

## GANDHI'S NON-VIOLENCE: A CONCEPT WITH A VARIABLE GEOMETRY

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### *Abstract*

Pacifist thinking has generally identified the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a sort of panacea. However, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi supported war on several occasions, although he morally condemned violence: indeed, in 1899 he took part in the Boer War alongside the English and in 1906 participated in an action aimed at quelling the Zulu revolt in Natal. Moreover, at two different times during the First World War when, in 1914 and in 1918, respectively, he was in England and in India, he urged his fellow countrymen to enlist in support of the King's Army. The article examines the grounds on which Gandhi rejected the use of violence a priori, comparing them with those used to justify support for war; just think about the difference, in his thinking, between 'non-violence as a creed' and 'non-violence as a policy'. Despite his extraordinary humanitarian inspiration, Gandhi was also a skilful politician capable of understanding, and taking advantage of, favourable opportunities for his people. From the 1960s, the theme of non-violence would be explored in depth by prestigious intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, Frantz Fanon, Keith Hancock and Malcolm X, who highlighted above all the weak points and, sometimes, the ineffectiveness of *ahimsa*.

**Keywords:** war, ahimsa, violence, imperialism, peace

### **1. Support for four armed conflicts**

The ethical-political ideas of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) have been interpreted in very different ways, beginning from the end of the 1930s. In particular, pacifist thinking has generally identified the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a sort of panacea. However, we must emphasise that although he morally condemned violence, Gandhi supported war on several occasions: in 1899 he took part in the Boer War alongside the English and in 1906 participated in an action aimed at

quelling the Zulu revolt in Natal. Moreover, at two different times during the First World War – when, in 1914 and in 1918, respectively, he was in England and in India – he urged his fellow countrymen to enlist in support of the King’s Army. If we want to understand Gandhi’s reasons for justifying his recourse to arms, we must go back to the time of his stay in South Africa (1893-1914)<sup>1</sup>. At that time, he sought to oppose the discriminatory system that was in force against Indians, although a first step towards more tolerant legislation in their favour was taken in 1897 by Natal’s government by granting them the right to vote, subject to passing a cultural and educational test. This decision led Gandhi and some of his followers to volunteer in the Army Medical Corps during the second Boer War (1899-1902). Given the recurring accusation that Indians had come to South Africa exclusively for economic reasons, and that appeared as a dead weight to the local population, as Gandhi recalled, it was evident that for them there was «a golden opportunity [...] to prove that it was baseless» by supporting the English by all means available to them. Pragmatically, he pointed out: «Our ordinary duty as subjects, therefore, [was] not to enter into the merits of the war», but since it had broken out, «to render such assistance as we possibly [could]»<sup>2</sup>.

In 1906, Gandhi took part in the military operations aimed at suppressing the Zulu rebellion; to Natal’s governor, he offered to form an Indian medical corps that would be in active service for about six weeks (on that occasion, he was integrated into the Army and wore a uniform in the rank of sergeant major). His reasons for justifying his participation in this new conflict were equally direct; at the time of the insurrection – he pointed out in his *Autobiography* – he felt «a genuine sense of loyalty»<sup>3</sup> towards the British Empire. And when he arrived in London in 1914, Gandhi urged his fellow countrymen who resided on the island to enlist as volunteers in the British Army, which was at war against the Wilhelmine Reich. As had already happened on the occasion of the conflict against the Boers, Gandhi’s decision stemmed from his hope of improving his people’s conditions within the Empire. However, he was aware that such a choice «could never be consistent with *ahimsa*», which

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<sup>1</sup> From 1888 to 1891, Gandhi went to London to study Law. Back in India towards mid-1891, he worked as a lawyer but was not very successful: it was perhaps for this reason that he decided to accept the offer by a Muslim firm from Portbandar to travel to South Africa as its legal representative. In May 1893, he arrived in Durban, intending to remain in South Africa for a year; however, the discriminatory measures adopted by Natal authorities against the Indian population persuaded him to stay until 1914.

