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Degeneration and satyagraha: Hind Swaraj and the crisis of liberal democracy

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We have a tendency to make contemporaries of thinkers we feel affinity towards. Gandhi is one of those who have been mined for aphorisms on issues ranging from the environment and alternative economics to an ethical politics and the placebos of peaceful coexistence. While the thoughts that what we need is less civilization rather than more and that the solutions that we offer are indeed sometimes the problem are bracing, it's the genealogy of the arguments that we make that is crucial here. Gandhi's words may have a resonance in our times, but the contextual influences on his arguments or indeed the diverse and now forgotten fields of discourse that his positions were located in have to be paid attention to. This is not about merely conducting a historicist exercise that imprisons thought in a temporal context. We have to deal creatively with notions of anticipation, prescience, and prolepsis. Thoughts are of their time, but they contain too, traces of the future, like plants reaching for the light: a phototropism of intellection. At the same time, there is a field of interlocutors within which arguments are made, as Skinner has reminded us, so that what appears so apposite to us in the present, may have been a response located within a now discredited field of ideas. For instance, we are wont to say, a tad smugly, that on some issue we are on the side of the angels. Of course, this is to forget that Benjamin Disraeli, said this in the context of disagreeing with Darwin on the idea of the origin of the species and of human descent from the apes: he preferred the inspiring story of God and the angels. To emphasize too much, whether for sentimental or progressive reasons, that Gandhi is our contemporary is to occlude the particularity, even eccentricity, of the positions within and against

which his stances were forged.

Two exemplary books that have been deeply sensitive to the field of Gandhi's interlocutors are Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities* and Kathryn Tidrick's *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*.¹ Leela Gandhi takes up the late Victorian world of pacifists, vegetarians and animal rights activists that Gandhi habited in his years in London and engages with sympathy and erudition issues regarding state, sovereignty and ethical politics that were raised by these groups who are now subject to the condescension of history. Tidrick too works through Gandhi's engagement with Christian Esotericism and the deep and lasting influence that ideas of personal martyrdom had on him. His understanding of India and its civilization was mediated through Theosophy, vegetarianism, the Bhagavad Gita and we are alerted to the *bricolage* that was an essential feature of Gandhian thinking and writing. If anything Gandhi's thinking was pragmatic, conjunctural and instrumental: he was responding to contemporary issues with what was at hand. Perhaps the most frank acknowledgement of this has come from the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami as he patiently attempts to recover an idea of "integrity" within the vast Gandhian oeuvre. "The truth of his claims seem to him so instinctive and certain that mere arguments seem frivolous even to readers who disagree with them. Being trained in a discipline of Philosophy of a quite different temperament, I will try to not get distracted by the irritation I sometimes feel about this."²

Of course, it could be argued that both Leela Gandhi and Tidrick find too much consistency and are less concerned with questions of misreading and

¹ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anti Colonial Thought and the Politics of Friendship* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006); Kathryn Tidrick, *Gandhi: a Political and Spiritual Life* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006).

² Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's integrity: the Philosophy behind the Politics", *Postcolonial Studies* 5 (1), 2002, p.1

misrecognition. This, I would argue, takes away from both the daring as well as the instrumentality of Gandhi's enterprise: he bends arguments to his will. We know that he was fond of Emerson's quote (not necessarily derived from a deep reading of Emerson) that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. Patrick Brantlinger, discussing Gandhi's reading and appropriation of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (which Gandhi translated into Gujarati in 1908), remarks that what Gandhi got out of reading Ruskin ("1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all 2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work 3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living") could have been arrived at even without his having read it.³ He also points to the irony of Ruskin being as much a Tory imperialist as a late Victorian precursor of socialism and a committed Orientalist with regard to India to boot. Which is ironical, but certainly not quixotic. This rugged non-ideological *bricolage* has to be seen as the leitmotif of Gandhian reading. All was grist to his mill; and all was bent to his will.

Broadly speaking, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) has been read within four frames none of which has been particularly attentive to the *fin de siècle* location of the text or its engagement with the detritus of 19th c European and Indian thinking of the period. The first tends to study Gandhi as an Indian thinker (while not excluding other influences) and stresses the Jain and Vaishnava landscape of Kathiawar and the roots of Gandhian political practice in his Gujarati lineage. Howard Spodek, for instance, talks of practices similar to *satyagraha* premised on ethical coercion of one's opponents to do the right thing.⁴ The second frame sees him as an Indian

³ Patrick Brantlinger, "A Postindustrial prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris and Gandhism", *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1996, pp.467-8.

⁴ Howard Spodek, "On the Origins of Gandhi's Political Methodology: The Heritage of Kathiawar and Gujarat", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 30 (2), 1971, pp.361-72.

thinker, but one who puts an intellectual inheritance in dialogue with a landscape of postindustrial thinking at times inflected with an agrarian romanticism, both traditions reflecting a deep skepticism regarding the necessity for the modern state and its administrations. His engagement with Thoreau, Ruskin and Tolstoy among others becomes crucial to the formulation of a distinctly modern transnational politics, reflecting a cosmopolitan crisis around the issues of violence and modernity.⁵ The third frame sees Gandhi as the architect of Indian independence and the mediator of a passive revolution, so a text like the *Hind Swaraj* becomes a manifesto of future political strategy in India. This despite the fact that the text reflected South African concerns thought within the framework of a distinct notion of imperial citizenship. Reading backwards from the Gandhi who was to be is a less than justifiable historical enterprise. So for instance, Partha Chatterjee speaks about the fundamental critique of “bourgeois society”; and a text concerned with the organization of a movement (unlike Tolstoy), which aimed “at the political appropriation of the subaltern classes”.⁶ Arguably, the Indian national movement at the time of writing *Hind Swaraj* was only a metaphor in Gandhi’s thinking even as Indian politics in South Africa was immediate and pressing. A fourth frame studies Gandhi as a philosopher who rejected Enlightenment categories of Reason, State, Progress and History: a postcolonial contemporary whose thought sits easily with our distemper regarding modernity and its mode of governmentality.⁸ Surely there

⁵ For a characteristically sophisticated and textured reading see Leela Gandhi, “Spirits of Non-Violence: a Transnational Genealogy for Ahimsa”, *Interventions*, 10(2), 2008, pp. 158-72.

⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986), pp.100-01.

⁷⁸ See for instance the essays by Faisal Devji and Uday Mehta in Faisal Devji and Ritu Birla ed. *Itineraries of Self-Rule: Essays on the Centenary of Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj*, *Public Culture* 23 (2), 2011; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Mazumdar; and Uday Mehta in Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji ed. *The Bhagavad Gita and Modern Thought, Modern Intellectual History*, 7 (2), 2010; as also Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s integrity”.

can be options other than those that too easily adopt or reject him? More careful historical readings have emphasized the location of *Hind Swaraj* in the politics of imperial citizenship; the historical circumstance of Johannesburg; and a particular kind of Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism that drew South Africa, London and the British Empire into its embrace and forged a conjunctural politics that was of its time and locale.⁹

In this paper, I shall attempt a reading of *Hind Swaraj* within the conjunctures of: the politics of empire and its relation to race in South Africa; questions of mass democracy and the crisis of liberal politics at the end of the 19th century; and the paradoxical relation of an anti-imperial politics to notions of trusteeship engendered by the trajectory of liberalism under colonial ideology. I shall adopt the simple reading strategy of what Conan Doyle might have called the dog that did not bark. In the brief, random, yet suggestive bibliography that Gandhi provides at the end of *Hind Swaraj*, amongst the familiar names is one misnamed text, *Paradoxes of Civilization* by Max Nordau. This we now know was the text titled *Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*, written in 1883 by Max Simon Nordau as a critique of the “inherently false and dismal tone and tendencies of our age”. More than a century and a half has passed since *HS* was written but as yet no one has asked the question as to what Gandhi was doing reading and thinking with the work of the founder of the World Zionist Organization, theorist of the idea of degeneration and close friend of Cesare Lombroso who wrote his celebrated works on the criminal type. Margaret

⁹ See Keith Breckenridge, “Gandhi’s Progressive Disillusionment: Thumbs Fingers and the Rejection of Scientific Modernism in *Hind Swaraj*”, in Devji and Birla ed. *Itineraries of Self-Rule*, pp.331-347; Isabel Hofmeyr, “Violent Texts, Vulnerable Readers: *Hind Swaraj* and its South African Audiences”, in *ibid.*, pp. 285-298 and *Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Harvard; Harvard University Press, 2013); Jonathan Hyslop, “Gandhi, Mandela and the African Modern” in Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp.119-36.

Chatterjee, probably the only one of the expositors of Gandhi's philosophy who notices Nordau, is dismissive of this reference. She writes, "Most probably he [Gandhi] had heard of him only as a critic of 'civilization' and may not even have read the writings he recommended to others," but offers no evidence other than this apodictic statement.¹⁰ Paying attention to Nordau, for one, opens up the world of Gandhi's South African Jewish friends, including Herman Kallenbach, who was his closest male friend.¹¹ Kallenbach was a Zionist and particularly influenced by Nordau's version of "muscular Judaism", which advocated regular exercise and weightlifting in addition to the usual Jewish diet of scholarship. More important is the evidence that not only did Gandhi read Nordau, he was hugely influenced by his *fin de siècle* pessimism regarding civilization and the degeneration of humans and their sentiments. Gandhi wrote *HS* in 1909, at the age of 40, while still active in South African politics and under the intellectual influence of his stay in England as much as his Jewish friends. In many senses, it can be argued that *HS* must be read as a late Victorian text informed by the unease felt by liberals about the opening up of mass democracy following the extension of the vote through the Reform Acts in England which brought in the great unwashed into politics. The figure of the disciplined satyagrahi, Gandhi's disaffection with Parliament, and the idea of civilization being an affliction were 19th century themes present in Nordau's trenchant prose. Again, Gandhi's recovery of the idea of Indian civilization, which is the balancing element in *HS*, was an attempt to distinguish India not only from degenerate Europe but barbaric Africa. This text, then is not the much vaunted critique of western modernity and its institutions but rather reflected both late 19th c distemper regarding the masses and politics as much as the fallout of imperial policies of racial

¹⁰ Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p.148.

¹¹ Shimon Low, *Soulmates: The story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2012).

discrimination.

Leela Gandhi and Antony Copley have written with some sympathy and contextual understanding of the second text mentioned in the bibliography, Edward Carpenter's *Civilization: its Cause and Cure* (1889).¹² What was a late Victorian homosexual (author of the 1894 bestseller, *Love's Coming of Age*), infatuated by Walt Whitman (who believed that male bonding could underpin the idealized democracy of the future); dabbler in the Vedanta; and part time anarchist doing on the pages of *HS*? Both Nordau and Carpenter, as we shall see, were to lend to *HS* the central metaphor characterizing civilization: if Nordau came at it through his study of degeneration, Carpenter arrived at it through his reading of Lewis H Morgan and his skepticism regarding civilization. Leela Gandhi argues for the "emphatic conjunction of homosexuality and anti imperialism" in Carpenter's thinking; arguably the latter more than the former was more Gandhi's on Gandhi's mind in *HS*. While Carpenter berates marriage, monogamy and the family, he argued for the "love sentiment" in its perfect form as friendship accompanying sexual abstinence.¹³

What if instead of moving forward from the *HS* to the nationalist movement (as left scholarship looking to confirm Gandhi's bourgeois agenda does) or locating it too narrowly in the conjuncture of the fallout of the Swadeshi movement of 1905-08 (where *HS* becomes a prefiguration of a nonviolent agenda against revolutionary

¹² Gandhi, *Affective Communities*; Antony Copley, *Gay Writers in Search of the Divine: Hinduism and Homosexuality in the Lives and Writings of Edward Carpenter, E.M.Forster and Christopher Isherwood* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006).

