

From Self-Reform to Social Reform:

a Study of Thoreau's Social and Political Thoughts

DE LA RÉFORME DU SOI À LA RÉFORME SOCIALE:

UNE ÉTUDE SUR LA PENSÉES SOCIALE ET POLITIQUE DE THOREAU

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Abstract: Despite the importance of his social and political thoughts, Henry David Thoreau is mostly studied as a writer of Transcendentalism and nature writings. Actually, Thoreau expresses many important ideas on social and political problems in his works. Through reading Thoreau's main political writings, this essay attempts to comment on his social and political thoughts from its four constitutive aspects, i.e., self-reform as the basis of social reform, strategies and forms of passive resistance, critique of the division of labor and emphasis on the importance of action. It argues that the significance of Thoreau's social and political thoughts lies in his insight in seeing the consistent relationship between the individual self-reform and social justice and political democracy. In other words, both individual and social reforms are important means in correcting social injustice and nourishing political democracy.

Key words: Thoreau, self-reform, social reform, passive resistance, division of labor

Résumé: Malgré l'importance de sa pensée sociale et politique, Henry David Thoreau est surtout étudié comme un écrivain de Transcendentalisme et de Littérature naturelle. Effectivement, Thoreau exprime beaucoup d'idées importantes sur des problèmes sociaux et politiques dans ses oeuvres. Par la lecture des principales oeuvres politiques de Thoreau, cet essai tente de commenter sur les 4 aspects constitutifs, c'est-à-dire la réforme du soi comme la base de la réforme sociale, stratégies et formes de la résistance passive, critiques sur la division du travail et accentuation sur l'importance de l'action. Il démontre que la signification de sa pensée sociale et politique existe dans sa perspicacité de voir la relation consistante entre la réforme du soi de l'individu, la justice sociale et la démocratie politique. Autrement dit, les réformes individuelles et sociales sont toutes importantes dans la correction de l'injustice sociale et dans la formation de la démocratie politique.

Mots-Clés: Thoreau, réforme du soi, réforme sociale, résistance passive, division du travail

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INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) has mostly been approached as a literary artist, a naturalist, a transcendentalist, whose scholarly interpretation runs like this: as a man celebrating natural beauty and transcendental individualism; as the initiator of the genre of nature writing; as a literary artist in the American Renaissance; the formal and stylistic studies of his individual texts and so on. Relatively speaking, Thoreau's social and political thoughts have received less critical attention. Nancy L. Rosenblum has mentioned this point, "Except for a surge of interest in the 1960s in Thoreau as a social critic and advocate of civil disobedience, cultural studies have eclipsed his political thought." (Rosenblum xiii)

Thoreau mentions in *Walden* "moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep." Actually, his whole life and all of his works deal with reform of all kinds—personal, social, political and religious. Scholars have argued about his thoughts of social reform. Some maintained that his first concern was not for society but for the individual and his strong emphasis upon self-reform unavoidably ignored the larger and collective dimension of social reform. (Meltzer xi) Others even concluded that Thoreau was no social reformer because he was occasionally pressed by public events and was drawn forth to "deliver jeremiads on the evil of his times; insisting that he had other more important affairs to attend to." (Gougeon 194) The above arguments look plausible because Thoreau seems to be more intent on individual self-reform rather than aiming directly at the social reforms. However, reading of Thoreau's main political texts reveals that his social and political thoughts are more concerned with the relationship between the individual and the State, and the social reform is mainly realized through the individual self-reform. The notion of self-culture as the primary element in all social reforms is the key to the understanding of Thoreau's social and political thoughts.

This essay aims to give a survey of Thoreau's main social and political thoughts by analyzing his main political writings, including "Resistance to Civil Government," some selections from *Walden*, "Life without Principle," and "Slavery in Massachusetts."

1. I SELF-REFORM AS THE BASIS OF SOCIAL REFORM

It is notable that most of Thoreau's writings deal with the problem of life, as the titles may suggest, "Where I lived and What I lived for," "Life without Principle," and *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, whose "Economy" chapter is all about the reflection of acquiring the "true necessities and means of life" and on how to "face the essential facts of life." The question of the relationship between the individual and the State is merely part of one's whole life because in which we "have other affairs to attend to." As a result of the involvement of life issue in all his writings, Thoreau's political thought is, compared with other political thinkers, more intensely personal and particular and less systematic due to its less references to the history of political thought.

