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**Problematizing modernity:
Gandhi's decentering impulse**

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Gandhi provides a powerful voice that challenges some of the central axioms of modernity. In the process, he champions those who have been ignored or dominated in the grand narrative of modernity and denies its claims that it is natural, objective, and neutral. For him, modernity is only one way of thinking, and frequently a flawed one at that. Among his major objections to modernity are its proclivity to deny the validity of other claims to knowledge/truth and to universalize its applications for all people under all conditions.

Today, questioning modernity is widespread, and Gandhi's voice represents an early refusal to accept the story that modernity is telling about itself. In some ways, his critique is as radical as many postmodern efforts to challenge modernity, but in other ways, he departs markedly from most postmodern thinking.¹ He believes, for example, that it is possible to repair our fragmented world with a cosmological outlook and holds that truths exist and parts of them can be found and practiced.

In this paper, I enlist Gandhi as a critic of the universalizing impulse and fatalism of late-modernity and argue that his primary interest is in preserving the autonomy of individuals. I argue that Gandhi insists on questioning modernity, not to conclude that it has nothing to offer,

¹ Both Gandhi and several postmodern writers offer alternative modes of discourse and analysis to modernity. In this paper, I deploy some conceptual categories used by various postmodern writers to show that the postmodern temper shares much with an unlikely voice, one which talks about love, truth, tradition, and autonomy. In drawing parallels between some postmodern writers and Gandhi, I do not mean to make the two interchangeable or to argue that postmodernism implicitly contains such Gandhian imperatives as love and self-sacrifice anymore than I claim that Gandhian can comfortably fit into a thoroughgoing postmodernism.

Then why use some of the postmodern perspective to think about Gandhi's critique of modernity? There are several reasons for embarking on such a discussion. For one, the exercise shows that neither is a totally distinctive language but shares some reading of the modern world and how that world has exhausted itself. Moreover, the exercise demonstrates that the logic of postmodernism about constructiveness and deconstruction does not necessarily lead to the kind of skepticism that characterizes much postmodernism today.

but to maintain that modernity can not set the exclusive standards of what constitutes the good life.² One reason he finds alternative logics require a hearing is not only that they house important truths invariably correct but that they also offer contestation and controversy, that is they are political.³ On Gandhi's account, these lost or neglected alternatives usually grasp parts of the truth and often provide fresh ways of seeing the world and the means to challenge late-modern versions of orthodoxy. Moreover, they are often expressed locally, that is, in a vernacular that make sense to people in their particular place and culture. Gandhi is also concerned that modernity sets the standards by which it judges its own performance, something he believes is not the case when tradition was vital. Then, he imagines, external standards are available to judge everyday life and the way power is employed in institutional practices.

Gandhi's interrogation of modernity is one of a selective but skeptical borrower. Even though he finds the Enlightenment project encumbered with pretentious claims to know the truth, he sees no need to completely reject modernity out of hand.⁴ Hence, Gandhi talks about the equality of everyone in his assault on untouchability; he speaks of the rights of women, including their right to govern themselves; and he attacks colonialism as a negation of the modern ideal of equal regard and respect for everyone.

² One of his primary complaints with modernity is that it judges not only the world but itself by its own internally generated standards. For Gandhi, any practice must do more than show it is good or efficient by its own lights.

³ *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 17, p. 92. The edition cited here is *Hind Swaraj* edited by Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴ See *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 13, p. 71. For a further discussion of Gandhi's selective reliance on modern concepts, see Ronald Terchek, *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), chs. 2 and 3; Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (Norte Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989); Anthony Parel, "Introduction" in *Hind Swaraj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Mahendra Kumar, "Gandhi in the 21st Century" in *Gandhi and the Contemporary World* edited by Anthony Copley and George Paxton (Chennai: Indo-British Historical Society, 1997); and Thomas Panthan, "Gandhi, Nehru, and Modernity" in *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India* edited by Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (New Delhi: Sage, 1995).

Gandhi's Problematizing Impulse

In whatever variant, postmodernism is characterized by its questioning of matters we commonly take as good, natural, or right in the modern era. In its efforts to unsettle and decenter the premises that moderns hold to be beyond the realm of scrutiny, the postmodern temper seeks to show how the constructedness of the modern world favors some over others, often leads to practices of domination, and legitimizes disciplinary practices. In many ways, this approach parallels the problematizing proclivities of Gandhi who continually questions much that has been taken for granted in the modern world. He means to show that modernity is not neutral or objective but carries extraordinary costs, even though many of its products provide welcome goods. Gandhi extends his argument to claim that what the modern world has constructed is not the culmination of a universal rationality but a particular rationality that legitimizes disciplinary networks that deprive modern men and women of their autonomy, some more severely than others.

