

HISTORY LESSONS: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Curricular Assignment



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Social movements, large scale efforts by everyday people to invoke changes in behaviors, norms, and laws are central to democratic life. An historical look at social movements reveals that their successes are dependent upon moral suasion that is expressed in the communication and coordinated action by collectives to resist or correct injustices harming the public good. Unfortunately, traditional textbooks often leave out or minimize the impact of these movements. Just a few examples in history that have influenced how we live today include:

- Women's Suffrage, US, 1848-1920
- Salt March, India, 1930
- Civil Rights, US, 1955-1968
- United Farmworkers, US 1962-1972
- Vietnam Draft Resistance, US, 1965-1972
- Americans with Disabilities, US, 1973-1990
- Three Mile Island Anti-Nuclear, US, 1979-1985
- Tiananmen Square, China, 1989
- Apartheid Divestiture, South Africa, 1990
- MeToo Movement, US, 2006
- Occupy Wall Street, US, 2011
- Arab Spring, Egypt, 2011
- Black Lives Matter, US, 2013
- Umbrella Revolution, Hong Kong, 2014
- Brexit, United Kingdom, 2016-2020
- Women's March, US, 2017
- Yellow Vests, France, 2018
- Hong Kong Protests, China, 2019

What an important impact these social movements have had in leading towards justice. For example, we wouldn't have environmental protections or LGBTQ rights without them. We wouldn't have regular workdays limited to 8 hours a day or child labor protection laws. By studying these movements, you will learn how people like you have spoken and acted in concert with their ethics in collective action. The more you learn the history of these movements, the more it will become clear how current day movements are relevant to you.

Social movements use many approaches to amplify their messages with campaigns that may include one or more of the following: petitions, posters, bumper stickers, living room meetings, film showings, street painting, leaflets and brochures, mass meetings, rallies, protests, social media blasts, staged newsworthy events, strikes, speeches, and civil disobedience to name a few (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen & Schulz, 2010)¹.

In this activity, you'll increase your *knowledge* by thinking about:

- How can we change our communities to make them more just?
- Who has sacrificed for justice?

You'll have the opportunity to learn new *skills* by considering:

- What writing and speaking strategies and skills do social movements use?

You can consider your *values* and that of others by asking:

- How are the values of people involved in social movements reflected in the ways the movement communicates in flyers, posters, manifestos, social media, and/or brochures?

Putting what you learn into *action* means asking:

- What new and creative ways to communicate can you consider using today that may not have been available to past social movements?
- What advantages and disadvantages do new communication forms have over traditional modes of outreach?

The Assignment

Part I: Research a social movement of your choice. Provide some detail of the movement's messages or rhetoric, the people driving the action (who were they as a group), the counter forces that made the work challenging, and the outcomes. This section should be 400-500 words.

Part II: Provide an analysis of the social movement that considers how the communication advanced an ethical stance. Be sure to consider the written and oral messages of the movement and its goals. You might critically examine the mission of the movement, for instance, or recruiting materials. Use the class readings to help you in the analysis (making meaningful connections between your research and the readings). This section will likely be 300-500 words.

¹ Bowers, J. W., Ochs, D. J., Jensen, R. J., Schulz, D. P. (2010). *The rhetoric of agitation and control*, 3rd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Social Movements

Part III: Conclude with some creative suggestions of your own for how to improve the movement if you were to launch it today (recognizing that conditions are somewhat different, yet maybe similar). By focusing on communication, you might consider the movement’s main message, vision, objectives, and actions. You could think of alternative messages and create a poster or public service announcement if you like. This section should be at least 150 words.

For Instructors:

Rationale

Ensuring the health and vibrancy of our democracy requires an entire community’s effort to be sure, but there are many small and large projects contributing to this goal that are most often started by just a few. With only a handful of people who are persistent and clear in their vision, rests the opportunity for more people to be included in determining their collective fate. The elected establishment may not (always) agree with the creative and courageous actions inspired by “people power.” The elected leaders and established community members (a.k.a. influential business owners, wealthy philanthropists, real estate developers) may even resist the intrusion. Among others, acclaimed writers and activists including James Baldwin, Henry Giroux, MLK, Jr., Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Fannie Lou Hamer all famously spoke out, organized others, and participated in social movements through their speeches, actions, and writings.

As professors, we have the opportunity and responsibility to reframe the discussion away from a “rhetoric of blame” that is ubiquitous in public spaces, and towards positive dialogue and deliberation, informed by historical precedents for positive, collective action for social change.

Objectives

1. Learn about the processes and impact of social movements.
2. Analyze writing and speaking strategies used to promote social change.
3. Critically examine social movement messages to consider their basis in ethics and justice.
4. Imagine new, creative ways to communicate to audiences about the need for social change.

Preparing Students for This Activity

1. You may want to show a video clip of recent action surrounding Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo movement to demonstrate how collective action emerges and develops into social movements.
2. A number of blockbuster films tell the stories of social movements that may inspire students, including: *Norma Rae*, *Milk*, *Selma*, *Gandhi*. Other documentaries that are lesser known yet detail how people organized for action include: *Cesar Chavez: History is Made One Step at a Time* (2014, 102 minutes); *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020, 108 minutes); *Greensboro, Closer to the Truth* (2007, 60 minutes); or *Bringing Down a Dictator* (2002, 56 minutes).

Discussion Questions

In advance of the assignment:

1. Where does power come from in our society? What forms exist within formal offices of government on the one hand, and people on the other hand, and how is that expressed (how do students see it)?
2. If you will show a movie or film clip, consider asking students to note the different methods employed to advance social change. Do they consider some productive and ethical? Why? Are other approaches less attractive? Why?

Following the completion of the assignment:

1. What lessons can we glean from past social movements in addressing contemporary concerns?

Time Required:

To set up the assignment:

- 30 minutes to 2 hours, depending on how much time is spent viewing films.

After the assignment is completed:

- 30 minutes for follow-up discussion.

Class Size

This activity can be adapted to any class size.

Alternative Assignment

Ask students to research a social movement and then edit a Wikipedia page to add details and depth to what might be provided there already.

Suggested Readings

- Bowers, J. W., Ochs, D. J., Jensen, R. J., Schulz, D. P. (2010). *The rhetoric of agitation and control*, 3rd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Brooks, M. P. & Houck, D. W. (2011). *The speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To tell it like it is*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Jovanovic, S. (2012). *Democracy, dialogue and community action: Truth and reconciliation in Greensboro*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press.
- Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.