In the 18th and 19th centuries, colonial powers justified the conquest of large parts of Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of an almost divine mission. The mission compelled them to bring “development” and “civilisation” to the territories that had been colonised. The justification was, but a cloak, for more nefarious purposes. The colonised lost control of their land, resources, and labour. These were yoked to the project of garnering economic profits for the imperial power.

Colonies were treated as a piece of real estate that could be plundered at will. The claim that colonialism would bring development to the inhabitants—childlike at best, savages at worst, but certainly heathens who were inept, inefficient and ineffective—was deeply offensive. It generated a backlash in the form of a struggle for freedom. The leaders of the freedom struggle had to re-establish political control over their own land. They also had to reclaim their identity as people who mattered. They had to establish that they were capable of ruling their own country.

Seventy-two years after Indians wrested their freedom from the British, the central government has imposed what can be termed “internal colonialism” in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The script of establishing control over the state coheres closely to the colonial project. Consider that the terminology of bringing “development” to the people of J&K has been summoned as a legitimising device. The economist Jean Drèze has established that indices of social development in the state are higher than in many other states, including Gujarat. But this does not seem to matter to the ruling class. The people of the state have been stripped of their dignity by the downgrading of, and the bifurcation of, their state into two Union Territories in a completely arbitrary fashion.

Recollect that the frontiers of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had been drawn by imperial power. Armed with a pencil they drew lines on a map of the continent at a meeting in Berlin in 1885. They called these lines boundaries of states. Much like the colonised were deprived of basic rights, the people of J&K have been divested of their constitutional rights. This, they are told, is for their own good.

What is more worrying is the reaction of other Indians to the...
internal colonisation of J&K. Except for a few notable exceptions, our fellow citizens have celebrated the erosion of the status of the state. No one seems to want to understand that the relationship of J&K to the central government is complex. No one recollects that the former princely state had acceded to India in October 1947 on certain terms and conditions, and that these were codified in Article 370 of the Constitution. No one bothers to remember that the people of the state had been promised a plebiscite and that this did not take place. And everyone prefers to forget that successive governments in Delhi have seriously violated democratic norms in J&K, whether these pertained to elections or to civil liberties.

Over the last five and a half years we seem to have mislaid our capacity for informed and reasoned debate. We see surges of emotions that hail every decision of the leadership. We live amidst the politics of din, the terminology of abuse and vicious trolling. We witness with great dismay the waylaying of democratic norms, and of the right of citizens to hold the government accountable. We seem to have lost our ability to stand up for fellow citizens whose rights have been infringed. It is time to raise a question that is central to our democratic life and federalism. Why not Article 370? Why not regional autonomy for groups that wish to protect and preserve their distinctive culture and language? Why do we fail to realise that a diverse society needs different policies for different groups within the country? Why have we forgotten the arguments that stress the importance of federalism?

The defence of federalism is located in at least three sets of arguments. One, in large societies, decentralisation of power enables citizens to access state and local governments, and hold elected leaders responsible. Two, decentralisation is indispensable for administrative and financial efficiency. Three, decentralisation allows elected representatives to gauge the needs of people in far-flung areas and design appropriate policies. For these and other reasons, federalism has been seen as appropriate for large and complex societies.

The debate on federalism acquired new urgency with the end of the Cold War that followed the collapse of actually existing socialism and the outburst of conflicts and civil war over identities. Groups struggle for resources, but these struggles can be resolved given some imagination, a great deal of generosity and some capacity for negotiation. Identity conflicts have proved infinitely more difficult to resolve; they are simply intractable. Some groups demand a share in the resources of the country, others demand regional autonomy and still others wish to secede. Civil wars have led to thousands of deaths, massive displacements and suffering. “Each new morn” says Macduff of war in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, “New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven on the face, that it resounds”.

With the explosion of identity wars in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a fourth argument was added to the defence of federalism. Federal arrangements might help to contain combustible politics of identity. The acceptance of identity politics did not come easily to democratic theorists. Many scholars were uncomfortable with linguistic, religious and ethnic identities. They followed John Stuart Mill who in 1861 wrote on the issue in his famous work Considerations on Representative Government. Free institutions, he wrote, are practically impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. People speaking different languages cannot develop fellow feeling. Nor can they generate a united public opinion that is necessary for the working of representative government.

In the opening years of the 1990s, the upsurge of hyper-nationalist identity politics, conflict and war forced democratic theorists to recognise the importance of, and the power of, identity. People are willing to kill and die for their religion, their language and their ethnic identity. This led to the break-up of countries, for example, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and secession in other countries. It has been calculated that the increase in the membership of the United Nations from the original 52 members in 1945 to 149 in 1984 was due to decolonisation. The growth thereafter from 151 in 1990 to 193 at present is largely the result of secession.

Democratic theorists had to, in effect, address a new political predicament—how can identity wars that have proved inflexible and resistant to mediation be contained? Though the literature on federalism as the preferred solution to identity struggles is divided, on balance, federalism, regional autonomy and the creation of federal units on the basis of linguistic, ethnic and religious identities is considered a better option than unitary government. Elites temper their demands and their intransigence the moment they are granted a state of their own. From resisters they become stakeholders. And anxieties
about religious and linguistic identities are assuaged.

Much before the western world confronted the issue, India had understood the significance of protecting and safeguarding languages and the culture it embodies. Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged this in April 1963. Intervening in the debate on the Official Languages Bill in the Lok Sabha, he remarked that in matters of language one has to be very careful. We have to be as liberal as possible and not try to suppress a language. “Whenever an attempt has been made to suppress a popular language or coerce the people into using some other language, there has been trouble.” Nehru spoke from experience: a rampant conflict over the national language and the demand for linguistic states, both of which came up in the first decade of the 20th century.

In the mid-1960s, a movement appeared on the political scene that held that Hindi should be the national language. The Hindi movement, which quickly acquired communal overtones because it positioned itself against Urdu, was hotly contested by Tamil nationalists. Repeated anti-Hindi agitations by the Dravidian leadership right until 1965 resisted what was called Brahmanical domination. Tamil nationalists threatened to secede.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar had remarked that no provision in the Constitution bred as much anger as that of the national language in the Constituent Assembly. The Assembly, therefore, postponed the adoption of Hindi as the national language to 1965. As the date drew near, Madras city was shaken by agitations; portions of the Constitution that dealt with the language issue, books written in Hindi and government documents were burnt on the streets. The central government decided that it was safer to compromise. The Official Amendment Act of 1967 adopted the three-language formulae. Major languages have been included in the Eighth Schedule.

Today we cannot imagine the anger and the passion that was expended on the issue of the national language. What is significant is that the government of the day accepted that language was important for people. Which language we speak determines what opportunities we have access to. Language is also important for us because language is culture, it shapes our worldview. To take away language is to diminish human beings.

The second issue that rocked the country was the conflict around linguistic states. The demand had erupted after Bengal was divided in 1905. The Indian National Congress agreed that after India became an independent country, states would be reorganised on the basis of linguistic identities. But when the time came, the Congress government hesitated and prevaricated. After the shock of Partition, which was legitimised by the two-nation theory, the new government could not reconcile with the linguistic reorganisation of states. It might have balkanised the country further.