¹³ See Low, *Soulmates* and Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul* as also Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi before India*, for recent discussions on the intimate friendship between Kallenbach and Gandhi. Gandhi could have arrived at Carpenter's writings through Henry Salt, uncertain acolyte of Carpenter, and the proponent of a higher vegetarianism, whose works Gandhi was familiar with. See Copley, *Gay Writers*, chapter 3 in particular, pp. 87-91. Henry Salt wrote to Gandhi in 1929, "All good causes have suffered a loss this year by the death of Edward Carpenter", quoted in L. Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 64

terrorism) we look at *HS* as standing within and at the end of 19th century anxieties about civilization, mass action and the idea of degeneration? Nordau's presence in the text, unremarked on so far, reminds us that the twinning of civilization and degeneration was a major trope of medical, scientific and social thought prior to the First World War. Second, we also need to explore the extent to which *HS* was shaped by South African concerns not least of which was Gandhi's location in Johannesburg in particular with its dark satanic mines and the febrile atmosphere of crime, grime and the underside of industrial modernity. Third, considering that the text was written en route from a failed venture to get the imperial government to withdraw the fingerprinting of Indians in South Africa and the increasingly repressive restrictions on the immigration and movement of "Asiatics" in South Africa, ¹⁴*HS* reflects many of the anxieties of presenting Indians as a "civilized" people from the racist characterisations in the South Africa press. The critique that *HS* launches on industrial civilization would not have been possible, necessary, or indeed conceivable if Gandhi were located in India where in 1909, the lack of industry was more the problem than an excess of it.

Degeneration and disease

The discourse of degeneration in the late 19th c related to the transition to civilization, the growth of a large discontented mass of populace and the fear of crowd violence. It was the product of the industrial revolution, consequent urbanization and the throwing together of classes in the cities which had to be regulated. Daniel Pick has argued that while the idea of generational and historical decline had been present in Aristotle, Rousseau or Hegel, in works like Max Nordau's *Degeneration* or Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man*, this process acquired a new meaning. Degeneration was discussed not as a religious,

¹⁴ Breckenridge, "Gandhi's progressive disillusionment".

philosophical or ethical problem but as an empirically demonstrable medical, biological and anthropological fact. This was to lead to the possibility of purification and perfectibility that characterized the Eugenics movement that emerged at the beginning of the 20th c.¹⁵ Pick emphasizes the coming together of multiple discourses from the fear of “outcast London” in the 1880s to the disenchanted new-liberal perception of democracy, mass society and urban life around the turn of the century, as social critique came to be powerfully inflected by biological theories of decline.¹⁶ These ideas were imbricated in anxieties of national unity as much as the uncertainties of cohesion. Lombroso’s theory of atavism was intimately connected with the perceived fragmentation of Italy and the presence within the body politic of criminal and sub-human types who nevertheless had to be accorded the status of citizens. In France, questions of reproduction, and degeneration of the national body reflected anxieties of the decline of an imperial race as much as the intellectual inferiority of other races.¹⁷ The late 19th century milieu, within which Gandhi was forged, both in his formative years in England and his political life in South Africa, were suffused with these multi-stranded concerns.

One intellectual trajectory was to see civilization as an affliction, or a disease that was wasting away modern man. The central problem before European science was the ambiguous question: whether the progress of civilization had increased the number of diseases. Gandhi’s exposition of civilization as a disease followed on from this idea as civilization as progenitor of disease. When he writes in *HS* that, “it is not due to any particular fault of the English people, but [their] condition is due to modern civilization...the nations of Europe are being degraded and ruined day by

¹⁵ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁷ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.40.

day”,¹⁸ he is drawing upon the prevalent discourse. In the chapter in which Gandhi begins his discussion of civilization, he begins by quoting “a great English writer”, who refers to civilization as a disease. He is quoting from Edward Carpenter’s *Civilization: its Causes and Cure* where Carpenter argues that civilization is a terminal illness that humans have to pass through though he knows of no case where a nation has recovered.

We find ourselves today in the midst of a somewhat peculiar state of society, which we call Civilisation, but which even to the most optimistic among us does not seem altogether desirable. Some of us, indeed, are inclined to think that it is a kind of disease which the various races of man have to pass through - as children pass through measles or whooping cough; but if it is a disease, there is this serious consideration to be made, that while History tells us of many nations that have been attacked by it, of many that have succumbed to it, and of some that are still in the throes of it, we know of no single case in which a nation has fairly recovered from and passed through it to a more normal and healthy condition.¹⁹

Nordau too expresses a similar sentiment, when he writes in the opening lines of his *Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*

“...the human race today is more discontented, more irritated, and more restless than before. The world of civilization is an immense hospital-ward, the air is filled with groans and lamentations, and every form of suffering is to be seen twisting and turning on the beds.”²⁰

Carpenter goes on to speak about the comparative freedom from disease of savages (citing Lewis Morgan on the Iroquois and Captain Cook on the Etahietei). Individual health is related to a sense of unity and wholeness with nature; the figure of the noble savage is recovered to contest the ravages of civilization.²¹ In

¹⁸ *Hind Swaraj*, edited by Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.33

¹⁹ Edward Carpenter, *Civilization: its cause and cure* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co, 1889), p.1

²⁰ Max Nordau, *The Conventional Lies of our Civilization* (Chicago: L. Schick 1887), p.1

²¹ Carpenter, *Civilization*, pp. 6-7

HS, too, there is a segueing from the diagnosis to the critique of a Europe in which “bodily welfare” had become the “object of life” (HS, 35), to a celebration of the times when men “wore skins, and used as their weapons spears”; ploughed their lands through manual labour; travelled in wagons; worked in the open air and so on. This is contrasted to the increasing mechanization of life, which takes away agency, self and volition from humans. There is little that is original here, much of what follows from the central metaphor of disease borrowed from Carpenter consists of a random elaboration of his arguments. What is interesting in Gandhi’s text, is the movement towards the characterization of civilization as being immoral and irreligious; in fact towards an equation of spare simplicity: “this civilization is irreligion” (HS 37). However, it is the *non sequiturs* that follow (“the people in Europe...appear to be half mad”; they lack in courage; they are intoxicated) and the capstone of the paragraph, “women who should be the queens of households, wander in the streets, or they slave away in factories” (HS 37), that suggests that Gandhi misremembers Carpenter, though following the sequence of his argument.