<sup>2</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Stanford, Academic Reprints, 1954, pp. 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, Washington, Public Affairs Press, 1948, p. 383.

was emblematically defined as «a comprehensive principle» before which human beings appeared as «helpless mortals»<sup>4</sup>. At the beginning of the following year, he returned to India with 20 years' experience of political battles gained in South Africa. Within a few years, he would become the charismatic leader of his country's fight for freedom, even though in 1918 he participated in the Delhi Conference for the recruitment of Indian troops in support of Britain's war effort.

Thus, if on the first two occasions Gandhi had enlisted only as a volunteer within the Army Medical Corps, during the First World War he strove to recruit soldiers for the British Army. However, he did not use this in order to diminish his moral responsibility; on the contrary, in his *Autobiography* he pointed out: «I make no distinction, from the point of view of *ahimsa*, between combatants and non-combatants; therefore, those who confined themselves to attending to the wounded in battle [could] not be absolved from the guilt of war»<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, we should not forget that Gandhi did not make a real distinction between the ethics that governed interindividual relationships and that which regulated relationships between groups. In other words – he wrote – what appeared as «ethically bad» in an individual was equally bad for «a community or a nation»<sup>6</sup>. This viewpoint was supported by such figures as Jeremy Bentham and Leo Tolstoy (though through different conceptions). In fact, Bentham asserted that the basic principle of his utilitarian ethics – according to which it was necessary to act so that each action would lead to «the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people» (*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789) – applied both to the personal and to the public sphere. This principle justified the use of violence, both from the individual and from the political point of view, provided it represented the alternative that could satisfy the greatest number of people. Tolstoy instead emphasised the «law of love», both in interindividual and in group relationships; that is, any behaviour capable of preventing people's suffering. In a letter sent to Gandhi on 20 September 1910, Tolstoy pointed out: «The employment of violence is incompatible with love, which is the fundamental law of life»<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 427.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, pp. 428-429.

<sup>6</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. 1, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1948, p. 505.

<sup>7</sup> P.C. BORI, G. SOFRI, *Gandhi e Tolstoj. Un carteggio e dintorni*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1985, pp. 209-210 (translated from the Italian by Claudio Giulio Anta). Regarding the relationship between Gandhi and Tolstoy, see also M. GREEN, *Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace*, New York, Basic Books, 1983.

## 2. The arguments against and in favour of war

We must now examine the grounds on which Gandhi rejected the use of violence<sup>8</sup> a priori, comparing them with those used to justify support for war on four occasions. Before that, however, we must recall what Gandhi really meant by the concept of *himsa* (violence). As highlighted by Giuliano Pontara – one of the most influential international Gandhi scholars – Gandhi attributed at least three different meanings to this term. Firstly, it was used to indicate a behaviour that did not conform with moral duty; in this regard, in an article of 1924, Gandhi pointed out that with the idea of violence he meant not only inflicting physical or psychological pain but also «corruption, falsehood, hypocrisy, deceit and the like»<sup>9</sup>. Through a second, less widespread, meaning, the concept was used by Gandhi to indicate the forms of injustice and exploitation intrinsic in certain institutions and structures (as Johan Galtung put it, it may be a sort of «structural violence»<sup>10</sup>). Finally, through an even narrower meaning, this principle indicated parts of methods of struggle; conceived in this way, *ahimsa* could

