

Women, workers, and women workers: Connections and tensions in transnational activism

ROBERTSON, Nicole <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9504-146X>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/33555/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

ROBERTSON, Nicole (2024). Women, workers, and women workers: Connections and tensions in transnational activism. *International Review of Social History*.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>



COMMENT

Women, Workers, and Women Workers: Connections and Tensions in Transnational Activism

Nicole Robertson 

Sheffield Hallam University, Department of Culture and Media, Sheffield, United Kingdom
E-mail: n.robertson@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

Daniel Laqua's *Activism across Borders since 1870* is an impressive contribution to scholarly research on transnational activism. It provides a detailed and innovative study of the connections but also the divisions between individuals, groups, and organizations. Laqua's approach and analysis interrogate the connectedness, transience, ambivalence, and marginality of transnational activism. He explores the complex relationship of campaigners, campaigns, and causes that crossed national boundaries, building a rich analysis of these interactions.

This contribution engages with *Activism across Borders* with a particular emphasis on women, workers, and women workers. This perspective offers an analysis at the intersection of women's history and labour history. Among the themes considered are: campaigns that forged partnerships and amplified voices; women's transnational activism and national borders; and the divisions and differences among activists campaigning to improve working conditions.

Daniel Laqua's *Activism across Borders since 1870* is a major contribution to the history of individuals, groups, and organizations whose networks, collaborations, and activities transcended national boundaries. It provides a fascinating and wide-ranging account of how we might make sense of transnational activism. Transnational history is a rich area of empirical studies and methodological discussion that has shifted emphasis and focus on a whole range of connections and *Activism across Borders* is an important contribution to this.¹ The book

¹For example, C.A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History", *American Historical Review*, 111:5 (2006), pp. 1440–1464; Patricia Clavin, "Time, Manner, Place: Writing Modern History in Global, Transnational and International Contexts", *European History Quarterly*, 40:4 (2010), pp. 624–640; Simon Macdonald, "Transnational History: A Review of Past and Present Scholarship", UCL Centre for Transnational History (2013). Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/centre-transnational-history/sites/centre-transnational-history/files/simon_macdonald_tns_review.pdf; last accessed 2 February 2024. Ann Taylor Allen and © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

provides fresh insights into transnational campaigns and campaigners by examining multiple causes and tracking “how different principles, objectives and forms of collective action intersected or collided”.² It examines in detail different patterns of interactions and asks how campaigners sought to create “bonds as part of their quest for political and social change”, including the inherent limitations of such ventures.³

As the introduction notes, the book builds on many years of researching, teaching, and reflecting on the themes examined. Laqua uses this knowledge to unpick specific case studies and explore wide-ranging broader campaigns relating to anti-slavery and anticolonialism, humanitarian aid, pacifism, socialism and social justice, feminism and sexual equality, anti-racism, human rights, and environmentalism. Of key importance to this study is the format: “rather than focusing on the high tide of a campaign, or raising the question of their success, the approach has been to look at different forms of activism as parts of a wider phenomenon”.⁴ In doing so, transnational activism is understood as a “thread running through European social, cultural and political history”.⁵

Four analytical lenses are used in this study: connectedness; transience; ambivalence; and marginality. These categories of analysis provide important tools to map the intricacies of individuals, networks, and causes. Based on my own work at the intersection of women’s history and labour history, I will offer some comments on what this book tells us about women, workers, and women workers,⁶ suggesting how it might promote further discussion of these topics. In doing so, I will consider campaigns that forged partnerships and amplified voices, followed by an examination of women’s transnational activism and national borders, and, finally, remarks on the divisions and differences among activists campaigning to improve working conditions.

Forging Partnerships and Amplifying Voices

One analytical lens used in Laqua’s book is “marginality”. As the book highlights, transnational bonds enabled “actors who were being marginalized at the national level” to form partnerships that “amplified their voices”. Thus, “transnational activism had particular potentials and roles precisely because it was not confined to the national arena and its existing hierarchies”.⁷ One of the case studies where this can be applied is the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). As Laqua

Anne Cova, “Introduction: Transnational Women’s Activism”, *Women’s History Review*, 32:2 (2023), pp. 165–171.

