

# “Purity is the End of Thought and the End of Philosophy.” Interview with Leela Gandhi

## “La purezza è la fine del pensiero e della filosofia.” Intervista con Leela Gandhi

TIZIANA FAITINI, LISA MARCHI

*Università di Trento, Italy*

[tiziana.faitini@unitn.it](mailto:tiziana.faitini@unitn.it); ORCID 0000-0002-6167-1305

[lisa.marchi@unitn.it](mailto:lisa.marchi@unitn.it); ORCID 0000-0003-3500-5875

**Abstract.** Leela Gandhi is internationally acknowledged as one of the foremost critical voices in contemporary postcolonial thought. In this conversation, Gandhi retraces her intellectual journey – from her formative years at the University of Delhi and the University of Oxford, to her sustained engagement with postcolonial theory, the ethics of nonviolence as a shared universal inheritance, and the significance of affect in philosophical inquiry and political life. The text is a transcript, elaborated and revised by Gandhi herself, of the dialogue she had with her interviewers and the audience at the masterclass held on 22 May 2024 at the Department of Humanities of the University of Trento.

**Keywords:** post-colonialism, feminism, traditional knowledges, canon formation, liberation, nonviolence.

**Riassunto.** Leela Gandhi è riconosciuta a livello internazionale come una delle più importanti voci critiche del pensiero postcoloniale contemporaneo. In questo dialogo, Gandhi ripercorre il suo itinerario intellettuale, dai suoi anni formativi all’università di Delhi e Oxford al suo interesse per gli studi postcoloniali, l’etica della nonviolenza come eredità universale condivisa e il ruolo degli affetti nel pensiero filosofico e nella vita politica. Il testo è la trascrizione, opportunamente rielaborata e rivista dall’intervistata, del dialogo avuto con Lisa Marchi, Tiziana Faitini e con il pubblico in occasione della lezione tenutasi il 22 maggio 2024 al Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università di Trento.

RIVISTA ITALIANA DI FILOSOFIA POLITICA 8 (2025): 139-157

ISSN: 2785-4256 (online) | ISSN: 2785-3330 (print) | DOI: 10.36253/rifp-3823

© 2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

**Parole chiave:** teoria postcoloniale, femminismo, saperi tradizionali, formazione del canone, liberazione, non-violenza

*Professor Gandhi, you are a long-standing friend of the Department of Humanities of our University. As we welcome you back, we would like to begin our conversation by talking about your early years and education. You graduated at Delhi University and later on you moved to Oxford University. Could you share with us your experience as a student both in Delhi and in Oxford, also with regard to some aspects related to methodology and curricula?*

My visits and ongoing dynamic interactions at Trento have truly shaped my thinking over the past so many decades. My debt to all of you friends and colleagues is profound, and I am honoured to be here again with esteemed colleagues and with emerging scholars.

This question of formation with which you begin is complex and important. Let me start with India. Though I launched into my university education in India some four decades after Independence, my training was still caught up in the legacy of colonialism in unexpected ways. In the 1820s, a forward-looking but complicated colonial official called Thomas Macaulay had said that not an entire library of Oriental and Arabian literature is equal to a single shelf of a European library. And so, he helped to institute a program of secular education in India, in the style of prevailing Western curricula. This was the system in which I was trained – and to be part of it plainly meant to be part of a denigration of your own cultural systems and knowledges. The sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to this process as *epistemicide*, meaning the annihilation, or devaluing of knowledge systems, particularly those outside the dominant, often Western, paradigm during processes such as colonization.<sup>1</sup> But the formation I am describing has complexities that overly dogmatic projects of decolonization do not always grasp comprehensively.

You see, these devalued traditional knowledges (derided by Macaulay, among others) were never available to women; nor were they available to people who were considered lower caste, for example. In fact, one of the great law books in the Indic tradition, the *Dharmaśāstra* manual, says that if a person of low caste is heard listening to a Sanskrit *śloka* (verse), hot wax should be poured into their ears. This gets to an ambivalence of colonial inheritance – you do not always end up on the side of the angels by reversing colonial paradigms. I was very aware of being formed within the framework of an epistemicide of knowledges to which I would never have

---

<sup>1</sup> Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

historically had access anyway – and which were entangled with their own epistemicides of subjugated knowledges. On a different note, at the time of my education, there was a great interest in available ecumenical forms of mystical and spiritual heterodoxy, in which there is a sustained critique of formal knowledge altogether, on the grounds that the intellect interferes with the apperception of true knowledge. It is only now that I have started to grasp this resource – in many ways, cross-cultural – as a postcolonial critique of mystical reason, we can call it!

