

DISOBEDIENCE AND THE COMMONSENSE REVOLUTION

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Historically, the most terrible things - war, genocide, and slavery - have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience.

(Howard Zinn 1997/2009, 420)

As of late, it would seem that the commonly sought after concept of collaboration has lost its appeal and, arising in its aftermath, is a reconfigured front of conflict between the public and private spheres of American life. In this current attack on the public, the stage is ripe for disobedience in all its various forms and functions to stand up against what privatization advocates have so strategically constructed as COMMONSENSE (Kumashiro 2008). This COMMONSENSE has evolved into a seemingly natural state that has captured the allegiance of folks who full-heartedly agree, without substantiated expertise, that systems of commodification and privatization will serve as simple solutions to the failures of society.

But let us always remember that this COMMONSENSE is most certainly not natural, and as it has been created by humans; thus it has been responded to by acts of human resistance and dissent. In education, these include parent coalitions saving their public schools from a charter school move-in; teachers co-developing curriculum against the rigidity of standards; and a slew of writers and producers of scholarly articles and counter-documentaries, all of whom hope to broaden our understanding of knowledge and experience, to be critical about widening inequity in society, and to fight for the lost voices and silenced identities that continue to be left largely unrecognized, if not violently marginalized and erased.

Indubitably, poignant examples of civil disobedience are nothing short of inspirational. But if reconstituting social, economic, and political division on behalf of the poor and the oppressed remains the obligation of a democratic society, perhaps we must engage in a slight retreat

from civil disobedience to exercise our analytical capacities. Perhaps we must also learn to offer an alternative language that disrupts reality on a level beyond political service and nostalgia towards the constitutive dimension that underlies our daily practices to redirect our attention to the core that remains unfettered in its continuance. Without forgetting acts of protest in all its forms and fashions, this piece follows the lead of Howard Zinn and revisits the meaning of disobedience as both an intellectual and political project within a world that for many seems stuck at a moral and ethical impasse. Surely, immediate reactions to human indignity are wholly necessary, but this cannot distract us from dismantling the symbolic field that systemically sustains this indignity – that of global capitalism and its discontents.

In education, we are framed within an overblown crisis that demonizes without exception all public school teachers and unions (Taubman 2009), preys upon the marginalization of low-income families without redress of context, and capitalizes on the struggle for a hopeful tomorrow by demanding allegiance to simple charter school solutions and faulty reliance on conflated statistics published by test taking regimes. It is COMMONSENSE that the U.S. school system is failing the public; that teacher education programs are to blame for ill teacher preparation; that theory has no business in matters of schooling; that incentives and sanctions move people into action; and that proof of the educational promise can be realized through rising test scores. To sustain the allocation of privileges afforded by the current economic system and business culture, proponents of this Kafkaesque COMMONSENSE have with great sophistication appropriated the language of equity and justice to then reduce, manage, and commodify human life. Even with benevolent beginnings, this COMMONSENSE strategically preys upon the vulnerabilities of parents, striking fear into those naturally concerned over the competitive and unpredictable future of their children, and thus has been proposed a reformation to overthrow an entire public entity for the eventual benefit of the private sphere (Lipman 2004).

Disobedience has been ignited, reconfiguring alliances into new tactics of repeal, and, generating under the name of true progressive reformation, a visible front of resistance. Quantitative researchers deconstruct the statistical validity of value-added measures alongside qualitative researchers who provide narratives of experience and patterns of social behavior. Those once in favor of rigorous accountability find themselves regretting their initial calls and cautioning the

public against the uncritical belief that control will produce insightful, innovative, curious young people that constructively participate in a better world. The counter-discourse has replaced authority with collaboration, reproduction with inclusion, structure with unpredictability, diversity, counternarratives, counterhegemony, and the like, even if reactionary forces may at times resemble the very extremes it first sought to temper.

But in the recurrent bifurcation of us versus them, have we once again displaced intimate narratives with exploitable situations, producing a discourse that judges fidelity or treachery without forgiveness? What has been neglected in the constant pendulum between the right and the left? Do they hold a false appearance of opposition while similarly relying upon the same wrought system of capital to miraculously produce equitable relations? Do such debates deflect attention away from focusing on the economic structure that sustains the very discrepancies justice advocates strive to temper? Is the wood that houses the clock rotting at its core?

