

Epistemological Colonialism & Resistance

A Case Study of the Epistemological Colonisation of India and Gandhi's Resistance

Dara Casey Ó Siochrú¹

Abstract: This paper begins with a brief examination of the epistemological colonisation of India during the British colonial era, using Foucault's work on the relationship between knowledge and power to explore how the modern order of knowledge came to establish itself on the sub-continent. The main part of the paper is dedicated to Mohandas Gandhi's resistance to this epistemological colonisation. We see that Gandhi not only launched a campaign against the political hegemony of the British, but also, using concepts and understandings derived from the Vedic tradition, challenged the field of 'politics' itself.

The term 'colonialism' is employed usually with reference to its political and economic impacts, but the ramifications of the (post) colonial era are much wider. European colonialism not only transformed global markets and political structures, it also propagated a particular way of thinking and living across most of the world. Knowledge is always linked in a circular and mutually constitutive relationship with power, and the expansion of colonial power came hand in hand with the expansion of colonial knowledge, the colonial way of understanding and acting in the world. We can refer to this phenomena, the propagation of the colonial Weltanschauung, as *epistemological colonialism*.

The number and diversity of methods employed in the process of epistemological colonialism are vast, calling on the services of priests, doctors, soldiers, teachers, politicians, scientists, bureaucrats, and anthropologists, to name but a few, and their effects are profound. In America and Australia, it meant the almost total destruction of indigenous knowledge and indigenous ways of life. In others, such as China and Japan, indigenous knowledge was forced to adapt to the new colonial order. This paper will outline one such epistemological encounter: that of the modern colonial episteme and the Vedic episteme of the Indian sub-continent. While colonialism in India had major political and economic dimensions, Vivek Dhareshwar is not the only scholar to note that 'the enslavement of Indians had a peculiar epistemic character: it taught them to ignore the kind of knowledge that organized the domains of practical life.' (Dhareshwar 2012, 259) It is this epistemic character of the colonisation of India that is the core concern of this paper.

The process of epistemological colonisation can be charted in many regions of the world, but India is a particularly fruitful area for investigation. Its non-modern order of knowledge (the Vedic tradition) is still strong, and there is a long record of the arrival of the modern episteme on the sub-continent documented by the colonisers and colonised. Our investigation begins with the emergence of colonial knowledge in India in the early 19th century, looking at how Indian intellectuals and activists first attempted to come to grips with modern discourses of the colonisers. Its expansion throughout the 19th and early 20th century is then followed up to the Indian Independence movement. Using the Foucauldian understanding of the dynamic interplay between

power/knowledge, we briefly look at some of the sites where the modern episteme took root, and see how the propagation of the modern order of knowledge often meant the subjugation of an episteme that had existed in India for over 3,500 years.

The main part of the paper examines the thinking and activity of Mohandas Gandhi; how he recognised, and tried to resist this epistemological colonisation. This begins by looking at how he challenged the attempts to delegitimise and undermine the Vedic tradition. But Gandhi's resistance went much further, as he understood that the activity of 'politics' itself is a colonial import. His actions amount not only to a campaign of political resistance, but also resistance to 'the political' as such. We finally look at how Gandhi offered a new way of thinking and engaging in large-scale social transformation that was based, not in the secular logic of politics, but rather in the concepts and understanding of the Vedic tradition.

The Epistemological Colonisation of India

The First Modern Indian

An essential figure in understanding the penetration of the modern order of knowledge into India is Ram Mohan Roy. Born in Bengal in 1772 to a moderately wealthy landowning family, Roy received a lengthy education from Hindu, Persian, and Arabic teachers and during the course of his studies was also highly influenced by the European traditions of both Christianity and the Enlightenment. He is often described as the first 'modern Indian' as he was the first Indian thinker to deploy the modern discourses that the British colonists brought to the sub-continent, and is thus a good point of departure for a history of epistemological colonisation.

People propagate knowledge in order to enact change. Knowledge is deployed to affect how people think and act, and Roy deployed the recently arrived modernist discourses for several purposes. The most famous, and the one of the most recounted in modernist historiography, was his successful campaign against *sati*, the practice of widows burning themselves on their husbands' funeral pyre. Although the practice was rather uncommon, it held special significance for Roy after as a young man he watched his brother's widow perform *sati*. Using modern discourses, Roy railed against 'idolatrous' and 'superstitious' Hindu practices, writing powerful tracts against *sati* and against the treatment of women in general by Bengali patriarchs.

Roy's campaigns of 'social improvement' are held up by modernists as the light of Reason piercing into the dark malaise of 'tradition.' And there is no doubt that Roy deployed modernist discourses in order to combat patriarchal and generally inhumane practices. Aside from championing the cause of women, Roy also campaigned against oppressive and exclusionary practices such as child marriage and untouchability. Yet while there is no doubt that modern Enlightenment discourses can and have been used to combat exclusionary practices and inequalities, it does not follow that it is inherently superior to other traditions, or that discourses from non-modern traditions cannot also be used to combat oppression.

An excessive focus on positive change brought about by a modernisation discourse can mask the many negative effects of its transformations including mass environmental destruction, severe exploitation of people in the global south, and a growing feeling of alienation in industrial society. Based on sheer scale, modern society can reasonably be identified as orders of magnitude more violent and destructive than anything that has come before it. Proponents of modernisation tend to ignore or conceal modern society's own systematic brutalities, while pointing to the violence

of ‘tradition’, such as the cruel duty of sati as typical of non-modern ways of acting. The genuinely positive narratives of Enlightenment rationality combating oppression can thus become a tool for the subjugation of non-modern ways of life. Any claim that modernisation is the sole, or best, route to combating oppression and social inequalities must be interrogated within the wider dynamic of power/knowledge and modernity’s project of epistemological colonisation.

