

Lenin and Gandhi

A missed encounter?

Étienne Balibar

The theme I shall address today has all the trappings of an academic exercise.* Still, I would like to attempt to show how it intersects with several major historical, epistemological and ultimately political questions. As a basis for the discussion, I will posit that Lenin and Gandhi are the two greatest figures among revolutionary theorist-practitioners of the first half of the twentieth century, and that their similarities and contrasts constitute a privileged means of approach to the question of knowing what ‘being revolutionary’ meant precisely, or, if you prefer, what it meant to transform society, to transform the historical ‘world’, in the last century. This parallel is thus also a privileged means of approach to characterizing the concept of the political that we have inherited, and about which we ask in what senses it has already been and still needs to be transformed. Naturally, such an opening formulation – I was going to say, such an axiom – involves all sorts of presuppositions that are not self-evident. Certain of them will reappear and will be discussed along the way; others will require further justification. Allow me briefly to address several of them.

1

Each of the words I employ here is as applicable to Lenin as to Gandhi, yet a bifurcation immediately opens up. It would nevertheless be too simple to believe that a tableau with two points of entry has been constituted, in which a series of antitheses would exactly correspond: for example, violent and non-violent revolution; socialist and national or nationalist revolution; a revolution based on a scientific ideology, a theory of social relations, and a revolution based on a religious ideology, or a religiously inspired ethic, and so on. We see right away that these antitheses cannot be deduced from one another; rather, they sketch a sort

of typology of modern revolutionary phenomena that helps us analyse their diversity, which is found here concentrated in figures whose power is great enough to have crystallized a debate that still reaches us today. This stems from the considerable consequences of the actions of these individuals, or the historical processes for which they were the protagonists – nothing less than the two great ‘anti-systemic’ movements of the twentieth century (to speak like Wallerstein), of which the split, the intersection, and the more or less complete fusion or on the contrary the divergence, will have been the most important thing about the century that Hobsbawm called ‘the age of extremes’. This stems as well from the extreme ambivalence about the effects of these movements, and the paradoxes with which they were objectively riddled. We have not finished seeking to understand the reasons for them.

And so the Bolshevik Revolution, inspired by an internationalist ideology and based on the conviction that capitalism is a global system whose transformation – whatever its initial modalities – cannot but concern the entire social formation, resulted in ‘socialism in one country’, or more precisely in the attempt to construct a model of organization of the production and normalization of society on a state-wide scale, then that of a bloc of states. This means that in a radical sense Stalin is indeed the truth of Lenin, even if one allows, as I do, that revolutionary practices from one to the other were inverted into their contrary. Once again, history advanced ‘by the bad side’. But it is also true, or at least arguable, that this model, in its reality and the idealized representation that the masses and political leaders of the world made of it, contributed to the establishment of relations of forces and spaces of political action without which capitalist and imperialist logic would have reigned supreme. We can clearly

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see the contrast with today. Until its exhaustion, this model kept the tension between social reproduction and transformation alive, including the ceaseless search for variants or alternatives to Leninism within the Marxist tradition, in such a way as to rectify what appeared as its counter-revolutionary degeneration.

For its part, the national revolution inspired and to a certain extent directed by Gandhi no doubt led to one of the greatest processes of decolonization in history, perhaps the greatest, even constituting one of its models (not the only one, obviously). But, as we know, it also produced a result that contradicted the perspectives sketched by its source of inspiration on some essential points.¹ Similarly, there was, according to the famous formula of Moshe Lewin, ‘Lenin’s last struggle’ against the statist drift and policing of the Soviet revolution, just as there was ‘Gandhi’s last struggle’, in which he met his death, against the partition of India and the institution of independence on ethno-religious bases.² The revolutionary ‘method’ that made a decisive contribution to the creation of the conditions of independence is known in the West by the name of ‘non-violence’ or ‘non-violent resistance’. But it turned out to be incapable of maintaining the content announced in the manifesto *Hind Swaraj* of 1908,³ and nationalist politics toppled into its contrary, a communitarian violence that today, fifty years later, threatens to subvert the states and societies of the Indian subcontinent. But it is also true that, like communism, the Gandhian model of politics – with its innumerable variations of place, conditions, objectives, and discourse as well – has acquired a universalist scope, as a form for the organization of mass movements that aims at the restoration or conquest of fundamental rights and a confrontation between the dominated and the power of the dominant. This does not apply solely to those struggles for national independence and autonomy by minority peoples, but also and everywhere, as we know, for the movements for civil rights and racial equality.

Pacifism draws on multiple sources and does not as such constitute the essence of non-violence, but it is obviously part of this heritage.

