SEAN CHABOT

Transnational ties that bind

The Gandhian repertoire's passage from India
to the American civil rights movement

A Prelude

The setting is Montgomery, Alabama – the cradle of the Southern confederacy and one of the most segregated places in the United States. The date is Monday, January 30, 1956 – nearly two months after Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man sparked the Montgomery bus boycott and the American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., the young Baptist preacher leading the boycott, is supervising the collection during that evening's mass meeting at the First Baptist Church. Suddenly, around 9:30 p.m., his close friend and associate Ralph Abernathy turns to King and informs him that his house has been bombed. After telling those present to stay calm and adhere to the boycott's philosophy of nonviolence, he quickly returns home to make sure his wife Coretta and daughter Yolanda are unharmed. The African-American crowd King encounters on the way is visibly angry and armed. He hears one African-American man telling a police officer: 'I ain't gonna move nowhere. That's the trouble now; you white folks is always pushin' us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let's battle it out.' Upon arrival, King rushes into the house and is relieved to find his family uninjured. As the appointed spokesperson for the bus boycott, he is obviously aware that this incident may endanger the nonviolent nature of the campaign. He walks out to the porch and addresses the volatile crowd.

'Now let's not become panicky,' he tells the audience, after declaring that his wife and child are all right. 'If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence.' He then adds: 'Remember the words of Jesus: "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword."' Finally, he urges people to go home peacefully:

> We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make
> them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the
> centuries: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that
> spitefully use you." This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.
> Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with
> the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance
> (King 1958).

Clearly touched by King's speech, the crowd answers with 'Amen', 'God bless
you', and 'We are with you all the way, Reverend', just as they do every Sunday
in church. Instead of responding to its anger with violence, the African-
American population of Montgomery demonstrates an unprecedented capacity
for combining active resistance with nonviolence.

What is the deeper significance and meaning of this episode? Historians
have demonstrated that King's oration on the porch helped sustain the nonvi-
olent character of the Montgomery bus boycott and, subsequently, the civil
rights movement. They have also pointed out that after the January 30, 1956
incident, the American public fully recognized King as the Gandhian leader of
the African-American freedom struggle. King, in the eyes of supporters and
adversaries alike, brought the philosophy and method of Gandhi to the United
States. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, the narrative he wrote several years after the
event, King confirmed his public image as the prophet of Gandhian nonviolen-
ce:

> As the days unfolded (...) the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi began to exert
> its influence. I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love opera-
> ting through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent
> weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom (...). Nonviolent
> resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as
> the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation,
> while Gandhi furnished the method (1958: 84-85).

King, in this book, acknowledges his personal debt to Gandhi and devotes an
entire chapter to his intellectual 'Pilgrimage to Nonviolence'. In this chapter,
he gives credit to African-American predecessors like Mordecai Johnson,
Howard Thurman, and Benjamin Mays for passing along their knowledge of
Gandhi's achievements and philosophy to him, but he does not analyze their
historical ties to Gandhi in any depth. King's narrative leaves the impression
that his own individual pilgrimage fully explains the Montgomery bus boycott's

adoption of the Gandhian method. Apparently, King was the first African-American leader to create the synthesis between the Christian spirit and the Gandhian method that made the Montgomery bus boycott, and the American civil rights movement it inspired, so successful.

Although such an interpretation seems convincing enough (it has certainly persuaded most civil rights scholars), it fails to answer at least five crucial questions: What was the broader historical context of King's porch speech? Was King really the first African-American activist to try to combine the Christian doctrine of love with the Gandhian method of nonviolence, or did others precede him? What was a more important influence, the Christian spirit or the Gandhian techniques? In any case, how did the Gandhian method travel from India to the United States? And, since Gandhi was most active between 1919 and 1947, why didn't African-American activists adopt his style of protest earlier?

To answer these questions, the analysis of links between the Gandhian method and African-American resistance must start in 1919, the year Gandhi started leading the nationalist movement in India, not in 1956. By doing so, it becomes clear that the transnational and historical contacts between Gandhi and African Americans go far beyond King's own intellectual pilgrimage to nonviolence. Most books on the subject frequently refer to Gandhi; some even deal with Gandhi's impact on civil rights organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), which experimented with nonviolent direct action during the 1940s. Overall, however, the civil rights literature regards the Gandhian influence as secondary and indirect: secondary because it did not emerge until after the Montgomery bus boycott started and indirect because it primarily served to confirm the relevance of existing African-American institutions (especially the black church, but also black colleges and associations) and traditions. Still, the impression remains that King was the first African-American leader to successfully apply the Gandhian method and invoke Gandhian language. Moreover, the civil rights literature tends to stress the short-term, national, and strategic reasons for referring to Gandhi, instead of the long-term, transnational, and intrinsic reasons. From this perspective, King's main purpose in using exotic Gandhian concepts was to legitimate the civil rights movement in the eyes of federal government officials, Northern intellectuals, and the American public at large (e.g. Broderick & Meier 1965; Meier & Rudwick 1973).

Sudarshan Kapur's *Raising Up A Prophet. The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* is one of few books that avoid a short time frame and strictly national focus. Unlike most other civil rights scholars, Kapur explicitly deals

with the underlying transnational connections between the Gandhian movement in India and the African-American freedom struggle *before* the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-1956, and *before* King's rise to international fame. He not only provides a broad historical context for King's porch speech, but also demonstrates persuasively that King followed numerous other civil rights activists in combining the doctrine of Christian love and the Gandhian method. Furthermore; Kapur's book shows that acknowledging the significance of indigenous Christian traditions does not rule out the transnational impact of Gandhian ideas and practices. Transplantation of Gandhian activism from India to the United States succeeded because African-American groups were able to adopt nonviolent direct action without sacrificing their cultural heritage or collective identity. Thus, by discussing the various African-American networks interested in Gandhi prior to the emergence of the civil rights movement, Kapur convincingly tackles the first three questions left unanswered by civil rights historians. But to answer *how* and *why* the Gandhian method traveled from India to the United States requires a more sophisticated conceptualization of the Gandhian method itself as well as its transnational diffusion. The next section argues that the repertoire concept enables a deeper understanding of Gandhi's ideas and practices. The third section discusses classical diffusion theory and outlines an alternative theoretical framework for studying the Gandhian repertoire's transnational diffusion. The final section offers a few empirical illustrations and ties some loose threads together.