However, the issue could not be swept away from the centre stage of politics. History has shown us that identity politics acquire a dangerous trajectory; they become independent of economic sops such as “development”, “integration” into the country, or more “opportunities”. In October 1952, Potti Sriramulu, a respected freedom fighter, went on a fast-unto-death for a separate state for Telugu-speaking people. By December of that year discontent erupted in the Andhra region. Sriramulu’s health deteriorated, and he died on 15 December 1952. Telugu speaking areas were wracked by riots. On 19 December, Nehru was forced to concede the new state of Andhra Pradesh. The state was carved out of Madras state, excluding Madras city. Telangana was incorporated into Andhra Pradesh.

The decision propelled other movements for linguistic states and Nehru appointed a States Reorganisation Committee on 22 December 1953. The Commission received and considered over 150,000 documents for and against linguistic states. The first round of state formation during 1956-1966 was based on language. Subsequent rounds, the formation of states in the Northeast, and the creation of Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh and Jharkand were justified on other grounds such as economic backwardness. In 2014, Telangana was constituted as a separate state again on the basis of language and shared cultural traditions.

India’s political experiment added another bow to the argument for federalism, the need to accommodate identity issues. That experiment has worked well, defusing tensions and allaying fears. The recognition of identity is in keeping with the best tradition of contemporary political theory, that there is no such thing as an abstract individual. Individuals are social beings. They realise their sociable nature through membership of associations in civil society, ranging from bird watching clubs, to book reading groups, to literary societies, to theatre-going associations, to cricket clubs, to civil liberties unions that keep
watch on acts of omission and commission of the government to even film fan clubs. Yet, undeniably, we are intimately attached to the community we are born into. Our community teaches us a language that allows us to make sense of the world, of our own place in the world, and our relationships with others. It follows that an individual should be assured secure access to her community. This is an essential precondition for being human.

The case of Jammu and Kashmir was different. It came into existence in 1846. When the Maharaja of Kashmir acceded to India in October 1947, he insisted on regional autonomy. For Jawaharlal Nehru the inclusion of J&K in India was important. It validated the doctrine of pluralism and secularism, notably that the country has place for all religious groups and that they will be treated equally by the state. If the inhabitants of a state form a minority and for that reason are vulnerable to majoritarianism, if they fear that their religion, their culture and their language is threatened, they should be accorded special protection in the form of regional autonomy. This commitment was incorporated in the Constitution in the form of Article 370. Nehru knew that the people of J&K could only be a part of India if they were assured of their identity and if the state protected their distinctive culture. This reasoning has also been applied to parts of the Northeast that possess a well-defined culture and language.

It is regrettable that over the years successive governments in Delhi have violated the basic terms of the contract with J&K. Yet the people of the state were willing to give democracy a chance. Discontent with the systemic violations of Article 370 and of all democratic norms burst into flames in 1990. Since then the people of the state have lived with violence that is unleashed on them from all sides. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has tried to contain this violence militarily. But political wars cannot be fought militarily. There is no evidence that violence has abated under the iron hand of the central government. Though all forms of violence are condemnable, state violence that terrorises the citizens of the country is sickening. It contravenes democracy, it leads to trauma.

The very people we voted for, the very people we entrusted our country to, have betrayed us. What could be more traumatic? The poet Umair Bhat gives us an indication of this trauma in his poem The Siege:

In the streets, filled with impenetrable smoke, Kashmir is burning again, so are tyres, rubber and logs. The houses are burning. Fire runs in waves. The air, heavy with soot, murmurs death overhead….

Each evening on the dinner tables we prepare for our little wars we will fight in the morning.

This is but a part of the story of violence that runs rampant in Kashmir. Thousands have been killed, thousands have been detainted, thousands have disappeared, young children have been radicalised and several thousand have been tortured. The people of Kashmir are caught between the Charybdis of Indian security forces and the Scylla of armed groups that have been active in the Valley since the late 1980s. Terrible forms of violence have engulfed minds and crippled imaginations, forbidden people to think of the future, compelled them to concentrate only on holding minds and bodies together. Violence has painted the history and the present of Kashmir in blood and has blurred the future by the smoke that curls upwards from burning homes and villages. Violence has begotten only violence and led to multiple tragedies of epic proportions.

The tale of the Kashmir tragedy could have been foretold. The Government of India, desperate to prevent further Balkanisation of the country, embroiled in a war that was not of its own making with Pakistan in 1947–48, pilloried in the United Nations by major western powers that had turned against India, and pressurised by right wing forces to integrate Kashmir into the country, was to later adopt extremely short-sighted policies in the Kashmir case. In retrospect it is surprising that the government did not realise that it was not dealing with a population that had been rendered acquiescent under princely rule.

The Government of India was dealing with a people who had mobilised against the misrule of the monarch since the 1930s. This politically aware population witnessed a series of cataclysmic events in the aftermath of 1947, the terror and the atrocities inflicted by raiders from Pakistan in 1947, the disruption that followed the war between India and Pakistan on Kashmiri soil, and the partition of the community and of the homeland between two, and then three countries. Above all, this population bore witness to the breach of contractual and constitutional obligations by the Government of India. Yet the Kashmiri people
were prepared to give democracy a chance. But it was precisely democracy that was compromised and denied to them.

Seventy-two years after J&K acceded to India, the Government of India has erased the state from the map of India. We do not know what the consequences will be because the people are shut off not only from the world, but also from their own kith and kin. A sense of foreboding, however, permeates the atmosphere. When Maharaja Hari Singh acceded to India in 1947, the country was poised to be a democracy. The status of the former princely state was fixed by making it a part of the federal structure and granting it regional autonomy so that the distinctive culture and identity of the people could be protected against marauders.

The hope that the Indian state could deliver to the people of the state protection, democracy and justice frittered away by the end of the 1980s. Thereafter the Valley has seen little but discontent and the politicisation of the people. Upon a deeply politicised people the Indian government has imposed humiliation. This is worrying. Thomas Hobbes wrote, “Though nothing can be immortal, which mortals make; yet, if men had the use of reason they pretend to, their Common-wealths might be secured, at least, from perishing by internal diseases.” But reason is not a constitutive aspect of the Kashmir policy of the Government of India. Can the Commonwealth be properly secured? Can rulers throw internal colonialism into the dustbin of history?

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The Monk Who Shaped India’s Secularism

Rahul Mukherji

Has Indian nationalism turned utterly exclusivist? What would one of the icons of nationalism, Swami Vivekananda, have to say about this shift? Nationalism, after all, is a battle for the myths that create a nation.

The practice of Indian secularism, despite its pitfalls, has distinguished the country from many of its neighbours. India is the nation with the third-highest number of Muslims in the world. Its ability to consolidate democracy amidst unprecedented diversity could teach a lesson or two even to advanced industrial economies that have operated along the lines of a classic monocultural nation. The country’s secular ideals have their roots in its Constitution, promulgated by its people, a majority of whom are Hindus. Would this state of affairs change because a different morality, Hindu nationalism, has surreptitiously overtaken India’s tryst with secular nationalism?

Indian secularism has always attempted, however imperfectly, to respect the credo of sarva dharma samabhava (all religions lead to the same goal), which translates to an equal respect for all religions. However, the early-day Hindu nationalists were clearly at odds with the idea. This was the reason Nathuram Godse assassinated one of its strongest proponents, Mahatma Gandhi.

