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# Moral Empire and the Global Meaning of Gandhi's Anti-imperialism

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**Abstract:** Gandhi famously shook the foundations of the British Empire and sparked the beginning of a new anti-imperial era. But his critique of empire does not quite fit the familiar script of twentieth-century anti-imperialism. Gandhi's positions ranged from sincere expressions of imperial loyalty to a condemnation of English civilization while endorsing its moral empire, to an unqualified disavowal of the British Empire without necessarily claiming independence. Reconstructing the long arc of his (anti-)imperial thought, this article shows that the idea of empire operated in the early Gandhi's thought in two ways: as the authorizing source of the rights of Indians and as the addressee of political claims. This genealogy helps explain the complex trajectory of his two separate breaks from empire. The article ultimately suggests that the key to understanding the global resonance of Gandhi's ideas lies in his transformation of the imperial adversary into a universal addressee of action.

## Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's monumental confrontation with the British Empire defined his career and continues to scaffold the interpretation of his political ideas, even as the appeal of Gandhian ideas—from nonviolence to *swaraj* (self-rule)—transcended their (anti-)imperial origins already in his lifetime. Gandhi's thoughts on empire, however, have proved to be difficult to pin down; the circuitous route of his anti-imperial turn has been equally resistant to neat periodization. His positions ranged from sincere expressions of imperial loyalty to a condemnation of English civilization (all the while endorsing the moral ideals of its empire) to, finally, a call to “uproot the

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Empire" without necessarily claiming independence.<sup>1</sup> These ambiguities notwithstanding, his political ideas reverberated through anticolonial and civil rights movements across continents.<sup>2</sup> Yet, his critique of empire was not normatively propelled by the idea that the global problem of empire requires a global resolution. In fact, he consistently refused to speak for the globe and emphasized the irreducibly local character of actions. The remarkable global career of Gandhian anti-imperialism thus accompanied another theoretical conundrum.

The perplexities of Gandhi's anti-imperialism also pervade the literature on the topic. Against the backdrop of his long and complex history of negotiations with and agitations against the British Empire, historians of Gandhian politics have struggled to specify the exact motivation—and theoretical shifts—underlying the thrusts and reversals of his break from empire. When Gandhi's approach to empire is considered, it usually assumes either the narrative-form of gradual disillusionment (from imperial loyalty to anti-imperialism) or that of opportunist political expediency. In particular, the hold of the narrative of gradual disillusionment in Gandhi scholarship is deep. Gandhi's once-enthusiastic support for the British Empire, Bhikhu Parekh observes, dissipated once he realized that its character had changed and it had become "too oppressive."<sup>3</sup> After all, Gandhi himself often framed his anti-imperial turn as a narrative of fierce imperial loyalty disavowed.<sup>4</sup> The broad strokes of this gradualist narrative, however, elide the specificity of Gandhi's (anti-)imperial thought, glossing over his early commitments to empire as a misunderstood or unfulfilled investment. In contrast to the gradualist narrative, there has also been a longstanding tradition to take his changing approach to empire—as Perry Anderson contends in the latest reincarnation of this old argument—to be "freed from any requirement of consistency,"<sup>5</sup> only held together by the supposedly deeper motive to resist "social upheaval."<sup>6</sup> Such interpretations of Gandhi's anti-imperialism tend not to inquire into his conception of empire and the issues that were at stake in his resistance to it. Unless we ask what precisely empire meant to

<sup>1</sup>M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, electronic book (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1998), 21:454. References to Gandhi's works are abbreviated as CWMG, followed by volume and page number.

<sup>2</sup>See David Hardiman, "Gandhi's Global Legacy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, ed. Judith Brown and Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 239–57; Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Reexamination* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 128; see also Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 140–41.

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, CWMG 21:400.

<sup>5</sup>Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (Verso: London, 2013), 30.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

Gandhi, we can neither theorize the distinctive trajectory of his imperial thought nor understand the global meaning and force of his anti-imperialism.

Central to the formation of Gandhi's imperial thought, I propose, was the idea of the moral empire, which he posited against the commercial drives of imperialism. His early career in South Africa was mediated by the discourse of an empire split between its moral and commercial dimensions—a discourse that was widely circulating among critics of the South African settler empire. South Africa stood as the “leading case of the Imperialist method” that engulfed the globe at the turn of the century,<sup>7</sup> exemplifying the separation between the settler and nonsettler possessions of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Gandhi's contemporary L. T. Hobhouse, South Africa signified the profound gap between the “two deeply-contrasted pictures of Imperialism—the Imperialism of promise and the Imperialism of performance.”<sup>9</sup> While the latter was commonly understood in reference to the exploitative needs of commercial expansion, there was less certainty regarding the content of the “Imperialism of Promise.” The turn-of-the-century British critics of imperialism broadly located the higher purpose of the empire in the ideal of self-government.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi's view of the imperial ideal was decidedly more minimalist. Bracketing the question of self-government, he understood the moral empire to necessarily entail the promise of the equal treatment of different groups within imperial bounds.

“Empires,” Uday Mehta observes in an essay on Gandhi, “typically lack an ethos, understood as a deeper form of public sharing that pervades the lives of the participants.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Gandhi struggled to locate animating common concerns binding together the disparate peoples and races in the fold of the British Empire. But he was still convinced of the presence of a moral empire beyond the lived experience of commerce and racial hierarchy. Against the split empire, the South African Gandhi held the moral empire to be both the authorizing source of the rights of Indians and the addressee of political action. If the question of authorization pertained to the ground of claiming political rights, the politics of addressing the moral empire followed from the belief that the imperial authority would be necessarily obligated to acknowledge the demands made on the basis of its own higher ideals. I argue that the analytical distinction between these two aspects of

<sup>7</sup>L. T. Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1904), 44–45.

<sup>8</sup>On the racially inflected imagination of the “two empires,” see Amanda Behm, “Settler Historicism and Anticolonial Rebuttal in the British Empire, 1880–1920,” *Journal of World History* 26, no. 4 (2016): 785–813.

<sup>9</sup>Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction*, 46.

<sup>10</sup>See, for instance, Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction*, 49; J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), 4.

<sup>11</sup>Uday S. Mehta, “Patience, Inwardness, and Self-Knowledge in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 2 (2011): 426.

Gandhi's moral empire illuminates the curious nature of his early imperial loyalty as well as offers a new key to theorizing the placeless, global potential of his eventual anti-imperialism.

