

The Grassroots Political Philosophy of Ella Baker: Oakland, California Applicability



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“In my organizational work, I have never thought in terms of my making a contribution. I just thought of myself as functioning where there was a need. And if I have made a contribution, I think it may be that I had some influence on a large number of people.”¹¹

Ella Baker organized and mentored a group of young people that mobilized thousands and ignited an entire nation but her modesty would not allow her to state it. She not only influenced a large number of people, she influenced a movement. And that movement, the Civil Rights /Black Power movement influenced the world.

25

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Ella Baker was one of the most effective, original, and masterful organizers of the twentieth century. Although mostly in the background, Baker was an integral part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leadership in the forties and fifties, serving as field secretary traveling throughout the south four to five months each year.² These regional and national contacts made her indispensable later in her work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which she co-directed and helped organize. In 1960, in response to the sit-in movement and at the behest of the SCLC, she organized a conference that founded the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).³ Here, her grassroots political philosophy came to fruition and this historical context serves as a reference point for speculations about contemporary Oakland, California.

Baker's Ideas and Practice

The core of Ella Baker's ideas and practice regarding political organizing and social change can be categorized as, an emphasis on organizing at the grassroots level from the bottom up, the limitation of personal ego, the importance of developing local community leadership, the need for group-centered leadership, the ability to trust the group process, and a form of radical democracy encompassing both situational and participatory aspects.⁴

Ella Baker's main focus was the mobilization, organization and empowerment of the grassroots, the masses. Although influenced significantly by the socialism of Max Yeargan, the early anarchist philosophy of George Schyler and Marxist literature she read in the thirties, Baker's grassroots focus originated more from her communal-like upbringing in rural North Carolina, and her closeness to her grandparents' slave heritage.⁵ Through her mother, she inherited a sense of service and dedication that combined the organizational skill of the Black Baptist Missionary Movement with the intellectual urgency of W.E.B. Dubois's talented tenth philosophy.⁶ She believed that if one was blessed with more talent or skill, or more often, simply more opportunity, he/she was obligated to do more for those less fortunate. She did not scorn personal achievement. She had been valedictorian of her 1927 class at Shaw Institute and had held leadership positions, but her focus was on advancing the whole group.⁷ She said, "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 his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it."⁸

Baker, in uttering those words exemplified someone who was committed to serving and organizing people as way of life. Ella Baker's work, whether it was teaching consumer classes and organizing co-ops, desegregating New York City schools, field organizing for the NAACP, working for and co-directing the SCLC, advising and mentoring SNCC, or later, working to free activist Angela Davis and for Puerto Rican Independence, was about empowering people.⁹

Baker attended Brookwood Labor College for a semester in 1931. Under the leadership of A.J. Muste, it was a school set up to train labor organizers. There she studied the history of labor movements and participated in a more democratic and less hierarchical method of education. This, in addition to the harsh reality of the Great Depression as well as her study and work at the Rand School for Social Science (similar to Brookwood), set the stage for her later work. These experiences reinforced her idea that people being organized had valuable experiences and knowledge to share and teach organizers.¹⁰

It was through these teachings and her upbringing in Christian service that Ella Baker developed her ideas about the ego and political work. She remarked, “My not pushing myself, as I saw it, came out of Christian Philosophy.”¹¹ Being female in mostly male leadership cadres, she had a unique vantage point and could see people often jockeying for power or recognition. With regard to her work with the SCLC, 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.”¹² Even though she was a co-director, she more often worked behind the scenes. From there she keenly observed group dynamics and was critical of uninhibited, conscious exhibition of ego. She recognized that talented individuals had to be allowed to fully grow and express themselves and their skills, yet, in the context of organizational work, have the ability to check themselves and keep their intentions and motivations focused on the welfare of the group. She also understood that individual and collective ego and pride were needed for people to rise from oppression, yet had to be restrained and channeled for full development and human growth.¹³

