

Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics

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The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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I.

The dominant model of contemporary political philosophy—what sometimes falls under the category of normative political theory—is animated almost exclusively by the question of “ends.” That is, it attempts to define and justify institutional arrangements, rules, and practices according to how best they coincide with or embody a set of norms and values (usually of a liberal and democratic kind). In the most prominent neo-Kantian schools of political theorizing, associated with the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, the project of legitimation/justification is further understood to require in the first instance an abstracting away from questions of praxis, power, and history—i.e., from questions of “means,” of practical contexts, constraints, and possibilities—in the project of reaching an agreement on the principles of justice. As a result, normative theory tends to construe the problem of means narrowly, as a question of how to “apply” principles and norms to a specific set of institutional or policy situations. Questions of feasibility, adverse effects, or unintended consequences intrude into normative theory only in extreme cases when recognizably “unjust” means are employed and the coercive imposition of principles of justice are contemplated, i.e., in relation to war and revolution.

The aim of the larger project, of which this paper is a part, is to move the problem of “means” to the center of political theorizing. To take “means” to be a central problem of politics is to give priority to dilemmas of political action, from basic questions of how to persuade people to accept or enact political reforms in historically-specific contexts, to the myriad ways that any particular political decision or action encounters and engenders resistance in the contingent field of political contestation. Political theorizing would not be confined to debates about value-pluralism or disagreements about what the good life entails (this is the sort of conflict Rawlsian and Habermasian models seek to address and overcome) but would also turn to considerations about how even broadly agreed upon ideals entail different modes of interpretation and implementation and inevitably face opposition, contestation, and attempts at subversion. The project is therefore premised on a series of doubts about the overly “idealist” or ends-orientation of much contemporary political theorizing, both in terms of its limited and often skewed characterization of the scope and nature of politics and the forms of reasoning, criticism, and action taken to be most appropriate to understand and intervene in the political world.

Despite its recent marginality, however, the means-ends question was a major topic of political debate throughout the twentieth century. A whole range of Marxist, existentialist, progressive, anarchist, and anticolonial thinking wrestled with the legitimacy and efficacy of new forms of mass political action—such as the boycott or the

general strike—as well as the specific question of the use of violence in politics, of what counts as coercion in politics and when it could be deemed permissible and necessary. This is the background context within which Gandhi developed his distinctive understanding of the means-ends question in politics.

II.

Meditations on the means-ends question confront a central dilemma about whether and to what extent political ends can justify the use of morally dubious and dangerous means. This formulation in turn inevitably pries open, and puts pressure upon, a classic disjuncture between the demands of politics and the demands of morality. On one side of the debate, you would find conventional political realists, thinkers such as Machiavelli or Trotsky who give priority to the political *vis-à-vis* the moral and openly declare that effective politics, especially radical political transformations and extreme ideological conflict, necessitate the overcoming of traditional ethical constraints, whether understood in terms of Christian, bourgeois, or liberal norms. For twentieth-century realist critics on both the right and left, liberal-bourgeois norms were taken to be not just ineffective but also a kind of evasion of real politics; their alleged universalism merely an ideological veneer for expressions of power of another kind. In his 1938 essay, “Their Morals and Ours,” Trotsky put the case sharply: the appeal to “abstract norms,” “eternal moral truths,” or any other kind of exterior, “supraclass morality” was merely a way of discrediting political action from below, the way “the ruling class forces its ends upon society and habituates it to considering all those means which contradict its ends as immoral.”¹ Morality, more than any other form of ideology, was thought to be thoroughly imbued with a class character and as such a central and “necessary element in the mechanism of class deception.”² It was simply hypocrisy to dwell on the morality of the means employed in political struggles, what mattered was the justness of the desired end; even democracy, Trotsky reminds us, did not come “into the world...through the democratic road.”³ Ultimately, “Means can only be justified by its end, but the end in its turn needs to be justified. From the Marxist point of view...the end is justified if it leads to the increasing power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another.”⁴

Poised against the realists are a less defined array of moralists and idealists (liberals, Kantians, pacifists, etc.)—their critics deem them to be absolutists—who are wary of attenuating moral principle in the face of the expedient demands of politics. They claim that to concede that political life necessitates the suspension of moral norms or that politics as a realm of social interaction requires and contains its own values and standards that regularly come into conflict with universalist ethical norms is to open the door to pure power politics and its stark relativisms. Absolutism itself covers a variety of even divergent claims: from a strong commitment to protect features of individual lives and liberties from political dispute and intervention; the belief that only moral means

can lead to moral ends; to a broad insistence that moral intention, criteria, and judgment have independent validity (regardless of political consequences), all of which seek in one way or another to privilege the ethical/moral over the strictly political.

Of course, this stark contrast between so-called realists and absolutists obscures as much as it reveals. I will say something about its limitations and offer a way to think beyond it. We can note at the onset that it is far from clear that conventional political realism was or is as “prudential” or as consequentialist as it often claims to be. As Dewey noted in his critical response to Trotsky, realisms themselves often rely on uncritical commitments to the political efficacy of violence, whether conceived in terms of the necessity of class-struggle or, in today’s terms, the always ready-at-hand “military option.” Realisms commit to a particular set of means regardless of whether those means will actually lead to the desired end. And in doing so, “in avoiding one kind of absolutism,” as Dewey forcefully noted, they “plunge into another kind of absolutism.”⁵ Likewise, idealisms are never as absolute as they hope or claim to be. As Weber argued in his classic essay, “Politics As a Vocation,” moral purists when faced with conflict and recalcitrance are easily tempted to compromise on the use of force; “those who have been preaching ‘love against force’ one minute issue a call for force the next,”⁶ often in a haphazard and dangerous manner.

