Thoreau’s Case for Political Disengagement

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Henry David Thoreau’s long essay, first published under the title Resistance to Civil Government, now usually known as Civil Disobedience, is frequently described as one of the founding documents of modern political activism. Thoreau’s appeal to the right and obligation of individual conscience to resist political authority certainly influenced many of the nonviolent activists who followed him, including Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. But the essay itself was not a call for political or social action. It did not call for creating the governmental means of solving social problems. It was a call for the autonomy of the individual and the disengagement of the individual from civic entanglements. Thoreau’s “inactivism,” as we might call it, was for him a necessary condition of personal conscience.

Civil Disobedience begins by subjecting government to the individual conscience, outside of guidance by any external authority. The famous opening sentence is a general statement of Thoreau’s attitude toward the State: “I heartily accept the motto, ‘that government is best which governs least’: and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.” The author extends the criticisms of standing armies, which since the time of the Revolution had been seen by many Americans as instruments of tyranny, to government itself. He argues that government is often a means of abusing the people. Nevertheless, while he would like to see government governing less, he does not carry this to the end of abolishing government. Although Thoreau may be a philosophical anarchist, he specifically states that having no government at all will be practicable only when the people are prepared for such a situation, and he implies that they are not prepared in his own day. Nevertheless, he maintains that government is only an instrument through which people act and that it should leave people alone as much as possible.

Thoreau maintains that because law is an instrument, the laws passed by government are no better than the people they regulate. For this reason, he expresses no regard for law simply because it expresses the will or acceptance of a majority. If any one person may be right or wrong,
then any number of people may be right or wrong. Laws and government may be improved when they come from conscience. To put conscience at the service of law, however, is to deny conscience and therefore ultimately to vitiate the law and the government behind it.

Following his own conscience, Thoreau asserts that the American government of his time does not merit his support because it is unjust in two respects. It is making war on Mexico, and it accepts the existence of slavery in the South. Given Thoreau’s view of government, he does not believe that these injustices can be righted by the democratic means of voting, since voting simply expresses the acceptance of the will of a majority, not a dedication to the dictates of one’s own conscience. Casting a ballot commits the voter to the political order that makes war and recognizes bondage; it reduces the full and free person to a mere citizen, a kind of soldier in the army of civil organization.

How then does Thoreau propose to create a better society if he rejects the tool of government? He makes no such proposal. In an important but rarely cited passage of *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau observes, “I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live but to live in it, be it good or bad.” His refusal to pay the poll tax does not come from any moral compulsion to right the wrongs of the world, but from the ethical desire to avoid doing wrong himself. Unlike many of those who have drawn selective inspiration from his essay, Thoreau does not argue for disobedience as a strategy of political engagement, but as an act of moral disengagement from politics.

The disengagement is not escapism or a denial of the world and its problems. Thoreau rejects political action, but he seeks to replace it with personal action. When the conscientious person meets the agent of the state, in the form of the tax collector, that person can refuse to be a party to wrong-doing by refusing to pay taxes. Further, the objector should recommend that the tax collector resign his official position and also refuse allegiance to the state. If the government imprisons the objector or confiscates his property as a response, then that government, which is engaged in immoral actions, simply reaffirms the moral position of the objector outside the state. In fact, according to Thoreau, since money itself is issued by the state, a truly virtuous person will be likely to have little money or property and therefore will show little concern over its confiscation. Each act of refusal undermines governmental power, since this power only exists in obedience.

If Thoreau’s refusal to commit himself to any project of building a better society may seem at odds with some of his contemporary “left-wing” admirers, his views on money-making might appear equally discomfiting to economically conservative advocates of the free market as the path to individual and collective well-being. “Absolutely speaking,” he writes, “the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains for him; and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it.” Committing oneself to the market is no better than committing oneself to politics since both are ways of subordinating one’s own judgment to the imperatives of external authorities.

He moves from the theoretical discussion of his views on the relationship between the individual and the state to the events behind his own act of civil disobedience. He tells first how he had previously refused to pay taxes to support his family’s church, which he himself did not attend, again striking the note of refusal to belong or to participate. That was the first time he was threatened for an act of tax resis-
tance. Thoreau tells us that he afterward resolved the problem of whether he should support the clergyman employed by the church by giving local officials a written statement that he was not a church member and that he did not want to support any organization that he had not voluntarily joined. Although Thoreau is no admirer of the market, he does clearly accept the libertarian principle that individuals can only be obligated by their voluntary agreements of exchange. “I did not see why the schoolmaster [Thoreau] should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the schoolmaster: for I was not the State’s schoolmaster, but I supported myself by voluntary subscription.” This story of individualistic voluntarism immediately precedes the more commonly remembered tale of the tax protest against the Mexican War and slavery. The only way properly to understand Thoreau’s motivation in the second refusal is to place it in the context of the first. “If I had known how to name them,” he says of the statement he gave to his local selectmen, “I should have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find a complete list.” This is not the attitude of a man burning to join a social reform movement.

