

Social Movements and
Global Social Change

The Rising Tide

Robert K. Schaeffer

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

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Chapter Eleven

Altruistic Social Movements

Altruistic social movements organized on behalf of subaltern groups and *assisted* global social change. They assisted subaltern groups because denizens and subjects often could not legally act on their own behalf and because aspiring movements often lacked the legal, economic, and political resources needed for acting effectively.¹ Altruistic movements provided resources to aspiring movements and fought with them to obtain rights and resources from dynastic and republican states. Altruistic movements objected to the violence inflicted on denizens and subjects by state officials and nonstate actors and worked with nonviolent aspiring groups to reduce violence in public and private settings and elevate the rule of law over arbitrary violence by state officials and their proxies. Although aspiring movements have been the driving force of global social change during the past two hundred years, altruistic movements have helped make it possible for aspiring movements to make change more often than not.

Historically, altruistic movements from “above” helped people from “below” make change. They filed lawsuits on behalf of American Indians (*Elk v. Wilkins*), African Americans (*Dred Scott, Brown*), Japanese Americans (*Ex Parte Endo, Korematsu v. United States*), women (*Griswold, Roe v. Wade*), children, immigrants, people with mental and physical disabilities, drug users, convicts, and death-row inmates.²

They organized movements to assist migrants and refugees. Conductors on the Underground Railroad helped blacks escape slavery, traveler’s aid societies helped immigrants settle in the United States, Casa del Migrante assists Mexican immigrants to the United States, and churches in the “sanctu-

ary movement" shelter economic migrants and political refugees, both legal and illegal.³

Altruistic male citizens supported suffrage for denizen women in the United States and around the world. Male citizens and female denizens fought first to end the slave trade and then to abolish slavery in dynastic states and slaveholding republics. White college students from the North registered adult black voters in the Jim Crow South. College students in the United States campaigned to release trafficked women from brothels and child soldiers from gangster armies.⁴

Consumer activists in the North promoted fair-trade coffee and bananas on behalf of small farmers and rural cooperatives in the South.⁵ Pro-democracy activists from Scandinavia dropped small toy teddy bears from an airplane over Minsk to protest dictatorship in Belarus.⁶ Gene Sharp, an American intellectual, distributed his manual on how to topple a dictatorship to activists in dictatorships around the world.⁷ "I Paid a Bribe" organizers exposed corrupt government practices in India.⁸ Interventions by altruistic activists prompted government officials in Russia and Israel to restrict the charitable activities of foreign and domestic nongovernmental organizations.⁹

Amnesty International, Movements.org, Human Rights Watch, and the Joint Mobil Group in Chechnya monitored the violations of human rights by governments and nonstate actors, while Oxfam, the Red Cross, and Doctors without Borders provided food, shelter, and medical care for the victims of war and natural disaster.¹⁰ Philanthropic foundations—Carnegie, Rockefeller, Gates, Soros, and Atlantic—provided funds for altruistic and aspiring movements in the United States and around the world. Philanthropy has not been restricted to the rich. In 1907, Emily Bissell organized the sale of Christmas Seals to working-class and poor people to fund a campaign against tuberculosis, which ravaged the poor.¹¹ More recently, Muhammad Yunus organized the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh so that poor people could themselves fund the work of other poor people.

PROVIDING RESOURCES, REDUCING VIOLENCE

Altruistic movements assisted aspiring movements and worked on behalf of denizens and subjects who may not have had the legal standing, political capacity, or financial means to act effectively on their own. Altruistic movements provided resources to assist disadvantaged subaltern groups and pro-

tect them from violence by state and nonstate actors in public and private settings. Their efforts transformed the policies and practices of dynastic and republican states.

