**The Gandhian State**

Inspirational Action and the Politicization of Conduct

*"…rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. They can never be imposed from outside."*[1]

## Introduction

Gandhi's discourse on the state has long been one of the most contested aspects of his political thought and his often-cited claim that the modern state is little more than a "soulless machine" that "represents violence in a concentrated and organized form" has been the focal point for a number of harsh critiques.[2] In fact, Gandhi's critics have used this discourse to suggest that his vision "was injurious and ultimately fatal to Hindu-Muslim unity" and that he was severely "lacking in both political wisdom and political strategy."[3] Others have claimed that Gandhi "committed serious blunder, one after another, in pursuit of some utopian ideals and methods which had no basis in reality."[4] Even Nehru shared little sympathy for Gandhi's vision of the state, seeing it as "intellectually and culturally backwards."[5]

Amidst all of these critiques, however, there is little agreement regarding exactly *how* Gandhi conceived the state. Some scholars have, for instance, taken the claims made above to demonstrate Gandhi's commitment to "an anarchist view of the State."[6] In a similar vein, Bhikhu Parekh suggests, "Like many moral idealist Gandhi found it difficult to appreciate the role of

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[1] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 175.
[2] Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Selections From Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1957), 41.
[3] Penderel Moon, *Gandhi and Modern India* (London: Norton, 1968), 275-6.
[4] Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, III (Calcutta: South Asian Books, 1963), xvii-xix.
[5] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 152.
[6] Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Santa Barbara: Concorde Grove Press, 1983), 254.

coercion in social life and to come to terms with the state."[7] Yet others have pushed back against this reading, arguing that Gandhi was, despite all of his critical rhetoric, ultimately in favor of a limited liberal state.[8] Indeed, during his life, Gandhi was at times labeled a Bolshevik and at other times, a conservative middle class "mascot of the bourgeoisie."[9] Thus, while Gandhi's discourse on the state has drawn its fair share of critics, it is difficult to judge the fairness of such critiques as an interpretive tension rests at the center of this debate.

These issues aside, Gandhi's discourse on the state is one of the most appropriate points of departure for an elaborate discussion of his democratic politics as it helps lay the foundation for a more thorough engagement with his model of citizenship. For instance, given his instrumental role in India's fight for national independence, Gandhi's writings on the state reflect a profound concern for the basic structures of society and the conditions under which it might be possible for individuals to exercise a morally and politically robust form of citizenship. In addition, Gandhi was keen to avoid simply adopting Western style institutions in the aftermath of British rule.[10] In fact, he raises a number of objections to Western forms of governance that form the basis for a critique of modern liberal democratic practices. That being said, it would be misleading to suggest that Gandhi dismisses this tradition all together.[11] As Anthony Parel points out, Gandhi

[7] Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 112.
[8] Anthony Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 55.
[9] David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 9-10.
[10] This is a principle concern for Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* as he wants to challenge the popular belief that forcing the British to leave India while retaining their governing institutions is the most effective way to achieve *swaraj* or independence. For instance, in Chapter IV he states, "You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you want India to become English…" (*Hind Swaraj*, 28). Gandhi proceeds, in the following chapter, with a fairly harsh critique of British parliament. At one point he even claims, "…the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute" (Ibid., 30). It is possible to read this section as a general critique of democracy. However, when placed in its proper context, I believe a more plausible interpretation is that he intended to warn against the uncritical adoption of British institutions instead of calling the notion of democracy in general into question.
[11] Amongst the thinkers that Gandhi lists in his appendix to *Hind Swaraj* are: Plato, Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Ruskin. In addition, it is well known that Gandhi received his legal training in London where he spent some of the most significant intellectual years of his life. For instance, while living in London, Gandhi became a vegetarian by "choice" and was actively engaged with a religious group know as theosophists who, according to his own account,

borrows heavily at times from the Western tradition, especially with respect to his advocacy of political and economic freedom.[12] However, Gandhi was never one to accept ideas or institutions in a ready-made fashion and modified them where he thought appropriate. That in mind, it is important to remain sensitive to the hybridity of Gandhi's political thought when trying to make sense of his conception of the state.

In this chapter, I put forward a reading of Gandhi that highlights his critique of modernity and situates it as the backdrop for his unique vision of the state. At heart in this critique, I contend, is an attempt on the part of Gandhi to *politicize* taken-for-granted norms of conduct embedded in the modern state.[13] The Gandhian state takes shape within the confines of this critique and it is through a unique model of ashram living that Gandhi attempts to enact an alternate mode of existence through practices consistent with what Foucault has termed "counter-conduct."[14] Thus, in contrast to prior interpretations, I read this discourse from the standpoint of an ethico-political struggle over the often unspoken methods and techniques used to reinforce patterns of conduct. That being said, the illusiveness of Gandhi's discourse may ultimately rest in

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introduced him to the *Bhagavad Gita* and helped shape his views on religion. See Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. by Mahadev Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 45-8 and 67-70.

[12] Anthony Parel, "Introduction: Gandhian Freedoms and Self-rule," in *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule* ed. by Anthony Parel (United States: Lexington Books, 2000), 2.

[13] I use the term conduct here in its dual definitional sense. On the one hand, conduct can simply refer to how one behaves themself whether in public or private. It can indicate a way of presenting oneself or denote the techniques and methods one uses to care for the self. On the other hand, the word can also be used in the sense of "conducting" others. In this way, conduct can signify correction or discipline; it makes references to processes of normalization external to the self.