*What about Oxford?*

At Oxford I encountered a rigorous but narrow form of knowledge, in which the worlds from which I came were not epistemologically visible (except in a limited way within area studies or Oriental studies). This provincialisation, however, did not only come from tradition, from the canon. In the late-1980s, when I left for the West to embark on my education in European knowledges, critical theory – a certain form of twentieth-century critique – had become not only widely available, but in some sense de rigueur in ostensibly progressive branches of the academy. I was excited to learn from this mode of thought, but I was in for a surprise. What I encountered in this tradition of critique was not just the critique of the canon, rather, the canonical form of critique. And that was actually even more exclusionary than the canon itself. This is because the canon wants to be universal. It is evangelical. It invites conversion, it says “Learn your Kant, learn your Shakespeare, learn your Plato, and you will be a better person.” It is an invitation albeit under the aegis of a civilizing mission. Canons are perhaps always hospitable. They need subscribers to consolidate their hegemony. And the more variation you introduce within the canon, the more it loves you. So, you can have an Indian Shakespeare, you can have a kind of Indic Plato, or a kind of Oriental version of the categorical imperative: it is lovable. Yet, critique is very inhospitable, because the Western tradition of critique that I encountered in the 1980s, at the beginning of the dissemination of post-modernism and cultural materialism, was an entirely domestic conversation: a critique of the West by the West. You had no stand in it as a non-European or non-American. Revolutionary traditions (as Simone Weil understood early in the 1930s) are perhaps no less inhospitable than orthodoxies. In recent decades however, with postcolonial, queer, feminist, critical race, environmental interventions, the tradition of critique has finally become more ecumenical and multi-directional. That said, I do believe, with other scholars, that critique may have run out of steam. In a way, the emerging tradition of repair or reparative thought is perhaps more capacious than the tradition of critique. It is no less interventionist, since it takes the liberty of designating sites and

scenes of thought and culture needful of repair – sometimes even when these objects feel they are doing quite well!

*The topic of epistemicide makes me think of the revivals of traditional knowledges and traditional culture that came with the postcolonial turn. In many ways, postcolonial theory and also postcolonial struggles have been accused of a regression, of taking postcolonial cultures back to forms of nativism, which very often take violent shapes, and lead to fundamentalist interpretations of religions. As a great postcolonial scholar, you managed with a very interdisciplinary method to escape the risk of reducing postcolonial culture to forms of nativism, to force very rich identities into essentialism, and to expose the struggles between the colony and the metropolitan centre simply as forms of hate and rejection. Can you explain to us what kind of methodology you found on your own educational path, in order to make your way into this very conflictual field?*

The critique of colonialism has certainly resulted, inadvertently, in cultural extremism and the quest for nativism and pure identity. This happens when colonialism is posited as a form of contamination. The standpoint produces myriad complications in places like India, where the advent of colonialism is projected back by centuries to cover the arrival of Islam and justify the most virulent Islamophobia. There is such hubris for so many reasons in the time-travel fantasy of return to unadulterated origins, which always ends up with a justification for violence in the present. We were injured 5000 years ago so now we must defend ourselves with retrospective force. Interestingly, nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus and Lev Mechnikov were also of the view (under the influence of radical evolutionary biology) that we need to touch base constantly with our earliest origins. But in these visions our beginnings (human and non-human) were unexpectedly places of mutual aid, cooperation and sociability – a discovery of accord rather than adversity and less a resource, as you put it, for “forms of hate and rejection.”

I have certainly worked against purity, because purity is the end of thought and the end of philosophy. It is the end of philosophy insofar as philosophy globally begins in the genre of dialogue – where the thought of another is braided with your own in interlocution, in conversation and in the act of addressing and being addressed. The genre of dialogue travels from parts of India to Greece and back again, and this is the philosophical tradition that matters to me. In his *Cultural Imperialism*, a book that came after *Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> Edward Said is clear that the critique of empire should never end up in a search for cultural and civilizational authenticity. This

---

<sup>2</sup> Said, *Orientalism*; Said, *Cultural Imperialism*.

is, as you say in America, the #101 of postcolonial theory. You may think you are engaged in postcolonial critique, but if you find yourself ending up in a fantasy of purity, then you are in the mindset of colonialism. And you have to be very vigilant about this. This is why I feel anxious about with the lexicon of decolonization: as though colonialism was some sort of infestation to remove from the system. I find it much more liberating to look for the fugitive elements that subsist well within oppressive systems and encounters. These are the elements that got away or remained hidden or camouflaged themselves and went underground or took refuge with others. It is always more satisfying for me to pursue these elements and tell (imagine) their stories and paths of flight in the exercise of postcolonial thinking.

I should say, however, that such resistance to cultural purism runs deep in postcolonial thinking. When I entered the field, I was surprised to find very few thinkers of the 1980s, 1990s, early 2000s interested in the critique of Europe. The main concern – a terror we can call it – was the resurgence of colonial conditions under the jurisdiction of the postcolonial nation-state and associated elites. I have found this approach very enabling in conceiving colonialism, in wider terms, not just as a European misadventure – though that too! – but a ubiquitous form of power: that relies on injuriousness, and which can occur anywhere, at any scale of site, e.g., in gender relations, in race relations, in a mode of thinking or speaking, and so on.

