Relinquishing republican democracy: Gandhi’s *Ramarajya*

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**Minor**

Towards the end of Chapter 4 in Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* (1909/1910), the Reader sums up his vision of *swaraj* ['independence’, ‘home rule’, ‘self-rule’]:

I have placed before you my idea of *Swaraj* as I think it should be. If the education we have received be of any use, if the works of Spencer, Mill and others be of any importance, and if the English Parliament be the Mother of Parliaments, I certainly think that we should copy the English people.

*Hind Swaraj* is organized as a dialogue between a Reader and an Editor, and at the most evident level, the Reader articulates the mainstream nationalist vision while the Editor voices Gandhi’s arguments. It is therefore apposite that the Reader should say this. He anticipates the broad consensus that emerges within a decade of *Hind Swaraj* in favour of republican democracy (schematically, majority rule that systematically provides for division of powers and rule of law so as to institutionalize respect for the abstract equality of citizens and minorities). At least since the 1920s, there has been broad agreement amongst nationalist leaders that independent India would be organized around the equality of citizens in law, that it would have universal adult suffrage, and that these citizens would elect their representatives to form a government. Most prominent mainstream nationalists presumed (as the Reader implicitly does in affirming Mill and Spencer, and later in saying that an independent India will have its own Parliament) that the future independent Indian state would be democratic along these lines.

Gandhi takes issue with this consensus, with republican democracy’s claim to institutionalize a space for the minor through human rights. Indeed, he is not willing to accept the sovereignty that the British exercise over themselves as ‘true *swaraj*’. As he says on one occasion, ‘England is not free, but only powerful [. . .] To a slave [gulam], his master seems free, and he strives to be like the latter [. . .] Such a slave never really becomes free.’¹ For him, in such a politics, what always prevails is the major—not simply numerically as in the term majority, but also conceptually and ethically, where the major names what is dominant. In Chapter 17, the Editor takes issue with the domination of the majority in a very distinctive language:
It is a superstition [vahem] and ungodly [anishwari] thing to believe that an act of a majority [ghana, many] binds a minority [thoda]. Many examples can be given in which acts of majorities will be found to have been wrong and those of minorities to have been right. All reforms [sudhara] owe their origin to the initiative of minorities in opposition to majorities.\(^2\)

Gandhi’s objection to republican democracy is conceptual, not practical. For him the major is inseparable from domination, or the exercise of what Gandhi calls ‘brute force’ [shareerbal]. He is thus hostile to the institutions of the modern state, including such constitutive ones as parliament, and rule of law (in Chapter 17 of Hind Swaraj, the Editor describes law as ‘another form of the exhibition of brute force’). To accept these is to submit to the sovereignty of brute force, of the majority. In other words Gandhi emphatically rejects the European tradition—exemplified in Britain in different ways by Hobbes, Locke and Mill—which seeks to arrange and produce interests in such a manner as to sustain a democratic governmentality and sovereignty, as to protect the rights of the minor while sustaining the rule of the majority.\(^3\)

Relatedly, he is also hostile to the order of general responsibility (or responsibility organized in accordance with the measure of the judge as the ‘third party’). For him, this order (which might well be considered to reach its conceptual apogee in republican democracy) goes hand in hand with domination. For him, the judge is not simply powerful but exemplary of the sovereign, occupying a conceptual position inseparable from measure, domination, and totality. For him, the very concept of general responsibility remains within a paternalist and colonial problematic.

Gandhi struggles instead to think another order and another responsibility organized around the rule of the thoda, the word that he translates as minority. This order he often describes by the word Ramarajya, a word that usually refers to the reign of Rama (the eponymous central figure of the epic Ramayana), and is a general signifier of a time of justice, peace and plenty.

Now, Ramarajya is a charged term to resort to. The conventional Rama is committed to the enforcement of the order of varnashramdharma—the upper caste vision of the fourfold proper ordering of castes and stages of life. In such a vision, lower castes would have had little place, and non-Hindus perhaps even less. It is not surprising then that the language of Ramarajya has often surfaced amongst Hindu nationalists. At least since the late twentieth century, Ramarajya has often articulated the vision of a substantively Hindu state, a project as majoritarian and vicious as its Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and Islamic equivalents have been.

But Gandhi does not think Ramarajya in social or cultural terms. Thus, for him Ramarajya is not necessarily Hindu. Indeed, the example of Ramarajya that he gives on occasion is that of the first Caliphs: ‘The race of Rama is not extinct. In modern times the first Caliphs may be said to have established Ramarajya.’\(^4\) Ramarajya is rather an invocation of an order that is marked by perfect justice to the minor, as in the famous episode that Gandhi cites on one
occasion, where a dog complains against a Brahmin and receives redress. He repeatedly emphasizes Ramarajya as an ethical and political order.

If the king is mindful of the difficulties of the weakest section of his subjects, his rule would be Ramarajya, it would be people’s rule. We cannot expect this of any government in modern times, be it British or Indian, Christian, Muslim or Hindu. Europe, which we are so impatient to imitate, also worships brute force or, which is the same thing, majority opinion, and the majority, surely, does not always look after the interests of the minority. In ordinary matters, the principle of majority rule is, by and large, justice as the world understands justice, but the purest justice can consist only in the welfare of all. It is only a government that fully protects the weakest among its subjects [nabadama nabada], and safeguards all his rights, which may be described as perfectly democratic. Such a government does not mean the rule of the majority, but protection of the interests of even the smallest limb of the realm. Gandhi thus not only rejects republican democracy but, under the sign of Ramarajya, puts forth another very distinctive vision, one that insists on the figure of the minor to such an extent as to destabilize the republican tradition of trying to reconcile the minor and the major within a totality. For Gandhi, the minor is constitutively non-totalizable, and a democratic politics would have to adhere by the minor in this sense. This association of the rule of the minor with Ramarajya occurs quite consistently from around the 1920s, as the demand for swaraj becomes one for purna swaraj or complete independence from the British. Gandhi often describes Ramarajya as ‘true swaraj’, ‘real swaraj’ and ‘true democracy’: ‘no matter how many interpretations I myself may have given it [swaraj], to me its only meaning which is eternally valid is Ramarajya’. Retrospectively, even Hind Swaraj seems to him to be organized by the thought of Ramarajya. In other words, Ramarajya is inseparable also from the practice of satyagraha or ‘passive resistance’. Central to this ethical and political order of the minor is a distinctive thinking of religion. The very indictment of majority rule, we saw, occurs on the register of the religious: while to be bound by the act of the majority or many is ungodly, being godly or religious requires an adherence to minority. And being godly involves for Gandhi a very distinctive religion—that of dayadharma, which could be translated as the religion of compassion. In Chapter 17 of Hind Swaraj, the Editor invokes the poet Tulsidas (whose rendering of the Ramayana Gandhi treats as a ‘talisman’, and whom he draws on for thinking Ramarajya) to think dayadharma:

The poet Tulsidas has said: ‘Of religion, pity, or love [daya], is the root, as egotism of the body. Therefore, we should not abandon pity so long as we are alive.’ This appears to me to be a scientific truth. I believe in it as much as I believe in two and two being four. The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth. We have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without the existence of that force.
Here, I would like to explore what *dayadharma* ‘is’ (though that word can always only be used transitively in referring to *dayadharma*) by attending to Gandhi’s invocations of *Ramarajya*. Central to Ramarajya is Gandhi’s conception of an equality that is no longer abstract, no longer marked by general responsibility and rule of law. And precisely because *Ramarajya* involves political rule, here the relation of that equality with totality and universality must be rigorously thought. What emerges especially forcefully in this thinking of Ramarajya is both Gandhi’s conservatism, and his own destruction of that conservatism. And in the wake of that destruction, there emerges also another far more radical thinking of equality.

There is thus the invocation of the *panch*, or the village body of five wise men who know better than public opinion what is good for the public. There is the insistence on the justness of Rama’s actions in banishing Sita. All of this resonates quite markedly with *Hind Swaraj*, where the Editor criticizes the British Parliament as a ‘prostitute’ and ‘sterile woman’, and goes on to remark: ‘If the money and time wasted by Parliament were entrusted to a few good men, the English nation would be occupying today a much higher platform. Parliament is simply a costly toy of the nation.’ Here, the minor is thought in terms of virtue, where the virtuous are in a minority, and equality itself comes to be thought in terms of virtue.

