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Feminism and Democracy

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Abstract

After work on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks walked onto a bus that was to take her home that night. She ended up on a trip to jail instead, for refusing to give her seat to a white passenger. The event triggered resistance to bus segregation, the founding of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and the election of the then-unknown Dr. Martin Luther King as its leader. The success of the campaign is an integral battle in our historical retellings of the US African American Civil Rights Movement. Fewer recount the sexual harassment against black women by white men that occurred on these buses, the experience of which motivated those who sustained this movement: black women. While the stated goal and effect of the male-led organization was to desegregate the buses, the women-led grassroots movement had the effect of easing sexual harassment and violence against themselves and delivering the campaign's ultimate success.

Keywords

Human rights, Libya, Women's rights, Civil rights, Political rights, Democracy

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The faces displayed in the media of the Libyan pro-democracy movement are largely those of male rebels. Wielding rifles and clad in blue jeans, their loud gunfire, bloodied faces, and impassioned appeals draw nearly all of the public attention given to their movement. Still, in the sea of faces at many of the protests are many women, fighting on their own behalf. However, gendered divisions of labor in movements are real and are patrolled. Observers of revolutions and social movements often spend much of their focus on property destruction, violence, strikes, or other performances mostly carried out by men. Meanwhile, the inglorious everyday labor of sustaining such mobilizations—knocking on doors, public education, distributing resources—so often, rightly or wrongly, has depended on women.

Broad coalition movements create the space for other issue groups to bring up their grievances, allowing them to frame them as issues of inequality within the movement. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, women are asserting their political rights as citizens in a polity as well as their rights in their positions in their households. Many men stood down as thousands of women attended rallies and political events throughout the region, facing violent repression, injury, and death. However, as soon as Ben Ali departed Tunis and Hosni Mubarak fled Cairo, both capitals saw spikes in sexual assaults against women. This as if to say, "Thanks, now don't take this too far."

But women have created their own opportunities, seizing the pro-democracy frame to illustrate the gendered patterns contained therein. These approaches often lead to real and evidenced improvements in the quality of life for women. Social movements can lift many boats by opposing external authorities, but even these imperfectly address their internal inequalities.

This is at least in part due to forces external to these movements. Chip Perrow argues that the rise of corporations in the United States occurred because corporate hierarchies resembled existing power structures in the US government—a highly rationalized hierarchy with compartmentalized powers and clear lines of authority. Because of the organizational resemblance, the government could better understand the corporate form. The corporation, while challenging certain forms of government authority by privatizing goods, did not challenge authority itself. The government invested in the corporate form, even though it was less efficient

at production than contemporary cooperative models. Those models were decidedly out-maneuvered with the bestowal of personhood to corporations in 1886.

Unfortunately, social movements that maintain hierarchies, such as patriarchy, are less threatening to governments because they challenge fewer forms of cultural and government authority. This should strengthen the resolve of movements to purge these from their structures rather than tempt them into adopting hierarchies to appear more palatable. This is the burden that feminist movements have carried at least through the last couple of centuries, and one that must be made central to all movements claiming to be pro-democratic.

Louis Edgar Esparza is Lecturer in Human Rights at the University of Denver, Josef Korbel School of International Studies. His work appears in Societies Without Borders, Qualitative Sociology and Sociological Forum. Dr. Esparza is writing a book on grassroots human rights movements in Colombia, where he completed ethnographic fieldwork in 2008. His research has attracted grants and awards from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Latin American Studies Association and Oxfam America.