

**Lanza del Vasto  
or  
Community Experimentation**

*Frédéric Rognon*

*And other essays by  
Louis Campana and Siby K. Joseph*

**Gandhi International**  
*in collaboration with*  
**Institute of Gandhian Studies**

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## ***Foreword***

Mahatma Gandhi's life was a source of inspiration for many people across the globe. Many important personalities like Fujii Guruji, Martin Luther King Jr., Danilo Dolci, Cesar Chavez, Dalai Lama drew inspiration from him and dedicated their lives for the cause of peace and non-violence. A number of people from different parts of the world used to visit his ashrams to seek inspiration and guidance. Lanza del Vasto from France was one among them.

I am glad that an English translation of the book written by Frédéric Rognon viz. "Lanza del Vasto or Community Experimentation" is being published on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the meeting of Lanza del Vasto with Gandhi in 1937 at Wardha. Some important writings of Lanza del Vasto and his life and contributions are available only in French and other European languages. The message of Lanza del Vasto should not be limited to France or Europe alone because it has a universal dimension. Therefore, it is a welcome step that this book is being published in Asia through the efforts of Gandhi International, France in collaboration with Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha.

Lanza del Vasto's pilgrimage to India and meeting with Gandhi and his three months stay at Wardha was a turning point in his life. Search for alternatives in his later phase of life can be seen as a direct result of his meeting and stay with Mahatma Gandhi. It was Gandhi who had given the name *Shanti Das* to Lanza del Vasto which precisely set the goal and mission of his life. It resulted

in the establishment of Community of Ark in France as a creative expression of alternative living and a European model of ashram on Gandhian lines.

His second pilgrimage to India and participation in Bhoodan movement led by Acharya Vinoba Bhave was also an enriching experience for him. It helped him to work with greater conviction, determination and enthusiasm. He continued his relation with India and visited Gujarat Vidyapith and delivered lectures on peace and nonviolence as a tribute to his Master - Mahatma Gandhi.

Lanza del Vasto, popularly known as the French Gandhi, was an epitome of peace and non-violence. Anyone who undertakes the study of lives of Mahatma and Lanza del Vasto could easily see the common grounds in the thoughts and actions of these two great personalities.

India and the world is preparing for the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Gandhi. The 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the meeting of Lanza del Vasto with Gandhi at Wardha will work as precursor to that great event.

I appreciate the efforts of Mr. Louis Campana, a direct disciple of Lanza del Vasto, President of Gandhi International and recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj International Award for promoting Gandhian values for this publication and the Sevagram international Conference on Non-violent Economy and Peaceful World.

I am sure the present work will inspire peace activists and academics across the countries and will be translated in many other world languages.

***Chandrashekhar Dharmadhikari***  
Chairman, Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha

## ***Preface***

On the occasion of the Sevagram International Conference to be held in October 2017, jointly organised by Gandhi International, France and Institute of Gandhian Studies Wardha, India, it would be appropriate to publish the English translation of the book written by Frédéric Rognon viz. “Lanza del Vasto or Community Experimentation” for wider dissemination among public and more particularly those interested in Gandhian Studies. This book was originally published in French by “Le Passager Clandestin” in 2013 ..It is now published in English by Gandhi International in collaboration with the Institute of Gandhian Studies along with some new essays.

Can we make a link between Gandhian thinking and the collection of books published by Le Passager Clandestin titled “the Precursors of Degrowth”? I think this link could be made indeed, and that is the reason we are publishing this book on this occasion. The economic war in which we are permanently engulfed in is far-off from the Gandhian *Swadeshi*, which essentially stands for harmony and care for the others, particularly for the most deprived ones.

Lanza del Vasto has dealt in his works issues like the reappropriation of military and civil nuclear usage by citizens as these are too serious concerns to be left in the hands of politicians and military men. The politicians are too much diffident and morally incapable and the military is too much under the political ideology of ruling class..It is the same in the case of agriculture which is in the hands of the powerful lobbies of chemical industries. The indus-

trialization of agriculture results in disastrous and poisonous food filled with pesticides, insecticides and other kinds of “cides”. This is very much against the organic agriculture that can provide massive employment opportunities and healthy food compatible with Gandhian principles. It is good to know that organic agriculture has been declared indispensable to eradicate starvation on the planet by Jean Ziegler and Olivier de Schutter, UN rapporteurs on the right to food, who openly condemn the industrial agriculture.

Community experimentation is a laboratory for a civilisation based on absence of fear or threat and where profit and domination are explicitly declared as illegal. Besides livelihood agriculture, this civilisation would also develop craftsmanship accessible to all and the splendour of celebration of seasons, without artificialities or unnecessary fanfare.

The present world is not favourable to the poor people since it throws them in stress, speed and crazy urbanization. So they are forced to live in degradation and indignity. Developing small communities where everyone is recognized and gets a proper place has become a social necessity. There is no need to wait for building up such a well knit and happy fraternity.

We should take this opportunity to strengthen the links on all continents among all Gandhian and non-violent movements in order to raise a common platform and support each other in non-violent action. I hope the international conference and the publication of this book would contribute significantly to such a perspective.

***Louis Campana***

President, Gandhi International, France



# I

## Lanza del Vasto or Community Experimentation

*Frédéric Rognon*

### 1. Introduction

If one were to pinpoint the defining feature that sets Lanza del Vasto apart from the other precursors of degrowth, it would unquestionably be his real-life experimentation. This testing of the basic principles of voluntary simplicity took shape over many years and in a specific context, namely community life.

*Le pèlerinage aux sources* (1943) [Return to the Source], which chronicles Vasto's encounter with Gandhi in 1937, has powerfully marked several generations of readers. As the "Gandhi of the West" and the "apostle of nonviolence," he is remembered for protesting against torture in Algeria and the creation of the atomic bomb and nuclear plants, as well as advocating for conscientious objectors and standing with the peasants of Larzac to oppose the project of expanding the military camp in their region. Yet the "positive" and propositional side of his life has all too often been forgotten, including his political and economic endeavours, and especially his experimentation with an alternative society through the communities of the Ark.

This concrete establishment, from 1948 to the present day, of a simple life based on farming, crafts and

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welcoming visitors constitutes one of his most powerful contributions to the degrowth movement. To show that it is possible to live this way, as brothers and sisters, simplifying one's everyday existence, reducing one's needs to the essentials, pooling together resources, working with one's hands, taking care not to burden the planet or other people, rediscovering spiritual life and a sense of celebration—and to show that all this is neither difficult nor unpleasant—this is the fundamental contribution of Lanza del Vasto. The limitations of his premises and the vagaries of his experiments may be scrutinized; yet through them all there emerges a fertile dialectic between theory and practice, written work and real-life work.

Because experimentation, by definition, implies a back-and-forth process and an often-winding path, we will begin by retracing the biography of Lanza del Vasto. In doing so, we will observe the process by which he “put [his] feet into the footprints of [his] thought” and gradually refined his intuitions as they unfolded in real life. Next we will examine the key premises of his economic and political thinking. Finally, we will take stock of his achievements through the communities of the Ark. Only at the end of this journey will we be in a position to assess Lanza del Vasto's posture with respect to the convictions of growth objectors.

### **2. A life and a way of thinking**

In retracing the life of Lanza del Vasto (1901-1981), a number of documents can be consulted: his own *Viatiques* (memories of youth)<sup>1</sup>, his three autobiographical books (*Le pèlerinage aux sources* [The Pilgrimage to the Sources]<sup>2</sup>, *Vinôbâou le nouveau pèlerinage* [Gandhi to Vinoba: The New Pilgrimage], *L'Archeavait pour*

*voilureunevigne*[The Sails of the Ark Were a Vine]), and finally the masterful biography by Arnaud de Mareuil, *Lanza del Vasto Sa vie, son œuvre, son message* [Lanza del Vasto: Life, Work and Message]<sup>3</sup>.

**a. From conversion to the praise of simple living**

Lanza del Vasto was born in San Vito dei Normanni, Southern Italy, to a Sicilian family of aristocratic origin. His father was half Italian, half French, while his mother was Belgian, from Antwerp. He was thus brought up immersed in European culture, particularly since he spent his childhood travelling between Italy, France, Belgium and England. Already at an early age, he mastered Italian, French and English. His given name was Giuseppe Lanza (with “lanza” meaning “lance” or “javelin”), and Lanza del Vasto or “Lance of the Desert” was his subsequently adopted pen name. Gandhi, one day called Lanza, *Shantidas* (in Hindi) meaning, “Servant of Peace” and then those close to Gandhi used that name to address him.

In spite of a Catholic upbringing, Vasto’s discovery of the works of Spinoza in 1918 led him to adopt atheism. The young man at the time was tormented by his search for the meaning of life and appalled by injustice. For his baccalaureate oral examination, he drew the subject of “Justice,” which he defined as “the strange calculation of men who would stop evil by practicing evil upon those who have done evil.” The teacher asked him if this was a quote; “No,” he replied, “I am saying what I think.” And indeed, throughout his life, he would search for ways to respond to evil with good. Although he went on to study philosophy at the University of Pisa from 1921 to 1925, he was left deeply dissatisfied. In his own words, “Philosophy is the love of wisdom, or the wisdom of love; yet there is neither

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love nor wisdom to be found therein, only a profound sense of boredom...”

In 1925, at the age of 24, Vasto discovered the works of St. Thomas of Aquinas. Here he found his own thoughts which he had confusedly attempted to formulate. In St. Thomas’ *De Trinitate*, he came across the words *Deus estrelatio, non autemrelativa, quia non mutabilis* (God is relationship, but not a relative relationship, since it is unchanging). From this perspective, God is not a Being-in-itself, an absolute substance, far removed from His creation, but rather a relational God, or more precisely the Absolute Relationship present in all relationships. Things therefore do not exist for themselves, but are in relation with each other; the entire universe, then, appears as a network of interrelations with at their summit the Absolute Relationship. Although paradoxical, and even an oxymoron, this expression of “Absolute Relationship” encapsulates the divine mystery: if all is relative, God is Relationship itself. Creation would then no longer be atomized, isolated and distant from a substantial God, but rather reconciled with itself and its creator, the relational God. Man is connected with man and with all living things as well as his God. Creation thus appears as a tapestry of interrelations between different levels of reality, overdetermined by the ultimate connection of man with God. This revelation in Lanza del Vasto’s consciousness via his reading of St. Thomas prompted a brutal conversion, “by logical constraint,” as he would describe it. Before this obvious truth that had, thereto, been concealed, he could only abdicate his will. Yet this was merely an intellectual conversion. The “God of Absolute Relationship” would be the subject of his philosophy dissertation, defended in 1928 and titled *Approches de la*

*Trinitéspirituelle*<sup>4</sup>, in which he developed an entirely original “relational philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Only later would he experience his moral conversion, the life change of restoring a living relationship with his God and with all other creatures: the conversion would be progressive, yet radical.

In 1928 Vasto read the Bible as well as Romain Rolland’s *Mahatma Gandhi* (published in 1924). In the Hindu that was Gandhi he saw someone who, better than Christians, had taken the Gospel seriously and put it into practice. For a few years more, together with friend and poet Luc Dietrich, he lived an artistic, bohemian and somewhat chaotic existence fueled by his intense spiritual quest. But in 1933, he set out: marking a break from social conventions and his family’s material comforts, he walked across Southern Italy for three months, barefoot and penniless, from Rome to Bari, in search of the essential. This experience of detachment proved a veritable inner liberation that gave meaning to his existence at last. At this time he began writing his *Principes et préceptes du retour à l’évidence* [Principles and Precepts of the Return to the Obvious], which would be published in 1945. Subsequent editions would bear the subheading *Éloge de la vie simple* [In Praise of Simple Living].<sup>6</sup>

This collection of notes, scribbled down while “swinging from one foot on to the other,” are the first glimmerings of his experimentation with simple living, and the reader can only be struck by their radicalism:<sup>7</sup> “He has no need of a vehicle and laughs at machines running on wheels, he who returns to the obvious. Alone and on foot, he goes toward what goes without saying.” Absolute poverty is thus a prerequisite for the “return to the obvious”: this undeniable truth imposes itself upon the

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mind without reasoning, merely by its internal force, even if it is one that has been forgotten or that one wishes not to see—indeed, it seems absurd in an urban and technological civilization. And yet it is that to which we must return, both from a historical perspective (turning back in terms of lifestyle) and a spiritual perspective (turning back to God, conversion). The *Principes et préceptes* were thus Lanza del Vasto's travel notes and the rules for living he gave himself, in the form of aphorisms, over the course of his journey. The subheading *Éloge de la vie simple* announces the author's ascetic intent to unbind himself from the artifices of modern life, to be freed from the self by limiting desires to actual needs. The first chapter, entitled "Introduction à la vie errante" [Introduction to the Wandering Life], declares in no uncertain terms that simplifying one's life and having a wandering lifestyle go hand in hand, and that one ultimately needs only what one can carry on one's person. Vasto also restores the nobility of walking, by drawing a link between uprightness and dignity, by calling for a new relationship to time that would be more respectful of natural rhythms, and by emphasizing the inner journey inherent to the pilgrim's path. Indeed, acting on the self, and especially taming the body, is the bedrock for the sober and frugal lifestyle he suggests.

This concept of self-sufficiency is coupled with his reflections on economic policy, and more specifically his wariness of commerce. Vasto sets forth a powerful critique of urban society, which he accuses of being incoherent, parasitic, overbearing and forgetful of the obvious: "What things does the city make that are necessary? Does it make the wheat of the bread it eats? Does it make the wool of the cloth it wears? Does it make milk? Does it make an

egg? Does it make fruit? It makes the wrapping. It makes the label. It makes the prices. It makes the politics. It makes publicity. It makes noise. It has taken the gold of the obvious away from us and has lost it.”

Already at this stage, Vasto evokes working with one’s hands and the spirit of service, which he presents as antidotes to accumulation and dishonesty: “Honest is he who draws a link between what he takes and what he gives in return.” But his most singular aphorism may be the one about foregoing what one disapproves of; in this context, coherent living implies a complete change of mindset, and voluntary poverty becomes more meaningful than making demands: “If you disapprove of lies, leave the city. If you disapprove of triviality, read no newspapers. If you disapprove of the ugliness of the century, throw away everything that comes from a factory. If you disapprove of butchery, stop eating meat. If you disapprove of the brothel, look on every woman as your mother. If you disapprove of war, never clench your fists. If you disapprove of the bondage of poverty, get rid of your possessions freely.”

In this handful of expressions, we can already identify several fundamental orientations of Vasto’s thought, still nascent at the time. This series of aphorisms would serve as a reference for Vasto and his companions, even after he adopted a settled lifestyle. He revisited and finished writing of the notes on Christmas 1937, during his trip to India.

**b. Encounter with Gandhi and vision for the Ark**

In January 1937 Lanza del Vasto left Europe to meet Gandhi at his Wardha ashram, where he stayed for three months. His encounter with the Mahatma, related in *Le*

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*pèlerinage aux sources*,<sup>8</sup> represented the completion of Lanza del Vasto's conversion, i.e. his "return" to the profound and forgotten truth of his own religion, and the birth of his own life task: "He, the Hindu, had to come for us to learn what we had always known." In his writings, Vasto described everyday life in the ashram, with its focus on manual activities and the simplification of needs, of which no one was exempt. For the author, learning to work with his hands represented nothing short of a rebirth: "A new life begins." The ashram's Rule required Hindus to renounce certain (non-fundamental) cultural aspects of their religion, in particular caste rules such as the avoidance between Brahmans and Untouchables as well as the formers' dispensation from menial jobs. Once their apprenticeship completed, Gandhi's followers would spread *Swadeshi* principles to villages across India: economic self-sufficiency was viewed as the first step toward political independence. Indeed, Gandhi taught that Indians' dependency on the English was based on their passive collaboration, especially economic, and as a result, meeting their own needs would enable them to learn to do without the occupiers. This implied on one hand revising the needs of the rich, and on the other developing the living conditions of the poor. Hence the principle embraced by Lanza del Vasto: "Let us get rid of squalor and cultivate poverty."

After spending three months with Gandhi, Shantidas ("Servant of Peace," as the Mahatma had named him) left Wardha for a pilgrimage to the sources of the Ganges, a pilgrimage that all Hindus achieve at least once in their lifetime, in order to prepare for his "new life" and to "enter into his mission." In so doing, he returned to wandering, which afforded an opportunity to put into practice the rules of absolute simplicity and to continue writing his



*Principes et préceptes du retour à l'évidence.* Eventually, exhausted, physically injured and believing himself to be dying, he was forced to stop just short of his destination. Here he remained immobile in a state of meditation and prayer, fed by villagers, pilgrims and hermits, for fifteen days. At last he decided to come back down without having reached the source, for, in his own words, "I have always preferred the journey over the destination." And it is in trekking back down the Himalayas that he received his life task. In *Le pèlerinage aux sources*, he recounts how he intended to stay in India to serve Gandhi, but "a new thought was dawning" in him: "that by virtue of the very principle of *Swadeshi*, the place of a Western disciple of Gandhi was in the West and his task to sow the seed on the most thankless ground—at home."<sup>9</sup> He wrote how it seemed vain to expose this principle in books and public speeches, how it had to be lived, and how it was necessary "to found a brotherhood of men, bound by solemn vows for the purpose of learning to live together according to the rule of *Ahimsa* [nonviolence] and *Swadeshi*." According to this initial vision, the Ark would take the shape of a wandering order. He wrote of his project to Gandhi, who replied, "You will do what your inner voice bids you." On his return to the ashram, he laid out his mission before the Mahatma in detail: "I already envisioned all the armies of the world conquered by the mere refusal of young people to touch a weapon. ... Further in the distance I could see the great furnaces dying out, the factories deserted, the machines devoured by rust, the pavement of great cities broken by grass ... simply because the working people had healed, had healed from servitude. Without any fanfare, the people had turned its back on its bosses. It had returned to the earth. Here it had rediscovered bread, clothing, tools, a roof and peace.