Introducing the Gandhian repertoire

The repertoire concept is familiar to social scientists in general, and social movement theorists in particular. Charles Tilly, for example, employs the phrase 'repertoires of collective action' to identify the limited sets of action forms that protest groups learn, share, and implement in their interactions with authorities and the public at large. He argues that these tactical routines emerge gradually from previous experiences of contention, not abstract philosophy (Tilly 1995: 26; Tilly 1978: 151-166; Traugott 1995). Tilly's broad definition of the repertoire has entered the lexicon of social movement theory and inspired affiliated scholars to specify it.

Elisabeth Clemens, for instance, asserts that protest groups tap into specific 'repertoires of organization', based on their culture's normative, practical, and institutional rules or prescriptions. While Tilly stresses the general constraints and opportunities for employing certain action forms, Clemens highlights the

particular constraints and opportunities for certain organizational styles (1996: 208-209). Another scholar taking Tilly as starting point, Marc Steinberg, uses the 'repertoires of discourse' concept to illustrate that past protest not only produces familiar forms of action and organization, but also familiar forms of dialogue between challenging groups, the public, and opponents. Based on prior experience, challengers create discursive repertoires by deliberately appropriating certain elements of dominant discourse and inflecting them with subversive meanings (Steinberg 1999: 751; Steinberg 1995). Steinberg's repertoires reflect the communicative actions a particular protest group has grown accustomed to. In other words, whereas Tilly emphasizes the 'strategic' imagination of collectivities, Clemens and Steinberg respectively highlight their 'institutional' and 'dialogic' imagination; the latter terms specify, but do not refute, the more comprehensive interpretation by Tilly.[1]

The three theorists of collective action repertoires alluded to above agree that new forms of protest originate in actual group struggle rather than in the hearts and minds of social movement leaders, and that fundamental repertoire transformations evolve gradually, as broader structural conditions for group struggle change. While collective protest involves incessant creativity at the margins, major shifts in repertoires only take place rarely, when the social and cultural environments of collective actors undergo fundamental change. Tilly, for example, claims that the European repertoire of collective action has experienced only one general shift: from the parochial, particular, and bifurcated repertoire of the eighteenth century to the national, modular, and autonomous repertoire of the nineteenth century (1995: 33-34). In his view, the underlying forces for this repertoire innovation were the rise of capitalism and the formation of nation-states at the macro level, not the emergence of new ideas or grievances at the micro level. Thus, 'repertoires', as Steinberg (1998: 857) writes, 'are not ideational elements carried about in individuals' heads, but are fundamentally collective diagnoses of injustice and prognoses of change'.

Although I concur with the relational emphasis of these repertoire scholars, my interpretation of the collective action repertoire is, on the one hand, more specific than Tilly's notion and, on the other hand, more general than either

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1   Steinberg adds insights from linguistic theory to Tilly's conceptualization of the collective action repertoire (esp. Bakhtin 1986), while Clemens incorporates work by neo-institutionalists (esp. Powell & Di Maggio 1991).

Clemens's repertoire of organization or Steinberg's repertoire of discourse. Whereas Tilly distinguishes between collective action repertoires at the highest level of abstraction – that is, between eighteenth and nineteenth century repertoires – I assert, at a lower level of abstraction, that the Gandhian repertoire was an unprecedented articulation of the 'nineteenth century' repertoire. I acknowledge that many of its distinct elements had already surfaced in Europe during the 1830s, and I also recognize that Gandhi learned from Indian traditions and predecessors. But, as a whole, the Gandhian repertoire represented a new way of engaging in collective action, both in its country of origin and in other parts of the world (Parekh 1989; Fox 1989).

Moreover, although I accept the relevance of discursive and organizational repertoires, I claim that the Gandhian repertoire was more inclusive and comprehensive than either type of repertoire separately. While Steinberg and Clemens add important insights, they do not suggest how to integrate their analysis of discourse and organization with Tilly's emphasis on action forms. In contrast, I incorporate all three elements into my conceptualization of collective action repertoires and define the Gandhian repertoire as: the forms of action, organizing styles, and discursive language that protest groups learned, shared, and implemented in dynamic transactions with authorities and other groups in their fields of contention. This definition not only transcends dichotomies between strategy (action forms and organizational style) and collective identity (discursive language), but also allows me to trace the shifts within the Gandhian repertoire over time and across space, without neglecting its specific characteristics or its varying contexts.

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2   Here I focus strictly on *collective action* repertoires. Of course, the repertoire of organization and the repertoire of discourse also apply more generally, outside the field of collective action.

3   Prior to the first nation-wide satyagraha campaign in 1920, as Richard Fox (1997: 70) notes, 'Gandhian nonviolent protest [was] almost as strange to Indians as it [was] foreign to Americans.'

4   Thus, instead of focusing primarily on strategy, as the Resource Mobilization school tends to do, or primarily on identity, as New Social Movement Theory is wont to do, I regard strategy and collective identity as two sides of the same coin. Neither side is a priori more relevant than the other and understanding one side requires comprehension of the other side. In other words, I concentrate on the relations *between* strategy and identity, not on strategy and identity as discrete analytical entities. See especially the symposium in *Social Research* (1985) and Goodwin and Jasper (1999).

