Reinventing Social-Movement Repertoires: The ‘Operation Gandhi’ Experiment

Anti-capitalists in Prague, Genoa and Melbourne proclaim the need to organise a Seattle-style protest, and contest the global dominance of transnational corporations; Australian students concerned with racial injustice join together in a Freedom Ride that faithfully mirrors the American example; socialists around the world form a new sort of ‘Communist’ party in the wake of the inspirational revolution of the Russian Bolsheviks; Gandhi’s non-violent acts spawn a host of sincere imitators in the U.S., U.K., and Africa. Four historical examples of the diffusion of collective action. How do such political translations occur? How do contentious political performances move from one national context to another?

This problem has traditionally been elided within social movement scholarship. The most influential studies have focused on the development of a modular, transposable repertoire of collective action,1 and have largely treated diffusion as the automatic reflection of “appropriateness” and political utility,2 or else, as has been noted elsewhere, as the product of direct experience on the part of activists,3 or structural similarity between the ‘transmitter’ and ‘adopter’ of the new performances.4

However, this rather superficial view has recently been undermined by a growing interest in globalisation, and by a cluster of theoretical and historical work. An emergent consensus now suggests that diffusion rests upon a sustained labour of cultural, intellectual, and practical translation.5 Similarity between ‘initiator’ and ‘receiver’ must be constructed or framed, and identification fostered.6 Brokers ease the process of transmission.7 The precise dynamics of diffusion will take on a different form, depending upon the relative activity of the transmitter and the adopter.8 The repertoire is not simply

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imported; it is *reinvented*. It is only after a sometimes long process of experimental political performance that novel forms of contentious politics may be transformed and redeployed in a fresh national context. Framing and experiment, in short, are the new watchwords.

Nonetheless, if the process of diffusion is increasingly understood as constructed rather than automatic; enculturated rather than simply strategic; relational rather than monadic; historically varied rather than singular; and creative rather than purely imitative, significant questions still remain. Most importantly, there is little understanding of the central dynamic of *creative reinvention*. What, precisely, is an experimental political performance? When and why does it occur? How is the move made from intellectual engagement to practical reinvention of the repertoire?

At present, researchers have not provided the necessary answers. ‘Experiment’ exists as a kind of black-box – a signifier of important but unexplored processes.

This article aims to redress such neglect. It offers the first *detailed* historical analysis of the reinvention of a repertoire, focusing on the creative remaking of Gandhian protest by a group of committed British pacifists in the middle years of the twentieth century.

The indebtedness of the British pacifist movement to Gandhi has perhaps been overshadowed by residual Eurocentrism, or by a preoccupation with the Gandhian antecedents of Martin Luther King, and the African-American movement for civil rights. However, British actions also deserve attention.

Beginning with Harold Steele’s 1957 attempt to disrupt nuclear tests in the Pacific Ocean, British pacifists gained international celebrity with their adoption of “direct action” techniques against nuclear weaponry. In 1958 the Easter march to the Aldermaston nuclear reactor helped give birth to a distinctive ‘New Left’. By 1960 the Committee of 100 was applying fresh techniques of civil disobedience and publicity creation, and helping to mark the transition to a new era in which “independent social protest” would become dominant. These were eventually broad movements, but they relied upon Gandhian-influenced pacifists for leadership and early guidance. Both key participants and subsequent historians have emphasised that the specific techniques developed by

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Gandhi were the model for this efflorescence of British collective protest. A clear case of historically-significant repertoire diffusion therefore seems to exist.

Moreover, the process of creative reinvention was particularly catalytic in the British case. Intellectual engagement with Gandhi’s methods persisted for more than forty years without the decisive move to practical adoption. For decades, British Gandhism was all talk and little action. The Reverend Joseph Doke first brought Gandhi to metropolitan audiences in 1909, with his *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa*. Over the following decades a small library of other works tumbled forth. The Peace Pledge Union (PPU), Britain’s leading pacifist institution, hosted vibrant debates over Gandhism from the late 1930s. In the years 1936-57 almost three hundred and fifty articles in the PPU’s *Peace News* directly contemplated the translation of Gandhiism to the West. Still, nothing was done.

When did interminable argument unfold into creative manifestation? If the mass take-up of Gandhian acts began in 1958, an identifiable phase of experiment was evident half a decade earlier. Between intellectual engagement and collective appropriation, there was experiment. In 1952, a new institution, ‘Operation Gandhi’, emerged out of the Non-Violence Commission of the Peace Pledge Union. It publicly announced its own birth with a sit-down demonstration on the steps of the War Office in London, and a press statement that highlighted the directly Gandhiian inspiration of the local act. As ‘Operation Gandhi’, and later as the Non-Violent Resistance Group, this collection of pacifists popularised the Gandhian performance in Britain over the years 1952-54.

Operation Gandhi members explicitly understood their activities as an “experiment”, and justified them in *precisely* these terms. The life-cycle of Operation Gandhi therefore offers a remarkable window on the creative reinvention of contentious political action. It smoothed the path from abstract debate to collective performance. Through the specific history of this experiment, pressing questions of social-movement theory may then be fruitfully posed and tentatively answered.

*What did it mean to experiment?*

When Operation Gandhi was described as an experiment, activists drew upon a discourse shared by interwar liberals, fabian socialists and committed pacifists alike.

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Experimentalists did not enunciate grand theoretical laws or insist upon final certainty. They took their cues from science, observation, and experience. Just as experimental scientists worked as craftspeople of the laboratory, so the experimental activists tested and explained political effects in action.

This was the method of Gandhi. He certainly made no absolute claims for the completeness of his political vision. On the contrary, his own personal history was nothing more than *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*:

> Far be it for me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusion, but keeps an open mind regarding them...The experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which every one may carry on his own experiments according to his own inclination and capacity...My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of Satyagraha, not to say how good I am.

