying there for a period of time, trying to identify local leadership, strengthen it, and help it find ways to create organizations and programs that would help local people reach a point of development where they would no longer need to rely on SNCC or anything similar. The intention was to leave behind enduring organizations led by the people in whose name they were created, organizations like the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama. At least, organizing under this conception involves the creation of stable, ongoing relationships and of ongoing attempts at political education.

By way of contrast, what the SCLC did in Birmingham and Albany and elsewhere was mobilizing—going in for a matter of weeks or months, leading massive demonstrations aimed at bettering the conditions under which people lived, and then moving on. By its nature, mobilizing is more likely to be public and to be dependent upon generating appropriate publicity. The point is not that one or the other is more important historically—both are clearly necessary—but that they are two different political activities.

The distinction between organizing and mobilizing has become increasingly muddled. Young people looking back at the movement tend to see the mobilizing but not the organizing. They see the great demonstrations and the rallies and take that to be the movement. They do not see the organizing effort, often years of such effort, that made the grand moments possible. They do not see organizers going door to door for months on end trying to win trust, overcome fear, and educate people to the ways the movement might connect with their lives. . . . In general, Deep South organizing was a process of trying to become a part of the lives of the people one was trying to work with, and there was frequently nothing very dramatic about it.

Ella Baker . . . was always dubious about the real value of demonstrations. Lobbying and demonstrations may produce some gains from the powers that be relatively quickly, but the same powers may retract those gains as soon as the political winds shift. What Miss Baker called “real organizing” might mean that results would take longer to achieve, but it might also mean these results would be better protected. . . .

One has to wonder how she sustained her involvement for so long. It is not difficult to imagine how much frustration was built into the work she chose for herself. Nowadays we tend to think that anyone who works for social change for a

year or two has made an enormous sacrifice. In the few places I know of where she comments on this, there is a suggestion that she was sustained by the faith that her work was a part of something on-going:

Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had this chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel new life as a result. . . .



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