

# **Gandhi, Mandela, and the African Modern**

Jonathan Hyslop



The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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## Gandhi, Mandela, and the African Modern

“If you know Joh’burg, the sound of a half-brick rattling against a policeman’s helmet tells you everything.”<sup>1</sup>

- Herman Charles Bosman

Sometime in the early 1930s, a Johannesburg shop-owner called Fanny Klennerman imported the first copies of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* ever brought to South Africa for sale at her Vanguard Booksellers. The book, originally published in 1922, had been suppressed in every major English-speaking country, and Klennerman seems to have imported the edition produced in Paris by Odyssey Press in 1932. Klennerman positioned herself at the cutting edge of metropolitan modernity. Born in Russia, she had come to South Africa as a child, attended university in Cape Town, moved to Joburg, organized white and black workers in trade unions during the mid-1920s and been expelled from the Communist Party for Trotskyist “deviations.” The name of her bookshop announced her purposes in life; she saw herself both as a revolutionary, as part of a political vanguard; and as a member of a cultural *avant-garde*, as part of the modernist movement of which Joyce’s book was the English language’s ultimate literary product. Klennerman had remarkably close links to New York publishing, which with her modernist eye, she recognized as the cutting edge of English language literary culture, while her fellow Joburg booksellers were still London-focused. She was proud of importing Random House’s innovative and beautifully produced Modern Library series and the leading journals of the New York intelligentsia such as *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*. In the 1930s, she took guidance on what to stock from *New Masses*, which, although edited by the grimly Stalinist Mike Gold, managed to attract contributions by many of America’s most innovative writers. *Partisan Review*, which Klennerman stocked in the 1940s, was a hugely influential journal, but it had a print run of only 6,000 copies per edition, so it is extraordinary that it should have had a following as far afield as Johannesburg. *Partisan Review* published original work by writers of the calibre of W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, George Orwell, John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Edmund Wilson, Saul Bellow and Mary McCarthy, as well as some of the first English translations of the French existentialists. (Its leftish but anti-Stalinist politics was presumably congenial to Fanny). To an astonishing extent, Klennerman succeeded in her project, through the 1930s and 1940s. Though she had little direct political influence, her immense bibliographic knowledge made her indispensable to the political activists, artists, and intellectuals of the city. And on Saturday afternoons, the shop became a haven of non-racial creative energies in a fiercely segregated city. In the upstairs rooms, poems were written and clandestine love affairs were conducted. Downstairs, self-appointed critics gave their opinions on their friends’ new literary productions. Amongst the shop assistants at Vanguard was Willie “Bloke” Modisane, who was to become one of the finest of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s, and regular visitors included a young Nadine Gordimer.<sup>2</sup>

I begin my account of Johannesburg history with Klennerman’s bookshop partly because I want to draw on Joyce’s book for the guiding theme of my discussion of the city’s politics. More substantially though, Klennerman exemplifies the way in which the story of Johannesburg is also part of the story of modernity and modernist culture. When I use the terms “modern” and “modernist,” I follow Marshall Berman:

To be modern...is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.<sup>3</sup>

As a modernist city, Johannesburg was a place of uncertainty and disintegration, but also a place which stimulated the search for the possibilities of freedom. It was a city of ideas: a place where notions of "reality, beauty, freedom, and justice" were explored; and nowhere was this done more energetically than amongst the shelves of Klennerman's bookshop.

In Georg Simmel's work, which forms a useful point of departure for my thoughts about the city, the metropolis is characterized by, amongst other things, its extension in time and space, the experience of hyper-stimulation, re-shapings of the self which produce new forms of intellectuality, and by the presence of the "stranger." In Simmel's words, "The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is the functional extension beyond its physical boundaries...a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines. Only this range is the city's actual effect in which its existence is expressed."<sup>4</sup> The metropolis, through its connections with other metropolises, provides a space in which not only the confines of rural life, but also the limits of national political frameworks, can be ruptured. Simmel argues that the emotional hyper-stimulation of the metropolis acts as a prompting to self-definition, both from the desire to escape from anonymity and from the need to cope with the demands of city life. This leads the dweller in the metropolis to react through an intensification of intellectuality which protects him against the "threatening currents and discrepancies of the external environment which would uproot him."<sup>5</sup> This defense of a self is productive of new forms of creativity: intellectuality "preserve[s] subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life, and...branches out in many directions..."<sup>6</sup> A particular role in the intellectual ferment of the city is played by the stranger. Simmel points out that there is something in the much-decried notion of the "outside agitator;" "it is an exaggeration of the role of the stranger: he is freer, politically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his actions by habit, piety and precedent".<sup>7</sup>

