

CHAPTER ONE

The Futility of Violence

I. Gandhi's Critique of Violence

For Gandhi, political life was, in a profound and fundamental sense, closely bound to the problem of violence. At the same time, his understanding and critique of violence was multiform and layered; violence's sources and consequences were at once ontological, moral and ethical, as well as distinctly political. Gandhi held a metaphysical account of the world – one broadly drawn from Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist philosophy – that accepted *himsa* or violence to be an ever-present and unavoidable fact of human existence. The world, he noted, was “bound in a chain of destruction;” the basic mechanisms for the reproduction of biological and social life necessarily involved continuous injury to living matter. But modern civilization – its economic and political institutions as well as the habits it promoted and legitimated – posed the problem of violence in new and insistent terms. Gandhi famously declared the modern state to represent “violence in a concentrated and organized form;” it was a “soulless machine” that – like industrial capitalism – was premised upon and generated coercive forms of centralization and hierarchy.¹ These institutions enforced obedience through the threat of violence, they forced people to labor unequally, they oriented desires towards competitive material pursuits. In his view, civilization was rendering persons increasingly weak, passive, and servile; in impinging upon moral personality, modern life degraded and deformed it. This was the structural violence of modernity, a violence that threatened bodily integrity but also human dignity, individuality, and autonomy.

In this respect, Gandhi's deepest ethical objection to violence was closely tied to a worldview that took violence to inhere in modern modes of politics and modern ways of living. This critical stance towards modern civilization was pervasive and long-standing; it fundamentally shaped Gandhi's basic moral commitments and the horizon of his politics. But alongside this broad ethical critique of violence – and the transformations of self and society it imagined, cultivated, entailed – Gandhi would also enunciate a specifically political critique, one that turned on exposing the *futility* of violence. These lines of overlapping criticism came together forcefully in what has remained Gandhi's most famous political tract, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1909).

Hind Swaraj is the *locus classicus* of Gandhi's critique of modern civilization as a civilization that degrades and “de-civilises.”² It was also Gandhi's first intervention in

¹ M. K. Gandhi, “Interview to Nirmal Kumar Bose (9/10-11-34),” *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 65, p. 318. References are to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols. (New Delhi, 1999) and are cited hereafter as *CWMG*, followed by volume and page number.

² M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (22-11-1909), *CWMG*, 10, Ch 3.

Indian political debate in which he began to outline his vision of *swaraj* or independence for India and the means appropriate to attain it, namely *satyagraha* or nonviolent action. *Hind Swaraj* emerged out of a confrontation with militant nationalism and its purpose was in part to undercut the growing attraction of terrorist tactics within Indian nationalist circles. To adopt such methods was to embark upon, in Gandhi's words, "a suicidal policy."³ Gandhi provocatively linked the appeal of these "modern methods of violence" to a misplaced desire to emulate modern civilization, famously ridiculing the nationalist understanding of independence as simply a demand for "English rule without the Englishman."⁴ In contending that a mistaken conception of *swaraj* was implicated in the very *means* of militant nationalism, Gandhi called attention to the *strategic* futility of political violence. To advocate for violence was to favor political means that oriented nationalism towards the wrong political ends, namely elitist and statist visions of *swaraj*.

For Gandhi, the route of violence was also 'suicidal' in a further sense: it was a political tactic internally fraught with distinct dangers and negative consequences. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi began to make more explicit the case for the tactical superiority of nonviolence, what he termed the efficacy or utility of *satyagraha* over violent methods for contesting injustice and securing political reform. This contention was closely tied to the notion that a deep reciprocity existed between means and ends such that political ends – freedom or *swaraj* – would be compromised or rendered precarious when pursued through inappropriate, dangerous, or dubious means. More specifically, provocative or violent tactics were seen to generate escalating dynamics of confrontation and retaliation by unleashing negative passions and dispositions that thwarted political resolution and progress.

These questions about the practical limitations of political violence – its futility and inefficacy – would become ever more urgent, and ever more insistently posed with Gandhi's return to India and the beginning of the mass movement against British rule. Indeed they were at the core of continuous controversies about the shape and direction of the independence movement, as well as Gandhi's ability to lead it. In his experiments in mass political mobilization, Gandhi confronted not only the continuing appeal of political violence, but also a practical overlap or intimacy between nonviolence and violence. His first attempts to practice large-scale, nonviolent civil disobedience were immediately accompanied by outbreaks of violence, which Gandhi needed to both account for and resolve. It seemed that the sources and temptations of violence in politics were more diverse, more dynamic, and more immediate than simply the byproduct of the structural violence of modern civilization. In this way, concerns about the practical futility of violence led to a broader engagement with the dilemmas and dynamics of political action as such, specifically the ways in which the very fact of political contestation seemingly generated tendencies towards violence.

³ M.K. Gandhi, "Preface to 'Indian Home Rule' (2-4-1910)," *CWMG*, 10, 458.

⁴ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, *CWMG*, 10, 255.

Part I of the book elucidates Gandhi's account of violence and the dilemmas of political action. In this chapter, I chart the development of Gandhi's critique of violence, focusing on how it was reconfigured in the context of political debate – mainly with militant nationalists – and in response to political crises, the outbreaks of violence that accompanied mass *satyagraha*. I draw out and disentangle three successive layers of Gandhi's critique of violence: a moral critique that was closely connected with his critique of the violence of modern civilization; a strategic critique which linked the advocacy of violence with elitist and statist visions of *swaraj*; and a third tactical criticism that was focused on the deleterious effects of violence in escalating political conflict. The latter two – the strategic and tactical critiques – together highlight the *futility* of violence, and lay the basis for a distinctively political line of criticism.

My aim in this chapter is to tease out and develop the logic of this often overlooked line of political criticism. Most discussions of Gandhi's critique of violence begin with an account of nonviolence or *ahimsa* as a given and static moral commitment – e.g. as an imperative to abstain from violence in thought and deed – and then consider how Gandhi attempted to instantiate this principle in his political practice. This way of posing the question, however, privileges Gandhi's moral or ethical objections to violence and renders the critique of violence's political futility as merely adjunct to it. And Gandhi's insistence on the 'absolute efficacy' of nonviolence is taken to be, at best, a claim about the self-defeating nature of pursuing purely instrumental politics in the long term than anything like a realist or tactical imperative in its own right.

Moreover, moral criticism of violence tends to foreground concerns about the legitimacy of violence, of when the use of violence is or is not justified; or, vice versa, when the abjuration of violence seems morally suspect. But taking nonviolence to be something akin to a moral principle, an ethical code, or a standard of judgment risks obscuring the political logic of Gandhian nonviolence. My contention is that nonviolence is first and foremost a *practical political orientation*, a framework to enable positive, strategic political action rather than the grounds of a restrictive political morality. As such, at stake in Gandhi's critique of violence is less the moral illegitimacy of violence per se, than bringing to light the kinds of action that can appropriately respond to the problem of violence.

The chapter therefore closely investigates Gandhi's account of the sources and consequences of violence in politics, and the ways in which those diagnoses changed and developed over time. I explore how each layer of Gandhi's critique of violence relates to different understandings of nonviolent action. I especially try to qualify and complicate models of exemplary action, ethical cultivation, and moral exhortation that are normally associated with Gandhian nonviolence. These models of moral action and moral exemplarity undoubtedly capture important features of Gandhian politics. Indeed, they seem central to how Gandhi attempted to answer some of his deepest concerns about the structural violence of modern civilization. They are also especially prominent in the earliest formulations of *satyagraha*, where *satyagraha* was seen to

offer a radical alternative to the path of violence in politics. But as Gandhi's analysis and critique of violence subtly shifted – in response to both advocates of violence as well as the experience of outbreaks of violence that accompanied mass mobilization – he began to think more pointedly about the temptations of political violence, and the moral psychology that underpinned it. In this context, *satyagraha* would emerge not just as an alternative to violence but also a mode of action that could directly counter and mitigate a violence born from the very nature of political action and conflict.

Reconstructing Gandhi's political critique of violence, and the implicit theory of politics it relies upon, allows one to see more clearly what Gandhian nonviolence as political practice and as a political orientation entails. It also brings into focus key elements of what I have termed Gandhi's realism.⁵ To think of Gandhi as a realist implies more than an acknowledgement of his skill as a political leader and strategist. To be sure, Gandhi was a much more pragmatic politician than is usually assumed in the popular image of him as the saint-as-politician. But I invoke the term realism to register a *theoretical* coherence in Gandhi's understanding of politics and his prescriptive orientation to it. At the core of Gandhi's realist theory of politics was a moral-psychological analysis of a political world understood to be marked by endemic tendencies towards escalating conflict, domination, and violence. Gandhi's challenge – and, we might say more broadly, the challenge for nonviolent politics – is to demonstrate how *satyagraha* could appropriately respond to these dangers, that is, how nonviolent political action can constrain and mitigate these same tendencies to effect progressive change.

II. Violence and Modern Civilization

Hind Swaraj was written in December 1909, on a return seaboard voyage from England to South Africa, after a failed attempt to press for constitutional safeguards for Indian migrants as the act creating the new Union of South Africa was being negotiated and passed. The defining event of Gandhi's stay in London and the event that sparked the urgency of *Hind Swaraj* was the assassination of Sir William Curzon Wyllie, aide-de-camp to then Secretary of State for India Lord John Morley, by Madan Lal Dhingra. Dhingra was an Indian student with close ties to militant nationalist groups that coalesced around India House and radicals such as Shyamji Krishnavarma and Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar.⁶ (Savarkar would later become infamous as the founder and central ideologue of the Hindutva movement, and was himself implicated in Gandhi's assassination almost forty years later.)

⁵ Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review*, 106: 2 (2012).

⁶ For recent accounts of the political contexts around the writing of *Hind Swaraj*, see Jonathan Hyslop, "An 'Eventful' History of *Hind Swaraj*: Gandhi between the Battle of Tshushima and the Union of South Africa," *Public Culture* 23: 2 (2011), 299-319 and Alex Tickell, *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830-1947* (Routledge, 2012).

Hind Swaraj was written amidst this rising global anticolonial ferment, in the wake of Japan's defeat of Russia and the upsurge of nationalist revolts in Bengal, China, Russia, Egypt, and Ireland. Gandhi closely followed the fate of these movements – especially the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal – and excitedly commented upon them in his journal *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi celebrated the rise of nationalism, the political awakening of colonial peoples, as well as widespread use of mass boycott and general strike as novel techniques of registering popular disapproval.⁷ He also noted the growing prominence of political extremism and the so-called 'terrorist' political trend in Indian politics as well as within wider activist circles.⁸

At the time, Gandhi had been directing political campaigns in South Africa – most importantly in the 1906 campaign of civil disobedience of the Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act – and had begun to fashion himself as the innovator of a new, universalizable, political method. *Satyagraha*, in his words, "merits the approval of all religious men, of all true patriots, of all men of commonsense and integrity."⁹ In the years leading up to the writing of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi began to actively meditate on the nature of *satyagraha*, suggesting that it "may well be adopted by every oppressed people, by every oppressed individual, as being a more reliable and more honourable instrument for securing the redress of wrongs than any which has heretofore been adopted."¹⁰ But Dingra's act, and the widespread approval it received amongst Indian nationalists and their supporters, forced Gandhi to articulate a sharper statement of the political efficacy of *satyagraha*, of why *satyagraha* ought to be the preferred method for progressive Indian politics. This involved a more pointed assessment and critique of political violence.

