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The British Movement against the Vietnam War: An Example of Transnational Solidarity?

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Résumé

Cet article étudie le mouvement britannique contre la guerre du Vietnam à travers l'analyse de sources primaires provenant de journaux étudiants et alternatifs de 1965 à 1975. Étant donné que le Royaume-Uni ne fut pas directement impliqué dans ce conflit, les jeunes britanniques ne risquaient pas d'être appelés sous les drapeaux contre leur gré, contrairement à leurs alter ego américains. C'est principalement pour cette raison que leur mouvement d'opposition n'a souvent pas été pris au sérieux mais a simplement été considéré comme l'expression d'une mode passagère venue d'outre-Atlantique. Ainsi il s'agira de démontrer que l'opposition à la guerre du Vietnam a pris la forme d'un mouvement cohérent doté de caractéristiques spécifiques héritées du contexte local, avant de proposer une vision plus globale du conflit symbolisant la lutte entre les puissances impérialistes et les peuples opprimés. Enfin, il conviendra d'examiner comment ce processus de cadrage a également permis la transposition à d'autres mouvements dans des contextes parfois très différents.

Mots-clés : mouvement social – guerre du Vietnam – manifestations – 1968 – impérialisme – étudiants – Irlande du Nord

Abstract

This article is a study of the British anti-Vietnam War movement through an in-depth analysis of primary sources coming from student and underground newspapers from 1965 to 1975. Since the United Kingdom was only indirectly involved in the conflict, British youths did not face the threat of conscription against their will, contrary to their American counterparts. This is mainly why their opposition movement was not taken seriously and was dismissed as a passing fad which had spilled over from the other side of the Atlantic. Therefore, this paper will try to show that protest against the Vietnam War took the form of a coherent movement endowed with specific characteristics shaped by the local context, before evolving to offer a more global vision of the conflict symbolising the struggle between imperialist powers and oppressed peoples. Finally, this framing process also enabled the transposition to other movements in very different contexts.

Keywords : social movement – Vietnam War – demonstrations – 1968 – imperialism – students – Northern Ireland

On 17 March and 27 October 1968, the streets of London were swarmed by respectively approximately 25,000 and 100,000¹ British anti-Vietnam War protesters. But despite these impressive numbers, the movement has been neglected. First, it is very often studied as part of the student movement, which has itself often been dismissed as “echoes from the storm” not measuring up to its American or European equivalents (Marwick, 1998, 632). It has also been claimed that the British version started much later than in other countries mainly because it was an insubstantial, fashion-induced copy of the American movement (Bouchier, 1978; Green, 1998; Sandbrook, 2007; Young, 1977).

It is true that British youths never faced the threat of conscription, and that their country was only indirectly involved in the war.² In the light of these facts, how can the massive London demonstrations be explained? Should they be understood as part of a real anti-war movement or just as isolated events? Why did the British activists take to the streets? Was it just for the fun of indulging in collective action or for the sake of rebelling against authority as the clichés often suggest? And more importantly, how did they perceive the conflict in Vietnam and their role as protesters?

In order to answer these questions, it will be necessary to show that the British activists constructed a unique movement which was shaped by the specificities of the British context. Then it will be argued that the issues at stake were reframed to offer a more global vision of the movement as a transnational phenomenon. The final part of this paper will explain how, thanks to the degree of abstraction required by the previous frame transformation to make the movement resonate in different countries, it also enabled its transposition to other issues.

To carry out this study as thoroughly as possible, four different newspapers were studied during a time span of ten years – beginning in 1965 when the United States started sending troops in South Vietnam while bombing the North and ending in 1975 since the fall of Saigon in April is generally considered the end of the war. Because the activists protesting against the Vietnam War in Britain were generally young and mostly students, three student newspapers and one underground magazine were selected to reflect the composition of the movement. First, the *International Times* or IT3 was an alternative cultural magazine with an internationalist focus

¹ These are the numbers generally agreed on by most scholars of the topic (Ali, 2005, 254, 304; Ellis, 1998, 63-64; Green 263, 270; Hoeflerle, 2013, 111, 113; Lent, 2001, 52; Nehring, 2005, 131; Sandbrook, 2007, 533).