Johannesburg was modern and metropolitan from the first. It burst into existence in 1886 as a mining camp, with no other purpose than the production of gold. This initial focus on a single commodity gave it an extraordinarily turbulent character. Four years later the town nearly collapsed because of difficulties in extracting gold from the ore. But technological innovations made it bounce back to become a city of 100,000 people within ten years of its foundation. The struggle between Boers and British over control of the gold fields produced a major international incident—the Jameson Raid—in 1896 and a major war between 1899 and 1902. The city's initial population came from the ends of the earth: miners from Mozambique, Nyasaland, Cornwall and Australia; artisans and engineers from Scotland; storekeepers from Lithuania and Gujarat; financiers from England and Germany. Between 1904 and 1907, Chinese workers were brought to the mines on a huge scale. In the subsequent decades came black mine workers from Basutoland, Zululand, and Pondoland; impoverished rural Afrikaners; refugees from Eastern Europe and migrants from Greece and Portugal. These populations were not initially clearly

segregated, and the process of creation of a city spatially divided by race took many years of labor by racist bureaucrats, and contained within it many ebbs and flows. By the end of the 1930s, the metropolis had a population of half a million. It was not only these flows of people that connected this city to the outside world. From the second year of its existence, the telegraph connected Johannesburg to the outside; the economic upheavals of the Rand impacted instantaneously on the London stock exchange, and investment decisions in London reverberated in Johannesburg just as fast. The city was marked physically, too, by international cultural trends. The city center's buildings were a mixture of styles ranging from the Victorian to the Edwardian to Chicago steel frame construction. In the 1930s, the city acquired one of the world's major concentrations of Art Deco buildings, and a few notable examples of Modern Movement architecture.<sup>8</sup> Johannesburg was always, then, in Simmel's sense a metropolis: its "functional extension," the range of its "actual effects" traversed the world.

Of course this city was characterized by extreme social inequalities, turmoil and conflict. Grotesque juxtapositions of affluence and penury, horrific living conditions in slum yards and mine compounds, the prevalence of industrial and epidemic disease, and violent repression of political and social protest, were all constant themes in the first six decades of Johannesburg's history. But it was this very extremity that made its experience of modernity productive of modernist cultural and political creativity. In a city where everybody came from somewhere else, social arrangements had to be constructed from scratch and everything was up for grabs. There was no sense of stability: life really was experienced as a "maelstrom": as in Berman's appropriation of Marx, all that was solid in the previous experience of the migrants and immigrants did indeed melt into air. Yet it was exactly out of the destructiveness of this environment that its potential for renewal came. People did find ways of making themselves at home in the maelstrom, and of finding new pathways to freedom within it. In few other places did the environment uproot the individual as comprehensively as in Joburg, and consequently the need for new forms of intellectuality was particularly acute.<sup>9</sup> And, in a city initially composed entirely of "strangers," there was an extraordinary range of outsiders able to generate new ideas. Klennerman was just one of them; her work shows the way in which Joburg linked to other metropolitan experiences, and how this opened new possibilities of freedom.

Fanny Klennerman, then, was a devoted, but largely unknown, pursuer of a modernist project. I will suggest in what follows that the two most globally significant and famous individuals to move on the Johannesburg stage in the twentieth century were also in important senses products of the peculiarly modern milieu which this particular metropolis created: namely Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. They can both be understood, I'll suggest, as practitioners of forms of modernist politics which Johannesburg made possible.

To think about Gandhi and Mandela in their Johannesburg setting, though, is immediately to pose the problem of the relation between the metropolis and nationalism. Gandhi and Mandela both owe their fame to their success as leaders of nationalist movements. Yet their global appeal is rooted in their transcendence of narrow nationalism. They are admired internationally for the way that they created national visions that were inclusive, rising above the cleavages of race, religion, and status, and for the way in which their moral stances appealed to humanistic values which had international relevance beyond the immediate concerns of their own political constituencies. Historically, nationalist movements have typically been the project of urban intellectuals, and have been made possible by experiences rooted in urban life, and knowledge of international developments. Yet the need for nationalists to represent the

movements they initiate as popular, has constantly led them to invocations of the spirit of the rural; the village is inevitably invoked as embodying the nation, and this leads to a denigration of the very urban conditions which have produced the new political form. Moreover nationalism is pulled between the discursive triangle of racial and ethnic particularisms, unitary nationalism and universalism. The very idea of the right to “national self-determination” is grounded on an appeal to universal rights and foreign examples. But the self-regard which nationalism involves necessarily leads to an emphasis on the supposed unique national virtues of “our” nation. While nations are supposed to confer citizenship on all within their boundaries if they are to meet universal standards of human rights, in reality the call of racial or ethnic particularism frequently constitutes an effective mobilizing tool for political leaders, making for a politics where some of those within the boundaries of the state are “true” citizens and others are not.

