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Orwell's Reflections on Saint Gandhi

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Abstract

In 1949, George Orwell published "Reflections on Gandhi," in which he offers a posthumous portrait of the Indian independence leader. My reading of the essay is at odds with some contemporary views voiced in the village of Motihari in Bihar, India, Orwell's birthplace as well as the site of an historic visit by Gandhi in 1917. In this small Bihari village, a 48-foot pillar was erected in the 1970s to commemorate Gandhi, and more recently controversies have erupted over local attempts to construct a memorial to the famous English writer. Now some are working towards the 2017 completion of a Gandhi memorial park in this village, to mark the centennial of Gandhi's visit and the beginnings of his civil disobedience movement. Local politicians claim that a relatively insignificant Orwell merely represents British oppression and an "enslaved India," while Gandhi represents the liberation of the nation. "Reflections" complicates these views, and more generally complicates people's understandings and memories of both historical figures, in South Asia and around the globe.

Keywords

Gandhi, India, memory, non-violence, pacifism, sainthood

Introduction

On April 13, 2013, in Motihari, Bihar, India, government officials laid the foundation stone of a memorial park to commemorate freedom fighter Mohandas K. Gandhi. Nearby there happens to be a historically significant building: a colonial bungalow where Ida Mabel Blair delivered her second child on June 25, 1903, a son named Eric who would become one of the twentieth century's most celebrated authors under his pen name George Orwell. Eric lived in this single-storey, two-room house for a year when his father Richard was in charge of the British government's opium warehouse, located just across from the family home. The son then moved to England with his mother and sister while his father continued his government service in Burma. The whitewashed, tile-roofed bungalow would languish over the years. In 2010, members of the George Orwell Commemorative Committee and the Motihari Rotary Club persuaded the state government to declare the property a protected area under the Bihar Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1976. With little governmental interest in developing the site, local citizens placed a marble bust of Orwell and a placard announcing that this was his birthplace. Motihari residents, who are leading efforts to restore this site, convinced the district magistrate to place plans for the Gandhi park on hold three days after state officials laid its foundation.¹

What was and is Gandhi's connection with Orwell's place of birth? Motihari is a rural town in Bihar's Champaran district, the place where Gandhi staged his first *satyagraha* (non-cooperation) campaign against the oppressive taxes on indigo farmers in 1917. These indentured laborers had invited Gandhi to investigate the British policy forcing them to grow indigo and other cash crops instead of foodstuffs necessary to their survival. Gandhi and his volunteers studied and surveyed the villages, interviewed the cultivators and land tenants, and investigated the peasants' conditions. They compiled an official report and the Government of Bihar passed the 1918 Champaran Agrarian Act, which granted the region's poor greater compensation and more control over farming practices, and canceled tax hikes and tax collection until the famine ended.²

¹ For more about the Motihari controversy, see Hendrix, "George Orwell's Indian birthplace dedicated to Gandhi"; Jha, "What Orwell Owes to Motihari"; Suraj, "Bihar govt pits Mahatma against Orwell; locals fume"; and Vincent, "Gandhi memorial axed to preserve George Orwell's Indian birthplace."

² For a detailed description of Gandhi's activities in Champaran, see Brown 65-83.

Motihari already has a memorial to commemorate Gandhi's historic 1917 visit: a 48-foot pillar erected in the 1970s at the spot where Gandhi appeared in court after police arrested him (for creating unrest and disobeying the district magistrate's order to leave Champaran), and where hundreds of people rallied to demand his release. Since some Bihar politicians believe that Gandhi represents an independent India while Orwell and his father—civil servants under British rule—symbolize an “enslaved India,” they have no qualms about a Gandhi park encroaching on Orwell's land (Gaikwad). If they succeed in adding another memorial—this time to celebrate the centennial of Gandhi's first civil disobedience movement—the 2017 completion of the park right next to Orwell's birthplace and first home would create a superficial link between Gandhi and Orwell. However, a more substantial connection between the Indian pacifist and the British writer is found in Orwell's writings. This article will examine “Reflections on Gandhi” (1949), in which Orwell offers a posthumous portrait of the Indian independence leader to American readers. Here I will take into consideration not only the “Reflections” essay itself, but also Orwell's earlier writings on Gandhi which informed these reflections. Yet in fact while Orwell draws from his previous thinking about Gandhi, this 1949 essay reflects the postwar context and the further maturation of his thought.

Orwell and *Partisan Review*

William Phillips, editor of the New York-based *Partisan Review*, invited Orwell in an August 24, 1948 letter to submit a book review of *Gandhi's Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, after Gandhi's tragic death in early 1948 inspired the American edition. Originally written in Gujarati, the autobiography first appeared as weekly installments in Gandhi's journal *Navajivan* beginning in 1925; later it was translated into English by his secretary Mahadev H. Desai, and published as a book in 1927 and 1929 entitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The 1948 Public Affairs Press publication is the first complete text of Gandhi's autobiography to be published outside India, and has the original title as its subtitle. Written in a series of short chapters when Gandhi was in prison, the autobiography describes his childhood days, his sojourn in London as a law student, his years in South Africa, and his return to India and life there until the 1920s. Gandhi says here that his aim was to describe the development of his moral and religious beliefs, not tell his life story:

I am not writing the autobiography to please critics. . . . I have spared no pains to give a faithful narrative . . . to describe truth, as it appeared to me, and the exact manner in which I have arrived at it, has been my ceaseless effort. . . . That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. (*Gandhi's Autobiography* 342, 614-15)

