Undermining populism through Gandhi’s intercultural democratic discourse
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ABSTRACT
Populism is receiving increasing attention and the intrinsic dependency of populism from liberal democracy is being scrutinised to find forms able to contain the populist rise, so far with limited success. Little consideration has been given to the implications that populism is a modern political category that could not emerge without liberal democratic regimes. This article analyses the entanglement between postcolonialism, democratic theory and populism in order to fill this research gap. It focuses on the notion of demagogic populism as a threat to democratic regimes that liberal theories are incapable of contrasting. It analyses in some detail the intercultural democratic discourse (IDD) of M. K. Gandhi, in order to understand to what extent it undermines the populist upsurge and contributes to structuring a substantive and intercultural alternative democratisation theory, with respect to liberal democracy. To cope with the extent of Gandhi’s thought, after addressing some limits of liberal multiculturalism, the article focuses on four Gandhian categories: ‘civilisation’, ‘duty’, ‘non-possession individualism’ and ‘spirituality’. As Gandhi engaged in the anti-colonial struggle and critical strategic dialogues in intra-civilisational contexts (tradition, religion, caste, modes of production, etc.), he advances a solid IDD, elaborating a groundbreaking vocabulary that includes ashram, satyagraha, swaraj and swadeshi.

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Introduction
Cultural Discourse Studies’ (CDS) aim at self-reflexivity and cultural conscience in global trans-scalar outlooks (Shi-xu 2012) supports an approach to intercultural dialogue from a critical perspective. CDS takes into account the range of layers of power relations that constitute cultures, and the connections among them, that include, but are not restricted to, economic, religious, linguistic, social and political domains. CDS aim to undermine cultural hegemony and favour intercultural politics and this cannot be achieved without cognitive justice and, therefore, through a postcolonial approach. These objectives are to be realised through exposing, deconstructing and neutralising ethnocentrism on the one hand and developing, practicing and advocating locally grounded and globally minded principles.
and strategies of communication’ (Shi-xu 2016, 5). Can CDS help to face the surge of demagogic populism and reconsider the Eurocentric ground of liberal-democracy?

In times in which India is governed through the narrative of the Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) by Narendra Modi, Ramin Jahanbegloo (2019), who has published relevant scholarly work about Gandhi’s political thought, wrote newspaper articles proposing that Gandhi’s intercultural democratic discourse (IDD) presents a solid alternative to demagogic populism. Where this idea has not been appropriately developed in scholarly work, this article aims to address this gap, on the basis that it is relevant not only for India, but for democratic theorisation at large, especially in times when liberal democratic regimes around the world are faced with an upsurge of demagogic populism. Based on truth and non-violence, Gandhi’s IDD is identified by decentralisation, independence, self-sustainability and political centrality of local communities in a trans-scalar national design emanating from the bottom-up (Kumar 2004).

Elaborating on Gandhi’s paradigm, this article addresses the central question: to what extent does postcolonial theory, such as Gandhi’s, undermine demagogic populism? Some authors have clearly identified that populism is a perennial possibility within liberal democracies (Canovan 1999; Urbinati 2019), while others define the conditions that make populism acceptable in liberal democracies (Wolkenstein 2019), this study considers what alternative to liberal democracy could undermine the rise of demagogic populism, and identifies responses derived from Gandhi’s work.

The methods used to build the argument are applied in the next seven parts of the article: (1) defining demagogic populism and highlighting entanglements with postcolonialism; (2) engaging in a critical analysis of liberal multiculturalism, showing why it is inappropriate to challenge the demagogic populist upsurge and justify cultural diversity. Then, analysing Gandhi’s intercultural discourse in some detail and against demagogic populism, the article focuses on four of the categories that are distinctive of its originality and popularity: (3) civilisation, (4) duties, (5) non-possession individualism (elaborating on Macpherson possessive individualism), and (6) spiritual and inter-religious discourse. The conclusions (7) then systematise how the dynamism of individual and collective agency, a main characteristic of Gandhi’s intercultural dialogue, is able to undermine demagogic populism and substantially enrich democratic theory.

**Postcolonialism and populism**

There is a historical trajectory connecting colonialism and (neoliberal) globalisation (Gianolla 2010). This continuity has two relevant implications here. The first is that by way of colonial occupation, the model of the western state has been used to define the interaction among cultures throughout most of the world’s territories (Santos 1998; Mignolo 2011). The second is that even after the end of the formal colonial empires (not to negate that institutional colonialism still exists in West Sahara, Palestine or Greenland for example), the political model that emerged within western modernity, which includes the conditions for the emergence of demagogic populism, has imposed itself as dominant and legitimate throughout the world. Confronted with this reality, an important question remains: how can democracy be rethought in order to be inclusive of non-western views?