For most of the past two hundred years, between 1800 and 1940, dynastic and republican states refused to provide economic resources or "welfare" to the urban poor, the displaced or landless farmer, the unemployed worker, the widow and her children, the abandoned child and the orphan, the mentally or physically disabled, the elderly or infirm, the derelict male or fallen female. However, altruistic movements and eleemosynary or charitable institutions, as they were once called, stepped in and provided disadvantaged subaltern groups with resources that state officials refused to provide.¹² For example, because the US government refused to provide contraceptives or abortions to women and girls, Margaret Sanger and two other nurses opened a birth-control clinic in 1916 to provide these services, fought with the government for the right to provide them, which resulted in their arrest and imprisonment (Ethel Byrne, Sanger's sister, nearly died from a hunger strike while in jail), and later founded the American Birth Control League, the organizational predecessor of Planned Parenthood, which later also provided abortions.¹³ Although state officials (and Republican presidents) for a time supported these efforts, they later turned against them, refusing to provide state resources for women and girls who wanted abortions and threatening to defund Planned Parenthood, which provides birth control and other health services for one in five American women.¹⁴

Altruistic movements such as Planned Parenthood have fought to provide resources from public and private sources to assist people who have few resources.

Since the early nineteenth century, altruistic movements provided resources to people whom state officials refused to service, providing homes for indigents, orphans, pregnant girls and homeless men, asylums for the insane, and shelters for battered women. Moreover, they fought to obtain state resources for unserved populations and persuaded state and local officials to assume responsibility for their care and provide funds to assist these and other groups. Their collective efforts resulted in an important shift during the 1930s.

Before the Great Depression, private altruistic and charitable institutions provided resources to disadvantaged subaltern groups.¹⁵ During the 1930s, local, state, and federal officials assumed greater responsibility for assisting

these groups and used *public* resources to do so. (State officials had always provided public resources to rich and advantaged citizens.)

The extension of suffrage to women was likely responsible for this shift. Women provided the electoral support needed by Roosevelt and the Democratic Party to allocate public resources for the first time, in a big way, to subaltern groups. Is it possible to imagine the passage of “welfare” programs—unemployment insurance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, social security, Medicare, farm subsidy and crop insurance programs—*without* suffrage for women? I think not. The rise of the “welfare state,” which really describes the distribution of public resources to subaltern groups for the first time, was largely a product first of women’s participation in altruistic movements and private charitable institutions and then of their participation in electoral politics as citizen voters, developments that scholars have neglected or ignored.¹⁶

Early on, state officials deployed violence and delegated the authority to use violence to nonstate actors. They still do. The soldiers, convicts, students, wives, children, workers, servants, and slaves who were victimized by nonstate actors could not legally or easily object to public and private violence. Altruistic movements fought to protect the victims of violence both because they could not defend themselves without risking further violence and because state officials would not defend them from nonstate actors who used violence on their own authority. For example, during the 1830s and 1840s, altruistic movements demanded that state officials and private authorities abandon the flogging or beating of soldiers, students, convicts, wives, children, servants, slaves, and also horses and other animals (see chapter 7).

Altruistic movements also stepped in to protect people from other dangers. They campaigned to protect travelers from boiler explosions on steamboats, which resulted in one of the first acts of “protective” state regulation, from dangerous drugs and hazardous foods, from the fires that menaced poor families in tenements and workers in factories, and from the floods, fires, earthquakes, and drought that ruined people without insurance and sometimes people *with* insurance (many insurance companies went bankrupt from losses incurred in the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans).

Altruistic movements not only intervened to protect the victims of violence and disaster, they campaigned to restrict the violence wielded by state officials and to revoke the authority given to nonstate actors, which allowed employers to hire Pinkertons to shoot striking workers, allowed whites to

lynch black men, women, and children, allowed husbands to beat their wives, and permitted teamsters to flog their horses. Of course, in recent years, nonstate actors have fought to reclaim their ability to use violence on their own authority, persuading state officials to adopt concealed-carry and stand-your-ground laws. But efforts by altruistic movements to reduce violence have contributed to the consolidation of legitimate physical force by the state, a process that is still incomplete.

MOTIVATIONS: PRINCIPLES, ALTRUISM, AND SELF-INTEREST

Altruistic movements *acted* on behalf of others. Of this there is no doubt. But they assisted subaltern groups and challenged the state for different *reasons*. First, many believed that liberty, equality, and solidarity were principles that should be extended to others, not only to themselves. Abolitionists believed that slavery violated democratic principles and undermined the liberty not only of slaves but also of free men and women. They believed in the rule of law and justice for all. Because religious and secular laws have much in common, many altruistic movements in the United States drew their participants from faith-based religious (Quakers, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews) and secular legal (the NAACP and the ACLU) communities.