Hindu nationalism today

For the likes of Godse, a corollary of the two-nation theory was that independent India was primarily a land for Hindus. More than 70 years after Independence, this notion has gained prominence as never before in India’s post-colonial history. This is evident when the Central government says it will consider all Hindus in neighbouring countries as potential Indian citizens. The most recent example of this is the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, the country’s only Muslim-majority State, into two Union Territories, with all special provisions taken away from the erstwhile State’s residents.

Not only were Kashmiris not consulted, they were made to suffer an information blackout. Does this kind of Hindu nationalism align with the cosmopolitan nature of India’s millennial traditions?

Another question that needs to be asked is: Is it fair to appropriate Swami Vivekananda, another follower of the sarva dharma samabhava philosophy whom Prime Minister Narendra Modi keeps citing, as a Hindutva icon?

Here, it is necessary to understand what Vivekananda’s life and worldview said about Indian nationalism. His Chicago lectures (1893) marked the beginning of a mission that would interpret India’s millennial tradition in order to reform it. He later spent about two years in New York, establishing the first Vedanta Society in 1894. He travelled widely across Europe and engaged Indologists such as Max Mueller and Paul Deussen. He even debated with eminent scientists such as Nicola Tesla before embarking on his reformist mission in India.

One of the key elements of his message, based on the experiments of
his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was that all religions lead to the same goal. Paramahansa is unique in the annals of mysticism as one whose spiritual practices reflect the belief that the ideas of personal god and that of an impersonal god as well as spiritual practices in Christianity and in Islam all lead to the same realisation.

While in Chicago, Vivekananda stressed three important and novel facets of Hindu life. First, he said that Indian tradition believed “not only in toleration” but in acceptance of “all religions as true”. Second, he stressed in no uncertain terms that Hinduism was incomplete without Buddhism, and vice versa.

Finally, in his last meeting there, he proclaimed: “If anybody dreams [of] the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not fight’; ‘Assimilation and not destruction’, and ‘Harmony and peace and not dissension’.”

**Religion and rationality**

Vivekananda’s interpretation of India’s past was radical and when he returned from the West, he had with him a large number of American and European followers. These women and men stood behind his project of establishing the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897.

Vivekananda emphasised that India needed to trade Indian spirituality for the West’s material and modern culture and he was all for India’s scientific modernisation. He supported Jagadish Chandra Bose’s scientific projects. In fact, Vivekananda’s American disciple Sara Bull helped patent Bose’s discoveries in the USA. He also invited Irish teacher Margaret Noble, whom he rechristened ‘Sister Nivedita’, to help uplift the condition of Indian women. When she inaugurated a girls’ school in Calcutta, Vivekananda even requested his friends to send their girls to this school.

Vivekananda also inspired Jamsetji Tata to establish the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Iron and Steel Company. India needed a secular monastery from where scientific and technological development would uplift India’s material conditions, for which his ideals provided a source of inspiration.

**Influence on Gandhi, Nehru**

Vivekananda made a remarkable impact on the makers of modern India, who later challenged the two-nation theory, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. He used the term ‘Daridra Narayan’ to imply that ‘service to the poor is service to god’, many years before Gandhiji addressed the socially oppressed as ‘Harijan’ (children of god). The Mahatma in fact opined that his love for India grew thousandfold after reading Vivekananda.

It is for these reasons that Vivekananda’s birthday was declared as the National Youth Day by the Government of India.

Was Vivekananda then a proponent of Hindutva or of the millennial traditions that have survived many an invasion and endured to teach the world both “toleration and universal acceptance”? Should Hindu nationalism take his name but forget his fiery modern spirit that rediscovered and reformed India’s past? And shouldn’t India’s secular nationalism also acknowledge its deeply spiritual roots in the beliefs of pioneers like the reformer Swami Vivekananda?

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**Gandhi for the Post-Truth Age**

**Pankaj Mishra**

In 2015, in South Africa, where Mohandas Gandhi lived from 1893 to 1914, a statue of him was defaced by protesters. The following year, the University of Ghana agreed to remove Gandhi’s statue from its campus, after an online campaign with the (misspelled) hashtag #Ghandimustfall charged the Indian leader with racism against black Africans.

Even some left-leaning writers have recently argued that Gandhi must fall. In “The South African Gandhi” (2015), Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed depict him as a pro-British lawyer, who worked within the country’s white-supremacist politics to promote his Indian compatriots at the expense of black South Africans. The Marxist critic Perry Anderson, in his scathing
account of Indian nationalism, “The Indian Ideology” (2012), charges that Gandhi’s “intellectual development” was “arrested by intense religious belief”.

While it is not the task of this essay to respond to these criticisms, one point we wish to make is that what many of these critics forget is that Gandhi was responding to an unprecedentedly violent and unstable period in human history, beginning with the intensification of imperialism and globalisation in the late nineteenth century and continuing through two world wars. “Politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries,” Gandhi once said. “I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.” His prolific writings in that turbulent era inspired thinkers as disparate as W.E.B. Du Bois and Reinhold Niebuhr.

The fact is, Gandhi’s thought continues to be very relevant in today’s world, seventy years after his death. In recent years, many scholars have asserted that he has much to say about the issues that make our present moment so volatile: inequality, resentment, the rise of demagoguery, and the breakdown of democratic governance. In several pioneering books and articles, the Indian thinker Ashis Nandy has presented Gandhi as boldly confronting the “hyper-masculine” political culture of his time, which sanctified “institutionalised violence and ruthless social Darwinism.” Writers such as Ajay Skaria, Shruti Kapila, Uday S. Mehta, Karuna Mantena, and Faisal Devji present a radical figure, who, diverging from the dominant ideologies of liberalism, nationalism and Marxism, insisted on the need for self-transformation, moral persuasion and sacrifice.

Ramachandra Guha has written a two-volume biography of Gandhi, that offers a more conventional account. The first volume talks of Gandhi’s early life and his South African sojourn, where he worked as a lawyer and a community organiser for the country’s Indian population. The second and concluding volume, “Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914–1948”, covers the most widely known part of Gandhi’s life—when he returned to India and emerged as the leader of the Indian freedom movement. Known as the Mahatma, he became famous worldwide as a practitioner of nonviolent resistance.

Gandhi, in Guha’s account, appears as a symbol of India’s imperilled secular nationalism, whose “ideals on religious pluralism and interfaith harmony speak directly to the world we live and labour in.” This bland do-gooder has little of the “sublime madness” that Niebuhr identified in the man who wrestled with the snake of politics.

Guha goes on to argue that Gandhi “is still relevant on account of the method of social protest he pioneered.” This is undoubtedly true, attested by the ubiquity of boycotts, strikes, collective vigils and other techniques that Gandhi pioneered, or practiced, with world-historical results. Activists fighting for the environment, for refugees’ and immigrants’ rights, and against racial discrimination and violence continue to be inspired by satyagraha, Gandhi’s neologism meaning nonviolent direct action. The aim of satyagraha was to arouse the conscience of oppressors and invigorate their victims with a sense of moral agency. Gandhi’s unique mode of defiance, Niebuhr observed as early as 1932, not only works to “rob the opponent of the moral conceit by which he identifies his interests with the peace and order of society.” It also purges the victim’s resentment of the “egoistic element,” producing a purer “vehicle of justice.”