Gandhi's unqualified disavowal of this moral empire on the eve of the Non-Cooperation movement would decisively transform the meaning and force of his anti-imperialism. Previously, with *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi questioned almost every premise of nineteenth-century imperialism—from developmentalism to statism. This specifically amounted to a rejection of his past view that the moral empire could act as the authorizing source of action for Indians. His second break from empire in 1920, in contrast, concerned the very possibility of addressing the British Empire in terms of the ideals he once ascribed to it. Gandhi, at that point, concluded that the British Empire was a fundamentally immoral actor whose ideals were inseparable from its practices. More importantly, this is a development that forced Gandhi to rethink the form of engagement with his political adversary, that is, the British Empire. Absent the mediation of the moral empire, Gandhi now developed the argument that self-authorized nonviolent action could “melt the stoniest heart”<sup>12</sup> and thus nonviolent actors should address their opponent merely as a potential subject of conversion. In other words, the violent adversary is not powerful enough to resist the irreducible possibility of its own conversion. In so doing, Gandhi reversed the familiar equation between subjection and powerlessness. That Gandhian ideas could be so portable and so easily separable from their context owed to his deliberate decontextualization of the empire into a universal addressee. This form of engagement with the political adversary, as we shall see, was as central to the global purchase of Gandhian ideas as the substantive content of the theory of nonviolence.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first section recovers the underappreciated role of an idea of eighteenth-century Scottish provenance in the formation of Gandhi's imperial thought: jealousy of trade. For the South African Gandhi, the settler colonies of South Africa were essentially trampling over the moral principles that held together the vast British Empire. In such a context, Gandhi concluded, imperial loyalty and opposition to British settler-colonial practices were one and the same. This background is crucial to understanding what was at stake in Gandhi's epochal first break from empire in *Hind Swaraj*. In shifting the source of action to the authority of the self, Gandhi sought to offer an independent foundation to Indian political actors laboring under the profound shadow of the British Empire. However, the persistence of the moral empire as the addressee of action, I argue in the second section, explains Gandhi's professing of imperial loyalty in South Africa and India over the 1910s, of which the most notable was his recruitment of Indian soldiers for the imperial army during the First World War. The third section traces how the disappointing outcome of the Khilafat movement in 1920 convinced Gandhi of the futility of addressing the higher ideals

<sup>12</sup>CWMG 25:219.

of the empire. The result was not simply an exit from the imperial horizon once and for all: the direct corollary of this second break from empire, as I trace in the fourth section, was the formation of the global scope of his theory of nonviolent action. The concluding section of the article reflects on how this history of Gandhi's (anti-)imperial thought sheds new light on the global reception of his ideas.

## 1. The Early Gandhi: Moral Empire and the Jealousy of Trade

On Empire Day in 1906, Gandhi published a short editorial in the *Indian Opinion*. He began in what by then was a well-rehearsed Indian style, invoking Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation promising the equality of Indians as British subjects.<sup>13</sup> By the time Gandhi arrived on South African shores, he was at home with the tradition of imperial claim-making established by Dadabhai Naoroji. A founding member of the Indian National Congress, Naoroji famously argued that the draining of resources from India to the metropole had left the former economically miserable and morally stagnant. But Naoroji also helped institutionalize the mode of politics whereby the Indian appropriation of British justice served not only as an antidote against its exploitative drives but also as the normative foundation for Indian participation in government.<sup>14</sup> Following Naoroji, the early Gandhi invoked the promises and authority of a common set of imperial references, ranging from T. B. Macaulay's 1833 Government of India Act speech to Mill's utilitarianism.<sup>15</sup> Gandhi had been corresponding with Naoroji since the early 1890s, when the latter was a member of the British Parliament. He read Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* with interest and made use of it on a number of occasions.<sup>16</sup>

Important divergences, however, soon emerged. Whereas Naoroji and his colleagues at the Indian National Congress were increasingly hoping to derive the right to self-government from British charters, Gandhi's focus was the equal rights and legal protections of Indians as British subjects across imperial space. The early Gandhi appealed to the moral empire not to make way for the political and economic progress of Indians but simply for the purpose of regulating the inevitable conflict that accompanied the competitive search for profit. For instance, he was at pains to underscore that his protestations against the disenfranchisement of Indians in South Africa were not on the ground of seeking political power. Rather, they were specifically an objection against the civilizational "degradation" entailed in disenfranchisement: the history of self-government in ancient India as well

<sup>13</sup>CWMG 5:228.

<sup>14</sup>See Mithi Mukherjee, *India in the Shadows of Empire: A Legal and Political History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 105–49.

<sup>15</sup>See CWMG 3:256; CWMG 3:177.

<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, CWMG 3:226.

as certain institutional arrangements under the British demonstrated the Indian familiarity with representative institutions.<sup>17</sup> Gandhi thus turned the question of the franchise into a matter of recognizing the claims of South African Indians as a respectable group of British subjects, rather than a demand for self-government. The early Gandhi's understanding of "true imperialism"<sup>18</sup> pertained specifically to the principle of equal treatment, which was significantly distant from—if not at odds with—the political project of self-government prioritized by his Indian contemporaries. What this meant was an emphatically moral, rather than a self-government-oriented, approach to the empire. The main argument of Gandhi's Empire Day editorial turned on a distinctively South African preoccupation: the tension between the two meanings of the empire. "True imperialists," argued Gandhi, do not merely aim at the "expansion of trade and acquisition of territory." Instead, they produce, "as John Ruskin puts it, 'as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures.'"<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps more than anywhere else, the imperial pursuit of what Ruskin elsewhere described as the "foul tissue of terrestrial gold" found its full expression in South Africa in the late nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi was not alone in South Africa in theorizing an empire split between its exploitative and moral components. Another Ruskin-inspired theorist of the split empire was J. A. Hobson. Hobson covered the South African crisis for the *Manchester Guardian*, and his *Imperialism: A Study* (1902) was one of the most damning critiques of the new imperial age. But its treatment of the imperial question was by no means unambiguous. The "earth hunger and the scramble for markets"<sup>21</sup> that began in the 1870s neither contributed to the economic growth of the metropole nor paid any respect to the political promises of the empire. Keen to distinguish settler-colonialism from imperialism, Hobson found the latter to be a "drain" on metropolitan resources while the former generated free "colonial connections" without complicating British foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> The aggressive pursuit of territorial gain and financial capitalism strengthened the war industry and undermined the moral and civilizational elements of the imperial project. The agenda of ruthless imperialists such as Cecil Rhodes "to combine the commercial with the imaginative" only meant the cynical use of the latter by the former.<sup>23</sup> Hobson suggestively asked: "How much Christianity and civilization

<sup>17</sup>CWMG 1:144–46, 304, 370.

<sup>18</sup>CWMG 5:228.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>John Ruskin, "Lectures on Art," in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20:42.

<sup>21</sup>J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), 11.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 201.

balance how much industry and art?"<sup>24</sup> Yet, he was far from giving up on the ideal of empire.<sup>25</sup> The moral right of advanced races to impartially inculcate "progress" in "lower races" was self-evident: "there can be no inherent natural right in a people to refuse that measure of compulsory education which shall raise it from childhood to manhood in the order of nationalities."<sup>26</sup>

Though there is no evidence that Gandhi read Hobson's *Imperialism* (he might, however, have come across Hobson's writings in the *Manchester Guardian*), the motif of the split empire also occupied an important place in his early writings.<sup>27</sup> But Gandhi's approach to "true imperialism"<sup>28</sup> departed from that of Hobson and his British contemporaries in an important way. Against exploitative imperialism, the latter took the training in self-government to be the core element of the mission of the empire. Refusing to attribute loftier promises to the British Empire, Gandhi instead posited the equal treatment (if not equal opportunity) of different groups as the foundational, and inviolable, principle of the imperial polity. Unlike his fellow British critics of imperialism, Gandhi's critique of commercial empire was not based on a contrast with the golden age of a progressive liberal empire. Nor was he invested in apportioning blame to the new form of financial imperialism that Hobson so influentially theorized in light of his South African experiences. Gandhi resorted to an older idea to make sense of the commercial empire: jealousy of trade. As early as the mid-1890s, Gandhi had settled on the argument that the main reason underlying the anti-Indian policies of European settlers in South Africa was "trade jealousy."<sup>29</sup>

For the early Gandhi, trade jealousy appeared to be the source of the sense of rivalry predominant among European settlers and the motivating factor underlying South Africa's racial laws.<sup>30</sup> The Indian population in South Africa at the time was primarily composed of indentured laborers; it also included a smaller but important number of traders. Gandhi himself first found employment in South Africa as a legal counselor to a Gujarati mercantile house in Durban. Gandhi's diagnosis of the anti-Indian policies of the

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>See Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 354–31.

