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## Philosophy as a Threat to Government

Elizabeth Gyori



Authority does not like being questioned. For, if power and absolute control is subjected to scrutiny, its very essence is destroyed by the possibility of a loss of control. Yet, that is exactly what philosophy strives to do: to challenge or question authority and the status quo in all of its forms.

According to Socrates, philosophy is the complete and total examination of self in a systematic and critical way in an attempt to become wiser, more self-reflective, and happier while also searching for a truth that lies within oneself. From the birth of Socrates to today, philosophy in all of its curious and inquiring forms has not only played an essential role in the development of oneself, but has served as a check of governmental authority. Government, throughout history, has been the organization of a bureaucratic authority that dominates certain boundaries known formerly as empires, or territories, and now as countries or nations. The limitations placed on the state by questioning derived from philosophy have threatened the very basis of the status quo. Since the basis of philosophy and the essence of government have not changed over the course of time, philosophy presents a terrible threat to government or authority in general due to the fact that inquiry has a tendency to uncover the most astonishing of facts and to instigate the most violent and inspiring revolts of humanity.

Socrates, considered the father of philosophy, was a man who liked to challenge the social norm in his hometown of Athens by criticizing democracy, ridiculing the practice of election by lot, questioning religion, and embarrassing prominent Athenians publicly. His strict adherence to virtue and his continuous search for truth conflicted with the social and political atmosphere of Athens at that time. Due to this, he was found guilty of impiety and corrupting Athenian youth, resulting in a death sentence by drinking hemlock. His story of persecution is most assuredly not the only example to be found in history. One of the most famous and well known religious philosophers and religious figures, Jesus, is yet another example of how the status quo endeavors to silence those opposing it. Born and raised a Jew, Jesus ensured his death by claiming that he was the son of God, and God himself, a blasphemy in the Jewish religion. He also claimed that he was the King of Jews, which was considered sedition, or conduct that is deemed by the legal authority to be an insurrection against the established order. His teachings that spread like wildfire throughout the empire also reinforced the threat that he posed to the government. Viewed as a rebel, a threat to the establishment by the Roman authorities, Jesus was crucified, a form of execution only used on slaves or insurrectionists by the Roman occupying force. Brutal deaths like those suffered by Socrates and Jesus were by no means the only way threats to authority were removed.

Even the United States, a country that claims to welcome dissent, has participated in the shunning and repression of those who choose to question the state of affairs. From the original declaration of the freedom of speech to the execution of the protection of it, the United States government has failed miserably in protecting said right, violating the civil liberties of those who choose to disagree, or identify with different political groups. A list of modern-day Socrates includes martyrs such as Emma Goldman, Matthew Lyon, and those of every ideological background. Matthew Lyon is a very early example in America's history of a citizen who dared to criticize the government. His harsh comments of John Adam's administration in a newspaper article led him to be one of ten people sentenced and imprisoned under the Sedition Act which restricted speech critical of the government.

Emma Goldman, otherwise known as "Red Emma," was also targeted by the United States government for not only her radical beliefs but her activist activities as well. She became such a threat to the American Capitalist socio-economic system through her magazine "Mother Earth," the various speeches and workshops she organized, and her anarchist and feminist writings that the government began to target and track her actions. This led to her jailing on several occasions and her



eventual deportation and the stripping of her citizenship in 1908. These actions pursued by the United States government foreshadowed the Red Scare which would soon evolve to be a nationwide fear of communists, socialists, and anarchists in the United States. Gross violations of civil liberties soon ensued, including the 1941 raiding of the Socialist Workers Party headquarters; eighteen members were arrested and prosecuted for advocating the overthrow of the government under the Smith Act of 1940. Sadly enough, the evidence produced in court was nothing more than Marxist literature.

As humanity enters into the modern era of the twenty-first century, the widespread human rights abuses and civil liberties violations by governments against their own people is a direct result of fear of philosophical examination. This mentality is adopted from the very basis of society where the questioning of authority is rarely encouraged: in schools. Failure to adhere to a teacher's direct order, questioning the morality of such, and pressing on or trying to grasp the validity of any certain claim made by a teacher, administrator, or staffer may warrant a student a detention or punishment of some variation because insubordination is apparently intolerable. The absurd circumstances have extended to the point where a student was assigned detention by his teacher because he contradicted his teacher on the fact that the one kilometer was greater than one mile. Although his contradiction was indeed correct, it was also a blatant disregard for authority and thus needed to be reprimanded. For, most powerful figures are under the impression that in order to maintain control over a group of individuals, one must constantly remain unchallenged, or when challenged, appear "victorious" and triumphant over the claims or requests of the challenger.

