**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 15: INTERPRETING GANDHI**

**Primary texts as sources for political thought:** The main sources for history of political thought are the texts written or produced in the period being examined, related to the theme or current of thought at issue. It is possible to get a grasp of a specific period, theme or current from the writings of historians of political thought who have studied it before. But you won’t be able to judge the reliability of the historical account they give if you have no experience in interpreting texts historically. In a certain sense, you won’t know what the historian whose work you’re reading is actually doing. If you rely entirely on secondary works, you may be able to repeat what other authors have said, or speculate on possible extrapolations from their arguments, but you won’t be able to pursue your own projects in the same field of research.

**Some principles for interpreting texts historically:**  Historical texts have to be interpreted. It doesn’t get you very far to repeat what the author has said, or to classify the author in one or other camp. There is no mechanical formula for interpreting texts, and the way you do it depends on the problem you’re researching. (How you formulate the problem also depends on how you interpret the texts concerned.) Textual interpretation is an art, acquired through practice, rather than a science, which fixed rules. But there are some general principles worth keeping in mind, including these three:

(i) Assume that the author means what she says, unless there is a compelling reason not to. The fact that you would not have said the same thing, or that the argument does not fit your preconceptions is not a reason to dismiss it. To understand a process of conceptual change, you often need to pay attention specifically to the parts which contradict the dominant views of our time.

(ii) Assume the text or author has a consistent and coherent point of view, except where there is reason not to. Just because we think of specific ideas as contradicting each other does not mean that was true in the context we are studying. We often come to a better understanding of the ideas involved by finding evidence for an unspoken assumption which reconciles apparently conflicting views.

(iii) Compare your interpretation of the text with the received or established view of the text, author and/or period. If your interpretation of an author’s thought is in conflict with it was understood by her contemporaries—especially those who generally shared the author’s views— then there is either a problem with your interpretation or a reason for the divergent understandings. Ask why people who were close to the author may have understood their thought differently, or developed the same ideas in a different direction or context.

**Gandhi—Nehru letters of 1945:** It is not unusual to find divergent emphases or arguments among people who worked together closely (Socrates and Plato; the disciples of Jesus; Marx and Engels). But the Gandhi—Nehru letters of 1945 provide an unusually stark case. Gandhi and Nehru worked together closely in the movement for Indian independence, and it’s clear from their exchange that they respected each other. Yet views of which Gandhi was convinced and saw as his bounden duty to advance if humanity is not to be destroyed (p. 150; reader page 44) are seen by Nehru as “completely unreal,” surprising and a source of confusion (p. 153). How do we explain this difference? Is the picture changed by Nehru’s agreement with Gandhi that the world “appears to be bent on committing suicide” (p. 154)?