A second important campaign of Roy’s held that the propagation of modern education was the best way to tackle the ‘irrational’ practices of the Hindus. In a letter to the Governor General of India, he appeals to the English Government to propagate modern education for the ‘improvement of its Indian subjects’. He writes:

such improvement [cannot] arise from such speculations as the following, which are the themes suggested by the Vedant:- In what manner is the soul absorbed into the deity? What relation does it bear to the divine essence? Nor will youths be fitted to be better members of society by the Vedantic doctrines, which teach them to believe that all visible things have no real existence; that as father, brother, etc., have no actual entity, they consequently deserve no real affection, and therefore the sooner we escape from them and leave the world the better. (cited in Guha 2011, 44)

While this presented as a benign warning about abstract meta-physical speculation, what he is doing here is de-legitimizing some of the core components of Vedic cosmology. Part of the Vedic way of seeing is the idea that our normal perception is conditioned by the human mind. *Maya* is the appearance of the world after it has been shaped by our limited senses, and our limited position in space and time. The most important of the four life goals (*purushartha*) within the Vedic tradition is *moksha*. One who achieves moksha sees beyond their conditioned experience to the underlying existence which is universal and unchanging (*Brahman*). Hindus believe that we spend many lifetimes experiencing the world as Maya, until we have done enough good work (karma) in this world, and we are absorbed into Brahman.

Far from being obtuse metaphysical propositions, these are the concepts that shape how people at all levels of Indian society think, see, and act. While the introduction of a modern education was put forward as part of a programme of ‘social improvement’, it also meant the subjugation of Vedic knowledge and thus the erasure of the Vedic way of being in the world. Roy continues:

In order to enable your Lordship to appreciate the utility of encouraging such imaginary learning as above characterized, I beg your Lordship will be pleased to compare the state of science and literature in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon, with the progress of knowledge made since he wrote. If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen, which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanscrit [sic] system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British Legislature. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy, with other useful science[s]. (2011, 45)

Here we see the unmistakable stamp of the modern episteme: intolerance for those ‘imaginary learnings’ that foster ‘ignorance of real knowledge’ and keep people in ‘darkness’; alongside an unashamed apotheosis of the ‘light’ of modernity, and its ‘useful’ ‘liberal and enlightened system

of instruction' (the 'use' of knowledge is, of course, defined on modernity's own terms).

We can recognise clearly here the Foucauldian mechanism of knowledge subjugation (Foucault 1995 [1961]). In the same way that the discourse of the madman is reduced to silence, designated as 'unreason' by Enlightenment's totalitarian rationality; the validity of the Vedic way of seeing, thinking and acting is de-legitimized by a modern discourse that puts forward its own epistemology, its own system of positivities, as the one truth. And just as the madman is reduced to silence by an apparatus of power that has the capacity to enforce its truth (the judiciary system, medical discourses, the disciplinary institution of the asylum, etc.), the subjugation of the Vedic order of knowledge is enabled by the expansion of colonial power. Although the physical presence of British people on the sub-continent was always going to remain marginal, as the 19th century progressed the political, economic and epistemological presence of the colonisers would expand and deepen exponentially, and would be felt first by those Indians closest to the new British colonists, the indigenous elites.

Power/Knowledge & Modernity in India

As we have seen, epistemological expansion is not only imposed from the state level on an unwilling population. It can also be willingly adopted by people seeking to turn the new order of knowledge in their favour. Indigenous elites usually recognise that conforming to the new order of knowledge is essential to retaining, or even expanding, their privileged positions in society. Roy, a very shrewd politician, remarked that 'the present system of Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests... It is necessary that some change should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.' (Rammohun and Ghosh 1901, 929-930) Thus it was the elite Brahmins (the priestly caste) in Indian society, such as Roy, who recognised the centrality of adapting to the modern ways of seeing, as a means to ingratiate themselves with the colonisers. And because these indigenous elites already had a base of local power, they were able to establish schools, societies and newspapers from which the modern order of knowledge could be propagated (generally to other Brahmins or high-castes).

Here the link between power and knowledge is clear. Foreign power enters the land and begins installing a new political, economic and epistemological order. Those seeking to capitalise on the political and economic orders must come to terms with the epistemological order, as one cannot be separated from the other. First it was the indigenous elites, the Brahmins, who sought to capitalise on this new order and reproduce their privileged place in Indian society through modern discourses. But it didn't take long for the growing Brahmin dominance to demonstrate the importance of modern education to other groups. Jtirao Phule was a champion of the lower castes and fierce critic of the brahmical social order. He saw that Brahmins were capitalising on the new constellation of power in India by monopolising access to modern education. He wrote to British officials noting that: 'the present system of education, which, by providing ampler funds for higher education, tended to educate Brahmins and the higher classes only, and to leave the masses wallowing in ignorance and poverty.' (Guha 2011, 79) He says that British officials have been fooled by the spurious Brahmin argument that if the British 'inspire... the love of knowledge in the minds of the superior classes', they will 'spread among their own countrymen the intellectual blessings which they have received.'(Guha 2011, 79) Phule pointedly poses the question:

what contribution have they made to [the] great work of regenerating their fellowmen?
How have they begun to act upon the masses? Have any of them formed classes at
their own homes or elsewhere, for the instruction of their less fortunate or less wise

countrymen? Or have they kept their knowledge to themselves, as a personal gift, not to be soiled by contact with the ignorant [and] vulgar? (ibid)

Part of the reason that the epistemological colonisations of India, the propagation of the modern regime of truth, was so successful was that it encountered an already deeply divided discursive field. The 'Vedic tradition' was not a harmonious and unified order of knowledge. Just like the modern order of knowledge, the Vedic order of knowledge is enmeshed in a network of power, and is rife with contestation. The most obvious example is the caste system, in which the upper-castes justified their positions of social hierarchy based on, what they put forward as, authoritative texts of the Vedic tradition such as the *Manu Smriti*.

Apart from these inter-caste and, inter-community contestations are an important reality in Indian society, particularly between Muslims and Hindus. While there is insufficient space to discuss all of these divisions here, the arrival of modernity would play an important role in the development of these struggles over the proceeding two centuries (and beyond). As new colonial rulers arrived with their own practices of truth, and the means to enforce those truths, local groups inevitably began incorporating these practices as part of a wider strategy in the field of social contestation.

