



“MEN FIRST, SUBJECTS AFTERWARD”

Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,”
and the Thoreauvian Echoes of 1968 and After

Reflecting on the abolitionist John Brown, whom he strongly supported and defended in the last years of his life, Henry David Thoreau noted that “the art of composition is as simple as the discharge of a bullet from a rifle, and its masterpieces imply an infinitely greater force behind them” (“The Last Days of John Brown” 71). Thoreau was referring to the truthfulness of man in relation to his speech, not the effect of man’s words; but if *speaking the truth* was the issue—“this first, this second, this third” (71)—then it only follows naturally that such masterpieces of composition imply an infinitely greater force not only “behind them,” but also resulting from them, evoked by them in future circumstances initially unpredictable. Thoreau fired his bullet in Concord Lyceum in the winter of 1848 by delivering a speech on the rights and duties of the individual in relation to the government, later to be known as “Civil Disobedience.” His target then was very near, namely his fellow Americans, but—as always with Thoreau—it was universal, too.

Now, a hundred and seventy years later, we know sufficiently enough about Thoreau’s powerful universal gunshot which zoomed across borders of both place and time in the course of the twentieth century: to India in the 1930s, to Denmark in the 1940s, and to Prague and Paris in the late 1960s. And, of course, to the United States in the 1960s. This was the time when a new generation of Americans commenced to envision themselves in a political context, which provoked a new interest in Thoreau’s work and brought in the yet unknown figure of Thoreau the politi-

Albena Bakratcheva
New Bulgarian University
Sofia
Bulgaria



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6517-6854>

cal thinker and dissenter. Thus began Henry Thoreau's political reputation in the United States. Up until then, the single most famous fact of Thoreau's life had been perceived as his going off to Walden Pond in order to drive life into a corner; in the Sixties that was superseded by the night Thoreau spent in jail in order to drive the government into a corner. Thoreau became not only relevant, but almost a popular icon. "He became important to the reform impulse of the 1960s [Michael Mayer observes] and as that impulse spread, so did Thoreau's political reputation" (152). In these years *civil disobedience* was already a phrase used by everyone—from the Beats to the Hippies to the Pacifists; Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement was gaining force exactly through their use of civil disobedience, or active nonviolence (until violently cut short itself with King's assassination on April 4th, 1968). Certainly, the Thoreauvian echoes were clear—and clearly effective—in both the United States and Europe of the 1960s. And so were they in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, when *civil disobedience* became the slogan of all the peaceful revolutions which led to the end of the socialist régime. Eastern Europe rephrased *civil disobedience* as the *Velvet Revolution* and subsequently entirely transformed the face of this part of the world.

Rather than discuss these more or less evident, well-known, and well-dealt with echoes of Thoreau's great political idea, I will consider Thoreau's idea itself as revealed by the recent reassessing contextualization (Robert W. T. Martin, W. Caleb McDaniel, Laura Dassow Walls, Daniel S. Malachuk, Jennet Kirkpatrick, Jack Turner, and others) of Thoreau's dissent. I will approach Thoreau's nonconformist gesture by articulating his concepts of civil disobedience and of wildness and will argue that this relation provides an additionally nuanced perspective towards the civic significance of both the gesture of dissent itself and the enormous social and political impact of the essay which explains it.

In his 1968 convocational speech entitled "Civilized Disobedience," Walter Harding, distinguished Thoreau scholar, and founder of the Thoreau Society back in 1941, emphatically declared that "[i]f 1775 and 1848 are known as the years of revolution, then 1968 will go down as the year of civil disobedience." Harding then continued:

It has been almost impossible any day of this year to pick up a copy of *The New York Times*, or in fact any other paper, without seeing some- place on the front page reference to civil disobedience in action whether at Columbia University, the Chicago Convention, the Pentagon, the streets of Paris, or Tokyo, Berlin, or Prague. (1)