As a political thinker Thoreau is mostly renowned for his essay on "Civil Disobedience," which had inspired political activists such as Gandhi, Emma Goldman and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, civil disobedience in the contemporary political theory is quite different from Thoreau's on that the former regards nonviolence, distinguishing it from revolution, as of a limited nature and purpose of action in violation of the law and voluntary acceptance of punishment. The further reason for this difference is that: "Contemporary theorists distinguish civil disobedience from revolution because they assume that political society is reasonably just and that citizens have an underlying obligation to obey political authority." (Rosenblum xxv) On the contrary, Thoreau was no principled advocate of nonviolence because he saw all political authority and representative democracy as conditional. Thoreau thought that the only obligation lying in man is to do what they think right.

"I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect

for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation that I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience, but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, power-monkeys and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences, which makes very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.” (Thoreau 2-3)

From the above quotation we can see that Thoreau believes in the higher law of individual conscience, which is set as the only standard to direct one's action. A corporation has no conscience unless its every member has a conscience. Besides that, the harm and danger brought by the undue respect for the law is drastically obvious: it produces mindless soldiers to fight wars “against their wills, against their common sense and consciences”. The loss of conscience and undue respect for the law make the mass of men serve the State “with their bodies as machines.” William J. Wolf once remarked that discussing the “civil disobedience” no modern reader can pick it up without feeling that he is being addressed by Thoreau on the “law and order” issue and on Vietnam.” (Wolf 82) Here we cannot help thinking of the Iraqi War launched by the US this year. Thoreau was strongly against the Mexican war; his criticism of the US government is of great significance even today:

“What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army. Witness the present Mexican War, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.” (Thoreau 4) Evidently, what Thoreau meant to say is that absolute binding and excessive devotion to law and order often implies acquiescence in injustice and might lead to imperial militarism and crises of conscience within a nation.

2. PASSIVE RESISTANCE

In spite of his strong criticism of the government and law, Thoreau was by no means an anarchist. His criticism does not mean the total cancellation of the law and government. He accepts the motto “The government is best which governs least.” while acknowledging that “Government is at best but an expedient, but most government are usually, and all government are sometimes, inexpedient.” (Thoreau 1) Actually, both Thoreau's words and deeds have proved his argument. What he said and did must be examined by treating him as a citizen. “But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.” (Thoreau 2) Thoreau has never refused to pay his highway tax and has never ceased to support education. “I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and, as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow countrymen now.” (Thoreau 17) Thoreau made a severe criticism of his government while making use of it. “In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is used in such cases.” (Thoreau 17)

Since Thoreau was by no means an anarchist, then what is peculiar way of dealing with the government? He endows revolution and democratic consent with fresh significance. In his opinion, “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its efficiency are great and unendurable.” (Thoreau 4), and the necessity of reform and revolution for “the birthday of the new world” is always at hand. Thoreau's way of resistance is unique, “I quietly declare war with the Sate, after my fashion.” (Thoreau 17) He doubted the usual institutional mechanism representing democratic consent and thought that the essential question has become how individuals might withhold or withdraw consent.

To say Thoreau was pacifist is neither appropriate. The title "Resistance to Civil Government" shows his evident rejection of "nonresistance." To see him as a pacifist may be deduced from his retiring and withdrawing style of writing, or simply from reading Gandhi's enthusiasm for nonviolence back into "civil disobedience." In Thoreau's mind, slavery and all other injustice justify rebellion and resistance. "But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?" (Thoreau 11)

Despite his strong antislavery attitude, Thoreau prefers a peaceful revolution of nonsupport and does not insist upon the principle of returning force with force. Most of Thoreau's way of opposition is indirect. For instance, he refused to pay the poll tax and was put into prison for one night. Just as Rosenblum points out: "civil disobedience points up individual responsibility takes up the forms of individual 'resistance to civil government'. The essay resounds with negative injunctions. With draw recognition. Refuse allegiance. Do not serve in the militia, and do not vote." (xviii) The reason why Thoreau refused to pay the poll tax needs further explication. His nonconformity reveals his serious reflection on the relationship between the individual and the State. "And each year, as the tax gatherer comes round, I find myself disposed to review the acts and position of the general and State government, and the spirit of the people, to discover a pretext for conformity." He refused to pay the poll tax, because his government is a slave-holding government and is waging unjust war against Mexico. He has a peculiar way of defining his nonconformity as peaceful revolution: "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that could not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceful revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, 'But what shall I do?' my answer is, 'If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.'" When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished." (Thoreau 11) However, Thoreau never preclude the possibility of using violence, probably because he prophesized the impending Civil War. "But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see blood flowing now." (Thoreau 11)