Second, they believed in helping others. They reached out to other groups and built relations based on cooperation, mutual respect, and solidarity. Adam Smith argued that while capitalism was driven by self-interest, it also relied on a spirit of giving: “How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.”¹⁷ This could be said of almost every parent.

Many natural scientists now think that altruism, cooperation, and equality were key to the success of *Homo sapiens* and the emergence of human communities. David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary theorist, “sees the onset of humanity’s cooperative, fair-and-square spirit as one of the major transitions in the history of life on earth, moments when individual organism or selection units band together and stake their future fitness on each other. . . . A major transition occurs when you have a mechanism for suppressing fitness differences and establishing equality within groups, so it is no longer possible to succeed at the expense of your group.” Wilson argues, “It is a rare

event, and it's hard to get started, but when it does you can quickly dominate the earth. [Human evolution] clearly falls into this paradigm."¹⁸

Sometimes, altruism grows out of a shared experience. Women in the 1830s supported efforts to curb male violence against others (children, servants, students, slaves, and horses) because they, *too*, were victims of male violence. Altruistic movements often fought for others because they identified with them, an identification based on their own experience.

Third, altruistic movements took action because they were motivated by different kinds of self-interest. The adult white men with property who voted to extend suffrage to adult white men *without* property did so in part because they sought to obtain political advantage in an enlarged electorate. As we have seen, the Jackson Democrats thought a wider franchise would increase their political power, and the Whigs followed suit because they did not want their opposition to this populist measure to disadvantage them politically. They both adopted altruism in their self-interest, as did the Republicans who extended adult suffrage to adult black men and the Democrats and Republicans who extended it to women and to youth.

Guilt has motivated some altruistic movements, particularly the wealthy industrialists who financed philanthropic foundations (Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford, Gates, Soros). Philanthropy has eased the conscience of cutthroat capitalists, helped them remake their public image, and secured tax benefits for themselves and their heirs.

Altruistic movements have acted because they wanted to change subaltern groups and, with messianic zeal, remake them in their own image. Religious and secular groups have tried to convert others to their faiths and political ideologies and tried to make others more like themselves, a self-centered, narcissistic aspiration.

Finally, altruistic movements acted because they *feared* subaltern groups or viewed them as a threat. They worried that if they did not assist subaltern groups, those groups might rise up in anger and destroy everything. Recall that slave owners in the South helped poor whites obtain suffrage because they wanted poor whites to "serve in militia patrols guarding against slave rebellions."¹⁹ In this case, help for whites was motivated by fear of blacks. Fear of immigrants likewise persuaded many adult male citizens to support women's suffrage and help women get the vote. In short, greed, guilt, narcissism, and fear have persuaded some altruistic movements to act on behalf of others. Still, whatever their motives, they nonetheless managed to assist and make change. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wryly observes,

"Many Americans go to the developing world to serve others. A smaller percentage actually end up being useful."²⁰

PROBLEMS WITH ALTRUISTIC MOVEMENTS

Activists in aspiring social movements and many social movement scholars view altruistic movements with skepticism. Generally, they have criticized altruistic movements for three reasons. First, they argue that altruistic movements have not promoted social *change* but only *reform*, which has strengthened capitalist states. Second, they maintain that people make change only when they act on their *own* behalf, when they exercise their capacity for "self-determination." Third, they argue that the misguided attempt to help others may actually make things worse.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx argued that altruistic movements, what he called "bourgeois socialists," did not promote change but instead promoted reform, which strengthened the capitalist state and bourgeois society: "Philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the working class, organizers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, [and] hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind [are] desirous of redressing social grievances in order to secure *the continued existence of bourgeois society*" (italics added).²¹ Marx allowed that a "small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift and joins the revolutionary class," and he welcomed them into the proletarian fold, but he rejected assistance from reformist do-gooders.²²