Harding clearly states his own position as a speaker, as well as that of his 1968 upstate New York, predominantly academic audi- ence: he will speak as a “good citizen” addressing his fellow “good citizens” in order to explain to them the essence of the idea of civil disobedience, which he defines as “a deliberate violation of a civil law *on moral grounds* with the willingness to take the consequences of that violation” (3). In the whole course of his convocational speech Harding provides arguments in favor of Thoreau’s idea (including that civil disobedience is, in fact, a deeply positive act; it offers a viable method for bringing about the repeal of an immoral law when other alternatives are not available; it is a deliberate choice made for the sake of dramatizing the immorality of the law, and more). But at the same time—as a good citizen—he keeps warning his audience that civil disobedience is not and should not be taken as an all-applicable universal remedy. Thus, Harding insists, every good citizen should know that civil disobedience is to be practiced *only when* all ordinary channels of reform have been exhausted; that it must always be based on moral grounds and never be an objection merely for objection’s sake; and that he who disobeys the law must maintain respect for his fellow citi- zens, must always keep an open mind, and must be certain that in obtaining his own rights he is not violating the rights of others (6–9). Harding is convinced that “Civil disobedience takes a courage that few people possess,” just as he is convinced that “the majority and the government are usually in the right”—though “not always in the right.” And he comes up with his 1968 example right away: “Look at Prague today. Who is right—the government which is per- mitting the Soviet to impose its will on the people or the young people who are leading the resistance movement there?” (9–10). Although Harding leaves the question unanswered, it is more than obvious that his sympathies lie with the young people of Prague. The fact remains, however, that his 1968 convocational speech

Albena Bakratcheva
New Bulgarian University
Sofia
Bulgaria

both defends civil disobedience and, at the same time, pleads for caution in using it.

“Civil disobedience must be *civilized* if it is to work,” Harding insists, and therefore titles his speech not “Civil Disobedience” but “*Civilized* Disobedience.” Because, he explains, “‘civil’ also means ‘polite’ and ‘courteous’—and Thoreau was thinking of the word just as much in that sense too” (10). Of the last, however, we cannot be certain at all. Not simply because Thoreau’s essay was first published as “Civil Disobedience” in 1866, four years after Thoreau’s death – and so the title was most likely not even given by Thoreau – but also because in the last years of his life Thoreau openly supported John Brown, and thus vigorously defended actions of violence rather than non-violent resistance, not to speak of “politeness” and “courteousness.” It seems that in the turmoil of 1968 Harding had found himself in the need of ‘moderating,’ or ‘civilizing’ Thoreau: hence, he would recognize the worldwide glory of Thoreau’s civil disobedience firing of a gunshot, but would still wish to ‘slow down’ the bullet. Interestingly enough, in 2016 or almost half a century after Walter Harding’s convocational speech, Richard J. Schneider published his study of Thoreau’s work under the title *Civilizing Thoreau*. Schneider makes a different point than Harding’s and is interested in what he calls Thoreau’s ‘human ecology,’ or how Thoreau, in his own epoch’s context of the emerging social sciences, applies ecological principles to both nature and society. Yet both authors, in their own ways, imply, in fact, that Thoreau and our thinking of Thoreau need some ‘civilizing,’ or, in other words, that ‘civilizing’ Thoreau is very much a matter of ‘taming’ Thoreau and our thinking of him and his ideas.

Had Henry Thoreau known about these interpretative impulses, he would certainly have been delighted: because what they suggest is very much the recognition of the ‘wild,’ if not even the too ‘wild’ Thoreau. All his life Thoreau had believed in and pleaded for ‘wildness:’ “wildness whose glance no civilization can endure” (“Walking” 129), as he put it in his late years. He advocated wildness of thinking and living, of mind and spirit, of nature and society, wildness of deliberate being beyond—sometimes even against—any disliked and morally unacceptable limitations. Such was the wildness Thoreau meant when he stated that “Life consists

with Wildness” (130). Such was the *wild* Thoreau who spent a night in jail in the summer of 1846, and in the winter of 1848 addressed his fellow Concordians with a lecture later to be known as “Civil Disobedience.” Perhaps in his peculiar phrasing Walt Whitman was paying ‘wild’ Thoreau the best tribute when he shared with his biographer that it was “his lawlessness—*his dissent*—his going his absolute own road let hell blaze all it chooses” to be the “one thing about Thoreau that keeps him very near to me” (Petrulionis 112).

