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## ELLA BAKER AND THE ORIGINS OF “PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY”

*Carol Mueller*

### INTRODUCTION

The sources of ideas that guide the transformation and renewal of societies are often obscured by dramatic events and charismatic leaders that fit the media's emphasis on conflict and celebrity and the public's demand for mythic leaders and heroic sacrifice. Yet the beliefs that may ultimately inspire the mobilization of thousands (and millions) have often been tested and retested in obscure and out-of-the-way places by individuals who may never write manifestos, lead demonstrations, call press conferences, or stand before TV cameras. As Ella Baker said of herself, “you didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, a complex of ideas coalesced under the label “participatory democracy,” bringing together in a new formulation the traditional appeal of democracy with an innovative tie to broader participation. The emphasis on participation had many implications, but three have been primary: (1) an appeal for grassroots involvement of people throughout society in the decisions that control their lives; (2) the minimization of hierarchy and the associated emphasis on expertise and professionalism as a basis for leadership; and (3) a call for direct action as an answer to fear, alienation, and intellectual detachment. These ideas not only informed the student wing of the civil rights movement and the new left during the 1960s, but also the movements of the 1970s and 1980s that came to be called the “New Social Movements” in Western Europe and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Participatory democracy legitimated an active public voice in a wide range of governmental decisions. Citizens now insisted on a voice in decisions regarding the composition of the Democratic Party—first in the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 and later in the reforms of 1972; in the decisions of the government-sponsored Community Action Programs of the War on Poverty and the Model Cities Program; in the decision regarding foreign policy of the Vietnam War, the acquisition of new weapons systems such as the B-1 bomber and the MX missile as well as the later deployment of the Cruise and Pershing missile systems in Europe; and in the decisions regarding nuclear power and environmental pollution.

In addition, the ideas of participatory democracy encouraged a broader base for decision making within social movement organizations. Experimentation with direct democracy and consensus decision making ranged from the early voter registration projects of SNCC in Mississippi and Georgia,<sup>3</sup> to the ERAP projects of SDS in the slums of northern cities in the mid-1960s,<sup>4</sup> to the consciousness-raising groups of women’s liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>5</sup> to the affinity groups associated with the antinuclear and peace movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In many of these movements there has been a conscious effort to minimize hierarchy and professionalism.

Finally, this has been a period of unprecedented direct action.<sup>7</sup> Since the United States has had a long history of open resistance and rebellion (the slave revolts, the revolution against England, the Civil War, the labor movement, the Molly Maguires) and of civil disobedience (the women’s suffrage movement of the World War I period, the nonviolent phase of the civil rights movement), it would be an obvious mistake to credit one particular formulation of ideas with legitimating direct intervention in the affairs of civil society or the state. Yet the ideas of participatory democracy frame the call to direct action—not as periodic response to crisis, but as part of a broader set of collective citizenship obligations.

These have been a powerful set of ideas, providing one of the major frameworks for legitimating, understanding, and stimulating the collective actions and protests of a period during which new resources combined with unprecedented political opportunity.<sup>8</sup> Despite the importance of these ideas, there is confusion and misunderstanding among historians regarding their origins. Particularly among some scholars studying the history of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), there is the assumption that participatory democracy originated with the intellectual core of students (Al Haber, Tom Hayden, Sharon Jeffrey, Bob Ross, Richard Flacks, and Steve Max) who participated most actively in drafting the Port Huron Statement of 1962.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, I argue that the basic themes of participatory democracy were first articulated and given personal witness in the activism of Ella Baker. These ideas served as the basis for her decisive intervention in support of an independent student-led organization within the civil rights movement. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee not only set much of the agenda for the civil rights movement during the next few years but also served as a model for later student-led political organizations such as SDS. During those years, SNCC also served as a laboratory field station directly testing the ideas of participatory democracy in daily practice. An appreciation of the role of Ella Baker in the creation of the participatory democracy frame is important for recognizing the source of transforming ideas in a context of ongoing struggle.

