



Impact of Nonviolent Movements on Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION

This project will examine the cultural impacts of Aung San Suu Kyi and Martin Luther King's nonviolent movements, through examples such as:

1. Changes in government policy
2. References in the media
3. Comparison to the influence of violent-protest leaders

In this case, the term "popular culture" is used to define everyday life and events.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Aung San Suu Kyi (1945- present)¹ was one of Myanmar's leading figures during its movement for democracy. As the daughter of national leader Aung San, who was assassinated shortly after becoming prime minister, she returned to Myanmar in 1988 from where she had settled in the U.K and became involved in the pro-democracy movement. She cofounded a political party known as the National League for Democracy (NLD). A focal part of Suu Kyi's ideas for the movement revolved around the discipline of nonviolence. However, as a result of her actions, the military government placed her under a house arrest that ran on-and-off for nearly 15 years. During her house arrest, she won the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. In the years following her release, the NLD won the 2015 presidential election; Suu Kyi now serves as state counselor in Myanmar.²



Aung San Suu Kyi



Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968)³ was an African-American minister that helped lead the American civil rights movement. His policies, much like Aung San Suu Kyi, involved messages of nonviolence and peaceful protests. His work was instrumental in ending the legal segregation of African Americans. During the movement, King worked on campaigns such as the March on Washington (1963), and the Selma to Montgomery March (1965). However, he was assassinated in 1969.⁴

The cultural impacts of their movements are significant because nonviolent methods are becoming an increasingly implemented and effective strategy during present-day. The results of their movements may teach us what we can accomplish as well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The basis of this research was conducted through analysis of historical sources and written papers. The website Google Ngram Viewer was also used to study the popularity of certain topics through time. Conclusions were then drawn from the results.

ANALYSIS

1. Government Policy Changes:

Aung San Suu Kyi:

The movement for democracy in Myanmar led to several political changes within the nation. For example, the 2014/15 Amendments to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Processions⁵ ended the legal imprisonment of peaceful protestors. The democratic movement that Aung San Suu Kyi led held a heavy emphasis on nonviolent methodologies. This clearly shows the impact that nonviolent protests can have on legislation and the approval that is garnered from it. In addition, one of the first mostly democratic, nationwide, and multiparty election within Myanmar was also held in 2015. The National League for Democracy (NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's political party) won, historically moving the country from a military-led government towards democracy. As democracy had been the goal of Myanmar's movement, one can say that this political change was a success for the movement.

Martin Luther King:

The American civil rights movement also had a definite impact on government policy. This is seen in Supreme Court rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (desegregation of public schools), and also the Civil Rights Act (it abolished the Jim Crow Laws and made discrimination illegal). Other legislation such as the Voting Rights Act were also put into place. A new political change, however, occurred when Barack Obama was elected in 2008 as the first African American president. These government policy changes emphasize the impact that nonviolent protests can have. These policy changes likely occur, in part, because of the public backing and raised awareness of the cause due to its peaceful methodologies, and the positive connotations that people associate with nonviolence.

2. References in the media

The first data piece was found using the online search engine Google Ngram Viewer, which displays graphs of a certain phrase/word's frequency in English literature over time. The data reaches until the 1800s, but in this case the graph has been shortened to begin in 1940. It should also be noted that usage of these phrases in media would be occurring more in areas of the world such as the U.S rather than Myanmar, due to granted rights such as freedom of speech. The second graph is from a study conducted by Erica Chenoweth of the University of Denver; she is the coauthor of the award-winning book *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*.

The results of the graphs show that nonviolent protests have grown in public interest over time, while violent protests have decreased. This is interesting because interest in nonviolent protests peaked in the 1960s, which was when the American civil rights movement was occurring, while public interest in violent movements began to decline. This shows that King's nonviolent movement brought public interest to the strategy during that time; this interest has continued to present day. Research conducted by the University of Denver backs up this point with the information that more nonviolent resistances have been occurring over time in comparison to violent ones. As a result, the usage of nonviolent movements brings more awareness to the cause and creates opportunities for further changes.

