



Gandhi – National Icon or Non-modern Radical?

On the Legacy of the Life and Writings of M. K. Gandhi in India and the World

On 15 August 1947, India formally became politically independent of the then colonial world power, Great Britain. Independence was the result of a mass movement which spanned almost three decades (1919-1947) and utilised predominantly non-violent methods of direct action.

On 30 January, 1948, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), the person who shaped the independence movement of India, was shot dead by Hindu nationalist Nathuram Godse (1910-1949).

The independence of India was central to the restructuring of political power on a world scale after World War II. It led to the decline of the British Empire and consequently contributed in a larger sense to the decline of the other European colonial powers, such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal. Hinting at the tremendous impact of the life and ideas of M. K. Gandhi, these two events – Indian independence and the death of Gandhi – triggered a huge amount of literature on, and interpretation of, his method of social change, as well as practical applications of his

philosophy. The history of these influences and interpretations documents the vitality of Gandhi's ideas and shows that his importance goes far beyond national iconography and his status as 'Father of the Nation'. That legacy has served as a continuous source of inspiration for social, feminist, anti-nuclear and ecological movements fighting capitalist globalisation in India and the world, in contrast to Marxist-Leninist reformist parties in India and guerrilla warfare. In one of the two non-official gatherings of activists at the World Social Forum 2004 in Bombay, these movements came together as the 'People's Movement Encounter', with the National Alliance of People's Movements as the best-known organisation. Writer-activist Arundhati Roy gave these movements a strong and radical voice which was heard all over the world.¹

¹ For further information on social movements in India see Graswurzelrevolution (ed.), *Das andere Indien. Anarchismus, Frauenbewegung, Gewaltfreiheit, Ökologie*, Verlag Graswurzelrevolution, Heidelberg, 2000, and Klas, Gerhard, *Zwischen Verzweiflung und Widerstand. Indische Stimmen gegen die Globalisierung*, Edition Nautilus, Hamburg, 2006.

Interpreting Gandhi: bans and restrictions, or free interpretation?

Already during his lifetime, there were countless discussions and interpretations of Gandhi, in India and throughout the world, particularly coinciding with the mass actions of the independence movement during and after 1920–22, 1930–31 and 1942.

Less known is the fact that there were many anarchists who wrote on Gandhi and his mass campaigns, arguing that anarchist methods or tactics were on the move. They considered non-violent action on a mass scale to be a reservoir of experience and an immense learning field for the European workers' movement. The anarchist interpretations of Bart de Ligt (1883–1938), expressed in his book *The Conquest of Violence*, published in London in 1937, as well as the reports on the Indian mass movement by the Indian anarcho-syndicalist M. P. T. Acharya for the antimilitarist War Resisters International (WRI) and the anarcho-syndicalist German-language journal *Die Internationale* oscillated between criticism and approval. Gandhi's fellow activists had contacts in the Bund Herrschaftsloser Sozialisten (Federation of Libertarian Socialists) of Pierre Ramus (1882–1942) in Austria, which they used to help facilitate some lecture tours in Europe by Gandhian activists from India.

Besides these multi-faceted anarchist currents, there were Christian as well as socialist circles within the peace movement of the 1920s that responded to Gandhi's ideas – as indeed did conservative currents and official publications of the establishment. The latter, of course, highlighted the nationalist char-

acter of the Indian movement, neglecting to note the differences between the moderate, federal nationalism of Gandhi and that of other, more central-state oriented nationalist leaders, and overlooking other facets of Gandhi's thinking. In her book *Politik und Moral: Gandhis Herausforderung für die Weimarer Republik*² Beate Jahn has summarised many of these interpretations and their impact on the public sphere in the German Weimar Republic of the 1920s.

In Europe and the United States possibly the most influential book on Gandhi after his death was the work of the eminent Jewish-American psychologist Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*³, which was published during the time of the student movements of 1968 and was rapidly translated into several European languages. Erikson separated non-violent direct action from some preconditions Gandhi insisted upon – a strict sexual morality that led back to an Indian ascetic tradition – and thus made the method more accessible to European and US activists.

But before reflecting on the different streams of Gandhi interpretation in a more chronological sequence we should discuss the fact that the possibility and the relevance of interpreting Gandhi within a universal context, or a context outside India, has been contested by some authors from the social science or political science fields. French Gandhi expert Claude Markovits, for example, declares in respect of Western interpretations of Gandhi that any such transference is a 'decontextualisation' of Gandhi,

2 Verlag Weber, Zucht and Co., Kassel, 1993.

3 Erikson, Erik H., *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*, Norton, New York, 1969.

tearing him out of his historical and cultural coherency and thus falsifying him. It isn't even sure, Markovits goes on, that – as he himself is obliged to acknowledge – ‘the relatively low level of violence within India’s struggle for independence could be explained predominantly by the influence of Gandhi’s ideas’.⁴ An assumption such as that would overlook the contradictory yet converging interests of the colonial power and Indian capitalists within the India of the 1920s and 1930s, who with various motives were eager to draw advantages out of a non-violent struggle.⁵ With this ban on interpretation Markovits has consequently to deny any influence of Gandhi on activists within successful non-violent mass movements on a world scale, any inspiration and creative implementation of the experiences of Gandhi in other movements: ‘No significant political change has ever been carried out on the sole basis of a recourse to methods of non-violent resistance.’⁶ Markovits himself cites the examples of the overthrow of fascist dictator Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 and the downfall of statist-communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, but he writes: ‘To concede to these different movements a “Gandhian” inspiration reveals in spite of everything a superficial analysis.’⁷ We will see whether it isn't Markovits' analysis that might turn out to be superficial here.

