

The Power of Peaceful Activism

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Corey Lee Wrenn, VegFund's Spring 2013 intern, discusses the history of peaceful activism and why it's effective.

Nonviolence in social movement activism has a long and successful history and works for one very important reason: it attracts people. The more people who are attracted to the movement, the more resources a movement can gather, and the more successful that movement will be.

Nonviolent activism has been central to most social movements. In a survey of over three hundred social movements in the 20th century, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) found that nonviolent movements were likely to succeed because they increased participation and movement resources. They also tend to lead to lasting success when a movement accomplishes its goals.

Nonviolent means were hugely popular with most anti-slavery advocates and were important for laying the groundwork for emancipation. Advocates swamped the U.S. mail with abolitionist literature, flooded Congress with petitions, assisted runaways, even boycotted slave-made products such as cotton and sugar. These tactics were low-risk and made participation easy and inviting for all. Without these methods, utilized for decades before the Civil War, the abolition of slavery would not have even registered in public sentiment, much less the Union agenda.

The Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century also successfully utilized nonviolent protest to raise awareness and elicit public sympathy. Marches, sit-ins, and Freedom Riders who rode buses into segregated states all utilized peaceful means to convey moral issues in a non-threatening way. Labor movements have also utilized nonviolent strikes to engage civil disobedience, undermine elite power, and improve workers' rights. The environmental movement has also relied heavily on nonviolent tactics to affect social change through consumer boycotts, green alternatives, and social education programs.

Creating a vegan world is slow work, but it is far from compliant or passive. Veganism is the refusal to participate in the suffering and death of other sentient beings. It seeks to realize peace and justice. Being vegan can be difficult because defying social norms challenges tacitly accepted privilege that is fiercely protected. However, individuals and groups peacefully advocating for veganism are essential for establishing concern for Nonhuman Animals. Advocates are outlining a vegan future, and the public is starting to understand and adjust their attitudes and behaviors. Veganism and Nonhuman Animal rights are concepts that are now basically understood by most Americans, and vegan products are increasingly available. This normalcy makes future advocacy considerably easier.

References

Chenoweth & Stephan. 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press.

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