Accordingly we find that it has been the work of Civilisation -founded as we have seen on Property - in every way to disintegrate and corrupt man – literally to corrupt - to break up the unity of his nature. It begins with the abandonment of the primitive life and the growth of the sense of shame (as in the myth of Adam and Eve) From this follows the disownment of the sacredness of sex. Sexual acts cease to be a part of religious worship; love and desire - the inner and the outer love - hitherto undifferentiated, now become two separate things. (This no doubt a necessary stage in order for the development of the consciousness of love, but in itself only painful and abnormal.) It culminates and comes to an end, as to-day, in a complete divorce between the spiritual reality and the bodily fulfilment - in a vast system of commercial love, bought and sold, in the brothel and in the palace.²²

²² Carpenter, *Civilization*, pp. 25-6

Carpenter's arguments about rescuing humans from civilization rested on his own engagement with exploring alternative forms of sexuality and his own homosexuality. There is an eccentric mix of a return to nature, remaking spiritual wholeness and reveling in the sexual self of which Gandhi retained only the former two elements. What is interesting that *HS* goes on seamlessly from irreligion to women becoming streetwalkers (the image of the prostitute recurs several times in the text) but without the tight logic of Carpenter's argument where sex is dissociated from spiritual union and yoked instead to commerce. Gandhi's distemper is as much with regard to the degradation of women as this "awful fact" being the cause of the suffragette movement (whose methods he disapproved of). (*HS* 37)

What indeed were the symptoms of civilization as disease? Carpenter essays an observation of "the consumption of the organism by means of social parasites" and specifically mentions the number of accredited doctors in England exceeding 23000.²³ If medical science makes a fetish of disease, the shareholder (commerce) and the policeman (nation: "policemanised nations") are further symptoms of this malaise. So what is the treatment, then, for this affliction of parasites (Gandhi adds lawyers to his excoriation of doctors)? How were the patients in the "immense hospital ward of civilization", as Nordau puts it to recover? For Gandhi the true test of, as much as antidote to, civilization is when people living in it start making bodily welfare the object of life. Unlike Carpenter, Gandhi was quite convinced that "civilization is not an incurable disease".²⁴ However, they are agreed on Carpenter's prescription that "to reinforce the central power till it is sufficiently strong of itself to eject the insubordinate elements and restore order"²⁵, is the way forward. For Gandhi the management of the self particularly through exercising restraint is an

²³ *ibid.*, p. 2

²⁴ *HS*, p.38

²⁵ Carpenter, *Civilization*, p.20

antidote to both disease as well as conflict. Just as it was “unmanly and cowardly” to resort to a lawyer and courts of law instead of settling a dispute “by fighting” (no restraint here!) (HS, 61), similarly soliciting the help of a doctor promotes indulgence in vice, rather than encouraging “mastery over self” (HS, 63). Gandhi provides the memorably extreme statement that “hospitals are institutions for propagating sin. Men take less care of their bodies and immorality increases” (HS, 63-4).

Many of Gandhi’s concerns in the text echoed and arose in response to two factors: the sudden growth of Johannesburg as a city with the discovery of gold in the late 19th c and the consequent explosion of migration; the response by the emerging South African state to control this influx through discourses of sanitation, hygiene and order in which racial characterizations were paramount. When WC Scully visited Joburg in 1911, numerous slum warrens housing “Europeans of various nationalities-Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Japanese, Kaffirs and miscellaneous Coloured people of various hues” struck him.²⁶ This racial mix, characteristic of the political economy of capital and labour under modernity was as much a cause for alarm in the colonies as the presence of a racially unified mass of the working classes in the cities of Europe. Gandhi was experiencing in Johannesburg what he would never have experienced in India: the maelstrom of industrial production, overcrowding of labour, the presence of men and women unmoored from families and general perceptions of the decline of morality. To quote van Onselen again,

Throughout 1888-89 the market [Market Square] and its surrounding dusty streets filled with produce merchants, traders, shops offices, banks, bars, saloons and canteens, formed the focal point for incoming transport riders as well as members

²⁶ Quoted by Charles van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2001), p. 45.

of the digging community who were dependent on food and mining supplies brought into the geographically isolated South African republic by ox wagon. The clamour set up by all of this human activity competed uneasily-and largely unsuccessfully- with the continuous din of the nearby mining machinery to produce a veritable cacophony of sound.²⁷

Gandhi's offhand remarks about immorality and hospitals as a site of disease are linked intimately to the particular relation of migration, sexuality and prostitution in Johannesburg. In the 1896 Census, there was "one whore for every 50 white inhabitants of the city or...10 percent of all white women over the age of 15 in Johannesburg were prostitutes". There was also the threatening presence of 200-300 pimps, white slavers and professional gangsters who controlled Joburg's prostitution business.²⁸ The towns prostitutes were concentrated in central Johannesburg or "frenchfontein": between Bree Street in north, Anderson street in south, Kruis Street in east and Sauer Street in the west, where Gandhi had his lawyer's offices at 21 Court Chambers, at the corner of Rissik and Anderson Streets.²⁹ The recurrence of the word and image of the prostitute recurrently (almost 7 times) in the text and particularly his memorable and notorious characterization of Parliament as a "whore", arise from these anxieties of Johannesburg's modernity. Associated with this was the problem of sexually transmitted diseases and their spread. The Cape Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Act a mere 12 months before its British equivalent was repealed, followed by a proclamation of scheduled areas, the registration of prostitutes and compulsory medical examination. With the extension of the railways, the move of prostitutes northwards

²⁷ Van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh*, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110,120. See van Onselen, *The Fox and the Fireflies: The Criminal Empire of the Whitechapel Murderer* (London: Vintage, 2007), chapters 8 and 9.

