Social Movements Essay, Research Paper

The definition of social movements cannot easily be summarized into one concise sentence. A social movement is an attempt to intentionally intervene in the process of social change. A social movement is a creation of modern society. A social movement is a collection of people engaging in practices and discourses designed to challenge and change society as they define it. A social movement takes on and challenges the authority of the ruling political system. As you can see, social movements involve various different aspects that can be somewhat summarized by stating that they seek to change society in one aspect or another.

The most active period of social movement in the 20th century were the 1960?s. This period roughly begins with a build-up from the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court Decision of 1954. This desegregation decision began the Civil Rights movement. By 1960, multiple movements are gathering steam in the United States. After 1970 and the Kent State killings, social movements began to decline and by the fall of Saigon that ended the Vietnam War in 1975 the most active period was over. Of course, movements continue to our day just as there have always been some active reform movements in America. But the most active period was over.

There were various reasons for the social movements that occurred in the 60?s. Despite the ending of slavery in 1865, American culture- particularly in the South- had reestablished a cultural system based on racial superiority. In 1960, one in five Americans lived in conditions described by the federal government as ?poverty.? In the midst of the Cold War, large amounts of resources went into building military power. Materialism in the United States only helped to fuel the cries for social movements. The children of the American middle and even upper classes were eager participants and often the leaders of these movements. They found that the material satisfactions of their wealthy status did not produce satisfaction with their lives.

The movements succeeded in countering the cooperation and suppression strategies of the dominant order through three categories. Physical confrontation, in both violent and non-violent ways, challenged the legitimacy of the established orders. Peaceful lunch hour sit-ins challenged white power, threatened vigilante violence from resisting white citizens, and would lead to police violence. In the process, the laws kept people from the simple act of eating at a lunch counter were demonstrated. The Black Panthers created such fear in law enforcement that they would routinely invade an apartment in the middle of the night and kill panthers lying asleep in their beds. Such actions not only prevented cooperation of members of the movement who felt under siege, they also served a proof that the movement?s charges of militarism and violence against the dominant order were given validity in the images.

Rhetorical confrontation included strategies such as name calling (calling officers ?pigs?), polemic rhetoric (a construction of the established order as the ?enemy?), and a totalizing rhetoric of exaggeration (painting the enemy with a broad brush as if there were no variations of opinions within the dominant order) polarized agents of the dominant order and those in the social movement. Rhetorical confrontation made compromise with the dominant order unthinkable for those in the movement, and inflamed the agents of the dominant order thus inducing the over-response of the dominant order in physical confrontation.

The last of the three tactics used by the members of the social movement was moralistic identity. The moral rhetoric characteristic of American social movements when combined with rhetorical confrontation and the violence of the dominant order created a moral distinction between movement and dominant order. Such a dramatic drawing or moral distinction, ofttimes with the dominant order?s own values, gave fervent commitment to those in the movement. It also made the compromise appropriate in cooperation seem irresponsible and even wicked. The perfection of all of these three strategies of confrontation in the sixties was a great power of the movement.