

Categorizing Social Movements as “Successful” or “Failed”: Exploring the Essence Contributing to Social Dynamic Balance

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Abstract: Research on social movements has been continuously robust and of significant theoretical importance in the field of social studies. This paper argues that there is no definitive criterion for categorizing social movements into a binary standard of either “success” or “failure”. Social movements emerge to instigate societal or ideological transformations. By analysing various historical movements worldwide, the study finds that when social movements reach extreme positions and unleash devastating forces upon society, they often provoke counter-movements that seek to restore social equilibrium. Societal trends oscillate back and forth, much like a pendulum, and social movements function as agents that pull the pendulum towards the centre when it reaches its peak on one side. Therefore, social movements act as regulators contributing to the constant dynamic balance in society. This nuanced perspective can inform policymakers, activists, and researchers in their efforts to engage with and respond to social movements, fostering more informed and effective strategies for societal change and progress.

Keywords: Social movement, social change, Germany, the United States

1. Introduction

William Wordsworth’s famous lines, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very Heaven!” capture the enthusiasm, courage, imagination, and idealism of the passionate youth who actively participated in the French Revolution. Although the initial goal of the French Revolution was to establish a democratic political system akin to that of the United States, it eventually descended into the tumultuous Reign of Terror. Napoleon’s rise to power as emperor marked a restoration of social order but the failure to achieve the Revolution’s original objectives. Nevertheless, the French Revolution holds immense historical significance, spreading its principles, inspired by Enlightenment thinkers, to other nations through various means. Therefore, evaluating this multifaceted historical event necessitates moving beyond simplistic binary standards of success or failure.

The assessment of historical events and social movements is a nuanced and multifaceted endeavour. It is inadequate to classify them as solely “successful” or “failed.” The evaluation process involves a comprehensive examination of intricate factors and their corresponding consequences. This paper aims to re-evaluate the criteria used to assess social movements, challenging the binary norms of success and failure. It seeks to situate the analysis of social movements within a broader historical

framework to illustrate their dynamic nature, which exhibits varying attributes over time and can yield both positive and negative long-term impacts on society.

2. Definitions of Social Movement

To facilitate a comprehensive discussion on the categorization of social movements as “successful” or “failed”, it is necessary to determine the concept of a social movement. An accurate definition serves as the cornerstone for later explaining and reflecting the specific research approach used in this paper.

Since the 19th century, various influential theorists have made significant contributions to social movement studies, offering diverse insights into this field. In these works, scholars have proposed various definitions for their objects of study. Charles Tilly, a proponent of the political process theory, defines social movement as a “sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations or support [1].” Mayer Zald and John McCarthy, on the other hand, define social movement as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution for the society” [2]. They distinguish preferences for change from organized collective action.

Alaine Touraine, in contrast, characterizes social movement as “the organised collective behaviour of a class actor struggling against his class adversary for the social control of historicity in a concrete community” [3]. In this context, “historicity” consists of the “overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society” [3]. Dingxin Zhao defines social movement as “a highly organized, noninstitutional political action involving many individuals seeking or opposing specific social change” [4]. This definition is similar to Richard Flacks’ argument that social movements are “collective behaviours, of some duration and organization, using noninstitutionalized methods to bring about social change” [5].

Each of these four definitions corresponds to a significant theory within the realm of social movement studies since the 1960s. This study adopts Richard Flacks’ definition, as it represents the commonly accepted understanding of social movements [2]. It shows a shared common ground among various definitions, while the other three influential definitions “lead to different emphases in the study of particular movements” [2].

This paper focuses on the historical examination of social movements in Germany and the United States. Both countries have experienced significant and ongoing dynamic changes and interactions among various participants over a long period of time. The paper also contains case analyses from China, Eastern Europe, and Iran. These diverse cases cover a global geographic scope, revealing complicated and distinct attributes related to how and why these movements unfolded within a shared essence in their particular historical contexts.

3. The Nuances of Social Movement Impact Across Diverse Historical Contexts

3.1. Social Movements in Germany

For over a century, German cultural nationalism movements, which initially contributed to the German unification in the early 19th century, underwent a significant transformation that ultimately led to extreme manifestations. These extreme manifestations catalysed the outbreak of the two World Wars. The consequences of this extremity had devastating effects on German society as a whole, subsequently giving rise to the opposite anti-nationalist movements in post-war Germany and ultimately culminating in the form of defeatism.

At the onset of the 19th century, Germany faced a situation where its economy was advancing rapidly, while its sense of national identity lagged behind other countries. French culture exerted a dominant influence over various aspects of German society. In response, the German national elite sought to utilize the distinctiveness of German culture to affirm and consolidate their own national identity. German intellectuals embarked on a journey of studying German epics, collecting folk songs, remembering the nation's illustrious past, and reconstructing German national culture.