²⁹ Eric Itzkin, *Gandhi's Johannesburg: Birthplace of Satyagraha* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000).

from the coast to Johannesburg was escalated from 1892. Gandhi's seemingly eccentric observations on the railways as propagating "evil" and "germs" have to be understood historically within the growing climate of panic and regulation arising from a juxtaposition of urbanity, migration and disease in *fin de siècle* South Africa.

Even though the disease of syphilis was associated with the white man and with towns, Africans as much as Indians were drawn into the discourse, as questions of sanitation, health and racial dispositions to dirt and disease circulated through legislations and began to circumscribe residence, trade and movement. Environmental factors like overcrowding, absence of sanitation, poverty, dirty habits etc. were seen as important despite Robert Koch's and Pasteur's discovery in 1870s that bacteria caused specific diseases. During 1890s segregation introduced in hotels, bars and trains in the Cape and the process of removing Africans from the towns, and residential segregation began.³⁰ In a petition to Lord Ripon in 1895, Gandhi referred to the petitions seeking exclusion of all Asiatics by enumerating their peculiar vices; referring, for instance, to the "dangers to which the whole community is exposed by the spread of leprosy, syphilis, and like loathsome diseases..." He also cited articles in the government paper in Transvaal describing the Asiatics as "uncleanly citizens, with whom syphilis and leprosy are common diseases".³¹

The turn of the century saw Gandhi fighting a rearguard action against a slew of legislations that brought together these racial discourses of disease along with the fear of Asiatic migration into South Africa aimed at the Indian labourer in particular. Gandhi's strategy was to disaggregate the threat: separating the Indian merchant from the Indian labourer; the Indian from the African; the rich and middle classes

³⁰ Karen Jochelson, *The Colour of Disease: Syphilis and Racism in South Africa, 1880-1950* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 20, 35

³¹ Petition to Lord Ripon, 5 May 1895, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 1, pp. 323-4

from the poor and indigent; the clean from the dirty; and the civilized from the barbarian. Law 3 of 1885 sought to put limits on Asian immigration, impose a registration fee and threatened to restrict trade to segregated bazaars. Gandhi protested that Indians were required to provide three photographs to secure passes, objecting that this implied that all Indians were criminally inclined and that the use of photographs was invasive and abusive. Lord Milner announced the formation of an Asiatic department with a view to impose a program of identity registration on Indians. In July 1893, Gandhi's petition sought to reassure the whites that propertied Indians could keep the vote (subject to the 50 pounds property franchise); they need not fear the consequences. Two more bills had received assent in 1897 aiming at driving Indian traders out of Natal: the Immigration Restriction Bill and Dealer's Licences Bill. The first set qualifications for entry of immigrants: a written English test and assets of 25 pounds. The second gave the Natal government powers to deny trading licenses on grounds of insanitation. In 1898, there was a test case at the Transvaal High Court to determine whether the law requiring Indians to live in locations also meant that their businesses could only be in locations. The Indians lost. In 1899 when Durban was threatened with plague Gandhi organised volunteers to get the Indian community to comply with health regulations. The impulse towards this arose as much from a sense of imperial citizenship and complying with the regulations of the government as also from the attempt to remove the stain of disease and lack of hygiene which was being put on the Indian laboring population and the lower mercantile class. Representatives of Indians agreed in 1903 to take out registration certificates incorporating thumbprint as marker of identification. Through all of this as Breckenridge has observed, Gandhi's own views were shaped by his attempts to "foster a politics of discrimination, to separate out his wealthy,

literate clients from the broader mass of indentured and ex-indentured workers”.³²

It was here that the idea of civilization, of India being more civilized as also having been civilized for longer, was brought in to strengthen these distinctions and to address the “anomaly that [Bills] would rank the Indian lower than the rawest native”.³³ Moreover, legislation and public opinion also sought to collapse, what was to Gandhi’s mind, essential distinctions between free and indentured effacing questions of class, civilization and culture among Indians in South Africa. As for insanitary habits, he argued in a letter to the members of the Legislative Council and Assembly, “in this respect they [indentured labourers] are not everything that could be desired”; “indentured Indians... are too poor to attend to personal cleanliness...the trading community are compelled by their religion to bathe once a week at least...”³⁴ Throughout the decades at the end of the 19th century, Gandhi was keen to separate himself from the African as an object of the attention and ministrations of the state and the racialised public. Parallel to this was the attempt to show that India was on par with the civilization of the English, stressing their common Aryan inheritance as against the savage African. He resented the attempts “to degrade the Indian to the position of the Kaffir” and degenerate they would. “By persistent ill-treatment they cannot but degenerate, so much so that from their civilized habits they would be degraded to the habits of the aboriginal Natives, and a generation hence, between the progeny of the Indians thus in course of degeneration and the Natives, there will be very little difference in habits, and customs, and thought...a large portion of Her Majesty’s subjects instead of being

³² Breckenridge, “Progressive Disillusionment”, p. 337

³³ Petition to Lord Ripon, 14 July 1894, *CWMG*, 1, 169.

