American Political Science Review (2022) 116, 2, 533–546
doi:10.1017/S0003055421001015 © The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Political Science Association.

Starting with People Where They Are: Ella Baker's Theory of Political Organizing

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This article argues that Ella Baker's ideology of radical democracy shaped her theory of organizing, including her theories of mass action and indigenous leadership. Against the emerging consensus in realist and radical democratic theory that both Baker's praxis and democratic organizing more broadly are nonideological, I argue that all *organizing is ideological if, with Stuart Hall, we understand ideology not as a rigid set of beliefs but as a dynamic framework for understanding society. Organizers make decisions based on their own ideologies and they attempt to maintain or reshape the dominant ideologies. In this sense, organizers are political theorists: they have self-conscious theories of how society works and changes based on which they make strategic decisions. I demonstrate a method for interpreting organizers' political theories and argue that Baker's theory of radical democracy offers democratic theory insight into the practices and organizational structures that advance democratization.*

INTRODUCTION

When asked how to organize a community, veteran civil rights organizer Ella Baker explained that people first had to recognize their own "right to participate in all the decisions that affect their lives." She continued, "Then comes the question, how do you reach people if they aren't already conscious of this right? You start with people where they are. For example, the burning question after the 1954 Supreme Court school decision in an urban center like New York, had to do with breaking down de facto segregation. You begin by organizing people around that issue in terms of their level of understanding. Then you try to reach from one level of understanding to another" (Baker 1970, 1). Scholars and organizers alike often describe grassroots organizing as "meeting people where they are": helping people identify and pursue their own desires rather than imposing an external agenda on them or making social change on their behalf. Baker is often presented as an exemplar of this approach (Nopper 2020; Parker 2020). But, as her response suggests, Baker saw her role as an organizer not as "meeting people where they were" but as *starting* with them there and trying to move them, gradually, somewhere else.

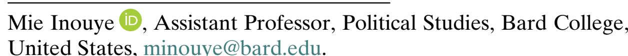
Although political theory has largely overlooked organizing, the process of developing the leadership of ordinary people by engaging them in mass organizations including parties, labor unions, community organizations, and social movement organizations, an emerging literature interprets organizing as a critical democratic practice. Baker is largely absent from this literature, which has drawn principally on the community organizing tradition initiated by Saul Alinsky, founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), who argued that ideology was incompatible with effective organizing (Coles 2005; Stout 2010; Phulwani 2016). Those theorists who do discuss Baker interpret her praxis as nonideological, depicting her as a facilitator, a listener, and a receiver and deemphasizing her attempts to move people toward her vision of a radically transformed society (Coles 2008a; 2008b; 2012; Sabl 2002a; 2002b). This interpretation both reflects and contributes to a tendency amongst political theorists to interpret organizing in general as a nonideological practice of empowering people to pursue their self-identified interests.

In this article, I argue that the emerging political theory literature on organizing understands "ideology" as a closed set of beliefs, consciously adopted or imposed through manipulation and coercion, removed from observed reality, and resistant to change. This definition does not capture the diverse configurations of ideas that guide political action. I draw on the writings of Stuart Hall to offer an alternative definition of ideology as a dynamic framework for understanding society. I reconstruct Baker's radically democratic ideology and show how it shaped her theories of mass action and indigenous leadership. Against the prevailing view of organizing as nonideological, I argue that Baker's praxis, and organizing more generally, are ideological in two senses. First, organizers make strategic decisions based on their frameworks for understanding society. Second, they seek to maintain or transform the dominant frameworks for understanding society.

In addition to arguing that organizing is ideological, this article introduces Baker as a political theorist who offers radical democratic theory a better understanding of how quotidian democratic practices and moments of rebelliousness translate into social change. In presenting this reading of Baker's praxis, it also builds on a growing body of work that treats political actors, including Baker, as political theorists and demonstrates a method for studying the political theories of organizers (Mantena 2012; Pineda 2021; Simon 2017; Spence 2020).

IDEOLOGY IN ORGANIZING

In recent years, an emerging literature has theorized organizing as a critical democratic practice. This



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Received: September 16, 2020; revised: April 06, 2021; accepted: August 09, 2021. First published online: September 24, 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

literature is divided into realist and radical democratic theories of organizing. While the realists and the radical democrats have different understandings of democracy and its relationship to organizing, they converge on the view that organizing is, at its best, nonideological.

Andrew Sabl (2002a; 2002b) and Vijay Phulwani (2016) theorize organizing as a democratic form of realist politics. On their view, organizing is a process of empowering ordinary people to pursue their own interests through association, which counterbalances the influence of the rich and indirectly promotes the general welfare. The realists see ideology as a strategic impediment to these goals. Here, they draw on Saul Alinsky (1971), who argued that ideology alienated potential allies and clouded organizers' strategic judgment. Sabl (2002b) also suggests that ideology undermines the organizer's ability to develop democratic agency in others, writing that "fanatical" organizers who impose their own ideologies on others manipulate the people they organize, preventing them from learning to identify and pursue their own interests (272, 277). Here, Sabl invokes Baker as an example of appropriate ideological restraint, writing that she "might have preferred to be a communist" but "deliberately subordinated her ideological attachments to her devotion to democratic methods" (284). By contrast, Sabl argues that Stokely Carmichael, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer and theorist of Black power, brought about SNCC's downfall by imposing his own ideology on the movement. With Sabl and Alinsky, Phulwani (2016) also holds that organizers must withhold their own ideological preferences in order allow people to pursue their own interests and build their own institutions (866). For the realists, the goals of organizing are at odds with the high-minded ideals and utopian ambitions of radical social transformation that they associate with ideology.

Whereas Sabl and Phulwani portray Baker as a realist, Romand Coles reads her as a radical democrat: someone who experimented with egalitarian alternatives to dominating aspects of the status quo in order to generate unpredictable theories and practices of democracy. On Coles's account, Baker thought that social change happened through the cultivation of what he calls "receptivity": attention to the latent possibilities within people and communities. Of Baker's theory of social change, he writes, "First and foremost, to change the world meant developing a practiced culture of people with discerning eyes and ears for present-yet-subordinated possibilities—for hopeful latencies—in self, in others, and in the surrounding world, possibilities that might be explored and refigured toward the 'beloved community'" (Coles 2008b, 63). According to Coles, this understanding of social change informed Baker's organizing career from the 1930s on (62). With his theory of receptivity, Coles suggests that good organizers *receive* visions and aspirations from the people they organize, allowing their own beliefs to be reshaped in the process, rather than trying to persuade others to adopt their visions. On this view, organizing requires resisting tendencies toward rigidity that inhere in ideology. Coles writes that the SNCC organizers Baker mentored overcame their tendencies to "seek to bend the world to fit rigid ideological frames" and to "flatten and objectify the world into neat ideological boxes" through deep immersion in the communities they sought to organize (63, 66). Unlike the realists, Coles sees an important role for radical critiques of existing institutions and visions of alternative social arrangements in organizing, but he still declines to use the term "ideology" to describe these ideas (Coles 2005, 236; 2006, 554–55; 2008b, 75–77).