Gandhi's confrontation with extremism was therefore crucial in provoking conceptual clarification. Moreover, it was a clarification that is more necessary and more theoretically significant than one might at first suspect. Gandhian nonviolence shared a standpoint and vocabulary with the more radical, militant strands of Indian nationalism. Gandhi – like many nationalists – worried that Indians as a people had become docile and servile, riven with a self-centeredness and divisiveness that had rendered them a subject people. Both participated in the call for hitherto emasculated Indians to regain their dignity through political action, and in this call relied heavily on notions of sacrifice and martyrdom, courage and manliness. Gandhi saw *satyagraha* – and the sacrifice and courage it demanded – as a vehicle for a moral and political awakening in which Indians could finally "learn to be men" and India would become "a nation."¹¹

⁷ For example, see M.K. Gandhi, "Russia and India (11-11-1905)," *CWMG*, 5, 7-9.

⁸ The Indian National Congress had dramatically split between moderates and extremists at its annual conference of 1907 in Surat.

⁹ M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to the Indian National Congress (4-11-1907)," *CWMG*, 7, 309.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi, "What Does the Struggle Mean? (23-1-1909)," *CWMG*, 9, 268.

Gandhi was surprisingly keen to speak of nonviolent courage and sacrifice in the language of martial honor and military heroism, a fact that would discomfort both militants and pacifists alike. In the chapter I explore the practical and conceptual challenge that this shared vocabulary posed for Gandhian nonviolence. As violence continued to shadow Gandhi's experiments in mass nonviolent action, the question of how to distinguish the courage, sacrifice, and heroism of the *satyagrahi* (the nonviolent actor) from the martyrdom of the terrorist or soldier would remain crucial.¹² To my mind, this distinction is also central to reconstructing nonviolence as something other than conviction politics, or in other words, in a realist or anti-moralist idiom.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi begins to chart the difference in orientation between nonviolence and violence in politics, one that turned heavily upon the critique of modern civilization. Gandhi spoke of *Hind Swaraj* as the outpouring of long-brewing ideas that "had only now assumed such a concrete form and had taken a violent possession of [him]."¹³ These rapidly converging conclusions coalesced around his disillusionment with modern civilization, disillusionment which would be explicitly linked to his growing uneasiness with the popularity of the "party of violence" in Indian nationalist circles.

In the summer of 1909, Gandhi arrived in London just days after the assassination of Curzon Wylie. Over the next six weeks – the period of Dingra's trial, court statement, and execution – Gandhi sought to engage the young, educated Indians who were celebrating Dingra's deed as a defining moment for India. In the same months, Gandhi also wrote and spoke publicly about the relations between East and West, a question that he increasingly defined in terms of a fundamental crisis at the heart of modern civilization. Political violence, such as the celebrated policy of assassination, was taken to be an extreme example of the love of modern civilization, and thereby a path that India in its political awakening needed avoid at all costs. *Hind Swaraj* wove these two concerns – about violence and modern civilization – together through a meditation on the "true spirit of passive resistance" or *satyagraha*.¹⁴

¹² I'll return to this point in sections VI and VII.

¹³ M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to H.S. L. Polak (14-10-1909)," *CWMG*, 10, 167.

¹⁴ In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi used the terms *satyagraha* and passive resistance interchangeably. He was always unsure whether *passive resistance* captured the essence of his political method, and he solicited a Gujarati/Hindi term for it in 1908, which yielded the term *satyagraha*. In 1917 Gandhi would make a definitive break with the term passive resistance as a misnomer for the kind of politics he was advocating. He objected to the sense of passivity and weakness implied in it, rather than the active strength of *satyagraha*. Also the most prominent example of passive resistance, the suffragette movement, which Gandhi had admired did not eschew violence in the ways that he thought *satyagraha* required. See, M.K. Gandhi, "Satyagraha – Not Passive Resistance (2-9-1917)," *CWMG*, 16, 9-10.

Though it took this particular encounter with extremism for Gandhi's views of civilization to assume a definite shape, that Gandhi's early defense of *satyagraha* would be so closely tied to a broad-ranging critique of modern civilization is not in itself surprising. Many of Gandhi's political ideas were originally sparked via the close association he had formed with such groups as the London Vegetarian Society during his years of legal training in London (1888-91). Gandhi's immersion in radical vegetarian circles was in some sense an eccentric route into politics. But vegetarianism in the late Victorian age – and amongst the circles in which Gandhi travelled – signaled openness to a whole series of interconnected radical political ideas such as anarchism, socialism, and pacifism but most especially a hostility to industrialism and industrial society.¹⁵ It was within these circles that Gandhi first encountered the work of Leo Tolstoy, an encounter which proved to be especially formative and long-lasting.

In a 1909 letter to Tolstoy, Gandhi announced himself a follower of his teachings – a “firm believer in the doctrine of non-resistance to evil”¹⁶ – and proudly declared that he was putting those ideas into practice in his passive resistance campaign. Gandhi saw in Tolstoy's concepts of “non-resistance to evil” and the “law of love” equivalents of *satyagraha*.¹⁷ Indeed, years later, reflecting on his early attraction to Tolstoy, Gandhi spoke of Tolstoy as the greatest exponent of non-violence: “no author in the West” had “written as much and as effectively for the cause of non-violence as Tolstoy has done.” And though *ahimsa* (nonviolence) was a principle that had its deepest roots in Indian traditions, “no one in India or elsewhere...has had as profound an understanding of the nature of non-violence as Tolstoy had.”¹⁸

The Kingdom of God is Within You (1894) had especially captivated Gandhi as it did a generation of activists for whom Tolstoy was the towering social critic of the time.¹⁹ *The Kingdom of God* was the most important modern statement and defense of the principles of Christian pacifism and nonresistance. In that work Tolstoy tried to demonstrate that the Christian critique of politics – its radical repudiation of politics and human institutions – could play a distinct and direct role in transforming modern political and social life. He presented the life and work of American abolitionists and social reformers such as William Lloyd Garrison and Adin Ballou and English Quaker philosopher Jonathan Dymond to show that Christian criticism could be a source of

¹⁵ See especially Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anti-colonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, 2006).

¹⁶ M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to Leo Tolstoy (1-10-1909),” *CWMG*, 10, 129.

¹⁷ M.K. Gandhi, “Count Tolstoy (2-9-1905),” *CWMG*, 4, 399-400. See also Martin Green, *The Origins of Nonviolence: Tolstoy and Gandhi in their Historical Settings* (London, 1986).

¹⁸ 1930, Speech on the anniversary of Tolstoy's birth.

¹⁹ Throughout his life, Gandhi would repeatedly refer to Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God of is Within You* as one of the texts that inspired and sustained him, indeed it spurred Gandhi to name one of his early experiments in communal living, Tolstoy Farm.

political action.²⁰ For Tolstoy, it could lay the basis of a much-needed politics of moral and political awakening, as a powerful antidote to the pervasive and dangerous forms of mass docility that had undergirded the rising tide of militarism and state violence. Tolstoy argued that duties to obey the state in an age of state militarism and mass conscription were obscuring men's conscience and their ability to recognize their complicity with and responsibility for acts of evil committed in their name. In response, Tolstoy recommended practices of non-participation – such as non-payment of taxes and opposition to military service – that Christian pacifists and reformers had proposed and practiced.

As Gandhi noted, Tolstoy's commitment to non-resistance was closely tied to a "merciless analysis" of governments as "institutions organized and based upon force."²¹ *The Kingdom of God* offered a searing indictment of government in general and especially modern governments that, in Tolstoy's view, had become thoroughly infused with a violence that had lost all purpose or justification. Tolstoy offered a speculative account of the origin of social order and government and the human race's acquiescence to its violence and authority. When governments were first founded they could legitimately claim to offer protection from external conquest and internal anarchy. But for Tolstoy both these justifications over the centuries had become thoroughly suspect and degraded, and were effecting a broad demoralization of society. Externally, the persistent problem of war, and newer practices of mass conscription, had only made people more subject to the exact kinds of physical insecurity and vulnerability that the state was meant to alleviate. Even the rise of representative government did not stem the tide towards self-destructive warfare as it was once expected to.²² Internally, while the state may have protected individuals from the violence of other individuals, it now seemed that its coercive force was merely an instrument for the ruling elite to further their domination.

It has come to the present state of things; one set of men commit acts of violence no longer on the pretext of resistance to evil, but simply for their profit or their caprice, and another set submit to violence, not because they suppose, as was supposed in former times, that this violence was practised upon them for the sake of securing them from evil, but simply because they cannot avoid it...Violence no longer rests on the belief in its utility, but only on the fact of its having existed so long, and being organized by the ruling classes who profit by it, so that those who are under their authority cannot extricate themselves from it. The

²⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Dover, 2006 [1893]). One of the main aims of the work was to provide an analysis of the Christian critique of war and its relevance for the contemporary world.

²¹ M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to W.J. Wybergh (10-5-1910)," *CWMG*, 11, 41.

²² Tolstoy was here referring to the classic social contract justification of the state, and reflecting on Kant's argument for perpetual peace.

governments of our day – all of them, the most despotic and the liberal alike – have become what Herzen so well called “Genghis Khan with the telegraph;” that is to say, organizations of violence based on no principle but the grossest tyranny, and at the same time taking advantage of all the means invented by science for the peaceful collective social activity of free and equal men, used by them to enslave and oppress their fellows.²³

Government institutions, in Tolstoy’s stark assessment, had become a vast organization for the protection of those in power, whose authority was sustained by a “circle of violence,” of intimidation, corruption, and manipulation.²⁴ On this account, the Church – like legal, penal, and educational systems, more generally – served as a mere adjunct for buttressing the power of the state, distracting masses of people with superstition and grand shows, teaching obedience to corrupt institutions, and educating subjects towards a murderous militarism in the name of patriotism. The oppressed are left stupefied and hypnotized into a radically docile existence. Many of these Tolstoyan motifs – especially the circle of violence, fear, and docility that grounded and reproduced modern institutions – would be taken up in *Hind Swaraj*, in which Gandhi criticizes the acquiescence to imperial authority along similar lines.

Gandhi drew explicitly from Tolstoy’s spiritual vocabulary of resistance to describe the incipient forms of *satyagraha* he had begun to practice in South Africa.²⁵ Gandhi’s earliest political campaigns were primarily based on appeals to constitutional principles to secure the rights of Indians as British subjects. They were implemented through petitioning local and imperial authorities and organizing public sentiment. In a sense, they were fairly orthodox campaigns following a recognizably liberal pattern of publicizing political grievances and appealing to the “British love of justice” and sense of “fair play”.²⁶ But from very early on, Gandhi described these campaigns as attempts to act in “truth,” to “patiently suffer wrongs,” “avoid punishment”, and thereby “conquer hate through love.”²⁷ As his campaigns developed, he took to characterizing the tactics of these early political interventions even more explicitly as examples of following a

²³ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Dover, 2006 [1893]), Ch 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Over the course of the twenty-one years that Gandhi worked in South Africa, he waged numerous campaigns on behalf of the rights of Indian migrants and indentured laborers. His main aim was to thwart various attempts to disenfranchise Indians, maneuvers which escalated into bans on Asian immigration and concerted efforts to make residence in South Africa so unattractive as to motivate repatriation. What began with petitions and publicity campaigns eventually led to more innovative experiments in civil disobedience – from public vows of resistance and the burning of registration certificates to hartals (work-stoppages), illegal border crossings, culminating in the Great March of indentured workers in 1913.