Gandhi and Mandela both contended heroically to create inclusive nationalisms founded on universalist values. But they did not, as we shall see, fully evade these contradictions. And the representation of their lives has, through the same logic, not escaped a significant distortion of the role of the Johannesburg metropolis. Gandhi’s emphasis on rural virtues and Mandela’s invocation of his chiefly heritage amongst the Thembu have crucially shaped how they are understood. In accounts of Gandhi’s life, his time in South Africa is commonly de-emphasized and his connection to Indian religious tradition foregrounded. In accounts of Mandela, his awareness of resistance to colonial conquest is often stressed, as is the oppressiveness of the Johannesburg he lived in. In this paper, I will argue that their remarkable politics were products not so much of their connections to the rural hinterlands of their respective countries, but rather of markedly metropolitan and cosmopolitan experiences.

Resistance to viewing Johannesburg as metropolitan and modern is likely to be based on a certain kind of reading of nationalist politics and liberation movements. Here I want to turn back to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. For the treatment of nationalism in his book is of significance for understanding that phenomenon in South Africa and elsewhere. *Ulysses* follows the movement of Joyce’s protagonists, Bloom and Stephen Daedalus, through Dublin on a single day, 16 June 1904, its structure paralleling the mythic journey across the world of Odysseus. Joyce strives for the complexity of language adequate to grasping the experience of a great metropolis.

Joyce mounts a critical, modernist attack on simplistic nationalisms. In the Odysseus myth, the Cyclops, a giant with a single eye in the centre of his forehead, holds Odysseus and his crew prisoner in his cave, and begins to devour them two by two. Odysseus and his surviving crew escape after driving a stake into the giant’s eye. In Joyce’s novel, the cave is replaced with the gloom of Barney Kiernan’s pub and the giant by one of the customers, a nationalist bigot called The Citizen. For Joyce, the extreme nationalist is metaphorically one-eyed; he can only see from the single viewpoint of his fanaticism. The clichéd language of the nationalist hack is brilliantly exposed by Joyce in this passage. The Citizen is implicitly contrasted with the two-eyed cosmopolitan empathy exemplified in the novel by Bloom. This is not to say that Joyce dismisses nationalism. The nationalist sees an aspect of reality, but he is not able to relativise it or balance it with other dimensions of reality. The uncritical nationalist sees only with one eye and thus must understand the world without perspective. Bloom, by contrast, sees the ambiguity and complexity of the world.

This conflict has a tragic character. Modern nationalism emerges from the metropolis and its cosmopolitanism. But the tendency of the logic of national identity is to deny these origins. The urban comes to be represented as less truly national than the rural. The

metropolitan nature of the making of modernist politics is denied. Ultimately the Cyclops wins out.

What then does Joyce offer against the clichés of nation? In the most quoted passage of the book, Stephen Daedalus is talking to the headmaster, Mr Deasey, an upholder of the official history propagated by state and church:

-History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.  
 From the playfield the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: goal. What if the nightmare gave you a back kick.  
 -The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr Deasey said. All history moves toward one great goal, the manifestation of God.  
 Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying  
 -That is God.  
 Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!  
 -What? Mr Deasey asked.  
 A shout in the street, Stephen answered, and shrugged his shoulders.

As Marshall Berman argues, what Stephen is saying is that if God is anywhere it is not in the repressive myths of nation and religion but in the “life and energy and affirmation” that is modern and yet “radically opposed to the forms and motions of the modern world” and which expresses itself in the everyday life of the streets. In Berman’s words, the street is experienced as “the medium in which the totality of modern material and spiritual forces could meet, clash, interfuse and work out their fates.”<sup>10</sup>

What I want to suggest then, is that when the metropolis generates new political forms, it is pulled between the one-eyed nationalism of the Cyclops and the modernist relativism of Bloom; between the nightmare history of ambitious nation-states in the making, and the creative rebellious energies of the street.

Although some time was to elapse between the publication of *Ulysses* and Eamon de Valera’s creation in the south of Ireland of a sectarian Catholic state, facing off against the oppressive Protestant enclave in the north, Joyce could see that Ireland was already well along that road. Intellectuals of Protestant background had played a prominent role in turn of the century Irish nationalism. But the clash of civil war led to an increasingly Catholic-sectarian construction of the nation. Joyce knew that it was not the humane, cosmopolitan Bloom but the monstrous Citizen/Cyclops who had won their clash.