The Gandhian repertoire: concepts and dimensions

The Gandhian repertoire consists of three basic concepts: *satya* or truth, *ahimsa* or non-violence, and *tapas* or self-suffering. Together, these notions form the core concept in Gandhian philosophy and action: *satyagraha* (e.g. Gandhi 1928; Bondurant 1971; Iyer 1973; Sharp 1973; Dalton 1993; Fox 1989; Parekh 1989). *Satya* reflects, on the one hand, the traditional Hindu aspiration toward self-realization, which occurs when someone comes face to face with the absolute, that is, with God. On the other hand, however, Gandhi reinterpreted this traditional view by stressing that no human can actually grasp the absolute Truth. In reality, he argued, an individual can only experience glimpses of a relative truth, by means of 'numerous experiments with truth'. God and Truth, for Gandhi, were convertible terms.

Ahimsa represents the means to advance toward the end of *satya*. Since the end is absolute (and humanly impossible to realize), Gandhi contended that the only practical means of knowing God and, therefore, Truth, is nonviolence or love. Unlike the orthodox Hindu notion, however, the Gandhian perception of nonviolence is explicitly positive and active. Like the Greek concept of *agape*, therefore, *ahimsa* implies the application of love in social life. Gandhi frequently tried to explain the intricate relationship between Truth and nonviolence, and between *end* and *means*, in simple terms. He once wrote:

> (…) without *ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find Truth. *Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say, which is the obverse, and which is the reverse? Nevertheless *ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsa* is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. When once we have grasped this point, final victory is beyond question (Gandhi, 1945: 8, quoted in Bondurant 1971: 24-25; Gandhi 1999).

Thus, in Gandhi's eyes, nonviolence was a practical prerequisite for engaging in deliberate social experiments with Truth, both in daily life and collective action.

Expressing nonviolence openly (whether in private or in public) involves *tapas* or self-suffering, with the intention of morally persuading the hearts of opponents and bystanders. *Tapas*, in the Indian context, juxtaposed nonviolent emotions like love, compassion, courage, commitment, patience, humility, altruism, self-reliance, pride, assertiveness, fearlessness, and respect on the part

of Gandhian activists with the cold-hearted reasons for colonization, exploitation and domination provided by British rulers. By actively demonstrating the Indian population's moral righteousness at the emotional level, Gandhi hoped to appeal to the goodwill of individual leaders rather than the subversive logic of an evil system. 'The heart,' he once remarked, 'accepts a conclusion for which the intellect subsequently finds the reasoning. Argument follows conviction. Man often finds reason in support of whatever he does or wants to do' (*Young India*, November 1925; Gandhi 1999). At the same time, he also felt that self-suffering required a great deal of common sense, discipline, and training. In other words, Gandhi believed that Indian adherence to *tapas* through 'rational' self-control and 'positive' emotions would elicit both the immorality of the colonial system and the humanity of British officials.

These three concepts are the building blocks of *satyagraha*, the underlying concept in all Gandhian theory and praxis. Literally, the word means 'holding fast to truth', but its most common translations into English are truth force and soul force. *Satyagraha* appropriates and reinterprets familiar ideas in Western philosophy and Hindu orthodoxy. Although it resembles the Western notion of 'passive resistance', which legitimates the expedient use of nonviolence by groups lacking the capacity to employ violence, Gandhi clearly stated that it is a method for the strong and the brave, not a 'weapon of the weak'. Moreover, while it borrows from age-old Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist conceptualizations of nonviolence, *satyagraha* translates their negative definitions of 'non-injury' or 'harmlessness' into, what Gandhi called, 'a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer.' Doing good to the evil-doer, Gandhi added, 'does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of Ahimsa, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically' (*Young India*, January 19, 1921; Gandhi 1999). Besides inflecting existing terms with strong and positive meaning, *satyagraha* was also innovative because it explicitly declared the need for mass direct action as a complement to community service at the grassroots level. Put differently, the purpose of *satyagraha* was always concrete transformation in the public arena, never merely spiritual or ethical purity in private life.

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5   For the role of emotions in social movements, see for instance, Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta (2000, 2001) and Emirbayer & Goldberg (2001). For a cognitive approach to social movements, see especially Eyerman & Jamison (1991).

The three dimensions of the Gandhian repertoire continually evolved as the situation, the actors, and the stakes changed. The forms of action ranged from simple daily tasks in Gandhi's ashrams (or communes), to unobtrusive community service through his constructive program, to purification acts before public protest, to dramatic direct action campaigns involving boycotts, nonco-operation, or civil disobedience. When the situation was unfavorable for Gandhian nonviolent direct action, Gandhi deliberately shifted the focus to the daily life of Indian villagers and the constructive program. When the situation was favorable, the stakes were high, or the Indian population appeared ready for collective struggle, Gandhi implored fellow ashram members, nationalists, and the Indian population to challenge British rule openly and directly. In short, far from being a static or substantialist entity, the Gandhian repertoire, through incessant experimentation, deliberately adapted its forms of action to the practical circumstances. These forms of action were never 'pure' or 'ideal', but always constrained, as well as enabled, by internal and external conditions. They were a product of actual collective struggle in India, not a result of individual genius or cultural traditions (Fox 1989; Sharp 1960).

Similarly, the Gandhian repertoire's organizational style spanned the entire spectrum from formal and permanent organizations to informal and ad hoc associations. In each organization, though, Gandhi stressed openness (towards supporters as well as critics) and inclusiveness in terms of religious affiliation, status, ideology, and mass involvement. Furthermore, Gandhi's commitment to an organization always depended on its specific contribution to the implementation of the Gandhian repertoire. Again, therefore, the Gandhian repertoire's organizational style invariably adapted to the specific situation, the level of discipline among the Indian people, and the degree of urgency (Kumar 1971).