Like Coles, Deva Woodly (2021) sees a role for radical critiques and alternative visions of society in organizing but resists the term "ideology." Woodly argues that, whereas Alinskyite organizing is explicitly anti-ideological, movement organizers, including those within the Movement for Black Lives, recognize the importance of orienting participants toward a "vision" of a better world. Still, she distinguishes "vision" from "ideology." She defines the latter as "a system of ideas and ideals that make up a coherent whole that constitutes a canonical set of beliefs that is resistant to change" while "vision" refers to a collectively imagined—and endlessly re-imaginable—world in which "the most marginalized can live and thrive" (14). On Woodly's view, Movement for Black Lives organizers believe that the value of Black lives is not obvious to everyone and that organizing therefore involves reshaping people's understandings of their interests. However, they reject "ideology" because they see it in tension with flexibility, questioning, and collective thinking (15).

Although they do not define the term, Sabl, Phulwani, Coles, and Woodly implicitly understand ideology as a closed set of beliefs, consciously adopted or imposed through manipulation and coercion, removed from observed reality and resistant to change. On this understanding, ideology is *cognitive* in that it consists of conscious beliefs: *negative* in that these beliefs obscure reality, preventing people from seeing their true interests and organizers from making sound strategic decisions, and *static* in that it resists change, even in the face of contradicting evidence. As Michael Freeden (1998) argues, this colloquial use of the term has been shaped in part by sociologists like Daniel Bell (2000), Edward Shils (1955), and Seymour Martin Lipset (1960) who, in the 1950s and 1960s, advanced the "end-of-ideology" thesis. In the wake of World War II and amidst the Cold War, these scholars argued that previously hostile world views had converged on the benefits of a consumer-oriented society with a social welfare state. They predicted the end of revolutionary struggles and geopolitical conflict over grand ideals. Whereas the classic Marxist account of ideology, developed by Marxist scholars from their readings of Marx's and Engels's *The German Ideology*, presented ideology as the ideas of the ruling class that functioned to dominate the lower classes, these Cold War scholars tied "ideology" specifically to totalitarianism and fascism (Brick 2013; Freeden 1998).

The Cold War definition of ideology is overly specific and does little to aid scholars of politics in understanding the diverse configurations of ideas that political

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

actors use to navigate and influence the social world. But "ideology" understood differently is a crucial concept for theorists of organizing, as it helps describe the kind of theorizing that organizers do in the process of crafting campaigns and building organizations. In his revision of the classic Marxist account of ideology, Stuart Hall (1995) offers a helpful alternative definition of ideology as "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence." Rather than a set of beliefs, ideology consists of "articulations" of concepts, images, and premises into "a distinctive set or chain of meanings."[1] For example, Hall writes, "in liberal ideology, "freedom" is connected … with individualism and the free market; in socialist ideology, 'freedom' is a collective condition, dependent on, not counterposed to, 'equality of condition'" (18). These frameworks include visions of the just society and theories of how society works and changes. For example, socialists generally envision the just society as one in which all people share common control of the political and economic decisions that affect their lives. They tend to see the organization of the working class as a necessary means of realizing that society.

By this definition, ideology is *practical* in that it resides primarily at the level of practice: repetitive actions taken by collectives at regular intervals. Ideologies are shaped, proliferated, spread, and transformed through practice. Moreover, by providing a framework through which groups of people make sense of society, ideology in turn shapes practice, leading people to act like consumers, workers, or law-abiding citizens and leading organizers to make particular decisions about strategy and tactics. Most people do not intentionally adopt ideology as they might a set of doctrines. Rather, in Hall's (1995) words, "we formulate our intentions *within ideology*" (19). Ideology gives rise to beliefs (e.g., the belief that the best society is one that is governed by the market or that the purpose of society is to promote the development of human capacities) and it can be made explicit and studied systematically, but most people do not experience it in the form of consciously held beliefs. In fact, as Hall (1995) argues, ideology is at its most effective when we are least aware that it underpins our beliefs and statements—that is, when it sinks to the level of common sense (19).[2] Organizers, however, make their ideologies explicit in order to devise means of maintaining or transforming the status quo.

Both the classic Marxist and the Cold War theories of ideology are *negative* in that they take ideology to be false and to have detrimental social effects.[3] By contrast, Hall offers a *neutral* definition. He denies that categories of "true" and "false" are relevant to ideology, which is an interpretation of people's *real* experiences of the social world that allows them to make sense of and function within that world. There is no "single, fixed, and unalterable" way of interpreting these experiences and articulating concepts (Hall 1986, 38). Hall writes, "the *same* sets of relations—the capitalist circuit—can be represented in several *different ways* or … represented within different systems of discourse" (30). Therefore, it makes little sense to say that an ideology is "true" or "false." The more relevant question is what ideologies reveal and obscure. Nor, by Hall's definition, does it make sense to say that ideology has detrimental social effects, as there are many ideologies that have diverse functions. Where these frameworks have negative social effects, it is due to their particular features and not to the fact that they are ideologies.

Finally, ideology is *dynamic* rather than static. Frameworks can shift, concepts can gain new referents, and images can acquire new meanings. To explain how ruling frameworks change, Hall draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," the power of the ruling class fractions in a society to dominate but also win the consent of the subordinated classes through ideology, deployed through the media, schools, churches, and state institutions. Hall (1988) argues that hegemony is always the fragile product of ongoing struggle, which, "once achieved, must be constantly and ceaselessly renewed, reenacted" (55). By the same token, the transformation of dominant frameworks for understanding society is not an automatic process. Hall writes, "Political and ideological work is required to disarticulate old formations, and to rework their elements into new configurations" (Hall 1979, 15). Again following Gramsci, Hall describes "organic ideologies," ideologies which seek to intervene in "common sense" (the dominant ideology) in order to transform the consciousness of the masses.

By this this definition of ideology, organizing is "ideological work" in two senses. First, organizers make strategic decisions based on their theories of how society works and changes, which form part of their ideologies. Even Alinsky's (1971) approach to organizing was ideological in this sense. He thought that society was divided into three classes (the "have-nots," the "have-a-little-want-mores," and the "haves")

[1] Hall's definition is similar to that of Michael Freeden (1998), who defines ideologies as "those systems of political thinking, loose or rigid, deliberate or unintended, through which individuals and groups construct an understanding of the political world they, or those who preoccupy their thoughts, inhabit, and then act on that understanding" (3). I find Hall's approach to ideology to be more useful to the study of organizing than Freeden's because it emphasizes the processes by which ideologies are formed and transformed, whereas Freeden focuses on morphological analysis. Hall's definition is also more flexible, allowing for images, e.g., the American flag or a border wall, and premises, e.g., a belief in the innate leadership capacities of all humans, to form part of the "framework," whereas Freeden's focuses on concepts.