Gandhi’s IDD presents an extraordinarily locally grounded and globally minded set of principles and strategies, and therefore offers a substantial contribution to CDS. His
discourse provides a perspective to analyse to what extent intercultural dialogue may be a way to achieve advanced forms of socio-political organisation, rethinking the hegemonic model of liberal democracy and addressing national-populist rhetoric (Taguieff 1984).

While other analysis has defended the view that in liberal democratic regimes, populism entails both demagogy and participation (Gianolla 2017a), the focus of this paper is on demagogic populism, addressing the assumption that it is a threat, challenge, pathology or deviation of the democratic norm (Mény and Surel 2002; Akkerman 2003; Arditi 2004; Mudde 2010; Hirvonen and Pennanen 2018). Extreme right wing phenomena are bright examples of demagogic populism, while responses from within the liberal democratic paradigm are often either built in antagonistic terms (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018), or to partially limit the populist upsurge (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In view of the current diffusion of demagogic populisms, liberal democratic regimes seem unprepared to cope with their rise. The hypothesis of this paper is that Gandhi’s IDD entails a political paradigm able to eradicate the conditions of demagogic populism.

The broad multiplicity of uses of the term ‘populist’ in relation to Mahatma Gandhi and authoritarian leaders like Indira Gandhi, regardless if a distinction is made about Mahatma’s democratisation dynamics (Subramanian 2007), is open to critique. The main reason being that popular support does not entail straightforward demagogic populism, Mahatma Gandhi’s IDD is popular rather than populist (Santos 2016). Indira Gandhi identified a category of political leadership in India characterised by direct, personalised appeals to “the people” by leaders who deploy particular cultural registers to secure and maintain political power by circumventing intermediaries and neutralising institutions’ (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017). On the contrary, Mahatma Gandhi’s ‘greatest contribution was the forging of a moral and political theory and practice from the standpoint of the oppressed and the excluded that does not itself bring about or legitimise a new system of oppression’ (Pantham 2015).

Barber (2015) argues that democracy developed in tension with multiculturalism, and identifies right wing populism, liberal tolerance and constitutional patriotism as possible responses. Gandhi’s IDD goes beyond the third (and best) option proposed by Barber and addresses an unresolved fundamental fault of liberal democracy; the fact that the modern state emerged in opposition to intercultural dialogue. This is evident by the chronology of colonialism and is exemplified by collective amnesia about the Haitian Revolution (Trouillot 1995). The Haitian Revolution proposed an ‘understanding of citizenship that had greater universal applicability than similar notions developed in [its contemporary] French Revolution’ (Bhambra 2016, 7). Eurocentric thinking (Amin 2009) is unprepared to recognise that the structure of its democratic theory is based on race domination and oppression, and is therefore also unprepared to face the rise of its endogenous consequence, demagogic populism. By addressing the entanglement between liberal democracy and colonialism, Gandhi overcomes the inherited colonial legacy of modern politics, undermining demagogic populism and contributing to the ‘building of a pluralist, free and equitable community of human cultures’ (Shi-xu 2017).

Whereas defining populisms raises enormous disagreement (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Torre and Mazzoleni 2019), in order to focus on demagogic variations, the analysis that follows focuses on four criteria that are generally used to (dis)qualify populisms: (1) the conflict between the elite and ‘the people’, (2) an aversion to cultural diversity, (3) strong and unmediated leadership, (4) the aim to maximise voter turnout through
oversimplification of political, economic and social discourses. The first two criteria are inflected together by using the joint definition of Manicheism, understood as anti-elitist (first criterion), and as xenophobic, racist, sexist and homophobic (second criterion). As discussed in the next section, liberal multiculturalism is unable to address the conditions that enable the emergence of populism.