Figures like Johann Gottlieb Gichte actively propagated nationalist ideas through countless speeches, while writers such as Johann Christoph Gottsched participated in associations that promoted the use of the German language. Theorists such as Friedrich Karl von Moser advocated the concept of "the German National Spirit" and put forward the theory of national spirit [6]. During the wars between the German states and Napoleon, many Germans were inspired to take up arms by patriotic poetry, such as that of Arndt.

Over time, the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism began to transform Germany, dismantling the existing social structure and political equilibrium. During this period of transformation, the cultural nationalism movement gradually took root, uniting the hearts of people across the disparate states within the ununified German region. Numerous assemblies and movements emerged, reflecting the German people's longing for the unification of their homeland. Cultural nationalism, as an ideological impetus among the German populace, provided both political imagination for German unification and vital spiritual support for Prussia's success in bringing about the unification of Germany.

Nonetheless, as the nationalist ideology reached its extremity, it led to the instigation of imperialist wars, specifically within Germany itself. Following the unification of Germany in 1871, the absolutist aspects of German nationalism began to surpass the more liberal elements. Concurrently, the nationalist movement, spanning various regions of the country, merged with Darwin's theory of evolution, which asserted that German unification and cultural accomplishments resulted from the inherent nobility of the German people [7]. Consequently, all the spiritual wealth created and possessed by the German nation was seen as a model for the rest of the world. No European nation since the times of Luther, Kant, and Schiller had exhibited such a profound commitment to constructing a morally and spiritually independent global sphere. During this period, the enduring influence of a series of cultural nationalism movements provided intangible spiritual support for the nation's engagement in imperialist wars, driven by aspirations to secure "a place in the sun" [8].

The consequences of the extreme nature of cultural nationalism became apparent following World War I. Germany's defeat in the war resulted in the failure to establish colonies and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles, which inflicted significant economic hardship on the country. This burden exceeded the tolerance of the German people, leading to the emergence of an extreme form of cultural nationalism known as German national revanchism during this period. The bleak backdrop provided fertile ground for the rise of the ultra-nationalist Nazi party, with Hitler publicly advocating the merits of extreme nationalism. The nationalism that had evolved from the 19th century onwards was pushed to its extreme, resulting in racial segregation and the subsequent brutal acts of genocide during World War II.

The post-war reflection on German nationalism, particularly the extreme nationalism of World War II, took a considerable amount of time but ultimately undermined the legacy of the original cultural nationalism movements. In West Germany, during the 1960s, students initiated a widespread re-evaluation movement of extreme nationalism and Nazism, actively opposing former Nazi officials who held positions in the government. By the early 1980s, the sense of national pride in West Germany began to diminish as debates on these issues unfolded. In 1981, national pride in West Germany was at a relatively low level, with only 35 percent of respondents expressing that they were

“very proud” of their country. In addition, regarding defeatism, only 35 percent of the respondents indicated a willingness to fight for Germany [9].

3.2. Social Movements in the United States

The impact of social movement legacies extends beyond the historical events that they are associated with, persisting in our current era. Even today, social movements that have achieved policy changes continue to generate ongoing effects, shaping people’s beliefs and actions. For example, the American civil rights movement and related movements in the 1960s and 1970s sought to secure equal social opportunities and legal protection for marginalized and oppressed groups, achieving some success. Notable outcomes in the legal and political fields include the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, along with affirmative action policies based upon American civil rights legislation of the 1960s [10]. These movements brought about transformative changes that reduced long-standing identity-based discrimination and social injustice in American society, promoting social progress and equality.

However, the goals of these social movements expanded beyond their initial objectives and persisted beyond the end of the Cold War. The pursuit of fundamental social equality and justice in economic, political, and legal domains merged with a new emphasis on self-identification and equal treatment in social and cultural values, often leading to extreme positions. In this process, the focus on identity became normalized and radicalized, affirming, emphasizing, and celebrating differences [11]. At times, it even led to demands for differential treatment based on these differences, potentially violating the principle of equal treatment for all.

Furthermore, other undermining effects are also overlooked. As identity assumes a prominent role in American political discourse, the concept of “political correctness” has become a sensitive issue that individuals carefully navigate in their daily lives, permeating various aspects of society. Within the discourse of “political correctness,” ordinary Americans feel compelled to carefully choose their words to avoid unintentionally offending specific identity groups. This phenomenon hampers public expression and limits freedom of speech.

