
Black Gandhi

Author(s): Vijay Prashad

Source: *Social Scientist*, Jan. - Feb., 2009, Vol. 37, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 2009), pp. 3-20

Published by: Social Scientist

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644307>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Scientist*

JSTOR

Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian apostle of Satyagraha, had the kind of serenity that disarmed even his fiercest opponents. Visitors came away overawed by his presence. His quiet demeanor yet sharp political analysis drove his enemies to distraction, while comforting his allies. Gandhi, in his lifetime, came to symbolize a new kind of politics, but his tactics had the weight of history behind them. The elements that distinguished Gandhianism — marches and fasts, disobedience and strikes — had little novelty. What was decidedly new was that Gandhi spoke of peace and compromise even as his people fought an unarmed war, and that at a time when workers' movements were gaining strength and demanding everything. Trade unionism and Bolshevism gained ground and terrified the owners of property and the managers of colonial states. Gandhi, by comparison, seemed serenely safe. In his first years in India, and especially during the Ahmedabad troubles of February-March 1918, he disavowed strikes and workers' organizations, gaining the trust of the owners of property and the distrust of the radicals. Workers' groups, the District Magistrate wrote, "assailed [Gandhi] bitterly for being a friend of the mill owners, riding in their motorcars, and eating sumptuously with them, when the weavers were starving."¹ Gandhi may not have been unacceptable to the captains of industry, but that does not detract from the sheer force of the movement he engendered, a movement that led him every bit as much as he led it.

In the 1920s and 1930s, as the Indian freedom struggle became synonymous with Gandhi, colonized and oppressed people in the darker nations took notice. From Jamaica, African America, and southern Africa, among other places, came the query: Where is our Black Gandhi? Will our Black Gandhi come?² Implicit in such queries was a demand for a replication, across the globe, of the type of anti-imperialist mass movement that Gandhi is believed to have fashioned in India.

Yet Gandhi was no unalloyed radical. Given a choice, the powers would much rather have dealt with him than with Lenin. Both encouraged mass revolt against injustice, both rallied the people for a permanent revolution against imperialism, but something very important set them apart. While Lenin embodied the socialist and communist specter, Marxism and all that it implied in the way of an

assault on property, Gandhi symbolized the Orient. The way he dressed, the way he spoke, the language he used to describe his tactics (some of them quite similar to those of the Bolsheviks)—all afforded Gandhi and his movement some legitimacy in certain respectable circles. Instead of being a war on property, his struggle was seen as the spiritual work of an Eastern seer, one more interested in the purification of Indian society than in the radical transformation of the world. That Gandhi made the requisite noises against working class-led strikes in Ahmedabad in 1918 offered further reassurance that this Oriental seer had more elevated goals than did the Bolsheviks.³

Gandhi thus provided many social movements the cover to do just what they might have done anyway, nicely shrouded in the cloak of Eastern pacifism. Nonviolent activism had a very long trajectory, from ancient times onward. However, while most political movements used nonviolent *tactics*, Gandhi raised nonviolence to a moral ethic, to a strategy with a vision for recreating the world. Other political traditions shared the Gandhian adherence to strikes, fasts, and other nonviolent forms the protest, but without rejecting other tactics, such as sabotage, destruction of property, and militant confrontation with the police. Gandhianism alone believed that the end of peace could only be attained through the means of peace. No violent means, according to the Gandhians, could possibly create a nonviolent society. Violence, in this scheme of things, breeds violence.

The Black International engaged aspects of Gandhianism that centered on whether it was possible to entirely eschew violence when confronted with an extremely violent colonial or racist regime, such as those in southern Africa and the southern USA. Could nonviolence, as a hard standard, succeed in bringing about popular mobilization when racist violence had shattered the confidence of a people? Would the oppressed not need a violent revolution to restore their sense of self? Despite occasional bouts of violence, the bulk of the population throughout most of the black world came to a simple conclusion: unless forced into guerrilla warfare by a ruthless adversary, it was far better to engage the last ounce of goodness in the enemy through moral nonviolent confrontation. That is the genius of Gandhianism that appealed to many in the Black International.

Gandhianism and African America: The Initial Phase

In March 1924, *The Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a journal edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, published a short, characteristically pungent, note from the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Entitled “The Negro and Non-Resistance,” Frazier’s piece deplored the tendency among “a growing number of colored people” to “repudiate the use of force on the part of their brethren in defending their firesides, on the grounds that it is contrary to the example of

non-resistance set by Jesus.” Drawing from the Biblical injunction to “turn the other cheek” to violence, the Christian critics of violent and direct resistance enjoined the black masses that those who do injustice to them must be met with love. The lynchers, being human, might also grow to love black people. Frazier rejected this argument. “While [those who criticize violence] pretend to emulate the meekness of the Nazarene,” he countered, “they conveniently forget to follow his example of unrestrained denunciation of the injustice and hypocrisy of His day and His refusal to make any truce with wrong-doers.” Jesus may not have fought oppression with guns, but he did give his life for justice and not for accommodation.⁴

