

Gandhi Marg  
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Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1989, pp. 330

In the introduction to his autobiography, Gandhi states that his life consisted of nothing but "numerous experiments with truth," and that he desired to offer only a "connected account" of these experiments in the spiritual field as much as in the realm of politics. Likening himself to a scientist who "conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought, and minuteness" but never claims any finality about his conclusions, Gandhi averred that he too was far from investing his findings with infallibility or even a rigid decisiveness. Emerson had said that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds;" in Gandhi's terms one must enshrine truth as the sovereign principle, and not strive to be needlessly consistent. As the scientist must discard his hypothesis when the data cannot support it, so every man, in whatever walk of life, must discard old ideas when they conflict with the truth and embrace new ones. "When anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine," Gandhi advised his readers in 1933, "he would do well to choose the later of the two."

It is Richard Fox's contention that we have, perhaps to our great detriment, ignored the "scientist" in Gandhi, a scientist working not within any closed laboratory but with the entire fabric of life. To view Gandhi as a scientist is not to transform him into a positivist or even into an advocate of modernity. Quite on the contrary, Gandhi's experiments led him to the rejection of both science as a panacea for the ills with which humankind is afflicted and of the modern civilization that science has helped to bring into being. Much as he believed that one must hate the sin and not the sinner, so Gandhi opposed not the scientific method, but science's hegemonic and totalizing practices, and the extraordinary claims made on its behalf.

In seeing Gandhi as a scientist, a man given over to experimentation, Fox is able to controvert certain stereotypes of the Mahatma. Placing him firmly as an exponent of "becoming," which is also the language of science and experimentation, Fox removes Gandhi from the timeless and

mystical world of the Hindus to which he is frequently relegated. Secondly, as Gandhi's detractors are mainly those who believe that Gandhi was opposed to the scientific world-view and progress, Fox attempts to show how Gandhi was, in fact, a better scientist than most others. Thirdly, arguing that "individual experiments make for constant personal becoming," Fox offers a critique of the concept of the "integral individual" subscribed to by such scholars as Erik Erikson (p. 279). The order in Gandhi's life "came only from the sequence of his personal experiments" (p. 279), not by living through a "life course" predetermined in infancy and childhood (p. 23). Fox posits, instead, the notion of "discontinuous personhoods" to suggest how each of Gandhi's experiments "made him into a somewhat different person" (p. 23).

It is not only Gandhi's experiments which engage Fox's attention. Gandhi is only Fox's medium of entry into the various debates taking place within anthropology, the discipline which he represents, and *Gandhian Utopia* is his own experiment with the premises and practices of anthropological inquiry which incidentally has largely ignored Gandhi. Anthropology's greatest difficulty has been its inability to communicate the "native's point of view," and the recent moves to jettison ethnography, important as they have been, bring anthropology no closer to letting the native speak for himself. If the authority of the anthropologist is sought to be replaced with a polyphonic authority, where several voices including that of the anthropologist's cooperate in the production of a discourse, will any coherent account and understanding of a culture emerge from the babble of voices? Fox does not think so (p. 22). Despite his unhappiness with the post-modern critique of anthropology, with its ostensible decentring of authority, Fox feels bound to honour the injunction of anthropology that the "native's point of view" must be communicated. His "native" then becomes the articulate Mohandas Gandhi whom anthropology would not however approve of as a proper "native" as he does not hail from a wild or primitive tribe in Polynesia or Micronesia. Ethnography too often, writes Fox, "specifies a physical location . . . in place of an intellectual position;" it is more concerned with place than with stance, and that to Fox's mind has been its bane (p. 36).

But what kind of native voice is Gandhi's anyhow? Is it even native? Gandhi subscribed to many Orientalist stereotypes of India. Thus he came to contrast the materialism of the West with India's essential spirituality. His idealization of the village republic was rooted in European characterizations of India as a land dotted since time immemorial with self-sufficient village communities. According to Fox, Gandhi (and one might add Indians in general) accepted the "orientalist notion that East and West are innately different" (p. 245). The India, which Gandhi constructed and in which he so ardently believed, was in fact largely a creation of European travellers, the scholar-administrators who governed India, the missionaries out to

convert heathens, and the Indologists. Fox goes so far as to argue that by the late nineteenth century, the cultural domination of the West was so complete that an entirely "native point of view" would have been inconceivable. Domination came to so infuse cultural meanings and practices that no exterior ideology was required to legitimize oppression; in the language of psychology, Indians internalized oppression. Rejecting the arguments of Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee that parts of traditional culture remained immune from domination, Fox argues that "Indian culture was in fact fundamentally displaced and distorted" (pp. 98-99). The very resistance that Indian nationalism could offer was still within the world system of domination and this resistance could only produce a counter-discourse which can never be sovereign (pp. 100-102). Why then should Gandhi be thought to represent the "native's point of view?"

Fox suggests that if Gandhi still was able to offer effective cultural resistance, he did so by turning Orientalism on its head. Fox draws a distinction between the pejorative Orientalism of European missionaries and writers and the affirmative Orientalism that Gandhi embraced: what the former describes as "other worldliness" is in Gandhi's language "spirituality" and likewise the so-called "lack of individualism" becomes revalorized as "consensus" (p. 270). Gandhi's Orientalism did not merely look back to the past, to some Golden Age of Hinduism. For, if he was a cultural conservative in some matters, for example in his defence of the village community and *varnashrama dharma*, in most other matters he was a cultural revolutionary, as exemplified in his attempts to improve the position of women and untouchables in Indian society. However much cultural meanings configure the past, Gandhi was interested in them as propositions for the future, propositions that promised a utopia. Thus, for example, in Gandhi's utopia, which envisaged India as a *ramrajya*, the essential spirituality of India would entitle this ancient land to show the world the way to peace through *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*.

Gandhi's utopia was not only of his making: it was authored also by European Orientalists, mid-Victorians such as John Ruskin and Edward Carpenter, and other Indian nationalists. Fox finds Gandhi's emphasis on India's spirituality pre-figured in Annie Besant's and Sister Nivedita's constructions of India; the idea of selflessness was co-authored among others by Aurobindo; and the call to *swadeshi* had already been made by Tilak, Besant, and Bengali nationalists. A great deal of what is credited to Gandhi was the result of "group effort". Moreover, "Great Persons are always authorized by little people" (p. 13). The implication here is that Gandhi was so effectively able to exercise authority because he successfully, indeed without much contest, laid claim to the authorship—an authorship that was only partially his—of nonviolent resistance. By giving this resistance a name, *satyagraha*, Gandhi further consolidated his claim to an

exclusive authorship (p. 139). *Satyagraha*, in turn, "came to claim authority over the Indian nationalist movement" (p. 133).

Gandhian utopia is exemplary of Fox's notion of "culture in the making." For, this utopia, more than fifty years after Gandhi's death, is still in the making and continues to be invoked in the experiments with culture and politics conducted in post-Independence India, most often by defenders of traditional Hinduism and exponents of Hindu supremacy with whom Gandhi would have been in disagreement. Illustrative of the manipulation of Gandhi by upper-caste interests and Hindu supremacists is their invocation of his supposed criticism of special electoral and legal arrangements to protect and enhance the rights of minorities and of a critique of the government's reservation policies (pp. 227, 243). Gandhian utopia conceives that change, which the law may encourage, must ultimately stem from the heart. But the Hindu fundamentalists and upper-castes have, in Fox's words, "hijacked" Gandhian utopia and converted it into a "justifying ideology" which preserves the status quo (pp. 162, 271). "Utopia," which shatters order, and "ideology", which preserves it, are seen as diametrically opposed. An ideology serves to legitimize authority and the function of utopia, contrariwise, is to "unmask" ideology (p. 33). This is not to say that utopia is without its difficulties; its pathological form is escapism. Fox quite rightly points to Vinoba's experiments and political practices as a pathological form of Gandhian utopia, denuded of the element of confrontation, which is required, as it were, to escape escapism. Gandhian utopia in Vinoba's hands even came to justify the Emergency which was proclaimed in the name of keeping law and order. Vinoba, like Nehru before him, resisted any interpretation of *satyagraha* that would have conserved it as a potent means of revolutionary experiment in India after the demise of Gandhi (p. 171).

Fox in his introduction declares that he hopes "to help develop a new approach to cultural history in anthropology, one that will encompass human agency, world-systemic power relations, and social inequality" (p. 9). He points out that anthropologists until recently "saw culture as compelling" or restraining only and that "individual practice" was seen merely as "epiphenomenal or arti-factual" (p. 266). Fox himself is less inclined to give culture precedence over individual intentions. Rather, he is throughout interested in exploring whether the social experimentation of individuals can alter cultural meanings which are entrenched in relations of inequality. Can human intentions hold their own against the face of culture? It is important to note that Gandhi is not so much the subject of *Gandhian Utopia* as the means to explore the relationship of the singular (the individual) to the structural (the web of cultural meanings and material conditions), the attempts of individuals and social groups to transcend the limits of the

social order imposed upon them, and the processes by which "ideology" and "utopia" interact upon each other.

*Gandhian Utopia* is an arresting work but ultimately it says little that is not by now commonplace. Fox wishes to privilege neither "culture" nor the "individual." He aims to keep them distinct and yet shows their dependence on each other. That anthropology has hitherto largely failed to take cognizance of the constituted character of culture in relation to the lives of "great men" or of the interdependent relationship of the singular to the structural attests only to the poverty of anthropological reasoning and the abandonment of commonsense, rather than to any striking originality in Fox's own work.

Although *Gandhian Utopia* is only incidentally about Gandhi, in the sense that the cultural history of utopia could be written in relation to the biography of some other famous leader, Fox's reading of Gandhi also calls for some comment. For example, his adherence to the view that for Gandhi success lay in the mere fact of opposition cannot be allowed to go unchallenged, turning Gandhi as it does into something of a Faustian, committed only to ceaseless striving. Fox supposes that confrontation invariably leads to truth, and that for Gandhi "experimentation in pursuit of truth became its own justification" (p. 2). To say that truth is an end in itself, sufficient unto itself, is to ignore the subtlety of Gandhi's many formulations on the mutual dependency of means and ends. Likewise, Fox's conviction that the world system of domination imposed by the West was so complete that it left no part of traditional culture "untamed" blinds him to Gandhi's use of *the body* to offer effective cultural resistance. The incomprehensibility with which the British received Gandhi's fasts is only one indication of how far, despite the far-reaching influence of Orientalism, Gandhi was able to employ a language of resistance that stood entirely outside the cultural meanings to which the British were attached. It is indeed with a history of the body—a history of Gandhi's "obsession" with food, nutrition, hygiene, ingestion and excretion, bowel movements, enemas, fasting, and scavenging—that one must begin to write the cultural history of Gandhian utopia.