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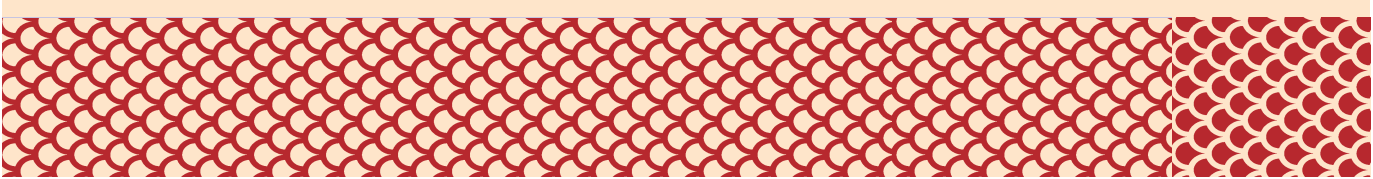


The Socratic Mind and the  
Civic Task of Philosophy: Gadflies in  
the Public Space

by  
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# The Socratic Mind and the Civic Task of Philosophy: Gadflies in the Public Space

## Introduction

This research started with an interrogation on the rise of mediocrity and complacency in contemporary political life, but it revealed to be the necessary end of a long concern with the question of the public task of philosophy. The concept of disobedient consciousness and the rebellious Socratic mind that grows out of this book is, above all, a product of my life meetings with the two apparently contradictory worlds of philosophy and politics. More precisely, it is the result of approaching the public realm in terms of a philosophical quest for truth and justice. This restless quest for truth and justice has a history that continues to bear upon us, however much we choose to ignore it. Part of the way to think about the current situation of philosophy lies in exploring that history. The image of Socrates represents a mid-point between politics and philosophy. As Arendt puts it adequately, 'The gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion. Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lecture delivered by Ramin Jahanbegloo at the IIC on 14 December, 2015

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doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings.'<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, particularly important to deal with the figure of Socrates as a philosopher-citizen who was unjustly accused and pushed to death. But it is equally important to rethink the historical image of Socrates as a rebel and a disobedient consciousness in the mirror of philosophy as a civic form of intervention in the *polis*. Our ability to rethink the Socratic mind as a nobility of spirit, but also a paradigm of examined life, is the most valuable lesson of philosophical resistance against the rise of mediocrity and insignificance in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the difficult times of meaninglessness we face, what more can we do than to learn from the Socratic experience of the gadflies who tried to weave from the strings of philosophy and politics a tightrope on which justice and truth walked along. Perhaps the most these Socratic experiences hoped to accomplish was to bring new modes of thinking reality and alternative approaches to the question of human interconnectedness. Hopefully, this effort continues in our world, despite its loss of interest for nobility and excellence. For it is no longer possible to think in terms of democracy and civilisation without having in mind the Socratic task of philosophy. We must learn that to accept passively mediocrity and thoughtlessness is to cooperate with and thereby to become a participant in its destruction of our world.

### **The Socratic Mind**

Socrates is widely regarded as the founding father of the history of philosophy. Socrates' philosophy has contributed in no small measure in the past twenty-five centuries to inspiring generations of philosophers, writers, artists and practitioners of peace and non-violence to focus on the so-called Socratic method as a way of living and as a tool for achieving the civic task of philosophy. The non-violent philosophy of Socrates, therefore, symbolises the application of eternal truths to daily life and its problems. In his design of what he calls 'the examined life', Socrates combined the *daimonion*, the divine voice, that provides him with a safeguard against all forms of wrongful action and evil, with the pursuit of moral wisdom. After all, because of the emphasis Socrates places on justice, courage and virtue, his philosophy helps us to give shape to dissent in

a manner that enables radical change through bloodless philosophical revolutions. This is why Socrates thinks that philosophy as a form of knowledge is a 'lordly thing' which cannot be 'dragged about as if it were a slave'. To confirm his belief in philosophy as a civic virtue, Socrates fosters time and tolerance for other points of view and offers space for discussion and dialogue. However, 'Socrates concedes that his need to converse with fellow citizens and foreigners precludes him from bearing the common burdens and from fulfilling the ordinary responsibilities of citizenship ( Apology 23b, 31d-e). In order to vindicate his belief that the philosophic life is virtuous, Socrates must show that his way of life is just. He must demonstrate that the philosophic life is just even in the eyes of those who are genuinely devoted to civic virtue.'<sup>2</sup>