Orwell accepts Phillips's request in his August 31, 1948 letter: "Yes, I'd like very much to review Gandhi's *Autobiography*. You didn't say what length? But I suppose the length of one of the longer reviews in *PR*?" ("To William Phillips" 427). As a regular contributor, Orwell was already familiar with *Partisan Review*, a political and literary quarterly founded in 1934 and initially affiliated with the American Communist Party as a counterpart to the latter's *New Masses*; it would later become anti-Communist, disillusioned with Stalinism and the Soviet Union.³ By the early 1940s, *Partisan Review* had established itself as "an influential new journal of literary, cultural and political criticism and comment in the United States" (Marks 108). Between 1941 and 1946 Orwell wrote fifteen "London Letters," a series of commentaries on politics, the war effort, and the London literary scene for the left-wing magazine before composing his book review of Gandhi's autobiography. These letters made him a recognizable figure in American political and cultural circles; the Harcourt, Brace & Company 1946 release of his successful *Animal Farm* would make Orwell a renowned author in America.⁴

Although works of political fiction such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* largely account for Orwell's fame, essays for periodicals such as *Partisan Review* constitute a substantial part of his literary output. Defined broadly as criticism, book reviews, column journalism, conventional essays, and rambling serio-comic passages (Crick, "Introduction" ix), essays contribute "significantly" to Orwell's "cultural and political development while transmitting his observations and arguments to a varied and vivid assortment of readers" (Marks 1). The essay format provided Orwell with a versatile medium in which to express his opinions about society, politics, literature, and prominent individuals. The essay, he says,

³ For more about *Partisan Review*, see Tanenhaus.

⁴ For a further explanation, see Rodden and Rossi 26, 29.

is a peculiar but reasonably specific form of writing . . . can be moral, didactic and serious, even propagandistic, up to a point; . . . is not a sermon . . . has more informality and flexibility . . . [is] content to raise an issue, force it on a reader's attention, but then to ruminate and speculate, neither to orate nor pontificate . . . will seem personal not objective, will give a sense of listening to an extended conversation by an odd but interesting individual . . . may refer to facts, evidence and authorities, but only in passing . . . speculates and enquires, as if the author is thinking aloud . . . [is] a set of free associations made by a sensitive and well-stocked mind. (Crick, "Introduction" x)

Orwell also had a pragmatic reason to rely heavily on the essay form. From 1945 until his death in 1950, Orwell was frequently ill or hospitalized, making it easier to write short pieces such as essays.⁵ His March 30, 1948 diary entry expresses the devastating effect illness had on his writing:

. . . At the start it is impossible to get anything on to paper at all. Your mind turns away to any conceivable subject rather than the one you are trying to deal with, & even the physical act of writing is unbearably irksome. Then, perhaps, you begin to be able to write a little, but whatever you write once it is set down on paper, turns out to be stupid & obvious. You have also no command of language . . . a good lively phrase never occurs to you. And even when you begin to re-acquire the habit of writing, you seem to be incapable of preserving continuity. ("Diary" 307)

During the postwar period and in between his two works of fiction, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Orwell wrote some of his most "enduring and representative essays," which appeared in such periodicals as *Polemic*, *Horizon*, *Gangrel*, *Tribune*, and of course *Partisan Review*: "Notes on Nationalism," "Politics and the English Language," "Why I Write," "The Prevention of Literature," "Thoughts on the Common Toad," and "Reflections on Gandhi" (Marks 135-36). Orwell composed his essay about Gandhi as he was finishing his revision and final typing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: after leaving Hairmyes Hospital near Glasgow in July of 1948, he completed this dystopian novel

⁵ See Marks 136.

and sent it to the publishers in early December, subsequent to submitting “Reflections on Gandhi” to *Partisan Review*.⁶

Orwell and British India

Before analyzing Orwell’s essay on Gandhi, it will be helpful to recount the author’s experience with British India in order to gain more insight into his understanding of India and its famous nationalist leader. Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25, 1903 in, as we know, Motihari in the Bihar region of eastern India, where his father worked as an assistant sub-deputy agent in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service. Orwell lived in India for one year before moving to England, where he grew up and attended school. When Orwell’s parents realized that their teenage son’s less-than-stellar academic performance at Eton meant that a university scholarship would be difficult to get, they suggested that he too engage in the foreign service in India or Burma. After passing the entrance examination, Orwell worked for the Imperial Indian Police in Burma, a province of British India, from 1922 to 1927. He chose Burma as it was where his maternal grandmother had lived and his father had once worked, and he drew from his life and work there for his 1934 novel *Burmese Days* and his essays “A Hanging” (1931) and “Shooting an Elephant” (1936).⁷ His next opportunity arose in 1937 when Desmond Young, editor of *The Pioneer*, a weekly journal in Lucknow, invited Orwell to be an assistant editor and chief leader writer. Orwell responded positively: “My object in going to India is, apart from the work on *The Pioneer*, to try and get a clearer idea of political and social conditions in India . . . [and] no doubt write some book on the subject afterwards” (Crick, *George Orwell* 239). However, with his health deteriorating because of tuberculosis, Orwell declined the job offer and never returned to India.

Orwell’s final involvement with British India came while he was employed by London’s British Broadcasting Company. He initially worked part-time, making a few radio broadcasts for their Eastern Service in early 1941, and then full-time as Talks Assistant and later as Talks Producer in the Indian Section of their Eastern Service, from August 1941 to November 1943. The BBC’s Indian Section aired

⁶ For more about Orwell’s illness, see Davison, *A Life in Letters* 375-76. As for “Reflections”’s completion date: in his March 3, 1949 letter to *New Leader* editor Sol Levitas, Orwell wrote that he had finished the essay before the beginning of December 1948 (51). Levitas replied: “We have all read with great pleasure and enthusiasm your piece on Gandhi in the *Partisan Review*. To be frank, we are extremely jealous that it didn’t appear in the *New Leader* . . .” (52n2).