This critique can be seen in his quest for Indian national independence or *Hind Swaraj*. As an advocate for Indian independence, he claims that his primary quarrel is not with the British; his fight is with modernity.⁵ In its effort to become the dominant way we think and organize the world, modernity makes diversity and plurality remainders of a forgotten past. For Gandhi, Indian independence cannot mean only, or even primarily, Indian national sovereignty.⁶ For him, it must mean that every Indian is self-governing. In this context, British imperialism is only a part of the problem.

⁵ *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 5, p. 33.

⁶ *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 14, p. 73.

As Gandhi understands matters, modernity advances the claim that its knowledge supersedes all other claimants to knowledge. On his account, it does this in several ways. For one, it introduces a science and a technology which can discover and produce things that traditional science and technology cannot. In the process, modernity introduces its own way of organizing the world, determining what is important in it and what is not. And it does this, according to Gandhi, not with brute force, although this is sometimes employed, but by disciplining individuals into accepting the many practices of modernity as legitimate. On his account, too many Indians have already acquiesced in accepting claims of the superiority of modernity and have, in the process, been drawn into a web of discipline where they reconstitute themselves and their understanding of the world.⁷ This can be seen in his observation that his "resistance to Western civilization is really a resistance to its indiscriminate and thoughtless imitation based on the assumption that Asians are fit only to copy everything that comes from the West."⁸

Gandhi's assaults on modernity emerge clearly in his famous, or infamous, attacks on modern medicine, railroads, and machinery in *Hind Swaraj*.⁹ One way of reading Gandhi on these matters, and not an uncommon way in either India or elsewhere, is to find him reactionary. But there is another way of grasping his meaning and that is to notice that he wants to problematize the apparent benefits of science and technology and see it as constructed phenomena that hide their unwelcome consequences and disciplinary character. He believes that

⁷ *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 8, p. 43.

⁸ *Young India*, March 21, 1928.

⁹ *Hind Swaraj*, chs. 9, 11, 12, and 19 and pages 164-79. But he continually makes it clear that he is not opposed to everything modern. Regarding machinery, he says that he rejects it when it ceases "to help the individual and encroaches] upon his individuality" (*Young India*, November 20, 1924).

if he can demonstrate that modernity is not benign and that it carries its own forms of inequality, domination, and normalization, then he can energize Indians to mobilize and resist.¹⁰

This can be seen in his critique of science where he calls attention to its paradoxes. Science promises both control and the truth, but Gandhi questions these claims. He thinks that in a perverse and unexpected way, we have lost control of the march of science.¹¹ When he writes about medicine, for example, he fears people have handed over control of their bodies to others.¹² He also argues that modern medicine's focus on the individual body de-emphasizes other reasons for sickness (such as environmental).

Gandhi finds that as modern science reaches to control nature, it is frequently employed to control people. As he understands matters, India would not have been colonized without modern science which enabled the British to assert their sovereignty. As he puts matters, "It is not the British people who are ruling India but it is modern civilization, through its railways, telegraph, telephones, and almost every invention which has been claimed to be a triumph of civilization."¹³

Science is animated by doubt, but no single discovery quiets its uncertainty about the world and conventional reason. Doubt has become, as Hannah Arendt observes, universalized in science which is ever-pressed to investigate new fields and, undermines, revises, and supplants

¹⁰ See *Hind Swaraj* ch. 3, p. 24 on the need to be discontented.

¹¹ On Gandhi's views linking science and ethics, see "Ethical Religion" in Raghavan N. Iyer, *Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2, 51-52.

¹² See *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 5 and Parel's notes in this chapter.

¹³ Letter to H. S. L. Polak, October 14, 1909 in Iyer, *Writings*, 1, 293.

its own current certainties.¹⁴ For this reason, the knowledge provided by science can never be settled, fixed, or stable. Any home it finds on the earth is subject to reconstruction and, in time, to demolition and replacement. But Gandhi holds that ordinary people desire and require some measure of stability to build a self-governing life for themselves. As he understands matters, fluidity, novelty, and incessant change create background conditions that are confusing and fragment both the world and the people in it. In such a world, we become both preoccupied with day-to-day problem-solving and less interested, Gandhi fears, in finding ways to live together harmoniously and peacefully.