²⁶ M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to ‘The Natal Mercury’ (15-11-97),” *CWMG*, 2, 179.

²⁷ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Calcutta Meeting (19-10-1902),” *CWMG*, 2, 433, 466; *The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa: An Appeal to the Indian Public* (14-8-1896), *CWMG*, 1, 386.

policy of “non-resistance to evil” and “returning good for evil.”²⁸ The duty of non-participation with evil in the form of immoral laws was a “divine duty,” it was to invite suffering and sacrifice in a religious battle, a battle on behalf of religion.²⁹

1906 marked a key turning point in Gandhi’s career; it was the moment when passive resistance was officially called forth in the form of active civil disobedience. Gandhi called for general “non-compliance” with a newly proposed law in the Transvaal that required compulsory registration of Asians. In his view, no “self-respecting Indian” could live with such a policy.³⁰ Famously, a pledge was taken at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg where Indians vowed to resist the law with “courage” and “firmness,” and to court imprisonment and jail-going rather than to register. This meeting and vow are recounted by Gandhi himself and in numberless subsequent biographies as “the birth of *satyagraha*.”³¹

In the wake of the adoption of the program of passive resistance, Gandhi reflected more pointedly on the nature of the new political method he saw himself to be inaugurating. In *Indian Opinion* – which by this time had become the in-house journal of the movement – Gandhi began a series of articles on the nature of passive resistance, civil disobedience, and *satyagraha*. These articles would often take the form of short summaries, excerpts, and translations, for example, of Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience, of Tolstoy’s short stories and philosophy, and Plato’s *Apology* in which Socrates is described as the first *satyagrahi*.³² Gandhi invited offered a prize for the best essays on the topic of passive resistance, asking his readers to analyze the work of the aforementioned works and authors in conjunction with an exploration of their religious traditions and modern history to develop the theory and demonstrate “its general utility.”³³ Most consequentially, Gandhi asked his readers to submit Indian language terms for “passive resistance” and “civil disobedience,” arriving at *satyagraha* – “firmness in a good cause” – as the best equivalent.³⁴

In these early reflections, Gandhi weaved together a religious or spiritual language concerning the divine duty of non-resistance and non-participation in evil with a more secular language of securing moral integrity, fortitude, and self-government in the face of degradation. The connection between non-resistance and the recovery of moral

²⁸ M.K. Gandhi, “The Uses of Adversity (10-9-1903),” *CWMG*, 3, 206.

²⁹ M.K. Gandhi, “Divine Law (27-7-1907),” *CWMG*, 7: 88; “Duty of Disobeying Laws I (7-9-1907),” *CWMG*, 7, 188, 191; “Message to Indians of South Africa (25-1-1909),” *CWMG*, 9, 310.

³⁰ The proposed ordinance required the carrying of registration certifications and fingerprint identification of all Indians on pain of deportation.

³¹ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Hamidiya Islamic Society (22-9-1906),” *CWMG*, 5, 331-332; “Mass Meeting (22-9-1906),” *CWMG*, 3, 336; M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1928), Ch 12.

³² Famously, all of these texts would be published illegally (as banned texts) in 1919 as part of the civil disobedience component of the Rowlatt *satyagraha*.

³³ See Appendix V of *CWMG*, 7, 429-30.

³⁴ Vb 31; and respons:80

freedom was itself a central strain in Tolstoy's thought and it was amplified for Gandhi via Thoreau and Emerson, whom he began to read more urgently after actively adopting civil disobedience.³⁵ All of these influences places Gandhian *satyagraha* within an eclectic but still recognizable line of nineteenth-century political thinking, a radically individualist strain of liberalism whose main feature included a theory of freedom defined by moral individuality, self-mastery, integrity, and conscience. It also carried a libertarian, anarchist edge with its suspicion of the state and mass democracy (i.e. the principle of majority-rule) to claim for itself moral authority and the right to substitute its judgment for that of the individual's.

The language of moral freedom and integrity was especially crucial to how Gandhi addressed his Indian constituencies. Gandhi argued that to resist degrading laws was a sacred act, and that *satyagraha* offered a way to restore/recover their honor and dignity; it would make them "men" again. It was in relation to a claim like this, that Gandhi liked to repeat with approval a line of Thoreau's – "we should be men first, subjects afterwards" – to underwrite the idea that obligations to conscience take precedence over those either to the state or the laws of the majority. But there was something more specific implied in the message. As I suggested above, Gandhi worried that Indians had become a docile and servile people. *Satyagraha* and the communal sacrifice it demanded would be a vehicle for recovering honor, dignity, and "manliness."

For Gandhi, then, *satyagraha* was understood both as a method for securing political redress and justice as well as a way to get people who were unaccustomed to acting politically – such as the Indian merchants and indentured laborers of South Africa – to do so. Gandhi began to see this part of his political activism as holding deep lessons for a newly "awakening" India. *Satyagraha* would infect them with the courage and self-respect needed to resist the forces of moral degradation and the temptations of docility. Indeed, when Gandhi returned to India, his expanding experiments in *satyagraha* were explicitly understood as various programs to teach ordinary people to regain courage and dignity by recovering their "power of action."³⁶

Gandhi's understanding of what Indians required to forge a nation, namely the idea that docility and servility could be overcome through moral and physical strength linked Gandhi to the more radical strains of Indian nationalism. Indeed, when Gandhi spoke of courage in the language of martial honor and military heroism – which he was surprisingly apt to do – his position shared the vocabulary most often used by the so-called "extremist" faction and more generally the militant end of the political spectrum. The fact of this shared vocabulary did not go unnoticed, indeed it was the source of some instructive debate in which militants and pacifists alike expressed dislike at Gandhi's coupling of nonviolence with martial virtues.

³⁵ Gandhi noted that he hadn't read Thoreau until after the call for non-compliance with the Registration Act.

³⁶ M.K. Gandhi, "Notes on the Agreement (13-11-1924)," *CWMG*, 29, 333.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi's first direct engagement with militant nationalism, he starts his counter-argument by contesting the extremists' definition of Indian slavery or docility, and therefore their recommended solution to it, namely, violence. The realization that Gandhi dramatically came to in *Hind Swaraj* was that it was not British power or the brute force of British rule that held India in subjection but rather it was modern civilization. And it was Indians themselves in their desire for modern civilization who had enabled British rule and thereby enslaved themselves.

III. Civilization and Self-enslavement

Hind Swaraj is staged as a dialogue between a Gandhi-like figure, the Editor, and a Reader who was sympathetic to the actions of a Hindu militant-nationalist youth like Dhingra. The Reader is "impatient" for *swaraj* and especially weary of traditional modes of parliamentary/constitutional appeals to the British crown for political concessions and, therefore, argues for more radical, violent forms of resistance to British rule. Gandhi's strategy was to position himself on the side of the militants in their unhappiness with petitioning (and the deference to legalistic channels of protest), but to also show them that the nationalism they espoused, the nationalism of the Western educated-elite was neither thorough nor radical enough precisely because it was overly enamored of the achievements of modern civilization.

Here, again, Tolstoy's influence is marked, especially the short "Letter to a Hindoo." In early 1909 Tolstoy replied to a request from the editors of the underground journal, *Free Hindustan*, to outline what he ought to be done for India's freedom.³⁷ Tolstoy's pointed criticism of the militant position apparently displeased its chief editor, Tarak Nath Das, and the "Letter" was left unpublished. The manuscript came to Gandhi in London, and it moved Gandhi to write to Tolstoy for permission to publish it in *Indian Opinion* (in English and Gujarati). This began Gandhi's short and mutually admiring correspondence with Tolstoy.³⁸ Tolstoy's "Letter" cemented a particular argument Gandhi had been developing. Gandhi had loosely suggested that Indian subjection was in some sense India's own responsibility, but Tolstoy had provocatively and sharply described this as a predicament of self-enslavement. Most crucially, Tolstoy tied the predicament of self-enslavement to India's desire to emulate the West.

³⁷ The chief editor was Tarak Nath Das, published out of Vancouver.

³⁸ In this exchange, Gandhi informed Tolstoy of his political activities in South Africa and sent him a copy of *Hind Swaraj*. In response Tolstoy expressed admiration at Gandhi's attempts to implement passive resistance. See Gandhi, "Letter to Tolstoy" *CWMG*, 10, 129-131; "Letter to Tolstoy (10-11-1909)," *CWMG*, 10, 223-224; and "Tolstoy's Letter to Gandhi (8-5-1910)," *CWMG*, 10, 511.

In many ways, Tolstoy's "Letter" was a restatement of the main thesis of *The Kingdom of God*, that it was the forgetting or occlusion of the law of love – the spirit of religion – that had allowed civilization to be built upon continuous coercion and violence. The East because of the strength of existing religion should have been (and may still be) able to more readily resist the lure of civilization. But what Tolstoy feared was that Indian nationalism, especially the young, radical followers to whom he was writing, had explicitly forsaken these traditions. The key point upon which Gandhi would build was Tolstoy's suggestion that in forsaking their spiritual roots Indians were responsible for their own subjection. Tolstoy pointedly asked:

What does it mean that thirty thousand people, not athletes but rather weak and ill-looking, have enslaved 200 millions of vigorous, clever, strong, freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that not the English but the Indians have enslaved themselves?

The idea that England ought to be ousted from India with a more resolute show of force, for Tolstoy, was not the solution but the root of India's self-enslavement. For what allowed England to hold India was that the latter come to recognize "force as the fundamental principle of the social order."³⁹ That is, it was Indian acceptance of the legitimacy of force that underpinned and bolstered British rule.

In the crucial seventh chapter of *Hind Swaraj*, in a similar vein, Gandhi famously claimed, "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them."⁴⁰ For both Gandhi and Tolstoy, it was not the mere preponderance of force that brought or kept India under British rule but Indian 'weakness.' And emulation was the mark of this weakness; it demonstrated the continued acquiescence to the logic of imperial conquest and legitimated material domination as an acceptable foundation of political authority. Gandhi also laid emphasis on the fact that it was less the power of the sword than "base self-interest," the attractions of commerce, and the lure of power that worked as so many "subtle methods" by which "they get what they want from us." To blame the English for Indian weakness was to merely "perpetuate their power."⁴¹

Gandhi here was also reworking J.R. Seeley's famous claim that the British conquest of India was not a conquest at all, but rather a kind of coup d'état or internal Indian revolution.⁴² In Seeley's terms, India had in fact conquered itself. The Company had

³⁹ Tolstoy, "Letter to a Hindoo."

⁴⁰ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 261.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 264.