The Gandhians of Britain did not have a direct formula or a Gandhian rule-book that could be strictly followed. When the Peace Pledge Union sought Gandhi’s personal advice, the Mahatma declared only that “you should act in accordance with your own lights,” and he mocked the notion that any pacifist would imitate the paradigmatic act of hand-spinning. As a result, British Gandhians needed to find their own version of Gandhism-in-action. This was a task at once conflictual, laborious, and frequently disappointing.

*Multiple Gandhisms*

The British pacifist movement was highly diverse, and punctuated by a welter of factional intrigues and cabals. The Peace Pledge Union was typically divided between parliamentarists, non-violent revolutionaries, christian non-resisters, secularist socialists, and constructive workers extolling the virtues of agrarian self-sufficiency. With this diversity came a variety of competing versions of Gandhism, as intellectuals refracted Gandhi through the prism of their preexistent enthusiasms, and rivals yoked the Mahatma’s prestige to their own, long-cherished projects. Gandhi could be depicted as an

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22 ‘Gandhi — “Greatest Christian”’, *PN*, 1/5/37, p.3.
23 Captain Philip S. Mumford, ‘Unity Within the Peace Pledge Union’, *PN*, 1/1/38, p.6.
overwhelmingly strategic, tactical or religious figure. Those intent on Gandhian experiment could claim any one of six approaches to political change:

**Figure One: The Diversity of the Gandhian Experiment**

<table>
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<th>Individual</th>
<th>Constructive</th>
<th>Educative</th>
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Gandhian action in Britain was divided by its application in one of three distinct social arenas, and by a strongly demarcated social basis. It could be divided in terms of a preference for individual or collective performance, and by a predilection for constructive, educative, or contentious work. Each version of practical Gandhism claimed some (more or less plausible) connection with Gandhian thought and practice. They coexisted in a discontinuous competition – rarely seen as complementary, sometimes understood as a succession of stages, most often depicted as hostile, antagonistic alternatives. To experiment with Gandhism in Britain was usually to champion a particular version of constructive, educative, or contentious work, on an individual or collective basis. Specifically, six versions of the Gandhian experiment circulated.

**Personal Service**
Many pacifists rejected the now familiar association of Gandhism with the method of satyagraha or non-violent protest. For John Middleton Murry, Gandhi’s non-violence was not a “technique” of “political change”, but primarily a “religious conviction”. As such, it was best expressed not in mass gatherings or passive resistance, but in acts of individual constructive labour:

> A selfless job of work, done with a true craftsman’s fidelity and whether with our minds, our tongues, or our hands, will teach us more about non-violence and pacifism than weeks of egotistical debate.  

Hundreds of British pacifists agreed. Individual service was associated with the personal volunteers of the Peace Army in Czechoslovakia and Palestine in 1939. It flowered in the wartime “experiment” in welfare work of the Pacifist Service Unit and the care for the homeless of the Hungerford Club. It lived on through the social service

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“experiment” of the Phoenix Group of pacifists in the years after World War Two. In such constructive acts of gentleness and healing, many individual pacifists claimed to be practicing a Gandhian politics. To adopt personal service was to experiment with the preliminary application of Gandhi’s methods in the West.

Non-Violent Living
If many Britons emphasised the constructive side of Gandhism, for a significant proportion of these pacifists, it was collective rather than individual labour that was crucial. This was a Gandhism that drew inspiration from the Mahatma’s life at the Sevagram Ashram and that emphasised the village community based on agriculture as the keystone of his social vision. It was championed most enthusiastically in the West by Labour parliamentarian, Wilfred Wellock.

British pacifists adopting such an approach attempted to detach themselves from the war economy. They formed their own agricultural communities in Essex, Norfolk, Gloustershire, the Rhondda Valley, and elsewhere. They cooperated in Forestry Land Units and shared in the often conflictual process of trying to build a collaborative, non-violent life. Again, this was a Gandhism quite distinct from the techniques of satyagraha or the drama of the fast. It was, nevertheless, confidently defended as an authentically Gandhian path:

It is not unknown for British pacifists to combine idealization of Gandhi with scarcely concealed contempt for the efforts of pacifist agricultural communities, and yet to be completely unconscious of the contradiction. It is desirable that those who desire to follow Gandhi should know to what they are committing themselves. It will save them much disillusion.

Individual Purification
How could a Westener ever hope to emulate Gandhi’s inspiring example? For some British pacifists, any attempt to work or protest along Gandhian lines required careful preparation and education. It could not be rushed:

The fact is that most of us have a very long way to go before we can put into operation any strategy of good will comparable in quality to Gandhi’s Satyagraha. And the

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29 n.a., ‘Where Stands Phoenix?’, PPU Journal, 6, September 1946, p.4
32 Hallam Tennyson, ‘India and the West’, PN, 19/11/48, p.3.
This underpinned an influential view that consistently unselfish and pious behaviour was a precondition of any kind of corporate non-violent action. The true Gandhian needed to train for non-violence. Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley suggested that silent meditation was central to such training, and American sociologist Richard Gregg offered detailed instructions to new converts.

Critics regarded such activities as a faddist trend in self-improvement. They worried that enthusiasts for the new method were discarding useful political effort for the “remote ideal of purging our individual natures of all evil tendencies”. Proponents, however, were equally convinced of the Gandhian and utilitarian virtues of such behaviour.

