

## HENRY THOREAU AND ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE MID- 19TH CENTURY

Thoreau argues that individualism has an effect on government. Individuals are responsible for injustices that they participate in. For example he states, "There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them, who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hand in their pockets and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing". Simply, by not acting upon an unjust law, he argues, we are giving in and supporting the government. In order to demonstrate disapproval, man must take action, and contradict those laws that are unjust. Any law that that degrades human personality is unjust. He also states, "If one honest man in the state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from his copartnership and be locked up in the county jail, therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America." In his argument he gives hope and confidence that it's on hold by someone persistent enough to stand up...

In 1849 Henry David Thoreau published an essay in which he outlined his views on government, and the duties of the individual to governments. He called this work "Resistance to Civil Government"<sup>1</sup>. It did not become known by its more common title, "Civil Disobedience," until it was republished years after his death<sup>2</sup>. The ideas that Thoreau presented in his essay were shaped by his New England upbringing and the events of his time. Thoreau was deeply influenced by the Transcendentalist and abolitionist thoughts that ran current through his home community of Concord, Massachusetts<sup>3</sup>.

He did not uphold the Federal American and Massachusetts state governments because he perceived their toleration of slavery<sup>4</sup>. Though Thoreau's ideas were unpopular with his more traditional contemporaries, generations of political thinkers have taken inspiration from them<sup>5</sup>. Thoreau's philosophies, revolutionary in the 19th century world revolutionized the 20th century political landscape. Students of Thoreau such as Gandhi and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, organized protests dissimilar in many ways from the sort of resistance Thoreau imagined, but they drew their fundamental beliefs from Thoreau's core philosophies.

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<sup>1</sup> - Gross, Robert A. "Quiet War With The State; Henry David Thoreau and Civil Disobedience." :p.1.

<sup>2</sup> - Herr, William A. "Thoreau: A Civil Disobedient?":p.87.

<sup>3</sup> -Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henw Thoreau.* .p:21,25.

<sup>4</sup> -Ford, Nick Aaron. "Henry David Thoreau, Abolitionist."p:363.

<sup>5</sup> - King, Martin Luther Jr.. "A Legacy of Creative Protest." .p:401.

Thoreau's upbringing in the social and political climate of mid-19th century Massachusetts had a direct impact in the development of the attitudes that he expressed in "Resistance to Civil Government." Thoreau grew up in an atmosphere of anti-slavery feelings. His mother and sisters were influenced by some abolitionist boarders to join an anti-slavery society. The Thoreau family became very active in that society and was well known in the community as abolitionists<sup>6</sup>. They were strong supporters of the outspoken radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and regularly read his publications<sup>7</sup>. In addition to this influence within his own family external conditions during his formative years pushed young Thoreau towards abolitionist ideals. He lived during a time of turmoil wherein the American people fought constantly over the issue of slavery<sup>8</sup>. The nation was divided over the issue of abolition, and support for it was scattered. Even in Massachusetts being an abolitionist was not very popular<sup>9</sup>.

Yet Thoreau was not one to check his morals and beliefs on account of social ramifications. Nick Ford describes how "Thoreau, knew nothing concrete about slavery when, under the influence of Garrison, he became an Abolitionist. However, he had accepted certain general principles about human relationships"<sup>10</sup>. In his upbringing Thoreau had developed sensitivity "to the demands of freedom"<sup>11</sup>, which was influenced and shaped by his family, leaders such as Garrison and friends like Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson in particular was extremely active in opposition of pro-slavery legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and a strong proponent of moral individualism.<sup>12</sup> Thoreau's association with him helped shape his own anti-slavery views, and ideas on how to act on them<sup>13</sup>. Both Thoreau and Emerson considered the Slave Act immoral and advocated disobedience of it in both word and action. Emerson is quoted as saying, speaking of the Slave Act: "I will not obey it, by God!" Emerson wrote and spoke against the Act extensively<sup>14</sup>.