In the best-known part of the work, Thoreau tells us that he has paid no poll tax for six years. He explains that his refusal to pay upon meeting the tax collector landed him in jail for a night. Thoreau’s willingness to accept incarceration is not a consequence of his willingness to accept the authority of the state, but a result of his casual recognition of its sheer power and a means of removing himself from a political order of which he disapproves.

In his mind, the walls between himself and his fellow townsmen simply made him freer than the others, since he was acting in accord with his own moral directions. There is a good deal of the classical Stoic in his idea of freedom, but Thoreau’s subordination of the authority of the state to the conscience of the individual is contrary to the civic-mindedness of the Stoicism of Seneca or Marcus Aurelius. It is also hard to see Stoic endurance of hardship in his account of his incarceration. In fact, his time behind bars comes across as more of a vacation than a punishment. “The rooms [of the jail] were whitewashed once a month; and this one, at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably the neatest apartment in town.” He describes arriving at the jail and finding the prisoners chatting in the doorway until the jailer announced that it was lock-up time. His cell-mate was accused of burning a barn, but Thoreau says that the man had probably just fallen asleep in the barn while drunk and accidentally set fire to it with his pipe.

Thoreau compares being in jail to traveling to a far country, both because it was a new place to him and because it gave him a new perspective on his own town. From the windows of the jail, he says that Concord seemed as strange as a medieval land. When he left the jail, he saw his neighbors as foreigners, guided by odd prejudices rather than reason. The jail stay itself, in other words, is a withdrawal from civic connections, albeit less voluntary than the tax refusal. By separating Thoreau from his neighbors, the incarceration has given him one more opportunity to step back from his associations and the ways of seeing things implicit in those associations.

The essay ends by returning to its beginning and then by projecting the political philosophy introduced with the first sentence into the future. The refusal to pay the tax, Thoreau explains, was a refusal of allegiance to the government. In this way, he quietly declares his own secession. The refusal also suggests what Thoreau
believes should be the proper relationship between individual and government in the future. The progress from absolute to limited monarchy and from limited monarchy to democracy can be carried further by moving toward the individual as an independent source from which all power and authority are derived.

What can this literary relic of a bygone era say to us today? If we approach it as political and social commentary, and not as sacred text, we have to admit that in practical terms Thoreau appears to have been wrong in many respects. Slavery did not end because conscientious individuals seceded from their morally compromised political order. It was ended by a war carried on by many “file[s] of soldiers, colonel[s], captain[s], corporal[s], privates, powder-monkeys and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale . . . [often] against their wills, . . . [frequently] against their common sense and consciences.” Those who fought for slavery were on the side of secession, albeit for states rather than individuals, and those who fought against it were primarily interested in the preservation of political union. Ironically, many of the military leaders on both sides had obtained their early training and experience in the Mexican War.

Slavery ended through war and by the pursuit of political union, not by acts of individual conscientious objection. The nation produced by war also differed dramatically from the localized, small-scale, face-to-face society of the antebellum era. Political consolidation had been stimulated by the expansion of federal authority required for warfare, as well as by the fact that the war had been fought by the victors in the name of the Union.

The political consolidation of the United States was accompanied by economic consolidation, stimulated by war spending that promoted the development of railroads, the steel industry, and Wall Street. The decades following the publication of Civil Disobedience saw the United States change from a mainly agricultural nation to a major industrial producer. The total output of coal in the U.S. grew from 8.4 million short tons in 1850 to 40 million in 1870. In the single decade of the 1850s, railroad tracks increased from 9,021 miles to 30,626 miles. In 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad connecting the East Coast to the West Coast was finally completed, helping to bind the nation into a single market. By 1890 the U.S. had outstripped the leading industrial nations of Europe to become the world’s foremost producer of manufactured goods. If we accept Thoreau’s apparent view of the relationship between money and virtue, then the rise of American prosperity was a long slide into corruption.

