

Civil disobedience

Sociology



Perhaps its most influential exposition can be found in Henry David Thoreau's *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1849), in which he claims that the individual, who grants the state its power in the first place, must follow the dictates of conscience in opposing unjust laws. (Carton 1998) Thoreau's work had an enormous impact on Mohandas Gandhi and the techniques that he employed first to gain Indian rights in South Africa and later to win independence for India. Gandhi developed the notion of satyagraha [Sanskrit: holding to truth], acts of civil disobedience marked by Indian tradition and his own high moral standards and sense of self-discipline. Attracting a huge number of followers from the Indian public, Gandhi was able to use the technique as an effective political tool and play a key role in bringing about the British decision to end colonial rule of his homeland. His was one of the few relatively unqualified successes in the history of civil disobedience.

Civil disobedience in the United States traditionally has been associated with those on the left of the political spectrum, as were most participants in the anti-Vietnam War movement, but toward the end of the 20th century, the strategy also began to be employed by those on the right, for example, by those involved in confrontational but nonviolent anti-abortion activities. When we look at the purpose of civil disobedience, we must acknowledge that had it not been for the acts of the participants, civil rights laws would not have changed. Passive resistance, historically, has gained more than rioting. Thus, while the disobedience may in itself, be illegal, it remains, nonetheless effective and poignant. There are proponents that note that civil disobedience may backfire, however, the benefits far outweigh the detractors.

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