



“It was like a fever . . .”: Why People Protest

On February 1, 1960, four black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro purchased a few items in the downtown Woolworth's and then sat down at its whites-only lunch counter. Told that they would not be served, they remained seated until the store closed. “Four guys met, planned, and went into action. It's just that simple,” Franklin McCain explained later to those who wondered who had planned the demonstrations. The Greensboro Four came back the next day, and the next, now joined by students from surrounding colleges. Students in other cities began to sit in. Within a month, the sit-ins had spread to thirty cities in seven states. Within two months, they had spread to fifty-four cities in nine states. By mid-April, fifty thousand people had taken part in the protests.¹

Students described the sit-ins as unplanned, impulsive, and, over and over again, as spontaneous. “It was like a fever,” students told *Dissent* writer Michael Walzer. “Everyone wanted to go.” Forty years later, we know, as did the students themselves, that there was a good deal of strategic planning behind the sit-ins. The Greensboro Four were members of an NAACP Youth Council and were in touch with activists who had led sit-ins in Durham in the late 1950s. When the protest began, a network of ministers, NAACP officials, and other adult activists contacted colleagues to spread the news, trained students in sit-in techniques, and persuaded other adults to support the cause.

This was far from the "grass fire" that protesters and observers described.²

Narrative reconstruction of this kind is not unique to the 1960 sit-ins. Consider the story of Rosa Parks. In 1955, this seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama, refused to yield her seat when a white passenger boarded the bus she was riding. She was tired, she explained later. In response to her arrest, Montgomery's black citizens vowed to stay off the buses. For over a year, they walked and carpooled until the boycott drove the bus company out of business and the Supreme Court ruled Montgomery's segregated busing illegal. That familiar story omits the fact that Rosa Parks was a longtime activist and Alabama state NAACP secretary, not just an ordinary woman whose fatigue inadvertently made her the hero of a movement. A cadre of black activists in Montgomery had been planning to challenge the city's bus ordinance for some time. They had considered a boycott after fifteen year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested but abandoned the idea when the unmarried Colvin became pregnant. Parks, who was married, middle-aged, and a churchgoer, better fit the bill as a test case. After her arrest, activists worked quickly to organize the boycott. No one knew it would prove so successful, that so many people would participate for so long, but the groundwork had been laid long before Parks boarded the bus.³

Groundwork of a different sort had been laid for Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. A scathing exposé of the postwar ideology that chained women to home and hearth, the book was an immediate best-seller when it was published in 1963. It is widely credited with helping to launch a nationwide movement for women's equality. In it, Friedan described herself as until recently an apolitical suburban housewife, captive of the forces of domesticity. She was not "even conscious of the woman problem," she wrote later. We know now, however, that Friedan was a longtime labor writer and activist with special expertise in discrimination against women. Her journalism in the 1940s and 1950s was marked by sharp insight into the economics of feminine domesticity and a keen sense of the "woman problem."⁴

Why do activists so often describe protest as sprung from the head of Zeus, ignoring or downright denying the planning that preceded it? Why do they cast themselves not as strategic actors but as swept up by forces over which they have no control? Activists tell stories for strategic reasons, and the stories I just recounted are no exception. For American activists during much of the last century, one of the thorniest challenges was to avoid charges of communist influence. Representing protest as homegrown and spur-of-the-moment was a way to deflect claims that it

was controlled by “outsiders,” which meant Communists. In the Tallahassee, Florida, sit-in campaign, adult leaders who helped plan the sit-ins denied their own involvement for that very reason. Rosa Parks’s activism before the Montgomery bus boycott included a stint at the Highlander Folk School, a radical education center in Tennessee that was branded a “communist training school” soon after Parks’s visit. This was reason enough for Montgomery activists to cast her as a political neophyte. Betty Friedan had also spent time at the Highlander Center. In addition to fearing redbaiting, she presumably wanted to appeal to women who had not been exposed to radical ideas and settings. Movement stories, in this view, are strategic bids for public support.⁵

But there is more to it than that. Student protesters in 1960 told the story of the sit-ins not only to reporters and the public but also to each other in letters to campus newspapers, editorials, handbills, flyers, and personal correspondence. In these less public venues, one might have expected that people trying to convince others to participate would attest to the power of individual will and collective agency, and would argue that with adequate planning and determination, anyone could launch a sit-in. Instead, students represented the sit-ins as spontaneous and impulsive. “*No one* started it,” one insisted.⁶

Why deny the intentionality that might have served to persuade other people of the ease of mobilization? Because stories are more than strategic devices. As I noted in chapter 1, we tell stories to persuade but also to make sense of the unfamiliar. Stories assimilate confusing events into familiar frameworks while recognizing that things are no longer as they were and we are no longer who we were. Hence, we hear stories of being born during moments of rebellion, or having been blind and coming to see—formulations that both integrate novelty into narratives of birth and healing and recognize a generative breach. Movement stories turn the strange into the new. This does not mean, however, that they fully *explain* the new. As I argue in this chapter, stories contain rather than resolve ambiguity. This is part of what makes them so engaging and compels their retelling. When students described the sit-ins as “spontaneous,” and as “exploding,” “welling up,” and “like a fever,” they captured the indefinable moment when a group of separate individuals became a collective actor. The stories’ ambiguity, their failure to explain a shift that seemed impossible to explain but could only be retold again and again, may have galvanized other students.⁷

