

## IDEATIONAL RELATIONS

### Mahatma Gandhi, South Africa, and Non-Violence

It is to be expected that with such tangible relations as those based on trade, investment, foreign policy, exchange of visitors, and the like, connecting two societies over a long period of time (spanning centuries) there is bound to be an interchange of *ideas* emerging out of the particular historical circumstances of each society of such significance as to have *some* determinative influence on the historical trajectory of either societies involved—depending upon the direction and intensity of the flow of the ideas in question. Not surprisingly, South Africa and the United States from this perspective have not been exceptions. For our present purposes, there are at least five examples that stand out for consideration and which are subsumed under these headings: “Tuskegeeism,” black power, black liberation theology, nonviolent civil disobedience, and musical influences. First, however, a cautionary note: the transfer of ideas (sometimes referred to as “cultural imperialism” when nations of unequal power, as in this instance, are involved) always takes one or both of two principal forms, informal and formal but whichever form it takes it does not necessarily mean that the transfer is always wholesale or that it is always successful, whatever the intentions of the agents involved (activists, experts, academics, researchers, think tanks, foundations, government officials, etc.), even when the transfer is the object of a planned endeavor.<sup>1</sup>

[....] (Some sections deleted)

### Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

It is most strange indeed that, with the exception of a few works, the large corpus of biographies and scholarly writings on Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi provides only a cursory nod at the formatively most important period of Gandhi’s personal *and* intellectual life, the two decades or so (from 1893 to 1914) that Gandhi spent in South Africa *as an adult*. (Whiffs of essentialism?).<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Brown (1996) and Parel (1996), for example, show, without the South African experience there would have been no “Gandhi” as we have come to know him. He may have been the father of modern India, but he was also, in a sense, the son of a modern (black) South Africa.<sup>3</sup> It is not simply that South Africa is where he first tried out his nonviolent approach to civil disobedience for purposes of effecting political change, or that it was the birthplace of this strategy in the form that he came to conceive it (as *satyagraha*—involving both political and “spiritual” dialectic

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1. For an interesting exegesis on the informal transfer of ideas see Chapter 10 of Said (1983) titled “Traveling Theory.”

2. More recent biographies are beginning to acknowledge the importance of South Africa to Gandhi’s life work; see, for example, Chadha (1997), and Wolpert (2001). A worthy read that focuses exclusively on the “South African” Gandhi, besides Brown and Proseky (1996), is Bhana and Vahed (2005). For primary source material on the evolving but critical phase of Gandhi’s nonviolent civil disobedience campaign see Volume 8, which covers the period January–August 1908, of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (published in 1962 by the Government of India).

3. It is ironic, that until recently, the one “biography” that did go to considerable length in correcting this scholarly imbalance, was not even a real biography in a scholarly sense. Reference here is to, of course, the Oscar-winning docudrama by Richard Attenborough, *Gandhi* (released in 1982), and in which Ben Kingsley gave a memorably rousing performance as Gandhi.

tically-connected goals), or that it is where he published his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, on the basis of his South African experiences (which provided both the historical and intellectual contexts for it), but above all, as an adopted son of (black) South Africa, specifically the free South African Indian community, South Africa provided him with the status of the “big fish in a small pond.” Whereas, had he remained in India he would have been merely one among millions of fishes in the sea (a nonentity to all intents and purposes, for there was nothing in his early life that pointed to eventual greatness as a “philosopher-activist”). To explain: given his lower middle-class Hindu status, coupled with his shy personality and self-effacing character, had he remained in India after returning from England he is unlikely to have had the opportunity to grow in both self-confidence and character—something that the act of leadership tends to *dialectically* engender—nor would it have been possible for him to undertake the social “experiments” (given the constraints of tradition and custom) that would be the basis of the evolution of his satyagraha. (It is most unlikely that he would have been able to establish a “Tolstoy Farm” or a “Phoenix Settlement” if he had remained in India.<sup>4</sup>) In other words, it is in South Africa that he came to both personal and intellectual maturity, without which he would neither have come to assume the leadership of the struggle for the independence of India from British colonial rule, nor would he have produced the philosophical contributions that have become the patrimony of all who espouse nonviolence change across the planet, or who seek truly meaningful ways of contributing to public life.

If one were to insist on a single seminal event in South Africa that would propel Gandhi onto the Gandhian trajectory of philosopher-activist, then it would have to be the train journey from Durban to Pretoria shortly following his arrival in the country in 1893 when he was unceremoniously forced off the first-class compartment of the train (because it was reserved exclusively for whites, even though he possessed a first-class ticket) at the Pietermaritzburg station. It is as a result of this incident, that he first began to entertain the idea of fighting the system that made this racist humiliation possible. Now, in one of those intriguing coincidences of history, this racially-inspired public humiliation would find its echo in a similar humiliation many decades later, and thousands of miles away across the ocean, in another country, in United States, and it too would help launch the career of a man and a movement of considerable import for essentially the same reasons: to overthrow a system that made such racial humiliation possible (and who, most sadly, would share the same mind-numbing ironic fate that befell Gandhi: death at the hands of an assassin). Reference here is of course to the much, and deservedly, celebrated rise of the nonviolent civil rights movement in the United States in the latter half of the 1950s led by Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) following the refusal by Gloria Parks to forcibly give up her seat on a bus in deference to white passengers—a compromise protocol established, ironically, as a result of another bus boycott organized by U.S. African Americans in 1953 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana—and the subsequent launch of a year-long bus boycott (1955–1956) in which Reverend King would come to play a prominent role.

