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A Symposium on Erin R. Pineda's *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement*

Candice Delmas, Alexander Livingston, Lawrie Balfour, and Laura Grattan, with a response by Erin Pineda

Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.)

Introduction

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Seeing Like an Activist revisits the theory and practice of civil disobedience as it developed through the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. From Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to the student sit-ins to the Freedom Rides, few movements and figures have had such a lasting impact on the way that people think about civil disobedience. In activists' steadfast commitment to nonviolence, their willingness to suffer violence without retaliation, their voluntary submission to arrest and incarceration, and their stirring appeal to constitutional and democratic principles, we find a demanding blueprint for civil disobedience. The movement, as exemplar and horizon of judgment, suggests that even in an order marked by entrenched and violent forms of inequality and injustice, those who disobey in the service of democracy and justice ought to do so by committing to the standards of civility, respect for law, and fidelity to the principles of majoritarian democracy that civil rights activists embraced through their actions.

My book stages an encounter with this familiar, comfortable narrative to render it less so, in part by revealing the assumptions about the nature of racial domination lurking beneath its evocations of shared democratic norms and principles. Theorists like John Rawls who approached the

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question of civil disobedience in the early and mid-1960s did so with the example of the civil rights movement centrally in view, aiming to transform the words and deeds of civil rights activists into a normative theory specifying under what conditions citizens of a fundamentally just but imperfect democratic order may break the law in protest. Approaching the movement not as a source for live, creative political theorizing, but as an object lesson within a broader philosophical account of political obligations, they saw civil disobedience "like a white state"—transforming Black collective dissent against the state-sanctioned and state-facilitated violence of a racial order into a testament of the system's democratic legitimacy. Read in the decades after the movement's end, and in the midst of a pervasive triumphalist narrative about ending American racial hierarchy, liberal theories of civil disobedience delivered a comforting message about the democratic order's inherent capacities for transformation.

My book returns to these seemingly familiar scenes—college students seeking arrest by sitting at segregated lunch counters; King theorizing disobedient dissent from within a Birmingham city jail—to suggest a different reading. Positioning movement figures as engaged in the creative work of political theorizing, it builds on historical and archival evidence to show how they deployed civil disobedience as a means of decolonization: a practice of self- and collective emancipation that could also transform the subjectivities, relationalities, and institutions of white supremacy. I place the movement in transit across a world in motion, as activists exchanged ideas and practices with anticolonial movements to theorize forms of action that could rebuild a world of violent racial-colonial world spanning Accra to Alabama. To "see like an activist" is to re-encounter the problem of civil disobedience not as a question of a citizen's obligation to obey the law, but as one about forms of action that allow subjects and collectivities shaped by violent forms of domination to make democracy—together and for the first time.

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