

New Civil Rights, New Civilization

On a certain level it is relatively easy to see the connection between earlier ‘civil rights’ struggles and what is currently unfolding through the Occupy movement.

But we must have the courage to dig a little deeper and see what, in reality, is the living connection between such movements in human history, and that which we are witnessing in our own time.

In the concept of ‘civil’ we can find much to help us. To be civil means to express something of the front wave of human and social striving – to be ‘civilized’ is to represent something of where civilisation itself wishes to move towards. Civil society today is that realm of social life where a new and moral civilization-building force is able to flow into society as a whole. Civil rights has to do with the way in which this civil – and ultimately cultural – force is able to affect the life of rights, of polity.

This can be seen in the great leaders of earlier civil rights movements both in America and around the world. Martin Luther King Jr in the USA, Mahatma Ghandi in India, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Jose Rizal in the Philippines, and so on.

The concept of ‘civil disobedience’ must also be mentioned here because it became something of a moral technique employed by many of these movements. Henry David Thoreau’s work on civil disobedience and its further articulation by Ghandi, King, Mandela, Tolstoy and many others is central to all civil rights activities, including the Occupy movement. Civil disobedience has become a kind of moral weapon.

Indeed, any other kind of weapon, or activity, ultimately falls short of the transformation of society as a whole. There must be a kind of moral or spiritual force at work if any true or lasting change is to take place in social life.

In this sense, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman and other transcendentalists of America were also civil rights leaders – they stood up for the moral and spiritual nature of the human being.

Anywhere a new way of being with one another as human beings announces itself through the true spiritual striving of individuals shall we, in truth, find an articulation of civil rights activity. True spiritual striving can no longer be divorced from the realities of daily life.

King’s final words in public, the day before he was assassinated, were: “I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Tolstoy’s main work on civil disobedience was titled *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Emerson’s greatest concept is perhaps that of ‘Self-Reliance’ – the capacity to rest upon the spiritual nature of one’s own self. Ghandi’s ‘Be the change you want to see in the world,’ speaks for itself, as did Mandela’s ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ following the end of apartheid in South Africa.

The success of these earlier movements rests upon the capacity of leaders to speak to the highest nature of others, so that others may freely and willingly act out of their own self-reliance. In the Occupy movement, it is not that there are no leaders – it is that there is a potential leader in everybody. Central to the Occupy movement is the desire to make a space for the leader – for the self-reliant spiritual activity – of the other human being.

This must continue to develop and flow into the movement as a whole if it is to bear true fruit. Only by acting out of our highest, spiritual potential will we be able to create a world worthy of the highest nature of the human being. The civilization being asked for today can only be built out of bricks fired in the kiln of the living spirit. We can help one another to achieve this.

In addition to a heart organ of equality, we must also have a head organ able to develop its unique capacities in freedom, and hands that are able to work co-operatively with others. In such a way shall we build a society where it is once again possible to find the human being – a spiritual cultural life working in complete freedom, a political-rights life based on equality, and an economic life based upon the cooperation of mankind. The archetypal human organism seeks to find itself in the archetypal social organism.

Only by seeking to create, out of love, the social organism as it itself is seeking to be, will we create the right kind of vessel for the true spirit of progress of our time to find right footing on the earth today. Nothing less is being asked of us than this – to create not only new civil rights activity, but new civilization – one worthy of the true nature of the human being.

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