

Obligation to the State

from Howard Zinn's *Declarations of Independence*

Despite all I have said about the gap between law and justice and despite the fact that this gap is visible to many people in the society, the idea of obligation to law, obligation to government, remains powerful. President Jimmy Carter reinstated the draft of young men for military service in 1979, and when television reporters asked the men why they were complying with the law (about 10 percent were not), the most common answer was "I owe it to my country."

The obligation that people feel to one another goes back to the very beginning of human history, as a natural, spontaneous act in human relations. Obligation to government, however, is not natural. It must be taught to every generation.

Who can teach this lesson of obligation with more authority than the great Plato? Plato has long been one of the gods of modern culture, his reputation that of an awesome mind and a brilliant writer of dialogue, his work the greatest of the Great Books. Shrewdly, Plato puts his ideas about obligation in the mouth of Socrates. Socrates left no writings that we know of, so he can be used to say whatever Plato wants. And Plato could have no better spokesman than a wise, gentle old man who was put to death by the government of Athens in 399 B.C. for speaking his mind. Any words coming from such a man will be especially persuasive.

But they are Plato's words, Plato's ideas. All we know of Socrates is what Plato tells us. Or, what we read in the recollections of another contemporary, Xenophon. Or what we can believe about him from reading Aristophanes's spoof on his friend Socrates, in his play *The Clouds*.

So we can't know for sure what Socrates really said to his friend Crito, who visited him in jail, after he had been condemned to death. But we do know what Plato has him say in the dialogue *Crito* (written many years after Socrates's execution), which has been impressed on the minds of countless generations, down to the present day, with deadly effect. Plato's ideas have become part of the orthodoxy of the nation, absorbed into the national bloodstream and reproduced in ordinary conversations and on bumper stickers. ("Love it or leave it"-summing up Plato's idea of obligation.)

Plato's message is presented appealingly by a man calmly facing death, whose courage disarms any possible skepticism. It is made even more appealing by the fact that it follows another dialogue, the *Apology*, in which (according to Plato), Socrates addresses the jury in an eloquent defense of free

speech, saying those famous words: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Plato then unashamedly (lesson one in intellectual bullying: speak with utter confidence) presents us with some unexamined ideas. Having established Socrates's credentials as a man for independent thought, he proceeds in the *Crito* to put on Socrates's tongue an argument for blind obedience to government.

It is hardly a dialogue, although Plato is famous for dialogue and the "Socratic method" is based on teaching through dialogue. Poor Crito, who visits Socrates in prison to persuade him to let his friends plan his escape, is virtually tongue-tied. He is reduced to saying, to every one of Socrates's little speeches: "Yes . . . of course . . . clearly . . . I agree. . . Yes . . . I think that you are right. . . . True." And Socrates is going on and on, like the good trouper that he is, saying Plato's lines, making Plato's argument. We know the ideas are Plato's because in his well-known and much bigger dialogue the *Republic* he makes an even more extended case for a totalitarian state.

To Crito's offer of escape, Socrates replies: I must obey the law. True, he says, Athens has committed an injustice by ordering him to die for speaking his mind (he seems slightly annoyed at this!), but if he complained about this injustice, Athens could rightly say: "We brought you into the world, we raised you, we educated you, we gave you and every other citizen a share of all the good things we could."

Socrates accepts this argument of the state. He tells Crito that by not leaving Athens he agreed to obey its laws. So he must go to his death. Yes, it is Plato's own bumper sticker: "Love it or leave it."

If Plato had lived another 2,000 years or so he would have encountered the argument of Henry David Thoreau, the quiet hermit of Walden Pond who wrote a famous essay on civil disobedience. Thoreau said that whatever good things we have were not given us by the state, but by the energies and talents of the people of the country. And he would be damned if he would pay taxes to support a war against Mexico based on such a paltry argument.

Plato, the Western world's star intellectual, makes a number of paltry arguments in this so-called dialogue. He has Socrates imagining the authorities addressing him: "What complaint have you against us and the state, that you are trying to destroy us? Are we not, first of all, your parents? Through us your father took your mother and brought you into the world."