Summarising further currents of interpretation, Markovits points to the French Gandhi researcher Henri Stern who distinguishes

between a ‘legitimate’ and an ‘illegitimate’ interpretation of Gandhi. Accordingly, the South African movement against apartheid during its early phase as shaped by Albert Luthulli (1898–1967) up until the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, and the African-American civil rights movement in the southern states of the US shaped by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) up until his death, would be movements that could claim a legitimate legacy of Gandhi’s ideas, whereas the anti-authoritarian movements after 1968 up until the international movement against nuclear power plants and weapons cannot correctly claim to be inspired by Gandhi’s ideas. The explanation runs like this: Gandhi was never anti-authoritarian; he had always respected the law and was only challenging unjust laws.⁸ If this perception of anarchism were true, there would have been many anarchists throughout history who defied, for example, just laws like equal rights for women and demanded their abolition just for the sake of defying the law. But there have been none.

It is especially due to a post-colonial Anglo-American current of interpretations of Gandhi that these restrictions and embargoes on interpretation have never prevailed and have always been counterpoised by creative, free-style and anarchist streams of posthumous interpretation of Gandhi. To begin with, there is the outstanding book by the US political scientist Joan V. Bondurant, *The Conquest of Violence*⁹ – apparently she had

4 Markovits, Claude, *Gandhi*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2000, p. 246.

5 Arguments against this assumption are presented in Nanda, B. R., *Gandhi and his critics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, esp. pp. 136–141.

6 Markovits, see note 4. p. 252.

7 Ibid.

8 Stern, Henri, cited by Markovits, see note 4, p. 253. For France, Jean-Marie Muller can be cited as a further exponent of this thesis; in Germany it would be W. Sternstein and T. Ebert; in the US, G. Sharp.

9 Bondurant, Joan V., *The Conquest of Violence. The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1958.

no knowledge of Bart de Ligt's book of the same title – which concentrates on Gandhi's foundation of non-violent direct action as *Satyagraha* (literally: holding on to truth) and the consequences of his reversal of the phrase 'God is Truth' into 'Truth is God'. Apart from conservative aspects in Gandhi's thinking she deals as well with 'anarchist' aspects. Following this subtle hint of Bondurant's, we must mention here the Indian historian Adi H. Doctor and especially the British and Canadian anarchist authors Geoffrey Ostergaard, Melville Curell, George Woodcock and Peter Marshall, who prepared the way for an anarchist stream of interpretation of Gandhi within the anglophone world.¹⁰ In his monumental book *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*¹¹ Peter Marshall was the first historian of anarchism after World War II to include Gandhi in the list of anarchist classics.

Of course, there are authoritarian elements in the political behaviour and private family life of Gandhi that are undeniable.¹² But at the same time libertarian and liberating tendencies, which very rarely receive at-

attention, are to be found; among these is the fact that Gandhi was the sole leading personality within the liberation movements after World War II who never assumed office within the newly created national state and didn't even aspire to that. Already in 1935 Gandhi had officially abandoned his membership of the Indian National Congress (INC), the organisation uniting all the different streams within the independence movement. Although he would henceforth 'counsel' the INC, intervening in decisive debates and leading further action-oriented mass campaigns, this step can't be viewed as merely symbolic. Gandhi was manifesting here his turning-away from party politics and bureaucratic functions as well as his desire to give most of his attention to organising non-violent direct action groups within his so-called ashrams, commune-like settlements of activists. For me it is evident that this – otherwise hardly understandable – decision on Gandhi's part went back to his discussions with the Dutch anarchist Bart de Ligt who, before and during Gandhi's round Table Conference visit to London in 1931, criticised his double moral standards of promoting non-violence on the one hand and claiming as representative of a national liberation movement the right to have an army in independent India on the other.

Gandhi reacted to this criticism by affirming that up until then the INC had held a unanimous position only in respect of relying on non-violent means in the struggle for independence. He didn't get his way on the question of shaping an independent India and the abandonment of the army though this was his ultimate desire. He hoped that being successful in a non-violent struggle for indepen-

¹⁰ See Doctor, Adi H., *Anarchist Thought in India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1964; Ostergaard, Geoffrey and Curell, Melville, *The Gentle Anarchists*, Oxford, 1971; Ostergaard, Geoffrey, *Nonviolent Revolution in India*, New Delhi, 1984. In *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, New York, 1962, Woodcock conceives a vision of anarchism for future times, drawing on Gandhi. For Marshall, Peter, see note 11.

¹¹ Marshall, Peter, *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism*, Harper-Collins, London, 1993.

