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Conceptualising Success and Failure for Social Movements

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Abstract

The paper discusses some of the most significant conceptions of success and failure present in the social movement literature, and highlights the gaps present in these theories. Through a seven-pronged critique, the paper stresses that the prevalent conceptions of movement success or failure are inherently unable to grasp the overall consequences and essence of a social struggle. Moreover, it is argued here that the problem lies not just in these conceptions, but also the concept of success or failure, because in its application to an entity as dynamic and complex as a struggle, it is unable to transcend beyond its black-and-white confines. It trivialises the concept of failure, which is an opportunity for learning from experiences, a chance for error correction and a prospect to rise higher than ever before.

Keywords

Social Movement, Struggle, Resistance, Civil Rights, Spillover, Success and Failure, Social Change, Agency

Author's Note

1. Introduction

The American Civil Rights movement, one of the most significant movements of the twentieth century, altered the socio-political landscape of the United States. Set against racial segregation and socio-political deprivation of the African-American people, it is claimed to have made an everlasting impact on race relations and 'Black and White consciousness'.1 Almost half a century later, the ripple effects of the movement continue, and recently the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the office of the President of United States was hailed as the biggest victory for the Civil Rights movement yet, which finally signalled for some activists that the 'scourge of race' has been overcome.2 Conversely, though, considering that strained race relations still exist in some parts of the American society, and the economic deprivation, lack of education and rampant crimes that confront the African-American community, it is argued from other corners that the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement stands against 'glaring failures'3. Interestingly, these polemical viewpoints are not limited to this movement alone. In the current year, when many are celebrating the centenary of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj – the 'inspired' and 'heroic' work that laid the foundation of Gandhian struggle,4 and initiated the philosophy that saw the mighty British Empire collapse in just under four decades – there are also those who consider him a reactionary who failed to achieve any real change in the status quo.5

The contrasting perspectives of successes and failures, on these struggles and others, compel us to contemplate how one particular social phenomenon can be considered a feat by some and a defeat by others; the same event can be, and is, perceived as a hurdle, setback, opportunity or an end. What this questions at the least, then, is the basis and objectives of our conceptions of success and failure. Can these categories be applied to an entity as complex as a social movement? Does the issue lie in the black-and-white nature of this classification or does it emerge from the application of a problematic criterion? Generally considered as mutually exclusive concepts, can the notions of success and failure co-exist in a continuum? While embarking on a brief inquiry into these questions, the paper would bring to light the gaps present in the success/failure conceptions present in the social movement literature. It would then argue that these conceptions specifically, and the concepts of success or failure generally, are inherently inadequate to apply to struggles and movements.

The first part of the paper will outline our definitional perimeter, by recognising and highlighting the theoretical paradigms associated with social movements. The next part will discuss some of the most acknowledged criteria used to gauge the success or failure of struggles. In the third part, the paper will focus on broader societal impacts of movements that are not widely acknowledged by these criteria, but nonetheless are essential for the understanding of this phenomenon. This journey will take us to the understanding that concept of success and failure has an inherent inability to grasp the essence of struggles.

2. Outlining the Perimeter

2.1. Definitional Issues

The study of social movements is challenging because it is not a term that refers to a singular, monolithic or unchanging entity; rather, it is a 'convenient fiction for a generally varied and diverse collection of activities'.6 Some scholars argue that social movements generally have two essential facets: orientation towards social change, and non-institutional or outsider status,7 while some add the element of collective or joint action to these facets.8 Other theoreticians focus on the nature of movements, and categorise them into self-help, social reform and religious movements,9 or divide them into 'respectable, peculiar and revolutionary movements'.10 Moreover, it is also argued by academics that movements should be differentiated on whether they aim for progression or regression of human rights.11

A phenomenon of such complexity precludes itself from getting encapsulated into a definition. Nonetheless, to clarify what the term refers to in the context of this paper, a perimeter has to be set. Therefore, the paper would adopt the definition expounded by Snow et al.:

> 'Social movements can be thought of as *collectivities acting with some degree of organisation and continuity outside of institutional or organisational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organisation, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part*' [emphasis in the original].12