Consistent with limiting the personal ego is being able to organize a group of people and help them develop their leadership capacity. Developing community leadership in each area, neighborhood, or region, empowers people at the local level and establishes a precedent and template within the culture of that community. The real value of local community leadership is that it strengthens faith in people that are seen daily, the barber, the teacher, the garbage collector; the elders; everyday people. This psychological reinforcement, when multiplied throughout the community creates an increased sense of trust. Ella Baker’s method was straightforward. She would go to an area and befriend people and organize around one key issue that they were concerned about. Commenting on the fight against violence in the fifties and sixties she said, “The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence even when it was perpetuated by the police or, in some instances, the state.”¹⁴

Ella Baker's concept of leadership was group centered. Clayborne Carson, in his history of SNCC, *In Struggle, SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, writes, "During the spring of 1960, Baker commended the inclination toward group-centered leadership among the students....What was needed in social movements, she later commented, was the development of people who are 'interested not in being leaders, as much as in developing leadership among other people.'"¹⁵

In her work with the students of SNCC, Baker was able to fully explore this group process. It originated, in part, with her work with Schyler and others in starting the Young Negroes Co-operative League (YNL) during the thirties in Harlem.¹⁶ The Great Depression with its devastating poverty and hardship, ideologically transported many African Americans and others toward any group that was effective in addressing the material needs of the poor. For many, it necessitated radical approaches to economic survival, thus the Co-operative League. It functioned as a coordinating mechanism for the many small cooperatives operating nationally at the time. Ransby, in *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, writes, "Baker and her idealistic young comrades saw the building of cooperative economic institutions as the first step toward a peaceful transformation of society from capitalism to a more egalitarian, socialist alternative. Buying cooperatives would, they hoped, demonstrate on a small scale the efficiency of collective economic planning, and simultaneously promote the values of interdependency, group decision making, and the sharing of resources."¹⁷ Ella Baker herself at the time said, "The day will come when the soil and all of its resources will be reclaimed by its rightful owners—the working masses of the world."¹⁸

Although short lived, the YNL produced information and developed educational materials on the essentials of deliberative politics, non-hierarchical decision making, and participatory democracy. Baker would internalize these principles and operate from them for remainder of her life. For her, "strong people don't need strong leaders."¹⁹ Her ideal form of leader would listen, facilitate, share, and lead in equal measure when appropriate, but most importantly, always remember that he or she was firstly a member of the group.

Within this group-centered leadership model, Baker was keen in trusting the group process. In her work later with SNCC, she was seasoned and experienced enough to know that her young associates had to find the answers within themselves and that the process was as important as the end result. Kwame Ture (Stokeley Carmichael) relates in his autobiography, *Ready for Revolution: the Life and Struggle of Stokeley Carmichael*, "So naturally we took all our tough questions to her. But we never got a dogmatic or in fact almost never, a direct answer. Usually she preferred to answer with another question and then another, forcing us to refine our thinking, and to struggle toward an answer for ourselves,"²⁰

This Socratic, deliberative, intellectually open process facilitated the development of many effective organizers and leaders because it encouraged independent, critical thinking within the context of a larger goal. Baker's ability to trust the group process originated from her ability to trust the innate sincerity of people (particularly youth) and the natural ingenuity and creativity she felt resided within everyone. Her skill in recognizing, acknowledging and utilizing hidden skills and guiding people to where they would be most useful is legendary.²¹ Early in SNCC development, it almost split into two factions, one more voter registration and mainstream-oriented and the other interested in continuing direct action. At a meeting at the historic Highlander Folk School, she was able to broker an agreement that saved and advanced the unity of the group by suggesting that they take both approaches and stay focused on the whole.²² In some ways, Baker was able to achieve these goals because of the respect she had earned from the students and because she embodied both paths herself. She was focused on results, not just ideology.