⁷ For more about Orwell in Burma, see Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* 73-103.

news, current affairs programs, reviews, roundtable discussions, poetry readings, plays, and music. Orwell wrote over 200 English-language news commentaries and reviews for broadcast to India and Southeast Asia, and these were also translated into Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, and Bengali.⁸ Capitalizing on his popularity on the Indian subcontinent and on the fact that his books were banned there, the BBC encouraged Orwell to write and broadcast under his pen name.⁹ Orwell also supervised cultural programs aimed at stimulating interest in the war effort among India's opinion-forming intelligentsia and students, in order to maintain the nationalists' conditional allegiance during the tense "Quit India" Movement:¹⁰ "Orwell knew very well that its propaganda purpose was to help to keep India within the imperial fold at least until after the war. He also happened to believe that this was in India's best interests" (Ingle 42).

At the BBC, Orwell worked alongside Balraj Sahni, an Indian Programme Assistant and Hindi-language broadcaster.¹¹ In 1939 Lionel Fielden, director of All India Radio in Delhi, met Sahni when he visited Gandhi in Sevagram, his ashram in Wardha, Gujarat, where Sahni had been living for one year. Fielden asked for Gandhi's permission to take Sahni with him to join BBC-London's Hindi service in the Indian Section he was organizing; Gandhi gave his consent and approval.¹² Perhaps Sahni spurred Orwell's interest and writing on Gandhi,¹³ because from the start of his BBC days in 1941 through the 1949 publication of his essay, Orwell mentions Gandhi in his personal correspondence, diaries, and essays, and he draws from these writings for his book review of Gandhi's autobiography.

Orwell and Gandhi

Partisan Review published "Reflections on Gandhi" in January 1949, a year after Gandhi's assassination. Orwell opens his essay with an assertion about saints: "Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases" (5). In the essay, Orwell "tests" the case of Gandhi's saintliness by examining the nationalist

⁸ On Orwell's BBC days, see Davison, "Orwell Goes East."

⁹ See Blair, "Memo from Orwell to the Eastern Service Director."

¹⁰ In August 1942, Gandhi launched his "Quit India" Movement, calling Indians to wage one last struggle to achieve independence from British rule, or die in that attempt.

¹¹ See Balraj Sahni 26.

¹² See Bhisham Sahni 62-75.

¹³ Davison asks: "Did his [Sahni's] work with Gandhi influence Orwell's writing on Gandhi?" (Orwell, *A Life in Letters* 521).

leader's actions as described in his autobiography, and by revisiting his own earlier thinking on Gandhi. The opening sentence is the second time Orwell applied the notion of saints to legendary figures. In his 1947 essay for *Polemic* about Russian writer, moral thinker, and social reformer Leo Tolstoy, "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool," he said:

Tolstoy was not a saint, but he tried very hard to make himself a saint, and the standards he applied to literature were other-worldly ones. It is important to realize that the difference between a saint and an ordinary human being is a difference of kind and not of degree. That is, the one is not to be regarded as an imperfect form of the other. The saint, at any rate Tolstoy's kind of saint, is not trying to work an improvement in earthly life: he is trying to bring it to an end and put something different in its place. . . . Ultimately it is the Christian attitude which is self-interested and hedonistic, since the aim is always to get away from the painful struggle of earthly life and find eternal peace in some kind of Heaven or Nirvana. . . . (63)

In a March 31, 1949 letter to his friend and literary executor Sir Richard Rees, Orwell wrote that his Tolstoy essay "really connects up with the Gandhi article" (73). Tolstoy would have a profound impact on Gandhi: in his autobiography, Gandhi says that Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* "overwhelmed" him, leaving "an abiding impression" (172); in 1904, Gandhi launched an experiment in community living called "Tolstoy Farm" near Johannesburg, South Africa inspired by Tolstoyan ideals, and from 1909 to 1910 Gandhi and Tolstoy exchanged several letters discussing their views of non-violence and global politics.¹⁴ However, this is not the connection Orwell contemplated in his 1947 essay. Seeing that "a sort of doubt has always hung around the character of Tolstoy, as around the character of Gandhi" (65), he is skeptical about both men's stature as saints. To him, Tolstoy's kind of saint is self-centered, oppressive, and fixated on the afterlife while Gandhi's kind of saint is humble, ethical, and inhuman. In "Reflections," Orwell ironically critiques the Western tendency to elevate the Indian leader to the level of a saint. I will discuss this topic of Gandhi's sainthood in greater depth a little later.

In his 1949 essay, Orwell explains that British authorities did not think Gandhi or his pacifist activities posed a real threat to their rule; rather they viewed him as "useful":

¹⁴ For an extended discussion, see Lavrin, "Tolstoy and Gandhi."

It was also apparent that the British were making use of him, or thought they were making use of him. Strictly speaking, as a Nationalist, he was an enemy, but since in every crisis he would exert himself to prevent violence—which, from the British point of view, meant preventing any effective action whatever—he could be regarded as “our man.” In private this was sometimes cynically admitted. . . . [T]he gentleness with which he was nearly always handled was due partly to the feeling that he was useful. (“Reflections” 5)

Here Orwell repeats sentiments expressed seven years earlier. In his April 8, 1941 letter to Reverend Iorwerth Jones, he declares with some cynicism that Gandhi’s non-violent tactics were successful because they were in harmony with British interests in India. After all, Gandhi was Britain’s “right-hand man.” Indeed, even though Gandhi’s non-violent, non-cooperation campaigns enabled the British to continue and then conclude their colonial rule as they wished, Gandhi continued to influence British public opinion and colonial government policies:

Gandhi has been regarded for twenty years by the Government of India as one of its right-hand men. I know what I am talking about—I used to be an officer in the Indian police. It was always admitted in the most cynical way that Gandhi made it easier for the British to rule India, because his influence was always against taking any action that would make any difference. . . . The reason why Gandhi when in prison is always treated with such lenience . . . is that the British officials are in terror that he may die and be replaced by someone who believes less in “soul force” and more in bombs. Gandhi is . . . unaware of the way in which he is made use of, and his personal integrity makes him all the more useful. . . . (“To the Reverend Lowerth Jones” 467)

