

From the lens of popular magazines to academic journals: A review of Thoreau's Life And His Civil Disobedience

Cliford Owusu Gyamfi and Abigail Gyasi

University of Geneva, Geneva

E-mail: owusugyamfcliff@gmail.com

Abstract

While Thoreau represents a great intellectual point of reference in today's political theories, this has never been always the same. The popular magazines during Thoreau's lifetime wrote a different view about him. This paper focuses on the life of Thoreau in the course of history. How he was received during his time in some popular magazines such as *The Sun* and *The New York Times*, and how some contemporary scholars such as Henry Salt saw his work. The paper will then focus on current trends in the works of Thoreau. How scholars like Leigh Kathryn Jenco and Jack Turner see Thoreau today, and how far he has influenced the American society. The subject of criticism is a spotlight on Thoreau's work, "Civil Disobedience".

Keywords: American society, civil disobedience, henry thoreau, transcendentalism, social justice

Henry David Thoreau was both a public intellectual and a scholar, and one of the important figures in the history of America. As a transcendent philosopher and someone who believed in the freedom of each person, Thoreau waved an intellectual protest against certain unjust treatment of persons, and improper government policies. Today in the history of America, Thoreau is very significant, not only as a national icon, but also his writings keep on influencing academic studies. This paper focuses on the life of Thoreau in the course of history. How he was received during his time in some popular magazines such as *The Sun* and *The New York Times*, and how some contemporary scholars such as Henry Salt saw his work. The paper will then focus on current trends in the works of Thoreau. How scholars like Leigh Kathryn Jenco and Jack Turner see Thoreau today, and how far he has influenced the American society. The subject of criticism in this

paper is on Thoreau's work, "Civil Disobedience". In *The Sun Magazine* in 1982, columnist Peter A. Jay hailed Thoreau for two things: an industry and as an icon (Jay, p. K5). Jay further recognized him as a "saint", in the sense of his radical promotion of social justice. But this achievement has not been gained without subjecting Thoreau and his writings into sharp criticism. Some of these criticisms have come from both scholars and journalists in Thoreau's own time. A contemporary writer by name Robert Erwin, criticized Thoreau in an article that was published in the *Harvard Magazine*. He referred to Thoreau as priggish and his books contrived. Erwin wrote that many "knowledgeable readers, find the actual Thoreau to be an awful person and his books exceedingly contrived" (Ibid). Beside Erwin, a Harvard professor known as Joel Porte also criticized Thoreau as an extremely egotist, who will find his own way to whatever (Ibid). His

criticisms come as a result of Thoreau's refusal to edit certain parts of an article he sent to an editor for publication. The editor suggested that Thoreau takes out a strange phrase in the poem. Thoreau refused and published the poem somewhere.

Henry David Thoreau's most famous piece is titled *Civil Disobedience*, and it is an essay that Thoreau wrote in response to the Mexican War and institution of slavery. The reception of Thoreau was through storms of criticism. His ideologies were attacked as well. Many popular magazines spoke of his new ideas. He received both favorable and unfavorable comments. Sometimes, harsh words accompany the criticism. Viola Dey Halliday, a columnist of the *New York Times* responded to one contemporary of Thoreau called George A. Manson from Brooklyn, who had debunked Thoreau's involvement in anti-slavery in the *New York Times*. Manson said, "From my recollection of Thoreau's life and writings, I do not think he ever took any active part or ever showed any special interest in the slavery question" (Halliday, p. BR11). Halliday in a counter response saw such a criticism as without any context. At least slavery was an "uppermost in his thought" (Ibid). She continued to assert that "He lectured on the subject frequently, and it is broadly hinted by those who knew him best that many a fugitive slave was helped toward "north star" by way of Walden" (Ibid). Eyewitnesses from Thoreau's time testify of his engagement in his own development of civil disobedience. Something he believed, and decided to live by it.