Ella Baker practiced her ideas. Through study, personal experiences, and consistent assessment of political issues, she was able to arrive at a form of democratic thinking and organizing that scholars call situational and participatory democracy.²³ On situational democracy, Ransby writes, "Democracy, for Ella Baker, was about fairness and inclusion, not sheer numbers. Therefore, democratic practice could never be formulaic but rather had to revolve around real participation and deliberation. It was given meaning by the specific situation or historical movement in which it was tested."²⁴

Baker implemented this concept throughout her career and life. In SNCC, she was keen to bring people who were at the margins or periphery toward the center and was constantly aware of group dynamics and power inequities. Her goal more often was to "tilt the leadership scales" toward the least powerful within the larger group so that they could be fairly heard or represented.²⁵ According to all who knew her, Baker was determined to practice fairness and equality in her social dealings, and detested unnecessary hierarchy. She also recognized, as did Alexis De Tocqueville over 170 years ago, the harmful effects of "the tyranny of the majority." Tocqueville wrote, "In our time, freedom of association has become a necessary guarantee against the tyranny of the majority. In the United States, once a party has become dominant, all public power passes into its hands; its particular friends occupy all the posts and all organized forces are at its disposal. As the most distinguished men of the opposing party are unable to get over the barrier that separates them from power, they must surely be able to establish themselves outside it; the minority must oppose its moral force as a whole to the material power that oppresses it."²⁶

The American South in the late fifties provided many opportunities where the “minority must oppose its moral force” in day to day situations and Ella Baker understood those situations well. As a NAACP and SCLC member, she functioned within non-violent philosophical organizations. Yet, she believed each situation had to be assessed from a local perspective, and when lives were in danger, supported the idea of self-defense.²⁷ During one of the most violent periods of the civil rights movement, Baker was not afraid to take a minority position if she felt it was correct.

In 1958, Robert F. Williams, and other members of the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP, had decided to take a stand and defend themselves against the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was reacting to accusations that a little black boy had kissed a little white girl and was threatening to hang the boy and his friends. Williams organized his members to protect the boys and themselves despite receiving little support from the local police or the NAACP.²⁸ Baker, while not directly involved in the so-called “kissing case”, supported Williams and the people of Monroe and later visited for several days at the home of Azalea Johnson, one of the Williamses' staunchest supporters.²⁹ For her, in this and other threatening situations, self- defense was common sense regardless of what the NAACP or SCLC espoused.

Baker operated from a perspective that was grassroots and participatory oriented, grounded in economic equity. Scholars and activists agree that Baker’s politics was lived experience and participatory democracy was embodied by and originated from her practice .In addition to the three aspects of participatory democracy that Mueller identifies; grassroots decision making and involvement; non-emphasis on hierarchy and professional credentials as the sole basis for leadership; and direct action politics, Ella Baker believed that economic empowerment for the poor was also vital.^{30, 31} Evidenced by her work teaching consumer education classes at the Rand School, her involvement in the Harlem’s Own Cooperative, The Young Negroes Cooperative League, the National Urban League and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the thirties, to the National Association of Consumers in the forties, and the National Sharecroppers Fund in the sixties and seventies, Baker was always involved in work that sought to raise the material standard of living for the poor.³²

Her roots continuously reminded her that real progress was progress for all. She remarked, “Where we lived there was no sense of social hierarchy in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon, or evaluate as a lower breed, those who didn’t have.”³³ With this idea as a foundation, Baker was able to work with people from different classes, races, positions of power and ideological perspectives. For her, participatory democracy was more than civic participation; it was integral to addressing inequities in political and economic power.