### ELLA BAKER’S PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

As was well known within the civil rights movement but not very far outside it, Ella Baker was one of its key leaders and the most important nonstudent involved in the phase of student activism that began with the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee following the dramatic sit-ins of the winter and spring of 1960. In dedicating his book *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* to Ella Baker, Howard Zinn (political scientist, then faculty member of Spelman College, and adviser to SNCC) wrote in his acknowledgments, “And finally, there is the lady to whom this book is dedicated, who is more responsible than any other single individual for the birth of the new abolitionists as an organized group, and who remains the most tireless, the most modest, and the wisest activist I know in the strug-

gle for human rights today.”<sup>10</sup> Writing his own history of SNCC at the close of the 1960s, James Forman, its executive director for most of that decade, begins “Book Two: A Bond of Sisters and Brothers, In a Circle of Trust” with a chapter on Ella Baker. It starts, “Ella Jo Baker, one of the key persons in the formation of SNCC, is one of those many strong Black women who have devoted their lives to the liberation of their people.”<sup>11</sup>

When this strong, Black woman died in December 1986, after fifty years of political activism, a funeral service was held in Harlem where she had lived most of her adult life. The list of pallbearers gives eloquent testimony to her central role in SNCC and the high regard in which she was held by many of its leaders. They were (listed in alphabetical order as they were on the program for the service):

Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin—formerly H. Rap Brown, elected chair of SNCC in 1967 to succeed Stokley Carmichael.

Julian Bond—for five years communications director of SNCC in the Atlanta office and later state representative in the Georgia House of Representatives.

Vincent Harding—minister and close associate of Martin Luther King.

Doug Harris

Charles McDew—chair of SNCC from October 1960 until the election of John Lewis in 1963.

Reginald Robinson—one of the first SNCC members to begin voter registration work in McComb, Mississippi, in 1961; later worked with Ella Baker in mobilizing northern support for the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Charles Sherrod—SNCC’s first field secretary and leader of community work in southeast Georgia.

Kwame Toure—formerly Stokley Carmichael, elected chair of SNCC in 1966; gave voice to SNCC’s emerging Black power orientation in the mid-1960s.

Robert Zellner—the first white field secretary hired by SNCC.

Honorary pallbearers included James Forman and Bayard Rustin, one of the key figures with Ella Baker in the organization of In Freedom, the northern support group for the Montgomery bus boycott who also worked with her in creating the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and one of her oldest political associates. The memorial service brought other civil rights leaders to pay their respects—Ralph Abernathy, cofounder of the SCLC and close associate of King; Wyatt T. Walker, who replaced Ella Baker as executive director of the SCLC in 1960; and Bernice Johnson Reagon of the Albany Movement and the SNCC Freedom Singers. The service included special tributes from Percy Sutton; Jo Ann Grant, veteran SNCC worker and producer of *Fundi*, a documentary film of Miss Baker’s life; Anne Braden, editor, with her husband, Carl, of the *Southern Patriot* newspaper published by the SCEF Education Fund, which Ella Baker served as a consultant; and Bob Moses, whose long years of organizing in the Mississippi project embodied, perhaps more than anyone else in SNCC, the philosophy of participatory democracy.

The words of Howard Zinn and James Farmer and the many who paid their respects at her funeral only begin to suggest the tributes to Miss Baker in the annals of the civil rights movement. Her lifetime of contributions to the goal of human freedom cannot be adequately chronicled here, but the major themes of her life are central to an understanding of the roots of participatory democracy as an outgrowth of active participation in the process

of political struggle. The three themes of participatory democracy—grassroots involvement by people in the decisions that affect their lives; the minimization of hierarchy and professionalization in organizations working for social change; and direct action on the sources of injustice—grew out of more than twenty years of political experience that she brought to the fledgling student movement in the spring of 1960. The philosophy of social change that led her to insist on an independent student organization at the Raleigh Conference in April 1960 was the logical extension of these experiences combined with a southern upbringing based in a strong allegiance to family and community.

Her great sense of social responsibility was based in the traditions of the small North Carolina community where she moved in 1911 at the age of eight with her family.<sup>12</sup> The local church was presided over by her grandfather, a former slave, who had bought the land on which he once had served, vowing to provide amply for the needs of his family and neighbors. It was a commonplace for his household to take in the local sick and needy. Regardless of their social position, Miss Baker learned at an early age to be responsible for all of them.

