



COMMENT

Transnational Activism through the Prism of Anarchism, and Vice Versa

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Abstract

Chapter Four of Daniel Laqua's *Activism across Borders*, on "Class, Revolution and Social Justice", opens stimulating avenues for reflection with its cross-partisan approach, over an ambitious chronological span – from the post-1848 wave of revolutionary exile to the contemporary global justice movement. From the perspective of a historian of pre-1914 transnational anarchism, this brief review essay considers three prominent aspects of this chapter: historiographic perspectives on socialist activism; the modalities of transnational activism; and borders and boundaries.

Daniel Laqua notes in *Activism across Borders* that "[t]here cannot be a comprehensive study of transnational activism, and the present book constitutes just one possible history of transnational activism: it is well possible to imagine a study on the same subject with very different examples and emphases".¹ While the scope and conceptual possibilities of the notion of transnational activism justify this claim, *Activism across Borders* is undoubtedly a landmark contribution and an essential synthesis, which impresses through the quality of its primary and secondary research, its sophisticated theoretical framework, and its deft writing. The consideration and confrontation of a wide range of transnational movements, ideologies, and activists is particularly fruitful from a theoretical and methodological perspective; Chapter Four, on "Class, Revolution and Social Justice", similarly deploys a cross-partisan approach, which opens stimulating avenues for reflection, over an ambitious chronological span – from the post-1848 wave of revolutionary exile to the contemporary global justice movement. Three prominent aspects of this chapter are considered in this brief review essay, largely informed by my perspective as a historian of pre-1914 transnational anarchism: historiographic perspectives on socialist activism; the modalities of transnational activism; and borders and boundaries.

¹Daniel Laqua, *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023), pp. 34–35.

Some Historiographical Perspectives on Socialist Activisms

Activism across Borders can be situated in a set of recent works offering renewed thinking on progressive and socialist internationalisms, informed by new labour history, the transnational turn, as well as “history from below” approaches, paying attention to actors and practices, to the modalities and scales of organizations, and to activist cultures as well as revolutionary breakthroughs. Laqua’s book thus sits alongside recent publications such as Nicolas Delalande’s *Struggle and Mutual Aid*, recent edited volumes on *Transatlantic Radicalism* and on *Leftist Internationalisms*, as well as larger publication projects such as the *Histoire globale des socialismes* and the *Cambridge History of Socialism*.² Like most of these studies, *Activism across Borders* covers “the left” and looks beyond individual movements and partisan divisions, emphasizing the fluidity and solidarity that existed between the various progressive currents until at least the late nineteenth century.

However, *Activism across Borders* also examines a wider range of mobilizations. In doing so, it restores the historical unity and complexity truncated by disciplinary and thematic siloes, since a significant amount of overlap or, indeed, solidarity connected the causes considered in the book – thus, for instance, with “Empire and Activism” (Chapter One), “The Politics of Gender and Sexuality” (Chapter Five), and “The Rights of Others” (Chapter Seven). While, as Laqua points out, socialists’ initial failure to denounce and organize against imperialism per se represented an important boundary of late nineteenth-century internationalism,³ the pioneering (if often fragmented) transnational engagement of radicals (including anarchists and syndicalists) in national emancipation struggles, from a relatively early date, is also increasingly recognized.⁴ Similarly, anarchists theorized and practiced less normative understandings of gender and sexuality from the movement’s very early days, with international icons such as Louise Michel or Emma Goldman acting as trailblazers in this respect, even as exile and migration further obscured the participation of less prominent women.⁵ In another area, transnational campaigns for the defence of persecuted anarchists have been important catalysts in the emergence of

²Nicolas Delalande, *Struggle and Mutual Aid: The Age of Worker Solidarity* (New York, [2019] 2023); Frank Jacob and Mario Keßler (eds), *Transatlantic Radicalism: Socialist and Anarchist Exchanges in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Liverpool, 2021); Michele Di Donato and Mathieu Fulla (eds), *Leftist Internationalisms: A Transnational Political History* (London, 2023); Jean-Numa Ducange, Razmig Keucheyan, and Stéphanie Roza (eds), *Histoire globale des socialismes, XIXe–XXIe siècles* (Paris, 2021); Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2022).

³Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 152.

⁴See, for instance, the classic by Steven Hirsch and Lucien Van der Walt (eds), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution* (London, 2010), and, more recently, the conference “Working-Class Anti-imperialism and the Global Left: New Directions of Study” held at the University of Bristol, UK, in 2023. Available at: <https://sslh.org.uk/2023/07/14/working-class-anti-imperialism-and-the-global-left-new-directions-of-study/>; last accessed 5 January 2024.

⁵Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

contemporary conceptions of human rights.⁶ Transnational activism, as defined and explored throughout the book, is therefore a historically cohesive notion, and Laqua's concept of connectedness plays out on multiple scales. In return, this broad thematic angle and the four lenses used by Laqua as red threads to comprehend the history of transnational activism are helpful in thinking outwards and challenging assumptions of movement singularity. Taking, once again, the example of anarchism, the lens of "ambivalence" captures the anarchists' uneven or indeed self-contradictory record in the above areas, and invites us to explore commonalities with other forms of transnational activism. Undertaking and encouraging such comparisons is a major contribution to the field of transnational history.

The Modalities of Transnational Activism

The inclusion of anarchism among the movements explored in Chapter Four is both self-evident and noteworthy. Indeed, while anarchism has often been sidelined in nationally focused histories of socialism, the transnational turn in the humanities and social sciences has done a great deal over the last two decades for it to be recognized as a "the world's first and most widespread transnational movement organized from below and without formal political parties" – a quote by José C. Moya, which, tellingly, has now become canonical.⁷ At a basic level, this inclusion means recognizing the movement's progressive orientation, which might have been consensual back in the ecumenical period of 1870s–1880s socialism, but became contentious soon afterwards due to the wave of anarchist-inspired political violence that peaked in the 1880s–1890s, as well as the movement's enduring image problem. As a highly versatile historian who has written previously on the global cross-partisan protests against the execution of Catalan anarchist and syndicalist Francisco Ferrer in 1909, and on the journalistic production of German socialist and anarchist exiles in London, Laqua is indeed in a propitious place to highlight how foregrounding anarchism enriches the methodological exploration of transnational networks and their functioning.⁸

His concept of transience thus captures the entanglement of informal networks and formal organizations. Rightly starting with exilic settings, Laqua charts a host of mobilizations, from coalition building, campaigns, everyday and commemorative gatherings, attempts at setting up Internationals and federations, without neglecting the remarkable power of individual activists. Nor is transnationalism equated with

⁶Mark Bray, "Beyond and Against the State: Anarchist Contributions to Human Rights History and Theory", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 10:3 (2019), pp. 323–338.

⁷José C. Moya, "Anarchism", in Akria Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (New York, 2009), p. 39.

⁸Daniel Laqua, "Freethinkers, Anarchists and Francisco Ferrer: The Making of a Transnational Solidarity Campaign", in *European Review of History*, 21:4 (2014), pp. 467–484; *idem*, "Political Contestation and Internal Strife: Socialist and Anarchist German Newspapers in London, 1878–1910", in Constance Bantman and Ana Claudia Suriana da Silva (eds), *The Foreign Political Press in Nineteenth-Century London: Politics from a Distance* (London, 2018), pp. 135–154.

individual and collective mobility, but more broadly with communication and a “culture of internationalism”. This comprehensive delineation of the many channels of activism has the added merit of eschewing a teleological focus on narratives of institutionalization and breakthroughs revolving around blunt verdicts of success and failure. The focus on the pre-1914 arduous and often thwarted efforts to organize supranationally, despite the range of structures created and ideological affiliations surveyed in the chapter (such as Internationals, Trade unions, cooperatives, etc.) stresses the failures and limitations of these endeavours. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the “culture of internationalism [...] maintained through publications, educational ventures and cultural activities”⁹ and, for the more recent period, on agitation and campaigns, paints a rich and more nuanced picture of social justice activism.

