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**From the Selected Works of Lester R. Kurtz**

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2012

# Mahatma Gandhi

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Forthcoming in the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Movements*

## MAHATMA GANDHI

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), often known as Mahatma Gandhi, is widely cited by contemporary activists as a source of inspiration and strategies. Gandhi was arguably unparalleled at mobilizing resources, taking advantage of – and creating – political opportunities, and effectively framing such messages as justice, equality, and independence or freedom (*Swaraj*, self-reliance). His legacy has almost become a cliché among movement organizers worldwide.

Raised in an Indian household, Gandhi was trained as a lawyer in London. His father was the *diwan* (chief minister) of a small princely state in the British Raj and his mother a pious Hindu with a tolerance for other traditions; this combination of faith and politics shaped his activism. Experiencing raw racism in South Africa while working as an attorney for a Muslim trading firm, Gandhi developed a repertoire of resistance that became a mainstay of social movements. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1906, he launched his first campaign of nonviolent noncooperation with a new law that required all Indians to carry an identity pass manifesting their second-class citizenship. He transformed the traditional Hindu idea of a spiritual community, the *ashram*, into a base for movement organizing, bringing together people across religious, cultural, class and caste divisions in a way that decades later inspired civil rights activists in the United States.

Gandhi was traditional, although far from orthodox. He incorporated multiple traditions into his worldview and strategies – Hinduism, Christian, Islamic, Jain, Buddhist, and ironically, secular British legal theory. He was, as Erikson points out, always a “counterplayer,” a scathing critic and paradigm challenger, not only of the British Empire but of Western industrial civilization. His drawing from these cultural traditions was not just a matter of ideology but a use of cultural capital for mobilizing institutions on behalf of social movements, primarily the Indian independence movement, but also on behalf of women’s liberation and the reform of the caste system, as well as the construction of a new nonviolent, just social order. Central elements of his strategies came from those spiritual traditions, refashioned for purposes of movement mobilization: the tactics of the fast (hunger strike) and pilgrimage-marches, daily prayer meetings to mobilize and inform adherents of ongoing actions and to build movement solidarity, and the frames he used to reach out to multiple audiences from the Indian masses to Hindu and Muslim communities, British Christians, and others, were all transformed elements of these traditional cultures that he made revolutionary.

At the root of Gandhi’s success in mobilizing against British colonialism in his native India, the “Jewel in the Crown,” was his concept of noncooperation and nonviolent resistance, what he called *Satyagraha*, literally holding fast to the Truth (*Satya*) or nonviolent struggle – sometimes called Truth Force or Soul Force. This approach synthesizes the two contradictory ethical traditions about how to respond to injustice, the

warrior and the pacifist. The Gandhian activist fights like the warrior but, like the pacifist, avoids harming.

Armed only with this idea of nonviolent struggle and a set of strategies and tactics for noncooperation with the colonial system, Gandhi mobilized the great mass of the Indian population. He transformed the independence struggle from one between a small group of indigenous and colonial elites, plus a few marginal armed insurgents against the military might of the British Empire, into a mass struggle of the Indian people testing the ability of occupying forces to control an entire population that refused to cooperate. In the end, people power prevailed, as it more often does, as Stephan and Chenoweth demonstrate in their book *Why Civil Resistance Works* that compares success rates of Gandhian style nonviolent resistance with violent insurrections over a century. The major determining variable for success of campaigns to end a foreign occupation, overthrow a dictator, or secede, was the level of participation. Gandhian nonviolent resistance was more successful in mobilizing activists because of lower physical, moral, and information barriers to engagement in a campaign for change.

Gandhi's strategies and tactics were skillfully framed to create opportunities in the face of overwhelming political and military control of the British Empire. The two key campaigns – the Cloth Boycott and the Salt March – were highly symbolic but also “framed,” as Snow et al. put it, to confront the power structure. At the core of his approach was an understanding of power that challenged political realism: power grows out of multiple sources, not just the state and its military, and even the tyrant cannot rule without the consent of the governed. By refusing to cooperate, a system is rendered ungovernable.

Gandhi's call for a boycott of British cloth in 1920 strategically attacked the British system built on the technological advances of its textile industry that relied on raw materials from and markets in its colonies. Rather than buying British cloth, Gandhi declared, Indians should make their own, simultaneously giving people an opportunity to resist British exploitation, participate in the independence movement in a low-risk but visible way, and benefit themselves, the movement, and Indian society at large economically. The spinning wheel became a low-risk symbol of resistance while simultaneously mobilizing unused labor resources for economic development.