*Among the warnings, and the directions, which Edward Said was helping us to observe and follow, was the idea that after postcolonialism, and after national liberation, there should also be other forms of emancipation: women's liberation, for instance, and the breakdown of any sectarian and caste systems. This is also what Frantz Fanon believes: the postcolonial national struggle should be just one destination on a longer path that will lead, hopefully, to universal emancipation. This thought leads me to the next question on the ethics of nonviolence. Can you share with us when and why you have been drawn to the ethics of nonviolence and felt the necessity to include nonviolence into your research and teaching? How did nonviolence enrich what you were doing?*

This is a wonderful question, thank you. You know, in the ancient Indic philosophical tradition of dialogue, answers are always less epistemologically interesting than questions. You must learn to ask questions that are unanswerable and put an end to noise and speech, for the sake of shared silence. Lesser philosophers are those who are answering all the time. This was Arendt's anxiety about Socrates, wasn't it? If we all became Socratic, there would be only silence!

So, to proceed in the vein of lesser philosophy, I came to the question of nonviolence through a circuitous route. I was very concerned, at a certain point, about the polarity of colonizer-colonized, which seemed to me false in the way of all polarities, because everyone, everything has a plurality that binaries put to death. To break that down, I started looking for cultural nomads and those who were crossing over from the side of the colonizers to the colonized. Much later, I became interested in those who were going the other way – not to become colonizers but to address colonizers in a gesture of repair, in a hope of transformation. In the first journey, by looking at European self-critique in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, I found subcultures that were not interested in the prestige of the empire at all.<sup>3</sup> And I have found that constantly: in as far as there are those in quest of supremacy, there are as many who are not. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were Europeans who gave up their privileges, who embarked on a kind of, not revolution, but renunciation of their given privileges: men who became suffragettes, who became feminists; men and women who became interested in the non-binarism of gender identities, deeply convinced that a fixed gender identity was inhibiting. There were people who became vegetarians, anticipating the critique of the Anthropocene now, who had the sense that the priority of the human over the animal was unacceptable. All these eccentrics and quacks and weirdos (as as they were often characterized) believed that not eating meat, or giving up on gender normativity, or making room for the dead and the non-sentient against the hegemony of livingness, was a kind of anticolonialism. I returned to this material after a long gap for a book I wrote, entitled *The Common Cause*,<sup>4</sup> where I was interested in 20<sup>th</sup> century subcultures; and I found that the eccentric movements of the fin de siècle had mutated into varieties of pacifism and anti-militarism. By the early twentieth century many socialists and anarchists, such as Rosa Luxemburg, for example, were alert to how vertical systems of power are premised on a systemic capacity for total war. These mutating outlooks were crucial for colonial worlds, because the colonies were basically garrison states caught up in the colonial-military-industrial-capitalist quest for captive markets. This picture is just emerging now: if you look at the archives of wars, starting with the Crimean war to the war in Afghanistan, then as now, most of these wars were fought by people from Asia and Africa having never met each other and enlisted against each other. East Africans and Indians encountered each other in the battlefields of the First World War; and, during the Boxer rebellion in China, Indians were enlisted to defend the forceable sale of opium to the Chinese

---

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi, *The Common Cause*.

population. From another angle, starting in the early twentieth-century, in response to the violence of the Russian Revolution, there was a great interest amongst global communities of socialists to discover the lineaments of new kind of revolutionary nonviolence: total non-injurious transformation. (Many European socialist-pacifists of the time with a bent toward syndicalism come to mind: Bart de Ligt, and later, Aldo Capitini). What I have come to think of as an ethics of nonviolence is just that: a quest for total radical relentless painstaking non-injurious transformation in every sphere of life, in every encounter.

*Black bodies have always inhabited European wars. Langston Hughes, who in the Thirties visited Spain during the Spanish Civil War, was himself struck by the fact that he would meet in the wards of a local hospital what were at the time being called “Franco’s Moors,” that is, Moroccan colonial subjectivities, who had been enrolled by Franco in the Spanish army and had to fight on the same side of the Christian Falangists against any kind of possible form of emancipation and liberation, both for the people in the colonies and in Spain. Reading the poem included in the prose piece “General Franco’s Moors,” which he dedicated to one of these very strange soldiers he met in Spain, made me ponder on how identities and alliances shift: if in the past the “Moors” were those who would frighten Europe, during Franco’s wars the Moors were the allies of Christianity and fighters of a war waged against Communism to preserve the supposedly pure religious tradition of Europe. It seems to me that what you are trying to say is that we should avoid fixation and embrace forms of nomadism, which are, probably, the best cure against forms of essentialism or forms of colonial purity.*