By 1848, as Laura Dassow Walls notes in her outstanding 2017 biography of Thoreau, “A winter lecture by Henry Thoreau was becoming a regular feature of Concord life” (246). Thoreau was already a successful and respected lecturer when on January 26th, 1848 he stepped on the lyceum podium again, this time to explain, after eighteen months of simmering, why he had gone to jail rather than pay his poll tax. Bronson Alcott, Thoreau’s fellow tax resister, had already sounded off at the lyceum about nonresistance. This, however, was different: “no one in town had taken the impractical Alcott [...] all that seriously,” Laura Walls observes, “but Thoreau was one of Concord’s own sons and they took him seriously indeed” (211). Moreover, the circumstances of his Walden life had already turned Thoreau into a celebrity: meeting Thoreau had become “an Event, the kind of thing one retailed to posterity” (195). By that time Henry Thoreau really (and in the very Winthropian sense, indeed) was in “the eyes of all people” and so he simply *had to* explain his action. He called his new lecture “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” significantly transforming the title of a required reading at Harvard—William Paley’s essay “On the Duty of *Submission* to Civil Government.” Instead of sticking to Alcott’s philosophy of ‘nonresistance,’ Thoreau uses Frederick Douglass to subvert Paley: he states that a smooth-running social machine is not an ultimate social good and when the smooth-running machine of civil government causes injustice, the citizen’s moral duty is not submission, but resistance. Not surprisingly, in 1849 his essay was published under the new title “Resistance to Civil Government.” Unlike Alcott and Charles Lane, followers of William Lloyd Garrison’s “No-Government” movement, Thoreau asks for “not at once no government, but at once a better government”

("Civil Disobedience" 17); instead of pleading for passive resistance or non-resistance like his Concord neighbor, Thoreau advocates, even orders, *active resistance*: "If the injustice [...] is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, *break the law*. Let your life be a *counter-friction to stop the machine*. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (23).

Thoreau had used his own life as counter-friction to the machine. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his senior transcendentalist co-thinker, disapproved. What Thoreau did, Emerson thought "mean and skulking, and in bad taste," even "a step toward suicide" (Walls 212–252). Legend has it that Emerson visited Thoreau in jail and asked him "Why are you here?" to which Thoreau famously replied: "Why are you not?" Emerson couldn't possibly have imagined that it would be precisely civil disobedience—both the act and the essay—which would bring Thoreau his international fame. Neither could have Thoreau's neighbors, who, watching him and the impoverished Alcott family, came to dread the consequences of any acts of civil disobedience. However, Thoreau the dissenter, himself the counter-friction, took all the disapproval only as proving the need for "at once a better government," which would not inflict punishment on such civil dissenters as Alcott and himself, but would value them and protect their right to live according to—in his own phrasing from *Walden*—the "higher laws" in them. This echoes what is stated in "Civil Disobedience" as "They only can force me who obey a higher law than I" (28).

Thoreau had no doubt that, disapproval or not, he was taken seriously by his 1848 Concord audience, and so, provocatively enough, ended his lecture by imagining a truly just "State [...] which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, not embraced by it" ("Civil Disobedience" 34). Thoreau's ideal state would not merely accept and protect such dissenting individuals as Alcott and himself, but would actually bear fruit in them—most precious, *wild* fruit; therefore such individuals would not be considered madmen, but would be treasured as redeemers. In these final lines of his lecture,

Thoreau is clearly ready for the passionate support he will give to the wild rebel/redeemer John Brown ten years later. Moreover, in this concluding hymn of the individual in relation to the state, as well as, in fact, the whole essay, Thoreau speaks of the special, the 'chosen' individual who is a "higher and independent power" and whose disobedience, discontent, dissent therefore comes only naturally to make the progress of humankind happen. Thoreau's 'individual' is a civil dissenter, who *will not be civilized*, as this will annihilate him. This individual is *wild* in the sense of being uniquely nonconformist and extra-ordinary, a moral corrective in his own right. It is therefore both the right and the duty of such an individual to be resistant, or *act from principle*. And action from principle, Thoreau insists, or "the perception and the performance of right," is what "changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was." It divides states and churches, but not only them; "ay,"—Thoreau flares up,—"it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine" (22). Such is the cathartic effect of action from principle that it even divides the indivisible, i.e. the *individual*. Thoreau's rhetorical power sets on fire the very etymology of the word, thus making his audience feel the energy he finds in true moral action: it redeems and purifies the government and the state, but also the one who performs it, the individual. So action from principle is above all a duty to oneself: to oneself as "man first and subject afterward" (17).