Beyond liberal multiculturalism

One of the limits of western models of intercultural dialogue relates to a political abstraction. Kymlicka (1989), for instance, takes into account two categories, the citizen and the State, whilst ignoring a third category that is central for Gandhi, as well as in many other cultural perspectives, the (local) community. This is particularly relevant as demagogic populism proliferates in communities that imagine themselves as remote from the political centre. The focus on the protection of minorities (Kymlicka 1989) is based on the representative political paradigms that set the majority to power, is rather (western) parochial for most world societies, and entails a limited debate between liberals and communitarians (Cantle 2014; Modood 2014). Even within the global North, Kymlicka recognises the limitations of an abstract intercultural approach, when it comes to identifying criteria that can stimulate dialogue between intra-national groups. He affirms: ‘self-development and personal enrichment […] are likely to push in the direction of global interculturalism. […] forms of local interculturalism must instead be grounded, at least in part, on considerations of justice’ (Kymlicka 2003, 161). Along this line, Kymlicka engages with Rawls’ (1999) liberal theory of justice, which is nonetheless based on the same structural shortcomings, since it elaborates a way for individuals with different cultural backgrounds to agree on principles that apply to everybody within the state. This scheme relegates the value of the local community to an individual matter and confirms the hegemony of western culture at the world level, thus falling short of a model of ‘interculturalism’ that presumes itself as universal (Pantham 2015; Aman 2015).

Societies are culturally and epistemologically diverse. Multiculturalism is the status quo, not the point of arrival of a political paradigm, such as the multicultural ‘multination’ state as elaborated by Kymlicka (2001, 91–119). Moreover, cultures do not correspond to nations alone; there is multiculturalism even within nations and their minorities. The action and reaction to the multicultural encounter between (inter)national cultures faces different and even opposite reactions within the same ‘national culture’. Let’s take the case of migrants, which shows very clearly the relevance of local community in relation to the emergence of demagogic populism. People act and react differently when they are exposed to the ‘radical’ Other (Giuliani 2016; Benveniste, Lazaridis, and Puurunen 2016). The Other being someone whose ontological origins are geographically and culturally placed outside of one’s own ‘nation’, culture, or imagined community (Anderson 2006). It does not matter that the geographically displaced have undergone a substantive relocation or dislocation. A radical Other can be born in the same neighbourhood as the ‘non-Other’, as can their parents and grandparents. Radical otherness is identified by the geopolitical location of origin associated with the Other, which highlights an intra-cultural dimension. This is where liberal multiculturalism, with its ethnocentric idea of justice, is unable to provide much more than tolerance and assimilationist inclusion as it departs from a static definition of culture (Dietz 2018). Such approaches lead to ‘functional
interculturality’ (Walsh 2012), that is, a utilitarian exchange based on liberal individualistic perspectives ‘which relegate the solution of cultural, political, and social inclusion to the universalism of legal norms that are basically neutral compared to the various ‘private’ ethical conceptions, without taking cultural diversity into account’ (Marci 2013, 188; see also Barber 2015). Assimilationist inclusion is based on ‘the hospitality relation, whoever is offered hospitality remains invariably Other with respect to the society that is nonetheless accepting him’ (Marci 2013, 195). Without being able to provide a deep ontological encounter with alterity, liberal multiculturalism represents a political strategy that has the same discursive validity as exclusionary discursive strategies, therefore facilitating the possibility of demagogic populism.

Gandhi’s paradigm is strongly rooted in a ‘diatopically based vision of living together’ (Guilherme and Dietz 2015, 3–4, 10–11), where meanings and symbols are jointly re-elaborated (Panikkar 2002). Gandhi, however, does not offer a universal understanding of the intercultural – something that is a contradiction in terms (Walsh 2007; Aman 2015; Guilherme 2019) – supporting a critical view of the intercultural and its diverse meanings in different contexts.

Civilisational political discourse

India’s post-independence social and institutional trajectory is profoundly indebted to Gandhi. However India’s current political organisation is at odds with Gandhi’s ideas (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006, 3–59). On the one hand, Gandhi’s intercultural discourse has structurally influenced Indian democratic institutions, something that is evident in the progressive pronouncements of the Supreme Court. While on the other hand, it is dismissed by the political pragmatism of governments in place, particularly those whose political ideology is based on Hindutva or ‘Hinduness’ (deSouza 2019).

For Gandhi, individual and collective independence, emancipation, and democracy are combined in a ‘true civilisation’ and he adopted the word ‘swaraj’ to express them in political terms. As a political programme, swaraj aimed at the accomplishment of Indian independence as well as five basic needs of the people: food, clothing, shelter, education and health (Ram Ballabh Agarwal, interview, Jaipur 15/01/2014).

In Hind Swaraj (1938), Gandhi criticised the model of western civilisation and the consequent notion of development. He instead put forward the Indian alternative that departs from an oppositional concept of the individual:

Civilisation is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilisation means ‘good conduct’ (Gandhi 1938 Chap. XIII).