Orwell also comments on Gandhi’s unremarkable looks as he notes the Indian leader’s humble origins and humility: “And though he came of a poor middle-class family, started life rather unfavorably, and was probably of unimpressive physical appearance, he was not afflicted by envy or by the feeling of inferiority” (“Reflections” 6). Earlier, in his January 7, 1944 column for *Tribune* entitled “As I Please,” Orwell dwelled on Gandhi’s physical imperfections, especially his “long

sly nose and huge bat's ears" (55). Gandhi's undistinguished features as well as his insignificant physique and attire belie his actual aura and denote an extraordinary moral fortitude, one which many writers besides Orwell have observed. When the Viceroy of India, Lord Reading, met Gandhi for the first time in 1921, he observed, "There is nothing striking about his appearance. He came to visit me in a white dhoti and cap, woven on a spinning-wheel, with bare feet and legs, and my first impression on seeing him ushered into my room was that there was nothing to arrest attention in his appearance, and that I should have passed him by in the street without a second look at him. When he talks, the impression is different" (Reading).

Next, Orwell opines that Gandhi did not pretend to be purely a saint, as he shared openly his few moral failings, however trivial they may be:

He was not one of those saints who are marked out by their phenomenal piety from childhood onwards. . . . He makes full confession of the misdeeds of his youth, but in fact there is not much to confess. . . . Gandhi's sins, at least his fleshly sins. . . . A few cigarettes, a few mouthfuls of meat, a few annas pilfered in childhood from the maidservant, two visits to a brothel (on each occasion he got away without "doing anything"), one narrowly escaped lapse with his landlady in Plymouth, one outburst of temper—that is about the whole collection. . . . The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible. . . . No doubt alcohol, tobacco, and so forth, are things that a saint must avoid, but sainthood is also a thing that human beings must avoid. ("Reflections" 6-8)

Orwell had read Gandhi's autobiography long before writing "Reflections": "At about the time when the autobiography first appeared I remember reading its opening chapters in the ill-printed pages of some Indian newspaper. They made a good impression on me, which Gandhi himself at that time did not" (5). Orwell drew one of "Gandhi's sins" from this earlier reading of the book, using it as an example in his 1944 review of James Burnham's *The Machiavellians* for *Manchester Evening News*. He speaks of the exhilaration Gandhi experienced during a sinful but pleasurable childhood excursion: "It is notorious that certain sins, crimes, and vices would lack attraction if they were not forbidden. Mr. Gandhi has described the shuddering joy with which, as a child, he sneaked down to some

secret haunt in the bazaar and ate a plate of beef . . . ” (72). In “Reflections,” Orwell praises Gandhi for his honesty in confessing his few sins and for his moral strength in avoiding more sins. Yet he also chastises him for his refusal to compromise his religious principles and commit a sin, even if, for example, giving his wife broth made from a taboo animal could save her (8). Such inhumanity propels Orwell to decry sainthood.

Orwell also writes about Gandhi as a famous pacifist; and in doing so he reveals that he has partly changed his own earlier view of pacifism:

However, Gandhi’s pacifism can be separated to some extent from his other teachings. Its motive was religious, but he claimed also for it that it was a definitive technique, a method, capable of producing desired political results. Gandhi’s attitude was not that of most Western pacifists. Satyagraha, first evolved in South Africa, was a sort of non-violent warfare, a way of defeating the enemy without hurting him and without feeling or arousing hatred. It entailed such things as civil disobedience, strikes, lying down in front of railway trains, enduring police charges without running away and without hitting back, and the like. (“Reflections” 8)

Some biographical details help to explain Orwell’s vacillations regarding pacifism. After he fought and nearly died in the Spanish Civil War in 1936-1937, Orwell joined the left-wing Independent Labour Party, Britain’s main anti-war organization which took a quasi-pacifist position, in 1938. With the Hitler-Stalin pact and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Orwell shifted his position and rejected pacifism.¹⁵ In 1941 Orwell states his opinion on the situation in wartime Britain in his pamphlet “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius.” This attracted the attention of Reverend Iorwerth Jones, who wrote Orwell to ask about his comments on pacifism. In his April 8, 1941 reply, Orwell condemns Gandhi’s pacifist teachings:

4. Gandhi and pacifism . . . Government cannot be conducted on “pure” pacifist lines, because any government which refused in all circumstances to use force could be overthrown by anyone, even any individual, who *was* willing to use force. . . . As to the conquest of England, Gandhi would certainly advise us to let

¹⁵ For an overview of Orwell’s views on pacifism, see Steinhoff 86-104.

Germans rule here rather than fight against them—in fact he did advocate just that. And if Hitler conquered England he would, I imagine, try to bring into being a nationwide pacifist movement, which would prevent serious resistance and therefore make it easier for him to rule. (“To the Reverend Iowerth Jones” 466-67; emphasis in original)

In his 1942 contribution to “Pacifism and the War: A Controversy” for *Partisan Review*,¹⁶ Orwell opposes Gandhi as a pacifist politician who insisted on remaining neutral in the war between the allies and Japan:

I am not interested in pacifism as a “moral phenomenon.” . . . As an ex-Indian civil servant, it always makes me shout with laughter to hear, for instance, Gandhi named as an example of the success of non-violence. As long as twenty years ago it was cynically admitted in Anglo-Indian circles that Gandhi was very useful to the British government. So he will be to the Japanese if they get there. Despotic governments can stand “moral force” till the cows come home; what they fear is physical force. But though not much interested in the “theory” of pacifism, I *am* interested in the psychological processes by which pacifists who have started out with an alleged horror of violence end up with a marked tendency to be fascinated by the success and power of Nazism. (397; emphasis in original)