In his 1862 eulogy, Emerson set the tradition of interpreting Thoreau's essentially dissentient political mode. "Idealist as he was [Emerson observed] standing for abolition of slavery, abolition of tariffs, almost for abolition of government, [...] he found himself not only unrepresented in actual politics, but almost equally opposed to every class of reformers" (*Thoreau* 346). Thoreau's cantankerous but idealist individuality, as outlined by Emerson, remains the first and best known style of Thoreau's political dissent. However, as Daniel Malachuk points out in an excellent essay on Thoreau's politics, recent contextualization reveals two more styles of Thoreau's dissent: one profoundly democratic, and another bafflingly utopian. Pointing out that in older histories of this period, focused on the rise of partisan politics, non-partisan higher-law

dissenters such as Nathaniel Rogers, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Thoreau were judged apolitical purists and usually simply ignored, Malachuk comments on recent Thoreau scholarship:

More and more Thoreau's dissentient deeds have been reinterpreted as not just individually expressive but democratically significant [...] Scholars now find in Thoreau's published admiration of John Brown's radical egalitarianism only the most obvious expression of his democratic dissent; indeed, nearly every action Thoreau ever took seems lately to be proof of his relentless participation in democracy. (180)

But did Thoreau practice dissent exclusively *within* democracy? Malachuk asks, in order to conclude that perhaps Thoreau's third and greatest gift to us as a dissentient is not these familiar counter-democratic deeds—of individuality, of democracy—but rather his astounding indifference to democracy itself [...]. Not *to confront* but *to walk alongside* becomes Thoreau's last and most nuanced style of dissent" (182). This is already Thoreau the utopian dissenter, the saunterer of the Holy Land from the late essay "Walking."

In the "Conclusion" of *Walden*, the book he kept working on until (literally) his last days, Thoreau writes:

I delight to come to my bearings,—not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may,—*not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.* (249)

In our own *restless, nervous, bustling, trivial* Twenty-First Century, when Thoreau's adjectives convey meaning even more intensely, we ought to know, respect, and continually contextualize all the worldwide civil disobedience echoes of Henry David Thoreau's dissentient politics during the whole course of the previous twentieth century: be they in India in the 1930s, in the United States in the 1960s, in Czechoslovakia in 1968/9, or throughout Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, when Thoreau's idea of a "peaceable revolution" was put into practice and successfully ended one of the darkest periods in human history. "If any such is possible," Thoreau had said about the peaceable revolution (25); the twentieth century certainly proved it possible. And if the twentieth century was mostly listening and responding to Thoreau the salubrious democrat and the obstructive individualist, perhaps the new

century will be able to hear more distinctly than before the echoes of the other style of Thoreau's dissent, that of "standing or sitting thoughtfully" aloof for the sake of preserving from too much 'civilizing' one's own inner wildness: because the delight of "coming to one's bearings," or of carefully maintaining a certain sense of direction in one's life is perhaps even more needed in our rather blurry time.

REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

*Albena Bakratcheva
New Bulgarian University
Sofia
Bulgaria*

WORKS CITED

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Thoreau." *Ralph Waldo Emerson. Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*. Edited by Robert D. Richardson, Jr. Bantam Books, 1990, pp. 341-360.
- Harding, Walter. *Civilized Disobedience*. State University College of Arts and Sciences, 1968.
- Kirkpatrick, Jennet. "Walking away with Thoreau: The Pleasures and Risks of Exit." *American Political Thought* 5, no. 3, 2016, pp. 446-66.
- Malachuk, Daniel S. "Politics." *Henry David Thoreau in Context*. Edited by James S. Finley. Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 175-184.
- Martin, Robert W. T. *Government by Dissent: Protest, Resistance, and Radical Democratic Thought in the Early American Republic*. New York University Press, 2013, pp. 1-14.
- McDaniel, Caleb W. *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform*. Louisiana State University Press, 2013, pp. 9-11.
- Meyer, Michael. *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation*. Greenwood Press, 1977.
- Petrulionis, Sandra Herbert, ed. *Thoreau in His Own Time. A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends and Associates*. The University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Schneider, Richard J. *Civilizing Thoreau. Human Ecology and the Emerging Social Sciences in the Major Works*. Camden House, 2016.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*. Edited by Richard Dillman. NCUP, 1990.
- . *Walden*. Washington Square Press, 1962.
- Turner, Jack, ed. *A Political Companion to Thoreau*. University of Kentucky Press, 2009.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Henry David Thoreau. A Life*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.