Her sense of community and responsibility expanded after graduating from Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1927. Unable to afford graduate work in sociology at the University of Chicago, she moved to New York where she could rely for support on her network of kin. Refusing to follow the traditional woman’s route of schoolteaching, she at first found it impossible to find a job doing anything other than waitressing or domestic service—despite her college degree. By 1929, the Depression had struck and the problems of the poor and needy multiplied around her.

#### EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE AT THE GRASS ROOTS

The type of solutions that Ella Baker sought in responding to the suffering of the Depression consistently reflected her belief that political action should empower people to solve their own problems. After several years of editorial work for the *American West Indian News* (1929–30) and the *Negro National News* (1932), she helped form the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League, became its national director, and began organizing group buying through consumer cooperatives. Her experience as an organizer, speaker, and writer on consumer education led to her employment with the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). In the WPA, she continued to bring people together to augment their meager resources through collective buying.

Equally important, in the WPA, Ella Baker was exposed to the fermenting ideas on social change that were widely discussed in Harlem at this time. Miss Baker later said of those years, “New York was the hotbed of—let’s call it radical thinking. You had every spectrum of radical thinking on the WPA. We had a lovely time! The ignorant ones, like me, we had lots of opportunity to hear and to evaluate whether or not this was the kind of thing you wanted to get into. Boy it was good, stimulating.”<sup>13</sup>

The diversity of opinions that she characterized as “the nectar divine” apparently reinforced Ella Baker’s commitment to social change through organizing people to act on their own behalf. In the late 1930s, as a young woman, she began working for the NAACP as a field organizer, traveling to cities, towns, and rural villages throughout the Deep South, speaking wherever she could find a group of people who were willing to listen.

In an interview with the historian Gerda Lerner, she described her work: “I used to leave New York about the 15th of February and travel through the South for four or five months.

I would go to, say, Birmingham, Alabama and help to organize membership campaigns . . . You would deal with whatever the local problem was, and on the basis of the needs of the people you would try to organize them in the NAACP.”<sup>14</sup> In the early 1940s, she was made assistant field secretary for the NAACP and in 1943 she was named the association’s national director of branches.

In her many years of travel for the NAACP trying to help people organize against the pervasive racial violence of the South, she was developing her own understanding of how people can collectively fight oppression. In the early 1970s, she described what she had learned from her many years as a field organizer:

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. If they only had ten members in the NAACP at a given point, those ten members could be in touch with twenty-five members in the next little town, with fifty in the next and throughout the state as a result of the organization of state conferences, and they, of course, could be linked up with the national. People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Her belief in empowering people through their direct participation in social change assumed a new form when she took on the responsibility of raising her niece and gave up the annual six months of travel required of a field secretary. After several years of working in fund-raising for the National Urban League Service Fund, she was elected president of the New York branch of the NAACP. “We tried to bring the NAACP back, as I called it, to the people. We moved the branch out of an office building and located it where it would be more visible to the Harlem community. We started developing an active branch. It became one of the largest branches.”<sup>16</sup>

When the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision came down in 1954, she was serving as chairman of the Education Committee of the New York branch of the NAACP. This committee began to fight segregation in the New York schools. Her view of what was successful about the work of this committee characteristically emphasized that “out of it came increased fervor on the part of the black communities to make some changes.”<sup>17</sup>

She was critical of the national NAACP’s failure to emphasize the development of self-sufficient local communities and, in 1944, initiated a series of regional leadership conferences, one attended by Rosa Parks of the Montgomery, Alabama, branch, to . . . “help local leaders develop their own leadership potential.”<sup>18</sup>

She continued to emphasize meaningful participation and the development of the resources within individuals and institutions when she worked with the SCLC in the late 1950s. In its first project, the Crusade for Citizenship, a drive to register Black voters in the South, Miss Baker worked with its first executive director, Reverend John Tilley, in local communities to try to get churches to organize social action committees, set up voter clinics, and affiliate with the SCLC. She attempted to interest its ministerial leaders in citizenship classes to teach basic reading and writing skills so that Blacks could register to vote.<sup>19</sup> She argued that the classes could draw on the considerable resources that already existed at the local level in religious and educational groups of women. These as well as other suggestions to broaden the involvement of youth and women in SCLC fell on deaf ears and contributed to her dissatisfaction with its ministerial leadership.

