Thoreau's Radicalism and the Fight Against the Fossil-Fuel Industry

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On a clear and seasonably cold Sunday morning in March, I made my way through the streets of an old neighborhood in Worcester, Massachusetts, and entered a large, converted brick building from some other century. Inside, in a cavernous room with worn floors and south-facing windows lit by the sun, a group of seventy or more young climate activists—mostly college students and recent graduates from the Boston area, along with a few veterans of the Occupy and global justice movements—were gathering for a full day and night of final preparations before carrying out a dramatic peaceful protest against the Keystone XL pipeline. The company building the pipeline, TransCanada Corporation, has its US Northeast office down the road in Westborough, and there, the next morning, twenty-five of these activists—accompanied by more than eighty others, young and old—would be arrested for conscientious, nonviolent civil disobedience.

These people, and those like me who support them, might with some fairness be called "radical"—not just because of their willingness to go to jail to express their principles, but because what they demand lies well outside the limits of mainstream partisan politics and conventional media wisdom.

How radical are they? They insist that those in power take seriously the international scientific consensus that says global greenhouse emissions must be cut at least 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, and that two-thirds to three-fifths of known fossil fuel reserves must stay in the ground, if today's young people and future generations are to have any reasonable hope of a livable climate. They insist, given this reality, that President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry heed what leading scientists are telling them: that massive new long-term investments in fossil fuel infrastructure like the Keystone XL—which will only accelerate and prolong the extraction of carbon-heavy crude from the Alberta tar sands, one of the largest carbon pools on the planet—are unconscionable.

Those activists in Worcester and Westborough weren't alone. As the battle over Keystone moves toward a climax this summer or fall, when Obama is expected to make a final decision, it has become the central rallying point for a broad and diverse climate movement at what looks like a pivotal, and "radicalizing," moment. More and more, what Bill McKibben recently dubbed the "Fossil Fuel Resistance" is turning to nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience to make its demands seen and heard.

The resistance has spread across the country. The fights are intensifying against mountaintop-removal mining in Appalachia, coal exports from the West Coast and shale-gas fracking in the Northeast, with waves of civil disobedience actions. Most dramatically, along the Keystone's southern leg from Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast in Texas (greenlighted by Obama last year during his re-election campaign), members of the Tar Sands Blockade—including climate activists, property owners, indigenous groups and people from frontline communities—have put their bodies in the way of the pipeline's construction, often at great risk, both physical and legal. In early March, CREDO Action issued a call to activists to resist the pipeline, and more than 59,000 people have now pledged to engage in peaceful civil disobedience if Obama approves it. Even the Sierra Club officially decided in February to participate in civil disobedience for the first time in its 120-year history. Its executive director, Michael Brune, was among forty-eight protesters arrested at the White House on February 13, three days before some 50,000 people rallied and marched in Washington to oppose Keystone and call for serious action on climate change—the kind of action that science, and conscience, demand.

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When Brune announced the Sierra Club's decision in January, in a short, eloquent piece titled "From Walden to the White House," he explicitly invoked the legacy of Henry David Thoreau and, of course, Thoreau's most famous essay, "Civil

Disobedience." For Brune, as for many other activists, engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience is a sacred American tradition. "We'll be following in the hallowed footsteps of Thoreau," he wrote, "who first articulated the principles of civil disobedience 44 years before John Muir founded the Sierra Club."

And yet, as the climate movement embraces the legacy of "Civil Disobedience," perhaps it's worth taking a step back and remembering just how radical Thoreau really was—and why. We should remember what it was, exactly, that made him so. Not his night in the Concord jail—that was the easy part—but something else: a readiness to speak the truth, forcefully and without compromise, no matter how fanciful or extreme it may have sounded to jaded ears or what risks it might have entailed. What's more, if we're going to invoke Thoreau, we should remember that he was less an environmentalist (a term that would have made no sense to him) than a radical abolitionist—and that the logic of "Civil Disobedience" led directly, a decade later, to "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

If that thought doesn't make you pause, it should. We might want to ask ourselves if we're really ready to walk in Thoreau's footsteps, and what it might mean, at this radical moment, if we did.