⁴² J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England*. Gandhi originally deployed Seeley's argument that the British did not conquer India – that Indians had given a kind of consent to British rule – to bolster Indian claims for legitimate inclusion in the Empire on equal terms, i.e. not as a subjected people. If India was not a conquered country, then its status in the Empire should be

been invited into Indian politics, to fight and finance wars amongst rival native kingdoms and the profits of commerce lured Indians into supporting Company rule. Gandhi used Seeley to suggest that what on the surface looked like conquest was in fact based on a kind of perverse collaboration, itself premised on the admiration of civilization, the promise of progress, and the riches that it bore. While Gandhi could use Seeley attribute agency to Indians in enabling and perpetuating British rule, he also pointedly rejected the other key premise of Seeley's argument, namely that British rule had brought unprecedented peace and a unifying identity to the subcontinent. For Gandhi, to credit British rule with bringing peace or wealth or progress or unity to India was to think from within the psychology of self-enslavement. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi would systematically attack each of these justifications of imperial rule and attempt to show that the so-called gifts of British rule and modern civilization – from railways and modern medicine to lawyers and representative government – were so many signs of civilizational corruption. The supposed signs of progress were, in his terms, emblems of slavery.

Gandhi's exhortation in *Hind Swaraj* was to find a mode of resisting British rule that did not at the same time emulate (and thereby legitimate) imperial claims to authority. In championing armed resistance as a vehicle to capture the state, extremist nationalism only worked to cement precisely the amoral foundations of the modern-imperial state. This, for Gandhi, was at the heart of the moral-psychological trauma wrought by imperialism, for in their subjection, the oppressed came to believe that force or material inequality (be it in political, economic, technological, or military terms) could legitimate domination. To obey a law out of fear of punishment was, for Gandhi, a sign of moral weakness and compliance out of fear served only to mask domination in the language of legitimacy.

Gandhi's criticism of the existing coordinates of Indian nationalism – as slavishly imitative of modern civilization – opened up a host of questions about his own vision of Indian independence. Gandhi argued that true self-rule or self-government for Indians – the true recovery of moral dignity and freedom – had to begin with a sharp disavowal of modern civilization. India's "salvation" required the "unlearning of what she has learnt during the past fifty years."⁴³ Indeed, it was the Western educated elite who most needed to "unlearn" its attachment to a civilization that had degraded not just India but most of the world, including England herself. Rather than becoming "a second or fifth edition of England or America,"⁴⁴ India would do better to loom inwards, to return to and revive its traditional institutions. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi associated this path to true self-rule with a program of *swadeshi* – the pursuit of self-reliance – through *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance).

more akin to the colonies. M.K. Gandhi, "The Cinderella of the Empire (30-7-1903)," *CWMG*, 3, 169.

⁴³ Gandhi, "Letter to Polak," *CWMG*, 10, 167.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

IV. Exemplary Action and its Limits

To his Indian interlocutors, as the way to overcome the predicament of self-enslavement, Tolstoy recommended the path of non-resistance to evil in the form of non-participation with evil. This entailed not taking part “in the violent deeds of the administration, in the law courts, the collection of taxes, or above all in soldiering.”⁴⁵ If Indians could withdraw support and consent from imperial institutions, Tolstoy contended, “no one in the world will be able to enslave you.”⁴⁶ As an answer to the structural violence of modern civilization, for both Tolstoy and Gandhi, programs of withdrawal or non-cooperation – which in Gandhi extended into the more positive program of *swadeshi* and, later, the constructive program – were linked to a hoped-for return to simpler forms of rural living, ideals of agrarian socialism, and various experiments in self-reliant cooperative communities. Indeed, for Gandhi, a decentralized polity built upon revitalized village communities was one way of imagining an ideal, post-imperial state-form for independent India.⁴⁷

Simplicity and the proposed forms of resistance and withdrawal were premised upon a notion of moral freedom that was closely tied to the ideal of self-mastery. For Tolstoy, outward non-participation was premised upon reignited moral strength and a spiritual re-awakening spurred by a conviction to live by the “law of love” that was at the heart of all religious belief.⁴⁸ Indians had become enslaved because they like most had lost faith in their religious truths and accepted the falsehood that the highest morality – the law of love – should be limited to private life. Moral regeneration, on Tolstoy’s account, worked through the slow extension outward of this basic moral truth, through the cultivation of an inward freedom and the overcoming of inner contradictions and hypocrisy, that is, the degradation of moral conscience that unthinking obedience to external authority had bred.

Gandhi similarly stressed the loss of religion and the lack of spiritual orientation as sources of India’s current state of degradation. And Gandhi’s answer likewise took the form of a plea for a moral and psychological awakening tied to self-government and self-mastery: *swaraj* required the cultivation of fearlessness and self-reliance so Indians could reinvent themselves as agents (and not passive victims) of rule. Here, *swaraj* and *satyagraha* were intimately combined: to resist an immoral law was to prove the capacity for self-rule. At the beginning of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, when Gandhi would controversially promise *swaraj* in one year, it was partly premised

⁴⁵ Tolstoy, “Letter to a Hindoo.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mantena, “On Gandhi’s Critique of the State,” MIH. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi argued that the Indian peasant already experienced a kind of home-rule. *Hind Swaraj*, 295.

⁴⁸ Tolstoy, “Letter to a Hindoo.”

on this idea that a psychological transformation or radical attitudinal shift was the essence of *swaraj*: the very attempt to win *swaraj* was its realization.⁴⁹

What I want to draw attention to are the ways in which, for both Gandhi and Tolstoy, one solution or response to the predicament of modern civilization – and the problem of violence as it inhered in it – called forth a politics of moral exemplarity. I term this response *moral* because the practices it recommended were largely predicated upon and gave priority to projects of individual self-cultivation and self-mastery for the realization and preservation of freedom. This seems to be especially the case for Tolstoy. The problem of violence in modern civilization turned fundamentally on an inner dilemma of corruption and hypocrisy, one that would be overcome by individual moral cultivation, of the individual returning to oneself and experiencing moral freedom.⁵⁰ In Tolstoy's model of moral progress, although it imagined acts of resistance to be critical and necessary, it would be difficult to describe them as strategic in any meaningful sense. They were themselves integral instances or exemplary acts of moral freedom. In showing that you obeyed only the law of love or moral conscience you proved yourself, in that very instance, to be a free being.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi explicitly builds upon the classical understanding of *swaraj*, that is, *swaraj* as a form of individual self-rule connected with ascetic practices that demonstrated control over the bodily. Indeed, he defines and recommends a civilized morality that seeks to “attain mastery over our mind and passions.”⁵¹ *Swaraj* as control over body and passions laid emphasis on the necessity of self-imposed constraints – material and spiritual – as marks of freedom. Many of the virtues associated with Gandhian nonviolence, as a form of life as much as a politics, involved cultivating such forms of ascetic freedom as practices of self-mastery, practices such as celibacy, fasting, spinning.

What makes these recommended models of moral action *exemplary* is that, firstly, they are practices of freedom or forms of ethical cultivation defined by the singularity of experience. They are also models of action where there is an absolute immediacy between means and ends, the enunciation of the act is at the same time its fulfillment.⁵² In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi contended that true self-rule or freedom had to be truly self-determining; “such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself.”⁵³ *Swaraj* was not a gift that others could grant, rather “everyone will have to take it for

⁴⁹ Gandhi referred to the need to mentally break with what Tolstoy had called the “hypnotism” that mankind labored under. M.K. Gandhi, “Swaraj in One Year,” *CWMG*, 21, 278.

⁵⁰ You can see clearly the influence of Rousseau on Tolstoy account of moral freedom.

⁵¹ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 279.

⁵² In the next chapter, I will distinguish these forms of moral action as perhaps better defined as “practices” as opposed to “action” as such, which I want to reserve to thinking about acting in the context of strategic interaction, in relation to others.

⁵³ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 282.

himself.”⁵⁴ Likewise, *swaraj* as independence could not, as it were, be granted or conceded by the British; it had to be “taken” by generating strength and power from within, for example through *satyagraha* and social reform.

A moral freedom that is taken so deeply to be an inner freedom is one that cannot be legislated into being by states or formal institutions, that is by any kind of external agency without undoing the conditions of freedom. The expansion and replication of freedom itself worked best through the force of exemplarity, the power of the moral exemplar. Tolstoy had suggested moral exemplarity – as in religious history – to be the great, unexpected agency of social transformation. This notion of exemplarity was also seemingly implied in Gandhi’s suggestion that even one *satyagrahi* or single act of civil disobedience done perfectly had the power to initiate radical change. One of Gandhi’s favorite example’s was from Thoreau again, and his suggestion that slavery could be undone by one honest man’s sacrifice.⁵⁵

Exemplary action was also in some sense a necessary feature of Gandhi’s understanding of the most effective means of everyday persuasion. It was concomitant to his “practical idealism” which elevated action above speech, and exhorted people to demonstrate truths through deeds. Humble deeds of service under conditions of intimacy and proximity would infecting others with the spirit of courage, service, and sacrifice. Finally, I want to suggest that *satyagraha* as a model of exemplary action was especially prominent in the earliest formulations of *satyagraha*, where *satyagraha* was seen to offer a radical alternative to the path of violence in politics. In his early campaigns in South Africa, Gandhi contended that in responding to “brute force” through “suffering” and “returning good for evil,” *satyagraha* would demonstrate by example the utility of nonviolence as another mode of redressing wrongs and attaining rights.

This picture adds up to a recognizable model of nonviolent politics as a politics of ethical cultivation and moral exhortation, where exemplary action could – in the right circumstances – avoid violent conflict and engender altruistic cycles of trust and cooperation. Indeed many interpreters of Gandhi have been especially attracted to this model of exemplary action, for it suggests a model of universality without the threat of compulsion or external imposition.⁵⁶ This characterization of nonviolent politics and

⁵⁴ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 305-306.

⁵⁵ I know this well that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name, —if ten honest men only aye, if one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts ceasing to hold slaves were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership and be locked up in the country gaol therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be, what is once well done is done for ever. Vol 21: 15.

⁵⁶ Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi, the Philosopher,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38: 39 (Sept 23, 2003); Uday Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7:2 (August 2010) and “Gandhi on the Common Logic of War and Peace,” *Raritan* 29:5 (Summer 2010).

exemplary action undoubtedly captures several important features of Gandhian politics. Indeed I want to suggest that it is the kind of action that matches most directly Gandhi's worry about the structural violence of modern civilization.

But Gandhi's critique of violence was multilayered. And though such an ethical-moral critique of violence was especially prominent in his early writings, Gandhi also developed a political critique that emphasized violence's practical futility. When Gandhi entered the scene of nationalist politics in India, the political analysis and critique of violence emerged most forcefully in response to both advocates of violence as well as the experience of outbreaks of violence that accompanied the first mass mobilization against British rule. Whereas the argument of *Hind Swaraj* included a strong contention that the temptations of violence stemmed most directly from emulation of modern civilization, afterwards Gandhi began to reckon with the fact that violence in politics may have more immediate or dynamic sources, sources that were not limited to the appeal of civilization. That is, Gandhi expanded his critique and diagnoses of violence, and focused more squarely on its political effects, on a range of negative consequences not reducible to the structural violence of modernity. Here, *satyagraha* would emerge not just as an alternative to violence but also a mode of action that needed to directly channel, mitigate, and counter a violence born from the very nature of political action and conflict. In this sense, it was a form of action more akin to a tactical maneuver and strategic choice aimed at immediate effect, rather than – or perhaps in addition to – being a powerful example to be emulated.