This argument departs from current thinking about how people are persuaded to mobilize. Ever since economist Mancur Olson argued that it

was irrational to participate in collective action, scholars have sought to explain why rational people nevertheless often do. Olson's argument was that, since one will enjoy the benefits of collective action whether one participates or not, it makes sense to free ride on the efforts of others—unless one is offered personal incentives to participate or is coerced into doing so. But movement scholars have identified other reasons that people join time-consuming and even risky movements: because it is fun; because their sense of solidarity with people they know who are already in the movement demands it; because if they don't do it, no one else will; because they are morally shocked and compelled by an injustice; because it is who they *are*.⁸

People also participate because movement activists *frame* protest in such a way as to make it seem a necessary solution to an obvious injustice. As framing theorists see it, if activists are shrewd, they make it obvious that people rather than impersonal forces are responsible for the injustice. They draw a sharp distinction between "we" and "they." And along with the injustice of the situation and the identity of those affected by it, they assert potential participants' efficacy, their capacity to bring about the changes they seek. Activists do not, in this view, deny their own agency by saying that "no one started it." They do not represent their struggle as against so vague an opponent as "apathy." They do not deny their own role in launching the struggle. At least, they do not do these things if they have any hope of mobilizing people.⁹

And yet students in the sit-ins did just those things and mobilized tens of thousands of people in the process. The key to this puzzle may lie in the fact that movement scholars have devoted very little attention to the kinds of discursive processes that characterize fledgling movements, before formal organizations with carefully crafted recruitment pitches even exist. In that context, I argue, narratives told by numerous actors more to make sense of surprising developments than to recruit participants may nevertheless endow events with the moral purpose, emotional telos, and engaging ambiguity that persuade others to participate. I advance this argument, first by discussing how sociologists have accounted for participation in the 1960 sit-ins, a protest that inspired important theorizing about participation generally. Then I draw on students' stories about the sit-ins to flesh out a different explanation, one in which ambiguity rather than clarity about the wellsprings of action spurs mobilization. What I am after is a discursive mechanism that operates in the fledgling stages of mobilization more generally, and I turn to several other movements to show the same mechanism at work.

Solidarity and Identity in the 1960 Student Sit-Ins

In his compelling analysis, sociologist Aldon Morris decisively rejected characterizations of the student sit-ins as spontaneous and as orchestrated by students. To the contrary, he showed that ministers, NAACP officials, and other adult activists mobilized to spread the word of the sit-ins, trained students in nonviolent tactics, and helped raise community support for them. "The sit-ins spread across the South in a short period because [adult] activists, working through local movement centers, planned, coordinated, and sustained them," Morris argued. But even if adult activists did play important roles in the sit-in movement, that alone does not explain why and how tens of thousands of students were persuaded to participate. Twenty or thirty activist ministers, even working overtime, could hardly have persuaded fifty thousand people to join the sit-ins.¹⁰

Sociologists Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam add a piece to the puzzle. For thousands of black southern students, Friedman and McAdam argue, protest became a normative expectation of being a student. In the early part of the civil rights movement, southern blacks had come to see activism as part of their role as churchgoers. In 1960, the same thing happened to students, as "activist" became what the authors call a "prized social identity." Such an identity supplied incentives to participate. Supporting Friedman and McAdam's explanation, eyewitness accounts suggest that in 1960 activism did indeed become normative for southern black college students. As Tallahassee sit-in leader Charles Smith put it, "a spirit of competition has found its way into the civil rights arena, and no college or university wants to be left behind or be found wanting in this kind of courage or conviction." In his survey of participants on eight college campuses shortly after the wave of sit-ins began, sociologist Paul Wehr found that "one common response to the question 'Why did the movement start at your school?' was '[W]e wanted to jump into the movement before [another school].'" Sociologist James Laue also observed that "the response of Negro students to Greensboro was almost always phrased in terms of 'keeping up' with the other students." Tuskegee Dean Charles Gomillion told Laue: "When students came to me to talk about their protest plans, I asked them, 'Where are you going to sit-in here?'—since Tuskegee was in a rural area. 'We *have* to go,' they said. 'What will other colleges think of us if we don't?'"¹¹

Friedman and McAdam's claim that student and activist identities had become normatively fused is persuasive, but their explanation for it is in-

complete. "In the first stage, the emerging movement grows out of but remains dependent upon preexisting institutions and organizations . . . *established groups* redefine group membership to include commitment to the movement as one of its obligations." In the case of the southern sit-ins, which established groups are they referring to? Southern college officials certainly did not promote an activist identity. Most student participants experienced their college administrations and faculties as unsupportive of the sit-ins. According to one survey, only 15 percent of the sit-in participants from public colleges reported that their administrations had been supportive. By the end of the 1960 spring term, more than a hundred students had been expelled from their colleges for their participation. My examination of campus newspapers showed that many made no mention of sit-ins in which their own students were participating. Some of the librarians I spoke to had been on staff at the time of the sit-ins, and they attributed this silence to the conservatism of campus administrations.¹²

If Friedman and McAdam mean instead that the equation of student and activist was effected by students themselves, then we need a better understanding of how that happened. To account for the emergence of a mobilizing identity on black college campuses and the development of such identities more broadly, we need to examine not only the instrumental framing efforts of established groups and movement organizations but also the larger cultural context in which an idiom of student activism made sense. Then we need to capture the diffuse, non-institutionalized discursive processes through which a rationale for protest, or a set of rationales, gained currency.