Despite its global reputation for greatness, I have to admit that I've never much liked "Civil Disobedience," the essay Thoreau began drafting in his cabin at Walden Pond in the fall of 1846. The tone is a little too arch, his performance somewhat preening. "I was not born to be forced," he writes. "I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest." Regardless of such posturing (or perhaps because of it?), you can't help feeling that there's not a whole lot at stake for him personally—that he was, in a way, slumming it there in jail for a night—so that it takes on the air of a privileged intellectual exercise, a kind of abstract thought experiment to be conducted, after a good dinner, in Mr. Emerson's parlor.

Still, for all the mannered poses, there's a reason the essay has lasted, that its influence extends across continents and centuries. So it's worth reminding ourselves what Thoreau is really saying in "Civil Disobedience." From a relatively minor incident, now wrapped in legend, in the last week of July 1846—he was stopped on his way into town to get a shoe repaired and asked to pay his poll tax, which he refused to do, though it meant jail—Thoreau gets down to first principles. The country was engulfed in controversy over the Mexican War, a flagrant act of aggression to expand slave territory to the west, and there was even secession talk in the North. But why, Thoreau wants to know, should he wait for a vote in the State House? "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?"

The moral equation, Thoreau is saying, isn't terribly complicated. There are expedient reasons to recognize the authority of a government, as he admits. But he insists that we recognize those situations "in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may." He goes on, in the very next lines, to offer a stark analogy: "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself…. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people."

From this straight-up, no-nonsense formulation, Thoreau lays down a marker, a point from which he'll navigate. "Action from principle," he tells us, "the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine."

This is strong stuff—and prophetic, in more ways than one. What we have here is a kind of working definition of Thoreau's radicalism: call it the willingness to face the "essential facts" (as he put it in *Walden*), and then to act as both facts and conscience require. Doing so, he assures us, "is essentially revolutionary"—the only real way to change the world.

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Thoreau's image as a kind of misanthropic recluse, an apolitical hermit, has always been a caricature; what we know about his active involvement in the Underground Railroad, and his resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act, puts the lie to it. Whether or not, as he hinted in *Walden*, Thoreau sheltered a runaway slave in his cabin at the pond—which seems unlikely, based on the evidence—we know that he helped multiple fugitives on their way to Canada, guarding over them in his family's house (the Thoreaus were committed abolitionists, especially his mother and sisters), even escorting them onto the trains, not without

personal risk.

In May of 1854, a fugitive slave named Anthony Burns was captured in Boston. Radical abolitionists made a dramatic attempt to free him from the courthouse by force, and only with the intervention of state and federal troops on the streets of Boston was Burns sent back into slavery. On July 4, Thoreau took an unprecedented personal step into activism and mounted a platform at Harmony Grove in Framingham—alongside William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth and other prominent abolitionists—to address a boisterous anti-slavery rally. The speech, known as "Slavery in Massachusetts," is merciless in its contempt for the Commonwealth. "My thoughts are murder to the state," he told his audience. "Nature," he proclaimed, "has been partner to no Missouri Compromise." The plight of Anthony Burns, and so many other fugitives, had reminded him of his own uncompromising principle. Five years later, in the fall of 1859, it would be put to the test.

Henry Thoreau met John Brown in March 1857. Already famous, or infamous, for his bloody exploits in Kansas—today we would call them war crimes—Brown came through Concord on a speaking and fundraising tour of the Northeast. Thoreau and Emerson spent hours talking with him, sizing him up, and came away greatly impressed.

But not everyone in Concord was so taken with Brown—far from it—and when the news arrived in October 1859 of Brown's deadly raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, reactions were sharply divided. The whole country was in an uproar. Even Brown's erstwhile supporters quickly distanced themselves. Most of his co-conspirators—many with close ties to Concord—went into hiding, several fleeing to Canada. The atmosphere was tense, even dangerous, for those voicing solidarity with Brown.

Into this picture steps 42-year-old Henry Thoreau, now a leading intellectual. Incensed by the timid and hypocritical reactions of his neighbors, and of the press, Thoreau let it be known that he would speak in support of Brown at Concord's First Church on October 30. The address he gave was "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

That fall of 1859 was Thoreau's most radical moment. He was the first in Concord, and among the first and most prominent in the country, to come to Brown's defense. Within days he would repeat the speech to large audiences in Boston—where he stood in at the last moment for Frederick Douglass, who had been chased into Canada by federal marshals despite having played no part in the Harper's Ferry raid—and in Worcester.