### **M.K. Gandhi at the Hamidia Mosque**

Let us then turn to our main protagonists and explore their battles with the nationalist Cyclops. On 10 January 1908, Mohandas Gandhi addressed a crowd of supporters at Johannesburg’s Hamidia Mosque. The mass meeting took place during a recess in Gandhi’s trial. He had been brought to court for his role in leading the Indian migrants of the city in a campaign of refusal to register with the government in terms of legislation which they saw as the harbinger of new forms of racial discrimination. Later that day, Gandhi would go to jail for the first time. Gandhi was not yet the world-famous, *dhoti*-clad Mahatma. He was a starch-collared, besuited figure, and one of the top-earning lawyers in the city. Although he was a Hindu, his meeting was taking place in a

mosque. His leading supporters were Muslim, but they also included Parsis, Christians and Chinese. Gandhi was a man of high-caste from Gujarat, but a substantial number of those present at the meeting were low-caste Tamil- and Telegu-speaking southerners. Gandhi was at that very moment beginning to generate a notion of Indian identity that cut through the barriers of religion, class, caste, and language. Although he was creating a nationalism, it was one which was linked to a humanistic universalism and which recognized its debt to diverse sources. As Gandhi was himself to acknowledge, in the development of his philosophy the key role was being played by a small group of Jewish intellectuals steeped in a syncretic mystical cult.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi, in my view, was able to create his politics, later to be put into world-transforming effect, uniquely in the context of Johannesburg. Given his later exaltation of village life and peasant craftsmanship, this may seem a bizarre claim. Yet I will show that the metropolitan context of Johannesburg enabled Gandhi to generate both nationalism and universalism, as well as an effective approach to political mobilization, in a way which contemporary political leaders in India itself failed to do.

In an incisive study of biographical writing on Gandhi, Claude Markovits has pointed out that most Gandhi scholarship gives little attention to his two decades (1893-1914) in South Africa. Markovits rightly notes that, strangely, it was in the apparently oppressive context of South Africa that “Gandhi blossomed in a way he would probably not have, had he stayed in Rajkot.”<sup>12</sup> But Markovits’ point requires refinement. For although Gandhi did indeed gain in professional skill and confidence in his Durban years, before the Boer War, all the decisive developments in Gandhi’s thought and politics took place in the metropolitan context of Johannesburg, between the end of that war and the beginning of the First World War.

When Gandhi published his autobiography, he famously entitled it *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The most important of those experiments took place in a mining town not obviously associated with that virtue. How did this come about?

The socio-political context of Indians in Johannesburg was strikingly different from anywhere else. In India itself, the creation of a unified political identity faced seemingly insuperable social cleavages. The Indian National Congress had been an elite and gradualist movement. Though the crisis over Lord Curzon’s partition of Bengal had recently and for the first time produced both modern mass mobilization and terrorist resistance against the British, this was largely confined to Hindus within the boundaries of Bengal. In Natal, the Indian political activity of the 1890s had been amongst Gujarati Muslim merchants, an elite stratum of society in relation to the predominantly Hindu southerners who constituted the “coolie” labor force on the plantations. When Gandhi came to Natal in 1893, it was as the legal representative of these merchants, who had hired him precisely to defend their social privileges. For example, one of Gandhi’s early legal fights involved an unsuccessful attempt to save Indian property-qualified access to the franchise—something that would benefit only the very wealthiest merchants.<sup>13</sup> Gandhi was at this time strongly loyal to Britain, mobilizing an Indian ambulance corps in the Boer War. His Natal years made him into an effective lawyer, but not into the political leader he wanted to become.

In the post-war years, when he moved his base of operations to Johannesburg, Gandhi found himself in a very different situation. Whereas the Indians of Natal were widely dispersed across the colony, the large majority of those of the Transvaal were concentrated around Johannesburg. Where Natal was an administratively and economically weak structure run by a bumbling plantocracy, in the Transvaal Lord Milner had created a brutally contemporary

bureaucracy which was busy using the wealth generated by the greatest mining center on earth to remold the city of Johannesburg through authoritarian planning. Milner's bureaucrats treated the Indians with an indifference to persons which contrasted with the equally racist but more paternalistic style of Natal. The nature of the Indian experience in Johannesburg is suggested by the events of 1904. Bubonic plague broke out in the "Coolie Location," the predominantly Indian slum area west of the city centre. Gandhi and a group of volunteers heroically tended the victims. The administration's response was to permanently evacuate the entire population of the area to a bleak and isolated site south of the city, burn the location to the ground, and rebuild the area as an industrial site. When settler authorities began to take over the Transvaal administration from the imperial power, the rigor of the administrative process simply continued and intensified. The obnoxious legislation on Indians introduced in 1906 did not differentiate between strata within the Indian community. Concentrated in the city, the Indians found themselves in a common situation, faced by draconian measures which cut across their various ethnic, religious and social divisions. Migration had ripped up people from their context and juxtaposed them in a dramatic way. Muslim merchants with origins in almost every part of India (although predominantly Gujarat), Tamil and Telegu small traders and low-caste laborers lived in close proximity and all faced common problems.