[2] In this respect, Hall's definition differs not only from the classic Marxist and Cold War definitions but also from the most widespread definition of ideology in political science, viz., the correlation of political beliefs or preferences across different sets of issues or questions (Campbell, Converse, and Miller 1960).

[3] Political philosophers Tommie Shelby (2003), Sally Haslanger (2017), and Jason Stanley (2015) also adopt the "negative" view of ideology as a distortion of reality.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which held competing interests. This class division could never be overcome, but the "have-nots" could form mass organizations to lobby for their interests and thereby counteract the disproportionate influence of the "haves." If each group in society was organized in defense of its interests, the "general welfare" would prevail.[4] In his analysis of social class and his theory of social change, Alinsky shared the pluralist view that American society, although far from egalitarian, was as democratic as possible as long as interest groups were allowed to compete freely (Dahl 2005). His pluralist ideology led him to organize at the local level rather than trying to create mass movements and to focus on self-interest rather than controversial issues that some community members perceived as at odds with their interests.[5]

Second, organizers and organizations seek to impart their understandings of society to their members and the broader society through political education, the strategic deployment of images and language, the cultivation of political relationships, and the experience of political action itself. Organizers make the fact that society is already organized—by economic systems, workplaces, schools, churches, and the state—visible. They attempt to enlist groups of people in maintaining or transforming the dominant modes of organization in order to contest for hegemony.[6] In this sense, far from being nonideological, organizing is the principal mode of "ideological work" available to those who lack control of the media or state institutions.

Recasting ideology in this way reveals it as a form of political theory worthy of study. Political theory is usually understood as the development of comprehensive and systematic philosophies on the part of socially recognized theoreticians, philosophers, or scholars. While this definition covers many influential works of political theory, it excludes many others. In contrast to this view, I follow Hall (1988) in broadening the definition of political theory to include an understanding of the social world that provides a basis for transforming it—that is, ideology. In this, I join Michael Freeden's (2006) call for political theorists to study ideology as a distinctive form of political theory. One object for this undertaking is the work of political organizers, who rely on self-conscious frameworks for understanding society in order to make strategic decisions about how to change it. Organizers sometimes explicate their theories in books like Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* or Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj.* More often, however, they express their ideas in memos, field reports, handbooks, meeting minutes, interviews, and the decisions they make in pursuit of their goals. Reconstructing theory from such sources demands close attention to organizers' goals as well as the historical contexts in which they formulate their strategies, the problems they attempt to solve, and the obstacles they encounter. In the remainder of this article, I draw on Baker's statements about organizing in interviews, speeches, and published and unpublished writings, as well as the decisions about organizational structure and strategy that she made in pursuit of her goals, in order to reconstruct her theory of organizing.[7]

BAKER'S IDEOLOGY OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Baker was neither dogmatic nor rigid in her thinking. She never articulated a blueprint for social change and, aside from her brief identification with Lovestonite socialism in the 1930s and her efforts to build a socialist third party in the 1970s, she maintained her independence from any particular tendency or party (Ransby 2003, 96, 354). Her political beliefs changed in response to new experiences. Most notably, the Great Depression, which Baker experienced as a recent college graduate living in Harlem, challenged her previous assumption that Black Americans could be liberated through a process of individual assimilation to mainstream society. Of that period, she later reflected, "with the Depression, I began to see that there were certain social forces over which the individual had very little control… . It was out of that context that I began to explore in the area of ideology and the theory regarding social change" (Baker 1968, 4). Baker's explorations led her to abandon the uplift ideology of her youth, which she had developed through her immersion in the Women's Convention of the Black Baptist Church and the missionary school she attended for high school and college (Baker 1979, 15; Gaines 1996; Higginbotham 1994; Ransby 2003). Through her experiences in Harlem during the 1930s, she developed a new ideology, which guided the decisions she made over four decades as an organizer with the Young Negroes Cooperative League (YNCL), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and as a mentor to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Baker's ideology from the 1930s onward is best described as radical democracy. Baker frequently described the civil rights movement's goal as the realization of "full freedom" and "full dignity as a human

[4] This was Alinsky's justification for refusing to repudiate the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in Chicago, which he had organized in 1939, when, after his departure, it organized in defense of racial segregation. Alinsky thought that the best way to counter this racism was not to demand that the white organization change its views or disband, but to organize Black Chicagoans in defense of their own interests (Norden 1972).

[5] What motivated the organizer, according to Alinsky (1971), was a "blurred vision of a better world," by which he meant a society in which all social groups were organized in defense of their own interests (75).

[6] For this insight I am indebted to Michael Denning (2021), who argues that the fact that everyone is both organized and an organizer by virtue of participating in institutions, from the state to the family and the political party, is the starting point for Antonio Gramsci's theory of politics as organizing.

[7] This article draws on archival research conducted at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Wisconsin Historical Society. For information about archival access, please see the online appendix.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

being" (1960; 1964; 1969; 1974b). For Baker, these two concepts—freedom and human dignity—were closely connected. She believed that all people possessed innate leadership capacities that they had a right to develop. Full freedom could only be realized by a society that recognized the dignity of all human beings by allowing them "to grow and develop to the fullest capacity with which [the Almighty] has endowed us" (Baker 1964). Baker's emphasis on "full" freedom, a freedom "that encompasses all mankind" suggests that she thought all people, even those who "thought they were making it good" under existing political and economic institutions, were unfree in the absence of such a social arrangement (Baker 1964; 1974b). Moreover, Baker thought that, whether they consciously knew it or not, those engaged in the struggle for civil rights were motivated by the drive for full freedom, not just the personal freedom to buy a hamburger at a Woolworth's nor even the collective freedom of Black Americans to vote (Baker 1964). She thought that people developed their capacities and gained a sense of their own value by participating in collective self-governance. Therefore, she envisioned a participatory democracy, a society in which all people, regardless of race or social position, had direct influence over the decisions, political and economic, that affected their lives, as the best society.[8]

Although Baker never offered a detailed description of the participatory society, she believed that it demanded a fundamental transformation of existing political and economic institutions. It was in this sense that her theory of democracy was radical. From the 1930s onward, Baker was an anticapitalist. In 1930, she and George Schuyler cofounded the Young Negroes Cooperative League (YNCL), an organization that sought to develop a national network of Black-youth-owned cooperatives. Baker and Schuyler saw the YNCL as a potentially revolutionary project that would mitigate the suffering caused by the Great Depression while radicalizing its participants against the existing economic order. Of the Black cooperative movement, Baker (1933) wrote in a letter, "Ours is an unprecedent [*sic.*] battle-front. We are called upon to both face the problems which are more or less peculiarly ours as a group, and at the same time, to be in the vanguard of the great world movement toward a new order." In a 1935 article about youth-led cooperatives in the *Amsterdam News*, she wrote that she hoped the new cooperative ventures would be harbingers of "the day when the soil and all of its resources will be reclaimed by its rightful owners—the working masses of the world" (cited in Ransby 2003, 86). These statements clearly evince the revolutionary, socialistic ideals underlying this early project. During this period, Baker also studied with radical labor organizers as a student at the Brookwood Labor College and cofounded the anticapitalist National Negro Congress (NNC) (Altenbaugh 1990; Grant 1999, 41–2; Polletta 2002, 36; Ransby 2003, 73–4).