Here we face what might be the most severe limitation of how the means-ends question is traditionally conceived and debated; the question comes to hinge less on the problem of means as such than on competing ideals or ends. For, a large part of what is at issue between realists and absolutists is *which* ends/ideals are privileged—the long-term ends of revolution, national security, democracy or progress, development, peace, versus the sanctity of persons and the immediate moral demands of existing lives and ways of living. To begin to work out of this impasse, it is crucial to distinguish between political ends understood as ultimate goals and ideals and ends understood as *consequences*, as the effects, entailments, and outcomes that are brought forth by particular forms of political action. To consider *ends* as *consequences* to be the distinctive challenge that the means-ends question poses is also to attend more closely to the problem of means *as such*, without folding it into, or subordinating it to, the problem of ends. Both Dewey and Weber, in different ways, sought to focus attention on means as consequences, for both were concerned that something about the subjective attachment to ends seemed to deny acknowledgment of and responsibility for the consequential effects of action. But it was arguably Gandhi who, more than any other thinker, took the problem of means and their consequences as the central and defining problem of political life.

Gandhi, in his political practice as much as in his political thinking, attempted to subordinate and even collapse the problem of ends to that of political means in such a way as to: (1) foreground the ways in which means and ends were interlinked, by pointing out that the choice and enactment of means defined, shaped, and changed the character of the ends; and, (2) shift attention more generally to the consequences of means, especially the unintended effects and incalculable burdens of action. It was this

second feature which in fact demanded the vigilance described in the first. What I mean is that what concerned Gandhi was not only that the means chosen should actually lead to the proposed ends. But also, he thought that a distinct *vigilance* was required to ward off and mitigate the adverse consequences of political action, namely, the forms of coercion and escalation that are endemic to the dynamics of political contestation.

Gandhi took politics to be defined by acute tendencies towards violence, structurally in the centralized state's hierarchical organization,⁷ and dynamically in the interactive structures of political contestation that tend towards coercion and escalation.⁸ When the pursuit of ends becomes abstracted from scrupulous attention to the practical means necessary to enact them, for Gandhi, it gives free reign to the negative entailments of politics: to forms of incitation and indignation, resentment, and hostility that dehumanize political opponents; and to psychological temptations towards violence and attendant forms of moral erosion. To give priority to means is therefore an imperative to orient oneself towards these negative entailments and burdens of action. In this manner, Gandhi's means-orientation, I will argue, enables a kind of consequentialism that is strategic, tactical, and vigilant, but one that also avoids a descent into pure instrumentalism.

III.

Gandhi's reorientation of what he took to be the accepted priority of ends over means in politics is one of the most striking and recurring features of his political thinking.⁹ Gandhi offered several overlapping formulations of the means-ends question and, in this paper, I will explore a few variations with the aim of establishing how they point to the revised notion of consequentialism intimated above.

Perhaps the most general Gandhian statement about means and ends took the following form: means and ends are "convertible" terms.¹⁰ This equation of means and ends has often be read in broadly Kantian terms, as an argument for taking means as ends in themselves. In this absolutist reading, Gandhi is seen to offer a theory of means-restriction, one that takes the imperative to nonviolence to be an absolute constraint on political action. In this vein, Raghavan Iyer, for instance, contended that Gandhi sought the purification of politics by insisting that "every act must be independently justified in terms of the twin absolutes, *satya* [truth] and *ahimsa* [nonviolence]."¹¹ To my mind, this rendering of the resolution, however, merely reasserts the primacy of ends, of truth and nonviolence as "good in themselves and not merely the means to a higher good;"¹² that is, as moral absolutes to which all action ought to be subsumed. Here, nonviolent action (*satyagraha*) is akin to a politics of conviction/conscience, a demonstration of "how the man of conscience could engage in heroic action in the vindication of truth and freedom against all tyranny."¹³ There are a number of drawbacks to this formulation, not least of which is the priority placed on the moral purity of the actor, or some version of the "dirty-hands" problem, with the static corruptions of political life as the primary danger

to avoid. As such, the formulation does not capture well Gandhi's emphasis on the efficacy of *satyagraha*, where *satyagraha* refers to a broad-ranging set of self-limiting political tactics and practices that could affect transformation in a political realm that is admittedly understood to be marked by acute dangers.¹⁴ Indeed, interpreters who emphasize a strong moralist reading tend to reject efficacy as a central component of Gandhian action, for it is taken to immediately entail instrumentalism. Moreover, the form of political action that is taken as the adjunct to the goal of moral purity looks very much like conviction politics. But Gandhi held a politics of pure conviction—and more generally forms of moral and political dogmatism and enthusiasm—in suspicion; they were for him one of the central dangers of modern politics.

The priority of means over ends in Gandhi's thought might be better understood as working in the opposite direction, not as a rejection of politics in favor of moralism but, on the contrary, as a plea for the heightened scrutiny of politics and its endemic dangers. Consider these two analogous formulations:

They say 'means are after all means'. I would say 'means are after all everything'. As the means so the end. Violent means will give violent *swaraj*. That would be a menace to the world and to India herself....There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed, the Creator has given us control (and that too very limited) over means, none over the end. Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means.¹⁵

The clearest possible definition of the goal and its appreciation would fail to take us there if we do not know and utilize the means of achieving it. I have, therefore, concerned myself principally with the conservation of the means and their progressive use. I know that if we can take care of them, attainment of the goal is assured. I feel too that our progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means.¹⁶

For Gandhi, then, to put means first was to insist that ends had to be understood in terms of the means they entail and the means required to attain them.