For all of his misgivings about modern science, he denies that he is "an opponent, a foe of science." Rather, he claims, he is concerned "about the misuse of science."¹⁵ What this means in practice can only be controversial, but Gandhi insists that too often the subject matter of modern scientific inquiry and the ways that science are applied are hardly neutral. Unless modern science is problematized, he argues, its worst features will never be resisted. Even though Gandhi is not forthcoming about the appropriate boundaries for modern science and its uses, he insists that scientific knowledge should ultimately contribute to self-knowledge.¹⁶ And he insists that its material benefits must be directed at the most vulnerable. For Gandhi, "The individual," not science or technology, "is the one supreme consideration."¹⁷ With this in mind, he directs

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 275. For extended discussions of Gandhi and science, see Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ *The Hindu*, March 19, 1925 in Iyer, *Writings*, 1, 310-311. Here and elsewhere, Gandhi shows that he carries his own appreciation of modernity of a certain sort.

¹⁶ *The Hindu*, March 19, 1925 in Iyer, *Writings*, 1, 312.

¹⁷ *Young India*, November 13, 1924.

some of his most pointed problematizing efforts to a critique of the grand narrative of progress that is at the heart of modernity.

The Grand Narrative

The grand narrative attempts to gather all of the disparate, sometimes messy pieces of life and society into a coherent whole which explains why things are what they are and what must be done to make them fit better, if not perfectly. In the process, the grand narrative is able to assign labels to people, practices, and all sorts of other things, holding some are positive and some are not. From this perspective, some must be nurtured and others impeded and some must be counted as allies and others as enemies. The successful culmination of the grand narrative comes when we are left with only the positive, mature, and friendly. Such a stance characterizes Marxism, market analysis, and nationalism; but for Gandhi, these are expressions of the core problem, that is to say modernity.

Gandhi distinguishes himself from those who want to write a grand narrative. He finds a penchant in modernity to homogenize the world and reduce what is unique to the status of remnants of a deficient past. But it is the uniqueness of cultures and different human beings that excites Gandhi and makes him suspicious of the tendency of modernity to seek general rules or procedures to describe our world and correct what departs from the grand narrative.¹⁸ It is the totalizing impulse that particularly troubles him with the story that modernity unfolds about itself.

¹⁸ Gandhi writes that "What may be, therefore, true of Europe is not necessarily true of India.... Each nation has its own characteristics and individuality. India has her own; and if we are to find out a true solution for her many ills, we shall have to take all the idiosyncrasies of her constitution into account" (*Young India*, August 6, 1925, in Iyer, *Writings*, 1, 317).

With the grand narrative, we are asked to surrender what is unique when it fails to conform to the plan and pace of progress. Progress becomes a benevolent but blind process that proclaims we are, on the whole, better off than we had been and promises that the future will be better still. Such promises can be honestly made and often met because of the specific meaning accorded to the term "better off." The promises of modernity receive their validation by looking at the material benefits won by successful members of the modernized sectors of society and ignoring the rest.

Gandhi recoils at this account not only because it excuses the inequality it spawns and the poverty it sponsors but also because it smothers community and the autonomy he believes community promotes. For him, autonomy is not to be confused with modern conceptions of individualism which, he insists, separates persons from one another. On Gandhi's reading of modern individualism, persons are largely left to their own devices and made responsible for the successes and failures that visit them. Gandhi fears that such a stance ignores how much individuals depend on others.

He cannot imagine human beings alone and isolated from one another. As I elaborate later, he places men and women in an interdependent cosmos where he imagines that each has dignity and respects one another but also carries duties to each other. For Gandhi, human beings become autonomous when they are embedded in a vibrant community which provides them with moral standards to judge themselves as well as social networks which can serve as a source of mutual assistance and respect.¹⁹ For this to occur, Gandhi believes that power must be dispersed

¹⁹ See *Constructive Program* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1941).

and inequalities narrowed. Then, he argues, a self can emerge that is confident in its own integrity as well as proud of the contribution it is making to the broader community.²⁰

But Gandhi does not believe this happens when modernity appears; initially, its occupation is partial. Some parts of society are modernized but others are not, and society becomes incoherent as the old and new parts often move in different, often conflicting directions. It frequently means that some are much worse off--socially, psychologically, economically, and/or politically--than they were before. From the story told in the grand narrative, however, this is a transition cost which, over time will lead to increasing productivity and growth, eventually reaching those now excluded. This argument holds that modernity can keep its promises and is, therefore, the legitimate way to proceed. This Gandhi rejects. As he sees matters, modernity can never fulfill its promises. One reason is that they are incommensurable: greater growth requires more discipline; more science leads to more fragmentation; more individualism diminishes a sense of community and personal responsibility. Taken together, these consequences contradict the humanitarian impulses of modernity. The more modernity honors its economic promises of prosperity, the more it needs to normalize, regularize, and supervise. From Gandhi's perspective, it cannot help but discipline deviant identities and diminish alternative ways of thinking and acting if it is to foster more economic growth.