The theme that later became a slogan, “Power to the People,” served as Ella Baker’s criterion for evaluating political work throughout her life. In the 1970s, when she was asked to comment on the movement for community control of schools, she saw it as part of a broad strategy:

First, there is a prerequisite: the recognition on the part of the established powers that people have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. And it doesn’t matter whether those decisions have to do with schools or housing or some other aspect of their lives. There is a corollary to this prerequisite: the citizens themselves must be conscious of the fact that this is their right. Then comes the question, how do you reach people if they aren’t already conscious of this right? And how do you break down resistance on the part of powers that be toward citizens becoming participants in decision making?

I don’t have any cut pattern, except that I believe that people, when informed about the things they are concerned with, will find a way to react. Now, whether their reactions are the most desirable at a given stage depends, to a large extent, upon whether the people who are in the controlling seat are open enough to permit people to react according to the way they see the situation. In organizing a community, you start with people where they are.<sup>20</sup>

#### GROUP-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Ella Baker’s impatience with the pretensions of hierarchy dated from her earliest childhood. Recalling her youth growing up in the South, she said:

Where we lived *there was no sense of hierarchy*, in terms of those who have, having a right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn’t have. Part of that could have resulted, I think, from two factors. One was the proximity of my maternal grandparents to slavery. They had known what it was to not have. Plus, my grandfather had gone into the Baptist ministry, and that was part of the quote, unquote, Christian concept of sharing with others. I went to a school that went in for Christian training. Then, there were people who “stood for something,” as I call it. Your relationship to human beings was more important than your relationship to the amount of money that you made.<sup>21</sup>

This sense of equality contributed to her capacity to identify with people from all walks of life in her organizing work for the NAACP and later the SCLC and SNCC.

On what basis do you seek to organize people? Do you start to try to organize them on the fact of what you think, or what they are first interested in? You start where the people are. Identification with people. There’s always this problem in the minority group that’s escalating up the ladder in this culture, I think. Those who have gotten some training and those who have gotten some material gains, it’s always the problem of their not understanding the possibility of being divorced from those who are not in their social classification. Now, there were those who felt they had made it, would be embarrassed by the fact that some people would get drunk and get in jail, and so they wouldn’t be concerned too much about whether they were brutalized in jail. ‘Cause he was a *drunk!* He was a so-and-so. Or she was a streetwalker. We get caught in that bag. And so you have to help break that down without alienating them at the same time. The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional,



they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for not identifying. You try to point out where her interest lies in identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks.<sup>22</sup>

Miss Baker's antipathy to hierarchy combined with her commitment to grassroots organizing led to a particular concept of leadership that she called "group-centered leadership."<sup>23</sup> This pattern of leadership emphasized the role of the leader as a facilitator, as someone who brings out the potential in others, rather than a person who commands respect and a following as a result of charisma or status.

This view began in her organizing work in the South and continued as a source of tension in her many years with the NAACP. In commenting on the leadership of Walter White, she noted that, "Unfortunately, he also felt the need to impress government people. He had not learned, as many people still have not learned, that if you are involved with people and organizing them as a force, you didn't have to go and seek out the Establishment People. They would seek you out."<sup>24</sup>

She felt that some of this same attitude characterized the entire organization. In 1968, she told an interviewer:

Basically, I think personally, I've always felt that the Association got itself hung-up in what I call its legal success. Having had so many outstanding legal successes, it definitely seemed to have oriented its thinking in the direction that the way to achieve was through the courts. It hasn't departed too far from that yet. So, I said to you that when I came out of the Depression, I came out of it with a different point of view as to what constituted success . . . I began to feel that my greatest sense of success would be to succeed in doing with people some of the things that I thought would raise the level of masses of people, rather than the individual being accepted by the Establishment.<sup>25</sup>

Miss Baker remained a tough critic of professionalized leadership throughout her association with the NAACP.<sup>26</sup> In particular, she criticized its emphasis on membership size without creating opportunities for members to be meaningfully involved in the program. At the time of her association in the early 1940s, much of the NAACP's membership of four hundred thousand primarily provided a financial base for its professional staff of lawyers and lobbyists. Payne's research into the reports of the association's field secretaries to the National Board has found a strong preoccupation with membership size rather than activities.<sup>27</sup> These tensions contributed to Ella Baker's resigning as its national director of branches in 1946 (as did accepting responsibility for raising her niece).

