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The Polish Round Table as a Blueprint for "Successful" Social Change? Some Thoughts on "Liberal Hindsight" in the Social Sciences

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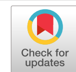

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Abstract

The Polish Round Table offers a rare historical example where negotiations between representatives of opposing political sides achieved major political transformation in a peaceful way. Such an outcome should undoubtedly be labeled a success. However, in our commentary, taking the example of the Polish Round Table, we take a critical look at the interpretation of success of social movements by social scientists. In line with the ethos of social sciences, social scientists value (harmoniously achieved) progressive types of change, such as the change that followed the negotiations of the Polish Round Table. Indeed, when it comes to the Round Table, our definition of success may be blurred by the political evaluation of the changes of 1989 from a liberal perspective. The target articles point out the importance of specific structural conditions (both internal and international) and psychological processes (perceptions of power, efficacy and moral commitment) that led to the successful outcome. We therefore argue that it is pivotal to delineate the conditions of success, if we want to apply them to other contexts without bias. Neither hindsight, nor liberal bias are problematic per se, but they can evoke a form of wishful thinking that, as scientists, we may want to treat with some skepticism.

Keywords

Polish Round Table, social change, social movements, group efficacy, social transformation

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At the time, the “Arab Spring” was hailed as a milestone in the presumed process of democratization of authoritarian regimes, and as a marker of the liberation of the people suffering from those regimes. Through a combination of online and offline mobilization methods, mass protests in Egypt, for example, challenged the regime, and, in the end, succeeded in toppling it. The broader picture seemed one of revolution, of qualitative change and transformation, of a new dawn and a new era. The movement that made it happen was certainly perceived as successful.

Almost a decade later, we can still conceptualize the Arab Spring as a wave of progressive social change. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is not impossible to reconsider this narrative. Of course, the facts do not change - there was an authoritarian regime, there was a dictator, there were mass protests, and then the dictator stepped down. But were these protests a “success”? With the benefit of almost a decade of hindsight, one may be tempted to say no: Egypt did not become the democracy people at the time thought it might become, and it may be difficult to point to clear signs of liberation and empowerment among Egypt’s population, it remained an authoritarian regime (see The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). Consequently, from today’s perspective, it might be rather hard to call the movement a success.

Concluding that success is in the eye of the beholder, however, implies at least two things: First, that to understand the meaning of “success” we need to understand which *goals people felt (at the time) needed to be achieved*, and evaluate those later with the benefit of hindsight; and second, that these are sometimes goals about *harmonious* forms of change – such as was the case in the Round Table (RT) – but at other times these are goals about *conflictual*, if not *violent*, forms of change. These two implications go hand in hand because they both derive from the tendency for social scientists to have a “liberal bias” (Duarte et al., 2015) - a bias that in this case makes scientists value *progressive* types of change (e.g., from dictatorship to democracy) that moreover occurs *harmoniously* and peacefully (e.g., through negotiation and positive intergroup contact, such as in the case of the Polish RT). It may not be surprising, then, that the narrative of the Polish RT is so appealing to many of us, as it offers an almost perfect definition of successful social change *for (social) liberals* - it is the right kind of change, done in the right kind of way. Indeed, this may be why the RT format might be considered a potential roadmap for harmoniously achieving progressive change in other situations of intergroup (even intractable) conflict.

This temptation, however, may also be a pitfall if we do not take into account which definition of success we are using, and whether this does not bias our analysis. As the target articles (Grzelak, 2020, this issue; Reykowski, 2020, this issue) indicate, there are incredibly important stories to tell about how social change can and did occur without a fight (Grzelak, 2020, this issue, p. 2, calls it “the bloodless revolution”). It only stands to reason that we can learn from this and apply that knowledge to solving other intergroup conflicts. Yet before we start doing that, it might be important to realize that both

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articles also discuss different interpretations of the success of the Polish RT (e.g., such as that it did not influence what was already happening, and was bound to happen). We suggest that this is precisely why it is important to first consider the definition of success in terms of the psychological goals people believed in at the time (and hence can be evaluated later, with hindsight), and if these are goals that we may not necessarily prefer or value (e.g., conflict, even violence).

The Meaning of Success

Research on the psychological underpinnings of collective action has a tendency to focus on progressive, social change movements with the aim of reducing social inequalities, promoting egalitarianism and democracy within a social justice framework (Wright & Lubensky, 2009). In this sense, this particular literature appears to match the broader tendency toward "liberal bias" in the social sciences (e.g., Duarte et al., 2015). Indeed, the vast interest in these movements can be explained by the political fit between the ethos of social sciences and the movements themselves (for a discussion of descriptive vs. prescriptive social science, see e.g., Merton, 1973).