The truth is that Socrates was an innovator in politics. Not only did he have a considerable understanding of political realities, but he was also well aware of the fact that philosophical knowledge can contribute to empower the powerless victims of injustices. As a result, he conducted his dialogue on three planes. At the political plane, he dialogued with violence and injustice. At a philosophical plane, he conducted a dialogue on truth and wisdom. At the spiritual plane, he raised the questions of virtue and selflessness. Throughout Plato's *Dialogues*, we find Socrates examining whether the words and actions of his interlocutors undermine or support the legitimacy of philosophy as a civic task in life. Socrates 'displays a courage and self-command that citizens would readily find exemplary...Moreover, he expects his manifest seriousness about virtue to merit not only tolerance of but even respect for philosophy among those who are most aware of the importance of virtue to themselves.'<sup>3</sup> This is not to attribute to Socrates the view that one who is not a philosopher would be a bad citizen, for among other things, Socrates believes that non-philosophers' beliefs and opinions about politics should be given adequate attention. "Thus, even as Socrates argues that most denizens of the cave can never be liberated from their shadowy understandings of virtue, in practice he relies on his fellow citizens' experiences and understandings of virtue to affirm his own."<sup>4</sup> As such, though Socrates knows that Athenian politics is rooted in the civic reality of Athens, he calls that reality into question. Among other things, he 'emphasises that his life

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is devoted to rational persuasion and non-partisan resistance to the unjust exercise of civic power...'<sup>5</sup>

In considering this critique of civic power, Socrates not only rejects the process of culture formation and civic education in the Athenian city-state, but he also pinpoints to the vulnerability and ambiguity of authoritative thinking in Athens. 'But because Socrates is an Athenian as well as a philosopher, his victory is in some respects self-defeating. He arguably undermines the concord that is essential for the city's survival just to the extent that he persuades others to follow his example...'<sup>6</sup> In other words, Socrates is well aware of the civic forces on which his philosophical fate depends and he engages in the serious business of striking a blow at the soul of the civic unanimity in the *polis*.

Moreover, Socrates' trial does not represent, as Hannah Arendt puts it, 'a conflict between politics and philosophy'<sup>7</sup>, but it exemplifies the first civilisational effort of philosophicide by a political community. However, this silencing of philosophy and philosophers, as dangerous and subversive elements, by the political power or the masses has been repeated continuously all through the past twenty-five centuries of human history. Socrates' trial and death was an opening chapter to what can be considered as a long and tragic confrontation between the civic task of philosophy and the abuses of political power.

Moreover, Socrates' trial does not represent, as Hannah Arendt puts it, 'a conflict between politics and philosophy'<sup>7</sup>, but it exemplifies the first civilisational effort of philosophicide by a political community. However, this silencing of philosophy and philosophers, as dangerous and subversive elements, by the political power or the masses has been repeated continuously all through the past twenty-five centuries of human history. Socrates' trial and death was an opening chapter to what can be considered as a long and tragic confrontation between the civic task of philosophy and the abuses of political power. In this case, it would be more adequate to distinguish (as many authors like Karl Popper and Cornelius Castoriadis do) the civic and critical engagement of Socrates with politics in general and with the Athenian democracy in particular, with Plato's anti-democratic

defense of political expertise in the *Republic*. As a result, while the civic and critical approach of Socrates to politics could be considered as an ethical and philosophical engagement with the political, Plato's rejection of Athenian democracy is supported by an ideal constitution and an educational system for philosophical cultivation of political experts. But approaching Socrates' politics as a form of civic philosophy, i.e. a philosophy of revolt, consisting of a critical and oppositional gesture to power politics, has the advantage of not only excluding the professionalisation of the political, but also transforming the conception of political sovereignty from the question of 'who shall rule the state?' to 'how shall we organise the society?' 'So although Socrates' criticism of democracy as a rule by a foolish mob resembles the criticism of oligarchs, because Socrates ties the content of the wisdom that could qualify someone to rule so closely to the job of ruling, and because he defines the job of ruling in terms of its goal of improving the citizens, he cannot but be a critic of oligarchy, tyranny, and the like, as well. Rulers in existing oligarchies and tyrannies are no less ignorant, and so no less incapable of improving the citizens, than the *demos*.'<sup>8</sup>

One way to appreciate the force of Socrates' critique of professional politics and the privatisation of the political as a form of philosophical revolt and a moral transformation of civic unanimity is to consider Socrates not as 'the founder of political philosophy'<sup>9</sup>, but as the founding father of political dissent and philosophical revolt against power abuse.

In fact, the question is not only about the confrontation between Socrates and Athens, but between the autonomy of philosophy and transformative thinking with the authority of political

In fact, the question is not only about the confrontation between Socrates and Athens, but between the autonomy of philosophy and transformative thinking with the authority of political sovereignty. Instead of thinking of Socrates as a unique philosopher who is suppressed and silenced by the Athenian *polis*, we will show that it is the 'Socratic complex', as the moment of philosophical interrogation of politics and dissentful thinking which lies at the heart of the life of the mind.



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sovereignty. Instead of thinking of Socrates as a unique philosopher who is suppressed and silenced by the Athenian *polis*, we will show that it is the 'Socratic complex', as the moment of philosophical interrogation of politics and dissentful thinking which lies at the heart of the life of the mind.