Modern Examples of Baker's Participatory Democracy

Baker's ideas and practice, coupled with later contributions by others has allowed the concept of participatory democracy to develop into a more workable format. In *PARECON (Participatory Economics): Life After Capitalism*, Michael Albert writes, "To transcend capitalism, PARECON-oriented anti-globalization activists would offer an institutional vision derived from the same values we listed earlier for shaping alternative global aims: equity, solidarity, diversity, self-management, and ecological balance. Such activists would urge that each workplace be owned in equal part by all citizens so that ownership conveys no special rights or income advantages. Bill Gates wouldn't own a massive proportion of the means by which software is produced. We all would own it equally so that ownership would have no bearing on the distribution of income, wealth, or power. In this way the ills of garnering wealth through profits would disappear."³⁴

In Brazil, participatory democracy has morphed into a form of direct democracy expressed through what they call a participatory budget. It combines the idea of direct action, where grievances and complaints are given directly at workplaces and mass demonstrations are held, if necessary, with participatory democracy. Direct democracy has given people an overarching concept that is tangible to their everyday lives. Its application through the participatory budget has given thousands in the city of Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Dul Sul decision-making power on many local issues. Their power is both political and economic and has served as the incubator for many of the sweeping changes seen in Brazil today.³⁵

Closer to home, Jim Diers writes in *Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way*, "Over the past third of a century, there have emerged three forms of participatory democracy that seem to me to be especially promising, asset-based community development, formal participation structures and community organizing...in Seattle and across the nation, more people are engaged in the newer forms of participatory democracy that have evolved to meet the needs of our present society."³⁶

In the examples cited above and others throughout the world, the ideas originating in part, from the political practice of a southern, educated, fiercely determined, African-American woman organizer are still relevant today. The question is how can these ideas; grassroots leadership, limitation of ego, group centered leadership and processing, and radical democracy, empower the oppressed poor and marginalized?

Baker's Ideas Applied to Oakland, CA

In their work *Countervailing Forces in African American Civic Activism, 1973-1994* authors Harris, Sinclair-Chapman and McKenzie argue that although increased influence within the political system increases black civic participation, “downward turns in the economic conditions of black communities produce less civic involvement in black communities.”³⁷ They assert that these two forces act as countervailing elements retarding the actual participation and economic development within these communities. Further, they state, “Growing income inequality is a statistically significant determinant of black political work for blacks overall and specifically for non-southern blacks and black men. A similar trend was evidenced for black organizational work and composite participation. The likelihood of participating in organizing activities such as making a speech or sitting on a committee declines among all demographic segments of the black community as income inequality increases.”³⁸

From the standpoint of applying Ella Baker's ideas to Oakland, while cognizant of the above statement, the question becomes two-fold and more specific, 1) how do we best utilize the recent upsurge in progressive and African American political power to ensure economic gain for the poor? And (2).how do we create organizational structures that have both mass civic participation and decision making capabilities?

If we look at Baker's ideas and these questions from Oakland's perspective, we begin at the grassroots level. Oakland, at present, is amidst its own *push and pull* of countervailing forces. On one hand, it's in a severe crisis. Its homicide rate is higher than it has been in ten years. Its high housing prices and rents have forced many to leave or become homeless. There is a shortage of jobs. The infrastructure needs overhauling. The school district was until recently, controlled by the state. And, the overall image that many have of Oakland is one of violence and inefficiency.³⁹

Yet, there are other perspectives of Oakland. There is the Oakland that is undergoing a *Manhattanization* of its downtown. The building boom to create housing for ten thousand people has created a frenzy of building projects. Coupled with the real estate boom, many residents have seen their property values rise, creating financial advantages. However, since home sales have slowed, the overall effect appears to be the lowering of the percentage of home ownership among working families. Many of the poor are being priced out of the city. Depending on who actually moves into the downtown housing, Oakland's class, race and ethnic demographics may be changed for decades.

Then there is the Oakland that is undergoing a progressive political resurgence. By petitioning, drafting, and electing former congressman Ronald Dellums as Mayor in 2006, along with the strong finish by City Councilwoman Nancy Nadel, in addition to the victory of State Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, and the spirited, yet unsuccessful campaign of Green candidate Aimee Allison for city council, Oakland has experienced a groundswell of electoral mobilization not seen since Lionel Wilson's mayoral election nearly thirty years ago. Although not as massed based and ideologically strident as in the past, the overall mobilization effort is reminiscent of the confluence of radical community organizing and liberal and progressive electoral politics of the early seventies.⁴⁰

