Can Civil Disobedience Work in the Age of Globalization?

Political protest has taken many forms throughout history, but one could argue that the last several years have seen an increase in violent protest against global political entities, such as the World Bank and the G8 conferences. In light of these growing protests, perhaps we should reconsider the role that civil disobedience could or should play in the development of these and other similar movements. To what degree could the lessons of Thoreau, Gandhi or King be employed in the modern global age? Are the concepts of civil disobedience even applicable to these kinds of protest movements? What could a current philosophical analysis of the tradition of civil disobedience offer for a contemporary application of its principles?

This issue of Essays in Philosophy attempts to address these questions by examining the degree to which the various methods of civil disobedience can be understood within modern protest movements such as the ones mentioned above. The three essays accepted for inclusion in this issue all carry this charge through as each attempts to further the discussion regarding how traditional conceptions of civil disobedience relate to twenty-first century problems.

The first essay, “All Things New: On Civil Disobedience Now” by Steven Schroeder, attempts to motivate reflection on the nature of civil disobedience as it has historically been expressed and practiced by focusing on its place as a strategic move among other competing options. Schroeder offers forty-three thought provoking theses that advance an argument that civil disobedience, as rhetorical strategy, is best understood and practiced as a tool to dismantle and reconstruct social orders, making reference to Thoreau’s ideas regarding the difference between social friction in a machine and the persistent social abuse that often occurs when the friction controls the machine itself. This essay looks backward to an analysis of the motivations behind the actions of America’s founding fathers during the revolution, but also looks forward to ways in which the practice of civil disobedience might have to be adjusted to address anti-globalization movements where the system being targeted employs corporations and not governments. In the end, says Schroeder, “The point of civil disobedience is public discourse . . . The question, finally, is whether it contributes to an argument that calls the authority of the abuser into question,” (§35)

In the second essay, “Civil Disobedience from Thoreau to Transnational Mobilizations: The Global Challenge,” Hourya Bentouhami continues the discussion Schroeder raises regarding the application of civil disobedience to issues arising in an era of globalization, agreeing that conventional conceptions of civil disobedience might not be applicable to the issues of today. In this intriguing essay, Bentouhami argues that civil disobedience is a dialectical concept that functions in relation to power and the State. As States themselves become players within a global framework, protests against those larger frameworks face a “global challenge” in their attempts to achieve success for their movements. Bentouhami attempts
to transcend this traditional dialectic by offering a conception of civil disobedience inspired by the theory of “Abnormal Justice” offered by Nancy Fraser in the recent article in *Critical Inquiry*, (vol. 32, no. 3). This new conception emphasizes the transversality of civil disobedience to address what Bentouhami refers to in the conclusion to the present essay as “a new form of political and economical imperialism that doesn’t bother with the rule of law.”

Piero Mararo closes the portion of this issue of *Essays* dedicated to Civil Disobedience with the essay “Violent Civil Disobedience and Willingness to Accept Punishment.” This insightful essay returns to questions regarding the degree to which an act must be non-violent in order to qualify as an act of civil disobedience. Mararo challenges the view of John Rawls that civil disobedience cannot threaten other individuals’ rights, instead proposing that the two paradigm cases of civil disobedience (involving communicative elements and conscientiousness) both leave the door open for limited forms of violence, as long as that violence is not aimed at seriously injuring individuals and is done by protestors who accept punishment for their actions. Mararo asserts that it is difficult to separate persuasion from coercion, insisting that persuasion often requires the use of limited means of coercion.

At the end of the day, these three essays may not settle the issue of how civil disobedience can be used to address injustice in our time, but they can at least offer us assistance in grasping the possibilities that may exist. In closing, I would like to thank my wife, Jo Meyer, as well as Michael Goodman, General Editor of *Essays in Philosophy*, for their constant willingness to provide advice and assistance to me throughout the process of editing the issue before you.

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