It is with the absence of a strategic or interactive element, that notions of nonviolence as exemplary action reach a kind of limit. For they offer little by way of an account of what nonviolent action entails for others – i.e., its impact on opponents and fellow citizens, and more generally its relation to a political audience and context that is necessarily characterized by contestation and recalcitrance. Gandhi developed forms of nonviolent action that were closely attuned to action's wider effects and entailments in the political world. Ultimately, I hope to show how and why Gandhian *satyagraha* had to be more strategic and tactical in orientation, but in a manner that was never wholly or reductively instrumental. To get a sense of these other kinds of orientations for nonviolent action, we have to consider the broader ways in which Gandhi understood the problem of violence.

Tolstoyian nonresistance and Christian pacifism – and perhaps even more generally the politics of conscience that has developed in the tradition of Thoreau and Emerson – have, rightly or wrongly, been suspected of carrying an antipolitical edge, a temptation towards withdrawal from politics and its complicity with morally suspect practices and institutions. Gandhi likewise exhibited a profound skepticism of the modern state and modern politics, indeed it was part of reason that Gandhian *satyagraha* was proposed and practiced as a primarily extra-institutional form of politics. Like these admired forbearers, then, Gandhi was often repulsed by traditional forms of politics and always felt the need to distance himself from directly occupying positions of power and political

office. At the same time, Gandhian *satyagraha* – even when considered as exemplary action – was always at root much more resolutely active and constructive in orientation. These aspects would become ever more developed through the evolution of *satyagraha* into mass civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and constructive work, all of which required more insistent and, indeed, collective and organized forms of action and engagement.

In these forms of nonviolence, Gandhi would provocatively turn the language and practices of self-cultivation towards other agendas and goals, not just as practices to be cultivated and emulated as ends in their own right. Rather they were mobilized to achieve discrete political goals and transform the terms of political contestation. In other words, implicit or incipient in Gandhi's politics of exemplarity, was always already a more strategic and tactical orientation for nonviolent action. In this respect, despite Gandhi's deep intellectual debt to Tolstoy and to a shared model of moral action, over time the differences would become much more important, for they marked the trajectory Gandhi's most distinctive innovations in the politics of nonviolence.⁵⁷

V. Violence and the Shape of *Swaraj*

One side of Gandhi's critique of militant nationalism was closely tied to his deep suspicion of the corrupting tendencies of modern politics and modern civilization. He saw in the advocacy of political violence an uncritical desire to emulate modern civilization. The central argument of *Hind Swaraj* turns on dissuading Indians of their desire and admiration for modern civilization and the supposed gifts it bore, and to convince them of forging their own distinct path of independence and self-reliance. But late in the dialogue of *Hind Swaraj*, after the Reader seems persuaded by Gandhi's critique of modern civilization and the need to reframe *swaraj* for India is this new idiom, the Reader continues to suggest that violence may yet be the right tool for enacting even this altered ideal of *swaraj*. He asks the Editor: "Why should we not obtain our goal, which is good, by any means whatsoever, even by using violence?"⁵⁸

The burden of Gandhi's response is to show that in politics one could not be indifferent to the means of seeking and attaining an end. Gandhi offered the following example to demonstrate the ways in which the very definition of "ends" or "results" was dependent on the nature of the means adopted to secure them:

If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it;
if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay for it; if I want a gift, I shall

⁵⁷ Indeed, we can see a noteworthy shift from *Hind Swaraj* onwards, when Gandhi more purposively develops and refines his own conceptual terms – especially *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* – relying less on the terminology of non-resistance and even the language of conscience.

⁵⁸ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 286.

have to plead for it; and according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means.⁵⁹

In more political terms, if freedom is sought through all available means, including arms, conspiracy, or fraud, it can result in conquest and usurpation as easily as true *swaraj* or self-rule. If “we” nationalists “were justified in gaining our end by using brute force, because the English gained theirs by using similar means...we can get only the same thing that they got,”⁶⁰ namely an unstable conquest sustained and legitimated by domination and fear. For Gandhi, the crucial point was that the means chosen to effect *swaraj* or independence – i.e. violence or force – would radically shape its realization, both in the sense of qualitatively shaping the substantive character of the new polity as well as determining the very possibility of its coming into being.

In this section I focus on the former, that is, Gandhi’s suspicion that violence would bring into being the wrong kind of independence and the wrong kind of polity. At one level, for Gandhi, trying to capture the state through force would only legitimate the amoral foundations of the modern state, one that claimed authority via the monopoly of force or violence. Nationalists seemed intent on maintaining the basic institutions of the centralized, modern state and therefore capturing the state amounted to retaining “the tiger’s nature but not the tiger.”⁶¹ And Indian freedom, in Gandhi’s iconic rendition, had been reduced to nothing more than “English rule without the Englishman.”⁶² This statism also implied elitism, for nationalism seemed to reduce independence to a “mere change of personnel.”⁶³ More provocatively, Gandhi worried that, for most of India, this transition would feel like “a change of masters only.”⁶⁴

For Gandhi, the nationalist demand for formal independence from the British was not altogether insignificant – he thought it would end specifically colonial forms of exploitation and check egregious abuses of power. At the same time, its elitism and statism rendered it an insufficient or incomplete conception of *swaraj*. Crucially, statism and elitism were implicated in the very means of militant nationalism. Political violence in the form of “secret societies and the method of secret murder”⁶⁵ was a mode of political action open only to the few and privileged and entailed a conspiratorial, centralized structure of action. In aiming at igniting patriotic fervor and hostility against the ruling power it offered little in terms of a model or method for attaining *swaraj* “in

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁶¹ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 255.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶³ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 255.

⁶⁴ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes (28-7-1946),” *CWMG*, 91, 371.

⁶⁵ M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to *The Times of India* (22-8-1919),” *CWMG*, 18, 304.

terms of the masses;”⁶⁶ that is, it did not seek true social, moral, and economic freedom for India’s peasant millions. Here, Gandhi’s view that self-rule was something that “everyone will have to take it for himself” had a particular populist resonance.⁶⁷ A truly effective form of large-scale resistance had to be an open and popular vehicle by which everyone could individually experience and demand self-rule.

Gandhi would repeatedly dissociate true *swaraj* from mere independence or the attainment of formal sovereignty. Such “external” forms would only become meaningful when gained through “internal” effort and transformation: “Swaraj is not going to descend on us from the heavens. It will not be received as a gift from the British Empire either. It can only be the reward of our own efforts.”⁶⁸ The struggle for freedom may involve a struggle with the imperial government, but it ultimately depended on “a real awakening of the people” which only could succeed through “activities directed inwards.”⁶⁹ “No amount of speeches will ever make us fit for self-government;”⁷⁰ self-rule as the capacity for “managing our own affairs” can only be developed and demonstrated through work and action that generates internal strength. *Swaraj* in Gandhi’s terms thus required a much more profound reorientation, one that especially aimed at reinventing ordinary Indians as the primary agents of self-rule; “Swaraj of the people means the sum total of the swaraj (self-rule) of individuals.”⁷¹

In *Hind Swaraj*, this alternative, populist model of *swaraj* as well as the means required to shape it are only intimated in a broad and formal sense. *Hind Swaraj* served more to clear the field and stake out a position vis-à-vis what *swaraj* would entail but as yet offered little by way of positive substance. But the key premise was laid: a popular or egalitarian vision of *swaraj* could only be realized through popular means. A more substantive elaboration of *swaraj* came in the crucial decade following Gandhi’s return to India, which saw Gandhi’s dramatic rise to power and the first major mass mobilizations against British rule.

Gandhi had only returned to India in 1915 and, in four short years, became the effective leader of the Congress party. He was instrumental in its reorganization and its extraordinary expansion, giving Congress “a new creed, a new agenda, and a new constituency.”⁷² On his return, Gandhi sought ways to overcome what he saw as the deep-seated fear immobilizing Indians, and spur ordinary people to recover their power of action. Mass participation in civil disobedience was one avenue for testing popular

⁶⁶ Gandhi, “Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes,” 91, 372

⁶⁷ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 305-306.

⁶⁸ M.K. Gandhi, “Lucknow (9-9-1928),” *CWMG*, 42, 454.

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⁷⁰ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Benares Hindu University (6-2-1916),” *CWMG*, 15, 151.

⁷¹ M.K. Gandhi, “Appeal to the People of Rajkot (13-3-1939),” *CWMG*, 75, 178-179.

⁷² Rahul Ramagundam, *Gandhi’s Khadi: A History of Contention and Conciliation* (New Delhi, 2009), 137. See also Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge, 1972).

resolve and a practical way for people to understand and regain the moral freedom at the heart of self-rule. The other was through concerted efforts at wide-ranging social, political, and economic reform. This was initially framed as the pursuit of *swadeshi* but would be expanded into a broad-ranging project known as the Constructive Programme. The agenda of *swaraj* would be explicitly formulated and implemented as a distinct project of construction – variously termed constructive work, constructive nonviolence, or constructive *satyagraha* – in which constructive work and action would play a central role as experimentation and education in self-rule for the peasant millions.

Gandhi's program of *swadeshi* was initially focused on propagating vernacular education and the spinning and weaving of *khadi* (home-spun cloth). But the idea of constructive work expanded into a large-scale program for "the curing of India's ills" – ills internal to the social life of the incipient nation/polity. This was essential in making Indian "fit" for *swaraj*. Almost from its inception, the agenda of the constructive program came to include three central pillars: the forging of Hindu-Muslim unity, the elimination of untouchability, and the promotion of *khadi*. Over time, the official Constructive Programme expanded even further to include an increasingly broad range of social reform programs focused on everything from sanitation and hygiene to the status of women, prohibition, and adult education. The structure of constructive work was national in scope but would take place as localized, village-level campaigns and so it was also seen to be part and parcel of a program of village reconstruction and revival.

The *khadi* program, as understood and propagated by Gandhi, was to be the heart of the constructive program; it was also arguably its most successful achievement, symbolized by the rapid adoption of *khadi* as a kind of uniform of the nationalist struggle. It was for Gandhi the essential, "positive side" of the successful boycott of foreign cloth.⁷³ The underlying ideology of the *khadi* program was closely tied to the nationalist economic critique of colonialism, inaugurated in the seminal work of Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India* (1876), and R.C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India* (1902/1904). This critique charged British rule with deindustrialization (the decimation of India's craft industries to make room for English manufactures) and the drain of wealth from colony to metropole. But whereas the first major economic boycotts of the original *swadeshi* campaign in Bengal (1905-1908) tied the boycott of English goods to the cultivation of Indian industry, Gandhi's agenda focused on rejuvenating non-industrial village production – cooperative or cottage industry – as the mechanism for overall economic self-reliance (for freedom from economic slavery at both the national and individual level).