The confrontation between the figures of Lenin and Gandhi is not new. On the contrary, it has not ceased to spring forth as a kind of test of the truth of relations between politics and contemporary history, since the end of the First World War. Its important role is particularly obvious in India, during and after the struggle for independence, where its detailed explication gave

rise to all sorts of variants, including, one might note, interesting attempts to interpret Gandhian strategy in terms of a ‘war of position’. Moreover, these attempts support several surprising moments in Gramsci, where he establishes a link with what he believes to have been Lenin’s ultimate intention as to the displacement of the centre of gravity of revolutionary struggles. These would form the common point between Gandhism and the major movements of religious reform.⁴ In Europe, and in especially in France, as Claude Markovits has rightly recalled in his excellent monograph, the confrontation was not only the doing of Tolstoy and Romain Rolland’s disciples; it was also sketched out at the end of the war by communists like Henri Barbusse who sought to make an inventory of all the forces converging in the anti-imperialist struggle.⁵

New life is breathed into this confrontation today from the profusion of social and cultural movements, as much because of the context of globalization as from their theoretical and strategic incertitude. It results as well from the fact that, compared to the conditions of the twentieth century, the politics of the twenty-first century, in which the idea of revolution circulates in a ‘spectral’ way, is characterized by the effacement or the complete redistribution of the ‘frontiers’ that structure the political domain [*l’espace politique*]: politico-cultural frontiers between ‘West’ and ‘East’, economic and geopolitical frontiers between a ‘central’ dominant world and a dominated ‘peripheral’ world,



institutional frontiers between a statist public sphere and a social private sphere, pertinent as much to the localization of powers as to the crystallization of collective consciousness. Above all, what determines this renewed actuality, or at any rate suggests it, is the fact that politics finds itself submerged in a lasting, if not irreversible, way in a milieu or economy of generalized violence and a circulation of its forms that appears to be structural. This violence bears the traits of a ‘preventative counter-revolution’, of the repression

and if need be perversion of social movements, which poses particularly difficult problems for the very idea of mass politics and, quite simply, democratic politics. In these conditions, it is not surprising to see debates resurface here and there in which Lenin and Gandhi figure as references, signs of strategic alternatives with which the present must be confronted, while ‘taking stock’ of the faded image of revolutionary politics.⁶

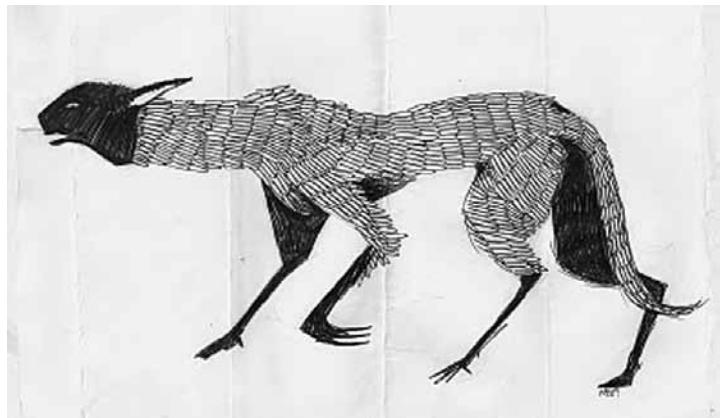
It is also true that these debates sometimes have a tendency to simplify excessively the terms of comparison. They do this, on the one hand, by referring all models of political action to abstract, quasi-metaphysical entities, such as ‘violence’ and ‘non-violence’, and, on the other hand, by coming closer and closer – in the grip of the shock produced by certain recent developments of the international conjuncture – to a double series of reductions. They reduce diverse forms of social violence – which are extremely heterogeneous even if they have a tendency to overdetermine and multiply one another – to the unique figure of war; and they reduce war itself to the function of the auto-destructive and catastrophic ‘ultimate stage’ of capital’s domination over the productive forces of society, which would turn them into their contrary and thus mark (once again) the imminent achievement of its historical trajectory.⁷ In my view, these are questions that need to be posed and discussed, but which risk serving as an obstacle to the necessity of compiling more partial inventories.

2

Before focusing on what seems to constitute, retrospectively, the neuralgic point of confrontation between our two models, I would like to recall what justifies bringing them together under the same name of ‘revolutionary movements’. It results from two traits that we can well see, after the fact, as inheritances of the nineteenth century and notably of the ‘revolutions’ for national independence and social emancipation in the Western world. They were perfected by the dramatic history of the twentieth century, to the point of crystallizing what, from different sides, political theory perceived as the irreducible gap between the concept of the political and its statist formalization, in particular in the mode of a juridical and constitutional definition.