That view of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a slide into corruption was one that many of that epoch would have accepted, and they would have pointed to the large-scale institutions that replaced individual action as the source of national vice. Henry Adams, for example, displayed a consistent sense of loss of the older, smaller, and more personal society in his great autobiographical work, and he bitterly portrayed the corrupt collusion of business and government in his 1880 novel, Democracy. Historian Richard Hofstadter famously argued that turn-of-the-century progressivism was a reaction of the old professional middle classes against the new corporate wealth, and efforts at anti-monopoly legislation can easily be seen as attempts to preserve something of the ethos of earlier times. The highly nationalistic strain in progressivism suggests, though, that the progressives were, however nostalgic, ultimately committed to action through institutions, especially highly centralized institutions, rather than
through the moral decisions of autonomous individuals. Is it anachronistic to wonder what Thoreau would have made of Francis Bellamy’s Pledge of Allegiance?

The corporate nation, the dominance of Big Business, Big Labor, and Big Government came to characterize the United States more and more over the course of the twentieth century. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, from 1914 to 1927, wage earners employed in factories producing products valued at $5,000 or more grew in number from 6,895,000 to 8,350,000, and the value added by manufacture nearly tripled from $9,708,000 to $27,585,000. By 1937, the 1940 Census reported, nearly 14 percent of all wage earners in manufacturing were working in establishments that employed over 2,500 workers, and three-quarters of American manufacturing wage-earners were employed by businesses with over one hundred workers.

During the Second World War, government and business grew even larger and drew closer together. In the war years, as the national government poured investment into the military and war industries, productivity climbed sharply. By the early 1950s, the United States was responsible for 45 percent of world industrial manufactures and for 18 percent of all the world’s exports. The elaborate organizational settings of the core firms that churned out this abundance created a new demand for white collar workers, so that the year 1950 began a steep increase in the proportion of the nation’s workers employed in managerial, professional, and technical occupations. Government, far from governing less, took on new responsibilities for subsidizing prosperity, insuring mortgages, building the interstate system and other highways, and providing funding for education at all levels.

In many ways, then, the United States did not move toward the independent individual after Thoreau’s time, but away from this ideal. When we lament our current economic difficulties, we look back to years of recent government-directed growth, not to pre–Civil War rural and small town life, and we generally call for more effective government economic policies. Much of what we began to describe, a century after Thoreau’s time, as “the American dream” is utterly incompatible with his dream of the future. While modern activists have pulled Civil Disobedience into our times by offering selective and distorted interpretations of the essay as a manifesto for movement politics, a careful re-reading of it may leave us perplexed by the distance between ourselves and that night in the Concord jail. It is hard to imagine Thoreau in Central Lockup today, even in Concord.

This distance between our highly centralized, interconnected society and that of the early nineteenth century creates the dilemma of how we should bring Thoreau’s call for rejection of individual participation in the politics of his time into our own. One approach might be that of intellectual history, understanding Civil Disobedience as one expression of early nineteenth-century individualism. From this perspective, we would read the essay as we read, say, Dante’s De Monarchia, for insight into ideas current in the past and for an understanding of how an influential author related to his own era, or we might look at Thoreau’s account as one example of cultural lag in the American mentality, describing our tendency to withdraw from the active struggle with social problems into the solipsism of our suburban homes as an inheritance from the old mythology of self-reliance.

I would not reject either the intellectual history or the cultural inheritance approach to this work. However, I also think that it can still speak to us as a living
document and not just as a literary fossil. The starting point for accepting *Civil Disobedience* as a contribution to contemporary ideas on civic life is to take Thoreau's libertarianism seriously. He has at least as much in common with Albert Jay Nock or Robert Nozick (look at the similarities between the ending of the essay and the last chapter of *Anarchy, State and Utopia*) as he has with Martin Luther King Jr.

For Thoreau, disengagement is a way the individual can serve the polity conscientiously, but it is also a manifestation of the individual's independent value apart from the polity. Individuals are prior to any particular form of civil society and have the right to exist for themselves. This right to live for oneself and for one's own purposes is not a repudiation of responsibility toward others, but the foundation of this responsibility. To the extent that people live for the sake of their governments or communities, they give up the power to think independently and to make moral decisions. The fully engaged person's moral decisions do not come from conscience, but from the external directives of community standards, laws, or business policies. The individual's detachment from the web of commitment is precisely what makes conscientious reasoning possible.

For my own part, I would not endorse Thoreau's political quietism without qualification. As a member of a family and a participant in a political order, my own conscience necessarily responds to the demands of my social position. Still, I think Thoreau makes a case for the moral disengagement of the individual that raises important questions for us today, especially for those of us surrounded by the intellectually conformist, politically correct culture of modern academia. If the private, apolitical realm of life dissolves in the public realm, as implied by the modern shibboleth “the private is political,” then in losing the right to live for ourselves, we lose the right to think for ourselves.