[14] Counter-conduct is a term coined by Foucault and discussed at length in *Security, Territory, Population*. In this series of lectures, Foucault refers to counter-conduct as "the sense of struggle against processes implemented for conducting others…" Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 201. The term should not, however, be conflated with other terms like revolt, disobedience, insubordination or dissidence. In Foucault's understanding, the term counter-conduct draws out the active sense in conduct and avoids the passivity implied by the word misconduct. He then goes on to identify five forms of counter-conduct developed in the Middle Ages: asceticism, communities, mysticism, the problem of Scripture, and eschatological beliefs. In the context of Gandhi on the state, I use the term counter-conduct in reference to his practice of enacting village life through daily experiments with ashram living. In doing so, I seek to highlight a dimension of Gandhi's discourse on the state that is often overlooked and concerned with the terms and techniques of conduct as prefigured by the hegemonic presence of modern civilization.

the tension between his need to work within the modern state framework and his realization of a viable indigenous alternative through ashram living. However, there is more to be gained here than a novel new reading of Gandhi on the state. Gandhi's discourse forces us to consider more thoughtfully the relationship between the state and action and the conditions under which the former may be intertwined with the expanded possibility of the latter.

The following chapter will be broken up into three parts. First, I introduce Gandhi's critique of modern civilization as presented in *Hind Swaraj*. Second, I turn to his discourse on the state and place it in conversation with Arendt's account of action, work, and labor. Finally, in the last section, I demonstrate Gandhi's desire to fashion a viable indigenous alternative to the modern state through a politics of counter-conduct derived from his experiments with ashram living.

**Gandhi's Critique of Modern Civilization and the Politics of Conduct**

In 1909, on his way back to South Africa from an unsuccessful lobbying expedition in London, Gandhi, putting pen to paper, crafted his most well known work *Hind Swaraj*. From the moment it was made public, *Hind Swaraj* became the source of much trepidation. Indeed, the short treatise was ceased soon after its initial appearance and subsequently deemed seditious and banned from distribution by *raj* censors.[15] Upon even the most cursory reading, it is clear why British and Indian authorities alike found its content unfit for public consumption. In it, Gandhi places Western "civilization" on trial and accuses many of India's elites of willfully capitulating

[15] The recommendation to ban *Hind Swaraj* came less than a year after its completion on March 24, 1910 and was made by the Government of India, Bengal, Bombay, and Madras. In the *Preface* to the English translation, Gandhi acknowledges the book's seizure as part of his motivation for translating the text, originally written in Gujarati, into English. *Hind Swaraj*, 5-6.

to its intoxicating pull.[16] From the outset, it is important to note that Gandhi's critique is not directed at Westerners per se. As he puts it, "I bear no enmity towards the English, but I do towards their civilization."[17] What was it then that Gandhi found so objectionable about Western civilization?

Gandhi's critique is presented in three parts each of which unfold different dimensions of his underlying attempt to politicize the notion of conduct. First, after proclaiming, "The English have not taken India; we have given it to them,"[18] Gandhi turns to India's railways, identifying them as one of the "chief symbols of modern civilization" and a key source of Indian enslavement.[19] Gandhi blames the railways for impoverishing India, spreading disease, and fostering needless divisions between its inhabitants. Notice that all these grievances can be associated with a fairly broad understanding of violence. However, abstracting from these particulars reveals a further disagreement he has with the mode of being promoted by this

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[16] I have placed civilization in quotes here to draw attention to the fact that Gandhi does not actually believe that the phenomena, which he is talking about, constitutes a civilization in the proper sense of the term. For instance, he tells us that Western civilization is "…a civilisation only in name" (*Hind Swaraj*, 33). What Gandhi really seems to have in mind is modernity and more specifically, certain manifestations of modernity brought on by the advent of industrialization. This point is further clarified when he says, "Let it be remembered that Western civilisation is only a hundred years old, or to be more precise fifty. Within this short span the Western people appear to have been reduced to a state of cultural anarchy. We pray that India may never be reduced to the same state as Europe" (*CWMG*, 8: 374). While Gandhi's critique of Western civilization is not solely a critique of rapid industrialization, it does plays a pivotal role in the critique of Western civilization that he puts forth in *Hind Swaraj*. With this in mind, it should be pointed out that Gandhi's views on machinery did not remain consistent over time and went through some significant modifications. In fact, he later came to accept machinery as part of a national action plan and in response to a pamphlet claiming his ideal state would be without railways, he wrote, "…under swaraj nobody ever dreams, certainly I do not dream, of no railways…" (*CWMG*, 26: 305). In considering this evolving position, however, I would submit that there is a consistent thread of concern shown towards what he sees as an intimate relationship between industrialization and urbanization. As he puts it in the second to last chapter of *Hind Swaraj*, "Where there is machinery there are large cities; and where there are large cities, there are tram-cars and railways…" (*Hind Swaraj*, 110). It appears that perhaps he saw the two as part of a spiraling process that once started is difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. Gandhi, who often claimed to be a practical idealist, may have come to accept that urban centers like Bombay and Calcutta could not be expected to do without factories and trains, but was perhaps more optimistic about the possibility for a mode of existence not completely saturated by these processes in India's largely untouched village communities.

[17] *Hind Swaraj*, 119. Gandhi's use of the distinction between agents and structures is made repeatedly throughout *Hind Swaraj*. For instance, he says, "It is not due to any particular fault of the English people, but the condition is due to modern civilization" (*Hind Swaraj*, 33). Later he says yet again, "…cease to blame the English. They rather deserve our sympathy" (Ibid., 38).

[18] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 39.