How will the people at the grassroots level benefit from this mobilization as well as city development? From Ella Baker's perspective, success will be measured by how far people on the bottom are able to develop, advance and participate. Adolph Reed, in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* observes, "Encouraging popular participation is the only effective possibility for reinvigorating a progressive movement in black political life because people respond by organizing themselves when offered concrete visions that connect with their lives as they experience them, not to ideological abstractions or generic agendas that perform narrow class programs."⁴¹

Based on Reed's observation, Oakland is poised to transform. In his campaign for mayor, Dellums outlined a vision of Oakland as a Model City. This Model City would have mass civic participation, universal health care, safety from crime and violence, relevant 21st century education, jobs and activities for youth, environmental sustainability, equitable economic prosperity, emergency preparedness and homeland security.⁴² The community response was overwhelmingly positive and it has been more energized than in thirty years. Dellums answered the call of grassroots support by incorporating community participation into the structure of his administration. He and his team created forty one task forces that cover every aspect of city life, from community policing, redevelopment, and civic participation, to youth violence, education and health. These task forces have produced over two hundred specific proposals for implementation. Eight hundred to one thousand community members are directly involved and have committed themselves to the implementation process. The question now becomes, what does it take to sustain such a high level of participation, how can it be expanded to include more people, and how can newly created entities have both political and economic impact?

To answer the first part, we return to Ella Baker's emphasis on local community leadership, limitation of ego, and group – centered leadership and processing. Any group that divides into many subgroups needs varying kinds of cooperative leadership. In this way, the groups' needs are met and everyone gets training and experience at the same time. Everyone is respected and encouraged to participate to their maximal potential without relying on any one individual to be the sole driving force.

Baker felt that “Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited a larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program.”⁴³ Baker’s attentiveness to the attitude of the community leader is relevant because the needs of today necessitates that leaders rotate duties equitably and listen and facilitate more than in the past.⁴⁴ The Civil Rights ,Black ,Red ,Yellow and Brown Power , Left , Women’s , Gay and Lesbian ,and Environmental movements have made people acutely aware of power imbalances . Subsequently , participants of these struggles and in general are sensitive to ‘ power plays ‘ and personal agendas played out in the name of group dynamics.

One presently used method that can be expanded is to teach facilitation skills to everyone; task force conveners, members, and the community at large. Within the language of group facilitation theory, detailed discussions can be had around different kinds of power, (physical, political, financial, intellectual, creative, spiritual, etc.).⁴⁵ This dialogue enables participants a methodology to differentiate personal from collective motives and gives them an objective tool in offering constructive criticism.

To compliment the facilitative process, a careful, deliberately styled meeting structure is best. By deliberation, participants refrain from excessive rhetoric and lecturing by asking questions and refining answers through careful thinking. For example, when asked her opinion on a subject ,Kwame ` Ture` (Stokely Carmichael) says ‘Ms.’ Baker would respond : “Well ,certainly you could ...but what is the result you really want to achieve here ? If you do thus and so, how do you think so –and –so are likely to respond? If you do X, what will that say about this organization? ‘Then she’d be content to sit back and listen carefully as we wrestled with the issue, groping our way toward a shared understanding. “⁴⁶Baker’s intention was the full development of each member and this involved making sure each person felt comfortable to speak. Jurgen Habermas, in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, quotes Frank Michelman on the deliberative process:” Deliberation ...refers to a certain attitude toward social cooperation, namely, that of openness to persuasion by reasons referring to the claims of others as well as one’s own. The deliberative medium is a good faith exchange of views – including participants ‘reports of their own understanding of their respective vital interests ...in which a vote, if any vote is taken, represents a pooling of judgments.”⁴⁷

Along with facilitative and deliberative skills, the group must successfully complete mini –projects within the context of the larger goal. By identifying short term goals that are attainable, and applying the group will necessary to complete them, the group gains a sense of solidarity.⁴⁸ The working friendships created, coupled with concrete results keeps momentum high enough to sustain enthusiasm through difficult times.

