



Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision

Barbara Ransby

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One of the most important African American leaders of the twentieth century and perhaps the most influential woman in the civil rights movement, Ella Baker (1903-1986) was an activist whose remarkable career spanned fifty years and touched thousands of lives.

A gifted grassroots organizer, Baker shunned the spotlight in favor of vital behind-the-scenes work that helped power the black freedom struggle. She was a national officer and key figure in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a prime mover in the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Baker made a place for herself in predominantly male political circles that included W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and Martin Luther King Jr., all the while maintaining relationships with a vibrant group of women, students, and activists both black and white.

In this deeply researched biography, Barbara Ransby chronicles Baker's long and rich political career as an organizer, an intellectual, and a teacher, from her early experiences in depression-era Harlem to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Ransby shows Baker to be a complex figure whose radical, democratic worldview, commitment to empowering the black poor, and emphasis on group-centered, grassroots leadership set her apart from most of her political contemporaries. Beyond documenting an extraordinary life, the book paints a vivid picture of the African American fight for justice and its intersections with other progressive struggles worldwide across the twentieth century.

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From Reader Review Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision for online ebook

Alex says

just kept getting better as it went on. the writing style was not my favorite, the author seemed overly interested in teasing out categories or labels to apply to baker's life, rather than telling the bare facts. a more serious complaint is that the book spends hundreds of pages in baker's early life and upbringing, only to speed through the most politically interesting part of her life, in the black freedom movement of the 50s and 60s. i'm sorry, but i can never get enough information about SNCC.

nevertheless, it's a good book, makes very useful points about radical democratic movement-building and education (that the role of the organizer is to bring people together and ask tough questions, but leave people to determine their own actions and strategy), and shows that ella baker above all others was the true mentor and parent of our grassroots organizing struggles today.

Bryce Blilie says

ELLA BAKER AND THE BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT
NOVEMBER 22, 2013

What, exactly, was democratic about Baker and the many hundreds that she worked with?

A democracy, as John Dewey says, is having faith in other people to do the right thing at the right time. Ella Baker and the various organizations and organizers she worked with had this faith not just in African Americans, but in all the people of any race. There is simply no other reason for their efforts to equalize economically and politically across racial and class lines. They had faith that the poor could do great things if they had fair and just opportunities to do so. They had faith that African Americans were capable of leading the country in a better direction, if they were given a chance on equal footing. But they also had faith in the elite aristocracy's ability to lead the nation, given in that their cause did not consistently advocate complete anarchy or move towards communism. Democracy was not the enemy, those who failed to practice it were. White supremacy, Jim Crowe, and the apartheid south were the enemy, not the founding principles of democracy.

Ella was raised by her mother to know and understand class and race did not dictate overall intelligence and ability (pg.19). She spent time learning about democracy in Harlem against a backdrop of the Great Depression, and she advocated democracy and worked to break up the enemies of democracy by visiting the members of the NAACP people directly, spending time with them rather than just leading meetings in the town center. This indicates a true sincerity towards making change happen, not for herself, but for the people she worked so hard for. She worked for the betterment of race relations to make a better democratic republic.

What unique contributions did Baker make to the burgeoning and diverse Black Freedom Movement?

Baker had a unique background that allowed her to continue to practice what she preached when she obtained higher levels of status within the NAACP. Many leaders coming from poor or lower class roots changed once they were put in charge or obtained a leadership position. But because Baker was raised in a substantial middle-class black neighborhood (and would routinely outreach to poorer black neighborhoods) she was taught at an early age that a life of service is never completed. On page 209, a perfect Baker quote is cited, "I never worked for an organization but for a cause." This speaks volumes about her true commitment

to the organizations she worked with and for. Baker left the NAACP because she felt it was “falling short of its present possibilities” and “the full capacities of the staff have not been used” and “there is little chance of mine being utilized in the immediate future”. (pg.146) It was a resignation based on lack of focus on the true meaning of the organization, not one due to lack of advancement towards leadership.