He also fears that when the grand narrative of modernity becomes the normal way of seeing things, people are apt to miss the injustice, hierarchies, and domination it spawns, not only on others but also on themselves. When costs are seen, they are frequently taken to be unavoidable and hence excusable ones that will be redeemed by future progress.

²⁰ For Gandhi's discussion of his idealized village as a minicosmos, see *India of My Dreams* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959) and *Rebuilding Our Villages* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1952).

In accepting the grand narrative, according to Gandhi, individuals usually do not recognize what is happening to them and accept its story as natural and inevitable. As a consequence, they allow themselves to become the playthings of an historic process they cannot fully understand, much less control. The idea of inevitable progress introduces, for someone like Gandhi, not a march to emancipation but a new form of fatalism which disenfranchises individuals who are now assigned places in a process outside of their reach and control.

Modern Fatalism

The grand narrative tells a story about how many of the most important things in the world and the people we have become are matters that cannot be significantly otherwise. If we stop growth, then the economy falls apart. If we do away with centralization and bureaucratic structures, we invite chaos. If we challenge complexity, we give up all kinds of future good things. If we undermine progress, we unglue all that is positive. If, if, if,... then all kinds of bad things happen. However, Gandhi finds that we do not control growth, progress, centralization, bureaucracies, or complexity. He fears that we have allowed ourselves, in very critical ways, to be controlled by them. Here I have in mind much more than such matters as bureaucratic regulations which tell us to do this but not that or economic imperatives that displace traditional occupations, although each is part of the problem for Gandhi.

Rather, I argue that Gandhi holds that because (and not in spite of) modernity, the transformations that mark the late modern period, human beings are often not, in the ordinary course of events, in control. A process (or many processes) beyond their comprehension propel matters along. When this occur, the best that people can do is to explain matters after the fact

and hope for the best in the future. This is one expression of the new fatalism of the late modern era that Gandhi finds disturbing and debilitating.

Are we, then, fated to take the current situation as intractable, carried along by an uncontrollable momentum and robbed of the chance to have a say in these matters? To have a say about who we are? Gandhi thinks not.²¹ To have a chance in gaining some of the control we want, he thinks it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the causes that distress us. This leads him to question modernity at its core. He wants us to grasp its axioms and assumptions that we take for granted and recognize their often hidden, negative consequences. In this way, he believes we can throw off the blinders that have been provided by modern fatalism.

For Gandhi, this can lead to *satyagraha* or civil disobedience which can be seen as not only challenging injustice but also fatalism. In mounting challenges to what appears to be solid and permanent obstacles that are unaffected by human aspirations or actions, Gandhi holds that apparently weak and powerless individuals are now able to take charge of their own lives. On Gandhi's account, this sometimes leads to change, but even when it does not, he believes that the moral assertiveness of individuals put them in charge of what they make important and what they do. In his own life, Gandhi confronts fatalism with his civil disobedience, taking on the British empire and challenging various elites in India.

Gandhi's Archeology

In order to resist the totalizing claims and fatalism carried by the grand narrative, Gandhi offers his own archeological approach to digging out truths as a way of empowering those who

²¹ See *Young India*, August 25, 1920 and *Harijan*, July 21, 1940 for examples of defying fate.

have been dominated or marginalized by the prevailing order, whether traditional or modern.²²

In proceeding in his nonacademic way, he devotes himself to uncovering actual practices that disable and then challenges them. In his archeological excavations, he searches for fragments of the truth that he believes have been covered over. For Gandhi, these fragments speak to the autonomy of all persons as well as to the transcendent nature of everyone. What follows in this section focuses on Gandhi's excavations of his own tradition, but he employs an archeological strategy in his critique of modernity.

As he understands matters, each tradition expresses fragments of the truth in its own vernacular and symbols. But because these are the expressions of human beings, they are subject both to the decay that describes the human condition as well as the possibilities for renewal and revitalization.²³ His archeological exercises have three dimensions. One is to identify the fragments of the truth he believes lie at the core of traditions, including his own; a second is to uncover the layers of sediment that have hidden the core and seek to stand in its place. Finally, he means to convey the findings of his excavation in the local dialect of the marginalized so they can act.

He employs these strategies in his campaign on behalf of untouchables attempting to open the Vykom Temple Road, in his work with striking textile workers in Ahmedabad, and in

²² Gandhi's critique of modernity cannot be understood apart from his critique of tradition. He is no nostalgic communitarian who seeks relief from the present by escaping into the past. As he understands matters, domination is no exclusive characteristic of either the past or the present and needs to be exposed and resisted whenever it asserts itself.

