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## Gandhi's Progressive Disillusionment: Thumbs, Fingers, and the Rejection of Scientific Modernism in *Hind Swaraj*

Keith Breckenridge

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj*—the anticolonial manifesto that defined him as one of the key political actors of the twentieth century—after six years of struggle over the fingerprint registration of Indians in the Transvaal. His little book is an angry disavowal of the political benefits of late-nineteenth-century progressivism—the widely held view that advances in industry and science were leading to better societies and better individuals. Where progressives extolled the benefits of modern medicine, Gandhi saw new opportunities for evil; where they celebrated the efficiencies and time-saving of long-distance rail transport and the telegraph, he found sources of conflict and disease; where they applauded the social benefits of modern education, Gandhi worried that sympathetic morality was being overturned by a “clear, cold, logic engine” of self-interest.<sup>1</sup> This rejection of the apparent benefits of progress became the distinctive element of Gandhi's politics after May 1908, but it has few precedents in his political arguments in the previous decades.<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars have commented on the extraordinary change in his politics in this period, and some have pointed to the special role that the struggle with the Transvaal state played in the development of his political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> But

1. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *“Hind Swaraj” and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101.

2. The most influential study of Gandhi's anti-progressive views is Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 85–126, which creates the misleading impression that the views Gandhi presented in *Hind Swaraj* were held consistently throughout his life.

3. Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed, *The Making of a Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893–1914* (New Delhi: Monahar, 2005), 19; Paul F. Power, “Gandhi in South Africa,”



all of these studies rest upon a simplification of Gandhi's role in these events that effectively clouds our understanding of the origins of *Hind Swaraj* and his antiprogressive politics. In this article I want to show that Gandhi's entanglement with the design of the systems of identity in South Africa in the first decade of the twentieth century was the source of the ideas in *Hind Swaraj* and of his repudiation of progressivism.

Gandhi's struggle with the Transvaal state may be one of the most widely known episodes of twentieth-century history. In this story, Gandhi organized popular resistance to a law that subjected Indian and Chinese immigrants to a stigmatizing system of fingerprint identity registration. The key moment in the struggle came in September 1906, when the protesters collectively resolved to accept imprisonment "rather than submit to the galling, tyrannous and un-British requirements" of the new law.<sup>4</sup> In the new official history of South Africa this act of defiance was the first in a long history of passive resistance to racist law.<sup>5</sup> Aside from ushering into existence the new political philosophy of satyagraha, the pact led to a stunningly successful campaign of noncooperation. The resistance dissolved during the first weeks of 1908 as Gandhi came to an agreement with the politician Jan Smuts to submit to voluntary registration in exchange for the withdrawal of the stigmatizing law. Two crises then confronted Gandhi: the first was the bewilderment and anger of his constituents at the betrayal of the promise of resistance, epitomized in a vicious assault on the streets of Johannesburg by a group of Pathan veterans, and the second was Smuts's refusal to withdraw the original act. By the end of 1908, Gandhi's campaign of mass resistance had collapsed and he sought, instead, to mobilize small groups of dedicated satyagrahis who were prepared to sacrifice everything in defiance of the law. It was only in

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*Journal of Modern African Studies* 7 (1969): 450; Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 55, 87; Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal* (Cape Town, South Africa: Kwela Books, 2007), 76–77; Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 109; Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky, eds., *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 1996); Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985), 163.

4. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "The Mass Meeting." *Indian Opinion*, September 15, 1906, in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999), 5:337.

5. This narrative is most clearly presented in the museum at the new Constitutional Court, a building fashioned out of the Old Fort Prison complex in Johannesburg. See, as a summary account, "The Satyagraha Campaign 1906," *South African History Online*, n.d., [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/passive-resistance/1906.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/passive-resistance/1906.htm) (accessed September 2, 2010).

1 1912, with his discovery of the grievances of the indentured Indians in Natal, that  
2 satyagraha again took on the qualities of a successful mass movement.

3 The South African satyagraha story has a heroic quality that derives from its  
4 special place in the biography of one of the great leaders of the twentieth century,  
5 but it also brought together a remarkable group of political antagonists. Aside  
6 from Gandhi, Smuts was the leading politician of the new South African Union,  
7 and a decade later he would become one of the most influential figures in Britain  
8 and the empire. As Mark Mazower's recent study of the United Nations shows,  
9 Smuts dragged the conflict with Gandhi with him into the new imperial conflicts  
10 of the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> There is also an irony here, for Smuts was actually implementing  
11 a plan that had been drawn up by Lord Alfred Milner's government. Milner, it is  
12 worth emphasizing, was the outstanding English advocate of the new imperialism  
13 and (at this time) Smuts's bitter enemy. But he was also, like the colonial secre-  
14 tary Joseph Chamberlain, an outstanding critic of Gladstonian liberalism and an  
15 advocate of social imperialism (the progressives' theory that the empire should be  
16 the source of improved welfare in Britain).<sup>7</sup> Milner's agent in the effort to curtail  
17 Indian immigration to the Transvaal—and the architect of the draconian scheme  
18 of fingerprint registration—was Lionel Curtis. Curtis, in turn, was the moving  
19 spirit of the Round Table movement, and he would go on to confront Gandhi  
20 again in India in the 1920s.