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<sup>8</sup> References to Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence are found in an ample bibliography. Among various volumes, see L. FISHER, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York: Harper & Row, 1950; W.E. MÜHLMANN, *Mahatma Gandhi. Der Mann, sein Werk und seine Wirkung*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1950; J. GALTUNG, A. NAESS, *Gandhi Politiske Etikk*, Oslo, Tanum, 1955; S.C. GANGAL, *The Gandhian Way to World Peace*, Bombay, Vora & Co. Publishers, 1960; A. NAESS, *Gandhi og Atomalderen*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1960; T. MERTON (ed.), *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, New York, New Directions, 1965; E.H. ERIKSON, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*, New York, Norton & Company, 1969; R. RONZA, *Pro e contro Gandhi*, Milan, Mondadori, 1972; I. VECCHIOTTI, *Che cosa ha veramente detto Gandhi*, Rome, Ubaldini, 1972; R.N. IYER, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973; A. NAESS, *Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha, Theoretical Background*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1974; M. CHATTERJEE, *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983; S.H. RUDOLPH, L.I. RUDOLPH, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983; BORI, SOFRI, *Gandhi e Tolstoj, op. cit.*; M. GREEN, *The Origins of Non-violence. Tolstoy and Gandhi in their Historical Settings*, University Park-London, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986; R.S. PURI, *Gandhi on War and Peace*, New York-London, Praeger, 1987; P. BANDYOPADHYAY, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Prophet of Peace*, Calcutta, Anglia Books, 1988; B.C. PAREKH, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989; M. BROWN, *Gandhi Prisoner of Hope*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1989; J. GALTUNG, *The Way is the Goal: Gandhi Today*, Ahmedabad, Gujarat Vidyapith Peace Research Centre, 1992; D. DALTON, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993; C. CLÉMENT, *Gandhi: The Power of Pacifism*, New York, H.N. Abrams, 1996; T. WEBER, *Gandhi's Peace Army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1996; Y. CHADA, *Rediscovering Gandhi*, London, Century, 1997; E. EASWARAN, *Gandhi the Man: The Story of His Transformation*, Tomales, Nilgiri Press, 1997; M. KING, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action*, Paris, Unesco Publishing, 1999; R.N. IYER, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; M.B. STEGER, *Gandhi's Dilemma. Nonviolent Principles and Nationalist Power*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000; F. MANARA, *Una forza che dà vita. Ricominciare con Gandhi in un'età di terrorismi*, Milan, Unicopli, 2006; E. PROTI (ed.), *Between Ethics and Politics. New Essays on Gandhi Today*, London, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha: Non-Violent Resistance*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1951, p. 294.

<sup>10</sup> J. GALTUNG, *Gandhi oggi*, Turin, Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 1987, pp. 95-97.

take different forms: direct or indirect, by omission or by commission, physical or psychic, personal or impersonal<sup>11</sup>.

In Gandhi's writings, we find numerous statements supporting a priori rejection of violence. For example: «I believe all war to be wholly wrong»<sup>12</sup>, or «violent resistance [...] is immoral because of its violence»<sup>13</sup>; and also «I suggest that it [violence] is wrong at any time and everywhere»<sup>14</sup>. The reasons by which Gandhi justified his dissent were essentially three. Firstly, violence could suppress conflicts, though without resolving them; in fact, already in 1930, he earnestly warned that «the foolish arms race» would lead to «a massacre with no precedents in history», unless «bold and unconditional acceptance of the non-violent method»<sup>15</sup> was affirmed. Secondly – he then asserted – throughout millennia, recourse to armed struggle had increasingly brutalised mankind; from this perspective, the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had represented the culmination of this process, «[destroying] the most noble sentiments that [had] sustained mankind for millennia»<sup>16</sup>. Thirdly – he argued – violence had negative consequences for typically democratic values such as equality, liberty and the moral autonomy of the individual because its use inevitably tended to concentrate power in the hands of a few individuals, excluding the majority of the citizens from a jointly responsible participation in the political struggle. Hence the conviction that «without the recognition of non-violence on a national scale» it would not be possible to set the premises for the construction of a «constitutional or democratic government»<sup>17</sup>.

Despite this extensive rejection of violence, within his intense civic and political commitment Gandhi proposed some justifications (initially only sketched) in favour of supporting war<sup>18</sup>. Firstly, he

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<sup>11</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *Teoria e pratica della non-violenza*, Preface and Introduction by Giuliano Pontara, Rome, La Biblioteca di Repubblica, 2006, xli-xliii.

<sup>12</sup> GANDHI, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 378.

<sup>14</sup> GANDHI, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 304.

<sup>17</sup> M.K. GANDHI, Working of non-violence, in «Harijan», 11 February 1939; this article can be found in Gandhi, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-212 (for the quotations see p. 211).

