



INTRODUCTION

Activism across Borders since 1870: A Review Dossier

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Abstract

This essay introduces a review dossier dedicated to Daniel Laqua's *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023). The dossier features comments by four historians – Constance Bantman, Georgina Brewis, Nicole Robertson, and Mark Hurst – as well as a response from Laqua himself. Laqua's book provides a framework for studying different forms of transnational activism in connection to one another.

Transnational activism is ubiquitous. We are surrounded by, perhaps even actively participating in, a multitude of transnational causes – campaigns against climate change, against war, against the actions of particular governments or private firms, for the sovereignty of certain polities, for the neglected rights of marginalized or vulnerable groups. Few activists need to be convinced of the relevance of transnational activism in our twenty-first-century lives, but some may be startled by the extent to which their movements draw on an arsenal of ideas, tools, and narratives that were developed over a century ago.

In *Activism across Borders since 1870*, Daniel Laqua takes stock of the history of border-crossing activist causes and movements, which he defines as “a variety of efforts to effect political, social or cultural change through practical or symbolic action”.¹ Laqua's book surveys a vast, growing, and heterogenous scholarship, but it is not “just” a survey of other people's writings: his own archival research informs his analysis and conclusions throughout.

Building on the body of scholarship of transnationalism and internationalism, Laqua convincingly locates political and social activism within the world of border-crossing flows of ideas, people, and objects, which, at various points, are bypassing, strengthening, or undermining national processes.² As he shows, “as

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

²See e.g. the introduction to the *Past and Present* supplement on “Transnationalism and Contemporary Global History”: Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter, “Introduction”, *Past and Present*, 218:S8, (2013), pp. 7–28, 10.

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long as there have been borders, activists have sought to cross them”.³ His focus on activism “in and beyond Europe” generates a broad geographical framework that goes beyond the continent itself and reaches into European empires and Europeans’ presence in and impact on a range of international projects.

Laqua’s most important (though to some readers perhaps controversial) intervention is to bring a range of seemingly disparate activist causes into the same frame of reference, and thereby to foreground shared histories of politically amorphous expressions of activism. Whereas the historiography of international movements often points to the mould set by late-eighteenth-century liberal campaigners for abolitionism, *Activism across Borders since 1870* resists the temptation to separate morally righteous or “liberal” causes from the rest and demonstrates that activists operated across the political spectrum. Without losing sight of particular contexts, personnel, or chronologies, Laqua identifies four features – “connectedness”, “ambivalence”, “marginality”, and “transience” – shared by the variety of activist movements since 1870, and thereby pinpoints a core of shared assumptions and a “set of tools and approaches to politics”.⁴

As a result, *Activism across Borders since 1870* is able to contribute to and intervene in ongoing debates and more specialist historiographies on particular national contexts, movements, and activists. This review dossier brings Laqua’s work into dialogue with the research perspectives of four historians, Constance Bantman, Georgina Brewis, Nicole Robertson, and Mark Hurst. As their pieces will show, each of the authors has been able to find their particular fields of activism – anarchism (Bantman), student activism and humanitarianism (Brewis), feminism and workers’ rights (Robertson), and human rights (Hurst) – represented and well-contextualized in Laqua’s study. Their contributions to this dossier bring out the particularities of different activist causes, but also the relevance of Laqua’s analytical framework and observations on shared features for making sense of their histories and connections between them.

Particular activist movements differ in the extent to which they provided platforms for particular national agendas or competing national loyalties or faced restrictions by particular states’ government policies. Their precise periodizations vary, as does the nature of their source base, which can be as transient as the movements themselves. Moreover, activists themselves may not always agree with being lumped together with other activist movements ranging politically from left to right: as Laqua observes and Brewis reminds us, movements often developed their own narratives about their past and the novelty of their campaigns. Nonetheless, Laqua demonstrates that actors’ own categories need to be studied within a broader analytical framework. *Activisms across Borders since 1870* shows us that different transnational causes are best understood as part of a much broader, deeper, and richer history that far extends beyond the narratives of particular strands of or settings for activism.

³Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.