²Daniel Laqua, *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023), p. 2.

³*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶See e.g. Nicole Robertson, “Women at Work: Activism, Feminism and the Rise of the Female Office Worker during the First World War and Its Immediate Aftermath”, in Keith Laybourn and John Shepherd (eds), *Labour and Working-Class Lives: Essays to Celebrate the Life and Work of Chris Wrigley* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 172–193.

⁷Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 14.

points out, the foundations of this organization lie in the reticence of the International Council of Women (ICW) “to engage in active campaigning on women’s suffrage”.⁸ This is not to say that members of the ICW failed to engage with this cause or that activists within the two organizations did not work together. *Activism across Borders* examines how activities by ICW members such as “information gathering could be a form of activism”.⁹ Despite being separate organizations, there were many personal links between activists within the IWSA and the ICW, as Laqua notes with regard to activists such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Aletta Jacobs.

Laqua illustrates how “the suffrage cause sometimes overshadows other concerns that figured prominently in the women’s movement”, engaging with work that has explored different facets of feminist campaigning.¹⁰ The IWSA was a pro-suffrage organization from its formal foundation in 1904, but was already broadening its focus to consider other issues affecting women, including employment rights, prior to World War I. The book’s emphasis on the role of transnational bonds in amplifying activists’ voices has particular relevance to the campaigns for equal pay, which I have explored in my own research. For example, members of the IWSA’s “Equal Pay and Right to Work” committee provided summarized reports in the Association’s journal, *Jus Suffragii*, on the employment position of women in different countries, bringing these to the attention of activists. They would highlight both general demands for equal pay and developments in specific areas such as in the teaching profession.¹¹ The purpose of this action, as noted by the committee, was “that wage-earning women, whose problems are so similar in so many countries, may gain strength by the exchange of this information”.¹² Congresses provided an important space for individual activists to share details of developments within their country to advance women’s rights to an international network of campaigners, an exchange that could have mutual benefits. For example, in 1920, Hanna Tschikalenko Keller, the first Ukrainian woman to speak at the IWSA’s International Congress, cited important developments in employment opportunities in her home country, noting that “[a]ll posts in the Civil Service are accessible to women, and we have the same pay as men have” and that women occupied several important posts in the Ministry of Public Education and other Ministries. She emphasized how: “The results obtained in the Ukraine must not be attributed to the efforts of Ukrainian women alone. It is one of those conquests the credit of which must be given to all women who have worked for our common ideal”.¹³ In this way, creating a shared sense of solidarity between activists was linked to the exchange of information that in other spaces was more likely to be

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.* For one example of such work, see Julie Carlier, “Forgotten Transnational Connections and National Contexts: An ‘Entangled History’ of the Political Transfers That Shaped Belgian Feminism, 1890–1914”, *Women’s History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 503–522.

¹¹For example, “Some Notes on Equal Pay and the Position of Women in Industry”, *Jus Suffragii*, 15:5 (February 1921), pp. 68–69; and “Meetings of the I.W.S.A. Board of Officers, ‘Equal Pay and Right to Work Committee’”, *Jus Suffragii*, 15:11 (August 1921), p. 162.

¹²“Meetings of the I.W.S.A. Board of Officers, ‘Equal Pay and Right to Work Committee’”, p. 162.

¹³“Ukraine. Report Presented to the Eighth Congress”, *Jus Suffragii*, 14:10 (August 1920), p. 178.

ignored. The lens of marginality put forward in *Activism across Borders* provides a framework to explore these interactions.