Thoreau's engagement in the anti-slavery movement was an immense contribution and many current scholars have hailed him on the role that he played in the abolitionist movement. Like other transcendentalists, Thoreau was an enthusiastic abolitionist. He believed in every way that slavery was the cruelest of institutions and must be abolished. Despite the many critics of abolition, Howard Zinn, a modern scholar and the author of *A People's History of the United States* claims that "The abolitionist committed necessary moral acts that led finally to the elimination of slavery (Zinn 2003: 189)." Thus, in retrospect, the abolitionist was in the moral high ground. There were no

valid reasons for slavery in the Americas. And yet, Thoreau records that there was great government corruption and unjust laws in place at the time that largely prevented or discouraged American citizens from acting upon moral intuitions. However, abolitionists paved the way for the future of the U.S.A. This comment points to the fact that American institutions were morally bankrupt but literally broken and corrupt. Henry believed that the Mexican War was a war being fought to extend slavery into Mexico. And for this reason, Thoreau strongly opposed slavery and the war in Mexico. In so many ways, Thoreau's reception in America didn't come so easily.

The reception of Thoreau in the American society today has come with some positive criticism. Scholars continue to shape and reshape his social and political ideologies. Unlike earlier critics who saw him as negative, current scholarship hails him as a giant transcendentalist rated alongside with Emerson. His scholarly works and public intellectualism have influenced scholars in the field of philosophy, politics, anthropology and many other academic fields of study. Jack Turner, of Princeton University, in a journal article captioned *Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for John Brown*, has argued that Thoreau's major concern was not to drive individuals into public politics. Rather, Thoreau's work was a conscience awakening in the individual. The individual's self-realization of social reforms was more important to Thoreau because he "shuns political parties and organized reform movements and instead embodies an individualized politics of no-saying, civil disobedience, moral dissent, and worldly withdrawal" (Turner 2005: 449). He championed the promotion of individuals' "private life" (Jenco 2003: 362). Turner further defined the goal of the performance of conscience in Thoreau as that which "transforms the invocation of conscience from a personally political act into a publicly political one" (Turner 2005: 453). These were the positive actions that Thoreau promoted in people.

Harvard professor Joel Porte who had earlier criticized Thoreau's ego obviously didn't see how Thoreau's ego was tied up to his intellectual

philosophies. Porte's criticism of Thoreau came as a slam of his entire work. Today, scholars like Turner will definitely disagree with such a blatant criticism. Thoreau had a tough head and never traded his conscience for what he did not accept as right. Constitutional laws by the government could not even change or push him into conformity. Turner observed that "Thoreau refuses, however, to comply with this violence just by virtue of its political constitutionality. He as a citizen not of the nation but of the world will stand as judge of the appropriateness of government action. If the government's violence threatens his life and liberty or the life and liberty of others, he will resist, violently if necessary" (Turner 2005: 461; See also Jenco 2003: 356). These were the values that made him an outstanding objector of slavery and the Mexican war. Turner does well to project Thoreau in a positive light, which shed lights on the man Thoreau.

Another legacy that Thoreau has left on the American society is voting with positive conscience in a democratic government. Though Thoreau in the *Walden* seems to distant himself from politics, Jenco recognized Thoreau's contribution to the relationship between government and individual as a contract. This contract is expressed in the Constitution of America. By the effectiveness of the constitution, each individual becomes a part of government. Jenco writes, "Constitution as a contract between individuals that simultaneously specifies the form, powers, procedures, and limitations of that government. Voting citizens "will" the system into being by the electoral procedure. It is a social contract to which all Americans give (rather superfluous) tacit consent" (Jenco 2003: 372). It is the needs of the people who are governed by the constitution that upholds the tenets of the constitution. For that matter, there must be a mutual "consent" between the government and the people. Jenco thus explains Thoreau's

sense of justice, and his declaration that he "do[es] not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which [he has] not joined," demand that any institutional obligations be grounded in a true, expressed consent; simply assuming that a positive evaluation of justice would constitute an act of consent gets the chain of causation backwards (Jenco 2003: 373).

Thus, Thoreau promoted a higher form of law, which is "consent" and a just execution of governance, which he thinks, must have some correlation.

