DEMOCRACY, CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE ENGINEERING OF UNDERSTANDING

Matthew A. Melville (Claudio Holzner)
Department of Political Science

During the present semester, I had the privilege of taking Prof. Claudio Holzner’s senior seminar: The Politics of Voice and Resistance. Power is a key concept explored in the seminar through the works of luminaries like John Gaventa and Michel Foucault, to name two. The writings of Gaventa and Foucault, along with the insights and knowledge gained from Prof. Holzner, joined with my own passion for the philosophy of politics, brought about this project.

Democracy is a powerful symbol regarded by many “enlightened” nations as the only legitimate form of government. Yet, what democracy means academically and what it does in practice differs substantially. Predominantly, history defines democracy as rule by the people, or even, “mob rule,” to use positive and negative characterizations. Recently, however, the singular action of voting distinguishes democratic states from undemocratic states, while other aspects of rule by the people are characterized as quaint or impractical. This intentional or unintentional redefining of democracy creates confusion and such situations that are ripe for manipulation by the power-hungry. Through deconstructing the dialectic usage of democracy, I show that what democracy is characterized as in modern society is hardly democratic in nature. In fact, the main function of the term is not definitional but manipulative; intended to manufacture consent among the people in whatever government is in power. Thus, civil disobedience arises as the last vestige of true democracy within an imposed system of elite rule—the only mechanism still available for the people to elicit change.