Particularly within the field of social psychology, research on activism grew out of a theoretical interest in overcoming intergroup conflicts by means of collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, when theories of collective action explain why some movements are (or are not) successful, they may overgeneralize the findings based on a limited scope of movements that define success from the perspective of the political goal of the movement. Jost, Becker, Osborne, and Badaan (2017) also claim that the most influential theories of the psychological conditions of collective action participation are informed by research on system challenging social movements, although when ideological factors are taken into account, similar needs can lead to supporting system defending social movements, often overlooked by social psychological research. Indeed, in the context of the Polish Round Table, our definition of success may be blurred by the political evaluation of the changes that took place in 1989 in Poland.

Despite such potential liberal bias, social scientists have also studied different social movements, such as extreme right-wing, reactionist, populist and white supremacy movements. Ironically, this may be precisely because they represent a threat to the values that progressive movements strive for. As the goals of these social movements are treated differently by social scientists, defining their success becomes problematic too. We may acknowledge that some of the more understudied social movements appeal to certain populations to an even greater degree than progressive movements (Klandermans & Mayer, 2005), but their success is analyzed differently from the success of progressive movements: They are in fact framed as a failure (of democracies in curbing these movements). Research on radical right-wing, extremist, populist or conservative movements tend to offer explanations as to why ordinary (not mentally ill) people join these move-

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ments (e.g., Doosje et al., 2016), or how they are similar (e.g., van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019) or as a matter of fact different from supporters of other movements (e.g., Pettigrew, 2017). The implicit aim of these theories is often to explain, control and prevent the further success of these movements, as defined by an underlying liberal ideology.

We want to be clear here that we do not question the ethos of social science in improving societies and the social responsibilities of scientists, and also do not see liberal bias as a problem, as long as social scientists are aware of it. But we think we do need to take a critical look at how we, as scientists, define success when it comes to evaluating and offering explanations (psychological or other) to the success of particular social movements, and then use them as best practice examples. Studies about different forms of perceived efficacy of collective action may be a relevant example here. Intuitively, efficacy perceptions may be strongly associated with goal achievement (such as changing a law). However, studies about the role of efficacy in motivating collective action participation have shown that expressing one's values (Hornsey et al., 2006), wanting to make a difference through participation (van Zomeren, Saguy, & Schellhaas, 2013), recruiting third party members (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008) and building a movement (Drury & Reicher, 2005) may be more important aspects of success in building and maintaining a movement than actual goal attainment. The question, then, is: What is the goal that people want to achieve through collective action? Hornsey et al. (2006) concluded that different people within a movement are likely to have rather different goals, and it is probable that not all of them can and will be achieved. As a consequence, the same movement may be perceived as more *and* less successful in the eyes of different members.

Rather than analyzing Solidarity as a successful movement for the way they protested and then participated in the RT, we may therefore ask questions about why people – participants of the negotiations as well as the wider public – perceived the RT as an effective method of achieving social change and therefore supported it. Both target articles, for example, describe a rather unique political context in which both sides needed each other, had rather modest expectations and goals related to the RT, and seemed intent above all else to avoid violence and state collapse. This certainly does not seem trivial as a facilitating, or even necessary, contextual factor for the RT to positively affect non-violent change, as it may have shaped individuals' efficacy beliefs mentioned above, both among RT participants and the general public. For example, and different perhaps from other intergroup contexts one can think of, people may have believed that violence would be ineffective in solving the situation, and that non-violent means such as the RT were perceived as relatively more effective.

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Some Conditions and Processes for Successful Social Change

Having suggested that success is in the eye of the beholder, and that different definitions of success may exist among people even within a single movement, we now turn to general insights about conditions and processes for social change. Indeed, there is a large amount of literature in sociology and psychology on social movements and the psychology of the individuals that participate in them. A shared assumption is that social movements can incite social change, but only under specific conditions and processes (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We briefly discuss these insights below and then try to apply them to the Polish RT, raising the question of whether these insights are generalizable to this particular case - and hence whether this case is generalizable to other contexts.

In terms of *psychological processes*, theory and research suggest that individuals have different motivations to participate in political action, such as movement participation and collective action more generally (van Zomeren, 2016). At least four such core motivations have been identified: Individuals' *identification* with the group, their *anger* about the unjust situation of the group, their belief in the *efficacy* of the group to achieve relevant goals, and their *moral motivations* related to the issue at stake. The underlying assumption is that, all else being equal, if one can increase individuals' experience of these motivations, they should become more willing to take part in collective action to change the situation. Note that this is theoretically independent of the specific goal that people want to achieve (e.g., changing a law or toppling a dictator) and of the type of action used to achieve it (e.g., harmonious or violent).