Can we call Baker a populist?

Baker was a populist by proxy, because she didn't advocate for all the poor all the time, but instead the African American poor most of the time, she was not advocating on behalf of the people. Populist beliefs are popular, and she was not in favor of pursuing the popular ideals at the time, such as the belief in white supremacy. As unjust and evil as the pursuits of racist ideals are, they were during her time popular. Baker did not need to be populist, Baker needed to be an advocate of an oppressed race of people in a democratic country. Baker perhaps, could not be a populist as it would undermine her efforts to bring justice and equal rights to a race of people who needed her. Baker's life was a series of desperate situations brought on by years and decades – millennia even, of ignorance and wanton hate. Baker was not a populist because it was more important for her to focus on African Americans and equal rights.

Joshunda Sanders says

A thorough and complete history of a civil rights Hidden Figure

I started reading this while in Norfolk VA over the summer, not realizing it was Ella Baker's birthplace and after reading Barbara Ransby's latest book, Making All Black Lives Matter. Ransby's command of history and narrative fills an important gap in the story of an iconic activist and freedom fighter who disrupted gender roles and expectations, transgressed respectability lines as delineated by blacks and whites and created, as Ransby notes, a magnificent and unique legacy.

Lynn Cowles says

Ransby admirably does the impossible job of biography in her examination of civil rights activist Ella Baker's overarching motivations and progressive strategies for social reform. Biography isn't a genre with which I'm very familiar, so I don't have a point of reference for the forced transitions in the work. Many sections conclude in the following formula:

- 1) Specific reference to the event or situation examined, usually in the form of primary material like quotations from interviews;
- 2) Analysis of the event or situation against the perspective of major civil rights figures of the time; and
- 3) Conclusion about Baker's democratic, grassroots style of leadership (not based on a figurehead, not centralized).

This pattern is worthwhile but boring, so the narrative depreciates Baker's unique influence and modes of interaction with politicians, civil rights leaders, and regular people. Ransby's syntax leaves room for improvement, and so does her grammar.

I give the book four stars because Ella Baker was a goddamn powerhouse, and I'm grateful for any book that allows me to spend 12 or 14 hours with her.

Dont says

For decades, the name of Ella Baker has lingered along the margins of my thinking about the intersection of popular education disposition and political organizing processes. When the question of an radical democratic practice indigenous to the United States, I would consistently cite Myles Horton, Grace Lee Boggs, Ella Baker and the numerous radical pedagogy practices in the Black Freedom Movement. Call it a prejudice of theory, I never took the time to actually research Baker's life in much detail due to the simple fact that unlike most radical pedagogues, Baker never wrote a book to codify her ideas. A search of the library index will reveal many books about the civil rights movement and SNCC in particular that have a dedicated chapter on Baker. But with the exception of Joanne Grant's "Ella Baker: Freedom Bound" from 1998, there's been no thorough and exhaustive study of Baker's life and thought. This fact is all the more startling considering how many generations of organizers, educators, and radical intellectuals have attributed to Baker the status of architect (or master weaver) of the civil rights movement and participatory democracy in the United States. Barbara Ransby's 2003 intellectual biography of Baker seeks to correct that omission.

As I read Ransby's book I consistently confronted my own prejudices about what constitutes political theory. For better or for worse, I feel like I have been trained to only recognize political thought when it is presented as a set of abstract political theoretical propositions. Of course, as has been argued for decades, this model of knowledge invariable privileges very specific experiences and histories, specifically a European male perspective. But more than that, such models of political thought reproduce the prioritizing of thought and ideas over experience and practice -- in other words, the Eurological model of political thought breaks the dialectic inherent to praxis. Ransby treads the fine line between providing a detailed account of Ella Baker's life and drawing from that life the lessons of a lived radical democracy.

I say all of this because it occurs to be that in an age where radical thought grows increasingly sterile, "Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement" is probably one of the most important books on political theory I have ever read. The fact that it in everyway departs from the model of contemporary radical philosophy demonstrates the urgency of its argument; that theory and lived experience need to be in dialogue if our ideas are to have any meaningful consequence in the world.

