

"If a law is unjust, a man is not only right to disobey it, but he is obligated to do so."

Thomas Jefferson

In a democratic society, laws are put in place to maintain order and stability, and to protect the members of the society. If a law does not protect the members of the society and instead degrades human personality or is inconsistent with the system's constitution, it is an unjust law that should be met with civil disobedience. Jefferson's statement highlights that in response to an unjust law, civil disobedience is not only justified, but that we are morally obligated to disobey an unjust law. Civil disobedience has been the cause of protests, rebellions, uprisings, and revolutions across the world and throughout history; because the people refused to believe in and follow unjust laws and the unjust governments that may be behind them.

Unjust laws create tension between the government and its people, who act on this tension through protest and debate. The tension and the action it engenders is not reprehensible in itself; the tension promotes a sense of urgency that leads to crucial, constructive change. The tension becomes problematic however, when the government attempts to enforce an unjust law. Enforcing an unjust law that is not reflective of the public conscience is deeply problematic to a democratic society as the law is followed because the members of the society agree with the law rather than being afraid of repercussion or punishment. Moreover, civil disobedience champions similar values to democracy - it enables a wide range of ideas and perspectives to the law to be heard and considered, diversifying the perspectives that are behind the formation of the law. These ideas and perspectives ensure that the law is more reflective of the people it is meant to protect, creating a fair society.

Civil disobedience has shown itself around the world and throughout history from India to America. Courageous individuals from these countries have protested against the

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government about unjust laws oppressing them and those around them. India's Mahatma Gandhi adopted civil disobedience as an ideology and lead India to their independence through his nonviolent approach to effectuate change. He was imprisoned many times for repeatedly disobeying Britain's unjust laws but did not falter in his moral obligation to disobey Britain's unjust laws. Perhaps one of the most compelling acts of civil disobedience was Gandhi's nonviolent salt march to protest against Britain's *Salt Law*, which imposed taxes on salt. He, like many others around him, understood how this law was unjust - the *Salt Law* put an inordinate amount of strain on Indian communities; many of them could not afford to pay taxes on an essential commodity for cooking food and became malnourished shortly after the law was created. The march he led to protest against Britain's *Salt Law* gained the attention of the world and was the impetus to the Indian independence movement. Gandhi's persistence in using civil disobedience as a method to effectuate change enabled him and his peers to lead India to its independence.

Echoes of this statement can also be found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws". King, similarly to Gandhi, adopted civil disobedience in the civil rights movement as an approach to effectuate change against unjust laws that denied black individuals equal rights. One of the most compelling acts of civil disobedience that directly resulted in black individuals gaining equal rights were the Selma-to-Montgomery marches. These marches grew out of the voting rights movement to secure equal voting rights for black individuals, and resulted in federal voting rights legislation to protect black individuals from barriers preventing them from voting. Using civil disobedience against racist laws helped to define and develop the identity members of the civil rights movement wanted to project - the prejudice, hatred, and racism they had experienced for decades was completely unwarranted and they deserved equal rights.

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Although civil disobedience has proven to be an important mechanism for social change around the globe and throughout history, it is not always translated into practice without fault. A violent reaction to protests from representatives of the state such as police officers in reaction to large protests and marches only breeds further violence from the people. For instance, the police's reaction to the protests and riots in Ferguson was to use tear gas, rubber bullets, and bean bag rounds to disperse protesters and rioters. The police matched the public's aggression during riots with equal force: protesters throwing rocks were met with tear gas and bean bag rounds, later, protesters throwing bottles were met with tear gas and a SWAT team the next day. The police matching the public's aggression only perpetuated and increased the violence between them. Furthermore, the cycle of violence that is created between the police and the public with each group becoming more aggressive and matching the other group's level of aggression creates a strong sense of urgency that sparks debates and leads to lasting change, but too often at the unnecessary cost of life.

Civil disobedience has perhaps been the most successful mechanism for creating positive long-lasting change around the globe and throughout history, from leading India to its independence to granting black individuals equal rights. This change is only made possible by an unjust law that affects the people so strongly that they feel compelled to protest, march, express their opinion, and, most importantly, never falter in their vision or moral obligation to disobey an unjust law. This process is vital to the construction of an intelligent democratic society in which the laws are reflective of the public conscience and protect its people.