In South Africa the final culmination of the nonviolent civil disobedience strategy that Gandhi had first articulated and nurtured there over a period of 21 years (1893–1914) was the *Defiance Campaign* of 1952 undertaken jointly by the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, and others. Yet, the Defiance Campaign as a strategy of nonviolence civil disobedience was a failure in terms of achieving freedom from racial oppression (leaving in its wake the adoption of an alternative strategy by the protagonists: that of revolutionary violence). In contrast, in United States, the nonviolent civil disobedience strategy adopted by MLK led eventually to the successes embodied by two of the major pieces of legislation in the history of the United States over the preceding century: the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965 that would forever alter the course of black-white relations in United States. However, our concern here is not the relative successes and failures of the strategy that has come to be so closely associated with Gandhi, but rather the mediatory role of South Africa as an ideational crucible for the genesis, blending, modification, flow-

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4. See Bhana and Vahed (2005) on the importance of Tolstoy Farm to Gandhi’s evolving concept of satyagraha. Incidentally, it was not without reason that the farm, where Gandhi spent some four years, was named after the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (see below).

ering, and propagation of an important idea behind satyagraha, nonviolent civil disobedience, that involved the work of three men but who never met in person: U.S. Euro-American philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Gandhi (1869–1948), and MLK (1929–1968)—the printed word being the principal link.<sup>5</sup> While some may, perhaps, dismiss out of hand the ideational connections that are being drawn here (and to complicate matters one may also add into the mix the Russian writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy, with whom Gandhi was in touch) between these three men as somewhat tenuous—though one should be reminded here that in the realm of evolving philosophies, strategies, and the like it is a fool’s errand to attempt to quantify the impact of ideas and insights sourced, whether consciously (as in this case) or unconsciously, from elsewhere—the point being made is that in tracing the well-known transatlantic journey of Gandhi’s influence, not only did South Africa play a pivotal role but that in addition that journey, at least part of it, had its roots in the United States. To put the matter differently: just as MLK gave credit to the *influence* of Gandhi’s ideas in the development of his own nonviolent approach to the struggle for civil rights,<sup>6</sup> so too did Gandhi give credit to the influence of Thoreau in the evolution (though not genesis) of his (Gandhi’s) own approach to nonviolent civil disobedience as a foundation stone of satyagraha.<sup>7</sup> There were, therefore, two transatlantic ideational crossings: from the United States to South Africa and from there back to United States.<sup>8</sup>

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5. MLK’s access to Gandhi’s ideas came through several avenues, including: connections with U.S. African Americans theologian Howard Thurman, who as a missionary abroad had had the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with Gandhi, and labor leader A. Philip Randolph who tried to incorporate the spirit of Gandhi’s approach in his civil rights work; U.S. Euro-American Reverend Glenn E. Smiley who was an admirer of Gandhi’s ideas; reading Gandhi’s writings; and visiting Gandhi’s family in India in 1959. See Fredrickson (1995) for more on both Gandhi’s work in South Africa and the transatlantic migration of his ideas to the United States. MLK’s trip to India is covered by Jackson (2007). For King’s own pronouncements on the relevance of Gandhi’s ideas to the civil rights struggle there is, unquestionably, no better resource than to mine the multivolume *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* produced by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Project at Stanford University under the direction of historian Clayborne Carson. (So far six volumes have been published, covering the period 1951 to 1963. A visit to the project’s website ([www.stanford.edu/group/King](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King)) also permits identification of relevant documents through a search engine.) See also, Fredrickson (1995), Hendrick and Hendrick (2005), Nojeim (2004), and Wolpert (2001)—plus of course MLK’s own description of his (MLK’s) intellectual journey toward nonviolent civil disobedience: King (1966 [1960]).

6. For example, the organization that MLK helped to found to spearhead the emerging civil rights struggle in the U.S. South in 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, among its earliest pronouncements included, what appeared to be, in Fredrickson’s words, “an unqualified celebration of Gandhism,” framed thusly: “The basic tenets of Hebraic-Christian tradition coupled with the Gandhian conception of satyagraha—truth force—is at the heart of SCLC’s philosophy” (from Fredrickson 1995: 258).

7. Gandhi explained his debt to Thoreau in these terms: “The statement that I had derived my idea of Civil Disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on ‘Civil Disobedience....’ Nonviolence was always an integral part of our struggle” (from Chadha 1997: 137). Yet, at the same time, without contradiction, he would also write to the British biographer of Thoreau, Henry S. Salt, in response to his question if Gandhi had ever heard of Thoreau: “My first introduction to Thoreau’s writings was, I think, in 1907, or later, when I was in the thick of the passive resistance struggle. A friend sent me the essay on ‘Civil Disobedience. It left a deep impression upon me.... The essay seemed to be so convincing and truthful that I felt the need of knowing more of Thoreau, and I came across your Life of him, his ‘Walden,’ and other shorter essays, all of which I read with great pleasure and equal profit” (Salt 1954: 147). For more on the Thoreau-Gandhi ideational connection see also Ezekiel (1972) and Hendrick and Hendrick (2005). Thoreau’s essay is available in many anthologies, including Mayer (1966), from pp. 140 to 159. In the anthology, the editor has juxtaposed it against Leo Tolstoy’s “Letter to a Non-commissioned Officer,” and “Letter to a Hindu” (pp. 160–76), both of which are also recommended. Note: Thoreau’s essay should be read in conjunction with the insightful analytical commentary by Rosenwald (2000).

8. Some would argue, with justification, that the crossings were triangular: from India to United States (since Thoreau was probably also influenced to some extent by ideas derived from Hindu philosophy as contained in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, texts he was familiar with—see Bhatia 1972, for example, on this), and then from the United States to South Africa, and back again.