During the middle period of her career, while she was working with the NAACP, the SCLC, and SNCC, Baker rarely used explicitly anticapitalist language. As a result, Sabl (2002b) argues that she only became a radical after her organizing career ended (285). But Baker's early radicalism, as well as her statements about voting and desegregation from the 1940s through the 1960s, suggests that her anticapitalism was a consistent—if at times less visible—feature of her ideology. Baker frequently articulated the fights against Jim Crow and Black disenfranchisement as parts of a larger struggle for human freedom that required deeper social transformations. For example, in a 1943 memo, written while she was working for the NAACP, Baker wrote that "branches should be made more and more aware that the fight for Negro rights is but one aspect of the larger fight for social and democratic gains" (132). Two decades later, in her 1964 Hattiesburg Freedom Day address, Baker pointed to the limits of a strategy focused solely on eliminating racial discrimination and urged her audience to think about the other changes required for them to become free: "Because even tomorrow … if all of us became free enough to go down and to associate with all the people we wanted to associate, we still are not free. We aren't free until within us we have that deep sense of freedom from a lot of things that we don't even mention in these meetings." She went on to argue that full freedom required not just the end of segregation but also the end of poverty, hunger, and unemployment. In the 1970s, Baker returned to using explicitly anticapitalist language (Baker 1974b). A more plausible explanation of her shifting language, then, is that she refrained from foregrounding her anticapitalism during the period of her organizing career that overlapped with McCarthyism and the Cold War. This may have been because she and many other civil rights organizers were under surveillance by the FBI and because anticapitalism was not the most direct entry point for some of the people she sought to organize (Ransby 2003, 129–30).

Imperialism was another system that Baker thought had to be transformed to make way for democracy. In the 1930s, Baker was active in anti-imperialist causes, participating in protests against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1934 and opposing England's suppression of an oil workers' strike in Trinidad and Tobago in 1937 (Ransby 2003, 99). In the 1970s, she was active in the movement for Puerto Rican independence. In a 1974 speech at a Puerto Rican Independence rally in Madison Square Garden, she described her own half-century-long organizing career as part of "three hundred or more years" of struggle. She concluded the speech by asserting the incompatibility of "capitalism and imperialism" with freedom. For Baker (1974b), the struggles against capitalism, imperialism, and racial discrimination were different facets of a larger struggle for a society that recognized the worth of each person and allowed every individual to fully develop her human capacities.

[8] Baker is widely associated with the origins of participatory democratic theory via her mentorship of SNCC (Mueller 2004; Polletta 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Baker scholars tend to view her as a teacher and a facilitator, rather than a theorist and strategist. As a result, they offer partial accounts of her praxis. Baker's realist readers emphasize her commitment to organizing while overlooking her theory of mass action (Sabl 2002a; 2002b; Phulwani 2016). In this, they assimilate her method to Alinskyite organizing, which pursues specific, winnable reforms through systematic community organizing rather than broader social transformations that depend on mass mobilizations. Coles (2008b), a radical democrat, also deemphasizes Baker's interest in mass action, depicting her focus on leadership development as a prefigurative practice of enacting democracy within the movement rather than a strategic practice of building a social movement's capacity to engage in disruptive mobilizations. Foregrounding Baker's ideological commitment to radical democracy reveals her commitment to generating disruptive mass action and her multifaceted reasons for engaging in leadership development. Baker saw mass action as a necessary strategy for transforming undemocratic institutions. Leadership development was, for her, simultaneously a prefigurative practice of enacting radical democracy within the movement and a tactic for building the movement's capacity to transform the broader society through mass action.

MASS ACTION

Like many organizers who had long hoped to generate a mass mobilization against Jim Crow, Baker was surprised and thrilled by the Montgomery Bus Boycott's emergence in December of 1955. In an interview, she recalled, "this was a mass action and a mass action that anybody who looked at the social scene would have to appreciate and wonder. Those of us who believed that [through] mass and only through mass action are we going to eliminate certain things, would have to think in terms of how does this get carried on" (Baker 1974a, 2). Most existing Baker scholarship underemphasizes or entirely overlooks her theory of mass action. This elision can be at least partially explained by the fact that Baker is often associated with organizing—the slow, patient work of developing the leadership of ordinary people by engaging them in mass organizations—and counterposed to King, who is associated with mobilizations—spontaneous, dramatic, and ephemeral acts of protest (Moses et al. 1989; Payne 1989; Ransby 2003). Indeed, Baker doubted that isolated, short-lived media spectacles led by charismatic figures could generate social transformation. But her decisions in the wake of Montgomery suggest that certain kinds of mobilizations were central to her theory of social change.

Although Baker never defined "mass action," she used the term to refer to political action outside the established mechanisms of government, undertaken by large enough numbers of people to incapacitate the institutions under pressure and force concessions.[9] Underlying the strategy of mass action is a theory of power: the form of power available to economically and socially oppressed people is the power to disrupt the normal functioning of political and economic institutions, whether through a general strike or mass marches on Washington (Bynum 2010, xv, 111). Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1977) articulate this theory of power in *Poor People's Movements*, where they argue that society is structured to protect the interests of elites. On their view, poor people's power therefore lies not in their ability to work within the system, which is always stacked against them, but in their capacity to withdraw cooperation from the institutions that depend on their participation. This causes disruption which, in turn, forces elites to make concessions. Examples of mass actions include organized and spontaneous, violent and nonviolent tactics such as riots, strikes, marches, and nonviolent civil disobedience.

Baker (1968) traced her familiarity with mass action to her time in Harlem during the 1930s: "I had been friendly with people who were in the Communist Party and all the rest of the Left forces, which were oriented in the direction of mass action" (3). One of these people was A. Philip Randolph, member of the Socialist Party and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to whom Baker attributes a theory of mass action in her reflections on Montgomery (Baker 1968, 10; 1974a, 27).[10] Indeed, Randolph made mass action a major tactic of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, most visibly through his involvement in planning the (canceled) 1941 March on Washington and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Bynum 2010).[11]

Mass action was the favored strategy of Baker's generation of civil rights organizers, who came of age during the Great Depression and felt the coincidence of racial and economic injustice keenly. They pushed establishment civil rights organizations in the direction of campaigns that connected civil rights with economic issues and employed forms of militant mass action rather than relying on legal strategies (Gellman 2012;

[9] The term "mass action" is sometimes used interchangeably with "mass direct action," which suggests that it refers to direct action on a mass scale (cf. Bynum 2010; Rustin 1957) According to L. A. Kaufman (2017), "direct action" refers to "efforts to create change outside the established mechanisms of government" (x). The term was first widely used by the anticapitalist, anarchist-leaning Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the early twentieth century. The IWW's manifesto called for "industrial action directly by, for, and of the workers themselves, without the treacherous aid of labor misleaders or scheming politicians" (cited in Kaufman 2017, xi).