Gandhi's political genius was to find a language that would speak to this common situation. But it was a genius that seized on the discursive materials that presented themselves in the metropolitan context. His campaign was initially built through the organizational work of the Hamidia Islamic Society, an organization centred on the Mosque, led by H.O. Ally and Haji Habib. Ironically, the society was named after the then Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid II, who was notorious for his persecutions of his non-Muslim subjects. But Ally and Habib proved willing and able to reach out to Hindus, Parsis, and Christians. This collaboration was in fact central to the evolution of the concept of *satyagraha* (soul force, sometimes misleadingly rendered as "passive resistance") by Gandhi. At the very first public meeting of the anti-registration campaign in 1906, it was not Gandhi, but Habib, who called on the audience to take a sacred oath to go to jail rather than to accept the oppressive law. Gandhi, initially surprised, accepted the idea, which provided the germ of his lifetime political strategy.<sup>14</sup> It could almost then be said that Islamic conceptions of sanctified struggle were a source of Gandhianism—not a connection which chimes in with the stereotypes of the present. Through his experience in Johannesburg, Gandhi, the high-caste Hindu, embraced Muslims, low-caste Hindus and others as fellow Indians in a way which social boundaries would have made it much harder to do at home. India was most decisively imagined in Johannesburg.

Meanwhile, Gandhi's philosophical and religious formation took place in Johannesburg in a notably cosmopolitan way, through his association with a group of mainly Jewish intellectuals who were fascinated by both eastern religion and western critiques of contemporary society. They became Gandhi's followers, but their ideas had a powerful impact on his thinking. The most important of these individuals were H.S.L. Polak from England, Hermann Kallenbach from Germany, and Gandhi's young secretary, Sonia Schelsin.<sup>15</sup> It was Polak who gave Gandhi John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* to read on a train trip in 1904. Ruskin's condemnation of Victorian industrial civilization became central to Gandhi's critique of industrialism. It directly inspired his life-long experiments with communal living, beginning with the Phoenix settlement in Natal and Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg.<sup>16</sup>

Even more striking, however, is that it was through his discussions with these “Western” mystics that Gandhi fully engaged with Indian religious thought. Before coming to Johannesburg, Gandhi had had only a passing interest in Hinduism and had not seriously studied its sacred language, Sanskrit. But Kallenbach, Polak and their associates were intrigued by Asian religion. This interest had developed through their involvement with Theosophy, a now largely forgotten religious trend, but one which attained great international influence at the turn of the century. Theosophy was constructed in the 1870s and 1880s by the Russian, Helena Blavatsky and her American disciple Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. Although Blavatsky’s writings are so turgid as to be reader-proof, she made two simple moves which had huge appeal for late nineteenth century Western intellectuals. She endorsed spiritualism (communication with the dead) and linked it with spirituality—a mysticism which invoked the East as an antithesis to the supposedly materialist West. Buddhism and Hinduism were celebrated by Blavatsky and Olcott as the most evolved religious forms. To those discontented with the hubristic pretensions of science and the bureaucratic socio-political order emerging in Europe and North America, this advocacy of the non-Western and the mystical was compelling.<sup>17</sup> Theosophists were also in the market for the ideas of another sage. The Bengali Swami Vivekananda played a major part in popularizing Eastern religion in the West. Vivekananda elaborated a doctrine which portrayed Christianity and Judaism as lesser versions of the same theology found in Vedantic Hinduism, thus providing those raised in the Western faiths with a conceptual bridge to Hinduism. In 1893, Vivekananda travelled from India to Chicago where a World’s Fair was in progress, and represented Hinduism there at a “World Parliament of Religions.” His speeches evoked tremendous interest among Americans and internationally. Vivekananda also, during this trip, initiated the teaching of yoga in the West, by codifying particular practices and doctrines for classes he gave to Americans in Brooklyn.<sup>18</sup> Thus Blavatsky, Olcott and Vivekananda successfully packaged Hindu and Buddhist ideas for international consumption. But their work had more directly political implications. Theosophy, although overtly apolitical, by viewing the East as spiritually more developed than the West, implicitly relativized occidental achievements and was therefore proved especially congenial to Western critics of their own societies. And Vivekananda was overtly anti-colonial.<sup>19</sup>

It was in the course of his Johannesburg discussions with the Theosophists that Gandhi for the first time was inspired to study the *Bhagavad Gita* seriously. Initially he read it in English translation, before going on to teach himself Sanskrit.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi became so devoted to the *Baghavat Gita* that his advocacy of it played a major role in it becoming the fundamental text of twentieth century Hinduism, a status it had not previously enjoyed.<sup>21</sup> It was also in talking with the Theosophists that Gandhi became interested in Vivekananda’s work. During Gandhi’s 1908 imprisonment in the Johannesburg Fort, he was able to synthesise his recent experiences and his reading of the *Baghavat Gita*, Vivekananda, Ruskin and other religious and literary texts to formulate the notion of *satyagraha*.<sup>22</sup> The ideology that steered the Indian nationalist movement was a product of the unique circumstances of Johannesburg.