As regards the second part of the question, how can participation be expanded to include more people, we return to both Baker and ideas expressed by Albert in PARECON (participatory economics). In 1964, Baker, Staughton Lynd, a Spelman History professor, Bob Moses and other young people of SNCC organized what they called Freedom Schools. In these schools for young and old, Baker and her colleagues sought to improve basic literacy as well as provide political education. Ransby quotes Tom Wahman, a SNCC worker at that time: “We want to bring the student to a point where he questions everything he reads or is taught –the printed word, movies, the ‘power structure –everything’.”⁴⁹

These Freedom Schools were used as political consciousness raising tools to further organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP was a partially successful attempt to build a grassroots alternative to both the Democratic and Republican political parties. Poor people, particularly African – American, had been disenfranchised in the south since the start of ‘Jim Crow’ in the late nineteenth century. Baker, SNCC organizers, and a dedicated group of local Mississippians went door to door registering people and politically educating them at the same time. Their goal was to have a voice at the ‘64’ Democratic convention and hopefully replace its delegates. From their perspective, the delegates were not representative of the racial and class realities of Mississippi. Although ultimately unsuccessful in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Baker and her SNCC comrades organized over 80, 000 people and showed everyone the potential of mass –based grassroots mobilization.⁵⁰ They were able to see for themselves the tremendous capacity for growth, development and power people demonstrate when approached with sincerity, respect and political clarity- especially around issues they care about.... These political struggles alongside dynamic people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Amzie Moore reconfirmed Ella Baker’s belief in the innate transformative capacity within all people and is the essence of participatory democracy.⁵¹

In Oakland, a similar opportunity was present in 2007. With the task force structure, combined with existing neighborhood groups, community members could organize Freedom-like schools that give non-hierarchical, critically oriented classes on a range of subjects. The subjects could include literacy, political education, community organizing, group –centered leadership, conflict resolution, immigration, health, employment, restorative justice, environmental sustainability and how to form entrepreneurial cooperatives.

This could prepare the way for the transformation of the neighborhood groups and task forces into ‘neighborhood councils.’ These councils, organized according to voting precincts, could begin the tedious process of creating mass based, democratic structures within each community ...

With regard to councils ,Albert writes :” As with workers ,the principal means of organizing consumers in a parecon is consumer councils .Each individual ,family ,or other social unit would comprise the smallest councils and also belong to its larger neighborhood consumption council .Each neighborhood would belong in turn to a federation of neighborhood councils the size of a city ward or rural county .” ⁵²

With a model similar to Albert’s ,a structure can be created that allows people a direct voice in community decisions and vehicles to participate .The incentive of course , is tied to the groups ‘ ability to enact decisions that are binding and where necessary , address economic needs .

Kerala ,India beginning in 1996 , embarked on an ambitious ‘People’s Campaign for the 9th Plan ‘.This plan , using the Black Panther Party – like slogan ,”power to the people “,entails a detailed strategy for empowering poor villagers throughout the south Indian state. ⁵³⁵⁴In an article ,’Power to the (Malayalee) People ‘, Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin write: “ activists are emphasizing decentralized planning with high levels of local participation at the panchayat (village) level .Planning is conceived of as a mass educational project which will aid in the future development efforts .”⁵⁵

Oakland can be conceived of as being comprised of many villages or neighborhoods. The neighborhood councils mentioned before can be given the concrete task of producing something .In Kerala, they produce a ‘development report ‘.For Oakland, the report could be each neighborhood’s needs from the perspective of The Model City. Each neighborhood report would entail precise plans on how task force recommendations and other ideas could best be used to develop a Model Neighborhood (i.e. Cooperatives, infrastructure, health centers, senior services, youth activities etc.) and fulfill those needs. . Together, these neighborhood reports would give the Mayor, city council members and community, a comprehensive overview on how to further carry out the recommendations to make Oakland a ‘Model City’.