Frazier had good reasons to be frustrated and despondent. Already in the late 19th century, lynching had become such a horrifying epidemic that journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett turned her career over to exposing it.⁵ In 1919, the NAACP held a conference on lynching, later publishing a report documenting more than 3,000 cases of vigilante racist murders between 1889 and 1919.⁶ Previously, in 1918, Congressman Leonidas Dyer had introduced anti-lynching legislation into the House. Then, in 1922, Mary Talbert, Mary Jackson, Helen Curtis and other women in the NAACP formed the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, but their efforts came to naught in 1923, when the Dyer Bill died by a filibuster in the Senate. While the bill languished in Congress, another two hundred African Americans fell victim to the lynch mob.⁷

It was in these circumstances that Frazier became disillusioned with non-resistance. His idea of fighting fire also had foundation in African American reality. From the borderlands with Mexico to the Carolinas, African Americans with military experience turned against white supremacy and the lynching regime. During World War I, the government worried about African American, Mexican, Japanese and German plots to foment armed strife in the US (the “Plan of San Diego” of 1916 being the most famous, and the Houston Mutiny of 1917 the most savage response).⁸ The authorities were seriously concerned about the loyalty of their second-class citizens. That the disfranchised might take to the gun against white supremacy was not an academic question, especially in the wake of the panic caused by the 1911 Mexican Revolution.⁹ The loyalty of African Americans, even though well demonstrated in the savage campaigns against the Amerindians and in the wars of 1898, could not be vouchsafed in the minds of the elevated citizenry, who feared “Negroes with guns.” Frazier’s rejection of non-resistance has to be read in this context.¹⁰

Frazier’s position shocked Ellen Winsor, a white Quaker ally of the NAACP and veteran Suffragette. She denied that nonviolent protest amounted to passivity, and urged Frazier to study the ways of M. K. Gandhi, “who has not one drop of white blood in his veins.” Perhaps with the harsh retribution visited upon any retaliation against the lynch mob in mind, Winsor asked, “Has not the

Negro learnt to his sorrow that violent methods never win the desired goal?" She concluded, "Who knows but that a Gandhi will arise in this country to lead the people out of their misery and ignorance, not by the old way of brute force which breeds sorrow and wrong, but by the new methods of education based on economic justice leading straight to Freedom."¹¹

Du Bois, in his capacity as editor of *The Crisis*, decided not to publish Winsor's response. Instead, he sent her a kind personal note, albeit one with an edgy conclusion: "I am, I must say, compelled to smile at the unanimity with which the great leader, Mr. Gandhi, is received by those people and races who have spilled the most blood."¹²

Du Bois then showed Winsor's letter to Frazier, and published his reply in June 1924. The use of violence, Frazier reiterated, anticipating an argument that would be made more famously by Frantz Fanon decades later, was indispensable in self-defence against white supremacist aggression, and would gain African Americans self-respect. "A Britisher remarked to me in England a couple of years ago," Frazier continued, "that once in the Far East you could kick a Japanese with impunity, but since the Russo-Japanese war, the Japanese had become so arrogant that they would take you into court for such an offence." Struck by Winsor's call for an American Gandhi, Frazier responded acerbically:

Suppose there should arise a Gandhi to lead Negroes without hate in their hearts to stop tilling the fields of the South under the peonage system; to cease paying taxes to States that keep their children in ignorance; and to ignore the iniquitous disenfranchisement and Jim Crow laws, I fear we would witness an unprecedented massacre of defenceless black men and women in the name of Law and Order and there would scarcely be enough Christian sentiment in America to stay the flood of blood.¹³

Whatever the merits of the debate, neither Frazier nor Winsor really understood Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle. For them, as for many in the US, Gandhi had become a mythical figure for whom nonviolence had religious qualities, and whose movement had been entirely motivated by an immense faith in him and in his ethical approach. Winsor wanted the Black movement to adopt Gandhian pacifism as much as Frazier rejected the purity of that approach. Neither, however, showed an appreciation of the historical Gandhi.

Du Bois came closer to the mark. In July 1929, for the 20th anniversary issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois invited Gandhi to submit a message. Gandhi did so, and in the margins Du Bois penned his own thoughts on Gandhian politics: "Agitation, non-violence, refusal to cooperate with the oppressor, became Gandhi's watchword and with it he is leading all India to freedom. Here and today he stretches out his hand in fellowship to his coloured friends of the West."¹⁴ The techniques of direct action, the ethos of solidarity, and the refusal to

bend to imperialism were far more important to Du Bois than Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa*, life without violence. Individual heroism and self-abnegation meant little to those who suffered the long arm of white supremacy. Even in India Gandhianism was often understood by the masses as the license to rebel violently against authority (as in Chauri Chaura, 1922, and during the mass "Quit India" uprising of 1942). Du Bois recognized the centrality of Gandhi to the rejuvenated mass movement of Indian nationalism, and while he saw Gandhi warts and all, he regarded him as one of the most important figures of his time.