Thoreau was equally vehement in his opposition of the law, but his dissidence took a quieter, more action oriented form. In 1851 Thoreau personally assisted a fugitive slave escaping from the South. This was even after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act which upheld the interests of slaveholders seeking to regain possession of their escaping slaves, even in northern states<sup>15</sup>. The Act

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<sup>6</sup> - Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. p:180

<sup>7</sup> -Ford, Nick Aaron. "Henry David Thoreau, Abolitionist." p:361

<sup>8</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> - Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. p:74

<sup>10</sup> - Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. p:362

<sup>11</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> - Brown, Thomas J. "The Fugitive Slave Act in Emerson's Boston." p:670

<sup>13</sup> - Madison, Charles A. "Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist."

<sup>14</sup> -Brown, Thomas J. "The Fugitive Slave Act in Emerson's Boston." p:674

<sup>15</sup> - Ibid.

further bound private citizens such as Thoreau to assist when needed in the recapture of escaped slaves. This disregard for what he considered an unjust law perfectly upholds one of the main tenements Thoreau developed in "Resistance to Civil Government." He wrote:

Must every citizen ever for a moment or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right<sup>16</sup>.

This passage illustrates the key to the philosophy Thoreau put forward in his essay, and is the essence of the inspiration that later civil disobedient took from his writings.

This idea of following one's own moral standard over the constraints of a civil government is a good indication of Thoreau's Transcendentalist influences. Thoreau was introduced to the emerging philosophy of Transcendentalism during his years at Harvard University. In the winter of 1835-36 Thoreau took a leave of absence from his classes at Harvard to teach school in Canton, Massachusetts. There he became acquainted and studied with the Reverend Orestes A. Brownson, author of *New Views of Christian Society and the Church*, which Walter Harding describes as "one of the seminal books in American Transcendentalism"<sup>17</sup>. Harding further states, "it seems inevitable that they discussed many of the new ideas then circulating among New England intellectuals. Brownson's influence on Thoreau at this formative moment in his career has generally been overlooked"<sup>18</sup>. In addition to the stimulus of teachers such as Brownson, Thoreau's education at Harvard prepared him to accept Transcendentalist beliefs. Thoreau's own disobedience of law, as evidenced by his disregard for the Slave Act, was merely a continuation of a pattern that had set years before even the publication of "Resistance," in which he describes how he had not paid his poll-taxes for six years previous. He then continues to describe the night he spent in jail for that offence. In his jailing Thoreau's philosophies on the state were put to the test by the state. Alfred Tauber argues that a study of Thoreau's life and work reveals "his underlying moral philosophy underwent no significant modulation"<sup>19</sup>.

His refusal to pay his taxes and his subsequent jailing was the inevitable result of the collision between Thoreau and the state he refused to state he refused to support. Charles Madison described the incident in these words: "He therefore submitted to incarceration rather than help support slavery; cherishing

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<sup>16</sup> - Thoreau. p:18.

<sup>17</sup> - Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. p:46

<sup>18</sup> - *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> - Tauber, Alfred I. *Henry*. Berkeley:U of California.p:189

liberty as he did, he knew he would feel freer in jail with a clear conscience than at large at the price of perpetrating a wrong"<sup>20</sup>. He accepted the consequences of his decision to abstain from paying his tax quietly and without protest. In fact those who paid his taxes so as to relieve him from jail did so against his wishes.