²³ According to Gandhi, sacred texts "suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly" (*Harijan*, December 5, 1936).

his salt *satyagraha*.²⁴ And they appear in his arguments regarding the equality of women.²⁵ His archeological approach does not look at traditional texts or practices as sacrosanct expressions of unchallengeable knowledge. Rather, he wants to move beyond standard readings of traditional practices and expose those that spawn domination. When he turns to gender relations, he finds that "The ancient laws were made by seers who were men. The women's experience, therefore, is not represented in them. Strictly speaking, as between man and woman, neither should be regarded as superior or inferior."²⁶ For equality to emerge, he urges women to deconstruct what has been fabricated for them. To do this, it is essential for women to refuse to be intimidated by traditional practices and to decline to accept an inferior position in the social order that they have been taught is natural.²⁷ Pursuing his archeological strategy, Gandhi finds that gender relations have been evolving and that what we have now is not neutral or natural. This can be seen in his commentary regarding polygamy and monogamy.

"Draupadi had five husbands at one time and yet has been called 'chaste.' This is because in that age, just as a man could marry several wives, a woman (in certain regions) could marry several husbands. The code of marriage changes with time and place."²⁸

Just as marriage "codes" change, so do other social "codes," some in ways that are emancipatory and some debilitating to the autonomy of persons. Gandhi, often the traditionalist,

²⁴ See Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 46-50, 53-61, and 65-71. Also see Yogesh Chadha, *Gandhi: A Life* (New York, John Wiley, 1997), 218-225.

²⁵ See Ronald Terchek and Nitis das Gupta, "Gandhi and the Autonomous Woman," *Journal of Gandhian Studies*, 1998.

²⁶ "Talks to Ashram Women," 1926 in Iyer, *Writings*, 3, 394.

²⁷ See *Harijan*, February 24, 1940 in Iyer, *Writings*, 3, 394.

²⁸ "Talks to Ashram Women," 1926 in Iyer, *Writings*, 3, 392.

turns out to be one of the harshest critics of his own tradition as he digs through what he takes to be its decay and rubble in order to find its core.

We see this again in his critique of untouchability and his excavation of layers of sedimentation to uncover what he takes to be the true Hinduism. His reading of ancient texts reveals to him that although untouchability is sanctioned in contemporary Hindu practice, it "disfigures" the core of Hinduism and "is a morbid growth."²⁹ Holding that Hindu practice roams from its ideals when it embraces untouchability, he calls for its elimination. Part of his reconstructive archeology is to deny commonly held interpretations in order to propose an alternative that he thinks embodies the original meaning of his own tradition. So, he argues, "Untouchability is not only not a part and parcel of Hinduism, but a plague, which it is the burden of every Hindu to combat."³⁰

For all of the variety in his many archeological efforts, the underlying purpose of each of them is to offer emancipatory materials to those at the periphery to enable them to voice their own needs and assert their own dignity.³¹ He argues that there is an underlying unity in the core of ancient traditions that has been lost over the centuries and needs to be uncovered and practiced. He sees the members of different traditions grasping different fragments of the truth, and when they adhere to its core, Gandhi argues, they have materials to judge themselves and

²⁹ *Harijan*, April 20, 1934.

³⁰ Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1935), 47. As Gandhi understands matters, "Caste, if you will, is undoubtedly a drag upon Hindu progress, and untouchability... is a weedy growth fit only to be weeded out. If I again interpret the Hindu spirit rightly, all life is absolutely equal and one" (*Young India*, October 20, 1927).

³¹ See his advice to women that they must be in charge of their own emancipation in "Talks to Ashram Women," 1926 in Iyer, *Writings*, 3, 394.

others.³² However, he insists, these fragments, precisely because they are fragments, do not give anyone warrant to impose their truths on others.³³

At the same time, Gandhi finds these fragments are sufficiently robust to challenge the fatalism he sees embedded in modernity as well as to confront the fatalism that is spawned by an unreflective acceptance of traditional practices that justify domination. Freed from such fatalism, women, untouchables, and others need not accept the way things are.

Old and New Expressions of Power

For some, the modern state serves as the primary vehicle for emancipation; others find the state oppressive and hold that if confined, civil society can become free. What we find in each of these accounts is the prominence given to the state and the need to make it a focal point of our attention. These are logical arguments stemming from conventional ideas of sovereignty. There can only be one sovereign; some power must stand above all other forms of power and, therefore, should have the ability to command. Gandhi is not content to concentrate on the state as the exclusive site of domination. To be sure, it is an important locale of power for him, but he finds the state sharing power with myriad other repositories of power.³⁴

³² *All Men Are Brothers*, edited by Krishna Kripalani (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 72-73.