But if, as I have suggested, collapsing the distinction between means and ends, or subordinating ends to means was not simply a mode of means-restriction, then what would the prioritization of means require in practice? What does *tactical vigilance* and *scrupulous attention* to means really entail? What would "the conservation of the means and their progressive use" look like in terms of concrete forms of political action? I would like to examine these questions through the example of Gandhi's idea of *swaraj* or self-rule, specifically through a consideration of the forms of action he advocated for its attainment. Attending to Gandhi's understanding of the *content* of the struggle for independence yields some surprising and counterintuitive insights into his distinctive approach to the work of politics.

IV.

Gandhi's intervention in the Indian independence movement began with the 1909 publication of what would become his most famous political tract, *Hind Swaraj* [*Indian Home Rule*]. At the time, Gandhi was fully enmeshed in South African politics; it would be a full ten years before he would lead the Indian National Congress and the first national mobilizations against British rule. *Hind Swaraj* was written, furiously Gandhi tells us, in ten days in late 1909, on a return seaboard voyage from England to South Africa, after a failed attempt to press the grievances of Indian migrants in South Africa. The crucial, defining event of his stay in London—the event that sparked the urgency of *Hind Swaraj*—was the assassination by Madan Lal Dhingra of Sir William Curzon Wylie, aide-de-camp to then Secretary of State for India Lord John Morley. Dhingra was an Indian student with close ties to militant nationalist groups in London, especially those that coalesced around India House and radicals like Shyamji Krishnavarma and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.¹⁷ (Savarkar would later become infamous as the founder and central ideologue of the Hindutva movement, and was himself implicated in Gandhi's assassination almost forty years later).

The assassination, and the excitement it generated in India, demonstrated, in Gandhi's words, the extent to which his "countrymen" had come to believe that "they should adopt modern civilization and modern methods of violence to drive out the English." *Hind Swaraj* was written to demonstrate that in taking this stance they were "following a suicidal policy."¹⁸ *Hind Swaraj* is staged as a dialogue between a Gandhi-like figure, the Editor, and a Reader who approximates the stance of a Hindu militant-nationalist youth like Dhingra. The Reader is "impatient" for *swaraj* and especially weary of traditional modes of parliamentary/constitutional appeals to the British crown for political concessions and, therefore, argues for more radical, violent forms of resistance to British rule. Gandhi's strategy was to position himself on the side of the militants in their unhappiness with petitioning (and the deference to legalistic channels of protest), but to also show them that the nationalism they espoused, the nationalism of the Western educated-elite, was not thorough or radical enough precisely because it was overly enamored with the achievements of modern civilization. In this respect, *Hind Swaraj* is remembered, and rightly so, as Gandhi's most sustained indictment of modern civilization as a civilization that degrades and "de-civilizes."¹⁹

Late in the dialogue, after the Reader/militant nationalist is seemingly converted to the necessity of thinking of *swaraj* in more expansive terms, the Reader asks the Editor: "Why should we not obtain our goal, which is good, by any means whatsoever, even by using violence?"²⁰ The burden of Gandhi's response is to show that in politics one could not be indifferent to the means of seeking and attaining an end and, further, that the means adopted determinately shape and define the character of political ends. Gandhi offered the following example to demonstrate the ways in the very definition of "ends" or "results" was dependent on the nature of the means adopted to procure them:

If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay for it; if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means.²¹

In more political terms, if freedom is sought through all available means, including arms or fraud, it can result in conquest and usurpation as easily as true *swaraj* or self-rule. For Gandhi, the idea that “we” nationalists “were justified in gaining our end by using brute force, because the English gained theirs by using similar means” was fundamentally mistaken. In “using similar means,” i.e., brute force to drive out the English, “we can get only the same thing that they got,”²² namely an unstable conquest sustained and legitimated by domination and fear. And Indian freedom, in Gandhi’s iconic rendition, would be nothing more than “English rule without the Englishman.”²³ In ridiculing the nationalist conception of independence as “a change of masters only”²⁴ or “a mere change of personnel,”²⁵ Gandhi intimated an alternative vision of self-rule, which in later writings would take the shape of a pluralist, decentralized polity based on the self-organizing capacity of the Indian village.²⁶ Gandhi was in part criticizing the substance of independence as elitist, but crucially it was an elitism that was also implicated in the very means of militant nationalism. Political violence in the form of “secret societies and the method of secret murder”²⁷ was a mode of political action open only to the few and privileged and entailed a hierarchical structure of leadership. Moreover, in aiming at igniting patriotic fervor and hostility against the ruling power it offered little in terms of a model or method for attaining *swaraj* “in terms of the masses;”²⁸ that is, it did not seek true social, moral, and economic freedom for India’s peasant millions.

In *Hind Swaraj*, this alternative model of *swaraj* as well as the means required to shape it are only intimated in a broad and formal sense. We learn that true self-rule has to be truly self-determining. *Swaraj* was not to be had for the asking, “everyone will have to take it for himself.”²⁹ Similarly, it could not be demanded of, and therefore conceded by, the British; it had to be “taken” by building up strength and power from within. This would also immediately demonstrate the capacity for self-rule, thereby making British rule irrelevant. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi associated the path to self-rule with a program of *swadeshi*—the pursuit of self-reliance—through *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance).³⁰ Although *Hind Swaraj* is often taken to be Gandhi’s definitive statement about the nature of self-rule, it important to keep in mind the limited scope of its elaboration in that work. *Hind Swaraj* in this respect served more to clear the field and stake out a position vis-à-vis what *swaraj* would entail but as yet offered little by way of positive substance.