Turner has also recognized the self-denial life of Thoreau as a humbler form of living. He writes: "Thoreau's call to purposeful death and purposeful life is thus both existential and moral. It is also political insofar as it enables the only form of political incorporation Thoreau finds morally acceptable—a "corporation of conscientious men" (Turner 2005: 464). This comes as exemplary lives of Socrates, Jesus, and Brown who was executed in Thoreau's time. A life of piety has been a hallmark of many philosophers and religious leaders. Thoreau's moral and political lifestyle is quite very obvious in most of his writings. Turner thus testifies of him that:

Thoreau's humbler and more abiding hope is to loosen the human attachment to the mortal and the material and to inspire his fellow citizens to take themselves seriously enough to place the ethical at the center of their lives. Thoreau states his moral and political aim in desperate terms... Moral action is the pinnacle of conscious living because it requires the successful exercise of one's ability to perceive right, the formation of an intention to act accordingly, and the successful translation of that intention into action over and against one's baser instincts. Moral action consummates self-mastery in one particular worldly moment and leaves a mark. (Turner 2005: 464).

Moral action that stems from the depth of a clean soul is what transcendentalists emphasized. These fundamental political principles became the core of Thoreau's philosophy and intellectual protest. Posthumously, his work inspired the British labor movement, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. King used Thoreau's idea of Civil Disobedience to distinguish between just and unjust laws while Gandhi used the moral force of Civil Disobedience to protest the British occupation of India. Self-awakening is the underlining concept towards any healthy society. The reception of his ideas by subsequent social activists suggests his influence in history, something which is beyond the American societies.

At this point, what can one say about Thoreau and his Civil Disobedience? Have people really criticized

his work? Opinions vary indeed. However, the civil disobedience of Thoreau came at the right time. Thoreau wrote as a witness of events unfolding before his eyes. The governmental system in his time lacked any moral aptitude. David Lyon has said: "Given the settings of their resistance..., it would not have been reasonable for Thoreau, [...] to have regarded the prevailing system as sufficiently just to support political obligation" (Lyon 1998: 40). The exploitation in slavery, and the Mexican war was a rift of moral governance. These two issues, according to Thoreau, must be addressed, "cost what it may". Opposition to slavery is the context for Civil Disobedience. Thoreau believed that the Mexican War was being fought to extend slavery throughout the American South. Furthermore, the author believed that a Government cannot force an individual to pay taxes to support activities that a person finds immoral. Thoreau believed that the state was corrupt and that its laws were unjust. Therefore, an individual must disobey the United States government because whatever services the government has provided the individual are incomparable to the corruption, irresponsibility and unjustness of the United States government. In many ways, Thoreau's critique of American society was moral, and in other ways, Thoreau was a man of action. Unlike most Americans living during the nineteenth century, Thoreau lived by his beliefs. He sought out nature, justice, and a new way of living. The transcendentalists were the most forward thinking Americans of the time, and as history shows, their impact and contribution to society were great.

Contrary, Thoreau has been criticized on his refusal to pay taxes as not an act of civil disobedience, rather a private affair. This criticism came from Rawls. Lyon states:

It might be suggested that Thoreau provides no counter-example to the notion that civil disobedients accept an obligation to obey the law. Rawls believes that Thoreau's tax refusal was not civil disobedience narrowly construed (which publicly calls for reform) but "conscientious refusal" (which may be done in private). Thoreau refused to pay the tax "on the grounds that to [pay] would make him an agent of grave injustice to another (Lyon 1998: 41).

This criticism is will not be supported by Thoreau. Thoreau's Civil Obedience is not a public display of one's displeasure of the government. In fact Thoreau rejected any act of public demonstration or public involvement of protest. These were less important to Thoreau. To him, protest begins with the self. One must empty self to do the right thing first. People must not submit their conscience to immoral government. From this background, Thoreau's refusal to pay tax was an exercise of his moral obligation to say no to the acts of the government in his time. Lyon seems to offer a counter position to the critics by saying "If we regard his lecture as part of his continuing tax resistance, then the latter qualifies as civil disobedience, even under a narrow definition, and Thoreau provides a counter-example to the notion that civil disobedients have a favorable judgment of the prevailing system and accordingly acknowledge a moral presumption favoring obedience to law" (Lyon 41, 422). Civil disobedience in Thoreau is a comely spirit. It emphasizes individuality. It starts with the individual. As stated above, it is the individual's self-realization that is important to Thoreau. Majority movements and political parties are just a waste of time. Thoreau's failure to pay taxes was an expression of his own self-realization to resist an immoral government. The Civil Disobedience of Thoreau should therefore not be considered as a mechanism for public protest. It is intended to help individual's realize their self-consciousness.