¹² A new Indian movie by Feroz Abbas Khan, *Gandhi, my Father*, explores the difficult relationship between Gandhi and the oldest of his four sons, Harilal. Gandhi opposed a child marriage for Harilal within his ashram as he wanted to fight child marriage and couldn't make exceptions within his own family. Because of these and other tensions Harilal eventually turned away from his father.

dence would convince his opponents within the movement that a national army for India would be unnecessary. Personally he held that he never promulgated violent means and would never so in the future. This point of view was confirmed by Gandhi in a public speech within the ambience of pacifists and members of the workers movement in Geneva, Switzerland, on 8 December 1931, after a personal encounter with Bart de Ligt on the same day. It was a kind of public response to Bart de Ligt's critique.¹³ Emanating from this dilemma, Gandhi was looking for a means to solve it and to cope with the fact that he had never been able thoroughly to implement his views within the ranks of the INC over a longer period of time. In fact, within the independence movement – which was immensely democratic in character – Gandhi had never been an uncontested leader. With his abandonment of membership in 1935, he had seemingly found the means to solve his dilemma.

Much earlier still, on 6 February 1916, Gandhi made a famous and scandalous speech inaugurating the Hindu University of Benares in which he discussed the direct actions of the generation of young terrorists and revealed his own position thus: 'I myself am an anarchist, but of another type.'¹⁴ The

ensuing uproar among the VIPs in the auditorium led to the intervention of the master of ceremonies – British pro-independence theologian Annie Besant, then president of the INC – and Gandhi was not allowed to continue his speech.

Going still further back in time, a well-remembered source of all radical and anarchist interpretations of Gandhi is his only systematic theoretical work, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, written in 1909 after a visit to London on his way back to South Africa by sea.¹⁵ This is a cardinal critique of Western industrial civilisation and culture. Here again a direct confrontation with contemporary advocates of violent actions against colonialism triggered the writing. Gandhi had been debating at a student meeting at India House in London with Shyamji Krishnavarma, a leader of a violent group from Maharashtra. Krishnavarma had been in close contact with V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966), then a student terrorist and later in the 1920s founder of the Hindu nationalist and militarist *Hindutva* ideology (which called for Indian society to be run according to Hindu rules, which were in fact the rules of the higher castes, especially the priest and the warrior castes).¹⁶

Gandhi used the term 'anarchy' in different contexts and in three distinct ways. First

13 For short film clips of the speech on 8 December 1931, see the documentary by Vithalbhai Jhaveri: *Mahatma. Life of Gandhi 1969–1948*, Gandhi Film Foundation, Delhi, 1968. The exchange of letters of Gandhi and de Ligt is documented in the German language in full by Bartolf, Christian (ed.), *Der Atem meines Lebens. Der Dialog von Mahatma Gandhi (Indien) und Bart de Ligt (Holland) über Krieg und Frieden*, Gandhi-Informationszentrum, Berlin, 2000.

14 Gandhi, M. K., Speech at the Hindu University of Benares, 4.2.1916, *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. VI, pp. 3–13, online: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/speeches/bhu.htm>

15 See for example Nandy, Ashis, 'From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the West', *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias. Essays in Political Awareness*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987, pp. 127–162. *Hind Swaraj* was immediately censored in India after publication in 1910.

16 Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Hoeber Rudolph, Susanne, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home*, Chicago University Press, Chicago/London, 2006, p. 42.

in the positive, anarchist sense as a distant but decisive vision or goal of a free society. If the means of struggle, non-violent direct action, has such an importance for Gandhi, the social aim on which violent action relies has a similar significance, too: 'Political power, in my opinion, cannot be our ultimate aim. (...) Representatives will become unnecessary if the national life becomes so perfect and self-controlled. It will then be a state of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler.'¹⁷ Secondly, Gandhi used the term in a negative sense to denounce the situation that British colonialism had brought upon India in 1942 on the eve of the Quit-India Movement. A Japanese military attack on India from Burma was imminent and Gandhi initially couldn't mobilise Indian masses in non-violent defence because the colonial power was promising nothing in return and had postponed any promise of independence. Gandhi called this situation 'ordered anarchy' – that is, institutionalised, organised chaos, but in tune with official law. To this state of things he preferred 'real anarchy', a kind of uncontrolled, unorganised chaos, which a non-violent revolt might lead to, but which also risks getting out of hand and, in parts, turning violent – a possibility Gandhi had to deal with in 1942, when he didn't call off mass resistance after violent incidents, as he had done in previous campaigns.¹⁸

The various ways in which Gandhi used the term 'anarchy' indicate that Gandhi's writ-

ings as well as his practical actions and experiments do not support schematic restriction or banning of interpretation. Gandhi's ideas and actions are complex, sometimes even contradictory, and thus too difficult to classify scientifically. Every kind of analysis is already interpretation and could be challenged by another interpretation, other sources or points of view. In fact, Gandhi can be 'decontextualised': every interpreter could and should use his legacy as a source of inspiration or a kind of construction site for historically and geographically different situations. Within this continuum, there is located an anarchist interpretation of Gandhi. This rejects all bans on interpretation as well as distinctions between so-called legitimate and illegitimate drawings on his legacy.