Group Training
Education in the ways of Gandhi was a collective as much as an individual process. Along with individual acts of self-purification, a plethora of group methods were also advanced. Gregg’s *Training for Non-Violence* closed with a highly detailed account of a group-training session, replete with singing, reading, manual work, discussion, public action, and folk dancing (all in forty minutes!). He vehemently denied that “folk-dancing or knitting or hand spinning” were anachronistic in the machine age, and persistently imagined such actions as analogous to the marching and counter-marching of the armed forces. If such actions seemed odd to many, they were embraced by a healthy minority of British pacifists. For some, the “communal side of mental training” loomed as the most important element in the laying of the foundations of the non-violent society. To join with others in non-violent training was therefore to experiment with the enormous possibilities of the Gandhi method in the West.

Self-Denial
The most eagerly discussed of Gandhi’s actions were his heroic fasts. Not surprisingly, therefore, much of the enthusiasm for Gandhian experiment in the West pulsed around the reproduction of such ascetic self-denial. British pacifists fasted for food relief in war-

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46 “Ampersand”, ‘It Seems to Me…’, *PN*, 10/10/36, p.4
time Europe,\textsuperscript{48} against the nuclear stalemate of the Cold War,\textsuperscript{49} as a gesture of repentance towards the colonised,\textsuperscript{50} and in support of the African-American movement for civil rights.\textsuperscript{51} Others adopted different kinds of self-denial. Drawing inspiration from Gandhi’s salt march and from the activities of Vinoba Bhave, one pacifist walked through England and Wales in a Gandhian attempt to raise funds for Indian villagers;\textsuperscript{52} another trudged from Salisbury to London in protest against the new H-bomb program of the U.K.\textsuperscript{53}

These were acts of public demand that resonated as effective political interventions. Roy Walker of the PPU said of a 1944 fast that: “I cannot imagine anything more likely to move the conscience of a man than such unobtrusive but quietly persistent pleading”. He was convinced, too, of its non-violent credentials, suggesting that it was: “a very fine example of non-violence as Gandhi would interpret it.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{Corporate Non-Violence}

If the constructive, educative, and individualistic sides of Gandhian behaviour were often emphasised, many pacifists still associated Gandhism with mass non-violent collective action. The term \textit{Satyagraha} often flowed from the pacifist pen, and many were keen to translate it into a Western idiom. “Non-violent resistance” and “non-violent direct action” were among the most popular renderings.\textsuperscript{55} Both suggested radicalism. Gandhism of this sort was an explicit alternative to resolutions and ordered meetings.\textsuperscript{56} It represented a choice to “fill the prisons” rather than rely upon “[l]etters of protest, telegrams [and] mass rallies”.\textsuperscript{57} Here the Gandhian experiment was a contentious collective act, and its perfection suggested a new science of non-violent struggle.

What kinds of corporate non-violence were promoted? The range of detailed suggestions is startling: pacifists should invade the “drawing-rooms” of the authorities with the force of “passive aggression”, and demand their signatures on a peace agenda.\textsuperscript{58} A mass hunger-strike of PPU members should be used to compel disarmament;\textsuperscript{59} non-violent volunteers should travel to Italy as tourists and thence offer non-violent resistance against the militarism of the Mussolini dictatorship.\textsuperscript{60} Five thousand select recruits should travel to Sudetenland to act as warriors of peace, and stand in the way of violence.\textsuperscript{61}

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Vera Brittain, ‘End-of-Year Fast’, \textit{PN}, 7/1/44, pp.1-4.
\item \textsuperscript{49} n.a., ‘Vicar’s “solemn fast” call against H-bomb’, \textit{PN}, 17/3/50, p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{50} n.a., ‘People Doing Things’, \textit{PN}, 15/6/51, p.6.
\item \textsuperscript{52} n.a., ‘Walking through Britain to help India’, \textit{PN}, 1/6/56, p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{53} n.a., ‘One woman to walk from Salisbury to London’, \textit{PN}, 25/2/55, p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Roy Walker, ‘Up Your Street’, \textit{PN}, 16/6/44, p.5.
\item \textsuperscript{56} F. Mary Barr, ‘Goa: Is This The Way?’, \textit{PN}, 28/10/55, p.5.
\item \textsuperscript{57} n.a., ‘The Responsibility of Every Man’, \textit{PN}, 9/11/56, p.2.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Fredoon Kabraji, ‘Fighting by Turning the Other Cheek’, \textit{PN}, 8/8/36, p.4.
\item \textsuperscript{59} E. White, ‘Strikes and Non-Violent Resistance’, \textit{PN}, 29/5/37, p.10.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Kingsley Martin, ‘The Peace Movement’, \textit{New Statesman and Nation}, 4/6/38, p.946.
\item \textsuperscript{61} n.a., ‘Non-Violent Volunteers for Sudetenland’, \textit{PN}, 8/10/38, p.1.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Plough should make its way across the iron curtain and into Poland,\textsuperscript{62} a non-registrants fellowship should be formed, to challenge the conscription system with the methods of non-violent non-co-operation.\textsuperscript{63}

Anyone with the vaguest knowledge of British political history will quickly be aware that all of these proposed experiments in corporate non-violence had something particular in common: \textit{none were ever to be successfully staged}. For decades the most contentious varieties of Gandhism were aspirations rather than actions. Why is this so?

\textit{Experiment and Agreement}

Experiment requires agreement. It is only after the establishment of certain social and discursive conventions that any kind of accepted “facts” can be produced by an experimental practice.\textsuperscript{64} There must be consensus on the boundary between accepted and contested knowledge,\textsuperscript{65} on the meaning of a successful experiment,\textsuperscript{66} and on the appropriate relationships between members of the intellectual polity.\textsuperscript{67} In the absence of such agreement, meaningful experimentation is not possible.

As in the laboratory, so in the pacifist community. While the Peace Pledge Union remained riven between rival versions of the Gandhian experiment, any common push for corporate non-violence was doomed to failure. Gandhism was not a single thing; notions of ‘success’ differed among adherents of the rival schools. Relations were strained and conflictual. In this context, any practical plan for contentious collective action was sure to be criticised (and therefore subverted) by champions of an alternative practice.