[19] Ibid., 107.

modern innovation. For instance, the structure of Chapter IX, which deals exclusively with the subject of railways, plays on the themes of time, space, and effort in relation to the body. Trains symbolize the enhanced speed and efficiency of modern life and in a move that demonstrates a less optimistic lining of thinking, he claims that "They accentuate the evil nature of man" and enable men with misplaced intentions to "fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity."[20]

For Gandhi, the issue of trains and efficiency goes well beyond their ability to enhance the negative effects caused by those with power or less than noble intentions. Railways also reduce life's encumbrances as activities once intimately associated with the body and its labor are progressively diminished. While acknowledging that trains allow for the effective transport of bodies to more far-reaching locations, Gandhi contends that individuals adopted patterns of conduct that inhibit care for the self and undermine a general concern for the world around.[21] This displacement of care and concern does not necessarily come from a gesture to the reification of nature,[22] but from the erasure of personal struggles linked to the body and its biological functions. What is lost in this process of struggle, for Gandhi, is nothing less than a solid grasp of the tightly coupled relationship between our lofty goals and ambitions and the means we employ to achieve them. Trains, in other words, provide a convenient yet inappropriate means to a desired end.

[20] Ibid., 47.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Recently, Farah Godrej has put forward the argument that Gandhi's writings demonstrate no clear concern for the modernist objectification of nature. Farah Godrej, "Ascetics, Warriors, and a Gandhian Ecological Citizenship," *Political Theory*, Vol. 40, No 4 (2012). This is not to say, however, that some readers of Gandhi have not drawn a connection between Gandhi's critique of modernity and the objectification of nature. For instance, Akil Bilgrami claims, "His own approach to such a genealogy was to ask a question of profound importance, a question whose central theme, he thought, provided the metaphysical basis upon which his more specific economic and political themes were to be integrated. That question was: How and when did the concept of *nature* get transformed into the concept of *natural resources?*" Akil Bilgrami, "Value, Enchantment, and the Mentality of Democracy: Some Distant Perspectives from Gandhi," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No 51 (2009), 47. Both interpretations appear plausible and have their textual support. However, Gandhi's concern for modernity as presented in *Hind Swaraj* is more closely associated with personal struggle.

The tight coupling of means and ends is a well-documented feature of Gandhian thought. As he puts it, “The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the ends as there is between the seed and the tree.”[23] The way modern civilization blurs the boundaries between means and ends is not only reflected in Gandhi’s critique of railways, but is also characteristic of a more general line of thought that envelops *Hind Swaraj*. For instance, while the treatise is couched in the language of state politics and the purview of national independence, Gandhi, speaking as editor,[24] subverts this state-centric discourse by arguing that true *swaraj* is an inward disposition towards the self, involving discipline and control over body and mind.[25] In this way, independence is not a territorial notion linked to sovereignty nor can it be achieved in a top-down fashion. Instead, it can only be *exercised* through practices that positively value intense personal struggle and self-discipline. Returning back to his critique of railways, we can see that, for Gandhi, they promote practices that blunt the mind and weaken one’s ability to discipline the body.

The problems Gandhi associates with the material transformation of Indian society through railways is further compounded by a second moral/psychological criticism he gives of modern civilization. Speaking as a notable insider, Gandhi transitions to a discussion of law and the legal profession, claiming that, similar to railways, “lawyers have enslaved India…”[26] At this point, Gandhi’s focus shifts to the type of conduct born from the profession’s inordinate emphasis on

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[23] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 81.
[24] *Hind Swaraj* is structured around a hypothetical dialogue between two interlocutors, a reader of the *Indian Opinion* and its editor. In this dialogue, Gandhi speaks from the vantage point of editor and the reader represents a number of different groups and arguments being made during the time, especially those sympathetic with a more militant and revolutionary line of thought. It is the reader whose discourse is centered on the state and while there are times where Gandhi joins in this discourse, his main arguments resist thinking about independence through a state-centric framework. For instance, Gandhi claims that real independence or true swaraj is only achieved “…when we learn to rule ourselves” (*Hind Swaraj*, 73). This notion of independence resists the dominant understanding of independence as territorial autonomy and replaces it with an argument about individual autonomy.
[25] Ibid., 73.
[26] Ibid., 58.

profits and incentives. He implies that the profit-seeking motive built into the profession causes a sharp disconnect between the theory and practice of law. While courts are, in principle, institutions designed to administer justice, he contends that the legal "profession teaches immorality," as its for-profit structure makes for justice in appearance only.[27] As he explains, "The latter's duty is to side with their clients, and to find out ways and arguments in favour of the clients to which they (the clients) are often strangers."[28] This makes for justice based on "play-acting" or one's ability to "make courts swallow any story that they choose."[29]

Here it is useful to draw a connection to Rousseau work on the origins of inequality. Specifically, his claim that modern man lives "always outside himself" and is "capable of living only in the opinion of others…"[30] shares strong affinities with the way Gandhi conceives modern civilization as fostering an artificial or disingenuous mode of conduct. This point is made clearer, however, by way of detour to Gandhi's autobiography where he gives a fascinating account of his repeated attempts, while living in England, to assimilate into Western society.[31] Here Gandhi discusses changing his attire, his way of speech, and even the motions of his body through dancing and violin lessons. While he eventually comes to the realization that he was "pursuing a false idea"[32] there is an underlying theme present in this account that resonates with Rousseau's criticism of modern society. In both cases, modern civilization and the conduct that it engenders is conceived in largely *performative* terms. English gentlemen and attorneys, much like Rousseau's modern bourgeois man, conduct themselves in a manner consistent with professional

[27] Ibid., 59.
[28] Ibid.
[29] This quote does not actually come from *Hind Swaraj*, but from an article titled "Are Indians Liars?" published May 2, 1910 in Gandhi's newspaper *Indian Opinion*. Given the close proximity of these publications, interpretive continuity should not be a major source of concern. *CWMG*, 10: 408-9.
[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 187.
[31] For the full account see: Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 48-51.
[32] Ibid., 51.

actors who adopt a persona for the sake of an audience. For Gandhi, these performances ultimately betray an authentic commitment to one's self and a truthful disposition towards others.