² Britain supported the American war effort mainly by providing arms and intelligence, sending experts and advisers, training American soldiers to jungle warfare in Malaysia and building air bases in Thailand. The successive British governments resisted American demands to officially commit military troops.

³ Because of legal restrictions, the newspaper was forced to use the abbreviation as its name (Green, 148).

destined to members of the counter-culture.⁴ It was launched in the autumn 1966 and interrupted its publication at the end of 1973, due to legal proceedings. It was one of the most prominent underground publications of the era in Britain and by 1969 boasted of having a readership of up to 150,000 regulars (14 February 1969, 1). It was written and mainly read by members of the London alternative society. The three student newspapers come from three distinct geographical areas. The *Beaver* was the publication of the London School of Economics (LSE) students' union. Although it was politically unaligned, its location at the heart of the capital, its high proportion of overseas students, and its focus on social sciences all contributed to make it more cosmopolitan and radical than other university publications (Hoeflerle, 2013, 57). *Union News* (UN) was published by the Leeds University Union until 1970 when it merged with *Pact*, the Leeds Polytechnic Student newspaper to become *Leeds Student* (LS). The publication was voted newspaper of the years 1970-71 and 1972-3 in a journalistic competition organised by the National Union of Students. As for *The Glasgow University Guardian* (GUG), it was chosen to exemplify a non-English viewpoint. Both provincial newspapers had no particular political orientation and represented more moderate opinions than the two London papers.

As British as the Beatles – The Specificities of the British Context A Reaction of Moral Indignation

As can be seen from a thorough study of the student and underground newspapers of the time, the main underlying emotion propelling their protest against the Vietnam War was one of moral indignation. It was a reactive negative emotion⁵ caused by the escalation of the conflict following the Gulf of Tonkin incident which led to an increasing American military presence on the ground and a sustained bombing campaign on North Vietnam launched in February 1965. The protesters' interpretation of the situation was woven into a coherent “moral” frame pitting themselves as the defenders of morality having the duty to protest against the immoral actions of the American and British governments. For instance, student journalists lambasted the United States as “a bigoted and morally bankrupt nation” (*Beaver*, 17 February 1966, 3) or the 1964-70 governments of Harold Wilson for lacking “moral fibre” (UN, 2 February 1968, 2), pointing to its support for the

⁴ Here the term is used to refer to the cultural movement of the late 1960s aimed at creating an alternative lifestyle through social and individual liberation and by developing their own parallel institutions. For more information on the British counter-culture see Green, 114.

⁵ The American sociologist Jasper studied the central role of emotions in protest movements. He distinguishes between reactive and affective emotions – the former being a temporary response to events or information while the latter is of a more general and ongoing nature. He also asserts that negative emotions caused by an unfair situation tend to have a stronger motivational effect as regard mobilisation. (Jasper, 401, 414)

war effort as “commercial complicity” (IT, 18 October 1968, 2) and even cheekily denouncing the alleged venality of the Foreign Office by calling it the “Whore Office” (IT, 21 April 1967, 2). Wilson had himself scathingly criticised US foreign policy in South East Asia during the 1950s, which explained the disillusionment and the sense of betrayal felt by the activists. As their indignation turned into outrage, their condemnation became more outspoken and virulent, accusing the American government of committing “a crime [...] against humanity and against civilisation” (UN, 21 November 1969, 3) or lamenting over “the hundreds and thousands of charred corpses hastily buried under Vietnamese clay” (GUG, 2 November 1967, 3). Their diagnostic frame⁷ was aimed at exposing the human toll of the war too often downplayed by the mainstream media, condemning American intervention and the backing of the undemocratic regime of South Vietnam, along with British nominal and material support. Consequently, they demanded immediate British disassociation from American actions, that Britain fulfilled her obligations as a co-signatory of the Geneva Agreement, an imminent ceasefire and support for United Nations peace proposals or any peaceful settlement negotiated with both Vietnamese sides.