Another means by which Thoreau used for resistance is withholding one's vote all together. This is a powerful expression of one's strong conscience when government turns from its ordinary business to injustice. "All voting is a sort of gaming, like chequers of backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority." (Thoreau 6)

According to Thoreau, democratic authority and validity is conditional because it is granted by elections. If citizen refuse to vote, then political authority loses its legitimacy. This is the revolutionary aspect of Thoreau's theory about representative democracy. Thus the way of individual "disunion" (passive resistance) shows an expression not only of one's private conscience but also the assertion of the democratic individualism. However, Thoreau has no principled objection to elections and majoritarianism like Garrisonian abolitionists, who oppose all forms of government and see all voting as a sinful rejection of the rule of God. What Thoreau means is that voting should play a vial role in embodying and carrying out the justice. "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep out just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose." (Thoreau 11)

To the voting issue Thoreau was mainly concerned with the individual will and the ultimate effect of election rather than with the form. "The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street

every morning.” (Thoreau 133)

Thoreau’s strategy of passive resistance proves quite effective because “he understood that individual resisters could constitute a ‘counter-friction’ to stop the machinery of government.” (Rosenblum xxiv-xxv) This indirect way of resistance is totally individualistic: “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too.” (Thoreau 7) By individual nonparticipation Thoreau means to produce a counter-friction to the smooth operation of the government machinery and to realize the aim of social reform. Furthermore, he remarked that those who obey government constitute as “serious obstacles to reform”. “Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support, are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform.” (Thoreau 8)

3. DIVISION OF LABOR

Another important aspect of Thoreau’s social thought is his criticism of the division of labor. F. O. Matthiessen said that “He objected to the division of labor since it divided the worker, not merely the work, reduced him from a man to an operative, and enriched the few at the expense of the many.”

(Matthiessen 78) It is known that *Walden* is the best exemplification of Thoreau’s way in experimenting the mode of human existence. He came to Walden not to become a hermit but to “face the essential facts of life.” Actually, “It is a book in praise of life rather than of Nature, a record of calculating economics that studied saving in order to spend more largely. But it is a book of social criticism as well…” (Parrington 399) Thoreau severely criticized the economic order of factory system and blames the crippling effect of the division of labor. “Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine.” (Thoreau 55) Mass production has reduced men to interchangeable parts, serving the State with their bodies. However, Thoreau was to be seen as no primitivist or anti-capitalist. He did not regard the growth of industry and commerce as corruption nor idealize the small-scale agricultural production that aims for the household use rather than profit. What Thoreau meant to say is that “When business enterprise and speculation monopolize our thoughts, we are shirking the real business of life.” (Rosenblum x) “Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives. This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle!… I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.” (Thoreau 104)

In Thoreau’s economy, “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.” (Thoreau 44) Thoreau saw “the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro slavery” enslaves both north and south, because both the slaves in the south and “wage-slaves” in the north cannot get the just reward for their labor. (Thoreau 26) In fact, Thoreau understood the slavery as the part of the “un-freedom” of human being; but he simply could not understand the reason why Americans should boast of a system that ensures the vulgar leisure of the slave masters at the cost of serfdom of the slaves and “wage-slavers.”

“Where is this division of labor to end? And what object does it finally serve? I can not believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming everyday more like that of the English; and it can not be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principle object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.” (Thoreau 40-55)

Thoreau’s proposition here is that “the only true America is that country where you are able to pursue

life without encumbrances.” (Matthiessen 79) His ideal state of labor runs like this, “The laborer’s day ends with the going down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor.” (Thoreau 73) or “Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it.” (Thoreau 106) Besides, he insisted that “to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely; as the pursuit of the simpler nations are still the sports of the more artificial.” (Thoreau 73) How inspiring and miraculous has Thoreau conceived of life! Though he has carried out his ideal experiment of life at Walden Pond, he must have no awareness that “The self-sufficient independent man, with his peculiar property which concerns no one else, is a concept without any validity for modern civilization.” (Matthiessen 77)

4. IMPORTANCE OF ACTION

The last, but no less important point about Thoreau’s social and political thoughts needs to be mentioned. Len Gougeon argues that “Ambivalent or not, an overview of Thoreau’s writings that deal specifically with reform in their historical contexts reveals an unmistakable movement from the passive to the active mode.” (Gougeon 196) Even if there exists a mode of the development of Thoreau’s social and political thoughts from the passive to the active mode, his emphasis upon the importance of action has been strong throughout his writings. For instance, he describes a philosopher as a man of both thoughts and actions: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically...When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there’s another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced.” (Thoreau 32)