21 Important elements of Gandhi's critique of modernity were shared by those  
22 who wielded power in South Africa in the first decade of the twentieth century;  
23 he was a product of late-nineteenth-century antimodernism, drawn to the same  
24 critiques of laissez-faire liberalism as imperial progressives like Milner and  
25 Curtis. T. J. Jackson Lears argues that a yearning for "authentic experience," a  
26 desire to throw off the material encumbrances of industrial civilization, was the  
27 common feature of the broad range of late-nineteenth-century antimodernists.<sup>8</sup>  
28 Anglo-American antimodernism incorporated movements in search of the moral  
29 rewards of craft work, of the simple agricultural life, of the self-sacrificing virtue  
30 of military service, of the discipline and exultation of ancient religion, and, above  
31 all, of minutely arranged therapeutic schemes for an always retreating physical  
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34 6. Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the*  
35 *United Nations*. Lawrence Stone Lectures (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

36 7. Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought,*  
37 *1895–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), 183.

38 8. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American*  
*Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 57.

well-being.<sup>9</sup> Often following John Ruskin or Lev Tolstoy, these movements were an effort to escape the pervasive and numbing benefits of industrial capitalism.

Gandhi shared all of these preoccupations. But unlike his antimodernist peers in the United States and England, whom Lears has followed in coming to a meek accommodation with corporate managerialism, Gandhi broke decisively, and irrevocably, with progressivism in May 1908.<sup>10</sup> This rupture was prompted by his realization that the imperial progressives were wedded to the ideology of segregation, and the technologies of fingerprinting, as tools for the making of a racially defined state. What I want to show here is that Gandhi's radical rejection of progressivism was impelled by his own participation in the design of this racialized modernism.

Key, then, to understanding the bitter rejection of Western modernity in general, and colonial government in particular, in the *Hind Swaraj* was its author's earlier involvement in the design of the administrative procedures of progressive imperialism in the Transvaal. Contrary to the popular view of his role, before 1908 Gandhi saw himself as an expert administrator and an architect of more efficient and secure legal mechanisms for regulating the movement and identity of Indians in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> He was an early advocate of administrative fingerprinting for South African Indians. In 1904, when he recommended to the Natal government that illiterate Indians should be required to provide thumbprints on promissory notes, the law was revised to accommodate his suggestion. While he was in the thick of the conflict with Smuts, he mastered Edward Henry's *Classification and Uses of Finger Prints* and became an expert on the administrative costs and benefits of ten-print and thumbprint registration. When he endorsed full-print registration in 1908, he was accepting Smuts's argument that the state required a scientific basis for identification, and he used the same scientific virtues of ten-print registration to cajole the Indians in the Transvaal to register.

The emphasis Gandhi placed on consent worked to bolster the reasonableness of his protests against stigmatizing administrative requirements, and, after 1908, he argued that it provided a tool to dissolve the hold of the administrative procedures he had helped design. But in this respect he was wrong. Despite his claims, at the time and in years afterward, the Asiatic fingerprint registry that was built in these months remained a tool of policing, taxation, and movement con-

9. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 57.

10. Lears, *No Place of Grace*.

11. In this respect Adam McKeown is correct that Gandhi's politics encouraged the bureaucratization of immigration systems. See Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 317.

1 trol of precision and longevity unprecedented in the history of the South African  
2 state. Despite his constant claims to the contrary, afterward there was no way to  
3 withdraw the fingerprint registrations once they had been offered. It was substan-  
4 tially for this reason that in the year before the writing of *Hind Swaraj* he was  
5 abandoned and castigated by the group he had toiled to represent. His precocious  
6 and furious rejection in 1908 of what Ashis Nandy calls technologism may make  
7 particular sense in the light of this horrible predicament.<sup>12</sup>

8 Much of what Gandhi believed in 1909 about the virtues of traditional India  
9 he learned from fin de siècle antimodernism.<sup>13</sup> He rediscovered the virtues of the  
10 Gita in London after the encouragement of two English theosophists.<sup>14</sup> Two of the  
11 three key intellectual figures in his life, Ruskin and Tolstoy, were the pillars of  
12 middle-class criticism of industrial society in the Atlantic. The appendix of liter-  
13 ary authorities that he appended to the *Hind Swaraj* reads like a short list of rec-  
14 ommended readings for nineteenth-century antimodernism, stressing his devotion  
15 to Tolstoy, Edward Carpenter, Ruskin, and Henry David Thoreau. After working  
16 in the cities of Durban and Johannesburg for almost his entire adult life, even Gan-  
17 dhi's account of the political virtues of the Indian village was derived from Henry  
18 Sumner Maine's *Village Communities in the East and West* and his preoccupation  
19 with handspinning as the remedy for the economic ills of the subcontinent from  
20 George C. M. Birdwood's *Industrial Arts of India*.<sup>15</sup> I think that it is indeed sig-  
21 nificant that, as Nandy pointed out, "almost all of Gandhi's gurus were Western  
22 intellectuals."<sup>16</sup> The significance is double sided—explaining much, on the one  
23 hand, about Gandhi's politics, but also, on the other, about the global history and  
24 politics of antimodernism viewed outside the national frames of American (or  
25 British) history. The fingerprint registration struggle in the Transvaal was "the  
26 crucial moment for Gandhi and the history of colonial resistance movements," not  
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29 12. Ashis Nandy, "From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the 'West,'" *Alter-*  
30 *natives* 7 (1981): 176–77.

31 13. See Nandy, "From Outside the Imperium."

32 14. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, 25.