Certainly, Gandhi, the resourceful activist, the impresario of nonviolent resistance, cannot be expunged from history as briskly as his statues. But there is also a case, which Guha does not make, for seeing Gandhi as far more intellectually ingenious. In “The Impossible Indian” (2012), Faisal Devji, the most stimulating of recent writers on Gandhian thought, calls him “one of the great political thinkers of our times”—an assessment not cancelled out by the stringent account of Gandhi’s fads, follies and absurdities frequently offered by his critics. Far from being a paragon of virtue, the Mahatma remained until his death a restless work in progress. Prone to committing what he called “Himalayan blunders,” he did not lose his capacity to learn from them, and to enlist his opponents in his search for a mutually satisfactory truth.

Satyagraha, literally translated as “holding fast to truth,” obliged protesters to “always keep an open mind and be ever ready to find that what we believed to be truth was, after all, untruth.” Gandhi recognised early on that societies with diverse populations inhabit a post-truth age. “We will never all think alike and we shall always see truth in fragments and from different angles of vision,” he wrote. And even Gandhi’s harshest detractors do not deny that he steadfastly defended, and eventually sacrificed his life for, many values under
assault today—fellow-feeling for the weak, and solidarity and sympathy between people of different nations, religions, and races.

No one would be less surprised than Gandhi by neo-Fascist upsurges in what he called “nominal” Western democracies, which in his view were merely better at concealing their foundations of violence and exploitation than explicitly Fascist nations were. He thought that democracy in the West was “clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists,” and as long as legislators act like a “prostitute”—his infamous term for the British Parliament—and voters “take their cue from their newspapers which are often dishonest.”

True democracy, or swaraj, involved much more participation from citizens, he believed; it required them to combine self-rule with self-restraint, politics with ethics. Turning his back on his middle-class origins, he brought millions of peasants into political life. To him, the age of democracy—“this age of awakening of the poorest of the poor”—was a cause for celebration, and he conceived of democracy as something that “gives the weak the same chance as the strong,” in which “inequalities based on possession and non-possession, colour, race, creed or sex vanish.”

People in the West, Gandhi argued, merely “imagine they have a voice in their own government”; instead, they were “being exploited by the ruling class or caste under the sacred name of democracy.” Moreover, a regime in which “the weakest go to the wall” and a “few capitalist owners” thrive “cannot be sustained except by violence, veiled if not open.” This is why, Gandhi predicted, even “the states that are today nominally democratic” are likely to “become frankly totalitarian.”

Many other anti-colonial activists and thinkers also saw Fascism and imperialism as “the two faces” of a “decaying capitalism,” in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi’s close associate and India’s first Prime Minister. Gandhi’s critique of Western-style politics, however, extended to its underpinnings of political and economic liberalism, and its central assumption: that material progress and industrial expansion could continue without devastating political and environmental consequences.

“Industrialism,” he argued in 1931, “depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competitors.” But intensified competition from Asian and African countries could change everything, he warned presciently, decades before the rise of China as a capitalist economy plunged once powerful nations of the West into irreversible economic decline and political crisis. Unlike Nehru and many post-colonial leaders, Gandhi derived no satisfaction from the prospect of heavily centralised Asian and African states industrialising and catching up with their Western overlords. He calculated early on the environmental costs of industrial progress by populous countries: in 1928, he wrote, “If an entire nation of 300 millions”—India’s population at the time—“took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

For these reasons and others, Gandhi thought that it was not enough to demand liberation from “exploitation and degradation,” as socialists tended to do. In 1925, in an article titled “What of the West?,” he argued that those who wished to “shun the evils of capital” would have to do nothing less than wholly “revise the view point of capital,” achieving an outlook in which “the multiplicity of material wants will not be the aim of life.” Indeed, Gandhi’s critique of modern civilisation hinged on what he saw as its refusal to recognise limits. To a civilisation shaped by unappeasable human will and ambition Gandhi counterposed a civilisation organised around self-limitation and ethical conduct.

“We shall cease to think of getting what we can, but we shall decline to receive what all cannot get,” he wrote. “The only real, dignified, human doctrine is the greatest good of all, and this can only be achieved by uttermost self-sacrifice.”

Gandhi baffled many of his colleagues in addition to his enemies, as Guha relates. His unashamed invocation of quasi-religious values in politics and his key value of self-sacrifice are also likely to disconcert many readers today. Such assertions as “Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence” set him in stark opposition to the utility-maximising premises of Western political economy. But Gandhi’s radically different conception of the human being, and its relationship with others, gives his ideas an inner coherence. Asked in 1947 by the director-general of UNESCO to contribute to the then new and growing discourse surrounding human rights, Gandhi retorted that he had “learnt from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved came from duty well done.... The very right to
live accrues to us only when we do the duty of citizenship of the world.”

At every point, Gandhi still upends modern assumptions, insisting on the primacy of self-sacrifice over self-interest, individual obligations over individual rights, renunciation over consumption, and dying over killing. What were the sources of Gandhi’s relentlessly counterintuitive thought, and what makes it resonate in our time?

Gandhi’s devout Hinduism, his vow of celibacy, and his penchant for wearing a loincloth and spinning cotton made him seem like an Indian mendicant—“a fakir of a type well known in the east,” in Winston Churchill’s contemptuous judgment. In fact, Gandhi, a devoted reader of the Bible, was, as Pope John Paul II once said, “much more of a Christian than many people who say they are Christians,” and the deepest influences on him were largely European and American. Immersed in an Anglo-American countercultural tradition, he counted Emerson, Thoreau and John Ruskin as his gurus, borrowing from Ruskin the notion of the dignity of manual labor. His emphasis on duty came from Giuseppe Mazzini. Gandhi closely read the gay socialist Edward Carpenter, who stressed the ethical and spiritual dimension of democracy while distrusting its institutional apparatus, especially the centralised bureaucratic state. Living in South Africa, Gandhi corresponded with Tolstoy, who called him his “spiritual heir.” Guha described in his first volume how the Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton helped inspire Gandhi’s main contribution to political theory, “Hind Swaraj” (1909). Gandhi absorbed many ideas osmotically during an era when a range of artists and thinkers, from William Morris to D.H. Lawrence, deplored the condition of human beings in industrial production and their entrapment in the cash nexus, and emphasised interdependence over individualism.

Tim Rogan’s book, “The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism” (2017), ably reconstructs the first extensive crisis of liberalism, during which Gandhi began to explore how to “revise the viewpoint of capital.” In the late nineteenth century, the process of globalisation was as disruptive as it is today. It had started to become clear that, as Rogan writes, “mutual utility—rational, self-interested actors meeting in markets overseen by a night watchman state—was not a sufficient basis for social order.” The social contract was breaking down across Europe, and those disaffected with the “social philosophy of laissez-faire” became vulnerable to authoritarian figures and “conceptions of a strong, unifying state.” Gandhi was thoroughly alert to this dangerous shift, eerily familiar in our own age of polarised, sectarian politics. “The violence of private ownership,” he once said, “is less injurious than the violence of the State.”

The moral economists argued against the political philosophy of liberalism, which saw the protection of life and property as the main impulse of social and political life. R.H. Tawney, a religious socialist, belittled the concept of economic man, and argued for a more exalted notion of human motives. Karl Polanyi, a refugee from Fascist Europe, became convinced that Fascism, “the most obvious failure of our civilisation,” was the consequence of subordinating human needs to the market, and he called for “freedom from economics.” Gandhi likewise argued that, “at every crucial moment, these new-fangled economic laws have broken down in practice. And nations or individuals who accept them as guiding maxims must perish.”