Then, as World War II came to an end, Orwell became more tolerant of pacifism, and his 1949 “Reflections” illustrates this change. Here he criticizes western leftists for valorizing Gandhi’s pacifism and anarchism while ignoring his teaching’s antihumanist leanings and his opposition to centralism and state violence. However, he sees more merit in Gandhi’s program of *satyagraha*¹⁷ than in the pacifism of western leftists, because its religious motives are politically efficacious. While India’s 1947 Independence may have played a role, perhaps what motivated the change between “the Orwell of 1941-4 and the Orwell of 1948” is the “yet harder fact of the bomb over Hiroshima” (Woodcock 214). For Orwell, atomic weaponry made Gandhian pacifism a viable option in a troubling world.

¹⁶ Orwell, D. S. Savage, George Woodcock, and Alex Comfort published essays on pacifism from September to October 1942. Orwell’s contribution is dated 12 July 1942.

¹⁷ Translated as “firmness in the truth” and not as “passive resistance” (5).

In “Reflections,” Orwell admires Gandhi’s readiness to accept boldly the horrific consequences of his philosophy, such as when he was asked about German Jews in the late 1930s, a topic other pacifists avoided. However, he believes that Gandhi’s non-violent strategies such as moral blackmail and publicity succeeded because the nationalist leader lived in British India, and not in Nazi Germany.

But it so happens that Gandhi was asked a somewhat similar question in 1938 and that his answer is on record in Mr. Louis Fischer’s *Gandhi and Stalin*. According to Mr. Fischer, Gandhi’s view was that the German Jews ought to commit collective suicide, which “would have aroused the world and the people of Germany to Hitler’s violence.” After the war he justified himself: the Jews had been killed anyway, and might as well have died significantly. One has the impression that this attitude staggered even so warm an admirer as Mr. Fischer, but Gandhi was merely being honest. . . . At the same time there is reason to think that Gandhi, who after all was born in 1869, did not understand the nature of totalitarianism and saw everything in terms of his own struggle against the British government. . . . It is difficult to see how Gandhi’s methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again. Without a free press and the right of assembly, it is impossible not merely to appeal to outside opinion, but to bring a mass movement into being, or even to make your intentions known to your adversary. Is there a Gandhi in Russia at this moment? (9)

Orwell reused material from his 1948 review of Louis Fischer’s *Gandhi and Stalin: Two Signs at the World’s Crossroads* (1947) for *The Observer*. Even though he alters the order, the salient points remain—Gandhi supported mass suicide as a heroic way for the Jewish Holocaust victims to have died, he never lived under a totalitarian regime, and his non-violent civil disobedience could not have worked in Stalin’s Soviet Union:

What would Gandhi do if he *wasn’t* given a shelf [of freedom by the British] to stand on? . . . The fact is that Gandhi’s political methods were almost irrelevant to the present situation, because they depended on publicity. As Mr. Fischer admits, Gandhi never had to deal with a totalitarian Power. He was dealing with an old-fashioned and rather

shaky despotism which treated him in a fairly chivalrous way and allowed him to appeal to world opinion at every step. (452)

It is difficult to see how his strategy of fasting and civil disobedience could be applied in a country where political opponents simply disappear and the public never hears anything that the Government does not want it to hear. Moreover, it appears that when Mr. Fischer tells us that we should follow Gandhi's teachings he . . . wants to prevent the expansion of Russian imperialism, nonviolently if we can, but violently if we must; whereas Gandhi's central tenant was that you must not use violence even if the alternative is defeat. Asked to give an opinion on the German Jews, Gandhi apparently answered that they should have committed mass suicide, and thus "arouse the world"—an answer which seems to embarrass even Mr. Fischer. (453)

Orwell acknowledges that Gandhi accomplished his main political aim in ending British rule peaceably. Nevertheless, he contradicts the dominant discourse surrounding Gandhi's role in the Indian struggle for independence:

I have never been able to feel much liking for Gandhi, but I do not feel sure that as a political thinker he was wrong in the main, nor do I believe that his life was a failure. It is curious that when he was assassinated, many of his warmest admirers exclaimed sorrowfully that he had lived just long enough to see his life work in ruins, because India was engaged in a civil war which had always been foreseen as one of the byproducts of the transfer of power. But it was not in trying to smooth down Hindu-Moslem rivalry that Gandhi had spent his life. His main political objective, the peaceful ending of British rule, had after all been attained. . . . [T]his was done by a Labour government, and it is certain that a Conservative government, especially a government headed by Churchill, would have acted differently. But if, by 1945, there had grown up in Britain a large body of opinion sympathetic to Indian independence, how far was this due to Gandhi's personal influence? ("Reflections" 10)

Orwell communicated similar thoughts in his May 2, 1948 letter to Dwight Macdonald, founder and editor of *Politics* (after leaving *Partisan Review* in 1944), several months before writing "Reflections." Given Clement Attlee's postwar

government and its liberal Labour ideology in Britain, Orwell asks whether Gandhi should be the sole receiver of accolades for liberating an India that was now divided along sectarian lines and mired in intercommunal violence:

Yes, I got Politics, as a matter of fact 2 copies, as you sent one to me direct here. It set me thinking again about Gandhi, whom I never met but whom I know a certain amount about. . . . I'm not certain that in the long run he failed. He was not able to stop the fight[ing] between Moslems and Hindus, but his major aim of getting the British out of India peacefully did finally come off. I personally would never have predicted this even five years ago, and I am not sure that a good deal of the credit should not go to Gandhi. Of course a Conservative government would never have got out without a fight, but the fact that a Labour government did so might indirectly be due to Gandhi's influence. . . . (328)

