

Chapter 1: Political Obligation

Case Study: The Global Justice Movement

On 30 November 1999, several thousand people sat down in the streets of Seattle and refused to move. What brought this act to the attention of the world was that the streets in which they chose to sit were the same streets that delegates attending the Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) had planned to use to reach the convention centre at which the negotiations were taking place. Despite the best attempts of heavily armed riot police to clear the activists—using water cannons, tear gas, and pepper spray—the determination of the activists won out and the opening of the WTO ministerial meeting was postponed. Simultaneous protests took place in cities around the world. Less than a year later, European activists staged similar mass blockades at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's Fifty-fifth Annual Summit in Prague. There have been mass demonstrations at nearly every (accessible) major global conference of the G8, the G20, the WTO, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and the IMF since then.

In the eyes of the world, the events in Seattle marked the birth of a new movement—often called the 'global justice movement'. Although the movement had never before come together on such a scale, it had its origins in the hundreds of protests and activist groups that, for years, had been meeting in all parts of the world to highlight the injustices of the global economy. These included: groups such as the Zapatistas, in Mexico, who, in 1994, declared that they were no longer prepared to put up with the injustices inflicted on them by the corrupt government and its neoliberal economic policies; groups such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India, whose members have, since 1987, refused to move from their ancient homes while the state governments have tried to dam the river valley in which they live. In recent years, a sister movement—the 'climate justice movement'—has arisen alongside the global justice movement. Although these two movements are often portrayed in the media as separate entities, there is a considerable degree of overlap between

the aims, tactics, and world view of both. At their core, both movements seek to provide a voice to oppressed groups of people whose rights have been cast aside by economic and political interests—to offer an alternative form of representation when democratic forms of representation prove inadequate or wholly absent.

BOX 1.5 THE NARMADA BACHAO ANDOLAN

For as long as they can remember, the tribal people of the Narmada Valley have made their homes on the banks of the Narmada River in central India. The river gives them everything that they need to sustain life: water, fertile soil, and rich forests. Even their customs and their gods revolve around the river. In 1979, work began on a series of dams—several reaching over 100 metres high—along the length of the Narmada River. The project, funded in part by the World Bank, aimed to generate electricity and channel water across central India. Residents of the valley were assured of a decent resettlement package.

As the dams began to go up and fields, homes, and forests began to disappear under water, problems were quickly encountered. There was no land on which to resettle the villagers. Most received no compensation at all. Even the electricity and irrigation that was supposed to justify construction of the dams barely materialized. What little electricity and irrigation did materialize was not for the villagers' benefit, being directed to the richer inhabitants of surrounding cities. With no alternative left, villagers began to relocate to the streets of nearby cities, taking up their places among India's many rickshaw pullers, beggars, and rag pickers (see, for example, Morse and Berger, 1992).

In 1987, the residents of Narmada launched a struggle to oppose any further construction of the dams—at least until those who had already lost their homes received the resettlement package that they had been promised. They called their movement the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, or the 'Save the Narmada Movement'. The villagers declared that they would rather drown in their homes as the

waters rose than relocate voluntarily—and police had a hard time stopping them from doing so. In the course of the struggle, two villagers were killed, one of whom—a 15-year-old boy—was shot by police for obstructing a dam-related survey of his village.

After many years of struggle, the movement had some notable successes, forcing the World Bank to withdraw from the project and staying construction of the dams for four years, while the Supreme Court of India considered their legality. Even the renowned Indian author Arundhati Roy, winner of the 1997 Booker Prize, took up the cause of Narmada with her essay entitled ‘The greater common good’ (1999; 2002). These successes opened up the space for the movement to expand and work on other initiatives. It founded the National Alliance of People’s Movements to unite grass-roots struggles across India and became involved with international global justice networks, such as People’s Global Action. In doing so, it emphasized that the problems faced by the residents of Narmada are symptomatic of wider trends in economic globalization. Representatives of the movement have been present at many of the large global justice demonstrations, marching alongside Western activists and representatives of numerous other indigenous groups from around the world.

In 2000, the fortunes of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* changed when the Supreme Court gave the go-ahead to continue construction of the dams. Once again, the waters began to rise and the focus of the struggle returned to the valley. To this day, most of those who have lost their homes have yet to receive compensation and the people of the Narmada Valley continue their struggle for life. (<http://www.narmada.org>).