Tragically, Gandhi, despite his extraordinary commitment to a unified India embracing all its peoples, did not succeed. The unity which was created around the Hamidia Mosque by a smart city lawyer was not maintained on the larger stage of the Indian nation by a saintly Mahatma, as M.A. Jinnah led South Asia’s Muslims in a separatist direction. And Gandhi’s role here was particularly tragic. He was powerfully committed to Hindu-Moslem unity, but in seeking to mobilize the Indian people he adopted a cultural style of religious asceticism and village life which was distinctively Hindu. This made it all too easy for Muslim sectarians to portray his

movement as Hindu and for Hindu fundamentalists to equate Indian-ness with Hinduism.<sup>23</sup> Absolutely against Gandhi's will, and despite great heroism on his part in behalf of persecuted Muslims, his movement divided along sectarian lines. In the end he was dragged into the Cyclop's cave.

### **Nelson Mandela at the Bantu Men's Social Center**

At Easter 1944, a group of young men (and one woman, Albertina Sisulu) met at Johannesburg's Bantu Men's Social Center. Amongst them were an estate agent, Walter Sisulu, a teacher, Oliver Tambo, and an aspirant lawyer, Nelson Mandela. They proceeded to form the African National Congress Youth League, aimed at injecting militancy and radicalism into the three decades old, but decrepit and cautious, ANC. This was of course a crucial moment in South Africa's revolutionary history; by 1949 these young turks would capture control of the ANC and lead it into its campaigns of peaceful resistance in the 1950s, and armed struggle from the 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

Yet there are a number of paradoxes about the 1944 meeting which are striking in relation to Nelson Mandela's later politics. At that meeting, Mandela was under the sway of a brilliant young ideologue of African nationalism, Anton Lembede. Though Mandela would go down in history as the great reconciler across racial boundaries, the ANCYL of 1944 declared themselves Africanists, excluding whites from a future free state. Indians were also not to be participants in the new nation, yet within a few years, the ANCYL leaders would not only work with Indian activists, but become deeply influenced by Gandhian ideas. Mandela and Tambo would, in their future struggles, develop close working relationships with Communists, yet Lembede and his disciples rejected all "foreign" ideologies.

How then did Mandela's politics take on a very different form? I want to suggest that it was through the way he worked out his metropolitan experience. Mandela's respect for tradition and his sense of authority are often, and with some justification, placed in the context of his origins as a scion of the chiefly house of the Thembu. But less recognized is that he first came to Johannesburg, at the beginning of the 1940s, as a rebel against custom and tradition, grabbing for the personal freedom of the metropolis. After growing up in the rural Eastern Cape and attending university in the small town of Alice, Mandela had faced an arranged marriage, ordered by the Regent of the Thembu. Mandela, whose education had exposed him to different conceptions of marriage, revolted in the name of a modernist individualism: "I was a romantic and I was not prepared to have anyone, even the regent, select a bride for me."<sup>25</sup> With a relative who was in a similar situation, Mandela left for Johannesburg. He was not then an uncritical traditionalist, but rather a young man with distinctly metropolitan aspirations.

Despite the oppressive racial order which he was to face in the city, Mandela reveled in its modernist promise. As the car in which he was travelling approached Johannesburg through the night, he saw its lights ahead:

Electricity to me had always been a novelty and a luxury, and here was a vast landscape of electricity, a city of light. I was terribly excited to see the city I had been hearing about since I was a child. Johannesburg had always been depicted as a city of dreams, a place where one could transform oneself from a poor peasant to wealthy sophisticate, a city of danger and opportunity.<sup>26</sup>

Mandela never lost his taste for the cosmopolitan glamour of the city. He loved its 1940s world of swing bands and dance. When, later in the forties, he began to attain some success as a lawyer, he bought an Oldsmobile and ordered a suit from the city's leading tailor.<sup>27</sup> One basis then for Mandela's transcendence of the Cyclops-nationalism of Lembede lies in a personal and cultural empathy with a metropolitan style which predisposed him against a continuing association with Lembede's indigenism.

The style which Mandela adopted was notably Americanised. There has been a remarkable duality in black Johannesburgers' historical relationship with the US. From the presidency of Truman to that of the elder Bush, the *de facto* support of successive American administrations for white minority governments in South Africa produced a visceral political anti-Americanism. Yet this was accompanied by a continuous, deep devotion to the emulation of American cultural styles, from the era of swing bands to that of hip-hop. The bands that Mandela followed modelled themselves on American stars like Duke Ellington and Glen Miller; the clothing and cars which Mandela and fashionable black youth aspired to were those they saw in Hollywood movies. At the level of self-styling, "America" represented personal freedom: one of the bands Mandela was associated with was "The Manhattan Brothers" and a notable township gang of the era called itself "The Americans."