Needless to say, I am not interested in repeating the historical identity of Socrates as pictured by Plato and the history of philosophy. Our interpretation of Socrates is to see him through the lens of creative and transformative dissenters like Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. As such, our goal is to explore the face to face between the Socratic moment of dissent and Athenian sovereignty as a valid paradigm of critical interrogation and moral transformation which provides a life's mission and a mindful home for three of the greatest critical minds and transformative actors of modern times. The historical figure of Socrates as a philosopher-citizen, who stood at odds with the Athenian *polis*, represents today a valid and relevant nucleus for the ongoing pursuit of dissentful thinking and philosophical interrogation in our world. In a world where philosophical interrogation has given its place to complacency, conformism, intellectual degradation and erosion of values, Socrates is more relevant than at any other time. It is clear that Socrates' life, thought, teaching and action are ever relevant for all aspirants of freedom of thought and democratic action. His non-violent principles of pursuit of excellence accompanied by a strong critical interrogation and refusal of the authoritarian imposition of absolute truth serves as a signpost to humanity marching towards new forms of social and political change whenever and wherever it is required. It is not only the non-violent struggle of philosophers and practitioners of peace and change against mediocrity and authority, but also the weapon of the brave against all evil. For civic philosophy to take place, in the tradition set out by Socrates, Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., chose deliberately to publicly and openly break the established laws.

## Socrates as Philosopher-Citizen

If Socrates was a gadfly on the forehead of the Athenians, his philosophy of revolt remained a gadfly on the neck of humanity. As Plato's *Apology* shows us, Socrates is a philosopher who is in conflict with the conformist conscience of his society, despite the fact that in *Crito* he advocates obedience to the Athenian laws, refuses to escape prison and accepts his death. For us moderns it is difficult to understand why Socrates chose to continue to be an Athenian citizen by obeying the law after his trial. It goes without saying that Socrates did not see any contradiction between his moral responsibility for obeying the laws of Athens as an Athenian citizen and his criticism of the same laws in the name of his philosophical convictions. This was deeply unacceptable to Plato, whose great historical task, as the founding father of an undemocratic tradition, "was in designing imagined regimes in which his literary creation, 'Socrates', could truly flourish--in which the laws would provide him with a birth, an upbringing, and an education worthy of his philosophical capacities."<sup>10</sup> However, for Socrates criticising and disobeying the laws of Athens came as a morally acceptable task from the viewpoint of his philosophical destiny. "If you should say to me, 'Socrates, we will not now be persuaded by Anytus, but will let you go on this condition: you will not any longer spend your time in this investigation or philosophising, and if you are found doing this again you shall be put to death.' If you should let me go on this condition, I should tell you, 'Men of Athens, I hold you in high regard and I love you, but I will obey the god more than you, and just as long as I breathe and am able, I will never cease from philosophizing or from exhorting you and from declaring my views to any of you I should ever happen upon'."<sup>11</sup> At this point, one might concede that Socrates' understanding of the ethical nature of his action is a clear commitment to philosophy. Having nourished his soul by cultivating philosophical wisdom all his life, Socrates knew that a life worth living is guided by the pursuit of wisdom and not by the pre-eminence of wealth, power or fame. By bringing the philosophical revolt into Athens, Socrates not only threatened the priority of the polis, but he also subordinated politics to the ethical content of

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philosophical interrogation. There is, in sum, a general agreement between Socrates' commitment to philosophy and his clear commitment to civil disobedience. Socrates refused categorically to violate his philosophical principles, or what he conceived to be the higher law.

Over the centuries, this Socratic moment of disobedience has been acknowledged and endorsed by all those men and women who have maintained that unjust laws of a state or a community are contrary to the higher law of moral conscience or God. It is by referring to this higher law that the 'arrogant' and 'over-scrupulous' Socrates put wisdom and virtue above the power of kings and masses. The truth of the matter was not that Socrates did not seem to be bound to the norms of the Athenian *polis*; rather, it was that he made of his *daimon* the ethos and measure of his character and action. "Eventually, his 'Copernican Revolution' or what Cicero called 'the bringing down of philosophy from the heavens to the cities of men' resulted from Socrates dwelling with the consequences of seeing via Delphi that the ultimate truth could never be at our disposal; we can only become aware of its existence and benevolence (...) By functioning in this manner, Socrates soon recognised that he himself would have to function as a kind of witness to the truth that Apollo wished to proclaim through him."<sup>12</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Socrates' philosophical revolt was clearly civic-oriented in its very essence. The politico-philosophical nature of his mission is further emphasised when Socrates explicitly claims in *Gorgias*: 'I am one of a few Athenians--not to say the only one--who undertake the real political craft and practice of politics, the only one among people now.'<sup>13</sup> Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, too, contains traces of this view: 'Would I [Socrates] play a more important role in politics, Antiphon, if I engaged in it myself alone, or if I produced as many competent politicians as possible?'<sup>14</sup> However, being political from Socrates' point of view is not a matter of being a political leader or an active member of a political party. What is at stake for citizen Socrates is a philosophical interrogation about the nature of politics itself. He enlarges on this theme: 'I have deliberately not led a quiet life, but I have neglected what occupies the many: wealth and private affairs and generalships and being a demagogue and other types of leadership and political clubs and factions that

come to be in the polis.<sup>15</sup> This account of philosophising about politics that Socrates underlines in this passage of the *Apology* is extended to all citizens of Athens with the aim of getting them to care for wisdom and release them from the hubris of accumulating wealth or honour. 'Best of men, you are Athenian, from the greatest polis, with the greatest reputation for wisdom and strength; are you not ashamed that you care about having as much money as possible, and reputation and honour, but that about wisdom and truth and how your psyche will be the best possible you neither care nor give thought?'<sup>16</sup>