Exactly. What interested me also was that these pacifists, and believers in nonviolence, were turning to Indic anticolonial thinkers and activists, and generating a discourse that nonviolence is a core feature of remote, non-western pasts. The mid-twentieth-century writer Raymond Schwab (whom Edward Said admired a lot) called this a subculture of orientalist nonviolence.<sup>5</sup> If colonial orientalism partakes in an epistemology of rule, this discourse identified by Schwab is an epistemology of dissent. Take an example. In around 1908 Tolstoy and Gandhi exchanged many letters and thoughts. In the gist of these, Tolstoy was saying something like: “Mr Gandhi, my name is Leo Tolstoy. You may not have heard of me, and I barely heard of you, but I know that people from your country are embarking on a violent revolution. Now, I know a thing or two about violent revolutions. People in my country are also very interested in violent revolutions, and that is not the answer.” A few years later Russia would

---

<sup>5</sup> Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*.

revive the idea of forceful revolution for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And Tolstoy said: “Do not do revolution in this way, because your tradition is a nonviolent tradition. Look at these sources, read these books, be true to yourself.”

This seems to me just magical. Many of the radicals I have been invoking believed they were custodians of the best of global culture. Tolstoy felt that Indian nonviolence was his inheritance, and that he had to tell Gandhi – who, at that time, had little deep knowledge of the Indian tradition as such – to take care of this precious inheritance. I think that is why I became interested in nonviolence: because it is such a beautifully transacted tradition. There is no authenticity here. You are being reminded by someone from somewhere else: “I need you to be true to yourself, because I need to be true to you.”

*This idea of being a custodian of a tradition – very far geographically speaking and also perhaps temporally speaking – is one of the most beautiful gifts you gave me. Custodians of a very far tradition of nonviolence, but also custodians of peace. You are also reminding us why we should read history, at least a particular form of history that excavates and unearths. Looking backward, doing some work of genealogy that also goes against the grain, helps us to be hopeful. My question now precisely revolves around the issue of pacifism and the cultures of pacifism. I wonder, especially in this very difficult time of war, how can we and why should we still believe in the force of peace?*

This is not only a time of war; it is also a time of peace. And I really look to the younger generations here: I am so amazed by what global student populations have been doing. It is so moving, in a non-partisan way, to simply call for sanity and accountability, and to do so in an entirely, by and large, nonviolent way. So, I do think that pacifism comes into its own in times of war. This is a time of totalitarianism and war on all fronts, *and* we have seen great acts of nonviolence.

But what is pacifism? What is nonviolence? What does it mean to be a pacifist? What does it mean to believe in nonviolence? Of course it means do not breach the boundaries, do not strike, do not hit or kill people, but it surely means more than this basic version – another #101! – which is not particularly ethically complex. I am in quest of what is strange – occult, in the true sense of occult – about nonviolence, and what it means to be a pacifist today. You protest and you are dragged away by the police: you know a thing or two about tactical nonviolence, so you do not hit, you do not scream back, you do not do those basic things, you make your body heavy, but you are dragged away. You tell yourself they are being uncivilized, you as a protester refuse to be uncivilized. But... that is not quite nonviolence.

Thinking with Foucault and genealogy can perhaps help. In his essay on Nietzsche and genealogy,<sup>6</sup> Foucault observes that genealogy is about emergences, and emergences are always violent. When he says emergence, he is thriving on a trope which is essential to branches of the European philosophical tradition: a certain preoccupation with form and the idea of *entelecheia*. As you move through the world, you emerge: you emerge as yourself, you emerge as a people, you emerge as an identity, you emerge as a nation, and nations emerge out of wars. Without such emergence in life, you may as well be a miserable scallop, you may as well be a miserable clod of earth, you may as well be a bird that cannot distinguish wing and sky or a fish who does not know the boundary between fin and water (I am ventriloquizing Heidegger on what it means to have world and be world-forming a little bit here).

Well, it seems to me that, in that framework, nonviolence is about non-emergence, or preventing emergences; not forever, not once and for all, but... every time something seems aggressively emergent in the world or in yourself, you stop that emergence, and you do so even if it is something good, even if it is a virtue. Another kin concept is the idea of neutrality – and here I come back to pacifism – which is about neutralizing everything. Barthes wrote about this in his book *The Neutral*,<sup>7</sup> where to become neutral is to literally have no form or identifiable coordinates: you sit on the fence. You know that is the abuse given to pacifists. Also, young people are always being told: “What do you really believe in? Earth? War? Non-binarism? That is too many things.” But it has to be too much, because it is the prevention of an emergence. It seems to me this is what pacifism does: it distracts you from the manifestation of finalized forms and creations. “What are students really protesting about?,” we keep hearing. They do not know, but... that is good, because that is nonviolence, I think. Nonviolence is a place of poetic scepticism. The Jaina monastic-philosophical sceptical tradition is salutary. It deploys the word *anekantavada*, meaning something like “many-mindedness,” to describe true nonviolence. In this perspective, any position or theory or belief (indeed, any deed, act, or advantage) is no more than it is not; it both is and is not; it neither is nor is not.