<sup>26</sup>Hobson, *Imperialism*, 229.

<sup>27</sup>On the early Gandhi's uneasy relationship with New Imperialists as well as their New Liberal critics, see Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 10–20.

<sup>28</sup>CWMG 5:228.

<sup>29</sup>CWMG 1:223.

<sup>30</sup>As Istvan Hont argues, the rise of the phrase "jealousy of trade" in the eighteenth century signaled that "the economy had become political," a development that underwrote the "international market rivalry" in the age of Europe's imperial expansion. See Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4–5.

settler states foregrounded the role of the Indian traders as competitors to European settlers. This argument was already prominent in the Green Pamphlet (1896)—his first sustained analysis of the South African situation for an Indian audience. There he observed that the colonists only wanted Indians as indentured servants and laborers. As a result, “the moment the Indians [*sic*] entered into competition with the European as a trader, he found himself thwarted, obstructed, and insulted by a system of organized persecution.”<sup>31</sup> The worry that the influx of Indian laborers could result in the outnumbering of European settlers gave rise to the policy of sending indentured servants back home after their contracts ended. The instrumentality of the arrangement led Gandhi to speculate that “if it was at all possible to repeat the days of slavery, we have a suspicion that much of the agitation against the importation of Asiatic labour would vanish.”<sup>32</sup> Indian traders, on the other hand, were unwelcome altogether as they were seen as market rivals. The prejudiced charges against Indians regarding their unsanitary habits and spendthrift customs were ultimately stemming from the jealousy of trade.<sup>33</sup>

The early Gandhi treated the question of trade jealousy as a fact of the global empire. The “gold hunger” made South Africa an exemplar of commercial civilization:<sup>34</sup> it was composed of self-seeking settler-colonial communities whose pursuit of material gains was unconstrained by any principles of rights and fairness. In fact, this had been the condition on which colonization originally took place in South Africa.<sup>35</sup> The logic of commercial imperialism, then, transcended the logic of color prejudice.<sup>36</sup> If Indians had their way, Gandhi noted, they too would have tried to push others out so that they could dominate commerce.<sup>37</sup> While Gandhi had no illusion about the jealous aims of the settler states, he was willing to entertain the commonplace metropolitan argument that the “inexhaustible resources” of South Africa offered “an outlet for its paupers.”<sup>38</sup> The settler fear that “assisted Asiatic immigration” would render Europeans reliant on Indian labor and undercut the agenda of white settlement was also not lost on him. Considering the phenomenon of further Indian immigration from the African perspective, Gandhi also noted that it would be “unfair to the Natives of the soil.”<sup>39</sup> Still, with more than a hint of irony, he observed that the solution to this dilemma of European settlers—requiring Indian laborers while closing the door on

<sup>31</sup>CWMG 1:452.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>34</sup>CWMG 3:481.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*



Indian traders—lay in “flooding the country with white men.”<sup>40</sup> Insofar as the jealousy of trade and settler anxieties appeared to be permanent features of the European communities in South Africa, Gandhi, at that point, reluctantly conceded them.

Where Gandhi refused to cede ground was on the premise that the moral empire held a higher claim than the commercial empire. The clash in South Africa was between the higher “imperial” and the baser “empirical” (trade jealousy and color prejudice) principles.<sup>41</sup> He observed that the British Empire was not built exclusively on the premises of economic interests and conquests. The exclusion and exploitation of Indians amounted to the “[trampling] under foot [of] all that is most dearly cherished by the British Constitution.”<sup>42</sup> While Gandhi invoked the British Constitution to appeal to broad principles of justice, the crux of the moral ideal pertained to its equal application regardless of race and religion:<sup>43</sup> “The distinction of colour . . . is repugnant to the British Constitution and . . . subversive of the broad foundation on which the British Empire is built.”<sup>44</sup> If the British colonies in South Africa were simply national entities, Indians would have no choice but to accept the anti-immigration policy of the European settlers. The imperial principle, however, could not be reduced to the logic of self-interest that governs national entities and the commercial society broadly.<sup>45</sup> His broader contention was that Indians were a partner, however unequal, of the transnational British Empire. Gandhi even invoked the authority of J. R. Seeley to claim that India was not conquered by the British but rather it voluntarily accepted imperial rule thanks, in part, to the promises of the moral empire.<sup>46</sup>

The upshot of all this was that the early Gandhi squarely located the authorizing source of moral claims in the empire. The British Constitution served as the premise of his advocacy for South African Indians. The abstract location of these higher ideals beyond the institutional order of South African settler states meant that Gandhi addressed his demands to the moral empire rather than to any specific instituted authority. The shared imperial ideals, he hoped, would enable his South African adversaries to acknowledge the force of such an address.

Crucially, however, Gandhi's defense of the imperial principle of legal equality qua British subjecthood remained entangled in an overarching

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 110–13.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 111; see also CWMG 5:28, 144.

<sup>43</sup>See, for instance, CWMG 3:53.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 344.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 170. In this short essay for the *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi misspelled Seeley's name and wrongly listed the title of Seeley's book (*Expansion of Great Britain* rather than *Expansion of England*). As Amanda Behm notes, it is not entirely clear if Gandhi read Seeley's text in original. See Behm, “Settler Historicism,” 809.

discourse of civilization. In the vein of a commonplace nineteenth-century Indian trope, Gandhi emphasized the greatness of the ancient civilization in India and thus its respectable, though still subordinate, place in the imperial hierarchy of nations.<sup>47</sup> He chose to contest the civilizational degradation of South African Indians, while leaving aside the order of civilizational qualification itself. As Paul Power noted in the 1960s: “in his concern for Indian disabilities Gandhi held his people apart from and above Africans” and did not question the underlying civilizational hierarchy.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the early Gandhi spent considerable time opposing the equation of Indians with Africans, especially in the context of justifying Indian demands on the basis of their comparative civilizational pedigree. His invocations of Indian civilizational qualification notwithstanding, Gandhi did not attribute the higher ideals of the empire to its civilizational stage; these ideals rather stood in opposition to the progressive, commercial civilization. Gandhi repeatedly argued that the “division” in South Africa was ultimately “the most unnatural [one], namely, between the white people and the coloured people.”<sup>49</sup> Yet this did not mean that the South African Gandhi considered groups on the other side of the color line to be the same, or that they should collectively resist their racial exclusion.<sup>50</sup> In addressing the ideal of imperial brotherhood, he simply concluded that Indians as a group should claim their rights as imperial subjects. The civilizational hierarchy through which the empire ordered its global landscape, however, remained still unchallenged.

