

Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture

Richard G. Fox

Beacon Press 1989

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1994 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

did Gandhi matter? can individuals change history?

Gandhian Utopia is an account of the origins, authorship and history of the complex of ideas associated with Mohandas Gandhi. As well as providing an account of a major strand of modern Indian history, Fox's book also deals with theoretical issues in the social sciences, and in particular with the relationship between individuals and culture in historical change. This review takes the form of a detailed summary because, while I feel *Gandhian Utopia* deserves close attention, I do not feel competent to assume an evaluative stance towards it.

Fox seeks to achieve the anthropological goal of "getting the native point of view" by using the epistemological framework of his subject, Gandhi, "to constitute this volume's format and theoretical design." In doing so he also hopes to answer the postmodern critique of ethnography better than he feels the suggested postmodern solutions — polyphony, reflexive and dialogic ethnography, and so on. (He accepts that his "culture history" is still a fiction, but hopes it will avoid some of the fictions of ethnography.) Gandhi's epistemology disowned the concept of the integral individual and replaced it with a "discontinuous personhood". Gandhi viewed cultures as changing through collective experiments, and cultural innovation as occurring only in the context of people's resistance to and struggle against cultural meanings. Fox discusses these ideas in the light of the similar theories of other thinkers, in particular the distinction drawn by Ricoeur (following Mannheim) between utopia as what shatters order and ideology as what preserves it. (Fox seems to share with these thinkers that teleological bias that is the heritage of Marxism — change is only **really** change when it is in the "right" direction. Hence his refusal, later in the book, to grant Hindu nationalism the status of utopia.)

Next comes a look at "Gandhian utopia", as a "dream of a future India, perfected on the basis of its presumed ancient culture." Fox presents this as an "anonymous and ahistorical set of cultural meanings", rooted in an ideal of an "essential India". Critical elements of Gandhi's vision included: sarvodaya - spiritual well-being for all and individual discipline (especially in such matters as consumption) as the underpinning of national strength; swadeshi - serving neighbours first; satyagraha - non-violent resistance (not passive resistance or pacifism, but a principled rejection of violence from a position of moral strength); trusteeship - the rich are trustees of their wealth for the good of all; bread labour - opposition to dehumanising technology; and panchayat raj - the village as central institution, with government by consensus of leaders.

The major theoretical issue tackled in *Gandhian Utopia* is the relationship between individuals and culture in history, and the role of individuals in cultural change. Associated with this are contingencies of authorship and authority. In a brief account of the "great men vs cultural determinism" debate the latter is seen as dominant in the anthropological tradition. In contrast Gandhi assumed "neither an integral individual nor a determined culture", and argued that "individual and culture are constantly interlinked by confrontation and struggle". The theory of culture change Fox finds closest to this is Bhaskar's transformational model, where "the intentions and actions of individuals, as they bounce off the existing culture and society, can either reproduce or transform that culture, in ways usually unintended by individuals." This is tied in with Gouldner's attacks on traditional ideas of authorship. The resulting conception of a "culture history" is "tested" by applying it to the history of scientific innovation.

Although Gandhi rejected modernisation and the West, Gandhian utopia, like the other strands of Indian nationalism, was a response to the impact of the world on India. Fox's sources and inspirations here include Wallerstein's "world system", William's "hegemony", Said's "Orientalism" and Terdiman's "conflicted intimacy". Gandhian utopia is seen as a form of affirmative Orientalism within the Orientalist hegemony of the world system, one in "conflicted intimacy" with the negative elements of that

hegemony. Comparisons are made with other instances of cultural resistance to the world system.

Gandhian utopia did not appear out of a vacuum; there were others confronting that same Orientalist hegemony. Affirmative Orientalism involved Westerners as well as Indians, and people such as Edward Carpenter, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Annie Besant had a significant influence on Gandhi. Among the most important forerunners of Gandhi were a group centred on Bengal that included Swami Vivekananda, Margaret Noble (sister Nivedita) and Sri Aurobindo. They shared with Gandhi a belief in the essential spiritual nature of India, opposition to modernisation and stress on an organic society. However they were also involved in revolutionary movements, and Aurobindo's "expedient passive resistance" lacked satyagraha's moral commitment. Another group of nationalists, centred on Bombay and London, was split between those favouring modernisation and Westernisation and revolutionary cultural nationalists like Bal Tilak and Shyamji Krishnavarma. Gandhian utopia was constructed as an alternative to these that rejected both Westernisation and violent revolution; its most important original component was satyagraha.

Gandhi left India for South Africa in 1893 as the result of an early "experiment" with British rule that went awry. It was in South Africa that he began his association with civil disobedience, and coupled it to moral commitment to form satyagraha as a weapon of mass protest. Gandhi maintained his authority over the resulting movement (and in particular his "authorship" of satyagraha) by protecting it against "misreadings", and in doing so enhanced his own reputation. When he returned to India in 1915 he was forced to reauthor satyagraha and to adapt it to new circumstances; fear of extremist protest was reducing his support among Indian nationalists. Early experiments involving support of tenants against British landlords had positive outcomes. But an attempt to intervene in disputes between mill owners and labourers involved him in direct class struggle, and he was ambivalent about the results, fearing the lack of discipline of the lower classes. This was to dissuade him from class-based politics and an appeal to the impoverished, and to turn him instead towards action against the British Raj. This led to the major successes of

satyagraha in the Salt March and Quit India campaigns.