Such a practical approach to Gandhi was rare in the US, where Gandhi's adherents were prone to depict him as a saint. A popular 1923 account by the University of Michigan's Claude Van Tyne noted: "Millions of Indians believe Gandhi to be a reincarnation of Vishnu."¹⁵ That view irked Gandhi's main Indian interpreter in the US, Krishnalal Shridharani, who wrote: "Whatever religious and mystical elements there are in the Indian movement, and they are greatly exaggerated by the American journalists and scholars – are there for propaganda and publicity reasons as well as for the personal satisfaction of deeply conscientious men like Gandhi and the members of the Gandhi Seva Sangh." What drew the millions, Shridharani added, was the fact that "the movement has been a weapon to be wielded by masses of men for earthly, tangible and collective aims and to be discarded if it does not work." Shridharani minimized the role of religion in the Indian movement precisely because it was exaggerated in the US. In fact, religious iconography and ideas did play quite a significant role in Gandhi's attempt to mobilize the population. Nevertheless, Shridharani was right to note: "American pacifism is essentially religious and mystical. West can be more unworldly than East, and the history of the peace movement in the United States is a good illustration of that."¹⁶ In writing these lines, he could very well have had Ellen Winsor, not just her Quaker community, in mind.

The South African Sojourn: How Gandhi Became Mahatma

Gandhi's adoption by American pacifism as an Oriental Saint faced a significant contest not only from the diligent analysis by Du Bois, but also from Gandhi's own biographical details. Gandhi's history has to be recovered from mythology or else it becomes impossible to understand what attracted him to anti-imperialist movements across the darker nations. Gandhi was not always Gandhi, and the Gandhi that we know only emerged because of his experience in the struggles for justice in southern Africa.

Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 at age twenty-four and left in 1914, aged forty-four. These were his formative years, when the naive man and mediocre lawyer became a major political and moral force in world affairs. How, exactly, did Gandhi become the Mahatma, the Great Soul?

In the 1860s, the British imperial project drew people from India as indentured labourers to work in the Natal province of South Africa. There, more than 150,000 Indian labourers worked in a variety of occupations, notably in the coalmines and the sugarcane fields, as well as built railroads. They suffered from the callous indifference of the colonial state, which valued them for their labour power and cared little about their welfare. Women among the indentured lived the harshest lives: all that the colonial state disavowed in the way of social life had to be manufactured with scant material by women within the gendered division of labor.¹⁷

When their indenture contracts ran out, many “ex-indentured” sought to stay on the land that had become their home. This desire posed a challenge to the colonial state, as did the arrival of a merchant class of Indians who came to sell goods and services to the indentured. The Indian merchants were known to the state as “Passenger Indians” (because they paid their own passage from India to South Africa) and to themselves as “Arabs” (to differentiate themselves from the indentured laborers). A firm owned by one of these “Arabs” or “Passenger Indians” engaged Gandhi’s legal services to resolve one their internecine disputes. Frustrated by the general lack of dignity accorded the merchants, Gandhi opposed laws that, to his mind, reduced the Indian merchant to a “kaffir” (the stereotypical word used by the white supremacist state to designate Black Africans). In 1894 he helped found the Natal Indian Congress, whose goal was to repeal the discriminatory laws that fettered the lives of the Indian merchants. Thus far, actually until 1907, Gandhi had little to say about the oppression of Black Africans and working-class Indians. His professional class, caste Hindu, and pro-imperial optic failed to detect them on the political horizon.¹⁸

From 1894 to 1906, Gandhi and the merchants eschewed mass struggles. According to historian Maureen Swan, the class divide “was a requirement of a colonial situation in which legal distinctions were increasingly being made on a racial basis, and in which the major threat to the merchants’ economic interests thus happened to be posed in terms of their being identified as part of a certain group which was placed low in the racial hierarchy.”¹⁹ In other words, to preserve their own narrow class advantages, the Indian merchants had to separate themselves from their indentured brethren (although it should also be said that this same class had little confraternity with oppressed castes and exploited classes within India). The “Passenger Indians” not only feared an alliance or a mass uprising, but they also could not countenance fiscal losses and imprisonment.²⁰ Even if Gandhi or the merchants had wanted to use the mass power of the indentured labourers, finding common causes on issues would have been difficult. In 1896, when the South African government and press attacked him for his caustic remarks about discrimination against Indians, Gandhi announced: “The lot of the indentured Indian cannot be very unhappy;

and Natal is a very good place for such Indians to earn their livelihood.”²¹ No wonder the Indian indentured did not flock to Gandhi in this period.

In 1906, the South African government introduced a bill to require the registration of all Indians and to control of the entry of Indians into the country. The proposed law would have hampered freedom of commerce for the Indian merchants. Incensed, they tried every available tactic: resolutions, petitions to the Colonial Office, requests for meetings with senior officials, letters and articles in the press. The government remained obdurate, and no compromise seemed possible (unlike in 1894, when 9,000 signatures forced the state to hold back on its attempt to abolish Indian enfranchisement). It is in this context that the merchants acceded to Gandhi’s call for “passive resistance” in September 1906.