This framing of the situation in moral terms was actually part of what connected the British anti-Vietnam War movement to its local context.

Continuity with the British Nuclear Disarmament Movement

When analysing the British anti-Vietnam War movement, it is necessary to take into account its direct predecessor – the nuclear disarmament movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s which set into motion the sustained protest wave of the following years. At the time, the activists’ main argument to support unilateral disarmament was that the decline of British influence and diplomatic prestige which had accompanied the collapse of the Empire could be compensated by taking on a new role as a moral leader and setting an example to the whole world by giving up nuclear weapons.⁸ Hence, British students had their own home-grown source of inspiration and first-hand experience of political protest. By looking at the chronological unfolding of the events on both sides of the Atlantic, it appears that they actually set up a national demonstration against the Vietnam War in February

⁶ Wilson had declared during the 1954 Geneva Convention: “we must not join with nor in any way encourage the anti-Communist crusade in Asia” (Vickers, 2008, 45).

⁷ According to Benford and Snow, diagnostic framing is one of the core framing tasks which allows the protesters to identify the problem in a given situation and to lay the blame on the group perceived to be responsible. Its corollary is prognostic framing, aimed at proposing a solution to the initial problem (Benford and Snow, 2000, 616).

⁸ For more information on the focus of the British nuclear disarmament movement on morality see Burkett, 2010.

1965 – a couple of months before their American counterparts. This protest was called for by the newly created Oxford Vietnam Committee – from which Tariq Ali would later be catapulted onto the national scene – and by the youth wing of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)⁹ and Committee 100 (C100) which were the two main organisations of the anti-nuclear weapons movement (UN, 26 February 1965, 5).¹¹ Although in both countries local actions had already taken place, the first national event in the United States would only be organised two months later by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). On 17 April 1965, more than 15,000 people gathered in Washington (Faber, 1994, 138). Scholars tend to agree on the fact that the nuclear disarmament movement declined after its peak in 1961-1962 when its emblematic Easter marches could conjure up to 150,000 people (Frey, 2008, 39; Burkett, 2012, 628; Wittner, 1993, 190). Although not focused solely on unilateral nuclear disarmament anymore, it seemed that the Easter marches continued to be organised and to muster a significant number of participants by taking on the Vietnam issue. In April 1965, a crowd of approximately 50,000 congregated on Trafalgar Square for the culminating rally of the CND march, which was more than twice the number present at the Washington rally (UN, 20 April 1965, 3). Hence, the existence of former anti-nuclear weapons organisations like CND and C100 might have fastened the emergence of the British anti-War movement by organising the first protest actions before specific organisations were created. The direct action focus of the C100 also provided the activists with a tactical repertoire that they immediately put into practice to organise local protests as when they used non-violent intervention to prevent the Prime Minister from speaking during the church service opening the 1966 Labour Party conference in Brighton. The article relating the event explicitly states that many of the protestors present that day had C100 backgrounds (Beaver, 20 October 1966, 3).

An Internationalist Attitude

Another characteristic that the British anti-Vietnam War movement seems to have inherited from its ancestor is its focus on internationalism. Because of Britain’s unique place on the international scene – her imperial past, her links with the Commonwealth, her special relationship with America and geographic closeness with Europe – led the activists to look in several directions. Thanks to the economic development and technological improvements of the post-war era, mass media communication and transports had been greatly facilitated. As

⁹ The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was a moderate extra-parliamentary organisation launched early in 1958.

¹⁰ The Committee 100 was created by Bertrand Russell who resigned as President of CND in 1960. This group was more radical and committed to the use of direct action tactics.