This paper is not suggesting a reversal of the simplistic dichotomy of modernity/tradition, to assert that modernity is bad and the Vedic tradition is good. Such simple dichotomies only obfuscate complex dynamics. Vedic discourses are deployed in oppressive ways, and modern discourses in progressive ways. Nor is it suggesting that those responsible for epistemological colonisation were consciously pursuing a colonial agenda, to suit their own ends. Power circulates without a puppeteer pulling the strings, and often without the conscious awareness of those within the network of power. There is no doubt that activists like Phule sincerely wanted to improve the lives of the worst off by advocating that the state provide a modern education for the masses. Like many others social reformers in India, he would see modernity as a new strategy to tackle pre-existing forms of domination. What he was probably less aware of was the new forms of domination that would result in the propagation of modernity throughout India.

The Civilising Mission

While various groups in India adopted as their own the discourses of modernity, seeking advantage in local power contestations, the British government also pursued a deliberate agenda of 'civilising' India. The British, in their hubris, came to regard their culture as so inherently superior that their historic destiny was to replace the world's 'primitive' cultures with that of the European Enlightenment. A plethora of tactics were deployed to achieve this, only a few of which can be touched upon here.

The British were not forthcoming in responding to requests for educational reform from various groups. The British knew they could not govern India on their own. They needed people on the ground who they could trust with the effective administration of their colonial regime, and this required impressing modern culture and knowledge upon certain groups. The idea was to create a class of people that was, in the words of colonial pedagogue Thomas Macaulay, 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect.' (Barlas 1995, 49) This was only the first step. The ultimate aim of educating these indigenous elites was 'to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.' (ibid) The ambitious endpoint of the civilising mission was to completely replace indigenous culture and

knowledge with that of the colonisers.

A second policy was the British codification of the legal system. In 1864 the British began working on judicial reform to render Sanskrit law, as well as the myriad of local systems of justice, more comprehensible to the British colonialists. Although the British sought only to translate them into English, the codification of these laws, and the establishment of the authority of precedence, transformed Sanskrit law, if not in the letter (although that letter was now English), at least in spirit. This was the foundation for modern forms of legality, social relations and conceptions of justice into the sub-continent. (Cohn 1996, 65-71)

A further British effort toward epistemological colonisation, one of critical importance, was the introduction of private property by the British in 1793. Prior to this, land was held communally by the local people, and the transformation that private property brought to the Indian way of life was immense. Private property alters modes of land tenure, social relations and, at the most fundamental level, people's relationship with the earth, a relationship which is at the 'heart of Indian society'. (Barlas 1995, 49) The introduction of private property also served the British colonial interests in a number of ways, primarily by creating a new landed class who could be relied on to collect taxes.

Legal and property reform may not appear, at first sight, to be closely linked to epistemological colonisation as is educational reform, but only if we regard knowledge as an abstract system, existing apart from day to day life. The concepts we use to understand the world are derived from our relationships with the world and with each other. Disrupting those relationships means disrupting the order of knowledge that supports, and is supported by them.

Modernity & Indian Independence

Gandhi's response to the preceding century of epistemological colonisation is best understood in the context of those of other important figures in the Indian independence movement. It should first be noted that the leaders of the Indian independence movement are hugely unrepresentative of the Indian population, since almost all (including Gandhi) went to England and were educated as lawyers. This immediately separates them from the lived reality of their Indian compatriots, and goes a long way to explaining their response to the huge transformation of knowledge imposed on the Indian sub-continent; transforming a world understood through concepts of *karma*, *dharma*, *artha*, and *atman*, into one understood through concepts of science, law, economy, and history. Most of these leaders secured their positions precisely because they could turn the British practices of truth against them; they were leaders because they understood, and largely assented to, the modern regime of truth, and thus were alienated from the Vedic tradition of the people they purported to represent.

Two of the most important figures in the formation of independent India were B.K. Ambedkar, *Dalit* leader and principle architect of the Indian constitution, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first and formative prime minister of India. Ambedkar was very much a modern subject, arguing that India must reject its past and modernize. He represented the most oppressed group within the Vedic order of knowledge - the untouchables. For Ambedkar, the Vedas meant oppression and nothing short of their complete abandonment and the foundation of a new order in India based on the ideals of Liberalism would suffice to slay the beast of caste. Nehru, on the other hand, came from a wealthy family and was sent to live in England from a young age. He was almost completely estranged from the epistemological world of his birthplace, and admitted to feeling

like an ‘outsider’ in India. Nehru was not in a position to defend the Vedic order of knowledge because he himself didn’t understand it. For Nehru, independence meant ending the political rule of the colonisers in India, but not their epistemological rule. He sincerely believed in the Enlightenment narrative of progress and the alleviation of poverty through industrialisation and modern education.

What these leaders sought in an independent India therefore was not resistance to epistemological transformation, but rather an intensification of it. What troubled people like Nehru and Ambedkar was not that colonial rule was transforming India according to the logic of modernity; it was that its transformations did not go far enough. However, not all leaders of the independence movement felt this way.

Gandhi’s Epistemological Resistance

The preceding section describes mechanisms by which the modern episteme began to spread throughout India, hand in hand with the expansion of colonial power. From this it might seem that, although British political colonialism as a whole was highly contested, the imposition of a new epistemological order was relatively seamless and that the 3,500 year old Vedic way of existing was quietly fading into the background. However, a fuller account would point to innumerable epistemic contestations along the route. Indian people did not act as Ram Mohan Roy did, joyously welcoming modernity’s new regime. The vast majority continued to live a Vedic way of life, and challenged the idea that the colonists possessed the ultimate, or even exclusive, access to truth. A full investigation of the (ongoing) subjugation of the Vedic episteme is not possible here, but outlining the life and politics of Mohandas Gandhi is a good start.

