

**History Q3. Which characteristics distinguish successful movements for social change from unsuccessful ones?**

On 15th August 2022, Indian Prime Minister Modi celebrated the 76th anniversary of India's independence by addressing the nation, lauding India's identity as a 'manufacturing hub': the 'foundation for a self-reliant India.' [1] Paradoxically, the success of the Indian Independence Movement would be less self-evident to its founding father Gandhi, who interpreted decolonisation not as the expulsion of foreign rulers, but as the expulsion of Britain's emphasis on material wealth. [2] "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West," he warned. "If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts." [3]

This contrast raises the following questions: What characteristics of a movement for social change convince the world of its success or lack thereof? Can social movements even be classified as successful or unsuccessful? If Gandhi's interpretation of the 'successful' Indian Independence movement implies that it is an ongoing struggle, what does that mean for our classification of social movements more broadly?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, this essay begins by identifying the primary characteristics commonly associated with 'successful' movements. I argue that these are poor measures of success. In their place, I offers an alternative lens through which the continuous current of movements for social change may be more holistically traced.

Throughout history, two characteristics have traditionally acted as barometers of a social movement's apparent success: achieving objectives through policy change and perceptions of social impact. Policy reform may seem like an obvious indication of a movement's success. To have the objectives of the movement enshrined as law would surely ignite widespread, top-down social change. For example, Abolitionism in the United States was successful because it achieved exactly the legislation it was vying for: the abolition of slavery through President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

However, policy change may be a superficial reflection of the desired objective. Though legal forms of slavery were abolished, political, economic and social slavery persisted: 'black codes' were passed as law across states, designed to produce what historian Daniel A. Novak describes as 'a close approximation of the now forbidden master-slave relationship.' [4] They encompassed limitations for formerly enslaved people on everything from property ownership and career options to physical mobility in social spaces. Many Black Americans would continue to perform unpaid labour under the legal guise of apprenticeship or fines [5], explaining why modern historians interpret the black codes as 'slavery by another name.' [6]

Evidently, policy change does not necessarily translate to success because it does not necessarily deliver the grassroots cultural shifts that the term 'social change' implies. Moreover, laws are not permanent. The Proclamation Act tore down the institution of

slavery, then the black codes restored it. By disguising forms of oppression, policy may also appear to aid social change while undermining its proliferation at a grassroots level.

Another determinant of the appearance of success for social movements is the socio-political landscape from which they are assessed. For instance, a contemporary of King Charles X of France would have perceived the French Revolution (1789) as ultimately unsuccessful because of its impact growing less tangible: Charles' meticulous restructuring of the social and religious hierarchies of the *Ancien Régime* would imply that the Revolution's attempts to tear them down had failed. However, the Revolution was 'successful' once again in 1880 for the Third French Republic, when Bastille Day would be officially commemorated to mark the 'victory of the new era' and 'consecration of the unity of France.'<sup>[7]</sup>

A more statistical evaluation is available for the Civil Rights movement. The movement is considered to be largely successful today, with Barack Obama famously saying, 'Because of the Civil Rights movement, new doors of opportunity...swung open for you, and they swung open for me.'<sup>[8]</sup> His opinion would not have resonated with a sizable share of 42% of Black Americans during 1968, who believed that the movement had failed to end discrimination.<sup>[9]</sup> This opinion reached an all-time high during the mid-1980s due to the 'racially hostile Reagan administration and the worsening economic position of blacks.'<sup>[10]</sup>

The chronicling of history plays a major role in the evaluation of 'success'. The revision of school textbooks and the publication of new books, articles and media mean that evaluations of a movement are revised every few generations to account for whether or not this social change is being viewed differently in the reflecting period.

So far, this essay has discussed apparent success, analysing the characteristics that largely determine whether a movement is deemed successful, and why these characteristics are incapable of producing a genuine or absolute picture of success. This is because movements that are absolutely successful do not exist, nor do good metrics for gauging success. Who should decide whether a movement has been successful? An activist or a politician? A historian or a scientist? The group that it benefits, or the group that it harms?