Because the primary political goal of Socrates is to examine why and how the Athenian polis exists and can be preserved, he treats the notion of wisdom not for the sake of his personal happiness, but as a rational perspective which may provide the civic philosopher with new insights to give practical political guidance. On this, Socrates keeps his philosophical distance from any form of relativism while assuming non-violent and dialogical truth-seeking as a key drive for democratic life. This way of understanding Socratic non-violence fits well enough with Socrates' *daimonic* mentality which enables him to reject wrong-doing and injustice. Socrates' *daimonion*, we are told by Plato, is the divine sign of Apollo which protects him against the false gods of wealth and honour while inspiring a struggle against harmfulness. That is why Socrates claims in the *Apology* to be engaged in a life of speaking truth to the unjust. Accordingly Socrates proposes an unforgettable argument that doing injustice is a greater harm than death and he tries to actualise a more authentic idea of justice out of the notion of abstention of harm. Perhaps even more remarkable than this is the fact that Socrates argues repeatedly in *The Crito* in favour of not doing evil in return for evil. 'Therefore', says Socrates, 'we should neither retaliate nor treat anyone evilly, no matter what we have suffered from them.'<sup>17</sup> There is, in sum, a general agreement between Socrates' commitment to civic philosophy and his acknowledgment of the general principles of civil disobedience and non-violence. Socrates' argument that he must not escape from prison and to die as a citizen-philosopher is a continuation of this same idea that wrong-doing, injustice and the acceptance of violence are forms of un-philosophical living and dying.

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In the light of all these Socratic parallels, it is plausible to suggest that the radical, disobedient and non-violent Socrates has been in a historical link and affinity with Socrates as a citizen-philosopher.

### **Henry David Thoreau: An American Gadfly**

For Socrates, the civic task of philosophy was founded on the idea that the criterion of wrongfulness lies ultimately not in the idea of justice but in the set of unjust laws. Henry David Thoreau starts his essay on *Civil Disobedience* with basically the same premise. His famous essay starts with the motto 'That government is best which governs least' and continues by saying 'That

government is best which governs not at all.'<sup>18</sup> The concept of disobedience is, of course, not Thoreau's innovation. There are many forerunners to him, Socrates being the most important.

But long before Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Thoreau stands at the first milestone of what we have considered as the Socratic philosophical revolution against conformism and complacency. This takes us to the question: in which way can Thoreau be considered as an American gadfly?

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It goes without saying that Thoreau discovered Socrates through his readings of Plato and he alludes to Plato very often in his writings. Thoreau makes a specific mention of Plato's *Dialogues* in his masterpiece *Walden*: 'I aspire to be acquainted with wiser men than this our Concord soil has produced, whose names are hardly known here. Or shall I hear the name of Plato and never read his book? As if Plato were my townsman and I never saw him--my next neighbour and I never heard him speak or attended to the wisdom of his words. But how actually is it? His Dialogues which contain what was immortal in him, lie on the next shelf, and yet I never read them. We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate; and in this respect I confess I do not make any very broad distinction

between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects. We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were.<sup>19</sup> The strongest conclusion to draw here is that Thoreau's study of Plato is overshadowed by his Socratic quest of 'knowing thyself'. Thoreau writes in chapter 18 of *Walden*: "It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better, and you may perhaps find some 'Symmes' Hole' by which to get at the inside at last. England and France, Spain and Portugal, Gold Coast and Slave Coast, all front on this private sea; but no bark from them has ventured out of sight of land, though it is without doubt the direct way to India. If you would learn to speak all tongues and conform to the customs of all nations, if you would travel farther than all travellers, be naturalized in all climes, and cause the Sphinx to dash her head against a stone, even obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself."<sup>20</sup> In Thoreau's eyes, 'the old philosopher' is no one else but Socrates, to whom this dictum '*Gnothi se Aut*' (*Know Thyself*) is attributed. As such, Thoreau's eco-philosophy and his transcendentalist individualism become one discourse in the Socratic maxim of self-examined life. 'To be a philosopher', says Thoreau, 'is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.'<sup>21</sup>

As we can see, references to Socrates are very explicit in *Walden*, though the typical Socratic mindset appears in Thoreau's short treatise on *Civil Disobedience*. It is here that we have the key to the major influence of Socrates operative in Thoreau's thought. The Socratic civic philosophy introduced Thoreau not only to a philosophy of revolt but also to a meaningful life in opposition to the meaningless complexities of modern civilisation. He knew what he hoped to find: the duty of confronting unjust laws by emphasising on higher laws. In a chapter of his famous book *Walden* entitled 'Higher Laws', Thoreau talks about having 'a life in conformity to higher principles.'<sup>22</sup> Judging from this statement, Thoreau's reference to 'higher principles'takes him to the same timeless and