In 1915 Gandhi returned to India after twenty years abroad. Although he had been politically engaged on behalf of Indian immigrants in South Africa, he was a relative unknown in his homeland. A mere five years after his return he was the undisputed leader of the Independence movement and had transformed the Congress party from a political society for elites into a mass organisation with the capacity to rally millions of people from all over India. How Gandhi achieved this remains one of the most debated points of modern Indian history, but what is clear was his capacity to communicate with the people of India on a deep level. While other independence leaders were struggling for an Indian nation state, Gandhi was mounting a sustained challenge to modernity’s regime of truth, resisting the subjugation of Vedic knowledge, and speaking for, and with, the millions of voices that modernity was (and is) reducing to silence.

Contestation of Modern Education

The education system is central to the propagation of a regime of truth and, as we have seen, was of prime importance to the various groups that sought to capitalise on the new colonial order. Knowledge is power and the ability to play the colonist’s games of truth meant getting the upper hand within the network of local power struggles. After the local elite, the Brahmins, had shown that modern education was a key to securing positions of hierarchy, social reformers began calling for modern education on a mass scale in order to combat the brahminical order. All this played into the hands of the British, who began to see themselves as part of a historical mission to ‘civilise’ (i.e. modernise) the rest of the world. Thus, the epistemological colonisation of India proceeded. Gandhi recognised this process - he saw how ‘modern civilisation’, as he called it, was propagating itself.

He recognised that modern education propagates not only the material sciences, but also an entire set of values and a way of life. He wrote: 'To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay [an important colonial pedagogue] laid of education has enslaved us.' (Gandhi 1938a [1909], 84) The 'enslavement' that Gandhi is talking about here is not that of physical chains, but of a regime of truth that imposes a way of seeing on the colonised population. He also recognised the role of India's elites in propagating modernity's regime of truth and lamented: 'by receiving English education, we have enslaved the nation... Am I to blame the English for it or myself? It is we, the English-knowing Indians, that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us.' (1938a [1909], 85)

Not only did Gandhi criticise the propagation of modernity through education, he also questioned the value of an education based on what Rammohan Roy described as the 'useful sciences'. Unlike other Indian elites that came into contact with modern education, Gandhi was sceptical about its value. He wrote: 'I have learned Geography, Astronomy, Algebra, Geometry, etc. What of that? In what way have I benefited myself or those around me? Why have I learned these things?' He maintained that for the vast majority of people in India, such learning is pointless, writing:

A peasant earns his bread honestly. He has ordinary knowledge of the world. He knows fairly well how he should behave towards his parents, his wife, his children and his fellow villagers. He understands and observes the rules of morality but he cannot write his own name. What do you propose to do by giving him a knowledge of letters? Will you add an inch to his happiness? Do you wish to make him discontented with his cottage or his lot? And even if you want to do that, he will not need such an education. Carried away by the flood of western thought we came to the conclusion, without weighing pros and cons, that we should give this kind of education to the people. (1934 [1909], 82)

What is of note in this paragraph is the question: 'do you wish to make him discontented with his cottage or his lot?', alluding to the implicit developmentalist values that one learns during the course of a modern education: the modern way of life is the highest, while the life of a person in rural India is 'primitive' (or in today's parlance 'less developed').

Not that he dogmatically opposed all forms of modern learning: He said: 'I have not run down a knowledge of letters in all circumstances. All I have now shown is that we must not make of it a fetish.' (1934 [1909], 84) Dismissing indigenous knowledge in favour of modern education turns modernity into a fetish. All things modern are seen as inherently good, and all things non-modern are 'primitive', 'superstitious' or 'irrational'.

At the same, it does not follow from modernity's often totalitarian implementation of its own worldview that all modern knowledge is inherently colonial. Unlike the majority of Indian leaders, who were simply 'carried away by the flood of Western thought', a considered approach is required. Gandhi maintained that '[i]n its place [modern knowledge] can be of use and it has its place' but only 'when we have brought our senses under subjection and put our ethics on a firm foundation...'. (1934 [1909], 84) Bringing the 'senses under subjection' and ethical understanding are two cornerstones of Vedic education. So while modern knowledge was not to be wholly rejected, it should only augment, rather than replace, a Vedic education. 'It now follows that it is not necessary to make this education compulsory. Our ancient school system is enough. Character-building has the first place in it and that is primary education.' (1934 [1909], 84)

Contestation of Reason

Gandhi's epistemological contestations were numerous. A famous and controversial example followed a devastating earthquake in the state of Bihar. Upon hearing of it, Gandhi proclaimed that it was 'divine chastisement for the great sin we have committed against those whom we describe as Harijans [the untouchable caste]'. (Makarand 2011b) By connecting natural phenomena with human actions, Gandhi shocked many of his rationally minded independence leaders. Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel prize winning poet-laureate of India, lamented: 'We, who are immensely grateful to Mahatmaji [Gandhi] for inducing, by his wonder working inspiration, freedom from fear and feebleness in the minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any words from his mouth may emphasize the elements of unreason in those very minds – unreason which is a source of all blind powers that drive us against freedom and self-respect'. (2011b)

Tagore's use of the figure of 'unreason', that childlike but dangerous figure lurking at the edges of civilisation, precisely parallels that traced by Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation*. (1995 [1965]) With his historical account of the changing relationship of European society to 'madness' in the modern period, Foucault traced how the Enlightenment's emerging rationality came to define itself through the radical exclusion of 'unreason'. By reducing everything outside of its own logic to 'unreason' or 'irrationality', Enlightenment thinking ensured for itself a monopoly on truth. It did so with the creation of discourses such as psychiatry (and I might here add anthropology) which would effectively reduce 'unreason' to silence. It is this same figure of 'unreason' that Tagore is here deploying against Gandhi.