Additionally, for mainstream groups, particularly economically disadvantaged white men, “political correctness” is perceived as a form of reverse discrimination against them. Today, there are white nationalists who say: “I am a majority that is being discriminated against by elites. I belong to a group that is not really privileged at all. This is being foisted on me by people that really are privileged, all of these educated people in universities, in the media, and so forth” [12]. These circumstances further deepen the divide between conservative or centrist groups and minority groups, exacerbating tensions and fuelling the rise of conservative and right-wing movements. The consequences of these dynamics became conspicuously evident in the 2016 American presidential election [13].

3.3. Social Movements in Other Contexts

To gain a comprehensive understanding of social movements, it is essential to explore not only those typically seen as successful but also those often labelled as unsuccessful. Traditional assessments of social movements have primarily focused on tangible political achievements, particularly those resulting in policy changes [14]. However, cases where movements faced government repression and failed to achieve immediate political goals are also important and enlightening materials that should not be ignored. One such case can be found in the socialist movements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. This period brought the Chinese economy to the brink of collapse, resulting in widespread disillusionment with the party’s leadership and political system following a decade of upheaval. Nonetheless, the ideological principles,

primarily Maoism, found their way to leftist movements in the West. For instance, students in May 1968 regarded them as theoretical guides [15].

Similarly, in Eastern European countries, an anti-Soviet sentiment had been brewing since the mid-1950s, driven by their aspirations to break free from Soviet pressure and control. While many of these movements before 1989 faced suppression by the Soviet Union, they awakened and spread national consciousness deeply ingrained in the hearts of Eastern European people. This suppression further fuelled patriotism towards their nations and deep-seated resentment towards the Soviet Union. As a result, a robust ideological foundation was laid for the success of the revolutions in 1989 [16].

Another example relates to a series of social movements during the Islamic Renaissance, which faced setbacks in the 1950s when the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in Egypt. Despite these challenges, the movement's advocacy for a traditional Islamic lifestyle offered an appealing but contradictory spiritual alternative to the prevalent Westernized and open society of the time. When Islamic nations encountered setbacks in their modernization and Westernization efforts, coupled with prominent social contradictions, the overarching ideology of these movements galvanized dissatisfied individuals to save their countries from what they perceived as "Westoxification" [17]. This ultimately ignited the spark of the Islamic Renaissance, exemplified by the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

The analysis above, examining social movements in Germany and the United States, suggests that movements initially promoting positive change, such as fostering patriotic enthusiasm, advocating for racial equality, or pursuing social justice, often undergo a transformative process. As their positive influence becomes dominant in society, they may eventually turn radical. This radicalization, in turn, prompts counter-movements aimed at synthesizing their extreme positions. These subsequent social movements possess their own influence, which can, at times, undermine the legacy of their predecessors.

In contrast, situations in China, East Europe and Iran demonstrate a different development path. In these instances where movements confronted government repression and failed to achieve immediate political goals, they nonetheless exerted significant ideological influence, not only within their respective nations but also on a global scale. This influence could potentially set the stage for future successful campaigns. Thus, it becomes apparent that labelling a social movement as either a success or a failure is an oversimplification that neglects the complexities of its influence.

4. Conclusion

The analyses in this paper highlight the absence of a definitive criterion for categorizing a social movement as either entirely "successful" or "failed." Social movements emerge to instigate social or ideological transformations. However, as they reach extreme positions, they often provoke counter-movements that seek to restore equilibrium. Societal trends oscillate back and forth, much like a pendulum, and social movements function as agents that pull the pendulum towards the centre when it reaches its peak on one side. Consequently, society continually engages in subtle adjustments to maintain the balance that has been achieved. In this way, social movements act as regulators that sustain a dynamic equilibrium within society.

Nevertheless, social movements surpass their utilitarian function of promoting stability and moderation. They embody dynamic attributes and a vibrant history. These movements encapsulate various elements, including the struggles of marginalized and oppressed groups against social injustice. They seek equal treatment in legal and cultural realms within pluralistic societies. Additionally, there were competitions and conflicts that featured prominently in the evolution of German cultural nationalist movements, whether through the endeavours of intellectuals shaping national identity or the protests of 1960s students challenging former Nazi officials. Furthermore, unwavering patriotism was displayed by young individuals in Eastern European countries who risked

their lives for their idealistic devotion to their nations. All these elements contribute to an intricate tapestry.

These luminous elements evoke daring, courage, imagination, and idealism as the driving forces behind social change, regardless of the direction of that change. Across time, social movements persist as propellers of history, ceaselessly seeking dynamic balance. Thus, the notion of an “end of history” confined to economic calculations and “rational specialists without spirits” is meant to be reignited by the presence of animated social movements [18,19].

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