Why People Join Social Movements Essay, Research Paper

Why do people join social movements? Why do people join political, professional, or social movements, of whatever size, and surrender so completely, giving up, in the extreme, everything; their fortunes, their critical thinking, their political freedom, their friends, families, even their own lives? What causes people to create a system or perhaps follow a system that creates such things as ?ethnic cleansing? and the killing fields of Cambodia? ?That anyone who opposes this system of aesthetics is committing a political offense might appear fanatic,? writer Andrei Milosz says. One cause of people to join social movements is fear.

It is a human effort at control and control of that type comes from what is common all of us, fear. It transcends all boundaries, nationalities, religions, and cultures. So to answer the question ?why do people join social movements?? is fear in part. We are human and we are, all of us, afraid of something. Autocracy is derived in fear. Autocracies use this in order to impose their view of reality, their particular version of the truth. The object is control over more and more followers; ultimately, control over everyone. Either one follows or one is eliminated. They swallow large numbers of people, if their ambitions are realized, in proselytizing campaigns designed to play on these common fears. And they claim to know of what people are afraid of, and to know what to do about it.

How do leaders and followers form a movement that eventually oppresses others and what is the relationship between them? At times we feel as ?having fallen from grace.? This can leave us with feelings of dispair and helplessness. A leader who is charismatic and persuasive can take someone in this mind frame and combine to form a leader and a follower. Together they combine to enslave people therefore slave is an inaccurate term for ?true believer?, that is, people who need to find a marvelous parent who will take away all one?s fears, define reality without questions and create the illusion of safety. There is also another group called the bystanders. They do not say nor do anything. They seem to just go along with the flow, making sure not to disrupt. Bystanders are like rocks in a river, small by comparison to it and, more importantly, separated. They are strewn all over the riverbed and are not united in a grouping large enough to dam the river.

A reminder of the characteristics of these bystanders is the case of Kitty Genovese, a famous incident in the United States. A young woman was being raped outside a large New York City apartment complex. She was screaming for help. It was the middle of the summer and many people had their windows open. No one did anything. No one came to her aid. Each in their own apartment. No one even called the police. She was murdered right there in the street in front of hundreds of witnesses and no one did anything. What would have happened if they had all been together in a large group? The fear consumed each of them so they stood by while the young woman was slain.

Actually bystanders have more power than they realize. For example, public protest was so strong in Germany in 1939 that Hitler was forced to close the Euthanasia program, the secret pre-war project to gas German citizens who were determined to be ?defective?. An important aspect of the silence of the bystander is the selective use of terror. It neutralizes most people.

Ideological leaders claim insight into a universal truth only they can reveal. They claim to hold the key to the book of knowledge and revelation. They create or adhere to a rigidly defined ideology, either complete and comprehensive as with Lenin and Stalin, or somewhat incomplete as with Hitler. These ideologies are utopian in nature promising relief and salvation. Ideological leaders need love and admiration, more precisely, a kind of secular worship from their followers. They identify themselves as having a special mission, for example Hitler fashioned himself as the genius sent to the German people. The leaders also identify a scapegoat. For Communists it is the bourgeoisie and for Hitler it was the Jews. The ideological leader seeks power, ultimate power if possible and must be willing to sacrifice even his own life for his cause. All of these add to the fire that fuels a social movement.

Perhaps the most important job of a leader is to convince people to follow him. The most important part of this is to identify an enemy. Not just any enemy will do. A source of evil must be found who helps create and sustain the special feeling so necessary for the formation of the followers and the leader into a social movement. All of these weigh in on whether or not people will or will not join a social movement. The movement must seem appealing to them. The movement must erase a fear. The promise of erasing a fear will lead to followers needed for a social movement.