A central theme of Ransby's book is the profound dissymmetry between Baker's vision of democratic action and the orientations of the mainstream civil rights leadership. Here Ransby is able to fully develop the now-famous philosophical opposition between Martin Luther King Jr. and Ella Baker. Based on the notion of "racial uplift", King and the civil rights leadership were convinced that the protagonist of the movement needed to be the black middle class. Accepting the American ideology of petite bourgeois respectability, organizations like the NAACP and SCLC presented an image of black middle class demanding their rights. The voice of that demand, therefore, would come from the clergy; a strata of black society that tended to have greater access to education and middle class opportunity. It was no accident that a leadership based the clergy would also equate civil rights struggle with patriarchy. Baker, however, argued for a different model of protagonism.

Ransby locates Baker's early life as deeply informed by the role of women missionaries in the black church. While often middle class themselves, these women functioned entirely differently from the male clergy. For these women, the work of the church bound together the personal social circles of women, providing for the needs of poor in the community, and advocating for the poor within the power structures of the community. As Baker matured in the fulcrum of the Harlem Renaissance and the subsequent Great Depression, her own

worldview moved further away from a notion of charity to a radical understanding of the poor as protagonists in their own struggles. Never confused about her own identifications, Baker then saw her role as an organizer and educator as one who identified and nurtured the fighting spirit and democratic possibilities within the lives of the poor. As a consequence of this position, solidarity assumes a different structure from that of "racial uplift." Seen as rich in experience and political analysis, the poor no longer need the middle class to speak for them. The organizer, instead, learns to be silence, to ask questions, to listen, and to bring resources and networks to the communities in the closest proximity to the violence of racial and economic exploitation.

As Ransby demonstrates over and again, a politics built upon the protagonism of the poor has implications beyond a class analysis of racism. It demands a different practice and analysis of gender from middle class normativity. Here we see how Baker's life exemplified this fact. It is no accident that in the context of SNCC, the organization where Baker had the most influence institutionally, the leadership role of women was unparalleled by any other national civil rights organization.

Ransby's biography of Baker contains many other thematic gems useful for a theory of political organizing. But beyond theory, perhaps the book makes its greatest impact in how it suggests a different way of being in the world. Over and again Ransby stresses how for Baker a movement exists as a web of personal social relationships. Those relationships span decades as ever changing constellations of organizations and resources consistently return to the same networks of friends and tender comrades. Baker eschewed partisanship in the midst of cold war terror (sometimes with more or less consistency). For her, the only partisanship worth adhering to was the movement itself. And here, the movement for Baker was always a class-based understanding of racism and struggle. The liberation of the poor meant the liberation of all. The aim of the struggle, as Ransby argues, was to understand the historical basis of exclusion. Organizing did not mean simple halting those exclusions but to reverse them. Such a reversal suggested not only the destruction of the white power structure. It also meant the end of middle class privilege and arrogance.

Linda says

I think I first heard of Ella Baker in the late 70s, when I heard Sweet Honey in the Rock's "Ella's Song": "We who believe in freedom cannot rest". And this sister didn't spend a lot of time resting. Her activist life moved through decade after decade of the 20th century, confronting racism, sexism, and the tendency of far too many civil rights activists to fall in love with their own fame. She stayed humble, built leadership, and left a legacy of young activist who are now our own elders, pushed and inspired by her to analyse, strategize, and to step up into a style of leadership that is more ally than director. Her respect for poor people, for the people of the South she grew up in, was crucial to the style of organizing in SNCC, which birthed a generation of anti-war, women's rights and other social justice activists.

And I loved reading about the sister's ability to maintain relationships with colleagues and comrades and sisters and brothers, and to maintain her own privacy. Now in addition to envisioning her telling the SNCC folks they needed to be their own leaders and organizers, I have the vision of her sitting on a porch after a day of meetings, kicking back, telling stories, and laughing in the face of the oppression she spent her life fighting.