Gandhi's reply to Tagore questioned the certainty with which modernity's regime of truth asserts itself. He wrote: '[w]e do not know all the laws of God nor their working... I believe literally that not a leaf moves but by His will. Every breath I take depends upon His sufferance . . . what appears to us as catastrophes are so only because we do not know the universal laws sufficiently.' (2011b) Modernity claims for itself a hegemony of truth. Within the modern episteme, the only valid practices of truth regarding events such as earthquakes are material explanations (i.e. the movement of tectonic plates). Other claims to truth are simply 'irrational'. But other orders of knowledge do not bestow such exclusive legitimacy on material explanations. The Vedic tradition places a strong emphasis on ethical interpretation, and Gandhi is here defending this way of seeing. 'If my belief turns out to be ill-founded, it will still have done good to me and those who believe with me. For we shall have been spurred to more vigorous efforts towards self-purification. . .' (2011b)

Gandhi challenged modernity's insistence upon understanding scientific explanation as the only valid form of truth when he said 'even as I cannot help believing in God though I am unable to prove His existence to the sceptics, in like manner, I cannot prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation [the earthquake] even though the connection is instinctively felt by me.' (2011b) Although linking an earthquake to human activity may appear unacceptably unscientific to our modern minds, we must understand the wider context of power/knowledge with which Gandhi was engaging. By not bowing to the pressure to conform to modernity's regime of truth, he was standing up for the ethically infused order of knowledge of the millions in India who had been reduced to silence. As Ashis Nandy put it: 'In a world where modern science has come to enjoy near total hegemony, certain forms of 'irrationality' could be a defence, against the encroachment of an oppressive, alienating and totalising culture.' (Nandy 1981, 174)

Gandhi was not denying the validity of geological theories in explaining earthquakes. He was not anti-science or anti-reason. The way Foucault describes his own work seems apt in explaining Gandhi's position: 'it [is not] sceptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the regime *du savoir*.' (Foucault 1982, 781) The Vedic order of knowledge has a pluralistic conception of truth, meaning that scientific and spiritual truths do not necessarily conflict with one another. From this position, modernity's insistence on the 'irrationality' of all other ways of seeing appears totalitarian. In reply to an advocate of modern education Gandhi wrote that his correspondent has a 'word that holds him in its chains. It is the mighty word "rationalism". Well', he continues: 'I had a full dose of it. Experience has humbled me enough to let me realize the distinct limitations of reason. Just as matter misplaced becomes dirt, reason misused becomes lunacy... Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence.' (Gandhi 2001, 401)

Gandhi thus demonstrates his willingness to court controversy in confronting modernity's campaign to subjugate indigenous knowledge, and his refusal to bow to modernity's totalitarian regime of truth. He did not do so by parochially asserting his own regional truth against modernity's, but instead by asserting the plurality of truth, and, as we will see later, by locating *Truth* beyond particular linguistic practices.

Gandhi Contra Other Independence Leaders

Further insight is gained into Gandhi's epistemic challenge by comparing him to other independence leaders. In his pamphlet *Hind Swaraj*, an extended meditation on the nature of colonialism and *swaraj* (literally translated as self-rule), he says: '[t]o drive the English out of India is a thought heard from many mouths, but it does not seem that many have properly considered why it should be so.' (1938a, 24) Many Indians were prepared to struggle and sacrifice for the cause of Indian independence, but they did not consider exactly what it meant to be independent. Gandhi poses a number of questions to his fellow revolutionaries: What are the effects of colonisation? What exactly are you attempting to change with independence? What would it mean to be independent?

For the likes of Nehru and Ambedkar, the vision of *swaraj* was relatively straight forward: politically remove the British from India, set up an independent Indian nation state, and begin to modernise and industrialise Indian society. In response to this, Gandhi was unequivocal: 'what you call *swaraj* is not truly *swaraj*' (1938a, 24). To say that the British should be removed from India in order for India to begin on its own path to modernity in effect 'means this: that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan.' (1938a, 25) For Gandhi the ramifications of British colonisation were much greater than merely having a British monarch as head of State. Political colonialism was not even a major concern of Gandhi's, provocatively asserting that the British could remain in India if they would assist Indians in achieving *swaraj*. (1938a, 25) For Gandhi, what was at stake was not merely the political status of India, but rather 'Indian civilisation'; a way of existence that has existed for thousands of years and was now under threat from the intoxicating force of 'modern civilisation'.

This is not to say that Gandhi was a traditionalist Hindu who wanted Indian society to remain static. He campaigned fiercely against the same social problems as the modern reformers. He

led major campaigns against the caste system (by the end of his life Gandhi would attend only inter-caste marriages), the oppression of women, and worked tirelessly for the cause of religious freedom and tolerance. Where Gandhi differed from many of his peers was that he wanted to reform India starting from within the Indian tradition, whereas people such as Nehru sought to reform India by imposing modernity on Indian society. The likes of Roy and Ambedkar blamed the entire Vedic episteme for the social ills present within India, but Gandhi insisted that this was a ‘mistake’, writing that ‘[t]he defects that you have shown are defects. Nobody mistakes them for ancient civilization [meaning the Vedic tradition]. They remain in spite of it. Attempts have always been made and will be made to remove them.’ (1938a, 58) While Gandhi recognised the problems within Indian society, he was not prepared to abandon ‘Indian civilisation’ because of them.

Gandhi’s understanding of the activity of politics was different to that of his peers. While most Indian elites engaged in politics within terms set by British colonisers, Gandhi often appeared to be speaking a different language. This was not only because of his regular insistence on speaking his native Gujarati while most Indian politicians were conducting their affairs in English, but also because he did not speak the language of politics. Discursive fields are ordered by a set of rules and procedures concerning what one can and cannot say within its boundaries, and statements that stray too far from these will no longer be recognised within the field. For example, if a book is to be considered a work of physics it must deploy a set of concepts that are already accepted within the field: it cannot use disallowed concepts, such as magic or sorcery, and its theories must be expressible mathematically.

In the same way, the discursive field of modern politics has a set of rules for what one can and cannot say. Modern politics is a discursive field that, like physics, has clearly demarcated boundaries of acceptability. Within these boundaries are a set of concepts and institutions (such as ‘rights’, ‘citizen’, ‘property’), a field of application (such as the ‘State’, or the ‘population’), and an underlying logic (often defined as ‘realism’ or ‘pragmatism’) that define the field of politics. Gandhi took no notice of this. He made no attempt to engage with political discourse on its own terms, rarely drawing on any of its concepts, theories, or literary forms. It is hard to identify any of his voluminous writings as strictly ‘political’ because they often appear both ‘above’ and ‘below’ politics: ‘Above’ because he would speak in a way that we would normally consider too spiritual and ethical for our Machiavellian field of politics; ‘below’ because he would often concern himself with the most ordinary of day to day concerns (such as dietary regime or hygienic standards).