33 15. Anthony J. Parel, "Editor's Introduction," in "*Hind Swaraj*" and *Other Writings*, by Mohan-  
34 das Karamchand Gandhi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xlii–xlv; Lears, *No Place*  
35 *of Grace*, 75–82. On Maine, see Gandhi, "Baroda: A Model Indian State," *Indian Opinion*, June 3,  
36 1905, in *Collected Works*, 4:302.

37 That Gandhi had read Birdwood and Maine is clear from Gandhi, "Petition to Natal Legislative  
38 Assembly," June 28, 1894, in *Collected Works*, volume 1; and Patrick Brantlinger, "A Postindus-  
39 trial Prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris, and Gandhism," *Critical Inquiry* 22  
(1996): 466–85.

16. Nandy, "From Outside the Imperium," 172.

because it provided a new kind of political struggle but because, through the *Hind Swaraj*, it reinvigorated and redirected nineteenth-century antimodernism.<sup>17</sup>

At precisely the same time as the critics of industrialism in America and England were gradually making peace with the expert-led factory system, Gandhi was being driven away from it. In the years between 1893 and 1908 Gandhi offered a continuous stream of helpful suggestions to the colonial government to iron out the kinks, loopholes, and unnecessary injustices of colonial administration. In the manner in which he ran his legal office, and in his relationships with officials in Natal and the Transvaal, he functioned in this period as a volunteer bureaucrat. That practice came, mostly, to an end in 1908. His turn to Tolstoy's simple life and Ruskin's critique of industrial capitalism came after the struggle over the fingerprint registration of the Transvaal Indians had begun in earnest. The "remarkable transformation in Gandhi between 1906 and 1909" that many scholars have discerned was his movement from managerialism to antimodernism, precisely the opposite journey to the one undertaken by key progressive critics of industrialism in the North Atlantic.<sup>18</sup> Gandhi was on the same road as the other progressives, like Beatrice Webb and Jane Addams, but he was moving in the opposite direction.<sup>19</sup>

### Advocate of Thumbprinting

Gandhi returned to South Africa from India early in 1903, with the expectation that "our position in the Transvaal is and ought to be infinitely stronger than elsewhere."<sup>20</sup> He quickly began to realize that the British government under Milner had plans to exercise a more onerous set of administrative controls over the mixed population they defined as Asiatic. When Gandhi managed to secure an audience with Milner in June 1903, the organizations representing the interests of Indian merchants protested the new administration's plans for enforcement of the old republic's Law 3 of 1885. The main elements of this newly enforced law included draconian limits on Asian immigration, a registration fee of three pounds for every adult male, and the threat of the restriction of trade to segregated bazaars.

17. Paul F. Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 7 (1969): 350.

18. Bhana and Vahed, *The Making of a Political Reformer*, 19.

19. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 81–83. See also Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," 450; *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, vol. 1, *Glitter around and Darkness Within, 1873–1892*, ed. Jeanne MacKenzie and Norman Ian MacKenzie (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982); and *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, vol. 2, *All the Good Things of Life, 1892–1905*, ed. Norman Ian MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

20. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, 58.

1 A politics of the technology of identification registration quickly moved to the  
2 foreground of this conflict. At the meeting Gandhi protested that Indians were  
3 being forced to provide three photographs to secure passes to leave, and return  
4 to, the colony. He objected that this special requirement implied that “all Indians  
5 were criminally inclined,” but, as he remarked repeatedly over the next five years,  
6 he also found the use of photographs invasive, and abusive, bearing the taint of  
7 criminality.<sup>21</sup> Milner promised Gandhi that he would consider “the points you  
8 have made about photographs, about the difficulty of getting the title to mosques  
9 registered in your own names, and about passes,” but he also announced that the  
10 state intended to create a special-purpose Asiatic Department and to impose a  
11 systemic program of identity registration on Indians particularly.<sup>22</sup> One deeply  
12 significant result of this cordial meeting, and the negotiations for the simplifica-  
13 tion of the permit system that followed, was that the representatives of the Indians  
14 in the Transvaal agreed to take out a new set of registration certificates, incor-  
15 porating, for the first time, the use of the thumbprint as a marker of identifica-  
16 tion.<sup>23</sup> These documents, which Gandhi later claimed were adopted voluntarily  
17 “to please Lord Milner,” marked the beginnings of a system of identity for Indians  
18 in South Africa that hinged on fingerprinting.<sup>24</sup>

19 Gandhi's own views on thumbprints at this time were shaped by his efforts  
20 to foster a politics of discrimination, to separate out his wealthy, literate clients  
21 from the broader mass of indentured and ex-indentured workers. A year after his  
22 meeting with Milner, Gandhi wrote to the attorney general of the Colony of Natal  
23 urging him to include a legal requirement that illiterate Indians should be required  
24 to provide a thumbprint on any contracts of debt. “I venture to think that if in this  
25 excellent measure a clause,” he noted of the draft bill regulating debt contracts for  
26 Indians, “is inserted that those who cannot sign their names in English characters  
27 should, in addition to putting the mark, put their thumb impression also, it would  
28 be a complete measure for the safeguard sought for in the bill.” While the officials  
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30 21. Gandhi, “The British Indian Association and Lord Milner,” *Indian Opinion*, June 11, 1903, in  
31 *Collected Works*, 3:64–73; Gandhi, “Oppression in the Cape,” *Indian Opinion*, December 29, 1906,  
32 in *Collected Works*, 6:201; Gandhi, “A Dialogue on the Compromise,” *Indian Opinion*, February 8,  
33 1908, in *Collected Works*, 8:136–47.