With respect to the context of student protest, black students in 1960 were exposed to student activism on a world-historical stage. "There was a feeling that it was the 'dawn of a new era,'" longtime activist Ella Baker recalled, "that something new and great was happening and that only [students] could chart the course of history." The sit-ins came at a time when students were playing visible and dramatic roles in regime changes around the world. Students had toppled military regimes in Turkey and South Korea and their representatives met with American students at the 1960 National Student Association conference. Some of the most momentous changes had been wrought by *black* student activists, and that was inspiring. "Sure we identified with the blacks in Africa," Nashville sit-in leader John Lewis said later, "and we were thrilled by what was going on. Here were black people, talking of freedom and liberation and independence, thousands of miles away. We could hardly miss the lesson

for ourselves.” Representatives of the Republic of Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and other nations visited black college campuses in 1959 and 1960, and black campus newspapers devoted considerable coverage to events in Africa. “Today, the dark people on the other side of the earth are protesting and dying for their freedom,” a Howard University editorialist noted in calling for student activism in early 1960. “All over the world a new generation of leadership is emerging,” wrote a Fisk student. And another, “We realize that students can play an important role in the development and redevelopment of society.”¹³

Black collegians were thus exposed to students as change-makers through their direct contacts with international student activists and through newspaper stories on protest abroad. At the same time, campus newspapers in 1959 and early 1960 referred frequently to the problems of student “apathy.” Editorials chastised students for their lack of political and intellectual engagement: “The majority of our students are now apathetic toward student government”; “General student apathy towards affairs pertaining to them—political, social or otherwise—is a ‘campus disease’ badly in need of therapy”; “Throughout American education there is a growing concern for what has been labeled by some ‘student apathy.’” Several editorials discussed the “beatniks” critically, attributing their rejection of middle-class conventionality to a pervasive normlessness.¹⁴

The cultural media to which students had direct access thus offered and evaluated two modes of being a student, praising the revolutionary aspirations of the international students and condemning the deviance of the beats. The dynamic involved in the fusion of prized role and activism that Friedman and McAdam describe was less engineered by established organizations than perceived by students on a world-historical stage. But how did the collective identity of student activist come to be associated with a particular set of expected behaviors? Even after news spread of the Greensboro protest, one could imagine that student activism might mean rallying financial and moral support for those taking part in the sit-ins, or organizing campus discussions about race relations or the upcoming presidential election. How and why did *student activist* come to mean putting one’s body on the line and participating directly in nonviolent desegregation efforts? To begin to answer that question, I turn to what students themselves said to each other about their participation in the sit-ins.

Spontaneity in the Sit-In Narratives

The very first accounts of the Greensboro sit-in were not narrative in form. An editorial in the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College *Register* used an explicitly persuasive mode: "You as students can believe me when I tell you this will benefit every one of us who sit at the Woolworth counter." The piece emphasized not the transformation that is characteristic of narrative, but continuity. "The waitress ignored us and kept serving the white customers. However, this is no great surprise to me because I have been exposed to segregation at lunch counters for 15 years and the situation is predominately unchanged." In the next days and weeks, however, as students from surrounding colleges joined the Greensboro protest and then launched their own sit-ins, narrative accounts began to appear. They circulated in flyers and handbills, campus newspaper articles and letters to the editor, and they figured in participants' speeches to student groups. After the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC; commonly pronounced "Snick") was formed at a sit-in conference in April, stories submitted by sit-in groups appeared in its publication, *The Student Voice*.¹⁵

Students' accounts of the sit-ins took a similar form. They described events occurring on their campus in chronological order, with a beginning, middle, and end. They detailed a key transformation and its larger meaning. We might expect that student newspaper accounts would be more likely than speeches or personal letters to recount events in narrative form, and I cite more of the former than the latter. But newspaper stories typically do not display the degree of suspense that the sit-in narratives did. They usually place the important information at the beginning and then provide increasing detail as the story goes on. Narrativity—an elliptical quality that engages readers—is not prominent. Nor do newspaper stories usually foreground a moral transformation in the way that the sit-in stories did.