Women, Transnational Activism, and National Borders

Activism across Borders shows how we can relate the transnational to the national and how state borders have framed the women's movement. It notes that attendance at international congresses often went hand in hand with expressions of national loyalties, building on the formative work of Leila Rupp.¹⁴ As Laqua highlights, "for many activists, recognition within the national sphere and the ability to speak the language of nationhood were vitally important".¹⁵ He considers how the divisions during World War I are a key example of this, and engages with Alison Fell and Ingrid Sharp's work, which has highlighted a diverse range of responses to the conflict from within the women's movement.¹⁶ Laqua traces reactions to the war from activists in the IWSA and ICW, and considers the reactions of those who went on to establish the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).¹⁷ The rebuilding of transnational ties in the post-war world permits an exploration of how ideas of sisterhood, which had transcended national boundaries, were challenged during a time of world crisis, and the reaction of transnational activists to this. In so doing, the book adds an important dimension to work analysing how the transnational can be restricted by the government policy of individual states.¹⁸

The book also acknowledges the "ever-more diverse landscape" faced by feminist organizations in the post-war world,¹⁹ and considers key questions about the impact of this on transnational links among activists. The patterns discussed in *Activism across Borders since 1870* can be mapped onto divisions between individual campaigners arising from changing priorities as equality legislation developed at different rates in different countries after the war. This analysis can be applied to, for example, the IWSA's post-war activism. In 1920, some activists within the IWSA had "hoped to merge it in various existing organisations, others wished to restrict its action to Women's Suffrage alone, to work only in unenfranchised countries, and only there until the vote was won. Both these wishes were frustrated [...]".²⁰ We can draw upon the book's approach to delineate discord as well as alliances among activists.

Moreover, *Activism across Borders* emphasizes connections between different causes. For example, it notes the role of WILPF as both a pacifist organization and part of the women's movement, engaging with the work of Sarah Hellawell, which

¹⁴Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ, 1997).

¹⁵*Activism across Borders*, p. 198.

¹⁶Alison Fell and Ingrid Sharp (eds), *The Women's Movement in Wartime: International Perspectives, 1914–1919* (Basingstoke, 2007).

¹⁷Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, pp. 198–200.

¹⁸Jan Rüger, "OXO: Or, the Challenges of Transnational History", *European History Quarterly*, 40:4 (2010), pp. 656–668; Taylor Allen and Cova, "Introduction"; Patricia Clavin, "Introduction: Conceptualising Internationalism between the Wars", in Daniel Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London, 2011), pp. 1–14.

¹⁹Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 200.

²⁰"The Eighth Congress of the I.W.S.A.", *Jus Suffragii*, 14:9 (July 1920), p. 146.

examines gender, patriotism, and pacifism.²¹ It also acknowledges the ambivalence in transnational activism. These were not necessarily inclusive exchanges. Here, the monograph examines various racist and anti-racist campaigns, and reflects on Rupp's work on the creation of collective identity that could privilege certain groups.²²

Divisions and Differences: Activism, Workers, and Working Conditions

Laqua presents an impressive analysis of divisions and differences arising within the international women's movement. This provides a framework to explore the complicated picture whereby activists crossed different ideological boundaries that were not necessarily complementary (e.g. feminism and socialism) whilst reminding the reader that "we must not assume a clear-cut dichotomy and instead need to appreciate the overlaps between different currents".²³ The book brings debates by those such as Marilyn Boxer, who has challenged the "dichotomous notions of class and gender relationships",²⁴ into its analysis, encouraging the reader to trace patterns and consider nuances in campaigners' actions.

The book rightly notes that the International Labour Organization (ILO) "emerged as a target and tool" for activists.²⁵ On the one hand, campaigners for women's employment rights could "engage with the ILO by working with and through trade unions" to effect change.²⁶ On the other, the book stresses the ruptures this precipitated, noting that "some ILO measures on labour protection proved divisive: among women's activists, a controversy ensued between those who advocated legal equality and those who sought special protection for women".²⁷

This raises thought-provoking questions about distinctions among different causes that often lay at the heart of these campaigns and the activists who pursued them. The importance of crossing national borders, as well as the challenges and obstacles that impede this, highlight central issues about translating causes into different national contexts. As Marcel van der Linden notes, "dramatic developments in one country may cause turbulence in other countries".²⁸ The book's emphasis on potential divisions can be applied to the ILO's 1919 Convention concerning women's employment in night work. The Danish feminist and politician Elna Munch highlighted the divisive nature of this topic among campaigners, stating that:

For her own part she had some reservation, partly on account of the animosity from the side of many women against prohibition, partly because this special

²¹Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, pp. 199–200; and Sarah Hellawell, "Antimilitarism, Citizenship and Motherhood: The Formation and Early Years of the Women's International League (WIL), 1915–1919", *Women's History Review*, 27:4 (2018), pp. 551–564.