34 22. Gandhi, “The British Indian Association and Lord Milner,” *Indian Opinion*, June 11, 1903,  
35 in *Collected Works*, 3:70.

36 23. Gandhi, “Fair and Just Treatment,” *Indian Opinion*, August 11, 1906, in *Collected Works*,  
37 3:300.

38 24. Gandhi, “Statement by the Delegates on Behalf of the British Indians in the Transvaal regard-  
ing the ‘Petition’ from Dr. William Godfrey and Another and Other Matters,” November 20, 1906,  
in *Collected Works*, 6:126.

in Natal were calling for “promissory notes not written and signed in English in the maker’s own hand-writing” to be invalid unless made in the presence of a magistrate, Gandhi suggested, with his experience of the Transvaal permit system in mind, only a “thumb impression would completely protect innocent persons.”<sup>25</sup>

A week later he elaborated on the same point in *Indian Opinion*. After first congratulating the Natal government for introducing the bill to control the signing of promissory notes by Indians, he worried about the great legal weight that would be accorded to notes signed before a government representative. “It has been found that it is impossible to forge a thumb-mark,” he advised his readers, “and the thumb-impression would be the surest safeguard against impersonation, for it may happen that the man who may put his mark before a Magistrate or a Justice of the Peace may not at all be the person intended to be charged with the debt.”<sup>26</sup> Gandhi’s daily negotiations for his clients suggest that he viewed the thumbprint as a reliable administrative remedy to the “question of fraud.” As late as August 1905, his application for a certificate of return for Abdul Kadir, one of the wealthiest men in Durban and the president of the Natal Indian Congress, noted approvingly that “the thumb impression on the certificate you may issue would prevent its use by any one else.”<sup>27</sup>

There is no sign in these early interventions of Gandhi’s later concern with the implications of what he, and others, called class legislation or the racial taint—the special, criminalizing focus of legislation on Indians as a group. Indeed, his role in the years between 1902 and 1906 was to act as an advocate of special legislation for Indians. This is probably because he did not see any reason to articulate the need for exemptions for “well-known” members of the merchant elite. His position changed early in 1906 as the state, chiefly through Curtis’s office, began to plan to build a ten-print fingerprint register and apply the routines of thumbprint identification where impersonation was unthinkable.<sup>28</sup> When the permit

25. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Attorney General, Natal, “Letter to Attorney General,” June 30, 1904, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (NAB), Minister of Justice and Public Works (MJPW), Volume 128, Reference MJ1287, “MK Gandhi Re bill to regulate the signing of negotiable instruments by Indians. Suggests the finger prints also be taken,” June 30, 1904.

26. Gandhi, “Indian Promissory Notes,” *Indian Opinion*, July 2, 1904, in *Collected Works*, 4:28.

27. Interestingly, Gandhi makes no mention of the history of thumbprinting in India in these recommendations. For that history, see Chandak Sengoopta, *Imprint of the Raj: How Fingerprinting Was Born in Colonial India* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 2003), and Gandhi, “Letter to Chief Secretary for Permits,” *Letter to Chief Secretary for Permits, August 8, 1905*, in *Collected Works*, 4:375.

28. Gandhi, “Deputation to Colonial Secretary,” *Indian Opinion*, March 17, 1906, in *Collected Works*, 5:127.



1 officer at the border post at Volksrust on the road from Durban to Johannesburg  
2 “had the effrontery to ask Mr Johari,” the representative of the Natal firm of  
3 Aboobaker Amod and Bros.—“a cultured Indian” who had “travelled in Europe  
4 and America”—to “put his thumb-impress on his book,” Gandhi protested the  
5 unmistakable racist insult. Thumbprints—at least for respectable, known, and  
6 literate members of the Indian elite—were horribly degrading. “Well may Mr  
7 Johari ask,” he wrote to *Indian Opinion*, “whether he is to be treated as a criminal,  
8 without being guilty of any offence, save that of wearing a brown skin.”<sup>29</sup>  
9

### 10 Scientific Thumbs

11 From the start of 1906, Curtis began to build the case for an elaborate, centralized  
12 fingerprint registration scheme designed to “shut the gate against the influx of an  
13 Asiatic population” and to “guard the Transvaal as a white reserve.”<sup>30</sup> For the next  
14 two years Gandhi campaigned locally and internationally to limit the effects of  
15 this register without contradicting the “principle of white predominance.”<sup>31</sup> Gandhi’s  
16 objection in this period was to the racist logic of the new law that targeted  
17 Indians and Chinese immigrants; he argued for a set of immigration and trade  
18 licensing restrictions of “general application,” not the “class legislation” that Curtis  
19 had in mind.<sup>32</sup> This argument worked to delay Curtis’s project until the opening  
20 of the white legislature in the Transvaal in 1907. Faced with a unanimously  
21 racist local parliament, Gandhi insisted that the most effective strategy for removing  
22 the racial taint was a combination of collective resistance to the unjust law and  
23 the offer of voluntary submission to the requirements of the Asiatic Registrar.<sup>33</sup>  
24

25 Toward the end of 1907, before the famous agreement with Smuts, he began  
26 to urge his audience to consent to a voluntary round of registration. To do this  
27 Gandhi insisted on the scientific qualities of thumbprint identification using his  
28 reading of Henry’s *Classification and Uses of Finger Prints*. His first object was  
29 to persuade the audience of *Indian Opinion* that there was nothing degrading,  
30

31 29. Gandhi, “A Contrast,” *Indian Opinion*, March 10, 1906, in *Collected Works*, 5:113.