The Gandhian repertoire's discursive language, as expressed through texts and symbols, was perhaps its most innovative, fluid, and adaptable dimension. It sought to transcend dichotomies that most Western philosophers and Indian thinkers considered unassailable. It attacked the institutions and ideology of the British Empire in India, while simultaneously appealing to the sympathy of British rulers. It asserted the importance of religious morals and spiritual beliefs, but also actively engaged in the 'dirty' game of politics. It promoted emotions like love, self-sacrifice, compassion, fearlessness, patience, and assertiveness, on the one hand, and the application of reason and science in social experiments with hand spinning, dieting, and nonviolent direct action, on the other. It stressed the supreme value of individual autonomy and private life as well as the imperative of public life and voluntary service to society. It posited the superiority of nonviolence, but, at the same time, argued that

cowardly passivity was worse than violence. It recognized the need for inspired leadership, but emphasized the interests of the poor masses. Depending on the situation or his audience, Gandhi highlighted different aspects of his eclectic discursive language. Moreover, at certain times, the Gandhian repertoire's discursive language aimed at disciplining Indian activists; at other times it intended to gain sympathy from the British or American public; and yet other times it directly confronted the authorities. Suffice it to say that, like the forms of action and organizational style, Gandhian discursive language was flexible and responsive to contemporary developments in its field of contention (Parekh 1989).

The interrelationships among these three dimensions were complex and dynamic. On the one hand, discursive language often served to legitimate (or delegitimate) the forms of action and organizational style adopted in a protest campaign (Amin 1995). To some degree, therefore, it was the Indian public's perception and interpretation of movement events that suffused protest strategies and tactics with Gandhian content. And the Indian public's perception and interpretation, in turn, partly depended on the extent to which the independence movement's 'collective action frames' resonated among the Indian population. On the other hand, the strategic choice of action forms and organizational style often derived from the collective identity and 'collective action frames' that satyagraha activists sought to create through discursive messages. When the latter wanted to highlight the need for Hindu-Muslim unity, for instance, they engaged in different kinds of campaigns than when they merely wanted to challenge British rule. Far from distinct, the pragmatic, institutional, and linguistic sides of the Gandhian repertoire implied each other.

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6   I define a field of contention as 'a socially constructed set of adversarial relationships' that is embedded in an ever-changing system of political, economic, social, cultural, and ideological power that constrains some forms of collective action and enables others (McAdam & Tarrow 2000).

Contextualizing the Gandhian repertoire:
contending actors and fields of contention

Mutations within the Gandhian repertoire were constrained, but also enabled, by shifts in the make-up of actors and fields of contention (Sewell 1992).[7] It is tempting for social scientists to reduce the individuals and groups adopting and responding to the Gandhian repertoire to several well-defined and monolithic actors. In the case of the independence movement in India, in particular, we could distinguish between Indian nationalists, bystanders in India and abroad, British rulers and their associates, and the mass media and its representatives (Israel 1994). Drawing sharp boundaries around these collectivities, however, would gloss over the conflicts that took place within each actor as well as underestimate the 'human agency' involved.[8] Agency, here, refers to the continual (re)interpretation of the Gandhian repertoire's implications, and the concomitant changes in behavior, taking place among Indian activists, domestic and foreign publics, and power-holding authorities. To begin with, not every Indian activist agreed with the types of collective action or targets Gandhi proposed. Some believed, for instance, that legislative reform was more effective than mass protest and dominion status more desirable than complete independence, while others favored more aggressive tactics than nonviolence and immediate eradication of British rule instead of gradual persuasion. The relationships between these two camps of Indian nationalists – the Moderates and the Extremists, respectively – were always tense and temporary, never unproblematic or permanent.[9] Similarly, public opinion in India and the rest of the world (within as well as outside the media) remained divided and fickle,

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7   The term actor, in this context, refers to individuals as members of particular informal groups or formal organizations who are linked to others in a network (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994: 1447). Actors involved in a social movement include participating individuals and networks, opposing authorities and their representatives, bystanders, and the mass media. See also Emirbayer & Goodwin (1994) and Emirbayer (1997).

8   Here, and subsequently, I adopt Emirbayer and Goodwin's (1994: 1442-1443) definition of human agency: 'Human agency (...) entails the capacity of socially embedded actors to appropriate, reproduce, and, potentially, to innovate upon received cultural categories and conditions of action in accordance with their personal and collective ideals, interests, and commitments. See also Emirbayer & Mische (1994).

9   For a historical background of British rule in India, and indigenous reactions to it, see esp. Cain & Hopkins (1993), Parekh (1989), and Kumar (1971).

rather than harmonious and predictable. And even the colonial government's reactions to campaigns guided by the Gandhian repertoire were not necessarily united or rigid (Kumar 1971).

While human agency certainly played an important role in the development of the Gandhian repertoire during the Indian independence movement, it did not occur in a social vacuum. Although the strategic decisions made by each contending actor influenced subsequent events, these decisions emerged in the context of a structural field of contention that was at least partially autono-mous and external (McAdam & Tarrow 2000). Every application of the Gandhian repertoire during the Indian independence movement, for example, attempted to generate some mutation in its field of contention, but the actual effect was not always in the desired direction. Every alteration in the social movement's field of contention, in turn, constrained some choices and enabled others in the next round of collective struggle. To fully grasp the emergence and development of the Gandhian repertoire, therefore, requires a glimpse into the dialectical interplay *among* the contending actors in India. Analyzing only the Gandhian repertoire itself and the decision-making processes *within* each individual or collective actor does not provide a comprehensive picture of the wider relational configuration within which these specific processes took place (Emirbayer 1997; Somers 1998).

The Gandhian repertoire in transnational motion: from India to the United States

Based on a clearer understanding of its content, I now turn to the Gandhian repertoire's transnational journey to the United States. As noted earlier, Kapur provides interesting historical material on this process, but his narrative lacks analytical depth. In contrast, classical diffusion theory develops a clear and comprehensive model of diffusion, with several concepts and hypotheses that, at first sight, seem to apply to my case. In my opinion, however, the model offered by Everett Rogers (1995) and other conventional theorists glosses over the non-linear historical processes and relational mechanisms characterizing the Gandhian repertoire's transnational diffusion process. While classical diffusion theory might apply to the spread of well-defined technologies, products, fads, information, and opinions, I argue that it does not provide an adequate conceptual map for investigating the dissemination of complex and ever-changing repertoires of collective action. After discussing the fundamental elements of the classical model, therefore, I outline a theoretical alternative that

does capture the twists and turns, problematic transitions, and contingencies of the Gandhian repertoire's diffusion from the Indian independence movement to the American civil rights movement.