[10] Randolph and Baker were acquaintances who ran in the same circles in Harlem. Baker's close friend and mentor, George Schuyler, was Randolph's protégé and worked alongside Randolph and Owen on the *Messenger* staff (Ransby 2003, 80).

[11] Although these massive marches and episodes of mass nonviolent civil disobedience were the most famous forms of mass action during the classical phase of the civil rights movement, Randolph also used the term to describe the general strike and the violent 1919 race riots (Owen and Randolph 1919a; 1919b).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Miller 2012). One example of this movement toward mass action is the NNC. Founded in 1935, this was an explicitly anticapitalist civil rights organization that connected civil rights with economic issues and engaged in militant tactics such as strikes, marches, and boycotts (Gellman 2012). Baker helped found the NNC in 1935 and served as its publicity director (Grant 1999, 41–2; Polletta 2002, 36).

Baker's response to Montgomery suggests both an appreciation for the unpredictability of mass action and a recognition that organizing had crucially paved the way for such events and was needed to build on the momentum they generated. To many observers, the boycott seemed to have emerged spontaneously. Baker (1968) saw it as unprecedented and unpredictable, but she also insisted that it "didn't come out of a vacuum." While King (2010) described the boycott as a "miracle" given the city's lack of unified leadership, Baker focused on the organizing that had paved its way (42). She identified the leadership of individuals like Rosa Parks and Edgar Daniel Nixon and the organizations with which they were involved, the NAACP and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, respectively, as crucial factors in the boycott's emergence and success. She noted that Parks, the local NAACP chapter's secretary, whose arrest triggered the uprising, had attended a NAACP Regional Leadership Training Conference in Atlanta, which Baker herself had organized, a decade earlier (Baker 1974a, 6). Of Nixon, she reflected, "[he] was the one force in Montgomery for a number of years that made any effort in the direction of challenging the power structure. Ed Nixon's source of direction for that comes out of his relationship with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Randolph philosophy of mass action. So, Ed Nixon really was the force that conceived of the boycott and drew up the original papers for the boycott" (Baker 1968, 10). The theories, skills, and relationships that these individuals and the organizations to which they belonged had developed in Montgomery were what drew 90% of the city's Black population into mass action within two days.

Baker also thought that organization was necessary to build on the momentum generated by mass actions like the Montgomery boycott. In the boycott's aftermath there was, as she recalled, "almost sort of a complete let down." She questioned the Montgomery Improvement Association's leadership about "why there was this not-knowing, why there was no organizational machinery for making use of the people who had been involved in the boycott?" and found King's explanation unsatisfying: "I think his rationale was something to the effect that after a big demonstrative type of action, there was a natural let-down and a need for people to sort of catch their breath, you see, which, of course, I didn't quite agree with." While King saw the mobilization as a spontaneous event that had already accomplished what it could, Baker recognized it as the product of ongoing organizing and as evidence of large numbers of Black people's willingness to take disruptive political action, which could be further developed to create more opportunities for mass protest. She recalled, "here had taken place a movement that involved masses of people. It suggested the possibility that there could be a much wider extension of the mass-type action, which carried with it a certain amount of confrontation" (Baker 1968, 8). In order to connect Montgomery to other sites of unrest throughout the South, Baker saw the need for a regional organization, similar to the northern-based NAACP, capable of providing "a mass base for action" (Baker 1977, 62).

Unwilling to let this historic opportunity go to waste, Baker, alongside Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, took the initiative to do what the formal Montgomery leaders had failed to do: create a "mass based organization" that could connect Montgomery with other centers of unrest in order to expand and coordinate the growing movement's use of "mass action as a means of confrontation" (Baker 1968, 8; 1974a, 63). They organized a meeting in February of 1957 in Atlanta, which became the founding meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Baker 1968, 5–7; Morris 1984, 83). There, Rustin delivered a series of position papers that made the case for an organization focused on mass action. Baker had helped prepare the papers, which we can assume expressed her views as well as Rustin's. The second paper, titled "The Next Step for Mass Action in the Struggle for Equality," argued that "mass direct action" was "the one realistic political weapon" available to Black Americans "until the Negro votes on a large scale." It posed questions to provoke discussion about how the strategies of mass action and electoral politics could complement each other (Rustin 1957). According to Baker (1968), the papers did not have the influence she and Rustin had hoped they would, in part because "Martin was not yet ready for the kind of leadership that would inspire [the ministers gathered for the conference] to really grapple with thought-oriented, or ideological differences and patterns of organization (13)."[12] As a result, she thought that the SCLC lacked a coherent theory of social change.

Against interpretations of Baker as an advocate of organizing to the exclusion of mobilization, Baker's decisions in the wake of Montgomery suggest that she wanted the SCLC to make mass action a central part of its strategy. Baker was deeply critical of King's leadership of the SCLC, but not because he saw mass mobilizations like Montgomery and Birmingham as the means of ending segregation. In fact, Baker believed that social transformation came through disruptive protest. In this, she differs sharply from Alinsky, who thought that social movements were ineffective vehicles for social change and prioritized organizing to the exclusion of mass action. At the same time, she diverges from Piven and Cloward (1977), who see organization as, at best, irrelevant to the emergence of social movements and, at worst, stifling of their

[12] Robinson (1997) argues that SNCC was the full instantiation of the kind of "mass action social base" that Baker, Levison, and Rustin hoped to create with the SCLC (147).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

capacity for disruption. Baker did not think that mass action could be organized into existence, but she insisted that organization was a prerequisite for its emergence and effectiveness. In order to combine a mass base with the flexibility necessary to respond to trigger events, Baker consistently tried to build organizations with regional or national scopes, rooted in local chapters with high levels of autonomy.[13]

Contrary to readings of Baker as nonideological, Baker's decisions in the wake of Montgomery and statements about the founding of the SCLC demonstrate that she was motivated by the goal of radical social transformation and that she thought ideological clarity was essential to effective organizing. Moreover, she associated ideology not with doctrine but with a theory of social change that informed questions of strategy and organizational structure. Moreover, against *negative* understandings of ideology, according to which ideology produces authoritarian organizations, Baker's ideology led her to design organizations that were decentralized and flexible, capable of responding to contingent possibilities for mass action.

DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS LEADERS

While few scholars have noted Baker's theory of mass action, many have explicated her approach to developing leadership (Moses 1989, 425; Payne 1989, 885). Baker's belief in the leadership capacities of all people, including those who lacked status or education, her commitment to giving those who were on the front lines of struggle influence over the organizations she helped form, and her attention to developing "group-centered leadership" rather than "leader-centered groups" make her praxis an important alternative to models of charismatic and custodial authority in the Black freedom struggle. Her theory of leadership has inspired critiques of ministerial and centralized leadership within the Movement for Black Lives while also serving as a reference point for critics of the idea that that movement is or ought to be leaderless (Baker 1967; Carruthers 2018, 66; Ransby 2015a; 2015b; 2018, 3; Taylor 2016, 163).

Political theorists interpret Baker's commitment to developing leadership in others as an example of either strategic politics—that is, political action as a means of achieving a political end—or prefigurative politics—that is, attempts to instantiate the desired society in the present through the internal practices of a social movement. The realists see leadership development as a strategic practice of teaching people to associate so that they can effectively pursue their own interests (Phulwani 2016; Sabl 2002a; 2002b). By contrast, Coles describes leadership development as a prefigurative practice of cultivating receptivity. He suggests that receptivity is strategic insofar as it "generat[es] knowledge about the world beyond the limits of white supremacy and hierarchy more generally," moves people out of "dominative subjugative currents" into "warmer currents of possibility," and builds power. Still, his inattention to Baker's thoughts about precisely *how* receptivity translates into power lends itself to the idea that she was indifferent to winning, or that she understood success exclusively in terms of helping people develop latent capacities (Coles 2005, 547; 2008a, 64, 68).

While the realists and the radical democrats notice important parts of Baker's praxis, both readings are incomplete because they divorce Baker's practice from her ideology, which shaped her approach to leadership development in two complementary ways. First, Baker's belief in the leadership capacities of each person and commitment to "full freedom" as the cultivation of those capacities led her to prioritize leadership development within the organizations she led. In this sense, leadership development was a prefigurative practice of instantiating the participatory society in the present. At the same time, Baker's belief that realizing democracy in the broader society required fundamental social transformation, which could only happen through mass action, led her to prioritize leadership development as a strategic practice.

Although Baker did not use the term in precisely this way, the concept of capacity is useful for understanding the strategic aspect of her theory of leadership development. Organizers and scholars of social movements use "capacity" to refer to an organization's power, measured by the actions it is capable of successfully undertaking. Capacity is a function of the size of an organization's base—the people it is capable of drawing into political action—and their level of skill and commitment. In order to build capacity, organizations recruit members and develop the commitment and skills of a subset (Han 2014, 4; McAlevey 2016, 199–211).

Baker was consistently preoccupied with capacity building. As executive director of the YNCL, she focused on recruiting members and developing their knowledge and skills so that they could successfully start and run cooperatives. She urged members to recruit at least 300 members before starting a business so that their ventures would succeed, warning that failures would "have a disheartening effect upon the whole movement" (Baker n.d.b). In her work with the NAACP, the SCLC, and SNCC, Baker focused on building the capacity for mass action against Jim Crow. In the NAACP, she did this by expanding and revitalizing the local branches. Her main source of frustration

[13] This approach is a precursor to a method known as "distributed organizing," practiced by the Sunrise Movement, the immigrant rights organization Cosecha, and the 2016 and 2020 Bernie Sanders presidential campaigns (Bond and Exley 2016), which attempts to build an organization's capacity by distributing leadership widely across a national or international area, empowering local leaders to innovate and respond to local circumstances, while maintaining a central coordinating hub and shared goals, strategies, and tactics. Baker's approach to blending spontaneous mobilizations and structure-based organizing is a precursor to momentum organizing, a method practiced by the Sunrise Movement, Dissenters, IfNotNow, and other member-based organizations, which seeks to generate disruptive mass mobilizations through distributed organizing, trainings in nonviolent civil disobedience, and media spectacles (Engler and Engler 2016; Momentum n.d.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the NAACP was its unwillingness to build the "organizational machinery" needed to develop the skills and commitment of its "mass base" (Baker cited in Grant 1999, 85).

One of Baker's tactics for building capacity was identifying and recruiting "indigenous leaders." Baker seems to be responsible for the widespread use of this term within SNCC (Baker 1967, 5). Other organizers use different terms, including Alinsky's (1971) "native leader," Jane McAlevey's (2016) "organic leader," and Bob Moses's (1989) "grassroots people." By "indigenous leader," Baker meant more than someone from a particular place. She used the term to refer to people who were deeply embedded in networks of relationships within particular communities and who had the skills and understanding necessary to lead other people into the struggle.

Baker's emphasis on indigenous leadership sprang from her understanding of political psychology. She thought that people made political decisions primarily based on personal relationships, which developed through interaction over long periods, within particular bounded communities. As a field organizer for the NAACP, she expressed this idea in her assessment of a decision to split the Birmingham branch into neighborhood units. In a field report, she wrote, "Concretely, of the 150 or more persons attending a unit mass meeting, at least one hundred of them probably would have made no effort to attend a citywide branch meeting, but did respond to direct community leadership" (Report of Field Work, July 8, 1942, cited in Grant 1999, 50) It was the force of personal relationships rather than ideological commitment or even self-interest that initially drew people into political activity. Organizers could develop these relationships over time, but local people, including those who appeared to be on the margins of society, had invaluable access to them by virtue of their experience in their own communities (Cantarow, O'Malley, and Strom 1980, 72). This was a further reason that Baker was committed to distributing organizational leadership: it was easiest to cultivate and draw on such relationships by working within particular bounded communities, all of which were already organized into workplaces, neighborhoods, families, and churches. The organizer's role was to tap into these networks.

Baker carried this theory with her to her role organizing the Crusade for Citizenship, a national voter registration campaign led by the SCLC. In a 1959 memo, Baker argues that the campaign should focus its energies on identifying and supporting "indigenous leadership." She frames this practice in strategic terms, explaining that developing indigenous leadership "seems to offer a means of expanding voter registration activities immediately in Mississippi." She suggests that the SCLC identify and recruit "indigenous leaders" based on political work that is underway at the local level: "In the Mound Bayou area, a young Negro Catholic priest and a Baptist deacon have been conducting weekly citizenship classes, from which more than 50 persons have become registered voters." Baker urged the SCLC leadership to put its resources toward supporting such local initiatives. The local clergy who registered 50 voters where 12 previous attempts had failed were clearly leaders in the sense that they commanded a following. On Baker's view, the SCLC's role was to amplify these indigenous leaders' work and thereby grow the movement's capacity. The goal of these practices was to make the Crusade for Citizenship into "a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people" (Baker 1959).