Gandhi was obsessed with the dangers to human freedom from hyperorganised states, economic calculus and technocracies, and he anticipated the many mid-century American and European intellectuals who grappled with the most obvious failure of their civilisation: the eruption of barbarism in the heart of the modern West. Gandhi saw the link between European imperialism in Asia and Africa and totalitarianism in Europe decades before Hannah Arendt elaborated on it in “The Origins of Totalitarianism” (1951). He also recognised, well before such Catholic thinkers as Simone Weil and Jacques Maritain, that new conceptions of social interdependence, individual agency and cosmopolitan responsibility were needed to save the world from the delusions of individualism and collectivism. But, then, Gandhi had a broader experience of the world than the moral economists, the Christian humanists, or even the German refugees from Nazism; he had been forced to assess modern Western democracies very early in the twentieth century, and from the vantage point of their profoundly undemocratic Asian and African outposts.

Most important, he devised a mode of resistance that skillfully infused mass politics with a moral imperative—to end the vicious cycle of violent antagonism and to prepare the ground for mutual toleration. Satyagraha, which
presumed a basic commitment to dialogue on all sides, was likely to be impotent against Nazism or any other genocidal ideology. But it remains a matchless political means to reconcile clashing interests in diverse and fractious societies, largely because it accommodates Gandhi’s proto-postmodern view that truths in politics are invariably partial and contingent. A satyagrahi ought to give “his opponent the same independence and feelings of liberty that he reserves to himself and he will fight by inflicting injuries on his own person.” Maritain correctly described satyagraha as “spiritual warfare.” Gandhi claimed that those engaged in satyagraha were “true warriors,” fearless enough to never resort to arms—as opposed to the cowards driven by fear to violence.

This was a new way of achieving moral agency in the most oppressive circumstances. Yet, as Faisal Devji writes, Gandhi was no humanitarian, concerned above all with ameliorating suffering. Rather, “tempting violence in order to convert it by the force of suffering into something quite unexpected” was at the core of his politics. “Mere appeal to reason does not answer where prejudices are age-long,” Gandhi pointed out. “The penetration of the heart comes from suffering.”

All this seems far removed from the rational debates and discussions that we assume are the way to build public consensus and inform government policy in democracies. But Gandhi realised that democratic politics, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, “must learn how to cultivate the inner world of human beings, equipping each citizen to contend against the passion for domination and to accept the reality, and the equality, of others.” Moreover, a profound philosophical conviction lay behind the communal endurance of pain and the refusal to retaliate. Gandhi believed that society is much more than a social contract between self-seeking individuals underpinned by the rule of law and structured by institutions; it is actually founded upon sacrificial relationships, whether between lovers, friends, or parents and children.

Gandhi could see that public life organised around a morally neutral conception of private interests is always likely to degenerate into ferocious competition and violent coercion. “Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle,” he warned. It undermines social cohesion, and, finally, creates the conditions for what the social contract is meant to preclude: a war of all against all.

As Trump’s trade wars, travel bans, deportations and denaturalisations demonstrate, an obsession with preserving what one has can quickly lead to depriving others of their human dignity. Gandhi would have recognised immediately that the source of Trump’s power lies in stoking people’s fear that the material interests of their nation, race or class will not survive unless ruthless measures are taken. He worked for much of his life in precisely such an inferno of existential terrors and predatory fantasies, when cruelty in the name of self-preservation received singularly wide sanction.

It was a man of the far right, consumed by survivalist anxieties about the “Hindu nation,” who shot Gandhi three times in the chest and the abdomen on the evening of January 30, 1948. Gandhi, who built an entire world view based on the nonviolent imperative of self-sacrifice, had looked forward to his assassination. Having survived a previous attempt on his life that same month, he made no effort to improve his security and, the night before his murder, told a close confidant of his wish to receive a “bullet in my bare chest.” His executioner failed to realise that he was merely helping Gandhi to perfect the “art of dying” and to consummate his cosmopolitan duty as a citizen of the world—the sacrifice of oneself for others. Many more of Gandhi’s statues may fall in the present climate of furious revisionism. But the Mahatma will remain, in his sublime madness, a consistently illuminating guide through the labyrinth of rational self-interest, and through our own decaying landscapes of liberalism and democracy.

(Pankaj Mishra is a well-known Indian essayist and novelist.)

Articles Put on Janata Blog Last Week (Oct 20)

1. John Bellamy Foster, “Absolute Capitalism”
2. David Barsamian, “Big Lies”
4. Subhash Gatade, “RSS to Start Sainik School in India”
5. Elizabeth Kolbert, “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race—It’s a Made-Up Label”
6. Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, “What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism”
In February 1958, when Ho Chi Minh visited India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru welcomed him as “a great revolutionary and an almost legendary hero”. September 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the death of “one of the most remarkable men of our times”, and serves as an occasion to remember what created him and made him such a legendary figure.

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890, at a time when European powers were engaged in a “scramble for Africa”, partitioning and colonising the continent, and had consolidated their hold over Asia. He was born in a small Vietnamese village, and was exposed at a young age to patriotic activities and peasant revolts against French rule. He also saw the extraordinary cruelty of the French, which he was to later document in great detail.

He seemed to have a continuous desire to acquire knowledge that would help liberate his people, and left Vietnam at the age of 21 by finding work on a steamer ship as a cook’s helper. His life story is so unique that it reads almost like magical realism. He wandered around the world, changed his name several times and was in a restless search for direction that could lead to freedom for his country. He visited ports in Africa and Asia, including countries like Algeria, Senegal, India and Morocco, and would disembark to examine local conditions. Seeing the commonality of colonial oppression in these countries had a deep impact on his views.

Eventually coming to live in France, Ho Chi Minh took up various odd jobs and joined the French Socialist Party. Here, he interacted with the French Left, a significant faction of which was talking about socialism domestically, and showed sympathy with him personally, but was half-hearted in its condemnation of French colonialism. Ho Chi Minh distributed leaflets exposing the nature of French colonialism, and also attacking the concrete manifestation of the so-called ideals of the French revolution with sharp irony. In one of these leaflets, he said,

“It is bitterly ironic to find that civilisation—symbolised in its various forms, viz. liberty, justice, etc., by the gentle image of woman, and run by a category of men well known to be champions of gallantry—inflicts on its living emblem the most ignoble treatment and afflicts her shamefully in her manners, her modesty, and even her life…. Colonialism is unbelievably widespread and cruel.”

Ho Chi Minh would develop this critique of European civilisation in a later article on Civilisation That Kills, subtitled ‘How the whites have been civilising the blacks. Some deeds not mentioned in history textbooks’. The article began:

“If lynching—inflicted upon Negroes by the American rabble—is an inhuman practice, I do not know what to call the collective murders committed in the name of civilisation by Europeans on African peoples.”

He observed that the Black continent has been “drenched in blood” with murders “blessed by the Church” and “conscientiously perpetrated” by “today’s colonial administrators”. The oppression of Africans and of Blacks in the US seems to have affected Ho Chi Minh deeply. He said:

“It is well known that the black race is the most oppressed and the most exploited of the human family. It is well known that the spread of capitalism and the discovery of the New World had as an immediate result the rebirth of slavery which was, for centuries, a scourge for the Negroes and a bitter disgrace for mankind.”

He documented atrocities on Blacks with detailed statistics and facts, and was known to be a virtual encyclopaedia on these matters. It is not insignificant that his development was shaped by the conditions in Africa, and its particular position in the world at the beginning of the 20th century.