³⁴ Open letter to the Honourable Members of the Legislative Council and Assembly, 19 December 1894, *CWMG*, 191

raised in the scale of civilization, will be actually lowered.”³⁵ Gandhi presented the effort of the Indians in South Africa, as a manly “struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness.”³⁶

It is in the context of this struggle that the category of civilization is appropriated, retained and burnished as a bulwark against a slide into the realm of the degenerate. Gandhi’s efforts were dedicated “to induce you [the south African public] to believe that India is not Africa, and that it is a civilized country in the truest sense of the term *civilization*.”³⁷ Citing WW Hunter, he pointed out that Indians and the British were descended from common Indo-Aryan stock and no inferior to their Anglo-Saxon brethren. He cited pell mell a litany of scholars, philosophers, and Anglo-Indian officials etc like Hunter, Max Mueller, Schopenhauer, Bishop Heber and Thomas Munro to show the distinct achievements of Indian civilization in fields as diverse as jurisprudence, algebra, philosophy, linguistics and village organization.³⁸ These arguments of affinity, racial and sentimental, were made in the framework of the idea of imperial citizenship and of the rights due to Indians under the Queens Proclamation of 1858. This second layer of argument, moved beyond the brothers under the skin to a more legal contract of equality and obligation that bound the Empire together. “India benefits hundreds of thousands of Europeans; India makes the British Empire; India gives an unrivalled prestige to England;

³⁵ Petition to Lord Ripon, 5 May 1895, *CWMG*, 1, 229.

³⁶ Interview to *The Natal Advertiser*, 4 June 1896, *CWMG*, 1, p. 417

³⁷ Open letter to the Honourable Members of the Legislative Council and Assembly, 19 December 1894, *CWMG*, p. 199.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.192

India has often fought for England. Is it fair that European subjects of that Empire in this Colony, who themselves derive a considerable benefit from Indian labour, should object to the free Indians earning an honest livelihood in it?”³⁹ Central to this understanding was the belief, and the hope, that India was the jewel in the crown.

This argument for India’s “civilization” was to acquire a different edge in *HS*, which is less an indictment of western modernity and more an assertion of India’s ancient civilization. It was made first in the milieu of differentiating Indians from Africans and claiming affinity with the European (we are as good as you). In 1909, in the context of the failure of Gandhi’s mission to England to stall the moves towards a racial state based on individual registration, the argument about civilization was more aggressive (we are better than you). As Breckenridge, puts it sharply, “Gandhi’s manifesto was famously the product of defeat” ⁴⁰and the exaltation of Indian civilization arose from this conjuncture; whether as a compensatory move, is an open question. In the chapter titled “What is True Civilization”, Gandhi states boldly, “the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world” (*HS*, 66). While other civilizations have vanished, declined or succumbed to westernization like Japan, “India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation...India remains immovable and that is her glory” (*HS*, 66). In the Gujarati text of the *HS*, there is a shift in the citational strategy from the 19th century reliance on British sources to show India’s achievements. Here the claim is more brazen and places British sources in a subordinate role as witness rather than as mere evidence: “as so many [British] writers have shown, [India] has nothing to learn from anybody else, and this is as it should be” (*HS*, 68) “We have retained the same kind of cottages”; “our indigenous education remains the same”; “each followed his own occupation or

³⁹ Letter to the *Natal Mercury*, 13 April 1897, *CWMG*, 2, 134

⁴⁰ Breckenridge, “Gandhi’s Progressive Disillusionment”, p.343

trade”; we decided that “we should only do what we could with our hands and feet” so that even though we knew how to invent machinery we did not do knowing that if we succumbed, “we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre”. “Large cities” were a snare and could lead to “thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice”; “this nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds. Last but not the least, “the common people lived independently and followed their agricultural occupation. They enjoyed true Home Rule” (*HS*, 68-70).

And if this is not enough. “Now you see what I consider to be real civilization. Those who want to change conditions such as I have described are enemies of the country and are sinners” (*HS*, 70). It is difficult to see how *HS* considered as a manifesto against western modernity. It is rather a celebration of Indian civilization, born in the crucible of defeat, and therefore intent on glorifying India in much the manner that the Hindu right wing would in later years. If Savarkar is the invisible interlocutor of *HS*, as Parel argues, against whose violent methods Gandhi was positing passive resistance as antidote and programme, what we have here is perhaps Savarkar’s revenge as Gandhi ventriloquises the credo of the Hindu nationalist. It is an India without inequality and without the iniquity of caste and it is less Savarkar than Jotiba Phule who could emerge as the villain of *HS*. His polemical pamphlet *Gulamgiri* [Slavery] written in 1873 against the inequities of caste and Hindu brahminical civilization would have made him the eyes of *HS*, both enemy and sinner. We must see *HS* as coming at the end of the recuperation of an Indian identity for the Indian in South Africa within a racialised atmosphere where colour was the defining benchmark. Gandhi resisted a cosmopolitanism of colour and a politics of racial affinity for strategic reasons, clinging on to the idea of civilization. He hope to hoist the English on their own petard, which explains the peculiar indigenist, nativist politics of the *HS* premised on the wonder that was India.

Making distinctions also meant creating an idea of distinction. While Gandhi attempted to combat the stereotypes of the sexualized, unhygienic Indian, at the same time he saw them as objects of reform. There is a profound ambivalence in his attitudes towards the masses. While arguing against their concupiscence to the South African authorities, he is severely critical in *HS* of the engagement of the masses of Indians in excessive and premature engagement in sexuality leading to loss of chastity, stamina and most of all masculinity (*HS*, 44). The *satyagrahi*, or passive resister had to be a man of “courage and manhood” and observed chastity, setting himself apart from the rutting masses. Gandhi’s notions of celibacy and restraint drew a lot from the landscape of popular sexual beliefs in the north Indian landscape regarding retention of semen and strength as much as moral superiority.⁴¹

We will have to improve our physique by getting rid of infant marriages and luxurious living. (*HS*, 96)

Chastity is one of the greatest disciplines without which the mind cannot attain requisite firmness. A man who is unchaste loses stamina, become [sic] emasculated and cowardly...When a husband and wife gratify the passions, it is no less an animal indulgence on that account. Such an indulgence except for perpetuating the race, is strictly prohibited. (*HS*, 97)