Absorption in civic involvement, from the point of view Thoreau gives us, diminishes the independent self and therefore diminishes the ability to think for oneself, which is necessary for the use of the full range of moral judgment. Moral judgment, in turn, is essential for true service to civil society. Paradoxically, only those who resist the state serve it with their consciences, and only those who hold themselves apart from civic cooperation can improve the political order. Thoreau's case for political disengagement foretells the distinction that David Riesman would make in the middle of the twentieth century between “inner-directed” and “other-directed” types of social personalities, probably because Riesman unconsciously drew on that same tradition of American individualism, which has not been a mere cultural lag but a voice in the ongoing dialogue of American political thought. The ideas and decisions of the “other-directed” type come from social expectations and demands, while principled introspection guides the “inner-directed.”

While Thoreau was opposed to slavery and to the Mexican War, he does not provide us with a blueprint for the peaceful and free society that he wanted to see conscience bring into existence. This lack of vision for the future follows from the inner-directed character of his thinking. Because the consciences of people differ, the coordination of people in collective action through formal government or informal community pressures will necessarily violate the principles of some. Thoreau's rule of conscience, then, requires not only minimal government but minimal social compulsion from any source. The ideal of a just social order is therefore entirely alien to Thoreau's rule of doing what one thinks is right. The author of
Civil Disobedience has little in common with the modern social justice advocates who claim him as an intellectual ancestor.

If Thoreau’s rule of conscience does not derive from any plan of an ideal social order in the future, then what is its source? This is a troublesome question and one that haunts individualist libertarianism in general. Thoreau has, after all, rejected the church of his father as well as the social order of his neighbors. His introspection finds no guidance in institutions or traditions. Although he does not make his moral philosophy explicit, his views are consistent with the natural-law perspective, the view that right and wrong inhere in an objective cosmic order that leaves its directives in each soul.

We should be cautious about accepting the implied natural-law argument without reservations. It is dangerous to assume that all individuals, left alone, will simply find the commands of natural law written on their hearts. The late Philip Rieff argued that a living moral order must be founded on externally established metaphysical truth and that subjectivism leads to a deadly relativism. There is, indeed, substantial empirical evidence that social order requires stable institutions that shape behaviors and consciences. The decline of the family, for example, can be clearly linked to a wide range of behavioral problems rooted in inadequate moral training. Arguably, Thoreau would find jail a much less pleasant experience today because he would be locked up with the products of decaying modern families and communities. As one re-reads Civil Disobedience carefully and critically, one needs to ask where the personal conscience that orients the individual finds its compass.

Looking at Civil Disobedience as an expression of our political traditions, we can see disengagement of Thoreau’s variety as the opposite pole of the American fondness for voluntary association, identified by Alexis de Tocqueville as a foundation of this nation’s democracy. The Tocquevillean perspective has enjoyed a revival in recent years in social capital theory, particularly in the works of political scientist Robert D. Putnam. Being a nation of joiners, according to the voluntary association point of view, has accustomed Americans to public action and given them connections to each other that help to prevent political and social polarization. Here, Thoreau’s experience with the demand that he support his father’s church might lead us to wonder just how voluntary the web of associations really were in early nineteenth-century New England. But his irascible response to the demands of association can also remind us that political freedom does not hinge on involvement alone, but on voluntarism. If conscientious involvement comes from choice, then this type of involvement can only exist if there is the possibility of the refusal to be involved.

Part of the contemporary significance of this work, then, is that it can provide an informative way of looking at debates about civic engagement, such as the social capital argument. We can read Civil Disobedience to complement our thinking on civic connections. If a society is to be based on moral decisions, then the degree of involvement of its citizens in public associations is not the only question that should concern us. We should also ask why they are involved and consider the commitments and motivations that lie behind associations.

While Thoreau’s essay can lead us to look critically at the foundations of Tocquevillean associations, we can also observe that the author is too dismissive of association in general. He reminds us of the importance of freely following conscience within a social order, but fails to
consider how a social order may be maintained. Thoreau’s libertarianism suggests that conscience lies outside of the social and political membership and provides the true source for that membership. Still, Thoreau never tells us what he sees as the source of conscience. If it is natural law, as I suggest, then how do individuals achieve access to the principles of that law?

Civil Disobedience, then, is not a call to activism or a program for some version of social justice, contrary to most modern readings of the essay. It is a manifesto of political and social libertarianism that displays both the strengths and weaknesses of that trend in American thought. The essay reminds us that we are not here to build the perfect world, but to live according to conscience. It points out that conscience is the basis of choice and association. At the same time, Thoreau is not only wrong in his predictions about the movement of the nation toward greater individual autonomy; he fails to ask some essential questions about where conscience finds its guidance and about how conscience can serve a social order that is stable as well as free. Reading this old essay as a living document requires us to look at what it really says and, above all, to argue with it.