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trans-historical universe of *philosophia perennis* on which Socrates' arguments are based against his judges. Separated by time and space, Thoreau and Socrates enter into a kind of philosophical fellowship in exploring, thinking and acting from principle. Thoreau's eco-criticism, developed in *Walden*, as his political individualism, exemplified in *Civil Disobedience*, are the two most complete theoretical statements of Thoreau's Socratic rebellion against the liberal morality of his time. This often involves an effort on Thoreau's side to continue the Socratic unfinished business of a self-reflective attitude about social life and its harmful consequences. In this sense, both *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* could be considered as the two most valuable Socratic texts of modern times. A re-interpretation of Thoreau's civic philosophy of dissent would precisely allow a celebration of such a Socratic self-examination. It is only thus, by following this tradition of thought, as Thoreau and later Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. did, that we will be able to expand the vibrant and relevant Socratic tradition of dissident thinking in order to bring some anti-conformism to, what Adorno calls, the 'damaged life' of our modern world.

### **Mahatma Gandhi: A Nonviolent Gadfly**

While still engaged in his non-violent struggle in South Africa, Gandhi published an article on Socrates in the columns of the *Indian Opinion*, the newspaper that he edited in South Africa, dated 4 April, 1908 entitled 'Story of a Soldier of Truth'. In this article, Gandhi describes Socrates as 'heroic' and adds: "Today the world cherishes Socrates' memory. His teaching has benefited millions. His accusers and his judges stand condemned by the world. Socrates has gained immortality and Greece stands in high esteem because of him and others like him."<sup>23</sup> A month later (on 16 May, 1908), in the same columns of the *Indian Opinion*, he wrote: "Socrates gave us some idea of man's duty. He practised his precepts."<sup>24</sup> Gandhi's reference hereby to Socrates' duty is related to his view of him as a philosopher who accepted a heroic death. We should not forget the fact that Gandhi first read Plato's *Dialogues* when he was a prisoner in South Africa. As such, he must have sympathised with the philosopher's quest for wisdom, imprisonment and finally martyrdom. According to Buddhadeva

Bhattacharyya, an eminent Gandhian scholar, "Gandhi's admiration for Socrates was explicit and unreserved. He, it seems, understood Socrates in his own way and found in him an embodiment of soul force against state injustice."<sup>25</sup> Since Gandhi considered *Satyagraha* as a universal and trans-historical doctrine, he had no problem accepting Socrates as a practitioner of soul force. Like Socrates, Gandhi was neither a mystic nor a hermit. He was a philosopher of civic action and a practitioner of dissident citizenship. Therefore, one should not consider Gandhi's reference to his 'inner voice' as a mystical experience. For Gandhi the 'still small voice' (as he called it) was always the final arbiter in his diverse conflicts in life. He also called it the voice of conscience or the voice of God. Speaking of his experience with this inner voice, he wrote in his journal *Harijan* in 1933: "For me the voice of God. Of Conscience, of Truth, or the Inner Voice or 'the still small voice' mean one and the same thing. I saw no form. Have never tried, for I have always believed God to be without form. But what I did hear was like a Voice from afar and yet quite near. It was as unmistakable as some human voice definitely speaking to me, and irresistible. I was not dreaming at the time I heard the Voice. The hearing of the Voice was preceded by a terrific struggle within me. Suddenly the voice came upon me. I listened, made certain it was the Voice, and the struggle ceased."<sup>26</sup>

As we can see, Gandhi's inner voice resembles Socrates' *daimon*, in appealing to higher principles, partaking of the nature of conscience and suggesting a path to truth. In both cases, the effect of the voice is to purify the heart and prepare oneself against the violence of criticisms. Though Plato's *Apology* is not 'the original source of Gandhi's belief in the indubitability of the inner voice'<sup>27</sup>, Gandhi was clearly influenced by the Socratic idea of a 'guardian spirit'.

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We may be deceived in thinking that Gandhi is listening to a God rather than to his conscience. But in either ways, as in the case of Socrates, the importance is the awakening of the individual conscience and the strife for truth. Speaking of truth and non-violence with several Englishmen at Patna in April 1947, Gandhi underlines, 'So far as I know my own conscience I have myself striven through thought, word and deed to reach the ideal.'<sup>28</sup> This puts Gandhi in a closer position to Socrates than we think. Gandhi considers Socrates' civic philosophy as a source of virtue and moral strength. He affirms: 'We pray to God, and want our readers also to pray, that they, and we too, may have the moral strength which enabled Socrates to follow virtue to the end and to embrace death as if it were his beloved. We advise everyone to turn his mind again and again to Socrates' words and conduct.'<sup>29</sup>

With so much interest in Socrates, it is not surprising that Gandhi mentions Plato's *Apology* in the Appendix of *Hind Swaraj* and in the issue of 4 May, 1908 of his journal *The Indian Opinion*, describes the great soul of Socrates as having 'the qualities of an elixir'<sup>30</sup> This is not strange when we know that Gandhi published a Gujarati version of Plato's *Apology* in 1908 in *Indian Opinion*. Socrates' personality and philosophical wisdom affirmed to Gandhi the importance of self-realisation and civic heroism at a time when the latter was developing his ideas of *satyagraha* and Indian nationalism.