**Lenin and Gandhi**

Ho Chi Minh has been variously compared to two other world leaders, Gandhi and Lenin. These comparisons reflect a deeper truth. Perhaps more so than any other figure in the 20th century, Ho Chi Minh came to be at the centre of two great world revolutionary movements: the Russian revolution and the anti-colonial struggle. Gandhi was less of a direct influence on him, though he was well known for his strong emphasis on morality and simplicity.

He was, of course, well aware of English colonisation and the Indian anti-colonial struggle, and he reportedly said once in a conversation comparing the Indian
to the Vietnamese situation. “There you had Mahatma Gandhi, here I am the Mahatma Gandhi.” On another occasion, he said, “I and others may be revolutionaries, but we are disciples of Mahatma Gandhi, directly or indirectly, nothing more, nothing less”.

Lenin had much more of a direct influence on Ho Chi Minh. In 1920, the Second Congress of the Comintern had published Lenin’s views on the national question. There, Lenin articulated how and why communists should seek to support all national revolutionary movements in the East. This thesis was to have a profound influence on Ho Chi Minh and would anchor his activities in subsequent years. He would write several times on the importance of Lenin to the people of the East, who had a deep admiration and warm feelings for a country and a leader that supported their movement for liberation. He said:

“Lenin was the first man determinedly to denounce all prejudices against colonial peoples, which have been deeply implanted in the minds of many European and American workers.”

This pushed Ho Chi Minh towards Leninism, and he conceptualised the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle as an important step towards a transition to socialism and communism. He would go to Moscow in 1923 and then work for the Comintern. In Moscow, he met and interacted with the Indian revolutionary M.N. Roy, who had debated with Lenin at the Second Congress on the national and colonial question. Both worked together in the Society of Oppressed Peoples of Asia in Moscow. This was an early instance of the commonality expressed in the struggles of Vietnam and India.

American imperialism and anti-colonial solidarity

Several other such instances of solidarity abound. In January 1947, before India’s independence, the All India Student Federation had declared a day to be Vietnam Day. There was a huge strike in Calcutta, which was met with police repression and firing. Two students died and one student, Ranamitra Sen, was shot in the leg.

This support for Vietnam in India was also reflected in the Indian leadership. Nehru was one of the first foreign dignitaries to visit Vietnam in 1954, after the victory of the Vietnamese over the French in Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva accords.

Ho Chi Minh had written a poem for Nehru capturing their common dilemma during their respective struggles:

You are in jail, I am in prison...
We communicate without words,
Shared ideas link you and me.

Subsequently, Ho Chi Minh participated in the Bandung conference in 1955 and visited India in 1958. He interacted with a wide range of people, with a delightful informality. On learning that Ranamitra Sen was in the audience at one of his gatherings, he got off the stage and went to greet and embrace him.

During the time of the Vietnam War, large demonstrations were held in India. In Calcutta in particular, the renaming of a street as Ho Chi Minh Sarani, the popularity of Ho Chi Minh sandals and the slogan “Amaar Nam Tomar Naam Vietnam” were symbolic of the huge popularity that Ho Chi Minh had.

The Vietnamese cause had earlier been given poetic expression in a touching tribute to Ho Chi Minh by Amrita Pritam, who met him when he visited India in 1958:

Who is this King, Who is this Saint?...
From the land of Vietnam, today a wind has come to ask
Who dried the tears from the eyes of my History?

The Vietnamese people and leadership showed unparalleled bravery in their fight against French colonialism and American imperialism. The Americans ruthlessly bombed Vietnam and experimented with chemical weapons. Their conduct would not have surprised Ho Chi Minh, who had visited the US and was familiar with the reality of “American civilisation”, as he had termed it earlier. He was well aware of how African-Americans were treated in the US. The irony of the Vietnam war was captured beautifully in a speech by Martin Luther King Jr., offering a fierce indictment:

“We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”

Today, the presumed stability of world capitalism under US dominance has come to an end. Many are restless and searching for direction as the world faces huge challenges. To them, Ho Chi Minh shines as a light whose relevance stretches far beyond Vietnam and offers a challenge equally grand in scope: to seek out and create a new civilisation.

(Archipman Raju is a research fellow in physics and biology at Rockefeller University.)
John Lennon vs. the Deep State

John W. Whitehead

John Lennon, born 79 years ago on October 9, 1940, was a musical genius and pop cultural icon. He was also a vocal peace protester and anti-war activist and a high-profile example of the lengths to which the Deep State will go to persecute those who dare to challenge its authority.

Long before Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning were being castigated for blowing the whistle on the government’s war crimes and the National Security Agency’s abuse of its surveillance powers, it was Lennon who was being singled out for daring to speak truth to power about the government’s warmongering, his phone calls monitored and data files illegally collected on his activities and associations.

For a while, at least, Lennon became enemy number one in the eyes of the US government. Years after Lennon’s assassination it would be revealed that the FBI had collected 281 pages of files on him, including song lyrics. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI at the time, directed the agency to spy on the musician. There were also various written orders calling on government agents to frame Lennon for a drug bust. “The FBI’s files on Lennon ... read like the writings of a paranoid goody-two-shoes,” observed reporter Jonathan Curiel.

As the New York Times notes, “Critics of today’s domestic surveillance object largely on privacy grounds. They have focused far less on how easily government surveillance can become an instrument for the people in power to try to hold on to power. ‘The US vs. John Lennon’ ... is the story not only of one man being harassed, but of a democracy being undermined.”

Indeed, all of the many complaints we have about government today—surveillance, militarism, corruption, harassment, SWAT team raids, political persecution, spying, overcriminalisation, etc.—were present in Lennon’s day and formed the basis of his call for social justice, peace and a populist revolution.

For all of these reasons, the US government was obsessed with Lennon, who had learned early on that rock music could serve a political end by proclaiming a radical message. More importantly, Lennon saw that his music could mobilise the public and help to bring about change. Lennon believed in the power of the people. Unfortunately, as Lennon recognised: “The trouble with government as it is, is that it doesn’t represent the people. It controls them.”

However, as Martin Lewis writing for Time notes: “John Lennon was not God. But he earned the love and admiration of his generation by creating a huge body of work that inspired and led. The appreciation for him deepened because he then instinctively decided to use his celebrity as a bully pulpit for causes greater than his own enrichment or self-aggrandisement.”

For instance, in December 1971 at a concert in Ann Arbor, Mich., Lennon took to the stage and in his usual confrontational style belted out “John Sinclair,” a song he had written about a man sentenced to 10 years in prison for possessing two marijuana cigarettes. Within days of Lennon’s call for action, the Michigan Supreme Court ordered Sinclair released.

What Lennon did not know at the time was that government officials had been keeping strict tabs on the ex-Beatle they referred to as “Mr. Lennon.” Incredibly, FBI agents were in the audience at the Ann Arbor concert, “taking notes on everything from the attendance (15,000) to the artistic merits of his new song.”

The US government, steeped in paranoia, was spying on Lennon. By March 1971, when his “Power to the People” single was released, it was clear where Lennon stood. Having moved to New York City that same year, Lennon was ready to participate in political activism against the US government, the “monster” that was financing the war in Vietnam.