These statements accord with the then current medical paradigm of degeneration, which in the words of the Darwinian zoologist, Edwin Ray Lankester, created

⁴¹ See Joseph S. Alter, *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (London: Penguin, 2012), ch. 4.

degenerate offspring through “the early marriage, and excessive reproduction of the reckless and hopeless, the poorest, least capable, least desirable members of the community.”⁴² As Pick observes, “There was sustained and growing pessimism in the 1870s and 1880s about the ramifications of evolution, the efficacy of liberalism, the life in and of the metropolis, the future of society in a perceived world of mass democracy and socialism.” The figure of the *satyagrahi* was forged within this miasma of fears, as in the very opening pages of the *HS*, Gandhi sought to delegitimize the revolutionary politics of the Indian national movement. The figure of the revolutionary was the obverse of the Indian labourer in South Africa, caught in the discourse of concupiscence and lack of hygiene, and the masses back home whom Gandhi only saw through the lens of reform. The fear that Indians would reproduce in their politics the degenerative effects of their life as labourers in South Africa was an exigent one that weighed on Gandhi’s mind.

Here the echoes of Nordau are ever present and ringing. Even as *HS* begins with the fervid atmosphere in India of the Home Rule agitation, and weighs the alternatives of moderation and violence, Nordau’s text is dramatic in its opening. In Austria, he writes

The cultivated classes in their despair have grasped Nihilism as their weapon against the present insupportable state of things, and risk their lives again and again, with dynamite and revolver, with the dagger and the torch of the incendiary, to precipitate the country into that bloody chaos, which, in their delirium, they imagine must precede the establishment of a new system of society (*CLC*, 33).

And in France,

⁴² Quoted in Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 32

how many incipient symptoms of disease are to be seen even there, the germs of coming evils. On every street corner in the large cities, excited orators are preaching the gospel of Communism and violence; the masses are preparing to get possession of the government and drive the ruling bourgeoisie out of the snug offices and sinecures which they have enjoyed since 1789, and to take their places in the legislative assemblies (*CLC*, 20).

This disease, manifesting itself in an uncontrolled pathology, arose from the “necessity for carrying on our existence in the midst of institutions which we consider to be lies; these are the causes of our pessimism and skepticism.”⁴³ Nordau lamented the absence of true conservatives willing to fight for the best of what existed, instead of harking back to the past or wanting to hasten the future. Patience with the present and its possibilities, rather than dyspepsia and the stress on alacrity, was needed. As Gandhi remarks to his impatient Reader, “Remember the old proverb that the tree does not grow in one day”. (*HS*, 14) Moreover, the individual in earlier days had a sense of respect for the traditions and structures, which s/he was part of and made.

The Roman plebeian looked upon himself as the unjustly despised and disinherited son of a wealthy house, and merely demanded his seat at the paternal board, and his share in the family discussions the thought of rebelling against the surrounding conditions of political and social life, never occurred to him. He was proud of them, and paid them willing and delighted homage (*CLC*, 19)

So what was then to be the trajectory of change? *HS* sets itself against violence and Anthony Parel suggests that the actions of militant Indian nationalists; the assassination of Curzon-Wyllie by Madanlal Dhingra and Shyamji Krishna Varma’s support, at the India House, of Hindu radicals like Savarkar made them the

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.20

provocation as much as the background to Gandhi's writings.⁴⁴ He insists that it was the Congress that brought together the Indians and enthused us about nationality: the Gujarati edition emphasized that it was improper for revolutionaries to claim that honour (*HS*, 18). Gandhi's suggestion of the use of soul force over body force and of principled engagement with existing institutions puts him very much on the side of order; the "true conservative" that Nordau spoke about. Hyslop has argued that Gandhi's predilection to order is evident in his characterization of the "physical force" dimension of British suffrage agitation before the Great Reform Act of 1832.⁴⁵ The term "physical force" (*HS*, 37 fn 55) was used throughout the 19th c in British political discourse to refer to violent opponents of the state such as the militant wing of the Chartists and the Sinn Feinians. Gandhi is categorical in stating that "the English in 1833 obtained greater voting power by violence" (*HS*, 81) Put within the larger context of the liberal disenchantment with democracy and the intervention of the masses (seen as degenerate and indisciplined) as also the abdication of the cultivated classes who as Nordau puts it grasp Nihilism as their weapon and risk their lives again and again with dynamite and revolver to precipitate bloody chaos, *HS* is firmly located within late 19th century discussions on democracy, the *demos* and a creative conservatism. Carpenter's diagnosis too is bleak: "the failure of nobler passions. This is the era of anarchy, the democracy of Carlyle; the rule of the rabble and mob law".⁴⁶

In the discussion of *swaraj* (self-rule), when Gandhi takes on the idea that driving away the English could be a solution to the problem, he suggests that it is the

⁴⁴ Anthony Parel, "Editors Introduction" in Parel ed. *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. xv. See also Jonathan Hyslop, "An 'eventful' history of *Hind Swaraj*: Gandhi between the Battle of Tsushima and the Union of South Africa", in Devji and Birla ed., *Itineraries of Self-Rule*, pp. 299-319

⁴⁵ Hyslop, "An eventful history", p. 315.

