Is There Strength in Numbers?

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Collaboration is peace for the people; it unites individual voices in a resounding chorus. Collaboration is power for the people; it provides the momentum and magnitude to propel societal change. From the Civil Rights Movement (1954-68) to the 2017 #MeToo movement, social movements not only suggest that there is *strength in numbers*, but that numbers are vital for a movement's success. Yet, in examining cases of collective security, this foundation breaks under the weight of colliding national interests. In comparing the successes of social movements to the failures of international relations, it will emerge that there can always be strength in numbers.

I. Social Movements: The Power of Collaboration

In social movements, it takes a fire, not a spark, to burn down barriers of oppression. The power of collaboration is firstly demonstrated by the Civil Rights Movement, which sought to end racial segregation and discrimination in the United States (Carson n.d.). On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks ignited the movement when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery (Norwood 2017); merely four days later, 40,000 Black bus riders, boycotted the system. (Onion, Sullivan and Mullen 2010). Furthermore, this incident was responsible for Martin Luther King Jr.'s emergence as a leader of the boycott and a prominent activist of the movement, organizing marches including the Washington March of 1963 which involved more than 250,000 people (Lazic 2022). Finally, the flames of protest enacted systemic change in legislation with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, outlawing racial discrimination and segregation (Stanford n.d.). Here, there is strength in numbers.

A pattern emerges with the #MeToo movement in 2017, reinforcing collaboration and solidarity as an enormous force for change. Spurred by a wave of sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein, the movement erupted on social media and sparked national discourse and awareness on sexual harassment in the workplace (Brown 2018). Within one year, the #MeToo hashtag was used more than 19 million times, showing the ubiquitous influence of the movement (Anderson and Toor 2018). Crucially, the significance of collaboration was evident from the start: producing the New York Times article that exposed Weinstein itself was not a solitary job; instead, this was the culmination of months of tireless investigation led by a team of journalists and the bravery of women in coming forward with their accounts of harassment to corroborate the story (Kantor and Twohey 2019) – collaboration permeated every level of the movement. Once again, when the chorus of incandescent voices becomes too loud to ignore, collaboration manifests into action: as of 2022, 22 states and the District of Columbia have passed more than 70 workplace anti-harassment bills (Johnson, Ijoma, and Kim 2022). In social movements, numbers are therefore the direct sources of policy change.

II. Collective Security: The Pitfalls of Collaboration

It is easy to paint collaboration as a harmonious blend of united actors. Yet, transitioning from individuals to nations, the consistent failure of 'collective security' illuminates the cracks in the painting. The belief that there was strength in numbers was evidently held by the League of Nations, so much that the system of collective security formed the basis for peace-keeping. As detailed in the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919), Articles 10-17 maintained that an aggressor against one state was an aggressor against all states, which would form an alliance together to repel the aggressor (Guieu n.d.). Peace and security, it seemed, was guaranteed by numbers.

The League of Nations was wrong: by 1930, it was clear that collective security would not survive national interest. As the Great Depression fractured the world in 1930, countries turned away from international peace-keeping and disputes that would cost them money (Clare n.d.). As the first substantial conflict presented to the League, there was no peace and security when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, nor was there strength in numbers when countries suffering from the depression refused to impose economic sanctions in fears of losing trading opportunities (Costa 2011). The disastrous consequences for the League was made clear as Japan withdrew from the League in 1933 (Office of the Historian n.d.), and in the face of serious aggression, the League had failed. Thus, the Manchurian Crisis supports the notion that a nation's internal priorities will always come before collective security.