Amid his call for passive resistance, Gandhi grappled with the failure of the Indian merchants’ polite strategy as well as the violent strategy of the 1905 Russian Revolution. “Under British rule,” Gandhi wrote, “we draft petition, carry on a struggle through the Press, and seek justice from the King. All this is perfectly proper. It is necessary, and it also brings us some relief. But is there anything else that we should do? And, can we do it?”²² The “it” referred to the Russian people, notably those whom Gandhi called the anarchists (although they included communists and others), who “kill the officials openly as well as secretly.”

Gandhi considered such armed action a mistake, because it kept both rulers and ruled “in a state of constant tension.” Nevertheless, the bravery and patriotism of the Russians appealed to him, for these men and women “serve their country selflessly.” Indians in South Africa, by contrast, had not attained that level of patriotism. “We are children in political matters. We do not understand the principle that the public good is also one’s own good. But the time has now come for us to outgrow this state of mind. We need not, however, resort to violence. Neither need we set out on adventures, risking our lives. We must, however, submit our bodies to pain....”²³ Gandhi struggled with the gap between the class interest of the Passenger Indians and the “public good” of the society. This is the first indication of his public disavowal of the narrow class strategy pursued by the Passenger Indians, and of his entry into the broader, messy world of populist, anti-colonial nationalism. Indians, he wrote, henceforth should refuse to abase themselves to unjust laws, and should rather suffer in jail. On September 11, 1906, before a room of merchants, Gandhi pledged to go to jail before submitting to the unjust laws. He asked those in the room to join him. “Imagine that all of us present here numbering 3000 at the most pledge ourselves.” But even fewer would suffice: “I can boldly declare, and with certainty, that so long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can only be one end to the struggle, and that is victory.”²⁴

Two years later, Gandhi reflected on the 1906 struggle. He noted: “The entire

campaign was intended to preserve the status of the well-to-do Indians...it was chiefly a businessmen's campaign."²⁵ The businessmen, however, did not lead the campaign. It was left to the working class and the small merchants to assume that function. In 1910, Gandhi singled out the hawkers of Transvaal for their important role: "because of their courage, the campaign has created so fine an impression. It is because hundreds of them went to gaol that it has come to be recognized as a great movement."²⁶ The strong stand of the workers and small merchants surprised Gandhi, because "questions of self-respect or honour, it was thought so far, could have little meaning for hawkers." But things had changed: "Now, everyone admits that hawkers do care for self-respect and they have risen in the esteem of others."²⁷

The masses came forward, mobilized either by class interest (the hawkers, the merchants) or by religious or ethnic fealty (through caste and creed associations, a central player being the Hamidia Islamic Society). Their arrival allowed Gandhi to lay out his theory, and to develop his concepts: Satyagraha (action on the basis of truth), ahimsa (action without violence), Swaraj (self-rule), Sarvodaya (welfare for all). Gandhianism began to be formulated in relationship to the mass upsurge. One crucial element of the revolt and of the theory is that it occurred in the context of widespread deprivation for the indentured and ex-indentured, but also under the heel of a state that, at this point, was more disposed to structural violence than to public and relentless physical violence. Despite the many protests engineered by the merchants and others, the state did not go after the Indian protesters with vehemence. Its rulers played politics with them, which they did not do with the Zulus, who in 1906 rose up in rebellion against colonial rule. The hierarchy of racism and the mediation of an educated, "reasonable" class of adepts provided the Gandhian revolt with a far more genteel state than experienced by the Zulus and others.

In 1913 the struggle picked up again, when Indians refused to concede to a poll tax and various other indignities. In 1908, Gandhi had signed an agreement with the South African government, but the authorities had only honored it in the breach.²⁸ In order not to antagonize the merchants, the government deployed measures that disproportionately affected the working class. Gandhi wrote to one of his confidants, "I am resolving in my own mind the idea of doing something for the indentured man."²⁹ It was in this spirit that Gandhi drafted a strong resolution against the poll tax, and although he called for resistance he did not draft a programme, or a plan of action for the campaign. Gandhi wanted to help the indentured, but he made no attempt to organize them. "Gandhi hoped to avoid an attempt to mobilize the underclasses, with whom he had no direct contact," writes historian Maureen Swan, "and he relied on an elite campaign, supported by the threat of mass mobilization which was implicit in the inclusion of the £3 tax question, to put pressure on the government."³⁰ Gandhi's various

ashrams trained fewer than forty satyagrahis, whom he hoped to unleash to conduct moral actions to challenge the government. He did tell the Minister of the Interior that he would urge a general strike of the indentured, although he had no expectation that this call would amount to much beyond its value as a threat to the government.