Baker shared her emphasis on leader identification and recruitment with both Alinskyite community organizers and labor organizers like Jane McAlevey, but she diverged from them in her focus on leadership *development.* Baker's belief that every person—not only those who already had influence within their communities—possessed leadership capacities that should be developed "for the benefit of the group" set her apart from organizers like Alinsky and McAlevey in two ways (Baker 1960). First, Baker's approach to organizing involved attempting to change the people involved rather than simply recruiting the right people. Therefore, it was more developmental than Alinsky's and McAlevey's models. Second, her approach was more egalitarian than those that emphasize identification and recruitment. Whether or not they occupy formal positions of power, people who "have followers" may also have social advantages over those who are less influential—for example, they may be better educated, more respectable, or members of a privileged social group. Focusing on these people may therefore cause organizers to neglect the most marginalized members of a community. Baker saw and capitalized on the influence of those who were already leaders, but she also believed that each individual had skills and knowledge that could be useful to the movement and that organizations should develop these as a democratic practice. Therefore, she focused not only on identifying and recruiting existing leaders but also on developing new ones. This, in turn, expanded the movement's capacity for mass action, as it created more points of agency that could respond to trigger events.

Ideological development was, for Baker, a crucial part of leadership development. In order to be leaders, people needed to gain a belief in their right to participate, a belief that "the system" was unjust and demanded transformation, and a theory of social transformation through mass action. To give people these ideas, Baker did not teach a particular line on race, capitalism, imperialism, or the issues of the day. Rather, she engaged people in political action and in practical forms of education focused on tactics and strategy, which she thought would, over time, reshape their frameworks for understanding society.

Baker understood participating in and witnessing mass action, in particular, to have a transformative effect on participants' self-understandings. She saw in the Montgomery boycott and the 1960 student sit-ins the emergence of new leadership across the South. In a draft of a newspaper column from around 1960, Baker describes recent direct actions in Birmingham as evidence of the birth of a "New South." She writes, "One cannot … hear average men and women eagerly testify

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that the Birmingham struggle has increased their knowledge of their rights as citizens and has strengthened their courage and determination to secure them … without being reassured that a New South is being born and a New Day is dawning for Negro Americans" (Baker n.d.a, 1). In the 1970 interview quoted in the introduction to this article, Baker describes "mass actions of recent years" producing a change in consciousness. She remarks, "What I find in general is that people have an increased sense of their own worth and their right to be considered as people." People are gaining the belief that "only basic changes in the social structure of the country will be adequate to the needs of the poor, both black and white," and that, "in the final analysis, *they* are the source of the nation's real worth and power" (23). Through participating in or witnessing mass action, Baker thought that people experienced their own power, or the power of people like them, which gave them a belief in their own worth and their right to participate. This, in turn, generated a demand for increasingly radical changes to society.

But Baker did not believe that action on its own would necessarily produce the understandings people needed in order to transform society in the direction of radical democracy. Rather, she saw a crucial role for organizers, including herself, as helping people to "think in radical terms," by which she meant to understand the root causes of their oppression and the means by which they could be eradicated (Baker 1969). Baker did this in part by engaging people in political organizing. In her 1969 speech at the Institute of the Black World, Baker describes a "learning process" that civil rights organizers underwent by experimenting with various strategies and seeing their limitations. One such strategy was voter registration. Reflecting on SNCC's voter registration program in the Deep South during the early 1960s, Baker recalled, "The voter registration was not just for the sake of getting people to register but to get them politicized to the extent that they would recognize that they could only fight the system if they had some political power. It also helped to show the limitations of political power simply by the vote" (Baker 1969). Baker describes a collective change in consciousness, as a result of this and other campaigns, which parallels the one she herself underwent in the 1930s from a theory of freedom through assimilation into American society to a theory of freedom through social transformation.

Baker also engaged people in practical forms of education that allowed them to reflect on their experiences and discuss their larger goals and the kinds of strategies and tactics that could help further them. Baker consistently advocated and planned workshops and conferences focused on developing the skills and understanding people needed to engage in political action, from political education within the YNCL to the Regional Leadership Training Conferences in the NAACP to numerous SNCC conferences and workshops. At a 1964 SNCC meeting, Bob Moses, Baker, and Howard Zinn urged the group to undertake a "formal program of economic education," and Baker requested permission to expand the group's set of advisors to help them chart their way forward (Ransby 2003, 315). Similarly, in 1966, Baker proposed a seminar series on "Revolutionary Ethics" led by Third World revolutionaries, through which she seems to have hoped that SNCC would clarify its emerging Black Power ideology (Ransby 2003, 348).

The programs of the NAACP Leadership Training Conferences give a sense of Baker's pedagogy. When she was appointed Director of Branches in 1943, Baker initiated regular training conferences for volunteer branch leaders "to increase the extent to which the present membership participates in national and local activities" and "to transform the local branches from being centers of sporadic activity to becoming centers of sustained and dynamic community leadership" (cited in Ransby 2003, 140). Between 1944 and 1946, she organized a total of 13 conferences, titled "Give People Light and They Will Find A Way," across the South, reaching over a thousand branch delegates altogether (Baker 1946). The conferences were practical in their orientation, featuring sessions on the mechanics of running a branch, strategy and tactics for campaigns for economic security and civil rights, and discussions of region-specific problems (Baker 1945a; 1945b; 1945c). For example, in Atlanta, there was a session on "Problems of Democracy in the South," including educational inequalities and voting restrictions (Baker 1945c). Baker led sessions on "Techniques and Strategies of Minority Group Action," which included discussions of "Definition of 'Minorities' and 'Majorities,'" "Definition of a Mass Organization," "Individual and Mass Protest," "Education and Propaganda," "Political Pressure," "Legal Action," and "Cooperation and collaboration with other groups" (Baker 1945b; 1945c). This list of topics suggests that Baker engaged would-be organizers in discussions of which strategies they could employ in order to effect social change. These discussions helped participants to develop a theory of social change that would allow them to choose between "individual and mass protest" or between "political pressure and legal action." By raising these questions and leading participants through a thought process that was tied to their own organizing experiences, Baker "gave people light" by which to see themselves and their social world anew. This, she hoped, would generate more opportunities for mass action, as greater numbers of people gained the capacity to respond to unpredictable opportunities for protest.

CONCLUSION

In explicating Baker's thought, this article makes several contributions to political theory. First, it contributes to existing Baker scholarship by arguing, against theorists who read Baker as nonideological, that she was, in fact, a radical democrat whose ideology profoundly shaped her theory of organizing. Baker understood freedom, the full development of people's innate leadership capacities, to depend on a society that allowed all people to participate directly in making

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the decisions that affected their lives. Such a society was incompatible with "the system," which included not only Jim Crow and mass disenfranchisement but also capitalism and imperialism. Baker thus concluded that freedom depended on radical social transformation, which she thought could only be achieved through mass action. According to her theory of organizing, mass actions like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the student sit-ins were never entirely predictable, but organizations could nonetheless prepare to help them emerge and take hold. In anticipation of such moments, Baker built the capacity of the organizations with which she worked by identifying, recruiting, and developing indigenous leaders. In her view, part of leadership development was helping people gain new beliefs: that they had a right to participate, that the system denied them this right, and that they could secure it by engaging in mass action. Baker thought that people gained these beliefs not primarily by studying theoretical treatises but by participating in mass action, political organizing, and conversations about strategy and tactics. In this sense, she not only had an ideology; she understood organizing as a process of ideological development.

