

Social Movements

These are some ideas I shared with a small workshop on the History of US Social Movements at Occupy Philly last week.

Once upon a time, a small group of Americans gathered together to express their moral indignation at what they viewed as the central injustice (they called it "sin") in U.S. society: slavery. Despised, feared, and isolated, they were accused of inciting violence and warfare, dismissed as radical lunatics, and derided for their attire, their lack of a coherent plan, and their refusal to compromise. They had no idea how their movement would end, or that they would devote thirty years of their lives to it; they could not have predicted the breakup of the old political system, the formation of a new, mildly antislavery, political party (the Republicans) or the Civil War. They saw themselves as

agents of moral change.

We don't know how social movements will turn out and neither do the upstarts who begin them – but I for one find such beginnings inspiring. Some shift from destructive action (busting up a saloon) to political transformation (Prohibition); others begin by sitting at a lunch counter or a city bus and, after much hard struggle and in the face of still-uncounted violence, put an end to Jim Crow. More recently, the Tea Party has risen from an oddly-costumed group of outraged Americans into a major force in American right-wing politics. When these things happen in other countries, we call it an Arab (or Prague) Spring. At the start, all such movements are condemned and derided; many just fizzle out.

We have no idea how Occupy Wall Street/Philadelphia will end, whether

people who are expressing outrage on behalf of the "99%" will be evicted, coopted, or simply snowed out. But dismissing this expression of moral indignation is to ignore a central, inspiring, practice in American history. This is what we do, sometimes in the face of extreme violence and terror, usually in the face of eye-rolling and sarcasm, often in the face of seemingly intractable forces. At the beginning, we sit in, we express outrage, we conduct non-violence training and we hold sessions in strategy; we march, we argue, we develop our ideas, we give speeches, and we vote. We call it democracy in action, and it is how all social movements begin.

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