

Recipe for Success: Movements that Shape Social Change

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Abstract: What are the variables that differentiate successful social movements from the unsuccessful ones? Comparing social movements that are contemporary and operate within the same domain allows for better control over external variables that could impact their success. Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movements sheds light on the critical factors that differentiate successful social movements from those that fall short. By contrasting these two movements—examining their strategies, leadership, messaging, and mobilization—this research can glean valuable insights into what differentiates successful social movements from those less effective.

Keywords: BLM; OWS; Movements; Social change.

1. Introduction

From the poignant cries of "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" during the French Revolution to the resonating chants of "I have a dream" during the American Civil Rights Movement, the landscape of history is profoundly etched by an array of social movements. These momentous uprisings reflect our collective aspirations, fears, and demands for justice, serving as transformative agents in the society that navigate perceived societal inadequacies. Despite their role in driving change and shaping history, the success of these movements is not uniform, leading us to an intriguing conundrum - what are the variables that differentiate successful social movements from the unsuccessful ones?

The most effective way to illuminate the characteristics that lead to the success or failure of a social movement is to compare two such initiatives that have arisen within a similar timeframe and domain. Comparing social movements that are contemporary and operate within the same domain allows for better control over external variables that could impact their success. These include socioeconomic conditions, prevalent social beliefs, political climate, among others, which can significantly influence the trajectory and outcomes of social movements. By selecting movements that have developed within a similar context, we minimize the impact of these external factors, thereby focusing on the characteristics intrinsic to the movements.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, both emerging in the United States in the 21st century and addressing structural inequities, present a compelling case study for this comparison. Despite their shared broad objective of confronting systemic injustice, their paths diverged considerably in terms of impact and longevity.

BLM, a movement against racial injustice, has become a globally recognized force, spurring in-depth discussions on systemic racism and police brutality, and initiating significant policy deliberations. Conversely, the OWS movement, despite its impactful start and focus on wealth disparities, faced challenges in maintaining its momentum.

By contrasting these two movements—examining their strategies, leadership, messaging, and mobilization—we can glean valuable insights into what differentiates successful

social movements from those less effective. This examination is more than an academic exercise—it's a tool for understanding and fostering active citizenship in our intricate and continuously evolving world.

2. Clear and Specific Goals

Among the constellation of factors that shape social movements' success, the clarity and specificity of goals play a significant role. For movements like BLM and OWS, their objectives act as the North Star, guiding participants towards a unified end. While both movements emerged from discontent with systemic issues, their paths diverged significantly due, in part, to how they defined their goals.

The BLM movement, born out of outrage over police brutality against African Americans, cemented its success by advocating clear, actionable objectives. These ranged from seeking justice for victims of police violence, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, to advocating for systemic changes, including defunding the police and investing in community-based solutions. The establishment of these specific objectives has rallied a diverse group of supporters, resulting in substantial policy shifts across multiple tiers of governance. For instance, the movement's promotion of "reallocating funds from police departments" led to the redistribution of budgets in different cities throughout the United States, such as Los Angeles, New York City, and Minneapolis. In Los Angeles, the city council voted to reduce the police budget by \$150 million and redirect those funds towards community programs.[1] In a comparable vein, New York City has allocated a substantial \$1 billion from the police budget towards bolstering social services and education initiatives.[2] These illustrations substantiate the concrete effects of establishing explicit objectives and underscore the capacity of the BLM movement to shape policy reforms at the community level.

Conversely, OWS, despite its commendable objective of combating economic inequality, faced criticism for its perceived lack of specific goals. The movement successfully raised awareness about wealth disparity and the influence of big corporations on democracy yet struggled to articulate specific policy changes. Critics argued that the lack of precise demands made it difficult to measure the movement's success and undermined its momentum.[3] It's worth noting, however,

that some argue the broad nature of OWS's goals was intentional and reflected the complexity of economic inequality.[4] Nevertheless, the movement's inability to effect systemic change on par with BLM suggests that the absence of clear, specific objectives may have curtailed its influence.

3. Effective Leadership

Effective leadership is a fundamental pillar of successful social movements, providing a unified vision, rallying diverse groups, and acting as a living embodiment of the movement's ideals. The dichotomy between the BLM and OWS movements underscores this importance.

In spite of its decentralized model, BLM has benefited from distinct and persuasive leadership at various levels. Notably, founders Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi used their platforms to focus public attention on the movement's goals.[5] Their exceptional leadership was crucial in propelling the movement to the forefront of the national sphere, capturing the interest of prominent individuals and decision-makers.[6] Examples of their impact can be seen in the nationwide discussions around police funding and systemic racism that followed the protests in 2020. In Minneapolis, a majority of the City Council pledged to dismantle the local police department, marking a substantial policy shift driven by the movement's advocacy.[7]

In contrast, OWS, while generating substantial media attention and sparking discourse on economic inequality, was often critiqued for its lack of clear leadership. This leaderless structure, some argue, was intentional, reflecting the movement's rejection of hierarchical power structures.[8] However, others posit that the lack of visible leadership led to perceived disarray and fragmentation, leading to difficulties in presenting a unified message and making collective decisions.[9] This leaderless nature perhaps contributed to the movement's struggle in enacting substantial policy changes, unlike BLM. While OWS did successfully shift public conversation about economic inequality and corporate power, tangible policy change or reform on a large scale remained elusive.[10]

However, the leaderless structure of OWS can also be viewed as a strategic attempt to promote inclusivity and grassroots activism. Some might argue that it's an oversimplification to view OWS's lack of traditional leadership as a failure, given it reflects the movement's unique ethos and structure. Nevertheless, when contrasting the tangible achievements of BLM, with its strong leadership, to those of OWS, which faced criticisms for its leaderless model, the importance of effective leadership in driving social movements is underscored. These two cases offer illuminating insights into the critical role leaders play in directing a movement, preserving unity, and ultimately catalyzing desired societal change.