The release of Lennon’s Sometime in New York City album, which contained a radical anti-government message in virtually every song and depicted President Richard Nixon and Chinese Chairman Mao Tse-tung dancing together nude on the cover, only fanned the flames of the conflict to come.

The official US war against Lennon began in earnest in 1972 after rumours surfaced that Lennon planned to embark on a US concert tour that would combine rock music with antiwar organising and voter registration. Nixon, fearing Lennon’s influence on about 11 million new voters (1972 was the first year that 18-year-olds could vote), had the
ex-Beatle served with deportation orders “in an effort to silence him as a voice of the peace movement.”

The FBI has had a long history of persecuting, prosecuting and generally harassing activists, politicians and cultural figures. Most notably among the latter are such celebrated names as folk singer Pete Seeger, painter Pablo Picasso, comic actor and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin, comedian Lenny Bruce and poet Allen Ginsberg.

Among those most closely watched by the FBI was Martin Luther King Jr., a man labeled by the FBI as “the most dangerous and effective Negro leader in the country.” With wiretaps and electronic bugs planted in his home and office, King was kept under constant surveillance by the FBI with the aim of “neutralising” him. He even received letters written by FBI agents suggesting that he either commit suicide or the details of his private life would be revealed to the public. The FBI kept up its pursuit of King until he was felled by a hollow-point bullet to the head in 1968.

While Lennon was not—as far as we know—being blackmailed into suicide, he was the subject of a four-year campaign of surveillance and harassment by the US government (spearheaded by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover), including an attempt by President Richard Nixon to have him “neutralised” and deported. As Adam Cohen of the New York Times points out, “The FBI’s surveillance of Lennon is a reminder of how easily domestic spying can become unmoored from any legitimate law enforcement purpose. What is more surprising, and ultimately more unsettling, is the degree to which the surveillance turns out to have been intertwined with electoral politics.”

As Lennon’s FBI file shows, memos and reports about the FBI’s surveillance of the anti-war activist had been flying back and forth between Hoover, the Nixon White House, various senators, the FBI and the US Immigration Office.

Nixon’s pursuit of Lennon was relentless and in large part based on the misperception that Lennon and his comrades were planning to disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention. The government’s paranoia, however, was misplaced.

Left-wing activists who were on government watch lists and who shared an interest in bringing down the Nixon Administration had been congregating at Lennon’s New York apartment. But when they revealed that they were planning to cause a riot, Lennon balked. As he recounted in a 1980 interview, “We said, We ain’t buying this. We’re not going to draw children into a situation to create violence so you can overthrow what? And replace it with what? ... It was all based on this illusion, that you can create violence and overthrow what is, and get communism or get some right-wing lunatic or a left-wing lunatic. They’re all lunatics.”

Despite the fact that Lennon was not part of the “lunatic” plot, the government persisted in its efforts to have him deported. Equally determined to resist, Lennon dug in and fought back. Every time he was ordered out of the country, his lawyers delayed the process by filing an appeal. Finally, in 1976, Lennon won the battle to stay in the country when he was granted a green card. As he said afterwards, “I have a love for this country... This is where the action is. I think we’ll just go home, open a tea bag, and look at each other.”

Lennon's time of repose didn’t last long, however. By 1980, he had re-emerged with a new album and plans to become politically active again.

The old radical was back and ready to cause trouble. In his final interview on December 8, 1980, Lennon mused, “The whole map’s changed and we’re going into an unknown future, but we’re still all here, and while there’s life there’s hope.”

The Deep State has a way of dealing with troublemakers, unfortunately. On December 8, 1980, Mark David Chapman was waiting in the shadows when Lennon returned to his New York apartment building. As Lennon stepped outside the car to greet the fans congregating outside, Chapman, in an eerie echo of the FBI’s moniker for Lennon, called out, “Mr. Lennon!”

Lennon turned and was met with a barrage of gunfire as Chapman—dropping into a two-handed combat stance—emptied his .38-caliber pistol and pumped four hollow-point bullets into his back and left arm. Lennon stumbled, staggered forward and, with blood pouring from his mouth and chest, collapsed to the ground.

John Lennon was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital. He had finally been “neutralised.”

Yet where those who neutralised the likes of John Lennon, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy and others go wrong is in believing that you can murder a movement with a bullet and a madman.

Thankfully, Lennon’s legacy lives on in his words, his music and his efforts to speak truth to power. As Yoko Ono shared in a 2014 letter to the parole board...
tasked with determining whether Chapman should be released: “A man of humble origin, [John Lennon] brought light and hope to the whole world with his words and music. He tried to be a good power for the world, and he was. He gave encouragement, inspiration and dreams to people regardless of their race, creed and gender.”

Sadly, not much has changed for the better in the world since Lennon walked among us.

Peace remains out of reach. Activism and whistleblowers continue to be prosecuted for challenging the government’s authority. Militarism is on the rise; the governmental war machine continues to wreak havoc on innocent lives across the globe. Just recently, for example, US military forces carried out drone strikes in Afghanistan that killed 30 pine nut farmers.

For those of us who joined with John Lennon to imagine a world of peace, it’s getting harder to reconcile that dream with the reality of the American police state.

Meanwhile, as I point out in my book Battlefield America: The War on the American People, those who dare to speak up are labeled dissidents, troublemakers, terrorists, lunatics, or mentally ill and tagged for surveillance, censorship, involuntary detention or, worse, even shot and killed in their own homes by militarised police.

As Lennon shared in a 1968 interview:

“I think all our society is run by insane people for insane objectives…. I think we’re being run by maniacs for maniacal means. If anybody can put on paper what our government and the American government and the Russian… Chinese… what they are actually trying to do, and what they think they’re doing, I’d be very pleased to know what they think they’re doing. I think they’re all insane. But I’m liable to be put away as insane for expressing that. That’s what’s insane about it.”

So what’s the answer?

Lennon had a multitude of suggestions.

“If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there’d be peace.”

“War is over if you want it.”

“Produce your own dream….

It’s quite possible to do anything, but not to put it on the leaders…. You have to do it yourself. That’s what the great masters and mistresses have been saying ever since time began. They can point the way, leave signposts and little instructions in various books that are now called holy and worshipped for the cover of the book and not for what it says, but the instructions are all there for all to see, have always been and always will be. There’s nothing new under the sun. All the roads lead to Rome. And people cannot provide it for you. I can’t wake you up. You can wake you up. I can’t cure you. You can cure you.”

“Peace is not something you wish for; It’s something you make, Something you do, Something you are, And something you give away.”

“If you want peace, you won’t get it with violence.”

And my favorite advice of all: “Say you want a revolution / We better get on right away / Well you get on your feet / And out on the street / Singing power to the people.”

(John W. Whitehead is the president of The Rutherford Institute.)

Food Scandals and Agrochemicals

Colin Todhunter

Mad cow disease is a fatal epidemic neurological syndrome created by the agricultural industry, farmers and food processors.

In 1987, an epidemic of a fatal neurological disease in cows suddenly appeared in Britain. Cows became uncoordinated, staggered around, collapsed and finally died. The disease was called Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) because there were holes in the brain where prion protein cells became folded, had linked up and then split to cover the surface of the brain. There were more than 1,300 cases of BSE spread over 6,000 farms.

For at least 40 years, infected slaughterhouse carcasses had been rendered down and recycled into animal feed. Not wanting to waste anything, pressure cooking of the spinal cord and brain produced a sludge known as ‘mechanically-recovered meat’. The regulators allowed it to go into meat products. This processed meat and bone meal was turned into a coarse powder and was fed back to cows. Cows are herbivores and this way they were turned into cannibals.