Gandhi's play on performance and appearance is linked to an important underground distinction if considered in conjunction with his critique of railways. For instance, while he demonstrates concern for the way railways subvert bodily struggle for individuals, Gandhi openly criticizes lawyers for advancing needless "quarrels, instead of repressing them."[33] These seemingly divergent positions illuminate Gandhi's take on conflict as a consequence of misguided conduct. The conflicted self that experiences struggle as a daily condition of life is beset by the requisite restlessness and longing that, for Gandhi, helps pave the way for moral growth and added depth of character. Modern civilization, by contrast, attempts to reduce these personal forms of struggles and in doing so, enhances intersubjective strife through its inherent emphasis on egocentric conduct. Gandhi's real concern then is with the source that manifests conflict. In his critique of lawyers, it is the motivation for profit and material incentive structures built into the legal profession that leads to artificial and ultimately undesirable forms of civic conflict. In fact, his personal reflections reveal that conduct driven by such considerations is incongruent with the demands of public service and undermine democratic norms.

Gandhi's attempt to politicize modern conduct is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his critique of doctors and modern medicine. At this point, Gandhi's discourse shifts as he speaks about modern civilization as conduct on two levels: the act of conducting others and the way one conducts themself. Speaking of doctors and the act of conducting others, he writes, "Their business is really to rid the body of diseases that may afflict it" and "help me to indulge myself."[34] Doctors, according to Gandhi, direct the conduct of others in a fashion that invariably

[33] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 59.
[34] Ibid., 63.

leads to increased dependency. For instance, he claims, "The fact remains that the doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we have become deprived of self-control…"[35] The cause for this is not exclusively connected to the doctor's actions or intentions,[36] but is born from the asymmetrical relation of power created between doctor and patient, which enables the doctor to conduct others with little concern of resistance.

The prior point requires further unpacking, but in order to do so, it is necessary to go back once more to Gandhi's autobiography. Here it is best to play on a general theme, Gandhi the nurse. Gandhi's autobiography is filled with story after story of his reverence for nursing. Whether caring for his aligning father or wife, serving the sick during a plague outbreak, or volunteering as part of an ambulance corps during the Boer War and Zulu Rebellion, Gandhi's life was closely tied to the medical profession.[37] He certainly did not envision a world without hospitals or doctors.[38] What Gandhi the nurse demonstrates is not just a willingness on his part to accept the necessity of medicine, but also the unique way he approached health and wellness. Modern medicine, for Gandhi, has a tendency to render the body docile as it provides care in terms of curing the body.[39] In this way, doctors treat patients as passive objects of observation

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[35] Ibid., 64.

[36] As indicated, Gandhi's method of critique avoids personal attack, so the doctor in this account is not the target of his criticism. In his autobiography, Gandhi puts this well when he says, "It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself" (*Autobiography*, 276). The doctor's actions and intentions are already situated within a system that allows those deeds to have particular effects. Thus, for Gandhi, there is only a structural critique in play when discussing the effects of doctors.

[37] Gandhi even claims in *Hind Swaraj* that he "was at one time a great lover of the medical profession" and intended to "become a doctor for the sake of the country" (62). Gandhi never moves away from the notions of health and wellness as they pertain to the body and continued to practice nursing even after publishing *Hind Swaraj*. This is indicative of a distinction he makes between modern medicine as a source of dependency and health care as a form of selfless service performed for the sake of others.

[38] *CWMG*, 26: 305.

[39] I use the term docile bodies here in accordance with Foucault's account in *Discipline and Punish*. An instructive account of this comes from Gandhi's autobiography when he tells the story of "Kasturbai's Courage." In this tale, Gandhi tells of a quarrel between him and the doctor attending to his wife Kasturbai. The dispute revolves around the doctor having given Kasturbai medicine without his or her consent. Paraphrasing the doctor's reply, Gandhi writes, "…we doctors consider it a virtue to deceive patients, or their relatives, if thereby we can save our patients…" (*Autobiography*, 322). The assumption embedded in this response is that doctors possess expert knowledge beyond the limited comprehension of patients and should therefore be at liberty to do what they know is

and correction. Nursing, on the other hand, construes care as a form of service that humanizes the patient by inverting the power dynamic between care provider and care recipient. Conducting others is not, therefore, always inappropriate according to Gandhi. However, it need be done in the spirit of selfless service and humility.

Gandhi's critique of doctors not only speaks to the conducting of others, but how one is to conduct themself as well. Modern medicine with its steady flow of readily available cures, for Gandhi, reinforces an approach to the self built around, as he puts it, either "negligence or indulgence."[40] This in turn causes individuals to "take less care of their bodies."[41] Gandhi seems to have been aware, even in his own time, of the way pharmaceutical companies can promote pathologies of dependency as an indirect cause of an instrumental pursuit of profit. These dependencies are even more problematic, however, when they are attached to vices like eating or drinking too much. For Gandhi, reliance on medicine to cure problems created by one's own conduct only increases the chances of "repeating the vice."[42] Once this cycle begins, one's ability to care for the self progressively diminishes as he or she fails to recognize natural limits associated with the body and its functions.