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What—is it really so hard for man to return to the obvious?”

Gandhi on his part warned him against any hastiness and exhorted him to stay at his side a while longer. But Shantidas felt the urgency of his vocation, of taking action to end the march to war. And in March 1938, he embarked on a boat to Europe.

The life task Lanza del Vasto received in India would be confirmed by others, in France, but only ten years later. On his immediate return to Europe, he saw war on the horizon and felt powerless before it. All he could do was undertake a new pilgrimage, on foot, this time to Bethlehem, while letting the storm pass. In 1944, three initial disciples came to find him, only to leave soon thereafter. Others followed, and Lanza del Vasto began to set up a budding community in Paris with a focus on manual work, including a woodworking workshop for boys on Montagne Saint Geneviève and a spinning and weaving workshop for girls on Rue saint Paul, with a garden in Marly accessible to all by bicycle. Each Friday, from 1946 to 1948, he would comment on the Gospel. These teachings would lead to the publication of his *Commentaire de l'Évangile* [Commentary on the Gospel].<sup>10</sup> During these years he also theorized what would become a very original political and economic thought, published in two volumes under the title *Les quatrefléaux* [The Four Scourges].<sup>11</sup>

### **c. The four scourges**

Lanza del Vasto's major political and economic works deliver a scathing critique of urban and technological civilization, along with suggestions for a community alternative based on the revision of needs and simplification of life.

Vasto's political philosophy resists the traditional classification inherited from the French Revolution, divided into the categories of left and right, progressivism and conservatism. Hence, for example, he is as concerned with freeing the exploited from their servitude as he is attached to tradition and rural living. In his view, humanity since the dawn of time has been afflicted with four man-made scourges: misery, servitude, war and rebellion. The first two are suffered passively, whereas the latter two are more actively induced by man because of the first two, and merely reinforce them. What is the cause of this affliction, and how can it be escaped? Many social sciences researchers, including conflict researchers, have sought to pin down the economic, demographic or sociopolitical causes of humanity's woes, and especially armed conflict. But for Lanza del Vasto, these explanations shed no light on the mainspring. Vasto instead interprets history and the functioning of human societies based on a unique hermeneutic principle, "original sin," which he sees not as a moral fault or disobedience, or even as the totality of all vices and crimes, but rather as a fundamental disposition, a metaphysical evil from which originate all ills. According to Vasto, who employs a play on words based on a paronymic (if not etymological) association between the words *fruit* and *usufruit*, original sin comes down to the spirit of profit and greed: "Original sin is the evil of having eaten the fruit-of-the-knowledge-of-good-and-evil. ... *Eating* means violently taking possession of and destroying something in order to reduce it to oneself. *Fruit* means *pleasure and profit*. The sin is therefore to have *taken for oneself and destroyed Knowledge for the purpose of pleasure and profit*." This novel definition of original sin allows Vasto to radically extract the concept from the field of ethics and to discern its impact in the

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behaviour of all men, including the most honest, the most virtuous and the most morally irreproachable—those who obey laws and abide by social and religious norms. Original sin does not merely concern cheating or stealing, i.e. transgressing the rules of the game, but the very game itself, which is played by all, and which is diabolical in nature: the game of the “Prince of the World.” In a society based on competition, social advancement, professional success, the valuing of wealth, and armed defence, original sin translates into abuses which, far from being condemned on moral grounds, are approved by all and profit all: in fact, it is the basis of the highest civil and military virtues. This explains why efforts to de-legitimize and challenge justifications of violence bring one into conflict not with the violent and evil, but with the good and pious. Vasto denounces the “devil at work” at the very foundation of our societies. One of the pillars of this diabolical system is the principle of property, which is viewed as entirely legal and moral, and consequently defended, valued and honored. Yet to quote Proudhon, “Property is theft.” Venturing a step further, Vasto proclaims that “Ownership is murder. The mandatory murder that we call war.” Indeed, property must be defended, a fact that logically and inexorably leads to war. He who would confront the true causes of war must grapple with this issue. War is thus rooted in the very structures of our societies, whose appearance of peace is utterly illusory: “It is customary to use the word ‘war’ to refer to the war that has broken out, and ‘peace,’ to the war that is hidden away from view.” This explains why Vasto rejects a pacifism that demands peace at all costs: he opposes peace (in the sense of hidden war) as much as much as he does overt war, and suggests nonviolent rather than pacifist solutions. Not only does ownership lead to

war, but the ownership of some leads to the poverty of others: “Poverty and wealth are flip sides of the same coin.” Importantly, poverty leads to violent revolt, an additional scourge that only exacerbates poverty.

Another cause of war is the desire for pleasure that results in the aspiration to avoid labor: “It is less gratifying for a man to take from the earth what he needs to live using a tool than from another man using a weapon.” But even before it leads to war, the aspiration to be exempted from work—which is permitted by wealth—is at the root of the servitude that is imposed on all the poor, i.e. slavery, or its modern form, wage labor. To illustrate his radical criticism of wage labour, which in his view degrades work and alienates workers, Vasto goes so far as to make an instructive comparison between the figures of the soldier, the prostitute and the wage-earner...<sup>12</sup>

This denunciation of private property and man’s exploitation of man could prompt one to associate the positions of Lanza del Vasto with those of Marxists. But in fact, a hundred or so pages of the first volume of the *Quatrefléaux* are devoted to critiquing Marx’s analysis and the practices of the communist regime (which, in the 1950s, meant going against nearly the entire French intelligentsia). According to Vasto, all political systems bear the mark of original sin, given that power always implies the power to abuse power, and systems engender each other without ever bringing an end to the four scourges. The regime suggested by the Marxists was intended to solve poverty and war; paradoxically, Christians themselves never attempted to accomplish this, preferring instead to associate with the powerful and the leaders of armies. This reversal of roles is troubling to say the least: does God want “for us to fight on the side of the

Good in order to maintain secular abuses,” Vasto wonders, “or on the side of the Evil in order to bring about a better world?” In fact, the implementation of communism would soon answer this question: wage labor and war continued, and the people, reduced to a mass, i.e. “a formless, burdensome thing destined to spiral ever lower,” simply changed masters: “To eliminate abuse, it is not enough to eliminate those who engage in abuse. It is important to look at who will replace them and wonder what discipline, what purification will have made them better, and which doctrine, wiser.” The dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing other than generalized servitude: “If wage labor is slavery, will slavery become freedom when everyone is a wage earner?” Finally, violent revolution can only be maintained against one’s enemies by force: “There are the indomitable masses (those that have not been exterminated), the millions of deportees who fill prisons and re-education and labour camps, a new proletariat waiting for their Marxes and Lenins to renew history.”

Nor does liberal democracy find favor with Lanza del Vasto. Both systems, opposed at the time, in fact share the same religion, i.e. materialism, which is the State religion in a communist regime and the dominant belief in a liberal system. In both cases, humanity puts its trust in science, economic growth, and the hope of salvation through progress and technology. The two systems resemble each other all the more since one is merely an outgrowth of the other: communist doctrine expresses “one of the dreams cherished by the Western *petit bourgeois*, namely a human city that has attained the perfection of an anthill.” Liberal democracy, for its part, has legitimized armed violence and instituted compulsory military service, and in so doing has made war “particularly popular, fierce and base.” Vasto aspires to choose neither

system, but rather to do without either, i.e. the illusions of liberal reformism as well as violent revolution.

But before turning to the alternative he suggests, it is worth taking a moment to examine his critical argument. Vasto is not content to reject the two classic political and economic systems: his denunciation extends more fundamentally to the basis of a technological and urban society that underlies both.

Lanza del Vasto's criticism of mechanization is very much in keeping with his religiously inspired political thought: in his eyes, scientific and technological civilization, aimed at profit and domination, is the most formidable renewal of original sin, and finds its accomplishment in the atomic bomb. We have already seen Vasto's criticism of the urban phenomenon and the new slavery of wage labour. The technological complex is merely their corollary, for it symbolizes the degradation of man, and reinforces the forgetting of the "obvious." Hence, once more, it is based on the argument of the "obvious" that Vasto opposes the glory of the human anthill as well as illusions of technical/scientific progress: the first and foremost wrong of technological society is its phantasmagorical nature. For it is in the very nature of the "obvious," to which Vasto invites the reader to "return," to be overshadowed by glitzy artifice to the point that it no longer appears to the subject's awareness with its original immediacy. This explains why Vasto supports his objection to the myth of progress being a road to freedom and bliss by using powerful and sarcastic illustrations that strike the imagination. He describes the scene of an urban crowd being flogged by an invisible whip,<sup>13</sup> and borrows the narrative model of the Gospel describing the threefold temptation of Jesus in order to condemn mechanization:

“I’ll save you time,’ says the machine, speaking like a lamb, and no sooner has man accepted the seductive invitation than all the days of his life are swallowed up by haste...”<sup>14</sup>

The second point of his denunciation of urban civilization and mechanization is that they threaten the dignity of man as a free being, considered and treated as an end in himself, capable of meeting his own needs by making his own goods. This leads Vasto to offer up a virulent diatribe on the technical division of labor, i.e. its compartmentalization into repetitive and degrading tasks: “Of all the ills caused by technical excesses, the degradation of human labor is certainly one of the most grievous. ... manual labour has been distorted, cut up into bits, emptied. This process of breaking up and ultimately eliminating man’s labour is done by the machine and is known as Industry.” If man has become no more than a means, then it is the machine that has become the end: “I made the machine so it would serve me and work in my stead. It was stronger, I served the machine, the machine fashioned me.” Vasto pursues his indictment of technical progress (in the middle of the post-war boom decades) in empirical and quasi-visionary fashion by condemning its social consequences and in particular the cyclical crises of the labor market. Yet he does not believe in the idea of escaping job crises by entering into a civilization of leisure, which was believed to eventually relieve industrial society. This illusory dream, in his view, called to mind the *panemetcircenses* of ancient Rome, which in modern language translates into “unemployment allowances and planned leisure activities.” Idleness is a form of alienation similar to mechanized work: in both cases, man is divested of his vocation to do manual work in all its nobility: “To ‘deliver man from work’ would be to deliver him of his deliverance.” Thus, the crown jewel of the “modern”



world, its utopia in a sense (man's liberation from labor through technology) is, in Vasto's thought, more a symptom of decadence. The triumphant hymn of "modernity" is no more than its swan song.

Even so, Vasto does not condemn the use of all technology on principle. He contents himself with reversing the order of priorities, following the example of the relationship between the Sabbath and its beneficiary. What is essential is that technology be made for man, and not vice versa: "What I have against their science and technology is that it has come first, even though it should be last! But the last place, far from being despicable, is the place of serving life and its needs." For Lanza del Vasto, as for Gandhi, the criterion of a machine's legitimacy resides in man's mastery of it. This would be expressed later by Ivan Illich through the concept of "conviviality": "I use the term 'convivial society' to describe a society where modern tools are at the service of people integrated into a community, and not a body of specialists. A convivial society is a society where man controls the tool."<sup>15</sup> For Lanza del Vasto, establishing an alternative society that puts technology in its proper place requires a revision of needs: it calls for a distinction between vital needs and artificial desires, a detachment from the latter, and the choice to use simple means, especially manual labour and rudimentary tools, in order to meet the former. Man must be able to master the entire production chain from raw material to finished product, and to this end must limit his consumption to what he can produce himself, so that his subsistence does not depend on any outside agent or abusive commercialization. These principles, already defended by Charles Fourier in the 19th century in his dream of "phalansteries," reject both the economic systems of liberalism and of state socialism. Instead, they demand

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a return to the land and a revaluing of traditional farming and crafts.<sup>16</sup>

How, then, to concretely overcome the impasses of technological growth? In observing the “circle of revolutions” that constantly gives rise to the same scourges, in searching the Bible for the meaning of history, and in drawing lessons from the Gandhian adventure, Lanza del Vasto concludes that the woes of man are not carved in stone but that there are paths to liberation. The answer lies not in opposing political and economic systems directly, but rather in appealing to the conscience of men. He finds inspiration in La Boétie who, as early as the 16th century, asserted that “no tyrant, exploiter or corrupter can succeed without the complicity of those he abuses. This is a great truth, a truth that delivers.” But to be freed from “voluntary servitude,” it is useless to want to take issue with anyone but oneself: “Properly organized revolution begins with the self,” and “revolution without conversion is like making a hole in water.” It is impossible to be freed from original sin without first returning to the obvious, without coming back to God. What is needed, accordingly, is to follow the divine commandments, i.e. the commandments of nonviolence as taught by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (especially the Beatitudes and love of enemies). Paradoxically, it is a Hindu, Gandhi, who dared to apply what Christians have known for 2,000 years, and who wished to convert them—not to Hinduism, but to their own religion! In the second volume of the *Quatrefléaux*, Vasto tellingly devotes 25 pages to Gandhi, then 45 pages to the principles and history of nonviolence, and finally 12 pages to the Ark.

The way out from the four scourges, in his view, lies in the community solution inspired by Gandhian

nonviolence. At the same time, he conceives the community as a laboratory for experimentation.<sup>17</sup> The utopia must confront reality in order to avoid lapsing into any kind of totalitarianism. Hence, for example, Vasto would eventually revise his initial vision of itinerant life and an Army of Peace in light of subsequent reflection as well as the emergence of new needs (especially with the arrival families and children). Wandering, when raised up as a system, reveals itself to be incoherent since it creates a dependency on those who produce: the Ark should be a working order and not a begging order. Yet the fundamental intuition always remained unchanged: to find a lifestyle that does not weigh on or exploit others (especially through wage labour), that does not allow abuse (via power or the accumulation of property), that replaces the spirit of profit with the spirit of service, that settles conflicts constructively, and that respects the environment. Such a lifestyle would be based on a number of principles: the community would produce what its members require, and choose voluntary simplicity as a cure for both poverty and wealth; no one could claim private property over anything; tasks would be done on a rotating basis (including the task of being in charge of the community), so that no one might take their status for granted; the simplest tasks (cleaning, cooking and doing the dishes) would be done in turn by all members; and decisions would be made on a unanimous rather than majority basis, requiring community members to agree, and making it possible to maintain or rebuild community solidarity (everyone's point of view must be taken into account and the common will must be adapted according to solutions not originally imagined: "Time spent agreeing is never wasted"). Finally, the "Gem of the Rule" would be co-responsibility: each individual must take responsibility

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for his or her actions, acknowledge wrongs, and right companions' wrongs if they in turn refuse to acknowledge and correct them themselves. The optimal number of members would be 30 to 50 per community (so that each individual would be able to meet all his or her companions every day). Beyond this number, the community would have to spread out. Under these conditions, the community solution appears as a way out of the mechanism of scourges weighing on man, and as a sign of what can be done to avoid the end of the world. For indeed, the domination of technology in modern societies, especially in terms of arms of mass destruction, has continued to loom large over the very survival of humanity.

Lanza del Vasto was not content to promote such an option, but directly experimented with it in communities he founded in order to show that it was not a utopia, and was no more difficult or unpleasant than other arrangements. His objective: “[To show] that a life free from violence and abuse (from hidden violence as well as from brutal violence, from legal and authorized abuse as well as from illegal abuse) is possible; that, even, such a life is not any more difficult than a life of gain, nor more unpleasant than a life of pleasure, nor less natural than ‘ordinary’ life.”<sup>18</sup>

Let us now see how these intuitions and analyses paved the way for community experimentation.

### **3. Concrete achievements**

#### **a. Foundation of the Ark**

All of this brings us to 1948, the year Gandhi was assassinated (January 30). Many companions, distraught by the assassination, joined Lanza del Vasto. To him, this

was a sign that the time had come to fulfill his mission: immediately after his wedding, together with his wife Chanterelle, he founded the first rural community of the Ark in Tournier, Charente, patterned after Gandhi's ashrams and adapted to European realities. The project was in fact a revised version of his initial vision: the sedentary community began with couples, soon followed by children. The men tended the garden while the women wove the clothing. Yet this first confrontation with the reality of community life would see its share of ups and downs: conflicts arose, which Vasto attempted to settle through nonviolence, and more specifically fasting; the community was open to all who wished to enter, and everyone had their say, even if they robbed the community and disappeared the same night! The rules would need to be refined, the terms of commitment in particular. But in the meantime, the first community had to close its doors in 1952, after just four years of existence. Vasto considered leaving France for the United States, where Martin Luther King had yet to rise to fame (i.e. only in 1955), in order to preach nonviolence and put himself at the service of the blacks struggling for recognition of their civil rights.

The seed had nevertheless been sown and seemed to want to grow. Kept in touch by the journal *Nouvelles de l'Arche* [News of the Ark], founded in 1952, groups of "friends of the Ark" sprang up throughout France and abroad, soon spreading as far as South America. A distinction would be made as of 1975 between on one hand the "Movement of the Ark," made up of "friends" (sympathizers) and "allies" (individuals bound by a commitment but living outside a community), and on the other the "Order of the Ark" comprised of "companions" who had pronounced their vows and lived within a community. This was not a religious order, but a working

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order of people from different religious traditions, united around manual work and Gandhian nonviolence. In 1954 the second community founded in Tourettes-sur-Loup (in the Alpes-Maritimes), subsequently relocated to Bollène (in Vaucluse), counted 14 companions. In 1956 it grew to 23, with an additional 30 groups of friends and 80 allies. In the meantime, Vasto had made his second pilgrimage to India (from January to May 1954) to take part in the non-violent campaigns of Gandhi's successor, Vinoba Bhave, in order to bring about land reform and eradicate poverty. Travelling from village to village on foot, Vinoba persuaded wealthy owners to give land to the poor, obtaining several million hectares as a result of his efforts over twenty years. Lanza del Vasto relates this journey in *Vinôbâou le nouveau pèlerinage* [Gandhi to Vinoba: The New Pilgrimage].<sup>19</sup> Vasto borrowed from Vinôbâ an idea originally received from Gandhi, the "spinning wheel test" as a simple way to assess a given economic system's justice or lack thereof. This test can be formulated as, "Make all you need with your own hands, and content yourself with what you can make manually or its exact equivalent. Anything more is abusive." The spinning wheel, as the very expression of the Gandhian economy, would soon become one of the symbols of the Ark.

