

Mahatma Gandhi's Dubious Thought

It is possible that some people still remember and recognize the extraordinary figure of Mohandas Gandhi, his policy of civil disobedience (*satyagraha* or insistence on truth) and non-violence or aggression (*ahimsa*), in the victorious struggle for independence in India (*Hind-Swarâd*), considering him, with good reason, one of the most charismatic and respected men of the 20th century.

In the United States, for example, Martin Luther King adhered to Gandhi's ideas, as he confesses in his autobiography: "As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. I was particularly moved by his Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of Satyagraha (Satya is truth which equals love, and agraha is force; Satyagraha, therefore, means truth force or love force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. ... It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking" (Clayborne Ed., 1998).

But what has probably already been forgotten is his extremely severe and reprobative judgment of all that the West has represented for itself as a civilization, including forms and objectives of life, science, the mastery and development of the most varied techniques. His criticism was not that of a philosopher, critic or sociologist, as his friend and poet Lanza del Vasco pointed out, but that of a deeply

religious man, an anti-colonialist politician and a culturally conservative or traditionalist man.

Curiously or unexpectedly, it was precisely in England, where he studied law at the University College of London, that he was able to discover the sacred Hindu texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, in the English translation, and to get to know closely the opposing values of European society, especially the English, in the years he stayed in that metropolis, then center of world decisions.

And in 1908, travelling from England to South Africa, where he would still work until his 45th birthday (when he would only then return to India, starting his political career), he wrote in *Gujarati* his first libel for the Independence of India, initially published in the *Indian Opinion* of South Africa (but forbidden to circulate in India itself by the English authorities) and whose French translation received the very different title of *Leur Civilisation et Notre Délivrance* (Their Civilisation and Our Liberation, Ed. Denoël, 1957).

Right at the opening of the booklet, and by way of explanation, Gandhi says: "This little book is a severe condemnation of 'modern civilization'... after that (of having written it), my conviction only accentuated. India, if it decides to fight against modern civilization, has only to win... I do not wish to suppress the railways and the hospitals, but their natural disappearance would be a joy for me... all you can say is that they are a necessary evil... and they have never added anything to the moral greatness of a country".

In the main chapter entitled *Civilization*, Gandhi takes up the subject and shows himself emphatic: "Modern civilization has only civilized the name and, in fact, it ruins and degrades the countries of Europe more and more every day... Societies have been formed to cure the country of evils engendered by civilization... He who works

in the pestilent atmosphere of modern civilization is like a man who dreams... Let us first look at the state of things that the word civilization implies. The people who defend it make material welfare the main object of their lives. Let's take a few examples. The people of Europe live better than they did a hundred years ago. This is considered to be the very mark of civilization and this progress contributes to material happiness... In other times, in Europe, the work of the earth was done by hand. Now, a man can, on his own, plough vast lands by means of motorised machines and thus obtain great riches. It is what is called a sign of civilization. In other times, only a few men wrote valuable books. In our day, the whole world writes and publishes no matter what, and thus poisons the spirit of people. In the old days, they used to travel in carriages. Now we travel through the air and cover hundreds of miles in one day. All this is considered the summit of civilization".

In the manner of a visionary prophet, he even sentences the advent of today's digitalization: "Men will no longer need their feet and hands. They will press a button and their clothes will stand before them. They will press another button to have their newspaper. On a third, and a car will pick them up ... All this will be done by machines. In the past, when people wanted to fight, they measured themselves in hand-to-hand. Today, one man can shoot thousands of people with a machine gun. It is civilization ... Before, men were reduced to slavery by physical constraint. Now they are because of the temptation that money represents, and for all that it allows to acquire. Nowadays, there are diseases that we would never have imagined before and that require an army of doctors in search of medicines, and a strong increase in hospitals. It is still a result of civilization ... Before, people ate two or three meals consisting of bread that they

themselves had produced and vegetables; now, they want to eat every two hours and barely find time to do anything else ... This civilization does not care about morals and religion; its adherents calmly declare that their job is not to teach religion. Many of them even say that it is just a superstitious belief ...

This civilisation is the irreligion itself, and its empire is such on the Europeans that those who support it seem to to be a little crazy... They have difficulty in being happy in solitude. Women, who should be queens of the home, stroll down the streets or are exhausted in the factories...

This civilization is of such a nature that we just have to wait patiently for it to destroy itself... Hinduism calls it the Dark Age".

Gandhi's conservatism may have been the cause of his lack of commitment to tackle the ancient Indian caste system more vigorously. Although he condemned the prejudice against the *Dalits* (those outside that order), or untouchables of the hierarchical social system of his country, Gandhi, born among the shudras (manual workers, artisans) was equally convinced of the cosmic and organic perfection of the fourfold order or the four *varna* (Brahmins, warriors, traders and artisans). The heredity of the past was, therefore, a guarantee of order, peace and social balance.¹

For Arundhati Roy, the Indian author who won the Booker Prize in 2014, Mahatma Gandhi was a firm discretionary and therefore asked that the institutions bearing her name be renamed. Speaking at Kerala University in the southern Indian city of Thiruvananthapuram, Roy, then 52, described the generally accepted image of Gandhi as

¹ Since independence, the *Jatis*, or reference communities, such as dairy farmers, butchers, fishermen, weavers, i.e. family professions or also those of tribal origin, are also considered to be part of western-style political parties today.

a lie. “It is time to unveil a few truths about a person whose doctrine of nonviolence was based on the acceptance of a most brutal social hierarchy ever known, the caste system ... Do we really need to name our universities after him”? (The Gardian Journal, 18.7.2014)

Gandhi's position is sometimes evasively confronted, like the reserved opinion of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Dalit who came to be the prominent leader of India's independence movement and minister of justice (under Nehru), responsible for much of the country's constitution. In 1955, in an interview with the BBC, he accused Gandhi of writing against the caste system in English-language newspapers, but in favour in his mother tongue *Gujarati*. Earlier, in 1936, Ambedkar had written a speech entitled *The Annihilation of Caste*, which was neither pronounced nor published. Arundhati Roy recently wrote a new introduction to Ambedkar's undelivered speech in which the teacher and political leader (and also founder of the Indian Independent Labor Party) referred to Gandhi as "the saint of the *status quo*".

In the face of such nuanced aspects, it is up to the possible reader, Western or otherwise, to draw his own conclusions regarding the Mahatma.