There is a foundational difference between the concept of civilisation defended by Gandhi and the hegemony of western civilisation. Gandhi attempted to diminish the philosophical, epistemological and scientific preponderance of western civilisation in order to undermine its supposed superiority, and pave the way for an intercultural dialogue among civilisations based on individual and collective empowerment.

Gandhi disliked the social segregation produced by representative democracy and its capacity to fortify indolence (passivity) to violence, power and brute force. He envisaged
a civilisational alternative based on non-violence (action of the soul), thus conceived as a form of struggle and a discursive *loci* of an alternative socio-political model. Gandhi wrote:

[To arm India on a large scale is to Europeanize it. Then her condition will be just as pitiable as that of Europe. This means, in short, that India must accept European civilisation, and if that is what we want, the best thing is that we have among us those who are so well trained in that civilisation. We will then fight for a few rights, will get what we can and so pass our days. (Gandhi 1938 Chap. XV).

Gandhi rejected the limited ambition to struggle for ‘a few rights’ and proposed meta-duty of *swaraj* that leads to individual and collective emancipation through agency. At the core of Gandhi’s civilisational discourse there are two historical objectives: first, to encourage people (Indians and foreigners) to deconstruct the hegemony of (western) civilisation based on passivity, and, second, to motivate the Indian people to recover self-consciousness and build a different political discourse based on agency (Parekh 1989; Hardiman 2003; P. A. Mishra 2012).

Benefitting from the immense cultural diversity of India, Gandhi was committed to challenge the violence of a monocultural political perspective or the clash between different cultural perspectives on three fronts. He struggled against the colonial empire, he opposed the segregation of outcaste people, as well as religious-based communal divisions between Hindus and Muslims, while he also opposed the partition from Pakistan as a confessional State. Muslims maintained that they were a nation, while Gandhi argued that India was not made of nations, but that was instead a cradle of ethnic and religious diversity that came to be integrated within the Indian civilisation (Parekh 1989, 177–8).

Gandhi forged the use of dialogue to construct a culturally diverse postcolonial India, and his political practice integrated the discourse he embodied. He personally sought empathy with the interlocutor and strived to keep diverging peoples united. For instance, Gandhi supported the integration of Ambedkar in post-independent Indian institutions, despite having opposing views about positive actions for Dalits (Pratibha Jane, interview, Jaipur 16 January 2014). He hoped to turn his enemies in his friend, not to win but to win over, succeeding in many cases, but not in all (Narayan Desai, interview, Vedchhi 8 March 2014). Gandhi also supported the nomination of Nehru as Prime Minister because he sensed that Nehru’s ideas would have a greater social appreciation, despite his industrialisation approach (Rajeev Bhargava, interview, New Delhi 26 February 2014). Gandhi ‘wanted a morally cogent universe’ and Nehru seemed capable to achieve it running a structured government (Aruna Roy, interview, Tilonia 9 April 2014). These examples highlight the great contribution of Gandhi to the dialogical construction of the Indian public sphere (Tridip Suhrud, interview, 05 March 2014).

Gandhi’s IDD is at odds with populist Manicheism, rejecting the nation as culturally uniform, adopted civilisation as the substitute political concept that could identify the lack of the historical uniformity of a single monocultural nation in India. ‘Gandhi’s political thought thus more or less completely bypassed the characteristic nature and vocabulary of European nationalism, […] he preferred to speak of swadeshi spirit which captured the interrelated ideas of collective pride, ancestral loyalty, mutual responsibility and intellectual and moral openness’ (Parekh 1989, 194). With the anti-colonial struggle, Gandhi showed the interrelation between political and economic structures, he strengthened the *swadeshi* movement as a form of social organisation and production that posed an
alternative to capitalism and western state-centrism. He supported a model of individual
duty, and community cooperation, without the regulation of the market (Dasgupta 2003;
see also Chimni 2012; Pandey 2014), and a value-based cooperative social and develop-
ment model (Ram Chandra Rahi, interview, New Delhi 20 February 2014). Cooperative pro-
duction helped create an entirely new symbolism for Gandhi’s IDD (Gonsalves 2010), one
example being khadi – locally self-produced clothing.

Opposing the nationalist ideology of Hindutva, which was ultimately responsible for his
assassination, Gandhi defended a progressive understanding of traditions. The dialogue
within the diversity of India, its cultures, languages, geographies and religions could
provide the impetus for an alternative democratic and intercultural political model to
western liberal democracy. Combined with the anti-colonial movement, this constitutes
the trans-scalar dynamic of Gandhi’s geography of struggle, moving from the local to
the global both in terms of village-city–state-global dimensions, and in terms of a diversity
that entails both the intra- and inter- cultural. Ghandi’s IDD arguably goes much deeper at
the local level, and much further at the global level, when compared to the primacy of
nationalist politics that prevail within the modern nation-state.