Everett Rogers and classical diffusion theory

Over the past forty years or so, the majority of diffusion studies have concentrated on testing the definitions, attributes, population categories, stages, and networks identified by prominent classical diffusion theorists like Gabriel de Tarde, Pitirim Sorokin, Elihu Katz, Paul Lazarsfeld, James Coleman, and Torsten Hagerstrand. Since the 1960s, no scholar has done more to delineate this research tradition than Everett Rogers has. Up to this day, his *Diffusion of Innovations* (1995), now in its fourth edition, remains the dominant handbook of diffusion theory. Rather than discussing numerous authors in the field, therefore, my review of classical diffusion theory will almost exclusively focus on Rogers' *locus classicus*. I do not claim to be comprehensive in my analysis of this cross-disciplinary and wide-ranging research tradition, but I do assert that the diffusion model outlined by Rogers is representative of the methodological approach used by mainstream scholars in the field.

In the first chapter of his book, Rogers (1995:5) defines diffusion as 'the process by which an *innovation* is communicated through certain *channels* over *time* among members of a *social system*.' After reviewing the history and criticisms of diffusion research, then, he discusses and extends each of diffusion's four fundamental elements: innovation, channels, time, and social system. Together, these elements form a parsimonious and comprehensive model.

Innovation. In the first place, classical diffusion theorists assume that the diffusion item is an idea, practice, or object considered novel by receiving individuals or groups. The relevant internal characteristics of an innovation are those perceived as essential by the receivers, not necessarily those intended by the transmitters (Rogers 1995: 111). Of course, intrinsic qualities may affect the receivers' perception, but in the end it is 'decoding' that matters and not 'encoding' (Hall 1974). Given this emphasis, classical diffusion theory identifies

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10 A recent issue of *The Annals* on 'The Social Diffusion of Ideas and Things', edited by Paul Lopes and Mary Durfee (1999), clearly demonstrates contemporary diffusion scholars' indebtedness to Everett Rogers' work. Out of a total of eleven articles in this special edition, nine refer directly to an edition of *Diffusion of Innovations* (of which six to the latest 1995 edition). See also, Valente (1995).

five internal attributes influencing an innovation's rate of adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, triability, observability, and complexity (Rogers 1995: 15-16). Studies show that these attributes determine the diffusion rate and speed of items as diverse as agricultural ideas, information on automobile safety, Post-it pads, Rogaine, the tomato-harvesting machine, the refrigerator, teaching methods, medical techniques, news events, drug programs, and a new brand of coffee (idem: 42-43, table 2-1). In each of the above studies, the item does not diffuse until *after* the innovation-development process ends.[11] Diffusion only starts when the innovation's content is already fully formed.

Communication channels. Secondly, classical diffusion theory argues that communication is most likely and meaningful between transmitters and receivers with similar socioeconomic status, education, language, beliefs, behavior, living environments, and cultural background.[12] Rogers (1995: 19) writes: 'When they share common meanings, a mutual subcultural language, and are alike in personal and social characteristics, the communication of new ideas is likely to have greater effects in terms of knowledge gain, attitude formation and change, and overt behavior.' Diffusion between two parties that do not share these characteristics occurs only rarely, because social differences lead to misunderstandings, distortions, and ineffective communication (idem: 287).[13] Homophily, in other words, is a prerequisite for transnational diffusion between transmitters and receivers.

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11 According to Rogers (1995: 133, figure 4-1), the development process includes the perception of a need or problem, research, development, and commercialization.

12 Rogers (1995: 18-19, 286-287) claims that such similarities produce homophily, which he defines as 'the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status, and the like. In a free-choice situation, when an individual can interact with any one of a number of other individuals, there is a strong tendency to select someone who is very similar.' He defines *heterophily*, the opposite concept, as 'the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are different in certain attributes' (idem: 19). See also Lazarsfeld & Merton (1964) and Tarde (1903).

13 Rogers (1995: 287) acknowledges *that* 'heterophilous communication has a special informational potential, even though it may occur only rarely,' but he (like most other classical diffusion theorists) does not explain precisely *how* links between dissimilar transmitters and receivers may be constructed. Instead, he assumes that diffusion primarily takes place between similar actors within similar social systems.

Two channels of communication play a crucial role in mediating an innovation's spread from transmitters to recipients. First of all, *mass media* channels like radio, television, and newspapers (and, more recently, the internet) are the quickest and most efficient ways to create awareness and spread factual information about an innovation. Classical theorists emphasize, however, that *interpersonal* communication channels such as speeches, correspondence, word-of-mouth, and face-to-face talking are most effective for persuading potential adopters to embrace a new idea, practice, or product. Once a foreign innovation has been introduced into the receiving population, dissemination proceeds from people at the top of the social hierarchy to people at the bottom, producing a simple and uni-directional picture of the communication process (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; Valente 1995).

Based on this general view of communication, then, classical diffusion theory divides the receiving population into five ideal-typical categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. It hypothesizes that innovators are venturesome and cosmopolite, early adopters are respected opinion leaders within the local community, the early majority consists of deliberate and highly connected decision-makers, the late majority represents skeptical community members motivated by peer pressure, and laggards are traditional and suspicious of innovations (Rogers 1995: 263-270). These categories' degree of innovativeness yields a graph that is normally distributed (idem: figure 7-2: 262).