Gandhi is hardly the first Socratic practitioner in the history of politics. He is, however, like Socrates, a genuine lover of justice and a truth seeker. According to Usha Mehta, a Gandhian scholar who took part in the independence movement, 'Both Socrates and Gandhi were truth-intoxicated souls. It was the life-mission of Socrates to help the Athenians realize Truth by making them aware of their ignorance. Gandhi believed that Truth is self-evident and that it shines radiantly as soon as the cobwebs of ignorance around it are cleared away. Both adored Truth as an ideal which helps and saves the individual, only if the individual lives up to it and tries to translate it into his life as both of them did thoroughly and consistently practicing what they preached.'<sup>31</sup> Following Socrates, Gandhi's non-violence embodies more famously than any

other political theory the Socratic spirit of freedom and democratic individualism. Moreover, Gandhi's insistence on ethical commitment in citizen politics and his practice of civil disobedience against unjust laws prepared the path to the social and political efforts of another Socratic personality: Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Martin Luther King Jr.: A Gadfly in Montgomery**

Like Socrates, King made a persuasive case for his claim that 'any law that degrades the human personality is an unjust law'<sup>32</sup>, and it needs to be disobeyed. In the same manner as Thoreau and Gandhi, King considers Socrates as one of the first in the history of mankind who practiced civil disobedience. 'We go back and read the *Apology* and the *Crito*', he underlines, 'and you see Socrates practicing civil disobedience. And to a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.'<sup>33</sup> King neither set out to become a philosopher, nor did he expect to become a leader in the American civil rights movement. However, while a student he got acquainted with the works of Plato and the figure of Socrates and later with the work of the 19th century Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau. His introduction to Gandhi and his pilgrimage to India also fortified his Socratic conviction in the difference between just and unjust laws.

In his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King refers to the Socratic idea of the necessity of gadflies to stir up human affairs and writes: 'Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.'<sup>34</sup>

Both Socrates and King are in favour of the rule of law, but they distinguish between just and unjust laws. While the Socratic ethics of conscience is exemplified by a just law, in King's civic philosophy a just law is also a moral

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law which should be obeyed. Interestingly, where Socrates talks in terms of 'divine calling' for his 'voice of conscience', King describes an unjust law as a law opposed to God's law and in contradiction with the moral law. King's different writings, especially the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* provide us with numerous hints to the distinction he makes between just law and unjust law. 'One may well ask,' says King, 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'<sup>35</sup> For King, an unjust law is a law that does not help developing and maturing human personality. He also defines an unjust law as an instrument in the hands of a majority to dominate a minority. Therefore, he thinks 'Any law that degrades the human personality is an unjust law...An unjust law is a code which the majority inflicts upon the minority, which that minority had no part in acting or creating...'<sup>36</sup>

As a result, King justifies civil disobedience as a Socratic manner of obeying one's self. He considers disobeying the unjust law as a way of respecting the law. Though several passages in the *Apology* and the *Crito* advocate obeying Athenian Laws, Socrates clearly cannot continue to live and philosophise under unjust laws. He knows quite well that philosophy is not a hypocritical enterprise, though philosophers might be hypocrites. The logical conclusion is that Socrates' 'lawfulness' in the *Crito* goes hand-in-hand with his conviction that disobeying injustice is a moral action in defense of 'higher laws'. King understood the Socratic value of disobedience of injustice as well as Thoreau and Gandhi did. Though some interpreters of Socrates consider it wrong to accept Martin Luther King's affirmation that Socrates was a supporter of his action, it goes without saying that Socrates was mature and rebellious enough as a philosopher to understand well that there was a difference in obeying the laws when they were just and trying to persuade his fellow Athenians to change them when they turned unjust. This is the same path followed by Dr. King with the American democracy. King believed in humanising the framework of the American

democracy by injecting social-democratic values into it. According to his widow, Coretta Scott King, 'within the first month or so of our meeting,' in 1952, King 'talked about working within the framework of democracy to move us toward a kind of socialism,' arguing that 'a kind of socialism has to be adopted by our system because the way it is, it's simply unjust.'<sup>37</sup> King made so powerful an impact on the evolution of American democracy that Americans and others around the world are not yet ready to fully assess it. His dream for America, as that of Socrates for Athens, will grace the corridors of American history for decades to come. King, thereby, laid the foundation for a world where the Socratic philosophy of revolt, against injustice and tyranny, but also in opposition to complacency and conformism, finds its moral and political foundations while remaining an inspiration for the present day gadflies who rightly struggle against the inequalities and injustices and try to break the wall of indifference.

