

剑桥政治思想史原著系列（影印本）

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

# 梭罗政治著作选

Thoreau

*Political*

*Writings*

Edited by

NANCY L.

ROSENBLUM

中国政法大学出版社

THOREAU

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*Political Writings*

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THOREAU  
*Political Writings*

# 剑桥政治思想史原著系列

## 丛书编辑

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在政治理论领域，“剑桥政治思想史原著系列”作为主要的学生教科丛书，如今已牢固确立了其地位。本丛书旨在使学生能够获得从古希腊到 20 世纪初期西方政治思想史方面所有最为重要的原著。它囊括了所有著名的经典原著，但与此同时，它又扩展了传统的评价尺度，以便能够纳入范围广泛、不那么出名的作品。而在此之前，这些作品中有许多从未有过现代英文版本可资利用。只要可能，所选原著都会以完整而不删节的形式出版，其中的译作则是专门为本丛书的目的而安排。每一本书都有一个评论性的导言，加上历史年表、生平梗概、进一步阅读指南，以及必要的词汇表和原文注解。本丛书的最终目的是，为西方政治思想的整个发展脉络提供一个清晰的轮廓。

本丛书已出版著作的书目，请查阅书末。

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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## Introduction

### *Thoreau's life*

Thoreau's life and work focus uncompromisingly on the question, how should I live? His titles prepare the way: "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," "Life Without Principle," and *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, whose opening chapter, "Economy," is an extended reflection on "the true necessities and means of life" (p. 27).<sup>1</sup> Thoreau's questioning is unwavering and exhaustive, personal and individual. No element of day-to-day life can be left unexamined if "our whole life is startlingly moral" (p. 87). The troubling political questions that face men and women – such as an individual's responsibility for social injustice, the obligation to obey political authority, and reasons for civil disobedience – arise as part of a whole life, in which we have other affairs to attend to. Thoreau asks not only about the best form of government but how much a person should have to do with government at all? If Thoreau is not a political philosopher like others in this Cambridge Texts series, it is less because his style of thought is unsystematic or his references to the history of political thought are few, and more because of his insistence that political society's claim on us is conditional and intermittent, and that government's contribution to a well-spent life is only comparatively important. Thoreau has "several lives to live" besides that of democratic citizen.

Like all of his writing, Thoreau's political thought is intensely

<sup>1</sup> Unattributed page numbers in brackets in the Introduction refer to the texts reproduced in this book.



personal and particular. "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking." He reminds us that he speaks for himself, about what he knows from experience, and only about what attracts his attention. Chattel slavery becomes his affair when it reminds him of "slavery of all kinds" and the need for self-emancipation, or when government tries to make him an agent of injustice – when it is forcibly impressed on him that southern slavery entails "Slavery in Massachusetts." The habit of speaking from personal experience points up the parochialism of Thoreau's life, the specific events that spurred his writing, and his audience of neighbors whom he addresses directly – "you who read these pages." *Walden* answers their questions about how he lived, and Thoreau identifies with chancleer bragging lustily in the morning to wake his neighbors up. In a contemporary review of *Walden* George Eliot thought she had gotten "a bit of pure American life (not the 'go-ahead' species but its opposite pole)," but Thoreau's roots were in New England, not America generally, and Concord, Massachusetts in particular (Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 338).

Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, a rural community twenty miles from Boston, newly opened to the railroad, to the poor Irish immigrants who built it, to southern slaves escaping by it, and to the growing national economy. John Thoreau's pencil-making business supported the family's modest middle-class household. Cynthia Thoreau was a founder of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society and a reformer. For many years she ran their home as a boarding house for reform-minded tenants and a haven for fugitive slaves and abolitionists escaping to Canada. Thoreau's anti-slavery passion was excited at home.

Except for two years at Walden Pond and another two living with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau resided in his family home. He led the circumscribed life of a naturalist, writer, friend, and neighbor, dividing his day between writing and walking the nearby fields and woods where he engaged in the systematic collection of botanical specimens and studies of temperature, ice, grasses, the succession of forests, and the dispersion of seeds. He did not travel far on his few excursions on foot or by boat – a trip on the Concord and Merrimack rivers, to Maine, Mount Ktaaden in New Hampshire, Cape Cod, New York, and Canada. Thoreau's pantheon of heroes from history and literature were drawn from

wide reading, but he found men he likened to heroes among his small acquaintance: a Native American Penobscot, Joe Polis; a Concord woodcutter, Alek Therien (the “true Homeric man”) (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 144); the anti-slavery raider, John Brown.

