

**Revolution and Non-Violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela by Imraan Coovadia (Oxford University Press, 2020)**

Review by Kalim Rajab

Apart from (in the main) his die-hard fans, I suspect most people would be surprised to learn that the 1993 film adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* – that ode to layered discretion and gilded New England social mores - was directed by Martin Scorsese. Besides Catholicism and its associated guilt, the theme most prevalent in Scorsese's works is violence, most often of an extreme nature. So *The Age of Innocence* – where scarcely a butter knife is pushed askew in anger – may at first glance seem to sit uncharacteristically within the great director's *oeuvre*. Yet the great director recalls *The Age of Innocence* as “probably one of my most violent films.” In Scorsese's assessment, the film was less a meditation of manners and rather more about the extreme tensions and horror lurking underneath genteel New York society, a society where the light cuts inflicted were never more than skin-deep - yet no less penetrating.

I thought about Scorsese's juxtaposition of violence screaming silently into a non-violent society when reading Imraan Coovadia's new work, *Revolution and Non-Violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela*, published last year by Oxford University Press. Coovadia, the South African writer and professor of English at the University of Cape Town, is also an imaginative essayist and here he casts his eye over an awkward juxtaposition he has noticed in the lives of three great and radical figures of twentieth century humanism and peace as they sought to bring about social change – a juxtaposition of violence co-existing with non-violent techniques, each manifesting itself in close proximity to the other within the lives and experiences of Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

If, for example, non-violence was a radical counterpoint to the despotic power of the state (arrayed against the downtrodden in Tolstoy's Czarist Russia, Gandhi's British India and Mandela's apartheid South Africa) then what interests Coovadia is that it was often also dependent for its power on “doctrine, collective memory and the force of example” – pillars upon which violent regimes equally relied.

He thus seeks to unravel the closeness between the practices of violence and non-violence – in how each is organised and maintained, and the discipline each needs to renew its strength. Gandhi spoke of how he saw the soldier's willingness to die as a first step in civil disobedience and in his case, violence was often a living shadow – the idea of *satyagraha* began in Johannesburg in 1906, mere months after Gandhi participated in assisting the British quash the Bambatha Rebellion led by black Africans. Mandela, equally, formed *Umkonotho We Sizwe*, the armed resistance wing of the ANC which he envisaged co-existing next to the party, a few months before his capture and eventual life imprisonment.

There is also the interesting hypothesis put forward in recent year by such academics as Faisal Devji, whom Coovadia quotes, in which Devji writes about the “temptation of violence” inherent in passive resistance which, according to him, “seeks to elicit a violent response from an opponent.” Such views are thought-provoking, even if they fail to distinguish between different levels of violence – would passive resistance have been as powerful, say, if the opponent had been fascism rather than British imperialism?

Then there is Tolstoy, who in his life and in some of his most vividly drawn characters, struggled with a disturbing sensation of complicity with injustice. In letters written to, among others, Gandhi, the novelist confronts the perennial question of how to confront injustice without mirroring its methods.

As Coovadia points out, it is hard to read such letters, especially ones written just before his death in 1910, without projecting onto them a feeling of dread with what we know will be unleashed upon Czarist Russia in the following years. As Tolstoy the radical feared, the type of non-violent social change he sought might well turn out to rely on violence for its power.

For professor of English, I expected Coovadia's style to be more lapidary; that does not, however, detract from the book's perceptiveness. A much recommended book by an excellent essayist.

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