Looking back at this event on August 8, 1914, Gandhi marveled at the workers who struck work and held fast. “There were 20,000 strikers who left their tools and work because there was something in the air. People said they did not know why they had struck.”³¹ Actually, the record shows that the workers struck for a host of reasons: some had heard that a Rajah would come from India to liberate them; others that the Rajah would come to decapitate them if they did not stop work; yet others against the atrocious conditions in the mines and fields; and some to join a rumored column of Indian troops that would overthrow the government. For Gandhi, the strikers “went out on faith.”³² But the Reverend A. A. Bailie perhaps put it best when he noted that the workers did not have a coherent reason to strike not because they had no grievances, but because they had so many.³³ The movement, Gandhi wrote, “spread beyond expectations”:

I never dreamt that 20,000 poor Indians would arise and make their own and their country’s name immortal.... South African Indians became the talk of the world. In India, rich and poor, young and old, men and women, kings and labourers, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, citizens of Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Lahore – all were roused, became familiar with our history and came to our assistance. The Government was taken aback. The Viceroy, gauging the mood of the people, took their side. All this is public knowledge. I am stating these facts here in order to show the importance of this struggle.³⁴

From these working class people Gandhi learned an enormous lesson: mass action can paralyze a state and force it, if the action is nonviolent, to its knees. The South African government tried to retaliate with viciousness, with police brutality and murder. But the strike held, and the government lost any moral legitimacy before the people.³⁵

Gandhi returned to India in 1916 after being pushed to the fore by this mass movement. He did not start a new movement in India, but once again got carried by forces that had almost five decades of organization behind them. The modern Indian nationalist movement began with the resolute struggle of the Indian peasantry, who turned to the leadership of people like Gandhi for a host of reasons. Gandhi represented a class that could stand between the inchoate utterance of mass rebellion and the bureaucratic speech of the state: he was part of the infrastructure of the emergent national bourgeoisie, frustrated into organization as the Indian National Congress (from 1885), but until his arrival,

fairly lackadaisical in its annual meetings. Gandhi adopted the style and idiom of the peasants in an attempt to earn their trust and loyalty.³⁶ For the peasantry, as for many of the other social classes in British India, Gandhi's power lay in the organization of the Congress, the rebelliousness of the oppressed classes, the enthusiasm of the middle-class students, the ideology (nonviolence) that he forged out of his experiences, and the early tactical successes of the mass mobilizations he had provoked (the 1917-1918 Satyagrahas of Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad).³⁷

The Uncrowned King: African America and Gandhi Reprised

In the early 1940s, the pace of black struggles in the US picked up. The wartime economy opened up some opportunities for blacks. Despite this, whites fiercely maintained their Jim Crow privileges. Tensions grew, particularly in congested spaces where the white and black working class confronted each other: they had less opportunity to segregate themselves into protected spaces. Sociologists Charles Johnson and Howard Odum, among others, wrote at that time of the impending antagonism between whites and blacks, with Odum warning of black soldiers who were "organizing shock troop units all over the country," and putting weapons aside for the inevitable "race war."³⁸

With the tempo of struggle being pushed from below, the veteran black activist, A. Philip Randolph, gave the government an ultimatum to end Jim Crow in wartime industries, or else he would lead 10,000 people on a march on Washington on July 4, 1941. Freedom had to be fought for, Randolph wrote, "with our gloves off." Responding to the immense majority of blacks, Randolph readied himself for a stiff confrontation. The government quickly capitulated, the President issuing an executive order meeting Randolph's demand.

Alongside Randolph was Bayard Rustin, who had just broken with the communists to become a leader in the pacifist Fellowship for Reconciliation (FOR). In FOR's magazine, Rustin warned, "Many Negroes see mass violence coming. Having lived in a society in which church, school, and home problems have been handled in a violent way, the majority at this point are unable to conceive of a solution by reconciliation and nonviolence."³⁹ Bitterness, fear and frustration governed the imagination of those who had begun to squirrel away arms or else hope for a Japanese victory because, as one person told Rustin, "it don't matter who you're a slave for."⁴⁰ To shift the tenor, Rustin argued that Civil Rights activists had to "identify" in an organic way with the black masses, by fighting daily for justice. "This demands being so integral a part of the Negro community in its day-to-day struggle, so close to it in similarity of work, so near its standard of living that when problems arise he who stands forth to judge, to plan, to suggest, or to lead is really at one with the Negro masses."⁴¹ But all this talk of nonviolence remained premature.

In 1943, when Randolph began to talk about the need for a nonviolent movement against racism, he faced a great deal of resistance.⁴² Du Bois wrote a searing attack on Randolph's desire to adopt Gandhianism.⁴³ Du Bois conceded that blacks had made some gains from their economic perseverance and from their legal struggles: "Our case in America is not happy, but it is far from desperate."⁴⁴ The African American situation, however, was different from India's. Gandhi's struggle thrived in a context where a tiny minority oppressed the vast majority, whereas in the US blacks comprised a small percentage of the population, and any call for nonviolence resistance "would be playing into the hands of our enemies." Du Bois's major point was that Gandhian tactics were alien to the US. Fasting, public prayer and self-sacrifice had been "bred into the very bone of India for more than three thousand years." But African Americans would mock that approach, should the black leadership "blindly copy methods without thought and consideration."⁴⁵

In fact, few Gandhians in the US advocated or adopted fasting as a method. Shridharani wrote that Gandhianism "should merely point the way," as fasting "may appear ridiculous in America," where it lacked "the same social significance" it had in India.⁴⁶ "Other countries," Shridharani wrote in 1939, "are likely to evolve different forms of self-purification, when and if they engage in a Satyagraha."⁴⁷ Du Bois' association of Gandhianism with fasting, without engaging the meaning of self-purification in nonviolent resistance, encouraged the view of Gandhi as mystical and Gandhianism as a specifically Indian political philosophy.