Border and Boundaries

Positing the defining and multifaceted importance of nations and nationalism is essential to comprehend the complexities of transnational activism. This is in keeping with Simon McDonald’s cautioning against the risk that “transnational history may become the handmaiden of globalisation” by delivering celebratory narratives of unfettered and unproblematic progress beyond the national.¹⁰ *Activism across Borders* reiterates and applies these principles. In September 2023, a roundtable / launch event at Birbeck, University of London, provided us with stimulating discussions on the borders and boundaries that are key determinants of transnational activism.¹¹ My final remarks in this review dossier are therefore an invitation for Daniel Laqua to reiterate some thoughts on these points.

Chapter Four opens with an area of acute ambivalence for transnational activists on the left: the thorny question of the links between nationhood and transnational solidarity. The example of anarchism nonetheless evidences the productive entanglement of national and international scales. Activists’ engagement with their own patriotism and national affiliations created original cultures of internationalism and sophisticated expressions of national identities,¹² new imaginaries of the national and a borderless world predicated on ideals of “federalism, the devolution of power, self-determination or self-government, autonomy and the right of secession”, as well as a record of thought and activism about national emancipation that remains influential today.¹³ Could one say that scholars are now paying enough

⁹Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 150.

¹⁰Simon Macdonald, “Transnational History: A Review of Past and Present Scholarship”, UCL Centre for Transnational History (2013), p. 11. Available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/centre-transnational-history/sites/centre-transnational-history/files/simon_macdonald_tns_review_0.pdf, last accessed 10 January 2024.

¹¹“Rethinking Histories of Transnational Activism”, held at the Centre for the Study of Internationalism, Birkbeck, University of London, 20 September 2023.

¹²See for instance Constance Bantman and Pietro Di Paola, “Banal and Everyday (Inter) Nationalism: French and Italian Anarchist Exiles in London, 1870s–1914”, *Nations and Nationalism*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 176–190.

¹³Jose A. Gutiérrez and Ruth Kinna, “Introduction: Anarchism and the National Question – Historical, Theoretical and Contemporary Perspectives”, *Nations and Nationalism*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 121–130, esp. 123, 125–127.

attention to the “rootedness” of these cosmopolitan activists?¹⁴ And, if that is the case, are there nonetheless areas that require further attention when it comes to the interplay of the national and the international in activism?

A second aspect concerns relations between transnationalism, the state, and the nation. Borders have acted as powerful boundaries, but also as catalysts for transnational activism. As the chapter underlines, progressive mobilizations do not operate in a vacuum. They are shaped by and, in return, shape state-led repression: anarchism famously spurred the development of national and supranational policing,¹⁵ which, in turn, became a focus for anarchist activism. The interplay with reactionary transnational movements must also be considered in connection, even as similar processes of connection and organization unfold across the ideological spectrum. The Spanish Civil War is a case in point here, as stressed by Laqua. Is there scope for a more systematic examination and entangled history of these competing forms and visions of globalization?

Thirdly, *Activism across Borders* focuses on European movements, with significant forays beyond these borders. What are the challenges of writing on such a large scale – but one that is also limited when writing about movements with an increasingly global consciousness and field of action? These questions have already generated substantial debates, not least in the field of anarchist studies, which has seen vigorous engagement with decolonizing perspectives.¹⁶ They also remain crucially important, including for contemporary activists. As *Activism across Borders* amply demonstrates, these are certainly not strictly theoretical concerns and questionings.

¹⁴Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹⁵Richard Bach Jensen, *The Battle against Anarchist Terrorism: An International History, 1878–1934* (Cambridge, 2013).

¹⁶See for instance Laura Galián, *Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Anarchism in the South of the Mediterranean* (Cham, 2020); and Raymond Craib and Barry Maxwell (eds), *No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries: Global Anarchisms* (Oakland, CA, 2015).