On a practical level such rigid differentiations between allegedly legitimate and illegitimate interpretations of Gandhi have sometimes even led to bizarre results. Activists following such regulations call themselves – more often than not – literally 'Gandhians', although Gandhi himself dismissed the term or any 'ism' under his name. Nonetheless, the interpretation that these activists implement isn't regarded as a brick or building-block (some bricks of the construction site are used and implemented, others remain neglected), but as a 100-per-cent transfer of Gandhian method and culture into a completely different historical and cultural environment. An illustrative example might be Lanza del Vasto (1901–1981) and his foundation of ashrams as interreligious communes on a Christian basis in post-war France, beginning in 1948, under the name of *L'Arche*. He saw these as a practical implementation of his interpretation of Gandhi, which he developed after a personal encounter with

17 Gandhi, M. K., January 1939, quoted by Bhattacharyya, Buddhadeva, *Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 360.

18 For quotations by Gandhi in Jhaveri's documentary (see note 13), see the section on the Quit-India Movement in 1942.

Gandhi in India in 1936. Del Vasto was creating a community on a Christian basis within the environment of a country whose culture had long since been greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideas and anti-religious currents of thinking. Within a very religious environment Gandhi welcomed and accepted non-believers as communards in his ashrams, along with activists from different religious backgrounds. He conceded that even ‘atheists and agnostics’¹⁹ could practise *Satyagraha*, non-violent resistance. In that spirit, Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora; 1902–1975) wrote a book called *An Atheist with Gandhi* and created together with his wife Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006) an ‘Atheist Centre’ in Vijayavada, drawing on Gandhi’s philosophy and on the discussions Gora had had with Gandhi during his time of supporting the latter’s struggle.²⁰

Already during his student days in London Gandhi had regularly encountered the famous 19th-century atheist Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891), during speeches and discussions at Hyde Park Corner. Gandhi had great respect for serious searchers after truth and reckoned them as real searchers for God – as he called them – even if they were atheists. Eventually, on one occasion, he called out to him: ‘Mr. Bradlaugh, you are a Truth-fearing man and therefore a God-fearing man.’²¹ Lanza del Vasto, on the contrary, accepted only religious activists within his

L’Arche communes in France. Atheist applicants were explicitly rejected by del Vasto, on the grounds that they were not capable of practising *Satyagraha*.²² I do not want to underrate the merits of *L’Arche* and del Vasto – an example being their leading role in supporting conscientious objectors to the French colonial war in Algeria – but I have nevertheless to call this rigid rejection of atheist applicants a religious fundamentalisation of Gandhi’s legacy and a narrowing of his outlook. These restrictions of del Vasto certainly did not help Gandhi’s ideas to be better received in France and paved the way to a false identification of these ideas with those of the self-proclaimed ‘Gandhian’, del Vasto. In this sense they hindered a genuine dissemination of Gandhi’s ideas in French cultural and intellectual public spheres.

Waves of posthumous interpretation of Gandhi in India and the world

‘My language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations.’²³ This statement was to be verified very quickly after Gandhi’s death. At first, Gandhi’s long-time companion and spokesperson on the leftist, socialist wing of the INC, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), who became independent India’s first prime minister, tried to impose an official state doctrine on Gandhi’s legacy. In

19 Nanda, B. R., *Gandhi and his Critics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 73 and 149.

20 See Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1951; see also website of the Atheist Centre in Vijayavada: <http://www.ibka.org/infos/atheistcentre.html>

21 Gandhi, cited by Rudolph Lloyd I. and Hoerber Rudolph, Susanne, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*, see note 16, p. 39.

22 So I was told by Francis Kaigre of the anarchist library, *Centre International de Recherches sur l’Anarchisme (CIRA)* in Marseille. As a young pacifist and anarchist as well as a non-believer, he wanted to participate in the campaigning work of the community, *L’Arche*. He was turned down by Lanza del Vasto because he was a non-believer.

23 M. K. Gandhi, cited by Chatterjee, Partha, ‘Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society’, Guha, Ranajit (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1984, S. 153.

the process, the cardinal strife between Gandhi and Nehru that led to their ideological break-up in October/November 1945 over differences concerning the industrialisation of a post-colonial India and Nehru's explicit rejection of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, was assiduously covered up.²⁴ As head of state, Nehru exploited two lines of interpretation of Gandhi, which are known to be the guidelines of official Indian recognition of the legacy of Gandhi – although Gandhi never served as a state icon in the way that Mao, for example, did in China. As a result of the shock and the mourning within the population concerning the fact that Gandhi had been killed by a Hindu nationalist – which led to a hold-off of communalist pogroms until the beginning of the 1980s – Nehru could present Gandhi as a kind of founder and guarantor of secularism in India, although Gandhi himself rarely, if ever, used the term 'secularism'. Secondly, Nehru established Gandhi as the founding personality of modern India, the so-called 'Father of the Nation' and thereby pushed a nationalist focus into the centre of his legacy. It was this official interpretation that has been seen as an appropriation and has triggered several radical counter-interpretations, including those of Ashis Nandy (born 1937) expressed in his articles and books. According to Markovits, Nandy 'considered the identification of Gandhi with modern nationalism as an act of hegemonic appropriation, committed by the State of India looking for her legitimisation, and as a fundamental deterioration of Gandhi's ideas'.²⁵

