




COMMENT

Humanitarian and Youth Activism across Time and Space

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Abstract

This essay engages with Daniel Laqua’s book *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023) from the perspective of a historian of both humanitarianism and youth. This short reflection therefore focuses primarily on the book’s engagement with the topic of humanitarianism, before discussing an understated, albeit important, cross-cutting theme of the book: the significance of youth in transnational activism. It highlights a number of features of Laqua’s book, for instance the merits of adopting a broad chronological approach. At the same time, the essay also uses the space to present a number of reflections on activism, from questions about the generational appeal of particular causes to the way in which particular figures might spark activism. It ends with some thoughts about the source base used to write such histories of activism.

Daniel Laqua’s *Activism across Borders since 1870* is an ambitious volume, which moves beyond studies that trace specific forms of activism (such as the peace movement or the women’s movement) across time and space, seeking to set “multiple causes and campaigns in relation to one another” and analyse “them within an overarching framework”.¹ An engaging read, the volume is richly illustrated with examples from Laqua’s own research as well as supplying pointers to other specialist studies. Indeed, Laqua’s collegiality as a scholar is evidenced both by the strong engagement with other secondary works and an extensive list of acknowledgements that testify to his own academic networks across borders. This brief reflection focuses on the book’s engagement with the topic of humanitarianism in Chapter Two, before discussing an understated, albeit important, cross-cutting theme of the book: the significance of youth in transnational activism. It ends with some thoughts about the source base used to write such histories of activism.

¹Daniel Laqua, *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023).

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Laqua's long *durée* approach, covering a time span of 150 years, allows him to make connections and note similarities between activist and humanitarian movements across time as well as across borders. Chapter Two of *Activism Across Borders since 1870* focuses specifically on humanitarianism against a backdrop of war and peace. The chapter offers a clearly written synthesis of the rich secondary literature that has emerged in recent years, including the strong interest taken in the evolution of humanitarianism by political scientists as well as historians.² For instance, Laqua identifies connections between, on the one hand, politically motivated inter-war humanitarianism, such as support for Republican Spain in the Spanish Civil War or aid for China in the Sino-Japanese War, and, on the other hand, later aid efforts that foregrounded political affinities, for example solidary movements for Nicaragua in the 1980s. My own research into humanitarian famine relief underscores the value of imposing analytical–historical frameworks to make sense of developments across a long time frame.³

Of course, as Laqua notes in his book's conclusion, such continuities and trends do “not obliterate the need to acknowledge the historical constellations that generated specific campaigns”.⁴ Moreover, this is not to deny change over time, for much recent scholarship has proposed alternative and sometimes competing periodizations of humanitarianism. Laqua, however, highlights that, contrary to some perceptions, often “narratives of impartiality coexisted with expressions of solidarity” across humanitarian action; accordingly, he largely steers clear of a chronological approach in this chapter.⁵ That said, Laqua does discuss the shift to a more political and “activist humanitarianism”, also variously described as an “expressive” or “populist” humanitarianism from around 1970.⁶ This form of humanitarianism rejected Red Cross-style neutrality, but also proved distinct from expressions of solidarity rooted in particular political ideologies. Such a change is encapsulated by Médecins Sans Frontières and its commitment to “speaking out”, even accepting expulsion from its famine relief work in Ethiopia in 1985, rather than remain silent on the abuses of aid. There are, too, insightful remarks in the conclusion about how we might examine particular tropes or symbols that have been regularly repeated and reused over time, such as the use of the globe and joined hands to express global solidarity and activism. When activists deploy such symbolism, then, they may consciously or unconsciously echo previous campaigns. Aware of the long histories and legacies of such symbolism, they rely on

²Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY, 2011); Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann, and Katharina Stornig (eds), *Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics and the Power of Representation* (Cham, 2020).

³Norbert Götz, Georgina Brewis, and Steffen Werther, *Humanitarianism in the Modern World: The Moral Economy of Famine Relief* (Cambridge, 2020).

⁴Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 217.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶On “expressive humanitarianism”, see Götz *et al.*, *Humanitarianism in the Modern World*, esp. pp. 24–25 and 57–61. On “populist humanitarianism”, see Kevin O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment: The Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 156–174. Cf. Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, pp. 81–83.

contemporary audiences to bring their own understanding of the current context to shape how the messages are received and understood.