An important conduit for American influence on black intellectuals was the Bantu Men's Social Center. Located at the southern end of bustling Eloff Street, the city's main shopping thoroughfare, the center comprised a two story building, including a hall which was the venue for dances, concerts, theatricals and meetings. It was conveniently placed for central Johannesburg office workers: Sisulu and Mandela were amongst those who dropped in regularly. The center had been founded in 1921 by the Reverend Ray Phillips, an American missionary, as a rather conscious attempt to "moralize" the leisure time of black men in Johannesburg. It was well funded and in particular had a substantial library founded by the Carnegie Corporation. But the agency of the users of the center took them, during the 1930s and 1940s, well beyond the kind of political quietism that Rev. Phillips envisaged.<sup>28</sup> The kind of ideological shifts which took place in the center, and the centrality of African American influences to that process, were captured by the young black man, Peter Abrahams, who came there in 1936. As he entered, he heard a voice singing on the gramophone: "That was a black man, one of us! I knew it. I needed no proof. The men about me, their faces, their bearing all carried the proof."<sup>29</sup>

The singer was Paul Robeson. Abrahams then found a section of "American Negro Literature" on the shelves of the center. He took down W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and it proved a life-transforming experience: "Du Bois might have been writing about my land and my people. The mood and feeling he described was native to me."<sup>30</sup> Abrahams spent all his leisure time in the next few months at the BMSC, working through the African American writers in the center's library: "I became a nationalist, a colour nationalist, through the writings of men and women who lived a world away from me."<sup>31</sup>

For the members of the BMSC, African America provided a fiercely attractive model of selfhood, combining modernity with defiance of racial power.<sup>32</sup> Their exemplars were black Americans whose sporting or cultural achievements had incorporated implicit or explicit statements of political identity. When the African American intellectual Ralph J. Bunche stayed at the BMSC during a 1937 visit to the city, he wrote to Robeson:

Paul, you are surely an idol of the Bantu...when one mentions American Negroes they all chorus 'Paul Robeson and Joe Louis'—the more sophisticated may also add Jesse Owens and Duke [Ellington].<sup>33</sup>

African America was thus essential both to giving black Johannesburg a sense that modernity and racial liberation could be organically linked, and in providing the city's intellectuals and politicians with discursive weapons through which inequality could be attacked. This American modernist strand was important in Mandela's development, for the style which he adopted as a political leader in the late 1940s and 1950s was far from the sentimentalization of "tradition" advocated by Lembede. This style, I would suggest, helped produce a Mandela who could look outwards, beyond the verities of one-eyed nationalism.

The evolution of Mandela's political strategy was centrally connected to the cosmopolitanism of Joburg, and indeed to its Gandhian and Indian linkages. With the formation of the ANCYL, Mandela and his associates were casting around for an effective political strategy. In 1946, a communist doctor of Gujarati descent, Yusuf Dadoo, led a campaign of resistance by the Johannesburg Indian community against racist property legislation, using volunteers who were willing to go to jail to defy the law. The campaign was explicitly based on Gandhian principles. Up to this time, Mandela had generally accepted Lembede's anti-Indian bias. But now he came to see Dadoo's campaign as exemplary and as a political model for the ANC, having "...witnessed the Indian people register an extraordinary protest against colour oppression in a way that Africans and the ANC had not....If I had once questioned the willingness of the Indian community to protest against oppression, I no longer could."<sup>34</sup>

When Mandela and his cohort won the leadership of the ANC in 1949, they consciously modelled the strategy they adopted, and which was put into practice in the mass resistance movements of the early 1950s, on what they had learned from Dadoo's campaign.

Dadoo's political trajectory and his consequent ability to influence the ANC, derived from the particular transnationalism of Johannesburg history. Born in nearby Krugersdorp in 1909, Dadoo came from a family which had personal links with Gandhi. In 1920 Gandhi had, from India, intervened on behalf of Dadoo's father when the Krugersdorp municipality tried to evict him from his property. During the 1920s, Yusuf was sent to school in India. He was influenced by the nationalist agitation of the time, and met Gandhi, on whom he made a favorable impression. After qualifying in medicine in the UK during the 1930s, Dadoo returned to South Africa and became active in the Communist Party of South Africa. What is striking about Dadoo's 1946 campaign is that though he was to develop a reputation as a very "orthodox" Communist, his actions in this period reflected more of the Gandhian than of the Communist influences on him. During the traumas of independence and partition in 1946-1948, the Communist Party of India took an extremely hostile stance toward the nationalist movement. Turning against Gandhi and Nehru, the CPI went so far as to dismiss the attainment of political freedom as insignificant. Yet in the same period, Dadoo not only conducted his activities along Gandhian lines, but was effusive in his praise of Gandhi.<sup>35</sup> He thus acted as a reviver of Johannesburg-invented forms of Indian nationalist practice, and transmitted this tradition to the new local form of African nationalism.