Two activists of the Fellow of Reconciliation traveled to India, where they learnt of Gandhianism first hand. In 1941, Ralph Templin and Jay Holmes Smith returned to the US, set-up the Harlem Ashram in New York City and translated Gandhian ideas into the theory of Kristagraha, an amalgam of Christianity and Satyagraha, Action on the Basis of Christ. One of the residents of the ashram was James Farmer, who joined in the creation of the Congress of Racial Equality from this base camp.⁴⁸ They began to experiment with their version of truth just as ordinary African Americans in Southern cities had begun to test the limits of Jim Crow. In Birmingham, Alabama, historian Robin Kelley notes, various organizations (the National Urban League, the Interracial Committee, and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights) spent a decade, from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, trying to harness the everyday frustrations of blacks: a lack of employment, a lack of decent housing, a lack of good schools, and a denial of dignity.⁴⁹ Both the minimal demands (better housing, better schools) and the maximum demands (total social transformation) had become clear to the black masses, and to an extent to the black leadership. What was also clear to the leadership, at the very least, was that the fight had to be nonviolent or else the retribution would be stronger than the people could bear. What had not

emerged clearly as yet was the form of struggle, the instrument that would emerge from popular protests. The anarchy of protests, helped along by organized forces, would reveal the tactical form of struggle. The Commune, the Soviet, the Worker's Council, and others, emerged from the heart of the collision between spontaneous unrest and organization.

In 1955, Rosa Parks' action set in motion a well-organized rebellion against Jim Crow. Thousands had been prepared for action by small forays into nonviolent resistance, and by more militant confrontations with the police and white supremacists.⁵⁰ They took to the streets, withdrew from the buses, and inaugurated the mass struggle called the Civil Rights Movement. The tactical form was simple: the sit-down strike, the refusal to leave a place where the body was not wanted. Such actions uncovered the essence of Gandhian civil disobedience. For CORE's James Farmer, "It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who established the shrine of Gandhian nonviolence in a southern city in the United States of America, drawing to him, as a magnet, pilgrims and press from all over the world."⁵¹ King's use of Gandhian and Christian imagery, of love and suffering, drew from the decade long Kristagraha tradition. But in truth, as historian Taylor Branch records, "Nonviolence, like the boycott itself, had begun more or less by accident."⁵² It is by such accidents that history is propelled.

The Civil Rights movement, like the Freedom movement in India, did not start with its leadership. It began in the acts of the Southern black working class, whose refusal to quietly ride at the back of the bus or accept second-class employment in a racist job market was spurred by experience in the World Wars and by the legacy of the CIO unions. If Gandhi learned his politics among the working class in South Africa and India, King too learned to bend to the will of the people while he picked tobacco in the outskirts of Hartford, Connecticut. Protected from the worst of white supremacy by the elite black circles of Atlanta in which he grew up, King did not face the everyday racist trauma as the black working class faced it. With a few fellow Morehouse College students in the summer of 1944, King worked in the fields of Connecticut with black workers, many from the US South and others from the Caribbean.

While toiling with the workers, King called his mother and told her that he wanted to be a minister; he had found his calling here, among the people who survived to struggle for a better day. King, like Gandhi, was led by the will of the masses, by such stalwarts as high school student Claudette Colvin and seamstress-activist Rosa Parks. The courage of ordinary people drew King into the struggle, and the Gandhian experiences of Farmer, Rustin and eventually James Lawson served him well. King took the everyday common sense nonviolence of the movement and raised it to philosophy, which, along with his immense charisma, were his contribution to freedom. In 1958, King wrote: "Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while

love stood as the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.”⁵³ King could have added: “The Churches provided the institutional framework, the radicals provided the disciplined leg-work, and the people provided the energy and enthusiasm as well as the resilience.” King was pushed by the socialism of his people, out of his own narrow class confines into the solidarity of generations.

