

From the outside, social change can appear chaotic, spontaneous, or organic, with little reason or explanation behind it. The Occupy movement, the Seattle WTO blockade, the Philippine 'People Power' revolution, or so many hundreds of other examples, could all appear to have 'just happened', or were sourced solely from the power and influence of an inspiring leader. In reality, underlying this myth - that 'things just happen' - are committed activists who put much energy into planning and organising, to building power from the ground up, working out how to apply pressure to make the change they hope to see take place. Things don't just happen – people make things happen!

The Montgomery Bus Boycott: why it didn't 'just happen'

Consider this – very common - reading of the story of Rosa Parks' refusal on 1 December 1955 to move from her seat in the front of the bus to the back, where blacks were supposed to sit.

Rosa Parks was a tired, old woman, who made a spontaneous decision to refuse to move to the back of the bus that started a chain reaction of events – the Montgomery Bus Boycott, that ended segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, USA, sparking the wider Civil Rights movement. The events that resulted from Rosa Park's arrest were spontaneous, random; they were not planned for or expected.

This version of events completely misses the point.

The effectiveness of the thirteen month Montgomery Bus Boycott was reliant on the years of organising and power-building that preceded it, and the recognition of the strategic opportunity Parks' arrest offered by the leaders groups such as the Women's Political Council, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The arrest was recognised by the Black leaders of Montgomery as the opportunity they had been waiting for to escalate the conflict over segregated buses, by calling for a boycott – escalating in such a manner was an overt, strategic decision (it wasn't 'spontaneous' and it didn't 'just happen'.) This is highlighted by the fact that Parks' wasn't the first woman to take such action; nine months before, Claudette Colvin also refused the bus driver's order to move. However, there was concern that a campaign or boycott built around Colvin's arrest would be undermined because she was a pregnant unmarried teenager. Given the societal norms at the time, it was thought that this would hinder a boycott campaign, and they waited for someone who was “above reproach”. Conversely, Rosa Parks was older, and had both a job and a very good reputation in the town; a strategic choice was made to boycott the buses after her arrest.

I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

Rosa Parks, in her autobiography “Rosa Parks: My Story”

However, recognising the strategic chance and calling for a boycott would not have been enough either – 25 local black organisations had spent years building grassroots power, creating networks and alliances, communicating, empowering and strategising, and preparing for an opportunity to reach their demands for desegregation and equality. As an active member of the Montgomery NAACP, Rosa Parks had attended a workshop at the Highlander Folk School, that included discussions on nonviolent civil disobedience as a tactic. Martin Luther King, Jr, the 25 year old new minister in town, had already begun his exploration of the power of nonviolent action. When the opportunity presented by Parks' arrest came, they were able to draw on these resources. Had Rosa Parks acted in isolation from this background of strategy and organising, it is difficult to see how her action – no matter how brave - would have brought about the change that it did.

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