V.

One of the defining moments for a more substantive elaboration of *swaraj* came in the crucial decade following Gandhi's return to India, which saw Gandhi's rise to power and the first major mass mobilizations against British rule, the apex of which was the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922). Gandhi had only returned to India in 1915 and, in four short years, became the effective leader of the Congress party. He was instrumental in its reorganization and its extraordinary expansion, giving Congress "a new creed, a new agenda, and a new constituency."³¹ The Non-Cooperation campaign took place under the revised Congress banner and as an explicit experiment in mass nonviolent action. The campaign itself came to a sudden and controversial end after the outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura, where policemen, after firing on protesters, were chased into a police station which was then set alight (leaving 23 dead). It was in this charged crucible of extraordinary mass awakening, with all its hopes, expectations, and ultimately disappointments that Gandhi would shape the means and methods of *swaraj*.³² The agenda of *swaraj* would be explicitly formulated and implemented as a distinct project of construction—variously termed constructive work, constructive nonviolence, or constructive *satyagraha*—in which constructive work and action would play a dual role (1) as experimentation and education in self-rule (especially for the peasant millions); and (2) a mode of localized action that would mitigate, channel, and suppress the temptations of and tendencies toward political violence.

The Non-Cooperation Movement was, for Gandhi, the spectacular or extraordinary face of the struggle for independence; it was also primarily its negative or destructive side. Non-cooperation properly aimed at a "complete severance of the British connection," where Indians would "cease to patronize the very institutions that are the emblems of British power and instruments for holding us under subjection."³³ This was in part a top-down program that sought to wean the Western educated-elite from supporting institutions that "confirmed English authority."³⁴ Non-cooperation therefore entailed the surrender of all honorary titles and offices as well as the boycott of Council elections, the civil service, and state-run courts and schools. The more bottom-up or grassroots platform for mass mobilization and resistance focused on the boycott of foreign manufactured goods, especially imported cloth. For Gandhi "construction must keep pace with destruction;"³⁵ therefore the political vacuum had to be reconstituted and redeemed through the generation of alternative, national/indigenous institutions (especially prominent in the sphere of education and the economy)—a whole series of nation-building enterprises that aligned well with ideology of *swadeshi*. Constructive work went further, however; it was also to be a vehicle for "the curing of India's ills"—ills internal to the social life and unity of the incipient nation/polity. From its inception, the agenda of the Constructive Program therefore included three central pillars: the forging of Hindu-Muslim unity, the elimination of untouchability, and the promotion of *khadi* (home-spun cloth). Over the years, the official Constructive Program would

continually expand to include an increasingly broad range of social reform programs focused on everything from sanitation and hygiene to the status of women, prohibition, and adult education, as well as a whole series of attempts at village reconstruction and regeneration. The structure of constructive work was national in scope but would take place as localized, village-level campaigns.

The *khadi* program, as understood and propagated by Gandhi, was to be the heart of the constructive program; it was also arguably its most successful achievement, symbolized by the rapid adoption of *khadi* as a kind of uniform of the nationalist struggle. It was for Gandhi the essential, “positive side” of the successful boycott of foreign cloth.³⁶ The underlying ideology of the *khadi* program was closely tied to the nationalist economic critique of colonialism, inaugurated in the seminal work of Dadabhai Naraji, *Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India* (1876), and R.C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India* (1902/1904). This critique charged British rule with deindustrialization (the decimation of India’s craft industries to make room for English manufactures) and the drain of wealth from colony to metropole. But whereas the first major economic boycotts of the original *swadeshi* campaign in Bengal (1905-1908) tied the boycott of English goods to the cultivation of Indian industry, Gandhi’s agenda focused on rejuvenating non-industrial village production—cooperative or cottage industry—as the mechanism for overall economic self-reliance (for freedom from economic slavery at both the national and individual level).

Khadi was offered both as a solution to rural poverty and underemployment as well as a model for cultivating self-rule or self-constraint. While the argument for the collective economic benefits of *khadi* was relatively clear and coincided with the mainstream of Indian anticolonial thinking, what was more interesting and elusive was how Gandhi sought to tie the act of spinning itself with the creation of *swaraj*. *Khadi* and *charkha* (the spinning wheel), for Gandhi, intimated a new (nonviolent) structure of rule and authority. *Khadi* was an exemplary model of large-scale decentralized, voluntary enterprise—a mode of cooperation that was collective in nature but also premised on the patient work of *isolated* individuals, where each and every individual could separately cultivate discipline and experience self-rule. Moreover, “through *khadi* we teach the people the art of civil obedience to an institution which they have built up for themselves” and thereby “train the masses in self-consciousness and the attainment of power,” requisites for both nonviolent disobedience and the attainment of *swaraj*.³⁷ But spinning was intended as a universal practice, an equalizing practice that traversed distinctions of high and low, rich and poor.³⁸ Gandhi called for Congress leaders especially to take the lead in daily spinning, to demonstrate service to, and egalitarian solidarity with, the laboring, rural poor. Gandhi was so enamored with the broad-ranging moral and political effects of *khadi* that he attempted to make spinning, and later the “constant wearing” of *khadi*, a prerequisite for Congress membership.³⁹

In its initial phases the *khadi* campaign was closely coordinated with, and tied to, the expanding structure of Congress organization, with its avowed attempt to place its

workers in every one of India's 700,000 villages. A considerable amount of subaltern participation grew around constructive work and *khadi* activities. It not only brought in large-scale peasant participation, but would also successfully target and incorporate women (as both producers and conspicuous consumers of *khadi*) in wider political campaigns. But even as *khadi* became a crucial hinge in the conversion of Congress into a mass organization and thereby an effective instrument for mobilization, it also ignited continuing controversy within Congress, one that that would eventually sideline constructive work's political role in the freedom struggle.

