

How Movements Succeed: Lessons from the Past

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One way to be successful at anything is to take into account how others who have been successful at this same kind of thing went about it. Three successful movements in recent decades have been the black civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s, the modern feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. Let's take a look at how they did it and see what those currently concerned about the wellbeing of white people can learn from it.

All three successful movements went straight for the center; they didn't come on as fringe types. Part of that, they attended closely to the manner in which they presented themselves. They used language, arguments, and approaches that resonated well with the mass public. Those front and center in the black civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements were mature, appealing, reasonable, credible, accessible, comforting, and likeable.

These successful movements were careful to stay away from self-labeling that might be problematic for them. "I'm a Communist, but don't let that get to you, just listen to my good ideas"--none of that. Hubert Humphrey was a proud liberal and it got him the vice-presidency and a presidential nomination, but the people in these three groups saw that that handle wasn't doing to work for them and shunned it. In modern times, the term "left" doesn't play well with most people (nor does "right"), so they avoided it. Martin Luther King didn't say, "As a representative of the left, I call for racial integration in America." Feminism didn't bill itself as a leftist movement. Gay marriage wasn't pitched as a left wing idea. In fact, these successful movements didn't take on any philosophical/political identity.

They didn't present themselves as an alternative. Not only weren't they left, they most certainly weren't *alt*-left, or alternative anything. What they were for was *it*, period. It was *the* true,

decent, fair, equitable, just, good, moral thing to do. It was *the* American thing to do. What they advocated was the right thing, the *only* thing, to do if you wanted to be respectable. To be against what they were insisting upon—their pitches were couched as imperatives—was no less than shameful. If you were unable to go along with it, you were obliged to get over on the side and out of the way—the right side, or an alternative right side, whatever you want; anyway, over there on the side, or sideline, that’s the place for you.

These successful movements associated themselves with attractive, convincing, and emotion-evoking images—they could be called memes in today’s parlance. The civil rights movement got a lot of mileage out of the image of four little black girls who were killed in a KKK church bombing in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. The gays had Ryan White, an Indiana teenager who became HIV/AIDS infected from a contaminated blood treatment—that is to say, he wasn’t gay. Americans watched Ryan die and it tore at their heartstrings. The gay movement also has had the casts of “Will & Grace” and “Transparent,” which personalized, humanized, and legitimized its arguments. All to say, no leering Pepe the Frog; to the general public, that kind of thing would have come across as menacing.

All three of these successful movements had radical, in-your-face components. The black movement had H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. There were the radical feminists. The gays had ACT UP. These groups had powerful and appealing symbols or memes, to some people anyway, clenched fists and so on. All of these more hard-edged individuals and organizations contributed to the cause, but if there had only been them, these movements would not have succeeded as they did. If it had only been these individuals and groups, anyone with a reputation to uphold, and that very much includes politicians, would have kept their distance. There would not have been a

voting rights act or public accommodations law if, in the public's perception, the black civil rights movement was just the Black Panthers. Martin Luther King and those like him had to be there.

Important to note, none of the more extreme components in these movements were condemned or expelled by the, call them, respectable components. At the same time, the more acceptable people and organizations in these movements didn't openly embrace or identify with the radical elements. They didn't have an overarching movement title—say, alt-left—that linked them and what they were doing to these more confrontational and threatening personages, groups, and activities. They basically stayed clear of their rough-and-tumble compatriots and went about the business of making their own appeals. Back to the Martin Luther King example, he spoke for himself and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, nothing more than that.

A last point, these successful movements avoided identifying themselves with, or linking their fates to, individual politicians or a political party. These successful movements kept the focus on the cause, not politics. Martin Luther King didn't talk about Lyndon Johnson; he talked about civil rights for black people. The gay rights movement didn't intertwine itself with, say, Bill Clinton to the point that if Clinton wasn't your man you were disposed to think that gay rights wasn't your cause. The women's movement kept the attention on women's interests, not the Democratic Party, and if you were on their side, whichever party you favored, wherever you were on the political spectrum, welcome aboard. Certainly individuals within these movements were politically active, but the movements as movements, and their leadership, stayed on message, whether it was black civil rights, women's rights, or gay rights.

What do you think? Are there any lessons to be learned here?