For conventional diffusion scholars, however, the most important distinction is between *opinion leaders* and *followers*, not between innovators and conformists (Rogers 1995: chapter 8). They claim that the innovator is less essential for diffusion than the early adopter or opinion leader, because the latter functions as a personal role model for her peers while the former does not. Whereas opinion leaders embody the successful and trustworthy application of new ideas and practices, innovators are often seen as reckless and dangerous in their behavior (idem: 295). Compared to their followers, opinion leaders tend to enjoy more links to the outside world (via mass media channels, cosmopoliteness, and contacts with innovators), be more involved in formal organizations and informal discussions, be of higher socioeconomic status, and be more innovative (idem: 293-294). Their degree of innovativeness, though, depends on the social system's norms. When these norms favor change, opinion leaders are relatively innovative; when these norms oppose change, opinion leaders are relatively conformist (idem: 295; Valente 1995). In sum, proponents of this paradigm present an orderly and hierarchical panorama of communication channels: homophily enables transnational diffusion, inter-

personal influence channels the innovation's flow from top to bottom, the receiving population consists of six definite categories, and these categories, in turn, highlight the distinction between opinion leaders and followers.

Time. The third fundamental element of classical diffusion theory, time, determines *how* the diffusion process evolves; it affects the sequence of diffusion stages, the rate of adoption, and the general causes at work. Researchers in the field have developed a straightforward model for analyzing the typical path of diffusion. During the initial *knowledge stage*, the potential adopter becomes aware of an innovation for the first time, often through exposure to the mass media, and seeks additional information. Based on contacts with trusted opinion leaders, the potential adopter forms either a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation at the *persuasion stage*, especially about its relative advantage, compatibility, triability, observability, complexity, and flexibility. Assuming the attitude is favorable, the receiving party will then proceed to the *decision stage*, during which it either adopts or rejects the innovation. Classical diffusion theory explicitly assumes 'a linear sequence of the first three stages in the innovation-decision process: knowledge-persuasion-decision' (Rogers 1995: 171-172). After making the mental decision to adopt, the receiving party actually applies the innovation during the *implementation stage*. Even then, however, the decision-making process is not finished: it may opt to either discontinue or reinforce implementation during the *confirmation stage* (idem: 20-21).

Time also channels the receiving population's rate of adoption. Nearly all innovations, according to classical diffusion theorists, follow an S-shaped rate of distribution:

> When the number of individuals adopting a new idea is plotted on a cumulative frequency basis over time, the resulting distribution is an S-shaped curve. At first, only a few individuals adopt the innovation in each time period (…) these are the innovators. But soon the diffusion curve begins to climb, as more and more individuals adopt in each succeeding time period. Eventually, the trajectory of adoption begins to level off, as fewer and fewer individuals remain who have not yet adopted the innovation. Finally, the S-shaped curve reaches its asymptote, and the diffusion process is finished (Rogers 1995: 23; Tarde 1903: 127).

Innovations only vary in the slope of their S-curve: those that diffuse rapidly have a relatively steep S-curve, while those with slower rates of diffusion have a more gradual slope. The innovation's attributes and the degree of similarity

between transmitters and receivers determine the speed of adoption and, therefore, the degree of slope. Figure 1.2 depicts the range of S-curves recognized by this paradigm, with the receiving population's percentage of adoption on the vertical and the time of adoption on the horizontal axis (Rogers 1995: 11).

And finally, most theorists agree that two kinds of social causes precipitate, propel, and sustain the diffusion process. In the early stages and during the take-off part of the S-curve the mass media is the prime mover; in the latter stages and the upper section of the S-curve interpersonal influence becomes the central driving force. Reception of an innovation proceeds in two steps:

> The first step, from media sources to opinion leaders, is mainly a transfer of *information*, whereas the second step, from opinion leaders to their followers, also involves the spread of interpersonal *influence*. This *two-step flow hypothesis* suggested that communication messages flow from a source, via mass media channels, to opinion leaders, who in turn pass them on to followers (Rogers 1995: 285; see also Katz 1957).

The spread of an innovation throughout the receiving population flows downward, from one coherent entity to another, whereas each entity – the mass media, the opinion leaders, and the followers – plays a very specific role in the diffusion process (see also, Burt 1999; Valente 1995). Classical diffusion theory thus paints a clear and orderly picture of the adoption process. The adoption stages follow a regular and predictable pattern; the shape of the curve illustrating the adoption rate is universal (only the slope varies across time and space); and the core causes are clearly visible, closely interrelated, and sequential.

Social system. The fourth essential aspect of classical diffusion theory, the social system, represents the structural parameters and hierarchical relationships that stabilize and regulate the behavior of a society's individual members. It contains a set of separate entities (individuals, formal organizations, informal networks, and subsystems) that coalesce to form the boundaries *within* which an innovation disseminates. By decreasing uncertainty, this structure determines 'who interacts with whom and under what circumstances' and allows the observer to predict when certain categories of individuals will adopt an innovation (Rogers 1995: 24-25). Diffusion, then, only takes place *within* a social system that facilitates the adoption of the innovation in question. Even if other variables – like individuals' characteristics or the innovation's attributes – are favorable, adoption will not occur unless the structural environment of the

receiving population provides sufficient opportunities for diffusion (idem: 23-24, 37; Valente 1995). Guided by this structuralist assumption, researchers have traditionally taken homogenous communities or countries as their units of inquiry. Even those interested in diffusion across national borders presuppose that isolated entities come first, and relations among them afterwards. Such a view leads them to categorize each unit's cultural norms, which Rogers (idem: 26) defines as 'the established behavior patterns for the members of a social system', as either enabling or obstructing the adoption of particular innovations.