Pascal says

One of the best histories of an American Civil Rights leader I've read. The importance of Ella Baker to the

Civil Rights Movement, compounded with her dedication to a democratic bottom up leadership strategy that empowered the dispossessed to take revolutionary leadership of their liberation is unparalleled. Not only a great biography, but a great history of the Civil Rights Movement.

Benjamin says

Wow. I knew she was supercool and did lots of behind the scenes work while men like Martin Luther King Jr and NAACP Walter White took all the credit, but I did not know how much influence she had on SNCC. She played a huge role in guiding individuals in SNCC towards more inclusive discussion and debate, towards direct action instead of legislative or electoral tactics, and she was always firmly for a big picture victory... it was never about just integrating lunch counters or small reformist struggles. She was working for a whole new world built on inclusion and fairness. I also did not know that she was one of the main instigators in setting up SNCC in the first place or later the broad movement to free Angela Davis.

Not only is the subject of this book exciting and amazing, but it is also fun to read. The concluding chapter has names like Gramsci and Freire in the title, and I was like, uh oh, here comes the impenetrable academic analysis... but no, that chapter was also awesome. I got to get more books about the women in SNCC, man. And about these smaller, whiter groups that she was down with who did fund raising and other support work.

But it isn't just the 1960s stuff that makes this book so great. Baker is active from the 1920s on. And looking at these struggles from her perspective is fascinating. Early in the book and her political life, Baker had an alliance with George Schuyler. They were working on building a network of African American consumer cooperatives... like Black food coops... He doesn't play a big role in the book, but I think his influence on Baker is there and that is another "wow" thing for me. Up til reading this book, I mainly knew Schuyler from an excerpt of his Black No More that appeared in Dark Matter: Reading the Bones and some mention of him in On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy... so more his literary work, the stuff that gets him compared to Mencken. The Internet considers him a Conservative, but that doesn't seem quite right. Anyway, he's a very small part of this book and now a significant part of this review and that also doesn't seem fair. The point is, that Baker was very active with a lot of amazing groups and even if SNCC is for me the jewel in the crown, there is a lot more to her even than that.

Erin says

I started reading a biography of Alice Paul immediately following this, which is perhaps not the greatest idea. The freedoms American women had - especially upper-middle class American women - compared to blacks even after they got the vote is astonishing and infuriating and mind-boggling.

What I liked best about this book is the both how ordinary and extraordinary Ella Baker was. She graduated from college after being raised by effectively a single mother, moved herself to New York, and, with only her brains and passion, consistently found work that was - if not always exciting - important. That would be an amazing story today, but for a woman to do this who was born in 1903 is inspiring.

What was useful to read was how she made all of this happen over the course of her long and fruitful life. It

was a slog. But still she came back, year after year, to do the copying, arrange the meetings, write the thank you notes, visit folks in the real world and make sure they get whatever financial compensation they can when they fight the system. It was often thankless, but all of it was necessary. It made me rethink how revolutions happen.

Drick says

One of the reasons we read biographies in part to find mentors from the past who can shed light on our present, and provide guidance through their lives and words. This book on the life and career of Ella Baker chronicles the life of an amazing woman who lived through and participated in some of the most dynamic moments and movements for racial justice of the 20th century. Her life brought her in contact with some of the most well known civil rights leaders of the time – Dubois, Garvey, King, Malcolm, Rosa Parks, and Stokely Carmichael – yet her name and her work is less known. For those who have only a cursory view of the history of the Civil Rights Movement, this book will provide you with insights into the complexity and internal tensions in a movement that has far more idolized than seriously analyzed.

In this well written book, we learn about this amazing Civil Rights leader who only reluctantly took a front stage role and yet whose approach to political organizing, teaching and leadership inspired and guided many of the significant figures in the Civil Rights Movement. There are many aspects of the story I found compelling but two that stand out is her stormy relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the impact on the young activists who founded SNCC. Also particularly interesting to me was her close and long term relationship with Anne Braden, a White Civil Rights activist and a personal hero of mine.