## 2. Gandhi’s First Break with Empire: *Hind Swaraj* and the Critique of Civilization

Gandhi’s move away from the explanatory device of trade jealousy would ultimately lead to his bracing critique of modern civilization. If his initial encounter with *Unto This Last* resulted in a Ruskinian gloss on the moral empire, the first expressions of his break with empire also appeared in the course of his protracted reckoning with Ruskin. The influence of Ruskin on the formation of his moral economy of *sarvodaya* (universal uplift) is well

<sup>47</sup>CWMG 3:240.

<sup>48</sup>Paul F. Power, “Gandhi in South Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, no. 3 (1969): 445; see also Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>49</sup>CWMG 3:104. On Gandhi and the global color line, see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, “Imperial Brotherhood or White? Gandhi in South Africa,” in *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 114–34.

<sup>50</sup>See Madhumita Lahiri, *Imperfect Solidarities: Tagore, Gandhi, Du Bois, and the Global Anglophone* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 65–109.

known,<sup>51</sup> but his important role in Gandhi's abandonment of the motif of trade jealousy has not quite been emphasized. Ruskin's argument that the economic logic of modern commerce undermines "social affection"<sup>52</sup> alerted Gandhi to scrutinize the relationship between the moral and commercial empires. While connecting trade jealousy to the wider problem of social "disaffection,"<sup>53</sup> Gandhi now took the latter to be a symptom of the deeper ailment of modern civilization. He began to argue that even though traders often engaged in the unscrupulous and single-minded pursuit of wealth, they are not solely responsible for it. Its source lies in the edifice of European civilization itself: the laws and public opinion accommodate and facilitate commercial pursuits all while "[looking down] on him [the trader] for his jealousy."<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, Gandhi gradually ceased to use the jealousy of trade as the explanatory device for racist policies in South Africa a couple of years before *Hind Swaraj* (1909). This also meant that he no longer saw color prejudice as a byproduct of trade jealousy. Writing in 1910, he noted that while traders might be the first target of anti-Indian policies, the scope of racism would ultimately be all-inclusive.<sup>55</sup> In *Satyagraha in South Africa*, written in the mid-1920s, Gandhi summed up his revised opinion: "the Indian question cannot be resolved into one of trade jealousy or race hatred. The problem is simply one of preserving one's own civilization, that is of enjoying the supreme right of self-preservation and discharging the corresponding duty."<sup>56</sup> This turn to the critique of civilization—rather than simply that of trade jealousy—also significantly altered Gandhi's thoughts on the hierarchy of civilization. Though he still liberally used the civilizational language, the order of civilization had flipped: Western civilization was no longer the apex but a corruption of the idea of civilization. This allowed Gandhi to approach African civilization in a new way. In a debate on the contributions of "Coloured people" to the empire in 1908, he found it possible to defend African civilization against the charge of unfitness.<sup>57</sup> His questioning of the progressive conception of civilization had thus begun.

*Hind Swaraj* marked Gandhi's decisive break from the idea of the moral empire as an authorizing source of rights. The foundational ideas of the Gandhi that we know were more or less forged in this period. Although he wrote *Hind Swaraj* in the midst of his South African preoccupations, the text was very much an intervention in the Indian debate over the meaning

<sup>51</sup>See Thomas Weber, "Gandhi's Moral Economics: The Sins of Wealth without Work and Commerce without Morality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, 135–53.

<sup>52</sup>CWMG 8:318.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>54</sup>CWMG 6:360.

<sup>55</sup>CWMG 11:121–22.

<sup>56</sup>CWMG 34:77.

<sup>57</sup>CWMG 8:319–24.

of swaraj or self-rule.<sup>58</sup> Gandhi's intervention sought to displace the developmental terms of (collective) "self" and "rule" in Indian anticolonial politics, while also turning against the politics of waiting for political authorization from above or below.<sup>59</sup> But one of the central anti-imperial wagers of the text—i.e., the action of political actors should not just be directed against the "Englishman" but must also have a foundation independent of the idea of the "English rule"<sup>60</sup>—was born out of Gandhi's rejection of his erstwhile reliance on the authorizing source of the moral empire. To be clear, the substantive sources underlying Gandhi's reconfiguration of the moral ground of action were complex, as he drew from Indic resources on *dharma* ("obligatory moral action")<sup>61</sup> as well as from contemporary European critics of civilization.<sup>62</sup> Gandhi affirmed the absolute nature of moral truth, but refused to codify morality into universal precepts.<sup>63</sup> His profound resistance to universalizing the content of moral duties followed from the diagnosis that an abstract determination of *svadharma* (roughly translated as "personal moral duty") belies the very point of context-sensitive moral actions.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup>The question of South Africa is more or less absent in *Hind Swaraj*, except for a passing reference in the opening paragraph and another reference to the form of self-government enjoyed by settler communities in Canada and South Africa in the fourth chapter. Gandhi also briefly brought up the example of the British approach to Transvaal to illustrate the pervasive nature of commercial imperialism and India's tacit acceptance of its logic. As he wrote in a letter to Gopal Krishna Gokhale on May 2, 1910: "Though [the opinions expressed in *Hind Swaraj*] have been matured in the course of the struggle [in South Africa], they have nothing to do with it at all." See CWMG 11:30.

<sup>59</sup>See Nazmul S. Sultan, "Self-Rule and the Problem of Peoplehood in Colonial India," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (2020): 81–94.

<sup>60</sup>CWMG 10:255.

<sup>61</sup>On the broad contours of Gandhi's understanding of *dharma*, see Anthony Parel, *Pax Gandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6–12; on the different uses of *dharma* in Gandhi, see Ajay Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 1–64; Aishwary Kumar, *Radical Equality: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and the Risk of Democracy* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 28–29.

<sup>62</sup>These include Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, Edward Carpenter's *Civilization: Its Causes and Cure*, and Thomas Taylor's *Fallacy of Speed*, among others. For a discussion of some of these sources, see Richard Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics: Modern Experiments on Ancient Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6–13.

<sup>63</sup>On Gandhi's simultaneous commitment to "Absolute Truth" and the "continued fallibility" of morality, see Farah Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration," *Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006): 287–317.

<sup>64</sup>On Gandhi's resistance to universalizing *svadharma*, see Sorabji, *Gandhi and the Stoics*, 119–33; Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 39 (2003): 4159–65.

Furthermore, having previously derived authorization for his political claims from the moral tenets of the empire, Gandhi was now keen to ground the source of authorization in the moral authority of actors themselves. The point of such an argument was not to reduce morality to the individual self; it rather pertained to a central contention of *Hind Swaraj*: “to observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind.”<sup>65</sup> No individualist in any conventional sense, Gandhi conceived an ideal nonviolent actor to be governed by a set of techniques of self-discipline and self-restraint.<sup>66</sup> Grounded in the principle of self-sacrifice, the self-authorizing actor stood as a direct, and immediately available, alternative to the authority of the empire.

The crucial point for current purposes resides in *Hind Swaraj*'s radical separation of the authorizing source of action from the substantive content of the moral empire. The civilization represented by the British was immoral and could not offer guidance for enacting self-rule. In and after *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi ceased to invoke any more the imperial promise to claim justice owed to India. Nor did he trace back the content of Indian demands to the authority of the British Constitution. *Hind Swaraj* offered an emphatic indictment of the dominant ideas of empire inherited from the nineteenth century: empire as an agent of development and progress and as the purveyor of self-government.<sup>67</sup> This critique of progressive civilization—the claim to disseminate which, after all, marked the modern career of the British Empire—replaced his earlier begrudging attempts to reconcile imperial justice with the jealousy of trade.

