
Social And Protest Movements Of The 1960s

Introduction

Social and protest movements throughout history, specifically in the 1960s, have significantly affected American culture and politics by pressuring elected and appointed officials to make changes. America was founded from a revolution; the original colonists of this country used protest tactics that led to the Revolutionary War and formed an independent country. Social and protest movements began the country, have shaped its history, and continue to presently shape American politics and culture. A social movement is formed when a substantial number of people organize to make a change, resist a change, or undo a change to some area of society. Those involved in social movements work outside the system to advance their cause because the followers of the movement believe the system has failed to address their problem. To draw attention to their cause and accomplish their objectives, supporters may strike, march, walk out, boycott, hunger strike, riot, or even terrorize. Such demonstrations also have an effect on American culture, which can be defined as the outlook, attitudes, values, morals, goals, and customs shared by society through material and non-material aspects. Material aspects refer to the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture, and non-material aspects refer to nonphysical ideas that people share to define their culture. The Civil Rights Movement, the LGBTQIA Movement, and the Anti-War Movement during the Vietnam War are excellent examples of effective use of social and protests movements to cite such change.

Examples of Social and Protest Movements

The Civil Rights movement was long-lasting and heavily documented, and its complex history makes it the perfect example of the effects of social and protest movements. The threat of deprivation, threats to one's livelihood, expectations for a better future, status, or position in society, is typically the start of a protest movement, and those fighting for civil rights were certainly under such threat. Brought to America against their will via the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Black Americans have long been oppressed by American society. William Hemstreet for the Arena said in May of 1903, "We Americans have the inborn social sentiment of master and slave... this ethnic prejudice is as universal and deep as the foundations of the Earth" (Civil Rights Museum 2019).

A good starting point for the Civil Rights Movement is the Brown v Board Supreme Court case. From the 1930s on, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lawyers chipped away at school segregation, suing states to make graduate schools and teacher salaries fair to all. After decades of preparation and local victories, they decided to attack segregation head-on. In the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas ruling, the US Supreme Court declared separate schools based on race unequal and unconstitutional (Civil Rights Museum 2019). While Brown was a major breakthrough for equal education, white southerners staged massive resistance efforts that held up desegregation in most districts for another ten years (Civil Rights Museum 2019). The wording in a second Supreme Court Brown opinion in 1955 – to carry out the ruling "with all deliberate speed" – left a vague timeframe for change (Civil Rights Museum 2019).

Even though segregation was illegal, many places, especially in the south, still enforced it. A key example of this illegal segregation took place on buses and in bus terminals. The NAACP famously organized for a black woman, Rosa Parks, to be arrested for sitting at the front of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, where there was still an ordinance requiring black Americans to sit in the back of the bus (History 2019). Following her arrest, a bus boycott was organized from December 5, 1955, to December 20, 1956 (History 2019). The purpose of this boycott was to economically affect the bus system in Montgomery, as a substantial portion of the people who typically took the bus were black, causing the bus system to lose money (Civil Rights Museum 2019). Following the boycott and arrests, the Supreme Court ordered Montgomery to integrate its bus system (History 2019).

In 1960, students began to get involved with protesting segregation. In Greensboro, North Carolina four young black men provided a blueprint for young people to get involved by sitting at a “whites only” counter in the downtown F. W. Woolworth store until they were served – which they never were (Civil Rights Museum 2019). Within two weeks, black college and high school students, many with connections to NAACP Youth Councils, were conducting these “sit-ins” at lunch counters in Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida (Civil Rights Museum 2019). These sit-ins, along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), an organization of students that would organize many influential demonstrations in the Civil Rights Movement (Etienne 2013). After six months of direct-action protests, Woolworths and other Greensboro stores desegregated their lunch counters (Civil Rights Museum 2019).