Initially, soon after independence, it was the activists of the ashrams, the *Satyagrahis* – that is, those who wanted to pursue Gandhi's cam-

paigns to revolutionise post-colonial India – who rejected the official interpretation of Gandhi's legacy as expressed by Nehru. Also, claiming to be more in line with Gandhi's true legacy and in direct succession to him, there were the non-violent action groups at the grassroots level, which organised themselves as the so-called *Sarvodaya* (welfare for all) movement under the leadership of Vinobha Bhave (1895–1982). Bhave initiated a 'land-gift movement' which attempted to convince landowners to give up part of their land. The movement was a failure, because the component of non-violent resistance was less central to Bhave's philosophy than it had been to Gandhi's, and Bhave denounced acts of land seizure by tenants and peasants. By contrast one may cite Gandhi, who on various occasions during the Quit-India Campaign in 1942 explicitly pointed out that the land belongs to God and therefore to all. According to Gandhi in 1942, the peasants' 'next step will be to seize the land' and the landowners 'might cooperate by fleeing'.²⁶

Furthermore, Bhave has been criticised by social activists of different origins for not fighting openly against the emergency regime of Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) from 1975 to 1977 because of his regard for the Nehru family to which he felt personally close (Indira Gandhi was Nehru's daughter; she was not related to Gandhi). In fact, already during the 1950s Nehru had become close to Bhave, who, unlike another interpreter of Gandhi, Ram Manohar Lohia (1910–1967), did not bluntly and explicitly blame the Nehru government. Lohia had a different background from that of Bhave. Coming out of the socialist wing of the INC during the Quit-India Movement, Lohia made an impassioned appeal to all so-

24 See Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Hoebner Rudolph, Susanne, *Postmodern Gandhi*, see note 16, pp. 21–27.

25 Markovits, Claude, *Gandhi*, see note 4, p. 115.

26 Gandhi, M. K., cited by Nanda, B. R., *Gandhi and his Critics*, see note 19, p. 135.

cialists in 1954 to abandon violent means of struggle and to support the Gandhian method of non-violent resistance from now on. In contrast to Bhave, however, Lohia adhered to party organising and politics and from 1955 to 1965 was a leading political functionary in the Socialist Party, which had split from the INC in 1948. During this time, he challenged the Nehru administration again and again. By approaching Bhave, however, Nehru succeeded in completely marginalising Lohia – the ‘rebellious Gandhian’, as he was called.²⁷

Nevertheless, both Bhave and Lohia contributed greatly to the universal diffusion of Gandhi’s ideas. Non-violent anarchists in France, like André and Anita Bernard, have been influenced personally by the philosophical anarchism of Bhave.²⁸ Black civil rights activists like James Lawson (born 1928) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) visited Bhave and the Sarvodaya ashrams in India during the 1950s. In response to an invitation from African-American civil rights activist Harris Wofford, in 1951 Lohia visited the black students’ Highlander Folk School, which was to become a centre for non-violent resistance by African-Americans in the US. There, Lohia held seminars on Gandhi’s ideas and on civil disobedience for black students. One of the students participating was Rosa Parks (1913–2005). She told

Wofford later – after initiating the famous bus boycott of Montgomery in 1955 – that she had been influenced by Gandhi and had ‘discussed the idea of civil disobedience at an earlier seminar at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee’.²⁹

The civil rights movement in the US was strongly influenced by the ideas of Gandhi, and the history and creative development of that interpretation go beyond the scope of this summary. It should at least be mentioned here that the reception of Gandhi within the US began much earlier, during Gandhi’s lifetime, with the publication of a book by Richard Gregg in 1934: *The Power of Nonviolence*. The revised second edition of 1960 contained a preface by Martin Luther King. Moreover, attention should be drawn to the tremendous work of editing and publishing Gandhi’s writings in the US done by Gene Sharp (born 1928), notwithstanding his tendency to curb radical interpretations of Gandhi and to conduct them into a more institutionalised backwater of the legitimate-illegitimate sort, and his attempt to reconcile non-violence and US foreign policy interests.³⁰

27 See Singh Almust, Ajay, *Lohia: The Rebel Gandhian*, Mittal Publishers, New Delhi, 1998.

28 André and Anita Bernard were, in their own words, influenced by Bhave during their early political engagement, when they were working in political campaigns to support French conscientious objectors within their organisation *Action Civique Non-Violente*. Later, with other activists and non-violent anarchists, they founded the journal *Anarchisme and Nonviolence*, published from 1965 until 1973. See Fraters, Erica (ed.): *Réfractaires à la guerre d’Algérie avec l’action civique non violente 1959-1963*, Syllepse, Paris, 2005. For several years André Bernard was to edit the French anarchist weekly *Le Monde libertaire*.

29 Parks, Rosa, cited by Rudolph, Lloyd I., ‘Gandhi in the Mind of America’, Rudolph and Rudolph (eds), *Postmodern Gandhi*, see note 16, p. 111. On black activists’ contacts with Bhave and other Gandhians in India see Carson, Clayborne, *In Struggle. SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (US), 1981.