In the 1949 essay's last sentence, Orwell ends up judging Gandhi favorably though with some reservations:

One may feel, as I do, a sort of aesthetic distaste for Gandhi, one may reject the claims of sainthood made on his behalf (he never made any such claim himself, by the way), one may also reject sainthood as an ideal and therefore feel that Gandhi's basic aims were anti-human and reactionary: but regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind! ("Reflections" 10)¹⁸

Orwell has an "aesthetic distaste" for Gandhi; he finds "the things that one associated with him—home-spun cloth, 'soul forces' and vegetarianism—were unappealing, and his medievalist program was obviously not viable in a backward, starving, over-populated country" ("Reflections" 5). However, Orwell does not dislike the Indian leader, unlike author Beverley Nichols, whose *Verdict on India* he reviewed for *The Observer* in 1944. Orwell objects to Nichols's utter loathing of

¹⁸ Britain's Central Office of Information omitted this last sentence and other objectionable phrases in a government-sponsored reprint of this essay in *Mirror* 16 (June 1949), transforming the article into a more positive assessment of Gandhi, perhaps to enhance Indo-British relations. See the editor's notes that follow "Reflections" (10-12).

Gandhi: “A more serious mistake is that he [Nichols] repeatedly attacks Mr. Gandhi, for whom he has an unconquerable aversion. Mr. Gandhi is an enigmatic character, but he is obviously not a plain crook, which is what Mr. Nichols seems to imply, and even his endless self-contradictions may be simply a form of sincerity . . .” (447). Nonetheless it remains true that, because of Gandhi’s puzzling and perplexing nature, Orwell harbors some misgivings: in his April 20, 1948 letter to editor and critic Julian Symons he writes: “Yes, I thought the last number of ‘Politics’ quite good, but I must say that in spite of all their elegies I retain dark suspicions about Gandhi, based only on gossip, but such a lot of gossip that I think there must be something in it” (322).

More importantly, Orwell concludes his essay as he begins it: assessing the case of Gandhi’s saintliness.¹⁹ According to Juergensmeyer, the recognition of Gandhi as a saint may have originated with Westerners and not with his “compatriots” (190). Indeed, Orwell is concerned with Gandhi as a saint in the thinking of the West in general, and of Americans in particular; here we also need to remember that he wrote “Reflections” for the U.S.-based *Partisan Review*. He notes that Gandhi himself never claimed to be a saint: “To clothe me with sainthood is too early. I myself do not feel a saint in any shape or form” (“Candid Critic” 21). In 1909, Reverend Joseph Doke, an English Baptist clergyman, portrayed Gandhi as almost god-like:

Our Indian friend lives on a higher plane than most men do. His actions, like the actions of Mary of Bethany, are often counter eccentric, and not infrequently misunderstood. Those who do not know him think there is some unworthy motive behind, some Oriental “limness,” to account for such profound unworldliness. But those who know him well are ashamed of themselves in his presence. (7)

W. W. Pearson, an English clergyman, described Gandhi as an “Indian Saint” in a 1921 *New Republic* article: “I remember my first glimpse of him. . . . He was dressed in simple homespun, had no hat on his head and was barefoot. He is not striking in appearance. . . . I was forcibly reminded of Saint Francis of Assisi” (240). In America, Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes called attention to Gandhi in his “Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today?” sermon (April 10, 1921), after

¹⁹ In his use of “saint” to describe the widely venerated Gandhi, Juergensmeyer defines saintliness according to the Christian tradition: “the possession of extraordinary power and the ability to convey that power to others” (188).

reading Anglican priest C. F. Andrews's early writings based on his association and friendship with Gandhi:²⁰

Such is Mahatma Gandhi! In this great spirit, he lives among the people. As he moves from city to city, crowds of thirty and even fifty thousand people assemble to hear his words. As he pauses for the night in a village, or in the open countryside, great throngs come to him as to a holy shrine. He would seem to be what the Indians regard him as—the perfect and universal man. In his personal character, he is simple and undefiled. In his political endeavors, he is as stern a realist as Lenin, working steadfastly towards a far goal of liberation which must be won. At the same time, however, is he an idealist. . . . [W]hen I think of Gandhi, I think of Jesus Christ. He lives his life; he speaks his word; he suffers, strives and will some day nobly die for his kingdom upon earth. (57-58)

Holmes's sermon sparked interest in America, possibly because Columbia University professor Taraknath Das and other Indian nationalists used the "unexpected publicity" for their own political purposes, and quickly reprinted and circulated Holmes's sermon (Juergensmeyer 191). Beginning from mid-1921, news about India and Gandhi independent of British sources and biases increased; the *New York Times* even reported Holmes's second sermon about the Indian leader, "Gandhi, His World Significance," on March 13, 1922 (Rudolph 100). Holmes would continue to revere Gandhi, seeing him as following in the footsteps of the Buddha and Christ, and he would often conflate Christ's message with Gandhi's teachings (Rudolph 100). As his ardent admirer, he actively promoted Gandhi's ideas and India's nationalist causes in the United States, and he wrote the introduction to Gandhi's *Sermon on the Sea* (1924) and to his own book, *My Gandhi* (1953), for an American readership. Holmes saw Gandhi as a modern-day saint and as his savior: "In my extremity I turned to Gandhi and he took me in his arms, and never let me go. Away across the globe he cared for me, and taught me, and reassured me. In London, in 1931, I met him and found him indeed my saint and seer. . . . He gave me a peace of mind and a serenity of soul which will be with me to the last" (*My Gandhi* 9).

²⁰ When Andrews met Gandhi in Durban, South Africa in 1914, he bent to touch his feet. See Tinker 84. Rudolph argues that Andrews's gesture began the canonization of Gandhi as a saint (114).