This book is so inspiring. Yet at the end Barbara Ransby confesses that despite her best efforts she has failed to fully capture this woman's whose story was "lived outside categories and labels." Even so this book achieves the goal of elevating Ella Baker to a status she was often denied while she was alive.

Thomas Flowers says

There isn't much to say that hasn't already been said in this list of reviews. I will say however, is on the importance Ella Baker played in sustaining the Civil Rights Movement down in Dixie. Baker's strong preference to "build upon the work others are doing," is the fundamental creed of SNCC and how voter registration and direct action protests were made successful; through building upon leadership within the community and simply providing the means for success. A lot of academic attention has been given to the "big boys" of the SCLC, but a grassroots history shows us something contrary to pop history. Sure, movements need charismatic leaders, but without a base, without the community, the movement would have sputtered and failed to gain the traction it needed during the 50's and 60's. Building upon the community is a large part of Baker's story and historian Barbara Ransby has done a superb job bringing the Ella Baker's light to a larger audience.

Sara says

I loved this book. The writing wasn't my favorite ever - I think the book is geared towards academic use and a lot of points get repeated over and over - but Ella Baker was an amazing woman. Baker's career spanned from the 1930's to the 1970's. I haven't read many books that talk about the older people who made

contributions to the liberation movements of the 60's or that show in such detail some of foundation building that occurred in the decades before.

I not only learned a lot from reading the book, but I was thoroughly inspired. She was an activist and organizer who continued to make meaningful and valuable contributions as she got older, and Ransby's depiction of her political development and evolution is certainly thought-provoking. Ransby also manages to place her within larger contexts which add to the story and to better understanding the many elements that are part of radical political culture in the US and Baker's role within that.

Baker moved through many organizations throughout her career, and found ways to shape her paying jobs to work for her larger political goals. Seeing an example of this meant a lot to me. It was so great to read about someone who held and maintained a vision and community that is outside of doctrines yet very firmly rooted, and was able to make it real too.

Dave says

17. by Barbara Ransby

Finish date: April 12, 2017

So, tell me. What do you know about Ella Baker? Have you even heard her name? Probably not. And that's too bad because she was flat-out amazing. Born in 1903 in North Carolina and gaining an education unusual for black women of her time, she lived into the 1980s and was involved in virtually every step of the black freedom and civil rights movements. She worked in the national office of the NAACP beginning in the late 1920s. She traveled the country doing grass roots organizing in the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. She was involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She was a founder and guiding hand of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and continued to work for civil rights up to her death.

There are probably two reasons you haven't heard of her. First, she was a strong organizer who didn't grandstand, working in the background and encouraging local people in cities and towns around the country to be the leaders their community needed. Second, she was a woman, and even as blacks fought for civil rights for all, black men were just as chauvinistic about women's roles as their white counterparts. The leaders believed that it was right for the men to be leaders and women to be followers. They weren't likely to give her, or any of the other women involved in the movement, any more credit than necessary.

Ella Baker fought this, won some battles, but more importantly, went about her tasks in the best way she knew how and advanced the movement immeasurably. She wasn't perfect, but she was impressive. This is an excellent story of her life.

Pablo Uribe says

Wish I had read this years ago. Really compelling, thoughtful writing/framing by Ransby. And Baker's politics, her radical democratic humanism, as I think it was called in here once, is really inspiring to learn about.

Carey Lamprecht says

This is one of my favorite books of all time. Ella Baker was behind the catalyzation of the movement for Civil Rights almost beyond anyother person, and yet she is not credited for it. She led people by teaching them to stand up for themselves, organize and be active participants in their own lives. She stood in the sidelines and made things happen by not leading, but inspiring change. This has made a hge influence upon me and my views of collective empowerment. I recommend this to anyone working to make the world a better place.