In the South African democratic transition of the 1990s, Mandela famously played his role of unifier of a country on the brink of civil war. His attempts to bridge racial and class divides were then much decried by extreme leftist critics. But theirs was surely not a sober

estimate. Mandela helped avoid a catastrophic war through a truly inclusive national self-definition. In his successor, Thabo Mbeki, we have seen a far narrower and more short-sighted approach. Mbeki combines the crudest ideological nationalist appeals to the “authentic” with the crassest promotion of the economic interests of a new elite. The one-eyed Cyclops is now calling the shots.

### **Conclusion: Herman Charles Bosman in Rissik Street**

Gandhi and Mandela were in large part, products of an extraordinary metropolis – Johannesburg. In different ways, the city’s cosmopolitanism provided them with contexts that were rich in new ideas. They drew on these ideas to generate thought which was nationalist, but which transcended the limits of nationalism. They became nationalist leaders who reached out beyond the narrow confines of conventional nationalist forms and who acknowledged their debts to cosmopolitanism.

James Joyce understood the urban and metropolitan origins of such political creativity. But he also saw that the logic of nationalism could undermine these potentialities. Like the intentions of the Irish radicals of Joyce’s youth, Gandhi and Mandela’s heroic aims would suffer shipwreck. The humanism of Gandhi and Nehru gave way to the irresponsible populism of Indira and the vicious sectarianism of Advani and Vajpayee. Mandela’s non-racism was overtaken, much more rapidly, by the paranoid ethnicism of Thabo Mbeki. Too often, leaders of broad vision cannot escape the Cyclops.

But the Joycean “Shout in the street” remains a source of hope. One who understood this was the writer Herman Charles Bosman. Bosman was, in his combination of violent destructiveness and superb creativity, a quintessentially Joburg character.<sup>36</sup> He was the son of a miner who died in an underground accident. In 1926, at the age of 21, Herman killed his stepbrother with a rifle shot, over a series of apparently trivial disagreements. Sentenced to death, he was reprieved, and out of his jail experiences created the remarkable prison memoir *Cold Stone Jug*. After serving only a few years, Bosman was released to become the *enfant terrible* of early 1930s Joburg journalism and spent the late 1930s as a poverty-stricken author in London. Returning to South Africa, he became the country’s most popular short story writer during the 1940s. Bosman knew that no orthodoxy, no one-eyed nationalism would in the end contain the energies of the metropolis. On the 18 September 1945, Bosman came walking down Rissik Street towards Johannesburg’s Town Hall. There, the Afrikaner Nationalist politician, D.F. Malan was addressing his followers. Within three years, Malan would become prime minister and initiate the policy of *apartheid*. Outside in the street, left-wingers and ex-servicemen, enraged by Malan’s Nazi sympathies and racism, were facing off against policemen. Silence reigned. But then to Bosman’s delight, it was suddenly broken:

A shower of bottles and half-bricks and pieces of masonry hurtled out of the eerie shadows of the trees in President Street and thundered against the policeman’s helmets. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was only the spirit of Johannesburg once more asserting itself. The undying spirit of the mining town, born of large freedoms and given to flamboyant forms of expression....

They are trying to make snobs of us, making us forget who our ancestors were. They are trying to make us lose our pride in the fact that our forebears were a lot of roughnecks who knew nothing about culture and who came here to look for gold. We who are of Johannesburg know this spirit that is inside of us, and we don't resent the efforts which are being made to put a collar and tie on this city. Because we know that every so often, when things seem to be going very smoothly on the surface, something will stir in the raw depths of Johannesburg, like the awakening of an old and half-forgotten memory and the brickbats hurtling down Market Street will be thrown with the same lack of accuracy as when the pioneers of the mining camp did the throwing.<sup>37</sup>

We can take comfort from Bosman's understanding that the modernist energies of his metropolis would prove unsubduable. Whatever the machinations of anti-urban, anti-cosmopolitan Cyclops, he will always have to live in fear that the motley crew of the Joburg street will, one fine evening, drive a stake into his eye.



## ENDNOTES

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- 3 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 345.
- 4 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in *The Sociology of George Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 419.
- 5 Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life," 410.
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- 13 Swan, *Gandhi*, 83; Markovits, *Un-Gandhian Gandhi*, 3-4, 80-84.
- 14 Swan, *Gandhi*, 119-122.
- 15 Margaret Chaterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1992).
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