*Which makes me think of Denise Levertov’s poem “An Interim,” which she wrote during the Vietnam war, in which peace is compared to the ocean. And the image of the ocean is chosen because it is an ever-moving system*

---

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie et l’histoire.”

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*. The book is based on Barthes’s Lecture Course held at the College de France (1977-1978).

*of different kinds of life forms, as you said: it never stops and it is naturally there, it comes and goes, with many things in it.*

*On a lighter note, since you are an aficionado of Trento and the Department of philosophy in particular, and since so much of your writing invokes and evokes affects, could you please speak a bit about the role of affects, especially friendship, in your work?*

That is a dear question and, indeed, I feel shaped by many years of conversation with Paola Giacomoni, Giovanna Covi, Michele Nicoletti, and indeed, with Lisa Marchi and Tiziana Faitini, among others. Of the many things that brought us all together one was a shared interest in affect and emotion, as a topic and as a practice of friendship. I need, again, a digressive answer. In the fields within which I have travelled, postcolonial thinking, especially, there was a lot of inspiration taken from the critique of the enlightenment closely galvanized for our times by Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, people who work in critical race thinking have also turned to this perspective. The writings of Sylvia Wynter can tend in this direction. Following the very useful, but too easy, paradigms of the anti-enlightenment, the activity of critique has become analogous with a strongly historicist critique of reason – concerning a particular ideal of rationality that is braided with the hubris of European modernity. Of course, there are earlier cues for this orientation in the Romantic tradition, and a certain Nietzschean inclination. It ends up with the catechism that colonialism is rational, fascism is rational, systems of race and caste prejudice are rational because they are so profoundly systematic and taxonomic. But good things also happen in the name of reason. The Encyclopaedists wanted world peace more than anyone. Jeremy Bentham advocated against cruelty to animals in the name of reason. Some of the most radical figures of our time such as the Indian jurist and caste-reformer Bhimrao R. Ambedkar were firm believers in the palliative resources of reason, and sought non-modern, culturally diverse forms of rationality.

In addition to my growing impatience with anti-enlightenment perspectives (including my own in earlier work) it seemed to me more productive – more propositional – to move away from the interminable negativity of the critique of reason toward something like a commendation of affect. The philosopher I love here is David Hume. The commendation of affect opens a world of possibilities rather than problems. It also opens an empirical world, because affect plays itself out in objects, situations and events. It is much harder to generalize affect (unlike reason): I feel one sort of emotion now, another sort of emotion later; intimacies are good and bad. You deal with them on a case-by-case basis. The standpoint of

---

<sup>8</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, "Dialektik der Aufklärung."

affect may well be a more capacious way of reading the world than a critique of rationality.

*I would like to go back to the above-mentioned exchange between Tolstoy and Gandhi. Both of them had a strong religious and spiritual background, and one may suppose that for them, far from being a practical tool to solve practical problems, nonviolence was only possible as a result of a strong religious or spiritual belief. Do you think that nonviolence needs this sort of horizon, foundation or whatever it might be – religious, spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical, transcendent – to function effectively?*

I think the answer is yes, but... what do we mean by religious and metaphysical? The mystical, the religious, the metaphysical, the occult, or the spiritual do two things. One is less interesting: they give you a clear idea of what “that better,” or we could call it “the utopia,” look like – and that is fixed, and is reified and divisive, because we kill each other over competing notions of paradise. But there is the other aspect of these traditions, which is about a belief in the unknown: something we do not know yet. And I do not know if there are secular traditions, except those that pertain to love, that allow for the absolute unknown. So, I would say yes: some version of those traditions has to be galvanized. I am very nervous about religion as such, unless it is a dialogic form of religion, because it gets so caught up with identity. But we certainly need some version of the mystical and spiritual that leave a space for the unknown.

*Could explain to us what you mean when you say that you “get nervous about religion”?*

It is a question to which I do not really have a clear answer, but let me think aloud in a historical and conceptual register. In postcolonial thinking it is often argued that a putative secular colonial intervention resulted in the invention of religion. This means that various ways of thinking and living were classified as religions as distinct from epistemologies: something to do with identity rather than apperception of the world. This project of course built on prior orthodoxies: more interested in the rules and regulations that define one group against another. In either case, a religious outlook stalls an epistemological outlook. Now what is a true epistemological outlook? It is simply to be in quest of knowledge – the truth of things. It seems to me that in our post-secular times it is important to rethink religions as coexisting epistemologies in a shared quest for reality – and these may incorporate reason, belief, blind faith, magic, revelation, intuition, forms of embodiment. And some of these may be wonderful and some quite awful! So, the category of religion makes me anxious because I always think it occludes the real world-grasping potential of the systems it

contains, and which exceed the work that the category religion can do. A proper critique of religion, then, is precisely not to promote secular verifiable knowledges at the cost of all others. It is to conjure and enter into conversation with the variant, epistemologies and disciplines secreted within this or that religion: forms of ethics, systems of accounting, systems of punishment and remuneration, ecological biorhythms, taxonomic thinking, imaginative thinking and so on.