The concept of social movement, while excluding interest groups and governmental structures, thus includes a range of social movements, from those that struggle to achieve basic amenities, to those that strive for

disbanding of global governance institutions, to full-fledge revolutions.[13] It also recognises employment of contrasting strategies by the movements, from using political or legal resources to engaging in direct action or civil disobedience. For instance, the Brazilian Landless Farmworkers' Movement (MST) which employs both legal and illegal tactics to assert its legitimacy and achieve its goals is one of the more prominent social movements of present time.[14]

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the danger of misconceiving social movements as monolithic entities. It is recognised by theorists, and maintained in this study, that social movements should not be considered as uniform groups with rigid boundaries, but as 'a collection of formal organisations, informal networks, and unaffiliated individuals'.[15] This multitude of actors has convergent, though not necessarily similar, aspirations which connect them to the broader platform of the struggle. Finally, it should be acknowledged that an inquiry on social movement theory is also marred with issues of causation (it is difficult to establish a direct causal chain from movement activities to realisation of goals),[16] presence of a host of actors (for instance role of third parties in realisation of goals)[17], and issues of timing (it is difficult to decide whether achievements are to be assessed in the long run or short run).[18]

2.2. Conceptual Issues

There are a number of theories that aim to explicate the linkage between social movement, political landscape and larger society, each of which generates a different understanding of the place and role of struggles in a society. Though a discussion on these models falls outside the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to briefly touch upon these to clarify the conception of social movements in the context of this paper.

Some of the more prominent, and contrasting, models that theorise struggles in society are the Resource Mobilisation Theory, theory of Political Opportunity Structures, and the Political Mediation model. The Resource mobilisation model focuses more on the internal characteristics of movements, such as organisational structure and resources, and considers these factors as being the key to movement success. In this manner it is claimed to have directed social movement research towards social movement organisations.[19] The principal issue raised against this model is that it does not factor the larger socio-political landscape and attributes everything to the internal characteristics and goals of the movements. Furthermore, it fails to predict and incorporate the successes of struggles, such as radical social movement organisations, which are inherently non-hierarchical and 'make an intentional decision to stay thin on resources'.[20] It is also unable to account for mass movements that achieved success despite lack of large membership or material means.[21]

At the other end of the spectrum, Political Opportunity Structures considers the political landscape as the primary reason for movement formation and success.[22] It portrays movements as 'an epiphenomenon – a sign that policies are changing, but not the cause of changes'.[23] However, it is criticised for depriving social movements and actors of their agency, as it attributes everything to the 'structures and processes which exist outside the meanings actors themselves attach to them'.[24] Extreme positions of Political Opportunity Structures also fail to acknowledge the impact of different social actors in the creation of these political opportunities. Because of this, some scholars assert that the internal characteristics, such as strategies, of movements cannot be completely ignored.[25]

Though not without several reservations, this inquiry takes the line of Political Mediation Model, as it appropriately selects a middle ground. This model, while mediating the 'relationship between action and outcomes'[26] through a focus on internal dynamics, maintains that in some situations, these dynamics of movements may not achieve their goals.[27] It accepts both internal characteristics of movements and the external socio-political environment as having an impact on movement success. The viability of this model can be illustrated by, for instance, comparing the successful revolutionary movements in Cuba and Nicaragua with the movements that failed to oust the governments in several other Latin American countries. It is argued that the socio-economic and political landscapes in these two countries were not starkly different from other states in Latin America at the time their respective revolutions began.[28] However, the alliance strategies adopted by the movements, and the 'availability of a suitable catalyst' (such as the nature of the regime) both played crucial roles in the triumph of movements in Cuba and Nicaragua.[29]

3. Conceptualising Success and Failure

3.1. Leading Paradigms

It is widely acknowledged that there is no agreed-upon model to gauge the success of a social movement. [30] The starting point for most discussions, however, is Gamson's proposition in *The Strategy of Social Protest*, which is considered a major contribution to the social movement literature. Gamson's work was a study of characteristics and achievements of 53 randomly selected American protest groups between the years 1800 and 1945. In order to analyse his findings and categorise the movements, Gamson stated that the success or failure of a social movement should be gauged through its results or outcomes. [31] This has roughly since synced the discussion on movement success with movement outcomes.

