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Thoughts On Jena and the Civil Rights Movement

Posted By [Timothy Zick](#) On September 26, 2007 @ 2:55 pm In [Civil Rights](#) | [5 Comments](#)

This past Thursday, we may have witnessed the face of the contemporary civil rights movement. Reacting to what they perceived as unduly harsh and discriminatory charging decisions by a local district attorney in the beating of a white student by six black students (the "Jena Six"), thousands of protesters descended on the tiny town of Jena, Louisiana. The controversy in Jena actually originated with the hanging of nooses by white students from the tree pictured at right, which was near a high school (it has since been torn down). White students had apparently long insisted that only whites were permitted to sit under the tree. The students who hung the nooses were suspended for a few days. Months passed, but racial tensions did not recede. Ultimately, there was an altercation that resulted in the charges noted above.



Some of the [reporting](#) ^[1] on the "Jena Six" protest expressly invoked the 1960s civil rights movement. Some have even suggested that the "Jena Six" protest may mark the dawn of a new civil rights consciousness or movement. Several notable aspects of this recent protest suggest both similarities to earlier civil rights episodes and some important differences. As for similarities, the protesters clearly thought it important that they assemble and express their frustration in the town itself. As noted below, there was a substantial amount of online networking. But in the end, there was a felt need to assemble and speak in a physical place where protest was likely to be noticed (by the media, of course, but also by members of the Jena community). By their presence, the protesters sought to make Jena a symbol of the unfairness of the criminal justice system, just as Selma has come to symbolize inequality in the franchise and Little Rock the stigma of segregated education. When they descended on the town, protesters instinctively used specific places within the town — the courthouse where one of the "Jena Six" was thought to be held and the tree — to amplify their message. They appear not to have sought permission, by permit or otherwise, to assemble and speak. In that sense, at least, the protest was defiant. In these respects, the Jena protest looked on the surface much like street protests of the 1960s.

Despite these similarities, there were some substantial differences between the Jena protest and earlier civil rights protests. Unlike protests of the 1960s, the reaction time from event to assembly was remarkably short. Indeed, the protest in Jena was organized and effectuated almost overnight. Protest spontaneity was facilitated to a large degree by new technologies and media. Word of the "Jena Six" spread rapidly on the Web. At least since the 1999 Seattle WTO protests, activists have been relying upon new technologies to organize public demonstrations, document events on the ground, and in some cases counter police tactics. During the Jena protest, civil rights activists embraced these methods. News and protest plans were disseminated on blogs administered, and heavily trafficked by, African-Americans. African-American talk radio also played a critical role in bringing protesters together. This access to media was important in both organizational and expressive terms. In previous eras, protesters had to rely upon media like television to convey their message. With mobile, hand-held technologies protesters were able to document the events themselves, from their own perspectives, allowing them to bypass media filters to some extent. Further, unlike previous civil rights protests — but like most Web-originated swarms — the "Jena Six" protest initially lacked a traditional organizational structure or distinct leadership hierarchy. Indeed, civil rights leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were apparently caught somewhat off guard by the reaction to events in Jena (Rev. Sharpton said he learned of the controversy on the Web). The Jena protest, unlike prior civil rights displays, was not part of a more sustained campaign; once it was over protesters quickly left the area. Finally, and fortunately, this time there was no violent reaction — by either police, who mostly stayed in the background, or citizens (who mostly stayed home). (There were, however, some [menacing statements](#) ^[2] regarding the "Jena Six" on the Web.) There were no hoses, no dogs, and no physical altercations between protesters and police. The marches and demonstrations appeared peaceful and generally well-organized. By most accounts, the

mood of the protesters could be described as concerned, but generally relaxed and even at times festive.

What, if anything, might these similarities and differences indicate regarding the future of the civil rights movement?

Of course, the observations above relate only to the external or public face of what may or may not be a new consciousness or movement in the making. Much will depend on the broader dynamics of social movement organization. Still, some tentative conclusions might be drawn from this event. Technology, and in particular African-American blogs and other media outlets, seems to have great potential in terms of producing a rank-and-file that is better informed, rapidly reactive, empowered, and more effectively networked. On the other hand, a movement consisting principally of decentralized swarms that rapidly form, and just as rapidly dissipate, would not seem sustainable. Much will depend, of course, on how networking and other technologies are used *subsequent* to these public events. But a "quick strike" model of contention, where protesters rapidly organize and engage in contests in various places, seems less likely to be effective than a long campaign. The monks and other protesters who had been marching in Myanmar until today's [violent crackdown](#) ^[3] by authorities were on the streets for a month. Although they were punctuated with prominent public displays, the Freedom Rides and civil rights marches of the 1960s were part of lengthy campaigns.

The decentralization of the Web raises another issue, namely whether there can be an effective civil rights movement without a traditional hierarchy or structure. Note that in Jena, national civil rights leaders did eventually arrive and play somewhat prominent roles. They have now taken the cause of the "Jena 6" [to Capitol Hill](#) ^[4]. A movement originating in media networks like the Web will likely still require a substantial degree of centralized authority — at least in the long term. In any event, one lesson the current leadership might reasonably draw from Jena is that they too must become part of Web and other media networks. The final point relates specifically to the public displays themselves. As noted, protesters descended on Jena with little notice. They marched peacefully, in organized columns, through the town and to specific places. But there was no disruption, no striking visuals of protesters clashing with authorities, no escalation of force by police — in short, none of the sorts of things that helped vault Selma, for example, into the national consciousness. One question, then, is whether there can be a new civil rights consciousness or movement without such episodes.

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[1] reporting: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/college/coll21jena.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

[2] menacing statements : <http://balkin.blogspot.com/2007/09/when-are-websites-threats-jena-6.html>

[3] violent crackdown: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/26/world/asia/26cnd-myanmar.html>

[4] to Capitol Hill:

http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5g_B895UEtV38cUvZWav9zg08hh3Q

[5] : <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/law/09/19/jena.six.link/index.html?iref=newssearch>

[6] : <http://robertlindsay.blogspot.com/2007/09/on-jena-six.html>