The first trait is constituted by the *place of mass movements*, passing by ‘active’ and ‘passive’ phases reciprocally, but maintaining itself for the *longue durée*, intervening on the public stage in an autonomous, majoritarian way, thereby escaping the control

and discipline of institutions. This trait is common to Leninism (which on this point takes the inherited tradition of the workers’ movement and social democracy to an extreme) and Gandhism (which on this point is innovative in the history of anticolonial struggles, in India and beyond).⁸ It involves a large variety of formulas associating spontaneity and organization, which depend both on cultural traditions and on the conditions of existence of the masses in the societies under consideration, the ideological motives for mobilization, strategic objectives, and the nature of the established power that it confronts. It in no way excludes ‘representation’. On the contrary, in many respects it renders it possible or re-establishes it there



where the existing political regime conferred a restrictive or fictive definition upon it. But in all cases it appears irreducible to it, showing in this way that the essence of democracy is not representation, or that representation only constitutes a partial aspect of democracy.

This leads us directly to the second trait common to Leninism and Gandhism, which is their *antinomianism*, taking the term in the traditional etymological sense: *a conflicting relation, at root contradictory, with legality* and thus with the power of the state whose norm of right [*droit*] constitutes both the source of legitimacy and the instrument of control over individuals or social groups. This may concern the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as the reversal of the ‘dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’, about which Lenin could write – recalling the most classical definitions of sovereignty – that its essence resides in the fact of placing, for a social class, its demands for social transformation ‘above the law’. Or it may concern ‘civil disobedience’, the concept of which, coming from Thoreau and, more distantly, the ‘right of resistance’, was systematized by Gandhi in such a way as to cover a whole, graduated set of tactics of struggle aiming to lead the state to the point where it openly enters into contradiction with its constitutional

principles, in order to compel their reform. But in both cases legality is transgressed – which does not mean that it is ignored. Rather, it would be brought into the interior of the field of relations of forces it purports to transcend.

Here we can use – and this is not simply a tribute to what's fashionable – the theoretical grid Negri borrowed from the constitutional tradition coming from the French and American Revolutions: *constituted power is led back to constitutive power*, to the insurrectional element of democracy.⁹ It is true that this occurs at scales and according to modalities and objectives that are profoundly different, that can even appear antithetical. A good portion of current debates on social movements and their capacity for the subversion of civil society comes back precisely to these differences, but this must not stop us from staking out the analogy in principle. This is what implicates a certain 'concept of the political' (*Begriff des politischen*), strictly dependent on the confrontation between the workers' movement and the set of democratic movements, and a kind of authoritarian state that is fundamentally repressive, and from which the expression of social conflicts is radically excluded.¹⁰ Other historians have remarked (as did Gandhi himself, when he touched upon its limits) that the strategy of 'non-violent civil disobedience' is made possible by the fact that the mass movement finds itself faced with a state of right (a *rule of law*)¹¹ that is not a simple fiction, in which particularly strong traditions of the guarantee of individual liberties exist. This is the case notably in the Anglo-American constitutional tradition, within certain limits.¹² The same observation has been made with regard to the effects of the movement of black Americans for civil rights under the leadership of Martin Luther King, at least if one rejects the idea that it was a matter pure and simple of the manipulation of the American federal state against certain local powers.

We therefore have modalities of transgression of legality that are radically different, and about which we cannot determine *a priori* which are the most effective from the point of view of the 'conquest of democracy', to speak like Marx in the *Manifesto*, but which each time seem strictly dependent upon the historical form of the state, or the formalization of the power of 'domination, which they measure. I use this Weberian term 'domination' deliberately, but to elaborate a conception of the forms of domination like the one Max Weber formulates in terms of the 'chance of obtaining obedience', and thus also the 'modalities for the production of disobedience', would take us too far from our discussion here.¹³

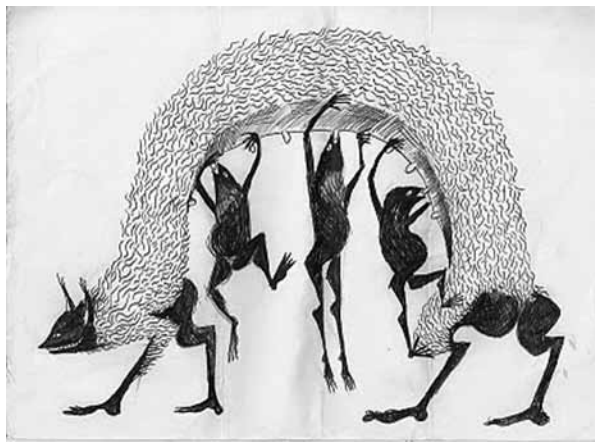
3

Before I turn to my two final points, let me first address what I hypothetically called the 'central' or neuralgic problem for each of these two revolutionary models such as we perceive them today.