**Duties over rights**

Gandhi’s popular politics centre on individual and collective agency and horizontal (par-
ticipative) power relations, as opposed to demagogic populism, which is based on ver-
tical power relations that are centralised and top-down. For Gandhi a critical point in
relation to western political models was their unbalance towards the primacy of insti-
tutional power and violence, as opposed to morality: truth and non-violence. Gandhi’s
IDD is characterised by social engagement that neither expect nor reject institutional
power:

> By abjuring power and by devoting ourselves to pure and selfless service of the voters, we can
guide and influence them. It would give us far more real power than we shall have by going
into the Government. But a stage may come, when the people themselves may feel and say
that they want us and no one else to wield the power. The question could then be considered
(CWMG Vol. 90: 223).

This approach needs to be understood within Gandhi’s inter-civilisational discourse of a
balanced life, based on the Hindu concept of purusharthas (purposes of life) with the
primacy of Dharma and morality (Parekh 1989, 210). That leads to sarvodaya, spiritual
and material welfare for all (Narayanasamy 2003), a political philosophy where duties
are central, besides (human) rights (Parel 2003; Gianolla 2017b).

> I would say that there is nothing like a right. For the one who has no duties there are no rights
either. In other words, all rights emanate from duties – if there is no duty, there is no right
either. When I do my duty, it brings some result and that is my right (CWMG Vol. 90: 91).

Instead of affirming individual rights as the basis of social action, Gandhi emphasised the
primacy of individual duties within the community and towards moral life. The political,
social and economic wellbeing of the community is built on individual service to society:

> Service in a spirit of detachment, which means complete independence of the fruit of action.
[....] The human body is meant solely for service never for indulgence. [...] Everyone has a right
and should desire to live 125 years while performing service without an eye on result. Such a life must be wholly and solely dedicated to service (Harijan 24-2-1946).

Preeminent in Gandhi’s democratic idea is the moral agency of subjects, which focuses on self-empowering individuals and communities, as opposed to centring them as egoistic subjects whose basic rights need protection from outside forces. It emerges as an active political subjectivity that entails political participation against the apathy of passive representation. ‘[The] Gandhian conception of individuality is fundamentally different from that of liberalism and it has a different implication for democracy because in liberalism, democracy is the aggregative system of self-interested individuals’ (K. P. Mishra 2012, 206–7). Gandhi’s discourse sets individual emancipation as a basic step for social emancipatory democracy, where citizens are political subjects as opposed to political clients. This approach undermines demagogic populism from the demand side, the voters.

Gandhi proposed a moral root for democracy that could re-establish the link between liberty and equality through fraternity, a category that Skaria (2002) names ‘neighbourliness’. This resonates with the Gospel and with the ideal of fraternity furthered by the French Revolution, although this has lost significance in western democratic discourse, compared to the other terms of liberty and equality. It is a central idea for the construction of citizenship (Gupta 2018), which to Gandhi, was paramount in building India in terms that contested discrimination, respected minorities, and put forward participation (Dipankar Gupta, interview, Jaipur 19 January 2014). Neighbourliness was elaborated in the *ashram*, moral community, through personal engagement, learning and experiencing of the ‘politics of *ahimsa*’, non-violence. While *ashrams* were envisioned as model political communities, they played an empirical role in the construction of Gandhi’s IDD, characterised by radical equality (‘kinship of all life’), without uniformity. *Ashrams* entailed non-violent means of decision making such consensus without voting and postponement if no agreement is met (Radha Bhatt, interview, New Delhi 20 February 2014). However, the larger the scale, the more difficult is to practice a duty devoted to the neighbour.

Neighbourliness implies that absolute difference among people could be overcome through suffering (*tapasya*), characteristic of non-violence. Here, ‘[the] tapasya of neighbourliness differed depending on the kind of absolute difference being addressed: the equal was met with *mitrata* (“friendship”), the subordinate with *seva* (“service”), and the superior with *satyagraha* (“civil disobedience”)’ (Skaria 2002, 957). *Satyagraha*, a word coined by Gandhi, means ‘insistence on truth’, besides being an instrument of social struggle, it is also advocating social service in operating the ‘constructive programme’ (Gandhi 1945, 1962), a set of development initiatives designed by Gandhi to implement his IDD.