¹¹ The four-hour protest rallied approximately 840 people outside the American Embassy in London (UN, 26 February 1965, 5).

a result, cross-national links between activists and organisations increased and tightened. The students were able to invite several foreigners to give lectures in their universities, including American officials like Walt W. Rostow who was one of President Johnson's chief advisers on foreign policy (UN, 3 March 1967, 5), American student leaders like Carl Oglesby – SDS President from 1965 to 1966 (UN, 18 November 1966, 9) or even Vietnamese students (UN, 21 October 1966, 4; Beaver, 12 October 1967, 1). Activists also gradually developed a perception of their movement as an international phenomenon as shown by reports describing protest actions across the world published in both student and underground newspapers such as the column “Student World” in Union News. In the year preceding the first transnational mass demonstration in October 1967, the number of news items describing anti-Vietnam War actions across the world soared. Such pieces ranged from how the Vietnam issue monopolised student debates in Chile (UN, 21 October 1966, 7), through draft resistance in Australia or Puerto Rico (UN, 4 November 1966, 4), to violent student riots in Japan (UN, 13 October 1967, 4). The activists' internationalist focus was also made explicit by the International War Crimes Tribunal organised by veterans of the earlier nuclear disarmament movement. In a statement describing his endeavour, the lead organiser Bertrand Russell¹² declared that “World opinion and world action must halt these vast atrocities, or ‘Eichman’ will come to stand for Everyman. ‘We,’ said Eichman, “only provided the lorries” (IT, 14 November 1966, 4). The analogy with the Nuremberg Trials showed the moral imperative to expose American actions in Vietnam before the eyes of citizens across the globe. Russell himself had been corresponding regularly with the North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and had also close relationships with members of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam which facilitated the coordination of anti-war events (Mehta, 2012, 69-72). Protest actions against the Vietnam War had already been synchronised to occur simultaneously in different countries in October 1965 thanks to the links between the Washington-based National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam and various Old and New Left groups in Europe. In Britain, local Communist branches and student societies helped to organise the first actions (UN, 19 February 1965, 2). In France, the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français) also played a key part in the early phase of the movement (Journoud, 2007, pp. 1103-4). The events which took place two years later were of a different nature. On 21 October 1967, protesters gathered in their capitals in unprecedented numbers. About 50,000 people marched on the Pentagon in Washington while the movement reached its peak in Paris with a crowd of 35,000 (Farber, 1994, 220; Jalabert, 1997, 73). In Britain, the movement was also

¹² Bertrand Russell was a famous British pacifist, Nobel-Prize winner and former President of CND. He used his Peace Foundation established in 1963 to set up the tribunal with the help of his close associate Ralph Schoenman. Two sessions were conducted in Sweden and in Denmark during the course of 1967 convening various internationally acclaimed intellectuals such as Jean Paul Sartre. For more information see Mehta, 2012.

stepping up. On Sunday 22 October, 10,000 activists¹³ had answered the call of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign¹⁴ and marched from Trafalgar Square to the American Embassy, through the Australian and New Zealand Embassies to denounce their involvement in Vietnam. New signs and slogans such as North Vietnamese flags and “Victory for the Vietcong” showed that the mood had changed and that the movement had entered a new stage (Beaver, 26 October 1967, 1, 8).

A Global Vision: Transnational Solidarity with “the Oppressed” Towards the Adoption of a Revolutionary Frame