32 30. Lionel Curtis, Assistant Colonial Secretary (Division II), Letter to Patrick Duncan, Colonial  
33 Secretary, “Position of Asiatics in the Transvaal,” May 1, 1906. LTG 97, 97/03/01 Asiatics Permits,  
34 1902–7, Transvaal Archives Repository (TAB) Lieutenant Governor (LTG), Volume 97, Reference  
35 97/03/01 Asiatics Permits, 1902–7

36 31. Gandhi, “Statement Presented to Constitution Committee,” *Indian Opinion*, May 26, 1906,  
37 in *Collected Works*, 5:238.

38 32. Gandhi, “Statement Presented to Constitution Committee,” *Indian Opinion*, May 26, 1906,  
in *Collected Works*, 5:239.

33. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, 141–61.

or peculiar, about having to give up their thumbprints. “In England they have become a rage,” he assured his readers. “Friends send their thumb-impressions to one another.” He reminded them of the widespread use of thumbprints in India for government transactions and of the fact that in Natal—he did not say that it was owing to his own recommendation—“it is the practice to have thumb-impressions on promissory notes.”<sup>34</sup>

Writing in Gujarati, Gandhi then explained the workings of the fingerprint repository. He contrasted the system of thumbprints, which he saw as an aid to identification, with the registration of ten fingerprints directed at people who want to hide their identities. His account closely followed the explanation that Henry presented in his book. Fingerprints were taken from criminals precisely because they want to hide, or lie about their names, and the prints allowed the state to determine their identity. “A person who has been required to give impressions of all fingers and thumbs can be identified by means of these impressions,” he explained; by using the different categories of patterns on the prints made it was “possible to prepare an index with the help of the impressions.” And it was the index that made it possible to identify someone, “even if he has not given his correct name.”<sup>35</sup>

Gandhi was insistent that, because the Indian traders in the Transvaal wanted to be recognized, ten-print finger registration was unnecessarily degrading and wasteful. He had no sympathy for the complaints of confusion and impersonation that issued from the Asiatic Registrar’s office, because he believed in the efficacy of the thumbprinting system; he argued in court and in the newspapers that thumbprinting had successfully eradicated “trafficking in permits.”<sup>36</sup> Fingerprinting, he argued, was completely unnecessary for the Indian in the Transvaal because he “wants himself to be identified.” The special relationship between the Transvaal Indians and the Asiatic Register was at the core of this desire to be recognized. “If his name is not on the records of the Government, he cannot live here,” Gandhi explained; “if he does not describe himself correctly, he cannot live in this country.” Running through this campaign, significant in the light of Gandhi’s later discontent with science in *Hind Swaraj*, was his insistence that his “argument has a scientific basis.”<sup>37</sup>

34. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” *Indian Opinion*, December 28, 1907, in *Collected Works*, 8:39.

35. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” December 28, 1907.

36. Gandhi, “Trial of PK Naidoo and Others,” *Indian Opinion*, December 28, 1907, in *Collected Works*, 8:41.

37. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” December 28, 1907.

## Scientific Fingers

As the time approached for the Asiatic Bill to become law, Smuts, serving as the colonial secretary of the new responsible government in the Transvaal, began to have doubts about the wisdom of Curtis's elaborate plan to extract ten fingerprints from each of the Asians in the Transvaal. In June 1907 he wrote, as a "matter of extreme urgency," to the state's legal advisers and to the head of the Transvaal Criminal Investigation Division that Henry had set up in 1900. After pointing out that the ten-impression requirement was derived from the system of Chinese indenture, he asked whether "in view of the strong agitation on the subject it might be desirable to adhere to the present system of identification by which the imprint of the right hand thumb only is required." But Smuts's question contained a rider, one that would provide the basis not only for his own insistence on ten-print registration but also for a dramatic reversal of Gandhi's own attitude. He was content to retain the thumbprint system "provided always that the single imprint can be relied upon as sufficient evidence of identification to satisfy the courts."<sup>38</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that in the decade after Henry's departure from South Africa the legal basis of single-fingerprint—what would later be called latent-print—identification did not even exist in theory. There was, at this time, no meaningful statistical basis for the claims popularized by Francis Galton and Henry that each fingerprint was unique. (It was only in 1910 that the Parisian criminologist Victor Balthazard elaborated on Galton's casual discussion of the improbability of matching fingerprint minutiae to make the kind of statistical claim that might support forensic uniqueness.)<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, the claims that the new fingerprint experts were making about single-print identification were being received skeptically in the courts and outside them.<sup>40</sup> In the face of this uncertainty the South African state's legal advisers opted for statistical certainty. "The only really safe course," they argued, "is to adopt a system of taking ten

38. Assistant Colonial Secretary to Secretary to the Law Department, "Letter to Secretary to the Law Department," June 19, 1907, Secretary to the Law Department (LD) 1466 AG2497/07 Finger Impressions, 1907, National Archives Repository (Transvaal Archives Bureau) (TAD).

