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## ON THOREAU'S CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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Henry David Thoreau; (July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862) was an American author, poet, abolitionist, naturalist, surveyor, philosopher, and leading transcendentalist. He is best known for his book *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay *Civil Disobedience*, an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to an unjust state.

One night in July, 1846, while Henry David Thoreau was living at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, he was arrested for not paying his poll tax. He says that he has never been attacked except by the government and that "wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions..."<sup>1</sup>. It is moral to break a law, Thoreau concludes, if that law "requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law ... What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn..."<sup>2</sup>. In fact, if a government becomes unjust or oppressive, everyone should resist it, peacefully at first but, if necessary, with force and violence. He wrote, "This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people."<sup>3</sup> Thoreau believed in the ability of the determined moral minority to correct the evils of the majority. Thoreau continued: "I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name--if ten honest men only--ay, if one HONEST man, in this state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co partnership (with the government) and be locked up in the country jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be, what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it"<sup>4</sup>.

Thoreau was released the next day because someone paid the tax. He gave a public lecture in 1848 at the Concord Lyceum to explain to his community his reasons for refusing to pay the tax. The text of that lecture was first published in 1849, under the title "Resistance to Civil Government." The essay did not become known by its more common title, "Civil Disobedience," until it was republished years after his death<sup>5</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

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<sup>1</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Resistance to Civil Government, Reform Papers*, Princeton, 1973, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Herr, William A. "Thoreau: A Civil Disobedient?" *Ethics* 85.1 (Oct. 1974), p. 87.

by the Transcendentalist and abolitionist thoughts that ran current through his home community of Concord, Massachusetts<sup>6</sup>.

In the essay, Thoreau explained his reasons for having [refused to pay taxes](#) as an act of [protest](#) against [slavery](#) and against the [Mexican-American War](#). He writes:

"If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, 'I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico; — see if I would go'; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute"<sup>7</sup>.

Regarding that *Civil Disobedience* was not only meant as a report of Thoreau's experiences in jail, but also as a proclamation to his fellow citizens to end their political passiveness and take action, one can say that it is a manifesto for social reform. C. Gayet interprets the essay as the first indication of a developing 'community consciousness' in Thoreau's thinking: "[...] it is evident that the night he spent in the Concord jail in 1846, for refusing to pay his poll-tax, marked his first deliberate involvement in the affairs of the society he was living in. Although Thoreau's act was basically an individualistic response to central issues in nineteenth-century America, its true import resided in a change of attitude towards man's place and significance within the community"<sup>8</sup>.

"Civil Disobedience" has become one of the ethical cornerstones of non-violent resistance movements. It is known to have been an inspiration to Mohandas Gandhi, who led the passive resistance movement for the liberation of India from British colonial rule. Mahatma Gandhi unlike most of Indian community wanted to stand up to Great Britain in passive resistance, he called it a "weapon of weak men". Gandhi believes that the way to stop the prosecution of his people is by civil disobedience. Mahatma Gandhi used civil disobedience because he knew that it was the only way that the Indian people could fight the Great Britain laws. 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>9</sup>. In a letter to P.K.Rao, dated September 10, 1935, Gandhi disputes that his idea of civil disobedience was derived from the writings of *Thoreau*:

"The statement that I had derived my idea of Civil Disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was

<sup>6</sup> **Harding, Walter.** *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, Princeton, 1982, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> **Thoreau, Henry David**, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> **Gayet, Claude.** *The Intellectual Development of Henry David Thoreau*. Uppsala, 1981, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> **Murti, V.V. Ramana.** *Influence of the Western Tradition on Gandhian Doctrine*. *Philosophy East and West* 18.112 (Jan.-Apr. 1968), p. 63.

well advanced before I got the essay ... When I saw the title of Thoreau's great essay, I began to use his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers. But I found that even "Civil Disobedience" failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase "Civil Resistance"<sup>10</sup>.