The concern Gandhi demonstrates for the way individuals are seemingly alienated from their ability to care for the self draws this discussion back to the more general narrative about modern civilization. Taken as a whole, Gandhi's critique suggests that modern civilization fosters a particular mode of being through the normalization of conduct that is undesirable and ultimately unsustainable. It is not that Gandhi rejects this way of living altogether. As it has been

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best. In this account, Gandhi's refusal and subsequent actions comes off as emotional and perhaps even foolish. However, I believe such an interpretation is too literal. A more metaphoric reading might emphasize the imposed passivity forced on Gandhi and Kasturbai by the doctor. Kasturbai is not placed in a position to exercise her own agency, so Gandhi, upon her request, removes her from that condition.

[40] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 63.

[41] Ibid., 63-4.

[42] Ibid., 63.

seen, Gandhi was at times committed to the modern way of life and never completely rejected its selective incorporation. He does find it, however, lacking moral depth. The idea that modern civilization represents the march of progress is, for Gandhi, simply a one-sided story that masks other equally viable narratives. It is from this vantage point then, from this position of ambivalence and dissatisfaction, that Gandhi's discourse on the state emerges. Modernity is always looming in the background.

**Gandhi's State, Labor-Action, and Local Politics**

Discussions regarding Gandhi's vision of the state often begin with his view that India should be a nation made up of a thousand small villages.[43] Although he spent over two and a half years in London, the experience left a less than favorable imprint on his imagination. Indeed, while James Hunt has suggested that Gandhi's time in London was "one of the truly shaping events of his career" that "began his intellectual awakening" and "moral maturation,"[44] Gandhi does not, in his writings on the state, associate urban living with a similar sense of moral and intellectual growth. Instead, he holds a more negative view, claiming that major urban centers represent the "real plague spots."[45] Given his critique of modernity, it is not surprising that Gandhi looked upon the growing process of urbanization with profound discontent. Like automated processes

[43] In a well-known exchange between Gandhi and Nehru, he writes, "I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces…I hold that without truth and non-violence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realise truth and nonviolence only in the simplicity of village life and this simplicity can best be found in the Charkha and all that the Charkha connotes" (*Hind Swaraj*, 150). Gandhi took the plausibility of this vision from his understanding of the unique quality and general condition of India. However, he also objects to the idea that his vision was simply synonymous with India's rural village communities. In fact, he writes, "You must not imagine that I am envisaging our village life as it is today" (Ibid). As it will be indicated later, fragments of Gandhi's vision comes from his experiments with ashram living.

[44] James D. Hunt, *Gandhi in London* (New Delhi; Promilla, 1993), xvii, 1-2.

[45] Letter to H.S.L. Polak in Iyer, *Writings*, 2, 293.

that enable machinery to produce commodities with optimal efficiency, the concentration of a burgeoning population normalizes conduct while obfuscating the visibility of inspirational acts.[46]

Visible action that inspires is a feature of Gandhian thought that plays an important role in his vision of the state. Akeel Bilgrami puts it well when he writes:

> Gandhi's ideal of peasant communities organized in small panchayat or village units could perhaps at lease approximate the family, where examples could be visibly set. That is, in part, why Gandhi strenuously argued that flows of populations to metropoles where there was far less scope for public perception of individual action, was destructive of the moral life.[47]

For Gandhi, visibility is not a trap because, like Arendt, he believes that action "…is never possible in isolation" and needs "constant contact with the web of the acts and words of other men."[48] Action, whether performed in concert or opposition to popular standards of conduct, has the potential to inspire others, promoting further acts of public service. Like the family or tightknit community that knows the intimate details of its members, Gandhi's village life places action within the close proximity of other potential agents.[49] This is in part why he resists the idea of structuring the state around large urban centers. Suffused in such loci, action losses its potency, as it is drowned out by the sheer density of busy bodies.

It is not solely the act itself that Gandhi sees as inspirational and in need of intimacy. While action requires the presence of others, its potency is derived primarily from the techniques

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[46] The notion that Gandhi was committed to politics driven by what I am calling inspirational action is discussed at length in the work of Raghavan Iyer who speaks of Gandhi's heroism and Akeel Bilgrami who employs the term exemplary. Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1973), 133-9. Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No 39 (2003), 4163. While there are variations in their accounts, I build off the general interpretation but join it with Arendt's account of action. Hannah Arendt makes a three-fold distinction between labor, work, and action. While the division is contestable, it is her account of action that I seek to work with in relation to Gandhi. I suggest that in this notion of action, Gandhi and Arendt share in an attempt to transform politics and expand its reach.

[47] Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher," 4163.

[48] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 188.

[49] An important distinction between Gandhi and Arendt here is their treatment of public and private domains. Arendt, in looking back to the pre-Socratic Greeks maintains that a clear division is necessary to highlight the realm of action. Arendt on Plato and the family. Gandhi, however, does not ascribe to a similar view and in fact believes that the lines between public and private should be all but erased. For Gandhi, the personal is political and thus the idea that there is a political and apolitical realm does not fit into his way of thinking.

used to produce it. For example, self-imposed suffering, as one such technique, shows the degree of one's commitment, encouraging others to introspect and examine their own actions. Added to the act, self-suffering works to counterbalance some of the inherent unpredictable qualities of action by signaling a lasting sentiment of brotherly love. At times, Gandhi even uses these terms–suffering and love–interchangeably as both, in his view, unlock the authenticity of one's actions by displaying his or her intentions through a more transparent medium. The technique of self-suffering is, in other words, a method of *disclosure* designed to reduce the uncertainty of action by attempting to tighten the gap between one's deeds, words, and intentions.