Holmes also encouraged Haridas T. Muzumdar, a Gandhian follower who came to the United States in 1920 for advanced studies, to write about Gandhi. *Gandhi the Apostle: His Trial and His Message* (1923) became the first Gandhi biography published in America. Muzumdar dedicated his book to Holmes, and included in it Benjamin Collins Woodbury's poem "Gandhi":

When shall there be again revealed a Saint,
A holy man, a Savior of his race,
When shall the Christ once more reveal His face?
Gautama left his 'bode without complaint,
Till weary, hungered, desolate and faint
He sank beneath the bo-tree with his load,
As on the Path of Solitude he stood;
And Jesus died to still the sinner's plaint.
Lives there a man as faithful to his vow
Mahatma to a bonded race of men:
Aye, Gandhi seeks his Nation's soul to free;
Unto the least, ye do it unto Me?
Hath Buddha found in peace nirvana now;
Or doth a Christ walk on the earth again? (iv)

French writer and winner of the 1915 Nobel Prize in Literature Romain Rolland also elevated Gandhi's status in America with his popular book *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being* (1924). Though full of inaccuracies, this book also views Gandhi as a Hindu saint and as another Christ.²¹ Rolland would later explain: "I thought I had found [the] rampart [of sovereign reason]. . . in the little Saint Frances of India, Gandhi. Did he bring, in the folds of his sackcloth, the word, which would free us of the murders to come, the heroic non-violence which does not flee but resists, 'Ahimsa'? . . . I believed in it passionately for many years" (Markovits 17-18).

As Gandhi's fame expanded (especially after his 1930 Salt March), descriptions of the freedom fighter inundated European and American books and journals in the 1930s and 1940s,²² the time when Orwell was thinking and writing

²¹ Rolland refers to Gandhi as being like "St. Francis" in his shunning of wealth (16), as the "great apostle" (227), as the "Messiah" (239), and as Christ-like, for whom "the only thing lacking is the cross" (247).

²² See Juergensmeyer 194.

about Gandhi. Examples include American journalist Louis Fisher's *My Week with Gandhi* (1943) and *Gandhi & Stalin* (1947, reviewed by Orwell). The descriptions of Gandhi's saintliness also continued, although the American popular press sometimes seemed ambivalent. On the March 30, 1930 *TIME* cover Gandhi appears as the devil above the caption "Saint Gandhi"; the inside commentary, "Pinch of Salt," explores the nonviolent opposition mounted against the British by "St. Gandhi." Again, those who met Gandhi spoke admiringly of him. In *Gandhiji as We Know Him* (1945), Henry Polak, editor of Gandhi's newspaper and supporter of his South African causes, recalls that when he first met Gandhi he felt he was "faced with a moral giant, whose pellucid soul is a clear, still lake in which one sees Truth clearly mirrored." Polak speaks of how Gandhi's "majestic personality . . . overshadows his comparatively insignificant physique" (45).

In his responses to these Western impulses to idealize and even deify the Indian nationalist leader in "Reflections," Orwell predictably remains skeptical:

In this yogi-ridden age, it is too readily assumed that "non-attachment" is not only better than a full acceptance of earthly life, but that the ordinary man only rejects it because it is too difficult: in other words, that the average human being is a failed saint. It is doubtful whether this is true. Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings. (8)

And the essay concludes by conflating Gandhi-the-saint and Gandhi-the-politician:

[T]his partial autobiography, which ends in the nineteen-twenties, is strong evidence in [Gandhi's] favor, all the more because it covers what he would have called the unregenerate part of his life and reminds one that inside the saint, or near-saint, there was a very shrewd, able person who could, if he had chosen, have been a brilliant success as a lawyer, an administrator or perhaps even a business man. (5)²³

²³ When Orwell writes that Gandhi could have been "a lawyer, an administrator or perhaps even a business man" (5), he refers to Gandhi as a London-trained barrister, son of a prime minister (*diwan*), and member of the merchant caste (*bania*).

This contradiction between Gandhi's image (as a saint) and his reality (as an astute politician) could also be seen as a form of "doublethink": a central idea in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this is "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (214). Orwell had already articulated (but not named) the "power of holding simultaneously two beliefs which cancel out" in his 1946 *Tribune* essay "In Front of Your Nose," noting the proximity of this power to "schizophrenia" (162). Even earlier, in his 1943 review of Lionel Fielden's *Beggar My Neighbor* for *Horizon*, Orwell explained how things do not make sense and are not as they seem:

We live in a lunatic world in which opposites are constantly changing into one another, in which pacifists find themselves worshipping Hitler, Socialists become Nationalists, patriots become quislings, Buddhists pray for the success of the Japanese Army, and the Stock Market takes an upward turn when the Russians stage an offensive. ("Gandhi in Mayfair" 215)

Thus Orwell also disparages Gandhi by saying he publicly adopts the mantle of poverty yet "plays with his spinning-wheel in the mansion of some cotton millionaire" (214).²⁴ Orwell even more strongly disapproves of those disaffected individuals who embrace social movements (and their leaders) while overlooking their often contradictory and ultimately totalitarian natures:

The creeds [pacifism, Anarchism, Stalinism] have the advantage that they aim at the impossible and therefore in effect demand very little. If you throw in a touch of oriental mysticism and Buchmanite raptures over Gandhi,²⁵ you have everything that a disaffected intellectual

²⁴ In his April 3, 1942 war-time diary entry, Orwell expresses a similar disdain for capitalists' support of Gandhi: "Gandhi is deliberately making trouble. . . . Impossible to be quite sure what his game is. Those who are anti-Gandhi allege that he has the worst kind of (Indian) capitalist interests behind him, and it is a fact that he usually seems to be staying at the mansion of some kind of millionaire [or other. *This is not necessarily incompatible with his alleged saintliness. His pacifism may be genuine, however. In the bad period of 1940 he also urged non-resistance in England, should England be invaded*]. I do not know whether Gandhi or Buchman is the nearest equivalent to Rasputin in our time" (259).