Thoreau was a disciplined, self-directed scholar whose wide-ranging reading is the key to his boundless intellectual and imaginative world. He studied the early literature of northern Europe, modern German literature, and the classics; Jesuit histories of the French settlement of Canada and relations with the North American Indians; Hinduism (Thoreau had one of the largest private libraries of Oriental books of his time); aesthetics, including Ruskin; Cato and other ancient writers on agriculture; books on language and etymology; ancient and contemporary natural history and zoology. In addition, as Robert D. Richardson Jr., has described, Thoreau’s “world was mapped by special, grand, epoch-making books, each introducing a whole universe of thought”: Homer’s *Iliad*, *The Laws of Menu*, Alexander von Humboldt’s *Kosmos*, Linnaeus’ *Philosophia Botanica*, Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* (Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, p. 242). Thoreau read these works for inspiration and found equivalence rather than historical difference: “I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in” (ibid. p. 26).

In his contribution to the Harvard College report ten years after graduation, Thoreau tells how he got his living:

I don’t know whether mine is a profession, or a trade, or what not. It is not yet learned, and in every instance has been practiced before being studied . . . It is not one thing but legion, I will give you some of the monster’s heads. I am a Schoolmaster – a private Tutor, a Surveyor – a Gardener, a Farmer – a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster . . . My present employment is to answer such orders as may be expected from so general an advertisement as the above – that is, if I see fit, which is not always the case, for I have found out a way to live without what is commonly called employment or industry attractive or otherwise. (Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, p. 220)

Getting a living was a critical moral predicament; if getting a living is not honest and glorious, living is not (p. 108). The quiet desperation of his neighbors “always on the limits, trying to get

into business and trying to get out of debt” struck Thoreau, as it has every romantic sensibility, as averse to poetry and philosophy and finally unproductive: “the twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken . . . but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor” (p. 24). Thoreau laments the crippling effects of the division of labor – the factory girls, “never alone, hardly in their dreams.” Mass production was applied first in small-arms manufacture, and he observed that men too had become interchangeable parts, serving the state with their bodies. Breeding slaves was simply the worst “staple production.”

The simplicity and independence of Thoreau’s experiment at living at Walden Pond are a commentary on the consumption side of economy as well. Men are “gross feeders,” and he saw the connection between consumption and economic expansion. Increased opportunities to acquire luxuries (“coffee, tea, and meat” at every meal) explained why his neighbors endured the strain of incessant work. The proliferation of desires and national “manifest destiny” mirror one another. Everywhere men labor under a mistake, Thoreau warns: “when he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now” (p. 32).

He did not prescribe severe self-sufficiency for everyone, however, or even for himself once he returned to the city, though it is easy to see why Thoreau’s notion of living within limits has inspired ecological “greens.” But Thoreau was no primitivist. Nor was he anti-capitalist. He did not subscribe to the moral economy of republicanism by characterizing commercial and industrial growth as corruption or idealizing the small-scale farmer virtuously producing for the household rather than for profit. His point was that when business enterprise and speculation monopolize our thoughts, we are shirking the real business of life.

His own domestic economy taught Thoreau that “the cost of some thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (p. 44). Spending one’s life at labor without just reward is the fate of southern slaves and northern “wage slaves,” but the worst master is the man who is slave-driver of himself (p. 26). Thoreau records rewards appropriate to his work of philosophy and writing. His “small

Herculean labor" hoeing beans introduces him to the tonic of a half-cultivated life; his sowing uncovers the ashes of primeval inhabitants; he works in the fields "for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker" (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 162). He labored "revising mythology, rounding a fable here and there, and building castles in the air for which earth offered no worthy foundation" (ibid. p. 269).

Thoreau recast two events from his life in his essays, most famously his experiment at living at Walden Pond, begun on July 4, 1845, Independence Day. This was no literal withdrawal. His life there was intended to be visible and visited. If the whistle of the locomotive penetrated his woods, his solitude was similarly intrusive and confrontational. Thoreau's two-year stay was literarily productive; he wrote his account of his travels with his brother John, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and began the lectures that would grow into *Walden*.

In 1846 while on an errand to the village Thoreau was arrested for nonpayment of the poll tax used to finance local government, and his night in jail became a cornerstone of "Civil Disobedience." This was not the first time Thoreau denied that he had an obligation to support public institutions; he had refused to pay the church tax, explaining that he "did not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined" (p. 13). He was not the first to use this tactic to protest government policy, either; his friend Bronson Alcott had been arrested on the same charge a few years before. We are not certain who paid Thoreau's back taxes but he was released after one night in Concord jail, ungrateful to the person who let "their private feelings interfere with the public good" (Glick, *Reform Papers*, p. 84).