<sup>18</sup> On the works of the last decade regarding Gandhi's thinking on *ahimsa* and violence, see above all F. DEVJI, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*, London, Hurst & Co., 2012; A. KUMAR, *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015; A. SKARIA, *Unconditional*

regarded himself as a citizen of the British Empire and as such morally obliged to intervene in its defence because at the time he believed that it «really existed for the welfare of the world»<sup>19</sup>. Thus, it was a sort of obligation to be loyal that subordinated every citizen of an organisation based on a justice system; as long as the subjects recognised the authority of a state – he argued – it was their duty to conform to its decisions. However, we must point out that during the years that followed the Second World War, Gandhi would increasingly blame the colonialist and imperialist nature of the British Empire, which was incompatible with the Indian people’s will to political emancipation<sup>20</sup>. Secondly, Gandhi justified his support for war (especially during his stay in South Africa) by highlighting the benefits granted by the political system to which he belonged, beginning from the degree of personal freedom and the possibility of consuming food protected by the British Navy. If the Indians intended to preserve such privileges within the Empire, it was their duty to offer «help and cooperation» to the English «in their hour of need»<sup>21</sup>. The general idea that inspired this reflection could be attributed to an obligation of appreciation and gratitude because it entailed that whoever enjoyed benefits that required shared efforts and sacrifices to be maintained had to necessarily make their contribution. Finally, Gandhi justified his participation in the First World War on the side of the English by emphasising the fear that the non-violent alternative – at such a dramatic moment for the destiny of mankind – would not really determine less recourse to arms on a global level. In this regard, in his *Autobiography*, he pointed out that «when two nations are fighting, the duty of a votary of *ahimsa* is to stop the war»; immediately afterwards, however, he pointed out: «He who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of resisting war» may take part in it, and yet «wholeheartedly try to free himself, his nation and the world from war»<sup>22</sup>. It is for this reason that he regarded himself as «an insignificant atom» destined to endure the war policy of the British Empire in «an impotent

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*Equality: Gandhi’s Religion of Resistance*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016; S. KAPILA, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

<sup>20</sup> In an article published in «Young India» on 17 January 1921, Gandhi had already shown that he had revised his ideas on the nature of the British Empire and therefore on the opportunity, in the past, to share its foreign policy. On those «four occasions», Gandhi pointed out, he had never «missed the opportunity to serve the government», always asking himself fundamental questions as was his duty as a «citizen of the Empire» and «staunch follower of the religion of *ahimsa*». A few years later, however – he argued further – «my positions changed radically, so much so that I could not be proud to call the Empire mine and regard myself as its citizen».

<sup>21</sup> GANDHI, *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 425

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 428.

manner»; thus, on the occasion of the First World War, Gandhi did not follow the road of *ahimsa* because of a lack of alternative strategies.

Along with the three aforementioned justifications – the obligation to loyalty and appreciation, as well as the lack of alternative strategies – a further, tactical motive emerged in Gandhi's writings. In fact, he asserted that one of the reasons that had led him to intervene alongside the English was the hope to achieve *Swaraj* (India's independence) thanks to the good services of British statesmen, but in order to meet this goal, it was necessary to serve the Empire in the armed conflicts in which it was involved. In this regard, a letter sent to Viceroy Lord Chelmsford on the occasion of the Delhi Conference of 1918, Gandhi stated: «I recognise that in the hour of its danger we must give [...] unequivocal support», hoping to make India «the most favoured partner in the Empire»<sup>23</sup>. In this way, Indians would benefit from the right to full citizenship that a state founded on “The Rule of Law” could not deny them. The words uttered by Gandhi during the trial he underwent in 1922, following the first *satyagraha* campaign at a national level, could be on the same wavelength. On that occasion, he asserted that he had supported Britain's war policy on four occasions because he believed that in this way Indians would achieve «a status of full equality in the Empire»<sup>24</sup>.