As mentioned above, over the course of his political career, Gandhi continually expanded the Constructive Program in breadth and scope, so much so that he regularly equated it with both the means and ends of *swaraj*. In his words, "the constructive program is the truthful and nonviolent way of winning *poorna* [total] *swaraj*. Its wholesale fulfillment is complete independence."⁴⁰ Despite Gandhi's resolute insistence on the importance of the constructive program and constructive work, both were met with equally insistent skepticism and often outright resistance. The main charge was that constructive work was essentially nonpolitical or apolitical, a social agenda that was distracting Gandhi and the national movement from the real political work of resistance to British rule. Gandhi's more severe critics also thought that its very substance was traditionalist and backward-looking or, worse still, merely a vehicle for propagating his "faddish" spiritual politics on a national scale. From the thirties onward, socialists began to argue that as a program of social and economic reform, the promotion of *khadi* and cottage industry was too piecemeal and small-scale to effect far-reaching economic renewal – especially for overcoming class exploitation and caste oppression. For critics on the left, the fundamental socio-economic transformation that Gandhi thought the constructive program ushered in could only come after independence, with the capture of political power and through the agency of the postcolonial state.

For many, both within and outside the Congress fold, the core connection between spinning and *swaraj* that Gandhi insisted upon, therefore, was neither obvious nor necessary. At the same time, people like Jawaharlal Nehru—left leaning modernists within Congress—lauded the *khadi* program in their own terms. For them, its main function was as a kind of mass contact program, the means to make the case for Congress among the peasantry, and to bring them into the cause of national independence. Constructive work was seen primarily as a mode of political pedagogy—propaganda and consciousness-raising—that set before the peasants the full force of the moral ideal embodied in the national project. In this way, those closest to Gandhi would invest in the symbolic implications of *khadi* and constructive work, without subscribing to the full range of political and moral (as well economic and social) effects Gandhi himself attributed to it. In other words, they adopted Gandhi's language of self-discipline and the cultivation of fearlessness, but did not see these as intrinsic to constructive action or to the substance of *swaraj*.

At issue, in part, were divergent senses of the meaning of politics and political education. For Gandhi, constructive work was not primarily a symbolic politics or an ideological project that would prepare the ground for national unity; rather it was the actual substance of politics. Gandhian constructive work was also a program of pedagogy, but one that was premised upon, and implied, a very different mode of political education:

...constructive work is the basis for solving political problems. Opinions may differ on whether this means the spinning-wheel or some other activity. But the time is drawing near when there will be general agreement that the true solution of political problems lies in the education of the people. This education does not imply mere literacy but an awakening of the people from their slumber. The people should become aware of their own condition. Such awareness is possible only through public work and not through talks. This does not also mean that every outward agitation is useless...But outward agitation cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work.⁴¹

Awakening and awareness were, for Gandhi, substantively defined in terms of the cultivation of fearlessness and discipline, and the aim of “solid political work”⁴² was training towards them as foundations of both the art of resistance as well as that of self-reliance. For Gandhi, “such training cannot be imparted by speeches alone,”⁴³ rather teaching “this art to the people” was made through “silent, patient, constructive work.”⁴⁴ This was “a task essentially for our national workers who must go and settle in the villages in their midst, win their confidence by dint of selfless service, identify themselves with them in their joys and sorrows, make a close study of their social conditions, and by degrees infect them with courage.”⁴⁵

As experiments in, and education for, self-reliance, Gandhi understood constructive work in terms of self-consciousness as opposed to national consciousness; its substance was not the cultivation of duty to the national project as much as regaining the power of action. For Gandhi, the educated elite, the impatient youth, and political radicals tended to equate politics and political action too easily with “the clamour for unadulterated excitement”⁴⁶ and the immediate capture of political office and power. They were “addicted” to the politics of speeches, resolutions, declarations, and legislation, of cultivating and exciting public opinion, and therefore shunned the solid and silent work of construction upon which the moral and political revolution of the masses depended.⁴⁷

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, for Gandhi, sustained constructive work was also important as a bulwark against excitement and incitement, against the harboring of resentments and impatience that tempts one in the direction of political violence. And,

in this respect, like the act of spinning itself, the imperative to work was a universal pedagogy, a remedy for both the political elite as well as the masses. On the one hand, “we want the people to become immersed in industries and constructive activities so that their temper is not exposed to the constant danger of being ruffled.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, absorption in common constructive work will “steady and calm us. It will wake our organizing spirit, it will make us fit for swaraj, it will cool our blood.”⁴⁹ The act of spinning again exemplified in miniature a practical and immersive exercise that cultivated patience, industry, simplicity as both an experience of self-rule and as a protection against passion and anger. Against the militants, Gandhi argued that the frenzied call for resistance and disobedience for something as broad and abstract as independence “without the co-operation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless.”⁵⁰ Likewise, against the socialists, he contended that “those who play upon the passions of the masses injure them and the country’s cause....Agitation against every form of injustice is the breath of political life. But my contention is that, divorced from the constructive program, it is bound to have the tinge of violence.”⁵¹

In the sharp contrasts Gandhi drew between the politics of speeches versus constructive work, agitation/revolution versus ordered progress, we can discern the fault lines that would eventually split apart Congress politics and Gandhian politics. Ironically, it would be Gandhians themselves who would start to characterize their constructive activities in the language of their critics, as primarily humanitarian and apolitical. The constructive program, divorced from a political project, would in the long term lose sight of any political objective. As a result, the post-independence Gandhian movement has come to inscribe the agenda of social reform and village reconstruction in terms of the depoliticized language of development. Likewise, decisively unmoored from constructive work, what sometimes comes to pass as Gandhian protest of an overtly political kind – for example in the staged public fast by prominent politicians as well as in the culture of intimidating street marches and boycotts – can appear as little more than orchestrated farce, but unfortunately of a kind that contains more than a tinge of violence.

