Limitations of the Database

The chief limitation of this database lies in the variable quality of the information available. We prioritized generating a large variety of cases, in order to expand the user’s scope, to encourage wider comparisons, and to support creativity and theoretical development. Given that decision, we limited our detailed investigation of individual cases. However, cases include references that readers can use to further their own, more detailed study.

Our researchers use secondary sources, ranging from scholarly studies that went into detail and were guided by sophisticated theory, to newspaper accounts, first-person descriptions, and references in history books. Many of our researchers have also been limited to English language sources. We had to leave out many interesting campaigns because we could not get a minimum of satisfactory information.

For these reasons we invite readers to send us information on cases we have already included as well as cases they believe should be added.

Most of the cases have been researched by undergraduates in U.S. colleges, and therefore reflect another limitation: an understandable interest in learning about the U.S. experience with people power. As the database expands, we expect more leads and sources to come from people in other parts of the world. We specifically invite professors to get in touch with us to explore collaboration to increase the range of cases.

Another limitation is that the contextualization of a case may be controversial. The factors leading up to a campaign may be considered differently according to the point of view; the campaigners may consider themselves oppressed while their opponents may consider them well treated. We do our best to write in an objective way and to avoid assessing the merits of each side’s case, but the reader should be aware that bias goes with the territory in describing conflicts.

The cases are usually signed by the individuals who first researched and wrote them, but additional details are sometimes added and editing may be done under the supervision of the GNAD manager. The initial writer, therefore, cannot be held responsible for the final product; that responsibility rests with the GNAD manager.

A further limitation is that the cases include little information on the organization of campaigns. The quality and kind of organizing that go into a campaign can make the difference between success and failure. Further, whether the campaigners are able to hold onto their victory can depend on the kind of organizing that went into it; see political theorist Hannah Arendt’s classic book On Revolution (1965) for a powerful argument that the creation of alternative democratic institutions before or during the campaign can determine whether democracy is sustained or lost, once the initial victory is won.

Our researchers found a scarcity of information on organizational work in most of our cases; readers especially interested in organizational forms can sometimes find supplemental information for some cases in the field of social movements.

- George Lakey
10/08/2011

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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