To generate interest and excitement about participating ,the organizers should be creative and utilize the local culture .In India , for example,” sound trucks ,processions ,and street theatre created a festive atmosphere .Each household in a ward received a written invitation to participate .Some panchayats (villages) developed innovative methods of mobilization ,such as a development quiz in the schools ,or a coconut oil lamp procession the night before meetings .From fifty to several hundred persons attended in each ward .Meetings began at noon and lasted ,in many panchayats ,well into the evening” .⁵⁶

Similar ideas can be implemented in Oakland .With its many cultures and ethnic groups, a rich tapestry of diverse traditions could be woven into an otherwise dull and monotonous process. What’s key about Kerala is that people at the grassroots level participate in drafting a document that exhibits their group decision making capacity.

To answer the last aspect of the question, what will it take to institutionalize and legalize newly created structures to have both political and economic impact; it is helpful to return to the concept of 'power'.^{57, 58} Power is defined as "the ability or capacity to perform or act effectively and the ability or official capacity to exercise control; authority"⁵⁹. For these grassroots organizations and or councils to accomplish anything, they must have political and economic power. Where does this power come from? First, it must come from the people participating. The people comprising these councils must recognize the collective power they already have; to meet, deliberate, vote, protest, selectively buy, self- manage and to conduct direct action campaigns organized around unifying themes. Second, the city, county, and the state have to be convinced, either through political pressure, dialogue or diplomacy to draft legislative policies that give cities and their neighborhoods more direct decision-making and budgetary control. Lastly, the groups seeking power must instill checks and balances within themselves to prevent the misuse of power in all of its forms. Only in this way are people actually advancing politically and humanistically.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Ella Baker's ability to think spontaneously and envision the potential of a movement was evidenced by the title of her speech at a historic student meeting in 1960. In, *More Than a Hamburger*, Baker shifted the political context of the student – led sit-in movement against desegregation to a larger one encompassing worldwide social change. In her exhortation to students who would become SNCC, she told them to "start thinking boldly about transforming the entire social structure" and chided the elders saying, "The younger generation is challenging you and me. They are asking us to forget our laziness and doubt and fear and to follow our dedication to truth to the bitter end."⁶¹ Later, in the summer she wrote: "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 'world' and the 'Human Race' "⁶²

Nearly fifty years later, and clearly ahead of her time, those words are still relevant. They are relevant in Oakland, Seattle, Chicago, Soweto, South Africa, Kerala, India, Chiapas, Mexico, and Porte Alegre, Brazil. Prophetically, they are relevant anywhere in the world where people are correcting past mistakes and excesses while demanding more local decision making power.⁶³

Whether it is acknowledged or not, wherever participatory democracy is practiced in its various forms, direct, economic, situational, planning, etc., along with group-centered leadership with an emphasis on grassroots participation, Ella Baker's presence and influence will be found. She neither wrote nor spoke of herself as a philosopher, yet she had one.

At age 77, six years before her death, she said, “If there is any philosophy, it’s that those who have walked a certain path should know some things, should remember some things that they can pass on, that others can use to walk the path a little better.”⁶⁴

The knowledge and practice that she passed on has helped develop generations of organizers and activists because her focus on people at the bottom will forever be needed. If her ideas, and most importantly her practice, can be studied, taught and institutionalized, a dynamic model will have been re-discovered and put to good use.

For those living in Oakland, (and Obama’s America) the opportunity is ripe. Thousands of people have called for sweeping changes; in leadership, public safety, economic opportunity, development, youth involvement, and a host of other public issues. . The leadership has a bold vision and has invited the public to participate. The public has responded and is to a degree, mobilized.

The challenge is whether the initial enthusiasm and excitement can be maintained and consolidated and how many risks all forms of local leadership will be willing to take to change existing political and economic structures. From the perspective of Ella Baker’s political philosophy, the focus has to stay on the youth, the poor, the elderly, the workers, the women, the homeless, the disabled, the disadvantaged, people on the bottom, the grassroots.

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¹⁶ Ransby, p.82.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.86.

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