Immanuel Wallerstein agreed with Marx, arguing that "liberals" and other altruistic groups advanced reform, not change. As Macaulay argued, in defense of the 1832 Reform Bill, "Reform, that you may preserve [the social order and the state]."²³ Although liberal reformers and altruistic movements campaigned to improve the condition of others, they deflected, deferred, or deterred demands by aspiring movements for real, substantive change. For Wallerstein, the expansion of citizenship and other reforms were designed "to tame the dangerous classes—in particular the urban proletariat—by incorporating them into the system politically, but in such a way that would not upset the basic economic, political, and cultural systems of [Great Britain and France]."²⁴

Of course, many altruistic movements contributed to reform, not to the transformation of the capitalist world-system, as Wallerstein suggested. Many helped to secure "the continued existence of bourgeois society," as

Marx maintained. But this was not always the case. The altruistic abolitionists who fought successfully to end the slave trade and abolish slavery in dynastic and republican states transformed the capitalist system. For centuries, slavery fueled economic development in the capitalist world-economy and enriched slaveholding European empires and republican states in the Americas. The end of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery changed the character of economic development in the capitalist world-economy, eliminated the slaveholding gentry as a key faction of ruling classes, and so transformed the character of bourgeois society and made it possible for slaves to ascend and become denizens and citizens.

Marx dismissed altruistic reformers such as the “members of the society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.” But recall that activists who fought against animal cruelty also fought to restrict male violence against women and children, sailors and slaves, servants and students. These were not inconsequential reforms. They contributed both to a secular decline in male violence and to new relations between state officials and male nonstate actors. At the urging of altruistic movements against violence, state officials rescinded the authority, given by the state to male nonstate actors, to use violence against subaltern groups (people and animals) on their own initiative. In light of these developments, Marx and Wallerstein’s characterizations of altruistic movements might be reconsidered.

It is true, of course, that state officials allowed or encouraged altruistic movements to ameliorate the conditions of subaltern populations and so “tame the dangerous classes,” strengthen the state, and secure the continued existence of “bourgeois society.” For example, US officials licensed the Red Cross to act as the first responder in emergencies and disasters across the United States. But the failure of the Red Cross to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina had the opposite effect: it failed to tame the dangerous masses, who looted New Orleans, and undermined the legitimacy of the Bush administration and the state.²⁵

Second, activists and scholars have argued that aspiring movements can make real or effective change only by acting on their own behalf, by exercising their capacity for self-determination, not by relying on altruistic movements to help them. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, the president of SNCC, argued that white participation in the civil rights movement was based on the assumption, by whites, that “the Negro is somehow incapable of liberating himself. . . . Shouldn’t people be able to organize themselves?”²⁶ Although white participation might be well intentioned, Carmichael argued that it cripp-

pled black initiative, subordinated black interests to white interests, and made change more difficult. To prevent whites from having an “intimidating effect” on blacks and prevent them from subverting “our true search and struggle for self-determination,” Carmichael argued that blacks “must cut ourselves off from white people” and “form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, write our own histories.”²⁷ This approach, which drew heavily on the arguments made earlier by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, persuaded activists in many other aspiring movements in the United States and around the world—women’s, youth, gay and lesbian—to abandon collaborative alliances with other altruistic and aspiring movements and instead exercise their self-determination and pursue social change on their own.

As we have seen, millions of blacks in the South exercised their capacity for self-determination and migrated to the North after World War I to obtain citizenship and suffrage. They did so without much encouragement or assistance from altruistic whites, without much assistance from anyone but themselves. They mobilized the meager resources available to them, seized the political opportunities that existed, and, by pursuing their self-determination, made change, much as Carmichael advocated. But this kind of self-determination was difficult for many denizen and subject groups to practice. Generally, citizens have a considerable capacity for self-determination (if by self-determination we mean self-reliance, which is how Carmichael used the term). Their liberty as citizens made it easier for them to mobilize resources and seize the political opportunities provided by popular sovereignty and constitutional government than denizens and subjects, who are typically deprived of economic means and legal, political opportunities to improve their status. As a result, denizens and subjects often sought or accepted assistance from altruistic groups and made principled or tactical alliances with them to increase their social weight and political clout. Alliances and collaborations between aspiring and altruistic movements made it possible for many movements to make change. Would they have been able to do so alone, as Carmichael suggested, if they relied only on their capacity for “self-determination?” Perhaps. But many of the aspiring social movements that successfully made change forged alliances with different ethnic groups (the nationalist approach) or different classes (the socialist, internationalist approach) and collaborated with altruistic movements that included people with higher social status.