The same issues over organizational leadership led to her eventual departure from the SCLC in 1960. Having been instrumental in the founding of the SCLC in 1957, Miss Baker agreed to go to Atlanta to set up its first office. She originally served as its only staff member. Her first responsibility was to coordinate meetings throughout the South on Lincoln's Birthday 1958 to kick off the SCLC's first program, a Crusade for Citizenship, which would seek to double the number of Black voters in the South in one year.<sup>28</sup> With no resources and little support from the new ministerial associates of the SCLC, the fact that thirteen thousand people turned out in twenty-two cities "on the coldest night in 50 years" was miraculous.<sup>29</sup>

Ella Baker was the central figure in the SCLC Atlanta headquarters during the late 1950s.<sup>30</sup> She organized the office, carried on correspondence, and kept in touch with the

local branches. With John Tilley, the executive director, she traveled throughout the South developing voter registration programs and SCLC affiliations that included a commitment to direct action.

It was not a compatible arrangement, however. Where Miss Baker had found earlier that professionalism and status concerns were an obstacle to group-centered leadership in the NAACP, she found in the SCLC that the emphasis on charismatic ministerial leadership was similarly at odds with her view of how organizations should be built to empower people to seek social change.

Despite considerably greater experience in working for social change than the ministers she worked for in the Atlanta office (she was fifty-four when she went to Atlanta), she was expected to handle administrative matters while her policy suggestions for greater emphasis on local organizing and the inclusion of women and youth were largely ignored.<sup>31</sup>

Although Tilley decided within a year to leave his post and return to his church in Baltimore, there was never any serious consideration of replacing him with Ella Baker. Instead, she was appointed acting director until an appropriate minister could be found. Reverend Wyatt Walker, who succeeded her, later told Morris, “When John Tilley left, it was within 90 days of his leaving or less [that] they knew they were going to hire me if they could get me, and Ella was just a holding action.” Walker felt that Miss Baker could not fit into the preacher’s organization: “It just went against the grain of the kind of person she is and was.”<sup>32</sup>

The incompatibility between the SCLC and Ella Baker reflected their very different understandings of leadership and, thus, of programs. Miss Baker was very critical of placing great emphasis on a single leader, the organizing principle of the SCLC, focused as it was on the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Thus, Miss Baker opposed not only its organizational principle, but the specific leadership of King as well. Asked in the early 1970s why she had not had a more prominent position in the civil rights movement, she stated her general philosophy of leadership:

In government service and political life I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon 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 he has been touted through the public media, which 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.<sup>33</sup>

For Ella Baker, it was more important to serve “what was a potential for all of us,” than to look after her own needs for status or position. She said, “I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role. The competition wasn’t worth it.”<sup>34</sup>

### DIRECT ACTION

The third component of the participatory democracy framework was an emphasis on opposing violence and the intransigence of bureaucratic and legalistic obstacles by collective

demonstrations of the “will of the people.”<sup>35</sup> Designed to counter apathy, fear, and resignation through an assertion of independence, as well as to exercise influence on behalf of collective goals, for Ella Baker it was always a part of an overall strategy of empowering people, never an end in itself.

In the Deep South where she worked as an organizer for the NAACP, public affiliation with the organization in the 1940s and 1950s was itself an act of defiance that gave people a sense of strength through a collective effort. She said of those years:

As assistant field secretary of the branches of the NAACP, much of my work was in the South. At that time, the NAACP was the leader on the cutting edge of social change. I remember when NAACP membership in the South was the basis for getting beaten up or even killed.

You would go into areas where people were not yet organized in the NAACP and try to get them more involved. . . . Black people who were living in the South were constantly living with violence, part of the job was to help them to understand what that violence was and how they, in an organized fashion, could help to stem it.<sup>36</sup>

For years it was her job to convince people that they should take this risk.

