

# Civil Disobedience

Instructor: Ross Mittiga  
Office: TBD  
Office Hours: TBD  
email: [rmittiga@virginia.edu](mailto:rmittiga@virginia.edu)

This course examines political theories of civil disobedience. Do citizens have obligations to obey unjust laws? What distinguishes civil disobedience from criminal? How do acts of protest influence public opinion and policy? Do disruptive protests endanger democracy and the rule of law or strengthen them? How is the distinction between violence and non-violence politically constructed and contested? And how has political dissent transformed in a digital era? We will study classical writings and contemporary scholarship in pursuit of answers to these questions and related debates over the rule of law, conscience, justice, violence and nonviolence, whistleblowing, direct action, riots, and hacktivism.

## 1. Course Materials

All readings and films will be available to download or watch on the course COLLAB site.

## 2. Rules and Requirements

### Attendance

Attendance at all classes and sections is a requirement of the course. Persistent unexplained absences constitute grounds for failing the class, regardless performance in other course requirements.

### Participation

The more students actively participate in class discussion, the better. I encourage questions and discussion during all meetings. Participation will count in my assessment of your final grade.

### Laptops and portable electronic devices

Texting, browsing, emailing, etc., during class are distracting to you and others, and so I respectfully ask that all laptops, phones, and other electronic devices be switched off and stowed away during class. Students are likely to retain more of the information covered in class if they take handwritten notes, so I encourage bringing a notebook and pen.

### Recording devices

Audio and video recording devices are prohibited in the classroom unless required for accessibility purposes. This is to create a safe space where students can feel comfortable expressing their opinions

in class without the possibility of their contribution to class being reproduced and replayed without their consent.

### **Readings/Viewings**

Students are expected to complete the reading and viewing assignments in accordance with the schedule. If you have trouble understanding what you have read or watched, don't be shy about visiting office hours for help. Learning to navigate through complex material is one of the most valuable skills a college degree can impart and I am happy to offer pointers on how best to develop that skill.

### **Academic Integrity**

Students must comply with all provisions of the UVa Honor Code. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are surprisingly easy to detect and very easy to avoid. Collaboration on tests and quizzes is strictly forbidden.

## **3. Grading Policies**

### **Grade breakdown**

- Participation = 10%
- Quizzes = 15%
- Introductory Reflection Paper = 5%
- Mid-term = 30%
- Final Paper = 40%

### **Late work**

There are very few assignments that have deadlines. For those that do, requests for extensions must be received in writing, by email, at least one week prior to the deadline. No extensions will be granted after that date. To request an extension, please send an email to me. Outside of approved extensions, late work will be penalized at a rate of a third of a grade per 24-hour period. These penalties may be waived in cases of documented emergency. NOTE: Loss of data (e.g., due to computer problems) does *not* count as an emergency. It is your responsibility to ensure that your work is backed up.

### **Appealing Grades**

Any student who feels that their assigned grade does not reflect his or her performance on an assignment can appeal the grade. All appeals must be submitted to the instructor in writing, in the form of a one-page document that clearly explains why you believe that the assigned grade does not reflect your performance. I ask that petitioners wait at least *five days* after the grade is announced before submitting their appeals. All appeals must be submitted no later than two weeks after the grade is announced. Also note that grades may be adjusted up or down upon review.

## Grade explanation

Here is a rough guide to interpreting the grades assigned to work in the class:

- A grade of A, in any flavor, signifies (varying degrees of) excellence: to earn a grade in this region, students must show genuine insight into (as opposed to just a basic grasp of) the material, and successfully develop cogent, convincing, and original responses to it.
- A grade of B+ signifies superior command of the course material: to earn it, students must show a good understanding of the leading arguments covered in the course, and demonstrate the ability to assess them critically on their own terms without necessarily achieving responses to them that are fully cogent or convincing.
- A grade of B signifies good performance: students receiving a B will have shown a firm understanding of the course material and made plausible, if not fully developed, critical responses to it.
- A grade of B- indicates solid performance: work receiving this grade will display a decent understanding of the basic ideas covered in the course, though may nonetheless be marred by (e.g.) unclear or vague writing, omissions of relevant ideas, ambiguous formulations, conceptual muddle, or unsophisticated argumentation.
- C grades indicate performance of mixed quality: in such work, competence, understanding, and insight will sit alongside error, misunderstanding, cliché, simplification, and confusion.
- A grade of D, in any flavor, indicates work that is in some respect (and in varying degrees) radically inadequate: such grades are symptoms of (e.g.) unfamiliarity with, failure to understand, or half-hearted engagement with, the course materials.