39. Simon A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 174. The controversy over the scientific basis of latent identification continues unabated. See Simon A. Cole, "Is Fingerprint Identification Valid? Rhetorics of Reliability in Fingerprint Proponents' Discourse," *Law and Policy* 28 (2006): 109–35. For Galton's demonstration of a one in "ten thousand million" chance of a match between a single fingerprint and the entire global population, see Francis Galton, *Finger Prints* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 111.

40. Cole, *Suspect Identities*, 174.

digit impressions.”<sup>41</sup> Here, then, was the argument that Smuts, the lawyer, would use to persuade the lawyer, Gandhi, to change his very public opposition to ten-print registration.

Later in the year, after Gandhi had broken off his negotiations with Smuts, he wrote to Herbert Henry Asquith’s government to explain the compromise. The Indians had agreed to give up their fingerprints “only in order to enable the Government to have a scientific classification.”<sup>42</sup> In the history of satyagraha that he wrote and published in the 1920s, Gandhi attributed the struggle to Curtis’s clumsy enthusiasm for the “scientific method.”<sup>43</sup> But in the months between January and June 1908, as he sought to encourage his own supporters to submit to fingerprint registration, he became a passionate advocate of the scientific and progressive merits of fingerprinting.

In his writings in *Indian Opinion* in the month after the compromise, Gandhi repeatedly berated his audience for their obsession with fingerprinting. But he simultaneously presented a fervent case for full fingerprint registration as a technology of government in his letters. The most important of these statements is “A Dialogue on the Compromise,” which adopts, for the first time, the elastic Socratic style that he would use in *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>44</sup> Gandhi’s enthusiasm for the biometric state (elaborating on his earlier claims for the scientific virtues of thumbprinting) showed off his courtroom skills. Gone, now, was his outrage over the criminalizing effects of ten-print registration, the emotional risks to the family, religious objections to the making of images, and the dangers to the honor of men. In their places, he presented an implausible case for the scientific merits of voluntary submission to ten-print fingerprinting. This argument — which showed his appeals to Smuts as untenable and obnoxious — was the antithesis of the trenchant assault on scientific modernity that he began to articulate the following year (and which finds its completed form in *Hind Swaraj*).

In his attempts to persuade his audience of the virtues of fingerprinting, Gandhi echoed the arguments of Henry and Galton. “The fact is that for the identification [of pass holders] and for the prevention of fraud,” he told his bewildered

41. T. E. Mavrogordato (Acting Chief Detective Inspector, Criminal Investigation Department), “Letter to Commissioner of Police,” June 19, 1907, TAD; Tennant, Secretary to Law Department to Assistant Colonial Secretary, Pretoria, “Letter to Assistant Colonial Secretary,” June 19, 1907, LD 1466 AG2497/07 Finger Impressions, 1907, TAD.

42. British Indian Association, “Petition to Secretary of State for Colonies,” September 9, 1908, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 9:119.

43. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 3, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, ed. Ahriman Narayan (Ahmadabad, India: Navajivan, 1968), 127.

44. Gandhi, “Dialogue on the Compromise.”

1 audience, “digit-impressions offer a simple, effective and scientific means.”<sup>45</sup> The  
2 theme of the scientific, modernizing character of fingerprinting provided the core  
3 of his new advocacy. He explained that “finger-impressions are likely to be intro-  
4 duced everywhere sooner or later” because “from a scientific point of view, they  
5 are the most effective means of identification.”<sup>46</sup> Fingerprints, he suggested, were  
6 “a thousand times better” than the photographs that were being introduced on  
7 documents of identification in the Cape, because “they cannot offend anyone’s  
8 religious susceptibilities.” To soften the points he had earlier made about the  
9 stigma of ten-print fingerprinting, which was used in India and in Britain only to  
10 identify criminals, Gandhi pointed to the long experimental relationship between  
11 science and the prison system.<sup>47</sup> When Edward Jenner discovered the smallpox  
12 vaccine, he first tested it on prisoners before offering it to the public. “No one  
13 could argue,” Gandhi claimed, “that the free population was thereby humiliated.”  
14 Now that fingerprints had been freed from the “enslaving law” that targeted Indi-  
15 ans as a race, he urged his readers to embrace them because of their “advantages  
16 from a scientific point of view.”<sup>48</sup> These recommendations, and the prospect of  
17 Smuts’s draconian sanctions, worked well. During February the officials of the  
18 Asiatic Registry were overwhelmed by applications. At the end of the month,  
19 Gandhi reported that “about 95 per cent of the Indians have already given their  
20 finger-impressions.”<sup>49</sup>

### 21 22 **Rejecting the Soulless Machine**

23 Gandhi’s manifesto was famously the product of defeat. It was written, as Mau-  
24 ree Swann observes, while he was “weighed down by the inadequacies of the  
25 first passive resistance movement.”<sup>50</sup> In the months after his public agreement to  
26 begin voluntary registration, Gandhi began to realize that Smuts would not repeal  
27 the Black Act (No. 2 of 1907) that specifically targeted Indians for fingerprint  
28 identification, nor did he intend to allow exemptions for a small number of edu-  
29 cated Indians under the new immigration law. After encouraging his supporters  
30 to undergo registration for the first half of 1908, Gandhi finally announced the  
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32 45. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” *Indian Opinion*, February 29, 1908, in *Collected Works*,  
33 8:169.

34 46. Gandhi, “Dialogue on the Compromise.”

35 47. Gandhi, “Letter to Colonial Secretary,” *Indian Opinion*, October 7, 1907, in *Collected Works*,  
36 8:246–47.

37 48. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” February 29, 1908.