Henry David Thoreau was both a public intellectual and a scholar. During his lifetime, he wrote many books and studied many scholarly subjects, yet Henry is almost as well known for his public intellectualism. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry's benefactor, was already a well-known public intellectual figure by the time Henry David Thoreau came of age. Thoreau followed in Emerson's footsteps in terms of scholarly subjects studied. Yet Thoreau was more action-oriented and radical than Emerson as Thoreau stood strongly for abolitionism and helped to defend the cause (against the American government). Thoreau was born in Concord, NH in 1817 in a "quaint old-fashioned house on the Virginia Road, surrounded by pleasant

orchards and peat meadows" (Salt 1890: 13). During his lifetime, Thoreau became a liberal critic of the newly developing liberal United States. He and his contemporary transcendentalists reacted to what they saw as a misshapen materialism and rationalism inherent in American society. The transcendentalists rejected the popular social styles of the day, and instead thought that man was better suited to seek out nature, harmony, and peace. Transcendentalism taught that man had a closer affinity for nature than was commonly thought in American society. In fact, this philosophy taught that sequestration from nature resulted in perverse human beings. The philosophy of transcendentalism focused on self-reliance, harmony with nature, and a skepticism of authority sources. Henry David Thoreau's involvement in the transcendentalist movement was radical, and he hoped to change American society, or at least address the unresolved political, economic, and social issues of the newly developed United States of America. Jenco has recognized Thoreau as a great contributor to American politics (Jenco 2003: 380).

Thoreau is notable of criticizing the American government. One may regard him as an enemy of the government. However, despite these criticisms of the United States government, Thoreau remains optimistic about American society. In fact, Thoreau blames the institutions of the government for the problems in American society, and not the citizenry. The above passage seems to claim that the American government is excessively corrupt and inept. However, Thoreau, like Emerson, believes that greatest problem is the culture. And thus, American culture is shown to be largely immoral, sick, and trite. Yet, more importantly, the words of Henry David Thoreau urge fellow Americans to action. The despair, grief, hardship, poverty, and difficulty that characterized American society during the

mid-nineteenth century, when added together, constituted, in the opinion of Thoreau, no sufficient reason for a refusal to act. In fact, Henry was a man of action, which set him apart from mainstream society. Transcendentalism stressed self-reliance, harmony with nature, and a skepticism of authority sources. Philosophically speaking, Thoreau believed that an individual must act, not think, not vote, and not believe, but act upon his conscious. Thus, the inability of American citizens to approach or use their government is the cause of extreme collapse. In defense of the American people, the author argues that the government is corrupt, totally irresponsible, and perhaps insane. In 1839, when Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience* the United States was facing several critical issues, including slavery, war with Mexico, and political, social and economic crises. Not twenty years later this unresolved conflict erupted into the United States Civil War.

References

- Halliday, Viola Dey. "Thoreau and Slavery". *New York Times* 1857-1922. Sep 8, 1900; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index pg. BR11.
- Jay, Peter A. "The Ruminant: Henry David Thoreau". *The Sun* 1837-1989. Feb 7, 1982; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun pg. K5.
- Jenco, Leigh Kathryn, Summer 2003. "Thoreau's Critique of Democracy". *The Review of Politics* 65(3): 355-381.
- Lyons, David. Winter 1998. "Moral Judgment, Historical Reality, and Civil Disobedience". *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27(1): 31-49.
- Salt, Henry, S. and Henry, D., Thoreau 1890. *The Life of Henry D. Thoreau*. R. Bentley & Son: London.
- Turner, Jack. August, 2005. "Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for John Brown". *Political Theory* 33(4): 448-471.
- Zinn, Howard 2003. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-2001*. New York: HarperCollins.