Gamson devised a four-part outcome model, divided into two main groups: acceptance and new advantages, dealing with the fate and gains of the movement respectively. Acceptance refers to the recognition of the movement as a legitimate representative of a particular constituency and its concerns, while new advantages refers to the gains won by the movement for its constituency. These clusters are then further categorised into a scale of outcomes to assess success or failure of a movement: Full response (complete success), Co-optation (recognition without gains), Pre-emption (gains without recognition), and Collapse (complete failure). [32]

Table 1[33]

		Acceptance	
		Full	*None*
New Advantages	*Many*	Full response	Pre-emption
	None	Co-optation	Collapse

Despite the centrality of Gamson's work as one of the earliest and foremost studies in the field, there are a host of issues that surround it. Amenta et al. have argued that the new advantages category holds greater significance than acceptance, as acceptance does not inevitably lead to a solution. Furthermore, while also raising the causality argument, they have asserted that rather than division into strict black-and-white categories, movement outcomes should be assessed along a continuum. [34] To rectify these deficiencies, Amenta et al. proposed a tri-tier formula. While placing Gamson's acceptance category at the lowest level, they state that at the highest level of success the movement 'transforms itself into a member of the polity'. Moreover, between the two extremes, success is reflected through relative influence of the movement on people and state structures. [35]

The defect of symbolic victory without actual change, acceptance without solution is also highlighted by Schumaker. He traces the impact of social movements on policy changes through five categories: access responsiveness (access to antagonists through acceptance); agenda responsiveness (movement's concerns placed on political agenda); policy responsiveness (formulation of legislation to address the concerns); output responsiveness (implementation of policies); and impact responsiveness (level of real change). [36] In addition to this, some scholars place 'structural impact' at the highest level of success, as it achieves procedural changes in addition to substantive ones, which affect the whole society in consideration. [37]

Table 2[38]

Type	Examples
Access	Movement participants testify at congressional hearing; submit amicus brief in court
Agenda	Desired bill introduced in Senate or House
Policy	Desired legislation adopted
Output	Legislation enforced as movement desired
Impact	Legislation has intended consequences
Structural	System changed to increase opportunities for movement influence

3.2. Examining the Deficiencies

The proposed paradigms illustrate that the most significant angle through which the impact of social movements can be gauged is through policy level outcomes, evident through production of policy/legislation. [39] However, even if the in-depth debates on these models are not factored due to limitations of space, there are a few evident deficiencies and problems associated with the presented models in particular and the concept of movement success or failure in general. First, these models are essentially geared towards movements that aim towards inclusion in the political system and its reform. There are several movements, however, that do not aspire to achieve these reform or inclusion oriented goals. For instance, it is argued that the anti-capitalist radical social movement organisations cannot be said to have *failed* if they are not included in the political system – to these movements 'achieving inclusion would be an anathema'. [40] Similarly, the emergent People's Law movements,

exemplified by the World Tribunal on Iraq, do not aspire to reform the political landscape; rather, they aim to create an alternate reality and 'a different authority for judgement and action altogether'.[41]

Second, even if a positive policy or legislation outcome is attained by the movement, it does not necessarily correspond to real change in ground realities – the more difficult yet more significant impact of social movements.[42] To illustrate, the Civil Rights Movement is credited with the enactment of two significant pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[43] The Voting Rights Act marked a policy shift in the registration and literacy requirements for voters, which were key instruments used to marginalise African-American voters and candidates in some districts of the US. According to the policy level success formula, this Act should mark the success of the Civil Rights campaign. However, through his study on the 1971 US elections, Loewen argues that the passage of legislation did not mechanically lead to a better result for African-American candidates or a change in peoples' consciousness. By 'skimming a small percentage of the Black vote in majority-Black voting districts', Loewen writes, 'White poll watchers contributed to disappointing outcomes for Black candidates state-wide'.[44] Recognising the aspect that policy does not automatically lead to change, the Civil Rights movement used the legislation primarily as a channel for further mobilisation.[45] Therefore, it is asserted here that academic analysis should recognise this conundrum as well.