## Conclusion

Socrates in Plato's *Apology* reminds us that all societies need a 'gadfly' to stir their citizens into life and acknowledge their proper duties and obligations. In his seminal work, *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, pre-French Revolution thinker, Étienne de La Boétie, posed the question: Why do people consent to their own servility? La Boétie was well placed to observe that obedience was essential to the survival of state authority. For him, this collective enslavement was a 'vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name.'<sup>38</sup> La Boetie argued that a tyranny is defeated when people refuse to consent to their own enslavement. The whole idea of La Boetie is based upon the conviction that consent is power. It is so interesting that the same key concern with the idea of consent as power is rethought and reconstructed in the works of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If one has the right to resist injustice, one has to avoid the possibility to be obligated to an unjust government. What would, therefore, disobedience to an unjust government mean? The act of disobeying is a way to refuse cooperation with an authority while consenting to one's political obligation as a citizen. The strong message of Gandhi, so relevant for today's

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world, is not only a project to empower citizens with new opportunities to assemble and organise, but also a demonstration of the fact that communal harmony among citizens of a society is attuned to a sense of moral obligation that they have in regard to each other rather than in regard to the state. At a prayer meeting in Delhi on 28 June, 1947 Gandhi came back on this important topic and stated, 'The Constituent Assembly is discussing the rights of the citizen. That is to say they are deliberating on what the fundamental rights should be. As a matter of fact, the proper question is not what the rights of a citizen are, but rather what constitutes the duties of a citizen. Fundamental rights can only be those rights the exercise of which is not only in the interest of the citizen but that of the whole world. Today everyone wants to know what his rights are, but if a man learns to discharge his duties right from childhood and studies the sacred books of his faith he automatically exercises his rights too. I learnt my duties on my mother's lap. She was an unlettered village woman...She knew my dharma. Thus if from my childhood we learn what our dharma is and try to follow it our rights look after themselves... The beauty of it is that the very performance of a duty secures us our right. Rights cannot be divorced from duties. This is how satyagraha was born, for I was always striving to decide what my duty was.'<sup>39</sup> In saying so, Gandhi was not only inviting Indians to understand their political obligations in regard to each other, but also to assume what he called after Thoreau, 'the duty of disloyalty'. This was actually the title of an article that Gandhi wrote during the salt Satyagraha in March 1930. Also Gandhi underlined, 'Responsible government will come, but will the people be able to shoulder the burden and rise equal to the task?'<sup>40</sup>

To Gandhi, disloyalty to an unjust state is essentially moral and freeing oneself and others from the law of a corrupt state becomes a peremptory duty. This responsibility is even greater under a democratic state, which is in an endemic danger of the misuse of power. That is why Gandhi distinguishes very sharply between the two conceptions of self-institution and institution of the state. According to Gandhi, 'If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a state everyone is his own ruler. He rules himself

in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbor. In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no state.<sup>41</sup> As a result, citizens could challenge their own obligation to accept the authority of the state by promoting all forms of initiatives from below which include non-violent means and ends to emancipate. This, actually, is the historical Socratic rationale for the use of non-violence as a means of resisting the state. In practical terms, the Socratic praxis of freedom and self-institution that Gandhi and many others refer to is a kind of self-learning for members of a community to overcome apathy, complacency and servitude.

Today, perhaps we are much more cautious and much less conscious than Socrates to say: 'I know nothing, except that I know nothing.' Maybe the appreciation of ignorance is a better part of the Socratic self-examination and self-transformation. And self-examination, after all, is not loud like our world; it is quiet, it is restrained, it is humble. Therefore, it takes Socratic dignity, but also a rebellious mind to resist the tyranny of mediocrity and to free ourselves from our 'self-incurred tutelage.' Not surprisingly, wherever philosophy is understood and practised as a form of self-awareness and self-transformation, we encounter the eternal Socratic disobedient consciousness. "Dissent and defiance, revolt and resistance, tumults and uprisings—much more than 'servitude volontaire', 'tacit and express consent', 'compliance through coercion', 'assujettissement', 'control' or even 'command obeying'—seem increasingly to be emerging as the normal modes in which many populations today relate to their lawfully constituted governments. We find ourselves today, philosopher Alain Badiou has declared, 'in a time of riots'. Disobedience, it would seem, is the order of the day.'<sup>42</sup>

This conception of civic-mindedness is most clearly developed by Albert Camus, a rebellious gadfly in his own way, when he affirms in a 1955 *Letter to an Algerian Militant*: 'You have said it very well, better than I can say it: we are condemned to live together.... We know that our destinies are so closely linked that any action on the part of one calls forth a retort from the other, crime engendering crime, madness replying to lunacy, and, finally, that if one stands