When tanks rolled along Northampton streets in 1937, a group of local pacifists planned to sit in front of them:

\textit{There was a strong opinion in favour of trying to adopt into English non-violent action a characteristic method of Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent resisters, and the feeling among this section seemed to be that it would demonstrate the power of non-violence and would most probably be successful.}\textsuperscript{68}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Hugh Brock, ‘Non-Violent Project’, \textit{PN}, 1/7/49, p.4.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} n.a., ‘Non-Registrants’ Fellowship’, \textit{PN}, 28/9/51, p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} n.a., ‘Can the West Use The Power of Non-Violence?’, \textit{PN}, 16/10/37, p.5; emphasis in original.
\end{itemize}
However, a long evening of disagreement and discussion followed, and the plan was eventually rejected in favour of a more conventional demonstration. Some thought the sit-down a “pure sensation”. Others doubted whether it would be adequately understood by the gathering crowd. Without a consensus, the PPU could not broach official involvement.

When a later plan was put forward for direct action against conscription,⁶⁹ it similarly prompted dissent, resignations, and eventual reversals.⁷⁰ There was even strong division over the question of training for non-violence.⁷¹

Opposition to non-violent resistance often came from those in positions of authority within the Peace Pledge Union,⁷² and extended especially to the censorious editor of Peace News, John Middleton Murry.⁷³ While ever such opposition existed, the National Council could not give a lead to non-violent action without risking further division.⁷⁴ Experiment could not proceed without agreement.

How was such agreement to be achieved? How could the preconditions of experiment be firmly established? Here the insights of the historians of science are especially pertinent. Shapin and Schaffer, in their meticulous study of Robert Boyle’s inaugural experiments with the seventeenth century air-pump, ask precisely these questions. They suggest in response that the pioneering experimentalist drew freely from a number of technologies in the course of his difficult labours. Specifically, Boyle relied upon a material technology (embedded in the operation of the air-pump), a literary technology (through which experiments were conveyed to those not directly present) and a social technology (which incorporated all of the conventions which regulated the relationships between experimental philosophers).⁷⁵ All were necessary to this first production of experimental fact.

Analogously, the quest for contentious collective experiment among pacifists also involved the adroit manipulation of an assembly of technologies. In this case, social, cartographical, disciplinary and literary technologies were all deployed in various ways. In combination they helped to produce the ‘Operation Gandhi’ experiment.

**Social technology**

The development of a working consensus among those dedicated to corporate non-violence was perhaps the most crucial precondition of the Operation Gandhi experiment.

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⁶⁹ n.a., ‘10th Annual General Meeting of the PPU’, *PN*, 25/4/47, p.4-5.
⁷² n.a., ‘The Freethought Committee’, *PN*, 2/8/40, p.3.
This was a social technology that comprised three distinct phases of operation, and that involved more than three years of institutional manoeuvring.

First, a specific organisational space within the Peace Pledge Union was carved out for those most interested in non-violence. In 1949 the PPU responded to the ossification of many of its regionally-based groups and the persistence of calls for greater action with the convocation of a ‘Steps to Peace’ conference at Friends House, London.76 One hundred and sixty enthusiasts attended,77 and seven separate Commissions were formed to canalize the eager energies of members: Social Order, Religion, Education, Science, Politics, Arts and Letters, and, crucially, Non-Violence.

The Non-Violence Commission was among the most popular. From its first meeting in January 1950, it grew quickly to embrace nearly fifty keen participants.78 A ‘travelling file’ of letters, suggestion, and newspaper-clippings circulated among those unable to attend regular meetings, and a distinct community began to develop.79 Leaders of the Non-Violence Commission emphasised that their task was to explore in depth a distinct side of pacifism, and to investigate the question of civil disobedience in particular.80 It developed into a forum for the discussion of schemes for direct action,81 and it soon generated fresh ideas for non-violent protest, like organised income-tax refusal.82 The Commission rapidly became what sociologists call an ‘abeyance structure’, or a ‘submerged network’ – a place of shared critical discourse, in which the flame of future rebellion is sheltered and fueled. As such, it was, by definition, primarily a place of discussion rather than of action.83

This was not forever to remain so, however. As some members grew impatient with all the talk,84 more practical moves were afoot. In February 1952, Hugh Brock suggested a novel kind of “experiment” for the budding non-violent theorists of the Commission – interested members should undertake a mass leaflet distribution in Finsbury Park, North London, adjourning afterwards to the Brock family home for tea and discussion.85 The experiment must have been considered a success. In December 1951 Brock suggested a

76 n.a., ‘Steps to Peace’, *PPU Journal*, no. 43, October 1949, p.3; n.a., ‘Making the PPU a vital force for peace’, *PN*, 11/11/49, p.3.
79 Ethel A. Lewis, ‘Non-Violence Commission to have Travelling File’, *PN*, 19/1/51, p.8.
new, more adventurous experiment: a program of direct action which he had drawn up, provocatively entitled “Operation Gandhi”.86

The formation of Operation Gandhi represented the second phase in the development of the experiment’s social technology. Clearly, although it was a distinct, autonomous body, Operation Gandhi relied very strongly on its parent organisation. It rested upon the Commission’s list of members for the acquisition of its volunteers.87 It was a product of the Commission’s productive intellectual networks: spurred into existence by the stimulating contact between British Commission members and overseas visitors practiced in non-violence. Mary Barr, Richard Gregg and Bill Sutherland all addressed the Non-Violence Commission during 1950-51, both relaying their own experiences of distinct Gandhian experiment and encouraging the most enthused of PPU’ers to do likewise.88 Sutherland, the African-American member of the Peacemakers group, was a particular inspiration.89