3. Comparison to Violent Methodologies

Myanmar: The ABSDF (All Burma Students' Democratic Front)⁶ was a student army formed after the 1988 uprisings. Their desire was to free their country from the Myanmar military government and restore democracy. However, a more democratic form of government was only achieved after Aung San Suu Kyi and the nonviolent movement she helped lead. Nonviolent methodologies are not only more admired (ASSK 1991 Nobel Peace Prize)⁷ but also attract participation from more diverse groups and are more supported by the public.⁸

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: During the American civil rights movement, activist Malcolm X challenged Martin Luther King's support of the usage of nonviolence to create change. He believed that more aggressive approaches were necessary to obtain their rights. However, the graph shows that Martin Luther King and his ideas have become more influential on the public mind over time, in comparison to Malcolm X, who drastically declined within the public mind after the 1960s. This shows that it is nonviolent movements that have an impact on popular culture because their ideas are more widespread and supported.

CONCLUSION

Changes in government policy and the growing number of references to nonviolent protests in the media are an example of the influence that nonviolent methods have on popular culture. The research shows that peaceful protests have become a more implemented and supported option, as well as resulted in real political change, due to its positive connotations within the public. As a result, people can utilize nonviolence to create more successful social justice and change.

Aung San Suu Kyi	Martin Luther King Jr
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amendment to Peaceful Assembly & Peaceful Procession • Nationwide Democratic Elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown v. Board of Education • Civil Rights Act • Voting Rights Act