If one attempts to 'judge' the relation between the Leninist theorization of revolution (which has itself evolved over time), the political strategy put to work by the Bolshevik Party under his direction (collective direction, but one over which he determined the orientations nearly to the end), and the historical circumstances (which amount to a genuine epochal mutation), one can say very classically that the difficulties concentrate around three moments that are progressively incorporated within one another. The first is tied to the conception of the power of the state as the dictatorship of a class 'autonomized' in relation to society, being a matter of conquering its apparatuses so as to transform them, which implies a conception of the class party as the 'eminent' subject of the revolution, or the privileged instrument of the movement from social to political struggle. The second is tied to the conjuncture in which one might say Lenin gains a foothold in history by converting a desperate situation into an occasion for rupture with the system of domination: this is the moment of the war of 1914, during which he formulated the slogan of the 'transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war', which the Russian military defeat and the uprising of revolting soldiers' councils and their fusion with the social movement of workers and peasants allowed him to put into practice. Finally, the third is tied to the vicissitudes of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' itself, in conditions of civil war and foreign intervention, lasting up to the failed attempt at reforming the Soviet system with the 'New Economic Policy'.

Indeed, each of these moments assigns a central place to the question of organized revolutionary violence, or more exactly to the dialectic of two aspects of what German designates with a single word – *Gewalt* – and which we split into 'power' [*pouvoir*] and 'violence', the institutional and anti-institutional aspects of violence. But in light of today's conditions and needs, it is the second of these moments (the war/revolution relation) that seems to me to command our attention first and foremost. This is what Lenin, and the whole socialist movement contemporary with him, opposed to the exercise of a radically destructive domination, or, if one prefers, to forms of extreme state violence (a point that many historiographies have a tendency to underestimate). From the impossible, it is necessary to remake the possible...

We know that the slogan ‘transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war’ is the privileged target of critiques of totalitarianism, which then find in this matrix of ‘terrorism’ proper to the Russian Revolution the possibility, at least, of a circulation between Revolution and Counter-Revolution (to be clear: European communism and fascism) of practices for the massive elimination of opposing policies and therefore of the annihilation of democracy (which will end by opening onto the destruction of the revolutionary proletariat itself), whose reality it is impossible to deny today.¹⁴ But this reading based on the terrorizing power of words (‘civil war’) does not sufficiently mark out the neuralgic point of intersection for the greatest force, the greatest capacity for liberation, and the



greatest danger of perversion, or indeed the greatest mistrust, implicated in Leninism. We must lend as much attention to the first part of this phrase as to the second: Lenin is in fact the only one (and let us note that on this point the Gandhian revolutionary strategy is, admittedly, radically inoperative) to pose the question of the transformation of a situation of extreme violence and the annihilation of the democratic forms of civil society into the means of collective action, of an initiative of the organized masses. In other words, he is the only one not to inscribe violence in the register of inevitability [*fatalité*] and to seek, from the experience itself, the paths of action towards the causes and centres of the decision for extreme violence.

No idea of revolution, or of democratic revolution, can avoid this question and, as in Lenin’s case, it is likely that it will also be confronted in the least favourable situations. But there is no doubt here that Lenin finds himself enclosed in a conception of the transformation of the relations of power with no exit, and this in two respects: enclosed in the national space, in the besieged fortress, as a result of the failure of the revolutionary movements in the other warring

countries, which prevented the internationalization of the ‘civil war’; and enclosed in the ideological space of a certain Marxism, perhaps of Marxism *tout court*, which cannot but vary to infinity the paradox of the ‘non-state state’, of seeking out the impossible withering of the state via forms of its reinforcement...¹⁵

If we return now to Gandhi, we can try to perceive the major lines of a contradiction or of a symmetrical *double bind*. We know that what has been translated in Western languages as ‘non-violence’ covers in reality two distinct notions forged by Gandhi: *satyagraha* for the first, and, for the second, taken and adapted from the ascetic Hindu tradition (‘Jainism’), *ahimsa*. Many of the discussions on the relation between the ethical, or ethico-religious, and the political elements in Gandhism, which different interpreters, including in India, read in diametrically opposed fashion – either as the primacy of a politics ‘adorned’ in religious conscience, or as a spiritual movement coming to perturb the normal course of the political and leading it back on the other side of modern institutional forms – turn around the signification of these two terms, and the possibility of dissociating and reconstructing them otherwise for moving from one cultural context to another, from the East to the West.¹⁶ However, if we do not attend to the set of questions to which they refer, we cannot, it seems, make a complete representation of the ‘dialectic’ for which the Gandhian conception of politics is also the basis [*siège*], nor understand in what sense it introduces a ‘moral’ element into it that arises from conscience but also in large part exceeds its domain.¹⁷

Satyagraha, more or less literally translated as ‘force of truth’, is the term Gandhi substitutes for ‘passive resistance’, from his first experiences of organizing struggles for the civil rights of Indians in South Africa. He then makes this term serve at once as the name of each campaign of civil disobedience and as the generic concept for a form of prolonged struggle, legal and illegal, destined to replace the revolts and terrorist acts with the prolonged mobilization of the mass of the people against colonial domination.