Toward an alternative theoretical framework of transnational diffusion
Classical diffusion theorists generally agree with Rogers that: (1) the diffusion item must be clearly discernable; (2) interpersonal and media channels interact, but are distinct; (3) the temporal process is linear, sequential, and follows two predictable steps; and (4) diffusion spreads *within* a social system (or within a population). In contrast, I argue that diffusion items may be dynamic, ambiguous, and malleable, both in the transmitting and receiving context. In many cases, they are not finished products but works-in-progress. Secondly, I emphasize how receiving groups interpret and employ a foreign innovation instead of whether the communication channel is relational or non-relational, established or new. The key receivers in this regard are not mainstream opinion leaders or media sources, which generally introduce and perpetuate stereotypical perceptions of diffusion items, but what Thomas Rochon (1998: 22-25) calls 'critical communities' – networks of excluded citizens who identify new social problems, formulate new modes of thinking and feeling, and develop new political and cultural solutions.[14] Thirdly, I stress that transnational diffusion may evolve non-linearly, may skip stages (forward as well as backward), and often relies on fluid and dynamic mechanisms (Sheller 2001). And last but not least, I focus on transnational diffusion *between* a non-Western transmitting environment in the world's periphery and a Western receiving environment in the world's core. Each of these environments was dynamic, permeable, and heterogeneous rather than orderly, contained, and homogeneous. The transmitting environment (India), moreover, was clearly distinct from the receiving environment (the United States) – culturally, politically, economically, and socially. Yet despite considerable differences between transmitters and recei-

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14 The term critical communities is in many ways similar to the term 'subaltern counterpublics' developed by Nancy Fraser (1992: 124).

vers, and despite the lack of a common social system, the Gandhian repertoire eventually crossed 'The Great Divide' between India and the United States (Chabot 2000; Snow & Benford 1999).

Based on the definition sketched above, I develop a theoretical framework that captures the gradual processes and unpredictable transitions of transnational diffusion between social movements. The first layer of my framework stresses two perceptual obstacles that mainstream receivers construct and that critical communities must overcome before they can seriously consider applying an innovative diffusion item in their own context. On the one hand, *hyper-difference*, as Richard Fox puts it, 'depends on a magnification of difference, a supposition that a cultural practice located elsewhere cannot travel anywhere else.' On the other hand, *over-likeness* indicates that admiration for a foreign culture 'may minimize real contrasts and may so wash out difference that we see similarity when it is not there' (Fox 1997: 67). Hyper-difference produces an exaggerated Other and over-likeness leads to a total assimilation to Self. Although hyper-difference is the most obvious form of negative stereotyping, therefore, even the positive intentions of over-likeness impede the transnational diffusion process.

The second layer highlights that, to transcend these interpretive obstacles, critical communities need to uproot the diffusion item from its place of origin and embed it into their immediate surroundings. *Dislocation* refers to potential adopters' cognitive and emotional recognition that the foreign innovation may also work outside of its original environment, while *relocation* involves collective experiments with new protest ideas and practices in the receivers' settings. In short, these two concepts highlight that transnational diffusion is not just a 'deterritorialized' flow of information, but involves much creative reinvention and pragmatist agency on the part of receiving actors (Fox 1997; Chabot 2000; Scalmer 2000; Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

The final layer, then, emphasizes that brokerage and collective appropriation are the main mechanisms allowing receiving critical communities to make the difficult transitions from hyper-difference/over-likeness to dislocation, from dislocation to relocation, and from relocation to full implementation in the form of a social movement. If these reciprocally interrelated mechanisms do not move in the right direction, however, they actually constrain attempts at adoption and application. I define *brokerage* as the formation of new links (or the consolidation of old ones) among transmitters and receivers, and *collective appropriation* as the ways in which receiving critical communities alter their strategies and collective identities in order to apply the diffusion item in

their own relational settings (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001; Elster 1998; Hedstrom & Swedberg 1998; Somers 1998; Emirbayer 1997).

Criticizing existing scholarship and proposing a new conceptual approach is only useful in so far as it produces better historical explanations of the Gandhian repertoire's transnational diffusion. The proof is in the pudding, so to speak. For now, however, a few empirical applications of my theoretical framework will have to do.

Empirical Applications and Conclusion

Hyper-difference and over-likeness
Transnational diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire started around 1920. In that year, mainstream opinion leaders and media in the United States began taking Gandhi and the Indian satyagraha movement seriously. Conservative journalists like Maurice Joachim, a former member of the Indian Civil Service, were strongly critical of Gandhi's leadership and pointed to the irreconcilable differences between progressive American and backward Indian culture:

Popular support for a new fad is not an uncommon thing in India. There has always been an undercurrent of ruthless criminality in the Indian masses. This is kept under control in normal times, but Gandhi's doctrines have caused it to surface and he has received a ready response because the majority of Indians experience and abnormal pleasurable excitement in defying law, provided they are in a crowd ('What is Wrong with India', *New York Times Current History Magazine*, July 1922: 649, quoted in Singh 1962: 171).

Liberal publications such as the *New Republic*, in contrast, ignored the unique characteristics of India and equated Gandhi's form of nonviolence with the Christian love ethic:

When Mr. Gandhi calls on his followers to renounce the social order which the British *raj* has imposed on India, to give up titles and offices, to refrain from Courts, to withdraw their children from Government schools, and above all to abstain from violence (…) he is following more closely the methods of Jesus than any leader since Saint Francis (July 27, 1921: 232, quoted in Singh 1962: 176).

Although the sympathetic press avoided the blatant stereotypes of the conservative press, therefore, it also overlooked the innovative aspects of the Gandhian repertoire and its relevance for collective protest at home.

The receiving critical communities during the 1920s helped spread awareness of Gandhi's ideas and practices but failed to overcome the hyper-difference and over-likeness obstacles erected by mainstream opinion leaders and media. John Haynes Holmes, for instance, a prominent leader of the religious-pacifist critical community and co-founder of its central organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), was one of the first and most enthusiastic supporters of Gandhi in the country (Wittner 1969; Chatfield 1976). At every opportunity, he promulgated his opinion that Gandhi was 'the greatest man in the world today' and that Gandhian nonviolence confirmed the significance of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus Christ's ethics. Similarly, during the 1920s, W.E.B. Du Bois was the towering figure in the critical community consisting of African-American intellectuals and artists. Like Holmes, Du Bois repeatedly expressed his admiration for Gandhi and the Indian movement, which, for him, symbolized the struggle of his race against the worldwide color line.