Thoreau's ideas also influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Civil Rights movement and the American struggle to end the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King Jr. just like Gandhi was a leader in his community and believed that civil disobedience was the way to change the laws and feeling that where set against the colored people in southern states of America. King believed that only way to get his point across is by taking action but he just like Gandhi believed that the action that has to be taking should be in form of non-violent protest and with out use of any physical force. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. described Thoreau's influence on him: "During my early college days I read Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I re-read the work several times. [ . . . ] As a result of his 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.

Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, it is an outgrowth of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice"<sup>11</sup>.

In his essay "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau states "I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least'"<sup>12</sup>, and then clarifies "That government is best which governs not at all"<sup>13</sup>. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau evaluates the federal government critically, contending that it is an artificial institution created by the powerful while acknowledging that it is believed to serve a purpose and is likely to remain a feature of American life.

Thoreau wrote that "If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the state will not hesitate which to choose"<sup>14</sup>. Thoreau was trying to convince people to stop paying taxes until the government gave up war and slavery. This non-violent direct action would adversely affect the country economically. Thoreau's goal was to force the government to correct the injustice out of fear of what would happen to the country's economy if they did not. Henry Thoreau believes that civil disobedience can be used only on certain conditions. These conditions are that the person must be willing to serve

<sup>10</sup> **Gandhi, Mahatma.** *Letter to P.K. Rao, Servants of India Society, September 10, 1935, Letter quoted in Louis Fischer's, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi. Part I. Chapter 11, pp. 87-88.*

<sup>11</sup> **King, Martin Luther Jr..** *A Legacy of Creative Protest, in Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism. Vol. 7, Detroit: Gale Research, 1984, p. 401.*

<sup>12</sup> **Thoreau, Henry David,** *op. cit., part one, 1849, p. 224.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

any consequences of the action, and if it is for a moral cause. He also argues that civil disobedience should not be used for violence or monetary gain.

Henry David Thoreau's Civil Disobedience shows his dislike of the government. We live in a world where everything we do is related to the government. There are many things that happen in which the citizens do not agree with but we have to or get ourselves killed or into jail. There are many things that the government has not done right but I do not believe that we should have a government at all, as Thoreau suggested. The government should not control the people but direct them in the right direction.

Henry Thoreau writes about how maybe we should not even have a government because the government does not do much. The government did not keep us free, settle the west, or educate us but instead the people did these things. He believes that things would have been more successful if the government had done less interfering.

Civil disobedience is often an effective means of changing laws and protecting liberties. It also embodies an important moral concept that there are times when law and justice do not coincide and that to obey the law at such times can be an abdication of ethical responsibility. The choice of civil disobedience and non-cooperation is not for everyone. We all choose to do what feels right to us personally. However, it is hoped that this paper will make such a choice more understandable to those who have wondered about this form of protest.

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 appropriate to conclude with some of Reverend King's words: "As a result of his 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>15</sup>.

#### О ГРАЖДАНСКОМ НЕПОВИНОЕНИИ

АЛИРЕЗА МАНЗАРИ

(Исламская Республика Иран, г. Мешхед)

#### Резюме

Согласно Генри Дейвиду Торо, человечество не должно допустить господства правительства над совестью. Он пропагандирует общественное сопротивление законам и правительству, действия которого считает несправедливыми. Генри Торо оказал огромное влияние на Махатме Ганди и Мартина Лютера Кинга, которые были сторонниками пассивного сопротивления.

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<sup>15</sup> King, Martin Luther Jr.. *op. cit.*, p. 401.

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(Իրանի Իսլամական Հանրապետություն, ք. Մեշհեդ)

**Ամփոփում**

*Քաղաքացիական անհնազանդության վերաբերյալ ակնարկի հեղինակը՝ Հենրի Դեյվիդ Թորոն պնդում է, որ մարդիկ չպետք է թույլ տան, որ կառավարությունները գերիշխեն և ճնշեն իրենց խիղճը: Թորոն հասարակությանը քարոզում է դիմակայել կառավարության օրենքներին և ակտերին: Կառավարության, որի գործողությունները նա համարում է անարդար: Թորոյի ակնարկը ազդեցություն թողեց պասիվ դիմադրություն ծավալող արշավների այլ առաջնորդների, մասնավորապես Մահաթմա Գանդիի և Մարտին Լյութեր Քինգի վրա:*