Duty makes subjectivity mutually responsible to cooperate for social progress and reduce the radical differences elaborated by cultural positioning. Diversity, therefore, does not relate to a scale of values, but rather through service, transposes to a horizontal order. Duty and political engagement of those with the least power is the measure of horizontality. Gandhi was clear in his belief that violence would first disempower the most vulnerable, and therefore political action should start from their self-empowerment (Kavita Srivastava, interview, Jaipur 25 January 2014).
Beyond the possessive individual

The theory of ‘possessive individualism’ helps to understand the ontological shift contained in Gandhi’s political discourse. This has an impact on the relationship between supply and demand in the political spectrum, and negatively impacts the conditions necessary for demagogic populism to rise.

Macpherson (1964, 270) maintains that possessive individualism is the foundation of liberal political thought, which he defines as follows: ‘man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and [...] human society is essentially a series of market relations’. Autonomous individuals enter into market relations with others (at least exchanging their own labour) as far as they want to. This implies that individuals owe nothing to society (rights over duties) and accession to society is a free choice of theirs. Macpherson (1964) argues that liberal democratic discourse is based on a theory of political obligation that is substantiated by equality within the market society, consisting of individuals that have the freedom to engage in social relations. As far as individuals see themselves as equal (having the same rights) in the market society, and there is cohesion among those who chose the government, there is essentially a rational theory of political obligation.

This cohesion was challenged by the extension of suffrage to the working class, with two main consequences: on the one hand, the political theorisation of the working class conscience explained that the market did not guarantee equality among individuals, while on the other hand, the cohesion of those choosing the government ceased. The absence of a rational ground was substituted by the ability of the political elites to retain power by refurbishing political cohesion through social welfare, whilst simultaneously furthering war and colonialism. The liberal state keeps going without rational grounds, showing that the permanence of possessive market societies is possible, but only at the expense of political and social exclusions (of the Other). This, ultimately, is a root cause of demagogic populism and a (false) ‘way out’ of the liberal rational impasse, that appeals also to the working class.

Dasgupta (2003, 184) highlights the rigour of Gandhi’s methodological individualism, centred on the political autonomy of the individual, and defined as ‘non-possessive individualism’. However, Gandhi’s insistence on ‘non-possession’ as ontological and epistemological horizon of detachment, and its implication in his political discourse, suggests that ‘non-possession individualism’ is a more adequate term.

Gandhi’s discourse put forward a different ontological and epistemological concept of the individual: someone that opts to recognise their own profound value with the freedom from attachment to worldly objects and beings (epistemology), while opting for belonging (ontology) built through agency, over possession. For Gandhi, individuals are not proprietors of their personal talent and the resulting gains, rather they are custodians of them, or ‘trustees’ for the benefit of society:

Every individual must have the fullest liberty to use his talents consistently with equal use by neighbours, but no one is entitled to the arbitrary use of the gains from the talents. He is part of the nation or, say, the social structure surrounding him. Therefore, he can use his talents not for self only but for the social structure of which he is but a part and on whose sufferance he lives. The present inequalities are surely due to people’s ignorance. With a growing knowledge of their natural strength, the inequalities must disappear (Harijan 2-8-1942).\(^3\)

Gandhi’s concept of swaraj at the individual scale, stresses the role of knowledge, as cognitive agency, by linking the existence of social inequalities with people’s ignorance.
Cognitive agency proposes that the first political action required of an individual is to assert oneself epistemologically, spiritually and socially within the community. For Gandhi, the minimalist concept of the individual of western political discourse was intrusive, in that it defined what a good citizen should be, and it reduced human essence from the spiritual to the political (Bilgrami 2009, 48). As a consequence, the separation of the private and public spheres, along with that of the state and civil-society, are radically questioned by Gandhi’s discourse, which speaks to an all-encompassing life, with all of its personal, social, and ecological meanings (Gianolla 2017b).

Non-possession individualism is influenced by the Hindu religious concept of moksha, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death, in a secular political discourse (Parekh 1989, 94–7). Gandhi contended that politics should strive for an inalienable, active and value-based life, which grounds a more democratic secular mentality with respect to the western liberal tradition, based on the detachment and alienation by science leading to the subjugation of nature (Bilgrami 2006, 2009). Parekh (1989, 97) underlines that with detachment, Gandhi ‘did not mean indifference but absence of attachment, not lack of interest but lack of self-interest’.