By 1990, BSE had spread into 14 other species, including cats.
Politicians, the food industry, media, the government, farmers and vets said BSE couldn’t jump species to affect humans and it was safe to eat beef. Advertisements were taken out in newspapers and politicians were shown eating steak tartare in the Houses of Parliament to boost the sales of beef. At an agricultural show, the Agriculture Minister John Gummer was seen offering a beef burger to his daughter.

In 1995, the first human under 40 contracted what became known as new variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (new vCJD, related to BSE and belonging to the same family of diseases). By March 1996, there were five cases and the government was forced to alter its advice. Kevin Maguire, a journalist, was lunching with someone in Westminster who said that scientists had discovered that ‘mad cow disease’ could jump species and had been found in humans.

Maguire said that it was a scandal in an effort to get every penny out of a carcass. His newspaper, The Mirror, was the first to break the news to the public, saying that humans could catch mad cow disease from eating infected beef and that the government was about to do a U-turn by finally accepting that the brain wasting disease may have been passed to people. This U-turn by ministers—who for 10 years had insisted it was impossible—was a devastating indictment of the British government and probably one of the worst examples of government since the war.

During 1996, 10 more cases of new vCJD in people under 40 were diagnosed. All died within 13 months and there was no cure. In 2005, the authorities thought the disease was over, but in 2009, a case was discovered in a 30-year-old man. Another case appeared four years later. Today, people are living with uncertainty, not knowing if they are incubating new vCJD.

The parents of children who had died from new vCJD said “We trusted government advice.” Each Christmas one mother had sent an e-mail to those she thought responsible with a photograph of her daughter and said your actions have deprived me of my daughter. Another parent from Scotland who had lost his 30-year-old son to the disease had tattooed on his arm the name of his son followed by: ‘murdered by greed and corruption’.

In the documentary Mad Cow Disease: The Great British Beef Scandal, first broadcast on BBC 2 on 11 July 2019, Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University London, said:

“New Variant CJD is not a natural disease. It is an epidemic we have created. If the agricultural industry hadn’t decided to feed cattle with meat and bone meal, if the food processors hadn’t decided to scrape every last bit of flesh off the carcass, and if MAFF [govt ministry] hadn’t prioritised farming over food safety, all of the people who died would still be alive. This is the tragedy.”

The following is taken from a publication compiled by the European Environment Agency, Late lessons from early warnings (authored by Patrick van Zwanenberg and Erik Millstone):

“Many of the UK policy makers who were directly responsible for taking policy decisions on Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) prior to March 1996 claim that, at the time, their approach exemplified the application of an ultra-precautionary approach and of rigorous science-based policy-making. We argue that these claims are not convincing because government policies were not genuinely precautionary and did not properly take into account the implications of the available scientific evidence.

“… It is, however, essential to appreciate that UK public policy making was handicapped by a fundamental tension. The department responsible for dealing with BSE was the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), and it was expected simultaneously to promote the economic interests of farmers and the food industry whilst also protecting public health from food-borne hazards. The evidence cited here suggests that because MAFF was expected simultaneously to meet two contradictory objectives, it failed to meet either.”

The UK introduced legislation banning the use of contaminated ruminant protein for use in ruminant feed in 1988. By then, a million cows had entered the food chain. At the height of the scandal, British beef had lost around 60% of sales. Prior to the ban, microbiologist Stephen Dealler challenged the government’s claim over safety and was moved from his research lab.

However, Britain continued to export meat and bone meal to Europe. The European Commission asked the UK to introduce an export ban on feedstuffs, but the UK refused to do so. It was not until 1996 that the EC banned these exports.

From mad cows to GMOs and pesticides

Where glyphosate (and other agrochemicals) and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are concerned, we again see commercial interests being prioritised and the public interest sidelined. Monsanto’s
glyphosate-based Roundup was originally sprayed on crops in 1980 and on grazing land in 1985 (recommended by Monsanto scientists). GMOs entered the commercial market in the US in the 1990s.

Heavily compromised industry-funded scientists and other lobbyists say the science is decided on GM and that glyphosate is safe. They say anyone who rejects this is anti-science and doesn’t care about world hunger because we can only feed the world by rolling out more GM crops and more agrochemicals. But this is little more than propaganda and emotional blackmail, part of an industry strategy designed to tug at the heartstrings of public opinion and sway the policy agenda. The fact of the matter is, key scientists have long been cautioning against both agrochemicals and GM crops.

We need to turn to author Andre Leu who has outlined major deficiencies in pesticide safety protocols. He offers a more realistic appraisal:

“It is a gross misrepresentation to say that any of the current published toxicology studies can be used to say that any of the thousands of pesticide products used in the world do not cause cancer or other diseases ... there is no evidence that pesticides are safe.”

Washington State University researchers recently found a variety of diseases and other health problems in the second- and third-generation offspring of rats exposed to glyphosate. In the first study of its kind, the researchers saw descendants of exposed rats developing prostate, kidney and ovarian diseases, obesity and birth abnormalities. The study’s authors say:

“The ability of glyphosate and other environmental toxicants to impact our future generations needs to be considered and is potentially as important as the direct exposure toxicology done today for risk assessment.”

And where GMOs are concerned, they are little more than a flawed technological panacea that ignores the structural causes of malnutrition and hunger. GM food crops are regarded as the second coming of the Green Revolution. But just how successful was that?

We must look no further than the poisoning of Punjab (the cradle of the Green Revolution in India) and its sustained use of chemical pesticides, insecticides and fertilisers, which has continued unchecked; and despite claims about the Green Revolution having increasing productivity and saved countless lives, emerging evidence shows that in India it saved zero lives and that food productivity per capita showed no increase or actually went down.

An increasing number of prominent reports and voices are now arguing that we do not need toxic chemicals to feed the world and that if we maintain our economic and agricultural course we are headed for disaster. FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva recently called for healthier and more sustainable food systems and said agroecology can contribute to such a transformation.

Moreover, the new report from the UN High Level Panel of Food Experts on Food Security and Nutrition—Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition—argues that food systems are at a crossroads and profound transformation is needed. Many high-profile reports and figures have been saying similar things for years.

Mad cow disease did not just suddenly appear from nowhere. It was created by humans, particularly the farming industry and food processors. The British government kept on maintaining that eating beef was perfectly safe. A scientist who spoke out was silenced. The interests of the beef industry were paramount. Evidence suggests there could soon be a second wave of cases affecting humans. It will be among people with a genetic predisposition towards longer incubation periods than the first patients had. This genetic predisposition is shared by half the British population. Over 200 have contracted and died of vCJD.

But that number is dwarfed when it comes to the spiralling rates of certain diseases and conditions that we now see across the world. This too hasn’t happened for no reason. It is in large part a consequence of a globalised neoliberal food regime that relies on unhealthy food processing practices and inputs and a chemical-intensive model of farming that has seen a narrowing down of the range of crops consumed by humans.

It is disconcerting that various governments seem oblivious to the need of the hour and remain intent on pursuing an obsolete neoliberal, water-polluting, soil degrading, health destroying, unsustainable model of food and agriculture.

And all for what? Not to feed the public but to feed the profit motives of corporate interests.

(Colin Todhunter is an independent writer.)
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