Third, as mentioned earlier, social movements are generally not monolithic or homogenous entities, but involve a multitude of actors who aspire to achieve convergent aims through a multitude of strategies at different times. The World Social Forum, comprising individual activists, representatives of different social movements, NGOs, students and academics is an apt example in this regard. However, the models mentioned above treat movements as a uniform body, and attempt to label the whole movement as a success or a failure.[46] They disregard partial victories and partial failures; overlook that some strategies are victorious while others not. For instance, the Civil Rights campaign faced a huge setback when thousands of its activists, along with Martin Luther King, were arrested in Georgia, in 1961.[47] This was a setback for the struggle, but not its end. Do we then label the whole Civil Rights campaign as a failure? Or if we consider it on the whole a success, should we completely disregard the mentioned hurdle?

Fourth, the paradigms fail to distinguish between the express and unintended outcomes of participants, despite the fact that on a number of occasions, the achievements of a particular struggle may be in radical contrast to its stated aims.[48] Social movements, by virtue of their ability to affect the general public and indirect targets, can and do have unstated outcomes.[49] One appropriate instance is the mobilisation of antagonists in response to movement's mobilisation, which should be an essential part of a discussion on social movement success or failure.[50] Moreover, the theories do not recognise that express goals of movements, if achieved, may prove to be devastating for its long-term aims and objectives. For instance, Rajagopal discusses the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement in India that originated to oppose the construction of Sardar Sarover Dam, representing the people whose homes and lands were to be adversely affected and displaced by this establishment. He argues that the movement was able to achieve one of its major goals, to try and convince the World Bank of the negative consequences of the dam. However, achievement of this goal materialised as a 'liability' for the movement, as after the Bank pulled out, the movement was left 'at the mercy of the Indian State'.[51] Without the pressure of transnational actors on the Indian state, the campaign was unable to hold back the state machinery for long. Furthermore, the ultimate approval for dam construction by the Indian Supreme Court cannot be understood without accepting the efforts of pro-dam actors. Such examples, therefore, aptly explicate the role of antagonists and the knock-on relation between stated goals and un-stated objectives.[52]

Fifth, scholars argue that the concept of success or failure raises the issue of subjectivity, as the outlook of movement participants and external observers may differ.[53] For instance, as opposed to Resource Mobilisation theory's perspective on ingredients of success, participants of radical social movement organisations do not define the success of their movements to be based on hierarchy, longevity, resources or membership.[54] Furthermore, while the outside observer may tag a movement as a failure so long as it is able to achieve its objectives, the participants may consider the struggle worthwhile, which is the basis of its continuity. This ties up with the sixth point of critique that *outcomes* focus only on results that emerge at the end of a movement – the 'ultimate outcome' – as Gamson himself mentions.[55] To contest this position, some scholars assert that outcomes are essentially a sub-set of broader movement consequences: those that relate directly to the goals and ends of the challengers.[56] While this issue raises the question of unstated goals, a more significant concern that stems from it is that of timing. The proposed models and the success/failure concept in general imply that the consequences of movements can only be judged through hindsight. However, hindsight does not add value to a particular movement at that present moment, and is probably just a convenient academic avenue. Furthermore, it fails to account for the achievements that may die out with time,[57] while also discounting that some achievements that may appear after a movement's decline may not be attributed to it at all.[58]

Finally, and most significantly, the proposed paradigms only focus on the policy level shift, disregarding the broader societal impacts of a social movement altogether.[59] Levelled as a vital objection against the success/failure concept, we will discuss this aspect in more detail in the following section.

4. Broader Consequences of Social Movements

Once we move into the sphere of broader consequences of social movements, we shift our focus from categorisation to a discussion of variables.[60] The astoundingly few studies that have focussed on this field identify three general groups of consequences: impacts on broader culture, individual participants and other social movements.

