

## Extracts from Andreas Malm's *How to Blow up a Pipeline*

Noblest and most cunning of all, however, was Gandhi. McKibben has revisited the history of the twentieth century and concluded that the mahatma is the one figure of that age who can still speak to us: 'I'm not sure I can think of a politics other than Gandhi's that offers much promise.' The mahatma not only drove the British from India but single-handedly launched the attack 'on the legitimacy of colonialism the world around', and if he could achieve all of this with his ahimsa, then we have a template for our times. Gandhi was the Einstein of nonviolence, 'our scientist of the human spirit, our engineer of political courage'; [...]

The incongruence of Gandhi has a different slant. Anyone who sees in him a paragon should pick up Kathryn Tidrick's masterful biography of the mahatma. During his time living in South Africa, he found his British masters marching off to the Boer War – and ran after, begging them to enlist him and his fellow Indians. A few years later, the British again paraded out to the provinces, now to the Zulus who rebelled against oppressive taxes and had to be flogged and mass executed into submission, and again Gandhi asked to serve. To his disappointment, he was taken on only as a stretcher bearer and nurse on both occasions, but in his autobiography he claimed his share of martial glory by arguing that medical staff are as indispensable to war as any soldiers on the front. 'Gandhi famously resisted any use of violence', runs the standard characterisation, here in the words of yet another writer who thinks the climate movement should model itself on the mahatma. Did he? Perhaps the Boer and Zulu episodes were youthful blunders?

Hardly had the First World War broken out before Gandhi offered up to the Empire himself and as many Indians as he could dispose of. In early 1918, certain movements were busy trying to end the slaughter, agitating for soldiers to desert and turn against their generals, at which point Gandhi decided that more Indians had to be thrown into the trenches. 'If I became your recruiting agent-in-chief, I might rain men on you', he flattered the viceroy, promising another half million Indian men on top of the one million already in regiments or graveyards, leaving no stone in the countryside unturned in his search for eager volunteers (few showed up, which he considered a profoundly humiliating setback). In these recruitment drives, the mahatma pursued a logic of sorts. As long as Indians were effeminate and weak, the British would never consider them equals and grant them independence; to recuperate their manhood and strength, they had to become brothers-

in-arms. Gandhi's strategy for national liberation never – this is true – condoned violence against the British, but it did include violence with them.

As for the former type, Gandhi mightily disapproved of the popular violence against the British occupation that seemed to accompany mass actions as surely as exhalation follows a deep breath. After setting up campaigns for satyagraha, engaging Indians in non-cooperation and lawbreaking en masse, he would receive word of crowds sabotaging transport systems, cutting telegraph wires, burning shops, breaking into police stations and attacking constabularies. He was flummoxed and livid every time. He likewise frowned upon anti-fascist resistance. In November 1938, in the days after Kristallnacht, the mahatma published an open letter to the Jews of Germany exhorting them to stick to the principles of nonviolence and to delight in the results. 'Suffering voluntarily undergone will bring them an inner strength and joy.' In the case of war, Hitler might implement 'a general massacre of the Jews', but 'if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving', for 'to the god-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep'. Facing objections, Gandhi had to clarify his comments and add subsidiary arguments – Jews have never mastered the art of non-violence; if only they could take on their suffering with courage, even 'the stoniest German heart will melt' – indeed, 'I plead for more suffering and still more till the melting has become visible to the naked eye' (January 1939). In any case, 'the method of violence gives no greater guarantee than that of non-violence. It gives infinitely less.'

The pith of non-violence, in Gandhi's philosophy, was abstention from sexual intercourse: the soul would reach exalted heights only if it learned to 'crucify the flesh'. In the midst of mass mobilisation in 1920, he directed all Indians to go celibate until further notice. Best of all would be if humanity as a whole ceased to copulate; then the species would transmogrify into something holier. It followed that orphanages were unsound institutions, artificially keeping alive babies born out of excessive lust and thereby awarding unclean living. Hospitals had the same effect of 'propagating sin'. Disease, in the Gandhian view, results from impurity and must be allowed to do its cleansing work, and the same goes for extreme weather and earthquakes: with unusual consistency, the mahatma preached that victims of such events had it coming. 'Rain is a physical phenomenon; it is no doubt related to human happiness and unhappiness; if so, how

could it fail to be related to his [sic] good and bad deeds?' One could descend considerably deeper into this rabbit hole.

Over his life, Gandhi's political compass gyrated wildly, the steady magnet being his view of himself as 'the pre-ordained and potentially divine world saviour', in Tidrick's summary. The fact that this man can emerge as an icon of the climate movement – not to mention 'our scientist of the human spirit' – attests to the depth of the regression in political consciousness between the twentieth and the twenty-first century. If the movement needs a lodestar from the past, it might as well choose the Sudanese Mahdi, Nostradamus, Rasputin or Sabbatai Zevi. Needless to say, the mass mobilisations led by the Indian National Congress had impressive features, and the Salt March and the withdrawal of cooperation with British authorities sent inspiration down the ages. But to attribute independence to them exclusively is, once again, to look at history with one eye. Subaltern violence marked the route to India, from the mutiny of 1857 to that of 1946; when the British finally packed up and left, a world war had intervened and drained the Empire of its strength: these were the years when decolonisation swept the globe. The selection of satyagraha as the take-away from that process serves only present wishes and biases. How did Algeria get free? Angola? Guinea-Bissau? Kenya? Vietnam? Ireland?