In September 1928, Gandhi further clarified his vision of non-violence in an article published in «Young India»; in response to criticism from Belgian pacifist Bart de Ligt, who had published an open letter in the French magazine «Evolution» in which he blamed Gandhi's justification of war, Gandhi argued: «There is no defence for my conduct weighed only on the scale of *ahimsa*». At the same time, however, he emphasised that especially on the occasion of the Second World War he had had no other choice but to support war because life «was governed by a multitude of forces» that prevented him from orienting his actions on the basis of «a general principle», and applying it was not «too obvious to need even a moment's reflection»<sup>25</sup>. A few weeks later, responding to biting criticism from Tolstoy follower Vladimir Chertkov about the previous article, Gandhi made it very clear that the war was an «unmixed evil», and therefore his initiatives in support for it had been carried

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<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 547.

<sup>24</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *How the Hope was Shattered?*, in «Young India», 23 March 1922; this article can be found in ID., *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-29 (for the quotation see p. 28).

<sup>25</sup> M.K. GANDHI, *My Attitude towards War*, in «Young India», 13 September 1928; this article can be found in ID., *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-80 (for the quotations see p. 78).

out «from expedience» but actually with «the purpose of advancing the cause of peace». Immediately afterwards, however, he pointed out that his conception of peace was rather different from that of a European because he belonged to a country that had been «compulsorily disarmed and held under subjection for centuries»<sup>26</sup>. And considering the weakness of the Indian people – he stated – non-violence «[was] not an easy thing to understand, still less to practise»; therefore, it was necessary to «continually ask God to open the eyes of our understanding»<sup>27</sup>.

### 3. Criticisms of Gandhi's non-violence

In order to understand a concept whose contours are not always well defined such as *ahimsa*, Giuliano Pontara's reflections appear illuminating as he highlighted the difference, in Gandhi's thinking, between «non-violence as a creed» and «non-violence as a policy»<sup>28</sup>. This clarification also allows us to focus on Gandhi's triple distinction between the non-violence of the «strong or *Satyagraha*», that of the «weak or passive resistance»<sup>29</sup> and of the coward: the first entailed the presence of the virtues required to support a just cause, namely courage and abnegation for the ideals for which one fought; the second regarded the position of those who did not resort to violence because they did not feel sufficiently strong and determined to take up arms<sup>30</sup>; whereas the coward, unlike the weak, abstained from *ahimsa* due to mere cowardice.

Despite his extraordinary humanitarian inspiration, Gandhi was also a skilful politician capable of understanding, and taking advantage of, favourable opportunities for his people. In this regard, Viceroy Lord Willingdon wrote to Secretary of State Samuel Hoare on the occasion of Gandhi's

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<sup>26</sup> «Young India», 7 February 1929; this article can be found in GANDHI, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-88 (for the quotations see pp. 86-87).

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> G. PONTARA, introduction to Gandhi, *Teoria e pratica della non-violenza*, *op. cit.*, xxiv (translated from the Italian by Claudio Giulio Anta).

<sup>29</sup> Regarding the distinction between the non-violence of the strong (*Satyagraha*) and of the weak (passive resistance), see J.V. BONDURANT, *Satyagraha Versus Duragraha: The Limits of Symbolic Violence*, in G. RAMACHANDRAN, T.K. MAHADEVAN (eds.), *Gandhi: His Relevance for Our Time*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964, pp. 67-81.

<sup>30</sup> Regarding the non-violence of the weak, Herbert Marcuse emblematically recalled that non-violence represented an instrument of struggle used by those who did not have weapons and, at the same time, whose goals could not be achieved in a short time by using force; more precisely, it was a strategy 'normally not only preached to but exacted from the weak', or, in other words, 'a necessity rather than a virtue, and normally it does not seriously harm the case of the strong'. See H. MARCUSE, *Repressive Tolerance*, in R.P. Wolff, B. Moore Jr, H. Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1965, p. 102.