Another activist that Thoreau influenced through his writings was Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. In accordance with George Hendrick, who said, "almost all popular articles on Thoreau usually devote at least one sentence to Gandhi's indebtedness to 'Civil Disobedience'"<sup>21</sup>, we will now devote some space to discussing that link. Gandhi may have been introduced to Thoreau's writings as early as 1906, in reading *Walden*, and to "Resistance to Civil Government" between that time and his first imprisonment in South Africa in 1908. This introduction came while Gandhi was still living in South Africa, fighting the Asiatic Registration Act, which required all Asiatics in South Africa to register and provide fingerprints. In other words Gandhi read Thoreau first while in the formative stages, wherein he was still developing his form of resistance. V.V. Ramana Murti writes, "What Gandhi found in Thoreau and his writings was nothing short of a philosophical justification for his movement of civil resistance and the principal reasons for its choice"<sup>22</sup>. Gandhi himself said that the essay "contained the essence of his political philosophy, not only as India's struggle related to the British, but as to his own views of the relation of citizens to government"<sup>23</sup>. If Gandhi did not directly receive his fundamental philosophies from Thoreau he found them strengthened and reinforced through reading Thoreau's writings. There are further interesting parallels and indications of the influence Thoreau had on Gandhi. After Thoreau's death his essay "Resistance to Civil Government" became known as "Civil Disobedience".

The combination of the type of man Thoreau was and the environment he grew up in influenced him to develop a very interesting and revolutionary philosophy. He lived simply, according to what he believed was right, and he lived his philosophy as he understood it. Though the ideas that he presented with such eloquence in "Resistance to Civil Government" did not create much of a stir in his lifetime, they lived on in his writings to influence another generation of concerned citizens. Just as his teachers and peers influenced Thoreau, he became a teacher and peer to men like the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi because they shared a common philosophical brotherhood. It seems fitting to close with some of Reverend King's words: "As a result of his

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<sup>20</sup> - Madison, Charles A. "Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist." *Ethics* 54.2 (Jan. 1944): 110-123.

<sup>21</sup> - Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' on Gandhi's Satyagraha." p:462

<sup>22</sup> - Murti, V.V. Ramana. "Influence of the Western Tradition on Gandhian Doctrine." p:63

<sup>23</sup> - Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' on Gandhi's Satyagraha." p:462

writings and personal witness we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest. It goes without saying that the teachings of Thoreau are alive today, indeed, they are more alive today than ever before"<sup>24</sup>.

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- 7- Gross, Robert A. "Quiet War With The State; Henry David Thoreau and Civil Disobedience." *The Yale Review* 93.4 (Oct. 2005).
- 8- King, Martin Luther Jr.. "A Legacy of Creative Protest." in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris, et al. Vol. 7. Detroit: Gale Research, (1984).
- 9- Madison, Charles A. "Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist." *Ethics* 54.2 (Jan.1944).
- 10- Murti, V.V. Ramana. "Influence of the Western Tradition on Gandhian Doctrine." *Philosophy East and West* 18.112 (Jan.-Apr. 1968).
- 11- Tabuer, Alfred I. *Henry*. Berkeley: U of California P: 2001.

## 2. Թորոն և ԱՄՆ-ում 19-րդ դարի կեսին հակաստրկատիրական շարժումը

XIX դ. կեսերին ԱՄՆ-ում շատերը ընդդիմանում էին կառավարության հակաստրկատիրական քաղաքականությանը: 2.7. Թորոն այն անհատներից էր, ով բացահայտորեն ներկայացրեց իր մտորումները այդ կապակցությամբ՝ պաշտպանելով պետության հակաստրկատիրական քաղաքականությունը:

Գլխահարկը վճարելու նրա մերժողականությունը մի ձև էր՝ ընդդիմանալու մեքսիկական պատերազմին և ստրկատիրությանը: "Քաղաքացիական անհնազանդության պարտականություն" աշխատանքում Թորոն քննարկում է անհատական անհնազանդությունը ընդդեմ քաղաքացիական կառավարությանը և պետական անարդարությանը: Նա պնդում է, որ յուրաքանչյուր անհատի պարտականությունն է՝ դիմել քաղաքացիական անհնազանդության, չենթարկվել քաղաքացիական օրենքներին՝ հասնելով այդ քաղաքականությանը՝ չկիրառելով բռնություն:

<sup>24</sup> - King, Martin Luther Jr.. "A Legacy of Creative Protest." p:410