However, we note that most research that identified these motivations is typically set in contexts in which collective action is already ongoing, and hence is perceived as both possible and appropriate (McAdam & Boudet, 2012). This means, in terms of *structural conditions*, that this literature offers only a rather partial picture - we basically see what seems to motivate people to act when such action is already ongoing (e.g., where movements are already present, and where movement action is perceived as possible and appropriate). This observation fits with structural models of collective action that focus on the structural factors that make collective action possible in the first place. McAdam's (1982) political process model, for example, identifies *political opportunities* and *indigenous organizational strength* as important precursors of collective action. An example of the former is an increase in the vulnerability of the state, which offers opportunities for political actors to exert influence; an example of the latter is a social movement's embeddedness in the broader political structure, such that it can effectively organize protests that influence the powers that be (for a broader discussion, see van Zomeren, 2016).

We believe we can see some reflections of key psychological processes and structural conditions described in both target articles. As for *structural conditions*, both Grzelak

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(2020, this issue) and Reykowski (2020, this issue) point out that the outcome of the Polish Round Table was closely related to broader external conditions that made both the communist party and the Solidarity movement vulnerable (and both seemed to know that), creating the mutual interdependence that may have facilitated peaceful negotiations (rather than conflict and violence). It is also important to note that Solidarity seemed to be well-organized, which presumably made it a serious negotiation partner, which was treated as an equal (Reykowski, 2020, this issue). As for *psychological processes*, Grzelak (2020, this issue) points to the motivational forces of engaging in the RT as generally being guided by perceptions of relative efficacy and, for some at least, a moral obligation to make use of this unique opportunity. Reykowski (2020, this issue) adds that although participants from both sides developed common goals during the RT, they were also still very aware of their differences, implying a strong sense of ingroup identification. Little is said in either target article, however, about anger and injustice, which is an interesting observation in and of itself. We assume that this motivation to redress an unjust situation was likely more psychologically relevant for Solidarity than for the other side, or even more relevant to movements and organizations that were not invited to participate in the RT. Indeed, both target articles describe the initial distrust between the sides, based on their experiences of the years before. They also describe that the contact between the groups during the RT seemed to unlock this distrust, and changed it into a (conditional) trust. In this way, perhaps the anger about the situation was uncoupled from the *target* of anger (i.e., the other side), which one needed to interact and negotiate with, and this is why anger does not really feature in the target articles' narratives about the RT.

Against this backdrop, then, was the RT a *success*? If the goals of the two sides were indeed modest, as indicated in both target articles, and the shared goal among participants and the general public seemed to be to avoid violence and state collapse, then it seems fair to call the RT, as a form of harmonious action toward social change, a success. It also seems that some of the psychological ingredients suggested in the literature were present: Beliefs about the efficacy of the group to achieve relevant goals (in this case through the RT), moral motivations to participate, and identification with the group.

Was the success of the RT *inevitable*? It is important to note that against the same type of political system, both the revolution of 1956 in Hungary and the Prague Spring in 1968 were defeated. Furthermore, Reykowski (2020, this issue) compared the RT context with the failed Camp David negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, suggesting that there was something special about the political context of the Polish RT that offered unique conditions for the success of the RT. We would suggest these are related to the joint vulnerability of both parties (as both seemed to be aware of and feel the mutual interdependence), the strength of their organization (which resulted in equal treatment),

the overarching goal to avoid violence and state collapse, and the relative efficacy of the RT as a way to achieve social change in correspondence with this overarching goal.

We believe it is absolutely pivotal for future theorizing and research to delineate such conditions, if we want to apply them to other contexts without liberal bias. Indeed, as social scientists we often have the benefit of hindsight, and we often have a liberal looking glass through which we seek to understand, explain, predict, and control. Both hindsight and liberal biases are each not problematic per se, but we believe that when they combine (one could call this "liberal hindsight bias" if we would want to add yet another concept to the psychological literature), they can evoke a form of wishful thinking that, as scientists, we may want to treat with some skepticism. For this reason, understanding the specific conditions and processes that made the "success" of the Polish RT possible will help us understand to which other situations it may successfully generalize - and to which situations it will not.

Conclusion

There are many pathways to social change, and certainly not all of them are so closely related to the liberal idea of a successful and "bloodless" revolution as the notion of the Polish RT. If we want to understand or even engineer such change, it is very important to understand when and why people want to create social change together, but it is also important to resist the temptation to overgeneralize from "successful" cases. Aside from the difficulty of defining success after the fact, we also suggest that we need to better understand the psychological processes and structural conditions for both harmonious and violent forms of social change. We very much hope that the lessons learned from the Polish RT can be applied to other contexts, but believe a first step is to articulate a theory that predicts specifically under which *conditions*, and through which *psychological processes*, the RT format has a good chance of being successful in achieving a "bloodless revolution" elsewhere in the world.

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