These triumphs include everything from the arrests and detainment of activists to tracking and even physically harming dissenters. In light of the Iraq War, the anti-war movement, the rising resistance and discontent of the people, the United States government has taken drastic steps to ensure its continued control over the daily lives of its citizens. Domestic spying has become an all too common practice by the government, rarely criticized and rarely stopped by the people. The National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States was exposed in 2005 for illegally spying on activists, and domestic activist groups without court-issued warrants. The report on the peaceful, sometimes anti-war groups, is more than 2,300 pages long<sup>1</sup> and centers on reference in internal files on groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Greenpeace, People for the Equal Treatment of Animals (PETA), Code Pink, Veterans for Peace, and the umbrella organization, United for Peace and Justice. The threat these organizations pose to the American people is virtually non-existent. They are merely first amendment sponsored outlets for the people to challenge, support, or disagree with the American government, large corporations, and the status quo in an organized and powerful manner. There is no real domestic terrorist threat emulating from the existence of these groups. Rather, the way that these organizations identify what is wrong with society, pinpoint the source of the problem and then choose to act to shut down said source is the actual threat to an organization that deems change to be abhorrent, useless, and an impediment to its goals. For example, Greenpeace, a well known organization with a 35-year record of peacefulness and nonviolence was targeted by the FBI for their also well known record of advocating for environmental safety and prosperity which also happened to include opposing those in power who were destroying the environment. This sort of infringement of rights is not restricted to the organizations themselves but the people who support or compose of these organizations. After the ACLU filed a Freedom of Information Act, it was revealed that the US government had spied on at least 186 protests in the United States, leading to over 2,800 reports that were collected and compiled into a single anti-terrorism database of Americans.<sup>2</sup> This sort of abuse of power has had chilling effects on the dissenting community, especially those of higher risk, such as Middle Easterners, Muslims, green-card holders or immigrants



Photo by Greg Smith

*Do we have free will?  
Can the wheel of fate be broken?*

who fear the stripping of their livelihood. Due to this, they have forsaken protesting, thinking that it is too risky and dangerous. These tactics have not secured the United States, prevented further domestic terrorist activities but have merely scared those who want to question authority and the government into submission.

Of course, not all people will sit down quietly and do what they're told due to the government tracking their activities at protests. The government takes a new approach to people that are not scared easily or have nothing to lose. They begin to detain protesters and hold them without charges in atrocious conditions. When the Republican presidential convention rolled around in 2004, more than 1,760 protesters were arrested and held on Pier 57, also dubbed a "Guantanamo-on-the-Hudson."<sup>3</sup> Their rights were not read before being arrested; they had no outside contact once detained; they had no access to a lawyer, had barely any room to sit in this cramped facility, no access to medical treatment even though Pier 57 was a chemically contaminated area where people should not be without safety equipment, let alone be allowed to consume food in such an area. The actual arrests themselves were nothing more than the hoarding of people onto buses after picking a few people from the crowd and slamming their heads into the sidewalk. When the protesters reached the site after a long and tedious bus ride, they were not allowed access to a bathroom or water in the first four hours of their detainment, and in their first nine hours, they were only given an apple as food. Many people were held for twenty to thirty hours, bypassing the legal limit of how long authorities are allowed to hold detainees. Those arrested cannot be held for more than 24 hours barring an emergency situation, which this protest did not constitute. People eventually left this facility emotionally and physically scarred from the treatment they received. Such experiences also have a tendency to scare, humiliate, and force people into compliance.

From the execution of the father of philosophy to the detainment and abuse of protesters in the twenty-first century, it can be seen that the government tends to abhor challenges to its absolute authority. These challenges exist because of philosophy, and the questions humans pose due to the quizzical essence of philosophy. In an effort to squash these philosophical questions, the government initiates or pursues scare tactics, and death sentences that attempt to eliminate such threats. However, these policies have yet to really work, for philosophical questioning has not stopped since the beginning of time and seem to only be growing more prominent and more frequent. As these two forces continue to be at odds with one another, one will be the downfall of another. The next question pertaining to this conclusion is: which force will prevail?

## Notes

- 1 "New Document Show FBI Spying on Domestic Activist Groups."
- 2 Glantz.
- 3 "Guantanamo on the Hudson."

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