Many criticised him for this, accusing him of lacking political savvy. And it cannot be denied that Gandhi’s refusal to conform to something politically comprehensible means that he remains a relatively marginal figure in mainstream political discourse outside of India. However, this refusal must be understood as part of his wider epistemological challenge. To conform to the colonisers concept of ‘politics’ is to conform to their regime of truth; it is to agree to the terms set by ‘modern civilisation.’ Gandhi’s aim was not only a political revolution, but a revolution of ‘the political’. As he declared before a large crowd in Calcutta: ‘I am not ashamed to repeat before you that this is a religious battle... to revolutionize the political outlook... to spiritualize our politics.’ (Skaria 2002, 955)

Revolutionizing the Political Outlook

To describe one's political programme as a 'religious battle' is the most feared bogeyman in modern politics. Emerging from the chaos of Europe's post-reformation religious wars, modern politics is firmly rooted in the principle of secularism, which affirms that religion and politics must remain separate from each other. Whereas 'religion' was prone to superstition and sectarian violence, 'politics' was to be conducted according to the 'neutral' secular logic of Enlightenment rationality. If this sounds familiar, it is perhaps because it echoes the above description of the British subjugation of the Vedic tradition. Just as modernity's regime of truth was established in colonial India, that same regime of truth was first established in Britain. Edward Royle's extensive history of secularism in Britain shows how secularism began as a movement for epistemological, as much as political, reform. (Royle 1974)

A political order always finds support from an epistemological order, defining what is and isn't acceptable to do and say politically. Modernity disqualifies the legitimacy of all knowledge systems it labels as 'religious' (i.e. most knowledge that lies outside the boundaries of Enlightenment thinking) as a basis for politics, thus disqualifying Vedic knowledge from the political field. Gandhi challenged this order, in a number of ways.

Firstly, on the individual level. Perhaps the most frequently discussed question concerning the life of Gandhi is this: was he a saint or was he a politician? (Lal 2013) Not only because of his distinct style of dress (the *dhoti*, a traditional Indian loincloth) but more generally because of his conduct and self-perceptions. In 1906, at the age of 38, Gandhi took a vow of *brahmacharya*; a spiritual vow taken by Vedic monks for many centuries. Brahmacharya is often erroneously simplified as 'celibacy' but its meaning is much deeper. Gandhi described it as the 'search for Brahma'. Brahmacharya is a vow to strive for the 'control in thought, word and action, of all the senses at all times and all places', (Gandhi 1924, 186) to eliminate all desire, and to focus one's entire being on the attainment of moksha. Indeed, Gandhi proclaimed in his autobiography that:

[w]hat I want to achieve – What I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years is – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. (Gandhi 2016 [1927], xii)

Gandhi's vow of brahmacharya places him therefore quite clearly in the realm of the spiritual. How is it that he became one of the most important political leaders of the 20th century? The general understanding of the *brahmacharyi* is of someone who has chosen to retreat from the ordinary world of human affairs, someone who has renounced human society and lives a solitary life in the forest, engaging solely in spiritual practice. Gandhi did none of these things. He did not renounce society, he did not live a solitary life in the forest, and he certainly did not renounce the ordinary world of human affairs. Insight into how Gandhi was able to live a life as a brahmacharyi while still engaged in that most profane of activities is to be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most important texts in the Vedic tradition and a perceptual source of inspiration for Gandhi.

As two armies face each other in battle, Arjuna, the commander of the Pandava army, sees friends and family within the enemy ranks and loses the will to fight. What follows is the counsel given to Arjuna by the deity Krishna, and one of humanity's most profound meditations on the nature of *karma* (action). The essential argument is that everyone has a role to play in this life (*dharma*): for some people, their dharma is to live the life of spiritual retreat; for others, such as

Arjuna, it is to act. The Gita is seen as providing the answer to one of the most difficult problems within the Vedic tradition: if the highest goal is the attainment of moksha, then should we not all abandon the ordinary world of human affairs and focus solely on spiritual practice? Krishna's advice to Arjuna reveals a path to moksha through karma: if one engages in action in accordance with *dharma* (the moral and cosmic order of the world), and purely because of a duty to act (as distinct from what one hopes the action will bring), then one can strive for moksha while engaged in the world of karma. The spiritual path of karma is *karma yoga*, and Gandhi was a *karma yogi*.

Gandhi's vow of brahmacharya meant that unlike other Indian elites he did not interpolate himself into the modern forces of normalisation solely as 'a politician'. He wrote: 'The politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries.' (Gandhi 1920, 2) It is clear that Gandhi identified himself first and foremost with the Vedic identity of the brahmacharyi, and refused to see the world through the eyes of a politician. This had a profound impact on the way he engaged 'the political', and led him to problematise how 'politics' is understood within 'modern civilisation'.

Gandhi went further than refusing the role of a politician. He went so far as to challenge the validity of 'politics' as a separate field of activity from any other area of human life. He argued:

[h]uman life being an undivided whole, no line can ever be drawn between its different compartments, not between ethics and politics. . . . One's everyday life is never capable of being separated from one's spiritual being. Both act and react upon one another. (Gandhi 1947, 85)

Since Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the field of politics has operated according to its own logic, its own system of values. Prior to that era, 'politics' fell under the sign of ethics. What was ethically correct was politically correct, and vice versa. *The Prince*, however, made no attempt at ethical justification. Its explicit rationale was the survival of the Prince, along with his ability to pursue power and prestige. It is from this point that modern politics unfolds, operating according to its own 'pragmatic' logic of power reproduction rather than any underlying ethical ideals.