Figure 1: Nonviolent Protesters Impact Upon Government Policies

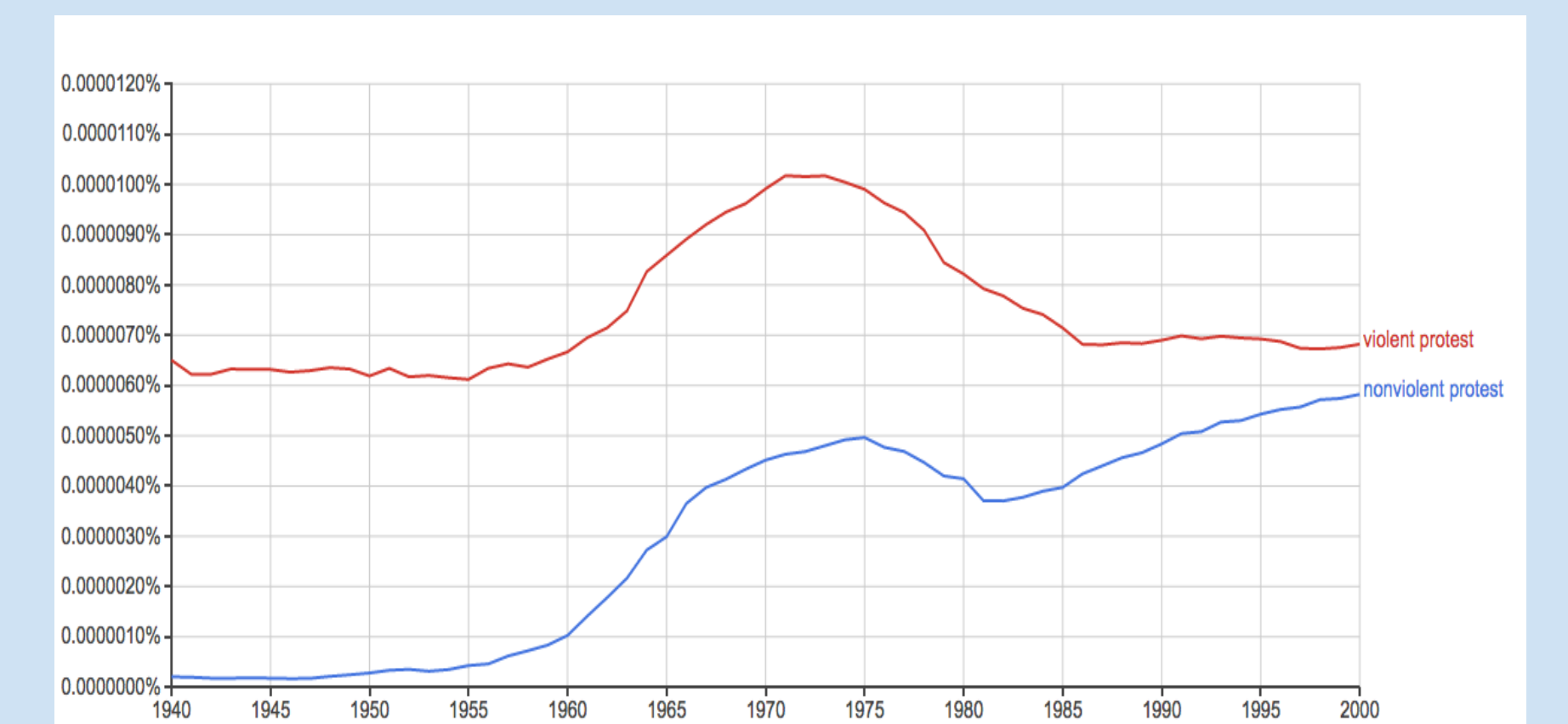


Figure 2: Frequency of the phrases "nonviolent protest" and "violent protests" in English books over time

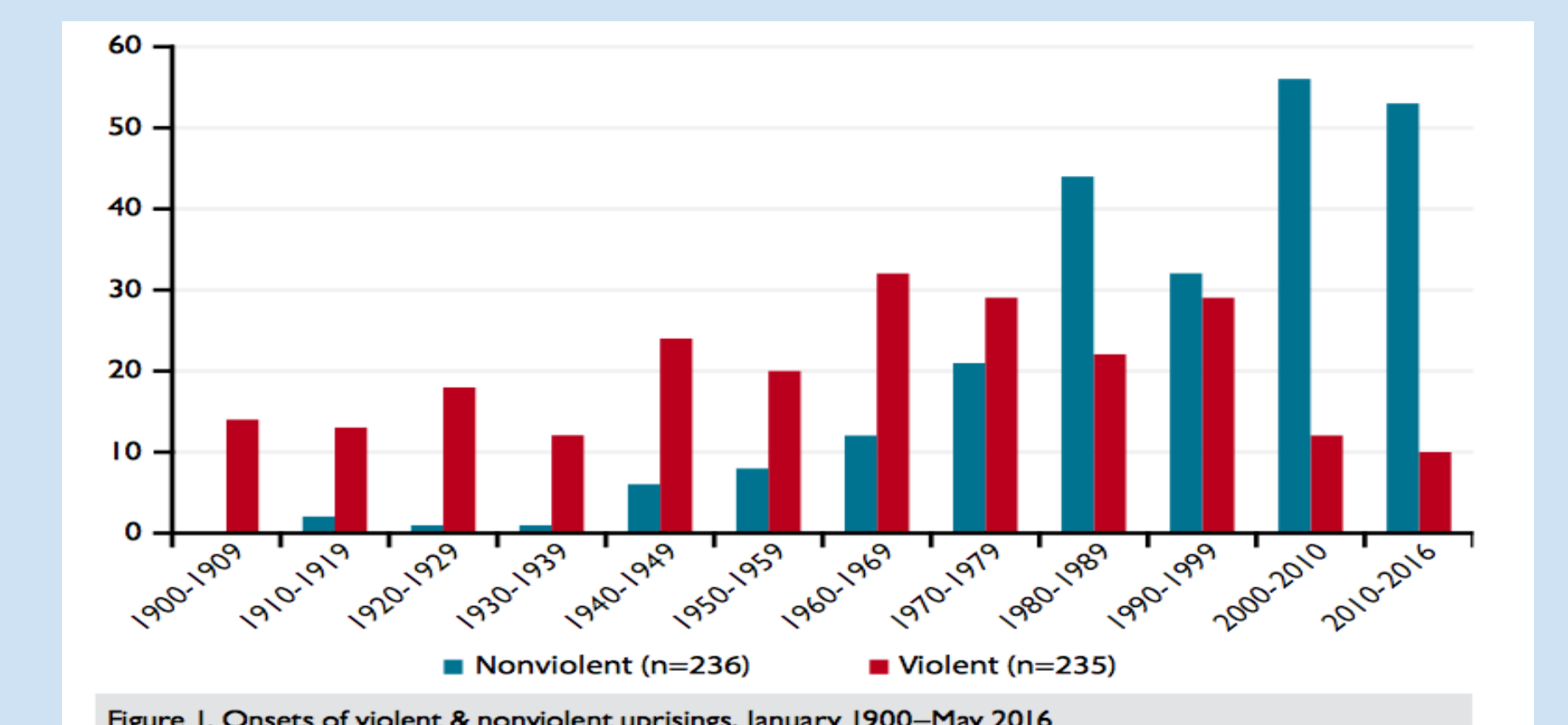


Figure 3: The Rise of Nonviolent Resistance (Erica Chenoweth, University of Denver)