Despite their enthusiastic support, however, Holmes, Du Bois, and their respective critical communities actually perpetuated stereotypical interpretations of Gandhi and invoked his protest methods to justify their own traditional means of resistance. Holmes and religious pacifists reinforced the over-likeness barrier by equating Gandhi with Jesus Christ and the Indian battle against British imperialism with Christians' struggle against the Roman Empire. Although he inspired a large number of followers to obey nonviolent guidelines in their personal lives, moreover, he did little to promote collective application of the Gandhian repertoire's militant aspects. Du Bois, on his part, confirmed the hyper-difference perspective by claiming that the Gandhian repertoire could only work in a traditional and 'Eastern' social system like India – where asceticism, fasting, and nonviolence were ingrained – not in a modern and 'Western' social system like the United States (Fox 1997: 73). Applying it in the American context, he declared, 'would be regarded as a joke or a bit of insanity' (Du Bois 1943, quoted in Kapur 1992: 110). Instead, he and fellow critical community members believed that agitation in the courts, legislative pressure, and public propaganda by the African-American 'talented tenth', and traditional organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), remained the most effective means for achieving civil rights (Broderick & Meier 1965: 54-60).

Dislocation and relocation

American receivers did not start moving beyond mainstream interpretations of the diffusion item until the 1930s. The FOR's Richard Gregg, for example, settled in India and, by observing Gandhi and satyagraha with his own eyes, gained a much deeper understanding of the Gandhian repertoire than his religious-pacifist colleagues. When he returned to the United States, he not only wrote a book on the efficacy of nonviolence, but also sought to convince other members of his critical community that Gandhi's approach was truly innovative and applicable in their own settings (Gregg 1935). In 1934, Krishnalal Shridharani, an Indian exile, reciprocated the contributions by Gregg and set the cross-fertilization process in motion. While Gregg was an *American* who experienced nonviolent direct action in India and brought it back home, he was an *Indian* who had participated in the satyagraha movement (during the Salt March of 1930 and 1931) and carried its methods to the United States. Like his American counterpart, Shridharani wrote a book stressing the militancy of the Gandhian repertoire and personally promoted its adoption by American activists (Shridharani 1939).

Both Gregg and Shridharani contributed to the Gandhian repertoire's dislocation from the Indian environment and encouraged American activists to experiment with nonviolent direct action in the United States. During the 1940s, several critical communities took their advice to heart and initiated the relocation process by implementing the Gandhian repertoire during small-scale protest campaigns. In 1942, James Farmer, an African-American FOR member, created the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and led various sit-ins in Chicago on the basis of Shridharani's book and Gandhi's guidelines (Farmer 1985; Meier & Rudwick 1973). Inspired by these events, interracial groups in other Northern cities founded their own CORE chapters and organized Gandhian sit-ins in their own settings. That same year, moreover, A. Philip Randolph (an African-American labor leader) and his March on Washington Movement (MOWM) also decided to apply nonviolent 'goodwill' direct action throughout the United States (Garfinkel 1969; Pfeffer 1990). Although these collective experiments were limited and short-lived, they demonstrated that mass Gandhian protest in the American context was possible.

Brokerage and collective appropriation

If American critical communities could have freely dislocated and relocated the Gandhian repertoire, they would not have taken thirty-five years to advance from initial reception in the 1920 to full implementation after 1955. Transnational diffusion from India to the United States was always an uncertain and

painstaking process that relied, at least in part, on the co-operation of relational mechanisms. When brokerage and collective appropriation enabled creative reinvention, dissemination moved forwards; when brokerage and collective appropriation inhibited creative reinvention, dissemination stalled or retreated (Chabot 2000).

The relocation efforts during the 1940s, for example, benefited from favorable developments in the brokerage mechanism, which in turn activated (and was further activated by) favorable developments in the collective appropriation mechanism. In the wake of these promising events, however, the early Cold War years (roughly from 1948 to 1954) witnessed an unforeseen downturn in both diffusion mechanisms. The rise of McCarthyism and hysterical anti-communism seriously hampered domestic brokerage and collective appropriation: with radical organizations and critical communities declining or even disappearing, activists became reluctant to engage in any form of direct action – no matter how nonviolent or conciliatory. Most activists, organizations, and critical communities reverted back to traditional and relatively moderate methods: religious pacifists once again opted for individual witness instead of collective assertiveness (see Wittner 1969), while African Americans put their faith in the NAACP's legal activities – which were particularly successful during these years.

Unexpectedly, however, there was another disjuncture in the transnational diffusion process after 1955 – this time in a positive direction. After the unpredictable (and thus non-linear) retreat of the early Cold War years, the African-American community in Montgomery fully implemented the Gandhian repertoire during its bus boycott, establishing Martin Luther King's international fame and sparking the American civil rights movement. Once again, brokerage and collective appropriation were fundamental elements of this accomplishment. The African-American leader who decided to initiate the boycott, E.D. Nixon, was a disciple of A. Philip Randolph, while the FOR sent two of its Gandhian experts, Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin, to assist King and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) in maintaining group discipline. These brokerage efforts enabled, and were in turn stimulated by, collective appropriation in the form of the Montgomery bus boycott (Burns 1997). Moreover, each of the subsequent satyagraha events during the heyday of the civil rights movement (roughly from 1955 until 1965) similarly relied on a dialectical mix of brokerage and collective appropriation. Thus, the involvement of Gandhian networks enabled Gandhian organizations and protest events, whereas Gandhian organizations and protest events in turn stimulated the expansion of Gandhian networks.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the preceding discussion has made clear that networks *in themselves* do not explain how and why the Gandhian repertoire's transnational diffusion took place. Only certain *kinds* of brokerage activated the *kinds* of collective appropriation that enabled critical communities to adopt a foreign repertoire, and adapt it to its own setting. Besides interest on an intellectual and moral level, receivers also had to engage in sustained practical experimentation with the new repertoire. Besides transnational linkages, moreover, receivers also had to construct domestic ones. In other words, diffusion between social movements depended not primarily on the quantity of transnational ties, but on the quality of 'transnational ties that bind'.

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