For all his rejection of the substantive content of the imperial promise in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi continued to hold that the self-authorized action of Indian subjects might be reciprocated by the higher moral ideals of an otherwise corrupt empire. In his preface to the English edition of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi affirmed that he was loyal to the empire while simultaneously comparing the modern English civilization to the “Kingdom of Satan.”<sup>68</sup> Parsing out this ambiguity is crucial to understanding Gandhi's intellectual horizon in the 1910s—an eventful decade by the end of which he would emerge as the undisputed leader of the Indian anticolonial movement. Gandhi spent the first half of the decade in South Africa leading *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance) campaigns, bargaining with Jan Smuts, and preparing for his return home. The distinct mode of Gandhian politics would be worked out in this decade, but this is the period that also witnessed his most emphatic assertion of imperial loyalty: the recruitment of Indian soldiers for the imperial army.

<sup>65</sup>CWMG 10:279.

<sup>66</sup>See Shruti Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 146–50.

<sup>67</sup>See CWMG 10:255–62.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 458.

Throughout the 1910s, Gandhi considered the moral empire to be still a salvageable ideal. Even as the civilization represented by their empire was a corrosive force, the British were not entirely reducible to modern civilization, since “they have had many heroes who have questioned them and followed instead [the] principles of moral conduct.”<sup>69</sup> Such an argument was not deployed to posit any determinate content to the moral empire. Gandhi emphasized that the empire had, or could potentially have, moral actors who could acknowledge the calling of higher ideals. Thus, while celebrating the coronation of George V, he noted that what South African Indians were addressing were the British ideals of justice, not the British people who are “strangers to real freedom” or the imperial government deviating from the ideals.<sup>70</sup> The irony of South African Indians showing their “loyalty to the Throne . . . in whose dominion they do not even enjoy ordinary civil rights” was not lost on him.<sup>71</sup> While all that was true, the essence of the British Empire was “that every subject of the Crown should be as free as any other.”<sup>72</sup> The important caveat here is that Gandhi was not approaching the empire as a source of Indian rights; he rather viewed it as an agent with the ability to respect the truth of the ideals enacted by its (otherwise morally autonomous) subjects insofar as their actions found reciprocity in the higher ideal of the empire. For the remaining years in South Africa after *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi combined his repudiation of European civilization with an expression of loyalty to the moral empire.

When Gandhi returned to India during the Great War, this rather fragile balance between a radical critique of the British Empire as it existed and an affirmation of the addressability of its higher moral ideals still underpinned his political actions. His *satyagraha* campaigns in Champaran and Kheda quickly established him as a formidable political force in India. But one of his first nationwide initiatives—the recruitment of Indian soldiers for the imperial army—would befuddle his admirers. During the Second Boer War and Zulu Rebellion in South Africa, Gandhi organized Indian ambulance-corps. But the Indian campaign went further in seeking to enlist Indian soldiers in the imperial army. Some saw it as a departure from the premise of nonviolence while others found the expression of loyalty questionable. Gandhi, however, offered neither an instrumental nor strictly loyalist legitimation for his decision to serve the empire. To an extent, he used the occasion to reaffirm the point that *satyagraha* could not coexist with the lack of courage: “you cannot teach *ahimsa* [nonviolence] to a man who cannot kill.”<sup>73</sup> Gandhi wrote to his close friend C. F. Andrews—who strongly objected to his recruitment campaign—that his method of *satyagraha* in India had been perceived as

<sup>69</sup>CWMG 6:362.

<sup>70</sup>CWMG 11:452.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>73</sup>CWMG 17:88 (original emphasis).

a weapon of the weak.<sup>74</sup> The military training for self-defense, Gandhi speculated with an uncharacteristically consequentialist form of reasoning, might generate the fearless spirit necessary for renouncing violence.

To take the moral empire as an addressable entity entailed the readiness to defend it without instrumental considerations. This understanding also shaped Gandhi's approach to the main political demand of the Indian National Congress at that point: self-government within empire. Though Gandhi himself had no special investment in the program of "self-government within empire," he reminded the Congress members who aspired to it that they "must be equally prepared to sacrifice themselves for the Empire in which they hope and desire to reach their final status."<sup>75</sup> Gandhi's conception of the means and end of action was crucial to this curious argument: "They say 'means are after all means.' I would say. . . as the means so the end."<sup>76</sup> For Gandhi, the means of an action, as Karuna Mantena puts it, are "ends-creative."<sup>77</sup> Instead of problematizing the goal of imperial citizenship, he was eager to subvert the developmental means laid out toward that end. He argued provocatively that it was self-authorized, "voluntary sacrifice" that would render the relationship between imperial masters and subjects obsolete.<sup>78</sup> That act itself would secure the end, whether it was self-government or the claim to equal treatment within empire. As Faisal Devji points out, the crux of Gandhi's case for imperial service concerned the paradoxical wish to acquire "detachment" from the empire through the very act of sacrificing for it.<sup>79</sup> To return to the theme of the moral empire, the self-authorized sacrifice for the empire could be a meaningful proposition because the latter still appeared to Gandhi as an addressee capable of responding to the rightness of the action of its Indian subjects. This thin, though still salient, version of the moral empire would face an existential crisis in the following year amid the fallout of the global order in the post-World War I years.

### 3. The Second Break: Addressing the "Satanic Empire"

In July 1920, Gandhi declared in a speech that "I have been a soldier of the government, but the time has now come for me to tell that . . . the Empire is

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 122; on Gandhi's intellectual struggle to reconcile nonviolence with the act of recruiting Indian soldiers for the imperial army, see Thomas Weber and Dennis Dalton, "Gandhi and the Pandemic," *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 25 (2020): 34–39.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>76</sup>CWMG 28:310.

<sup>77</sup>Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Non-Violence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 462.

<sup>78</sup>Mahadev Desai, *Day-to-Day with Gandhi* (Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh, 1968), 128.

<sup>79</sup>Faisal Devji, "Gandhi's Great War," in *India and World War I: A Centennial Assessment*, ed. Roger D. Long and Ian Talbot (London: Routledge, 2018), 191–206.

founded on injustice. . . . We cannot be loyal to it.”<sup>80</sup> He noted several times over the next few months the end of his loyalty to the “Satanic Empire,”<sup>81</sup> and his actions now were “fraught with greater peril to the Empire.”<sup>82</sup> He also refused to distinguish between the moral empire and imperial administration: “[one] could not separate the bureaucracy from the King, that the King was an impersonal ideal existence which meant the British Empire and that no Indian could remain loyal, in the accepted sense, to the Empire.”<sup>83</sup> The illegitimate force on which the empire was founded could not be separated from the higher ideals he himself had once sought to distinguish.<sup>84</sup> Gandhi thus declared: “it was the duty of every Indian to destroy” the British Empire.<sup>85</sup>