Khadi was offered both as a solution to rural poverty and underemployment as well as a model for cultivating self-rule or self-constraint. While the argument for the collective economic benefits of *khadi* was relatively clear and coincided with the mainstream of Indian anticolonial thinking, what was more interesting and elusive was how Gandhi

⁷³ *Ibid.* See also M.K. Gandhi, "To No-Changers (19-1-1928)," *CWMG*, 41, 128.

sought to tie the act of spinning itself with the creation of *swaraj*. *Khadi* and *charkha* (the spinning wheel), for Gandhi, intimated a new (nonviolent) structure of rule and authority. *Khadi* was an exemplary model of large-scale decentralized, voluntary enterprise – a mode of cooperation that was collective in nature but also premised on the patient work of *isolated* individuals, where each and every individual could separately cultivate discipline and experience self-rule. He contended that “through *khadi* we teach the people the art of civil obedience to an institution which they have built up for themselves” and thereby “train the masses in self-consciousness and the attainment of power,” requisites for both nonviolent disobedience and *swaraj*.⁷⁴

Moreover, spinning was intended as a universal practice, an equalizing practice that traversed distinctions of high and low, rich and poor and thus would lay the groundwork for a more egalitarian polity.⁷⁵ Gandhi called for Congress leaders especially to take the lead in daily spinning, to demonstrate service to, and egalitarian solidarity with, the laboring, rural poor. In daily labor, the educated would begin to “unlearn” their privilege. Gandhi was so enamored with the broad-ranging moral and political possibilities of *khadi* that he attempted to make spinning, and later the “constant wearing” of *khadi*, an absolute prerequisite for Congress membership and office-holding.⁷⁶

In its initial phases the *khadi* campaign was closely coordinated with, and tied to, the expanding structure of Congress organization, with its avowed attempt to place its workers in every one of India’s 700,000 villages. A considerable amount of subaltern participation grew around constructive work and *khadi* activities. It not only brought in large-scale peasant participation, but would also successfully target and incorporate women (as both producers and conspicuous consumers of *khadi*) in wider political campaigns. But even as *khadi* became a crucial hinge in the conversion of Congress into a mass organization and thereby an effective instrument for mobilization, it also ignited continuing controversy within Congress, one that that would eventually sideline constructive work’s political role in the freedom struggle.

Over the course of his political career, Gandhi continually expanded the Constructive Programme in breadth and scope, so much so that he regularly equated it with both the means and ends of *swaraj*. In his words, “the constructive programme is the truthful and nonviolent way of winning *poorna* [total] *swaraj*. Its wholesale fulfillment is complete independence.”⁷⁷ In structure and form it also intimated the alternative

⁷⁴ M. K. Gandhi, “Interview to Nirmal Kumar Bose (9/10-11-34)”, *CWMG*, 65, 317.

⁷⁵ Gandhi, “Is It Non-Co-operation?” 27, 370.

⁷⁶ On the controversy around Gandhi’s attempt to institute a “spinning-franchise” within Congress, see Ramagundam, *Gandhi’s Khadi*, 124-171.

⁷⁷ M. K. Gandhi, “Foreword to ‘Constructive Programme - Its Meaning and Place’ (13-11-1945)”, *CWMG*, 88, 325.

model of state championed by Gandhi, namely, a pluralist, decentralized polity based on the self-organizing capacity of the Indian village.

Despite Gandhi's resolute insistence on the importance of the constructive program and constructive work, both were met with equally insistent skepticism and often outright resistance. The main charge was that constructive work was essentially nonpolitical or apolitical, a social agenda that was distracting Gandhi and the national movement from the real political work of resistance to British rule. Gandhi's more severe critics also thought that its very substance was traditionalist and backward-looking or, worse still, merely a vehicle for propagating his "faddish" spiritual politics on a national scale. From the thirties onward, socialists began to argue that as a program of social and economic reform, the promotion of *khadi* and cottage industry was too piecemeal and small-scale to effect far-reaching economic renewal – especially for overcoming class exploitation and caste oppression. For critics on the left, the fundamental socio-economic transformation that Gandhi thought the constructive program ushered in could only come after independence, with the capture of political power and through the agency of the postcolonial state.

For many, both within and outside the Congress fold, the core connection between spinning and *swaraj* that Gandhi insisted upon, therefore, was neither obvious nor necessary. At the same time, people like Nehru – left leaning modernists within Congress – lauded the *khadi* program in their own terms. For them, its main function was as a kind of mass contact program, the means to make the case for Congress among the peasantry, and to bring them into the cause of national independence. Constructive work was seen primarily as a mode of political pedagogy, of propaganda and consciousness-raising that set before the peasants the full force of the moral ideal embodied in the national project. In this way, those closest to Gandhi would invest in the symbolic implications of *khadi* and constructive work, without subscribing to the full range of political and moral (as well economic and social) effects Gandhi himself attribute to it. In other words, they adopted Gandhi's language of self-discipline and the cultivation of fearlessness, but did not see these as intrinsic to constructive action or to the substance of *swaraj*.

At issue, in part, were divergent senses of the meaning of *swaraj* and the place of political action and political education in attaining it. For Gandhi, constructive work understood as large-scale work for village revitalization was the most crucial mass-based, egalitarian means that prefigured the forms of a future populist *swaraj*. In this sense, constructive work was not primarily a symbolic politics or an ideological project that would prepare the ground for national unity; rather it was the actual substance of politics:

constructive work is the basis for solving political problems. Opinions may differ on whether this means the spinning-wheel or some other activity. But the time is drawing near when there will be general

agreement that the true solution of political problems lies in the education of the people. This education does not imply mere literacy but an awakening of the people from their slumber. The people should become aware of their own condition. Such awareness is possible only through public work and not through talks. This does not also mean that every outward agitation is useless...But outward agitation cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work.⁷⁸

Awakening and awareness were, for Gandhi, substantively defined in terms of the cultivation of fearlessness and discipline, and the aim of "solid political work"⁷⁹ was training towards them as foundations of self-government. For Gandhi, "such training cannot be imparted by speeches alone,"⁸⁰ rather teaching "this art to the people" was made through "silent, patient, constructive work."⁸¹ This was "a task essentially for our national workers who must go and settle in the villages in their midst, win their confidence by dint of selfless service, identify themselves with them in their joys and sorrows, make a close study of their social conditions, and by degrees infect them with courage."⁸²

As experiments in, and education for, self-reliance, Gandhi understood constructive work in terms of self-consciousness as opposed to national consciousness; its substance was not the cultivation of duty to the national project as much as regaining the power of action. For Gandhi, the educated elite, the impatient youth, and political radicals tended to equate politics and political action too easily with "the clamour for unadulterated excitement"⁸³ and the immediate capture of political office and power. There were "addicted" to the politics of speeches, resolutions, declarations, of cultivating and exciting public opinion, and therefore shunned the solid and silent work of construction upon which the moral and political revolution of the masses depended.⁸⁴ Gandhi therefore gave priority to constructive work and service as the exemplary model of nonviolent action.

⁷⁸ M.K. Gandhi, "My Notes (30-8-1925)," *CWMG*, 32, 362-363.

⁷⁹ M.K. Gandhi, "Atrocities By Officials (23-9-1928)," *CWMG*, 43; 342.

⁸⁰ M.K. Gandhi, "Policy of Making Khadi Self-Supporting (23-9-1928)," *CWMG*, 43, 45. See also M.K. Gandhi, "'Bitter As Poison' (5-9-1929)," *CWMG*, 46, 377.

⁸¹ M.K. Gandhi, "The Old Story (25-7-1929)," *CWMG*, 46, 247-248.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸³ M.K. Gandhi, "The Congress (10-1-1929)," 43, 497. See also M.K. Gandhi, "Notes (2-3-1922)," *CWMG*, 26, 254; "The Way To Do It (16-5-1929)," *CWMG*, 46; 19-20; "To Proud Gujarat (15-3-1931)," *CWMG*, 51, 252.

⁸⁴ M.K. Gandhi, "Notes on the Agreement (13-11-1924)," *CWMG*, 29, 333; "What Should Be Done Now? (30-11-1924)," *CWMG*, 29, 394-395; "My Duty (26-7-1925)," *CWMG*, 32, 180; "Notes (17-9-1925)," *CWMG*, 32, 410; "Notes (25-3-1926)," *CWMG*, 34, 446; "Kathiawar Political Conference (12-12-1926)," *CWMG*, 37, 401-402; "'Bitter As Poison,'" 46, 377.

VI. The Limits of Violence as a Political Tactic

Like Gandhi's understanding of the constructive program, populist movements have long sought to develop popular agency within the organization and enactment of the movement itself. Likewise, the idea that political struggles – in the form they took and the experience they yielded to participants – should prefigure the political ends and ideals advocated is common to many popular movements. It arguably received its most important development in Marxist and socialist ideas of revolutionary praxis, where forms of workers' self-organization were meant to mirror future models of cooperative activity and self-government. Indeed, the question of how to connect mass protest and mobilization, democratic party politics, and revolution, attracted the attention of many early 20th century Marxists, especially those critical of the Leninist state-party model such as Sorel, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Goldmann, and Gramsci. It was at the core of the debate on the means-ends question in politics.⁸⁵ But as the mention of Sorel signals, in the debates on political action, violence could also be taken to play a crucial, regenerative role in the revolutionary transition to a new polity.

In the context of anticolonial movements, one important and often overlooked commonality between Gandhian *swaraj* and Fanon's model of national liberation is a populist aspiration to overcome the elitism of traditional forms of bourgeois nationalism. Moreover, Fanon and Gandhi both saw political action and mobilization as a key mechanism by which the oppressed could overcome the psychology of fear, docility, and inferiority. That is, despite difference stances on the question of violence/non-violence, there remains a striking similarity between them on the purpose and centrality of popular action – i.e. of the need to train the masses to recover the power and freedom to act. For both, this was necessary for the creation of a polity that could free itself from European precedents and strike out on an authentically postcolonial political trajectory.⁸⁶

But if – as Fanon and other theorists of national liberation movements contended – violent mobilization could be made populist then Gandhi's contention that *swaraj* required nonviolence to instigate a populist experience of agency would be suspect, or at least incomplete as a critique of violence. To put it in the language of Gandhi's critics: if the discipline, fearlessness, and sacrifice of the soldier were ideal examples of the kind of attitudinal shift and training in self-mastery required for Gandhian *swaraj*, why should its nonviolent version be preferred to the violent? Here, I see Gandhi's most convincing response in an argument concerning the practical futility of violence. Even if one did not share Gandhi's moral stance vis-a-vis violence, nor his vision for a future, nonviolent

⁸⁵ See Dennis Dalton, "Gandhi's Originality," in *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule*, ed. Anthony Parel (Lanham, 2003) and the discussion of the means-ends debate in Chapter 3.

⁸⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Conclusion.

polity – as most radicals on the both the right and left did not – an independent case for nonviolence could be made by demonstrating the self-defeating character of political violence.

Moreover, the argument demonstrating the ways in which violence as political tactic was vulnerable to numerous and inherent dangers would be crucial to sharpen the sometimes diffuse line between nonviolence and violence. As I suggested before, a conceptual and practical intimacy between nonviolence and violence revealingly shadowed Gandhian *satyagraha*. Conceptually, Gandhi often showed admiration for military training and virtue and used them as ways to model nonviolent action. The description of nonviolent struggle – its campaigns, its training, its leadership, its virtues – was replete with military metaphors. The *satyagrahi* was to embody the most “soldierly of a soldier’s virtues,” namely courage, defined by Gandhi, as the ability to overcome the fear of death. Moreover, in some very important ways, this was not merely a metaphor. In one of the more curious episodes of his career, Gandhi embarked a drive to recruit soldiers to the imperial army for WWI. This campaign thoroughly perturbed close friends like C.F. Andrews and would be a continuing source of criticism in pacifist circles.