38 49. Gandhi, “Johannesburg Letter,” February 29, 1908.

50. Swann, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, 177.

resumption of resistance at a mass meeting held on August 16. Thousands of people gathered at the Fordsburg Mosque to offer up the paper certificates of their voluntary registration to be symbolically burned in a large cast-iron *potjie* (pot). But the exultant mood that greeted Gandhi's return to opposition to the Black Act did not last. Faced with a barrage of penalties and punishments and a system of identification that left them naked in the face of the Asiatic Registry's grasp, opposition collapsed utterly in the early months of 1909.<sup>51</sup>

Popular resistance on the Witwatersrand, the source of so much hope and strength, had dwindled to a handful of die-hard satyagrahis, many of them targeted for deportation. In the months immediately preceding the *Hind Swaraj's* composition, Gandhi had been locked in negotiations with the representatives of the Transvaal Boers in London. Smuts had, yet again, rejected his conservative proposals to make space for the principle of nonracial legal equality in the new South African constitution. And in Natal, open conflict had broken out between the (mostly Hindu) ex-indentured small-scale farmers and the (mostly Muslim) merchants.<sup>52</sup> Everywhere Gandhi turned, his South African project was in ruins. One result was the retreat of the faithful to Tolstoy Farm, outside Johannesburg, with a growing emphasis was on the moral, and interior, qualities of satyagraha; valuing personal integrity above material benefit and political advantage was another. But Gandhi also began to deploy the apocalyptic language of the social revolutionary, rejecting in sweeping and contemptuous terms the foundations of the English liberal civilization that he had defended so vigorously before 1908. The origins of this militant rejection of Western modernity lay in his bitter experience of the compromises over fingerprint registration.

By the middle of 1908, it was the machine, and the horrifying effects of a normative physics that sought to treat human beings as machines, that possessed Gandhi. "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilisation," he says in *Hind Swaraj*. "It represents a great sin." Like the Luddites he worried about the destructiveness of modern technologies, but when he claimed that machinery "has impoverished India" he had in mind a much wider cultural and religious decline.<sup>53</sup> This obsession was unmistakably taken from Ruskin's work *Unto This Last*, which he began to expound on in detail in the last weeks of May, as the com-

51. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, 175, 173–78.

52. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, 177, 200; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 217; Bhana and Vahed, *Making of a Political Reformer*, 67.

53. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 107.

1 promise with Smuts was disintegrating. For Ruskin the central problem of modern  
2 English political life was the application of a Smithian physics to the govern-  
3 ment of human beings. "Let us eliminate the inconstants," he mocked the political  
4 economists, "and, considering the human being merely as a covetous machine,  
5 examine by what laws of labour, purchase, and sale, the greatest accumulative  
6 result in wealth is obtainable."<sup>54</sup> Raging against the obvious moral effects of the  
7 capitalist market as a guide to the good, Ruskin insisted that the human being was  
8 "an engine whose motive power is a Soul." This claim, that Western modernity  
9 had abandoned its metaphysical compass in its frantic search for material prosper-  
10 ity, became the key argument of Gandhi's political philosophy.

11 He chose the title "Sarvodaya" ("The Advancement of All") for his detailed  
12 Gujarati paraphrasing of *Unto This Last* in *Indian Opinion*.<sup>55</sup> And his introduc-  
13 tion frames Ruskin as the most important English critic of Jeremy Bentham, dis-  
14 missing the claim that the goal of society should be "the happiness of the greatest  
15 number," even "if it is secured at the cost of the minority" and in violation of  
16 divine law.<sup>56</sup> Two months later, when he had completed the nine-part transla-  
17 tion and the compromise with Smuts had collapsed into bitter conflict, Gandhi's  
18 explanation of the significance of Ruskin's work had expanded into a wholesale  
19 rejection of modern capitalism.

20 All of the arguments of *Hind Swaraj* are presented in summary in this con-  
21 cluding comment, with a much more direct link to the lessons of the political  
22 struggle in South Africa. Writing a year before his encounters with the young  
23 radicals in London in 1909, Gandhi warned the enthusiasts of violence that "the  
24 bombs with which the British will have been killed will fall on India after the  
25 British leave."<sup>57</sup> He reminded his readers that despite the comparative youth of  
26 European civilization, it had already been reduced "to a state of cultural anarchy"  
27 and stood on the brink of a terrible war. And he asked them if the sovereignty they  
28 hankered for was the kind that Smuts had secured for the Transvaal. Smuts, who  
29 "does not keep any promise, oral or written," represented a political elite "who  
30 serve only their own interests" and who "will be ready to rob their own people  
31 after they have done with robbing others." Real sovereignty for India would follow  
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33 54. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 1860, [www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/ruskin/ruskin](http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/ruskin/ruskin) (accessed October  
34 5, 2009).

35 55. Gandhi, "Sarvodaya," *Indian Opinion*, May 16, 1908, in *Collected Works*, 8:316.

36 56. Gandhi, "Sarvodaya," *Indian Opinion*, May 16, 1908, in *Collected Works*, 8:316.