Similarly, self-interest preceded collaboration in the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935: as Italy invaded Abyssinia, Britain and France prioritized the protection of their alliance against Germany over international security. While some sanctions were imposed on Italy, the two major powers refused to close the Suez Canal (Italy's main supply route to Abyssinia), despite the fact that closing the canal could have ended Italy's campaign quickly (Moorhouse 2011). Afraid of losing Italy as an ally, the failures of Britain and France were further exacerbated by the Hoare-Laval Pact of December 1935, which demonstrated their desperation to retain Italy's friendship at the cost of losing Abyssinia (Costa 2011). This was an act completely contrary to the interests of collective security, rendering the concept of strength and safety in numbers meaningless. Hence, the Abyssinian Crisis emphasizes that collaboration fails when its means are irreconcilable with that of national interests.

The United Nations, borne out of faith for a peaceful world after WWII (United Nations 2022), did not lose confidence in *strength in numbers;* instead, Article 51 in the Charter of the United Nations (1945) reaffirms the principle of collective security with

the hope that the addition of UN independent armed forces would preserve international security despite potential conflicts with national interests (Ebegbulem 2011). However, such hope was short-lived due to the Cold War's polarization of the world into capitalist and communist spheres. Here, the structure of the United Nations did not account for a situation where the primary drivers of dispute, the United States and the Soviet Union, were also the founding members of the peace-keeping organization, holding veto powers that were exercised unrestrainedly (Husain 2007). During the Cold War, the USSR alone used the veto 18 times to protect their national interest against the United States (Stoessinger 1977), whilst the post-1945 climate did not witness peace but a series of wars in countries including Korea, Vietnam, China, Iran, and Afghanistan (Imperial War Museum n.d.). As a result, this implies that new mechanisms have failed to promote international peace above national agendas, and as long as self-interest persists to dominate countries, the constant expectation of *strength in numbers* appears to exist only in the abstract, not actuality.

III. The Interest Gap

Success in social movements isn't explained by an absence of self-interest; on the contrary, self-interest is a main cause for success. Sparks fuse into fires when individuals join social movements by choice, united by fierce personal drive towards a common goal: in the Civil Rights Movement, this was the end of segregation (Carson n.d.); in the #MeToo movement, this was the end of sexual violence (Gordon 2023). On the other hand, in maintaining collective security, countries joining in international disputes goes *against* national self-interest in most cases (certainly in those of Manchuria and Abyssinia), bound not by their own will, but by the covenant of the peace organization. Thus, self-interest remains embedded in the core of nature.

Moreover, another difference between social movements and international relations lies in the status quo. Social movements are driven by intolerable situations: within the word 'movement' contains the correlation of action and a desire for change; activists and protestors are emboldened by the hope for a better future, the *escape* of the status quo. In the international sphere it is the reverse: the refusal to collaborate is the refusal to plunge *from* the relatively-comfortable status quo into potential war and economic drainage – again, this is illustrated in both the 1931 and 1935 failures of collective security. The experience of the status quo is clearly tied to the individual; as such, personal interest is again highlighted as the determinant of collaboration's success.

Still, not only would it be naïve to wish for the eradication of all self and national interests; it would also be wrong to antagonize such interests as the reaper of failures. In social movements, mutual self-interest has been shown to incite societal change, creating an improved world in which more are content. Even in international relations, the realist school of thought sees global politics as a struggle for power and national interests yet does not deny the presence of ethics in guiding their foreign policy (Korab-Karpowicz 2010). Hence, one may argue that values such as human rights and dignity are amongst internationally shared interests, encouraging successful collaboration (Ota and Ecoma 2022). Thus, self-interest can be a force for good.

IV. Conclusion

While the power of collaboration is apparent in social movements, it is not as discernible in international relations. Yet, within this comparison lies a huge disparity: while individuals are free to pursue their own desires in society, the web of global politics and alliances is much more complicated; the delicate balance between interests and obligations contributes to the tumultuous successes and failures of international relations. Although it is unlikely that collective security will ever become a perfect

framework for peace, it is still one we should strive towards, because a future without collaboration is a future devoid of hope. Therefore, one must not regard global politics with pessimism, but with the faith that the universal pillars of empathy and human dignity will bring countries together. After all, there will always be strength in numbers.

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