To understand this transformation in Gandhi’s approach to empire, it is worth recalling his distillation of the meaning of the moral empire in the principle of racial and religious equality in his South African years. In 1919, the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre shocked the Indian political scene and marked the intensification of imperial repression. Gandhi started a *satyagraha* campaign against the Rowlatt Bill, while the violence in Jallianwala Bagh sparked a renewed mobilization of the anticolonial movement. It was, however, the Khilafat movement that brought forth the imperial question with the most pressing urgency for Gandhi. This movement was forged in the global tumults around self-determination, albeit in a rather unexpected form. Indian Muslims claimed that the planned abolition of the sovereignty of the Ottoman emperor by the victorious Allied forces would compromise their religious standing, since the Ottoman emperor was claimed to be the religious figurehead of Sunni Muslims (who composed the majority of Indian Muslims). Without entering into Islamic theological considerations, Gandhi maintained that insofar as Indian Muslims considered the status of the Ottoman Empire integral to their standing in the empire, they were entitled to imperial protection qua religious group. If the Khilafat movement succeeded, India would not only unite Hindus and Muslims but would also “come to enjoy a *moral empire*.”<sup>86</sup> Yet, in spite of his vociferous support for the Khilafat movement, Gandhi failed to solicit any meaningful response from the imperial administration. It was not simply that the movement fell short of accomplishing its goal; the very premise of the moral empire failed to be recognized by the imperial administration as a foundational principle. After the deputation to the British viceroy in India failed, Gandhi wrote: “What is this British Empire? It is as much

<sup>80</sup>CWMG 21:66.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 449.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>83</sup>CWMG 22:450.

<sup>84</sup>CWMG 21:319–320.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 362.

<sup>86</sup>CWMG 19:482 (emphasis added).



Mohammedan and Hindu as it is Christian. Its religious neutrality is not a virtue, or if it is, it is a virtue of necessity. Such a mighty Empire could not be held together on any other terms."<sup>87</sup>

By the middle of 1920, Gandhi had concluded that the minimal moral claims of legal and religious equality had no place within the British Empire. We have seen earlier that the substantive sources of Gandhi's politics had already moved away from the tenets of the moral empire. With the failure of the empire to follow its pledge to the Indian Muslims, Gandhi further concluded that no ideal of the moral empire, however minimally conceived, could any longer be ascribed to the British Empire. From this point onward, Gandhi ceased to make any distinction between the civilization represented by the empire and its worthier moral ideals: they were both complicit in the subjection of Indians. The "god" of "wealth and its deceits"—rather than the ideal of equal treatment—was its sole spiritual guide.<sup>88</sup> The split empire that Gandhi articulated in South Africa had finally dissolved into its baser elements; there was no moral dignity left in living under the British sovereign.<sup>89</sup> Gandhi thus gave up the politics of addressing the British Empire as an agent bound to certain higher moral ideals. Since this shift, the political crux of a principled anti-imperialism lay in the point that India should no longer be associated with Britain on the terms of the latter's ideals of justice and morality. If he argued in *Hind Swaraj* that anticolonial actors should morally authorize themselves to self-rule independently of the empire, he now added that such actions should be directed against the very idea of the British Empire.

With this transformation, the framework of the moral empire finally ran its course. His later political undertakings—from the Salt March of 1930 to the Quit India movement of 1942—sought to forge no common ground between Indians and the British on imperial promises. This crucial transformation in the mode of Gandhi's engagement with empire from 1920 onward usually receives only a passing note. Judith Brown argued that this change marked Gandhi's rejection of the guarded "hope" since *Hind Swaraj* for redeeming "the future rather than the present practice of the raj."<sup>90</sup> In my reading, the imperial ideals that Gandhi tried to salvage earlier were meaningful not because of what they could have delivered in the future but because of their present addressability as moral ideals. What Gandhi abandoned in the aftermath of the Khilafat movement was no optimistic view of the empire, but rather the very possibility—and legitimacy—of independently addressing the higher ideals of the empire.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 359.

<sup>88</sup>CWMG 22:34.

<sup>89</sup>CWMG 21:310.

<sup>90</sup>Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, 140.

The historical neglect of Gandhi's second break with empire owes no less to his refusal to give any specific institutional content to anti-imperialism.<sup>91</sup> When Gandhi's anti-imperialism reached its zenith, Indian anti-imperial politics was becoming wedded to a specific program of sovereign statehood. Gandhi's younger comrades—especially Jawaharlal Nehru—had found the British connection to be categorically in contradiction with the premise of democratic self-government. Gandhi never took much interest in defining the institutional end of the anticolonial movement, which frustrated Nehru and his republican colleagues.<sup>92</sup> More harshly, Gandhi's Marxist critics, while occasionally appreciative of his skills for mass mobilization, considered his anti-imperial politics to be constrained by "petty bourgeois moralising speculations and reformist pacifism," which ultimately stymied the revolutionary struggle of the Indian masses.<sup>93</sup>

Gandhi's distance from the increasingly mainstream form of anti-imperialism in India resided in a disagreement over the political implication of principled anti-imperialism. By equating self-rule with a given juridical form of sovereignty, the agenda of independence, Gandhi maintained, rendered the means of acquiring self-rule secondary.<sup>94</sup> The political upshot of his own form of anti-imperialism—as he noted many times in the 1920s—may or may not entail "severance" of the British connection. India could "remain a free partner in a future British Commonwealth, as distinguished from the Empire," if a relationship of equality was established.<sup>95</sup> In other places, he accepted the goal of independence, albeit with the reservation that as a negative ideal it offered no meaningful normative guidance.<sup>96</sup> These ambivalences, however, should not be taken as an unresolved contradiction in Gandhi's thought. He was not so much indecisive regarding the nature of the postimperial polity as skeptical of the urgency of prioritizing this question of the "British connection" over the means of acquiring and exercising self-rule.

The most significant development of Gandhi's thought, following this decisive anti-imperial turn, was the reconfiguration of his approach to political adversaries. Gandhi had long refused to accept that one's adversaries, including the most violent of oppressors, should be seen as an enemy. However, once he gave up on addressing the moral empire, there remained no mediator between a Gandhian actor and the empire steeped in violence. To be sure, as

<sup>91</sup>See Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susan Hoebar Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 64–71.

<sup>92</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (New York: John Day, 1941), 74.

<sup>93</sup>Rajani Palme Dutt, *India To-Day* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), 307.

<sup>94</sup>CWMG 41:106.

<sup>95</sup>CWMG 21:429.

<sup>96</sup>See, for instance, CWMG 51:208.

Gandhi liked to remind his readers, the power of resistance lies with the nonviolent actor, in his or her capacity to practice self-discipline and bear suffering. However, insofar as “nonviolent noncooperation” sought to address certain political concerns (e.g., *swaraj*, redressal of Khilafat and Jallianwala Bagh massacre), the problem of how an actor should address the empire which subjugated them emerged again as a critical question following Gandhi’s emphatic rejection of its moral ideals.