This was not the first occasion that Gandhi would support recruitment or offer his services for an imperial war-effort. As he proudly reported in 1918, he had served time in the Zulu campaign and the Boer War – in a non-combatant role, as part of ambulance core. Gandhi’s attracted to the idea of Indian recruitment was in part the role it played in signaling Indian commitment to the duties of imperial citizenship. Racial animosities had associated the Indians of South Africa with venality and inwardness, a view Gandhi thought might be corrected if Indians displayed honorable action: the war “furnished the Indians with an opportunity to prove their mettle.”⁸⁷ Indeed, for Gandhi, it was morally and strategically imperative that Indians conspicuously and voluntarily showed honorable loyalty at the very moment they were asking for their rights of citizenship to be protected and fulfilled. It was at once a claim of a right to demand equality and itself proof of equality – for the battlefield, Gandhi would say, was a place of equalization.⁸⁸

But, upon his return to India, there was something more aggressive, demanding, literal in this prescription for enlisting in the imperial army. The campaign for recruitment was animated by the idea that if millions would show such service than political reforms could not be denied.⁸⁹ But, more provocatively, Gandhi began to suggest that training

⁸⁷ Gandhi, “Speech at Calcutta Meeting,” *CWMG*, 2, 433.

⁸⁸ “The battlefield has always formed the short cut to an honorable equality between races.” “Letter to ‘The Natal Mercury’ (15-9-1895),” *CWMG*, 1, 272.

⁸⁹ “The easiest and the straightest way to win swaraj is to participate in the defence of the Empire.” “Appeal for Enlistment (22-6-1918),” *CWMG*, 17, 83.

in violence might be a prerequisite for the true practice of ahimsa.⁹⁰ Gandhi had always insisted that, on the scale of values, if the choice fell between cowardice and violence, violence was the morally superior and preferred option. Nonviolence was of course superior to violence, but violence involved fearlessness and fortitude and, as such, was much closer to the psychological orientation of nonviolence. Training in violence could therefore be construed as bringing one closer to the nonviolence of the brave. In this vein Gandhi could suggest that the best practitioners of nonviolence would be those who had been trained in the arts of violence.

Conceptually, for Gandhi, the renunciatory power of ahimsa – i.e its ability to have an effect – was dependent on its voluntary nature. It had to appear as a conscious choice, a position taken from strength and not a capitulation or a necessity born of weakness.⁹¹ In his view – a view he shared with the militants – India “had lost its power to fight” and it desperately needed to regain that power, by a “well-sustained, conscious effort.”⁹² Such power, as well as the honor and respect that comes with it, would be regained in an instant with mass and voluntary recruitment for the army. This would be an especially powerful gesture if undertaken and led by the educated elite which was at the forefront of the political battle for reform. For India could not display the power of nonviolent action until it first regains “its power and then abdicates it.”⁹³

The idea that “he alone can practice ahimsa who knows how to kill” was, Gandhi claimed, a new and “terrible discovery.”⁹⁴ It was one that perplexed pacifists and militants in one stroke.⁹⁵ Militants were of course resolutely suspicious of Gandhi’s celebration of ahimsa. For them, if anything, following otherworldly or renunciatory ideals was causally connected to Indian subjection. As Lala Lalpat Rai put it:

Ahimsa overdone and misapplied is a gangrene that poisons the system, enervates the faculties and converts men and women into half-lunatic, hysterical, unnerved creatures...The Tolstoyian ahimsa has been known and practised in India for three thousand years. There is no country on the face of the globe which contains so many and such profound ahimsa-ists as India does and which she has been having for centuries. Yet there is no country on the face of the globe which is so downtrodden, so bereft of manly virtues, as India of today is...⁹⁶

⁹⁰ “Letter to C.F. Andrews (23-6-1918),” 17, 88; “Speech at Ras (26-6-1918), 17, 100; “Letter to Hanumantrao (17-1918),” 17, 131.

⁹¹ Ibid, 131

⁹² Ibid.

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⁹⁴ “Letter to CF Andrews,” 17, 101.

⁹⁵ Militants were also perplexed by how such enthusiasm for joining imperial army could be squared with Gandhi’s advocating (in principle) withdrawal from government.

⁹⁶ Lala Lajpat Rai, “‘Ahimsa Parama Dharmah’ – A Truth or a Fad?” *Modern Review*

To offset these doubts Gandhi had to make clear that *ahimsa* was not an inward or enervating orientation. At was precisely at this juncture that Gandhi would make the definitive break with the language of passive resistance, to emphasize precisely the “intensely active” nature of *satyagraha*.⁹⁷ Gandhi had repeatedly insisted that *satyagraha* was not merely a weapon of the weak – as passive resistance seemed to imply – and so also emphasized the great fortitude and courage it required and displayed. The argument with militants was thus a generative paradox: Gandhi could play with and appropriate the language of militancy and masculinity and redefine both by associating them with *ahimsa*. In turn, *ahimsa* could be defined by its new association with activity, strength, and courage as opposed to an orientation of withdrawal.

Gandhi’s recruitment campaign itself was a resolute failure, he not only failed to attract many recruits, his own offer of service was never accepted.⁹⁸ With the war’s end a more potent political question attracted Gandhi’s interest and energy, namely, the extension into peacetime of wartime detention and emergency measures, known collectively as the Rowlatt Acts. It is for the repeal of the Rowlatt Acts that Gandhi organized his first nationwide experiment in mass *satyagraha*. It was his first opportunity to test the nation’s resolve vis-a-vis the desire for *swaraj* and its capacity for nonviolence. But within weeks of the campaign’s start, Gandhi suspended the civil disobedience aspect of it in the wake of outbreaks of violence in Ahmedabad and Punjab, the former disturbances were in response to rumors of Gandhi’s arrest. This episode foreshadowed Gandhi’s much more dramatic suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement in face of violence three years later.

The shadowing of violence and nonviolence would be present throughout many of Gandhi’s subsequent campaigns, and it proved to be a question with which Gandhi continually contended. With Rowlatt – and later with Chauri Chaura – it seemed that the very fact of action – the motivations and psychology of action – could unleash passions, provocation, and tendencies that easily spilled over into violence. Could it be that the language and style of Gandhi’s exhortation to direct action was too uncomfortably close to that of the militancy, for nonviolence to have an altogether different and more productive effect?

Gandhi had to confront both a practical and conceptual overlap between violence and nonviolence. If Gandhi was to insist that violence was morally superior to cowardice and both morally and psychologically closer to nonviolence, then Gandhi also had to be careful about laying out the dividing line between the two. Precisely because for Gandhi violence was admitted to be at time morally justified, certainly understandable and

⁹⁷ “Satyagraha – Not Passive Resistance” Vol 16: 6-14

⁹⁸ Narayan Desai in his biography thinks stance to be so wildly anomalous that he suggests that Gandhi’s health breakdown of this period was an unconscious sign of how far this was an aberration from the true philosophy of nonviolence.

always more admirable than cowardice, he had to make the case for nonviolence on other grounds than the strictly moral, hence the importance of the argument for the tactical superiority of nonviolence. This was a ground from which he could – he hoped – convince his detractors, and “wean them from violence.” To do so, Gandhi relied on two interconnected strategies and claims. The first and most important was Gandhi’s contention that violence would not carry the “right affect,” that it lacked political efficacy. And secondly, that this had something to do with the psychological dispositions that accompanied violence.

From *Hind Swaraj* onwards, Gandhi had been suggesting that militants, though they ought to be admired for their heroism, their willingness to sacrifice their lives, and more generally for their sincere patriotism, they suffered from a thoroughly unrealistic and fantastical sense of violence’s political efficacy, of what the effect of using violence would be. Violence’s futility was in part derived from the kinds of psychological attachments, passions, and desires that violence both requires and unleashes; desires and passions that feed conflict, and lead to self-defeating spirals of militancy and embitterment. Violence was seen to instantiate escalating dynamics of confrontation, resistance, and heightened conflict. Gandhi’s worry about the tactical futility of violence opened broader questions about the very nature of political contestation, specifically the ways in which political action becomes implicated in tendencies towards coercion. As the question of consequences comes to fore, the critique of violence involved much more than exposing the moral illegitimacy of the violence.

One common objection to violence would be in terms of what we might call its long-term futility: that violence cannot produce stable political orders. For Gandhi (as well as Tolstoy), violence would amplify and legitimate the state’s inherently violent tendencies. Practically, insurgent violence only led to the strengthening of the police powers of the imperial state and a more exploitative rule. And any new order established by violence was likely to become *more* rather than less despotic than its predecessors, for it offered no argument against violence by future resisters and could not alter the underlying violence of the modern state. A brokered peace was always fragile and liable to be upset by the lingering resentments that such a peace would instill. In general, Gandhi was sure nothing permanent could be secured through violence; rights secured through violence would only last as long as the force that extracted them was active.

But there was also a more immediate sense of the futility of violence; not just that it was incapable of generating just and stable political orders, but a specific sense that the use of violence initiates counterproductive reactions and negative political dynamics. In short, it adversely affects the terms of political contestation. Political contestation is an interactive and iterative process, which characteristically proceeds through continuing chains of actions, reactions, counter-reactions. Though the appeal of violence is often tied to a hope that the chain of action will come to an end – i.e., with one last show of force that can secure a final peace – in practice violence breeds resentment and further

resistance. For Gandhi it was a basic political fact that action elicits resistance; resistance and recalcitrance are endemic to the dynamic of contestation. This was especially acute in the case of violence, for in being an absolute, irreversible deed, violence initiates definite dynamics of resentment, retrenchment, and retaliation – a dynamic that is often prosaically referred to as the *cycle of violence*. The choice of violent or coercive means therefore would necessarily affect the terms and nature of conflict, where extreme or confrontational means could easily exacerbate the tendencies towards polarization, heightened conflict, and entrenchment.

VII: Affect and Escalation: The Moral Psychology of Violence

To speak of the ways in which violence or coercion or contestation expectedly leads to forms of entrenchment, resentment, and mutual hostility is to call attention to the central role of affect in political life. Gandhi's worry about negative entailments of violence was closely tied to a concern about the negative passions and dispositions that both enable and are enabled by the dynamics of conflict. Gandhi was especially attuned to this particular dimension and took passions such as pride and egotism – and their derivatives such as anger, ambition, humiliation, insolence, revenge, retaliation, etc. – to be key forces for understanding the structure and psychology of violence and escalation. The moral psychological dimension of the dynamics of contestation drove politics well beyond conflicts of interest. The performative or dramaturgical aspect of political interaction transformed political actors' motivations and subjective investments.

On the one hand, violence and heightened conflict arouses certain passions, such as anger, resentment, humiliation, and desire for revenge and retaliation, passions which in turn feed the cycle of violence. On the other hand, certain passions and attachments – such as impatience, vanity, hubris, the need to prove the truth of an ideal and one's commitment to it – may draw one towards violence, or tempt one in the direction of violence. In this sense the moral psychology of action and violence was central to the way Gandhi understood the interactive and dynamic logic of politics. It was also key to the ways in which Gandhi deepened his critique of militancy and marked the line between the attitude or disposition – and eventually the heroism and courage – of the satyagrahi versus that of the militant. Gandhi's response to the militants was that violence could not produce the right effect precisely because it was driven by destructive and egoist passions.