For many Germans, Bismarck had successfully united German states into a singular, cohesive entity. For ardent supporters of Grossdeutschland, his Kleindeutschland solution was an dismaying. The 58% of Black Americans who believed that the Civil Rights movement had succeeded in 1968 were also noticeably wealthier than those who disagreed, supporting critic's claims that poorer demographics were only disillusioned by the movement's 'successes'.<sup>[11]</sup> Is Gandhi's interpretation of the Indian Independence movement enough to outweigh the opinions of countless Indians who believe they are part of a successful independent nation?

The subjectivity of the definitions of success and failure is one problem. Their dichotomy is another. The rigid binaries of success and failure cannot be applied to something as ever-shifting and intangible as a movement for social change. Social change that is not merely legal or political but truly transformative boils down to the values, perceptions and emotions of individual human beings. For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement (2011)

appeared to irrecoverably descend into a disaster of police raids and tear-gas. Micah White, an architect of the movement, wrote a book on how it 'failed to live up to its revolutionary potential.' [12] Today, Occupy's vernacular centred on class equality and social justice characterise a newfound global concern about tackling the world's greatest problems, from student loans to climate change. [13] Occupy did not succeed, nor did it fail.

The same can be said for Atenism, the worship of the Sun institutionalised as Egypt's state religion under Akhenaten. By Western and expansionist standards of success, which value fame, legacy and material wealth, the fact that Atenism died out and thus lost its influence over social and political institutions marks its failure. However, many followers of Atenism found solace, spiritual grounding, and guidance through their religion, as suggested by the Great Hymn to Aten: 'You are in my heart...You yourself are lifetime / One lives by you.' [14] For the followers of Atenism, the structure and meaning that Atenism brought to their life would counter any notion that it was a 'failure'. The binaries of success and failure are incapable of encompassing the complex, dynamic nature of social change.

I propose an alternative lens through which to evaluate movements for social change. Such movements do not succeed, nor do they fail. They evolve continuously, just as human civilisation does. And their progress is rarely linear.

For example, the White Lotus was a religious group that organised numerous rebellions in 14th century Imperial China. When it was prohibited by the Ming Dynasty in the following century, its values and practices permeated different religious sects, and the movement was thought to be dead. [15] However, the White Lotus resurged as a fighting force 400 years later, and continues to date. Similarly, though the Occupy Wall Street movement's name and branding have faded, the leftist progressive politics at the core of the movement have become more mainstream. The Arab Spring was also widely regarded as a categorical failure. Yet resistance to autocratic regimes persists like a "current of magma flowing beneath the surface" [16], just as democratic resistance in the Arab world persisted for decades before the actual uprising.

The decolonisation of the 20th century did not mark the end of colonialism, but its evolution into neo-imperialism. "Debt traps" for developing countries, the political hegemony of global superpowers, and the proliferation of Western systems of knowledge: all legitimise colonialism within our current moral frameworks. As these frameworks evolve, so might these forces, and so will our adopted methods for decolonisation.

The worship of the 12 Olympian gods was perceived as an ancient religion centuries after the advent of Christianity's anti-pagan laws. The resurgent Hellenism and neo-paganism practised today would indicate that the religion did not truly, or at least permanently, 'fail'.

The eradication of 90-95% of the indigenous American population by European settler colonialism would strongly imply that indigenous resistance had failed. [17] However, the Land Back movement and the increased political participation of indigenous communities would suggest that mass genocide had forced resistance into a similar state of dormancy as Hellenism, and not a permanent decline.

Movements for social change do not simply happen; they are created, sustained, and evolved. If the movement for democracy can be born in Ancient Greece and define global systems milleniums later, if indigenous and White Lotus resistance can be revived after centuries, and if forgotten religions may garner a following once again, then other ancient systems that we have left behind as 'unsuccessful' movements may end up forging our global landscapes hundreds of generations from now.

While the policy change and social impact achieved by a movement suggest that it has successfully created social change, the dynamic nature of human society means that this success is cursory, subjective, and momentary at best. The stagnant binaries of success and failure cannot be applied to such continuous processes, nor can they effectively account for the intangible forces that lie at the heart of social change. Movements for social change will never be definitively successful or unsuccessful. Instead, they will endlessly transform, oscillating between activity and dormancy, independent of our ability to recognise them.

### Endnotes

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