During this new phase of mass protest, the mobilising frame was altered reflecting a more global vision both of the protest movement itself and of the issues at stake. From the very name of the main organisation to the repeated calls for protest, “solidarity” became the activists' leitmotiv. With IT's typical sarcastic tone, an account of the climatic demonstration of 27 October 1968 mocks the relatively peaceful and acquiescent behaviour of the protesters: “We thronged the streets to show our politico-emotional solidarity with the Vietnamese people but instead used the opportunity to express our solidarity with some of the basic thinking of our spiritually and politically mortgaged elders” (IT, 15 November 1968, 3). This shift in focus was also accompanied by a reframing of the issues in a more Manichean fashion. The Vietnamese, as the inhabitants of a rather small and poor nation, were now perceived as fighting a war of liberation from the oppression of one of the most heavily armed superpower metonymically standing for Western imperialist forces protecting and even expanding their own capitalist interests. Therefore, the new dichotomy pitted the oppressed against their evil oppressors and the capitalist system they wished to withstand. Therefore, the prognostic frame evolved into support for a victory of the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam along with a more general inclination to overthrow capitalism. The demonstrators drew an analogy between the struggle of the Vietnamese against the Americans and their own against the perceived flaws of their societies: “such demonstrations give a unique opportunity for progressive forces to come together and demonstrate not only their solidarity with the Vietnamese but their solidarity with each other, a

¹³ The number may seem small compared to previous CND Easter marches, but it actually represented an increase given that the action focused solely on the Vietnam issue. It should also be noted that CND and the old left-wing organisations had refused to support the event and had organised their own alternative demonstration on the previous day. But the turnout was unimpressive due to poor advertising (Beaver, 26 October 1967, 8).

¹⁴ The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was founded in 1966 by Ralph Schoenman – the director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation – showing yet another degree of filiation between the struggle for nuclear disarmament and the one opposing the Vietnam War. It became the leading organisation of the movement in Britain.

solidarity which is ultimately going to form the basis of the only real challenge to the kind of society we live in" (Beaver, 29 February 1968, 3). In their minds, to solve the situation in Vietnam, it was necessary to change the whole system responsible for creating the problem in the first place.

The Allegorical Dimension of the Tet Offensive

In January 1968, the Tet Offensive became a real turning point in the conflict in Vietnam. Although it was technically a defeat for the North Vietnamese forces who were ultimately beaten back, the operation had a significant impact which extended far beyond the military realm. The Vietcong launched a synchronised series of attacks on more than a hundred cities in South Vietnam, even daring to assault the American Embassy in Saigon. By doing so, they exposed the "credibility gap" between the claims of Johnson's administration that the war was being won and the reality of the situation. For the activists, the David and Goliath symbolic of the conflict had potent implications for their movement. "Vietnam," wrote an enthusiastic LSE student less than a month after the Tet episode, "continues to offer a ray of hope that if the extension of Western capitalism can be defeated in South East Asia, then it can be defeated elsewhere" (Beaver, 29 February 1968, 3). The Tet Offensive had a galvanising effect on the movement which reached its peak in the course of the year with the demonstrations of March and October.

The Romantic Ideal of Guerrilla Warfare

Guerrilla fighters became romantic figures in the eyes of the protesters. Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the North Vietnamese forces, was revered as a hero by young activists, as the numerous slogans such as "Ho-Ho-Ho-Che-Minh [sic]" (Beaver, 7 November 1968, 2) or "Long live Ho Chi Minh" (GUG, 2 November 1967, 3) and the eulogy published in IT after his death could testify (IT, 26, September 1969, 5). Guerrilla fighters were not only praised for their revolutionary character but also for their rejection of the rigid top-down hierarchy characterising regular armies. Guerrilla forces were usually made up of small autonomous units which strongly appealed to the protesters' longing for more horizontal, community-oriented structures – which could then be applied to anything. "On this march," a participant in the 27 October 1968 demonstration admirably declared, "there were no stewards and the march was self-organised. People linked arms and kept their own groups together" (UN, 1 November 1968, 5). By praising this new configuration, he was implicitly rejecting the usual structure of traditional demonstrations with stewards in charge of keeping the procession in order. But guerrilla tactics were also transposed to university functioning, as a Union News report about the Medical Faculty of Hanoi University showed. Not only were its facilities dispersed in the jungle to avoid US bombing, but its power configuration was egalitarian and it operated autonomously. The students had taken "the leading role in running the university", performing

various tasks such as "building the roads, houses, laboratories and equipment, growing their food, doing military training" and teaching "methods of sanitation to the neighbouring villages." Relations between students and faculty were described "as man to man" (UN, 13 December 1968, 3). This ideal of a small, self-reliant and egalitarian collective became a model for community organising and was taken on by other movements. The crafting of a global frame had required a degree of abstraction to construct a binary vision of the world, but by doing so it paved the way for a transposition of the frame to other issues.