Second, I have presented Baker as a radical democratic theorist. In fact, I have argued that all organizers are political theorists insofar as they have self-conscious ideas about the best society and theories of how society works and changes, based on which they make strategic decisions. Through this study of Baker, I have demonstrated a two-pronged method for reconstructing the political thought of organizers. First, political theorists can study organizers' explicit statements about organizing in their interviews, memos, letters, and speeches. Second, they can analyze the decisions organizers make about organizational structure and strategy at key moments in order to elucidate their underlying theories of the best society and the process of social change.

Third, I have shown that Baker's theory of democratization, which begins from her attempts to change American society, offers an important corrective to radical democratic theory's tendency to elide the question of how democratic transitions occur. Radical democratic theorists tend to locate democracy in ephemeral moments of rebelliousness, in revolutionary events, in moments of democratic promise that defy existing principles and traditions, or in quotidian practices of cultivating "receptivity" (Badiou 2005; Coles 2005; Derrida 1994; Wolin 1994). Democracy is presented as a prefigurative practice, an ideal that can be instantiated in the present through mass action or the formation of egalitarian counterpublics. Although these theorists see social transformation through social movements as necessary to radical democracy, they tend to deemphasize the question of how, concretely, social movements scale up from quotidian practices and ephemeral moments of rebelliousness to democratization. In other words, radical democratic theorists overlook the question of strategy: how do social movements win the power to transform the broader society? Like other radical democrats, Baker saw the democratic promise of each of these sites of action. She rejoiced in the possibilities of mass actions like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1960 student sit-ins, and she labored to build organizations that cultivated receptive, egalitarian relationships. But her practical orientation also gave her a theory of the organizational structures and practices of leadership development that could translate prefigurative practices of receptivity and ephemeral mobilizations into social change. In situating Baker's practices of leadership development within her ideology of radical democracy, I bring the significance of these practices more fully into view. Baker identified, recruited, and developed indigenous leaders both to uncover latent possibilities within individuals and communities and to build the capacity of a mass movement to engage in disruptive mass actions that sought to radically reshape society. While much radical democratic theory emphasizese the democratic potential of quotidian and spontaneous events, Baker's theory of organization shows how such practices and moments can build popular power and how intentionally cultivating capacity can generate unpredictable events with revolutionary potential.

Finally, my reading of Baker corrects the tendency of the emerging political theory literature on organizing to present organizing as a nonideological practice. Inspired by both Alinsky's eschewal of ideology and Baker's nondogmatic approach to organizing, this literature thus far presents ideology as an obstacle to the democratic ends of organizing. I have shown that this way of thinking about organizing relies on a narrow Cold War-era definition of ideology as a rigid system of beliefs. I have offered Stuart Hall's revision of the classic Marxist understanding of ideology as a helpful alternative definition. In this definition, ideology is a framework through which people understand, interpret, and attempt to change the social world. I have argued that *all* organizing is ideological in this sense: organizers make strategic decisions based on their ideas about the best society and their theories of how society changes, which they seek to propagate by engaging people in political action. Organizing is not only based on ideology; it is itself a process of ideological development. For political theorists, the question of ideology is important to our accurate understanding of what organizers do and how many of them, including Baker, understand their work.

My intervention also helps political scientists understand the stakes of questions about the role of ideology in organizing for contemporary organizers. Since the 1980s, community organizers have criticized Alinsky- and IAF-influenced organizations for disavowing ideology and thereby inadvertently reentrenching dominant systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist community organizers have argued that in seeking to evade ideological debates, Alinskyite organizers often removed issues deemed too controversial, such as domestic violence and racism, from the table and foreclosed the possibility of developing far-reaching critiques of capitalism and alternative visions of economic organization (Coles 2006; Hinson and

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Healey 2020; Sen 2003). To avoid these pitfalls, groups like the Center for Third World Organizing and the Grassroots Policy Project have emphasized political education and explicit conversations about ideology as crucial aspects of community organizing (Hinson and Healey 2020; Sen 2003). Similarly, contemporary abolitionist and socialist organizers rely on ideology to identify "nonreformist reforms"—that is, policies that weaken the systems of policing or capitalism from within, thus paving the way for deeper changes. In order to distinguish such policies from reforms that strengthen the systems in question, organizers intentionally develop and propagate theories of how these systems persist and grow (Critical Resistance n.d.; Frase 2013; Kaba 2021). Some contemporary abolitionist organizers depart from Baker in making their ideologies more explicit than she tended to make her own (Carruthers 2018; Dream Defenders n.d.). However, they share Baker's approach to identifying and seeking to eradicate the systems that produce injustices rather than addressing symptoms of underlying problems. In fact, Charlene Carruthers (2018), cofounder of the Black Youth Project 100 cites Baker's "framework for radicalism" to describe BYP 100's approach to organizing, which seeks to attack the roots of anti-Black racism (36). For these organizers, as for Baker, organizing is "ideological work" insofar as it involves developing frameworks for understanding society, using these to develop strategies and tactics, and forging alternative institutions and practices in order to engage people in processes of subject formation that remap their understandings of the social world, enabling them to transform it.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001015.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is largely the product of my conversations about organizing with Jasson Perez, whose knowledge, encouragement, and insight inspired me to undertake this reading of Ella Baker's praxis. It has benefitted from generous feedback at various stages by current and former members of the Yale Political Theory Women's Writing group, including Nica Siegel, Alyssa Battistoni, Erin Pineda, Joy Wang, Naomi Scheinerman, Demi Moore, Stephanie Almeida, Anne Mishkind, and Isabelle Laurenzi. I received careful comments on earlier drafts from Karuna Mantena, Noreen Khawaja, Hélène Landemore, Michael Denning, James Scott, Daniel Denvir, Laura Grattan, Deva Woodly, Samuel Bagg, Aaron Greenberg, Isak Tranvik, Mark Cladis, Andre Willis, and participants in the Religion and Critical Thought Colloquium at Brown University, the Religion and Modernity Workshop at Yale University, and the Harvard Symposium on the Ethics and Practice of Dissent. The three anonymous reviewers and the *APSR*'s editors offered enormously helpful criticisms and suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to the archivists at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Wisconsin Historical Society for their assistance in accessing Ella Baker's papers and to the Institute for Social and Policy Studies and the Center for the Study of American Politics at Yale University for a generous grant that facilitated this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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