Gandhi's Salt March in 1930 was dramatic and symbolic noncooperation, strategically focused on a specific goal that mobilized widespread participation and prompted civil disobedience that overloaded the colonial system and its prisons, all the while inspiring and empowering people to act. Marching through the Indian countryside with an entourage that increased daily, Gandhi was met by spinning freedom fighters and local officials whom Gandhi called upon to resign their posts in the Raj. He involved women and “untouchables” in the movement, crossing gender and caste lines to transform fundamental aspects of Indian society in a way that far outlasted the movement, although some criticized him for broadening the agenda beyond independence, bringing in other issues.

The marchers arrived at the Indian Ocean on the anniversary of a bloody massacre of unarmed demonstrators by British troops at Amritsar a decade earlier. As Gandhi picked up salt from the shore in defiance of British law, he engaged in a type of repression management that takes advantage of what Smithey and Kurtz call the “paradox of repression,” in that efforts to clamp down on a movement often backfires against a

regime, creating internal divisions and moving public opinion in favor of the opposition. The march itself became a memorial highlighting the injustice of the massacre and British rule itself, which attempted to control even the daily lives of South Asians who relied on salt as a preservative.

Gandhi's rethinking of conflict and power had an impact on social movement theory and strategies for decades to come. Noted conflictologist Johan Galtung argues that Gandhi is to conflict what Einstein and Newton are to physics – he gave us an altogether new paradigm for thinking about contentious politics as something positive. Conflict is not necessarily to be resolved, but can be creative and should sometimes be provoked, although carried out nonviolently. His understanding of power involves a similar challenge of conventional thinking. Moreover, one should (1) respect one's opponents as persons, fighting the structure rather than the people representing it; (2) refuse to cooperate with unjust power (noncooperation); and (3) create alternative systems of power through nonviolent civil resistance.

Gandhi's legacies in the field of social movements are iconic, if often misunderstood and debated, used to legitimate campaigns by everyone from Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights struggle to the 1989 East European revolutions, the 2011 Arab uprisings and the 2011 Occupy Movement, but was also quoted at the United Nations by US President Ronald Reagan.

The Indian Freedom Movement inspired anticolonial movements elsewhere, with some movements explicitly modeled after Gandhi's, notably Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere's, the latter claiming that Gandhi's success "made the British lose the will to cling to empire." A. Philip Randolph, Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays and other African Americans began exploring Gandhi's mobilizing techniques as early as the 1920s and a Yale Seminar on the Negro Church in 1931 passed a resolution contending that Africa-American churches should develop "a type of leadership that would do for America and the Negro race what Gandhi has done for India and what Jesus has done for the world." Gandhi-mentored activists George Houser and Bayard Rustin tutored Dr. King and the Montgomery Improvement Society on Gandhian tactics and the American Friends Service Committee sent the Kings to India to consult with Gandhi's colleagues. Human rights and ecological movements drew upon Gandhi's inspirations, strategies and tactics worldwide, disseminated through religious institutions (especially churches), NGO's and various committed activists.

Whereas King baptized Gandhi's nonviolence, giving it a Christian frame, American scholar Gene Sharp secularized and systematized it after spending time studying Gandhi in India in the 1940s. Coretta Scott King wrote the foreword to his first book on Gandhi as a political strategist, and his 3-volume outline of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* published in 1972-1974 analyzed Gandhi's theory of power and change, providing historical examples of 198 categories of nonviolent actions that had had some impact when used by various movements worldwide.

Sharp criticized Gandhi for his religious rhetoric and spiritual aura, as well as his personal charisma, claiming they were counterproductive, especially when trying to diffuse civil resistance strategies and tactics to other resistance movements globally. His later elaborations of nonviolent civil resistance were translated into many languages and used by activists to challenge dictators and shake power structures; his *From Dictatorship*

to *Democracy* continued to guide many of those who shaped the 2011 insurgencies from Cairo to New York.

**SEE ALSO:** Anti-colonial movements; Boycotts; Civil disobedience; Civil rights movement; Decolonization and social movements; Direct action; Indian Independence Movement; King, Martin Luther; Non-violence/non-violent direct action; Satyagraha;

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