## 4. Schedule

### Part 1: Conscientious Objection

- Henry David Thoreau, “On Civil Disobedience”
- Roger Baldwin and Others, “Statements of Conscientious Objection, 1917-1918”
- Michael Walzer, “Conscientious Objection”
- Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann In Jerusalem,” pp. 21-55, 135-150

### Part 2: Civil Disobedience and the Rule of Law

- “Statement by Alabama Clergymen”
- Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 3-19, 47-56, 93-101
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 293-343

### Part 3: Civil Disobedience and Popular Sovereignty

- Michael Walzer, “The Obligations of Oppressed Minorities”
- Jurgen Habermas, “Civil Disobedience: Litmus Test for the Democratic Constitutional State”
- Daniel Markovits, “Democratic Disobedience”

#### **Part 4: Civil Disobedience as Political Action**

- Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience”
- Keramet Reiter, “The Pelican Bay Hunger Strike: Resistance within the Structural Constraints of a US Supermax Prison”
- Lisa Guenther, “Political Action at the End of the World: Hannah Arendt and the California Prison Hunger Strikes”

#### **Part 5: Civility**

- I.M. Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy”
- Emmeline Pankhurst, “I Incite this Meeting to Rebellion”
- Emmeline Pankhurst, “When Civil War is Waged by Women”
- Linda Zerilli, “Against Civility: A Feminist Perspective”
- Raven Rokia, “Black Riot”
- Robert Gooding-Williams, “Look, a Negro!”
- Dora Apel, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot: Surrendering Liberal Illusions”

#### **Part 6: Punishment**

- William Scheuerman, “Whistleblowing as Civil Disobedience: The Case of Edward Snowden”
- Candice Delmas, “The Ethics of Government Whistleblowing”
- Erin Pineda, “Civil Disobedience and Punishment: (Mis)Reading Justification and Strategy from SNCC to Snowden”

#### **Part 7: Nonviolence**

- M.K. Gandhi, “The Theory and Practice of Passive Resistance”
- M.K. Gandhi, “The Secret of Satyagraha in South Africa”
- M.K. Gandhi, “Satyagraha - Not Passive Resistance”
- M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, pp. 286-298
- Guest Lecture: Nonviolent Direct Action Training
- Gene Sharp, “Waging Nonviolent Struggle,” pp.25-65
- Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict”

#### **Part 8: Digital Disobedience**

- Critical Art Ensemble, “Electronic Civil Disobedience,” pp. 7-32
- Molly Sauter, “The Coming Swarm,” pp. 1-7, 39-57, 137-157
- William Scheuerman, “Digital Disobedience and the Law”
- Candice Delmas, “Is Hacktivism the New Civil Disobedience?”

## Part 9: Environmental Disobedience

- *Fierce Green Fire* documentary
- *Bidder 70* documentary
- Tim DeChristopher [speech](#)
- “I shut down an oil pipeline – because climate change is a ticking bomb,” [Guardian Article](#)
- *Disobedience*, [short documentary](#)
- Peter Singer, Preface to 1990 edition in *Animal Liberation*
- *If A Tree Falls* documentary

## Part 10: Tactics

- *The Black Bloc Papers*, pp. 39-52
- Chris Hedges, “The Cancer in Occupy”
- David Graeber, “Concerning the Violent Peace Police”
- Salar Mohandesi, “On the Black Bloc”
- Robert Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, pp. 110-124
- Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, selections TBD
- Nathan J. Robinson, “Thinking Strategically about Free Speech and Violence”

## 5. Assignments

### Participation

- Counts for 10% of the final grade. Effectively, ½ point will be given for each class period in which you are well prepared to critically discuss the readings and participate in discussion, with two points given for consistent, outstanding contributions.
- Asking intelligent, probing questions is a highly recommended form of participation, as is critical and constructive engagement with your peers.
- Talking for the sake of talking is to be avoided.
- Students should have all the readings completed by the Tuesday class.

### Introductory Reflection Paper

- Write a short (between 400 and 500 words in length) reflection essay on a personal experience where you disobeyed a rule, a law, or an authority figure on moral grounds.
- What was your motivation? Why did you think you were justified? Do you think your disobedience was civil or uncivil? Why or why not?
- Paper will be graded pass/fail.

### Pop Quizzes

- 2-3 questions (responses should not exceed 5 sentences each)
- 12 all semester; only the top 10 count

**Mid-term**

- 5 questions (responses should be 6-8 sentences each)
- Take at home, submit to collab
- Open-book/open-note, but no collaboration!

**Term Paper**

- Paper should be 10-12 double-spaced pages in length.
- Late papers will be penalized  $\frac{1}{2}$  letter-grade for each day late.
- Paper topics will be closely aligned to the seminar readings and themes, and will be chosen in consultation with Mr. Mittiga.
- The paper is worth 40% of your final grade.