

Who Benefited from the Civil Rights Movement?

Herron Keyon Gaston, 2/9/15, Huffpost

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s helped to shape social justice advocacy in a new and profound way. It provided a clear roadmap for other social justice movements to follow. In other words, it served as a prescription to challenge various forms of systemic oppression. The Civil Rights Movement can be radically interpreted as being the precursor and catalyst for gaining social freedom by providing a replicable platform to fight against the many ills of society. Although the Civil Rights Movement did not explicitly or specifically deal with issues such as homophobia, sexism, or ableism, it provided a classic model for other groups interested in challenging whatever “isms” that exist in our society with an astute methodological approach worthy of imitation.

The Civil Rights Movement enthusiastically stirred the imagination of countless of Americans who felt that their backs were against the wall, and served as a vehicle through which they learned to better articulate, frame, and lament their own struggles of subjugation and suppression in the public domain. Many groups throughout America begin to apply the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, and adopted perceptive maneuvers and stratagems to achieve their own equality and liberation. The movement didn't just benefit African Americans, but prompted gains for nearly all marginalized groups and individuals.

For example, in the 1960s, Native American, Puerto Rican, and other minority youth from all persuasions, all across America, fashioned themselves after the African American youth in SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee], the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], the Black Panther Party, and the Black Power Movement. These particular groups drew inspiration, strength, and insight from African American youth and begin to interpret their own experiences through a very similar lens.

In addition to these minority youth being positively inspired by African American youth of the 1960s, the liberal white student antiwar program, (particularly the ones that operated on predominately white college campuses,) were also heavily influenced by the experiences of the black freedom struggles. Similarly, today, many groups continue in that same tradition; groups such as the LGBTQIA, women's liberation groups, persons with limited abilities groups, poor people's groups, and a host of other social activism groups, just to name a few.

The leaders in many of these groups give enormous credit to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s for much of their political and legal victories. It is important to note, however, that the black-led Civil Rights Movement helped to create the conditions for a more broad-based, comprehensive democracy. Civil rights leaders of yesteryear helped to solidify a precedent that makes it difficult to undermine and erode fundamental human rights in the 21st century. The Civil Rights Movement confronted the judiciary with bold proclivity, including

the Supreme Court, and reminded the government of its role as protector of individual liberties against the strong and powerful.

While no one particular group owns the patent or copyright to the Civil Rights Movement, it is advantageous to recognize the significant impact that this movement has had on the face of law and politics in the United States. No other social or political movement of the twentieth century has single-handedly had as astounding an effect on the legal, educational, and governmental institutions of the United States. Its precocious wisdom should continue to serve as a pedagogical tool to move our society progressively forward towards full inclusion. I believe, in the words of activist Terry Tempest Williams that “the eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time.”