Gandhi would remain a model for Lanza del Vasto, even if the communities of the Ark had to contend with the political, economic, social and religious context of France in the *trenteglorieuses* post-war decades. The first major difference he noted between Gandhi and himself was that the Mahatma, like Martin Luther King and others, had not chosen his struggle, which had been imposed on him, but only his "weapon," i.e. nonviolence. The Companions of the Ark, who had not been subjected to colonial occupation, racial oppression, or even economic

precariousness, made nonviolence and simple living the very object of their struggle, seeking thereby to show their relevance and their urgency. Vasto did not hesitate to say that the communities of the Ark “went further than” the Gandhian ashrams in terms of coherence: they depended on no one, whereas Gandhian endeavors were supported by wealthy donors. This is because “our primary struggle was and still is the struggle against self,” as he clarified. That is, the object was not so much to make objects as to make men. This explains why the Ark realized the *Swadeshi* to which Gandhi had only tended. But the greatest lesson Lanza del Vasto learned from Gandhi, and which empowered him to present his companions as “Gandhians of the West,” was to conceive salvation only in “self-mastery, purification and giving; voluntary poverty; the duty for all to do crafts and rural manual work; the simplification of means and clarification of ends; the simplification of exchanges, business and structures; and attentiveness and listening to the will of God and the voice of the conscience.” Hence, the way out of poverty in India also became the way out of wealth in the West: “the same cure for opposite ailments.”

There were, however, other differences between the Mahatma and Shantidas, starting with the Gandhian ashrams and the communities of the Ark.<sup>20</sup> Besides the vow of chastity adopted by the followers of the former, which Vasto abandoned, and the Ark’s emphasis on the aesthetics and recurrence of festivities in community life, which were absent from the Gandhian ashrams and were introduced by Lanza del Vasto, the two men held different views of history. While Gandhi’s optimism posited moral and spiritual growth over the history of humanity, Vasto embraced a certain pessimism that drew a causal link between technological growth and moral and spiritual

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decline; this required reversing the causal order and initiating a moral and spiritual revival by means of technical degrowth.<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that although the Gandhian ashrams and the communities of the Ark bore strong resemblances in their relationship to work and technology, they also diverged sharply in terms of the philosophical presuppositions of their respective founders.

### **b. Consolidation and expansion of the model**

The Bollène community, founded in 1954, would play an important role in stabilizing Vasto's endeavours. Over 11 years, the self-sufficiency economy would prove its worth, and the community would grow slowly but surely. Starting in 1956, this solid base would allow Lanza del Vasto and his companions to initiate non-violent political actions to promote justice and peace: the community, henceforth financially independent, would serve as a training ground and refuge for the companions.

Lanza del Vasto and his friends began by fasting for eight days in Sicily in order to attract the authorities' attention to the miserable living conditions of the population. In March 1957, they would fast for 20 days to condemn torture in Algeria, perpetrated by the French Army as well as by FLN [National Liberation Front] rebels. Non-violent demonstrations were organized, in particular near internment camps, with the activists of "Action Civique Non-Violente" willingly accepting to be imprisoned. Subsequently, in 1958, they campaigned against the production of the first atom bomb by France by entering and denouncing a factory in Marcoule. In 1963, during Vatican II, they fasted for 40 days in Rome to sensitize Pope John XXIII and cardinals to issues of peace and justice. Later, they worked toward securing the right to conscientious objection; protested against the civil



nuclear industry, weapons sales and atomic experimentation; and finally, in March 1972, fasted for 15 days at Larzac to support peasants threatened with expropriation by the army. The fast at Larzac ended up decisively encouraging non-violent resistance by peasants, many of whom were initially prepared to resort to violence. This lengthy 10-year struggle would at last be victorious in 1981. All these non-violent campaigns marked the fulfillment of Lanza del Vasto's project of community life and returning to simple living, and greatly contributed to spreading his name. He described these events himself in the books *Pacification en Algérie*<sup>22</sup>, *Technique de la nonviolence*<sup>23</sup>, and *L'Archeavait pour voilureunevigne*<sup>24</sup>.

Lanza del Vasto would clearly become one of the main popularizers of non-violent principles and action strategies in France. In so doing, he followed in the tradition of Thoreau, who had devised "civil disobedience" (preferring in 1846 to be sent to jail rather than pay his taxes to a militaristic and pro-slavery government); in the tradition of Tolstoy, who was excommunicated for denouncing the Church's compromise with State violence; in the tradition of Gandhi, the artisan of India's liberation from colonial oppression, who had always adopted non-violent means that respected his British adversary; and finally, in the tradition of Martin Luther King, who had used nonviolence to achieve equal civil rights between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Many more, including Cesar Chavez in California, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Aung San SuuKyi in Burma, would likewise show the power and effectiveness of nonviolence.

Paradoxically, at the time the first actions were carried out, and in particular on the occasion of the 1957 hunger strike against torture, half of the friends of the Ark defected, disappointed to see Lanza del Vasto engage in

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political action instead of limiting himself to the quest for a spiritual life. Others, of course, joined him specifically for this reason, as well as for the steadfast link he drew between inner life and nonviolent action to achieve peace and justice.

In 1965 the community of the Ark established itself in La Borie Noble, northwest of Montpellier, benefiting from the “back to the land” wave of the late sixties. At the time the community’s summer camps attracted over 400 attendees. Soon, over the vast estate, two more communities set up living quarters in the abandoned hamlets of Nogaret and La Fleysi re. For these communities, the seventies were a time of maturity and recognition.<sup>25</sup> In the context of a country modernizing at a frightful pace, the Ark’s economic model inevitably struck visitors by its stability and consistency, with its pooled resources and means of production, rudimentary farming and gardening equipment, making of bread and cheese, spinning and weaving of clothing, craft workshops (including pottery), candle lighting, handwashing of clothes, and so on. As Lanza del Vasto recalls, “It will come as no surprise: ... that we endeavor to draw our living directly from the earth by the work of our hands, avoiding, as far as we can, the use of machines and money. That we endeavor not to break the link God and nature have put between what the mouth asks for and what the two hands can produce. That we reduce our desires to our needs, and our needs to the extreme so as to free ourselves from excessive toil. ... That, as far as we can, we observe the golden rule never to pay anybody and never to let anyone pay us. ... That in the practice of any craft, we are less concerned with the quantity of the product than with its quality, and less concerned with the product than with the craftsman. ... That every craftsman among us knows and

carries out his craft from beginning to end and makes the whole object, from the raw material to the final decoration.”<sup>26</sup>

This choice of a simple life, with its spinning wheels and candles, would of course prompt misunderstandings, irony and rejection, based on the idea—hardly new—that “there is no turning back.” Lanza del Vasto would offer up an original response to this notion: “It is impossible *not* to turn back.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, given that history has never been linear but rather always cyclical, with recurring steps back, and that the next step back may be especially chaotic, Vasto suggested a gentle return which, rather than constituting a regression to one historical period or another, since “all times of history have been awful times,” would embrace a return to principle, to the Garden, to God and to oneself: a radical conversion leading to a harmonious lifestyle “in order to avoid the end of the world.” Lanza del Vasto thus clearly distinguishes the barbaric state into which men inevitably relapse, on one hand, and the state of simplicity they may choose of their own volition, on the other: “This simplicity may end up being the final refuge of a civilization and the source of a renewal.” For, instead of turning back after a catastrophe, it would be preferable to do so out of wisdom and in order to avoid the catastrophe in the first place.

In a powerfully moving poetic text drawn from his commentary on Genesis<sup>28</sup>, Lanza del Vasto discusses this major catastrophe toward which we are rushing headlong<sup>29</sup>: the text is a parody of the creation story in the first chapter of the biblical text. But the story is turned on its head, and instead of leading from the first day to the seventh, it follows the reverse order, showing how man “undid Heaven and Earth” so that the first day never in

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fact comes to pass. Reading this text in parallel with the biblical text reveals Vasto's remarkable acuity: each of the original motifs is subverted, and it is not God who created man in his image, but "man [who] created man in the image of his power," up until the final deflagration.

Are these the words of a doomsayer? It is true that Lanza del Vasto has often been likened to a prophet of doom. In an extensive interview published the year of his death<sup>30</sup>, he would deny this label as a "prophet," but not his announcement of doom: "There is no need to be a prophet, for all one needs to do is look around at the state of things." He recognizes that awareness of danger has "slightly" begun to dawn, but does not believe it will be sufficient to avoid the worst of the impending catastrophe: "They're starting to worry, but they don't see any remedies. Business obviously carries on as usual." Lanza del Vasto thus anticipates Jean-Pierre Dupuy's famous statement, "We do not believe what we know."<sup>31</sup>

The community alternative Lanza del Vasto suggests has a quasi-monastic dimension, as the companions of the Ark take vows, which they recite each evening during prayers around a fire. In 1978, Lanza del Vasto published a commentary on these vows.<sup>32</sup> The vow of poverty reads, "We have vowed to live in simplicity, sobriety and cleanliness, and to cherish Poverty so that we can attain to Detachment and perfect Charity."<sup>33</sup> The commentary shows how voluntary simplicity is first and foremost a matter of justice: wealth is viewed as a considerable and immoral encumbrance, given that "it would be impossible to accumulate so many superfluous things around us without depriving our neighbors of their necessities." Poverty is also closely linked to nonviolence, since wealth must be protected, "by the sword or by the law."

Safeguarding creation is thus not the main motive for the choice of poverty: it is merely the result of a life free of abuses, i.e. a life that guarantees justice and peace. At the same time, however, Vasto denies wanting to establish a new form of legalism: even if any surplus is abusive, the boundary between what is legitimate and illegitimate to own is a matter of conscience rather than rules.

In the final years of his life, Lanza del Vasto's growing fame brought him into the media limelight. In an interview hosted by Jacques Chancel, in the then-popular show *Radioscopie*,<sup>34</sup> he summed up his criticism of growth and his suggested community alternative: "The growth of modern countries is incompatible with nonviolence, Christianity, truth, wisdom, love, and even survival. It is truly madness, isn't it? ... If you want to establish a parallel society, as they say today, and as ours may be defined, you start by taking that away, don't you? No profit, no gain. No gain: no one owns anything. Nor should the community itself own, accumulate and profit—which would mean partaking in the labour system of hiring people, giving them a wage or receiving one from others—isn't that so? Let us eliminate this spirit of gain, not because it is a sin, but because it is The Sin. ... It is very important to show that this is possible, that it is not so difficult, that it is not at all unpleasant."

In the 1970s the Ark experienced a number of crises and upheavals. Even so, it continued to grow and eventually spread. Lanza del Vasto was increasingly sought after for speaking tours in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Japan. He died in 1981, in his eightieth year. At the time, the Ark counted some 100 companions, 300 allies, and 78 groups of friends across the world. This was not the Army of Peace of which Vasto

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had dreamed, yet its impact went far beyond the number of its members. Many of his ideas—suggested in the 1940s to near-generalized indifference—were taken up by larger and more official movements, or made headline news. Among these were his thoughts on the excesses of science and technology, the preservation of healthy food and agriculture, the threats posed to humanity by the arms race, the scandal of torture, constructive ways to resolve conflict, and inter-religious dialogue.

#### **c. The Ark after Lanza del Vasto**

The Ark reached its zenith in the 1980s, after its founder had passed away. The movement continued to expand, numbering up to thirteen communities in France as well as in Spain, Italy, Quebec and Argentina. The new communities, however, sometimes distanced themselves from the strict economic model of La Borie Noble. An example would be the Ark community of Bonnacombe (Aveyron) founded in 1980 and located in a huge 12th century Cistercian abbey surrounded by 80 hectares of forests and fields, where the working animals were replaced by the use of tractors (albeit relatively old ones). Electricity generated by a river turbine, built by the monks, was available upon the first companions' arrival, and was maintained, though while avoiding excessive consumption. The abbey's location attracted large numbers of visitors (with local accommodations offering some two hundred guest rooms) and made for significant earnings, in turn raising the living standard of the community's members. Yet the foundational principle of simplifying life was maintained, with the absence of wage earning and the prevalence of manual labour, basic trades (farming and gardening, baking, cheese making, woodworking and visitor hospitality), a rotating schedule of tasks, a sober

use of energy, recycling of waste, a common fund, and a spirit of service. The Ark's openness to the world thanks to large-capacity communities such as Bonnecombe, then Saint Antoine l'Abbaye (Isère) that extended from Bonnecombe in 1987, allowed thousands of people to experience simple living, even if not to the radical degree upheld during Lanza del Vasto's lifetime. Those who have spent a week, six months, or even five to ten years in these communities can testify that revising one's needs is neither difficult, nor unpleasant. To the contrary it brings about an inner liberation that restores a sense of the essentials: human relationships, meditation and contemplation, the rhythm of the seasons, and the many festivities that punctuate the year. Adults who spent part of their childhood within the Ark are the most enthusiastic proponents of how this "joyful sobriety"<sup>35</sup> gave them structure and shaped the course of their lives.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the Ark would go through a series of internal crises starting in 1991, resulting in a hemorrhaging of members and the closing of most of its communities. The reason lay no longer in its radical economic choices but rather the vagaries of commitment to community life, as well as the difficulty of managing tensions and multiple visions for the community. The principle of having a common fund, too difficult for 21st century Europeans to abide by, would nonetheless be replaced by an allowance for each family. In 2003, there remained only three communities (La Borie Noble and La Fleysière in Hérault, and Saint Antoine l'Abbaye in Isère) and 65 companions, most of whom lived outside these communities. A structural overhaul in 2005 led to redefining the "Community of the Ark" as an association of "community houses" and local groups. Taking the "vows" became optional, and the split between "companions" and "allies"

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was eliminated. In 2013 the community counted almost 160 members who had taken vows, distributed between “community houses” and local groups, who permitted themselves to pick and choose elements from the tradition inherited from Lanza del Vasto. Still today the Ark in its many forms remains a laboratory for experimentation with alternative living. Degrowth is a key dimension of the Ark.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion : Assessing Lanza del Vasto’s contribution to the degrowth movement**

While Vasto is surely a precursor of degrowth in general, there can be no doubt that he is the precursor of a specific form thereof, i.e. a spiritual and community-centered degrowth, radical in its rejection of property, committed to manual work and a connection with the earth, and weary of the political sphere. It is clear that this paradigm does not reflect the entire degrowth movement with its many currents. However, it can be useful to point out the contribution of Lanza del Vasto and of the Communities of the Ark to the degrowth movement, as a powerful source of inspiration, among others, for reflection and action.

Vasto’s contribution to the history of the degrowth movement can be seen in a number of respects. Paradoxically, economic and environmental concerns are not foremost in his reflections: the issues of justice and nonviolence are what led him on his path. Hence, the catastrophe he foretold for a near future, and to which he attempted to alert his contemporaries, was always linked to a military nuclear conflagration. War and arms were in his view major problems because they logically gave rise to all the rest. Setting up an alternative society, founded on simplified living and voluntary sobriety, was merely an



outgrowth of this main concern. The military threat certainly looms just as large today, but has been compounded by equally daunting challenges such as climate change, industrial catastrophes, and public health disasters.

Vasto's criticism of growth is, at its core, spiritual: unbridled technology is a result of original sin, which Vasto associates with the spirit of profit and domination. This explains why all his teachings underscore the urgent need for a personal conversion, which extends out to continual spiritual work on the self and on one's inner life.<sup>38</sup> In his view, there is no conceivable way out without this return to interiority. This spiritual dimension makes the reception of his message both problematic and promising: problematic in the context of French and secularized society, but promising in that the evolution of the religious landscape in the post-modern era is in harmony with a non-denominational spirituality, even if Lanza del Vasto invited each individual to come back to their religious own tradition in order to avoid any form of syncretism.

The case Vasto makes against technological civilization is very much a case against urban society. The model counter-society he promotes is fundamentally rural, agricultural and artisanal. Without denying this original impetus, which remains just as relevant today when considering the fate of the agricultural world, the diversification of forms of community life proposed by the Ark since the death of Lanza del Vasto somewhat relativizes this paradigm, which could have been be constrictive for the growth objectors of the 21st century. The multiplication of community groups and friends of the Ark in cities, for example, bears witness to this readjustment. Yet the fate of the agricultural world is one

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of the factors for moving beyond a growth society: it is an issue that the communities of the Ark, which initiated the civil disobedience actions of the GMO “volunteer reapers,” has continually brought to our contemporaries’ attention.

Lanza del Vasto’s hall mark contribution to the degrowth movement remains his experimentation with community living. One of the lessons of these sixty-five years of experiments is that degrowth is not a utopia, that it is possible and much less difficult than imagined, and that through all its ups and downs, community life offers surprising potential for gradually beginning the shift that has become indispensable. There can be no doubt that the monastic form Lanza del Vasto inspired in his communities is not for everyone, and that such communities cannot spread on a massive scale merely by the strength of their example. However, when it comes to the home-workplace proximity accomplished by relocating activities, the energy savings achieved by pooling electrical appliances and means of transportation, the rediscovery of a harmonious relationship to the earth and animals, mediation and the non-violent management of interpersonal conflict, and the need for friendliness and celebration expressed by our contemporaries, has the Ark’s community experience not carried the theoretical and empirical seeds of such change over the past several decades? It is evident that growth objectors can only benefit from the living legacy of the one whom Gandhi, not without reason, called “Servant of Peace.”