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aloof the other suffers from sterility.<sup>43</sup> The Camusian gadfly rebels against fate, but at the same time he/she understands 'that one cannot be free at the expense of others.'<sup>44</sup> Pushing the argument a bit further, one can say that this practical rebellion against catastrophes of mediocrity in our world paves the way to the construction of a new reality which overcomes the division between politics and ethics and means and ends. As such, the Socratic mind, exemplified by the presence of the public gadfly in history, finds itself at the beginning of a new struggle for truth. The journey to arrive here started with the trial of Socrates followed by the three main historical experiences of Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. But the forging of the rebellious mind and the sustaining of the civic task of philosophy are goals which impose themselves to us each time that we are reminded by the urgency of critical thinking in our own dark times. If humankind is looking toward a future it necessarily requires convictions and commitments, but it also requires Socratic rebels, of the mind and of action, who have the courage to swim against the tide and think against the general drift to superfluity and meaninglessness. But if human beings 'were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.'<sup>45</sup>

End Notes

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<sup>5</sup> Howland, Jacob, "Plato's Apology as Tragedy" in Dustin, Christopher & Schaeffer, Denise, *Socratic Philosophy and Its Others*, Lexington Books, Maryland, 2013, p. 176

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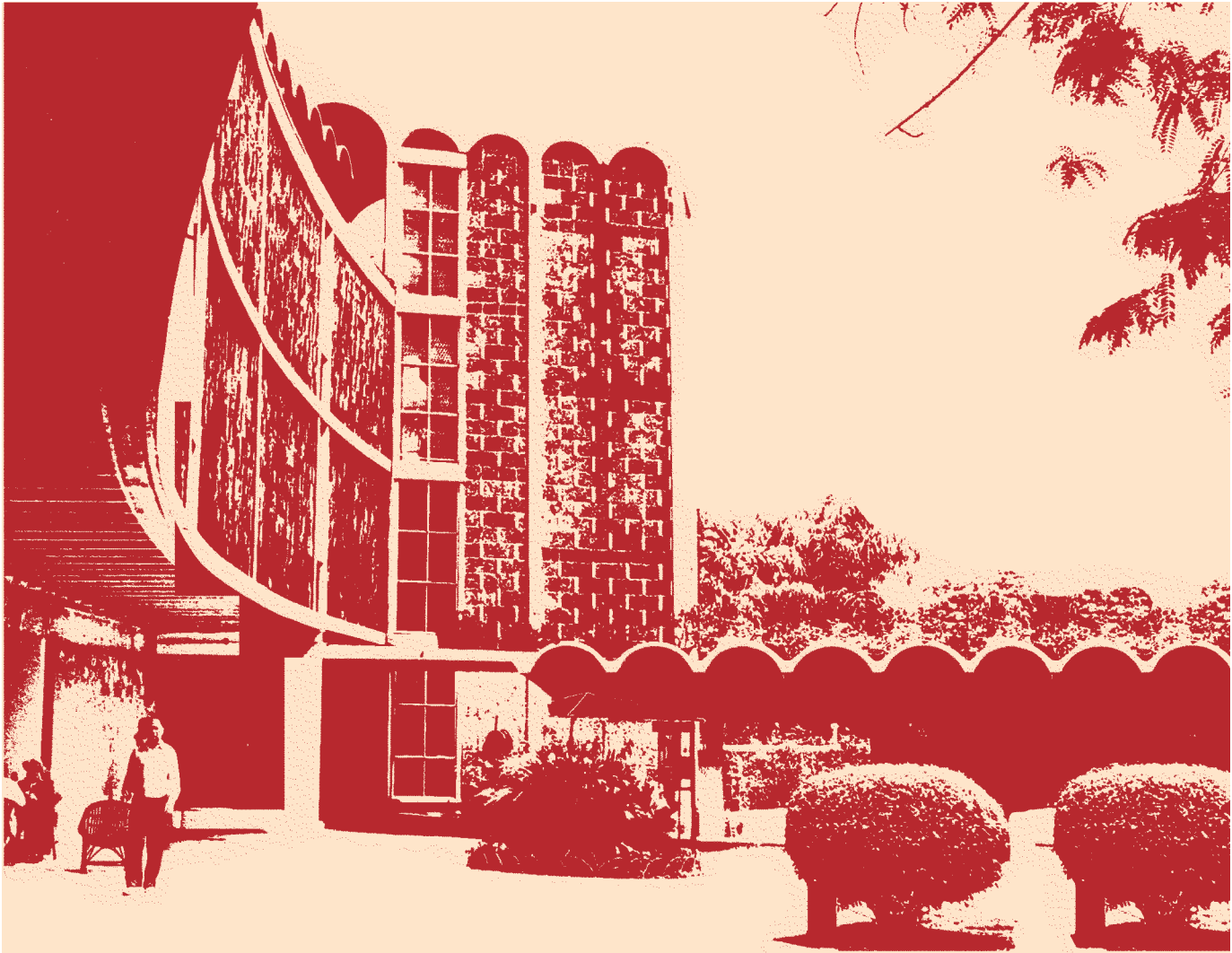
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