Christian Maul

From Self-Culture to Militancy, From Conscience to Intervention

Henry David Thoreau
Between Liberalism and Communitarianism

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To my parents

"Much of mankind's struggle is taken up with the task of finding a suitable, that is to say a happy accommodation, between the claims of the individual and the mass claims of civilization."

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I vividly recall the hot and sunny summer day in 2003 when I had my initial encounter with Henry David Thoreau: I was sitting in a café and was reading through the first pages of *Walden*. As I found out later, my intuitive reaction to the text was similar to that of other beginners in the fields of Transcendentalism in general and Thoreau in particular: Why would anybody be interested in reading about a sociophobic curmudgeon who had nothing else to do except to watch shrubbery grow, observe ants fighting, and gripe about his hard-working contemporaries?

I want to thank my advisor Prof. Dr. Dieter Schulz for showing me in his seminars and in numerous discussions that there is indeed more to Thoreau, that this writer represents a unique approach to the world and is able to inspire one's own life. Without Dieter Schulz's teaching and encouragement, I would most probably never have continued to read Thoreau, let alone write a dissertation about him. Schulz's constructive feedback and suggestions were crucial for the progress of my work.

I also want to thank Prof. Dr. Günter Leypoldt for taking the role of second reader. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to Robert N. Bellah, George Kateb, and Michael Walzer, whose writings informed and inspired my work. All three authors devoted their valuable time for personal interviews during which problematic issues could be clarified in an atmosphere of openness. Many thanks also to the participants of the Ph.D. colloquium at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA), the HCA's Spring Academy, the Ph.D. seminar at the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, Netherlands, and the symposium "Thoreauvian Modernities" at the Université de Lyon for their comments and suggestions.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CD	Thoreau, Henry David. "Resistance to Civil Government," referred to as "Civil Disobedience." *The Higher Law*. Ed. Wendell Glick. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. 63-90.
W	Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. 1854. Ed. Lyndon James Shanley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
Week	Thoreau, Henry David. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. 1849. Eds. Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth and Elizabeth Hall Witherell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

I. INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE THOREAUVIAN SELF

Discontent may sometimes drive us out of our habitual world. Dissatisfaction with our profession, our social environment, our achievements, or simply with the relationships to others – no matter whether freely chosen or imposed on us – might force us to reassess our own *status quo*. Then, we begin to ask ourselves, "Do my daily activities still satisfy and vitalize me?" "Have I chosen the right friends"? "Do I (still) share the principles and values my society professes?" We have to be honest with ourselves to find true answers to these questions, and honesty often requires courage, "*that most admirable of human virtues*,"[1] as John F. Kennedy writes in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book *Profiles in Courage*. And if we want to assuage our discontent, we have to summon up the courage to answer these questions sincerely. The abatement of discontent presupposes the self's candor toward itself.

History abounds with examples of discontented individuals who were honest with themselves and courageous enough to reexamine their *status quo*, to find sincere answers to questions they had about moral conduct and human relations, and to bear the consequences that these answers had for their lives. Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, turned his back on the luxuries available at the palace of his father, King Suddhodana of Kapilavatthu, because he knew that life had more to offer than the meaningless existence as a prince, shielded from reality. After leaving his wife and son, he lived as an ascetic for six years during which he refined his meditation skills. He returned to society as a founder of a religion. The theologian Martin Luther was discontented with the Catholic practice of commissioning indulgences and with its exorbitant expenditures. In his eyes, the individual could only find salvation *sola gratia*, through God's mercy. Luther could not reconcile with his understanding of the Scripture the forgiveness of sins through paying money to the church, which would then spend that money on building the greatest cathedral of Christendom.

Siddhartha Gaudama alias Buddha and Luther shared a willingness to trace the origins of their discontent and to change their situation for the better. What distinguishes them is the fact that Luther found the way out of his moral dilemma within his society. The consequences of this way for world history are commonly known. Buddha, in contrast, had to temporarily leave behind the world into which he was born to reassess the values that this world had bestowed on him. At last, he found his way back as a different person, as an individual with novel values and moral principles from which his followers could benefit. Both Luther and Buddha, however, were constantly aware of the natural, inescapable ties to the environment in which they were raised. Never losing sight of these ties, both could project the corrective measures to their discontent on their respective society and shape its members' perception of

1 John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper, 2006) 1. Kennedy's italics.

themselves and their morals, beliefs, and attitudes. Their initial discontent triggered a reformation of society.

The history of the USA is also grounded on sentiments of discontent. The 102 Puritans departing from England to the New World in September 1620 turned their backs on Europe because they perceived that the Reformation had not been pushed far enough. These separatists could not tolerate the coexistence of Christian denominations granted by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555; only their separation from the 'depraved' Church of England could do justice to their religious beliefs. The Puritans' discontent with the practices of the Catholic Church and the failed reformative attempts finally drove them out of their habitual world, Old Europe. They sought to establish a society based on liberty and genuine faith, a society which John Winthrop, the spiritual leader of a second group of emigrating Puritans, described in a biblical metaphor: a city upon a hill.

In his sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, Winthrop outlined to his associates the importance of their journey: They had entered into a contract with God; they were His chosen people, charged with the mission to create a community in His name which could function as a model for the whole Christian world. Winthrop sensitized his followers to the fact that they could only be successful if this community was held together by the "bonds of brotherly affection." In order to illustrate the necessity of social coherence for their mission, Winthrop, inspired by Paul's letter to the Ephesians, employed an ancient metaphor: The Puritan community shall be bound together by the bonds of charity and mutual love like the parts of the human body are held together by ligaments.[2] In this body, each part has different functions and obligations. Although each settler existed as an individual, endowed by God with distinctive characteristics and abilities, they were supposed to form a community in which all parts interacted. With his body metaphor, Winthrop created a model of the American society: Individuals form a community which has the ability to harmonize diverging forces and to find consent where variety seems to prevail; the American society thus makes one out of many, *e pluribus unum*. Only if the self comprehends itself as a part of the larger whole can the city upon a hill prevail. Despite his collectivism and defense of the community against the claims of the individual, however, Winthrop did not completely undermine the importance of the single self for the communal goal. The body of the society he had in mind could only persist if every single organ and limb was healthy and able to perform its function undisturbed. In other words, the Puritan society could only be stable if each individual was enabled to exist as an independent, self-reliant entity. Thus, the impact of the single individual on the well-being of the whole society must not be underestimated, even in the Puritan vision.

Winthrop's image of the American society has continually challenged intellectuals to define the characteristics of the American self, to determine its relationship to

2 For a comprehensive study of the body metaphor in European cultural history, see Albrecht Koschorke, *Der fiktive Staat: Konstruktionen des politischen Körpers in der Geschichte Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2007).