Yet, and again as always, these conservative arguments dehisce into a distinctive politics that involves what might provisionally be called an equality of deference, or absolute equality. This equality, which is constitutive of *satyagraha*, *ahimsa* and *Ramarajya*, not only contests domination, whether in the form of abstract equality or virtue, but does so without seeking to become dominant or the new major or centre. Such a politics is especially pressing in our current moment, when on the one hand republican democracy has become so hegemonic that there seems to be no conceptual alternative to it, and on the other hand the profound violence that can be unleashed by it is all too evident in Kashmir, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel-Palestine (to name but a few examples). Through such a politics, we can continue what I take to be the most pressing task that postcolonial thought has initiated—that of provincializing Europe. To provincialize Europe is not about a relation with a physical place called Europe. It is rather, to extend Chakrabarty arguments only slightly, about a relation with general responsibility, which Europe is usually taken to exemplify (though only usually—for Gandhi for example there is nothing essentially European about general responsibility). To provincialize Europe is thus to deny the relation where general responsibility is the capital, heading, or major; it is to claim equality with Europe. And yet, general responsibility constitutes our very concepts of abstract and substantive equality. To provincialize Europe is thus to demand more than either abstract equality or substantive equality with Europe; indeed, it is to claim an equality which cannot be thought in Eurocentric terms—in terms, that is, of general responsibility and its abstract universalism. But what is this other equality, and what is its relation with abstract equality? That is a question that we have only now begun to formulate, though perhaps we have always been answering it. It is the task of listening to this answer, and of arriving at
questions appropriate to this answer, that this essay participates in. Because satyagraha is the struggle to practise absolute equality, it necessarily involves provincializing both satyagrahis and their others. In exploring Gandhi’s thinking of absolute equality, the essay thus also asks: what is entailed in satyagraha and provincializing?

Kin

What is perhaps Gandhi’s most sustained discussion of Ramarajya occurs in the course of a speech in 1928 in the princely state of Morvi at which the ruler too seems to have been present:

We call a State Ramarajya when both the ruler and his subjects are straightforward, when both are pure in heart, when both are inclined towards self-sacrifice [tyaag], when both exercise restraint and self-control while enjoying worldly pleasures, and, when the relationship between the two is as good as that between a father and a son [pita-putra]. It is because we have forgotten this that we talk of democracy or the government of the people. Although this is the age of ‘democracy’ [English word in quotation marks in Gujarati, with parenthetical translation of it as lokshahi], I do not know what the word connotes; however, I would say that ‘democracy’ exists where the people’s voice is heard, where love of the people holds a place of prime importance. In my Ramarajya, however, public opinion cannot be measured by counting of heads or raising of hands. I would not regard this as a measure of public opinion; the verdict of the panch should be regarded as the voice of God. Those who raise hands are not the panch. The rishis and the munis after doing penance came to the conclusion that public opinion is the opinion of people who practise penance and who have the good of the people at heart. That is the true meaning of democracy. […] What was the manner in which Ramachandra ruled? The rulers of today assume that it is their birthright to rule and they do not recognize the people’s right to voice their opinion. However, you rulers who may be regarded as the descendants of Rama, do you know how he ruled? You may also be regarded as the descendants of Krishna. And what did Krishna do? He was the servant of his servants [dasanidas, ‘the most perfect servant’]; at the time of the rajasuya yajna, he washed everyone’s feet. That he actually washed his subjects’ feet may be fact or legend, that custom may or may not have been prevalent at the time; its underlying implication, however, is that, at the sight of his subjects, he bowed to them or rather bowed to their wishes. This very matter has been differently presented in the Ramayana. Through his secret agents Ramachandra elicits public opinion and finds that Sita is the object of censure in a particular washerman’s home. He was well aware that this adverse criticism [apvaad] was groundless; Sita was dearer to him than his own life, nothing could lead to a difference between him and her; nevertheless, he renounced her, realizing that it was improper to let such criticism continue. As a matter of fact, Ramachandra and Sita had become one; they lived for and in each other; nevertheless, he thought it necessary to endure the physical absence of that very Sita for whom he led an army to battle, whose presence he desired day and night. Rama honoured public opinion in this manner; his rule is called Ramarajya. Even a dog could not be harmed in that State, as Ramachandra felt that all living beings were part of himself. There would be no licentious conduct, no hypocrisy, no falsehood in such a State.
A people’s government would function in such a truthful age. When the ruler forsakes his dharma, this age ends. When the ruler forsakes his dharma when this age ends, attacks will then be made from outside the State. However, when there is a bond of affection between the ruler and the ruled, the people as a body can face attacks. The authority exercised by the State should be one of love; the sceptre does not signify the exercise of brute force but rather a bond of love. The word ‘Raja’ is derived from the root ‘raj’ which means ‘that which is befitting’. Hence Raja implies one who does credit to the office. The people are not as wise as he is. He has bound the people to himself with the bonds of affection and he is a servant of his servants. Shri Krishna was such a servant and he was subjected to kicks like a servant. Hence I tell the rulers and the chiefs that if they wish to be known as the descendants of Rama and Krishna, they should be prepared to put up with their subjects’ kicks. They should put up with the latter’s abuses; although the people may act in an irresponsible manner, the ruler cannot do so. If the rulers did, the world would come to an end.

There are many intriguing issues that this troubling and even terrifying passage raises. Its deployment of the metaphor of kinship is quite at odds with dominant iterations of that metaphor in republican democracy. In the latter, kinship is both what founds citizenship and yet what needs to be relegated into the prepolitical, or titrated into the political. On the one hand, fraternity names the affect, even affection, that organizes citizenship. Amongst citizens of the nation-state, the emphasis on fraternity stresses that the equality and liberty that prevails is not antagonistic, and is unlike that between two equally powerful nation-states. There is a primal, even primordial, bond that holds together the citizen-brothers of a nation-state. On the other hand, because primordiality always carries the possibility of privileging some citizens over other citizens of the same nation-state, republican democracy is also suspicious of kinship. So it is that violence is often cast as the recrudescence or persistence of kinship—perhaps the sum of every analysis that draws on the tropes of tribe and feud to understand conflict.

By contrast, Gandhi understands kinship itself in a different way. As noted earlier, in Chapter 17 of *Hind Swaraj*, as the Editor begins to explain *satyagraha*, he invokes the verses by Tulsidas on daya or love. The Editor goes on to describe *satyagraha as dayabal*, the force of *daya*. The Editor describes such ‘working of the force of love or of the soul’ as *swabhavik*, a word that can perhaps be translated etymologically as own or ownmost (*swa*) orientation (*bhav*), and lexically as habit. The force of *daya* is thus the *swabhav*—habit, ownmost orientation—of the universe.

And the privileged example of this work of love is kinship, *sagpan*. Here kinship is emphasized not because it involves ties of blood, but because in it relations of strife are most likely to be refigured by love. Thus, ‘little quarrels of millions of families in their daily lives disappear before the exercise of this force’. The Editor inscribes familial relations into the conflicts he describes. Quarrels are between two brothers. The limits of ‘brute force’ as a way of opposing what is wrong become most evident through an example where the thief is ‘my father’.
Here, furthermore, the primordiality of kinship names not a bounded or exclusionary social entity such as a village or nation; it constitutes the world as a whole without exception. Recall: ‘We have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without the existence of that force.’ ‘And what is true of families and communities is true of nations. There is no reason to believe that there is one law for families and another for nations.’ Elsewhere, Gandhi describes satyagraha itself as ‘an extension of the domestic law on the political field’.10

Justice

Yet that extension only raises more questions. In extending the domestic law, daya, to the political field, what precisely is being extended? Here, we encounter some of the divergences that mark Gandhi’s formulations. In the Morvi speech, the king is a father. One implication of fatherhood is written into the very etymology of the word raja—the king is wiser, and so fit to rule. This insistence on a kinship organized around the father’s fitness to rule and knowledge is perhaps the dominant and most evident aspect of what we usually understand as Gandhi’s conservatism. Speaking in 1925 as the President of the Kathiawar Political Conference, Gandhi says that Rama ‘proved that Ramarajya was the acme [pariseema] of swaraj. Rama did not need the very imperfect [adhuro] modern instrument of ascertaining public opinion by counting votes. He had captivated the hearts of the people [prajana hridayno swami]. He knew public opinion by intuition [saamma] as it were.’11

In this formulation, kinship (and kingship) is a form of knowledge: Rama knows public opinion so well that he captivates hearts and the demand for self-representation does not arise. Symptomatic of this knowledge is Gandhi’s resort to a distinctive trope of justice in characterizing Ramarajya. For him, the ‘ancient ideal of Ramarajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure’. But this is not simply about the speed of justice; it is also about the form of justice. In the Morvi speech, for example, to the public opinion determined through elections, Gandhi contrasts the panch.