But whatever its indebtedness to the Non-Violence Commission, Operation Gandhi was officially separate from the Peace Pledge Union.90 As a result, the task of brokering agreement around Gandhian experiment became far simpler. The working agreement of Non-Violence Commission members over the virtues of Gandhian protest could now proceed directly to action without the need for wider, institutional unity. As PPU General-Secretary Stuart Morris explained:

“Operation Gandhi” is strictly speaking neither an official part of the PPU nor a breakaway. It is a group of members of the P.P.U. acting under this title and under their own responsibility, so that P.P.U. officially will not be committed, since it is not likely that all members of the P.P.U. would approve of their activities, but giving in this way the opportunity of any member of the P.P.U. who is in sympathy to take their share.91

Operation Gandhi was a kind of improvised social technology – an elegant institutional solution to the multiple versions of the Gandhian experiment coexisting within the PPU. It changed the task of consensus-formation from one of consensus within the entire institution to one of consensus among the enthusiasts for ‘Gandhian-style’ civil disobedience.

86 Non-Violence Commission of the PPU Minutes, 12/12/51, p.1.
But even with this vital grouping formed, total agreement was still lacking. There remained a residual degree of difference within Operation Gandhi as to the ideal dimensions of a contentious Gandhian experiment. Suggestions for action fluctuated wildly.

Hugh Brock’s original idea was organised around the need to remove American bases from British soil. It was long on political aims, such as withdrawal from NATO, but short on practical detail. Brock suggested only:

A press sub-committee should be formed, and an operations sub-committee should arrange the mechanics and timetable for demonstration.  

What form was Gandhian protest to take? Surviving archival material indicates a range of actions were entertained – protests at Grosvenor Square, Fleet Street, Whitehall, Labour Exchanges, among others. Two schemes were seriously examined. The first was an invasion of the House of Commons:

Select evening session when appropriate matter is being discussed – trickle one by one to Central Lobby and ask to see our M.P.

No given time (no signal), - as team squats in the passage from the Chamber to the Lobby, produce and display posters – and perhaps sing appropriate hymns.

Remainder to act as observers only.

When, if, first group ejected, and after short interlude for order to be restored, next group take up position and proceed as before. Meantime a further group – perhaps number of further groups, will arrive at House, by bus – having previously timed journey from a number of surrounding fire-off points – and will come into Lobby seeking M.P.s – and then follow as before…

Police to be told only that Operation Gandhi will visit on that particular evening.

A second visualised a similar kind of shocking display, to be staged in a popular London church:

Attend morning service and take part fully in it. At end of service squat in main exit, display appropriate posters, singing suitable hymns, handing out leaflets.

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92 Non-Violence Commission of the PPU Minutes, 12/12/51.
93 A list of these and other sites as points of demonstration is found in Hugh Brock’s papers, in a loose three pages entitled ‘Operation Gandhi’, Hugh Brock Papers, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Operation Gandhi Papers Selected by Hugh Brock’.
Leaflet distributors in vicinity to go into action (well dispersed beforehand) when they see congregation begin to emerge.95

At the same time, Alex Comfort suggested a supplementary plan for agit-prop, entitled ‘Umbrella Man’, which involved theatrical displays of umbrellas, stickers, and pickets all over London.96

As forms of political gimmick or media display, none could be faulted. However, their specifically Gandhian credentials were more seriously questionable. Although Hugh Brock praised the Umbrella Man scheme,97 others were less easily impressed. Gwyneth Anderson was highly suspicious of Alex Comfort, and warned of his past habits of recommending sabotage while sitting on the sidelines when it came to implementation.98

Kathleen Rawlins also raised a number of concerns. First, she worried about the participation of communists – “already working for the same objectives and by different means.”99 Second, she emphasised that “public opinion” was in favour of defence, security, and the fearful grinding of the war machine. As a result, any action needed to be accompanied by a “simple leaflet”, outlining the methods and aims of the protesters.100

Others agreed, and the drafting of the inaugural Operation Gandhi leaflet began. Quickly, it became a gigantic exercise in consensus-formation. Meeting after meeting witnessed deep philosophical and practical discussion.101 An unpublished, unattributed history of the early days of the group remembers the process well:

Meetings...were stepped up to about twice a week with daily consultation between the four or five members who were drawing up the leaflet which would be distributed during the demonstration.

Whole evenings were given up to the discussion of the leaflet and planning of the timetable of the action. A draft idea...by Kathleen Rawlins was remoulded by Alex Comfort. The renovated draft was cut to pieces by Kathleen and criticised by everybody else. One sentence would be upheld by some members of the group and objected to by

97 Hugh Brock, Letter to Alex Comfort, 29/12/51, Hugh Brock Papers, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Operation Gandhi War Office Demo’.
99 Non-Violence Commission of the PPU Minutes, 9/1/52.
100 Non-Violence Commission of the PPU Minutes, 12/12/51.
101 Hugh Brock, Letter to Alex Comfort, 29/12/51, Hugh Brock Papers, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Operation Gandhi War Office Demo’.
others. The printer had to reset almost half the leaflet after we had given him what we thought was a final draft.102

Slowly, very slowly, the dimensions of a ‘Gandhian experiment’ for Britain were teased out. Through the drafting and redrafting of the leaflet, a more subtle and collective sense of Gandhian contention was developed. In early January, consensus had arrived. Operation Gandhi came to agree that the essence of Gandhism-in-action lay in the making of an appeal to conscience. The “conscience of the British people” became the group’s core target.103

This was an ethical appeal. As such, it required high ethical standards among the protesters. Members of the Operation Gandhi experiment now came to agree that three elements of “Gandhi’s method” were therefore crucial:

1. Open strategies of organisation, with preliminary notification of any protest actions given to police and official authorities.
2. Complete personal non-violence of behaviour.
3. Willingness to accept legal penalties for action “knowing that the suffering of these penalties is our best means of persuasion.”104

As a result, the schemes for the House of Commons and Church invasion were now rejected. So was a plan for pacifists to form a bus queue near the War Office in Central London, only sprinting into a sit-down position when Big Ben struck twelve.105

When the first Operation Gandhi demonstration was organised, it adhered to all of the group’s new wisdom. On a cold January morning, eleven pacifists carefully lowered themselves onto the steps of the War Office in London. Police had been notified, and arrests were quickly made. Participants went with officers happily, also pleading guilty to charges of obstruction and obstructing police. A new experiment had clearly begun.106

Once this social agreement had been constructed within Operation Gandhi, further actions soon followed. The leaflet drew praise from non-participants,107 and the confidence and energy of members rapidly developed.108 Similar protests were held at Aldermaston nuclear reactor,109 the U.S. base at Mildenhall Aerodrome,110 the Porton

103 This is reflected in the text of the leaflet: “Operation Gandhi – a call to you”, PN, 18/1/52, p.3.
104 n.a., ‘Pacifists Told Police and War Office: “We are coming to squat”’, PN, 18/1/52, p.1.
106 n.a., ‘Pacifists Told Police and War Office: “We are coming to squat”’, PN, 18/1/52, p.1.
107 Dorothy Glaister, Letter to Hugh Brock, 21/1/52, Hugh Brock Papers, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 1.
110 n.a., ‘Armed Guards Turn Out for Pacifists’, PN, 4/7/52, p.5.
microbiological research facility,\textsuperscript{111} and Harwell atomic energy plant,\textsuperscript{112} among many others. With its name changed to the Non-Violent Resistance Group, the same basic cluster activists expressed demonstrative support for the passive resistance movement in South Africa,\textsuperscript{113} and took Gandhian performances to regional centres like Ilford and Colchester.\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, with agreement over Gandhism now established, continual experiment quickly became possible.

\textit{Cartographical technology}

Other kinds of technology were also needed. Whatever the undeniable agreement among activists, the experiments of Operation Gandhi were clearly daring acts. They provoked strong opposition from many pacifists,\textsuperscript{115} and troubled questioning from others.\textsuperscript{116} They summoned forth feelings of silliness, timidity, and fear among participants, who hovered, with trepidation, before the decision for action.

The British, of course, were justly famed for their self-consciousness. Many considered themselves “too reserved” for simple acts like the poster-parade, or literature distribution.\textsuperscript{117} The leaflet for the first War Office action began with the words: “We know we look silly”,\textsuperscript{118} and admirers of the action were known to declare: “It was more than I would care to do.”\textsuperscript{119} Even participants in later contention were fearful of stirring up a “hullabaloo”,\textsuperscript{120} and confessed to “cold feet” on the eve of squatting.\textsuperscript{121}

How could middle-class Britons conquer this embarrassment? How could they develop the courage to sit on the steps of the War Office, to march on the gates of Aldermaston, to adorn the road outside of a US bomber base with their own, trembling bodies? In addition to agreement over the meaning and purpose of Gandhism, activists also required a cartographical technology.

Maps are a reconfiguration of the spatial.\textsuperscript{122} They are associated with the definition and control of territory, and with a distinctive moral geography.\textsuperscript{123} Maps remake spaces – drawing boundaries, highlighting certain physical shapes and marginalising others. Once a space has been mapped, it becomes amenable to negotiation and manipulation.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[113] ‘P.N. Reporter’, ‘Pacifists Demonstrate at S. Africa House’, \textit{PN}, 3/10/52, p.4
\item[114] n.a., ‘Colchester Hears the Pacifist Case’, \textit{PN}, 29/10/54, p.6.
\item[117] n.a., ‘Strengthening Self-Discipline’, \textit{PN}, 2/7/54, p.5.
\item[118] n.a., ‘Operation Gandhi’ – A Call To You’, \textit{PN}, 18/1/52, p.3.
\item[121] Connie [Jones], Letter to Hugh Brock, n.d., \textit{Hugh Brock Papers}, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Mildenhall’.
\end{footnotes}
The sites of Operation Gandhi protest had already been mapped by the agencies of the State. The War Office, Aldermaston and the Mildenhall aerodrome were comprehensively scrutinised, possessed, buttressed. The Porton microbiological research establishment was fenced and contained. These were ‘proper’ spaces of secrecy, privilege, and power.

As a result, if Operation Gandhi members were to make their own moral entry into such spaces, then they needed to undertake their own kind of mapping. Spaces of protest needed to be appropriated, spatially reclaimed as zones of a distinctive ethical practice. Before experiment could occur, a cartographical technology was required.

Through advanced planning, visitation, and transcription, the mapping of Operation Gandhi created an imaginary space of operations – a place where non-violent experiment might occur. Activists ‘went over the ground’ in advance, weighing possible tactics and rejecting those deemed unsuitable to the local environment. Scenarios of patterned interaction with police were developed, with relevant distinctions coined between squatters and marchers; highways and roadsides; special volunteers who vigorously reclaimed space, and routine participants who watched on the sidelines. Sometimes pictures were drawn. More frequently they were not; but the importance of the verbal and literal maps produced could not be doubted. Cartography underpinned successful experiment. Mapping made unorthodox, unconventional, Gandhian protest possible.

Disciplinary Technology

Planning an action is one thing, carrying it out quite another. If Operation Gandhi were to conduct successful experiments, then their own, self-defined standards of ethical Gandhian practice needed to be respected. This required discipline and organisation.