Gandhi responded by emphasizing and developing a theme he had previously mentioned only occasionally: the universal possibility of converting one’s oppressors. When the Nehrus were arrested at the height of the Non-Cooperation movement, Gandhi laid out the new approach to the imperial adversary in the article “Love not Hate” for *Young India*. Ever so anxious to affirm the force of voluntary suffering, Gandhi noted, following his familiar script, that the “arrests of the totally innocent is real *swaraj*.”<sup>97</sup> However, the intensified imperial repression, which Gandhi celebrated as it offered Indians an opportunity to act, made the question concerning the form of engagement of nonviolent action all the more urgent. Gandhi now had to rethink the mode of addressing the empire: “Our non-violence teaches us to love our enemies. By non-violent non-cooperation we seek to conquer the wrath of the English administrators. . . . I believe in the power of suffering to melt the stoniest heart.”<sup>98</sup>

Gandhi would return to the metaphor of “melting the stoniest heart” on numerous occasions over the course of the Non-Cooperation movement. He first appeared to have used the expression in 1913 while declaring *satyagraha* following his failed negotiations with the South African government regarding a set of anti-Indian policies.<sup>99</sup> The expression—and the theme of converting the opponent—would make a few more appearances in the following years before its emergence as a mainstay of Gandhian politics in the 1920s. This was no mere a shift in his rhetoric but rather a direct corollary of his refusal to address the moral empire. Prior to his second break with empire, Gandhi—as we saw in the second section—still believed in the possibility of achieving reciprocation from the higher moral ideals of the empire. It was only after he gave up on addressing the moral empire that this theme of conversion took center stage. Scholars have noted that Gandhi’s idea of conversion, grounded on disciplined self-suffering, seeks to conquer the opponent through a staging of selfless commitment to the issue in question.<sup>100</sup> There is, however, another dimension to Gandhi’s turn to the idea of conversion: his rejection of the view that the imperial adversary

<sup>97</sup>CWMG 25:218.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>99</sup>CWMG 13:290.

<sup>100</sup>See Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 209; Dennis Dalton, *Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 46; Mantena, “Another Realism,” 463–64.

possessed a sovereign agency that could disregard the force of moral action. Such an approach to the imperial adversary rendered it a universal addressee, for Gandhi no longer appealed to any higher ideals of the empire but to the irreducible possibility of converting the opponent. This move also allowed Gandhi to question anew the calculus of power that separated the mighty empire from the seemingly insignificant individual actor. The power to transform the adversary remained with the nonviolent actor, even when there was no common ground between them. In so doing, the form of Gandhian action transcended the imperial form in which it was born and developed. In this move, I submit, lay the source of Gandhi's remarkable global career beyond the imperial context.

#### 4. From the Imperial to the Global: The Politics of the Universal Addressee

While touring Bengal in 1925, Gandhi struck a conversation about khadi (hand-woven natural fiber) and the boycott of foreign clothes with a "fine old Mussalman friend," who observed that "all cloth however and wherever manufactured between China and Mediterranean is khaddar for me. You see my swadeshi is not narrow."<sup>101</sup> Gandhi was unconvinced. He argued that effacing distance between one's neighborhood and the wider world is not conducive to action: "every man's primary and natural obligation was to serve his needy neighbour in preference to one more remote."<sup>102</sup> This anecdote captures an enduring feature of Gandhi's thought: his refusal to universalize the specific content of an action and to engage in global moral judgment. And yet, Gandhi was already in the process of becoming one of the twentieth century's first truly global figures. For all his hesitation to speak for the globe, many of Gandhi's distant admirers found political resources in his writings and actions. Through the rest of the century, his ideas would inspire many anti-imperial and civil disobedience movements, influencing a host of extraordinary actors, ranging from Martin Luther King Jr. to Nelson Mandela.<sup>103</sup> Gandhi's aversion to universal prescription and his intense attention to the local context of a given action, then, did not foreclose but rather enabled the global purchase of his ideas.<sup>104</sup>

Beginning in the 1920s, Gandhi would often be approached to comment on the international concerns of the age. His usual attitude to such approaches was one of resistance. Consider, for example, his lesser known but suggestive

<sup>101</sup>CWMG 31:435.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>See Sean Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>104</sup>On Gandhi's critique of the universalist mode of thought, see Faisal Devji, "Gandhi, Humanism, and Humanity," in *The Oxford History of Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 375–97.

remarks on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, which tested the limits of international norms in a still imperial world. A rumor spread that Gandhi had taken initiatives to help the Red Cross mission in Ethiopia. The Council of the League of Nations also approached Gandhi for a message regarding the Italo-Ethiopian war, to which he curtly replied, "I can only pray and hope for peace."<sup>105</sup> Acknowledging telegrams from across the world regarding the Ethiopian situation, Gandhi noted that a "verbal expression of opinion would be valueless unless [I] was also able to follow it up by action."<sup>106</sup>

The event also greatly affected Jawaharlal Nehru, who had done much in the preceding few years to establish global anti-imperial solidarity as a central plank of the Indian anticolonial movement. On one occasion, while fielding questions about Ethiopia, Gandhi was reported to have been reading with keen interest Nehru's impassioned letter to the Italian consul-general.<sup>107</sup> Nehru's letter was a classic statement of global anti-imperial solidarity and stood in sharp contrast to the Mahatma's more idiosyncratic form of anti-imperialism. Nehru wrote to the Italian consul-general that "wherever imperialism appears, in whatever guise it might be, it is the opponent of forces struggling for freedom and we have to oppose it."<sup>108</sup> A couple of days before, an anguished Nehru wrote in a public statement that "India can do nothing to help our brethren in distress in Ethiopia for we also are the victims of imperialism."<sup>109</sup>

Gandhi eventually noted that while not "indifferent" to the invasion of Ethiopia, he "resisted" invitations to share his opinions and offer "a lead to the country."<sup>110</sup> The reason for this reluctance was his own limitations in successfully enacting nonviolent resistance in India. While underscoring his distance from the Ethiopian context, Gandhi observed that the true moral course of action for Ethiopians would be to offer no armed resistance. Italy seeks submission of the Ethiopian people, and thus their nonviolent noncooperation would mean that "Italy would find nothing to conquer."<sup>111</sup> Nor should Ethiopians seek armed intervention from the League of Nations. They possessed everything needed to resist imperialist aggression.<sup>112</sup> In sharp contrast to Nehru, Gandhi also chastised Indians for fixating on their own weakness as a stumbling block toward performing solidarity with Ethiopians. In his usual telegraphic fashion, he argued that if India adopted nonviolence from a consciousness of strength, England

<sup>105</sup> CWMG 67:297.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> CWMG 68:423.

<sup>108</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 7, ed. S. Gopal (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1975), 568.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 567.

<sup>110</sup> CWMG 68:56.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

would readily lose its status as a conqueror. In such a scenario, Italy, too, would be forced to listen to India's words of solidarity with Ethiopians and disengage from Ethiopia.<sup>113</sup>

This line of argument would also characterize Gandhi's better-known engagement with the African American question in the segregationist United States. During his conversation with a delegation led by Howard Thurman, Gandhi was asked what African Americans should do in a situation where they or their loved ones could be lynched at any moment. Gandhi's answer was consistent: "Supposing I was a Negro . . . I must not wish ill to [the lynching community], but neither must I co-operate with them."<sup>114</sup> He further added that the faith in converting violent adversaries through "self-immolation. . . must remain undimmed whilst life ebbs minute by minute."<sup>115</sup> Gandhi speculated that African Americans may very well be among the first to deliver the "unadulterated message of non-violence" to the world. Yet, he repeated, it would be futile to try to lead others until he succeeded in demonstrating the truth of nonviolence in India.<sup>116</sup>

Gandhi's response to the plight of German Jews, though more controversial, maintained a similar principle. Nazi Germany exemplified the terrifying efficiency of violence, but this should not dictate the terms of nonviolence. "If I were a Jew and were born in Germany, " Gandhi wrote, "I would claim Germany as my home even as the tallest gentile German may, and challenge him to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon; I would refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment."<sup>117</sup> The principled nonviolent action—what Gandhi characterized as "voluntary suffering"—would be a rejection of the very relationship of superiority that the Nazis sought to maintain.<sup>118</sup> As he elaborated while addressing the Czechs in the wake of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia:

As a believer in non-violence, I may not limit its possibilities. Hitherto he [Hitler] and his likes have built upon their invariable experience that men yield to force. Unarmed men, women and children offering non-violent resistance without any bitterness in them will be a novel experience for them. Who can dare say that it is not in their nature to respond to the higher and finer forces? They have the same soul that I have.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.