VI.

What does this revised understanding of *swaraj* amount to in relation to the means-ends question? Gandhian constructive work was premised on the deep reciprocity or convertibility of means and ends. Less than a model of *means-restriction*, means are taken to be broadly *ends-creative*.⁵² In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi offered the following organic metaphor to capture this kind of interdependence between means and ends:

Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake even men who have been

considered religious committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is the same as saying that we can get a rose through planting a noxious weed...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 end as there is between the seed and the tree....We reap exactly as we sow.⁵³

Here, I will explore two potential ways of theorizing this interdependence of means and ends in Gandhian action: as an enlightened instrumental model (associated with Dewey) and as a model of exemplary action (which some contemporary interpreters of Gandhi have employed). I conclude by proposing a third model of self-limiting, strategic action that incorporates elements of both instrumental and exemplary action but, I argue, better captures the interactive political logic, as well as the distinct ethical valence, of Gandhian action.

Dewey's essay, "Means and Ends," was premised on a broad agreement with Trotsky that means and ends were deeply interdependent and, moreover, that the only way means could be justified was by reference to the end towards which they aim. But, for Dewey,

what has given the maxim (and the practice it formulates) that the end justifies the means a bad name is that the end-in-view, the end professed and entertained (perhaps quite sincerely) justifies the use of certain means, and so justifies the latter that it is not necessary to examine what the actual consequences of the use of chosen means will be. An individual may hold, and quite sincerely as far as his personal opinion is concerned, that certain means will "really" lead to a professed and desired end. But the real question is not one of personal belief but of the objective grounds upon which it is held: namely, the consequences that will actually be produced by them.⁵⁴

Dewey's critique of Trotsky therefore turned on the fact that Trotsky had betrayed consequentialism correctly understood by introducing his own absolutist account of means. Dewey recommended instead a kind of experimental and fallible pragmatism in which one would be willing to shift and adjust the ends-in-view (the ends that actually orient action) in light of objective consequential effects. For instance, if in some cases the tactics of class struggle were to lead to reaction and retrenchment rather than liberation, then alternative means have to be seriously contemplated.

In a general sense, Gandhian nonviolence adhered to this kind of experimentalism; it was not a simple or static position but referred to a range of tactics that attempted to overcome opposition and progress towards avowed ends. But Dewey's vision is in some sense still beholden to an overly objective instrumentalism; it calculates the connections between means and ends in a way that distances the means (and their

consequences) from the actors, from both the subjects who act as well the subjects who are acted upon. In this sense, Dewey's resolution would be compatible with the claim that if the end is right then it is morally irrelevant *which* actors and *which* actions bring it about. In other words, from the standpoint of enlightened instrumentalism, if the act is taken to be correct in that it is properly directed toward achieving its end, there is little worry about the ways in which the actor is affected (changed or compromised) by the act itself. For Gandhi, the self was deeply implicated in action, both in terms of gaining internal power as well as forestalling psychological temptations and moral erosion.⁵⁵

The model of exemplary action, by contrast, eschews any hint of instrumentality. In exemplary action – which can also be characterized as expressive or principled action (in the Arendtian sense) – the principle (or end) is enunciated in the action itself. And in inscribing means into ends in each and every single act so that every act contains/entails its end, one can avert precisely any disjuncture between actor/act and means/ends. There is a great deal in Gandhi's understanding of *swaraj* or self-rule that aligns with exemplary action in this sense. For Gandhi, the very attempt to win *swaraj* was its realization, for it involved a moral psychological transformation, an overcoming of fear and the constitution of new bonds of voluntary authority through the creation of self-sufficient and free institutions. It was in this way that Gandhi conceived of individual *swaraj* and collective *swaraj* as isomorphic. Constructive work contained and entailed the end of *swaraj*; through everyday acts of curing its own ills India would attain and sustain self-rule and thereby make British rule irrelevant.

Contemporary interpreters of Gandhi, for example James Tully, Akeel Bilgrami, and Uday Mehta, have been particularly attracted to this model of exemplary action. The tight temporal and conceptual imbrication of means-ends implied in the logic of exemplarity can be seen to overcome the abstraction or suspension between practices and principles that generates the possibility of violence, coercion, and imposition. But the kind of imposition or coercion that most concerns them stems from the disjuncture between particular acts and the principles or norms they embody; that is, through Gandhi these interpreters seek to question top-down models of norm generation in which the meaning of an act is subsumed under a universal principle or rule. For Tully, Gandhi's constructive work was an attempt to ground nonviolence and civic friendship within local practices so as realize from below an alternative world. These practices thus intimate non-hegemonic ways of being in the world.⁵⁶ For Bilgrami, nonviolence should be understood as a practice of exemplarity, where moral exemplars instantiate universality without recourse to universalizable principles. The universalizability of principles, on the model of Kant's categorical imperative, implies forms of criticism and judgment of the actions of others, which for Bilgrami, "have in them potential to generate psychological attitudes (resentment, hostility) which underlie inter-personal violence."⁵⁷ Mehta aligns this understanding of exemplarity with Gandhi's rejection of the progressive teleology and idealism of modern politics more generally, in which political action is rendered meaningful only through its instrumental connection with,

and subsumption under, desirable political ends. For Mehta, the meaning of the act—especially in acts such as spinning, fasting, and celibacy—is contained in the radical singularity of the act itself. It is exemplary in the sense that its meaning, purpose, and motivation bear no reference to moral and political principles exterior to or beyond it.⁵⁸