Ahimsa, a traditional term of asceticism, extended by Gandhi from the individual sphere to that of interpersonal relations, is very difficult to ‘translate’ into the language of Western spirituality, even if Gandhi believed he saw affinities with the Christian love of one’s neighbour. It designates above all the concentration of energy that allows one to renounce the hatred for one’s enemy, or the inhibition of counter-violence. If one does not make this ‘religious’ element operative at the heart of the political, one cannot really

tie together the contrary movements that form the ‘dialectic’ spoken of above, with its very concretely practical and socially determined aspects, in particular the famous succession of phases of ‘aggressive non-violence’. Here the mass movement frontally opposes domination by illegal practices and phases of ‘constructive non-violence’, which are essentially phases of democratization internal to the movement, which Gandhi in particular worked to have recognized as an essential aspect of the struggle for independence and a condition of its victory, what Jacques Rancière would call ‘the part with no part’ – that is, the equality of principle (with nuances that I leave to the side) of pariahs or untouchables, ethnic minorities and women.¹⁸ But neither can one understand the ‘revolution in the revolution’ constituted by the idea systematically developed by Gandhi – profoundly foreign to the Marxist, and thus Leninist, tradition, despite all that it was able to think concerning hegemony, democratic alliances, the ‘contradictions at the heart of the people’, and so on – according to which the nature of the means used in the confrontation of social forces reacts on the very identity of these forces and consequently on the ends of the movement, or on the results that it produces in its deeds, whatever its intentions or ideological aims.¹⁹ This opens directly on to Gandhi’s famous ‘dialogism’:²⁰ the idea that all political struggle must involve *a moment of opening to the adversary* that conditions the transformation of his point of view, and on to the practices of auto-limitation of mass action (very difficult, as we know, to put to work, because generally incomprehensible or unacceptable to those who believe the moment of the ‘final struggle’ has come), illustrated notably by the interruptions of the *satyagraha* when it suddenly reversed from non-violence into communitarian or terrorist violence.

Here I will risk a hypothesis on the aporia internal to the Gandhian model (aporia does not mean absurdity, or inefficacy). It is symmetrical with the Leninist aporia because it also bears on organization, or more profoundly on the nature, the mode of constitution, of the transindividual *collective link* that makes possible the emergence of a political subject, and particularly of a revolutionary subject. This link that one calls ‘religious’ is more precisely ‘charismatic’, hung upon the person of the leader as an object of common love and a subject endowed with a quasi-maternal love that would benefit all the participants of the struggle, and that helps them endure the sacrifices that it involves. This is what one calls roughly saintliness or holiness [*prophétisme*]. We know that in crucial moments

when political divergences amount to antagonism (as with Ambedkar on the political representation of the untouchables), where the state refuses to give in, where intra-communitarian conflicts explode into massacre, Gandhi was only able to arrive at the autolimitation of the violence by threatening his own disappearance, the public fast until death, the ultimately but also profoundly ambivalent expression of spiritual force.²¹ This lasts until the ‘final combat’ in which this method fails, or provokes a political murder in return, by a kind of passive violence. The moral, subjective link that makes up the force of the masses and its capacity for resistance then appears profoundly ambivalent, based on an intensely sexualized relation, in which love and death deliver themselves over, on an ‘other scene’, to a struggle that determines, at least in part, all conditions being equal, the objective possibilities for influencing the domination and structural violence of society in a transformative – that is, historic – way.

Are we still in the era of the masses and mass movements, at least in the sense in which the great revolutionary movements of the twentieth century staged them with contradictory results? I cannot answer this question, not only because I don’t have time, but because I don’t know anything about it (I’m not speaking here of wishes, projects or programmes). What is certain, however, is that it seems that the idea of political action must remain closely linked to that of the constitution of a collective actor, in conditions which are themselves not typically the object of programming or a deduction, even if they are by all evidence profoundly determined by class conditions and cultural models. However, these conditions, tied to the urgency of certain conjunctures, in particular to extreme conjunctures – which make the intolerable rise to the scale of whole societies, perhaps to the scale of the world, and which relaunch the demand for revolutionary transformations – only ever give us a possibility. Some collective actors, or collective practices, in the traditional sense of a philosophy of action that not only transforms a certain material, but ‘forms’ as well the agents themselves, requires forms of organization, and they require affective investments, or processes of subjective identification. In showing – but after the fact – the depth of the contradictions concealed within each of these two apparently simple terms, the histories symbolized by the names Lenin and Gandhi help us not to lose sight of this complexity of the political, in which history projects us without asking our opinion.

