Crossing the great divide: the Gandhian repertoire's transnational diffusion to the American civil rights movement
Taudin Chabot, S.K.

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**Author**: S.K. Taudin Chabot  
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The intellectual roots of this thesis evolved after finishing my Master of Arts in International Relations in 1995. Around that time, I started thinking seriously about what actors initiate and propel social change. Frustrated by theories that emphasized the role of the state and political leaders, I turned to civil society as the space where ordinary citizens coalesce to form the groups that shape communities, countries, regions, and world systems. Of course, my interest in civil society did not arise from out of nowhere. Just a few years earlier, I had witnessed how people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union brought down totalitarian regimes that most experts assumed to be unassailable. In the wake of these dramatic transformations, prominent academics, journalists, politicians, and intellectuals highlighted the importance of civil society in undermining oppressive states and institutions on the other side of the Berlin Wall. As an observer of sociological phenomena (I did not think of myself as a scholar in those days), I found these opinion leaders’ arguments tantalizing as well as vague. What exactly did they mean when they talked about civil society? If civil society was such a progressive force, why didn’t it overthrow the Soviet Empire before 1989? And if the significance of civil society was so obvious, why didn’t opinion leaders predict the end of the Cold War?

Energized by such questions, I wrote a research proposal for the Research Centre of International Political Economy (RECIPE) at the University of Amsterdam, arguing that civil societies played an important role in past and contemporary international relations. When I began reading the relevant literature, however, I soon discovered that the idea of civil society was extremely difficult to pin down. Some employed it to justify government repression to safeguard “democratic freedom,” others invoked it to call for the end of state interventionism and “liberalization.” Both the conservative voices I opposed and the progressive voices I supported referred to the civil society notion to support their arguments.

To avoid this conceptual ambivalence, I decided to focus on collective actors within civil society that clearly contributed to social change: social movements. After reading groundbreaking books like *De Verbeelding aan de Macht* by Jan Willem Duyvendak and others, *From Mobilization to Revolution* by Charles Tilly, and *Power in Movement* by Sidney Tarrow, I was convinced that I had made the right choice. After reading Doug McAdam’s *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, moreover, I knew that I wanted to concentrate on the African-American civil rights movement. But how could I add anything new to a field with such brilliant scholars? In retrospect, the answer seems obvious.

When I began working on my dissertation in 1997, Robyn and I had just moved to the Netherlands after living one year in Japan, another year in France, and about two years in the United States. I had traced my biographical roots by returning to the United States and Japan, while Robyn had fulfilled her childhood dream by residing in Paris. Now, I was ready to build a life in the country where I had grown up. Given my personal background, and given the strong national focus in the literature, it is not surprising that I eventually chose to highlight the transnational dimension of social movements.
specifically, since several books on the African-American freedom struggle had alluded to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s debt to Gandhi, I decided to focus primarily on the relationship between the Indian independence movement and the American civil rights movement. (At the time, I even hoped to extend my analysis to the influence of the latter on the liberation theology movement in Brazil.)

Based on my work at RECIPE, I applied for a Ph.D. scholarship at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR) and joined this branch of the University of Amsterdam in September 1998. During the next four-and-a-half years, I took advantage of all the privileges the ASSR offers its students. In early 1999, the ASSR funded my research trip to Atlanta, where I perused through the archives of the Martin Luther King Center, and visited Stanford University, where I had an inspiring discussion with Doug McAdam. (It was McAdam who advised me to focus exclusively on transnational diffusion from India to the United States.) In early 2000, the ASSR sponsored my journey to Delhi, where I found the necessary primary sources on Gandhi and Gandhian nonviolence at the Jawaharlal Nehru University library. In the summer of 2000, it allowed me to participate in the International Peace Research Association’s annual conference, during which I met Stellan Vinthagen and Senthil Ram, my two closest Gandhian friends. The following year, I went to New York twice—the first time to take advantage of materials at the New York Public Library, the second time to present a paper during an International Sociological Association (ISA) meeting. Of course, I had no idea that these would be my last chances to see the World Trade Center. And most recently, I traveled to Tromsø University, the northernmost university in the world, at the ASSR’s expense. In Norway, I not only revived my ties with Stellan and Senthil, but also found and planted the seeds for my next research project. I cannot thank the ASSR and its staff enough for facilitating my transnational passages and research during these years. I am particularly grateful to Hans Sonneveld, José Komen, Teun Bijvoet, Miriam May, Anneke Dammers, and Annelies Dijkstra.

Some of my most important intellectual epiphanies came away from home and in the presence of strangers. But these unexpected insights would not have been possible without constant encouragement from my mentor and supervisors, or without the company of fellow Ph.D. students. First and foremost, I am indebted to Jan Willem Duyvendak, for reading and commenting on all my drafts (no matter how rough), patiently listening to all my explanations and justifications (no matter how far-fetched), and supporting all my academic initiatives (no matter how impractical). He has been much more than a mentor; during the last five years, he has been my example, employer, colleague, collaborator, counselor, and friend. I also owe a great deal to Rosanne Rutten, who not only provided constructive criticism on my articles and chapters, but also enabled me to develop my teaching skills. She demonstrates that friendly people need not finish last in the academic rat race. And, as academic director and supervisor, Peter van der Veer has always encouraged me to blaze my own academic trails instead of following those of others. Through his remarks and his own work, he has challenged me to engage in critical theory without sacrificing analytical or linguistic clarity. Furthermore, I want to thank all the RECIPE and ASSR researchers who took the time to listen to and talk with me during the last five years. The following list of “fellow-
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Finally, the last five years have confirmed the sociological principle that personal life and academic endeavors are inextricably connected. Without the love and peace of mind that I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) at home, I would not have been able to make it through the ups and downs of writing a dissertation. My deepest gratitude goes to the Payne family, my parents-in-law Ronald and Barbara, my grandfather Henri, my brother Raymond and his girlfriend Charlotte, and my parents David and Jeanette. Their support and presence have made me who I am. Only a poet could adequately express my feelings for my wife and son in words. All I can do is dedicate this book to Robyn and Julian, my two “buddies.”