30 See Sharp, Gene, *From Dictatorship to Democracy. A conceptual framework for liberation*, Albert Einstein Institute, Boston, 1993, among many other publications on Gandhi and Gandhi’s writings. The cited book fitted perfectly with US foreign politics and financing of non-violent movements engaged in the toppling of dictatorial governments in Eastern Europe, who at the same time opposed US political and economic interests, whereas non-violent opposition groups in other countries with dictatorships, such as Azerbaijan, who were already on the side of the US, were not financed.

Meanwhile in India, the non-violent direct-action groups of the *Sarvodaya* movement regained force in the early 1970s and launched mass actions against the government of Indira Gandhi. The so-called Bihar movement in 1975 – especially in the federal states of Bihar and Gujarat, backed by a new generation of student activists – turned into an uprising as mass blockades of state assembly buildings by the movement, who accused the political elite of endemic corruption, were followed by strikes on the part of railway workers. The movement was shaped by Jaya Prakash Narayan (1902–1979) who came out of Lohia’s Socialist Party. But Narayan left party politics and turned to the grassroots democratic *Sarvodaya* movement to give the concept of non-violent resistance of Gandhi a more offensive character.

During the campaign of the Bihar movement, Narayan propagated a concept of ‘partyless democracy’, set against the corrupt nature of the party-based regime. In the face of this movement, Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency which lasted from 1975 to 1977. When at very short notice Indira called a general election which she was sure to win easily, it was again Narayan who – in a sudden reversal of his abandonment of party politics – forged an all-party-coalition against Indira and her Congress-I party. As a result Indira Gandhi lost the election. With these events, Narayan and the *Sarvodaya* movement could be accorded the achievement of having safeguarded India against military coups and the tendency to dictatorship at least for some decades. On the other hand, this was gained at the price of an all-party-coalition that included even the Hindu-nationalist

religious party *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People’s Party, BJP), which for the first time was given a kind of validity on the political scene in India.

Although there have been large numbers of publications in India on Gandhi, there are certain waves and emphases to be highlighted. At the beginning of the 1980s the reception of Gandhi’s ideas changed considerably. On the one hand there was a crisis within the *Sarvodaya* movement after the death of Jaya Prakash Narayan in 1979. It turned out to be fatal to the movement that – although there were sufficient democratic decision-making structures at the grassroots – the movement was still relying too much on charismatic leading. The *Sarvodaya* movement now lost its formerly considerable influence on the shaping of social movements in India. At the same time, these social movements were recovering, with the emergence of the women’s movement against deforestation in the Himalayas, known as the *Chipko* movement (*chipko* means ‘embracing the trees’); the grassroots health movement, after the murderous chemical disaster of Bhopal in 1984; and the ecological movements, especially against big dam projects like the Narmada dams.

The new ecologist social movements engaged in a predominantly non-violent struggle, but mainly because non-violent methods were rooted in Indian tradition and utilisable for the struggle, not because the activists considered themselves to be in a direct line from Gandhi’s legacy. However, some of the activists emanated from the organisational framework of *Sarvodaya* and its still-existing ashrams or other forms of direct inheritance from Gandhi; and some,

too, were supporters or even founders (as in the case of Mehda Patkar, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Uma Gadekar, Vandana Shiva and others) of other social movements. Within this situation the forms of interpretation of Gandhi were becoming more diverse and more creative.

In parallel with these shifts in the activist sphere, there was a wave of publications and interpretations on Gandhi from intellectuals and academics and, for the first time in India, Gandhi was to be taken seriously as a philosopher and political thinker. This resulted in new lines of communication and discussion networks between these intellectuals and activists in the social movements – for example, the *Lokayan* (dialogue among the people) network founded in 1980 by Rajni Kothari (born 1928), which succeeded in incorporating activists and intellectuals for a fruitful exchange of ideas and the creation of new communication structures.

This wave of interpretations of Gandhi was shaped by intellectuals and journalists like Claude Alvarez and Ashis Nandy, who tried to launch a grassroots-oriented, radical interpretation of Gandhi that was directed against the pillars of Western capitalist industrial civilisation and based on a critical re-acquirement of indigenous traditions, but which didn't mean separatism, identity politics or nationalism. Instead, they sought ways to unite with the so-called 'other West', the emerging ecologist, feminist, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements, in order to create a new, alternative universalism. And they found common ground with radical currents within these movements that rejected the dominant, institutionalised solutions and criticised the concept of

growth and ever-accelerating productivity – or the growing military-industrial combine. In the field of development policy the term 'development' was wholly rejected and the financing of development projects by Western donor agencies fundamentally questioned. Claude Markovits, in his history of post-colonial interpretations of Gandhi in India, calls this wave of movement-oriented intellectuals 'Indigenists', as they rely on thorough research into and re-evaluation of the domestic – for the most part popular Hindu – traditions that Gandhi used as his source of inspiration. Markovits cites Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy. Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* as the formative and trendsetting work of that current.³¹

Almost at the same time, within the Marxist camp in India a new, creative analysis emerged that distanced itself from the traditional Marxist outlook according to which Gandhi was denounced as a subjectively unconscious, but objectively guilty agent of the implementation of a bourgeois and capitalist society in independent India.³² Various regional and local studies on the mass movements and the campaigns of the independence movement have concluded that it was not Gandhi but Nehru who was ultimately responsible for the bourgeois character of independent India. These regional studies have been published by Ranajit Guha (born 1922)

³¹ Oxford University Press, Oxford/Calcutta/Madras, 1983. The history of interpretations of Gandhi is best summarised by Markovits, Claude, *Gandhi*, see note 3; for the 'indigenists' see p. 114f., notwithstanding the fact that I do not share some of his conclusions.