<case study ‘A’ head setting>Direct action

What unites those who participate in the global justice movement is a refusal to grant unlimited authority to the state, allied with a willingness directly to confront power—a readiness not merely to ask the powers that be to make good injustice, but directly to set about remedying the problem themselves: a willingness, in short, to use **direct action**. Direct action comes in many shapes and

sizes. It encompasses Gandhian hunger strikes, African Americans using white-only facilities during the era of **segregation**, blockades, lockdowns, strikes, taking a hammer to weapons of war, etc. Different styles of direct action each have their advocates, and each have found favour with different movements in different national and historical contexts.

Direct action need not be—although often is—illegal. Most activists who use direct action do not use violence of any kind and some even use the term ‘non-violent direct action’ to emphasize this point. Damage to items such as weapons of war and genetically modified crops is not regarded as violence by most activists. A small minority of activists—the so-called ‘black bloc’—are prepared to damage other types of property, such as the premises of companies and organizations that they regard as complicit in global injustices. One of the main direct action tactics used by the global justice movement is the blockade—a tactic that has been used by protest groups for centuries.

Let us concentrate on *illegal* direct action. When theorists have thought about illegal protests in the past, they have tended to argue that the only legitimate forms of **civil disobedience** are those that are open and accountable. They have insisted that those undertaking civil disobedience ought not to hide their illegal acts and that they ought subsequently to surrender themselves to due legal process. As Rawls writes, ‘*By acting in this way, one addresses the sense of justice of the majority of the community and declares that in one’s considered opinion the principles of social cooperation among free and equal men are not being respected*’ (1971: 364).

Perhaps it is unsurprising that political theorists have tended to defend a form of civil disobedience that emphasizes openness and accountability, and which appeals to the public conscience to bring about change. After all, most of these theorists were writing at a time when the public perception of civil disobedience was strongly influenced by the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Taking its inspiration from Gandhi, this was a movement that used open and accountable civil disobedience to great effect, as a vehicle to highlight the injustice suffered by African Americans.

The direct action practised by the global justice movement takes some tactics from the civil rights movement, but does not emulate it in every respect. Activists do not always perform their illegal acts openly and they do not always surrender themselves to due legal process. Their primary aim is not to attract media attention or public sympathy, in the hope that the state will be persuaded to remedy the injustice; although many in the movement hope that such publicity will be a side effect of their actions, direct action is undertaken with the sincere aim of directly stopping an injustice from taking place. Whether or not this aim is achieved, activists believe that confronting the injustice is important for its own sake.

Yet it is not obvious that the direct action practised by the global justice movement is illegitimate just because it does not meet the demand for openness and accountability. One possible activist response to this demand appeals to the need to use different tactics in different contexts. Open and accountable civil disobedience may have worked for the civil rights movement, but it might not be an effective means of fighting global injustice. But activists can, and often do, invoke a much more radical response to the demand for openness and accountability. The Rawlsian model of civil disobedience starts from a background assumption that we ought to obey the law, except when a specific injustice requires disobedience; direct action practised by the global justice movement is much more philosophically anarchist in orientation. Many of the movement's activists, whether committed anarchists or not, share a deep suspicion of the authority that their governments claim for themselves.

An activist and a police officer

To illustrate this last point, let us imagine how a conversation between a direct activist and a police officer at a global justice demonstration might go.

The scene is a peaceful sit-down blockade of a highway leading to the venue of a major WTO

meeting. A police officer, under orders to clear the road in preparation for the arrival of a number of important WTO delegates, walks towards an activist, pepper spray in hand. The police officer explains that, by sitting in the middle of a public highway, the activist is causing an illegal breach of the peace and is liable to arrest. If she refuses to cooperate, the police officer continues, he will have to use force to remove the activist from the road.

Under normal circumstances, the conversation would be likely to end at that point and be followed by the infliction of pain on the activist. But let us suppose, for the sake of exploring the issues, that both the activist and the police officer are somewhat philosophically inclined, and that the latter is willing to defer the infliction of pain at least until he has had a chance to reach a considered judgement on the legitimacy of his doing so.

‘So, tell me,’ says the police officer, ‘why are you sitting in the road obstructing these delegates?’ In response, the activist explains her belief that the WTO makes and enforces unjust global trade rules that cause suffering to people living in poverty.