But why the panch? The young Gandhi, like many other Indian nationalists of the time, draws on Henry Maine to celebrate India’s village communities as ‘essentially representative’. Writing in 1895, he holds up the panch, ‘a Council of Five elected by the class of the people to whom the five belong, for the purpose of managing and controlling the social affairs of the particular caste’, as evidence that Indians had exercised ‘the power of election from times far prior to the time when the Anglo-Saxon races first became acquainted with the principles of representation’.12

Once back in India, he comes to develop a systematic understanding of the sense in which the panch is essentially representative: ‘a panch settles the dispute and so brings the two parties together [ekkatha]’ while courts ‘increase enmity’ by treating the two parties as antagonists and the judge as...
The third party. The panch, as a community of elders, works here as Rama does, or as a ‘few good men’ do in Hind Swaraj. It presumes a distinctive horizon of reconciliation and resolution—one where unity is produced by deference to the wisdom and knowledge of the father. Writing in the context of the Ahmedabad mills, Gandhi feels that there would be no need even for institutions like the panch, ‘if the workers behave with courtesy and respect and the mill-owners, on their part, maintain a fatherly attitude towards the workers’.

In this dependence on traditional leaders from the community to resolve disputes, surely we encounter the presumption that justice and the minor are best served by the masterly love of the thekaana [rightful place] and the satyagrahi-warrior? Here, representation becomes a matter of virtue, where a few good men take care of the minor. Such governance by virtuous men, need it even be said, is profoundly violent. This is especially dramatically so in the case of Dalits, as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar points out so devastatingly in Gandhi’s own time. Notoriously, Gandhi campaigns to make sure that they cannot be awarded separate electorates, and indeed argues that they cannot be considered a minority. In making these claims, Gandhi works very much as the Rama of Morvi speech does; he knows what the Depressed classes think. During the debate over separate electorates for ‘Depressed Classes’, he argues against Dr Ambedkar: ‘If he was a real representative, I should have withdrawn. Today he cannot coherently think of the problem. I repudiate his claim to represent them. I am the representative of the depressed classes. Get a mandate and I may not [sic] be elected but Ambedkar cannot be returned [. . .]’ He also knows the consequences of separate electorates better than Dr Ambedkar does: ‘it would do that very community [Depressed Classes] immense harm’.

Given Gandhi’s repeated professions of love for the Harijan, combined with his reform programmes that effectively sought to proselytize upper caste values, it would not seem out of place to suggest that this claim to know what is right for the ‘Depressed Classes’ and represent them is organized by the knowledgeable and masterly love of the father. To such a resolution of the matter, the objection can begin very simply with the remark that Gandhi reports that Dr Ambedkar had made to him in a related context, when, after the Poona Pact Congress workers took up work among Dalits, ‘He said, “Let there be no repetition of the old method when the reformer claimed to know more of the requirements of his victims than the victims themselves.”’

**Deference**

Were Gandhi’s emphasis on kinship relations to be confined only or even primarily to the claim of the father as the masterly figure of wisdom and knowledge, it would be an intriguing but nevertheless quite conventional conservatism. As always, however, his conservatism also undoes and destroys itself, and in this destruction there emerges a radical politics that questions
republican democracy in quite another way. Already in his affirmations of the 
panch, he insists that the panch is possible only where both parties voluntarily 
accept its legitimacy, and agree to abide by its decisions (and Gandhi 
reluctantly acknowledges that such consensus does not usually exist). That is 
why, indeed, he hesitates to promote the establishment of panches on his 
return to India, and why the Ahmedabad experiment does not seem to have 
been replicated or even continued.

In the wake of this reluctance, the love involved in kinship comes to be the 
occasion for working out the distinctive form of resistance involved in 
satyagraha. In Chapter 16 of Hind Swaraj, when the Reader suggests to the 
Editor that in some cases violence is justified, as with a thief in the house, the 
Editor demurs, and indicates that the means will depend on who the thief is. 
One of his examples is his father: ‘If it is my father who has come to steal, 
I shall use one kind of means.’

I fancy that I should pretend to be sleeping whether the thief was my father or 
that strong armed man. The reason for this is that my father would also be armed 
[bal] and I should succumb to the strength possessed by either and allow my 
things to be stolen. The strength of my father would make me weep with pity 
[daya]; the strength of the armed man would rouse in me anger and we should 
become enemies [dushman].

Here, between father and son, the hierarchy is not sustained by power. The 
father does not demand daya as his right or because of his authority; indeed, 
daya cannot be demanded. Compelled by daya, compelled to give daya 
(though this compulsion is the son’s own), the son defers to or submits to his 
father. The son defers—this is to say that he accepts an inequality with his 
father. But also: the son defers because of daya—this is to say that he 
practises also an inalienable equality, for to give daya is to refuse hierarchies 
sustained by power, most emphatically those in which the giver is 
subordinate. It is from this equality that he gives his inequality. This is why 
daya involves what may quite properly be described as an equality of 
dereferece.

This equality extends to the point of dying for kin. In his abridgement of 
Ruskin’s Unto This Last, published under the title Sarvodaya, Ruskin argues:

The [ship] captain’s duty is to treat all sailors as he would treat his son. In the 
same manner, a merchant may ask his son to work alongside of those under him. 
He must always treat the workers as he would then treat his son. This is the 
true meaning of economics. And as the captain is bound to be the last man to 
leave his ship in case of shipwreck, so in the event of famine or other calamities, 
the trader is bound to safeguard the interests of his men before his own. All this 
may sound strange. But the really strange thing about the modern age is that it 
should so sound.[…]17

The ship’s captain-father must die rather than allow his sailors to do so. 
Gandhi emphasizes ‘dying for’ in this sense—mothers, parents, children dying 
for each other—on several occasions: ‘Let us learn to die for the country
[rashtrene saaru marta seekhiye]. […] we can serve the country in this way only if we have in us the motherly love [maatruprem] about which we learnt in our childhood from [the Gujarati poet] Dalpatram.18 Here, ‘dying for’ exemplifies the way in which daya or love sustains equality amongst those who are otherwise profoundly, constitutively, unequal. Indeed, given the minority of the minor, for Gandhi it is only through the absolute responsibility involved in kinship that a politics that abides by the minor can be practised.

Now, Gandhi’s Ramarajya involves swabhavik conduct by subjects and citizens. Observing that conduct, they make themselves into kin—here, fathers and sons. And when the people seek the swaraj that is named Ramarajya, what they seek is not sovereignty as self-representation but rather the rule of what is proper or swabhavik. And what is swabhavik, it turns out, is the equality that defers. Here, the father is not a thief but rather responsibly accepts the deference that the son offers. To accept it responsibly is to recognize the equality that courses through it. And even though the equality is the truth of the deference, equality cannot be treated in liberal fashion as the essence that can be extracted from the disposable husk of deference. Rather, accepting the equality of the deference, accepting deference in other words as a gift, requires a deference to the deference. This makes the king into what Gandhi describes in the Morvi speech as the dasanidas, ‘servant of his servants’.

Moreover (and this is why the politics of deference is so destabilizing), the equality of deference necessarily resists that which it defers to, for it defers as part of the insistence that those it defers to conduct themselves in a manner that is swabhavik. Thus, the deference of the praja to the raja is also the demand that the raja conduct himself as a dasanidas, the servant of his servants. The son who practises non-cooperation against the father-state claims equality through a deference that resists. ‘The relationship of the government and its subjects is that of father and son, not of master and slave. It is the duty of the son to resist injustice on the part of the father.’19 One example of such resistance that Gandhi returns to over and over again is that of Prahlad, the son of a demon-king: ‘By disobeying [anadar] his father’s order for the sake of truth, Prahlad not only remained staunch in satyagraha but also did his duty as a son’).20 As the description of Prahlad’s actions as satyagraha suggests, satyagraha is for Gandhi essentially the practice of the resistance inherent to the equality of deference.

Thus also it is that the British are to be resisted through the practice of the equality of deference. As he argues at a speech in Dakor:

The present Government is no Ramarajya; it is Ravanarajya. We suffer under this Ravanarajya and learn the ways of wickedness [pakhand] under it. How are we to be rid of this Ravanarajya? By becoming evil men [pakhandi] in dealing with evil men? […] How can we ever match them in their wickedness? […] You should run away from evil men and from injustice as you would from a forest fire. This running away is non-cooperation. Non-cooperation does not proceed from ill will or hatred. It is a religious duty for the man of religion [dharminu
Even between father and son, non-cooperation is proper [yogya]; between man and wife and between relatives, it is a duty [varajroop, kartavya].