Hugh Brock provided firm leadership. Even critics had praise for his organisational acumen, and for the preparation and planning of each action. The virtues of discipline were often insisted upon, and the order and control of marching columns the object of self-acclamation. Briefing notes outlined the precise bodily dispositions required: wear warm clothing; smile; behave naturally; sit in the middle of the pavement; march in single file; behave as if a party of hikers; do not keep as much as fifteen yards apart.

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129 ‘Final Briefing for Operation Gandhi’, *Direct Action Committee Material*, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay A.
130 ‘Briefing for Main Procession’, *Hugh Brock Papers*, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Operation Gandhi’.
Discipline encompassed the aftermath of each contentious performance, too. The London Working Party gathered fortnightly to pack copies of *Peace News*, and to consider “the problems that arise as a result of our demonstrations.”¹³¹ They pulled few punches, subjecting the cost, organisation and effectiveness of protests to continued examination.¹³² Doubts about the whole experiment were frequently expressed,¹³³ and the need for hard thinking about the group’s methods was a common theme.¹³⁴

This was nothing less than a collective process of self-criticism. Operation Gandhi members policed themselves and each other. This ensured adherence to ‘Gandhian’ standards. It meant that their actions constituted genuine experiments in the effectiveness of corporate non-violence in Britain.

**Literary Technology**

Shapin and Schaffer’s study of Robert Boyle found a mass of discourse around the air-pump: a prolix body of text, reports, justifications and analyses. This body of verbiage created Boyle’s experiments as public acts. The literary reproduction of his laboratory tinkerings made them mass events, encompassed by the virtual witnessing of educated European readers. Through writing and reception, the findings of the experiment became “facts”, the value of his tests became scientifically accepted.

In an analogous fashion, the Operation Gandhi experiment was also enmeshed in a dizzying variety of written accounts. These were most often produced by enthused participants. Nearly all of them emphasised the significance and replicability of the experiment. They made groping beginnings into exciting discoveries; preemptory displays into solid achievements. They constructed Operation Gandhi as a bold, extensive and historic band, beating back the very edges of political knowledge in the West.

Accounts written by participants in *Peace News* were relentlessly positive. They highlighted the discipline of activists.¹³⁵ They claimed vindication in the positive responses of bystanders.¹³⁶ Their accounts were often outright fictions. They conflicted with the reports offered by professional journalists.¹³⁷ They also conflicted with the views of disillusioned participants,¹³⁸ and the corrective, later admissions of protest leaders.¹³⁹

Operation Gandhi’s literary agents were not to be deterred. They publicly confirmed the rightness of their own tactics. They claimed that the sincere display of non-violence won

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¹³³ *Operation Gandhi Newsletter*, no. 4, p.1.
¹³⁴ *Operation Gandhi Minutes*, 13/7/52.
¹³⁶ Connie Jones, “‘We came in a spirit of friendship – you reciprocated’”, *PN*, 4/7/52, p.5; Margaret Brooks, ‘No other answer’, *PN*, 10/6/55, p.6.
¹³⁸ Ursula McHale, ‘Vested Interest at Mildenhall’, *PN*, 18/7/52, p.5.
over initially hostile observers.\textsuperscript{140} They glossed over failures of planning that would be more rigorously assayed in private correspondence.\textsuperscript{141} They defined these experiments as successful, proferring the large mass of media coverage as evidence for their claims.\textsuperscript{142} Through such assiduous literary application, the importance and findings of the Operation Gandhi experiment became widely accepted.

\textit{What was the fate of this Gandhian experiment?}

If Operation Gandhi was only possible because of a dexterous blend of social, cartographical, disciplinary and literary technology, then what did it actually achieve? What was the outcome of this enormous labour? Briefly, a combination of discovery, refinement, stimulation and guidance was eventually evident.

First, there was discovery. By 1953, members of Operation Gandhi felt that they had tested their way towards a new form of contentious performance – what they called “an effective method of demonstrating”.\textsuperscript{143} Whereas explicitly non-violent and theatrical political performance had once been a rarity in Britain, it was now widely and consistently applied by crusading British pacifists. Historians of the peace movement have confirmed that the experiments of Operation Gandhi laid the basis for the later success of the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, and therefore of the New Left.\textsuperscript{144}

Second, refinement of the Gandhian collective performance was also evident. Operation Gandhi learnt from experience to develop the scope and the form of their demonstrations. Activists changed the dimensions of their performances – adding local speakers;\textsuperscript{145} developing public discussion after each event;\textsuperscript{146} extending the distinct phases of each protest;\textsuperscript{147} selecting new targets after local suggestions;\textsuperscript{148} accepting that the basis of early successes often relied upon “the surprise element”, and therefore could not be repeated.\textsuperscript{149} In this sense, the ‘experiment’ did more than introduce Gandhian contention to Britain, it also developed its practical basis to a significant degree. Operation Gandhites learnt the ‘how’ of protest over time.

\textsuperscript{141}For example, self-criticism of the Porton demonstration was not reflected in \textit{Peace News} reports. For private criticism, see: \textit{Non-Violent Resistance Group Newsletter}, no. 8, 2/4/53.
\textsuperscript{143}\textit{Non-Violent Resistance Group Newsletter}, no. 9, 9/5/53, p.2.
\textsuperscript{147}\textit{Non-Violent Resistance Group Newsletter}, no. 11, 15/8/53.
\textsuperscript{148}\textit{Non-Violent Resistance Group Newsletter}, no. 7, 10/2/53.
\textsuperscript{149}Dorothy Glaister, Letter to Hugh Brock, 5/7/52, \textit{Hugh Brock Papers}, J.B. Priestley Library, University of Bradford, Bay D, Box 2, Folder: ‘Operation Gandhi Papers Selected by Hugh Brock’.
Third, the development of these protests also provided a stimulant to those outside of Operation Gandhi. Others began to take up these methods independently. Individuals started lone pickets of army bases, ‘war’ movies, such as the *Dam Busters*, military tattoos, and civil defence displays. Younger members of the PPU formed the ‘Pacifist Youth Action Group’ to share in such adventurous acts. The ranks of the new organisation swelled after a succession of notable events, and Secretary Ian Dixon expressed how far the quest to apply Gandhism had now spread:

We in the West have much to learn from the techniques which Gandhi adopted. PYAG is endeavouring to learn.