Consider the parable of the thief Gandhi offered in *Hind Swaraj*. Here, the dynamic of confrontation begins with a thief illegitimately stealing your property. In response, you, full of anger, resolve to punish the thief who has stolen from you, “not for your own sake, but for the good of your neighbours.” You organize an armed band to counter-attack; the thief responds defiantly and “collects his brother-robbers” and “pesters your neighbours,” who complain that the robber has only resorted to open threats against them “after you declared hostilities against him.” You feel badly that you have

exacerbated the situation but feel trapped. Knowing you will be “disgraced if you now leave the robber alone,” you instead distribute arms to all your neighbors “and so the battle grows...the result of wanting to take revenge upon the robber is that you have disturbed the peace; you are in perpetual fear of being robbed and assaulted; your courage has given place to cowardice.”⁹⁹

One of the overt lessons of this story is that improper means chosen to respond to injustice can lead to unintended, deleterious, and unmasterable consequences – more violence, injustice, and instability. The choice of means – namely violence – did not have the “right effect” in that it did not mitigate but rather excited the resentment and hostility of opponents. Secondly, escalation not only provoked strong resistance it also required more ideological justification. It unleashed an egoism, a perverse attachment to principle. In this sense, the parable shows how the investment in, and motivation for, seeking justice and redress is imbricated in the agent’s sense of self such that this investment itself – this egoism – becomes a vehicle for escalation. The attachment to principle, paradoxically, becomes more important as the consequences become negative or less tangibly beneficial. Principled conviction functions as an alibi for a violence born of weakness, egoism comes to thwart a clear-eyed assessment of consequences, and the appeal to justice becomes merely a cover for escalation.

The parable also shows that the choice of violence raises the stakes of justification and hence of retreat or reconsideration. This in some sense is the product of the absolute nature of violence, or its presumption of infallibility. Gandhi suggested that one of the reasons that violence was illegitimate was that it assumed infallible knowledge. In his words, *satyagraha* “excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.”¹⁰⁰ Gandhi’s objection here is often construed as an *epistemological* critique of violence, founded upon a conception of truth as many-sided.¹⁰¹ But the posture of infallibility assumed in violence also itself depends on a heightened sense of subjective certainty. In this sense, the posture of infallibility was also a moral-psychological one, a problem of pride and, at the same time, of weakness and cowardice. The extreme irreversibility of violence demands hubris in its undertaking and in its continued justification, a precarious subjective orientation that made acknowledging errors of judgment and policy reversals difficult and rare.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 288-289.

¹⁰⁰ M.K. Gandhi, “Notes (23-3-1921),” *CWMG*, 22, 451.

¹⁰¹ Bhikhu Parekh offers a sophisticated elaboration of Gandhi’s epistemological critique of violence in his *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (London, 1989). But see also Akeel Bilgrami’s sharp critique of the epistemological view in “Gandhi, the Philosopher,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38: 39 (2003), 4159-4165.

¹⁰² Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, 147.

Gandhi suggested many ways that affect worked to pervert effective political action, ways in which political agents could delude themselves about their motivations, drives, and interests. This criticism was directed very often against militant idealism and what he viewed as the fragile egoism of idealism. Idealism involved attachment to an idea, and hence an egoism. Attachment could lead to impatience and excitement, passions that tempted one towards violence. Gandhi provocatively questioned Indian defenders of extremist violence in this vein. In response to Rai, he suggested that the strength associated with the willingness to use violence was in actuality merely a brittle posturing, a papering over of ego-driven investments. The militant Hindu “who will protect by force of arms a few cows but make away with the butcher” or the militant nationalist “who in order to do supposed good to his country does not mind killing off a few officials...are actuated by hatred, cowardice and fear. Here love of the cow or the country is a vague thing intended to satisfy one’s vanity or soothe a stinging conscience.”¹⁰³ Conviction here is psychologically motivated by a need to protect and project one’s self, betraying an egoism grounded in weakness rather than, in Gandhi’s terms, a genuine and detached commitment to truth.¹⁰⁴ And certain kinds of action that seem driven by principle, by a kind of selflessness, might actually reveal a deeper ego-attachment or vanity.¹⁰⁵

In response to those who praised Dingra’s act of assassination, Gandhi wrote that though there was undoubtedly some bravery in Dingra’s sacrifice, he also “gave his body in the wrong way.”¹⁰⁶ Firstly, his act was done in a state of “intoxication,” drunk on a “mad idea” and thus not a true courage, a courage based on thoughtful, patient, reflection.¹⁰⁷ Unlike such blind courage, true courage “consists in suffering deeply and over a long period. That alone is a brave act which is preceded by careful reflection.” More generally, the excitement of action could engender egoism and bravado and a hubristic politics that tempted one in the direction of an unconstrained politics of escalation.

In the impatient idealism of militant and radical nationalism Gandhi discerned a coincidence or co-mingling of principle and violence sustained by corrupting forms of self-righteousness, vanity, and egoism. An absolute conviction accompanied the enactment and justification of violence, a god-like certainty whose moral psychological implication is hubris, pride, and egoism. Moreover, for Gandhi, radicals and militants of all stripes associated political action with continuous agitation and excitement, an

¹⁰³ M.K. Gandhi, “On *Ahimsa*: Reply to Lala Lajpat Rai (10/1916),” *CWMG*, 15, 253-254.

¹⁰⁴ It is telling that when Gandhi extolled courage and fearlessness as “the most soldierly of a soldier’s virtues” they were associated with the willingness to die, to sacrifice one’s life, and not with the will or desire to kill, which, on the contrary, were thought to stem from cowardice and weakness. See Gandhi, “On *Ahimsa*: Reply to Lala Lajpat Rai,” 252-253.

¹⁰⁵ See also “On *Ahimsa*: Reply to Lala Lajput Rai,” *Modern Review*.

¹⁰⁶ M.K. Gandhi, “London (16-7-1909),” *CWMG*, 9: 428;

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 427-428.

impatience for immediate results that confused the vociferous demand for justice with its achievement. In a strikingly similar vein, Weber complained that the conviction politician substitutes “excitement” for “true passion” and likewise mistakenly confuses the mere agitation for moral ideals with their realization.¹⁰⁸ The psychological temptation to use any and all available means for even small and/or temporary gains seemingly becomes greater in proportion to one’s belief in and attachment to ends. The dynamic may actually function in the reverse, that is, it might be precisely because the gains are small or nonexistent (or even negative and deleterious) that insisting on the rightness of principles becomes ever more politically urgent. In either case, the exaltation of ends becomes all too easily implicated in the justification of various forms of political coercion. Here, the problem of passion and enthusiasm is closely linked to problem of idealism, where the certainty in the rightness of ends – what Gandhi would call an egoistic attachment to principle - works to enable, justify, and/or redeem the use of dubious political means.

It is often thought that what Gandhian politics is really set against was power politics or a pure machiavellianism, that is against a politics shorn of all ethical coordinates. This might resonate with Gandhi’s critique of imperial power as premised on organized coercion, but even in this case Gandhi saw the British as claiming to enact this force on behalf of order and progress. When Gandhi was arguing with and against various idealisms – from anarchist nationalism, aggressive religious revivalism, to revolutionary Marxism – that shaped the ideological landscape of Indian anticolonial politics, the problem was not one of ethical deficit per se, but heightened moral self-certainty, and an attendant worry that politics driven by principle can undo inhibitions against violence and lead to impatience and disappointments that further drive escalation. Gandhi worried that “to serve the noblest of causes,” political idealism became susceptible to taking and legitimating “short-violent-cuts to success.”¹⁰⁹ An uncompromising insistence on ideals may not only lead to the use of coercion but may well slide into a moralistic politics of conviction or ideological dogmatism which, for Gandhi, were especially liable to breed contempt, engender a logic of escalation, and be tempted towards a kind of limitless politics.

That Gandhi was sensitive to ways in which self-denial and self-sacrifice can sometimes mask and enable egoism, that cultivation of fearlessness could also be reckless bravado, and that moral conviction can lead to dogmatism, should unsettle interpretations that easily equate Gandhian politics with conviction politics. Ultimately, the critique of militant nationalism and idealism was always already a form of self-critique, of the ways in agents and practitioners of nonviolence would also have to discipline their own idealism. That is, recognizing the subtle moral psychology at work in Gandhi’s understanding of violence, draws attention to ways in which the efficacy of nonviolent

¹⁰⁸ Max Weber, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” in *Weber: Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), 367.

¹⁰⁹ M.K. Gandhi, “My Path (11-12-1924),” *CWMG*, 29, 442.

politics relied upon its ability to undercut, discipline, and moderate the egoistic drives and demands of idealism. In the respect, as we will explore more fully in Part II, Gandhi would advocate forms of self-disciplining action, where discipline meant learning to detach the self from desire for ends and the egoistic investment in principles. The dispositional training for *satyagraha* therefore required a cultivation of humility and fearlessness, the willingness to sacrifice one's life but in a form that also entailed an overcoming of the ego's passions and attachments. The great challenge for Gandhian nonviolence – and for nonviolent politics more generally – to find models of self-limited action that can temper this moral-political psychology and without themselves devolving into simple a politics of moral critique and exhortation.

VIII. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to draw out and disentangle three layers of Gandhi's critique of violence: a moral critique that was closely connected with his critique of the violence of modern civilization; a strategic critique which linked the advocacy of violence with elitist and statist visions of *swaraj*; and a third tactical criticism that was premised upon exposing the deleterious effects of violence in the escalating dynamics of political conflict. Three forms of criticism diagnose the problem of violence in different ways, and therefore invoke or elicit distinct kinds of nonviolent action in response. I suggest that the moral or structural critique of violence lines ups most closely to forms of exemplary action and moral emulation, practices in which means and ends are so deeply intertwined and in each and every single act so that every act immediately contains/entails its end. The critique of violence's political futility points to models of nonviolent action that are more strategic and tactical in nature. In its strategic form, nonviolent action is premised upon the view that the choice of means defines and shapes the character of the ends pursued. And that the kinds of ends we ought to pursue in politics – freedom, equality, justice – would be compromised, rendered fragile when pursued through inappropriate, dangerous, or dubious means. The tactical critique further implies that means not only shape the character of ends, crucially, they are implicated in the very nature of political conflict. The tactical critique most sharply enables us to develop a view of nonviolent action as a distinct form of self-limiting action: action that can mitigate cycles of violent escalation to effect progressive change.

This understanding of violence as a dynamic feature of politics was not simply derivative of the ontological/metaphysical fact of violence or the structural aspects of violence alluded to above. I term it *political* in that its aim was not just to expose the moral illegitimacy of violence, but to more sharply attend to the strategic and consequential dimensions of violence. This political line of criticism developed alongside Gandhi's immersion in mass politics, and the attempt to instantiate satyagraha on a mass scale, as he became attuned to the specific forms of violence endemic to the dynamics of action and contestation on mass scale. The next chapter I will consider one more important element that heightened Gandhi's worries about the dilemmas of action –

about provocation, escalation, and the moral psychology of violence – namely the conundrums attendant to hazards of *mass* action in particular.