There are important differences and nuances of interpretation to which I have not sufficiently attended here. The point of commonality I wish to highlight is a view of exemplarity which emphasizes the *self-contained* nature of Gandhian action. Others may be inspired to emulate the act or respond to its radical ethical demand, but only through the non-compulsory “force” of the example.⁵⁹ As such, exemplary action more closely resembles a form of ethical action without a clear sense of its political valence. That is, there is little by way of an account of what that force entails for others, its impact on opponents and potential fellow citizens, and more generally its relation to a political audience and context that is necessarily characterized by contestation and recalcitrance. But, as I have tried to show, Gandhi developed models of nonviolent action that were closely attuned to action’s wider effects and entailments in the political world. The limits of exemplary action as it is currently being theorized (and sometimes attributed to Gandhi) are in part due to the fact that action is viewed as the site for the immanent constitution of norms or ends, rather than in terms of its situation within the interactive dynamics through which political relationships are reshaped and transformed. It is too closely tied to epistemological conundrums about judgment, rather than to the means-ends idiom appropriate for understanding action’s consequential effects.

Gandhian action, to my mind, is best characterized less as self-contained action than as self-limiting, strategic action; that is, a non-instrumental form of consequentialism that sought to curtail and mitigate endemic violence and sustain progressive change. Its vigilance was two-pronged: internally it aimed at averting moral erosion and the temptation to violence and externally it focused on nonviolent means to “convert” others to the cause of reform. In the case of civil disobedience and non-cooperation, that is, in negative or destructive *satyagraha*, self-limiting action seeks to mitigate the resentments that action entails, most importantly by taking upon itself the burdens and consequences of action. Likewise in constructive *satyagraha*, perhaps especially in its more pedagogical forms, self-limiting action attempts to undercut psychological impulses like impatience, bravado, self-righteousness, dogmatism through the cultivation of confidence, trust, and authority through work and service. Abstract ends—such as *swaraj*—needed grounding in immediate, intimate, and precise practices—such as spinning—as a way to ward off the temptation to look for “short-violent-cuts” to temporarily satisfying but ultimately self-defeating gains.

VII.

I will conclude with some speculative remarks on wider implications of turning to a means-orientation in politics, of a kind that I attribute to Gandhi. I hope it can provide

a different, critical angle from which to think about the recurrent fragility of norms and ideals in the face of the constraints and hazards of political action. When faced with disappointments and failures with respect to the implementation of ideals, there is a temptation to turn inwards to clarify or purify those ideals. For instance, in the body of twentieth-century political thought that tried to make sense of totalitarian and revolutionary violence, there was an attempt to pinpoint some logical fallacy or inadequacy in conceptualizations of liberty, freedom, progress, equality, or community that was seen to be the deep source for the violence that ensued. One can think here of Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty, Arendt's account of political versus social revolution, or even Hayek's privileging of equality before the law over and against equality of opportunity. But the question of why and how particular ideals in particular circumstances are accompanied by and enable violent or coercive politics may have as much to do with the forms of power used for their implementation—that is, the *means* employed to secure politics ends—than with the internal logic/coherence of the ideals themselves or the purity (or not) of the intentions of individual and collective agents that seek their instantiation. This is one lesson I take from a book like Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, namely, that the recurring threat to principles of moral universalism and equality lies in the moral erosion that proceeds from habituation to violence and domination. In other words, despite the recognition and sanctification of universal norms of human equality and dignity, these principles can all too easily be corrupted and degenerate when tied to and subsumed by the dynamics of power politics—nation-state rivalry, empire, war, and revolution. I want to suggest that attending to means is to take seriously the processes of moral erosion that violence in politics is both premised upon and compounds. If we recognize the potential for violence and coercion given in all political action—as consequential entailments of action—then the responsibility for violence in politics cannot be so easily disavowed by claims about the purity of moral intention or the justness or universalism of the ideals pursued.

ENDNOTES

1. Leon Trotsky, "Their Morals and Ours," in *Their Morals and Ours: The Class Foundations of Moral Practice* (New York, 1973), 25. Trotsky's essay was originally published in *New Internationalist* in June 1938.
2. *Ibid.*, 26-27.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 54.
5. John Dewey, "Means and Ends," in *Their Morals and Ours*, 79. Dewey's response to Trotsky first appeared in *New Internationalist* in August 1938.
6. Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Weber: Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994), 361.
7. Karuna Mantena, "On Gandhi's Critique of the State: Sources, Contexts, Conjunctures," *Modern Intellectual History*, forthcoming. See also N.K. Bose, *Studies in Gandhism* (Ahmedabad, 1972).
8. Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review*, 106: 2 (2012).
9. For discussions of Gandhi's account of means and ends, see especially Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, 1958); H.J.N. Horsburgh, *Non-Violence and Aggression: A Study of Gandhi's Moral Equivalent of War* (London, 1968); Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford, 1972); Dennis Dalton, "Gandhi's Originality," in *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule*, ed. Anthony Parel (Lanham, 2003).
10. M.K. Gandhi, "Presidential Address at Belgaum Congress (6-12-1924)," *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols. (New Delhi, 1999), 29, 497. [All references to this edition are cited hereafter as CWMG, followed by volume and page number. The electronic edition can be consulted at <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>]
11. Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 366.