What complaint? Only that they are putting him to death! The state as parents? Now we understand those words: the Motherland, the Fatherland, the Founding Fathers, Uncle Sam. What neat spades for planting the idea of obligation. It's not some little junta of military men and politicians who are sending you to die in some muddy field in Asia or Central America, it's your

mother, your father, or your father's favorite brother. How can you say no? "Through us your father took your mother and brought you into the world." What stately arrogance! To give the state credit for marriage and children, as if without government men and women would remain apart and celibate.

Socrates listens meekly to the words of the law:

Are you too wise to see your country is worthier, more to be revered, more sacred, and held in higher honor both by the gods and by all men of understanding, than your father and your mother and all your other ancestors; that you ought to reverence it and to submit to it . . . and to obey in silence if it orders you to endure flogging or imprisonment or if it sends you to battle to be wounded or to die?"

In the face of this seductive argument, Crito is virtually mute, a sad sack of a debater. You would think that Plato, just to maintain his reputation for good dialogue, would give Crito some better lines. But he took no chances.

Plato says (again, through Socrates bullying Crito): "In war, and in the court of justice, and everywhere, you must do whatever your state and your country tell you to do, or you must persuade them that their commands are unjust."

Why not insist that the state persuade us to do its bidding? There is no equality in Plato's scheme: the citizen may use persuasion, but no more; the state may use force.

It is curious that Socrates (according to Plato) was willing to disobey the authorities by preaching as he chose, by telling the young what he saw as the truth, even if that meant going against the laws of Athens. Yet, when he was sentenced to death, and by a divided jury (the vote was 281 to 220), he meekly accepted the verdict, saying he owed Athens obedience to its laws, giving that puny 56 percent majority vote an absolute right to take his life.

And so it is that the admirable obligation human beings feel to one's neighbors, one's loved ones, even to a stranger needing water or shelter, becomes confused with blind obedience to that deadly artifact called government. And in that confusion, young men, going off to war in some part of the world they never heard of, for some cause that cannot be rationally explained, then say: "I owe it to my country."

It seems that the idea of owing, of obligation, is strongly felt by almost everyone. But what does one owe the government? Granted, the government may do useful things for its citizens: help farmers, administer old-age pensions and health benefits, regulate the use of drugs, apprehend criminals, etc. But because the government administers these programs (for which the citizens pay taxes, and for which the government officials draw salaries), does this mean that you owe the government your life?

Plato is enticing us to confuse the country with the government. The Declaration of Independence tried to make clear that the people of the country set up the government, to achieve the aims of equality and justice, and when a government no longer pursues those aims it loses its legitimacy, it has violated its obligation to the citizens, and deserves no more respect or obedience.

We are intimidated by the word patriotism, afraid to be called unpatriotic. Early in the twentieth century, the Russian-American anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman lectured on patriotism. She said,

Conceit, arrogance and egotism are the essentials of patriotism. . . . Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others."

Even the symbols of patriotism - the flag, the national anthem - become objects of worship, and those who refuse to worship are treated as heretics. When in 1989 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that a citizen has a right to express himself or herself by burning the American flag, there was an uproar in the White House and in Congress. President Bush, almost in tears, began speaking of a Constitutional amendment to make flag burning a crime. Congress, with its customary sheepishness, rushed to pass a law providing a year in prison for anyone hurting the flag.

The humorist Garrison Keillor responded to the president with some seriousness:

Flag-burning is a minor insult compared to George Bush's cynical use of the flag for political advantage. Any decent law to protect the flag ought to prohibit politicians from wrapping it around themselves! Flag-burning is an impulsive act by a powerless individual-but the cool pinstripe demagoguery of this powerful preppie is a real and present threat to freedom.

If patriotism were defined, not as blind obedience to government, not as submissive worship to flags and anthems, but rather as love of one's country, one's fellow citizens (all over the world), as loyalty to the principles of justice and democracy, then patriotism would require us to disobey our government, when it violated those principles.