³³ He reports that "After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (1) all religions are true; (2) all religions have some error in them" (*All Men Are Brothers*, edited by Krishna Kripalani [New York: Columbia University Press, 1958], 60).

³⁴ When some talk about power and Gandhi, they discuss his theory of the power of love. Here, I want to take up another aspect of power in his writings. I do not mean to discount the importance of love in Gandhi's conceptualization of power. I take this matter up in *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy*. See also Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* and Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*.

Gandhi believes the state has been assigned an exaggerated role in contemporary society. It is not merely that the state is pretentious in what it claims for itself but that the attention paid to it deflects us from looking at the many other sites of power. Wanting to move beyond conventional readings of the modern state, he finds that it is part of a much larger phenomena and cannot be treated as something that stands above modernity.

Gandhi holds that much power is embedded in traditional practices such as caste and gender relations as well as in modern economic and social practices and modern claims to knowledge. This theme is prominent in *Hind Swaraj* where Gandhi denies that if only the seat of sovereignty changes from London to New Delhi, then India will be emancipated.³⁵ What is necessary, on his account, is that the institutions of civil society change and the debilitating consequences of modernity be openly challenged. For this to happen, Gandhi wants people to become political.

Gandhi participates in politics, he tells us, "only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish, therefore, to wrestle with the snake."³⁶ In this way he departs from those who ignore the state or take a fatalistic position that nothing can be done.³⁷ He finds, most obviously, that the British colonial state cannot be escaped or ignored. But any effective resistance in the name of autonomy, he argues, must do more than take on the coercive state. As important as the state is as a site of power, Gandhi thinks that it represents only a part of the problem. He finds that in

³⁵ See *Hind Swaraj* ch. 19, p. 198.

³⁶ *Young India*, May 23, 1920.

³⁷ Gandhi regards the rise of the nation state and its accompanying bureaucracy as a threat to the power of the periphery. For a further discussion of Gandhian politics, see Ronald Terchek, "Gandhi's Democratic Theory," *Political Thought of Modern India* edited by Thomas Pantham and Kenneth Deutsch (New Delhi: Sage, 1986).

the modern world, disciplinary networks have evolved which direct and manage people and deprive them of their autonomy. For Gandhi, disciplinary power does not rely on the visible coercion of conventional state power. From his perspective, modernity coughs up rules that, to be followed, require people to redefine themselves. For him, this reconstructed self accepts the new rules as necessary and takes their construction as appropriate. Modern disciplinary power is so dangerous, according to Gandhi, because it attempts to disguise itself and pretends it is not power. Hiding behind appearances which mask its real nature, disciplinary power departs from state conceptions of power.

Why should individuals not recognize that they are being redefined and disciplined? Gandhi thinks that much of the answer comes with the way discipline is often tied to necessity, that is, to the economy.³⁸ Necessity not only has to do with the ways households meet their elementary needs in order to survive biologically, but today it also has been greatly expanded to include all manner of things that are considered needs in a commodified society.³⁹

Gandhi finds that any social system creates its own unique set of needs layered on top of basic ones. These needs address what it takes to get along in that society. To meet these needs, it is necessary to work: how persons work,⁴⁰ how they are rewarded, and what goods they consume or want to consume are important to individuals. He holds that with modernity, needs expand all over the place, and it becomes impossible to satisfy all of them. The explosion of

³⁸ In this way, he departs from most postmodern writers who tend to devalue the economy.

³⁹ Gandhi holds that modernity feeds on the proclivity of the biological nature of human beings always to crave more. On his account, "The mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions the more unbridled they become" (*Hind Swaraj*, ch. 13).

⁴⁰ Gandhi is as interested in production as distribution. He argues that if production or work is degrading and thwarts autonomy, then it is not good enough to concentrate on distributive policies. See *Young India*, July 2, 1931.

needs stems not only from the burgeoning of systemic needs but also from the materialistic character of modernity which ties identity to a consumption that is never satiated.⁴¹

It is not the case that the privileged classes discipline other classes but are not disciplined themselves. Gandhi's critique of modernity holds that those most likely to be disciplined by modernity are those in the modern sectors, accepting the claims of modernity about its humanitarian impulses, its commitment to rationality, its debts to science, and its promise of progress. Those who have been or seek to be integrated in the modern sector find their success depends on their "self-discipline." The "self-discipline" Gandhi has in mind concerns the ways persons redefine themselves to accommodate to moderns norms in order to take advantage of as much of the material and status advantages that the modern age offers.⁴² Among the Indians Gandhi targets as falling victim to modern discipline are those who are attempting to insert themselves into the modern sector, such as lawyers in British courts.⁴³ Ironically, those outside the orbit of modernity often escape many of its pressures of normalization, but they frequently fall under its coercive power.

