

# Thoreau and Revolution

It has long been the promise of revolutionary action that it will inaugurate not only a new social system, but also a new human. The tight, ineradicable link between individual and society necessitates this dual movement. If something of this gesture has been minimized in the Occupy Movement – as compared with, say, the Zapatista Movement – perhaps it is because of a material inequality so great that mere mention of personal change smacks of the egotism of self-interest that has fueled so many of our current problems. A proper thinking through of revolutionary activity requires that we understand societies, individuals, and nature(s) as feedback

justice, we were told the situation was changing. We had despaired; now it was time for “hope.” But to tell a despairing man that he need only hope to be cured is not much better than telling a sick man he needs only health to feel better. In either case, there is no transition, no logic by which we can move from one pole to another. There is, in a word, no process.

Thoreau tells us later in *Walden*, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” but it is prior to this, in “Resistance,” where he tells us why: “The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies... Others... serve the state chiefly with their heads.” The

moves on with the resolution: I will no longer. The resolved person must then find the means to effect their dissolution from the state.

This is what Thoreau means by “in earnest and with effect.” And it will not mean protecting ourselves as individuals of conscience while we send someone else to do our dirty work. Thoreau’s example, as pertinent in our day as it was in his, is the individual who says, “Let them try to send me to war, I will refuse.” Yet everyday she pays the taxes that send another person to the front in her place. To act in conscience then is not merely to refuse because of personal interest. It is to refuse because of an acknowledgment of one’s own complicity, and a resolution to end that complicity all the way down.

Those who have turned to Thoreau – King, Gandhi, many more – have not always repeated his specific actions. Sometimes we resist the state by refusing to pay our taxes, sometimes by refusing to buy certain kinds of clothes, or to take public buses. Indeed, in our present conjuncture refusing to pay taxes may help end the war, but it won’t help our equally important messages about the need for public healthcare and fair tax codes. This is why Thoreau will speak of action that must “belong to the hour” – belong to our ability to understand and act in the present moment.

It is this action – not the overthrow of the state – which Thoreau calls “essentially revolutionary” – though of course such an overthrow may be that as well. But a coup d’etat which occurs without having a proper conscience and resolution is not revolutionary for Thoreau; it is just more of the same. The true revolution is “Action from principle – the perception and performance of right.” Such action may not have the visible effects of total revolution, but it will have been a moment in a long march to real and lasting change. Moreover, it will have been a moment which helped end our despair, and which continues to nourish our future actions.

Such action for Thoreau need not be physical. While mere language – signing a petition, say – may be useful but not revolutionary, true expression is. Words as individual parts of a language are empty: We. The. Ninety. Are. Nine. Percent. But



loops of mutual dependence and power.

What such an understanding gives us is not a fall back into mere subjectivity or a banal environmentalism. Rather it forces us to confront the environment and the social as things which we are responsible for making, at the same time that they are responsible for making us. There is arguably no greater statement on this situation and its meaning for politics than Henry David Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government,” or, as it is better known, “Civil Disobedience.”

Thoreau’s aim in “Resistance” is to unmask the workings of political despair. Despair, for many of us, was the position in which we found ourselves in 2008. After eight years of seeming impossibility for political

beginning of despair then is a refusal to acknowledge our relationship to the state. Rather than being its mutually constitutive part, we merely serve it. The only service it does us in response is to lead us into despair. And acts of desperation – acts which for Thoreau include diversions from our goal, “the games and amusements of mankind” – can lead us nowhere.

The beginning of overcoming despair is thus to refuse the condition in which we serve the state chiefly with our bodies and our heads, and begin to resist the state by our conscience. This resistance does not take the mere form of hypocritical opposition – to petition the government while doing nothing “in earnest and with effect” to change the situation. It begins with the concession – I serve the state – and

expression forms those words into an action of constituting a political unity: “We are the ninety-nine percent.” If the phrase feels good to say, it is because it is essentially revolutionary. And if it someday feels good to remember, it will be because we no longer have cause to say it, because the ninety-nine will have become one, and the vast injustices of the present will have been overcome.

But we are not there yet. And arriving there for Thoreau will mean the difficult work of acting from conscience and being resolved to find our means of action. This difficulty is compounded by the need to be aware of the risks we are taking. Our actions must be thoughtful: “consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil.” Such were, for example, the consequences of the Iraq War. No one would deny that Saddam Hussein should not have remained in power, but in the war effort there was no action from conscience, and no precision in how to go about achieving change, and the resulting quagmire came as no surprise to many of us.

Thoreau also has a word on violence when it comes to action. His interest is a “peaceable revolution.” For Thoreau this is not a commitment to passivity and non-violence. It is a commitment to stop committing violence. We are violent everyday in that we support others to be violent by our very existence in an unjust world. If we are to be humans of conscience, then we must be resolved to ending violence. For Thoreau the means to this must themselves be peaceable, for if we are ourselves violent then we are living in contradiction. To be contradictory is to be at war with ourselves, and to be at war with ourselves is nothing other than despair. For remember that despair began when we refused to acknowledge that we were the makers of our own world by our participation in it. In other words, it began when we pretended to be whole when we were in fact split between our conscience and our daily lives. A life of conscience unites our vision and our actions – “the perception and performance of right.”

This performance is not momentary, it is perpetual, it demands commitment. When we have gained conscience, when we have found our action, then, “Let your life be a constant friction to stop the machine.” The path to overcoming despair which began with conscience ends with conviction, with the willingness to give one’s life to a cause. This does not necessarily mean martyrdom, imprisonment, or abandonment of obligation. It means giving your life, not some abstract idea of “a revolutionary life.” It means giving what you can to overcome despair, and to help others to overcome theirs. And lest we fret that our attempts at change are frustrated no matter how much we give, Thoreau leaves us with this: “For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever.”

-Avi Alpert