Gandhi's village life attempts to carve out a larger space for action than that afforded by its modern counterparts and, in this regard, shares features in common with Arendt's own account of action, work, and labor. It is, for instance, telling that nowhere in Gandhi's writings do we see a sustained reverence for *homo faber*. Gandhi wished to structure the future Indian state around an enhanced public life, but in doing so he refused to give a privileged place to markets or commercial innovation. The Gandhian state would most certainly have industry, but the simplicity of village life would, in his understanding, help fortify it against being dominated by market principles. This is not to suggest that Gandhi sees the productive life as somehow incongruent with the demands of action. In fact, the very opposite is true. Labor involving one's body, as opposed to work performed with machines, is a requisite condition of action and any attempt to disentangle the two would be, for him, misguided from the outset.

That Gandhi's vision of the state was built around the close coupling of labor and action is brought out in the clear political aim of his ashrams and the mandatory role of manual labor in these communities. What is fascinating about the conjoining of these activities is the reversal Gandhi seeks to achieve with respect to work and labor. Instead of a state built around liberating citizens from the burdens of labor through the use of machines, Gandhi attempts to infuse the life of labor with new ethico-political meaning by weaving it together with the creative potentiality of action. However, it should be noted that in doing so, he does not rely on the Ancient division between public and private like Arendt. In fact, it is through the erasure of this divide that the coupling of labor and action is made possible for Gandhi. Some controversy over Gandhi's state may thus be warranted as his vision actively seeks to displace the dominance of *homo faber* in the modern state and attempts to replace it with more favorable treatment of labor-action.

The Gandhian state goes beyond what at first appears like a simple romanticized view of village life and participatory democratic politics. As indicated, Gandhi was one to modify ideas and institutions, so in adding to this vision, he tells us, "every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full power…self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs."[50] The argument here is clearly one in favor of localism. Indeed, he goes on to claim, "In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles,"[51] which again suggests that sovereignty, in the Gandhian state, will reside with local communities. That there are strong immediate objections to this vision is not of major concern for Gandhi. In his view, the self-sufficient, autonomous village's overarching advantage rests in its ability to aid individuals in their moral and political growth. This is also where reading Gandhi's critique of modern civilization as a fold for his vision of the state is instructive because lurking in the shadows of this discourse is his notion of *swaraj* as self-rule. His positioning of the state can, therefore, be interpreted as a conscious attempt to avoid inhibiting this principle aim.

At this point, the actual structure of the state appears far less important to Gandhi than its substance and central to that substance would be local associations, whom he viewed as the best

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[50] Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 188-9.
[51] Ibid., 192.

vehicle to perform the task of civic development. In outlining his Constructive Programme, Gandhi says, "…instead of half a dozen cities of India and Great Britain living on the exploitation and the ruin of the 7,00,000 villages of India, the latter will be largely self-contained, and will voluntarily serve the cities of India and even the outside world in so far as it benefits both the parties."[52] The voluntary nature of this relationship serves a dual function. First, it allows for action divorced from compulsion. Gandhi, perhaps because of his experience with colonial rule, emphasizes the need for autonomy. Second, this local voluntarism democratizes local politics, making it a reciprocal space of civic cultivation. In fact, in his last will and testament, he called for replacement of the Indian National Congress with a Lok Sevak Sangh or a people's service organization.[53]

Gandhi's optimism about local politics and the role of voluntary action was shaped by a number of factors including his reading of Ruskin and Thoreau and his own personal experiences with social and political activism. However, it is important to keep in mind that Gandhi's reverence for local associations is part of a broader vision that seeks a larger more principled place for labor-action in daily life. Civil associations, of the kind Gandhi has in mind, blend these two activities together in a way the state cannot because of their inherent ties to voluntarism. It is here where Gandhi is sometimes accused of harboring anarchistic sympathies, as he appears, at times, overly optimistic about the natural ability of individuals to produce public goods without compulsion through coercion or incentives. As Parel points out though, such readings fail to consider how the state and civil society are made to work *alongside* one

[52] *CWMG*, 81: 358.
[53] Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, p, 78.

another in Gandhi's writings.[54] This point is easily overlooked as Gandhi's opposition to the colonial state is often conflated as a more general opposition to the state.

Gandhi's localism again springs forth from his critique of modern civilization as he objects to the compartmentalizing and stratifying tendencies imbedded in the modern bureaucratic state logic. Adding to his conception of the state, Gandhi writes, "Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village…"[55] Gandhi's discourse reflects his concern for the top-down logic of the state and the way that bureaucratic institutions remove from individuals control over their affairs. The state, in his view, is often too far removed from local realities to address the diverse array of concerns that accompany disparate communities. Despite this distance, it nonetheless tries to fix or transpose a framework capable of condensing that difference into a set of standard rules and procedures.[56] For Gandhi, this logic not only masks the dynamic nature of reality, but also creates a political structure that is ill prepared to act with the sensitivity necessary to effectively address local needs.

This concern for the state's top-down standardization processes is illustrated in part by Gandhi's use of *satyagraha* (nonviolent civil disobedience) as a political technique to challenge the state. Gandhi shared with Thoreau the conviction that the state is often on the wrong side of justice. When its laws, rules, and procedures do not map onto the real needs of individuals on the ground, both maintain that it is the moral obligation of individuals to withdraw their voluntary support for the state. Gandhi goes further than Thoreau, however, rejecting the idea that his

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Iyer, 334, vol. 1. "Nature works unceasingly according to her laws, but man violates then constantly. In different ways and at different times, Nature tells man that there is noting in the world which is not subject to change."

brand of civil disobedience is equivalent to passive resistance.[57] For Gandhi, civil disobedience must be therapeutic, a form of action capable of cleansing the state. Notice here how the use of *satyagraha* presupposes the legitimacy of the state and its laws.[58] Gandhi does not advocate resistance for the sake of resistance. Instead, individuals on the ground are to use resistance as a way to correct for deficiencies in state's top-down logic. Thus, *satyagraha* is used as a political tactic not only in claiming rights for local groups, but is also a reflexive technique used to incorporate local forms of knowledge into the state apparatus.

