Gandhi’s radical conservatism

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IN Hind Swaraj, the Editor famously questions the Reader’s nationalist vision of swaraj, describing it as ‘English rule without the Englishman.’ That remark is symptomatic of Gandhi’s questioning of liberal conceptions of freedom and equality. Liberal traditions usually conceive freedom in terms of autonomy – as the everyday sovereignty that a rational being exercises by authoring universal law, or law that any rational being would and must freely submit to. Autonomous beings are also equal, and modern republican democracies enshrine this equality in the rights of citizens. Autonomy is accompanied moreover by a distinction between the public and the private, with the presence of religion in the public sphere being regarded as undesirable – as heteronomy and unfreedom.

The Reader in Hind Swaraj could well be working within this problematic that affirms the rights of man and citizen. He wants an Indian parliament, and says: ‘What they have done in their own country has not been done in any other country. It is, therefore, proper for us to import their institutions.’

Gandhi by contrast is critical of both sovereignty and autonomy. In his writing, sovereignty is not exemplified only in the state. Rather, every self is deeply fissured, and sovereignty is ubiquitous, always to begin with exer-

* The arguments ventured here are explored at greater length in my forthcoming book, Immeasurable Equality: Gandhi and the Gift of Religion.
Autonomy becomes here one kind of everyday sovereignty – that exercised over the self through measure and calculation. And when autonomy is institutionalized as a social order, as with parliamentary democracy, the violence of sovereignty is intensified in two ways. First, this order grants equality only to those beings presumed to possess the power to reason and measure, and in this way systematizes domination over all other beings (such as animals or the colonized). Second, autonomous beings inflict a massive violence on themselves, for they lose the power to love, which in Gandhi’s writings requires the surrender of autonomy and even sovereignty. (It is because of this loss that for the Editor the English deserve ‘pity’.) In both these ways, autonomy institutes a rule of the major. Here, freedom and equality is possible only through domination over the minor. What is lost is the possibility of an exit from subalternity that does not participate in domination or majority.

Questioning autonomy, Gandhi affirms instead a politics organized around dharma or religion – not this or that religion, but around religion as a concept (or, more precisely quasi-concept). For him, there can be ‘no politics without religion.’ Religion provides him with another way of thinking freedom and equality. He writes in 1926, for example: ‘The truth is that my dharma not only permits me to claim but requires me to own kinship [sagpan] with not merely the ape but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake and the scorpion.’ As kin, his remarks elsewhere suggest, satyagrahis must strive to be absolutely equal to all beings.

But beings such as the snake or the scorpion can never claim the equality involved in autonomy or even that broader concept sovereignty. His religion thus requires him to ask: how might a subaltern politics not only refuse subordination, but do so by relinquishing autonomy and even sovereignty – which is to say, by becoming minor?

Such a religion must strive for an equality of and with the minor – an equality that does not make the minor into a major, that remains minor. In chapter 17, the Editor takes issue with the privileging of the majority: ‘It is a superstition and an ungodly thing to believe that an act of the many [ghana, ‘majority’] binds the few [thoda, ‘minority’]. Many examples can be given in which acts of the many will be found to have been wrong and those of the few to have been right. All reforms owe their origin to the initiative of the few in opposition to the many. ’ Here and elsewhere, ‘minority’ (Gandhi’s English translation) names not so much a sociological or historical category as a way of being. Relinquishing sovereignty, satyagrahis must strive for an equality of and with the minor.

This freedom and equality resonates intriguingly with the ‘pre-definition’ Derrida offers of religion: ‘however little may be known of religion in the singular… it is always a response that is prescribed, not chosen freely in an act of pure and abstractly autonomous will. There is no doubt that it implies freedom, will and responsibility, but let us try to think this: will and freedom without autonomy.’

Central to Gandhi’s equality of the minor is a distinctive surrender. In chapter 13, thus, the Editor remarks: ‘every lover of India’ should ‘keep faith [shraddha], and ‘cling to Indian civility even as a child clings to the mother.’ These lovers, thus, do not autonomously and as mature adults arrive at a love for India that makes them stand by India and loyally critique it. Rather, their love makes them minors, and surrender as a child would. In Gandhi’s writing, this self-surrender is religion.

The struggle to think this religion of self-surrender, this other freedom and equality, leads him to his most famous neologism, satyagraha. He initially coins the word to translate the English phrase ‘passive resistance’, but it quickly exceeds these origins – very soon afterwards, he describes ‘passive resistance’ as an inadequate translation of satyagraha. For him, satyagraha is the ‘religion that stays in all religions.’

There is thus a striking paradox: though religion involves ‘self-surrender’, satyagraha as the most intense practice of religion involves ‘passive resistance’, which is not exactly surrender in the sense we usually understand the word. What then is the concept of religion that Gandhi offers, and what is its politics? We can take a cue from the etymology of satyagraha. Agraha: seizure of or by, Gandhi’s translation of ‘resistance’, Satya: not just truth, but being; Gandhi’s equivalent initially of ‘passive’. Satya is conceived moreover here not as some shared inert substance but as an active force that is everywhere constitutive of being, as care and love for all beings; hence the translation of satyagraha also as ‘love force’ or ‘soul force’.

For Gandhi, this religion that stays in all religions, satyagraha, is both

borne and obscured by ‘formal religions’ or ‘customary religions’. It is borne by them since all religions are marked by the surrender, offered in faith, of the self to the sacred. It is obscured by them since these religions usually conceive the sacred in terms of a sovereign power, God; their surrender thus becomes a subordination of the self. Such obscuring of absolute equality is in his writing the himsa or violence that being originally inflicts on itself and others.

In his writing, to be seized by satya – to practice satyagraha – is to oppose the subordination of either self or other, to strive for the absolute equality of all being. This resistance is ‘passive’ in the sense of proceeding through ahimsa or nonviolence – it surrenders to the opponent in order to neither subordinate itself to nor master the opponent. But this resistance is also intensely active in the sense of springing forth from the originary care and love that marks being – it relinquishes the freedom of everyday sovereignty only in order to share with opponents another freedom and equality, one organized around surrender without subordination.

Gandhi thinks this surrender through several phrases – satyagraha, ahimsa, ‘pure means’, ‘pure example’, ‘pure gift’ and ‘pure self-sacrifice’. In different ways, these phrases are troubled and troubling responses to the same question: what would be a subaltern politics that refuses subordination, but does so without claiming sovereignty or autonomy, without claiming rights and citizenship? Surrender without subordination names the most crucial stake of Gandhi’s politics – what it most gives to think, and yet what perhaps remains most obscured not only from us but also from Gandhi. (Symptomatic of the latter phenomenon is the gap between the Gujarati in which Gandhi often first writes, and his own English translations: entire words and phrases are missing, or carry quite different connotations, in the latter.)

Here, I would like to stress one dimension of this surrender without subordination: how, in thinking of the satyagrahi’s seizure by religion, Gandhi formulates a radical conservatism. Modern conservatism, beginning at least with Edmund Burke, has questioned the calculability that marks liberal traditions, and has emphasized instead incalculability and finitude. In his Reflections, Burke contrasts the abstract equality and rights sought by the French Revolution to the finite and place-bound ‘rights of Englishmen’.

Believe me, Sir, those who attempt to level, never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levellers therefore only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society, by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground.3

And he offers instead a vision of an English equality marked by a ‘generous loyalty to rank and sex’, a ‘proud submission’, ‘dignified obedience’, and ‘subordination of the heart’, which keeps ‘alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom.’ A ‘noble equality’ accompanies and works across inequalities; this equality consists in the respect that each rank offers the other.

Gandhi intensifies this tradition by insisting that the purest affirmation of incalculability and finitude consists of the practice of fearlessness (abhay). Symptomatic of that intensification is the repeated description, by this most famous proponent of nonviolence, of satyagrahis as kshatriyas or ‘true warriors’. The warrior exemplifies abhaya, for he lives a life that he has received by risking what is constitutively finite and yet immeasurable or incalculable to him – the possibility of his own death. This self-sacrificial conduct imbues him with a certain immeasurable equality with similar warriors. But here immeasurable equality is also simultaneously an immeasurable inequality – not only with the warriors whom the warrior seeks to kill, but also with those who cannot ever be kshatriyas: for example, women and lower castes. If we are to say, with Ranciere, that politics is that activity which turns on equality as its principle, then the warrior in his fearlessness exemplifies an especially charged political moment – one where both equality and inequality become immeasurable.4

The warrior’s incalculable political order is sustained through an economy of the gift. As we know well, the gift is constitutively marked by incalculability – this is how we distinguish it from the commodity. Here, the warrior gives what is incalculable to him – his own life. But what is given is an economic gift – he gives with conscious or unconscious expectation of return. It is not only that the warrior offers his life in return for sovereignty at least over himself and potentially over others. Even more crucially, his gift institutes a proper social order, a sovereignty of the proper. As a kshatriya, the warrior himself is one of the four varnas or castes, and it is his dharma or religion to uphold both varnashramdharma as well as the dharma of womanhood (stridharma).5 Here, each entity limits itself to its religion, and in this sacri-


ficial self-limitation maintains the social order. Each caste and gender is moreover so immeasurably given to what is proper to it that there can be no equality across divisions; they can be equal only in and to their inequality.

Gandhi’s writing intensifies the politicalness of the warrior by venturing on a radical conservatism – radical not because it is to the left or right (not at all), but because it relinquishes and destroys the warrior’s sovereignty and arms while conserving the latter’s immeasurable equality. (We could also thus call it an autoimmune conservatism.) For Gandhi, the warrior’s sovereignty is in its way as violent and ‘demonic’ as the sovereignty of measure. But the warrior in his immeasurability and finitude can nevertheless publicly practice what modern civility cannot – trust, forgiveness, and love. The satyagrahi strives to be seized by, and radicalize, these practices. Gandhi’s radical conservatism begins from an emphasis on abhaydana, the gift (dana) of fearlessness (a-bhay) or, in his suggestive translation on one occasion, the ‘gift of life’. He draws this charged word from Jain and Buddhist traditions, where abhaydana names the first and foremost of gifts, even the only gift. For him too, abhaydana is the ‘greatest of gifts’, ‘the first requisite of true religion.’

Extending Jain traditions, Gandhi reads satyagraha as the most intense moment of that gift. He suggests that a residual bhay or fear marks the arms-bearing warrior, and makes him take up arms. Satyagrahis by contrast are true warriors – so fearless as to never take up arms, as to sacrifice themselves rather than kill their opponents. They work for an absolute equality – to universalize immeasurable equality to include all being, without exception. Through self-sacrifice, satyagrahis offer fearlessness to their opponents and experience it themselves. Their fearlessness differs from that of warriors – while the latter requires a mastery of fear, the former requires a welling of love or compassion (prem, daya).

In Gandhi’s writing, all being originarly bears the potentiality for this other fearlessness. Thus ‘corn emerges from seed’ through ‘self-sacrifice’, and the child lives because ‘the mother suffers for it even to the point of death.’ As such, all being is capable of responding to, offering and receiving satyagraha (for him the life of St. Francis of Assisi amongst others reveals this).

These opposed forms of fearlessness – one organized around sovereignty, power, and the other around satyagraha – are moreover coeval with each other. This is why satyagraha can only be conceived as the relinquishment of everyday sovereignty. It may also be why the word ahimsa is much more prominent in Gandhi’s vocabulary than shanti, ‘peace’: unlike the latter, the former constitutively presumes a violence or himsa that it works against.

This radical conservatism is moreover not one. As he struggles with the question of how to gift fearlessness, his writing comes to be marked by the destruction of conservatism in two divergent senses of the genitive – one where the conservatism that is his point of departure destroys his efforts to relinquish sovereignty, and the other where his efforts to relinquish sovereignty destroy the conservatism he starts out from.

He never draws a line between the two radical conservatisms; perhaps, indeed, that line cannot be known. The same sentences, phrases, and even words, often accomplish the destruction of conservatism in both senses of the genitive. Yet, the political entailments of the two diverge abysally.

In the first, satyagrahis are driven by their prem or love to exercise so thoroughly a sovereignty over their own lives that they refuse to seize even the last chance at life before their own death. By doing so, they extend the arms-bearing warrior’s immeasurable equality and sovereignty to all being; they wrench that warrior’s immeasurable equality apart from immeasurable inequality, and thus practice ahimsa or satyagraha.

Precisely because of the resultant universality, satyagrahis as the true warriors are no longer only male. Here, rather, the gender, caste and majority of the arms-bearing warrior is thoroughly transformed. It turns out thus as we attend to Gandhi’s writings that the exemplary satyagrahis are usually women and children. In these and many other ways, the true warrior is organized around what is made minor in the figure of the arms-bearing warrior.

Nevertheless, this conservative satyagraha becomes as ‘demonic’ and violent as ‘modern civilization’, or the immeasurable sovereignty of the warrior. Even if satyagrahis claim no sovereignty over the other, this is so because they exercise a thorough sovereignty over the self. That grounding violence institutes an order where it is proper for the self to surrender to the other; it also imposes the sovereignty of the proper over the other too.

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It would be easy enough to indicate the many occasions on which his interventions institute such sovereignty. His explicit formulations draw heavily on the trope of the thekana (rightful place) in thinking of the role of women or varnadharma; he cannot envisage any significant role in the Congress for prostitutes – women who exemplify the abandonment of rightful place; and his explicit formulations cannot conceptualize a political role for insurgent untouchables or ‘Dalits’, only for deified untouchables or ‘Harijans’. In all these cases, Gandhi’s conservatism destroys his affirmation of the equality of all being. Even though satyagrahis give themselves aneconomically here, in the process they establish an economy of the proper – a sovereign social order centred on propriety and appropriation.

To the extent that Gandhi works within the terms of the proper, then even on the most generous reading he can only appear the way he does to Jawaharlal Nehru or, even more, B.R. Ambedkar – as thoroughly unable to even recognize the demand for equality from the margins. An understanding of caste, gender or the Indian village in terms of the proper would naturalize relations of power – regarding them as prepolitical, and glossing over their work of domination; it would also be entirely incapable of responding to the subaltern demand for abstract equality – which Gandhi faces, for example, from Ambedkar. Such satyagraha not only perpetuates the arms-bearing warrior’s violence (even if that figure itself disappears); it might even intensify that violence, for now the giver has a good conscience, and the receiver is expected to be grateful.

More complicated and intriguing is the other radical conservatism. Here, satyagrahis no longer practice a greater degree of the same fearlessness as that practiced by arms-bearing warriors; they no longer exercise the immense sovereignty over self which allows them to surrender to their opponent without subordinating themselves. Rather, they surrender by relinquishing sovereign power even over themselves. While the first radical conservatism remains a willed surrender – where satyagrahis exercise their will over themselves; in the second they surrender by relinquishing their will – by becoming shunya or ‘ciphers’, to use a word that infects his vocabulary from the late 1910s.

What is at stake in becoming a cipher? Most crucially, the figure of the cipher introduces a politics of the pure gift – schematically, the gift that is aneconomic, or given without expectation of reciprocity. Following Mauss, anthropological scholarship has usually insisted that all gifts are economic. In anthropological or sociological terms, it is correct to say that the pure gift is impossible. Nevertheless, as several thinkers (most notably, again, Derrida) have by now pointed out, the gift as a concept is in turn impossible without a certain purity and aneconomy.

If we are to extend these arguments, then it could be said that a pure gift can only be given and received freely – it thus presumes a freedom and swaraj for both the giver and the receiver. But this is a strange freedom. On the one hand, to give a gift is always to relinquish sovereignty and agency: a gift is separated from the giver, who cannot and will not control the gift. Indeed, the gift no longer belongs to the giver, for it has come also to be marked by the receiver. On the other hand, the gift does not belong to the receiver, for it is marked by the giver. To accept a gift is again to relinquish agency; the gift seizes the recipient, even though the giver cannot control the recipient. This loss of sovereignty and agency by both giver and receiver, this separation from oneself experienced by both – this is what everywhere marks the pure gift.

To give or receive a pure gift is therefore to simultaneously destroy sovereignty and subordination. Involved in the pure gift is the politics proper to the being who simultaneously refuses privative non-being and autonomous being, who is oriented in other words towards a freedom without being and sovereignty, without propriety. It is moreover marked by a distinctive purity of means, for here the gift is not given or received as a means to an end, however delayed or deferred. In ways both evident and not so evident, satyagraha ‘is’ the politics of pure means, or the pure gift (and those quotes around the ‘is’ are necessary since satyagraha and the satyagrahi do not possess the sovereignty or substantivity that usually make for is-ness).

Such abhaydan or the gift of fearlessness, moreover, makes satyagraha the most intense moment of the political, if we are to continue to operate with Ranciere’s understanding of that term. In their self-sacrifice, satyagrahis strive to gift the greatest equality to all being, and do so moreover only by receiving it themselves from all being. Gandhi’s aneconomic thinking of the gift of fearlessness perhaps murmurs already in the English translation of Hind Swaraj, where the Editor remarks that the satyagrahi ‘keeps death always as a bosom friend’ (there is no equivalent to this phrase in the Gujarati text).

In Gandhi’s writing, only in friendship with one’s own death is it possible to love at all. Friendship with death names the way that satyagrahis must go to their own deaths, the non-
being that must mark their being. They cannot go to their death as sovereigns over their lives – if so, they would fight death, and the moment of their death would be the moment that death becomes sovereign over them. Rather, they must gift themselves to their own death, and receive their own life as a gift from their own death. This friendship with death is the non-being, notness or ciphering proper to satyagraha.

Friendship with one’s own death moreover sustains a relation of the pure gift with the other. Satyagrahis always offer their own lives to the other, and the life that they lead after so making themselves vulnerable is one that is received from the other. And yet this surrender is never a subordination; here rather submission to the other is the utmost resistance. Put differently, because they give a life that they have received through a friendship with their own death, their submission is at the same time the giving of the notness of their being to the other. When they submit, they give to the other only their difference from the other. By so doing, they derange both themselves and the other; this derangement is swaraj.

Swaraj as derangement?: if swaraj is the raj or rule of the swa or proper/ownmost, then here swaraj becomes the impropriety proper to being. How does this other swaraj work? It is not possible to respond to these questions here. But this much at least must be said: the politics of the pure gift is not nonviolence in the conventional sense of the word: not only is it not an attenuation of force, but Gandhi is quite emphatic that it may on occasion even involve active killing of both animals and humans. The only thing that makes that killing nonviolent, if that adjective can be used at all to describe killing, is that it seeks to enact a surrender without subordination.