
Review of Henry David Thoreau's Writing, Civil Disobedience

There is an old saying that states that one should not build a house on sand; instead, one should always build a house on solid ground. Using this phrase as a metaphor in order to discuss the foundations of government, one can allude to the fact that citizens prefer to trust in a government of which the foundations are firmly built into a solid moral framework. In his work *Civil Disobedience*, Henry Thoreau presented his arguments for his general distrust of the concept of representative government at large, citing the American government as his example. Reading Thoreau forces one to beg the question: how should a population react if its members fulfill their civic obligations, but the government, in return, fails respect the rights and privileges of all citizens? Would a nation sink like the house built on shifting sands if its politicians lack the faith of their constituents? In 1837, the American government's attitude regarding slavery and the Mexican-American War convinced the lonely Thoreau to cease in fulfilling his civic obligations in the fact of politicians who failed to properly represent the American people. Thoreau, in this light, followed his conscience and sought to demonstrate to the American people that we all should possess a voice in political matters, which is an entirely agreeable manifestation of Thoreau's ideas respecting individualism, which remain appropriate today in 2016's political arena in which the American people struggle to let their voices be heard.

As an individual thinker, Thoreau wanted to follow his own conscience and analyze his personal ethics more deeply, which he writes can be "seen from a point of view a little higher; seen from a higher still, and the highest" (Thoreau, 194). Thoreau's musings on his own personal ethics lead him to think about the reasons behind laws and to consider the impacts that they create rather than following laws blindly. It not at all uncommon to encounter people who disagree with the effectiveness innumerable laws that exist in society. In some communities, the majority of the people might disagree with existing legislations that guide social obligations and individual rights. Just like these individuals, Henry Thoreau possessed an ethical dilemma in this respect: "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" (184). Thoreau firmly believed that if individuals would refuse not think for themselves, that the government would think for them, which would not necessarily be in the best interests of the general public. Thoreau asks: "Why has every man a conscience, then?" (178). His conviction was that the human conscience was made for each individual to follow their own instincts and that laws often prevent this freedom of moral choice.

If a needy man were to find a briefcase full of money and his friends were to try to convince him

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to keep the money, but he, instead, found himself moved by his conscience to look for the owner in order to return the found possessions to their rightful owner, this would be an illustration of man's natural individualism. Similarly, Thoreau's opposition to the American government's ethical standpoints regarding slavery and the Mexican-American War was an exercise of his own individualism. This can be perceived in the line: "If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go" (Thoreau, 185). This injustice to which Thoreau referred was the institution of slavery. Thoreau further discusses the lack of upstanding moral character in the government in writing, "Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset the people would not have consented to this measure" (177). For Thoreau, the laws and attitudes within the government that supported slavery were the most unjust of all. Furthermore, Thoreau claims that his conscience guided him to exercise his own voice through separating himself from mainstream society and through refusing to pay taxes to a corrupt institution: a government built upon sand, not stone.

In the manner reminiscent to a widow who grieves with the loss of her husband through isolation, Henry Thoreau expressed frustration with the corrupt politics of the American government, which spurred his withdrawal from society. Although these realities troubled him, Thoreau desired to let his voice to be heard. Thoreau's first step in protesting American moral corruption was his relocation spend his life isolated in a cabin in the wilderness. Thoreau writes, "I saw the barriers between me and my neighbors and particularly between me and the state. My perspective on my town became that of a foreigner..." (25-37). The barriers to which Thoreau refers in this quote are the differences between his personal views on government and those of the contemporary society. Thoreau felt as if he lacked roots in this society, which alienated him emotionally from his "home". When an individual expresses discontent with his or her situation, he or she possesses the option to leave the situation behind. For example, the recent results of the Brexit referendum demonstrated the typical Briton's dissatisfaction with the EU and urged the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

According to Thoreau, a physical fight against corruption in a political system of which primary characteristics are authoritarianism and oppression is wholly unnecessary. Thoreau writes, "Those who fail to oppose wrongdoing with action, but simply voice or vote their convictions, are leaving justice to chance. A real man refuses allegiance on any level to a government that pursues immoral policies" (7-15). The refusal to vote was, therefore, Thoreau's second step toward protesting against a corrupt government. Thoreau envisioned a society in which all were more participative, stating that "We should concern ourselves with living justly and not with reforming the government" (16-19). Through the following words, we can infer that Thoreau only wanted a just government that represented the interests of all Americans: "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it" (178).

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Thoreau's third step in protests was his refusal to pay taxes: "I have paid no poll-tax for six years" (189). Thoreau was well aware that his taxes were funding the Mexican-American War and defending the practice of slavery, two institutions which he fiercely opposed. If he were to pay into such a corrupt system, Thoreau would have been complicit with the existence of these institutions.

Many of Thoreau's concerns about governmental deficiencies remain relevant in that although Thoreau wrote his works in the 19th century; his observations resemble many of the contemporary issues that exist in government today. Although slavery has been dissolved as an institution, we are nowadays enslaved, at least metaphorically, through the lack of appropriate representation in a nation that enforces laws that benefit a small minority of individuals. An awareness of social problems without appropriate reaction is a dangerous form of apathy that fails to bring justice for future generations. In response to a problem being presented, a light at the end of this dark tunnel is immediately provided; this is for all individuals to listen to their consciences in order to respect human values through the idea of individualism. It fails, however, to relieve us of our civic responsibilities to promote a sense of unity among all people, regardless of an individual's background. Thoreau's advice was never intended to guide the dissolution of government institutions, but rather the resistance against undemocratic processes in a corrupt government, which is a theme that is relevant in any time and location.

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