

Thoreau's Action: Nonviolent or Violent?

Kong Lingyu

Foreign Languages Department, Inner Mongolia University, China
Corresponding Author: Kong Lingyu

Abstract: Henry David Thoreau is usually considered as a representative figure who advocated and practiced nonviolent resistance against social evils. But as matter of fact, his essay not only influenced social reform leaders who insisted on using nonviolent means to achieve their political goals, but also social reformers who used violent means. This paper is an attempt to try to examine and explain the changes that Thoreau underwent.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thoreau's essay *Resistance to Civil Government*, which emerged from his action of refusing to pay the poll tax, explained the meaning of action, and his essay was turned into action by its readers who found inspiration from it. Henry David Thoreau is conventionally considered as a towering figure who advocated and practiced nonviolent resistance against social evils. But as matter of fact, his essay not only influenced social reform leaders like Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King who insisted on using nonviolent means to achieve their political goals, but also anonymous fighters in the Danish Resistance who used violent means. How could this happen? What is the meaning of Thoreau's action in the essay? Does Thoreau's action mean violent or nonviolent action in his essay? Actually, the meaning of Thoreau's action underwent some transformation.

II. II.THOREAU'S INITIAL STANCE ON ACTION

Initially, Thoreau's action seems to mean nonresistance and anti-government in general. On July 24th, 1846, Thoreau was arrested for refusing to pay the poll tax and was put into jail. Thoreau himself explains why he refused to pay the church tax: "I did not see why the schoolmaster should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the schoolmaster . . . I did not see why the lyceum should not present its tax-bill, and have the State to back its demand, as well as the church." [1] Thoreau denied the church's right to tax. He does not object to any particular church policy or practice; he was not saying, "change this policy and I will pay." He suggested that the schoolmaster and the lyceum had as much right to tax as the church does, and that if all institutions could present their tax-bills, then he would feel at ease in paying them. What matters is not a particular policy but the underlying structure.

Similar reasoning evidently underlies the nearest precedent for Thoreau's refusal to pay the poll tax, namely, Bronson Alcott's refusal to pay the same tax in 1840. Alcott was arrested on January 17th, 1843; he was brought to the town jail that Thoreau later spent a night in. Ten days later, in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, Alcott's friend Charles Lane gave a rationale for Alcott's action:

"This act of non-resistance, you will perceive, does not rest on the plea of poverty . . . Neither is it wholly based on the iniquitous purposes to which the money when collected is applied. But it is founded on the moral instinct which forbids every moral being to be a party, either actively or permissively, to the destructive principles of power and might over peace and love." [2]

To make sense of this, we have first to know what Lane meant by calling Alcott's tax refusal an "act of non-resistance." "Non-resistance" was then a term referring to William Lloyd Garrison's New England Non-Resistance Society, founded in 1838, and to that society's doctrines. Non-resistance opposed to both individual violence and state violence, even state violence intended for self-defense. Furthermore, Garrison and his colleagues held that non-resistance are against not only all violence but also all cooperation with violence, for example, holding office in a state that maintains a standing army, or a standing police force, or a jail.

"I will hold office on no such condition, I will not be a voter on such conditions. I will join no church or state, who hold such a creed or prescribe such a covenant for the subscription of their members." [3]

All of this is called non-resistance because for thinkers like Garrison and Ballou, the central moral question is how we are to respond to injury and evil. The "almost universal opinion and practice of mankind," writes Ballou, "has been on the side of resistance of injury with injury". [4]And it is this opinion that

non-resistants reject, claiming instead that by adhering to the law of love and suffering wrong rather than inflicting it, they shall finally overcome evil with good and exterminate all their enemies by turning them into faithful friends.

To call Alcott's tax refusal an act of nonresistance means that by it Alcott refuses to cooperate with a potentially violent state, one that "spends money on prisons, gunpowder, and halters". [5] Alcott's grounding for refusing to pay the poll tax are thus a little more specific than Thoreau's refuse to pay the church practice. But prisons and halters are practices of every government and objection to them is objection to state in general.

At its beginning, then, it seems that the Thoreau's action of tax refusal meant much the same as what Alcott's meant. Alcott defends Thoreau's tax refusal "on the grounds of a dignified non-compliance with the injunction of civil powers." [6] Thoreau himself, in describing Alcott's arrest, associates himself with Lane, and lays emphasis on "the State" rather than on state policies. And as late as January 26th, 1848, in a Lyceum lecture on "The Rights & Duties of the Individual in relation to Government," Thoreau is still presenting his action much the same as Alcott's.