*I now wonder whether you can elaborate on what you said about purity and emergence. I love this idea that purity is dangerous and I find that both Tolstoy and Gandhi insist on purity, yet perhaps not in terms of the myth of the origin: purity for them is something that we have to try to realize through our living. And I am also intrigued by your reading of “emergence”, but I would like to know why you believe it to be violent. Life, not all forms of life, but animals, plants, human beings... they need to break the egg, to emerge from the chrysalides. A rupture is needed to come to life, and for a birth to occur, but is it necessarily violent? Does birth have to entail such an original sin?*

I think both Gandhi and Tolstoy falter severely in a quest for purity, in a quest for an untroubled world and in forms of renunciation that find emotional, biographical and political mess intolerable. They are both very much in error of purity, which is a danger in any renunciatory tradition of nonviolence. That tradition must be updated to become less immaculate, and something that you can do *in medias res*, absolutely in the middle of everything. I am inclined to take an Epicurean approach to nonviolence, which is more about an openness to alternatives, rather than the quarterisation or elimination of temptation and distraction. There is an ancient Indic renunciatory text that says the zenith of renunciation is the renunciation of renunciation!

As for the most difficult question you raise... can we do without emergence? No, of course, we cannot because there are pleasures in emergence. But I do want to question that philosophical attachment to rupture at the heart of emergence. Why is rupture – the break from formlessness or alleged non-identity – “the only good” of existence. Why not consider that the event we call rupture may not just be the prelude to acquiring our own, given, distinctive signatory form. Why not rethink rupture as one of multiple moments of transition whereby we change our relational fields. So, when you break the egg, you become this or that entity, of course, but you also enter a new milieu of relationality with space, with time, with the sky, with proximate and foreign entities. When you exit life, no less, you also change a given field of relationalities: you become a material form reaching for inorganicity. What is more important? The state of rupture

or the state of perpetual relationality or perpetual mutating relationality? I do believe, though, that this shift is very hard for the Western philosophical tradition. Emergence, rupture, formation, fabrication, world-making, self-making are so exciting here: they are the cue to so much!

This fascination can be found in Arendt, in Foucault, in Heidegger. It is this image of teleological, productive life moving toward concretion, species-identity, away from passivity into activity, away from silence into speech, away from sameness into difference. This can seem so much more charged than the view that a meaningful life is about constant, variable entanglement. Interestingly, the latter vision is robustly promoted in certain branches of so-called modern science. Evolutionary biology, much like certain branches of quantum physics upholds a vision of entanglement (my late-friend Giovanna Covi was a great admirer of Karen Barad's thinking on topic). The mathematical tradition developed by logical positivists such as Carnap, Russell, Whitehead (and Charles Peirce at source) was keenly interested in the likeness and the similarity of all things, and the quest for that similarity of substance.

The critique of emergence may well end up as a negative fantasy of non-birth and anti-natality. But then, in the other tradition... I am just thinking of Arendt: she says repeatedly, speaking like Heidegger, that to emerge is to do a violence. When you separate yourself from the world and you start to fabricate, to become *homo faber*, you are doing a violence. The shell of the egg must be broken. The earth must crack open for the plant. But why do we have to think like that?

*It is so true that there is a real fascination in our tradition with the idea of fabrication and the idea of the emergence of the single figure. Even Arendt, while criticizing Western philosophy, still ends up with the claim that action is the action of the single one. And building on Nietzsche, in the text you mentioned, Foucault gives a very clear explanation of the inherent violence that lies behind every act of existence and emergence: the fact of emerging, the very fact of taking form, and of acting indeed, is always the outcome of a struggle and an act of supremacy. For them, the basis for arguing this is the biological fact of birth, so the fact that biological life is both relational entanglement and the violence of taking a form, of imposing something on the other and on the environment. On this background, I would like to bring you back to your definition of pacifism as the necessity to prevent the emergence: and even to prevent the emergence of something good, as you said. To me, this definition points to an alternative, and much needed, paradigm of (non-) action. On the other hand, however, can we act without taking form? Maybe we need to take a form at a certain point, in order to be able to take action – whether that be a form of a personal subjectivity, or a form of a political*

*subjectivity and organisation. How would you develop such an alternative paradigm of action or, paradoxically, non-action?*

Both your last questions are warning me of a danger. The moment you start saying “non-emergence is better than emergence,” then you are engaging in an emergence. You are right: we dwell amidst emergences and non-emergences. We have to hold both together, but we certainly need some kind of emergence in order to act, in order “to be.” Ontologically, even in its basic form, all acts of being are acts of doing, as the verb “to be” tells us.