Political liberalism emerged through an elitist concept of the polity, thus on the epistemic deficit of the people, a category constructed institutionally, as inferior. ‘[T]he point is not just about media and information but much more broadly and pervasively about subtle forms of internalisation of pervasively orthodox and uncritical thinking on public matters from very early on in the mainstream educational institutions’ (Bilgrami 2009, 54). This generates an ‘epistemic weakness’, in that social and political structures both direct and undermine the political culture of the people and provide ground for demagogic populism:

These are weaknesses in the cognitive realm generated by a political and economic culture and institutions deriving from the metaphysical shifts that I had genealogically traced to the late seventeenth century, which in their entrenchment over the centuries ensures that ordinary people have the epistemic deficits I am stressing. It is the longstanding institutional causes of these deficits that should be the real target of our criticism and contempt, not the ordinary people who are its victims (Bilgrami 2009, 56).

Criticising populist leaders for their demagogy should not accompany criticism of those who support them in elections. As Bilgrami highlights, supporters of demagogic discourses are often the passive victims of an epistemic deficit that is structural in liberal democracy, which Gandhi’s cognitive agency aims to overcome. In one sense, this implies that the masses are victims of the exclusion, and instead of portraying populists as foolish actors, we should reflect on the fact that they are able to give voice to constituencies who do not feel represented’ (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 501). While conversely, this cognitive weakness has wider implications in relation to liberal democracy. It should be faced, as Gandhi did, with theoretical argumentation leading to cognitive emancipation, and with the creation of a network of active ‘constructive work’ to practically enact a social self-education to an emancipated political paradigm.

**Spiritual inter-religious discourse**

Demagogic populism often uses religion as an argumentative pivot to build Manicheism. Gandhi opposes this approach through a spiritual understanding of democracy, with a
moral-discursive justification in truth as God, which is at odds with theocratic or religious fundamentalism (Parekh 1989, 94–7; Skaria 2002; Bilgrami 2002, 2009). His understanding also includes those who achieve political morality through a different secular path, such as constitutional patriots (Barber 2015). Gandhi open to both inter-religious dialogue and secularism thanks to his understanding of truth:

The word ‘satya’ [Truth] is derived from sat, which means that which is. Satya means a state of being. Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why sat or satya is the right name for God. In fact, it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth. […] And where there is Truth, there also is knowledge which is true. Where there is no Truth, there can be no true knowledge. […] Generally speaking, [observance of the law of] Truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the Ashram should understand the word satya or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech and Truth in action (CWMG Vol. 44: 40-1).

Gandhi’s spiritual discourse encompasses religions beyond any cultural traditions, understanding them as instruments to walk the path of truth. This perspective opens up the dialogue with and about truth to atheists, and avoids anthropocentrism (Parekh 2001, 35), by adopting a rational concept of the human being who orientates their action towards a moral concept of truth (Bilgrami 2002). The rationality inscribed in Gandhi’s IDD is anthropological not theological, as beings move – voluntarily – towards truth, and are not moved by truth. Agency is thus epistemic, spiritual, social and political.

Contrasting with Hindutva, Gandhi’s discourse on religion was characterised by a civilisational form of open spirituality engaged in Hinduism – Muslim inter-religious dialogue. He advocated religious diversity and opposed religious-based social classification centred on power and wealth, coupled with violence and social fascism (Santos 2002, 453–56, 2014, 49–51). Gandhi also engaged in dialogue on another front, that of the Dalit (Untouchables or Hindu’s outcaste), debating with Dr. Ambedkar, who advocated for the political segregation of the Dalit community from an antagonistic perspective with respect to high caste Hindu’s cultural discourse, which entailed the practice of caste discrimination. The well-known debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar has retained substantial attention (Kolge 2014; Roy 2014; Gandhi 2015). Gandhi’s discourse about caste aimed at eradicating discrimination within the intra-civilisational perspective of India, through intercultural dialogue between high caste Hindus and Dalits.

Gandhi’s spiritual discourse is both based on the Hindu’s worldview and western humanism (based on human rights, state secularism, equality, and civic nationalism). His opposition was towards the excessive centrality of wealth and passion, and the loss of morality and spirituality (Parel 2003). It encompassed the struggle against capitalism, its modes of production, and the need to engage in intercultural discourse with the oppressor, not simply opposing them agonistically. For example, Gandhi thought the British should reconcile with their civilisation and with their own morality and spirituality, and they should not merely replace them with another ethnocentric monolithic and monocultural political proposal. He intended for coloniser and colonised to mutually support each other in this exercise, and likewise, intra-culturally, between Hindus (castes) and with Muslims (inter-religious). Therefore, Gandhi’s struggle for independence was a non-antagonistic effort to build an intercultural dialogue able to dispute the historical impact of colonialism, and at the same time, was a struggle with different intra-cultural forms of oppression.
Agency against demagogic populism

The liberal democratic discourse has historical colonial roots in exclusionary politics, today rephrased in the toleration of difference that enables the rise of demagogic populism as an intolerant perspective, within the same discursive spectrum. An ethnocentric model of liberal multiculturalism lacks relevance for most societies and social groups as it either neglects or underestimates the ongoing impacts of colonialism. We therefore need a critical postcolonial approach to intercultural dialogue (Guilherme 2019), Gandhi contributes to this scope and offers an original paradigm of IDD that is capable of envisaging a different model of socio-political imagination, in which demagogic populism would have no ground.