*Translated by Joachim Lépine.*

### Notes and References

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7. Cf. *supra*, “Éloge de la vie simple,”
8. Vasto, *Pèlerinage aux sources*.
9. Cf. *supra*, “La vision de l’Arche,”
10. Lanza delVasto, *Commentaire de l’Évangile* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1951).
11. Lanza delVasto, *Les quatre fléaux. Le diable dans le jeu*, vol. 1 (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1959); *Les quatre fléaux*.

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*La roue des révolutions*, vol. 2 (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1959).

12. Cf. *supra*, “L’anti-crétation de l’homme,”
13. Cf. *supra*, “D’une chaîne et d’un fouet,”
14. Cf. *supra*, “Les trois tentations de la machine,” and “De la vitesse,”
15. Ivan Illich, “La convivialité,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 456.
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17. Cf. *supra*, “De l’Arche, ou confrérie des gandhiens d’occident,”
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26. Cf. *supra*, "Des éléments d'une économie non violente,"
27. Cf. *supra*, "Pour éviter le fin du monde,"
28. Lanza delVasto, *La montée des âmes vivantes. Commentaire de la Genèse* (Paris: Denoël, 1968).
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34. Cf. *supra*, "Critique de la croissance et alternative communautaire,"
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36. Cf. Claire Moussalli-Martinet, *Il était une fois l'Arche de Lanza. Une enfant raconte* (Paris: Karthala, 2001).
37. Charles Legland, "L'économie gandhienne," in *Nouvelles de l'Arche*, year XXXVII, no. 6 (July–August 1989), 96-102; Thierry Castelbou, "Réflexions sur l'économie gandhienne," in *Nouvelles de l'Arche*, year XXXVII, no. 6 (July–August 1989), 103-107; Marie-Andrée Brémond, "Rôle des communautés et éco-villages," in: Michel Bernard, Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin, *Objectif décroissance. Vers une société harmonieuse* (Lyon / Montreal / Paris: Silence / Écosociété / L'Aventurine [L'après-développement series, 2003], 158-165); Marie-Andrée Tremblay and Jean-Luc Brémond, "Simplicité volontaire: Marie-Andrée et Jean-Luc: vivre tout simplement," in *La Décroissance*, no. 25 (February 2005), 5; Nicole Lefeuvre and Pierre Veyrand, "Soixante ans de simplicité volontaire: les communautés de l'Arche de Lanza delVasto. La communauté de l'Arche de Saint Antoine," in: Etienne Godinot, *Entre satisfaction des besoins et avidité du "toujours plus". Quels chemins pour une économie non-violente? Compte rendu de la rencontre organisée à Saint Antoine l'Abbaye du 10 au 13 juin 2011* (Carcassonne: Éditions de Gandhi International/Ekta Parishad, 2011), 24-25.
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## II

### **Lanza del Vasto : An Apostle of Nonviolence and Peace<sup>1</sup>**

*Louis Campana*

As a young idle aristocrat, Giuseppe Lanza del Vasto travelled around Europe, from high society salons to literary circles, in search of meaning and recognition. He was already in his thirties when he heard about an Indian man who was resisting the British occupation. Was he familiar with *Hind Swaraj* ! ? It is hard to tell. But news spread across Europe of a modest lawyer, educated in England, trained in South Africa, who was organizing a campaign of resistance against the established British order in reaction to the humiliation and exploitation of poor Indians in this remote land ruled by the British administration. His indignation was also triggered by the behaviour of some of his fellow-countrymen who were quick to collaborate and profit from the process of colonisation.

At the age of 24, Lanza del Vasto became a Doctor of Philosophy and a teacher at the University of Pisa in Italy and had only started to reconcile with his Catholic faith.

He had experienced a spiritual awakening at a very young age, an epiphany which had profoundly shaken and enlightened his life : he was four years old when he fell hard on the frozen ground of the garden of his father's mansion, but his cry of pain was quickly interrupted by the sight of an extraordinary light. The sun was shining

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through millions of frozen dew drops around him, reflecting the light in a fantastic beam, like the many edges of a glowing diamond. This instant marked the beginning of his intellectual quest and, through this fascinating stained glass, came his search for meaning, for the holy path and the finality of all things. He then discovered Thomas of Aquinas and read the last lines of the *Summa Theologica* as the goal of his quest : “Deus est relation, non autem relativa quia non mutabilis.” (God is relation, but not relative, because unalterable), (*Viaticum* I, VII, 32). This infinite and ultimate relation to God persuaded him to join Gandhi in search of a holistic life where everything would be connected, where matters of politics, society, culture, cult, spirit and religion would be brought together in order to work towards an economy based on community and in which each and everyone would be considered with dignity, a place where people would live together in respect and fellowship.

The 1930s were a very unstable period in Europe and uninterrupted political tensions carried the seeds of another major conflict. Revenge was in the air and in order to avoid hostilities some nations made dangerous pacts with Hitler or Mussolini, thus demonstrating their desire for power on the international stage.

In 1936, Lanza Del Vasto’s growing concern led him to visit Gandhi in Wardha, and as he entered his house he thought : “Here he is before my eyes, the only man who has shown us a green shoot in the desert of this century. A man who knows the hard law of love, hard and clear like a diamond. The captain of the unarmed, the father of the pariahs, the king who reigns by the divine right of sainthood.” (*Return to the Source*, New York : Schocken Books, 1972. pp 100-1).<sup>2</sup>



Upon his return, in 1937, Del Vasto decided to compile and share the results of his reflection on personal and social transformation, on other forms of living together. He published three books : *Principles and Precepts of the Return to the Obvious* (New York: Shocken, 1974),<sup>3</sup> a collection of principles for the ones in the throes of wandering, begging and self-contemplation; *Judas* (Paris: Grasset, 1938),<sup>4</sup> a reflection on Judas's role in Jesus's life and its analogy applied between a man and himself. *Return to the Source*, partly written in India, relates his own experience of the Hindu culture. In this book, he expresses a holistic approach to the religions of the world, stating that, although profoundly diverse, each of them is a pillar of Man and his History.

In 1939, the war broke out and Europe was quickly ablaze. In Italy, Lanza Del Vasto enlisted in an international medical unit in order to help injured and wounded soldiers. He later remained very secretive about his period of his life. In 1942, the publication of *Return to the Source* was an unexpected success in those time of war (200,000 copies sold) and consequently brought him back to his circle of friends, intellectuals in search of meaning. However, it soon became apparent that they did not share the same revolutionary viewpoints : Lanza Del Vasto rejected their Marxist tendencies in favor of a revolution of the Self, which he simply called "conversion". This self-discipline, not associated with any religion, echoed Gandhi's *Swadeshi* : an economical, ethical and personal autonomy leading to a fulfilling life for every individual.

He organised lectures on the Gospels, highlighting their similarities with the teachings of Gandhi, and saw the Beatitudes as the founding principles of a government based on evangelical poverty, compassion and the absolute necessity to respect all human beings. In the growing spiral

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of hate and violence of the time, in which modern societies were heading to their own destruction, the non-violent movement led by Gandhi and followed by millions of poor people asking for freedom and independence appeared to be an effective way to liberate long-standing fears, hate and resentment while preserving strong determination in the face of abuse of power. During these lectures, Lanza Del Vasto invited people to bring spinning wheels, to work on leather, to carve and design little objects in order to promote personal economic independence. This also encouraged people to develop a sense of the aesthetic. They sang both Gregorian chants and traditional popular songs.

He met his wife, Chanterelle, during the war. She was a musician and a singer. Their common passion for the arts (contemporary and medieval) and crafts (spinning, weaving, chiseling, sculpture...) had a strong influence on the Ark communities that they would develop together.

This took place in Paris, in the heart of busy popular neighbourhoods and the small group of people soon felt the urge to move outside the city, to the countryside, to a place where the first demand of the non-violent movement could be answered. In one of his famous quote Lanza Del Vasto criticized the society of his time by saying : “Work is divided in such a way that one does the ploughing but another enjoys the harvest”.<sup>5</sup> Following Gandhi’s principles, he believed that the one working the land should also be the one harvesting the fruits of his labour and the first to consume them. In the same way the spinning wheel had become the symbol of a newly reconquered freedom in India, Lanza Del Vasto believed this group of people could embody a new sense of freedom in Europe after World War Two.

This is the beginning of the community of Ark : a boat (like Noah’s in the book of Genesis) floating on the

ocean of a world based on profit and domination, a boat with no port and no anchor, inhabited by resisting and actively thinking individuals. Paradoxically, they adopted the figure of the farmer (pretty rare on a boat) as a symbol of self-sufficiency : in their eyes, the farmer was freed of any compromise because they were no longer subject to any form of power. Indeed, history has shown that the control of food is often linked to the control of people.

In 1945 the war ended in Europe. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1948 Gandhi was assassinated in India. The community settled in the small village of Tournier, on an estate lent to them by friends. The transition to farming life was not easy for these former city-dwellers and even though crops were slow to come their commitment did not fade. Lanza Del Vasto (known as *Shantidas*, or “Servant of Peace” : the name given to him by Gandhi in Wardha), travelled across France spreading Gandhi’s “Good News”. More publications followed : *Commentaire de l’Evangile* (Commentary on the Gospel)<sup>6</sup> in 1951 and *Gandhi to Vinoba: The New Pilgrimage*<sup>7</sup> in 1954.

For a period of six months he joined Vinoba (a follower of Gandhi) and the Bhoodan movement in their continuous march across India. For almost fourteen years Vinoba went from village to village, introducing himself as the youngest member of the family and asking rich land owners for his share of the heritage in order to give poor or landless farmers. Through this door-to-door process, millions of acres of land were then distributed, but various legal issues started cropping up in the handling of the donation procedures : landowners coming back on their decisions, pieces of land proving to be barren, dishonest beneficiaries selling their lot... However, this journey remained an expression of outstanding generosity and became a myth in the great Gandhian saga. In 2011, in

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Jarkhand, villagers who had been given land 60 years earlier had created a fantastic oasis providing fruits and food for the 250 people living there in harmony.

In 1959, Lanza Del Vasto denounced the violences perpetrated on Algerians in Algeria (then a French colony) and in France. As a disciple of Gandhi, he started a non-violent campaign and published *Pacification en Algérie, ou mensonge et violence* (Pacification in Algeria or deceit and violence).<sup>8</sup> As an Italian citizen denouncing the actions of the French authorities, Lanza Del Vasto was at risk to be arrested or even deported.

He protested vigorously against the tortures and abuses perpetrated on Algerians and gathered many followers, in particular Jo Pyronnet, who eventually took the lead of the movement. The fight lasted for years. The activists relentlessly expressed their outrage going as far as chaining themselves on the Place de la Concorde, in Paris, while holding banners reading 'Nous aussi sommes des suspects' ('We are suspects too'). At that time in France, racial profiling could lead to imprisonment without trial.

While his companions kept on stomping the streets of Paris, risking violent encounters with the police force, Lanza del Vasto kept on writing columns in newspapers and published a new book entitled *Les Quatres Fléaux* (The Four Plagues).<sup>9</sup>

What he says on his presentation of the book is : "Misery, Slavery, War, Sedition : these are the four plagues which have been striking the cities and kingdoms of humanity since the beginning of time. The first two are passive, you are subject to them even if you did not create them for one endure them without creating them. They are states of being, not events; a lingering and endemic

evil ruling on every era and every society like the high price to pay for any civilisation. The other two are active, for they are thought, planned and put into action. They differ from other voluntary acts by their fatal and ineluctable character.”<sup>10</sup>

In this book, Lanza Del Vasto presents his vast historical and political analysis in a sort of panoramic view, which stands as the “philosophy” of Ark. It is directly inspired from the teaching of Gandhi and adapted to the western civilisation and its biblical foundation. It aims at denouncing the treason of a civilisation originally based on the principles of the Gospel and corrupted by speculation, greed, oligarchic land ownership, profit and domination.

Lanza del Vasto was a supporter of a non-violent revolution. In the book series *Pensée gandhienne* (Gandhian Thought), he published a French translation of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* (1909) with his introduction with the title “Leur civilisation et notre délivrance” (Their civilisation and our deliverance).

This non-violent revolution consisted in refusing to collaborate with the dogma of profit, in resisting and disobeying its system, in reaching personal inner transformation, in taking only what one needs, in being aware and considerate of the needs of others. This programme was based on the spirit of the Beatitudes and, according to Lanza Del Vasto, followed the path Gandhi would have taken if he had been in charge of India’s constitution.

The 1960s were marked by the fight against civil and military use of nuclear power (one being the alibi of the other). Protests were fierce. By this time, the community had moved to Bollène, not far from the nuclear sites of

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Marcoule and Tricastin, forefronts of the French nuclear industry.

In 1963, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, Lanza Del Vasto brought the issues of the nuclear bomb directly to Rome and started a hunger strike in order to urge the Church to adopt nonviolence as an effective and civilising position. He remained on strike for 40 days.

A few years earlier, in 1958 in Geneva, Lanza Del Vasto had already strongly protested against the nuclear weapons that France was promoting as an effective defense system during the Cold War times. The world's nuclear power already had the power to wipe out the entire planet in a gush of fire and blood. In summer 1976, in Malville, Lanza Del Vasto started a 7-days hunger strike in order to protest against the construction of Superphénix.<sup>11</sup> This one lasted for a week, until he broke into the plant. However, no one dared to touch him and the line of policemen parted to let this old white-bearded man go through, imposing respect with his determination. After years of judicial battles, the facility definitely closed in 1997 due to the high cost of maintenance.

A few years earlier, in 1971, farmers of the quiet Larzac plateau learnt overnight that the 3000 hectares Larzac military base was to be transformed into a 17,000 hectares experimental military station, directly connected to the ground-to-ground (GGM) missile launch facility in Albion, used as tactical deterrence by the French Nuclear Force in case of enemy attack. André Faton, then France's Secretary of Defence, commented on the project : "Whether we like it or not, the potential agricultural riches of the Larzac are extremely weak. So I think it was logical to consider that the extension would cause only minimum inconvenience... It is true that there are a few peasants ...

who desultorily raise a few sheep, while living the life of the Middle Ages. It is necessary to take their land.”<sup>12</sup>

Most of the farmers immediately reacted by grabbing their rifles, ready to die for their land, and waited for the police who come and expel them. This could have been tragic. At that time, the community of the Ark resided at the foot of the Larzac plateau, at Borie-Noble, on the southern side.

Lanza del Vasto learnt about the farmers’ reaction. He was asked to meet with them and said : “Your violence will justify the violence of the State and within fifteen days the Larzac will be a military camp and you will have lost your life, your land and your hope. Let me stay with you and fast for 15 days and I will show you to another path”.<sup>13</sup> And he did. Shantidas went on a 15-days hunger strike and was joined by farmers and the bishops of Montpellier and Rodez for several days. He slowly and peacefully spread the teaching of Gandhi and shared his own experiences and christian faith in the face of power. Furthermore, he asked them to take the oath that they will never sell their land to the government, to be used as a place promoting death and nuclear weapons.

One hundred and three farmers took the oath and one hundred and three trees were planted along the road to legitimize this new fight. Lanza Del Vasto urged the farmers to decide for themselves what actions to take, stating that it was their future to shape and that they should not let themselves be controlled by small political groups or radical movements. In reaction, these groups were invited to support the farmers and join their struggle. As a matter of fact, the Larzac became a national symbol of contestation. Lanza Del Vasto also suggested that the community of the Ark settled on the Larzac plateau, in the

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deserted village of Les Truels, which still exists today, and where “a few peasants ... who desultorily raise a few sheep, while living the life of the Middle Ages” have been making and selling delicious goat cheese in the local markets every day for the past thirty years.

The struggle for the land of Larzac became a leading symbol and gave rise to many slogans, such as “*La terre fait vivre, les bombes font mourir !*” (Land brings life, bombs bring death!) Pieces of land left unused by the army were cultivated and the crops sent to the Sahel (in the Sahara desert), where famine is recurrent. Consequently, actions of civil disobedience assumed at the same time a social, humanitarian and international significance and generated a global philosophical debate, asking fundamental questions to the people of that time and their lifestyle. Other forms of protest followed : herds of sheep were brought under the Eiffel Tower in Paris, marches (with families and tractors!) between Rodez and Paris were organised in 1973, 1978 and 1980... All these actions had a friendly atmosphere and along the road they found the support of the population and a general enthusiasm for this peaceful but unbroken resistance.

This struggle lasted for ten years, until the election of François Mitterrand, in 1981. François Mitterrand had visited the Larzac in 1978, but had been assaulted by radical protesters. Local farmers had defended him, thus attesting their non-affiliation to any particular political movement. After this event, Mitterrand had promised that, if elected president, he would forgo the extension of the military camp. And indeed he did. The fight led by the farmers of the Larzac is the only example of a popular and nonviolent movement's victory without casualties in France.



The influence of Lanza del Vasto in the world of both active and passive non-violent movements is beyond doubt. The Latin-American SERPAJ ('Service Peace and Justice', led by 1980 Nobel Peace prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, 14 delegations on the continent) advises all its members and supporters to consult the books of Shantidas, all of which are translated in Spanish, and to look at Lanza del Vasto's actions and commentaries as a source of inspiration. In the Republic of Congo, a nonviolence advocate has created the 'Lanza del Vasto Institute'. Films and documentaries on his writings, his life, his actions as well as his philosophical works have flourished since his death in 1981. On every continent he is admired for the holistic life he led, embracing with wisdom and strength all aspects of life : living as a society, ecologically, with the respect of traditions (as well as their being challenged), the systematic rejection of war, moderate personal asceticism, the hard reality of choosing every day what you take and what you give, the refusal of monopoly, of greed and of the control of the basic human needs.