With a sympathetic, yet uncompromising, smile, the police officer replies that, be that as it may, it is not the activist’s job to tell everyone else how the world should be run. ‘We have elected leaders for that purpose,’ he argues, and while the activist is quite welcome to lobby those leaders by writing letters and going on marches, she is not at liberty to force her ideas on society by obstructing the highway.

At this point, the activist reels off an impressive list of facts, statistics, and economic models to back up her view that the policies implemented by the WTO really do cause suffering to millions of people around the world. She tells the police officer that she and thousands of her fellow activists have, for years, been using every legal method in the book to try to convince their government not to support these policies, but that their efforts have been entirely futile. Concluding, she asks the police officer why, if he is entitled to use force to stop various wrongdoings being committed around town, she should not be similarly entitled to use force to stop this wrongdoing being

committed on the global stage.

‘Well,’ says the police officer, ‘that’s easy: I am a representative of an elected government, enforcing rules chosen by them. You are not. So my use of force is legal, whereas yours is not.’

The activist is unmoved: ‘Why should I care what the government says? I didn’t ask the government to make the rules for me. I never consented to be governed by the state, tacitly or otherwise. I didn’t vote for the government, or anyone else for that matter. And I didn’t invite them to run my country. As far as I recall, they were already here when I was born. I suppose I could leave, but then I’d have to leave my family and friends behind and I’d only have to put up with some other government instead. Besides, the rules that the government’s delegates will make if I let them through into that WTO meeting will be unjust and harmful to millions of people who, because they live in other countries, didn’t even get a chance to vote for or against my government.’

‘The bottom line is that where there is a serious injustice taking place, whether perpetrated by a private citizen or by the government, anyone has a right to use force to stop that injustice. I’m not saying that we have a right to take to the streets and cause disruption for the sake of any old grumble, but if we give up our right to use force to hold governments to account when they commit serious wrongs and cause serious suffering, then we would live in a very dangerous world indeed.’

The police officer looks puzzled. He agrees with the activist that we would not want to live in a world in which the only people allowed to use force were those directed by the government to do so. After all, he thinks, surely people living in Nazi Germany had a right to use force against their government? But where can the line be drawn? As the activist herself said, we would not want to let people take to the streets with any old grumble, so when does a grumble become serious enough to justify direct action? And what if people disagree about how serious a grumble actually is?

‘OK,’ says the police officer thoughtfully, ‘let’s take a step back here. Do you think that the government never has any reason to expect obedience from you? Or do you agree that, most of the

time, we should obey the law, except perhaps when the government does something really bad, which we need to stop? Don't you think it's a bit selfish of you to undermine the government's authority in this way, when the government brings so many benefits to so many people? After all, your fellow citizens might not agree with everything their government does, but they obey the law nevertheless, so that the government can carry on doing its job.'

The activist pauses to think for a moment and then tries to render precise the police officer's appeals: 'Let me get you right here: are you saying that, if I disobey the law here, then I'll stop the government from doing all of the wonderful things that it does elsewhere and that I owe it to society not to do that? Well, I'm prepared to accept that the government does do some useful things, but I certainly don't accept that my challenging the government's harmful policies is going to threaten its ability to carry on doing those useful things.

'And what about all of the people in the poor world who are going to be sat on by the WTO if this meeting goes ahead? Don't I owe them anything? I appreciate your concerns, but I really think that you need to be a bit clearer about what it is that I owe to my fellow citizens and why it is that this requires me to obey the law all the time. I mean, is this some kind of utilitarian duty you're appealing to, or are you trying to imply that it's unfair of me to break the law when everyone else obeys it? Surely you wouldn't seriously want to assert that I'm freeriding on my fellow citizens' dutiful obedience to the law by breaking the law to stand up for justice?'

As you can see, this argument could go on for a long time. What it reveals, however, is that the question of when one can justifiably break the law is by no means a straightforward one. The answer depends, among other things, on fairly involved normative reasoning about the limits of political authority and obligation. Neither the police officer nor the activist in the discussion above is *obviously* in the right, and it is ultimately up to you to reach your own conclusions. But the arguments in this chapter should have got you thinking about some of the relevant issues, and given

you some of the tools that you will need to begin thinking about political authority and obligation for yourself.