4. Broad-Based Support

Broad-based support is a pivotal element for successful social movements. Achieving wide-ranging endorsement bolsters a movement's legitimacy, magnifies its voice, and enhances its impact. BLM and OWS provide compelling insights into the power of broad-based support.

BLM is a testament to the transformative effect of broad-based support. Despite originating as a response to specific instances of police violence against Black individuals, the movement managed to draw an extensive array of allies.[11]

Beyond the communities directly impacted by police violence and systemic racism, it attracted endorsements from diverse quarters of society. Celebrities like Beyoncé and LeBron James voiced their support, while politicians, including President Barack Obama, acknowledged the legitimacy of the movement's concerns.[12] Major corporations such as Nike and Twitter also joined the fray, expressing solidarity and launching initiatives to address racial inequality.[13] Its message resonated globally too, with protests under the BLM banner taking place in various international cities like London, Berlin, and Sydney, underscoring the influence of broad-based support.[14]

In contrast, the OWS movement, while spotlighting crucial issues of wealth inequality and corporate influence, struggled to gain as diverse a support base. Predominantly composed of young, liberal, urban supporters, it faced challenges in reaching broader demographics.[15] Although OWS prompted essential discussions about economic disparities and changed the national conversation, it found it difficult to effect lasting systemic change or drive specific policy reforms.

However, the limited breadth of support for OWS doesn't negate its importance. The movement resonated with significant populations, shifting public discourse around wealth inequality. For example, the protest encampment in Zuccotti Park, New York, garnered national media attention, inspiring similar encampments and protests across the country.[16] Yet, the relative success of BLM in achieving substantial policy proposals, like defunding the police, showcases the crucial role of broad-based support in a movement's sustainability and influence on societal change.

5. Strategic Use of Resources

Strategic use of resources is an essential trait that often distinguishes successful social movements from those less successful. Resources, including time, funds, human power, and especially in the modern age, digital platforms, are crucial for the sustainability and impact of a movement. Efficient resource management strengthens a movement, enabling it to maintain momentum and expand its influence.

The BLM movement offers a valuable case study on the effective utilization of resources, particularly in the realm of digital platforms. Established in the age of online networking, BLM astutely leveraged digital resources such as Twitter and Instagram to spread its message, activate its followers, and gain global recognition.[17] The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which came to prominence following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer in 2013, has played a central role as a mobilizing force online, sparking widespread discussions about racial discrimination, police misconduct, and systemic bias.[18] The effective utilization of digital tools by the BLM movement facilitated the illumination of the lived experiences of Black individuals on a global scale, transcending national boundaries.

Conversely, OWS, though making use of digital platforms to organize and spread its message, lacked the same level of strategic resource utilization. While OWS did use digital platforms like social media to disseminate information, its horizontal structure and lack of a central leadership often resulted in a somewhat scattered approach to resource use, which some argue may have contributed to the movement's lack of policy impact.[19]

Yet, poor management of resources can have damaging consequences, potentially leading to a loss of legitimacy and even a movement's decline. This can arise due to misuse of

funds or a lack of transparency and alignment between the distribution of resources and the organization's goals.

Unfortunately, even the BLM movement has faced controversy over resource management. There were instances where one of its co-founders was accused of using the organization's funds for personal benefit, including buying property in a predominantly white neighborhood and paying substantial consultancy fees to her own relatives. [20] The aforementioned actions have led to a notable decline in trust and credibility among a considerable segment of stakeholders, ultimately compelling the co-founder to step down from their position [21], which tarnished the movement's reputation and led to a dip in enthusiasm among a section of its supporters.

These examples from BLM and OWS highlight the crucial importance of strategic resource management in social movements. Successful movements, like BLM, demonstrate how well-utilized resources can aid in gaining traction and achieving goals. However, they also illustrate the potential damage mismanagement can cause, emphasizing the need for transparency and strategic planning in resource allocation.

6. Conclusion

The examination of BLM and OWS movements sheds light on the critical factors that differentiate successful social movements from those that fall short. The clarity of goals emerges as a defining characteristic, with BLM's specific objectives fueling tangible policy changes while OWS's lack thereof hindered its progress. Effective leadership proves instrumental, as BLM's cohesive guidance propelled national discourse and policy shifts, while OWS's leaderless structure faced challenges in presenting a unified message. The power of broad-based support is evident in BLM's ability to garner diverse alliances and drive global conversations, whereas OWS struggled to extend its reach beyond a specific demographic. Furthermore, strategic resource utilization, exemplified by BLM's adept use of digital platforms, amplified their impact, while OWS's scattered approach hindered their efficacy. By studying these dynamics, we gain valuable insights into the foundational elements that shape the success of social movements, urging us to harness their power to challenge inequalities and shape a more just future. The enduring impact of these movements serves as a poignant reminder of the capacity for concerted efforts to redefine our society and engender enduring transformation.

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