For example, the civil rights movement brought together people from different racial, class, gender, geographic, age, and status groups in a collaborative struggle. Collectively, they brought an end to Jim Crow and the violence associated with it and (re)secured citizenship and suffrage for four million black adults in the South. By contrast, the groups that advocated black “self-determination” and, importantly, also armed “self-defense”—the Nation of Islam, SNCC after 1965, and the Black Panther Party (which Carmichael joined)—enjoyed considerably less political success. Still, while it is impossible to imagine the election of Barack Obama without the civil rights movement, it is also impossible to imagine rap music without the movement for “Black Power.” It may be that black power contributed more to cultural change in the black community—promoting a new identity and solidarity in the community—than to political change, though the two were related.

Carmichael’s critique of white altruism was joined by a critique of nonviolence. In the civil rights movement, the two were closely linked. By attacking white altruism, Carmichael made it easier to jettison black and white nonviolence and promote black violence as an alternative political strategy. In his “Declaration of War,” Carmichael advocated “revolutionary warfare” to protect black people from attack by “the missionaries, the money, and the marines,” and said that “we have no alternative but to fight . . . black people have got to fight, got to fight, got to fight.”²⁸ He went on to say that if black people “become a threat [to our struggle], we off them. We off them. . . . We’re talking about being the executioners of the executioners.”²⁹

Given the history of black movements that emphasized self-reliance, not collaboration, in the years after 1965, there is good reason to be skeptical of Carmichael’s claims that people should make change *only* on their own behalf or that violence is a *necessary* or effective instrument of change. Unfortunately, many aspiring movements in the 1970s adopted the view that self-determination was the best way to make change, that violence might sometimes be “necessary,” and that they should not collaborate with altruistic movements, which typically shun violence. As a result, many aspiring movements pursued change separately, on their own, which weakened them at a time when New Right restrictionist movements emerged to deter, deflect, and reverse change.

Third, activists and scholars argued that altruistic movements’ efforts to assist others actually made things worse.³⁰ During the 1990s, critics of humanitarian organizations that provided food, resources, and health care to

victims of war and natural disaster in Africa, Asia, and the Americas argued that because altruistic movements did not understand or appreciate local political, economic, social or cultural realities, they adopted policies and practices that *undermined* the ability of victims to regain their independence and made them dependent and despondent.³¹ In *The Road to Hell*, Michael Maren describes relief organizations as “mercenaries” and argues that “their work is pointless or counterproductive.”³² In Zaire, De Waal argues, “it was the disaster relief agencies that were out of control.”³³

Altruistic movements have promoted and assisted real change, advanced reforms that strengthened the state, and took ill-advised or inappropriate steps that made things worse for the people they were trying to help. But much the same could be said of aspiring movements, whose members also adopted poor strategies and ineffective tactics based on faulty assumptions and poor information and whose failures set back their causes for decades.

Many of the aspiring movements that seized state power advanced dictatorship, practiced ruthless forms of capital accumulation and economic development, and failed to transform the capitalist character of the state or the world-economy as a whole. Although a large number of “antisystemic” movements “have come to power in a large number of states,” Wallerstein admits that “post-revolutionary regimes continue[d] to function as part of the social division of labor of historical capitalism.”³⁴ The seizure of state power was an “unfulfilled revolution” because, while “changes in state structures have altered the politics of accumulation, [they] have not yet been able to end them.”³⁵ Indeed, Wallerstein argues that aspiring socialist movements failed to make substantive change and suggests that the anarchists may have been right when they argued that state power should be destroyed, not seized.³⁶

But keep in mind that all social movements risk failure and that failure can exact a heavy toll on movement participants and others. Failure can embolden opponents, strengthen the forces of reaction, and incur the wrath of state officials. Still, because people who organize movements operate in environments where information about the consequences of action is poor and incomplete, it may be better to risk failure than to do nothing at all. In the long run, both aspiring and altruistic movements have succeeded more often than not, and their collective efforts have contributed to significant social change.