

## Perspectives on Gandhi's Significance Today

---

MICHAEL SIMPSON

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada (mighk@uvic.ca)

It has been over a century since Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to India to become a leading figure in the Indian Nationalist Movement. His legend remains a moving symbol of the power of non-violence to confront even the most oppressive political regimes. Gandhi's example has inspired countless political struggles worldwide over the past century. We might then ask how his thought has been transferred and translated when taken out of the particular historical and geographic context in which he lived. How have Gandhi's ideas been changed or altered when adopted in different contexts? Which aspects of Gandhi's thinking remain most relevant to struggles for social and environmental justice today? These are just a few of the questions that were discussed at the "Perspectives on Gandhi's Significance Workshop" hosted by Reed College in Portland Oregon (USA), on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Dennis Dalton (Columbia University, USA) opened the workshop by demonstrating the importance of understanding Gandhi's thinking as an engagement with both ancient and modern sources of Indian thought. Dalton's paper demonstrates that Gandhi's concepts of *Swraj* (freedom) and *Satyagraha* (truth) were developed as an intervention in the vibrant exchanges that animated the modern Indian Nationalist Movement during his time. Gandhi also drew on ancient texts from the Hindu spiritual tradition, most notably the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he creatively reinterpreted with 'striking originality.' Dalton's contribution reminds us that Gandhi's thought was characterized by a distinctly 'Indian idea of freedom,' which raises questions about how faithful we remain to Gandhi's ideas when they are adapted to different contexts, or when they are understood from the perspective of different philosophical traditions.

Gandhi's indifference to the Western concept of secularism offers an example of how his thought could easily be misunderstood when his ideas are abstracted from the context in which he lived. If one were to assess Gandhi's thought in accordance with the secular values and worldviews of many contemporary social movements or Western critical theory, one might perceive his political philosophy to be unacceptably shrouded in religious language and references. However, Akeel Bilgrami (Columbia University, USA) reminded workshop participants that secularism is a concept with firm historical roots in the European experience—it was not a concept that was relevant to the Indian context during Gandhi's time. Bilgrami's paper explains that secularism emerged in Europe during the modern period as a counter to the violence of religious nationalism. He argues that because India did not experience the same nation-building process as Europe, there were no wide-ranging religious conflicts to be corrected. Secularism was, therefore, not central to Gandhi's thought because it was not relevant or necessary in the Indian context at that time.

Karuna Mantena's (Yale University, USA) presentation examined how social movements have engaged with Gandhi's tactics in different contexts over the past decades. Her paper argues that non-violent movements since the 1980s have tended to dismiss Gandhi's variety of non-violence as overly prescriptive. The dominant model of non-violence has become the 'collective action model,' which understands mass mobilization to be an effective political tactic rather than a moral imperative grounded in principle. However, Mantena argues that this conceptual distinction between principled and strategic non-violence is 'untenable and misleading' because

the disciplined action for which Gandhi advocated was itself primarily strategic. Gandhi considered self-disciplined conduct to be more effective, in part because it created a powerful affect that could persuade and convert one's opponents. Mantena calls for a revival of disciplined practices among non-violent movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Whereas Mantena highlighted how aspects of Gandhi's approach have lost their centrality in movements of non-violent collective action, James Tully's presentation (University of Victoria, Canada) reminded participants that Gandhian non-violent relationships of mutual aid are nevertheless characteristic of most of our everyday interactions. Indeed, non-violent cooperation is the necessary and foundational condition for any form of sociality to occur, and are thus far more commonplace than violent relations. These practices of non-violence can form the basis of an alternative to the destructive social and political systems characteristic of Western civilization today. Tully argues that a key lesson that we can learn from Gandhi is that violent systems can be transformed, and alternative modernities brought into being, when people practice non-violent forms of relating rooted in equality and cooperation as a way of life and in direct contestation with the dominant structures.

These four presentations offered throughout the course of the day-long workshop stimulated lively and robust conversation among workshop attendees. These productive discussions raised further questions about the effectiveness of Gandhian non-violence when faced with contemporary technologies of structural violence such as drone strikes, the relevance of Gandhian tactics to political movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy, and the tensions between the perceived prescriptiveness of Gandhi's disciplined non-violence and more loose-knit forms of horizontalism that characterize many of today's movements that engage in collective action.

**Michael Simpson** is a SSHRC Joseph A. Bombardier doctoral fellow in the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia (Canada). His research focuses on the political ecology of settler colonialism. His dissertation examines how First Nations and environmental groups forge political solidarities to contest pipeline developments in British Columbia.