III. THE TRANSFORMATION THAT THOREAU UNDERWENT

By May of 1849, however, when his revised lecture comes out in Elizabeth Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers*, Thoreau has changed its title to "Resistance to Civil Government" and dropped all reference to Alcott. And these changes suggest that Thoreau has rejected much of what his tax refusal must originally have stood for.

The title as a whole is obviously at odds with the non-resistant position on citizen's action. The chief tenets of non-resistance forbid not only government based on violence but almost all forceful resistance to it. Thoreau's title, then, implicitly rejects Garrison's non-resistance. But it also evokes the positive meanings of "resistance," and thereby associates Thoreau with Garrison's colleague and antagonist Frederick Douglass. Douglass's view can be seen in a notable passage from the *Narrative on Douglass's "resistance" to the slavebreaker Covey*:

"Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment - from whence came the spirit I don't know - I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. . . . He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. . . . Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all." [7]

Douglass' "resistance" means self-defense, a refusal to cooperate with Covey's attempts to beat and subdue him. It does not mean leading a rebellion like a raid in John Brown; but it does mean, in Ballou's phrase, "resistance of injury with injury." And Thoreau's new title clearly associates him with resistance in that sense.

In his essay, Thoreau gave the term resistance a more specific meaning in relation to the symbol of machinery. In *Resistance to Civil Government*, Thoreau is asking two questions. First, in the large symbol of the machine as government, what sub-symbols represent injustice, in particular slavery and unjust wars? And then, what sub-symbols represent resistance? It seems at first that the answer to the first question is "necessary friction" [8] - in other words, slavery something construable as part of the normal functioning of the metaphorical machine.

But then Thoreau changed his mind and restated that slavery is not an unavoidable construable friction that keeps every mechanical device from being a perpetual motion machine. Slavery is something bigger and more perverse, an impediment to efficient action intentionally built into the machine; it is something that implies a lack of respect for the basic mechanical principles. In his essay, Thoreau made it clear that "when the friction comes to have its own machine, . . . I say, let us not have such a machine any longer". [9] Then, having ascertained that slavery is not friction but the machine itself, Thoreau described the right thing to do with the machine: "let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine". [10] If slavery is the machine, then the individual's job is to stop it. Here Thoreau clearly stated the action of resistance to the mechanism.

Most importantly, Thoreau does not associate his action with a position on violence. Tolstoy and Gandhi and King have of course associated Thoreau's essay with a rejection of violence. An anonymous member of the Danish resistance learned a different lesson from it:

"Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" stood for me, and for my first leader in the resistance movement, as a shining light with which we could examine the policy of complete passivity which our government had ordered for the whole Danish population. . . . I lent Thoreau's books to friends, told them about him, and our circle grew. Railroads, bridges, and factories that worked for the Germans were blown up." [11]

And though they contradict each other, all their understandings of Thoreau's writing are right. Thoreau speaks of "a peaceable revolution", and brilliantly describes an action that has a long history of association with nonviolence. Moreover, his need to economize on action, to leave room in his life for "other concerns," [12] attracts him to prefer nonviolent actions on the ground of their simplicity. But nonviolence is not a first

principle for him; it is at most a practical preference. He said that if we are cheated "out of a single dollar by [our] neighbor . . . [we] take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see that [we] are never cheated again" [13]and he did not stipulate that the effectual steps be nonresistant ones. In the one passage that considers that matter explicitly, he accepts the possibility of violence by stating that:

"But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? . . . I see this blood flowing now." [14]

Thoreau's statement is somewhat evasive. Thoreau does not make it clear whether the blood that might flow belongs to resisters or slaveholders. What is clear is that Thoreau is willing to have someone's real blood flow, because, in his view, metaphorical blood is flowing already. In Thoreau's view, the right thing to do is what is appropriate for the moment. Thoreau's own explanation runs like this:

"One cannot be too much on his guard in such a case, lest his action be biased by obstinacy, or an undue regard for the opinions of men. Let him see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour." [15]

Later, then, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, and still more after John Brown's raid, Thoreau defends violent actions on the same grounds as those on which he defends nonviolent action in the essay - because, by that time, what belonged to the hour had changed, and the actions he found himself called to defend were violent. This point is clear in this passage from "A Plea for Captain John Brown":

"It was [Brown's] 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. . . . I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable." [16]

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both the earlier essays and the later ones explain and defend the direct action that Thoreau found appropriate to the moment. And that pragmatic focus on a particular action makes Thoreau's essay legitimately available to sharply opposed readers; both King and Gandhi, on the one hand, and the anonymous fighter in the Danish Resistance on the other, are reading Thoreau rightly.

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