King’s views did not go unchallenged. In the late 1950s, Robert Williams, head of the Monroe, North Carolina branch of the NAACP, had espoused the view that there is no substitute for armed resistance against a recalcitrant and hostile Jim Crow establishment.⁵⁴ As the NAACP expelled Williams, King addressed his case in *Liberation*. Williams, King argued, offered two paths of struggle, either “we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms.” King disagreed, since the people of Monroe themselves had used “collective community action” to win “significant victory without use of arms or threats of violence.” Then, King offered his view on the power of nonviolence as he had learned it from Gandhi’s example:

There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men. Our enemies would prefer to deal with a small armed group rather than with a huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people. However it is necessary that the mass-action method be persistent and unyielding. Gandhi said that the Indian people must ‘never let them rest,’ referring to the British. He urged them to keep protesting daily and weekly, in a variety of ways. This method inspired and organized the Indian masses and disorganized and demobilized the British. It educates its myriad participants, socially and morally. All history teaches us that like a turbulent ocean beating great cliffs into fragments of rock, the determined movement of people incessantly demanding their rights always disintegrates the old order.⁵⁵

While King knew that the black working class in the South had responded well to the call for nonviolent mass resistance, he also knew that class fissures in the “community” had already prevented the formation of the kind of total resistance he had envisioned. King had read E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), in which the sociologist catalogued the economic powerlessness of the African American middle class, who nonetheless wielded political power over segregated black neighborhoods.⁵⁶ In 1958, in *Stride Toward Freedom*, King cited Frazier’s book, noted that it was unlikely that the middle class would bear the “ordeals and sacrifices” of nonviolence, pointed out that the method “is not dependent on its unanimous acceptance,” and then hoped that a few dedicated resisters can “serve as the moral force to awaken the slumbering national conscience.”⁵⁷

The American engagement with Gandhi moved from mass protest to

individual witness, to a combination of the two. But for the struggle against Jim Crow, Gandhi was never a mystical, almost extra-terrestrial, Vishnu-like figure, but a shrewd political tactician whose weapons of the weak could, with care, be adopted elsewhere. The Indian Shridharani, Gandhi's chief interpreter in the United States, had called him an "unwilling avatar." Indeed he was. In black working class and militant African American circles, the Mahatma was transformed into a comrade in arms.

Gandhi and King learnt their non-violence from the masses, whose courage and resilience surprised both of them. It was from these acts of resistance that they developed their theories. Gandhi's Oriental and King's Christian sheen allowed them space to manoeuvre. Their faith of non-violence earned them the goodwill of the masses, who were ready to act, and it paralyzed the state whose response could only turn the population against ruling classes who cannot act without the consent of large sections of the citizenry. Frazier's frustrations with the non-violent strategy reflected the impatience of those who wanted change to come fast, but were not ready to find the organizational form to bring the masses into making that change happen. The real danger, not identified by Frazier, is that whereas Gandhi and King drew their lessons from the masses, and drew the masses into ever-powerful mobilizations, they could just as easily betray the needs and aspirations of those very people.

Vijay Prashad is George and Martha Kellner Chair of South Asian History, Professor of International Studies and Director of the International Studies Program at Trinity College, Hartford, CT, USA

Acknowledgements:

The material for this essay began to accumulate as I researched *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Beacon, 2001). That I could not fit it in there allowed me to give it as a talk at the symposium in Madison, Wisconsin (2004) to honour the 100th anniversary of Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*. Nellie McKay kindly invited me, Robert Warrior and I held it down for the Indians, and Maurice Wallace gave me very useful feedback. A raw version appeared in *Little India*, for which thanks to my editor Achal Mehra. I could not have written this essay without the pioneering work of Sudarshan Kapur's *Raising Up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Beacon, 1992) and Richard Fox, "Passage from India," *Between Resistance and Revolution*, Ed. Richard Fox and Orin Starn (Rutgers, 1997). Thanks to Michael West and Bill Martin for their patient encouragement.

Notes:

- 1 Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power*....
- 2 For example, in 1933 Leonard Howell, a founder of Rastafarianism thought that he might become the Gandhi of Jamaica. Hélène Lee, *Le Premier Rasta* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), p. 127.
- 3 General Jan Smuts had a more caustic view of Gandhi, whose departure in 1914 he welcomed in letter to Sir Benjamin Robertson, "The saint has left our shores. I sincerely hope for ever." Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power*, p. 3. Winston Churchill's snide remarks in the British Parliament (1931) speaks to Gandhi's mobilization of Oriental tropes, "It is alarming and nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a *fakir* of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal Palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a campaign of civil disobedience, to parlay on equal terms with the representative of the Emperor-King."
- 4 E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro and Non-Resistance," *The Crisis*, 27, 5, March 1924, pp. 213-214, citation p. 213.
- 5 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2002). For an excellent analysis of lynching and violence, see Crystal Feimster, "'Ladies and Lynching': The Gendered Discourse of Mob Violence in the New South, 1880-1930," Princeton University Ph.D., 2000.
- 6 NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: Arno Press, 1969; reprint of 1919 edition).
- 7 Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
- 8 All of this is from Gerald Horne's highly informed *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), Chapter 8, "Kill the 'Gringo' Men," pp. 156-180.
- 9 Horne, *Brown and Black*, p. 92, 110-111.
- 10 Although there is always a temptation to read Frazier as impetuous and exaggerated, given the reaction to his *The Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957).
- 11 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois. Volume 1, Selections, 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1973), pp. 283-284.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- 13 E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro and Non-Resistance," pp. 58-59.
- 14 "To the American Negro: A Message from Mahatma Gandhi," *The Crisis*, July 1929, p. 225.
- 15 Claude Van Tyne, *India in Ferment* (New York: Appleton, 1923), p. 110.
- 16 Krishnalal Shridharani, *My India, My America* (Garden City, NY: Halcyon House, 1941), p. 276.