⁴⁶ Carpenter, *Civilization*, p.32.

conditions of the overthrow as much as what is retained after their departure that demands further thinking on. It is not sufficient, Gandhi says to have “English rule without the Englishman”. He chides the Reader, “You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger” (*HS*, 28). There is an uncanny echo of Nordau here in his discussion of the revolt of the slaves led by Spartacus (unlike “the two hundred millions of India, who in silent acquiescence bear the yoke of the English, as for centuries, they bore that of Caste”) (*CLC*, 19-20)

But the followers of Spartacus were neither radicals nor pessimists, according to our ideas. They attacked the goad, not him who wielded it. Their anger was not directed against the regulation of the world, but only against their position in it. Did they recognize the fact that reason refuses to sanction the degradation of men with will and judgment into mere property, like cattle and inanimate things? By no means. They accepted the institution of slavery without question, only they did not want to be slaves themselves. Their ideal was not the abolition of an unreasonable form of social life, but simply an exchange of roles. (*CLC*, 20)

Nordau has an extensive discussion on the conventional lies of our civilization: which attempt to anchor people in family, property, state and religion. The tragedy of modern times lies in the fact that these institutions lack the courage of their convictions and try an impossible reconciliation of their premises to the exigencies of the present. “The new ideas to which they are trying to conform themselves are in direct opposition to every one of their fundamental principles, so that they resemble a book containing on the same page some ancient fable with foot-notes criticizing, ridiculing and abusing it in every possible way” (*CLC*, 87). So for instance, natural hierarchies exist wherever human beings move into a permanent union of interests and this cannot be reconciled with the modern need for equality: one cannot have mere philosophical speculation that does not take into account actual facts (*CLC*,

130). Gandhi draws a fine distinction between discontent and unrest, where the latter is initially compared to sleepwalking, an unenlightened restlessness as people negotiate the state between sleep and wakefulness. To move from sleep to a state of being awake, is akin to waking from acceptance of the present condition, to a state of non-acceptance (*HS*, 24-5). Recent politics have awakened the Indian to the “proper state” of knowledge, but this has led to the second kind of unrest that has “brought about many deaths, many imprisonments, many banishments...All these may be considered good signs, but they may also lead to bad results” (*HS*, 25) Here we see an interstitial phase where a state lacking conviction in itself comes into confrontation with a people who as somnambulists dimly sense the lie of the state and oscillate between sleep and wakefulness, unrest and discontent.

So is Parliament then the reflection of a state politics firm in its convictions or is it a sign of vacillation and indecision: “resembling a book containing on the same page some ancient fable with foot-notes criticizing, ridiculing and abusing it in every possible way”. Gandhi is unequivocal on this. “That which you consider to be the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute”: without outside pressure it can do nothing and it is subject to the fickle control of ministers who change as regularly as clients (*HS*, 30). Parliament lacks the strength of its convictions because it is by its very constitution a capricious body with no sense of finality, making it but a poor prize to cherish. Neither the people nor the state is steadfast: “if India copies England...she will be ruined” (*HS*, 33). Nordau raises the same question in a more historical way

And, now, what about representative legislation? Does it not return to the individual the liberty of which he has been deprived by Fiscalism and Mandarinism and the laws passed in their interests? Does it not change the feudal subject into the modern citizen? Does it not place in the hands of every individual the right to govern and

decide the destinies of the State, in conjunction with the rest? Is not the voter on the day when his representative is elected, a real sovereign, exercising even if indirectly, the old royal privileges of appointing *employees*, passing laws, levying taxes and deciding upon the foreign policy of the Government? In short, is not the ballot the all-powerful weapon? (*CLC*, 170)

Nordau precedes Gandhi in stating that “Parliamentism” is a lie because in it the eternal form, the internal organization of the state is completely unchanged. The institution is hobbled at its foundation because it is peopled by the ambitious and vain; not men of character who would sacrifice. Subject to the will of party leaders, pointless arguments and other structural constraints, the ballot becomes a less than powerful weapon in the hands of the citizens, rendering them little better than feudal subjects.

the people are obliged to transfer their power to a small number of delegates whom they authorize to act for them and exercise their rights of self-government. These delegates in turn are obliged to transfer the power a second time, as they can not govern directly, and they authorize a still smaller number of chosen men, the members of the Cabinet, who in fact, prepare and administer the laws, levy and collect taxes, appoint employees and decide upon peace or war. In order to have the people retain its sovereignty, in order to have its will continue to be the sole arbiter of the destinies of the nation, notwithstanding the repeated transmissions of authority, certain suppositions must be proved to be true. The confidential agents of the people must divest themselves of their personality. The seats in the legislative assembly must not be filled by men, but by mandates, who speak and vote (*CLC*, 172)

Moreover,

Representative legislation even in its most classic homes, England and Belgium, does not fulfill a single one of the conditions I have been enumerating. The will of

the citizen expressed in his vote, is entirely barren of results. The delegates elected act in all cases according to their individual pleasure, and their only sentiment of constraint is in regard to their rivals, not at all in regard to the wishes of the people who elected them. The Cabinet not only rules the country but the Parliament as well; instead of their following a policy prescribed to them, they dictate the policy of the Parliament and nation. They manage all the powers and resources of the nation according to their own discretion, bestow favors and presents, support numerous hangers-on in luxury at the expense of the community and never hear a word of reproof if they remember to send to the majority in Parliament occasional titbits from the royal feast spread for them by the State (CLC, 173)

In the end, Parliament is little more than the rule of party leaders, and the people are subject to demagoguery and oratory that incites the passions, now removed from the street to the debating chamber. “The forces which theoretically keep the parliamentary machine in motion, are experience, foresight and abnegation of self; in reality they are strength of will, egotism and fluency of speech. Culture, intelligence and noble sentiments are defeated by noisy eloquence and indomitable audacity, and the halls of legislature are ruled, not by true wisdom, but by individual, obstinate wills”(CLC, 191)

There is much that Gandhi shares with contemporary thinkers in *fin de siècle* Europe arising as much from his years of reading in England as his close association with his Jewish friends in South Africa through whom he learnt about Nordau. Nordau and Lombroso dedicate their books to each other, each calling the other *maestro* – the problem of violence, national unity and the resurgent masses are central to their concerns as it is to Gandhi. Gandhi’s delineation of the *satyagrahi* – disciplined and disciplining- responds to this need suturing the ideas of degeneration and the restoration of wholeness through creating national unity without the violent

intervention of the masses. The *Hind Swaraj* is born of and located within the 19th c crisis of liberal democracy and its resolutions of an intimate animosity towards the masses.