Lanza Del Vasto was a loyal follower of Mahatma and he faithfully spread the Gandhian philosophy, but he also drew on his Christian tradition and in highlighting their similarities, he allowed its major principles to be renewed and understood in a way uncorrupted by history or obsolete practices.

## **Notes and References**

1. This text was written after the oral presentation of Sixth Ravindra Varma Memorial Lecture on 9th October, 2012 at the Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha. It does not pretend to cover the whole subject of such a unique and universal thinker. To know more, visit the site of the "Friends

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of Lanza del Vasto” (<http://www.lanzadelvasto.fr>), run by Daniel Vigne, author of number of books on Lanza’s philosophy.

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3. Lanza del Vasto, *Principes et préceptes du retour à l’évidence*, Paris: Denoël, 1945. (réédition sous le titre *Eloge de la vie simple*, Paris: Le Rocher, 1996.)
4. Not translated in English.
5. *Le travail est si bien divisé que l’un travaille et l’autre récolte.*
6. Not translated in English.
7. Lanza del Vasto, *Vinoba, ou le nouveau pèlerinage*, Paris: Denoël, 1954 (réédition: Gallimard, 1982.)
8. Not translated in English.
9. Not translated in English.
10. Misère, Servitude, Guerre, Sédition : quatre sont les fléaux qui frappent les cités humaines et les royaumes depuis les commencements des temps. Passifs les deux premiers, parce qu’on les subit sans les faire. Ce sont des états de choses et non des évènements, mal chronique, endémique, régnant à toute époque et sous tout régime, rançon, semble-t-il de toute civilisation. Actifs les deux autres, parce qu’on les prépare, prémédite et conduit, différents pourtant des actes volontaires par leur caractère inéluctable et comme fatal. [www.lanzadelvasto.com](http://www.lanzadelvasto.com)
11. Superphénix was a nuclear power station on the Rhône River at Creys-Malville in France, close to the border with Switzerland.
12. *Tous au Larzac (Everyone to the Larzac)* (DVD) by Christian Rouaud.
13. Votre violence justifiera la violence de l’État et dans quinze jours le Larzac sera un camp militaire et vous aurez perdu la vie, vos terres et vos espérances. Laissez-moi passer quinze jours avec vous à jeûner et je vous engagerai dans une autre voie.

### III

## The Community of Ark: *Hind Swaraj* Perspectives in Practice<sup>1</sup>

*Siby K. Joseph*

Gandhi envisioned the essential prerequisites for the attainment of true *Swaraj* in his small tract viz. *Hind Swaraj* which he wrote during his stay in South Africa. The original text of *Hind Swaraj* was written in Gujarati between 13th and 22nd November 1909 on board the ship *S. S. Kildonan Castle* during his return voyage from London to Cape Town after a rather disappointing mission to London to plead on behalf of the Indians in South Africa. The immediate provocation for writing this book was to denounce the cult of violence represented by the avowed Indian anarchists in London and their prototypes in South Africa and place before them the unique weapon of *Satyagraha* based on nonviolence or love.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript of *Hind Swaraj* was first serialised in two installments in the columns of the *Gujarati* section of *Indian Opinion* in December 1909 and later published in the form of a booklet in January 1910 in South Africa. This Gujarati text of *Hind Swaraj* was proscribed by the Bombay Government in March 1910. Gandhi countered the proscription of the booklet by publication of its English translation on March 20, 1910. Even though Gandhi's ideas underwent 'necessary evolution'<sup>3</sup> in the course of time, he remained strongly committed to the views he expressed in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909.<sup>4</sup>

One who scrutinises Gandhi's philosophy and methods will see their seeds in his work *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>5</sup> That is why this booklet is often hailed as Gandhi's 'seminal work'. Though Gandhi wrote this book keeping in mind mainly the Indians, his concept of *Swaraj* is not confined to the *Swaraj* of India alone. In fact, the ideas presented in this book constitute the foundation of Gandhi's philosophy of life. It may be said that it is on the foundation of *Hind Swaraj* that the whole edifice of Gandhi's theory of life is built. Anthony Parel has rightly pointed out that "*Hind Swaraj* is the seed from which the tree of Gandhian thought has grown to its full stature".<sup>6</sup> Lanza del Vasto, philosopher and western disciple of Gandhi in his "Introduction" to the French edition of *Hind Swaraj* in 1957 wrote "This small work is fundamental. It is surprising that in France many of Gandhi's writings have been published, and many, many more on Gandhi himself, yet this one, in which the germ of his whole doctrine lies, has been neglected."<sup>7</sup> The values presented in this booklet are eternal and transcend geographical boundaries. Also, while this booklet is a severe condemnation of modern western civilization and its institutions, it also presents Gandhi's concept of an alternative way of life based on moral values, and spirituality.

Records show that *Hind Swaraj* gave rise to a lot of controversies. Discussions and debates were aplenty at the theoretical level. It is to be noted that several experiments were also undertaken by people of idealistic orientation to put the *Hind Swaraj* insights into practice. The Community of Ark in Southern France, for example, is an attempt to apply the *Hind Swaraj* perspectives on nonviolence as a way of alternative living. This paper tries to look at the Ark experiment and examine how its

activities cohere the *Hind Swaraj* insights and perspectives.

### **The Community of Ark**

Before discussing the main theme of the paper a brief introduction about the Community of Ark is in order. Joseph Jean Lanza del Vasto (1901-1981), founder of the Community of Ark, was an Italian aristocrat who came to India on a pilgrimage in December 1936.<sup>8</sup> He met Gandhi in 1937 and stayed with him for three months. His stay with Gandhi was a turning point in his life. Gandhi introduced him to nonviolence and on his request gave him a new name, *Shantidas*, meaning Servant of Peace. Lanza returned to Europe with the conviction that the Gandhian vision provided a framework to solve the evils of modern civilisation.

The catastrophe of the Second World War deepened his conviction and he decided to spread the Gandhian doctrines in the West. This finally resulted in the founding of the original rural Community of Ark with his wife Chantrelle in the Southwest of France in 1948. However, his first experiment in community life was short lived. Lanza del Vasto left France and joined Vinoba Bhave in his Bhoodan movement in early 1954.<sup>9</sup> He returned to France to re-establish the community on an estate in the Rhone Valley in the south of France. This community had strict entry procedures to become a full-time member of the community. For three years, a new member would be treated as a novice and then will be admitted to the community by a unanimous decision. With the increase in number of members a new home was found for the Community of Ark in La Borie Noble with the acquisition of 1000 acres of farmland and forest in the hills of the

Languedoc in Southern France.<sup>10</sup> The group shifted to this location in 1963 and rebuilt the half-ruined buildings of stone deserted by the villagers since the First World War. Thus from that year onwards La Borie Noble became the headquarters of the Community of Ark. In the course of time two further communities were established on the land viz, Nogaret and La Fleysière. La Borie Noble and La Fleysière are the two rural communities of Ark which are still active and functioning on the ideals laid down by Lanza del Vasto. But the number of persons staying in these communities has come down drastically after the passing away of the founder. The members of these communities still follow the spirit of Lanza and Gandhi.

It may be said without exaggeration that these Communities of Ark are probably the finest examples of community living in the world. The members of these communities live together practising the values of truth, love and mutual tolerance. They follow a way of life completely devoted to nonviolence. The Community of Ark is a typical example where people live a simple life based on manual labour similar to the life of the ashrams founded by Gandhi in South Africa and India. The Community of Ark of Saint Antonie was founded in 1987.<sup>11</sup> It occupies part of the building of the former Abbey of St Antonie in the village of St. Antonie l'Abbaye. This community is basically a training centre providing courses, sessions and accommodation to guests. This community consists of more than 50 members and on an average welcomes 3000 people in a year. The Ark consists of communities, friends and well wishers who pursue individually or in groups the ideals of Lanza. Thus, Ark can be described as a movement and a group of communities. The Ark has centres in Germany and Argentina and the movement is spreading

to different parts of the world viz. Spain, Italy, Quebec, Mexico and South Africa.

### **Application of Hind Swaraj Perspectives in Ark**

Gandhi outlined his vision of *swaraj* in his booklet *Hind Swaraj*. For Gandhi *swaraj* is not a political or social term. It is basically a moral and ethical principle. While summarising the key message, at the end of the book, Gandhi clearly stated that real home rule is “self rule” or “self control.”<sup>12</sup> For him it is not a utopia, a dream or an abstract idea. It is something one has to experience internally. It calls for an internal transformation of the individual. Intrapersonal transformation is only the beginning, not the end; once such a transformation is achieved by an individual, it becomes the responsibility of that individual to persuade others also to experience it.<sup>13</sup> Explaining the concept of Swaraj Lanza del Vasto wrote “Swaraj does not have the negative etymological meaning of Independence, it is not just a simple fact of nondependence on, it is Raj or Sovereignty over Swa or oneself. Mastery of oneself is, therefore, the principle of freedom, what makes the problem pass from the social to the spiritual plane. Political freedom and national independence are negative and fictional, real alone is the sovereignty of each person in their inner tribunal.

The Kingdom of heaven, there it is - not a utopia, abstraction or system. And first of all it is said: The Kingdom of Heaven, not complete Socialisation and mechanised paradise. It is neither utopia, nor abstraction, nor system. It is life. The Kingdom of heaven is like the father of a family, The Kingdom of heaven is like a wild mustard seed... It is like the measure of yeast put into three measures of flour so that the dough rises... It is present as

well as future, it is on the earth as in heaven, it is life. The Kingdom of heaven is in your heart.”<sup>14</sup>

The members of the Community of Ark are trying to achieve such *swaraj* through an alternative way of living. Simple living is the hallmark of the community. Leading a simple, communitarian life is basically an exercise in detachment and self renunciation. For Gandhi such a spiritual exercise is an essential prerequisite for the attainment of the true *Swaraj*. The Ark explains the necessity of voluntary simplicity in the following words: “Everyone knows these days that the planetary resources are limited. We are squandering the heritage from previous generations that we should be passing on to our children. Given the situation, members of the Ark choose to live in voluntary simplicity, each according to his or her own lights.... It is also the preference of living together in solidarity and well-being rather than having more and more.”<sup>15</sup> It shows Ark’s deep environmental awareness and a sense of responsibility to safeguard our common heritage.

The Ark communities try to practice some of the economic ideas of Gandhi presented in *Hind Swaraj*. For example, the members of the Ark embrace voluntary poverty as part of their personal ascesis. They limit their needs voluntarily to the bare minimum because they want to free themselves from the trap of the urge for consumption. They try to have an economy with a human face, one that valued relationship, sharing and mutual aid. The Ark community attaches great importance to manual labour.<sup>16</sup> Everybody is supposed to acquire/learn basic labour skills so that each member will be equipped to meet the basic necessities of life – food, clothing and shelter. Work is looked upon not only as a means of living but also an expression of one’s creativity and total self.<sup>17</sup> Each



member is expected to work for about eight hours a day or for as many hours as one's physical ability warrants, including performance of household chores. All work stops once in an hour for a moment of silence and reflection on the work one has done. The members work with joy and it has a rhythm. The fruits of the labour are pooled together and each one receives according to his/her needs. They strive towards a self-reliant economy free from machinery, modern technology and market. The community engages in a healthy protest against the misuse of science and technology. The Community uses little electricity as an expression of their commitment to simplicity and opposition to nuclear power.

Gandhi wrote in *Young India* in January 1921 that the *Hind Swaraj* teaches the gospel of love in the place of hate. "In my opinion it is a book which can be put into the hands of a child. It teaches the gospel of love in the place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force."<sup>18</sup> Gandhi admitted that *Hind Swaraj* was a true measure of his faith in the weapon of Satyagraha.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on the chapter 17 of *Hind Swaraj* which deals with Satyagraha Lanza del Vasto wrote "It does not require the training of an army; it needs no jiu-jitsu. Control over the mind is alone necessary, and when that is attained, man is free like the king of the forest and his very glance withers the enemy."<sup>20</sup> The Community of Ark is an experiment to apply nonviolence (love) in different facets of human life. The Ark Charter reiterates the community's faith in nonviolence. Their document lays down as follows: "In the footsteps of Gandhi and Lanza del Vasto, the members of the Ark choose the path of nonviolence which is rooted in work on ourselves and spiritual seeking. They choose: to open themselves to others in a relationship of mutual

support; to live simply; to respect all life; and to work for Justice and Peace by nonviolent means.”<sup>21</sup> The members of the Ark follow the seven vows of the community by their own choice. They are : work (including bread labour, service), obedience (primarily to the rule and one’s vows), responsibility (and co-responsibility), purification (of one’s self), poverty (living simply), truthfulness (service of truth) and nonviolence (including defense of justice).<sup>22</sup> Community life in the Ark serves as a touchstone of their commitment to all the dimensions of nonviolence.

The Ark is highly critical of modern governments and their institutions. The members of the Ark look upon government as an embodiment of violence. Mark Shepard writes: “The companions saw modern government as built on violence, because its final authority rests on force, or threat of it, from its military, police and prisons .They didn’t believe that force or violence against a person is never justified, whether it is by individuals or by a government. When a government inflicts punishment on an offender, they said the crime is not corrected but doubled. In fact, they saw violence by government as more insidious than violence by individuals, because it hides behind a cloak of legitimacy”<sup>23</sup> The Ark visualises a nonviolent form of governance or self-governance in which each individual is free to act according to his/her conscience.

According to Gandhi organization is the test of nonviolence and organization means among other things decision making. Members of Ark take all important decisions relating to the community unanimously by and by consensus. If they fail to reach unanimity on a particular issue they follow different methods like discussions, observance of silence to calm down the heated arguments,

prayer, meditation and, in extreme cases, even fasting. Prayer, meditation, physical exercises, work, singing, dancing, celebration etc., are carefully interwoven into this nonviolent experiment. The Ark community has no religious affiliation. They welcome people following different religious faiths and even those with no religious affiliation. It believes that nonviolence exists within all the major religions of the world at varying levels.

The Ark, as a community has deep faith in the efficacy of nonviolent direct action or *Satyagraha*. From the year 1957 onwards, the Ark has been directing and collaborating with groups with similar objectives in non-violent direct action to address conflicts, wars, torture, internment of Algerian civilians during the French war in Algeria, nuclear energy/weapons, compulsory military service, countryside railways and similar issues. The Ark played an important role in the struggle of farmers of Larzac plateau of Southern France to prevent the Government plan to expand the military camp of Larzac by taking huge areas of agricultural lands for weapon testing. The Battle of Larzac<sup>24</sup> (1970-1980) is well known in the annals of nonviolent struggles of France and of Europe. In recent years, the Ark has been actively involved in nonviolent action against genetically modified (GM) crops. Presently the CANVA (Coordination of the Nonviolent Actions of the Ark), St. Antonie l'Abbaye, specialises in nonviolent action. This association organises campaigns and supports those institutions and individuals engaged in nonviolent movements. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Gandhi's martyrdom, the Ark was one of the pioneering institutions responsible for the organization of an International Congress on Peace and Nonviolence at Sewagram/Wardha.<sup>25</sup> Two close associates<sup>26</sup> of Lanza del Vasto got the Jamnalal Bajaj

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International Award for promoting Gandhian values outside India in 1988 and 2008.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi defined true or ideal civilization as “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.”<sup>27</sup> The performance of duty or observance of morality is essential to attain mastery over our mind and passions. It calls for an alternative way of life. Gandhi believed that the ancient Indian village system was conducive to the performance of duty which also meant the observance of morality. The Community of Ark places before humanity such an alternative way of living where social relations are organised on the basis of the principle of nonviolence and such other eternal values of life. There are several alternative experiments going on in various fields in different parts of the world based on this Gandhian vision. These experiments are mostly on a small scale, but they are concrete efforts towards building a society on the basis of the values of truth, nonviolence and justice. The real task before those who dream a just world order is to strengthen and multiply these experiments in alternative living and network them in such a way that they eventually assume the required critical mass in society.

### **Notes and References**

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Seminar on ‘Hind Swaraj:100 years and after’ organised by Gandhi Bhavan, University of Delhi from 11th to 13th Feb. 2009 at Conference Centre, University of Delhi, Delhi. Another version of this paper appeared in *Gandhi Marg* (A journal published by of Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi), July- September 2009 issue.

2. During Gandhi's four month stay in London in 1909, he had occasion to talk with many Indian anarchists representing the Indian school of violence. Gandhi wrote in his *Satyagraha in South Africa* that the *Hind Swaraj* "... had its birth from the necessity of having to meet their arguments as well as to solve the difficulties of Indians in South Africa who held similar views" See M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1993), p. 211. Gandhi further explains that the "*Hind Swaraj* was written in order to demonstrate the sublimity of *Satyagraha* and that book is a true measure of my faith in its efficacy" See *Ibid.*, p. 212.
3. An expression used by Mahadev Desai, Secretary of Gandhi in the brief note to the preface of the new edition of *Hind Swaraj* on 11th December, 1938. See M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 2004), p. 5.
4. In a message to the *Hind Swaraj Special Number of the Aryan Path* published in September 1938 Gandhi wrote "I might change the language here and there, if I had to rewrite the booklet. But after the stormy thirty years through which I have since passed, I have seen nothing to make me alter the views expounded in it". *Ibid.*, p. 14
5. "All that Gandhiji was teaching now lay in the germ in that little book" – Lord Lothian, See M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 2004) p. 12.
6. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* edited by Anthony J. Parel (Ed.) (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1997), p. xiii.