Thoreau did not formulate universal principles to correct "life without principle," and would not have others adopt his mode of living. He could not say why he was obsessed with "how to live and what to live for," but he did tell us what it is like to be in his skin. Thoreau's minute knowledge of nature, systematic reading, the deliberateness with which he went about every aspect of his daily life, his patient and reflective writing and rewriting were all in the service of severe self-examination. We know from his work what one self-charted life looks like. It is impossible to agree with Emerson's thought that Thoreau "had no temptations to fight

against, – no appetites, no passions”: there was always the temptation to relax his awful vigilance.

Thoreau died at home, of tuberculosis, in 1862 at the age of forty-four, and is buried at Author’s Ridge in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. His final thoughts were of moose and Indians.

### *Thoreau’s writing*

Thoreau’s way of working was to record excerpts from his reading in commonplace books and to keep the daily journal of his thoughts and observations which he had begun at his friend Emerson’s urging in 1837. He culled the journals and notebooks for materials, and the excursion form adapted from records of his travels gave characteristic shape to many of his pieces. His best-known essays first appeared in public as lectures before a local audience. The Concord Lyceum was part of a national movement of community education that sponsored lectures on scientific, moral, and literary topics, and Thoreau gave twenty-two lectures there.

The essays collected here reflect this history. *Walden* was begun during his sojourn at the pond, pieces were given as public talks (“Economy” was delivered as a lecture before the Concord Lyceum in 1847), and the manuscript underwent eight revisions over seven years before it was published in 1854. The 1848 lecture “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” incorporating an account of Thoreau’s night in jail two years earlier, was published in 1849 as “Resistance to Civil Government” and appeared under the familiar title “Civil Disobedience,” supplied by the editor in the 1866 posthumous volume *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. “Life Without Principle” was a lecture revised many times beginning in 1854 and delivered under a variety of titles: “What Shall it Profit?,” “Life Misspent,” and “The Higher Law.” Thoreau spoke on “Slavery in Massachusetts” at an anti-slavery meeting at Framingham, Massachusetts. “A Plea for Captain John Brown” came directly from several days’ journal entries and was delivered as a lecture in 1859, and “The Last Days of John Brown” was written for delivery at Brown’s grave in 1860.

Thoreau never earned a living from his writing. He published *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* at his own expense and

three-quarters of the edition went unsold. *A Week* and *Walden* were the only books Thoreau prepared for publication; his other principal works were edited after his death. There is no evidence that he planned a collection of political essays.

"Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written," Thoreau challenges his readers (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 101). His characteristic techniques were designed to force the reader's close attention. Paradox is one; rejecting the expected word or thought for its opposite is in keeping with a determination to disorient readers and awaken them to fresh meanings. Thoreau's *figural language of economics* – cost, labor, capital, profit and loss, wealth and value – parody common moral and economic calculations. There is also the militancy of Thoreau's language and conception of the act of writing. "We need to be provoked, – goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot" (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 108). In his extended literary analysis of Thomas Carlyle's work, Thoreau praises the author in military terms: he "meets . . . face to face," wrestles and strives, "advances, crashing his way through the host of weak, half-formed, *dilettante* opinions," and finally "prevails; you don't even hear the groans of the wounded and dying" ("Thomas Carlyle and His Works," pp. 231–2). Thoreau, too, aims to produce thoughts like bullets (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 140). He wants to speak somewhere "without bounds," to find expression that is "extravagant" enough (p. 94). He hopes his writing will occupy "our most alert and wakeful hours" (Shanley, *Walden*, p. 104).

Studies of the reception of Thoreau's work in the United States and abroad detail successive waves of interest in particular works and changing scholarly interpretations: cult attachments to Thoreau as the exemplar of beatific solitude and celebrations of his individualism; Thoreau as the initiator of a genre of nature writing; his place in "the flowering of New England" literary culture and Transcendentalism; formal critical studies of individual texts for symbolism and style; social and cultural histories situating his work in the period of economic growth of the first half of the nineteenth century and in the market for advice books on advancement and self-improvement. Recent scholarship has examined Thoreau as a writer for whom consciousness and written language were inseparable, and interprets *Walden* as a book about its own writing. Except for a surge of interest in the 1960s

in Thoreau as a social critic and advocate of civil disobedience, cultural studies have eclipsed his political thought. This book attempts to correct the imbalance.

*Thoreau's political essays in context*

The coming Civil War should not overshadow Thoreau's proximity to the Revolutionary generation. His paternal grandfather served under Paul Revere; the Wellfleet oysterman in *Cape Cod* "heard the guns fire at the battle of Bunker Hill"; Thoreau's earliest published piece was an obituary of Concord's last survivor of the Revolutionary War; and Concord was debating where to erect monuments to its famous battle. "Civil Disobedience" opens with the reminder that this American government is a recent tradition, "endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity" (p. 1).

