

Mahatma Gandhi and Satyagraha. "Soul Force" against "Brute Force"

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Mahatma Gandhi was born in 1869.

As is of course very well known, he opposed colonialism, oppression, and exploitation.

Gandhi is also well known for advocating and practicing *satyagraha*, which in his own translation of his 1909 book on [Indian Self Rule](#), he renders as "soul force" or "love force" in English (for instance in [this chapter](#)).

Of this concept, Gandhi wrote:

"When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force" (chapter 17, "[Passive Resistance](#)").

In that same text, which he wrote in 1909, he provides many perspectives upon the reason that soul force is superior to brute force — perhaps most succinctly when he says:

To use brute force, to use gunpowder, is contrary to passive resistance, for it means that we want our opponent to do by force that which we desire but he does not. And if such a use of force is justifiable, surely he is entitled to do likewise by us. 17.

But just because he subscribed to the principle of nonviolent or peaceful resistance does not mean that he believed in allowing oppression, exploitation, and colonialism to continue — quite the contrary. In the same 1909 text, he proclaims:

"You may keep the riches that you have drained away from this land, but you may not drain riches henceforth. [. . .] We cease to play the part of the ruled" (chapter 20, "[Conclusion](#)").

Mahatma Gandhi realized and acknowledged that those who had turned his country into a colony had superior military power. He says as much in the same concluding chapter just cited, but then notes that it is only by the cooperation of the governed that those who have been oppressing and exploiting the people are able to do so, when he declares:

You may, if you like, cut us to pieces. You may shatter us at the cannon's mouth. If you act contrary to our will, we shall not help you; and without our help, we know that you cannot move one step forward.

This insight, that "without our help, we know that you cannot move one step forward," is

crucial to understanding the power of Gandhi's *satyagraha*. At another point in the same tract, he declares that without those who collaborate with the colonizers, the country could never have been enslaved: "It is we, the English-speaking Indians, who have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us" (chapter 16, "[Education](#)").

Without such collaboration, the oppressors would be stymied. This fact is the key to the effectiveness of the nonviolent resistance which Gandhi demonstrated and advocated.

The colonialist powers used brute force to try to coerce collaboration, or to give an excuse to those who collaborated — enabling them to rationalize their collaboration by saying, "What else can I do? They have all the firepower." By demonstrating that the occupiers had no power without such collaboration, Gandhi removed that rationalization.

When that which belongs by right to all men and women is siphoned-away for the benefit of a small group at the expense of everyone else, the only way this can happen is if the vast majority of the people (who will intuitively realize that a wrong is being committed) allow it to happen, usually due to their fear of the threat of violence, and also due to their lack of awareness that they already possess the means to bring that misappropriation to a stop. Gandhi's teaching and his example addressed both of these obstacles.

Colonialism, by its very definition, has at its core the seizing of that which belongs to all men and women in a nation by a very few (some of them from another nation, but requiring the cooperation of collaborators from the colonized populace as well). We may delude ourselves into thinking that such imperialism came to an end around the world many decades ago, but in fact today's neoliberalism operates on the very same principles, having at its core the [privatization](#) of resources which belong to the public, on a vast scale — including mineral resources such as oil and natural gas and ores and metals and rare earth elements, public utilities, ports, airports, railroads, forests, aquifers, pensions belonging to retirees, and even rivers.

Almost everyone knows without even having to be taught that the seizing of such gifts of the gods for the benefit of the few at the expense of everyone else is inherently wrong. Gandhi's teaching should open our eyes to the fact that without our cooperation, such unjustifiable exploitation could not take place.

His remedy was both simple and at the same time powerfully effective: do not cooperate with it. Refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to your conscience.

That this methodology is greatly feared by those few who rely on the cooperation of the many in order to drain away the riches that belong to all men and women is evidenced by the fact that Mahatma Gandhi was brutally assassinated on January 30, 1948. Just over twenty years later, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. — who was implementing the very same conscience-driven nonviolent approach — was also brutally assassinated. John Lennon was advocating and practicing much the same soul-force or love-force.

The actions and example of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King brought about incredible changes. They demonstrate that soul force is indeed more powerful than brute force.

They knew that violence could not stop their message: but it is up to us to continue to

proclaim it and live it.

Near the very end of the conclusion of the text by Gandhi cited above, Gandhi urges us not to wait for anyone else in our application of the principle of *satyagraha*. To ask when everyone will be ready to join us in this refusal to cooperate with oppression and exploitation, he says, is to make a mistake.

Seventy years after the departure of Mahatma Gandhi from this incarnation, his message and example live on, as urgently needed today as ever in the past.

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