12. *Ibid.*, 369.
13. *Ibid.*, 252.
14. Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence."
15. M.K. Gandhi, "'An Appeal to the Nation' (17-7-1924)," CWMG, 28, 310. The "they" in this quote refers to the signatories of a petition which sought, amongst other things, the removal of a clause in the Congress constitution that referred to using only "peaceful and legitimate" means in the nationalist cause.
16. M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru (14-9-1933)," CWMG, 61, 393.
17. For a recent account of the immediate political context around the writing of *Hind Swaraj*, see Jonathan Hyslop, "An 'Eventful' History of *Hind Swaraj*: Gandhi between the Battle of Tshushima and the Union of South Africa," *Public Culture* 23: 2 (2011), 299-319.
18. M.K. Gandhi, "Preface to *Indian Home-Rule* (20-3-1910)," CWMG, 10, 458.
19. M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (22-11-1909), CWMG, 10, ch. 3.
20. *Ibid.*, 286.
21. *Ibid.*, 287.
22. *Ibid.*, 286.
23. *Ibid.*, 255.
24. M.K. Gandhi, "Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes (28-7-1946)," CWMG, 91, 371.
25. M.K. Gandhi, "Is It Non-Co-Operation? (8-5-1924)," CWMG, 27, 369.
26. Mantena, "On Gandhi's Critique of the State."
27. M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to *The Times of India* (22-8-1919)," CWMG, 18, 304.
28. Gandhi, "Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes," 91, 372.

29. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 305-306.
30. *Ibid.*, 310-311.
31. Rahul Ramagundam, *Gandhi's Khadi: A History of Contention and Conciliation* (New Delhi, 2009), 137. See also Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge, 1972).
32. The outbreak of violence was what Gandhi would later dub his "Himalayan blunder," stemming from a naïve over-confidence in the nonviolent character of mass *satyagraha*. One of the key lessons he learnt from these first large-scale experiments in *satyagraha* was that the majority of Indians—and not just the educated elite—did not yet have the discipline and self-control to mount nonviolent campaigns on a mass scale, hence the increasing emphasis on constructive work.
33. M.K. Gandhi, "Then and Now (17-1-1929)," CWMG, 44, 4.
34. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 274.
35. Gandhi, "Is It Non-Co-Operation?" 27, 369.
36. *Ibid.* See also M.K. Gandhi, "To No-Changers (19-1-1928)," CWMG, 41, 128.
37. M. K. Gandhi, "Interview to Nirmal Kumar Bose (9/10-11-34)," CWMG, 65, 317.
38. Gandhi, "Is It Non-Co-operation?" 27, 370.
39. On the controversy around Gandhi's attempt to institute a "spinning-franchise" within Congress, see Ramagundam, *Gandhi's Khadi*, 124-171.
40. M. K. Gandhi, "Foreword to 'Constructive Program—Its Meaning and Place' (13-11-1945)," CWMG, 88, 325.
41. M.K. Gandhi, "My Notes (30-8-1925)," CWMG, 32, 362-363.
42. M.K. Gandhi, "Atrocities By Officials (23-9-1928)," CWMG, 43, 342.
43. M.K. Gandhi, "Policy of Making Khadi Self-Supporting (23-9-1928)," CWMG, 43, 45. See also M.K. Gandhi, "'Bitter As Poison' (5-9-1929)," CWMG, 46, 377.

44. M.K. Gandhi, "The Old Story (25-7-1929)," CWMG, 46, 247-248.
45. *Ibid.*, 247.
46. M.K. Gandhi, "The Congress (10-1-1929)," 43, 497. See also M.K. Gandhi, "Notes (2-3-1922)," CWMG, 26, 254; "The Way To Do It (16-5-1929)," CWMG, 46; 19-20; "To Proud Gujarat (15-3-1931)," CWMG, 51, 252.
47. M.K. Gandhi, "Notes on the Agreement (13-11-1924)," CWMG, 29, 333; "What Should Be Done Now? (30-11-1924)," CWMG, 29, 394-395; "My Duty (26-7-1925)," CWMG, 32, 180; "Notes (17-9-1925)," CWMG, 32, 410; "Notes (25-3-1926)," CWMG, 34, 446; "Kathiawar Political Conference (12-12-1926)," CWMG, 37, 401-402; "Bitter As Poison," 46, 377.
48. M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to Konda Venkatapayya (4-3-1922)," CWMG, 26, 272.
49. Gandhi, "Notes," 26, 254.
50. M.K. Gandhi, "Constructive Program - Its Meaning and Place (13-12-1941)," CWMG, 81, 373.
51. M.K. Gandhi, "Ahimsa in Practice (27-1-1940)," CWMG, 77, 245.
52. I broadly follow Horsburgh in this distinction; see Horsburgh, *Non-Violence and Aggression*, 41-53.
53. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 10, 286-287.
54. Dewey, "Means and Ends," 76.
55. I was first alerted to this possible difference between Dewey and Gandhi by David Bromwich and his remarks on Dewey's essay at the conference, "Means and Ends: Rethinking Political Realism" (Yale University, April 2011).
56. James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume II: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge, 2008), ch. 9, especially 308-309.
57. Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38: 39 (2003), 4163.

58. Uday Mehta, "Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life," *Modern Intellectual History* 7:2 (2010), 355-371.
59. For an analogous philosophical defense of exemplarity (though without reference to Gandhi), see Alessandro Ferrara, *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment* (New York, 2008).