The speech itself is stunning. What Thoreau was saying in his "Plea" for Brown was the same thing he'd said a decade earlier in "Civil Disobedience"—"action from principle…is essentially revolutionary"—only in far stronger terms, and with real skin in the game. What was once a kind of philosophical exercise was now in deadly earnest: Brown's raid and certain execution—not to mention the risk of publicly aligning oneself with him—made Thoreau's night in jail look like child's play. (The day after Brown's hanging in early December, Thoreau became an accomplice in the escape of a desperate Harper's Ferry conspirator, spiriting him out of Concord to a train for Canada.)

But what I find most striking about Thoreau's "Plea" isn't the fact that he championed the violent and fanatical Brown; it's the rhetorical strategy he chose. Thoreau explicitly sets out to defend him not in the court of conventional opinion, nor of any state or constitution, but in the court of conscience. "I plead not for his life," Thoreau tells his audience, "but for his character—his immortal life." Most of all, and most profoundly, it becomes clear, this means pleading for Brown's *sanity*.

Nothing offends Thoreau more than the knee-jerk reaction among his neighbors, and even many abolitionists, to write Brown off as a madman. "Even the *Liberator* called it 'a misguided, wild, and apparently insane…effort,'" he writes. "Republican editors…express no admiration, nor true sorrow even, but call these men 'deluded fanatics'—'mistaken men'—'insane,' or 'crazed.'" This pushes Thoreau over the edge: "Insane!… while the sane tyrant holds with a firmer gripe [*sic*] than ever his four millions of slaves, and a thousand sane editors, his abettors, are saving their country and their bacon!… Ask the tyrant who is his most dangerous foe, the sane man or the insane." Far from insane, Thoreau argues, Brown was the "superior man," even Christ-like—an explicit, if rather strained, comparison throughout the speech.

In defending not only Brown's actions but his sanity against the moderate opinion of what we might call the "center" and "center-left," Thoreau was pushing hard on the boundaries of acceptable discourse. He was, as the saying goes, moving the center. He forced his listeners to consider what was truly "sane" and "insane" in the face of slavery. For Thoreau, Brown's was

a “saner sanity,” recognizing the fact that slavery, intolerable on every level, would never be abolished in the United States without bloodshed. This is what it meant, Thoreau was saying, to be sane in America in 1859.

“In my walks, I would fain return to my senses,” Thoreau wrote (with characteristic wordplay) in the great essay “Walking”—first delivered as a lecture in April 1851, in the midst of the uproar over another escaped slave, Thomas Simms, who had been seized in Boston and returned to the South. It’s the same essay in which Thoreau wrote the line most quoted by conservationists: “in Wildness is the preservation of the world.” In John Brown, Thoreau would encounter a human force of nature, a kind of wildness, that he hoped would bring the country to its senses, its sanity, on the question of slavery—the kind of sanity Thoreau had expressed in “Civil Disobedience”: “This people must cease to hold slaves…though it cost them their existence as a people.”

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Fortunately, Thoreau—with his explicit endorsement of violence—didn’t get the last word on civil disobedience. Mahatma Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others (including some environmentalists) transformed resistance to intolerable injustice in ways Thoreau never imagined—demonstrating the power of a steadfast, principled, radical *nonviolence*. Gandhi and King were the best kind of radicals. So was Jesus (whose nonviolence Thoreau conveniently omits from his “Plea”).

And yet today we face a human crisis as extreme in its way as the one faced by Thoreau. What is the “sane”—and appropriately radical—response to the urgent human crisis of global warming? Is anyone willing to say, “This people must cease to extract fossil fuels, and to unjustly rob today’s children and future generations of a livable planet, whatever the cost”?

It sounds crazy. But just as Thoreau and other radical abolitionists were willing to push the boundaries, so climate activists must be willing to say and do “crazy” and “radical” things—like put their bodies in the way of coal shipments, or demand that universities divest from fossil fuel companies—not because it’s politically expedient, but because it’s morally imperative. When the truly sane courses of action—putting a heavy price on carbon, leaving fossil fuels in the ground, massively scaling up clean energy, urgently seeking the necessary global commitments—lie outside the limits of political “realism” and “reasonable” debate, it’s time to ask who has the firmer grip on reality and reason.

And it’s time to take the strongest nonviolent action. As climate radicals, we need to be true to our understanding of the facts, and to our principles, our perception of right, even as conscience compels us to act—to be, crazy as it may sound, revolutionaries.