America was trying to live with one inheritance: a Constitution reflecting the federal consensus that only the states could abolish slavery within their jurisdictions. In the decades following the Revolution, flush with the spirit of independence, slavery was outlawed in the north, but the Constitution said nothing about its extension to territories and new states. The annexation of Texas in 1845 brought war with Mexico and a victory for the expansion of slavery. Thoreau refers to these events in "Civil Disobedience," but characteristically he concentrates on what he knows from personal experience. The Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850 insured federal assistance to slavecatchers, and brought the intrusion of slavery into the north. "What should concern Massachusetts is not the Nebraska Bill" and the disposition of some wild lands a thousand miles off, "but her own slaveholding and servility" (p. 133), Thoreau writes – and calls his most intense political essay "Slavery in Massachusetts."

In short, the national promise of freedom and the rhetoric of liberation common in politics and religion were confronted with a massive contradiction. Because Thoreau thought the tradition was impaired from the start, he does not invoke historical contracts or original promises. The citizens of Concord celebrate Independence Day with bells rung and cannons fired, "as if *those* three millions had fought for the right to be free themselves, but to hold in slavery three million others" (p. 126). Public indifference to several failed

attempts to free fugitive slaves arrested in Boston convinced Thoreau that Massachusetts "praises till she is hoarse the easy exploit of the Boston tea party, but will be comparatively silent about the braver and more disinterestedly heroic attack on the Boston Court-House, simply because it was unsuccessful!" (p. 133). He is puzzled by his feeling of vast and indefinite loss, until he realizes that "what I had lost was a country" (p. 134).

This is not to diminish the promise of the American Revolution. If "we have used up all our inherited freedom" (p. 000) we must reproduce it. Tom Paine had insisted on a revolution in every generation. Thoreau was still more radical; there is always Paine's "Crisis" and "the birthday of the new world" is always at hand. He also shared Paine's grim recognition that new beginnings are seldom innocent. Independence was preceded by conquest and forcible expropriation, the Indian was the native of the New World ("three thousand years deep into time"), which was not really discovered at all; the Pilgrims were not the first European settlers ("*New England commences only when it ceases to be New France*"). Thoreau is indignant that America's history goes unrecognized: "I notice the chips which some Indian fletcher has made. Yet our poets and philosophers regret that we have no antiquities in America, no ruins to remind us of the past" (Fussell, "The Red Face of Man," p. 148).

Revolution and democratic consent provide Thoreau with his political vocabulary, then, but the words have become relics; he wants to give them fresh significance and uses terms in a way calculated to point up difficulty rather than invoke conventional common sense. "All men recognize the *right of revolution*," he observes (p. 4), but what would revolution look like now that the tyrant is not a foreign government but our own? "I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion," suggesting that there are changing styles in resistance, too (p. 17). Because the war of independence brought limited political freedom but not economic or moral freedom, "we tax ourselves unjustly. There is a part of us which is not represented." We think we know what counts as consent, but Thoreau casts doubt on the usual institutional mechanisms for signalling democratic consent. Beyond that, he advises that the great question has become how individuals withhold or withdraw consent – for which there is no precedent, and no philosophical authority. Above



all, democracy must be recognized as an invitation to cast not one's vote only, but "one's whole influence."

Events in Boston and Concord and debates among northern abolitionists gave Thoreau's thoughts about democracy and revolution immediate significance. He wrote for convinced anti-slavery audiences, and from the start his subject was not why slavery was wrong but what its opponents should do. "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" (p. 8).

Most opponents of slavery were gradualists who agitated against extending slavery to the territories and supported the African colonization of freed slaves but felt bound by the constitutional compact to respect the south's property in slaves and to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. "They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect" (p. 6). Abolitionists insisted uncompromisingly on an immediate end to slavery everywhere. They constituted only a small and controversial part of the anti-slavery movement, however; members of the Concord Lyceum, for example, were united in their opposition to slavery but divided over abolitionism, and even the abolitionists were divided between those who formed the Liberty Party and "nonresistants" led by William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Adin Ballou. Thoreau's political essays reflect his own progressively more radical position, worked out principally in relation to the Garrisonians.

"Resistance to Civil Government" (later renamed "Civil Disobedience") was cast in part as a response to Daniel Webster's speech insisting that associations "springing from a feeling of humanity" have no right to interfere with slavery where it exists. (Glick, *Reform Papers*, p. 325). Webster deserves the title "Defender of the Constitution," Thoreau wrote ironically; he epitomized "statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold[ing] it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it" (p. 19). From his vantage point outside, Thoreau saw the Constitution as a work of legislation by men no different and no better than most others: "No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America" (p. 20). Jefferson and Adams were not Solon and