I have realized that in my thinking there is a flaw if I focus too much on the problem of formation. Let me re-circuit what I have been saying via the idea of *Gewalt* that you find in Walter Benjamin’s *Critique of Violence*,<sup>9</sup> drawing on Heidegger. What I am describing, and what I am especially suspicious of, in my account of emergence, is not just formation, rather it is the theory of form as force. This is the entrenched and truly difficult conceit of Western philosophy: to achieve form, you must turn a force against yourself. To express this form – and sometimes to form subjects under your jurisdiction (as a teacher or a government or a parent), in *Bildung* – you must use force against others.

But what about a form without force? And what does that mean? That is only possible when the form is not final, when there is no interest in a final form. So, you can have one form followed by another, followed by another, and you are not especially attached to any of them. Also, you can have many simultaneous forms; I am a woman, but, in so far that I am a woman, I am a friend, I am someone who would love a cup of coffee: I am this plurality, at any moment.

I am very interested here in an icon from early Buddhism, called the *Abhayamudrā*. In colonial looting, these icons were amputated and dismembered, and the most important details were lost, but sometimes you see this intact image of the Buddha with his right hand open and raised facing outward. It is a gesture of the gift of fearlessness. This gift means that the person – the monk, who has given up everything and is wandering in the world – says to everything they encounter “I give you the gift of fearlessness from me.” This means I have a form – I am unmistakably and identifiably me – but that form is not going to harm you, and you have no reason to be fearful of the me you encounter. You do not find that hand very often, but it is one image of a kind of form without force, gesture without *Gewalt*.

Another way is to incorporate, prophylactically, in every emergence a factor of non-emergence. Again, as I do not want to speak too abstract-

---

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, “Zur Kritik der Gewalt.”

ly about this, I can give you examples so that we can talk about them. In the Islamic tradition, in the recitation of the names of Allah, you have 99 names, and one is hidden. Or we may think of the ancient Indic sacrificial tradition and the performing of sacrifices. You must be violent because you must appease the temperamental gods of that imagination, but you also have a great anxiety about this violent performance. So, there are a lot of prayers for the accomplishment of sacrifice – “May this god appear,” “May this wind serve me,” “May this happen,” “May that happen.” But these performative utterances strangely include elements (prayers, gestures, moments of occultation), that symbolically subvert full manifestation of intentions and desires (or include the wish that your wish may not come to pass). They are actions of or for non-action. These include inaudible recitation, or the throwing sand, because sand disperses form. Here rituals of non-emergence are nested within rituals of emergence. You have desires, you have quests, you want their fulfilment, and you need to act – but you make some provision for unfulfillment.

But... I would love to hear from you. Do not worry about being formal or sophisticated: it is as much for my pleasure, so I have a sense of being in conversation with young and emerging scholars.

*I wonder whether the problem in some ideas of emergence is a problem of identity. We tend to think that something emerges in imposing its own identity. However, there are traditions – Romanticism and Goethe, for example – arguing that there is no identity as such, and that pure identity does not exist. In conceptualizing birth, they are more concerned with the development of the environment rather than with the imposition of the self on the environment; the individual is hybrid and is a multiplicity of individuals. It is problematic to deal with the political aspect of this idea of emergence, but, maybe, this perspective helps us to understand some pacifist movements that do not want to “emerge”. Think of Occupy Wall Street: it was difficult to approach them because they were not an identity, they had no leaders or representatives, but everybody could become a leader. This is quite challenging, from a political point of view, but touches upon the points that were raised before.*

This is exactly the sort of conversation I was hoping for. Goethe is the great thinker of elective affinity, which for him is the *a priori* of emergence. If I were to make a taxonomy of non-emergences, or prophylactic non-emergences, then what you are describing in the Romantic tradition as an emergence of affinity would belong to such a taxonomy. There is a full spectrum of shades in that taxonomy, including the most extreme (“let me be not created”) and the nuance “let me be created into affinity,” which is what you are very helpfully pointing to.

*Listening to you I am reminded of Simone Weil's critique of the European idea of power as supremacy, and her belief that we should give up this very idea of power because the problem lies in the idea in itself, and not in how this idea is historically used or realised.*

Simone Weil is exactly the philosopher who inspires me here! I think of her idea that the experience of God is an experience of decreation. Creation is concealed by our forms and formations of power. We need to undo these to grasp what is there, what has been executed and made for everyone and everything.

