

It Could Be Worse: Perceived Passivity Prevails in Civil Disobedience

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Although civil disobedience can be a very effective means of resistance and protest, there are certain limitations that arise from its very nature. These limitations can be specifically evidenced in the case of the fight to end apartheid in South Africa. In this thesis I will examine the strengths of passive resistance as well as explore the limits of civil disobedience through several historical examples. Furthermore, it is imperative to evaluate cases of paralleling violent movements which heavily influenced oppressive powers. Ultimately, it may have been favorable for such oppressors to succumb to passive forces because they provided the only deterrence to the overwhelming destruction of violent revolt.

As a revolutionary, Henry David Thoreau is hardly noteworthy, spending only a night in jail for his refusal to pay taxes as protest to American slavery and the Mexican War. The basis for his moral protest, while it was a just and righteous cause, is inconsequential when paralleled with the effect that his message had when written in his magnificent prose. The revolutionary ideas he advocated in “Civil Disobedience” spread beyond the United States and influenced the freedom and apartheid abolition movements in India and South Africa. Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela embraced Thoreau’s concepts in their struggles for self-determination, as did the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States, and the struggles of Cesar Chavez to achieve fair wages and safe working conditions for field workers in California. While Thoreau did not create a great change in his contemporary society, he is now immortalized for the influence that his philosophy has had on many human rights movements worldwide.

Thoreau’s writings expound on the condition of the United States at the time they were published. His two objections to the current affairs were those of the Mexican-American War and the institution of slavery. His stance was that these affairs were unjust and immoral and since they were supported and perpetrated by the government, then the government itself was immoral and unjust. Likewise, any man who supported the state by paying taxes or taking benefit from the government in any way was immoral and unjust as well. Through this concept, Thoreau developed the idea of civil disobedience, the willful and deliberate violation of the law by the individual citizen. Although Thoreau’s protest was a non-violent act, his text did not specifically condemn violence. By refusing to pay taxes and consequentially spending a night in jail, Thoreau upheld his morals and demonstrated a peaceful rejection of the government and its policies.

The British ruled their India colony oppressively in order to exploit it for its resources. Prior to British intervention, India was composed of many small, self-sufficient communities. Great Britain fostered a monoculture in which products such as cotton, jute, tea, and indigo were produced for British consumption and manufacture. The drain on India’s ability for independent subsistence caused extreme poverty and starvation among Indians. Ultimately, these oppressive strategies and the forced dependence inherent of colonialism united the Indian nation against a common enemy, the British. Mohandas Gandhi emerged as their leader of civil disobedience to challenge British imperialism. Without Gandhi, the various Indian resistance movements were apt to erupt in violence and their numbers could

be quite imposing. This Gandhi's primary strength, to negotiate with the British that violent revolution among the masses was the alternative. If something happened to Gandhi, then India would erupt in violence. All Indian factions were galvanized by this single man and the British weighed their potential losses against the possible alliance of an independent Indian partner.

As in the case of India, the civil rights movement in the U.S. had met with brutal oppression under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Simultaneous movements of the Black Panthers and Malcolm X evolved. Whereas King preached non-violence and civil disobedience, the Panthers and Malcolm X advocated change by any means necessary. The struggle for civil rights in the U.S. had two options: violent or nonviolent. Typically, history tells that the civil rights movement was successful because of the nonviolent methods lead by King and glosses over the actions taken by violent organizations. Freedom marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and acts of passive resistance are the acknowledged means by which the equal rights for African-Americans were acquired, but nothing is said of the violent option. It is therefore useful to acknowledge the violent movements and explore their effectiveness in an attempt to analyze the effectiveness of the passive civil rights movement.

In South Africa, the struggle to abolish apartheid was initially cast as a nonviolent cause. Under the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela, the people of South Africa rallied together in acts of passive resistance to challenge the domination of the white minority over the black majority. After years with little to show for accomplishments, the ANC developed an underground violent faction that called itself Umkhonto we Sizwe. The organizing view of this organization was expressed by Mandela in the following way:

The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices – submit or

fight. That time has come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means in our power in defense of our people, our future, and our freedom. (Mandela, 4)

Thus, while the ANC maintained its passive stance towards change, it coincidentally, but secretly, supported the violent measures taken by Umkhonto. In addition, there were many other radical and violent sects that revolted in South Africa at the time. By granting the ANC victory over apartheid, the National Party avoided a bloodbath of more violent and destructive methods

In California, Cesar Chavez worked with the United Farm Workers to achieve decent wages and safe working conditions. The struggle to achieve these means was approached at length through passive resistance. Boycotts and strikes were used to persuade farm owners and growers into granting the wishes of the UFW. Paralleling these attempts though, the Teamsters Union took more aggressive measures. With the intervention of the teamsters, the UFW were granted the concession of growers.

Although the accomplishments that were made in all of the mentioned examples are attributed to passive factions, they did not exist alone as the only movements of the time. It seems that these movements gained more support because they were more appealing to average citizens than violent revolt. By acknowledging the role of the parallel violent movements operating concurrently with non-violent movements in each geographical location and time-period, we can perhaps identify them as contributing factors leading toward success of the non-violent movement, perhaps even see them as a major cause of change. Through historical research it is possible (and important) to note these instances, and to credit them with some of the accomplishments that have moved so many contemporary societies towards the goal of securing more respect and protection for human rights.

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