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Critical Discussion: Civil Disobedience - Note of Introduction

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Critical Discussion: Civil Disobedience - Note of Introduction

Abstract

PSCI 315 Classical Political Thought: Democracy in Athens and America is a foundational course in the political science major, and one option in the required political theory sequence at Illinois Wesleyan. One of the goals of the course is to introduce students to some of the fundamental problems in political thought. The issue here was the nature and extent of civil disobedience. This assignment began with the queries: when are we justified in disobeying the law? Do democratic lawmaking procedures and the opportunity to dissent before the law is passed make a difference in assessing the warrant of disobedience? Students read Plato's *Crito*, where Socrates argues in favor of the duty to obey. The law in question was a bar on public impiety or openly expressing doubts about Athens' established religion. Ironically, and perhaps to his credit, the law in question was one that led to Socrates' being sentenced to death. To provide an American parallel to the Athenian example, the students read a 1968 debate between Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas and historian Howard Zinn on the justifications put forward for and against the protests—some of which involved breaking the law—mounted by members of the civil rights movement.

Critical Discussion: Civil Disobedience

Note of Introduction

Professor James Simeone

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The five persuasive essays which follow were some of the best the class produced. Prior to writing them, students had a chance to practice their persuasive arguing skills. The class debated the civil disobedience issue using the claim-objection-rejoinder format. Pro and Con sides of the question are arrayed and given the opportunity to make claims. Claims are defined in the class as statements which defend a conclusion with a reason. For clarity, they should employ "because" clauses, viz., Disobedience to a democratic law is justified because marginal members of society are systematically excluded from lawmaking and lack other means to challenge the status quo. Here is how this debate format works: One member from the first array states a claim; a member from the other array is then given the chance to offer an objection; finally one member of the first side responds with a rejoinder. Then the other side has the chance to pitch its first claim and the cycle is repeated. Essays are graded in part on the quality and charitable interpretation of the objections raised.