Protest Movements: Analysis of Three Stories

Introduction

In their articles, Hass, Sayrafiezadeh, and Hochschild explore the phenomenon of modern mass protest movements. Each author offers his perspective on mass protesting and presents his unique point of view. Hass shares his and his wife’s experience of participation in students’ Occupy space protest movement. Hochschild draws historical lessons and crystallizes parallels between mass public movement of 18th, 19th, and even 20th centuries and modern anti-war protests in the days of Vietnam War. The author highlights immense power and potential that can be unleashed by united actions of many people in order to affect social, economic, and political changes. Sayrafiezadeh tells a story of a person who participated in mass actions out of habit. However, this person’s vision is renewed through the realization of the greater good that takes place when public unites pursue a common goal. When people get together to protest, it means they care and believe in the rightness of their cause and possibility of success in their confrontation against the government. Mass demonstrations and protests are powerful instruments that allow society effectively fight for civil right and liberties, boost morale of general public, and unite people from different walks of life to fight and scarifies for the individual’s, society’s, country’s, and humanity’s benefits.

Protest Movements

In his story, Robert Haas analyzes one day of his life when he went with his wife to the square where students of his university held peaceful the Occupy Space protest. In the beginning, Haas recalls an inspiring history event when students’ active mass participation
guaranteed students freedom of speech and self-governance (34). Then, amidst police brutality and using force against non-threatening young students, he identifies sense of unity, purpose, and empowerment that protest participants experience as a result of taking part in mass action. Following words describe author’s and his wife’s motives, “If there was a trouble, we wanted to be there to do what we could to protect the students” (Haas 35). This statement carries the evidence of motives many people have in joining mass protests or demonstrations. They want to help, assist, and protect their fellow countrymen who dare to challenge the social, economic, or political systems of their day. Witnessing cruel treatment of youth by police deputies makes the reader want to join the ranks of students, rectify inflicted sufferings, and support the uneven struggle. A Contingencies crossed Robert Haas’ mind when he saw protesting students. First, he recalled the fast spread of the Occupy movement 50 years ago. The idea of occupying public space was so appealing to common people that in almost every large city, they started occupying public places. In this same area, almost 50 years ago students touched off the Free Speech Movement that transformed the American universities’ life through the assurance of self-governance and freedom of speech (Haas 34). These inspiring historical accounts testify of the tremendous power that organized mass protesters can wield and exercise. In Haas’ case, students were forced to leave the square under the threat of arrest, and when they could not protest actively anymore, they occupied air with thousands of balloons as a sign of continued active engagement in the life of the state.

Adam Hochschild presents an account of few historical events of successful mass protests and discusses similarities between examples from history and contemporary protest events. Hochschild finds the sense of personal inspiration and inner confidence through realization that in large scale mass protests, millions of individuals feel the same way as protesters in squares and on the streets, “When people who cared deeply about something
looked around and saw they were not alone” (Hochschild 33). The author describes events of 1960th, when crowds of people went over and over again into the streets to oppose the war in Vietnam. It took several years, and a lot of blood shed before the war was over, but people won in a tough confrontation against the government. Direct participation and support of mass protests causes positive changes in people’s consciousness. Hochschild (32) said, “But something changed after those demonstrations begun. All of us who vowed to never fight in Vietnam looked up and down the lines of fellow marchers and knew we were not alone.”

Another historical event of successful mass protests took place in 1989 in East Germany prior to the fall of the Berlin wall. Germans started to meet on Monday evening in Leipzig, in a public square. “The demonstrations quickly spread to other cities and crowds increased in number leading to the coming down of the Berlin Wall” (Hochschild 32). However, the author does not just describe events of 20th century but goes two centuries back to times when slavery and the slave trade flourished as the source of successful business and accepted social practice. First anti-slave protests by individuals quickly grew into antislavery and human equality movements. Ordinary citizens gave a powerful impetus for change to the government as a classic example when “The grassroots outpaced headquarters” (Hochschild 33). In England, people discovered the strength of numbers through vast petition campaigns, sugar boycott, and mass meetings (Hochschild 33). Knowing that one is not alone in his/her struggle against injustice fuels person’s resolve and determination to achieve the end goal of greater good for humankind, even to the point of being willing to pay the price of personal sacrifice. It is easier to go the long distance towards the goal when one knows he/she will not be alone but will have hundreds of thousands of likeminded individuals to march together. In England, 400,000 people refused to eat sugar that was grown by slaves (Hochschild 33). Lobbyists, government, and sugar planters had no means of coping with such form of peaceful social protest. Author notes that victory does not always come quickly in a struggle.
against deeply rooted flaws of political, social, and economic systems, as in the example with Berlin wall. However, as the movement becomes more widespread, it increases the chances that the government will satisfy protesters’ demands. The very massiveness of protests serves as a source of confidence and comfort by messaging people that they are not alone.

In his *Notes from a Bystander* story, Said Sayrafiezadeh tells the story of a person does not believe in the effectiveness of mass protests and participates in mass actions rather out of a habit and imposed social obligations. Main character says, “There is something pathetic about crowd, we might appear large and vital all crammed into a city street, but the reality was that we were minority with strange ideas” (Sayrafiezadeh 17). However, this person’s vision is renewed by enthusiasm as well as calm and rational realization of the greater good that is achieved when public unites in pursuit of social justice or in a fight for their lawful rights and liberties. Main character of Sayrafiezadeh’s story does not like demonstrations but acknowledges undeniable existence of a distinctive positive moment of mass protests in that demonstrations reassure every participant that he/she is not alone in his/her noble aspirations (Sayrafiezadeh 17). Although participation in demonstrations embarrasses main character, the absence makes him feel guilty. Demonstration against police brutality in which he participated was not perfectly organized event, but it symbolized “The endless protest, the endless striving, the next generation taking up the mantle” of fighting for civil rights (Sayrafiezadeh 30). There was something comforting in people’s “commitment to the change put to the test” (30). Demonstrations give a chance to everyone to sacrifice part of his life to change the world.

Analysis of the articles shows that Haas, Hochschild and Sayrafiezadeh address the same theme of mass protests, but they do it from different perspectives and points of view. They use social-political, historical and personal approaches to examine mass actions. However, by using different approaches and patterns of logical thinking and perception, each
of them provides a unique explanation that demonstrations are good for society. All three writers agree that mass rallies signify that general public is not asleep, and that people care about what is happening to their fellow countrymen. All authors conclude that mass meetings testify that society is attentive to government’s actions and will rise and present its demands should the government, politicians, or big corporations start bending things for their benefit or impose politics against people’s will. Authors agree that when people with similar ideas and aspirations unite, they can influence a change in society’s benefit. A lot of demonstrations seek to bring equality in economic, political, or even social sphere. Subsequently, many oppressive regimes across the globe fall because of mass protests (Guttmann, 60). However, demonstrations and mass meetings can turn into riots, revolts, revolutions and looting which may have both positive and negative consequences (Fang 472). Also, authors point out to freedom of speech and assembly as fundamental rights that people are entitled to. The authors note that changes do not occur rapidly in society, and protesters should be ready to go a long way before they can improve the situation.

**Conclusion**

When people get together to protest, it means they care and believe in the rightness of their cause and possibility of success in their confrontation against the government. Mass demonstrations and protests are powerful instruments that allow society to fight effectively for civil right and liberties, boost morale of general public, and unite people from different walks of life to fight and scarifies for the individual’s, society’s, country’s and humanity’s benefits.
Works Cited