Surely, the question can be asked whether modern society is more disciplinary than other societies? Probably not, but modern discipline takes place within the context of freedom. The things we want are seen as free expressions on our part. But are they? Gandhi believes that modern freedom often clouds an understanding of how people are being disciplined and shaped.

⁴¹ He finds that "The distinguishing characteristic of modern civilization is an infinite multiplicity of human wants" (*Young India*, June 2, 1927).

⁴² He complains that the British "spend their days in luxury or in making a bare living and retire at night thoroughly exhausted. In this state of affairs, I cannot understand when they can" transcend their worlds of work and consumption (*Collected Works*, IX, 389).

⁴³ See *Hind Swaraj*, ch. 11.

For him, the order imposed in modern society comes not primarily from the state but from the disciplinary practices that are scattered throughout modern society.

Plurality and Universalism

With modernity, several changes occur: the preferred politics that develops is of a certain sort (democracy as centralized, bureaucratic, representative, and interest-attentive); the norms of modern culture are secular, consumer-oriented, and pleasure-driven; economics rotates around markets, efficiency, growth, and consumption; education becomes the acquisition of skills valued in the economy. These changes signal the invasion of traditional and transcendent modes of understanding and acting in the world. For Gandhi, such developments also crush what was once a robust diversity.

What is important about diversity to someone such as Gandhi is that it makes room for much of what modernity ignores, namely transcendent ways of thinking about the self. He sees people with a material, biological nature and a transcendent, spiritual nature, and Gandhi argues that to be fully human it is necessary to attend to both. For him, transcendence means moving outside oneself, something that requires detachment and results in service to others.⁴⁴ Gandhian transcendence is something anyone is said to be able to achieve, independent of income, education or religious commitment.⁴⁵ For him, the universalizing materialism of modernity stands in the way of the many different expressions of transcendence that he believes once flourished and are in danger of being lost. He also fears that detachment becomes difficult when

⁴⁴ Gandhian detachment is a prelude to action, not an escape from the world. See Terchek, *Gandhi*, 29-33.

⁴⁵ According to Gandhi, "God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness.... God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist" (*Young India*, March 5, 1925).

the self-referential self, particularly the materially oriented self-referential self, is the primary way people understand themselves.

Gandhi's celebration of transcendence does not require an external standard that purports to be objective and applicable to all situations. Although he believes that real truth exists, he holds that no single creed, tradition or philosophy grasps the truth in its entirety.⁴⁶ On Gandhi's view, most traditions grasp important fragments of the truth which are translated into local idioms. For him, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, in their highly distinctive ways, do this in confronting the raw ego and providing individuals with a meaning beyond their biological properties.⁴⁷ Believing that every tradition is partial in the sense that it can not grasp, much less incorporate, the entire truth, Gandhi resists efforts to appropriate dogmatic truth-claims by any tradition, including his own, or to use its understanding of the good to claim a privileged status for itself in relation to other traditions.

With modernity, Gandhi fears that many diverse expressions of culture are in danger of disappearing and the rest must explain themselves by reference to modernity. On his account, many different logics carry challenges to modernity, and what I have in mind is the not the shaman or magician but such logics that emphasize the relationship of human beings to one another and to their environment and the responsibilities the members of a community have to

⁴⁶ Gandhi holds that all "religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God but all are imperfect because they come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality" (*Young India*, May 24, 1924). He returns to this theme in *Harijan*, March 17, 1929. Also see, Ronald Terchek, "Gandhi and Moral Autonomy," *Gandhi Marg*, 13 (March 1992) and Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 19.

⁴⁷ Gandhi announces that he is "a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Christian, a Jew, a Parsi" (Watson, 6). On another occasion, he asks, "Why blaspheme God by fighting over different media? Koran, Bible, Talmud, Avesta, or Gita?... Why make of books and formulas so many fetters to enslave rather than to unify?" (Gopi Dhawan, *Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* [Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1951], 9). Also see Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 152.

each other. For Gandhi, this requires moral agents who are not stuck on their material attachments and see themselves as part of an interrelated and interdependent cosmos where all of the parts are equal and united.

Gandhi's Cosmos

Throughout this paper, I have used some conceptual frameworks that Gandhi shares with postmodernism. But these similarities become exhausted after awhile, and one place where this is the case concerns Gandhi's view of the cosmos.⁴⁸ Postmodern writers would find that his cosmos looks too much like a *telos*, with its own imperatives, and is unwittingly open to domination. This Gandhi would deny.

For him, the cosmos is ideally characterized by the interdependence and interrelatedness of the parts which simultaneously retain their own integrity and coexist together harmoniously.⁴⁹ These two latter characteristics are what I want to pursue in terms of Gandhi's critique of modernity. Gandhian harmony cannot evolve out of a discipline which seeks to universalize rules and conduct; rather he imagines that any real harmony reflects the rhythm of life with all of its diversity. One thing this requires is that the many aspects of a person's life coexist in some reasonable harmony.⁵⁰ This internal rhythm is interrupted when one aspect of our life, such as economics, dominates the other aspects. The diversity within our own lives needs to be

⁴⁸ Gandhi finds that every living being has a role in the continual cycles of life and must be respected. On his reading, human beings have duties and responsibilities in the cosmic cycle. One reason is that every individual is a debtor, not only taking from nature but also in living in a particular community with its own language, customs, divisions of labor, and patterns of cooperation and support. As such, individuals are said to owe debates to the many persons who contribute to their well-being.

⁴⁹ See V. R. Mehta *Foundations of Indian Political Thought* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).

⁵⁰ See Bhikhu Parekh, "Is Gandhi Still Relevant?" in *Gandhi and the Contemporary World* edited by Anthony Copley and George Paxton (Chennai: Indo-British Historical Society, 1997).

safeguarded, and part of Gandhi's quarrel with modernity is that he believes it cancels the multiple needs of individuals in favor of making economic ones primary.⁵¹

Gandhi presents his cosmic harmony as something on the horizon, something to aim for. Standing away from us, it remains elusive and, at the same time, is the embodiment of what Gandhi considers to be our highest human aspirations. From his perspective, if all that we have are practicalities and no ideals, we remain bogged down in the world, its captives, as we find how best to adjust and adapt rather than to aspire to take control of our own lives and to shape our common community.

The coherence and intelligibility Gandhi finds in his cosmos are shattered in the modern world which offers a series of discrete rules to apply to the many separate and distinctive roles which individuals carry. He fears that when a person's life is splintered by conflicting standards, eventually one or another dominates, and the weaker ones no longer contribute organizing principles for the person. For him, modernity supplies the dominant standard for individual well-being for too many people today. The surviving fragments of a tradition roam only in marginal realms of a person's life or live in the shadows of ritual and nostalgia.

Gandhi offers *swaraj* or self-rule as an alternative to modernity, not as an abstraction but as an affirmation of the dignity of ordinary people in the countless, diverse villages of India.⁵² He sees each community as a minicosmos reflecting the rhythm, cooperation, responsibilities, and opportunities resident in his idealized cosmos. Each community is said to have its own particular mixture of tradition, religion, language, economics, and myriad other properties. In

⁵¹ The multiple needs of individuals are not stationary, according to Gandhi but change as people move into new stages of their lives.

⁵² See *Harijan*, January 20, 1940.

emphasizing each distinctive community as integral parts of the foundation of Indian society, Gandhi opposes one of the most characteristic features of the modern age: its tendency to homogenize.

Gandhi's cosmos is not guided by comprehensive standards which replace diversity and plurality with uniformity. For him, ordinary men and women need to work with familiar materials when they construct a moral life for themselves and meet necessity. The intersection between a (local) tradition and an active, sentient person creates Gandhi's autonomous person, situated with others who share a common life built on mutual respect. To eliminate various local traditions because they do not accord with the grand narrative of modernity is to deny people their familiar identities and assume they can readily accept some unfamiliar, universal construction that coherently covers them and everyone else. This, Gandhi holds, is not possible and efforts to make it so are destined to be cruel.

In his own unique way, Gandhi offers a response to late modernity, whether modernity is characterized by modern science, economics, or culture. He also takes on traditionalists who want to vitalize hierarchical understandings of citizenship and duty as well as depoliticized much that Gandhi wishes to contest. In proposing everyday autonomy in a plural setting as the standard for judgment, rather than abstract standards such as justice or the modern standard of progress, he seeks a society that respects plurality and whose practices are under constant scrutiny and potential revision. This is why he wants civil-disobedience to remain part of his idealized society. It to be a place where its primary, self-conscious goals speak to the autonomy and equality of everyone and where efforts to deny these goods can be challenged.

With this vision, Gandhi parts company with a major strand of the Enlightenment which exudes a confidence that the good material life will be the good life and the engine of progress will deliver prosperity and personal fulfillment. For his part, Gandhi disputes these claims and calls attention to the many sites and abuses of power and calls for resistance to domination. In the process, he means to defend the idea that the autonomy of individuals must be the standard with which to judge claims to knowledge and social practices.