²⁵ Frank Buchman was a Protestant Christian evangelist and founder of Moral Re-Armament (a moral and spiritual movement) who respected and appreciated Gandhi. He met him in 1915 and remained in touch through the years. During a 1924 visit in India, Buchman wrote of Gandhi: "the sphere of his usefulness will be sainthood, and a compelling one at that" (Lean 120).

needs. The life of an English gentleman and the moral attitude of a saint can be enjoyed simultaneously. By merely transferring your allegiance from England to India (it used to be Russia), you can indulge to the full in all the chauvinistic sentiments which would be totally impossible if you recognized them for what they were. In the name of pacifism you can compromise with Hitler, and in the name of spirituality you can keep your money . . . There is indeed a sort of apocalyptic truth in the statement of the German radio that the teachings of Hitler and Gandhi are the same. . . . (215-16)

In the end, Orwell questions the idea of Gandhi as a saint and abhors his inhuman abstinence that contributes to his saintly image, but he still respects the Indian nationalist leader for his remarkable acumen in politics. This admiration is a reversal of his earlier views of Gandhi. In his 1943 review of *Beggar My Neighbor*, Orwell vociferously attacked its author: “Fielden’s hero is Gandhi, about whose financial background he says nothing. . . . Now, I do not know whether or not Gandhi will be a ‘flaming inspiration’ in years to come. When one thinks of the creatures who *are* venerated by humanity it does not seem particularly unlikely. But the statement that India ‘ought’ to be independent, *and* de-industrialized, *and* neutral in the present war, is an absurdity” (211; emphasis in original). As the BBC producer, Orwell’s (and Sahni’s) boss, and the Indian Government’s ex-Director of Broadcasting, Fielden was of course very knowledgeable about Indian and imperial politics. Understandably, Orwell’s comments about him made him livid, and he expressed his anger in a retort published in *Horizon*’s November 1943 issue.²⁶ Roy Walker of the Peace Pledge Union was also upset by Orwell’s stand, and he exclaimed in a September 28, 1943 letter: “So what you’ve got against Gandhi is that some ‘big capitalists’ show ‘veneration’ for him!” (222).²⁷

Postwar developments would cause Orwell to partly revise his estimate of Gandhi in a world where nuclear threats loom, where “somebody presses the button and rockets begin to fly.” Or as he says in “Reflections”: “It seems doubtful whether civilization can stand another major war, and it is at least thinkable that the way out lies through non-violence” (10).

²⁶ See Fielden 216-21.

²⁷ Orwell and Walker continued to correspond in 1943. Davison suggests that Walker’s November 25, 1943 letter may have influenced Orwell’s “Reflections” (340), an idea that seems unlikely given Orwell’s post-1943 writings on Gandhi and how war changed his thinking.

Conclusion

Orwell wrote “Reflections on Gandhi” as he was revising *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is possible that while editing his novel about a totalitarian and bureaucratic future society, Orwell was also contemplating Georges Sorel, the French Anarcho-Syndicalist philosopher who advocated liberating violence as a solution to the corrupt politics of bourgeois democracy and as a way to dismantle capitalism.²⁸ Critics can interpret both Orwell’s novel and essay in light of Sorel. Perhaps Winston Smith’s musings about the good that will come from a violent proletarian uprising in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—“if there was hope, it *must* lie in the proles” (69; emphasis in original)—draws from *Reflections on Violence* (1908), in which Sorel affirms that the real solution to exploitation and suffering lies in revolutionary struggle or “proletarian violence” (93). Probably Orwell, in his own ruminations on Gandhi, violence, and the postwar prospect of nuclear warfare in “Reflections on Gandhi”—even borrowing the word “reflections” for his essay title—saw an ironic connection between a book on “violence” and his own thoughts about the world’s most famous pacifist.

Orwell valorized Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence and passive resistance in the late 1940s, but he refused to see Gandhi in a simplistic way. Maybe he saw in Gandhi’s use of symbols (the spinning wheel) and imagery (the look of an oriental mystic) a shrewd political myth-maker prefigured by Sorel, who also argued that imagery and myth are necessary since people are moved by passion, not reason.²⁹ Currently, Indian politicians want to memorialize the beginnings of Gandhi’s non-violent movement in Bihar to the extent that they are encroaching upon land upon which stands the house where Orwell lived as an infant. These are people for whom Orwell was merely a British author who wrote a few novels, while Gandhi liberated an entire nation. How these Bihari politicians apotheosize Gandhi in a postcolonial, nationalist context echoes what Americans and the world did from the 1920s, which is precisely what Orwell critiques in his 1949 essay. The vertiginous irony of their denigration of Orwell and lionization of Gandhi dismays

²⁸ I am grateful to my colleague Gerry Iguchi for this observation and his generous advice throughout the writing of this article.

When fighting in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1938, Orwell sympathized with the Anarcho-Syndicalists (whom he cites in *Homage to Catalonia*, his personal account in 1938 of his time spent in Spain) and Sorel was a famous Anarcho-Syndicalist. Orwell also mentions Sorel in his writings: see his 1943 “As I Please” (34), “Review of *The Machiavellians* by James Burnham” (73), and “Second Thoughts on James Burnham” (269).

²⁹ For more about Sorel’s theory of myth, see Sorel 50 and Tager 626-31.

local Motihari residents who oppose the government's plan, one that would erase Orwell's memory from their village. Reading "Reflections on Gandhi" alongside this confrontation between a local commemoration, in Bihar, of Orwell and one of Gandhi problematizes our memory of both of them—in South Asia and around the world.

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