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The Three Keys for Radical Activists

Aurora Castañeda

Introduction

Famous social movement leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela have long preached for world peace and tolerance much like the majority of the population today. However, within this web of social activism, there is that smaller body of radical activists that resort to the side of physical harm and chaos. With the risks of damaging their social movement's credibility, I ask, why is it that these social radicals decide to take their cause to the extreme with riots, destruction of property, and sometimes even violence against people? Taking into context articles from social scientists, I narrowed down three main motives for pursuing violent approaches in activism: collective identity, defense against hate crimes, and media coverage and public attention.

Collective Identity

Religion is at the center of many people's lives (Spong 2005). For this reason, Hafez (2006) and Blanchard and Prewitt (1993) have highlighted the passion often found when religious motivated activist which can be considerable contributors to these life threatening actions. They concluded religion may be in strong correlation with actions that bring individuals to go as far as committing suicide in order to make their voice be heard across a large population. Hafez and Blanchard argue that radical individuals use their beliefs to justify the damage and lives lost. One example is the Christmas Day bombing of 1984, in which the lives of the employees at the Pensacola abortion clinic were at risk. Four individuals who were

charged with planning the bombing were part of the Christian church, and intended to put an end to what they viewed as a greater sin than what they themselves were taking part in (Blanchard and Prewitt 1993). Drastic measures like this have captivated sociologists for decades and have made this topic inevitable to discuss. That is why by analyzing some of these religious perspectives and world views, we, as the observers, can come closer to preventing dangerous confrontations between crowds of social movements.

Religious identity consists not only of the religion humans practice, but also their beliefs about honor and worthiness to the God they worship. Parallel to how soldiers serve in worldwide wars for the love of the country, radical religious proclaimers devote their lives for the love of their beliefs, even so far as to sacrifice their own lives. However, violent activism, like war, sometimes takes the lives of many innocent others as well. When observing different cultures and religions around the world, differences in how respect and honor are maintained are seen through the rituals they practice each day. Mixing together the value of family honor as well as appearing worthy

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to the God they worship is sufficient self-sacrifice for most religious activists to promote what they believe is the greater good of their religion. Additionally, some religions require believers to convert others. Believers use a number of tactics to do so; while most are peaceful, like simple pamphlet handouts on the street, a few commit more tragic events such as terrorist attacks happening in places like Gaza in the name of spreading their faith (Hafez 2016).

Studies done by Blanchard and Prewitt (1993) and Hafez (2016) both give credit to the religion-based aspect, but they also pinpoint two different factors that may lead individuals to defend their views passionately. Blanchard and Prewitt (1993) consider a third possible aspect: influence of the current government system. By analyzing the up-rising in anti-abortion bombings during the years of Ronald Reagan (known as a highly conservative Republican), Blanchard and Prewitt (1993) find that the political context may also act as a pushing point for the social extremists. Hafez (2016) argues that instead, it is in the name of religion solely that humans justify their evil actions as opposed to governmental shifts and influences within nations.

Sociologists have come up with different interpretations of what individuals are being influenced strongest by. They agree on concepts of collective identity, but disagree on what is the strongest fundamental influence on radical activists. There is no clear indicator as to why radical activists believe it takes harmful action to promote positive outcomes.

Self-Defense

Self-defense is another cause of destructive activism. Some civil rights activist groups, like the Black Panther Party, and individuals, like Malcolm X, have justified their own destructive actions as a defense act against the injustices of both the

white supremacist groups and the government's justice system. Destructive actions often began as intentionally peaceful gatherings, but oppressors of this movement provoked these protestors in physically harmful ways. Verbal and physical harassment were used on a daily basis to generate fear and oppress the individuals who gathered for their basic rights and respect (Hill 2011). Bermanzohn (2000) explains the frustration activists endure in a world that seems to be completely against their views of a new society. The minimal protection given to African American people by the government during the 1960s resulted in some activists using weapons for protection. The bombing of an African American church in Birmingham, AL was all the more reason for local families to be on the alert for possible threats. For radicals, this was taken as a rationale to point out the racism within the broken justice system (Courtright 1974). In several cases, the use of violence was not due to destructive protest, but was instead a result of provocation from their opposers (Wahlstrom 2011). The feeling of being unheard, insignificant, and taken advantage of may produce frustration. Mixing negative emotions over time can lead some activists to abandon peaceful protest and use harmful tactics (Santoro and Fitzpatrick 2015).

Sociologists agree that activists may turn to weapons in self-defense. Yet, these social scientists disagree on the smaller details such as what aspects of provocation, whether physical threats or societal discrimination, were most crucial to individuals' emotional frustration.

Media Coverage and Public Attention

The percentage of movements that gain enough awareness to gather nationwide media attention is small, but media attention is an essential tool to generate popularity for effectiveness of a social movement (Morris 1993). Therefore, social scientists argue that

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gaining attention is essential to making a movement successful. Violence may be used as a tactic to lure attention needed to spread the idea of the entire movement. By using public, destructive tactics, activists may believe that audiences will sympathize with the protester's frustration. Take for example, the Birmingham confrontation in 1963. Media attention was essential for the success of the movement; however, in months prior, activists were becoming worried that there would not be significant media coverage to captivate America. The lack of attention would ultimately hinder protestors' message that African American's deserved the same basic rights as any other race, in this case, the white race. In the weeks leading up to the event, violent acts committed by white supremacists had concerned government officials, including the current President, John F. Kennedy (Morris 1993). This violence against African Americans resulted in increased media attention and two negotiations to settle the conflicts between community, business, and the civil rights movement. The negotiations may be seen as a positive effect, despite the physical violence imposed on civil rights activists.

Public attention is key to reeling in the surrounding audience however, in most cases, the message is brushed off due to lack of attention grabbers. Destructive protest can quickly grab the public's attention. Once a single object is thrown or an object breaks, heads immediately begin to turn. This particular event can be seen in any place throughout the day. When a stranger drops their water bottle it makes a slight commotion, but enough to make one or two people turn around to observe what just occurred. Likewise, the same can be said when property damage begins to occur during a civilian protest (Wang and Piazza 2016). In this way, the event is shifted from

being a local action to becoming a news headline.

Sometimes, destructive activism can cause dissent within a movement, while at other times, it broadens movement participation. In the case of the Guatemalan guerrillas in the 1900s the oppressed activist groups who decided to resort to arming themselves, actually resulted in division instead of uniting (May 1999). The different views of violence ultimately caused disagreement within this particular movement. However, sometimes, destructive tactics can be useful in acting as a strategy to "serve as an acute motivator for support," as seen with the struggles of the civilian people of El Salvador's factions (Wood 2010). Whether the organizations were successful in maintaining their message or not, it is important that the purpose of their physical chaos be observed to ask why it is some of these failures occurred within the social movements.

Conclusion

Social movements are struggles that oppressed groups have endured through in hopes of shaping an equal society. Through actions such as marches and peaceful gatherings, movements of social justice have brought change. However, despite the history of peaceful protest, there remains a smaller percentage of individuals that use harmful actions as the way to approach social injustices. By asking why it is that social radicals and extremists continue to uphold violence within their movement, we can uncover key information that is beneficial to the lives and safety of others. Discovering why individuals act the way they do can help us find ways to prevent the use of weapons in the future, by tackling issues that led humanity there in the first place. Research is needed to determine how we can change the thoughts and positive perceptions toward

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violence that still lurk in social radicals today.

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