<sup>114</sup>"With Our Negro Guests," *Harijan* 4, March 14, 1936, 39.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid. On the theme of self-suffering and conversion in African American political thought and its Gandhian influences, see Karuna Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics," in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 78–101.

<sup>116</sup>"With Our Negro Guests," 40.

<sup>117</sup>CWMG 74:240.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 241.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 90.

The self-authorized action of the oppressed was an intrinsically valid procedure. More importantly, there was no reason to conclude that violent actors were more powerful than exemplary nonviolent actors. Gandhi's point was not the pragmatic wager that Nazis were likely to be transformed; it rather meant that the horizon of possibility for nonviolent action was much superior to that of violence.

This insight of Gandhi was recognized by some of his keenest global admirers. W. E. B. Du Bois, writing Gandhi's obituary in 1948, noted that before Gandhi "there absolutely seemed no chance for the majority of the people in the world to gain freedom and autonomy except by fighting and overcoming the dominant white race."<sup>120</sup> Gandhi did not simply contest empire on the end goal of freedom or independence but sought to question the means of war and civilization that once appeared to have set the terms of resistance. As Du Bois implied, Gandhi's problematization of these terms made him the harbinger of a new, anti-imperial era.<sup>121</sup> If Gandhi's anti-imperial thought ultimately reverberated so powerfully in different contexts, it was not only because of the substantive or strategic content of nonviolent action. In reducing the figure of the oppressor into a universally addressable and convertible adversary, Gandhi also offered a new form of engagement with violent adversaries. It is, therefore, no surprise that Gandhi's account of nonviolent action—constrained neither by the specificity of the oppressor nor the calculus of war and solidarity—lent itself easily to other contexts.

### Conclusion: Gandhi's Global Meaning

In *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt observed in passing that "if Gandhi's enormously powerful and successful strategy of nonviolent resistance had met with a different enemy—Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, even prewar Japan, instead of England—the outcome would not have been decolonization, but massacre and submission."<sup>122</sup> Arendt here repeated a point that had been made numerous times since the overshadowing of imperial violence by fascism. Arendt's remarks, however, had a deeper contention than a mere restatement of the dialectic of repression and resistance. "In a head-on clash between violence and power," she argued, "the outcome is hardly in doubt."<sup>123</sup> Gandhi would have agreed that violence corrodes the power of

<sup>120</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, "Gandhi," May 1948, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 2. On the common thread of "fearlessness" between Gandhi's *satyagraha* and American civil disobedience, see Alex Livingston, "Fidelity to Truth: Gandhi and the Genealogy of Civil Disobedience," *Political Theory* 46, no. 4 (2018): 511–36.

<sup>121</sup>Du Bois, "Gandhi," 2.

<sup>122</sup>Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 53.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*

the oppressor. Yet, just as importantly, he also believed that violence is an opportunity to stage and cultivate the power of nonviolence: the limit of violence does not lie within itself but in the power of nonviolent actors. Gandhi remained consistent in never conceiving nonviolent action in reference to the adversary's comparative capacity for violence. In fact, Gandhi went even further: he self-consciously sought to detach nonviolent actors from the terms that might bind them with their violent adversaries.

Studies of Gandhi's reception have long been centered on the distinction between nonviolence as a tactic and as a principle. Given the demanding core of the Gandhian theory of action as a whole, the uses of nonviolence as a strategic technique have served as a convenient explanatory device for his global appeal. The approach to nonviolence as a political technique emphasizes the power unleashed by the refusal to cooperate with oppressive political adversaries. As Gene Sharp influentially argued, the strategic purchase of Gandhian nonviolence stems from one substantive content of his political theory: political rule, no matter how despotic, relies on the consent of the governed.<sup>124</sup> Others underscored the wider range of the content of Gandhian moral action, from bodily self-discipline to the ethos of loving one's enemies.<sup>125</sup> The separation between nonviolence as a principle and as a tactic has been widely criticized, not least because it reduces, as Nico Slate observes, the complex itinerary of the idea into a flattened choice between a way of life and a strategic instrument.<sup>126</sup>

This article takes a different approach to the global Gandhi. Gandhi's theory of action did not simply involve moral claims regarding nonviolence; it also brought into being a new form of engagement with one's political adversary. In reconstructing the buried steps of Gandhi's engagement with an eminently global phenomenon, that is, empire, this article has theorized the form of political engagement that Gandhi put into action. With the completion of the full circle of his imperial engagements, the empire turned out to be neither an authorizer of rights nor an addressee of claims. With the detachment of nonviolent action from the imperial addressee, the latter was reduced to a mere potential subject of conversion. The result was a form of political action which neither made an appeal to shared ideals nor sought to morally blackmail the adversary. In excluding the need for moral negotiations with the immoral oppressor, Gandhian nonviolence deprived the latter of the power to supplement the force of violence with moral reciprocation. One crucial upshot of this was Gandhi's contention that the severity of political misery need not mean the loss of an actor's authority and power. Intensely attentive to the local site of action and yet bound to no time and place,

<sup>124</sup>Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (Boston: Sargent, 1979), 14–15.

<sup>125</sup>For a survey of these debates, see Nico Slate, "A Dangerous Idea: Nonviolence as Tactic and Philosophy," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 4 (2021): 1130–54.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 1134; see also James Tully, editor's introduction to *The Power of Nonviolence*, by Richard Gregg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xlv–lv.



Gandhi's anti-imperial action effaced the context of the imperial adversary to set up an example of nonviolent resistance unconstrained by its own history.

Perhaps it is a proof of the success of Gandhi's break with the (moral) empire that the latter has been more or less absent in the voluminous literature on his global career. Although the arc of Gandhi's career—from an imperial loyalist to a principled anti-imperialist—shares broad similarity with his fellow twentieth-century opponents of empire in India and elsewhere, his preoccupations were ultimately rather singular. The vast majority of the past century's exemplary critics of empire responded to the global phenomenon of modern empire with an equally globally ambitious anti-imperialism. Gandhi was an exception: he not only prioritized one's duty toward the specific context of action, but also steered clear of formulating a global theory of anti-imperialism or drawing any causal connections between different experiences of oppression across the globe. In the shadow of the mighty empire, Gandhi instead attended to forging a form of political action where actors neither needed external authorization for their action nor were required to address the empire on its own terms. In his early years in South Africa, Gandhi contended that rights claimed by Indians as imperial subjects should be understood without "reference to the place."<sup>127</sup> His investment in the moral empire as a source of such placeless rights might have proved to be futile. But, in the process, he fashioned his anti-imperialism as a form of action grounded in its own context yet open to the otherwise decontextualized—and placeless—possibility of converting the adversary. Gandhi's extraordinary global reception bears testament to the force of one of his lesser known, but perhaps most far-reaching, contentions: the act of opening up to the globe does not require speaking for it.

<sup>127</sup>CWMG 3:135.