37 57. See the insightful account of the origins of *Hind Swaraj* in Parel, "Editor's Introduction," in  
38 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, xxxvii–xli; Gandhi, "Sarvodaya," *Indian Opinion*, July 18, 1908, in *Collected  
Works*, 8:455.

from the number of citizens who chose to live a moral life, and it “will not be possible for us to achieve it by establishing big factories” or through the “accumulation of gold and silver.” All this, he said very generously, “has been convincingly proved by Ruskin.”<sup>58</sup>

A key part of this critique, much of which would not have been imaginable by Ruskin writing in the 1850s, was a fierce rejection of the benefits of the technologies of the second industrial revolution. When Gandhi was called to debate the question “Are Asiatics and Coloured races a menace to the Empire?” at the Johannesburg Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) on May 18, 1908, as Smuts’s refusal to withdraw the Black Act was becoming obvious, he spent much of his time rebutting the claims of the new “segregation policy.” Speaking in the city of gold, surrounded by the workshops, railways, and reduction works of the largest mines in the world, Gandhi warned his audience that “South Africa would be a howling wilderness without the Africans.” Segregation, he suggested, was a product of the ascendancy of the Spencerian moral philosophy of the “survival of the fittest,” which made physical and intellectual strength the means and the end of Western civilization. “I decline to believe,” he told the audience at the YMCA in terms that were elaborated in *Hind Swaraj*, “that it is a symbol of Christian progress that we have covered a large part of the globe with the telegraph system, that we have got telephones and ocean greyhounds, and that we have trains running at a velocity of 50 or even 60 miles per hour.” Machines, on the contrary, had become the measure, and the telos, of a brutal, un-Christian, goalless, progress and the essence of “western civilisation.”<sup>59</sup> Ruskin’s targets had been the political-economists, the destructive effects of the market, the mindless pursuit of wealth, and the neglect of the fashioning of good Souls. (Like Marx, he was concerned to inject the social into the economics of exchange.) “The real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology,” he argued optimistically, “is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life.” Ruskin exhorted his readers to consider whether the price they had paid in the market was fair for the producer, but he had almost nothing to say about the political dangers of machinery. That was a lesson Gandhi learned somewhere else.

By the 1930s, Gandhi had come to the view that modern bureaucracy was an instrument of genocidal conflict. The state, he argued, was a “soulless machine”

58. Gandhi, “Sarvodaya [-IX],” *Indian Opinion*, July 18, 1908, in *Collected Works*, 8:455.

59. All quotations are from Gandhi, “Speech at YMCA,” *Indian Opinion*, May 18, 1908, in *Collected Works*, 8:319–24.



1 which “can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.”<sup>60</sup>  
2 The real danger, for India, was that progressive government threatened to intro-  
3 duce the state into every village and every home. He chastised the economic his-  
4 torian Manmohan P. Gandhi for suggesting that there were similarities between  
5 the character of violence under the Mogul state and its British colonial heir.  
6 “Formerly, the [Mogul] government touched the lives of only those who were  
7 connected with the administrative machinery,” Gandhi responded, anticipating  
8 Michel Foucault’s argument: “It is only in the present age that governments have  
9 become eager to extend their grip over entire populations.” In this project of uni-  
10 versal administration it was British rule that had “acquired the utmost efficiency”  
11 and posed the most serious danger to India.<sup>61</sup>

12 Many scholars have noted the profound shift in Gandhi’s politics in South  
13 Africa during 1908.<sup>62</sup> In his own accounts the turn was a shift away from the  
14 external world to the interior self, from politically to personally motivated change,  
15 but there is an element of deception here. In South Africa in 1913, and after-  
16 ward in India, Gandhi’s interest in personal transformation was always attached  
17 (although the connection was often frayed) to the wider political force of mass  
18 protest. If anything, after 1908, Gandhi was more attentive to the ideological  
19 demands of maintaining a mass constituency than he had been before. His self-  
20 conscious adoption of the tactics of saintliness, deploying the life-threatening fast  
21 as a weapon against his friends and his enemies, ensured that he was almost invul-  
22 nerable to the charges of corruption and self-interest his critics used in 1908.<sup>63</sup>  
23 The change was certainly not a dramatic disavowal of the British Empire. Gan-  
24 dhi’s views of the moral and political virtues, and failings, of the British Empire  
25 remained strikingly and consistently ambiguous from the 1890s into the 1930s.  
26 Nor was it a fundamental realization and rejection of the simplistic forms of rac-  
27 ism coursing through the empire in this period. Gandhi’s broadly Victorian and  
28 paternalistic views about the civilizational prospects of different races remained  
29 with him after 1908.<sup>64</sup>

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32 60. Gandhi, “Interview to Nirmal Kumar Bose,” November 9, 1934, in *Collected Works*, 65:316.

33 61. Gandhi, “Letter to Manmohandas P. Gandhi,” March 3, 1930, in *Collected Works*, 48:371.

34 62. Bhana and Vahed, *Making of a Political Reformer*; Brown and Prozesky, *Gandhi and South*  
35 *Africa*; Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*; Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*; Swan, *Gandhi: The South African*  
36 *Experience*.

37 63. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, 311.

38 64. “Administrative inequality must always exist so long as people who are not the same grade  
live under the same flag.” Gandhi, “Letter to ‘The Star,’” September 17, 1908, in *Collected Works*,  
9:153.

**Public Culture**

The real change was in his understanding of the nature and purpose of the state. Before 1908, he had seen the state as an instrument of harmony, shaped by science and law, and he had understood his own practice as an extension of that power. Afterward he viewed the “administrative machinery,” with its technological means and telos, as an instrument of destruction. The timing and character of this capsized view of the state suggests that it was his entanglement with the building of the fingerprint register that prompted the change.

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