With this brief account in mind, how should we understand Gandhi's discourse on the state? As this account suggests, it exists, in part, in opposition to the modern state and hence the narrative that Gandhi presents us with should not be taken too seriously as a rigid blueprint for a state to be expected, but more so as a critical discourse helping to highlight the costs associated with the modern state. However, this critical discourse is not divorced from the action-oriented nature of Gandhi's thought and reflects a pragmatist's appreciation for piece-meal experimental reform. In the following section, I look to the handful of ashrams Gandhi helped found and read them as a bridge between his critique and reform, one that demonstrates his will to fashion an indigenous alternative to the modern state through daily practices of counter-conduct.

## Gandhi's Ashram and the Politics of Counter-Conduct

Gandhi's discourse on the state is sure to strike some as fanciful. Compounded with the popular, albeit misleading image of "Gandhi the saint" and his vision may seem like little more than an abstract rural utopia. Having attempted to problematize this view, it is important to note that such a view is also at odds with the pragmatic dimensions of Gandhi thought that reveal a man

[57] Ibid.
[58] Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, 56

committed to praxis, someone constantly experimenting with new methods and techniques. Fittingly enough, Gandhi often referred to himself as a "practical idealist"[59] and while his vision grew out of a profound discontent for modern civilization, he optimistically pulled from alternate modes of being already present in his immediate surroundings, the clearest source being the ashram. Gandhi's ashrams play a unique role in his critical discourse on the state as they fashion spaces for the enactment of practices of counter-conduct. Gandhi tells us that the "Ashram set out to remedy what it thought were defects in our national life"[60] and as is now known, part of that defect comes from the spread of modern forms of conduct into India. Gandhi's discourse, seen through this prism, amounts to an ethico-political narrative in action.

A small peak into Gandhi's ashrams reveals a number of practices that are of some interest. For instance, one cannot help but be struck by the intense disciplinary structure of daily life. Timetables, charts, and observances abound, as every detail of every day is neatly woven together in a well-organized plan.[61] Within the confines of this structure, members of the ashram engage in various *shared* social activities such as worship, labor, and education and while "Ashram rules were observed at first with some laxity," as it developed, these rules became "stricter from day to day."[62] For Gandhi, strict adherence to the ashram's schedule was part of a comprehensive set of techniques used to discipline the body and mind, preparing ashramites for the uncertainties that accompany political action. It is easy, however, to overlook how the ashram's disciplinary nature was also connected to a broader social vision concerned to grow social capital in the nutrient deplete soil of colonial rule. As Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph point

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[59] Citation needed
[60] Iyer, 563.
[61] "Members of the Ashram shall be such persons as believe in the object and obey the rules and regulations of the Ashram, and who shall be constantly endeavoring to observe its principles, and be faithfully performing the duties assigned to them by the Managing Committee or by the Secretary on its behalf" (Iyer, 547).
[62] Iyer, 564.

out, “Gandhi was a tireless creator of civil society.”[63] His commitment to civil society speaks to a general desire to enhance social trust, even between groups with existing cleavages, through the process of working together and performing the same tasks. Thus, while it is true that ashram discipline prepared *satyagrahi* for non-violent civil disobedience, it was also a kind of training ground for future democratic citizens.

A specific feature of ashram discipline that merits attention here is the long list of observances or vows required as part of ashram membership.[64] Of these assorted vows, Gandhi identifies control of the palate as one of the most important.[65] That Gandhi personally struggled with this vow is clear from his autobiography.[66] When taken in conjunction with his critique of modernity, however, control of the palate reads as more than an ascetic attempt to master the desires. From the vantage point of his critique, control of the palate reads as a practice of counter-conduct. Remember that one of Gandhi’s chief quibbles with modern civilization is that it promotes self-indulgence. In controlling the palate, he tells us, “Food must, therefore, be taken, like medicine, under proper restraint.”[67] It is not surprising that Gandhi references medicine and food in the same instance. His concern for both revolves around the way they promote added dependencies. That being said, restraining one’s desire for food and reforming his or her diet represents alternate forms of disciplinary conduct that seek to displace those dependencies that may inhibit one’s ability to engage in political action and democratic self-rule.

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[63] Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 141.

[64] From the list of vows that Gandhi cites, there are: the vow of truth, *ahimsa*, celibacy or *brahmacharya*, non-thieving, non-possession or poverty, physical labor, *swadeshi*, fearlessness, control over the palate, the rejection of untouchability, and tolerance (Iyer, 536 – 539).

[65] Out of all the vows that Gandhi lists for ashram membership, control of the palate is the one vow that he says is “placed as a principle by itself” (Iyer, 537).

[66] Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 320.

[67] Iyer, 537.

Control of the palate is closely associated with another related observance, the vow of truth. Of all Gandhian virtues, truth ranks highest as “All other observances take their rise from the quest for and the worship of Truth.”[68] This firm formal commitment to truth implies honesty, but as he tells us, “Truth is not fulfilled by mere abstinence from telling or practicing untruth…”[69] Gandhi’s truth is indeed more far reaching as, at its most abstract level, he equates it to God.[70] Moving away from the comprehensive notion, which even Gandhi acknowledges as beyond human understanding, we see again the active reversal of practices that he equates with modern civilization. For example, modern civilization’s continuous play on appearances is counteracted by the ashram’s rigid attempt to aligning thought, speech, and action. One of the methods used to achieve this was through the removal of social classifications by requiring everyone to perform the same menial tasks. Perhaps the most widely know of these is that everyone had to take turns racking the latrines. This was done as a way of promoting humility and social cohesion by showing that no one was above certain ashram chores.