As to the problem of slavery, Thoreau’s attitude from the start is quite definite and clear. His subject was not slavery was right or wrong but what actions should take. “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded. Or shall we transgress them at once?” (Thoreau 8)

Thoreau criticized those who were only anti-slavery in words but not in deeds. “There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery, and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know what to do, and do nothing;...They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect.” (Thoreau 5)

He emphasized once and again the importance to take action to “rebel and revolutionize”: “But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us have not such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.” (Thoreau 4)

“...but if it 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.” (Thoreau 9)

As the anti-slavery movement was becoming tenser, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and the two cases of Thomas Simms and Anthony Burns in 1854 spurred Thoreau’s political thoughts to a more radical stance. “Slavery in Massachusetts” was even more militant than “Resistance to Civil Government”: “Among measures to be adopted, I would suggest to make as earnest and vigorous an assault on the Press as has already been made, and with effect, on the Church.” (Thoreau 129)

“It is not an era of repose. We have used up our inherited freedom. If we would save our lives, we must fight for them...My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her.” (Thoreau 135)

“A Plea for Captain John Brown” expressed Thoreau’s similar radical attitude toward slavery: “It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others.” (Thoreau 153)

CONCLUSION

Thoreau’s ideas of passive resistance and peaceful revolution are nothing but his transcendental individualism translated into his politics and sociology. Parrington has made this point clear by arguing that “It sources run straight back to eighteenth-century liberalism with its doctrine of minimized state.” And he compared Thoreau’s social and political thoughts with Godwin’s *Political Justice*, “In Godwin’s thinking the problem of man in society is the problem of a voluntary adjustment of the individual to the state; and it is only by establishing economics and politics on morality, that political justice is possible. The moral law is the fundamental law, superior to statutes and constitutions; and to it the citizen is bound to render allegiance.” (Parrington 402)

Similarly, Thoreau set individual conscience and morality as the fundamental law, the higher order, upon which political and social justice is built upon. Whenever political expediency clashes with the higher law of morality and conscience, it is the duty of a citizen to follow the latter. “Will mankind ever learn that policy is not morality—that it never secures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient?…what is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity—who recognize a higher law than the constitution, or the decision of the majority.” (Thoreau 133)

However, Thoreau has shifting attitudes toward the U.S. government and Constitution.

“Seen from the lower point of view, the constitution, with all its fault, is very good, the law and the courts very respectable.”

“Even this State and this American government are, in many aspects very admirable and rare things, to be thankful for.”

“But seen from a point of view a little higher, they are what I have described them.”

“Seen from a higher still, and the highest who shall say what they (the constitution and government) are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all? (Thoreau 18)

Thoreau’s shifting stance reveals that he acknowledged and made advantage of representative democracy in which he could pursue the life of both a neighbor and a citizen and address his “countrymen” directly and specifically. (Thoreau 131) “The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual.” (Thoreau 20-21)

Yet Thoreau’s appreciation of the democratic society never precludes his effort to nourish or perfect democracy through the individual means, such as deliberate self-reform and passive resistance.

“Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor;…A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.” (Thoreau 21)

Thoreau has great confidence in the possibility of promoting democracy through democratic individualism: “I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success

unexpected in common hours.” (Thoreau 94) And in the conclusion of Walden, his confidence is reasserted: “There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” (Thoreau 101)

The significance of Thoreau’s social and political thoughts lies in his insight in seeing the consistency between the individual self-reform and social justice and political democracy. Rosenblum has pointed this out clearly: “Interpreting individual conscientious action as consistent with democracy, indeed as uniquely fitting expression of democratic individualism, was Thoreau’s distinctive contribution to thinking about disobedience and dissent.” (Thoreau xxvi)

By emphasizing the significance of Thoreau’s self-reform and individual democracy we never mean to undervalue the necessary role of government and social institutions. (Ni 128) Human nature is usually regarded as a combination of divinity and animalism. In fact, Thoreau knows this well, “I found in myself, still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.” (Thoreau 81) “We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers.” (Thoreau 87) In spite of his awareness of the necessity of the existence of law and institution in dealing with the relationship between man and state, Thoreau’s thoughts of individual self-reform are very idealistic in some sense. “He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.”(Thoreau 88) We insist that both individual and social reforms are important means in correcting social injustice and nourishing political democracy.

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