²²Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 195–201; Leila Rupp, "Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945", *American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), pp. 571–600.

²³Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 197.

²⁴Marilyn J. Boxer, "Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept 'Bourgeois Feminism'", *The American Historical Review*, 112:1 (2007), p. 132.

²⁵Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 201.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Marcel van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 3.

protection might become a drag on women. She referred to the discussion of the International Women Suffrage Congress in Geneva, which resolved that no special laws concerning women's work ought to be carried in countries where women opposed them.²⁹

This statement illustrates and corroborates Laqua's emphasis on "transience" in transnational activism, drawing attention to the fact that alliances and allegiances among activists change, sometimes ending in disagreement or dissent.

Activism across Borders since 1870 provides a tool kit for exploring the differences and divisions between activists as much as their connections. In my research on non-manual workers, I am particularly interested in activism among clerks. Activists within the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees (IFCCTE) supported various measures for equality and protection of workers. For example, they pressed "for equal wages for male and female employees".³⁰ But the position of these activists within the ILO and the wider labour movement was less clear. Members of the IFCCTE supported the ILO, regarding it "as a valuable forum in which to put forward the social demands of the non-manual workers".³¹ However, protagonists were frustrated and felt the ILO failed to acknowledge their causes in the same way it did with other groups of workers, noting "it took considerable time, and in many cases repeated efforts, before the machinery of the I.L.O. had so adjusted itself as to allow adequate time for the discussion and consideration of questions relating to non-manual workers".³²

This can lead us to question whom we might regard as an "activist" and invites us to explore various perceptions as well as matters of inclusion and exclusion. In my work on the role of activists representing non-manual workers, the place they occupied within the labour movement was a point of contention that campaigners sought to address. Following an address given by G.J.A. Smit Jr – a Dutch trade unionist and General Secretary of the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees – at the Federation's Congress in 1928, it was clear these activists did not feel adequately represented by the wider labour movement, nor their views fully taken into consideration. The resolutions after Smit's speech stressed that "the Labour Movement must be gradually converted into an organisation representing both the manual and non-manual workers".³³ Various suggestions were put forward to address this including "a representative of the salaried employees should be elected on the Executive Committee of the

²⁹"Denmark. Women as Industrial Workers. Washington Convention Proposals", *Jus Suffragii*, 15:6 (March 1921), p. 87.

³⁰International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees, *Meeting of the Executive Committee, Amsterdam 1926: Report on the Activities and Financial Report for the Period from 1 July 1925–1 July 1928*, p. 8, as featured in Archiv der sozialen Demokratie (AdsD) der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn.

³¹The International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees, *The International Non-Manual Workers' Movement* (Amsterdam, 1938), p. 21.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 22.

³³International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees, *Dresden Congress 1928: Report on the Activities and Financial Report for the Period from 1 July 1928–31 December 1930*, p. 13, as featured in AdsD.

International Federation of Trade Unions, in order that this body may always be kept well informed of the interests and views of salaried employees”.³⁴ It is here that we can return to arguments in *Activism across Borders* about changing alliances, the role of international organizations, and broader social, cultural, and political contexts in “shaping campaigners’ agendas and actions”.³⁵

Conclusion

Activism across Borders since 1870 is a rich study of the complexities of transnational activism, providing a detailed framework to interpret how activists “navigated, negotiated, contested and reshaped” understandings of causes across borders.³⁶ Daniel Laqua’s approach and analysis demonstrate the importance of campaigns and campaigners that are active beyond individual nations, enabling the reader to ask questions about different forms of activism. A key strength of the book lies in the way it examines not just the connections, but also the divisions between activists, as it explores how individuals and groups engaged with multiple causes in various ways at different times. *Activism across Borders* merits praise for the fresh understanding it brings to the field.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁵Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 13.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 1.