Because the equality of deference is required in every relation, the language of kinship has a consequence quite the opposite of what might be expected: now the resistance of kin to each other proliferates, and becomes swabhavik. This relation of resistance no longer springs from the father–son bond; instead that bond too must submit to what is prior to it—the conduct of the religious. And to the extent that it is swabhavik to claim kinship with the world, what is being claimed is also a relationship of resistance with the world.

Aporia

The resistance involved in the equality of deference is organized quite differently from that involved in the equality of sovereignty. For the latter, we may take as our point of departure the suggestive formulations of Claude Lefort, who provides perhaps some of the most compelling affirmations of ‘modern democracy’, or what I have been calling republican democracy. For Lefort, ‘modern democracy’ represents ‘power in such a way as to show that power is an empty place’.

It does so by virtue of a discourse which reveals that power belongs to no one; that those who exercise power do not possess it; that they do not, indeed, embody it; that the exercise of power requires a periodic and repeated contest; that the authority of those vested with power is created and re-created as a result of the manifestation of the will of the people.

Central to Lefort’s affirmation of ‘modern democracy’ is a certain thinking of resistance as the symptom of sovereignty. Citizens resist in order to demand participation in the empty place of power, and non-citizens resist in order to demand citizenship; here, resistance names the pursuit of sovereignty and self-representation. And ‘modern democracy’ is organized around an empty place of power, or in such a way that there can structurally never be a full realization of sovereignty and self-representation, that resistance always mils the polity. In other words, sovereignty comes to mark every citizen in such a way that the modern democratic state cannot produce or sustain a totalized sovereignty, that its sovereignty is always ruptured by the sovereignty of its citizens.

As such, the sovereignty of the modern democratic state is much more attenuated than is the case with classical democracies. If we say in a Schmittian spirit that the sovereign is he who decides the exception, then perhaps the mark of the modern democratic state in Lefort’s formulations is threefold. First, the sovereign as the figure who decides on the exception becomes generic, almost indistinguishable from the figure of the citizen—this is the sense in which the place of power is empty. Second, the classic concept of decision is reiterated but democratized: a decision must be taken on the
basis of not just knowledge but public knowledge, and it must also abide by the rule of law. Third, the moment of exception is thereby attenuated, hemmed in by a regime of rights, law, and the empty place of power. (Indeed, even though Schmitt does not to my knowledge explicitly figure in those of Lefort’s translated essays that have become canonical in the English-speaking academic world, the latter’s arguments could almost be conceived of as responding to precisely the questions that Schmitt raises.)

Yet this attempt to generalize the sovereign, democratize the decision, and attenuate the exception never quite possesses the stability and inclusiveness that Lefort claims for it. Even if the sovereign is now synonymous with the citizen (because citizenship in the nation-state is marked by a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’, in Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase), citizenship is inevitably exclusionary not only of the non-citizen, but of the minor whose citizenship remains formal. Even if the decision is democratized, the moment of decision (about which more soon) remains the gremlin in the machine—unjustifiable and marked by madness. Even if the exception is attenuated, the non-citizen and the minor citizen remain constitutively vulnerable to it.

In contrast, the equality of deference is not organized around sovereignty and self-representation. Something that puzzle the Reader in Chapter 14 of _Hind Swaraj_, as similar assertions do Gandhi’s interlocutors in later years, is the Editor’s argument that in order to obtain _swaraj_ ‘it is not necessary to have as our goal the expulsion of the English’. Indeed, quite late in the independence movement, Gandhi argues for an arrangement where the British would provide the Indian army, leaving Indians free to concentrate on other things. Similarly, the insistence on a structural emptiness of power, on a narrative that privileges (in however attenuated an iteration) the forms of republican democracy as its telos—all of this disappears in Gandhi’s thinking of _Ramarajya_. He is quite willing to countenance princely rule and hereditary kingship. In his most evident formulations at least, the resistance involved in the equality of deference makes the question of the form of rule one that is not so important.

At the same time, in the equality of deference, ‘the people’ and the state cannot be represented in each other; the two are forever apart. Rama’s rule is not the rule of the majority. Rather, Rama must submit to his servants in their minority, just as they must to Rama. In this constitutive separation, marked not just by the empty place of power, a resistance roils the equality of deference, organizing what might to begin with be called its aporetic relation with the equal.

In so describing it, I take some of my initial cues from the way that Derrida has powerfully explored how justice requires the ‘very experience of the aporia’. He suggests:

> an experience is a traversal, something that traverses and travels toward a destination for which it finds the appropriate passage. The experience finds its way, its passage, it is possible. And in this sense it is impossible to have a full experience of aporia, that is, of something that does not allow passage. An aporia is a non-road. From this point of view, justice would be the experience that we
are not able to experience [...] But [...] there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible.\textsuperscript{23}

This impossibility has to do with the irreconcilability of the generality of just laws with the singularity that they address.

How are we to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, irreplaceable groups and lives, the other or myself as other, in a unique situation, with rule, norm, value or the imperative of justice which necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application in each case? If I were content to apply a just rule, without a spirit of justice and without in some way inventing the rule and the example of each case, I might be protected by law (droit), my action corresponding to objective law, but I would not be just. I would act, Kant would say, \textit{in conformity} with duty, but not \textit{through} duty or \textit{out of respect} for the law.\textsuperscript{24}

This aporia makes a just decision impossible.

To be just, the decision of a judge, for example, must not only follow a rule of law or a general law but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstituting act of interpretation, as if ultimately nothing previously existed of the law, as if the judge himself invented the law in every case. [...] In short, for a decision to be just and responsible, it must, in its proper moment if there is one, be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle. Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely. At least, if the rule guarantees it in no uncertain terms, so that the judge is a calculating machine—which happens—we will not say that he is just, free and responsible. But we also won’t say it if he doesn’t refer to any law, to any rule or if, because he doesn’t take any rule for granted beyond his own interpretation, he suspends his decision, stops short before the undecidable or if he improvises and leaves aside all rules, all principles. It follows from this paradox that there is never a moment that we can say \textit{in the present} that a decision \textit{is} just (that is, free and responsible), or that someone \textit{is} a just man—even less, ‘\textit{I am} just.’\textsuperscript{25}

Also, as Derrida argues elsewhere, the condition of possibility of responsibility on the one hand is that every decision ‘must be taken on the basis of knowledge’. As such, every decision responds to a ‘general responsibility’ or ‘responsibility in general’, a responsibility to the law. On the other hand, if it is only that, ‘then it is no more a responsible decision, it is [...] the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem’. The general responsibility is always ruptured by an absolute responsibility, which for Derrida is exemplified by Abraham’s decision to kill his son Isaac. This decision is absolutely responsible ‘because it answers for itself before the absolute other’. And yet it is
also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal. Everything points to the fact that one is unable to be responsible at the same time before the other and before others, before the others of the other.26

The aporia of responsibility is thus that the decision is always irreconcilably marked by both a general and an absolute responsibility: it is responsible on the one hand to ethical generality and laws, and on the other hand to an absolute singularity that cannot be referred back to or grounded in this generality. This aporia is inescapably constitutive of the very concept of the decision; it is a spectre that haunts every claim to either absolute or general responsibility, even and perhaps especially where the latter seek to repress it.

In Gandhi’s thinking of satyagraha, ahimsa, and Ramarajya amongst other terms, in his equality of deference, there is at work a similar and yet abyssally different manner of abiding by the aporia. The suggestion of similarity may not seem so startling when we heed one matter which, even if it has not been formalized in these explicit terms by Derrida, is nevertheless given with great force to us in his writings: that perhaps what is especially significant about the term aporia is that it initiates a distinctive thinking of equality. We usually think of equality in terms of equivalence. Thus, the concept of the third, and the measure it involves, posits a prior togetherness or shared medium on the basis of which equality or inequality can be thought. Involved in an aporia, by contrast, is the impossibility not only of sublation or subordination, but even of an equality based on measure. An aporia involves a relation of non-relation in the sense that it broaches a relation of absolute equality (this is why it is a relation of non-relation, rather than only a non-relation). The thought of this absolute equality is perhaps in different ways both Derrida’s and Gandhi’s greatest gift.

If nevertheless a difference both subtle and abyssal opens up between Derrida’s and Gandhi’s problematics here, then perhaps this is because of the way each reads absolute responsibility, and consequently the aporia of responsibility. Derrida simultaneously abides by both absolute and general responsibility, and it is the impossibility of passage between the two that constitutes the aporia of responsibility that for him marks justice. Here, absolute responsibility is constituted by faith; it is absolute ‘because it answers for itself before the absolute other’. And in this very act of being responsible to the absolute other, it gives up on any ethics or reason justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal. Everything points to the fact that one is unable to be responsible at the same time before the other and before others, before the others of the other.’ This is why general responsibility too is unavoidable and necessary. And because of the absolute equality of absolute and general responsibility, each both requires and destabilizes the other. If deconstruction is justice, then, it is so in the sense that it is neither absolute responsibility nor only general responsibility; it is rather the undecidable destabilization of each by the other;
it is necessity of abiding by both. As such, there is no relinquishment of measurable equality here, and it may even be necessary to affirm sovereignty and the rule of law. But that rule of law and general responsibility is no longer pure; now while a decision needs knowledge, it is also constituted by a moment of madness that destabilizes knowledge; ‘a certain “madness” must watch over thinking’. And what marks republican democracy, what makes for its autoimmunity, is that it is a form of general responsibility that is most open to this madness and its absolute responsibility.27

Perhaps indeed it is this reluctance to relinquish measurable equality and its institutions of law, even to desire to abide by them aporetically, that organizes in part Derrida’s sense during the first Gulf war that he must “go with Mitterand” and support the war.28 I do not mention this in order to mount some facile denunciation of that support. Whether one agrees with Derrida or not in this particular matter (and it should be noted that he opposes the second Gulf war), at stake here is a crucial point: to abide by sovereign power or republican democracy, however aporetically, is also to accept, at least as a painful possibility, one’s own practice of war waged as a general responsibility (even if one may then oppose almost every actual war).

Gandhi by contrast abides only by absolute responsibility, which he thinks most often under the sign of dharma—which he translates as ‘duty’, ‘obligation’, ‘religion’, which for him is both always binding and always a future, never capable of being completely accomplished. In his thinking of dharma, there is an insistent demurral from the pervasive understanding, perhaps even an ontotheological one, of absolute responsibility as only a groundless faith that is not justifiable before the law of some universal tribunal. It is indeed groundless, and indeed not justifiable, but for him that groundlessness and relinquishment of justification is not nothing; it is not vacuity.

Rather, for him dharma is marked by at least three crosshatched moments, which for now may be stated schematically. First, and most importantly, he insists doggedly on the absolute equality that dharma entails (the animal metaphor, if you will, is very apposite here—it is with reference to dogs and other animals that Gandhi often considers the question of absolute equality).29 This practice of absolute equality with oneself and others produces the originary aporia. The aporia is in this sense internal to and given by absolute responsibility, rather than marking the relation between absolute and general responsibility. Second, dharma, in order to sustain the groundlessness and absolute equality proper to it, in order to abide by absolute responsibility, must give up general responsibility, for the latter seeks always to deny, repress or overcome the aporia, to replace absolute equality with an equality of equivalences. Third, this giving up, because it seeks to practise absolute equality not just with its other but with the others of its other, must never become an overcoming of general responsibility. It must rather be itself carried out in the spirit of absolute responsibility and equality; it must be a relinquishment of general responsibility.
In order to prepare for a more sustained consideration of these entailments, I would like to attend to the dialogue in *Hind Swaraj*. Critics have sometimes been tempted to ascribe *Hind Swaraj*'s organization as a dialogue to Gandhi's familiarity with Plato. This ascription is all the more tempting since Gandhi had translated Plato in the year before.

Gandhi by contrast claims that Gujarati influences are at work in his choice of the dialogue form, remarking in the preface to the English translation:

> Some of the friends who have read the translation have objected that the subject-matter has been dealt with in the form of a dialogue. I have no answer to offer to this objection except that the Gujarati language readily lends itself to such treatment and that it is considered the best method of treating difficult subjects.  

This claim is a little puzzling if we consider only the exclusively Gujarati literature—very few major Gujarati works of the period seem to have been in a dialogue format. It seems more likely that this was a reference to a text that he would have read at least in Gujarati and English, and which he was deeply influenced by—the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is organized as a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna.

In claiming this genealogy, Gandhi breaks from dominant iterations of the *Gita* and the *Dialogues*, which are both marked, albeit in very different ways, by a logic where one figure submits to the other, where the dialogue is also marked by a resolution. Of the Socratic dialogue, I will only recall how Deleuze and Guattari have powerfully indicated that the dialogue initiated by Plato's Socrates effectively insists on the dominance of the single concept. Socrates engages with his interlocutors by eliciting the presumptions of their arguments, showing that these presumptions are contradictory or otherwise untenable, and leading them to Socrates' arguments. In this sense, the Socratic dialogue is a monologue, with the other posited only in order to be overcome. Here, the other is always marked by lack, even when that lack is treated with the responsibility that characterizes every civilizing mission. This dialogue's truth and totality can allow little legitimate space for another argument or position.

The *Gita* is a profoundly fractured text, but Simona Sawhney's compelling recent reading has described well the logic that dominates it. As she points out, it begins with Arjuna expressing his doubts to his charioteer, the divine figure Krishna, about the correctness of taking to the battlefield against his kinsmen. He is 'overcome by compassion', and his compassion is organized by *kuldharna* or law of the family, since the battle would by destroying the family also undermine *kuldharna*. And Krishna proposes another understanding of the warrior's *dharma*—in terms of *nishkamakarma*, where detachment is 'the privileged means to the salvation of the soul'. Krishna effectively enjoins Arjuna to fight as a *karmayogi*, with actions done as a sacrifice for the sake of the godhead that Krishna embodies. Thus it is not
only that Arjuna in the end submits to Krishna and joins the battle; rather, a profoundly sublative logic dominates and organizes the dialogue of the Gita. And Arjuna accepts this—the Gita closes with Arjuna resuming the battle on Kurukshetra.  

Gandhi effectively breaks from this dominant reading of the Gita, and reads it instead in terms of a finite ethics of daya. Relatively, he understands the ‘form of a dialogue’ itself differently. Perhaps we can take our cues from the word samvaad, which is what Gandhi translates as dialogue. A samvaad is a talking together. The root sam refers simultaneously to equality and togetherness. In a samvaad, equals talk together. But how equals talk together depends on how equality and togetherness is thought. And in thinking equality and togetherness, a gap opens up between the Reader and the Editor. It is the Reader who initiates the samvaad, asking the first question about swaraj that opens the book. The Reader understands the samvaad in a way quite different from the Editor. For the Reader, equality involves a prior grounding and togetherness organized by the concept of the third. The third provides a way to think a commonality that is abstract, and that can therefore practise general responsibility more inclusively than what might usually be considered its precursors—the substantive universalisms (say, Arjuna’s kuladharma, or even Krishna’s nishkamakarma and Plato’s ethics) based on commonality. From the perspective of the concept of the third, any emphasis on substantive commonality is marked by inadequate grounding, and must be confined to the private sphere, or at best provide the affective dimensions of everyday life.

Indeed, if modern European universalism has been adopted so enthusiastically elsewhere in the world (and emphatically not just by elites), surely this has to do with the way its concept of the third organizes general responsibility in an especially forceful way—one that leaves open at least in principle, which is to say in its very abstraction, the equality of what is marginal to what is dominant and universal. What the Reader affirms then is an especially powerful manifestation (one that necessarily accompanies every declaration of rights of man and citizen) of general responsibility: that which produces and sustains the public sphere as a secular space within which different groups and individuals can interact as abstract equals by leaving behind in the private sphere that which is incommensurable with such equality. From his commitment to Parliament, courts of law, English-style education, and so on, we can safely presume that for the Reader equals talk in the secular public sphere. Through the protocols sustained by these institutions amongst others, participants in the public sphere address each other—this is the dialogue or samvaad that the Reader seeks.

To think general responsibility through the concept of the third is also to simultaneously think absolute responsibility in a distinctive way. For this tradition the cardinal mark of absolute responsibility—indeed, the mark of its absoluteness—is its groundlessness. It is absolute: here, this also says—it is not amenable to reason, it is marked by faith alone, it has no further form or entailments. Consequently, it must be kept out of the secular public sphere and transformed into a secular religion or a religion within the limits of
reason alone; general responsibility must not be contaminated by it. This is why, when the Editor argues that ‘we are turning away from God’ because of ‘modern civilization’, the Reader responds by accusing the Editor of ‘encouraging religious charlatanism’. The Reader argues: ‘In the name of religion Hindus and Mahomedans fought against one another. For the same cause Christians fought Christians. Thousands of innocent men have been murdered, thousands have been burned and tortured in its name. Surely this is much worse than any civilization.’

If the Reader attacks religion so vehemently, this is because for him the relinquishment of general responsibility in the name of religion or absolute responsibility would be the greatest violence. For him, where there cannot be the dialogue organized by general responsibility, there can only be irrational relations that are always likely to topple over into violence in at least two senses. First, how will absolute responsibility be responsible to that it is not in an absolute relation with? Will not this relation always be absolutely irresponsible? Second, how will absolute responsibility ever ensure the justice of its relation with that which it claims absolute responsibility towards? When Rama banishes Sita, or Harishchandra raises his sword on Taramati (two examples that Gandhi discusses)—how can these acts of absolute responsibility ever be just? Within the terms of general responsibility that the Reader works with, these insuperable objections ensure that absolute responsibility must always be limited and confined to the private sphere, or in other words not allowed to be absolute.

When the Reader seeks a dialogue, then, he seeks one that is conducted within the terms of general responsibility, or one that is organized by the possibility of a more or less full address. Such a dialogue may not lead to resolution. It may even be marked by a permanent disagreement. But it does presume that each can address the other within the dialogue, and that even where such address fails, the most responsible response would be to continue to try to address each other through the dialogue. To abandon the address involved in dialogue—for the Reader this would be to lapse into irrationalism, to allow for violence. If the Reader is willing to use force with the British, it is precisely because with them no reason or dialogue is possible.

**Absolute**

By exploring the three schematizations named earlier, it is possible to have some sense of Gandhi’s very different understanding of dialogue and responsibility. First, Gandhi affirms satyagraha as an absolute responsibility, a dharma. He refers often to the ‘law of satyagraha’. It is moreover a ‘divine law’ [khudai kayado], and as such one that must under no circumstances be disregarded or disobeyed.35 Both in Hind Swaraj and elsewhere, there is an emphatic privileging of satyagraha as the obligation and duty that cannot be avoided under any circumstances.

But what is distinctive here is that satyagraha is not just an absolute responsibility; it is rather what is always and everywhere proper to absolute
responsibility. For the Editor, *satyagraha* names what *dharna* entails when it moves from being a primarily cultural and social phenomenon to a primarily political and ethical one. Breaking from the ontotheological inclination to understand absolute responsibility only in terms of its groundlessness, Gandhi’s argument suggests that absolute responsibility itself has conceptual entailments, which he thinks through terms such as *satyagraha*, *ahimsa*, and *Ramarajya*. Absolute responsibility can remain absolute only by abiding by these entailments.

If *satyagraha* is what is proper to absolute responsibility, this is because it involves absolute equality, the equality of deference. Even as *satyagrahis* decide to resist, they recognize the potentially ungrounded and unfounded nature of their resistance—the fact that their knowledge cannot ever justify their resistance. If they fail to recognize this, they fail also to recognize the absolute nature of their responsibility, the bare faith that is constitutive of it. Thus Gandhi’s description of *satyagrahis*—they refuse to take lives of those whom they struggle against, but nevertheless do not mind giving up their lives.

They seek to resist non-violently, taking on themselves the consequences of unjust resistance, and hoping to provoke in their interlocutors a similar response—one organized not by protocols of the universal tribunal of law but by their singular responsibility to the *satyagrahis*. *Satyagraha* is thus the moment simultaneously of the practice of a singular and absolute responsibility, and of the resistant submission of that responsibility to every other responsibility. It is in this submission that the *satyagrahi* practises a relation of absolute equality with the other, and with the others of other. This absolute equality is what is proper to absolute responsibility; absolute responsibility is no longer absolute if it abandons the practice of absolute equality.

Second, the Editor attacks the concept of the third, or the ‘third party’. But he does not make the usual nationalist argument that it is a substantively European practice masquerading as a universal one. What troubles him is the concept of the third party itself, which for him is by no means uniquely European, which has its Indian genealogies too. For him, that concept—constitutive of general responsibility, abstract measure, or the secular public sphere—names the greatest violence. Recall what he says to the Reader: ‘two persons fight, one or both of them have their heads broken. What justice can a third party do in this.’ He therefore urges the Reader to have nothing to do with judges or lawyers.

He questions general responsibility—exemplified for him in Parliament, rule of law, the concept of the third, and the figure of the judge—because it cannot allow for absolute responsibility. As he remarks in a speech he makes in Nadiad in 1918 in the wake of the District Collector’s imprisonment of some *satyagrahis*: ‘One cannot expect a man occupying the chair of a judge to be a *satyagrahi*, for law does not recognize [swikara] *satyagraha*. For Gandhi, even where the judge arrives at a unique decision that takes account of the judge’s absolute responsibility to the other (as in Derrida’s example), that decision must, because it takes the form of the justice of law, insist on making absolute responsibility subordinate to general responsibility, on
sublating the former within the latter. In terms of Gandhi’s arguments, such judgments can never be singular; they can only be particular. The practice of general responsibility, in other words, must constitutively deny and repress an aperetic relation with absolute responsibility, and the judge’s inability to recognize satyagraha is symptomatic of this. Within the terms of Gandhi’s politics, thus, abiding by absolute responsibility requires, to begin with, a relinquishment of general responsibility, and an affirmation of the absolute responsibility of satyagraha.

This resistance to general responsibility is what the Reader finds so hard to understand: ‘You would then disregard laws—this is rank disloyalty [. . .] You seem to be going even beyond the extremists. They say that we must obey the laws that have been passed, but that if the laws be bad, we must drive out the law-givers even by force.’ As the Reader senses, the Editor disregards laws not because he would like to institute new laws (driving out the old laws by force), but because the very order of secular laws is challenged.

Province

Third, and very intriguingly, despite the Editor’s attacks on ‘modern civilization’, the latter is not overcome. This is intimated by the dialogue or samvad that occurs in Hind Swaraj. Quite clearly, Hind Swaraj is organized so as to privilege the Editor’s arguments, and little space is even provided for the Reader’s arguments. Over much of the text, especially the later part, the Reader is limited to asking questions that provide cues for the Editor’s expositions. But it would nevertheless be misplaced to argue that Hind Swaraj is marked by the domination of the Editor’s argument. The Reader remains in a troubled and questioning mood throughout. In the earlier chapters, when the Editor attacks ‘modern civilization’, the Reader emphatically argues back. And in later chapters, while the Reader elicits the Editor’s arguments about ‘true civilization’, it is not at all clear that he endorses these arguments. Even at the end of Hind Swaraj, there is no confluence between the Editor’s and Reader’s arguments. The Reader’s last questions seek a programme from the Editor realizing his vision, but it is again by no means clear that the Reader assents to this. Perhaps what the Reader says in Chapter 14 well describes his disagreement with the Editor: ‘I understand [samjhyo, “appreciate”] your thoughts [vicharo] on civilization. I will have to think over [dhyaan deva] them. You must not assume that I can take them in all at once. You must not even keep such hopes.’

Nor is it only that the Reader resists the Editor’s arguments. Earlier, in Chapter 7, the Reader becomes enthusiastic about the Editor’s argument and says, ‘You are right. Now I think you will not have to argue much with me to drive your conclusions home. I am impatient to know your further views.’ But the Editor responds: ‘I am afraid that, in spite of your enthusiasm, as we proceed further, we shall have differences of opinion.’ And in Chapter 14, when the Reader says that he will have to ‘think over’ the Editor’s arguments, the Editor responds:
I do not at all expect my views to be accepted all of a sudden. It is my duty [kartavya] to place them before people [manaso, ‘readers’] like yourself who wish to know my thoughts. Whether they will like those thoughts or not, that will be known only with time. [‘Time can be trusted to do the rest.’]

The Reader and the Editor agree that they might disagree. But the way they come to even that agreement is organized differently. The Reader needs time to critically reflect on the Editor’s arguments, to take them in (they cannot be taken in all at once), and this additional time need not lead to agreement. But even so, that disagreement itself will occur within a future dialogue.

Going by the English version, it might seem that the Editor’s understanding is not that different from the Reader’s, and that what he adds is the confident assertion that he trusts time to resolve the matter. Time in other words is on the Editor’s side and will help overcome the Reader in the future dialogue. Here, time has a certain patience that we have encountered often enough in dominant universalisms.

But the Gujarati version is marked by somewhat different emphases. Here, time holds its secret from the Editor too (‘that will be known only with time’). If we read the English translation while listening also to the Gujarati text, perhaps the Editor trusts time in a sense that is recessive in the English version read by itself—he puts his faith in time. To put his faith in time in this way is to submit to the possibility of a non-justiciable difference between him and the Reader, one that cannot be resolved even in a future dialogue. It is to think the Reader as never overcome, as opaque to the Editor, and the Editor’s relation with time as one of bare or groundless faith. In this way of thinking, the Reader comes to be marked by an absolute equality to the Editor, one that cannot be organized, even if the two were to agree, by a concept of the third.

And this equality to the Reader’s politics erupts repeatedly in Gandhi’s politics. In a preface to a new edition of Hind Swaraj, Gandhi emphasizes that even though the book is against ‘parliamentary swaraj’, that is what he demands as a member of the Congress. Effectively, then, Gandhi demands as a Congressman what the Reader demands, and what the Editor attacks. So too of satyagraha against the British—what is it if not the offering of absolute equality to ‘modern civilization’?

What do we make of this peculiar dialogue that reaches no conclusion, that presumes and enables the persistence of the difference that it attacks as evil, that must to accomplish its work trust to a time that does its work in an indeterminate future (for Gandhi is very clear that parliamentary swaraj and political independence from the British, which he is fighting for, will not result in the swaraj envisioned in Hind Swaraj)? What is the relation here between general and absolute responsibility? Why does general responsibility persist in the Editor’s affirmation of absolute responsibility? How in other words does this absolute equality work?

To begin with, this persistence is not because of ambivalence towards general responsibility. It is certainly correct to observe that Gandhi is ambivalent towards ‘modern civilization’ during the early part of this period. At the time that he writes Hind Swaraj, he still believes in the ultimate
goodness of the British empire and its rule of law. Yet, whatever the other points of interest of this ambivalence, it is inconsequential for the politics of absolute responsibility. Ambivalence is towards an object, and depends greatly on the characteristics of an object. In treating Gandhi’s affirmation of parliamentary swaraj as provoked by ambivalence towards specific features of ‘modern civilization’, we would seriously qualify his total questioning of that civilization. But what is thought-provoking about Gandhi’s argument here is quite the opposite—it is the aporia signalled in his simultaneous attack on modern civilization and affirmation of parliamentary swaraj.

I suggest that this aporia (which resonates strikingly with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument that European universalism is ‘indispensable and inadequate’) occurs because the practice of absolute equality always requires a provincialization of the self, or a relinquishment of domination. This may seem a curious thing to say. For Gandhi, to rehearse arguments I make in my forthcoming book, *Immeasurable Equality*, the self is always already inclined towards infinitude and mastery, towards the inevitable and indispensable machinic which reaches its apogee in ‘modern civilization’ and its order of general responsibility, its regime of rights, its republican democracy. Central to his politics, thus, is the struggle to limit that infinite and machinic self which participates both in domination of the other and its own subordination.

In *Hind Swaraj* as in later writings, this limiting is often carried out through brahmacharya, which is in later years to emerge for him as the first of the vows that concretized and embodied the vows of satya and ahimsa. But where the machinic self is limited by being overcome instead of provincialized, another infinite self is instituted in place of the machinic self—the upper caste brahmachari who affirms varnashramdharma, the warrior who has mastered the fear of death. To the extent that Gandhi pursues the strategy of mastering the infinite self, his politics leads not to the finitude necessary for absolute equality, but to a conservative iteration of the infinite self. There is no relinquishment of domination here—only a mastery of it, a domination of domination, so to speak.

But Gandhi also pursues another strategy of limiting—that of the self provincializing its own infinite self, or relinquishing domination and subordination. A suggestive example here is Gandhi’s response to the question of how to treat a dacoit:

I have never approved of killing a dacoit [dhadpadu]. I have preferred winning him over with love [prem]. But he who cannot follow that dharma [‘is not equal to that love’], who cannot summon the strength of love [prembad poonji, ‘master all the love’] that the act demands, has the right [adhikar] to protect his proteges and his property even by killing the dacoit.39

In this formulation, absolute equality perdures not only between self and other, Editor and Reader, but also within the Editor.40 Here, both actions—loving and killing—are appropriate, even if one is more so than the other. Nor indeed can the transition from the one to the other be forced. For Gandhi, if one cannot bring oneself to feel the necessary love to forgive or to win the
dacoit over, then it would be mistaken to try to force oneself to forgive. Encountering their own infinite selves, satyagrahis practise not mastery but relinquishment. Here, satyagrahis on the one hand seek to be so disciplined by daya or love that they can give up the demand for general responsibility and its justice, and on the other hand recognize that their daya may be inadequate and therefore do not seek to master or overcome their own demand for justice. In this provincializing of the self or relinquishment of domination, satyagrahis offer an absolute equality to both themselves and their others.

I may also add an anecdote here that I can only hope is not apocryphal, since despite memories of having read it I have not been able to find again the reference to it in the all too voluminous writings by and about Gandhi. Somewhere in the 1920s, one of Gandhi’s associates writes to him, reporting a theft in his house. In keeping with what Gandhi argued for, the associate writes, he had not registered a case with the police. But he still felt angry at the thief. Gandhi responds by arguing that if the associate was resentful of the theft, then it was his duty to report it to the police; he should refrain from registering a complaint, Gandhi adds, only either if he was sure that he could forgive the thief, or if he could practise satyagraha against the thief.

Again, then, Gandhi simultaneously pursues two strategies. On the one hand, there is the need for the satyagrahi to transform himself so that he can forgive the dacoit, or failing that offer satyagraha against him. On the other hand, to the extent that the satyagrahi cannot transform himself, there is the need for him to confront the robber in other ways. These other ways include physically fighting the dacoit or approaching the police. These are acceptable strategies to Gandhi even though they are premised on general responsibility, and on creating and sustaining precisely the figure of the third that Gandhi as a satyagrahi opposes. Here, the satyagrahi thus both exercises the right to demand abstract rights, and attacks relations organized by rights.

Symptomatic of this doubled relationship again are his remarks about why he takes medicines despite the attack on modern medicine, including hospitals as ‘institutions for propagating sin’: ‘What I have said about hospitals is also true. And yet I suppose I shall resort to the few medicines I hold lawful, so long as I retain the least attachment for my body.’ As this formulation suggests, satyagrahis should seek to ‘overcome’ (a word Gandhi often uses in this context) attachment to the body, but that overcoming cannot simply be a repression or suppression of attachment; that other overcoming should itself be organized by daya. (Symptomatic of this other overcoming is his suggestion in Chapter 8 of Hind Swaraj that nationalists should ‘conquer’ Bhils, Thugs and Pindaris; here, he uses the word ‘conquer’ to translate jeeyta, ‘win over’.)

Is this not a contradiction in terms? It clearly would be if the satyagrahi were an agent who regarded these as two divergent strategies and decided between them depending on what was most workable in a given situation. If this were the case, then the best that could be said is that the weapons of the weak, of those who have been traumatized by domination, cannot be held to the same criteria as others.
But *satyagrahis* are not agents, and provincializing is never a strategy. Rather, the *satyagrahis* seek to make themselves into finite figures. And yet, to the extent that they cannot make themselves finite, they also lapse into the very agency that they struggle against. To recognize the constitutive unavoidability of general responsibility, then, is to emphasize that even where *satyagrahis* affirm absolute responsibility, it can never be total. Absolute responsibility could become total only by overcoming general responsibility, and it would in this very overcoming no longer be absolute responsibility. The only pure absolute responsibility, in other words, would practise equality with general responsibility and other absolute responsibilities.

Perhaps this should allow us also to reconsider the relation between the Reader and the Editor. It is conventional, and in a sense quite correct, to observe that the Editor voices the arguments that Gandhi affirms, and the Reader voices arguments made by the mainstream nationalists that Gandhi met, especially on his trip to London just before he wrote *Hind Swaraj*. But given what we have discovered to be the conceptual necessity of the Reader, perhaps it would be more apposite to say that the Reader too makes Gandhi’s arguments—arguments that the Editor must oppose without overcoming, arguments that he must provincialize. The Editor is the Reader, though we must understand ‘is’ here transitively.

This absolute equality also organizes *satyagraha*’s relation with the secular laws of the land, which instantiate general responsibility. As I remarked earlier, *satyagraha* does not recognize the law: *satyagrahis* cannot be judges even when they practise justice. But *satyagraha*’s non-recognition of the law does not involve overcoming the law to institute a new law; it involves rather a resistant submission to it. Gandhi insists that the *satyagrahi* must follow these laws wherever possible, and yet must where necessary defy these laws and suffer the consequences of so doing. The absolute responsibility of *satyagraha* thus does not seek to sublate or repress the law.

Is not this absolute equality at work in the phrase ‘trust time’? At its most basic, does not that phrase say this?: the Editor must leave it to the Reader to himself reject ‘modern civilization’, which is to say that he must also take the chance that the Reader will not do this. But to the extent that the Reader demands modern civilization, the Editor can interrogate the Reader’s participation in it, maybe even eventually practise *satyagraha* against him, but he cannot seek to overcome modern civilization, or the Reader who by participating in it also embodies it. This is another reason why the Reader must continue to be a significant presence in the text.

Perhaps the phrase also says more still. Trust time—the Editor cannot hope to convince the Reader through arguments within the covers of *Hind Swaraj*. There is work to be done outside these covers, opaque and secret from not only the Editor but the Reader. That is to say, it is not opaque in the sense of being the Reader’s sovereign communion with his conscience about the Editor’s arguments, which the Reader invokes the right of privacy to keep secret. It is secret in the sense rather that the Reader comes to be seized by the Editor’s arguments (and Gandhi often resorts to the word ‘conscience’ to describe this seizure). This seizure occurs in ways that are obscured from,
secret from, both the Reader and the Editor. The Reader must be provincialized, must provincialize himself, but the Editor cannot demand this of the Reader, any more than he can of himself.

If I may, so to speak, recapitulate: provincialization is not only a rejection of the infinitude of the other; it is also a reworking of that infinitude into finitude, into that which rejects the capital. Only by provincializing that infinitude can the Editor affirm the otherness of the other, for where there is infinitude, there can only be specificity, particularity and generality—no otherness, and no singularity. In this affirmation of the otherness of the other and the self, in this work of provincializing, Gandhi espies ahimsa.

And yet, Gandhi slowly comes by the 1920s to acknowledge that the practice of dying without killing, giving one’s life instead of taking the other’s life, is by itself inadequate. He comes to acknowledge a violence internal to the absolute responsibility that is ahimsa. This violence, for him, is practised in Rama’s banishment of Sita, or Harishchandra lifting his sword on Taramati. To this terrifying moment in his thinking, we will have to attend on some other occasion.

Notes


1 ‘My Notes’, Navjivan, 4 April 1921, Akshardeha, Vol 21, p 476; CWMG, Vol 25, p 191. Gandhi usually writes originally in Gujarati, and this writing is then translated (sometimes by him, as in the case of Hind Swaraj) into English. In these notes, I first refer to the language in which Gandhi originally wrote, and where this is in Gujarati, provide a reference also to the English translation. Where Gandhi originally wrote/spoke in Gujarati, I have usually adhered to the official translation. However, I have sometimes either indicated my own translation in parentheses, or provided the official translation within quotes in the parentheses. When citing from Hind Swaraj, given the number of editions available even online, I have tried to make things easier for the reader by indicating the chapter from which the citation is taken. Since these chapters are fairly short, it will presumably not be a problem to find the citation within the chapter.

2 This hostility to the majority persists in later years. Writing an obituary for Lokmanya Tilak in 1920, Gandhi remarks that he ‘believed in rule of majority with an intensity that fairly frightened me’ (‘Lokmanya’, Young India, 4 August 1920; CWMG, Vol 21, p 11). In a similar vein, he warns a year later that majority rule would be a ‘barbarous imposition, if it were utilized to crush a minority’ (‘Notes’, Young India, 1 December 1921; CWMG, Vol 25, p 167).


8 For a more extended reading in this vein of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s classic, Provincializing Europe, see my ‘The Project of Provincializing Europe: Reading Dipesh Chakrabarty’, Economic and Political Weekly 44(14), 2009.
Wherever he [the Indian] goes, and under whatever conditions he is placed, he bows to the decision of the majority represented by those in authority over him. For, he knows no one can be in authority over him, unless he is tolerated there by a majority of the body to which he belongs. This principle is so ingrained in the Indian heart that even the most despotic princes of the Indian States feel that they are to rule for the people. It is true that they do not all act up to that principle. The causes need not be discussed here. And the most astounding fact is that, even when nominally there is a monarchical government, the Punchayat is the supreme body. The actions of its members are regulated in accordance with the wish of the majority.

11 Evidence before Disorders Inquiry Committee, 4 January 1920; CWMG, Vol 19, p 217.
12 Petition to Natal Legislative Assembly, 28 June 1894; CWMG, Vol 1, p 145. See also ‘The Indian Franchise’, 16 December 1895; CWMG, Vol 1, p 287. Here Gandhi writes:

13 I discuss the thekaana in my ‘Only One Word, Properly Altered: Gandhi and the Question of the Prostitute’, Economic and Political Weekly 41(49), 9 December 2006, pp 5065–5072; also published in Postcolonial Studies 10(2), June 2007, pp 219–237. I discuss the figure of the satyagrahi warrior in my ‘Living by Dying’, in Daud Ali and Anand Pandian, Ethical Life in South Asia, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. The latter essay explores Gandhi’s argument that warriors are marked by their willingness to sacrifice their lives. This imbues them with a distinctive immeasurability, for one’s own death is what one cannot measure, and they have mastered fear of death, they are equal to their own deaths. And satyagrahis are the ‘true warriors’, even more so than the warriors who kill their enemies, for they have so mastered fear of death that they resist the other by offering their own lives, without seeking to defend their own lives, without taking the other’s life. In doing so, satyagrahis, impelled by daya or love, practise an immeasurable equality with their antagonists.

of republican democracy, and in the caution about disavowing general responsibility, Gandhi’s arguments are subtly different. While Gandhi does not necessarily contest this autoimmunity, he is more emphatic about the way this autoimmunity also limits itself—in other words, about the way republican democracy must dominate the minor that it celebrates and creates a space for. Relatedly, he seeks to relinquish republican democracy; he seeks therefore a sovereignty that is the other of sovereignty—this is what he calls Ramavarjya.

32 She points out that Arjuna feels compassion here because ‘the ends of war—territorial conquest, wealth, and power—have value for Arjuna only insofar as he is connected to others’. Krishna’s response to Arjuna, like Hegel’s response to Antigone, is marked by ‘precisely the necessity of negating and disavowing the community of kin’. In Krishna’s answer, such sacrifice to the godhead is the dharma or law of the warrior. (Sawhney, The Modernity of Sanskrit, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p 94ff.)
33 The infinitizing involved in the Gita provides us with a clue to why so many Indian nationalists turn to it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to formulate their critiques of colonial rule. Quite apart from the crucial historical contingencies that made the Gita available, perhaps there was also its conceptual accordance with their needs. These thinkers encountered a colonial humanism which claimed its legitimacy from the general responsibility of humanism. Could it be that in claiming and producing an alternative to this, they sought to produce another infinite ethics or order of general responsibility, and gravitated towards a text that was in its way already available for such a task? Could it be that they reworked it to provide an infinitizing ethics appropriate for the modern state? And could the decline of nationalist interpretations of the Gita be connected to the fact that colonial appropriations of liberal humanism, which too were a characteristic of the period, had by that time prevailed?
34 While the conceptual logic of the third is by no means either modern or western in its origins, certain forms of historically modern European universalism exemplify that logic especially forcefully, to the extent that they erase at times even their place of origin—Europe—and claim to be correct for all ‘humans’. One very important aspect of the recent turn to intellectual history in South Asia (exemplified in different ways in the work of Chris Bayly, Chris Minkowski, and Sheldon Pollock) is that it provides non-European genealogies for the concept of the third, and also explores the distinctive historical conjuncture that led to one of these universalisms—the European one—dominating and eclipsing other universalisms.
38 This last sentence is missing in the English translation. The previous sentence is translated: ‘I cannot take them in at once.’
39 ‘Rosary or Spinning Wheel’, Navijvan, 10 August 1924, Akshardeha, p 505; CWMG, Vol 28, p 461.
40 I explore this constitutive separation of the self in ‘Only One Word, Properly Altered’.
41 ‘Rosary or Spinning Wheel’, Navijvan, 10 August 1924, Akshardeha, p 505; CWMG, Vol 28, p 461.
42 For an extremely thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion of how trauma might authorize resentment as a strategy quite opposed to satyagraha, see Ananya Vajpeyi, ‘Resenting the Indian State: For a New Political Practice in the Northeast’, in Sanjib Baruah (ed), Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. I worry, however, that an affirmation of resentment might even in its own way be dehumanizing, suggesting that the victims of violence can never be part of a politics of provincializing, or even part of a politics of general responsibility.