At multiple points, the book introduces the varied roles of young people in transnational activism, ranging from school children to higher education students, as activists across borders. From young people's participation in nineteenth-century famine relief efforts to 1960s student anti-apartheid activism or school strikes for the environment in the twenty-first century, its striking how often, and in what different ways, it is children and young people that are most engaged. As Laqua notes, faraway children in need had figured prominently in humanitarian appeals since the nineteenth century, but the use of children by humanitarian organizations proliferated after World War I, with their images often deployed to pull the heartstrings of prospective donors, and this is encapsulated in the 1919 creation of the Save the Children Fund in Britain.⁷ Young people and children are also seen in more active roles as fundraisers, campaigners, marchers, and protesters. In the 1960s, UN campaigns such as the Freedom from Hunger Campaign provided opportunities for grass-roots engagement, often through youth groups and schools.⁸ My own work has highlighted that, even when they did not physically cross borders themselves, students at universities and colleges in the UK connected to a range of transnational causes, partly through their interactions with international organizations and campaigns, such as European Student Relief in the 1920s, World University Service in the 1950s, or Third World First in the 1970s.⁹

Indeed, it is important to understand each generation's veneration of such high-profile transnational activists as Nelson Mandela or Greta Thunberg by young people *themselves*. For example, Mandela was repeatedly honoured through the naming of numerous student union buildings from the 1960s and the singing of "Free Nelson Mandela" by The Special AKA at the end of student discos in the 1980s. Meanwhile, climate activist Greta Thunberg's values are celebrated and repackaged for an even younger age group in numerous picture books and in pop music from the late 2010s, including the Swedish singer Frida Green's 2019 song "What Would Greta Do?".¹⁰ Three per cent of the purchase price of Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico's 2019 book *Greta and the Giants* goes to Greenpeace, reflecting the consistent desire over time for some NGOs to identify their cause with celebrity activists and mediators. In the 1980s, too, aid agencies fell over themselves in an

⁷Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 71. On Save the Children, see in particular Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2021).

⁸Anna Bocking-Welch, "Youth against Hunger: Service, Activism and the Mobilisation of Young Humanitarians in 1960s Britain", *European Review of History*, 23:1–2 (2016), pp. 154–170.

⁹Georgina Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and Beyond, 1880–1980* (New York, 2014), esp. pp. 52–58, 169–173, 179–186.

¹⁰For these songs, see The Special AKA, "Free Nelson Mandela" (single, 2 Tone, 1984); Frida Green, "What Would Greta Do?" (single, Cardiac Records, 2019). For a list of British students' involvement in anti-apartheid, see "Students against Apartheid", *Forward to Freedom: The History of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement 1959–1994*. Available at: <https://www.aamarchives.org/who-was-involved/students.html>; last accessed 9 January 2024. To cite just two examples of publications presenting Thunberg to young audiences, see Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara and Anke Weckmann, *Little People, Big Dreams: Greta Thunberg* (London, 2020); and Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico, *Greta and the Giants: Inspired by Greta Thunberg's Stand to Save the World* (London, 2019).

effort to get close to Irish pop-star-turned-humanitarian-fundraiser Bob Geldof, recognizing he could appeal to a constituency of young people that was “not ours”, in the words of a Christian Aid report.¹¹ There is, perhaps, more research to be done examining the generational and cross-generational appeal of particular figures and causes, the role of the media, and the engagement of voluntary organizations with this process.

As Laqua states at the opening of his book, “neither global interdependence nor transnational activism is a recent phenomenon”, and this has increasingly been recognized among contemporary activists and humanitarian practitioners.¹² Indeed, Laqua draws attention to the way in which individual humanitarian actors and organizations often seek to craft narratives about their own pasts, elevate particular historical moments or emphasize the novelty of specific campaigns, as well as the ways in which academic research is increasingly seeking to relate to the concerns of present-day activists.¹³ Activists have sometimes preferred to see “their own moment as exceptional and thus standing ‘outside’ of time”. Yet, Laqua concludes that “while particular years loom large in both popular memory and historiography, any moment can be a valid starting point for exploring transnational connections”.¹⁴ One of the challenges of all such scholarship is the continued vulnerability, globally, of the archives and records of activist networks, causes and campaigns, and charities and NGOs.¹⁵ Important studies such as *Activism across Borders since 1870* draw attention to the value of both historical and more contemporary records, whether retained in-house by organizations or deposited in research libraries. In so doing, we might encourage better preservation and improved access to a significant source base for better examining European social, cultural, and political history as well as understanding today’s globalized world.

¹¹Götz *et al.*, *Humanitarianism in the Modern World*, p. 135.

¹²Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 1.

¹³On this subject, see Eleanor Davey and Kim Scriven, “Humanitarian Aid in the Archives: Introduction”, *Disasters*, 39:2 (2015), pp. 113–128; Bertrand Taithe and John Borton, “History, Memory and ‘Lessons Learnt’ for Humanitarian Practitioners”, *European Review of History*, 23:1–2 (2015), pp. 210–224.

¹⁴Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, pp. 319–320.

¹⁵Georgina Brewis, Angela Ellis Paine, Irene Hardill, Rose Lindsey, and Rob Macmillan, “Co-curation: Archival Interventions and Voluntary Sector Records”, *Area*, 55:3 (2023), pp. 332–339.