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978-1-107-02264-5 - Disobedience in Western Political Thought: A Genealogy

Raffaele Laudani and Foreword by Adam Sitze

Excerpt

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Introduction

Western civilization has always had a difficult relationship with disobedience; it has been both fascinated and dismayed by it at the same time. As Eric Fromm wrote quite a few years ago, the main founding myths of Western culture put disobedience at the origin of civilization.¹ Jewish and Christian traditions, for example, begin History with Adam and Eve's refusal to obey the divine command not to eat from the tree of knowledge. Even if this beginning is certainly a "fall," the loss of the harmony that characterized existence in Eden and an ineluctable destiny of toil and suffering to which human beings are condemned until the end of time to atone for the original sin of that primordial disobedience, it is only with that act of disobedience that man really became man, different and superior to the other creatures in Paradise, not through the Creator's will but by virtue of a free choice. In addition, the promise of happiness, the possibility for man to create a new Eden, a new harmony with nature – entirely human – is also contained in that disobedience, especially in its prophetic interpretation. Similar is the Hellenic tradition: without the disobedience of Prometheus, the rebel who, for the love of man, prefers "to be chained to this rock than be the obedient servant of the Gods,"² there would be no human progress.

¹ E. Fromm, "Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem," in *On Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1981), 10–19.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

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In both cases, the development of humanity is made possible by refusal, by the capacity to say no to power in the name of autonomy and the desire to freely choose one's own destiny. However, at the same time, Western culture – and particularly Western politics – makes obedience the keystone to human existence, the necessary condition to guarantee the organization and the production of human activities and the fundamental “virtue” of the human race. Without it, there would be no orderly cohabitation among men and, therefore, even in this case, “civilization.” Exalted in literary circles as the tragic expression of a radical desire for autonomy – for example, in Schiller's *The Bandits*, where disobedience works like a dream of liberation that, in the end, “would disrupt the whole structure of civilization” – from a political point of view, disobedience thus remains a taboo, a prohibited and scabrous activity.

Obedience's primacy – which is also manifested from a lexical point of view in the inability to name the acts normally identified with disobedience, if not in the form of its negation and deprivation, precisely as *dis*-obedience – makes any political discourse on disobedience paradoxical. This is especially true for Modernity: the refusal of existent authority – political or ecclesiastic authority but also the authority of traditions – is the starting point of the modern Subject, the act that allows an individual to leave the state of “minority” in which he has lived until that moment and to finally live an adult, free, and rational existence. However, at the same time, modern politics is built as a will for order that, in the absence of a transcendent objective foundation, must artificially construct obedience. This is only possible drawing from these same principles of liberty, autonomy, and self-determination that motivate disobedience, which thus rests in the background as an irresolvable political problem, a necessary assumption that is shunned at the same time.

Explicitly assuming the paradoxical nature of disobedience, this volume attempts to reconstruct the historical-intellectual path that led to the emergence of disobedience as a specifically political problem at the beginning of the modern age and the theoretical strategies that were in turn adopted to neutralize it. Its specificity will

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be shown in respect to the traditional concepts of “resistance” or “revolution” and the relationship of opposition, overlapping, or alterity that, depending on the circumstances, disobedience has held with them. More generally, with an image that is as Freudian as it is heir of Frankfurt school critical theory – and through an “Atlantic” perspective, which observes in Modernity both its state and colonial dimension – disobedience will be discussed as Modernity’s “return of the repressed” that demonstrates its aporetic foundations in its periodic reappearance on the political scene as a collective and mass phenomenon. In other words, disobedience will work as a mirror for Modernity’s incapacity to understand liberty and life’s mobility without continually posing constraints and limitations on them, taking advantage of this failure to understand authority, if not as the spontaneous acknowledgment of political obligation and renouncing unconditional liberty.

A clarification, both theoretical and methodological, is necessary at this point. Despite being an integral part of Western political vocabulary, as a specific object of study, disobedience escapes the ways that the history of political thought is traditionally done. Disobedience cannot be considered a political “idea,” an entity with a permanent theoretical nucleus that changes over the course of history, because it is only in Modernity that the conditions to politically conceive disobedience are created, that is, understanding it as an act of agency expressing a clear political intention. Strictly speaking, however, disobedience is not a political concept either, a stratification of the ways with which politics were understood in Modernity, because the dimension of practical experience, of disobedience’s concrete historical manifestation, is decidedly predominant. With a certain degree of approximation and in the absence of a fully exhaustive term, disobedience could be at most defined as a political practice that acquires sense and theoretical depth in relation to the way the agents that practiced it assumed, re-elaborated, and criticized the fundamental concepts of modern politics. In other words, from a theoretical point of view, disobedience should be seen both as a space of intersection of the main concepts of modern politics and, through a series of semantic shifts that occurred over the course of its history, as a place where the

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sedimentation of an alternative way of articulating them could take place.