arrival in England for the Round Table Conference of 1931: «He might become a saint, a man of very high moral excellence; I believe that he genuinely believes in the principles he professes; but [...] he is one of the most cunning and politicised little men I have ever stumbled upon»<sup>31</sup>. Gandhi's support for war generated a lively debate amongst those who did not regard his non-violence as an opportunistic, arbitrary and random stance. Already at the end of the 1930s, the British philosopher John Lewis<sup>32</sup> saw in Gandhi's personality «a strange mixture of Machiavellian astuteness and personal sanctity, profound humanitarianism and paralysing conservatism»; therefore, considering his existence as «a complete demonstration of the success of non-violence [would have been] entirely to misjudge the Indian situation»<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, Lewis asserted that Gandhi had not resolutely committed himself against the war, as other intellectuals such as Jean Jaurès, Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster, Clifford Allen and Bertrand Russell had done. Rather, he had turned his attention to India's suffering masses subjugated by British imperial power. In Lewis's opinion, Gandhi had supported «non-violent tactics» only because they represented «the most effective way, for a disorganised and unarmed multitude, of resisting the armed troops and the police»; in fact – Lewis concluded – Gandhi never said that it was necessary to «disband the Indian army»<sup>34</sup> once full independence was achieved.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Frantz Fanon addressed the theme of non-violence with reference to the phenomenon of decolonisation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). After the capitulation of French Prime Minister Guy Mollet to the colonisers of Algeria in 1956 – Fanon asserted – the National Liberation Front found that the colonialism of the Fourth Republic could capitulate «only with the knife at its throat» because it was not «a body endowed with reason»; indeed, colonialism was «naked violence», which could be defeated only through «greater violence»<sup>35</sup>. To avoid such a scenario, Fanon argued, at «the critical and deciding moment» the colonialist bourgeoisie appealed to non-violence in order to reach «an agreement for the common good» with the colonised intellectual and economic elites. And this represented «an attempt to settle the colonial problem around the

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<sup>31</sup> BROWN, *Gandhi Prisoner of Hope*, op. cit., p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> John Lewis (1889-1976) was a British politician and philosopher with Marxist leanings who wrote many philosophical, religious and anthropological works. During the Second World War, Lewis was a teacher at The Army Education Corps and The Army Bureau of Current Affairs; from 1946 to 1953, he was an editor of the magazine «Modern Quarterly».

<sup>33</sup> J. LEWIS, *The Case Against Pacifism*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1939, p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, pp. 99-100.

<sup>35</sup> F. FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press, 1963, p. 23.

negotiating table», before «any bloodshed or regrettable act»<sup>36</sup> was performed, a sort of peaceful «compromise» between the colonisers and the colonised. Also in 1961, William Keith Hancock (1898-1988)<sup>37</sup> highlighted the limits of Gandhi's non-violence; although it had successfully been applied at different times in Gandhi's life – for example towards Jan Smuts<sup>38</sup> and Lord Halifax<sup>39</sup> – it did not prove to be an effective practice in the face of the military power and the brutality of 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarianism such as National Socialism and Stalinism. Hancock did not conceal his doubts when he asked himself the following question: «Did Gandhi believe that his technique of non-violence which had proved its worth in conflict with Smuts and Halifax, would prove just as effective in conflict with Hitler and Stalin? Gandhi was too honest a man to shirk questions like these»<sup>40</sup>. At the end of the 1960s, Malcom X, the famous American supporter of the rights of African-Americans, emphasised the random character of *ahimsa*: «I myself would go for nonviolence if it was consistent, if everybody was going to be nonviolent all the time». Referring to the difficult racial integration of Blacks in America, he argued: «If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent»<sup>41</sup>. However, as long as somebody

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<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Born in Melbourne, Australia, Hancock was a professor of Modern History at the University of Adelaide from 1924 to 1933 and at the University of Birmingham from 1934 to 1944; during the Second World War, he collaborated with the War Cabinet.

<sup>38</sup> In 1913, a racial law of the government of Transvaal had made marriages between non-Christian people illegal; Indian women adopted the method of *satyagraha*, employed for the first time by Gandhi in 1906 (for which he was arrested), by going on strike and marching in the streets. Public opinion condemned the extremely harsh measures adopted by the South African government towards the peaceful protesters; general Jan Christiaan Smuts (the future Prime Minister of South Africa) negotiated a compromise with Gandhi: mixed marriages were considered legal, and a tax of three livres (the equivalent of six months' salary) imposed on Indians who wanted to become free workers was abolished.