The last point is clarified further by drawing briefly on the vow of *swadeshi*. Gandhi’s ashrams, drawing inspiration from thinkers like Tolstoy and Ruskin, were built around the requirement of manual labor. This labor, performed with others, had a privileged place in human existence as it helped ashramites connect to a more basic understanding of humanity. Again the idea here is that by tearing down the façade of certain modern social practices, individuals could act more authentically. The social dynamic of this labor is also, however, connected to Gandhi’s commitment to civil society and the cultivation of social capital. Social labor was a vehicle for developing social trust. Through the process of doing things with others, members of the ashram built bounds capable of withstanding sources of fragmentation caused by differences in identity.

[68] Iyer, 536.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

Social labor was thus a kind of glue holding together not only a tightknit group of activists, but citizens for a future democratic society as well.

One of the best illustrations of the alignment or harmony Gandhi sought between thought, speech, and action comes from the practices of transparency that were part of ashram discipline. Gandhi explains that "Whenever someone was found telling a lie in the Ashram, effective steps were taken to deal with the situation as symptomatic of a serious disease."[71] These instances were publicized and then rectified through methods like bodily penance or fasting. However, in Gandhi's unique style, penance was performed by the party trying to persuade the person in violation to reform his or her conduct. This is why he adds the caveat that "bodily penance is only a means to an end…" and cannot guarantee that the erring party will truly change.[72] The practice of penance is merely a tool at one's disposal, but alone its affects are uncertain. It must therefore be connect to other methods of transparency and persuasion.

The public nature of ashram practices went well beyond any one individual's actions as the ashram's commitment to transparency was also reflected in its architectural design. Gandhi's ashrams were quite literally open, providing few spaces away from the sight of others. The divide between public and private was all but nonexistent, as the secrecy afforded by hidden space was not an option provided by the structural layout of the ashram. The lack of privacy here is admittedly extreme, but we may choose to see in this architectural transparency an experimental attempt to further fasten one's thoughts, words, and actions.

It would be easy to associate ashram discipline with other forms of discipline developed during the late eighteenth century. Foucault, for instance, has shown how techniques of discipline developed in western military establishments eventually found their way into schools

[71] Ibid, 564.
[72] Ibid, 566.

and hospitals.[73] However, unlike the disciplinary techniques used to train soldiers and students, ashram discipline was not driven by a view to make the body and its motions more efficient. There was, in other words, no attempt in the techniques of ashram discipline to render the body docile so that it could be more easily managed and made to fit a definite end. Instead, ashram discipline invoked an alternate set of techniques designed to enhance one's ability to care for the self and by extension others. It is more accurately understood as an ethico-political approach that attempts to reverse the modern mode of conduct by replacing mastery of the body's motions with mastery in terms of self-understanding.

Ultimately, the ashram should be seen as serving multiple purposes in the larger scope of Gandhi's political thought. Certainly the ashram was a space for cultivating the small group of *satyagrahi* who performed acts of nonviolent civil disobedience with Gandhi, but it was also a space to challenge and slowly displace the spread of certain taken-for granted features of modern civilization. Such an interpretation allows us then to see that the Gandhian state is largely misunderstood if affiliated with speculative flights of fancy and was instead part of a more pragmatic critical discourse in action.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that the Gandhian state should not be read as an intellectual exercise divorced from the world around, but as a critical narrative in action. The Gandhian state is rooted in deep dissatisfaction and a desire to respond to that dissatisfaction through a politics of counter-conduct bent on piecemeal reform, which brings us to a number of concluding points about his politics. The first and perhaps most telling being that Gandhi's critical discourse on the state reveals something of the vantage point from which he thought and wrote about politics in

[73] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*,

general. That is, Gandhi understood politics as starting from the *personal* and then eventually growing beyond to wider more general concerns. It is not that Gandhi's politics is exclusively a politics of localism or that he wished to transform it into a practice characterized by the banality of everyday life. As indicated, Gandhi shares Arendt's appreciation for the extraordinary and unpredictable nature of action. That being said, politics, for Gandhi, is always bound up in ethical questions of how one is to conduct themself when alone and with others.

Secondly, Gandhi's discourse on the state demonstrates just how far his reservations to modern civilization truly went. That Gandhi is one of the great critics in this tradition is not lost on his readers, but he is too often cast, even by those who knew him well, as an advocate of some highly naïve version of the state. This dominant albeit misleading picture, however, filters our interpretations through a problematic lens, as accusations of incoherent and even worse, irrelevance, become perennial points of contention in debates over his politics. The problem is that Gandhi self-consciously resisted the temptation to think and write in these terms. By situating his critique of modern civilization in the broader arch of his politics, the frames through which Gandhi is approached can hopefully be altered, creating new possibilities for future critical engagement with his writings.

Finally, Gandhi's critical discourse provides us with a narrative that brings to light what might be called the agonal nature of his political thought. For all the images conjured of Gandhi that portray a man kind and gentle mannered, a saintly individual who just happened to have been brave enough to act on strong moral objections to British rule, we see here a thinker deeply committed to challenging hegemonic modes of thinking and ways of being. Gandhi's discourse on the state shows just how deep the agonistic line of thinking that runs through his thought shaped what he wrote and the things he did. Perhaps we will eventually come to see Gandhi's writings through a more confrontational lens.