³² See the classic work on this tendency by the foremost theoretician of the largest Indian communist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI/M): Namboodiripad, E. M. S., *The Mahatma and the Ism*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1958.

in a series called *Subaltern Studies*, which also furnished the name of that current of interpretations of Gandhi. Partha Chatterjee, a founding member of the Subaltern Studies editorial collective, in his texts within the series³³ and in his most important book on the matter, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*³⁴, pointed to the radical critique of industrial civilisation in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. Up until then Marxist analysts tended – if they had, exceptionally, any sympathetic view of Gandhi – to point to an evolution of Gandhi's thought: he was accorded a more progressive, socialist attitude, the more 'mature' his thinking became – which was quite in tune with some remarks of Gandhi's that his experiments in truth would lead to more and more valid results in time.³⁵ This benevolent estimation by some orthodox Marxists had been based on an institutionalised understanding of socialism and on several scattered statements of Gandhi's shortly before independence, when he was no longer excluding the nationalisation of some key industries. In contrast, there has been no similar recognition by Indian Marxists of the socialist tendencies within Gandhi's thinking illustrated by his vision of self-governing villages with commonly owned land, a topic which Gandhi continuously emphasised – just as he always abided by the key theses of *Hind Swaraj*, even though this was written as early as 1909. The *Subaltern Studies* are the

only Marxist interpretations of Gandhi that indicate the continuous, radical, anti-statist, anti-institutional and anti-progress tendency in Gandhi's thinking.

Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* and Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* can both be considered early milestones in the emerging, worldwide field of post-colonial studies.³⁶ In spite of partly converging views there are essential differences in the interpretations of Gandhi between Nandy and the 'Indigenists', and Chatterjee and the proponents of 'Subaltern Studies', which are not only due to the use or non-use of Marxist terms. Nandy, in particular, looks at the radical momentum and indigenist sources of the concept of non-violence that Gandhi uses and ends up with an anti-colonial social psychologist's legitimisation of non-violent resistance, which he considers to be essential for the overcoming of the intimate enemy – that is, the colonised consciousness prevailing in post-colonial societies.

By contrast, Chatterjee and Guha see in Gandhi's non-violence – arguing here in a more traditional Marxist way – an obstacle to the development of an anti- or post-colonial consciousness of liberation. This follows from their analysis, that the subaltern masses of the independence movement in India were indeed following the calls for action issued by Gandhi, but that they were filling the local implementation of the campaigns with their own meanings, often violent,

33 See Chatterjee, Partha, 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society', Guha, Ranajit (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 153–195.

34 See Chatterjee, Partha, *National Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Zed Books for the United Nations University, London, 1986.

35 See Bhattacharyya, Buddhadeva, *Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi*, Calcutta, 1969.

36 In its introduction to Ashis Nandy, Wikipedia cites journalist Phillip Darby as follows: '[He] is best known for his writing on colonialism but in recent years he has come to be acknowledged as one of the founding figures of postcolonial studies.'

even if Gandhi was calling for non-violent action. This interpretation draws upon the old Marxist perception of non-violent direct action as the petty bourgeois ideology of the middle classes, which is imposed upon the subaltern, peasant-proletarian classes – in this case as Gandhi’s ideology. But the subaltern classes, this thesis concludes, are capable of self-determination and view this imposition from above as being against their nature. Ashis Nandy, in contrast, treats Gandhi’s non-violence as an authentic form of resistance, corresponding to indigenous traditions, especially of androgyny, within the hybrid and tolerant currents of popular Hinduism in rural India, which could be grasped, understood and implemented by the subaltern masses in a self-evident, often unconscious way – and for which Gandhi was only an inspiration and strategist.

Drawing on Nandy’s essays in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century plenty of new and unorthodox interpretations of Gandhi have been published around the world as part of the post-colonial studies, focusing on particular topics Gandhi raised, such as sex, age, diet and body symbolism, addressed in Joseph Alter’s book *Gandhi’s Body*.³⁷ These studies do not necessarily stress Gandhi’s indigenist basis, but converge in a *post-modern* interpretation of Gandhi. A kind of programmatic manifesto of this youngest current of interpretation of Gandhi was published by the Gandhi experts Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, teaching in Chicago: *Postmodern*

