

Oppression, Civility, and the Politics of Resistance

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Dissertation Abstract

Oppression based on social group membership has been and remains a major injustice which thrives in modern liberal democracies like the United States. Organized political resistance to oppression and the structures that perpetuate it has taken many forms throughout history, from the early acts of revolution that founded the United States, to the nineteenth century abolitionist movement against slavery, to the New Deal-era labor struggles and Black civil rights movement of the twentieth century and the LGBTQ+ rights movement of recent history. The moral and political legacy of these historical struggles, as well as the extent to which the surrounding culture has responded (or failed to respond) to them well characterize resistant attitudes toward our present social and political ills.

This project aims to critically engage with the act of resisting oppression, making distinctions between its forms, inquiring after its justifiability in various cases, and exploring what kinds of moral and political considerations ought to constrain such acts in general. I will proceed from the basic assumption that oppression is a central case of injustice in a modern liberal democracy like our own and explore various conditions and justifications for its amelioration. More specifically, I aim to examine the politics of protest through a conceptual lens which informs a standard treatment of political resistance in the American context in particular: the virtue of civility. It has often been argued that a clear commitment to this virtue lies at the heart of modern-day liberal democracy. As the lionization of (some of) the essential figures of the American civil rights movement shows, a romanticized version of this ideal is also central to the narratives by which we understand our own society, its problems, and its prospects—for better or for worse.

After clarifying the nature of oppression in Chapter 1, I argue in Chapter 2 that our commitment to an over-romanticized conception of civility is, at its best, a case of political conviction misplaced, and at worse, an actively disingenuous and pernicious force in our increasingly fraught and scarcely democratic politics. However, I also recognize in Chapter 3 that dispensing with civility altogether in favor of political violence also has important costs and negative implications where resisting oppression is concerned. Ultimately, in Chapter 4, I synthesize some important conceptual resources from each of these approaches to political resistance—civil disobedience on the one hand and uncivil or militant resistance on the other. There, I argue that what is truly important about the easily misunderstood virtue of civility is a deep sense of commitment to reciprocity and cooperation toward a shared end—to a sense of political constructiveness. It is this idea of constructiveness which I argue should guide our thinking, discussion, and action toward the end of resisting oppression. I end with some recommendations for a new brand of civic radicalism which takes in stride both the radical project of constructively (if not always civilly) resisting oppression and the need to orient citizens toward a suitably refined sense of justice (and the accompanying recognition of injustice) through meaningful civic education initiatives which model and encourage the practice of substantive equality.