Review

Gandhi in political theory: Truth, law and experiment

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This rich and thought-provoking book provides a thorough examination of the implications for political theory of Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with truth and nonviolence. Gandhi was not a systematic political theorist in the sense that he did not intend to develop or formulate a coherent and comprehensive theory explaining or providing a normative framework for political institutions and forms of social organisation. This was partly (or perhaps largely) for methodological reasons, because of Gandhi's emphasis on experiment through continually testing his ideas about nonviolence, self-rule, social norms, popular mobilisation and a host of other issues in the sphere of political practice. And yet, as Anuradha Veeravalli establishes in this book, this experimental method is in constant dialogue with a profound commitment to certain complex values (such as nonviolence) and political principles (such as *swaraj* or 'self-rule'). This dialogue forms the basis of Gandhi's self-proclaimed 'experiments with truth'.

Gandhi's engagement with political theory provides a serious challenge to many of the presuppositions underlying conventional Western liberal political theory, concerning the place of the individual in society, the role of the state, and perhaps most significantly, the centrality of violence and coercion to forms of social and political organisation. Furthermore, as Veeravalli points out, Gandhi is significant for political theory not only because he presents 'a critique of the presuppositions of modern civilization' (p. 2) but also because he provides an alternative vision of a peaceful society in which the full meaning of nonviolence, *swaraj* and *sarvodaya* or 'the well-being of all' can be realised, as well as at least some of the conceptual and practical tools needed to build such a society, or what Veeravalli calls 'an alternative modernity' (p. 2).

Central to both Gandhi's political, social and even cosmic philosophy and his political practice is his understanding of nonviolence. Here we need to distinguish between what Veeravalli refers to as 'a law of non-violence' and nonviolent action (p. 12); although, Gandhi was of course concerned with both and was hugely

influential in the development of nonviolence or civil resistance as an effective method of political action. Nonetheless, as Veeravalli points out, Gandhi's primary concern was with nonviolence as a law (in both the ontological and the normative or ethical sense) governing human behaviour and human relationships at multiple levels (from the interpersonal to the intercommunal to the international).

This emphasis on nonviolence as a law and not only as a form of political action directly contradicts one of the central assumptions of modern political theory. According to Veeravalli, Gandhi 'insists that the law of non-violence is a *law* of human existence. This poses a challenge to a fundamental presupposition of modern political theory – that competition, conflict and violence comprise the law of nature and the law of man in the state of nature' (italics in original) (p. 23). In other words, Gandhi's law of nonviolence refutes a basic belief of modern Western political theory concerning the need for a social contract and the construction of the sovereign state to reduce or eliminate violence and create the conditions for a peaceful society. Gandhian nonviolence, properly understood, does not accept this 'separation of the rational order represented by the power of the state and the irrational, dark life of passions and conflict in nature' (p. 24).

Gandhi attempted instead to establish 'an experiment with the law of non-violence and truth' (p. 24) based on the sovereignty of the people through civil society. This is the proper understanding of *swaraj* or self-rule as a central principle of Gandhian thought and practice. One of the more intriguing aspects of Veeravalli's analysis of Gandhi's political theory concerns the discussion of *swaraj*, self-rule or sovereignty in terms of a distinction between the state and civil society, and concomitantly (according to Veeravalli) between 'the presuppositions of war and ... the presuppositions of peace' (p. 20). The state is the institutionalisation of the social contract, premised on the need to employ legitimate violence to contain or restrict the unconstrained violence of the state of nature, both domestically (within societies) and internationally (between societies). Civil society, on the other hand, expresses the capacity of the people for self-rule, cooperatively and peacefully. The suggestion is that Gandhi rejects conventional interpretations of sovereignty, identified with the state in terms of its power to rule over individuals and communities, in favour of *swaraj* as this capacity for self-rule on the part of individuals and civil society.

Gandhi also rejected 'industrialism' as a form of production that separated the producer from their labour and the products of their labour, thus undermining *swaraj* or self-rule at the individual and community level, as well as the nexus between such 'industrialism' or 'the capitalist mode of production' and 'the state and its military' (p. 97). As Veeravalli writes, for Gandhi it was 'imperative to change the very basis of the political economy ... rather than address war alone which was only the product of industrialism' (p. 97). Gandhi's rejection of industrialism involved replacing it with 'a craft based economy with non-exploitative machinery that each craftsman could understand and use' (p. 97), exemplified by his commitment to *khadi*, or hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, and the *charkha*, or spinning wheel.

Gandhi's interpretation of the full requirements of *swaraj*, or self-rule, in terms of its connection to the law of nonviolence, translated itself not only into an understanding of the effectiveness of *satyagraha*, or mass nonviolent civil disobedience, as a form of resistance to injustice or foreign rule. It also provided the basis for his 'constructive programme', or a positive vision for social change and a just society. In India, Gandhi pursued his constructive programme for social transformation through a specific concern with Hindu-Muslim unity, a rejection of the inequalities associated with the caste system (especially Untouchability), and a wide range of other social problems affecting the daily life of the rural and impoverished population of India. Veeravalli refers to these changes as the 'indispensable pillars of *swaraj* for India' (p. 19). Thus, there is much more to a full realisation or implementation of *swaraj* than a demand for political independence for India (or any other colony or subjugated territory). Gandhi's constructive programme was not only an effort to address the wide range of social and economic issues and inequalities afflicting Indian society, it was also a demonstration of 'the sovereignty of the people' and their capacity to act through civil society (p. 50).

The constructive programme was a programme for specific social and political reforms at the local and national level, but it also provided an opportunity to challenge the structural and institutional sources of war and violence and, more importantly, to develop alternative forms of social and political organisation and economic production in accordance with *swaraj* and the law of nonviolence. Thus, Gandhi extended the people's capacity for self-rule towards political practice ('non-violent methods of dissent') but also to political economy ('non-exploitative modes of production and distribution') (p. 20). According to Veeravalli, '... the constructive programme was intended to conduct experiments that would transfigure the very institutions, structure and culture of society into a civilizational experiment in non-violence' (p. 43).

Gandhi is perhaps most often associated with innovations in the sphere of political practice, particularly his pioneering use of *satyagraha* as an effective form of non-violent political action. One of the few case studies of Gandhi's politics in action included in the book concerns the famous salt march to Dandi in 1930 (pp. 57–60). A more deliberate or explicit investigation of links between the central principles or concepts of Gandhian philosophy and the practice of nonviolence as a form of both civil resistance and social transformation would add an additional, important dimension to such discussions of Gandhi as a political theorist. The book succeeds in providing an insightful if perhaps uncritical examination of Gandhi's approach to political theory and method through examining in depth the significance of political experiment and its connection to truth and knowledge for Gandhi, as well as core Gandhian concepts such as *swaraj*, *swadeshi* and *sarvodaya*, for example. Furthermore, it shows how Gandhi employed these ideas systematically and in conjunction with each other as part of his broader vision of a just society conforming to the law of nonviolence. Finally, the book demonstrates how Gandhi both engaged with and

challenged central normative and epistemological assumptions of Western liberal political theory as a dominant discourse or tradition, through his rejection of the necessity for political violence and hierarchical or centralised forms of social, political and economic organisation and his theoretical and practical experiments with the full implications of nonviolence as he understood it.

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