<sup>39</sup> From 1926 to 1931, Lord Halifax had been appointed India's Viceroy by King George V. Following the Salt March (March-April 1930) organized by the party of Gandhi's Indian National Congress, he had Gandhi arrested, but violent protests forced the viceroy to sign the Delhi Pact in January 1931. The pact forced the English to free the political prisoners and to legitimise the harvesting of salt, and Gandhi to suspend the movement of civil disobedience.

<sup>40</sup> W.K. HANCOCK, *Four Studies of Peace and War*, Cambridge, University Press Cambridge, 1961, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> The White Citizens Councils formed a network of overtly racist organizations that originated in the United States and were particularly concentrated in the Southern States. With some sixty thousand members, these groups developed in the 1950s and 1960s with the main aim of opposing racial integration in schools, enrolment in the electoral register and integration in public structures.

continued to practise violence – he bitterly concluded – «I don't want anybody coming to me talking about nonviolence»<sup>42</sup>.

In sum, Gandhi regarded non-violence as a doctrine in the making and susceptible to development, revision and modification through new «experiments with Truth». In this regard, Gandhi argued in his *Autobiography*: «My experience [...] convinced me that there [was] no other God than Truth» and added that however «sincere my strivings after *Ahimsa* might have been», they still had been «imperfect and inadequate»; for this reason, «a perfect vision of Truth» could only follow «a complete realization of *Ahimsa*»<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, we cannot be surprised by «the absence of a systematic approach and the rhapsodic character»<sup>44</sup> of many of his articles and speeches<sup>45</sup> published for over a quarter of a century in weekly magazines such as «Indian Opinion», «Young India», «Navajivan» and «Harijan»<sup>46</sup>. However, they represent a useful and valuable instrument for a reconstruction of Gandhi's ethical-political conception. At any rate, to avoid misunderstanding Gandhi's thinking on *ahimsa*, we must remember at least the two aforementioned concepts of loyalty and appreciation; they constituted two limits for this principle, whereby the non-violent was a citizen of a state or of a wider organisation capable of guaranteeing the freedom and wellbeing of the individual. In contrast, no requirement of loyalty and appreciation demanded that non-violent individuals support *himsa* if they were part of a national or international system founded on injustice, exploitation and terror. Thus, Gandhi was not a systematic theorist of the doctrine of non-violence; in other words, he was not an absolute supporter of it (an attitude that is typical of Western religious pacifism). He was more prone to listening to his own «inner voice». Despite the lack of a constant linearity on the idea of *ahimsa*, Jawaharlal Nehru (the future Indian Prime Minister, as well as an opponent of Gandhi's non-violence)

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<sup>42</sup> MALCOLM X, *To Mississippi Youth*, 31 December 1964, in ID., *Malcom X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, edited by George Breitman, New York, Grove Press, 1965, pp. 137-146.

<sup>43</sup> GANDHI, *Gandhi's Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

<sup>44</sup> This evocative expression was used by Pontara in his Introduction to Gandhi, *Teoria e pratica della non-violenza*, *op. cit.*, xvii.

<sup>45</sup> Regarding the complete collection of Gandhi's writings, see ID., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols., New Delhi, Publications Division-Ministry of Information and Broadcasting-Government of India, 1958-1994.

<sup>46</sup> «Indian Opinion» was founded by Gandhi in South Africa in 1903 and continued to be published even when Gandhi left the country (it was run by his son Manilal); «Young India» was issued from March 1919 to February 1932, whereas «Navajivan» began to appear in 1919 in Gujarati; the first issue of «Harijan» (God's people) was published on 11 February 1933; its publication was interrupted for almost four years from 16 August 1942 to 10 February 1946 and was resumed until 1951.

nonetheless regarded Gandhi as the greatest revolutionary ever to have appeared on the political scene in their country because he shook the inactivity and passivity of his people and stimulated its economic, social and moral emancipation, thereby questioning British dominance in the Asian Subcontinent. In fact, Nehru did not hesitate to define Gandhi's actions as «a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes»<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> J. NEHRU, *The Discovery of India*, New Delhi-Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 358.



Sesto San Giovanni (MI)  
via Monfalcone, 17/19



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