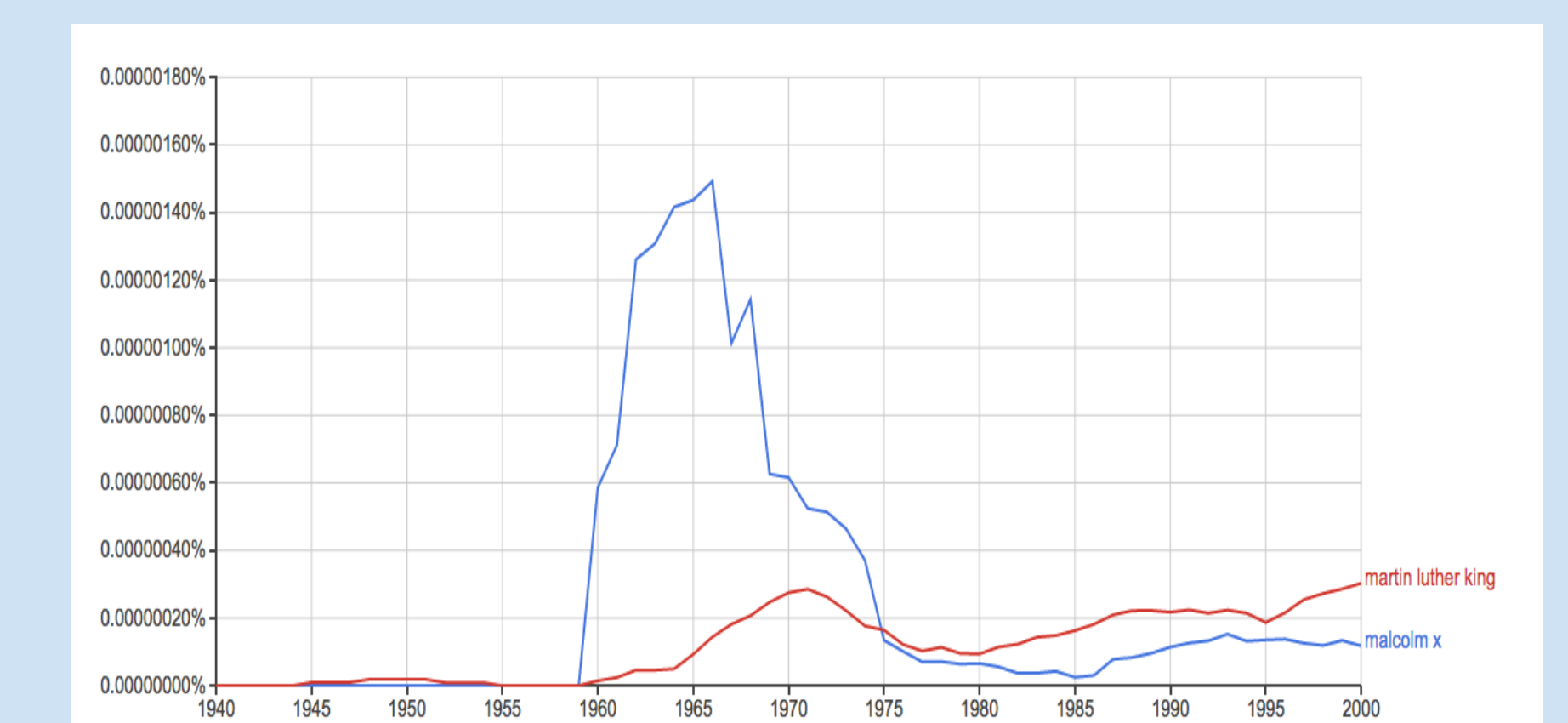


Figure 4: The frequency of the names "Malcolm X" and "Martin Luther King"

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