Gandhi and Other Essays.³⁸ Lloyd I. Rudolph’s own manifesto-like essay starts with the proclamation that Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* of 1909 should be considered a classical work of post-modern theory in general. ‘When, in 1909, he wrote *Hind Swaraj*, he helped to inaugurate the postmodern era by critiquing and rejecting “modern civilisation” and by articulating a civilisational alternative to it.’³⁹ Then Rudolph elaborates his view that Gandhi’s reversal of the classical Hindu phrase ‘God is Truth’ into ‘Truth is God’ supports a relativist and subjective conception of truth – the term *satya*, truth, is central to *Satyagraha*, Gandhi’s conception of non-violent resistance – instead of an objectivist, scientifically discoverable, absolute truth. In an earnest search for truth an individual is able, according to Rudolph’s interpretation, to come close to absolute truth – which is visualised according to Gandhi in an impersonal way as *brahman* (the all-soul) – but he is never able to fully discover absolute truth. The discovery of absolute truth remains denied to the mortal individual. Rudolph points out that Gandhi has compared absolute truth to a diamond, which cannot be seen in its entirety but has many visible facets (thus corresponding to relative truth). This concept of relative truth according to Gandhi is connected in a next step by Rudolph with the relativism that is typical of

37 See Alter, Joseph S., *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000.

38 See Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Hoeber Rudolph, Susanne, ‘Postmodern Gandhi’, in Rudolph and Rudolph (eds), *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*, see note 16. Lloyd I. Rudolph had already published essays with a similar tendency, see *The Modernity of Tradition. Political Development in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 1967, and *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1983.

39 Rudolph, Lloyd I., ‘Postmodern Gandhi’, see note 16, p. 3.

post-modern theory.⁴⁰ Ashis Nandy, on the contrary, is not looking for relativism, but for an alternative kind of universalism.

In his chapter on *Hind Swaraj*, Rudolph criticises bourgeois, modernising researchers on Gandhi such as the German, Dietmar Rothermund, who regards *Hind Swaraj* as a 'contemporary' script, oriented only towards the Indian nationalism of his time. According to Rudolph, Rothermund thus declares Gandhi's classic book next to irrelevant and significantly reduces its impact. For Rudolph Gandhi's only programmatic account of his philosophy neither relied on a specific historical context nor was a document for the Indian nationalist movement alone, but was a general, timelessly valid critique of civilisation, influenced by most of the main Western critiques of modern civilisation (Emerson, Ruskin, Thoreau, Tolstoy etc.).⁴¹ This book remained, according to Rudolph, even in October and November 1945 the valid ideological basis for Gandhi's break-up with Nehru on the question of industrialisation of an independent India.

Rudolph again criticises Nehru for neglecting Gandhi's vision of communal self-governance of the Indian villages relying on a renewed traditional body, the *panchayat* (council of five), based on consensual decision-making at the grassroots level, as Indira Rothermund shows in her case study of Aundh, where Gandhian principles were incorporated in a draft constitution of 1939

in a former princely state.⁴² Nehru, by contrast, preferred a town-centred development strategy. Only after this had demonstrably failed were parts of Gandhi's vision remembered, in the 1990s, brought up to date and improved in some respects – a third of all seats were fixed for women – and institutionalised, with mixed success.⁴³

Rudolph's interpretation differs from that of Ashis Nandy in that Nandy prefers to speak of an un-modern or non-colonised consciousness or 'innocence' in relation to Gandhi and the rural people he relied upon. In this sense Nandy draws upon mainly popular Hindu traditions of the rural majority culture, which weren't touched at all by modern colonial structures of consciousness and were touched only superficially by modern ideologies such as secularism and nationalism (that is why Nandy calls them 'non-modern' or 'un-modern', but not 'anti-modern' or 'post-modern' which implies acquaintance of modern structures and consciousness). It was these non-modern masses that Gandhi relied on during his anti-colonial campaigns and whom he succeeded in mobilising.

Finally, and to round up this tour of the history of interpretations of Gandhi, mention should be made of comparative, cross-cultural readings of Gandhi, which are used to solve problems or impasses in one culture by applying concepts or adaptations of concepts from another culture. Concerning

40 Ibid., pp. 6-7.

41 Ibid., p. 17.

42 See Rothermund, Indira, *The Aundh Experiment. A Gandhian Grass-roots Democracy*, Somaiya Publications, Bombay, 1983.

43 See Rudolph, Lloyd I., 'Postmodern Gandhi', see note 16, pp. 28-31.

the German-speaking culture, the specialist in public law, Dieter Conrad (1932–2001), compared in a juridical study – regrettably unfinished owing to his death – the Western concept of the state with Gandhi’s state-critical political concept. Conrad arrived at surprising conclusions, especially that ‘discussion of *Satyagraha* shouldn’t take place within the specialism of the history of Indian decolonisation, but in relation to the notion of a virtual challenge to the state by the laws of nature’. Gandhi’s critique of state and violence could serve to relativise ‘the state of the occidental type’ and its privileged monopoly of violence: ‘With his principal critique of the violent form and the one-sidedness of domination, [Gandhi] introduced a challenging element into the system and questioned the concept of state as such.’⁴⁴ In the face of current world problems like ‘cross-border ecological tasks’, in the face of ‘worldwide mobility and communication’ among ‘world citizens’, Conrad pointed out that we have to ask, with Gandhi, ‘if the complete juridical surrender of the individual to his or her respective territorial legal order is still sustainable.’⁴⁵

44 Conrad, Dieter, *Gandhi und der Begriff des Politischen. Staat, Religion und Gewalt*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 2006, p. 173.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 175.