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7. Lanza del Vasto's introduction to the French edition of 'Hind Swaraj' was translated by Gerry Blaylock during the Hind Swaraj centenary year. The author uses Gerry Blaylock's translation in this paper. It is available in the website. <http://www.semisottolaneve.org/ssn/a/30496.html>  
  
See also "Introduction" by Lanza del Vasto in M. K. Gandhi, *Leur in civilisation et notre délivrance* (Paris; Denoël, 1957)
8. See Lanza Del Vasto, *Return to the Source* (New York: Schocken Books), 1972.
9. See Lanza Del Vasto, *Gandhi to Vinoba; The New Pilgrimage* (New York: Schocken Books), 1974.
10. Mark Shepard, *The Community of Ark* (California: Simple Productions), 1990 p. 13. See also <http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/Ark.htm>
11. <http://www.arche-de-st.antonie.com>
12. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule op.cit.*, p. 90.
13. Gandhi defines Swaraj as "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream. There is no idea of sitting still. The Swaraj that I wish to picture is such that, after we have once realized it, we shall endeavour to the end of our life-time to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself." *Ibid.*, p. 56.
14. Lanza del Vasto's introduction to the French edition of 'Hind Swaraj' op. cit.

15. *The Ark Community of Lanza del Vasto*, a brochure of the Communities of Ark, France.
16. It is evident from the description of life at the Ark for the participants of Summer School and Workshops at the La Borie Noble. “ Generally in the morning, after helping in the kitchen, there is work on the farm or in gardens With its working horses, its cows and hens, its arable farm, its haymaking and wood cutting, life unrolls peacefully and almost self sufficiently. Help is always welcomed. Occasionally there is work in the dairy, assisting with cheese making or in the bakery....After lunch and siesta there is time for craftwork, woodwork, spinning, drawing and painting, for workshops and group discussions, visits to the pottery or bakery, for learning dance,...for thinking.”
17. “It is in the making of things that human beings are themselves made” -Lanza Del Vasto.
18. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule op.cit.*, p. 15.
19. Gandhi explains that the “*Hind Swaraj* was written in order to demonstrate the sublimity of *Satyagraha* and that book is a true measure of my faith in its efficacy” See M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1993), p. 212.
20. Lanza del Vasto’s introduction to the French edition of ‘Hind Swaraj’ op. cit.
21. <http://www.arche-nonviolence.eu>
22. Mark Shepard , *The Community of Ark op. cit.*, p.29
23. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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24. Roger Rawilson, *The Battle of Larzac* (Fellowship of Reconciliation: England).
25. For details See <http://www.gvpwardha.in>
26. Pierree Parodi (1988), Louis Campana (2008).
27. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, *op.cit.*, p. 53



## IV

### Texts of Lanza del Vasto

*By Frédéric Rognon*

#### a. The Praise of Simple Living

In 1933, Lanza del Vasto decided to set out and radically experience detachment and simple living, thirty years before the beatniks. The aphorisms he scribbled on bits of paper, published in 1945 under the title *Principes et préceptes du retour à l'évidence*, are a striking testament to his thirst for the absolute. A journey had begun that would lead Vasto, 15 years later, to found sedentary communities that were nevertheless dedicated to revising their needs.

*The brief introduction to each text of Lanza del Vasto given in this section was translated by Joachim Lépine.*

#### 1

The life of a gentle highwayman is hard to lead well, but it is lit up by the joy of springs and always by the greatness of the sky.

For a long time now, I have been the owner of a staff, a knapsack, and a beard.

By dint of swinging from one foot on to the other, I have ended by forgetting everything I was made to learn at school, everything I ever read in books.

The few thoughts left to me, rattled in my head for some time, then dropped, dried up in the sun and air, and have hardened and shrunk almost to nothing.

Only a fool states the obvious with great fervour and an air of having discovered it. Forgive me, friend, if henceforth I cannot do otherwise. The only things I know now are so obvious that an intelligent man would disdain to say them. So obvious that most intelligent men have come to forget them.

**2**

He has no need of a vehicle and laughs at machines running on wheels, he who returns to the obvious. Alone and on foot, he goes toward what goes without saying.

**3**

Tramp, know the dignity of the vertical act, uniquely human, that walking is. Standing upright belongs to man alone. Even birds flying in the sky sit on their feet and lie in their wings.

**4**

He who walks has not arrived. The pilgrim is not a wise man, he is not a saint; he is a friend of wisdom and a seeker after saintliness.

The truth you are looking for is not at the end of the road. It is everywhere: it is in you. It is yourself you are looking for, you madman, and here you go running to fetch yourself from a far.

Yes, my body dragging in the outer world still does not know the truth my intelligence has seen. I want to put my feet into the footprints of my thought, I want to feel with my hands what my knowledge knows, I want to weigh my weight on the promised land of spiritual certainty.

Go on then, you fool! Start walking with all your life. Let the road take the dried reed off your body and the wind your legs and teach them to sing.

**5**

Suffice unto thyself.

Be the one to enjoy what your own hands have made.

Content yourself with what your own hands have made.

Do without what you cannot make.

Or go to someone you know and let him make for you the thing you need.

Let nothing be made in order to undertake the adventure of sale.

Let selling not be work outside work, and work a risk without the pleasure of play.

While they play at cheating each other, suffice unto thyself.

**6**

If you close your hand, the world will remain closed to you like a fist.

If you want the world to open up to you, open your hand first.

**7**

Endeavour to do WHAT nobody but you can do.

Endeavour to want what everybody else can have as well.

Distinguish yourself by what you are, not by what you have.

**8**

Don't waste your time earning your Jiving.

Earn your time; save your life.

**9**

Don't protest against what you disapprove.

Do without it.

Do without all industrial, commercial and official organizations.

If you disapprove of lies, leave the city.

If you disapprove of triviality, read no newspapers.

If you disapprove of the ugliness of the century, throw away everything that comes from a factory.

If you disapprove of butchery, stop eating meat.

If you disapprove of the brothel, look on every woman as your mother.

If you disapprove of war, never clench your fists.

If you disapprove of the bondage of poverty, get rid of your possessions freely.

But fully approve what remains to you then.

Be wise enough to know its value.

**10**

What things does the city make that are necessary?

Does it make the wheat of the bread it eats?

Does it make the wool of the cloth it wears?

Does it make milk? Can it make an egg? Does it make fruit?

It makes the wrapping. It makes the label.

It makes prices.

It makes politics.

It makes publicity.

It makes noise.

It has taken the gold of the obvious away from us and has lost it.

**11**

Do without a watch.

Time does not count in the obvious.

You will rise when the sun rises.

When it goes down, you will lie down.

You will eat when your hunger has struck noon.

You will drink when a spring refreshes your path.

You will arrive when God wills.

Be in no hurry; don't waste time hurrying.

Only God knows the hour of your death and for your own good He keeps that knowledge from you.

Lanza del Vasto, *Principes et Préceptes du retour à l'évidence*, Paris, DDB, 2014, p. 13-16, 18, 20, 24-25, 34-35, 38-39. Trad. Jean Sigwick, *Principles and Precepts of the return to the obvious*, New York, Schocken Books, 1974, pp. 7, 9, 11, 13, 16-17, 24-25, 27.

**b. The Vision of the Ark**

*In 1937, Lanza del Vasto visited Gandhi in order to try to find a way out of the impasses of civilization. Over the course of his journey to India, he trekked along the Ganges, making his way to its sources. And this is where all became clear: his task would be to found a brotherhood of people dedicated to a lifestyle free of any violence, abuse or cooperation with war and injustice. He would tell of this initiative in the book that brought him to fame, *Le pèlerinage aux sources*.*

I had not left my country in order to seek adventure, but rather to be set free from adventure and to find a way out of our disorder. The customs and mental habits of Europe which inevitably and logically result in deserved upheavals and suffering and ugliness of all kinds, constitute a system which some uphold deliberately and

from conviction, others by acquiescing to it. I felt an urgent need to escape from it. The problems that we have - mechanisation, enslavement to convenience, lucre, violence and irreligion - were solved at one stroke by Gandhi. It seemed to me that it was my duty as a man to go to him. I intended, when I had finished my apprenticeship, to shut myself up in some Indian village and serve a general human cause there till the end of my days.

I had undertaken my journey to the Source in order to steep myself in the traditions of the country I wanted to settle in and had undergone the ordeals of my noviciate in order to strengthen myself and prepare myself for the task.

But now a new thought was dawning in me: that by virtue of the very principle of *Swadeshi*, the place of a Western disciple of Gandhi was in the West and his task to sow the seed on the most thankless of all ground - at home. For nowhere was the need for his teaching greater.

I knew that to give this truth life it was vain to expose it in books, or scatter it abroad in lectures or public speeches; vain to theorise and polemise, vain to appeal to those who read out of curiosity or to the crowds that howl and forget. For it is the kind of truth one can learn only by living it and teach only by helping someone else to live it. It was therefore necessary to find a brotherhood of men, bound by solemn vows for the purpose of learning to live together according to the rule of Ahimsa and Swadeshi; and to make this community thrive in poverty and hard bodily labour and grow in independence, while nevertheless subject to civil law, so that in time and with the help of God, without preaching revolt or forcing destiny, it would transform the life of the peoples from within, eliminating bloodshed and revolution and the endless chain of wars.

With deep emotion, I wrote to Bapuji about my project; the letter was clear and well written. That done, it seemed to me that the peace of the world had been achieved. By return of post, the answer came, 'You will do what your inner voice bids you. But if it is at all possible, come and look us up before you leave the Indian shore.'

Lanza del Vasto, *Le Pèlerinage aux sources*, Paris, Denoël (coll. Folio), 1972 (1ère éd. 1943), pp. 334-335; trad. Jean Sidwick, *Return to the source*, New York, Schocken Books, 1972, pp. 242-243.

**c. A Chain and a Whip**

The following brief text illustrates Lanza del Vasto's implacable gaze on our modern servitude: do the lifestyle, rhythms and values to which we are subjected not make us into veritable slaves? Though we may not see the whip, we can see those who consent to be flogged...

In a great Capital, opulent and free, I saw the passers-by hastening in life between the walls and along the asphalt.

They looked as if they were fleeing, back bent, head bowed as if they were being lashed. But nobody was pursuing them except other fugitives and I could not see the whip.

They were all tied to each other, but I could not see the chain.

They were all prisoners of the station clock rising at the end of the street like a sinister star.

*Anonymous translation*

**d. The Machine**

*In Lesquatrefléaux, a work of political and economic philosophy published in 1959, Lanza del Vasto deconstructs the productivist propaganda that seeks to*

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*seduce citizens and consumers. Mechanization, from this last perspective, is shown in its best light as the purveyor of ease and comfort; however, the reality is far more ambivalent... the following text could easily be updated with examples drawn from 21st century technologies.*

To deceive means to lead astray by lies. It is fairly clear (though not to all) that the benefit promised and produced by the Machine is a snare.

To catch a monkey, they say, all you have to do is to hollow out a coconut, fix it to a tree-trunk, put some appetizing food into it and leave a hole for the monkey's paw. When he grabs the food, he cannot pull his fist out, and so he wriggles and wails without letting go, until he is caught.

They also say that the sight of a monkey captured does not at all deter the next monkey.

This monkey story makes plain the exact measure of licence, necessity and absurdity, simplicity and roguery, practical reasoning and silly thoughtlessness required for man to fall into the trap of machinery.

"I'll save you time", says the machine, speaking like a lamb, and no sooner has man accepted the seductive invitation than all the days of his life are swallowed up by haste. "I'll save you toil", says the machine, and man jumps into the bottomless pitfall of colossal industry.

"I'll give you wellbeing!" (Who could resist such solicitude?) And lo! the air is fouled, the view cut off, and we find ourselves in the stink and roar of engines, jostled on foot or blocked in traffic jams, overwhelmed by stress and strain, by tons of cheap rubbish and tinned foods, by skyscrapers and food-factories and the final worldwide deflagration that will put an end to the madness.

*Anonymous translation*



**e. Of Speed**

We live, as we all know, in the era of acceleration: everything is constantly going faster and faster. Starting in 1959, Lanza del Vasto questions this utterly unproductive, meaningless and unchecked race. History since then has only confirmed these orientations of civilization and borne out this voice in the wilderness, which was all but inaudible during the post-war decades.

The main goal of “progress” is to accelerate transport and communication more and more. This is a goal such as players set themselves, in itself insignificant and void, like throwing balls into holes: a goal which, at its best, serves only to permit play. In fact, the speed gained serves the development of commerce, apart from which it serves no one and nothing.

Proof of this is not hard to find: the countries where people go to the greatest trouble, take the greatest risks, and undertake the heaviest expense in order to procure time-saving machines, are precisely those where everybody is always in a hurry or late, and where haggard, hunted-looking people tell you they have no time. They look as if they did not know what is happening to them. Yet it is not difficult to understand. Time and speed are not objects or riches that can be heaped up, and above all, they cannot be possessed in common. Time is a measure, a relation, and of relative reality. If I have a car and gain time, it can only be in relation to those who go on foot. If everybody drives a car, I gain nothing. When traffic as a whole speeds up, whoever walks at a normal pace might as well have had his legs amputated. Far from saving time, general acceleration cuts time short, not to mention all the time lost in forging and repairing the machines-for-catching-up-on-time.

**f. The Ark of the Gandhians of the West**

In *Les quatrefléaux*, Lanza del Vasto sets out the core principles of the communities of the Ark, which entail nonviolence in all areas of life and not only political activism. His aim: to show that an alternative is within our reach, and no more unpleasant than other lifestyles.

The Ark might be reproached with doing just the opposite, of being more deeply engaged in spiritual preparation and in all-round education for nonviolence than in any particular public action.

Its intervention in public affairs has never been more than testimony — symbolic rather than successful.

To do one must first be, and this is what we are attempting. Spiritual preparation is not a means for us, but an end in itself more important than any outward manifestation or victory. Bringing man face to face with God and with himself is in itself desirable. If the Tree of Life is found again, acts will fall from it like ripe, good fruit.

The most efficient action, the most significant testimony to nonviolence and truth is not so much handing out tracts in the street and talking to crowds, or going from door to door, leading walks and campaigns, invading bomb factories, fasting in public, braving the police, undergoing assault and imprisonment (all of which we find right to do on occasion and do willingly), as living.

Living a life that is whole, and in which everything has the same sense, from the prayer and meditation to ploughing for our daily bread, from teaching the doctrine to handling manure, from cooking to singing and dancing round the fire.

Showing that a life free from violence and abuse (from hidden violence as well as from brutal violence, from legal and authorized abuse as well as from illegal abuse) is

possible; that, even, such a life is not more difficult than a life of gain, nor more unpleasant than a life of pleasure, nor less natural than “ordinary” life.

Finding the nonviolent response to the problems that have always beset man, such as:

Can there be an economy that lends itself neither to oppression nor abuse?

Can children be educated in nonviolence?

Can nonviolence be taught to people of all ages?

Can authority be nonviolent, neither dependent on force nor carrying privilege?

Can justice be nonviolent?

Can there be justice without punishment, or punishment without violence?

Can agriculture and animal-breeding be nonviolent?

Can there be nonviolent medicine? A nonviolent diet?

And to begin with, have we eliminated from our religious life all violence, even in word and thought, even hidden or disguised?

*Anonymous translation*

Lanza del Vasto, *Les QuatreFléaux. II – La Roue des révolutions*, Paris, Denoël-Gonthier (coll. BibliothèqueMédiations), 1971 (1ère éd. 1959), pp. 227-229.

### **g. Elements of a Nonviolent Economy**

After a dozen years of experimentation, Lanza del Vasto sets forth the rules for a nonviolent economy as implemented by the communities of the Ark. The rules focus on refusing any form of exploitation, fostering a relationship with the earth, working with one’s hands, and living simply.

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In the light of what we have said about the spirit of Profit and the spirit of Play, it will come as no surprise:

That we endeavour to draw our living directly from the earth by the work of our hands, avoiding, as far as we can, the use of machines and money;

That we endeavour not to break the link God and nature have put between what the mouth asks for and what the two hands can produce;

That we reduce our desires to our needs, and our needs to the extreme so as to free ourselves from excessive toil;

That we sell the surplus of what we produce for ourselves, but never buy in order to sell or profit from mere exchange;

That we pool what resources we have that can serve the community and give up the rest, but our communities remain poor and do not accumulate more than is needed for the year's supplies;

That, as far as we can, we observe the golden rule never to pay anybody and never to let anyone pay us;

That we exploit no man, even if he asks us to, and refuse to become the accomplices of any profiteer, even if it might be convenient. For in the same measure as we are dedicated to service, we refuse servitude;

That we try to exploit nothing at all, neither animals nor plants nor the earth. We work the land, we let live, we accept natural losses, we help to live — because one always ends up treating men in the same manner as one treats nature;

That in the practice of any craft, we are less concerned with the quantity of the product than with its quality, and less concerned with the product than with the craftsman;

That we do not consider work and craftsmanship as something external to personal and spiritual life, but consider the work of the hands as a sacred act. It is also an act of life. So we want it to be interesting, varied, harmonious, strengthening, instructive and edifying;

That the lowest and most menial tasks are shared by all, and foremost by our leaders, so that no-one is demeaned or burdened by them;

That every craftsman among us knows and carries out his craft from beginning to end and makes the whole object, from the raw material to the final decoration. Nobody is harnessed to a fragmentary task or makes less than the whole object for fear of his becoming less than a man. For it is by making things that a man makes himself. Nobody among us will be limited to a single craft, but will possess several, and alternate them. Everybody has to help with the farming and the gardening according to the season. This is the best kind of work for health and holiness. Let every craftsman seek the rhythm and the sense of his craft and he will discover secrets lost since the ruin of the guilds.