Bringing the War Home - Transposition of the Frame to Other Issues From External to Internal Issues

Students in Britain started mobilising around external issues which then made them aware of problems more directly relevant to them. Protesting against the Vietnam War enabled many of them to develop a political consciousness. The Leeds students who revolted against the award of an honorary degree to the Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart did it first in light of their opposition to the government's support for American policy in Vietnam, but also because it made them aware of their exclusion from the decision-making process in their university. Consequently, they demanded that "students should have some expression or representation in the selection of honorary degree candidates" (UN, 24 June 1966, 1). In the aftermath of an anti-Vietnam protest at Sussex University when an American official was splattered with red paint, two students were suspended. This incident called to the students' attention their lack of say over disciplinary procedures. One of the two students sanctioned lamented to Beaver: "I was given no chance to say anything in my defence, but was merely told the sentence. Nor was I allowed to hear the evidence against me, or even witnesses names" (29 February 1968, 12). Similar grievances were expressed by the LSE students after the Director Walter Adams decided to close the School to prevent students from occupying the buildings. The students had planned to organise "sanctuary, medical assistance and political discussion" in preparation of the 27 October 1968 demonstration (Beaver, 24 October 1968). But in the event, the authorities were unable to close the facilities, and during the Saturday night it is estimated that a total of 3,000 took some part in the event. Although Vietnam was the original cause of the action, the perceived "arbitrary" and "authoritarian" character of Adams's decision inflamed the protesters and led to a surge in numbers. Most students did not originally support the proposed action, but the announcement of the closure changed the minds of many, including moderates (Beaver, 7 November 1968, 4-10). Each time, the students felt they were being "oppressed" by the administration. From there on, it was easy to portray the administration as another expression of a faceless, oppressive system.

Hence by changing the students' perception of their own situation, the anti-Vietnam War movement catalysed the movement centring on student issues.

Vietnam – a Unifying Issue

A similar process can be seen at work in the extension of the frame to include the people within the “oppressed” category, as opposed to the system and its representatives. Hence, the workers joined in the anti-war protest under the rallying call of solidarity and started organising their own actions, which were also attended by students for the sake of “solidarity” (UN, 28 February 1969, 3). Both groups set up symbolical joint actions, as the blood donor session which took place at the LSE when members of about twenty different trade unions gave around 81 pints of their blood (Beaver, 3 November 1969, 7). The movement against racial discrimination which had progressively emerged in the early 1960s had also drawn analogies between racism experienced at home and imperialism abroad which were seen as part of a global black struggle. Ideological bridges were then constructed to link their fight with the anti-Vietnam War movement. The example of a combined demonstration of the VSC and British Black Panthers in London which claimed to be a “unified action in solidarity of the Indo-Chinese and Trinidadian peoples” focused on unity by depicting the “oppressed” as “people” and as fighting a war of liberation from their racist oppressors represented by the police and their alleged “brutality and racist behaviour” (IT, 8 May 1970, 2). Other movements emerged at the time, spurred by the anti-Vietnam War protest and transformed the frame to adapt to their own concerns, as for example the Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Front whose very names clearly indicate their source of inspiration.