This alternative articulation is here presented under the (maybe provocative) name *destituent power*:³ starting with the French Revolution, Modernity has prevalently understood political conflict in terms of constituent power, as the activation of a creative energy that gives rise, *ex nihilo*, to a (new) institutional order where human relations are disciplined and organized (constituted power). However, at the same time, another (minority) modality of understanding conflict as a process of continual and generally open-ended withdrawal from the legal, political, economic, social, and cultural stumbling blocks developed little by little, interposing the full articulation of that same political energy. Both modalities are an expression of a *potency*, a power (and will) to be something new and different from what already exists. In the first case, this potency is the answer to an “absence,” a *manque à être* that the subject must bridge with political struggle and the acquisition of rights, freedom, and better living conditions that, to be guaranteed, should necessarily be established in an institutional framework. Contrarily, in the other case, potency is the immanent movement of an excess, an “essential superabundance” that should not be conquered – because it already exists, even if in the form of potentiality – but rather freed from the institutional chains that limit its full expression.

Another preliminary clarification might be useful here: this destituent way of understanding the relationship between political conflict and institutions also marks a conceptual difference to anarchism (and also simultaneously explains the merely occasional reference to anarchic thought in this volume). Despite carrying clear libertarian instances, destituent power is not anti-institutional per se, because, on the contrary, it makes the assumption of the nonartificial and ineradicable presence of power and its institutions.

³ The expression “destituent power” has been taken from the Colectivo situaciones’ pamphlet on the Argentinian revolt of 2002 titled *Argentina piquetera*, available online at <http://www.situaciones.org/>. The expression was later used with a different meaning in AA.VV., *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane* (Rome: Mimesis, 2008), in reference to the Parisian *banlieues* revolts of 2005.

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Its action is instead extrainstitutional, in the sense that unlike revolution and other forms of modern political action inspired by constituent power, it is not primarily motivated by an institutionalizing end. In this case, the African American struggle against slavery in the United States can serve as an example and can be considered a prototype for destituent conflict: the flight from and the refusal of a subaltern condition that the plantation regime imposed on slaves profoundly modified the “material constitution” of American society, even producing normative effects on its formal constitution despite its not having systemic change as an objective. Rather, it had a more prosaic desire for freedom that, without a genuine theoretical or practical discontinuity, was then reelaborated as a struggle against racial segregation, that is, against the new institutional configuration assumed by racism in America.

Hence a conceptual history of disobedience – in the impure and *sui generis* meaning that its articulation as destituent power⁴ implies – is the history of its absence (Antiquity and Middle Ages), of its spectral presence (Modernity), and of its progressive and contradictory self-dissolution (Globalization). If premodern political thought was incapable of understanding disobedience, negating any political intention for fear of changing the cosmic order whose laws no one really knew (Greece), or that is necessarily subsumed as an internal function of obedience and tool for stabilizing an immutable order (Rome and the Christian world), Modern political logic is, in large part, an answer to the discovery of the undisciplined nature of men and the absence of an objective foundation for obedience; which, despite remaining the goal of politics, now appears logically dependent on disobedience (in the sense that the nonactivation of disobedience is the proof of its legitimacy) and therefore in need of being constructed and artificially fed. Unable to absolutely negate disobedience, because that would mean negating the very assumptions of Modern subjectivity, modern political thought – and

⁴ On conceptual history, see S. Chignola, “Storia dei concetti e storiografia del discorso politico,” *Filosofia politica* 1 (1997): 99–122, and Chignola, “History of Political Thought and the History of Political Concepts,” *History of Political Thought* 3 (2002): 517–41.

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more precisely the main rationalist stream – thus tried to reduce its most subversive effects through two neutralizing strategies: the contract, with which the instances of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination that fuel disobedience are transformed into a “voluntary servitude” under the state, and, a necessary correlate of the first, the invention of the colony as a qualitatively different political space of the state, in which disobedience is physically and theoretically externalized. With the full affirmation of state logic in Modernity, disobedience – considered as a specific way of understanding conflict – thus almost exclusively found a place in colonial and postcolonial contexts, particularly in the United States, where it became the mythopoeic image of “American” liberty. It is only with the affirmation of so-called globalization – that is, when the Modern distinction between state and colony gave way to a new unitary political space where state and colonial logics overlap and are continually blurred – that disobedience once again became the object of reflection in Europe too. Just as the results of Modernity were marked by the incessant repetition of episodes of disobedience – religious civil wars, popular resistance to the first processes of capitalist accumulation, mutiny and sabotage of colonial expeditions – its transfiguration in the global age happens, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the protests of the new global movements against neoliberal policy, under the sign of disobedience. Its progressively becoming the form *par excellence* of global dissent, however, has been accompanied by the daily affirmation of ever more effective machines of coercion to obedience that seem to make any attempt to modify the actual state of things vain; this is, from a theoretical point of view, expressed in a growing difficulty in producing new theories of disobedience and in the ever more distinct awareness of the necessity of going beyond its “Modern” form.

Naturally, this way of conceiving and discussing disobedience is quite different from a liberal perspective that, based on the model of “civil disobedience” practiced by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the last century, “justifies” disobedience in virtue of its higher moderation in respect to other, more radical forms of practicing conflict such as revolution or rebellion. More than its promoters are ready to admit, this justification for disobedience – “civil”

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in the measure in which it does not put the existing order in discussion – appears, in the perspective delineated here, wholly internal to the strategies that modern political thought used to neutralize the more perturbing aspects of disobedience. In this sense, this volume is simultaneously the genealogical reconstruction of an alternative stream within Modernity and the critical deconstruction of this still largely dominant image of disobedience.