Translated by Knox Peden

Afterword

The current essay was intended as a sequel to my entry on ‘force/violence’ (*Gewalt*) in the great *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (in progress), published under the editorship of Wolfgang-Fritz Haug.²² I had ended that very long entry, somewhat cryptically, by suggesting that for the dialectics of structural (capitalist) violence and revolutionary (emancipatory) violence, or counter-violence, to become again an object of theoretical and strategic investigation in the current conjuncture, ‘some debates that have been evaded or closed too rapidly’ ought to be reopened. I gave as a prime example the confrontation of the Leninist politics of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and the politics of ‘non-violence’ and ‘civil disobedience’ theorized and practised by Gandhi in India, which I labelled ‘the other great form of revolutionary practice in the twentieth century’. And I concluded: ‘This fictional history never took place. But it could take place in people’s minds in the twenty-first century, as they face the development of a global economy of violence and the concomitant crisis of representation and sovereignty. It has the advantage of drawing our attention, not only to the necessity of civilizing the state, but also to the necessity of civilizing the revolution.’ The essay above on Lenin’s and Gandhi’s ‘missed encounter’ (which, incidentally, was also prompted by the development of a debate in the post-communist Italian Left around the possibility of keeping a revolutionary perspective in the face of triumphant global neoliberalism, while breaking with the strategies and organizational models of the Kominternian era)²³ represented my personal contribution to this opening.

I certainly see it as a sketch rather than a conclusive argument, if only because my acquaintance with the Gandhian legacy and trajectory is recent, partial and indirect. And although, like many Marxists of my generation and affiliation, I have spent much time reading, reflecting upon and discussing Lenin, this does mean that I claim a ‘final’ understanding of his historical role. On the other hand, I can testify to the crushing effects that an introduction of ‘Gandhian questions’ *qua political questions* into the Marxist and Leninist problematic can produce, provided the confrontation does not remain *external* – that is, offering only an abstract choice between opposite ethical values. (The reverse introduction has been rather more frequent, especially in India, for historically understandable reasons.) I can also confirm that, if carried on as more than an academic exercise (in the spirit of the Plutarchian parallels), against the background of the contemporary crisis of capitalist globalization (which

is also a crisis of its alternatives), this confrontation is bound to remain relatively inconclusive. All the better, in a sense: this shows that we find ourselves in a genuinely *interrogative* moment: what the philosophers classically call an *aporia*. Not only do I not deny this aspect of my essay, which was acutely pinpointed by some readers,²⁴ but I see it as an advantage, provided the *aporia* does not remain immobile, or is enriched with the introduction of ‘third’ protagonists. Luxemburg, Mao, Gramsci, Fanon and Mandela are obvious candidates, to remain in the twentieth century. In its dynamic sense, the *aporia* is simply the name of a temporal nexus that does not rule out the ‘bifurcations’ of the present, because it does not accept that we should simply let ‘the dead bury the dead’.

To return to the philosophical-political stakes of the discussion, I would say that – eight years later! – I am even more interested in submitting three issues that were subjacent in my essay.

The first is concerned with the blurring of the Oriental–Occidental divide, which certainly played a significant role in keeping the Lenin–Gandhi confrontation as a unilateral figure – unless it was replaced by a repetition of an ‘intra-European’ confrontation, featuring the Marxist and the Tolstoyan traditions on both sides, in spite of some interesting intuitions in Gramsci. This is not only a question of geographies and cultures, but also of returning to the classical considerations on the respective importance of ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ in European and Asian societies. It now appears not only that their respective importance might have been assessed in the wrong way, when describing the constraints imposed by bourgeois ‘hegemonic’ structures on popular movements of transformation, but also that they have never constituted a simple dichotomy at any moment of modern history, and even less so now, of course. The ‘world system’ was always already a system of ideological and political communication, and not only a capitalist global economy.

The second issue is concerned with the disentanglement of the categories ‘revolution’ and ‘violence’. Of course, at an abstract level, it might seem sufficient to interpret the idea of revolution in the sense of ‘transformation’ (an idea that is already anathema to many a political theorist today), and then (to avoid the ‘reformist’ or ‘evolutionary’ predicate) to add such qualifications as ‘radical’ or ‘structural’... But this would remain verbal. The problem is not to keep the revolution and drop the violence, because this is practically never a *choice*; it is to understand the retroactive effects of this or that modality of confrontation with violence on the revolution itself. In philosophical

terms, it is the question of which violence is *active* and which is not (or is only ‘reactive’). In Spinozistic terms, which violence (on the side of the oppressed, but also dialectically the oppressors) leads to an *increased capacity to act*, and which to a decreasing capacity (hence to passivity or ‘subalternity’)? It is with this question in mind (not a simple ‘pacifism’) that I alluded to the twin necessities of ‘civilizing the state’ and ‘civilizing the revolution’.