4.1. Cultural Impact

Rochon argues that 'the arena in which movements have the greatest effect is cultural, not political'.[61] While recognising the role of human agency, he contends that cultural change does not automatically occur; rather it begins with the birth of regenerative ideas within 'critical communities', which are then carried to the general public through social movements.[62] Some scholars also maintain that movements utilise the existing cultural resources, such as channels of communication and solidarity, while at the same time transforming them.[63] The effects of this cultural transformation are more extensive than policy shifts.[64]

Social movements, in this perspective, serve as a prominent resource for social change through their ability to influence people, identities, public debate and even technological advancement.[65] The most important case in point is the Abolition movement that began and spread in Europe and US at the juncture of the 18th-19th centuries. Although it did not achieve its expressed goal of abolition of slavery in the first instance, it played a vital role in re-defining the status of slaves in British society.[66] In a similar vein, the Civil Rights campaign and the Women's Movement of 1960s in the US are claimed to have altered inferior status of African-Americans and Women, as well as bringing a shift in larger societal consciousness through the incorporation of ideas of racial and gender equality;[67] the environmental movement is said to have inspired scientific research;[68] while the anti-globalisation movement's demonstration at Seattle in 1999 against the proceedings of the World Trade Organisation is claimed to have fuelled a world-wide discussion on themes such as social inequality and global economic governance.[69]

Therefore, though not all the mentioned movements can be considered successful by the criteria of success or failure that movement literature presents, they nonetheless produced societal impacts that elude this concept all together.

4.2. Impacts on Individual Participants/Biographic Impacts

While movements affect the people outside their sphere through cultural shifts, they also have an enduring impact on individuals that participate within them. Movements play a key role in challenging the identities and outlooks of individuals on political and socio-economic issues, which are later reflected in their personal and professional associations.[70] Movement participants may stay associated with the movement or continue their activism by aligning with other movements.[71] McAdam et al. mention that a number of White activists won over by the challenge of Civil Rights campaign, later participated in anti-war and student movements that emerged in the US in the second half of the 20th century.[72]

Scholars such as Jasper propose that movement culture develops through the emotions participants possess towards antagonists, as well as reciprocal emotions directed at other participants. When movements decline, the participants either continue their individual struggles, or separate from them carrying strong emotions, such as disillusionment, 'spiritual and psychological crises', pessimism and fatalism.[73] Although he argues that this may not be the case where a particular movement successfully achieves its goals, some research studies claim otherwise. The most appropriate illustration of this comes from the study of individuals who participated in movements against the Pinochet regime in Chile.

As General Pinochet assumed power in Chile through a coup in 1973, overthrowing the democratic government of Allende, a clandestine resistance regime emerged which comprised numerous social organisations, communities and individuals. One of the most prominent of these communities was that of the women artisans of arpilleras (hand-sewn pictures). The artisans would portray the pictures of poverty and repression of democracy on the arpilleras, which were then sold to people in foreign countries.[74] Alongside the means of tackling rampant poverty, these arpilleras were vital in communicating on-ground realities to the people outside, and channelling the struggle of the involved communities.[75] The primary goal of the resistance movement was achieved in 1990,

when the dictatorship ended after a plebiscite and elections, and the resistance as well came to a successful end. However, despite this apparent success, the arpillera artisans were disillusioned by the loss of movement solidarity and loss of agency, amongst other factors.[76] The statements of craftswomen, such as, 'The country has to suffer for those things [solidarity] to return', and half-wishes for the return of Pinochet as a common enemy, imply that movements mean much more for their participants.[77] In addition to a collective platform to achieve their goals, it provides participants ambition, solidarity, camaraderie and a sense of agency, which are sought by them even after the movement has successfully or unsuccessfully ended.

4.3. Impacts on other Movements

In the summer of 1968, a major student movement erupted in Mexico. While initially aimed at police brutality against students, it quickly shifted to greater demands of democracy, and was joined by several sections from the political left, middle class workers and mothers.[78] Even after some remarkably successful demonstrations (for instance, one demonstration was attended by 300,000 people), the struggle was met with state repression in late 1968 in which hundreds of students and leftist activists were killed and arrested.[79]

Though the repression marked an end to the student movement, two years later the struggles of unarmed peasants through land occupation began in Mexico. These struggles were local in nature, connected through leftist activists.[80] Despite the fact that participants of the peasant movement were fewer in number than the student movement, and that they too faced considerable state repression, this movement met with success through some measures of land redistribution in 1975.[81] Scholars argue that that the principal difference between the two struggles was that of 'framing' – how the aim and philosophy of the struggle aligns with that of the larger society – with the student movement and the peasant struggles being aligned against and in-line with public ideology on ground respectively.[82] What is less stressed, however, is that leftist leaders who led the peasant movement 'had learned from 1968' and amended the strategies that fell short earlier.[83] The successful 'framing' of the latter struggle was in part born out of the failure of framing used in previous struggle. In this manner, failure of one movement became the cause of success of another.

