**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 13: GANDHI AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR**

**1..Gandhi in South Africa:** Mohandas Gandhi (later known as Mahatma Gandhi) is mainly thought of as a central figure in the history of modern India, and its struggle for independence, which indeed he is. But he spent twenty-one years of his adult life in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 (after intending to stay only one month) and his characteristic ideas and methods were developed in the South African context. Indeed, it is arguable that he could not have developed those political ideas in the Indian context, where religious, caste and class divisions would have played a different role. Within South Africa, he worked mainly within the relatively small Indian community. But he also grasped the logic of resistance to racial injustice in the South African context, and provided a model that was followed more broadly.

**2. “Justice is on the side of the Boers”:** The South African War took place before Gandhi had developed his strategy of *satyagraha* or civil disobedience (which we discuss tomorrow). He provided this account of the war in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*, written decades later, after his return to India. His account of the conflict is surprisingly sympathetic to the Boer republics. Although the British allege that the Boer treatment of Indians was one of the causes of the war, Gandhi describes the British as no better than the Boers. Indians in South Africa are “more or less a community of slaves” and “helots in the Empire,” he says (pp. 97-98). As for the main conflict, he acknowledges that “justice is on the side of the Boers” (p. 98). Should that not lead him to side with the Boers against the aggression of the British?

**3. “Our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects”:** Gandhi acknowledges the strength of the argument against siding with the British, but draws a different conclusion. His starting point is that Indians are proud of their British citizenship. But he adds an interesting qualification: “Or have given our rulers and the world to believe that we are so proud” (p. 97). Although he does not think Indians have many rights in the Empire, “our rulers *profess* to safeguard our rights because we are British subjects.” He doesn’t say whether he believes this profession or not. Later he quotes a Durban newspaper responding to the Indian ambulance corps with the refrain that we (whites and Indians, but not blacks?) are “sons of the Empire” together (p. 102). But the context of Empire seems to allow more room for exploiting legal fictions. Can we say that Gandhi sides with the British because they are less honest about their belief in racial inequality?

**4. Satyagraha and truth:** At the end of his account of these debates, Gandhi states that he would support the same views at the time of writing, about twenty years later. Again, there is a qualification which is hard to interpret: “*if* I had today the faith in the British Empire which I then entertained” (p. 99). But this does not tell us whether that faith in the Empire was justified. The point is important because, as Gandhi himself explains, his idea on *satyagraha* insists on truth (p. 100). But it seems he has a different sense of truth in mind: sincere belief, rather than correspondence to reality?

**5. Bilgrami on Gandhi’s truth:** Tutorials for this week make use of an extract from Akeel Bilgrami’s article on Gandhi’s religion, in relation to his politics (included in the reader). Bilgrami describes Gandhi’s originality as a political thinker as stemming from his conception of lived truth, which makes it possible both to act according to your own beliefs and yet convey the universal significance of your own beliefs. The radical aim of Gandhi’s mature politics (post 1908-09, say) is a society in which people live by their own beliefs without their beliefs becoming a private concern or a matter of opinion.