Colonialism negatively impacted the openness of western civilisation towards other cultures, which were dominated and subjugated. Intercultural dialogue built through political agency is the political agenda of ‘good civilisation’ that can also benefit western civilisation. Agency, as described above through duty, *ashram*, *satyagraha*, *swaraj* and *swadeshi*, characterises ‘service’ within the community and penetrates socio-political structures. It is ‘conduct’ that constructs ‘civilisation’ and opposes the passivity of the political subjectivity of liberal democracy. Agency in society counters the demagogic oversimplification of social issues, as discursively mobilised by populism. Manicheism constructs cultural value based on social classification while Gandhi defined identity through active experience countering the stronghold upon which colonialism, essentialist nationalism and demagogic populism are built. Identity is thus defined dynamically; no individual or social group is superior or inferior because of its distinctiveness. The relationship with the Other is therefore a constructive force because there is no opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as all are characterised by equal otherness. Diversity is understood, through Gandhi’s secular spirituality, as a way towards a postcolonial ecological thinking (Santos 2014) of human existence, and as a value base to build equality upon personal, social and cosmic – and not exclusively economic – prosperity.

The agency inscribed in the (personal and collective) duties entails self-rulled civic engagement that opposes strong leadership hunting electoral success and overcomes the passivity which manifests as a limitation inscribed in (human) rights. Duties are an active dimension to achieve within a community of people and cultures where the intercultural is built. Individuals and cultures contribute with their active experience to the maintenance and construction of dialogue and overcome the limits of individualism, as well as the social hierarchy of possession. In this sense, there is no intercultural without the agency associated with it. Gandhi’s non-possession discourse provides an epistemic shift in terms of individual freedom and presents a reconceptualisation of the political subjectivity of ordinary people. Gandhi’s own leadership was built on constructive action, leading by example, he came to represent himself as the symbol of the Indian people (Prem Anand Mishra, interview, Ahmedabad 4 March 2014). He rejected institutional roles in independent India, in order to keep his community work, something at odds with the actions of the strong vote-catching-orientated leadership of demagogic populism.

Gandhi’s genealogy of the political individual, in a non-possessive spiritual (but not confessional) metaphysic centred on ‘truth’ as ‘God’, which entails horizontal relations with the community and nature, overcoming their domination as inscribed
in a capitalist model of development. For Gandhi, the individual is the agent of epistemic liberation, thus the concept of democracy (as swaraj) combines the spiritual with the socio-political sphere, the individual within the community, through dharma and morality.

Gandhi is the postcolonial master intercultural translator (Santos 2018, 209–246). His discourse is rich with an epistemological effort to overcome the limitations of one-sided perspectives, thereby, it is ecological, neither universal nor culturally relative. Such ‘in-between’ is the ontological locus of critical intercultural research, because ‘postcolonial thinking stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demark, in co-constitution’ (Mbembe 2008). The ‘in-between’ is typical of Gandhi’s IDD and it undermines the basic features of demagogic populism. Gandhi’s popular, intercultural and anticolonial patriotism is the opposite of nationalist-racist-xenophobic and discursive anti-corruption, anti-elitist candidates seeking electoral turnout. Instead, it builds on dialogue between peoples and among social groups within the polity.

Notes
1. Harijan Newspaper articles (Gandhi 1956) are cited in short indicating DD-MM-YYYY and the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Gandhi 1994) indicating volume and page number. These and other key texts are available online via the Gandhi Heritage Portal (www.gandhiheritageportal.org).
2. These statements are extracted from an article in which Gandhi makes an appeal to Indian princes to voluntarily share their properties with the people, under his economic doctrine of ‘trusteeship’ which is based on the concept of non-possession (aparigraha in Sanskrit). For more insight on trusteeship see Dasgupta (2003, 118–131). Non-possession was also one of the vows to be respected in Gandhi’s communities living in his ashrams.

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