This leads me to a third issue: that of collective subjectivity. Towards the end of my essay, I strike a somewhat disenchanted note on the indiscernibility of the ‘masses’ and ‘mass movements’ in contemporary politics. I will not propose here a facile inversion of this formula, invoking recent events such as the *indignados* of Spain or the regime changes in the Arab world after massive popular mobilizations, as evidence of the ‘return of history’. I prefer to reiterate the latent question, which is a question about the *morphology* of the collective subject who can be ‘active’, in the strong sense, in history, *making a difference* in the structures of power, and *sustaining that difference* over a period sufficient to produce a transformation. Less than ever such questions will be asked outside of the symmetries and dissymmetries of violence and non-violence. But there is little chance that they can become resolved in the ‘old’ terms of confronting the state’s ‘monopoly of organized violence’ in order to address the more structural violence of the economy. The economy is more violent than ever, and the state is not disarmed, but it is disseminated and ‘privatized’ in a way that renders the ideological protocols of ‘mass politics’ highly indeterminate. We would not be surprised if we were increasingly surprised by the emerging morphologies. A serious discussion of the past in *all* its dimensions is a condition for that.

Irvine, CA, 28 January 2012

Notes

1. Several commentators defend this point of view, albeit often from opposed premisses. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, ch. 4, ‘The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society’; and David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of History Ideas*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003. See also Robert Young, ‘India II: Gandhi’s Counter-Modernity’, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, pp. 317ff. The debate today has moved to the question of the relation between Gandhi’s legacy and that of the ‘cosmopolitan secularism’ of his successors (Nehru), after the critical

- intervention of Ashis Nandy, which attributes Gandhi’s insistence on tolerance to the religious character of his thought and action (see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2001, pp. 298–301).
2. Moshe Lewin, *Le dernier combat de Lénine*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967; translated as *Lenin’s Last Struggle*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith, Random House, New York, 1968.
3. Initially published in Gujarati and English in 1908/9, Gandhi’s manifesto for independence, *Indian Home Rule, or Hind Swaraj* has been republished numerous times with variations and the prefaces of collaborators. Many of its themes (including the definition of *satyagraha* as ‘civil disobedience’ and ‘passive resistance’) can be found in articles, a selection of which has appeared in French: *La jeune Inde*, with an introduction by Romain Rolland, Librairie Stock, Paris, 1924, and in Gandhi’s *Autobiographie, ou mes expériences de vérité*, ed. Pierre Meile, PUF, Paris, 1950.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Edizione critica dell’Istituto Gramsci a cura di Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, 1975, Vol. I, pp. 122–3; Vol. II, p. 748; Vol. III, p. 1775. Gramsci oscillates between two readings of Gandhi: one which makes non-violence a strategic moment in the scenario of the ‘war of positions’ (a reformulation enlarged by Gramsci of the Leninist concept of the political), and another which makes it a ‘passive revolution’ of a religious type, under the influence of Tolstoyism, by allowing in the same stroke for the actualization and retrospective interpretation of the political sense of the major popular movements of religious reform since primitive Christianity in the Roman Empire.
5. See Claude Markovits, *Gandhi*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2000, p. 42.
6. This is what took place in Palestine in the years after Oslo. We can see a reflection of this in the book of interviews by Moustapha Barghouti, *Rester sur la montagne*, Éditions la Fabrique, Paris, 2005. In a wholly different context, the discussion has relevance as well in relation to the strategy invented for Chiapas by the Zapatista movement (see Yvon Le Bot, *Le Rêve Zapatiste*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1997).
7. Here I simplify – perhaps excessively – the thesis of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin, London, 2004.
8. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991*, Vintage, New York, 1996, pp. 199–222.
9. In *Le pouvoir constituant* (trans. Étienne Balibar and François Matheron, PUF, Paris, 1997), Negri discusses Lenin at length, but never mentions Gandhi.
10. The Gramscian thesis opposing the different conditions of the communist revolution in Eastern and Western Europe via the *inverse proportions* of the development of the state and civil society from one side to the other is not fundamentally different. It can even be considered as the reformulation, in Hegelian–Marxist language, of this liberal view. See *Quaderni del carcere*, Vol. II, pp. 865ff.
11. In English in the original (Trans.).
12. This thesis has been defended, with pertinent nuances, by George Orwell in his article ‘Reflections on Gandhi’: ‘Without a free press and the right of assembly, it is im-