In light of examples such as these, it is argued that even unsuccessful efforts are important 'as they create room for other movements'.[84] Movements can either generate new movements, in the same period or in the future, or strengthen and affect existing struggles.[85] They disseminate ideas, identities, strategies, personnel, coalitions, networks and experiences to other movements through migration and solidarity of individual participants and organisations, and through an impact on the broader socio-political political culture.[86] This concept of social movement *spill over*, thus synchronises the movement outcome and continuity question,[87] and implies that even movements that fail to achieve their goals may become successful in achieving broader social change.

5. Conclusion

Through a seven-pronged critique, the discussion above highlights that the prevalent conceptions of movement success or failure are inherently unable to grasp the overall consequences and essence of a social struggle. First, the success/failure models that exist in movement literature only account for movements that are geared towards inclusion, and disregard the movements that struggle to create their own realities. Second, these theories focus primarily on policy level shifts, and overlook the fact that policies and legislations are not mechanically transformed into a change in societal consciousness or ground realities. Third, these models take movements as monolithic entities and incorrectly label the entire movements as success or failures, and disregard partial victories and setbacks. Fourth, the success/failure conceptions are unable to differentiate between the explicit and unintended outcomes of a struggle, even though movements are capable of generating unplanned results. Moreover, the intended consequences achieved in the short-term may sometimes go against the long-term and primary aims of the struggle. Fifth, the theories take an external perspective on the movements, which ignores the perspective of the participants and adherents of the struggle – a viewpoint which is internal, and perhaps more important. Sixth, relying on hindsight alone, the conceptions primarily focus on final and ultimate outcomes and are of little value during the continuation of a movement. Finally, the mentioned models do not highlight the spillover of movements, or consequences of struggles on larger society and culture, attitudes and ideologies of participants, and their impact on other movements.

The problem, however, lies not just in the conceptions, but also the concept, of success or failure. Because in its application to an entity as dynamic and complex as a struggle, it is unable to transcend beyond its black-and-white confines, the boundaries of its classification. It trivialises the concept of failure, which is an opportunity for learning from experiences, a chance for error correction and a prospect to rise higher than ever before. A defeatist approach would have marked the end of several movements at their very beginnings at the sight of their first setback. It is argued here that both failures and achievements lay the foundation of subsequent actions, on

which sound structures can be built. As Tilly states, from errors and their constant correction through historical experiences and social understandings, rise 'orderly consequences'.[88]

However, the question that emerges from this is that if we account for all these consequences of movements, can any movement ever be called a failure? The response would be, perhaps not. Even if the logic behind differentiating success from failure was to identify winning strategies for struggles, the present obsession of some sections of academic literature with labelling and identification of 'incompetence'[89] of social movements only adds insult to the misery of those who are engaged in the struggle to attain the basic amenities and freedoms of life. Perhaps one of the directions to take is to differentiate goals from outcomes,[90] account for broader consequences, focus on smaller subsections of movement strategies, and abandon the fascination with tagging 'FAILURE' on social movements. Perhaps, another way forward is to identify whether the movement has been successful in providing a sense of agency to the participants, as it appears to be one of the most important aspects of social movements. Though an inquiry into this concept of agency requires extensive space and examination, it should be acknowledged that movements replace powerlessness with a sense of efficacy; they give their participants the sense of ability that the state of affairs can be changed. A positive account of social struggles can lead to hope and mobilisation; the negative story may end in helplessness and despair.[91] Loss of agency and movement decline are both mutually constitutive[92], and the academic focus should be on igniting agency and struggle, rather than extinguishing them.

Ingram and Mann assert that the concepts of success and failure are slippery and subjective concepts, which reflect an individual's aims and 'even disposition toward life'.[93] If our aim is to achieve social change, the fatalistic labelling of struggles may not be the right path forward.

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