Ella Baker saw direct action in the creation of an insurgent organization such as the southern NAACP in the 1940s. In 1955, however, mobilization of the Montgomery Improvement Association inspired her, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison of the New York support group In Friendship to believe that a new stage of public mass action had arrived.<sup>37</sup> Following the integration of the Montgomery buses, Miss Baker worked with Rustin, Levison, and King on seven “working papers” that the New York group hoped would serve as the basis for discussion at the meeting of January 1957 that would lead to the formation of the SCLC. Although the meetings were officially entitled the “Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-violence Interpretation,” the working papers called for a broad strategy.

The strategy called for two principal tactics: voting power and mass direct action. Until more Blacks could vote, they argued, “we shall have to rely more and more on mass direct action as the one realistic political weapon.”<sup>38</sup> Montgomery showed that the center of gravity had shifted from the courts to community action; the only question was what kind of mass action to use. The In Friendship group considered many of the tactics later developed by SNCC under Ella Baker’s tutelage, particularly mass arrests and the creation of a “small disciplined group of non-violent shock troops to lead community mass actions.”<sup>39</sup> These working papers failed to have a significant impact on the formation of the SCLC for a variety of situational reasons. Yet commenting later on those formative days of the SCLC, Miss Baker thought there were other reasons as well: “The other, I think, factor that has to be honestly said is that Martin was not yet ready for the kind of leadership that would inspire these men to really grapple with . . . ideological differences and patterns of organization.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the working papers indicated the direction of the thinking among the more experienced organizers from New York. Particularly, they are important in showing the ideas that Ella Baker would shortly bring to SNCC.

During her tenure with the SCLC in the late 1950s, her own efforts were still directed toward direct action in the context of empowering local people. As associate director and later as acting executive director, she went to Shreveport, Louisiana, to help with voter registration drives. There she supported an all-day stand-in at Caddo Parish, where a strong

local movement sent 250 to register but only forty-six were interviewed and only fifteen were actually allowed to complete registration. She also worked with Dr. C. O. Simpkins, a local dentist, to prepare sixty-eight witnesses who gave testimonies at a Louisiana hearing.<sup>41</sup> Altogether, she spent five months in Shreveport working with local leaders to counter the countless reprisals against Blacks who tried to register.

Despite her efforts and those of many local leaders, Miss Baker felt that the SCLC at this time offered little support for a massive confrontation. Of her years with the SCLC's Crusade for Citizenship, she said, "It was very difficult to get it from being oriented in the direction of just big meetings; you know, having an annual conference, and a big meeting . . ."<sup>42</sup>

After Tilley left the position of executive director in April 1959, Ella Baker was named acting director. The following October, she wrote a memorandum expressing her frustration with the progress of the branches:

The word Crusade connotes for me a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people. In search for action that might help develop for SCLC more of the obvious characteristics of a crusade, a line of thinking was developed which I submit for your consideration. . . . To play a unique role in the South, SCLC must offer, basically, a different "brand of goods" that fills unmet needs of the people. At the same time, it must provide for a sense of achievement and recognition for many people, particularly local leadership.<sup>43</sup>

At this time Ella Baker already knew that the SCLC had not provided the leadership in direct mass action that she, Rustin, and Levison had hoped for. She also saw it as limited by a conception of leadership that inhibited mass participation and exalted the charismatic leader. She felt that both limitations failed to organize the people for self-sufficiency.

## CONCLUSION

When the winter of 1960 brought a massive wave of sit-ins by Black college students throughout the South, it was Ella Baker who saw their potential more clearly than anyone else.<sup>44</sup> As conversations began within the civil rights organizations over how this new energy could be harnessed to fuel the lagging efforts of the movement, it was Ella Baker who called for an organizing conference of student sit-in leaders at her old alma mater, Shaw University. When the Raleigh meeting was held in April 1960, it was Ella Baker who insisted that the students who had created the sit-ins should decide their own future independently of the already established civil rights organizations.<sup>45</sup> When the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formed as a result of the Raleigh meeting, it was Ella Baker's unlabeled, but fully articulated, ideas on participatory democracy that were most compatible with the students' search for autonomous and active leadership roles in the civil rights movement.<sup>46</sup> As SNCC began to develop an office, a staff, and a program, it was Ella Baker who served as their chief adviser from 1960 through the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in the summer of 1964. In the summer of 1960, she wrote of her hopes and dreams for the new student movements:

By and large, this feeling that they have a destined date with freedom, was not limited to a drive for personal freedom, or even freedom for the Negro in the South. Repeatedly it was

emphasized that the movement was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the “whole world” and the “Human Race.”