- 17 Jo Beall, "Women under indentured labor in Colonial Natal, 1860-1911," pp. 146-167 in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990).
- 18 Although his concentration on Indians is not an indication of a lack of alliance or support, for he worked very closely with the Transvaal Chinese Association and with the Natal Native Congress. On the Chinese, see Karen L. Harris, "Gandhi, the Chinese and Passive Resistance," pp. 69-89 in *Gandhi and South Africa. Principles and Politics*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky (Scottsville, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 1999). On the Africans (and the Natal Native Congress), see Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting. Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), pp. 94-96.
- 19 Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 50.
- 20 I have relied upon the outstanding, unpublished dissertation by the former speaker of the South African National Assembly, Frene Ginwala, "Class, Consciousness and Control – Indian South Africans, 1860-1946," Ph. D. Oxford University, 1974, notably pp. 147 onward for this section.
- 21 Swan, *Gandhi*, p. 64.
- 22 M. K. Gandhi, "Russia and India," *Indian Opinion*, September 8, 1906, *Collected Works* (New Delhi: Government of India), vol. 5 (1961), pp. 413.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1950); *Collected Works*, vol. 5, p. 421.
- 25 M. K. Gandhi, "A Brief Explanation," *Indian Opinion*, February 22, 1908, pp. 99-101 in *Collected Works*, vol. 8 (1962), citation p. 100.
- 26 M. K. Gandhi, "Duty of Hawkers," *Indian Opinion*, January 8, 1910, *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (1963), p. 123.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 It was in the context of that agreement that Gandhi wrote, "A satyagrahi bids goodbye to fear. He is therefore never afraid of trusting his opponent. Even if the opponent plays him false twenty times, the satyagrahi is ready to trust him for the twenty-first time, for an implicit trust in human nature is the very essence of his creed," M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 159.
- 29 Swan, *Gandhi*, p. 242.
- 30 Swan, *Gandhi*, p. 244.
- 31 "Speech at London Reception," *Indian Opinion*, September 30, 1914, *Collected Works*, vol. 12 (1964), pp. 523-524, citation p. 524.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Swan, *Gandhi*, p. 252.

- 34 M. K. Gandhi, "The Last Satyagraha Campaign: My Experience," *Indian Opinion*, December 1914, pp. 508-519 in *Collected Works*, vol. 12; citation pp. 509-510.
- 35 As Jan Smuts put it to Gandhi, "I often wish you took to violence like in English strikes, and then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy. You desire victory by self-suffering alone and never transgress your self-imposed limits of courtesy and chivalry. And that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness." Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 325-326.
- 36 Ranajit Guha, "Discipline and Mobilise," pp. 64-120 in *Subaltern Studies no. 7*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) offers an insightful analysis of Gandhi's relationship to the mass movement that developed around his persona.
- 37 On Champaran, see Jacques Pouchepadass, *Champaran and Gandhi. Planters, Peasants and Gandhian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). On Kheda, see David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District 1917-1934* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).
- 38 Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country. Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 105.
- 39 Bayard Rustin, "The Negro and Nonviolence," *Fellowship*, October 1942, pp. 6-10 in *Time on Two Crosses. The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devon Carbado and Donald Weise (San Francisco: Cleis, 2003), citation p. 8.
- 40 Rustin, "The Negro," p. 9.
- 41 Rustin, "The Negro," p. 10.
- 42 Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph. Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 64.
- 43 W. E. B. Du Bois, "As the Crow Flies," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 13, 1943, as cited in Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: the African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp.109-111.
- 44 Du Bois, "As the Crow Flies," p. 110.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Krishnalal Shridharani, *My India, My America*, p. 281.
- 47 Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence: a study of Gandhi's method and its accomplishments* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1939), p. 13.
- 48 A longer version of this essay will offer more details of the Ashram.
- 49 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels. Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: the Free Press, 1994), Chapters 3, "Congested Terrain" pp. 55-75, and Chapter 4, "Birmingham's Untouchables" pp. 77-100, especially pp. 82-85.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart. An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), p. 185.

Social Scientist

Vol 37/Nos 01-02 January-February 2009

- 52 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters. America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), p. 195.
- 53 Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Experiment in Love," pp. 16-20 in *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), citation p. 17.
- 54 Robert Williams would eventually put his case in his 1962 *Negroes With Guns*, reprinted in 1998 and edited by Timothy Tyson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press). For the context and Williams' subsequent political career in Cuba and China, see Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixon: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- 55 King, "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," pp. 31-35 in *A Testament of Hope*, citation p. 33.
- 56 Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie*.
- 57 Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper, 1958) and *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 485-486.