- possible not merely to appeal to outside opinion, but to bring a mass movement into being, or even to make your intentions known to your adversary. Is there a Gandhi in Russia at this moment? And if there is, what is he accomplishing? The Russian masses could only practice civil disobedience if the same idea happened to occur to all of them simultaneously, and even then, to judge by the history of the Ukraine famine, it would make no difference.’ *Partisan Review*, January 1949; republished in *The Collected Essays: Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Penguin, London, 1945–50, Vol. 4. But David Hardiman is right to insist on the fact that the ‘favourable conditions’ necessary to the success of emancipation movements constitute a problem as much for the ‘violent’ (or armed) movements as for the ‘non-violent’ movements, which is to say, coming back to the dilemma for the Third World between the 1960s and the 1980s, the ‘Guevara’ or the ‘Martin Luther King’ model (*Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, pp. 255ff.). Partha Chatterjee’s position in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (Leonard Hastings Schoff Lectures, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006) is substantially the same.
13. In §§5–7 of ch. 1 (*Soziologische Grundbegriffe*) of the first part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)*, Weber defines the ‘legitimacy’ (*Geltung*) of a ‘social order’ as the chance that the constitutive dispositions of this order are effectively followed (and in particular that the laws are obeyed). This entirely pragmatic definition (arising from a sociological theory of action and not a normative theory of right) opens onto the study of the modalities of conflict and its regulation. Today this makes us think of Spinoza on one side, and Foucault on the other.
 14. Such was the fundamental thesis of the protagonists of the German *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Controversy), in particular Ernst Nolte, taken up in France with certain nuances by François Furet (see E. Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus, Mit einem Brief von François Furet*, Herbig, Munich, 1997 (1987); François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999), but contested by Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, trans. Julian Bourg, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007.
 15. As we know, this formula is at the heart of the brochure prepared by Lenin between the two revolutions (February and October 1917) and destined to become the breviary of ‘Marxism–Leninism’: *L’état et la révolution* (Lénin, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris and Moscow, 1962, Vol. 25, pp. 429ff, 453ff).
 16. Young, *Postcolonialism*, pp. 317ff.
 17. For contemporary definitions close to the source, see Krishnala Shridharani, *War without Violence: A Study of Gandhi’s Method and its Accomplishments* (1939), with a new introduction by Gene Sharp and an epilogue by Charles Walker, Garland Publishing, London, 1972, which insists in particular (p. 283) on the mobilization of the capacity for suffering and the force that it confers against the causes of suffering. Also see Suzanne Lassier, *Gandhi et la non-violence*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1970; Bhiku Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.
 18. Lassier, *Gandhi et la non-violence*, pp. 100ff. Claude Markovits (*Gandhi*, pp. 199ff) describes the acuity and the limits of the conflict with the leader of the movement of ‘untouchables’ (dalits), Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar, and insists on the double failure of Gandhi to get this cause ‘recognized’ by the Hindu nationalists or his strategy by the dalits themselves.
 19. Joan V. Bondurant, influenced by Hannah Arendt in her interpretation of Gandhi, insists particularly on the difference between Marxism and what it presents as a ‘dialectic of the resolution of conflicts’ (but not of ‘compromise’). See her *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.
 20. This is essentially Hardiman’s idea (*Gandhi in His Time*).
 21. This is the problem of the mechanism of identification derived from the figure – traditional in Hinduism – of the ‘renouncer’ (see Markovits, *Gandhi*, pp. 54–5). But Partha Chatterjee’s interpretation (*The Politics of the Governed*, pp. 11–12) is more political: she privileges the figure of the ‘mediator’, by insisting on his capacity to establish an equivalence between distinct popular movements in a given conjuncture (in terms that are ultimately close to what Ernesto Laclau calls ‘populism’. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005).
 22. Étienne Balibar, ‘Gewalt’, in Wolfgang-Fritz Haug, ed., *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 5: *Gegenöffentlichkeit–Hegemonialapparat*, Hamburg, 2001, pp. 1270–1308; in English as ‘Reflections on Gewalt’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009, pp. 99–125. See also the rejoinder by Luca Basso, ‘The Ambivalence of Gewalt in Marx and Engels: On Balibar’s Interpretation’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2009, pp. 215–36.
 23. See the volume *La politica della non-violenza. Per una nuova identità della sinistra alternativa*, Introduction by Alessandro Curzi and Rina Gagliardi, Edizioni Librerazione, Rome, 2004.
 24. See Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Re-thinking Emancipation*, Continuum, London and New York, 2010, especially pp. 136–8.

Images

The drawings in this article are from James Heslip, *Drawings from within the Prison Walls*. Heslip, a student at Kingston University, was sentenced to 12 months in prison in October 2011 for his participation in the demonstration in London against the rise in university tuition fees.