The Ark is neither a Religious Order nor a Chivalrous Order. It draws, however, from both: it is a Working Order. It is not a brotherhood of monks, but a new people, made up of laymen who have children and bring them up. A people apart, but indifferent to barriers of nationality, class, race or creed. A people that does not without good reason oppose established national law and authority but considers itself, small though it be in numbers and strength, as free and sovereign like the nomads of the desert and itinerant Gypsies.

*Anonymous translation.*

**h. To Prevent the End of the World**

According to the critics of voluntary simplicity, “There is no turning back.” Lanza del Vasto, not without provocation, replies that it is impossible not to turn back. If we do not make radical choices in order to live simply today, we will be forced to do so tomorrow, in catastrophic conditions.

How to get rid of the shackles of the world? We see that all the efforts we put into getting out of them only consolidate the chain. To free ourselves from oppression, we revolt and we give weapons to the oppressor, and oppression grows stronger! Or we fight the oppressor and the oppressed become in turn the oppressors.

We suggest sensible remedies: “Let us be less wicked.” This is not a bad idea, but it does not solve the problem. “Let us try to do very well what we do. Let us do, with unsullied professional conscience, what we are paid to do. Let us obey the orders of our superiors. Let us be more and more active, more educated, more robust, more intelligent, more virtuous.”

This is all very well, very honest, very honorable, but beware! Vices and wickedness do not cause wars or revolutions, nor do they sustain misery. But virtue and the science of the too clever by half do.

So what? What should we do to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven?

“My friend, Jesus says, you must be born again.”

It is not about becoming stronger and stronger, but perhaps about becoming weaker and weaker. It is not about making bigger and bigger things. No. Create things that are smaller than you are. Own things that are worth less than you are. For if you own a thing more valuable than you, it will own you; if you build a thing taller than

you, you will fall on your knees and it will make you its slave and worshipper.

If you amass goods that are worth more than you are, you will not enjoy them: they will take advantage of you. Thus, possess less than you are. Be more than what you have. Do small and necessary things; the world will only gain from it and so will you. It starts with a personal and social reform.

What an undreamt improvement we make once we learn how to do without some things! What a workload avoided for you and for others! What led you to believe that all this accumulation of junk was necessary? What made you entangle yourself in the complicated system of commodities? Behind all of this not only lie your wrongdoings, your shortcomings, your limitations and your wickedness. But also sin, that of everyone. And a degenerate intelligence, and all that follows: the world turned upside-down.

Have you ever noticed how people walk on their heads? You may think they stand right side up. Perhaps this is because you do stand upside-down yourself...

Beware! The goal is not in the minor change, in the correction of the detail: it is from one improvement to another that we've reached this extreme degree of reversed perfection. The aim is to go back, to convert.

We have spoken of sin as a revelation of the human condition, as it appears in the very first pages of the Old Testament. A revelation without which one cannot comprehend human destiny. It shall be no surprise, then, to find in the New Testament the key to the exit door.

New Testament, Gospels, good news. What kind of good news? The good news is that we have found a way out, a way out of the nightmare, the madness, the violence,

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the injustice, the oppression, in short : of sin and its consequences.

You know that the Gospel opens on a preamble that is the preaching of John the Precursor.

John the Precursor preached in the middle of the desert. People were leaving the cities, the temples and all the rest behind and it is while crossing the desert that they met with this great priest of a new Order. In the deepest part of the desert, when the throats become the driest, there lies the Jordan River. The Jordan River springs in the snowy mountains of Mount Hermon and works its way down to the boiling pit of the Dead Sea. The people who came there, he plunged them into the water. He put his big hand on their foreheads and pushed them underwater, until they start to gurgle, to suffocate. Then he let them reach the surface again : it is the baptism, the dip.

We are still underwater, scared, tortured by the lack of air, of light, and the need to come back up to the surface. The word of John the Baptist punctuates the Ancient Testament: “Convert.”

In Latin and in Greek, the word means “to turn around, to turn oneself outside in.” In Hebrew and Aramaic, the same word translates as “to go back”. It is always about a turning point. We hear from the everyman that: “we cannot go back.” This can have two meanings, which actually combine :

1. We cannot resist the flow of History, which is stronger than us.
2. We don't have the right to resist and to go upstream.

However, if one has the slightest knowledge of history, they will find that we have always gone back. That we *cannot* not go back, because history is not at all a straight and upright road: it is a series of cycles. And the



main characteristic of a cycle is to go back to the starting point.

Hence the never-ending returns of history. Whenever a civilisation has built great monuments and large machines, it has crumbled down.

The people that once were civilised have started to blow on the fire again to dry herbs. We now acknowledge that the ones we found in a “primitive state” are generally ancient civilisations. The shift from savagery to civilisation is quickly followed by a return to savagery.

But there are two ways to go back:

1. When everything has crumbled down and gone up in flames, we will be left with a bare land. We will then have to find our way, just like the cavemen had to. Unless one has been absolutely corrupted, rotten, benumbed by civilisation, we will manage to survive, to rise up and to start again.
2. But we can also go back out of wisdom, without the occurrence of a catastrophe. In fact, a collective step back might very well avoid a catastrophe. A great and general effort of simplification, in accordance with Nature, this nature that we have been violating both inside and outside our selves. A return to God.

For, to go back, to convert, does not mean to return to a specific time in History. All the times of History are horrible times, just as horrible as ours. It is precisely to go upstream the course of History. It is going back to the principle, to God. It is also going back to our own selves, from whom we have so disastrously been driven further and further away with increasing speed. At the end of these distances, these spaces, these speeds, there is only death, catastrophe, disaster, void, night.

How come people marvel at the Moon expeditions?

What is the point of this? Why the fascination? Because it is the fastest and most efficient way to run as further away as possible from ourselves : this is the answer. The rocket and the atomic bomb are the fruits of the same tree: the science of good and evil, whose seed is Sin.

But the cry of the one preaching in the desert keeps on echoing all throughout the Gospel. It teaches us the conversion and the return; it announces that all will be turned around if our heart is. Your intelligence, your heart and your actions have to take a different direction, and you will then enter a new world.

The Beatitudes, which we recite, clearly mark this tipping point: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.”

Does this mean that in order to be happy, one has to be a beggar? Do we have to give up everything we have?

“But this is exactly what I call being miserable, says the civilised man. The sad, the miserable shall be pitied, not imitated! They need to be saved!” You have spoken well, civilised man, but you haven’t read well. It doesn’t say: “blessed the miserable” but “blessed the poor in spirit” that is to say those inspired by the Holy Spirit, those who willingly chose to be poor, because they understood that it is the way out of the state of sin, because sin is the *spirit of profit*.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

The verb is in the future tense. Because today, the meek don’t own the hearth: the bully do. A violent one, ten violent ones served by ten thousand cowards result in a considerable power. The violent give the coward weapons, and then put them on the front line : “ We will see how they do... ” They will do anything, kill anyone in order to save their own skin. Guided by a frenzied fear, they will pass off as heroes.

But the meek - to be translated in today's language as the *nonviolent* - is neither tough nor weak. They are those who don't let themselves go or force anything, the ones who act out of wisdom, kindness, justice, moderation, sobriety, and prudence. All of these objectives are contained in the word "meek".

When will the meek own the hearth?

When the bully will have destroyed one another, when the tough and the cowards will have destroyed and burnt everything.

We are often told : "Look at this world. It is not you and your nonviolence that is going to overthrow all this, all these armies, these factories, this traffic! You will not stop this..." We answer with confidence : "Even if we had the power to destroy all of this, we would not. But all of this will be destroyed anyway." By whom? By us? No. They will destroy it themselves. They will tear each other down. In two or three generations, not a single stone will remain of any of this. It seems unshakable, unattainable, it seems to grow bigger and bigger, faster and faster, further and further, stronger and stronger... but it is extremely vulnerable, it may collapse in the blink of an eye; it is a fantastic illusion.

You see people building exactly what they need to destroy what they build. They think of destruction before thinking about construction. The aim is to destroy what the other is building. In the meantime, the other feels the same about us, because such a relationship is common among friends, coworkers, nations. In sin, we create for destruction: when we accumulate in sin, we accumulate for dispersion. When we try to enchain others, we enchain ourselves to the other end. When we plan the other's death, we plan our own death.

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You see what the justice of God is, and why it is just: the justice of God means reaping what you sow.

Oh, sower, first look at the seeds in the bottom of your bag! Take a good look at them before you put them into the ground. Ah! You did not want this kind of crop? Well, you should have checked your bag first! If you throw a stone in the air, it will fall on your head. It is useless to kneel, join your hands and pray : “Lord, Lord, make this stone not fall on my foolish head.”

*Translation by Marie Delcambre*

**i. The Anti-creation of Man**

The following text is a parody and backwards take of the creation story from the book of Genesis. It runs from the seventh day to the first, showing how man undoes Heaven and Earth so that the first day... never comes to pass! With his boundless will to assert his power, man is setting the stage for the imminent end of his adventure on earth. The text’s particularly stark and gloomy tone is aimed at shaking up our contemporaries’ conscience, while there is still time.

In the end, the Man unmade the Sky and the Earth.

And the earth abounded with wonderful forms and, filled with life, it was spinning in the light, but the spirit of the Man was on it, fueling the fire.

And the man said : “Let there be Wickedness” and Wickedness was. And then, the man differentiated Wickedness from Innocence and he called Wickedness Intelligence, and named Innocence Stupidity. And he found a way to separate and distort every little thing at will. There was a night and there was a morning. The Seventh Day.

And the man said : “Let there be a division between those above and those below, between all the peoples of

the earth.” And so it was. He drew borders and built walls. And he called Order this division. And he believed the Order was good. There was a night and there was a morning. The Sixth Day.

Then the Man said : “May power and wealth be gathered together in the same place, and while the rest of the world is oppressed and pushed to hard work by Need.” And so it was. He called the pile of wealth Civilisation and the enslaved; he called them “Raw Material.” And he believed it was good. Then the man said : “Let the Raw Material produce Wealth, and let Wealth bear the seed of its own kind and Power grow the fruit of its own tree.” And so it was. The Wealthy drew their wealth from those who had nothing, and the Powerful thrived on those subjected to their force. And the man thought it was good. There a night and there was a morning. The Fifth Day.

And the Man said : “Let there be Sciences, beacons of Wickedness throwing light on Civilisation and separating it from the poors in spirit. Let them classify and sort all things animate or inanimate, natural or human, and enlighten all things on their way.” And so it was. And man created two great Sciences : the greatest to discover things and to take control over the laws that govern them, and the smallest, a dubious one, to preside over the secrecy of human affairs. He also created thousands and thousands recipes to arm Power and serve Wealth, and thousands clever tricks to adulterate things and manipulate people. And behold: he thought this was good. There was a night and there was a morning. The Fourth Day.

Then the Man said : “Let Power breed weapons to protect and spread itself, and let Wealth create machines to multiply itself.” And so he built great vessels to rule over the seas as well as in their depth, armoured with stronger scales than the biggest sea monsters, and also rockets faster than any of the birds God had ever created to explore

the vastness. And the man congratulated himself and shouted : “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the seas, the earth and the sky with your encounters and squeals.” And so, there was a night and there was a morning. The Third Day.

The Man said : “Let the earth be covered with vehicles faster and wilder than the beasts and the snakes created by God.” And so it was. And the earth was invaded by rolling and creeping machines, by speed machines, work machines, and war machines. And the Man thought it was good. And so he said: “Now, let us make a man true to the image and the measure of our power, and let him rule over the fish in the seas, over the birds in the sky, over all the people on earth and all things crawling.”

And the Man created a man modelled on his power. He created him commensurate to the power of man. Man and machine he created them. The man congratulated himself and said : “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and make it your slave, reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, any living soul, any human carrying a spark of intelligence, the crowds, the armies, and the chiefs of States.” And the Man told the man what he had done : “Here, I give you all the people to serve you as energy and fuel. All the fallen ones, the innocent, I give them to you to beat up, to break down and to suffocate until they take the aspect of sharp stiffness of a piece of metal, until bitten by other claspings jaws, they stumble and surrender. ”And the man saw the man he had created, and so he thought: this man was more beautiful, bigger, stronger than himself and he fell head down on the floor and worshiped his own image, exalted by his own power, and he disappeared in front of it. And there was a night and there was a morning. The Second Day.

This is how was achieved the Destruction of the Sky, the Earth and the Man. An explosion rumbled in the abyss, a black cloud rose, a long moan was scattered in the wind.

And the earth became shapeless and empty. And the whole place took rest from all the creations the man had made in his madness, for his creations were no longer. And there came the night but no morning followed. There was no more light, as on the First Day.

*Translation by Marie Delcambre*

**j. Prophet of disasters**

Lanza del Vasto has often been called a prophet of doom. In this book of interviews published the year of his death, he explains his point of view: while he recognizes that the conscience of men has begun to awaken in recent years, he remains pessimistic before the scope of the challenges lying ahead of us, in a context where alternative solutions, especially community-based, do exist and have proven their feasibility.

**Claude-Henri Rocquet** : *The patron saint of L'Arche is John the Baptist, the prophet; what is a prophet?*

**Lanza del Vasto** : It is someone who sees, and who is inspired by God. He is the one who utters the word of God. Therefore, he is the one who is inspired, he does not necessarily speak of the future. He speaks about the future, he speaks about the past, he speaks about the present. To him, time is contained in prophecy. Indeed, it is remarkable to see that prophecy is not subjected to time, just like when, high in the mountains, the gaze does not distinguished distances. You look at a summit and you think you can reach it in two hours : it takes three days to get there. And so, the prophet sees an event in the near future, and it may actually take two thousand years for it to occur. Or, he bundles up two or three events together into one, like the ends of the world and the end of Jerusalem, the apocalypses in the Gospel. "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have

happened. And, indeed, it is the fall of Jerusalem. We can talk about it like the end of the world. As a matter of fact, generations after generations, especially those who followed Jesus, thought they had reached the end of the world. If I had an extra life, I would write the story of the ends of the world. Because almost every century came to believe that it was the end. I would like to tell this tale, from one century to the next. With proofs and documents of what the prophets of the time were saying. And then the different dates, the dates found in the Scriptures, like Joachim of Flores who made precise calculus in order to explain that the end of the world was to happen in year one hundred and two thousand.... I don't exactly remember the number. And then we are surprised to still be to the world, this thing that never ceases to end, and we are still here... We are surprised to see that the end of the world has taken place and that the world has carried on. And, indeed, the world is something that keeps on ending, and each and every one of us will take it down with us. And it will go through the terrible destructions of the Apocalypse, the locusts and the falling stars and the sun like a sackcloth. This is what we will see in the fevers of our agony, obviously. We carry a world and we will take it down with us. And today like never before do we have the feeling that the time has come for the end of the world. We see that all the elements are gathered for a total and definitive destruction to happen. And made by the very hand of man!

*I wonder if you have not changed your mind a little on this matter in, lets say, the last twenty-five years. It seems to me that your words, twenty-five years ago, were more "apocalyptic", that you had the feeling of an imminent destruction.*

I still believe that there will be tremendous destructions. And that we work towards them with a remarkable zeal and that we deserve them. We will reap



what we would have sown. We have never seen a people not go to war, so what will be the next world war? Something absolutely unbelievable, but the facts are there. We are getting ready for it all. And one does not need to be a prophet, only to look at the things around. All the components are here, the means that destroy all are here, and the mind that destroys all is here too.

*And to those who are concerned about this peril, this destruction...*

We shall not put them back to sleep! To their nice little dreams.

*And what do you say then, to the ones who worry?*

I tell them : "Scream, and try to worry others!" Because I don't believe there is such thing as fate. Nor do I believe in God's will to destroy what he has created. But I believe the causes and the effects are linked. Certainly, inevitably. And if you throw a stone in the air, it will inevitably fall on your head. But nothing forces you to throw stones in the air. Leave it alone. And try to find solutions that will not put the world, or yourself, at risk.

*Twenty years ago, it looked like nothing could ever stop the catastrophe that was on its way. Today, it seems that a general conscience has woken up.*

Yes, a little.

*Do you think it has awoken in time to avoid the worst?*

No, not quite. A little. People start to worry, but as for the remedies, they don't see any. All goes on as if we knew nothing. We keep on arming ourselves as if we did not know that we were taking up arms against ourselves, and the next generation. We multiply poisons, smokes, noises and mayhems. And then, behind closed doors, we worry. It is a start. But as far as taking action, no. I see the day when the non-violent will have to hide technicians,

engineers, and scholars whom the people will accuse of having lead us to the disasters, finally aware of the source of these fatal perils. Because the people is like a bull charging a red cloth, we don't see the man who is waving the red cloth. That is the game of the bullfighter, to let the horns past only a few centimetres from his flank.

*Translation by Marie Delcambre*

**k. The vow of poverty**

Lanza del Vasto founded communities with companions bound by solemn vows. Chief among these is poverty, or simple living, which paves the way for an economy free of abuse and refrains from burdening men and the environment. In the following text written toward the end of his life, Lanza del Vasto comments on this fundamental orientation as the cornerstone of community experimentation with degrowth.

Our vow of poverty is thus formulated :... *to live in a simple, sober and clean way, and cherish Poverty, in order to work towards Detachment and perfect Charity.*

One day, on a boat, I met a young Chinese man. When I asked him what he wanted to do in life, what were his ambitions and his aspirations, he said : "I want to be big". For these people, it is indeed a sign of prosperity, strength, stability, happiness, honour, or even wisdom. On the contrary, we are often ashamed of a big belly and we are ready to take on unhealthy habits in order to keep it flat. We find it inelegant, we believe that the man who is fat does not stand up to the slim one in terms of beauty, health or strength, that he is less endurant in a race, more restrained in the use of his body, that he is less attractive when he dances and less moving when he talks about love, that his plumpness sparks more ridicule than grace.