Gandhi was part of a tradition in which selfless action and the transcendence of the individual ego is the highest good. Thus he was highly critical of modernity for interpreting a huge area of human activity according to a logic of individual pursuit of gain. This perhaps helps to put into context Gandhi's labelling of modernity as 'immoral', or even 'Satanic'. (1938a, 34) Gandhi rejected the very concept of 'politics' as it emerged in the modern era. He insisted on the primacy of ethics in considering human action, and refused to allow any sphere of human activity to stray beyond its boundaries. 'The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a haze of "sound and fury signifying nothing".' (Gandhi 1938b, 393)

Gandhi's refusal to afford special status to any area of life is evident in during the tumultuous years of the independence struggle, when he would spend a considerable amount of his time advising the throngs of people who would come to him seeking counsel, not only on matters of revolutionary struggle, but often on more mundane affairs: a mother worried about a rebellious son, a student worrying about their preparations for exams. To Gandhi it was all part of a single continuum, which he termed 'religion'.

Challenging the Secular Understanding of Religion

What was Gandhi's religion? He admitted that '[m]any of my political friends despair of me because they say that even my politics are derived from religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion.' (Gandhi 1934, 23) How are we to interpret this statement? He understood himself to be on a spiritual mission to infuse politics with religion. But what does this mean in practice?

What most of us think of as 'religion' emerged as a concept at the beginning of the modern era in Europe. There is no equivalent word in any Indian language. The closest concept is perhaps *dharma*, though this does not really correspond to the European concept of religion. Gandhi's use of the term 'religion' must always be understood in the context of its epistemological distance from the modern use which itself emerged within a very particular context.

That context was the demarcation of Church and State in Europe after the post-reformation religious wars. The concept of 'religion' that emerged during this period would have been unrecognisable to the people of Europe in the preceding centuries, a concept that was also alien to the rest of the world until the colonial spread of secularism. Ajay Skaria is one among many anthropologists who makes the point that religion, as we understand it, is a European invention that loses efficacy when applied to other regions:

The continuity of religion as a name after its modern reworking should not be allowed to obscure the point that a new category had been created—religion within the limits of reason alone. Religion in this new sense was distinctive not only because it was now confined to the private sphere (as though all that had changed was its domain, as though this transformation could be described in terms of a constriction), but because of the new terms that described it. When it remained within this (private) sphere, it could, bereft of its absolute subjection, be defined only in terms of its domain of objects—the various scriptures, rituals, and institutions such as church, mosque, or temple. (2002, 969-970)

What Skaria means with the phrase 'bereft of its absolute subjection' is that the 'subjectifying' effects of religion (the effects it has on one's consciousness) diminish as 'secular' forces begin to act on individuals to reshape them. The modern concept of 'religion' transforms the phenomena that it signifies; turning what was a way of seeing, a way of existing in the world, into a domain of objects and symbols. In the words of Talal Assad: '...from being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized. In this movement we have. . . . the mutation of a concept and a range of social practices which is itself part of a wider change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge. That change included a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject.' (Assad 1993, 122)

It is clear that Gandhi's understanding of 'religion' did not correspond to the modern secular concept, and this helps us distinguish Gandhi's religious politics from that other form of Indian religious politics – *Hindutva*. This political ideology has grown greatly in influence in the past few years with the rise of the Hindutva party – the BJP – and aims to establish a Hindu hegemony within India. Yet, ironically, this hegemony would not mean the propagation of the Vedic order of knowledge (which is inherently pluralistic anyway), but rather the opposite.

Hindutva implicitly subscribes to the modern definition of religion as a set of symbols and objects (temples, scriptures, or holy relics, etc.) and so mainly concerns itself with symbolically

charged issues such as cow slaughter or the destruction of buildings built by Muslim conquerors in India. ‘In this sense’ Skaria writes, ‘Hindu nationalism, like all modern fundamentalisms, is profoundly secular. For rather than denying or questioning secular regimes of truth, it produces a Hinduism that is compatible with these regimes’ meaning it can ‘only claim absolutism without subjection: it could only seek to make absolute its new domain of objects.’(2002, 970) Hindutva therefore does not stand up to the subjugation of Vedic knowledge by a colonising episteme; it tacitly consents to it, seeking instead to assert symbolic dominance of the domain of objects that the Vedic tradition has been reduced to.

Gandhi’s understanding of the relationship between politics and religion was very different to the ideology of Hindutva (his murder by a Hindutva assassin makes this clear). Gandhi stood firmly opposed to this type of politicisation of religion, and to the Hindutva aim of symbolically glorifying Hinduism in general. Although he admits that as ‘long as there are different religions, everyone of them may need some outward distinctive symbol’, he argues that ‘when the symbol is made into a fetish and an instrument of proving the superiority of one’s religion over others, it is fit only to be discarded.’(2016 [1927], 349)

We then see that Gandhi was not interested in propagating ‘Hinduism’ at all, as ‘Hinduism’ itself is a colonial construct that flattens a vast terrain of knowledge and practice in order that it may fit with their conceptual map of ‘religion’. Gandhi was instead interested in the propagation of:

the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature... which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself. (1920, 3)

Now armed with an idea of what Gandhi did not mean by the term religion, we can start to explore what he did mean by it.

Religious Politics of Truth and Non-Violence

Although Gandhi was a religious pluralist, it is clear that his spiritual understanding (including his religious pluralism) stems from the Vedic tradition. He exclaimed that ‘Truth is my religion and *ahimsa* [non-violence] is the only way of its realization. Search for truth is search for God. Truth is God.’ (Tendulkar 1952, 50) But rather than holding truth to be tied to a particular doctrine or revelation, as in the Christian tradition, the Vedic tradition holds Truth (*Satya*) as isomorphic with Reality (*Sat*). Nothing exists except for Truth, and everything that exists is a part of Truth. Truth is therefore both one, as the underlying unity pervading all of reality, and many, for there are many perspectives on Truth (the Sanskrit name for this is *anekantavada* – which translates as ‘the many-sidedness of all phenomena’).