Framing theorists might expect student writers to emphasize the injustice of their situation, define themselves against clearly specified antagonists, and assert their capacity to bring about the changes they sought. In fact, the injustices student writers described were often vague: denial of "the humane aspects of the American dream," and "shackles of immorality, archaic traditions, and complacency." Students conducting the sit-ins pitted themselves against apathy, a condition that does not seem clearly situational rather than individual and political rather than personal. Students in the sit-in stories acted powerfully, transgressively,

with immediate, real consequence. Yet they were simply the carriers of a force beyond them, they said. When one group of students launched a demonstration, they felt that "[t]his was a surprise (and shock) not only to the whole town but to themselves as well." Students attributed the sit-ins not to a newfound sense of collective efficacy but to forces over which they had no control. Would not this kind of framing discourage student participation rather than mobilize it?¹⁶

Consider the students whose flyer described their sit-in as "the result of spontaneous combustion," then chronicled the planning that had preceded it. They emphasized, however, that, "there was no organizational tie-in of any kind, either local or national." This seems to be the point of using the phrase "spontaneous combustion." But the students also acknowledged, "in order to make the story complete," that members of the sit-in organizing group had previously received a "Letter to Christian Students" from the National Student Christian Federation urging them to seek ways to participate. Students' characterization of the sit-ins as spontaneous even as they described planning them suggests that spontaneity meant something other than unplanned. In fact, closer examination of the sit-in stories indicates that it meant several things. Spontaneity denoted the sheer power of moral protest. Sitting in was motivated by an imperative to act now that brooked no compromise. One simply put one's body on the line, without debating its ideological potential or waiting for instruction from higher-ups. "The fact that the protest broke out overnight and spread with fantastic speed said simply this: the Negro, despite the thoughts of too many whites, is NOT content. . . . And *nobody* could escape this." A piece in the *Student Voice* opened with a story of one student's effort to launch a sit-in: "It is really strange—to do things alone. Sometimes we have no alternative." Descriptions of protest "burst[ing]," "breaking," "exploding," "sweeping," "surging," "rip[ping] through the city like an epidemic," of students "fired" by the "spark of the sit-ins," of a "chain reaction" all suggested an unstoppable moral impetus. "The spirit reached the boiling point at 11:00 a.m., March 10, 1960," wrote Philander Smith College students in Little Rock, Arkansas. For Vanderbilt students, the "current wave of demonstrations is the spontaneous ground swell of the profound determination of young Negroes to be first-class citizens."¹⁷

Spontaneity also connoted a sharp break with adult forms of protest. "Our impatience with the token efforts of responsible leaders was manifest in the spontaneous demonstrations which, after February 1, spread rapidly across the entire South," said Nashville participant Marion Barry.

"Spontaneous" meant free of the caution, slow-moving consultation, and sheer timidity that students saw in adult protest. Commending the formation of a new black periodical, SNCC wrote to its editors, "There is no longer a way to rationalize gradualism. It did die on February 1, 1960, in Woolworth's of Greensboro. It will die again and again when every individual rises to his responsibility."¹⁸

Spontaneity described the emotional experience of the sit-ins as well as their political message. Students applauded their comrades' discipline, calm, courage, and determination. Their "only prayer" was to "have the strength, knowledge, and fortitude that these students exhibited." They described the "spirit of love" with which participants had confronted their enraged white antagonists. But their accounts of the sit-ins also conveyed a sense of *fun*. They emphasized not the sober religiosity and seriousness characteristic of pacifist and Quaker nonviolent witness, but rather humor and a giddy sense of excitement. Editors of a college newspaper wrote, "Here were two harmless young people sauntering through a store . . . stalking them in true dragnetness were no less than half a dozen police officers, while customers and managers hovered in corners as if the invasion from Mars had come!" (ellipsis in original). A Knoxville College writer composed a poem entitled "Ode to a Lunch Counter": "Little lunch counter with your many stools / And your nervous pacing manager fools / How do you feel amid this confusion and strife? / Do you object to a change inevitable in life?" None of the stories represented participants as enraged or calculating.¹⁹

Protesters did frequently describe themselves as tired. They were tired "of waiting for the American dream to materialize"; "tired of un-American discrimination"; "tired of moving at an ox-cart pace"; tired of "wait[ing] for the course of time to supply us those rights we as first class citizens of this *our* America deserve." They had "'taken it' since the day [they] were born," and the sit-ins were the result of their impatience. "After 95 years of discussions, delays, postponements, procrastination, denials, and second-class citizenship, the Negro of today wants his full citizenship in his day." After "hundreds of years" of living "without pride and honor," the sit-ins "serve[d] notice that the Negro, particularly of the South, no longer accepts second class citizenship." These formulations are interesting. They merge the individual with the collective: *I* protest because *we* have waited for generations to be treated with dignity. "Our biggest influence has been inside—all those years of second-class citizenship," one protester wrote. The motivation in these formulations was a simple one. You did not have to have a sophisticated agenda or

ideology in order to protest; you just had to be impatient, unwilling to “stifle” your “feelings any longer.” Impatience was familiar to most adolescents.²⁰

The “tired” formulation is interesting for another reason. It was often paired with a characterization of students before the sit-ins as apathetic. The sit-ins had destroyed “the myth of student apathy,” had dealt “a death blow to apathy,” to students’ “false robe of sophistication and unconcern.” “No longer may students be called the ‘Silent Generation.’” Being tired and being apathetic both suggested passivity and inaction. Yet being tired of waiting issued in radical action. The narrative thus reconfigured apathy *as* being tired of waiting. Only one thing distinguished those who were laying their bodies on the line from those who were lying around in their dorm rooms: the first group recognized that their apathy was the repression of a desire for full political citizenship. It wasn’t that they were apathetic; it was that they were “weary with waiting.” In that sense, said students, “we had been ready to do something like this for a long time.” Indeed, “we have been planning it all our lives.” The story did not exhort students to shake off their apathy, an injunction that most students probably associated with the familiar calls to vote for student council, come to the debate club, or volunteer. Instead, it endowed apathy with a transformative telos:

Time was when our elders, those who in their school days dreamed radical dreams, wondered what disease was responsible for the apathy that was apparent among today’s college students. Three months ago, they ceased from wondering about the apathy and began marveling over the radicalism . . . the students say—and it is reasonable to believe them—that they are tired of waiting for the humane aspects of the American dream to materialize.²¹

Other emotional transformations figured in the sit-in narratives. The “butterflies” of apprehension ceded to “joy” in demonstrating. Students in North Carolina, said *Dissent* writer Michael Walzer, “told one story after another about . . . minor but to them terribly important incidents in the buses, in stores, on the job. The stories usually ended with some version of ‘I ran out of that store. I almost cried. . . .’” The sit-in narrative transformed a too-common story of humiliation into one of triumph.²²

Narratives of the sit-ins, in which spontaneity denoted a break with adult gradualism, a moral rather than political strategy, a joy in action, and an unstoppable force, may have motivated students to en-

gage in time-consuming and dangerous activism. Students narrativized what was happening in order to make sense of it and to signal its significance, "The sit-ins," SNCC Chairman Charles McDew said in October 1960, "have inspired us to build a new image of ourselves in our own mind." Along with that image came new behavioral expectations.²³

Spontaneity as Ellipsis

The sit-in accounts may also have motivated action by their *failure* to account for mobilization. Their ambiguity about agents and agency, not their clarity, may have engaged their audiences. I have argued that the elliptical character of storytelling is necessary to stories' suspensefulness. But literary critic J. Hillis Miller takes the argument further. The impossibility of logically explaining events compels us to tell stories, which in turn preserve the ambiguity that compels us to tell more stories. All narratives are characterized by the repetition of what Miller calls a complex word, one with multiple, even incongruous, meanings, as we use "right" in the phrases "to have the right," "to be right," or "to go right." Each of those meanings may or may not be simultaneously operative in the same story. This indeterminacy is both what rivets our attention and invites more stories. "[W]e always need more stories because in some way they do not satisfy," Miller observes. The dynamic is clearest in stories of humankind's origins. The point at which humans separate themselves from beasts is unknowable, since "whatever is chosen as the moment of origination always presupposes some earlier moment when man first appeared." The question cannot be answered logically, and the alternative is a mythical narrative whose illogical premises will nevertheless require that it be retold.²⁴

As a poststructuralist, Miller believes that meaning is not only polyvalent but indeterminate. This is true in all discursive forms. Logical arguments are just as dependent on a complex word whose meaning is undecidable as is a work of literary fiction. However, one need not endorse Miller's argument in its entirety to accept the possibility that in accounting for *origins*, in particular, we may turn to stories that are ambiguous, and that ambiguity may lead us to tell more stories. When, then, did the sit-ins begin? Did they begin when the first students were arrested? Or did the impulse behind them go back further: to the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 or the Brown v. Board decision in 1954? Did the sit-ins begin with the first slave rebellion? With the first song sung,

or African tradition preserved, or Christian ritual reinterpreted in what James Scott calls an infrapolitics of dissent stretching back to Africans' enslavement in this country? The question of origins is historical but also personal. When does collective action begin? When does individual action become collective and resistance become opposition? When can I call myself an activist? The impossibility of answering these questions may call for more stories and more actions to recount.²⁵

Let me expand on this possibility with an origin story from another movement. According to framing theorist Robert Benford, a story called "The Hundredth Monkey" proved to be an extraordinarily effective mobilizing tool for organizers in the American antinuclear movement. The story opens with a parable, which I quote at length:

The Japanese monkey, *Macaca fuscata*, has been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the island of Koshima scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant. An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way and they taught their mothers too. This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by various monkeys before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable . . .

Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes—the exact number is not known. Let us suppose that when the sun rose one morning there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let's further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash potatoes. THEN IT HAPPENED!

By that evening almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough!

But notice. The most surprising thing observed by the scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea—Colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakyama began washing their sweet potatoes!

Thus, when a certain critical number achieves an awareness, this new awareness may be communicated from mind to mind. [. . .] You may furnish the added consciousness energy to create the shared awareness of the urgent necessity to rapidly achieve a nuclear free world.²⁶

Benford argues that the story was so widely used by organizers because it conveyed a sense of efficacy, demonstrating to potential recruits "the

power of the new awareness and your role in the unfolding drama." But does the story actually do that? Does it demonstrate the power of conscious individual action? "THEN IT HAPPENED," the story goes, but it is not clear just *what* happened, nor why all the Koshima monkeys and monkeys in distant tribes suddenly, "spontaneously," began washing potatoes. How did monkeys that were not in contact with the original tribe learn the practice? The story raises more questions than it answers. My own guess is that the story was successful precisely because it failed to supply a logical explanation for action. The story promises to explain the link between action and outcome but then simply places us, the reader/listener, at the victorious end. Penetrating the mystery of collective action requires more stories and more actions to recount. So framing theorists may be wrong to insist that people need a clear specification of agents, antagonists, and targets, and an easily interpretable rationale for participation. The stories protesters tell to make sense of what is happening may compel others to listen and to act not by providing a sense of the ease or efficacy of protest, but by reproducing its inexplicable character.²⁷

