

Six Degrees of Separation

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By

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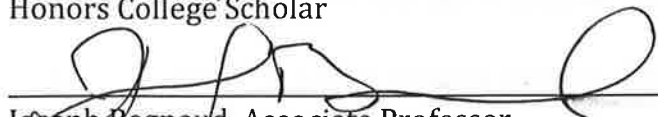
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Throughout the course of history many individuals have been able to make their mark and lasting impression on the world. While some chose to violently rebel against their government, others were breaking away from religious conventions in lieu of more scientific based understandings. Regardless of the motivations or intended outcomes of these persons, they were able to deviate from the “norms” of their societies. To me this ability to defy the ever-present systems and customs enacted in one’s community is a great example of radicalism at its best. The characters behind such extreme viewpoints began to intrigue me, and it was through my research of Huey P. Newton that I found many other radical thinking individuals, such as Jim Jones the cult leader, which could be linked to him. The more in-depth my research became, the more I began to realize that self and societal proclaimed revolutionary individuals such as Huey Newton, Jim Jones, and Cornel West could figuratively be linked together one-by-one due to their influence on each other either inadvertently or intentionally. Though a large realm of possibilities opened up when I decided on my path of research, I took it upon myself to examine six specific relationships I will refer to as *Six Degrees of Separation*.

Though my research was not organized chronologically, I will structure this paper in such a manner to more clearly define the sequencing of individuals. With that being said I will commence my series with Cornell West, a modern day philosopher and educator. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and raised in California, West has maintained a rather radical viewpoint on

society and its operation from a young age. As a boy West believed that African Americans were treated unfairly and not granted the full rights of a United States citizen, and as such refused to salute the American flag. During his teenage years he partook in demonstrations advocating for the rights of African Americans, and even went as far as to, “ask of his school that it offe[r] courses on African Americans” (“The European Graduate School: Graduate and Post Graduate Studies”). In his adult years West has not ceased to publically vocalize his disdain for the American society; it was his belief that the September 11th attacks on America were a way of revealing to white Americans what it is like for Black Americans in the United States. West stated that the feeling of being, “unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence and hated for whom they are” was nothing new to Black Americans and the attacks served as an example of the struggle (DiscovertheNetworks.org).

This leftist stance seen throughout the ideologies of West can be greatly attributed to his interest in the Black Panther Party, and its founder Huey Newton. The headquarters for the Black Panther Party were not too far from the church with West attended as a child, and it was the drive and passion of both the Panthers and Newton that gained his attention. West learned an invaluable lesson from the principles enacted by the Panther’s founder and, “began to understand the importance of community based political action that has been carried out” (Cornel West Biography). Newton was not one to sit quietly while racial injustices occurred, and instead chose

to revolt against such disparities; it was this aggressive attitude that helped contribute to the philosophical foundations that is seen in West today.

Huey Newton gained notoriety for his assertive and often aggressive nature, which was admired by Cornel West. It was the ideology of the Black Panther Party, and also the strong belief of Newton that, "Black people should have *full control* of their communities" (Swaim 27). In Newton's desire to fulfill such a request for African American independence, he often became the figurehead for Black Revolution. He used his persistent appearances in the media and ever-present influences in the public eye to further project his ideals. More often than not Newton came under fire for his methods of obtaining control for African Americans in the United States due to his non-objection to violence and an, "by any means necessary" approach. It was on October 28, 1967 that Newton demonstrated just how violent he would get for his cause. That day, and the actions of Newton which ultimately resulted in him being charged with murder, was marked with much turmoil. The events helped propel the Black Panther Party to notoriety as a, "a Panther Police shoot-out erupted, leaving one police officer dead and Huey Newton wounded" (Jones 415). Though the altercation did not result in the death of Newton, it supported by a term he used often, "revolutionary suicide", which was also employed by the cult leader and preacher Jim Jones.

Newton believed that regardless of the oppression that Blacks in America were facing, defeat of any kind was not an answer. It was up to African Americans to take matters into their own hands, even if it meant

facing death. To stand up for what one believes in so much that even death is not a deterrent was the basis of the idea called *revolutionary suicide*.

According to Newton it was, "better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them" (Newton). Not only did Newton interact with Jim Jones personally, such as through phone calls while Jones was in Guyana, but both individuals believed in revolutionary suicide. Jones strongly preached of dying for what one believed in, which is why in concern to the mass suicides he orchestrated and minutes prior to his death he stated that, "[w]e didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world" (Riding). This was the rationale utilized by Jones to explain the motivation behind the Jonestown Massacre.

Jim Jones did not begin his religious career as the corrupt and immoral revolutionary individual that many believe him to be in the present society. In his younger years Jones was motivated by social injustices and tried to integrate churches and businesses. However, as the years progressed he became more fascinated with the thoughts of revolutionary suicide and communism. These influences caused him to use his position to take in individuals that had fallen on hard times and were vulnerable to his control. The longer Jones preached, the larger his following became, and the more he felt his work was reaffirmation feel that he was the reincarnation of some of history's most influential individuals. One individual in particular that Jones believed to re-embodiment was Mahatma Gandhi.