Finally, Operation Gandhi provided direct guidance and example to would-be protesters. The group’s archival holdings include papers offering explicit instruction to those contemplating non-violent resistance. *Peace News*, too, reproduced advice for those contemplating a poster-parade, but unsure of how, precisely, to proceed. As this group organised protests around the country, so local PPU activists in regional centres benefited directly from their experience and instruction. For example, in 1956 Ipswich pacifists followed up a London-led, non-violent demonstration in their city with their own non-violent attempt to break down the local colour bar.

All good experiments must come to an end, however. The institutional independence of the Non-Violent Resistance Group, as it came to be known, did not survive for long. The leaders of the National Council of the PPU eventually demanded coordination and control of its protests, and tighter integration with the Non-Violence Commission. By 1954 the group existed only to cooperate with the PPU’s Campaign Committee in the organisation of a series of ‘Objective Peace’ demonstrations. As a result, the group largely lost its challenging, experimental edge.

It would take a new issue: the H-bomb tests of the British government, and a new institution: the fully-independent Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, to relaunch the Gandhian repertoire in Britain on a firmer basis. None of this would have been possible, however, without Operation Gandhi’s earlier experiments.

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150 Sam Walsh, ‘He marches to the barracks twice a week’, *PN*, 30/10/53, p.3.
151 Hugh Brock, ‘From the Editor’s Notebook’, *PN*, 23/9/55, p.3.
152 n.a., ‘Tattoo Protest Committee Formed in Leeds’, *PN*, 4/6/54, p.3.
153 n.a., ‘Councillor leads H-bomb demonstration in Salisbury’, *PN*, 16/7/54, p.5.
157 n.a., ‘It needs only six people’, *PN*, 18/3/55, p.4.
Conclusion

It is now increasingly accepted that the diffusion of a social-movement repertoire is a complex political act, reliant upon persistent framing, vigorous intellectual debate, frequent disagreement, and pioneering experiment. The intricacies of this last process have typically gone unexamined, however, and the mechanics of political experimentation have been misunderstood or overlooked. What does the history of Operation Gandhi’s political life tell us about the dimensions of contentious experiment?

First, the importance of this process has been confirmed. Decades of intellectual engagement with the Gandhian repertoire did not, in many ways, bring the widespread use of Satyagraha very close. Divisions and competing constructions undercut action. Suggestions for particular demonstrations remained vague and outlandish. When self-confessed Gandhians came to contemplate protest, they often imagined secretive and only nominally non-violent scenarios. It was only in the teeth of practical action that these problems were overcome. Experiment represented a moment of accelerated learning, vital to the successful take-off of non-violent protest in the late 1950s and early sixties.

Second, the experiment was itself a difficult and intricate labour, marked by a high degree of internal complexity. The success of Operation Gandhi was only made possible by the subtle deployment of four discrete technologies: a social technology (through which a consensus over the meaning of Gandhism was hammered out); a cartographical technology (which imaginatively annexed the spaces of political experiment); a disciplinary technology (to ensure the maintenance of self-defined Gandhism in action); and a literary technology (to publicise the organisation of each demonstration, and construct its general importance). All were necessary to the establishment of Operation Gandhi’s trials. A consideration of their range and many-sidedness highlights just how imposing the labour of political experiment is. It also highlights just how significant was the British pacifist achievement of the early fifties.

Finally, this was a political history structured by a high degree of interiority and self-consciousness. Operation Gandhites were primarily means rather than ends driven. The aim of British military disarmament was comparatively deemphasised. The act of protest figured more prominently than the chances of securing changes in governmental policy. To this extent, the dimensions of the outside political environment were comparatively unimportant. No obvious changes in the political opportunity structure triggered action, and no deterioration prompted abandonment of the experiment. At least in this case, experimentation followed an internal logic, and sat outside of the oft-cited dynamic of the ‘cycle of protest’.

How typical was the Operation Gandhi case? We can only really know after wider, more comparative studies have been undertaken. Precisely because social-movement studies traditionally embrace moments of mass mobilisation and shun processes like diffusion, such studies are still some way off.
Is political experiment important enough to justify this expanded, redirected attention? I would argue so. The history of social movements is often told as the history of actors: the labour movement mobilises in the nineteenth century; the suffragettes rise and fall; the new social movements bring a new sensibility to politics. This is a historical vision that marginalises performance – refinement in the methods of acting is less important than the story of those who enunciate the most important lines.

Doug McAdam and William H. Sewell Jnr. have recently posited a different kind of historical periodisation, however. They suggest that social movements can be thought of as existing along a number of different registers of time. Among them are two worth consideration: the time of repertoires, or cultural epochs of contention, and the time of transformative events, which are associated with the birth of new repertoires, and thereby with the promulgation of new epochs.161

A history organised by McAdam and Sewell’s principles would represent a different kind of social movement narrative. Experiment with the repertoire and its expression in transformative events would loom as the very engine of historical change. Thought of in this way, the qualitative development of the repertoire would outrank the quantitative mobilisation of sheer numbers. The history of a few foolhardy pacifists might be fundamental to the twentieth century, and groups like Operation Gandhi might deserve far greater attention than they have so far been thought to merit.