Ambiguity operated similarly in the sit-in narratives. The word *spontaneous* means voluntary *and* instinctual (involuntary). Contradictory meanings are contained in the same word. In the sit-in narratives, in this reading, spontaneity functioned as a kind of narrative ellipsis in which the movement's beginning occurred. "BOOM—It Happened," as one account put it, and the non-narratable shift from observer to participant took place. This ellipsis strengthened the engagement of those hearing or reading the sit-in narratives in at least one of two ways. Either the story's underspecification of the mechanisms of participation forced readers to fill in the missing links, to become co-authors of the story, or the story could not fix the motivation for participation and so required its retelling. Either way, it was not the sit-in narratives' clarity about the antagonists, protagonists, and stakes of struggle that made them so compelling but their containment of mystery and risk within the familiarity of a ubiquitous discursive form.²⁸

Institutionalizing Spontaneity

How compelling were the sit-in narratives? By September 1961, seventy thousand people had participated in the demonstrations. Of course, we do not know that the sit-in narratives were directly responsible for that. However, the challenges that were created for the sit-in movement's new organization by those narratives suggests their potency. Spontaneity,

emblematic of students' independence and their unique contribution to the movement, became an organizational commitment that both animated and constrained strategic action. Students called for coordination but resisted direction, wanted the movement to speak to the nation but were wary of leaders, wanted to expand the scope of protest but distrusted adult advice. At a college workshop sponsored by the Highlander Center in April 1960, just before the formation of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, seventy-five students discussed "the spontaneous origin and spread of the sit-ins," and complained about adults' interference. They were determined that no organization should control the protests. Participants at SNCC's first and second conferences delineated only a modest role for their own organization in which it was "made quite clear that SNCC does not control local groups."²⁹

SNCC's administrators found themselves repeatedly called upon to defend the organization's very existence to its members and supporters, and specifically to reassure them that organization would not stifle the spontaneity of the movement. SNCC's Jane Stenbridge responded directly to a donor's concern: "We believe that the spontaneity will not die and the coordination will speed the coming of genuine equality." She and SNCC Chair Marion Barry reassured another supporter, "The purpose of the Coordinating Committee meetings is not to control the movement but to make an attempt at coordination of efforts." In funding appeals, newsletters, and speeches, SNCC leaders represented the group as an extension of the spontaneity of the sit-ins and of the values of moral imperative, local autonomy, and radicalism that spontaneity connoted.³⁰

These statements never contrasted spontaneity to effectiveness. To the contrary, student activists believed that it was their capacity to move fast that was responsible for the remarkable scale of the demonstrations. At this point, the conventional oppositions between spontaneity and organization and between instrumental and expressive action simply did not hold. However, spontaneity's more capacious meanings would eventually yield to its conventional ones. In the next few years, a view of direct action as moral *rather than* political occasionally crept into SNCC workers' discussions. The conventional interpretation associated spontaneity not only with moral and immediate action but also with nonpolitical and nonstrategic action. The message of the sit-in story, in this interpretation, was that moral action demanded spontaneity and *not* planning. The minutes of a 1963 SNCC strategy session record that when participants had reached an impasse, older SNCC advisor Myles Horton observed, "It appeared that most of the participants wanted to deal with political questions, and wanted to deal exclusively with the political orientation. SNCC

has continually had debates of whether the emphasize [*sic*] should be political or religious, spontaneous or rigidly political." By contrasting "spontaneous" to "*rigidly* political," Horton was leaving room for a view of direct action as political but not conventionally so. But he and others lacked the language for describing a politics that was not "rigidly political."³¹

That said, a tendency to view direct action as nonstrategic and nonpolitical by definition was much more pronounced among the white new leftists who were building their own movement—one that was profoundly influenced by the southern sit-ins. Students on northern campuses were impressed by the protesters' courage and by their unabashed sense of moral purpose. Their determination to act for their ideals now, without calculation or compromise, was a challenge to what historian Christopher Lasch called the "hard-boiled pragmatism" of the left. University of Michigan student Tom Hayden saw the sit-ins as "risky, shoot for the moon affairs," the beginnings of "a revolution that would reduce complexity to moral simplicity." He joined a new group named Students for a Democratic Society and described it as a northern counterpart to the southern student movement. But Hayden and his SDS colleagues were not shy about identifying what they saw as the limitations of that movement. Hayden criticized it in 1961 for lacking a "precise political vision"; even a "real political consciousness" to match its "moral clarity." His colleague, SDS founder Al Haber, criticized a focus on direct action as "non-political." Another SDS leader wrote, "The focus of action on Negro campuses in the non-violent protest movement has been largely 'non-political.'" The sit-ins were admirably moral, SDS leaders agreed, but not yet properly political.³²

The sit-ins and, more broadly, direct action, were thus viewed as immediate, expressive, and powerfully moral—all meanings associated with "spontaneity"—but also as nonpolitical, and nonstrategic. This perception endured for the rest of the decade. Antiwar activist Staughton Lynd expressed a minority position in 1966 when he asked, "[W]hy should it be assumed that direct action is 'moral' rather than 'political'? If enough people act, or if the act is of a particularly strategic kind, there is a political impact." Lynd was a longtime pacifist and well-schooled in the Gandhian techniques of direct action that pacifists had developed before and after World War II. While often trained by those pacifists, black student protestors had transformed direct action. They put it on a mass scale, stripped it of its somber asceticism, and made it exuberant. But they never denied the discipline and training that preceded their actions. However, those features dropped out as the story of the sit-ins was retold. Historians have argued that direct action in the new left and anti-

war movement tended to be poorly organized, with participants rarely trained in nonviolence or even clear on the principles guiding their actions. Partly responsible was the antinomy between spontaneity and strategy on which conceptions of direct action came to rest. The conventional story line, which has people acting out their moral commitments in emotional and impulsive protest, eclipsed one in which people acted emotionally, morally, *and* in politically instrumental ways.³³

Destiny Stories

I have argued that when students called the sit-ins spontaneous, they were not saying that their actions were unplanned. Rather, they were conveying the sit-ins' urgent, moral, and local character. Calling the sit-ins spontaneous also captured the impossibility of fixing the point at which individual intention became collective will, the point at which resistance became opposition. Describing the sit-ins as spontaneous or using phrases like "BOOM—It Happened!" did the same thing that the ellipsis (. . .) did in the antinuclear movement's story of the hundredth monkey. It contained without explaining the unexplainable point at which protest began.

A similar ellipsis (often, literally three dots . . .) has figured in the mobilizing stories of other movements. For example, in his best-selling manifesto for community organizing, *Rules for Radicals*, published in 1971, Saul Alinsky imagined a conversation between an organizer and a resident. "Organizer: Do you live over in that slummy building? Answer: Yeah. What about it?" The organizer suggests that the residents should demand building repairs, and the resident counters that it will not do any good. "Organizer: Hmmm. What if nobody in that building paid their rent? Answer: Well, they'd start to throw . . . Hey, you know, they'd have trouble throwing everybody out, wouldn't they?" Again, the transformation takes place in the three-dot ellipsis, where the resident realizes the potential of collective action. His next line is "Hey, you know, maybe you got something—say, I'd like you to meet some of my friends. How about a drink?" He has become an activist.³⁴

Another example comes from the first issue of the new magazine of the women's movement *Ms.* in 1972. In an article entitled "The Housewife's Moment of Truth," journalist Jane O'Reilly described a workshop she had attended where participants were asked to imagine themselves as animals. One woman told the group that she had been a snake:

As I was moving through the grass, enjoying my slithering, curving progress, I realized I had no fangs. No bite. I couldn't even hiss. My only protection was that I could change color in reaction to the people that passed by. I started to go through my garden and I saw that there were panthers draped over all the lawn furniture. I went into my house, and there were panthers everywhere, filling every chair, curled up in groups in all the rooms. They were eating, rather elegantly, and no one paid any attention to me, even when I asked if they wanted anything more to eat. I was interested but I was different, and finally I withdrew.³⁵

There were both men and women in the workshop but O'Reilly and the other women had an immediate reaction. "The women in the group looked at her, looked at each other, and . . . click! A moment of truth. The shock of recognition. Instant sisterhood. 'You became a *housewife*,' we said, excited, together, turning to the men to see if they understood. 'She is describing a housewife. Do you know that?'" According to O'Reilly, the men did not get it, did not, as she put it, "recognize the click! of recognition, that parenthesis of truth around a little thing that completes the puzzle of reality in women's minds—the moment that brings a gleam to our eyes and means the revolution has begun." The article went on to recount story after story of men taking women's subservience for granted in mundane ways: men casually instructing their wives to pick up the toys, pooh-poohing the onerousness of housework, expecting a colleague to perform secretarial duties. Episodes like these were common, a dime a dozen, but for some reason, *this* time, they ended differently. The conclusion to each was "Click!" and then the woman's resistance, telling her husband to pick up the toys himself or sharply protesting her denigration. The dénouement of the panther story was actually not the confusing and unsatisfying ending that the woman herself gave it—"I was interested but I was different and finally I withdrew"—but the response of the other women: the three dots and then the new consciousness: ". . . click!" And that click, said O'Reilly, meant that "the revolution has begun."³⁶

O'Reilly's article prompted thousands of letters to the editor, the vast majority of them telling personal stories of injustice and many of them beginning or ending with "Click!" The first letter, for example, began "Click!" then described a dinner party where the men professed their puzzlement at inner-city rioting: "Jesus, in their own neighborhoods, what's the matter with those people?" The letter-writer continued: "And one of the women said, very quietly, in a kind of wondering voice, 'Sometimes I think I know just how they feel . . .'" The three of us women looked at each other: Click!" Again the banal comment, again *this* time, a pro-

foundly different, rebellious response. What accounted for the change? In each case, only the three dots. According to *Ms.* magazine's historian, the O'Reilly article and the response to it had a profound impact on the magazine and the movement. So many readers wrote in with their stories that "click" became a "feminist term of art." And the magazine's editors realized that whatever format they chose for the magazine, they would have to plan for multiple columns of reader mail. But it was a certain kind of reader mail. From O'Reilly's story on, readers would recount episodes in their own lives as a way to make a point about an article they had read. Telling stories, personal stories, was political action. This would remain a hallmark of the women's liberation movement.³⁷

In Alinsky's account of community organizing and in the feminist Click! accounts, narrative motivated action precisely by its capacity to represent without explaining the point at which resistance became opposition and/or individual action became collective. However, if this suggests that origin stories may operate similarly in all movements, there is another possibility. The critical discursive ellipsis, the point in the story where the non-narratable movement beginning takes place, may in fact be distinctively modern. In earlier eras and other places, understandings of the logic of individual action and of historical time may have made for narrativity of a different sort. The counterpart of modern narratives' suspenseful "Who or what is responsible for what is happening to me?" may have been "How does one come to know God's will?" or "Is our fate to be one of victory or defeat?" Viewed in a broad historical sweep, the sit-in stories' emphasis on spontaneity may have reflected an age in which the relations between agency and fate had become poignantly unclear.

In fact, we have evidence that people in other eras have acted collectively on the basis of quite different logics of agency. For example, in sixteenth-century France, people petitioning authorities for the remission of punishment for crimes they had committed often described their actions as the unfolding of a religious ritual. In her study of French pardon tales, historian Natalie Zemon Davis found that petitioners rarely invoked the historical circumstances of their actions, which included participation in tax riots and other forms of collective action. One petitioner, accounting for her involvement in a riot in Vermandois in 1539, described tax collectors breaking into peasants' homes and seizing the possessions of those who had refused to pay. Women took up pitchforks and pots and fought back. In her plea for pardon, the petitioner explained her action not by the excessiveness of new taxes or the overzealousness of those collecting them but by the fact that she mistook the tax collectors for soldiers. Perhaps the woman believed that the king would

be more likely to grant pardon in a case of mistaken identity than one of incipient rebellion. But Davis argues that this unwillingness to invoke the historical contexts of action was characteristic of family histories and autobiographical writing of the time, which focused on moral and psychological circumstances rather than historical ones.³⁸

If they were largely inattentive to their political historical setting, petitioners did invoke ritual and festive time to account for their actions. The compulsion to challenge or the obligation to retaliate made sense when put in their ritual context. For example, one account opened with the petitioner and his friends entombing themselves in imitation of the Lord on the day of the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Later that evening, the narrative went on, the petitioner was insulted by a man he passed on the street with the words, "I see the god on earth. Did you keep your virile and shameful member stiff in playing God?" Passing by the man again, the petitioner was once more subjected to words that were "insulting to our Lord Jesus Christ and to the holiness of the day," and then assaulted by him. The petitioner responded "in hot anger" by fatally wounding his assailant. In this and other accounts, the acts of individuals became the unfolding of a narrative plot line, with insult become defilement and retort remade as retribution. Indeed, Davis observes, group fights between Catholics and Protestants often took place on religious occasions. The riots were experienced by participants either as an extension of the religious ritual or an exposition of its hypocrisy. Either way, action supplied the narrative reversal that drove the story.³⁹

Sixteenth-century petitioners relied on narratives to make sense of their actions, just as participants in the 1960 sit-ins did. They too relied on a narrative trope of reversal, with a shift from peaceable gathering or harmonious relationship to confrontation. What differed were the relations between agency and structure embedded in their respective plot lines. This suggests that although people everywhere rely on stories to make sense of breaches with the conventional, the stories readily available to them reflect culturally distinctive understandings of the relations between individual and group and between agency and fate.

Strategic Storytelling

I have argued that narratives are a common form of discourse in fledgling movements, before formal organizations are established and while the idea of a collective actor is still tenuous. Narratives' endowment of events with coherence, directionality, and emotional resonance provides

an explanation for confusing developments at the same time as it provides rationales for participation. In the stories students told, the 1960 sit-ins were a break with the incomplete engagement and gradualism of adult leaders (spontaneity denoted a moral imperative to act). They were a break with the action-impeding bureaucracy of mainstream civil rights organizations (spontaneity denoted local initiative). And they were a break with the sober asceticism of prior direct action (spontaneity denoted a joy and freedom in action). Narratives of the sit-ins helped make normative a physically dangerous form of activism. To be sure, representing the surge of student protest as spontaneous discredited charges of outside planning by left-wing groups. And tying SNCC to the sit-ins effectively legitimated the organization. However, my account suggests that such an instrumentalist view is limited. Rather than simply being persuasive devices used by strategic collective actors, narratives helped to constitute new collective actors and stakes in action. Multi-authored and told in formal and informal settings, stories made participation normative.

What role does storytelling play after formal movement organizations have been established, complete with strategic agendas and deliberate recruitment campaigns? Activists tell stories in courtrooms and in congressional hearings, in press briefings and on doorsteps. They craft their stories to make what they are up against seem intolerably unjust, their own actions seem worthy, and their opponents and competitors seem familiarly villainous or deluded. They use stories strategically. But stories also set the terms of strategic action, defining what is an opportunity or an obstacle, a success or a failure, and a cost or a benefit. I show how in the next chapter.