In his young adult years Jim Jones was initially inspired by, and spent a great deal of time researching, Mahatma Gandhi. The power Gandhi had to captivate his audience and convey his message to the masses truly intrigued Jones. It was a goal of the cult leader to evoke these same levels of charisma and captivate his followers using the same methods of Gandhi. This desire to have the appeal of Gandhi soon turned into an obsession for Jones as he named one of his sons Stephan "Gandhi" Jones, and eventually proclaimed to be the second coming of the Indian leader (Jones). Jones became very disillusioned with his own powers and eventually used his charismatic appeal to convince, though some were forced, over nine hundred individuals to commit suicide. The ultimate violent end, which resulted from the influence of Jim Jones over his followers, was definitely not the peaceful approach that Gandhi advocated and gained notoriety for.

During the early to mid 1900s India, the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi, was experiencing a great deal of turmoil due to British control. In 1914, after twenty years of fighting injustices against Indians in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India and to the social injustices of the land. Class discrimination was rampant and many Indians were facing inequality; it was in Gandhi that the nation looked for guidance and a solution to their independence dilemma. Gandhi, "conceived the idea of social thinking on the basis of traditional non-violence," and used this approach as the foundation for building equality among social classes in India and gaining independent from Britain (Sinha). Because non-violence was the antithesis of the social

climate in India at the time, the peaceful protestor was viewed as radical. Nonetheless Gandhi was able to fuel this peaceful desire for equality among social classes with the help of Marxian theories he spent a great deal of time researching.

With the exception of using violence as a means for social classes to gain independence, there were many aspects of Karl Marx's ideologies of socialism that Gandhi agreed with. In order to gain independence and equality in India Gandhi was, "prepared to embrace the concept of Marxian socialism, conservatism, anarchism or even communism but only with due modifications effected by his tools of [n]on-violence" (Sinha). For the lower classes to speak out against the injustices of the society was a notion that both Marx and Gandhi believed in. However, Gandhi did not find violence to be a necessary factor in the battle for justice while Marx thought that a bit of uproar was sometimes inevitable and should be accepted in the journey for change.

To Karl Marx, social struggle was an unavoidable truth that occurs in all communities. His research into societies and how different classes of people unite for a greater cause became the basis of Marxism. He believed that, "progress comes from material and social factors—class struggles, technological change, and human labour;" meaning that in order for progression to occur in a community there would ultimately be some sort of influence from either the physical or societal elements (Ormerod 1576). In nineteenth century England Marx was viewed as a revolutionary for this

train of thought. Living only twenty miles from Marx was the evolutionary scientist, Charles Darwin, whose works affected those of Marx both intentionally and more inadvertently due to society trying to relate theories of evolution to class struggle.

The Origin of Species, written by Charles Darwin, was a text Marx read several times and referenced in his own scholarly writings. Darwin's book delves into the evolutionary practices found in the world and in sciences; after examining the text Marx even went as far as to say that, "Darwin's book [was] very important and serve[d] me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle" (Colp, Jr. 330). Marx did not fully accept all of the theories Darwin established on evolution and did not want Marxism or social problems to be viewed as the result of Darwinism. However he did believe, "the two views [were] coexisting in several ways," with each, "possess[ing] some general similarities" (Colp, Jr. 332). Marx was willing to acknowledge the theories of Darwin and, though his did not force correlations between his own works and the scientists, he did recognize that similarities were there and could be utilized to help elaborate on his own works.

Also a notable social revolutionary of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin stood by his theory of evolution though it gained much criticism within the European society. Publishing works that advocated for examination into how species transformed and progressed throughout time, Darwin became a pioneer for some and an antagonist for others. Though his publications came out prior to those of Marx, both individuals were viewed

as social radicals because at the time, very few people had the moxie to speak on such findings contrary to common beliefs. Darwin did not ignore opposing ideals often going, "out of his way to consider the views of those who he thought would be most likely to object his own" (Padian 353). Regardless of his considerations of other however, Darwin's views frequently landed him the hot seat. For the purposes of my research, such a result is quite beneficial because he becomes the catalyst in a line of radical and forward thinking individuals who were ahead of their time.

It has been my hope that my own work, *Six Degrees of Separation*, could be more easily understood as I laid out connections from the modern day philosopher, Cornel West to the nineteenth century evolutionary scientist, Charles Darwin. When an individual to go against the customs established by their society they are often labeled as an activist, a radical, or even a revolutionary. I have found six particular individuals that have not only been called just that, but have also been influenced be either other in some way. While some had personal exchanges with their inspirations, others were more indirectly affected. Regardless of how these interactions occurred, they were undoubtedly influenced, causing a secondary reaction, no matter how big or small, to the ideologies that have become so notorious for.

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