Fox now asks a critical question: What difference did Gandhi and Gandhian utopia make to Indian history? Both his successes and his failures had consequences for Indian independence and independent India. Important successes included non-violence (the relatively bloodless British withdrawal from India), class conciliation and the avoidance of peasant militarism, and the building of a strong voluntary movement. Failures included the spread of religious intolerance (and especially the partition with Pakistan), the partial "hijacking" of Gandhian utopia by Nehru and Congress, and the ideological transplant of Gandhian utopia in the interests of the rich peasants, the urban middle classes and big business. Even these failures were only partial, and while Gandhi was alive those seeking to turn Gandhian utopia to their own ends had to deal with his personal authority.

The last part of *Gandhian Utopia* looks at the inheritors of Gandhi's legacy and the history of that legacy up to the present. After Gandhi's assassination in 1948 Vinoba Bhave was his principal heir, and he formed the Sarva Seva Sangh to coordinate the activities of Gandhian workers. Vinoba represented the more spiritual side of Gandhi's programme, and in particular he rejected "harsh" satyagraha. In this he was opposed by Rammanohar Lohia, who sought to turn satyagraha into a weapon of class struggle. Vinoba was helped in this confrontation by government subsidies, and became dependent on Congress support. Vinoba's most important experiments were "khadi", or home-spun cloth production, and "bhoodan", or voluntary land reform. The former became an unprofitable enterprise kept alive only by subsidy, while the latter relied too much on the acquiescence of landowners and was a general failure. Vinoba, as a result of his unworldliness and the "mildness" of his experiments, effectively assisted Nehru and Congress in their "hijacking" of Gandhian utopia in support of their political interests.

Around 1970 Indira (Mrs.) Gandhi gave up the hijack of Gandhi's legacy in favour of a class-based popular appeal. This set the scene for a revival of Gandhian utopian experiment. Jayaprakash Narayan (J.P.) was originally a

Marxist but embraced Gandhian utopia and became a follower of Vinoba soon after Gandhi's assassination. He became disillusioned, however, with the failures of bhoodan and the mildness of Vinoba's approach, and moved back towards activism. His long term goal was "total revolution", or the complete reworking of Indian society along Gandhian lines. But he failed to seize control of the Sarva Seva Sangh from Vinoba and this complicated his claims to Gandhian authority and obliged him to seek mass support elsewhere. He supported, and gradually asserted his authority over, student protest movements in Bihar, but outside that state he never managed to mobilise much of a following and had to rely on the support of the organised opposition parties. The Bihar experiment was ended in 1975 by the declaration of emergency and subsequent suppression of protest by Mrs. Gandhi.

Fox now looks at the history of Hindu nationalism and its intertwining with Gandhian utopia; he sees the conjunction of the two as a contingent result of history. The Janata party was formed by a coalition of social democratic, centrist and Hindu nationalist parties, all claiming a Gandhian character and employing J.P. as their link to Gandhi. It was successful in the 1977 elections, but three years later it fell apart (as a result of disputes over affirmative action policies) and Mrs Gandhi returned to power. As part of her crackdown on opposition, Mrs. Gandhi repressed the followers of J.P. and reauthorized Vinoba as the spiritual head of the Gandhian voluntary movement. Gandhian utopia became peripheral to politics, with those parts of it that continued to be important being subsumed within Hindu nationalism.

Modern Hindu nationalism contains much that is derived from Gandhian thinking. Recently forms of non-violent protest have been employed by upper castes opposing reservations for the lower castes. The nationalist goal of the creation of "Hindia" — an essential India built around Hinduism — shares with Gandhian utopia the vision (derived from affirmative Orientalism) of India as different but not inferior to the West. Other common elements include support of decentralisation and stress on the avoidance of class conflict and subordination of the individual to the community. The major difference lies in the narrow religious and sectarian focus of Hindu nationalism; its intolerance of Muslims and other

minorities and opposition to affirmative action run directly counter to Gandhi's beliefs. Hindu nationalism has reduced Gandhian utopia to an ideology deployed in caste/class conflict, both against the formation of a capitalist class and against Muslims and the lower castes. Nevertheless, Fox sees the possibility of a new utopia growing out of this ideology, and suggests the career of Deendayal Upadhyaya as a plausible forerunner of such an event.

Gandhian Utopia covers a vast amount of material. Not only is Gandhi is an extremely complex subject, but the theoretical issues raised include some of the most important in the social sciences. I certainly didn't agree with all of Fox's methodology or conclusions (and few readers are likely to, as his viewpoint is distinctive), but I feel they deserve close consideration. It is as a meeting between anthropology and history that *Gandhian Utopia* really stands out. Students of modern Indian political history should find *Gandhian Utopia* provocative. Anthropologists will find the focus of study on the life and ideas of a single person unusual, but they will also find much that is familiar; since the issues considered are important to anthropology, it is to be hoped they will give Fox's book the attention it deserves.

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