

DISPUTATION CLXXXIX

October 11, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Welcome back from fall break. Just like that, it seems, the leaves [turn to brown](#) and the sun sets a little too soon. I've heard from many of you about exams and papers preventing this week from being the blissful *nos-tos* you may have anticipated. The good news is, you've still got us. We'll be brushing off the dust and stoking the fire until it's roaring again.

RESOLVED: SOCIAL PROTEST SHOULD ALWAYS BE NON-VIOLENT

Affirmative: Simone Weil '20

Negative: Gaius Plinius Secundus '21

Writing a discursive primer on this resolution would do a disservice to the two disputants, who have spent a lot of time preparing this debate. Their views are shaded and subtle; I'd rather not attempt to summarize them. Instead, I will pose a few questions to get us thinking.

- What is social protest? What is the goal of protest? When is protest appropriate?
- Is it right for the state to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence?
- What counts as violence? Other than direct bodily harm, can violence include speech, property damage, or the propagation of unsafe conditions?
- Are there "rules" for protest, and do these rules differ case to case? (E.g., are the acceptable means of protest available to slaves any different from those available to Bowdoin students?)
- What effect does the method of protest have on society post-change?

There is an extensive literature on social protest out there. But I'd be remiss not to direct those with a little time on their hands to at least read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)" in which he eloquently defends nonviolent protest, as in this passage:

"Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."

I'd also encourage a look at least a few of Malcolm X's speeches, including his infamous 1964 "[By any means necessary](#)" speech:

"We don't have to ask the man downtown what tactics we can use to demonstrate our resentment against his criminal abuse. We don't have to ask his consent; we don't have to ask his endorsement; we don't have to ask his permission. Anytime we know that an unjust condition exists and it is illegal and unjust, we will strike at it by any means necessary. And strike also at whatever and whoever gets in the way."

Please don't get me wrong. I am not casting Weil & Pliny into an MLK/Malcolm X mold, nor do I want us to get mired in the social movements of the '60 in America. I merely suggest these two texts as a starting point

for thinking about the problem of violence in social protest. The resolution we're facing tomorrow night affects all people in all places at all times; it matters to leaders, and it matters to students.

I'm looking forward to seeing you all soon—it's been too long.

Thursday, October 11th

7:45 PM

Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-formal attire encouraged (see Postscript)

PLSH,

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Archon Eponymous, Peucinian Society

POSTSCRIPT

Why do we dress up?

Although our dress code can seem uninviting at first glance, we use it as a way to distinguish our discussions from the rest of the week's activities. This marks disputations as something special and worthy of our attention. In choosing to dress ourselves differently, we convey respect for the event and for each other, much in the same way one would for a *capella* or mock trial. If you choose to attend a disputation, feel free to dress in a way that is special and comfortable for you.

P.P.S. I heard through the grapevine that the value of Polar Points is going to plunge soon. Better exchange it for a more stable currency ASAP...