

## Dangerous Dreamers

In the early 1900s, people who called for women's suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, or the right of workers to form unions were called rabble-rousers, instigators, and socialists.

So were those who demanded an end to lynching, or the establishment of a federal minimum wage, insurance for the elderly, or the dismantling of Jim Crow laws. Then it was the plea for government-subsidized health care and housing that made people nervous. These days we take many of these laws and programs for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

How did demands that seemed impractical or overly idealistic move from the margins to the mainstream, and from controversy to official policy? In many ways, the 20th century was a remarkable story of progressive accomplishments against overwhelming odds, and this progress—when and where it occurred—was caused by social movements that sometimes began with just a few people in one small community.

Because each change was ushered in by a separate movement, the democratic system we have today was never a tale of steady, unbroken progress. Social improvements came about slowly, and through relentless organizing on the part of a few who then persuaded many to care about their cause.

As a result, we have the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote in 1920; the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which created the minimum wage; the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed many forms of racial discrimination; and the Clean Air Act of 1970, which regulates the emission of toxic gasses created by factories, cars, and other sources.

Most sociologists believe that a society's structural conditions make a given movement more or less likely—that “the time must be ripe” for a movement to emerge, gather support, and bring about change. That's what Carl Oglesby, a leader of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, meant when he observed, “It isn't the rebels who cause the troubles of the world; it's the troubles that cause the rebels.”

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