This volume is the fruit of many years of research, beginning in 2003 with a postdoctorate scholarship awarded to me by the Department of Politics, Institutions, and History at the University of Bologna and continued at the Department of History, Anthropology, and Geography of the same university, parallel to new research inquiries that ended up significantly changing the initial project. Among these, my journey through Atlantic history and postcolonial studies was particularly important, allowing for the possibility to give a geographical perspective to the study of disobedience, which I believe, together with its articulation as destituent power, is the most original contribution of this volume.

The first results of this research were published in an article titled “Lo spazio atlantico della disobbedienza; Modernità e potere destituente,” published in *Filosofia politica*, 1, 2008, pp. 37–60, whose traces can be found above all in the second chapter of this volume. However, its guiding lines were previously “tested” on the students attending my course on Theories of Disobedience, held in fall 2005 at Columbia University in New York and, the following semester, in Bologna in my class on History of Political Thought. As often happens, those lessons were not exclusively a moment of expressing an already completed research but a genuine laboratory where the theses of this book were tested and redefined based on the reactions and solicitations coming from students. Thus I owe them a particularly heartfelt thank you.

In addition, I would like to thank all those who were able to read and comment on the manuscript or its parts, who gave me bibliographic suggestions or with whom I simply exchanged reflections that were later useful to me: Bruno Accarino, Raffaella Baritono, Tiziano Bonazzi, Adriana Cavarero, Sandro Chignola, Jean Cohen,

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Angela De Benedictis, Furio Ferraresi, Eric Foner, Simona Forti, David Graeber, Andreas Kalyvas, Robin D. G. Kelley, Sandro Mezzadra, Paola Rudan, Steven Shukaitis, Nadia Urbinati, Richard Wolin, and Howard Zinn. Along with them, I'd like to thank Prof. Carlo Galli, whose teachings are present in the text more than they are explicitly noted.

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Before Disobedience

Antiquity and the Middle Ages

1.1. The Tragedy and Mockery of Greek Disobedience

With Sophocles' *Antigone*, Greek culture leaves us the most discussed case of disobedience in Western political thought.¹ Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, at the end of a civil war that had torn the city to pieces after the death of Oedipus, emanates an edict that denies burial rites to Polyneices, one of Antigone's brothers, guilty of trying "to consume utterly with fire the city of his fathers" and of having "sought to taste of kindred blood, and to lead the remnant into slavery."² Disobeying the edict, the Greek heroine refuses to conform to a "masculine" conception of politics whereby, as her sister Ismene reminds her, women must obey men because they hold political power in virtue of their superior physical strength. As a woman, Antigone asserts her adhesion to the *genos* value system, to familial duties of blood relations and aiding loved ones that require, among other things, rescuing her deceased brother from the forces of nature to allow him, through a proper burial, to enter

¹ G. Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996): AA.VV., *Antigone e la filosofia*, ed. P. Montani (Rome: Donzelli, 2001).

² Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. R. C. Jebb (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>.

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Hades.³ Following the city's public laws would mean denying the preeminence of *philia*, making Antigone responsible for the extinction of *genos* in the anonymous and indistinct generality of *demos*, which would be unacceptable for a woman.⁴

In his *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel saw in Antigone's stance the constitutive tragedy of all Western culture:⁵ what Creon considers a case of unacceptable "obstinacy and disobedience," incomprehensible for those responsible for guaranteeing the fate of the *polis*, from Antigone's point of view is an inevitable answer to the "sheer violence" implied in the indiscriminate extension of that edict to the entire community. Even though Antigone is right, she is still guilty, in Hegel's opinion, because she sees her rights from "a point of view which is merely particular" and is therefore lacking "self-consciousness from the essential nature [*Wesen*]" in the *other* law, too; she is unable to grasp the essential unity of the universal, reducing her individuality to a mere means through which ethical law must be realized. However, thus conceived and realized, it loses its universal character of law and is transformed into control, into an arbitrary assumption of a particular point of view.⁶

In recent years, *Antigone's* modernity – which Hegel considered both prodromal and crepuscular – has been pushed until making it the "Greek prototype of civil disobedience."⁷ If we stick to an exclusively literal reading of the work, free from any attempt to frame it in the overall sense of the Greek world, Antigone's disobedience would perfectly coincide with the definition of civil disobedience that has been established since the 1970s: along with that, her disobedience is described and motivated as a conscientious act, as *dike*, that is, the respect of a superior justice and "the unwritten

³ For a feminist interpretation of Antigone's disobedience, see A. Cavarero, *Corpo in figure* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995); J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁴ G. Carrillo, "'Bia(i) politon': Sulla disobbedienza di Antigone," in *Filosofia politica* 1 (2008): 5–19.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), trans. J. B. Baillie (Moscow: University of Idaho), <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/Phil%20310/ToC/Hegel%20Phen%20ToC.htm>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, section 484.

⁷ D. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 5.