The Freedom Rides of 1961 also protested illegal segregation. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized activists to travel by bus throughout the South to integrate seating patterns and desegregate bus terminals, as required by federal law (Civil Rights Museum 2019). The plan was to peacefully ride the bus from Washington, DC to New Orleans, Louisiana, but riders were met with violence. In Anniston, Alabama, one bus was firebombed, forcing its passengers to flee for their lives (Civil Rights Museum 2019). In Birmingham, Alabama, an FBI informant reported that Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor had encouraged the Ku Klux Klan to attack an incoming group of freedom riders (Civil Rights Museum 2019). Eventually, Public sympathy and support for the freedom riders forced the Kennedy administration to order the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to issue a new desegregation order (Civil Rights Museum 2019).

In the summer of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the March in Washington for Jobs and Freedom where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech (Civil Rights Museum 2019). The march was organized to push President Kennedy’s Civil Rights Act bill, which made it federal law to prohibit discrimination based on race in employment and housing matters (Civil Rights Museum 2019). Even though divisions were growing between the SCLC and SNCC, as SNCC wanted more protection from the Kennedy administration, the march remained peaceful, allowing Kennedy to push congress to pass his civil rights bill (Civil Rights Museum 2019). The Civil Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 after Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963 (Civil Rights Museum 2019).

Another impactful social movement that affected American politics and culture is the Gay Rights Movement. LGBTQ acts, identities, and communities were subjected to legal repression in the 1800s, and further laws in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (NPS 2016). For example, in 1961,

Illinois passed a law that increased the ability of Chicago's Mayor to close gay bars (NPS 2016). Many states, such as California and Florida, authorized the denial and revocation of licenses for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals if they were homosexual (NPS 2016). It was illegal in New York, among other cities, to dress in clothing designated for the opposite, targeting transgendered individuals (NPS 2016). It is estimated that tens of thousands of individuals lost their jobs and hundreds of businesses were harassed, raided, and closed by the police because of anti-LGBTQ laws (NPS 2016). This deprivation of rights led to a long fight for equal rights, and the protests of the Gay Rights Movement changed discriminatory laws and helped to change prejudiced views of gay and transgendered people.

Taking note of and standing in solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement and the Greensboro sit-ins, gay activists staged their own "sip-ins" at a New York City gay bar in 1966. They were denied service because they were purposefully forthcoming in their homosexual identity. These activists chose to litigate and won a 1967 state court ruling (NPS 2016). This example of civil disobedience gave other gay people the courage to appeal against discrimination experienced because of their sexuality. In 1969, a DC circuit court ruled that homosexual conduct alone was not sufficient reason to fire a federal government employee (NPS 2016).

The start of the modern Gay Rights Movement, however, can easily be pinpointed to the Stonewall Riots of 1969. The Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City, was raided by the police due to anti-LGBTQ laws in the city (NPS 2016). Contrasting the nonviolence preached by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement, this event was met with violence. Led by Marsha P. Johnson, a transgender woman, the event turned physical – the crowd at the bar threw objects at police, and the police aggressively responded, even hitting a lesbian over the head in an attempt to arrest her (History 2019). The six-day riots following the initial raiding of Stonewall were a catalyst for LGBT political activism, leading to the organization of the Gay Liberation Front, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (History 2019). Stonewall was especially important because the news of these riots filled the news, publicly exposing the mistreatment of gay Americans (History 2019).

The Gay Liberation Front was a radical group that launched public demonstrations, protests, and confrontations with political officials (History 2019). Along with other small gay rights groups, the Gay Liberation front marched through the streets of New York City in 1970, marking the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. This march is considered to be the country's first gay pride parade (History 2019).

The Anti-War Movement during the Vietnam War also affected American politics and culture. The Vietnam war was one of the most controversial political decisions in American history. At the time, American foreign policy extremely opposed the ideology of communism, and those in the office felt that events in Vietnam threatened the spread of it. There were various reasons many Americans opposed American involvement in the war, especially the draft. Protesters of the war spawned a counterculture, specifically those referred to as hippies. This hippie counterculture and colorful protest tactics have found their way into present American Culture.

The counterculture that emerged during the Vietnam War greatly affected present American culture. This counterculture involved, typically, young, white, middle-class men and women who felt "alienated from mainstream middle-class society and resented the pressure to conform to the 'normal' standards of appearance, employment, or lifestyle" (History 2019).

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