From the Vietnamese Jungles to the Streets of Belfast

This frame was also transferred to another issue, closer to Britain but which still required some alterations to become compatible with the Northern Irish Troubles. The four newspapers studied have all published at least one article comparing more or less explicitly American intervention in Vietnam and the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland. A number of analogies were drawn between both conflicts: the terrain (the maze-like configuration of the streets of Belfast and of Vietnamese jungle), the low morale of the soldiers, the rising rates of drug abuse and desertion among the troops, the guerrilla tactics used by the NLF and the IRA, the lack of popular support for both American and British forces among the local populations, officials inflating the numbers of Vietcong or IRA members arrested, the involvement of ground troops as a temporary solution which gradually dragged both countries into a quagmire, and most of all the denunciation of American and British imperialism (Beaver, February 1973, 12; GUG, 29 October 1971, 6; IT, 28 June 1973, 6-7; LS 15 October 1971, 4). The first article on the subject in the

four newspapers understudy was published about a month after British soldiers were sent to Northern Ireland in August 1969 to quell the intense sectarian rioting which had followed in the wake of the local Civil Rights movement. Both the timing and the title of the piece (“HANDS OFF VIET ULSTER”) indicate that the anti-imperialist frame was applied to Northern Ireland precisely because the British government had chosen to take military action since it echoed “Hands off Vietnam” – one of the first slogans used by the anti-Vietnam War movement (IT, 26 September 1969, 5; UN, 19 February 1965, 2). But the campaign really stepped up in reaction to the introduction of internment without trial during the summer 1971 and the allegations of torture experienced by the internees at the hands of British soldiers. The leaders of the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement came to give numerous lectures and speeches on the British mainland, as for instance, when Bernadette Devlin and Eamon McCann spoke in front of a packed theatre at the LSE in October 1971. They sought to take advantage of the analogy with the anti-Vietnam War movement to point out the paradoxical discrepancy of protest against both issues: “LSE students had a fine record of concern and action over many distant issues such as Vietnam but that once the situation was closer to home the student movement as such had done little to show evidence of its solidarity with the oppressed people of Northern Ireland” (Beaver, 28 October 1971, 2). Again, the very use of the same terms (“solidarity”, “oppressed people”) belonging to the same anti-imperialist frame, showed that the activists were willing to oversimplify the religious, political and social entanglement of the Northern Irish conflict in order to raise awareness and convince the students to join in the protest. The fact that they resorted to drawing comparisons with such a far-away land to interest the students in what was happening in their own country, could perhaps indicate that Vietnam War had by then become some kind of universal allegory of the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors.

Conclusion

The British anti-Vietnam War movement never reached the scale and the intensity of its American equivalent, but it does not follow that it should be neglected or dismissed as a pale imitation, reduced to the catchy slogans of rebellious students or lost among the sound and fury of the 1968 demonstrations. Thanks to the preceding nuclear disarmament movement, British protesters were actually early birds. They made use of its pre-existing organisations to build a coherent campaign mobilising around a sentiment of moral injustice at the actions of the American and British governments and focusing on making international connections. They managed to enlist mass support by reframing the issues at stake in a new anti-imperialist frame aimed at arousing solidarity with the oppressed in their fight against their oppressors. The guerrilla fighters of the NLF were acclaimed as heroes after the breakthrough of the Tet Offensive of early 1968 which was interpreted by the protesters as a proof that a popular movement could triumph against the forces

of Western capitalism. Finally, by protesting against external issues, British students started applying the same frame to their own situation and became aware of new issues concerning them more directly such as their lack of representation which catalysed their own separate movement for university reform. Similar processes occurred with the feminist and LGBT movements. Bridges were also created to rally to their cause other groups which were fighting their own struggles such as black people or workers. The Vietnam War became a potent symbol of the struggle between Manichean forces and its mobilising potential was widely used as a unifying issue. So much so that it was even used to propel people in Britain to protest against the involvement of the army in their own country in Northern Ireland.

This very example quickly exposed the limits of such analogies. Although several protests against internment and military presence took place both on the local and national scale, they failed to attract as much support as the mobilisation against the Vietnam War and to materialise into a fully-fledged movement. If for a while, the radical students, left-wing activists and members of the counter-culture could paint the IRA as romantic heroes defending the oppressed Catholic minority, the bombing of mainland Britain in the 1970s soon crackled the painting.

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