This universality of approach was linked with a perceptive recognition that “it is important to keep the movement democratic and to avoid struggles for personal leadership.”

It was further evident that desire for supportive cooperation from adult leaders and the adult community was also tempered by apprehension that adults might try to “capture” the student movement. The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination.

This inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader centered group pattern of organization, was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.<sup>47</sup>

When hundreds and then thousands of northern white students supported the sit-ins or went south to view at first hand a student-led movement to end racial oppression, Ella Baker’s ideas found another receptive audience and spread and spread and spread.

## NOTES

1. Ellen Cantarow and Susan O’Mally, *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York: 1980), 55.

2. Claus Offe, “New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics,” *Social Research* 52, 4 (winter 1975); Bert Klandermans and Sidney Tarrow, “Mobilization into Social Movements: Synthesizing European and American Approaches,” in *From Structure to Action: Comparing Movement Participation Across Cultures* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1988).

3. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand, 1985); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

4. James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

5. Joan Cassell, *A Group Called Women* (New York: David McKay, 1977); Jo Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” in Jane S. Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1974).

6. Steven E. Barkan, “Strategic, Tactical and Organizational Dilemmas of the Protest Movement Against Nuclear Power,” *Social Problems* 27, 1 (October 1979).

7. See Craig Jenkins, “Interpreting the Stormy Sixties: Three Theories in Search of a Political Age,” *Research in Political Sociology*, forthcoming, for a summary.

8. See John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, *The Trend of Social Movements in America: Professionalization*

and *Resource Mobilization* (Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1973) on new resources; Craig Jenkins and Charles Perrow, “Insurgency of the Powerless,” *American Sociological Review* 42 (April 1977); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) on shifts in the political opportunity structure.

9. See especially James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

10. Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), iii.

11. Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 215.

12. Cantarow and O’Mally, *Moving the Mountain*.

13. *Ibid.*, 64.

14. Gerda Lerner, “Developing Community Leadership,” in *Black Women in White America* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 347.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 348.

17. *Ibid.*, 349.

18. Charles Payne, “‘Strong People Don’t Need Strong Leaders’: Ella Baker and Models of Social Change” (unpublished paper, Northwestern University, Department of African American Studies, 1987).

19. Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 114.

20. Lerner, “Developing Community Leadership,” 20.

21. Cantarow and O’Mally, *Moving the Mountain*, 60.

22. *Ibid.*, 70.

23. See especially Payne, “‘Strong People Don’t Need Strong Leaders.’”

24. Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingam Research Center, Howard University, June 19, 1968, 6.
25. *Ibid.*, 12.
26. Payne, “‘Strong People Don’t Need Strong Leaders,’” 5.
27. *Ibid.*, 36, n. 4.
28. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 102–4.
29. Morris, *Origins of Civil Rights Movement*, 109.
30. *Ibid.*, 102–8.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 115.
33. Lerner, “Developing Community Leadership,” 351.
34. *Ibid.*; also Britton, Interview with Ella Baker, 34.
35. Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*.
36. Lerner, “Developing Community Leadership,” 346–47.
37. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 85–87.
38. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
39. *Ibid.*, 86.
40. Ella Baker interview by Britton, 21.
41. *Ibid.*, 25.
42. *Ibid.*, 23.
43. Quoted in Morris, *Origins of Civil Rights Movement*, 112.
44. See Carson, *In Struggle*, 19–30; Morris, *Origins of Civil Rights Movement*, 195–223.
45. See especially Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 131–34.
46. See Carol Mueller, “From Equal Rights to Participatory Democracy: Frame Generation in a Cycle of Protest” (paper presented at American Sociological Association, August 1988).
47. Ella J. Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” *The Southern Patriot* (June 1960).