The ease at which such a discourse has been ushered into the field of education lies partly in the subtle infiltration of the market, its unquestioned presence in the habits of Western democratic life, and the silenced violence that makes life comfortable for those on its upper echelons. This is a silenced disavowal, a disposition that denies the tragedy resultant from a system that even the most ethical of individuals somehow concedes. From complicity emerges a guilt-ridden passiveness to attack at its core the capitalist system that allows, produces, and is sustained by economic and political inequity. Those who speak of alternatives to the market are dismissed and ridiculed as nostalgic outliers, dreamers, abstract, and impossible. How is it that we are able to celebrate space exploration when so many sleep in the cold? How has our image of starvation been burned into a negligible consequence of consumerism? How do we reconcile ourselves as complicit within a system that obstructs the livelihood of entire nations? Even more devastating perhaps, how has the public been convinced that no other alternatives are possible?

For Zinn, the necessary arbitration between the nation-state and its citizenry requires both a recognition of the ideals and beliefs that rise above popular trances and a relinquishing to the consequences that may result from such dissonance. Hinting to the unique interstices between individual and context, Zinn recognized the pivotal place of disobedience in the workings of social justice and moral and individual rights,

thus asking: what is our role in accepting a dissenting point of view, to disobey COMMONSENSE on grounds of moral principle, and to accept the consequences of thinking and believing otherwise? Around the turn of the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau (2003) argued in this vein that an individual's sense of right versus wrong supersedes the social laws legislated and enforced by government houses, thus calling for individual judgment as a necessary service to society, not likely inferior nor under absolute rule by any political body or legislative decision. When an individual's sense of moral righteousness clashes with sovereign polity, that individual must follow his or her ethical intuition. Going so far as to critique democracy for its reliance on the majority rule, which indubitably suppresses the opinions of some over others, Thoreau paid great tribute to those who fought against the grain to defy COMMONSENSE in the name of grander virtues for humanity.

Our humanity, argues Zinn, is constituted by the very nature of this disobedience, built into the very fabric of our being, so that every human interaction is not only an active wrestling with an incommensurable other, a disobedience, if you will, but also a reflective glance into the conditions of global capitalism that sustain divisive discord and complicit passivity.

This hints towards at least two distinct spheres of disobedience: the explosive response to moments of injustice, and an analytic study and refashioning of what it is that may be happening in the world.

As for the former, consider John Brown, a white abolitionist whose moral fortitude and fervent opposition to the institution of slavery made him ironically the first American since the founding of the nation to be hanged as a traitor. Immensely influential to his contemporaries, Brown's admitted disobedience to the injustice of slavery was at the time considered radical, if not rigidly unacceptable and lunatic. "If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice...let it be done," declared Brown (Loewen 1995, 175). Civil disobedience, such as that exemplified by John Brown, is characterized as a conscientious act intended to garner public attention in order to change political reality and is grounded upon an assumed societal conception of justice which citizens gauge to regulate and interpret the moral extent of political and personal affairs. But what if the public conception of justice is fundamentally premised on the injustices of class division and the maintenance of the status quo? To what do we focus our agentive abilities?

As for the latter, the project then becomes how to develop a critical

lens that brings greater visibility to the condition from which grave injustices are cultivated, to bring wide-awakeness to how the public submits to authority even in the face of such injustice, and to begin the formulation of an alternative image less disabled from market principles and practices. This requires understanding capitalism, not as a natural situation, but rather as a fantastical ideology that accommodates itself into a civilization, not objectively, but by the sheer force of private benefactors. Slavoj Žižek (2008) names this as systemic violence, the catastrophic events of economic systems. Critiquing such systems requires individuals to contend with full disclosure, the workings of their envy, to see how personal desire for what others desire sustains a relation of inequity and plays divisively into our sense of social worth and placement. Our sense of value must be prefaced on a spectrum outside economics.

For Zinn, disobedience is a justifiable break from subservience to the rule of law, to work against exalting a condition of systemic violence, and to desist from bowing to the power of authority, to question and think otherwise. Disobedience must be cultivated away from the choosing of sides and towards a return to the self as an educated and intellectual dissident, measured in the argument that compliance and resistance are not mutually exclusive and that we are and can do both in order to shift our moral condition towards the betterment of a society of all. There will always be differences between the interests of the individual human, and sacrifices will have to be made. From this juncture may we birth an awakened hope for a world crafted towards human dignity, livelihood, love, and justice. Is this the calling of Howard Zinn?

References

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