*I find it interesting that Benjamin refers to the strike as "pure political mean," claiming purity as a metaphysical concept, which is a bit problematic for the reasons you have pointed out, such as extremism and dangerous utopic visions that might lead to clashes. Then he also speaks about Sorel and political strikes...*

This is a wonderful set of examples. Sorel and Benjamin are close to the themes we are discussing in their proposals, variously, for political actions that do not end in actualization. Sorel's conception of the strike is germane here, as are Benjamin's many explorations of settings, forms, genres of pure means. My problem with these hypotheses is that they often converge with an unexpected derision of "necessity" let's call it – instrumental life, where the primary purpose of action is to stay alive, to sustain "mere life." Agamben is acute here in his neo-Hobbesian account of violence as the procedure whereby naked life is separated from its signifying forms. He famously upholds an indivisible form-of-life where biological life can no longer be separated from cultural life. In the world we inhabit, in conditions of extreme poverty, war and displacement, staying alive is an art, keeping people alive is a beautiful thing, an attention to metabolic life is at the heart of caregiving: are you breathing, are you eating, is your body, your mind functioning? The planetary project of extinction rebellion seems to tend toward the value of life as such: not at the cost of everything but as a gift worthy of tending.

*You mentioned Anthropocene and the critique of Anthropocene, and my question is about the environment and environmentalism. What role did the thinking about the environment, about nature and the relationships between human being and nature, influence your thinking? And specifically, what do you think about what Arundhati Roy says in terms of siding with contesting movements and protesting against postcolonial elites that actually use and abuse the environment in the way that are typical of colonial mindset and colonial paradigms?*

I agree entirely with Arundhati Roy. I think one of the great problems in the part of the world that I come from is the desire for development.

Postcolonial nation states borrowed from state socialisms and imperialisms, and embarked on massive development projects, participating in the devastation of the earth. There is no doubt about that. This is the point made by Benjamin Anderson in his *Imagined Communities*:<sup>10</sup> imperial infrastructures and forms of governmentality are modular and are passed on. On the other hand, can we entirely scorn the desire for development? Arguments to this cause say: why should we not develop and have a share in forms of affluence and well-being exacted at the cost of the impoverishment of large parts of the world? If you want us to participate in environmentally forward programmes, then we need reparations. To move beyond this impasse, we need to work with imaginative critiques of developmentalism that inhabit many early moments of anti-colonial thought and are consonant with present-day planetary perspectives. These come out of movements for the rights of indigenous lifestyles. They also inhabit forms of moral economy. Amartya Sen has revived these perspectives in his view that factors of capital growth – prosperity, as such – are at best impertinent to the good life. A good life gains more substantially from opportunities for the development of existential capabilities. Present-day ecological thinking has added to these conjectures and advanced the train of my own thinking through the standpoint that true development – existential, material – occurs with others, not at the cost of others, in a relational field that demands comprehensive flourishing.

*In concluding our dialogue, and in resonance with this attempt for comprehensive flourishing, I would like to go back to your starting point, and the disadvantaged condition you evoked together with being low caste: being a woman. How about being a woman and a philosopher in the academy? How do you feel your thinking is perceived? And, if you feel that being an academic woman is a disadvantaged condition, how do you address it?*

It is an important question and a genuine problem in the academy. I think these struggles need calm and a desire to speak from the heart, no matter who is listening or not listening. You should have that confidence. So, firstly, make sure you have clarified your convictions, that you have taken the time it takes for them to feel clear and truly incorporated in yourself, not just as something acquired, and then... speak from the heart. It does not matter who is listening or not listening. You have to address the universe. Someone will hear, or perhaps you might hear yourself, it does not matter!

Secondly, take the task of building and cultivating alliances very seriously, because what is beautiful in any struggle is allies. There are male

---

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

thinkers who are really interested in giving away their privilege. I say this to the younger men here as well, although I think your generation is already more there. It is terribly important to work on yourself and realise that the pleasure of giving up your privilege is greater than having it: when you give it up, you acquire community you would not have believed or imagined that you have. What is to gain in thinking is just the pleasure of being alive and inventive – and this is best done together!

*What a wonderful conclusion. Listening to you, I was reminded of a Buddhist saying, which says: “in a crystal-clear pond there is no fish to be found.” I think this illustrates the conversation we had this morning about purity, emergence, the idea of an alliance with the submerged world and all sorts of things you so kindly offered us today. Thank you so much.*

## Acknowledgements

The conversation was held in the framework of the second series of lectures “Voices from Contemporary Philosophy,” coordinated by Tiziana Faitini, Alessandro Palazzo and Michele Nicoletti. We thank our colleagues Paola Giacomoni, Federico Laudisa, Sara Lorenzini, Michele Nicoletti, Giulia Valpione, and all the PhD and MA students for their active participation in the conversation. Special thanks are due to Andrea Fregona and Giorgia Pizzini for their help in transcribing the dialogue.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso Books, 1991 (rev. edition).
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max. “Dialektik der Aufklärung.” In *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden*. Ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Vol. 5. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987, 6-142.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Zur Kritik der Gewalt.” In Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Vol. 2.1. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991, 179-203.
- Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, la généalogie et l’histoire.” In Foucault, Michel. *Œuvres*. Ed. by Frédéric Gros. Vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard 2015, 1281-1304.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

- Gandhi, Leela. *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900-1955*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Chattoo & Windus, 1993.
- Schwab, Raymond. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Sousa Santos, Boaventura de. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2014.