A popular and oft recounting story in India depicts five blind people feeling different parts of an elephant. ‘It’s a tree’ exclaims the first person holding on to the leg, ‘it’s a snake’ retorts the second, holding onto the trunk, etc. While Truth may be one, we all have our own (partial) perspective on it. Rajiv Malhotra phrases it nicely when he says:

[u]nlike truth in the Western sense, *Satya* is not an intellectual proposition but a way of life which has to be actualized and embodied directly by each person. There is no

place for the reification or codification of Satya, because truth is not held in some book or set of laws; it lives in oneself, and cannot be separated from oneself. This philosophical distinction is at the heart of Gandhi's dharma. (Malhotra 2011)

The modern order of knowledge holds truth to be a property of language, an abstract representation that corresponds to the world. The proposition 'I am holding an apple' is true if there is some external referents that correspond to 'I', 'holding', and 'apple'. Within the Vedic episteme, Truth has a much broader meaning than this; not only something that can be said, but, more importantly, something that can be experienced, that is lived.

Gandhi referred to his political actions as *satyagraha* campaigns. Satyagraha translates as 'truth-force'. 'Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement 'Satyagraha', that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or Non-violence'. (Gandhi 1928, 110) Gandhi's talk of truth and love was not merely lofty ethical rhetoric; it was actually the basis for a practical set of political strategies and a guide of conduct for political activists. In 1915 Gandhi founded the Sabarmati Ashram in order to train *satyagrahi* activists. Becoming a satyagrahi was not only a decision to engage in a political campaign, it was a commitment to dedicate oneself to truth. Satyagrahis chose to live their lives by a number of *yamas* (ethical observances). These principles included elements such as ahimsa, satya, *asteya* (non-stealing), and *aparigraha* (non-possession). This is in itself an important act of epistemological resistance. All of these concepts are highly important within the Vedic episteme. By creating spaces in which one would commit to live, and propagate this order of knowledge guided by these practices of truth, Gandhi made an epistemological stand against the encroachment of modernity's regime of truth.

The ethical observances of the satyagrahis acted as guidance for the satyagraha campaigns. And none more so than that of ahimsa. For Gandhi ahimsa was central not only to his political campaigns, but more generally to his entire understanding of the world and of right conduct.

Ahimsa is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of *himsa* [violence]. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa. The very fact of his living - eating, drinking and moving about - necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward himsa. (2016 [1927], 310)

Outward himsa is violent action. Yet the very act of living in this world make it impossible to avoid entirely, since each step we take does damage to something, however minute. Inward himsa is the force within living beings that drives them toward egoistic action. It is the force that drives us to preserve ourselves as individuals, at the expense of other living beings. While we cannot overcome outward himsa, we can overcome inward himsa and live according to ahimsa, the opposite force, the force of selflessness and compassion.

For Gandhi, the force of ahimsa was as important as Truth. In fact, the two are 'so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disk. Nevertheless, ahimsa is the means;

Truth is the end.’(Gandhi 1958, 224-225) Truth is reality in its totality. We all have our own perspective on this reality but ahimsa is the method of attaining a wider perspective, a higher degree of Truth. Himsa (violence) prioritises a single mind and body at the expense of all others, and thus obscures the perspectives, the Truth, of other living beings. Himsa confines one’s Truth to a single body, a single mind. Ahimsa is the force that expands Truth. Showing compassion and understanding demands the transcendence of the perspective of the individual ego. By living in the world by the principle of ahimsa, Gandhi argues that one is expanding one’s view of Truth.

We can therefore say that Gandhi’s religion of Truth and ahimsa meant living a life of compassion. He wrote: ‘of religion, pity, or love, is the root, as egotism of the body. Therefore, we should not abandon pity so long as we are alive.’ This gets to the heart of Gandhi’s ultimate criticism of the ‘modern civilisation’. In contrast with what Gandhi called ‘true religion’ or ‘true civilisation’, ‘modern civilisation’ is based on a principle of egoism, of individual human beings working to improve their own lot at the expense of everything else. This is what Gandhi understood as the core of ‘modern civilisation’. And 100 years later, as we witness the highest levels of inequality in human history and a consumer society that is bringing the earth to the brink of complete environmental collapse, Gandhi’s words ring true.

Conclusion

Of all the epistemological encounters that have taken place since the beginning of the colonial era, of all the non-modern knowledges and ways of life that have been erased, of all the innumerable voices that have been lost to the echoless silence of history, Gandhi’s struggle against the forces of ‘modern civilisation’ stands as perhaps the most powerful example we have of epistemological and cultural resistance. Yet this colonial resistance is not a thing of the past. Modernity’s march of ‘progress’ continues till this day. Indigenous orders of knowledge and ways of life continue to be eroded by the seemingly irresistible forces of nation states and global capital. Gandhi’s anti-colonial resistance, not only to the colonial state, but also to the colonial way of thinking and way of life, serves as a model of resistance for all those confronted with the totalitarian force of Enlightenment rationality.

Whereas modern ‘politics’ has always been ruled by the ‘tyranny of Reason’, making it almost impossible to engage in social transformation on any terms other than those set by modern discourses, Gandhi showed that non-modern knowledges could challenge the political hegemony on its own terms (in Gandhi’s case, the terms of the Vedic tradition). What this means in practice, today, is a willingness to challenge not only modern institutions, but also the modern regime of truth. Modernity’s games of truth, centred on material sciences and rationality, have no doubt brought tremendous technological advancement, but they have also led to the mass extinction event that the planet is currently suffering from. The first step opening up the political landscape to that which lies beyond the dogma of Enlightenment Reason is to listen to and respect long subjugated indigenous knowledge; to open up important communication and knowledge platforms to alternative ways of seeing.

While modernity has a long tradition of speaking for the Other, it must now learn to listen if it is to have any hope of overcoming the challenges that lie ahead.

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Notes

¹Dara Casey Ó Siochrú, 14 Eaton Brae, Shankill, Dublin, Ireland, 004915771083884, daracasey2@gmail.com
Dara studied Philosophy and Sociology at Trinity College Dublin, and Global Studies at Humboldt University, FLACSO Argentina, and Jawaharlal Nehru University. He currently lives between eco-villages and climate actions, taking part in, and documenting, the movement.