So we rightly laugh at the mindset of these people and find it unrefined. It is a pity, however, to see that we

display the same coarseness in our judgement as soon as wealth is involved, and that in this perspective obesity suddenly provokes our envy, forces our respect and our admiration.

It is obvious, however, that wealth is a blister, an anomaly, a painful congestion. It is, in itself, an immoral condition since we cannot possibly accumulate around us so much unnecessary wealth without denying our children the basic needs. It puts us in a wrong and hindering position towards our peers: it prevents us from noticing their needs and understanding their pains and efforts. It keeps us from all effort and spares us all work, depriving us at the same time of the chance to develop our talents and show our value. It attracts flattering opportunists, forcing us to hide behind a fallacious image of ourselves, preventing us from finding, grasping and correcting ourselves. It leads us to temptation. It takes away our freedom by numbing our character; it replaces the constraints of necessity by overwhelming, absurd and tyrannical vanities and conventions. By dint of protecting us, wealth puts us to sleep and entraps us. The artificial paradises it surrounds us with keeps us away from the realities of this world and the next. But there is more : to accept wealth tacitly means to put it above the life of others, for if some people die of privations, rich men build walls and fences in order to conscientiously ignore them. To accept wealth is to accept violence, because wealth demands to be protected, by the sword or by the law.

This is the reason why the Vow of Poverty is ingrained to the Vow of Non-Violence. A logical necessity forces us to accept it. It creates, along with the obligation to work and the wish for independence, the conditions for a pure life, free from any kind of abuse.

Saint Francis called himself the “blessed husband of Lady Poverty”, and wrote loving and passionate notes, that

legitimate lovers seldom exchange, to her. In India, I have met ascetics who had qualms to possess even a bowl or a piece of cloth to cover their naked bodies. These men are lovers rather than spouses of Poverty.

We are bond to it by our vows in a legitimate matrimony. Our marriage with poverty is a marriage of reason. We are not asked to embrace it with fervently, but to endure it with courage and to appreciate it to its true value. Perhaps, after we have acquired strength, clarity and freedom at its contact, will we eventually truly love it.

Our poverty thus needs boundaries. In fact, it has always needed some. Absolute poverty is death on this earth, since our very flesh constitutes a wealth and a reserve. Limits need to be set.

But we will have no difficulty in doing so. Our principles form fixed constellations, our rules, straight lines that intertwine and mark the exact place of each thing.

Our poverty can be wholesome, whatever may be the amount of wealth we handle, as long as it comes and goes, and does not result in accumulation nor profit.

The accountant who, at the bank, makes little piles of notes and pin them together, is not richer at the end of the day if millions went through his fingers. Gandhi handled millions every day and remained simple.

First of all, we refuse to exploit the other in any way whatsoever, even with his consent; we refuse to employ labourers on our lands or proletarians in our factories, to give them a salary but keep for ourselves the profits of the company. We refuse to make benefits on stock exchange or any financial manipulation.

We refuse to keep money for more than a year; the provisions for the year to come. We are to redistribute our

products among the members of the Ordre depending on their needs and if any of it remains, to give it the poor.

One point on which we shall distinguish ourselves from all those who possess, is that we must refuse to defend the goods which are in our hands. Against anyone who wants to encroach, abuse or steal, we refuse to use force or threat or resort to law enforcement so as not to fall into the chains of legitimate violence, which is the enemy of nonviolence, even more so that illegitimate violence. We will consider the thefts or abuses we could be victims of as natural disasters, just like drought, floods or forest fires. One does not prevent drought by brandishing a gun, nor lighting bolts by taking the sky to court... Thus, we resort to other means of defence against thefts and abuses. We prevent encroachment, for example, by working from the outset to establish friendly relationships with our neighbours, by finding ways to serve them, by coping with mockeries with such a patience it enforces respect, by giving goodness when we received wickedness with a systematic obstinacy, by using persuasion by any means. Also, we rely on our insurance and compensation for the losses brought by the thefts and abuses of individuals, as well as the occasional persecution from the State : that is the brotherly and gratuitous mutual help of all the members of the Order and our Friends and Allies, before and beyond the borders.

Indeed, the reality is that if our conduct and our doctrine expose us to the attacks of some, they will also bring the benevolence and assistance of others, and there are many people to protect us and support us with their donations and help.

Also, we are not a pious organisation; we do not sustain the poor nor do we intend to allow ourselves to be sustained by the rich. We do not want to side with them, nor will we let them interfere with our issues. We cannot

thank our friends, however generous, by giving them any authority over our Ordre. Work must be our only support, and independence one of our goals.

By observing these restrictive rules, we can fully enjoy what we have left, and our promise to live “in a simple and sober way” will keep us from abusing it in case of abundance.

As long as the Order will observe this true poverty, it will not risk stiffening and degenerating, as long as we will remain humble and rely on God for our future, and will stay considerate to the needs and sorrows of others.

And now, listen to the story the Hasidic Jews tell :

A Saint was passing through a village at nightfall. He knocked at every door. No one answered. As he reached the end of the village, he saw a hut. He could not knock, for there was no door. The poorest man in the country was stirring the embers in this shelter. When he saw the rabbi, he welcomed him in, shared his soup, spread his coat on the ground, and then laid himself down on the beaten ground. The next morning, the rabbi woke up, blessed his host and said : “You, my friend, are the only man in this village who deserves wealth. God bless you!”

Since the rabbi was a very holy man, the Lord could only give way to his blessing. In a few years, the poor man became rich.

When the rabbi return to the village, he found himself in front of the gates of the most beautiful house, where the hut used to stand. The doorman sent the rabbi to hell, but this did not impede the rabbi. He walked in and the poor rich man saw the visitor enter his room.

The rabbi took him by the hand and led him to the window.

What do you see through this window?

I see an old woman gathering wood, children playing, lovers looking for the shade of trees.

The rabbi then brought him before a mirror.

And now, what do you see?

I see my face.

Are you not tired of only seeing your own face? Through the window you could see people, the joys, the pains, the works of others and here you can only see your sad face. What is the difference between those two pieces of glass? Behind this one was placed a little money.

And the rabbi left the man to his thoughts.

*Translation by Marie Delcambre*

## **1. Critique of the economic growth and community alternative**

In a 1971 radio show, Lanza del Vasto articulates a scathing critique of unbridled economic growth, and outlines the community-based solutions he implemented together with his companions. In spite of the naive questions he is asked, he succeeds in condensing the gist of his message of alarm and hope in just a few sentences.

**Jacques Chancel** : *Are you disappointed by this modern world, by progress?*

**Lanza del Vasto**: Oh, I am not disappointed, I am utterly disgusted and horrified; from the very beginning, I have never really believed in it. And I see it more and more for what it really is, that is creating its own destruction, with a fantastic relentlessness. Try and stop them from creating the bomb that is going to kill them all! You will see how grateful they will be! They want destruction, they want death, they want their own fall, they

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fly to the moon in order to get as far away from themselves as possible, and to do absolute vain and stupid things, regardless of cost and engineering. All of this would be remarkable if it was actually going somewhere.

*Is it just all a waste?*

Oh, it is craziness, it is folly. And yet, this is actually harmless, or so it seems.

*Lanza del Vasto, if you had the chance to organise human life, what would you do?*

Oh ohoh, I would first shiver for a long time, and think for a long time, yes. But I don't really think about that. I believe that true justice starts within our own selves. I already have a lot to work on with my own existence, with the one of the people close to me, and the people who listen to me. We are trying, we still have a long way to go.

*Is it easy to detach yourself from life?*

As I said before, it is often and simply a matter of understanding. And understanding is often as easy to do as misunderstanding, and even easier. If you don't understand, you will suffer. If you understand, then you don't have to suffer, you see, it becomes pointless. Once you understand, you go where you need to go.

*How is life in your Community? And first of all, where is it?*

It is in the mountains, at the foot of the Massif Central, in the West part of the Cévennes, what is known as the Haut Languedoc. It is a hard land, with what might be the worst climate in France. It is a vast property, with plenty of rocks, thorns, and brambles, yes, but there is also space, there is air, a good and fresh air, and a beautiful view.

*How many people live there?*



About a hundred, yes, including the children who make half of the population.

*Do you live in good harmony?*

Well yes, if not we would not live.

*It is said that you weave your own clothes?*

Yes.

*... that you do everything yourselves?*

Oh, we don't do everything, but we do weave our own clothes, we grow our own food and make our own bread, well we do a good part, almost all the essentials.

*Who are the people who have been following you?*

Ah, they cannot be classified, I mean there are all sorts of people, from every social class, with different levels of education, from the lowest to the highest, with different religions too. There is no real difficulties. If there ever are tensions or arguments, it is often between people from the same side, yes, rarely between people with different backgrounds.

*What is the common denominator that unites you?*

Well, it is the shared vision of what we want to achieve. It is nonviolence and the respect of all life, especially the human life. Trying not to use anyone, and not to be used: it has to go both ways. We cannot become the servant of someone's arrogance. The Rule is in front of us, and the vision of what we want to accomplish is apparent. At first, it was only a mere idea, now it is a picture.

*Do you ignore the world if you part from it?*

I believe it is the product of knowledge. We don't happily part from it. We don't easily part from it. And to take the first step away from the world is naturally not to profit from it. To renounce the good things, the nice things,

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the things that are easy. Because if you protest, and profit at the same time, something is not right, someone has to pay. You must know what you do, and why you do it. And more importantly you must know that you resent no one, you see, and you don't accuse the ones who do or think differently. You have to see the flaws, the errors, the faults even, but man is something else. You must always respect him and bear hope with him.

[...]

*In your community, are you cut from the rest of the world? No radio nor TV?*

In this sense we are, yes. But well, we are not cut from anything. Not even from the news of the world that, most of the time, we get first hand. We often learn about things before journalists do, because we meet and talk with witnesses who come and visit us before the news spread. Yes, but do we really need to know about every little thing that is happening somewhere, and risk forgetting what we were actually doing? Obviously, when we throw ourselves in an action we need to follow its course, and we always do.

*Do you follow strict rules in the community?*

Ah, obviously there is one Rule. And I don't believe a community can live without any rules.

*For example, you don't eat fish and meat?*

Ah yes, but this is not the Rule. Those are habits, yes.

*Is it easy to adopt these habits?*

Well yes, I personally haven't had any difficulties, I have been following them for forty years. As for the others, I had no trouble convincing them.

*This renouncement of any previous life, it is quite an achievement.*

Yes, well it is not that difficult. Like I said, it is always a question of knowledge, of understanding. To understand that there is nothing to regret.

*Arthur Koestler says that the teaching of Gandhi, and therefore your teaching, are incompatible with the growth of modern countries. It means the refusal of progress.*

Yes, well the growth of modern countries is incompatible with nonviolence, with christianity, with the truth, with wisdom, with love, even with survival. Because it is all madness, isn't it? Now if you adhere to this system, you cannot promote the other at the same time. Arthur Koestler is a clever man, he has written some valuable books, but he should speak about the things he understands. Of this, he has no experience nor comprehension. It is a pity to hear him say such nonsense.

*Lanza del Vasto, do you, yourself, have the feeling of being understood?*

Oh, I do now more than in the past, but it is still not enough.

*Are you still the pilgrim?*

Yes, well, I am becoming a homebody. I almost don't go out anymore. Well, I am here though, am I not?

*But morally, do you wander around?*

No, we tend to anchor ourselves.

*Can we denounce the word "progress"?*

Ah, progress is the headlong rush forward, but we need to know what is ahead, where it is leading to. What if we are heading towards the abyss? What then?

*Do you agree with this quote : "Education is a way to enslave the masses"?*

Oh, what does education mean? What education? I would say that non-violence, charity, justice are all

questions of education. And their opposite are too, obviously, if education is bad.

*Do you hold grudges against Arthur Koestler for saying so many things that you consider wrong? For example this sentence: "India would be better off if Gandhi had not existed at all"?*

I don't hold any grudges, but I disagree. I believe it not only to be wrong, but also a lie. To say that Gandhi stopped the movement of the liberties in the Indies is an obvious lie. The reason why the success of Gandhi did not manage to pull India out of its misery is also obvious: India simply did not follow him on this point. But anywhere they followed him, that is to say where people adopted his system of a simple life, the cult and culture of poverty, and the perfect organisation of the simple things, well, there is no misery anymore. And when in the great carpet, the vast grey doormat that is India in winter, or under the dry and sweltering sun, you see a green patch, you can be sure that it is where his followers are. It is where wells were built, the land is cultivated, bulls roam, and nothing is wasted. Everything has its use, there is enough for those who work as well as all the neighbourhood around.

*You wrote a book entitled "The Four Scourges".*

Yes.

*The four scourges : misery, servitude, war, sedition. Do you think the human hand is ever going to stop creating these scourges?*

Well, it is the very study at stake in the book. How come these four scourges?

*Indeed.*

First of all, why these four? Because they are the scourges created by the human hand. And why is it that the human hand cannot refrain from creating them? This is the problem as we see it, and we are surprised to realise

that no one has ever looked at it this way before. There are so many historians and philosophies of History, but we've never asked ourselves why History was made of so much wars, revolts, oppressions and slavery, have we? Why? And it is this *why* that I have tried to picture as precisely as possible. One rule, and we not only revisit our whole civilisation - obviously, we first have the duty to try and understand our own, the one we participate to, whether we want it to or not. And we shall not consider ourselves as being clean from its sins, you see, we contributed to those sins and we will also, not really unfairly, suffer the consequences - but also all the previous ones, which have ended in blood and fire. Why? Why? What triggers them, what makes them grow and prosper, what makes this oily machine run, produce, what makes people work for its product, even those crushed by its force manage to catch a few drops, to pick up crumbs from the floor, everyone profits from it, and then it all blows up. Why? Ah, ah! Then we look for the economic causes of the war etc... Well then, what is the trigger? The trigger of all of these civilisations, all this progress? One could say: it is the spirit of lucre and the spirit of domination. The spirit of lucre culminating in the spirit of domination, since the greatest profit is to profit from the other, to overpower him and to make him do what you want but what he doesn't want to. Well, it is what we all do. We all play this game of mutual profit. And the stronger one, the most cunning one wins. And the machine keeps on running.

*Is this what we call fundamental injustice?*

It is fundamental injustice. And if you want to make reforms, start at this very point. This is why, if you want to establish a parallel society, as we say nowadays, and as ours is defined, you start with cutting this part off, you see? No profit, no gain. No gain : no one possess anything. Not even the Community can possess, accumulate and gain profit by putting people to work, by paying them or being

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paid by others, right? Let's eliminate this spirit of profit, because in this notion lies not just a sin but the Sin. I don't say: no sins ever. Sins don't necessarily stem from bad intentions, they are not always the consequence of an abuse... I will never say: a trader is a thief, though he is sometimes, but the one who doesn't trade can be a thief too. No, that is not the point. We can play the game fairly, respect all the rules: the ones of equality and morality. And the rupture occurs even if there is no villain. There are some, but it is only the sugar on the pie. The pie is the justice of the just.

*Do you think that one day the world will be shaped according to these rules?*

That the world could be shaped according to different rules?

*Yes, according to yours?*

I say it is possible. I say it is possible, but I don't say it will be. And it is very important to show that it can be, and that is not that difficult, and that it is not a strain at all. I always tell my people : you have to, it is a duty, to show a happy face, whatever your feelings inside. And this is why we are so incline to sing, dance, celebrate. A community cannot last without songs and dances, or if the youth is not well, if the child is unhappy, if one is crushed by work and worries, or even by good sentiments, too good sentiments. There must be a place to relax, and some fresh air, we need to be able to breathe.

*Lanza del Vasto, when you walk in the streets, do you feel like people are happy or sad?*

Oh, it is a distressing sight. Those faces, in the underground, the lost faces... We can't see the whip, but we see them beaten down, pushed away, to the dark end of the street.

*Are we living in a decadent century?*

Oh, I think so, yes, for many reasons, yes. But then, you know, renewals are always possible. We must hope for them.

*Is your lifestyle, the fact of living in a community, well accepted or are people still shrugging?*

Oh well, yes, obviously! They still do, for most of the people... What is the point of this? And, can't we do all this in the middle of society? Wouldn't it be better to be in the heart of what we call the world? As if we were stronger, that would be quite pretentious. And, it would mean that we are not in fact in the heart of the world, when we actually are. Going upstream, but still part of it.

*You have dreamed of social reforms, but not of Communism?*

Well, I think it is a very blinkered reform, I would say a bourgeois reform. It is the dream of the little bourgeois to transform our society into a termite mound, and to force the people, to rob them from their happiness in spite of them. Obviously, I would not be devastated by the loss of the wealth I don't own. It is not that I like this system. Between one or the other, I choose none of them. And I actually have found a way to go in between them.

*Is it a refuge?*

It is also a refuge, but it strives to be a bastion.

*Do you think masses are dangerous? Are they responsible?*

Let's not talk about this, let's not talk about this. They can become very dangerous, obviously. But again, this is human nature. Well, we wish for them to stop being masses, and to become a people. A people is not a mass. A mass is a shapeless and heavy form falling down the abyss. But a people, it is something with a sense, it is just like a man.

*Translation by Marie Delcambre*

## Authors

**Frédéric Rognon** is Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the University of Strasbourg. He lived six years in the Community of the Arch of Bonnecombe, founded by Lanza del Vasto. He is the author of *Les primitifs, nos contemporains* (Hatier, 1988), *Les passions* (Hatier, 1997), *Médias et démocratie* (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2010), *Génération Ellul. Soixante héritiers de la pensée de Jacques Ellul* (Labor et Fides, 2012).

**Louis Campana** is President of Gandhi International, France and recipient of the Jamnalal Bajaj International Award for promoting Gandhian values outside India (2008).

**Siby K. Joseph** is Dean of Studies and Research, Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha.