

Gandhi's Political Realism

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Seminar Introduction

Abstract:

Gandhi's legacy is usually defined by the theory and practice of non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*) and his success at leading the popular mobilization against British rule in India. Closely tied to with this view of Gandhi as an inventor of a novel form of political protest, is a potent image of the saint-like, spiritual leader and a suspicion that his achievements stem in large part from the enigmatic force of his moral personality. The recourse to a theory of charisma or the enigma of ethical authority, however, poses a challenge to how we understand the relationship between Gandhi's political ideas and Gandhi as a political actor, indeed it may well point to a necessary chasm between the two. That is, if Gandhi's efficacy in politics seen to rely less on the *content* of his political ideas and more on their aesthetic or ideological impact, then how we characterize, understand, and situate his political thought would be have revised. For the most part, studies of Gandhi's political thought, even when sensitive to the broad array of techniques and practices that constitute non-violent political action, tend to view Gandhi as a moral absolutist in politics and thus implicitly reinforce this kind of disjuncture between Gandhi's ideas and politics.

I will argue that there is something fundamentally misguided, both substantively and methodologically, with the dominant characterization of Gandhi as a political moralist. Though Gandhi's moral-political persona bears an important relationship to his mass political appeal, it tells us very little about other equally critical facets of his political life. Most importantly, his popularity alone cannot explain or account for the *character* of Gandhi's political judgment, for the processes of reflection, reasoning, and analysis that enabled him to make sound political decisions. There is a great deal more to be said about how Gandhi came to his political decisions and how he was able to make political judgment both effective and principled, or rather effective *because* it appeared principled. If we ignore the broad question of judgment, we not only circumvent a meaningful analysis of the relationship between Gandhi's political thought and political practice, but we also risk misconstruing Gandhi's political theory as essentially a theory of political morality.

I propose that the way we should understand Gandhi is not as someone who applied or impose preconceived moral principles to the realm of politics, but rather as someone who experimented with a variety of methods, techniques, and modes of political action which taken together produced the cumulative effect of principled politics. I will reconstruct Gandhi's political theory according to the logic of this methodological and substantive reversal. Rather than beginning from abstract philosophical premises about non-violence and truth or from the depth of his moral

commitment to them, I will proceed by outlining, first, what I take to be his *theory* of politics, his understanding of what the fundamental problems of politics are and, then, turn to how he developed distinct political *means* – i.e. modes and principles of political action – to constrain, transform, and ultimately overcome them. Because Gandhi worked from the standpoint of wanting to effectively intervene in and transform the political world, and not from the standpoint of moral criticism, I will conclude by suggesting that Gandhi might be legitimately characterized as a political realist.

Further Reading:

Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings, edited by Denis Dalton (Hackett, 1996)

The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, 3 vols, edited by Raghavan Iyer (OUP, 1986). There is also an abridged single volume, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (OUP, 1983).

Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (University of California, 1965)

Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Studies in Gandhism* (Navajivan, 1972)

Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (OUP, 1973)

Karuna Mantena, “[Gandhi’s Critique of the State: Sources, Contexts, Conjectures](#)”

Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (University of Notre Dame, 1989)

Biography:

Karuna Mantena is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University. She received her PhD from Harvard University in 2004 and has previously taught at Cornell University. Her research interests include modern social and political thought, the theory and history of empire, Indian intellectual history, and South Asian politics and history. Her first book on nineteenth century British imperial ideology, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, has just been published by Princeton University Press.