

# Comment on black bloc “recruiting poster”

Jaggi Singh

2003

I wish I checked out the “Gandhi is dead” poster earlier, but I guess it’s better to respond later than never ...

It shows a Gandhi-figure getting run over by a DC cop’s motorbike. the caption reads “Gandhi is dead, because he didn’t strike back! Support your local bl@ck bloc!”

I’m writing to seriously object to the poster. It’s not that I’m offended... It’s just that the poster is misguided and stupid. not to mention that the Gandhi figure is a stereotype of an Indian male — specifically, a caricature of cowardly-looking Gandhi — which i find racist (so ya, i am offended!). The caricature reminds me of something Howard Stern would develop a skit around.

Here’s something for comparison: could you imagine if instead of Gandhi, anarchists went around Washington, Philadelphia, Los Angeles or wherever putting up posters that read “Martin Luther King Is Dead ... because he didn’t strike back! Support your local bl@ck bloc!” accompanied by a cowardly-looking MLK caricature? When you choose which battles to pick, is that really an important one to start? You can disagree with King and civil rights pacifists of the 50s and 60s on many fronts, but they were our comrades, and they were for the most part courageous. Cheney, Goodman and Schwerner, and hundreds of others, including MLK, are not dead because they “didn’t strike back”, but because of racism and white supremacy.

MLK or Gandhi are not the problem, but the people who mystify them today. Pardon the history lesson, but Gandhi is not dead “because he didn’t strike back”, but because he was murdered by fascist hindus. The political descendants of those same fascists are alive-and-well in today’s India.<sup>1</sup>

Just a word about where I’m coming from, before anyone assumes anything: i’m an anarchist and anti-authoritarian, and a Desi (Punjabi-Indian, born in Toronto). I’m also NOT a pacifist (as it so happens, some of the most authoritarian people I’ve come across in activist circles are pacifists). I have nothing against “direct actions becoming less passive and more direct”, and have actively organized along those lines. I’ve publicly defended black blocs in various forums.

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<sup>1</sup> *Some contemporary background: the Indian fascists hold power federally, and in several states in India. Their multifold organizations — grouped together as the Sangh Parivar — are responsible for a litany of abuses (including assaults, torture, bomb attacks, rape and murder) against muslims, christians, communists, feminists and all sorts of radicals and progressives. Their front organizations operate in the USA, Canaduh and Britain, raising millions and spreading propaganda. many radical Desi-s (people of South Asian ancestry in the west) are active in organizing against them in those countries. These radical Desi-s are also open to a lot of the anti-authoritarian ideas within the anarchist milieu.*

Moreover, I recently returned from India, where based on my encounters with activists there (especially friends in Faridabad), and much critical reading, I'm hoping to write up an article called "De-mystifying Gandhi".

When i talk about "de-mystifying Gandhi", I mean taking apart the way his myth is used by middle-class, pacifist liberals in the west (including many parts of the non-violent direct action movement). It means critiquing Gandhi's stifling and irrational moralism, his views on caste, his hypocrisy, his authoritarianism, and yes, his pacifism. De-mystifying Gandhi also means contextualizing Gandhi, acknowledging that while he was in many ways an important and courageous figure (like MLK), he did not embody the anti-imperialist, freedom movement in India as many uncritical westerners assume. (Bhagat Singh and Uddham Singh, who were hung by the british, are two lesser-known freedom-fighters that come to mind, much like King's very "un-civil" counterparts in the Black Panther Party and elsewhere.)

"De-mystifying gandhi" includes a critique of his elitist collaboration, along with Nehru and the Congress, with the British. I used to argue with my Indian friends that Gandhi perhaps prolonged "independence" with his collaborationist non-violence campaigns (if that's what 1947, ninety years after the 1857 uprising, could really be called). It's the same argument that many historians have made. In some moments of bluster, I'd say that any self-respecting freedom fighter should have sent Lord Mountbatten home in a box, instead of letting him salute the lowering of the Union Jack.

"De-mystifying gandhi" also means remembering his famous quote (paraphrased): "if i have to choose between being violent and being a coward, i will choose to be violent". No better critique of unthinking pacifism than that. now i don't expect one poster to present a well-developed critique of Gandhi or pacifism, but what the "Gandhi Is Dead" poster does do is tap into simplistic, regressive feelings towards Gandhi and pacifism in general. The poster reflects a frat-boy mentality and sense of humor, which ties into a lot of the stereotypes of who actually participates in black blocs (young, white, middle class males). That caricature is overblown, but the poster sure does play into it (unless of course, the poster IS meant to recruit young white men with a similar sense of humor). I'm all for a concerted, fun, biting, uncompromising, intelligent critique of pacifists and pacifism, including the whole Gandhi myth. I also have nothing against being offensive, if you're offending the right people. But while potentially offending pacifists with "Gandhi Is Dead", you're also offending me (an anarchist who's not white), and potentially lots of other sympathetic non-pacifist radicals and progressives (the vast majority of whom come from communities of colour in this world).

Again, for some context, how would a "Martin Luther King Is Dead" poster go over, even among radical, non-pacifist blacks? Strategically speaking, that kind of poster is a non-starter (even if it's not objectionable in-and-of-itself), if we're seriously interested in building the anarchist movement, and not revel in self-imposed, mainly white, ghettos.

When i was in Washington for the anti-IMF/WB demos, some protesters smugly carried portraits of Gandhi above their heads. the portrait was accompanied by a quote that i can't exactly remember, but it was a Gandhian platitude about not following his personality, but his deeds. I approached the pacifists, and confronted them on the portraits, and their whole mystification of Gandhi (not to mention the irony of them holding the portraits while the quote exhorts the opposite kind of behavior). The protesters and their demeanor reminded me of those "Free Tibet" types who uncritically carry portraits of "His Holiness" the Dalai Lama.

Needless to say, I found the Gandhi worshippers to be liberal morons. more importantly, I find the “Gandhi is dead” poster to be the other side of the same proverbial coin — white and macho, and equally liberal and moronic.

On a related note, what’s with the black blocs being “the marines of the movement”?! that phrase was presumably meant as a compliment, but for fuck’s sake, let’s be a little more self-critical of appropriating the marines, not to mention talking about “recruiting posters” that are meant to attract “A Few Good Anarchists”. pardon me while i puke ...

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