

Research Seminar on International Organizations

2013-2014 series, Sciences Po, Paris

Seminar One:

**International Organizations from a Transnational Perspective**

Dr Thomas Richard Davies, City University London

3 October 2013

Text of 30-Minute Presentation

**Introduction and Concepts Used**

This presentation begins by introducing my field of research and concepts I refer to such as international non-governmental organization and transnational civil society. It then proceeds to provide an introduction to transnational historical method, with a particular focus on primary sources on transnational history. And the discussion concludes with a synopsis of some of the key insights that my work in this field has provided.

Since my work focuses on the *transnational* history and politics of international organizations, it concentrates on the subcategory of international organizations that, at least in theory, are independent of governments. Since the reference to ECOSOC's ability to consult with 'non-governmental

organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence' in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, these have tended to be referred to as non-governmental organizations, or NGOs for short. ECOSOC subsequently defined an NGO as 'any international organization which is not established by intergovernmental agreement', including those with members chosen by governments 'provided that such membership does not interfere with the free expression of views of the organization'.<sup>1</sup>

The literature on NGOs has tended to make reference to the term inconsistently, especially with respect to whether or not only international bodies should be referred to as NGOs. For the purposes of clarity I tend to make a distinction between national non-governmental organizations (NNGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and I focus largely on the latter due to my transnational focus. The principal data repository on INGOs, the Union of International Associations, tends to define as *international* organizations operating in three or more countries, but also lists organizations operating in fewer countries but with internationally-oriented goals.

In addition to the national-international distinction, a further significant distinction is between profit-making and non-profit-making organizations. United Nations practice has tended to exclude profit-making establishments from consideration as INGOs, as has wider usage of the term. The boundaries between profit-making establishments and non-profit-making INGOs,

---

<sup>1</sup> ECOSOC Resolution 1296 (XIV): 'Arrangements for Consultation with Non-Governmental Organizations'.

however, are rarely clear. Amply-funded global sporting organizations such as FIFA and the IOC, for instance, are generally considered to be INGOs despite their vast corporate sponsorship deals.

This latter point is indicative of the gigantic diversity of INGOs. While it is common to assume that INGOs are largely in the aid and development sector, including such bodies as Oxfam, World Vision and BRAC, this is just one component of the overall INGO sector. Nor are INGOs limited to wider humanitarian goals, such as health (for instance, MSF), or human rights issues (for example, Amnesty International). In fact, INGOs represent nearly every sector of human activity, whether business associations such as the International Chamber of Commerce, religious bodies such as the Society of Muslim Brothers, professional associations such as the International Federation of Library Associations, scientific bodies such as the International Council of Scientific Unions, or political bodies such as the Socialist International. Despite this diversity, as Peter Willetts has noted, terrorist, criminal and violent organizations are generally excluded from consideration as NGOs.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'INGO' is highly problematic. For a start, these organizations are defined by what they are not, i.e. they are not governments or inter-governmental bodies. Prior to the drafting of the United Nations Charter, what are now referred to as INGOs tended to be described instead as 'private international organizations', in contrast to 'public' international organizations, now generally referred to as inter-governmental organizations (IGOs).

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Willetts, *Non-Governmental Organizations in World Politics: The Construction of Global Governance* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Furthermore, NGOs are rarely exclusively non-governmental, often accepting either funds from governments or members appointed by governments. And many INGOs actually take on functions that one might expect governments to carry out, such as the extensive welfare services provided by INGOs such as the Muslim Brotherhood in territories where governments fail to provide them.

Given their at least purportedly non-governmental and non-profit-making properties, INGOs have tended to be considered to be the key institutions in 'global civil society'. The notion of 'global civil society' entered popular discourse as a part of the wave of optimism that accompanied the ending of the Cold War. The concept of 'civil society' stems from the ancient notion of *societas civilis*, and originally referred to a rule-governed political order that was peaceful, or 'civil', in its operation. Over time, the concept of civil society has become detached from the governmental and profit-making sectors, but retains attachment to the notion of civility.<sup>3</sup> It is popular to posit the development over the last two decades of *global* civil society that consists of 'institutions that straddle the whole earth, and have complex effects that are felt in its four corners'.<sup>4</sup> Given that even some of its proponents accept that the notion of a truly 'global' civil society may still be an aspiration, I refer instead to *transnational* civil society, which involves 'non-governmental non-profit collective action that transcends national boundaries but does not necessarily have global reach'.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Richard Davies, 'The Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society: The Evolution of International Non-Governmental Organizations since the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in Luc Reyndams (ed.), *The Global Activism Reader* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 33.

## **Researching Transnational History**

Research into the history of INGOs and transnational civil society is a sub-field of the emerging discipline of transnational history, which aims to challenge the traditional state-centrism of a significant proportion of historical research. One of the reasons for this traditional state-centrism has been the comparative ease of access of centralized and well-catalogued national archives. The archives of INGOs, by contrast, have commonly failed to survive, or may be incomplete, poorly catalogued, scattered across multiple locations, or closed to historians' access.

Despite the lack of similarly centralized resources on which the national historian may rely, the transnational historian has a rich array of potential avenues for obtaining primary sources. The transnational historian's equivalents to the national historian's national archives are the archives of transnational actors, which are greatly more numerous than states. In some cases, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the World Council of Churches, the archives are located within the organization's headquarters and may be well-catalogued and accessible to researchers. In many other cases, access to archives within the headquarters of a transnational actor can be far harder to obtain, given their highly variable record-keeping practices and funds available for such purposes. Nevertheless, there are significant repositories of INGO archives in institutions such as the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which has particular

strengths in transnational labour history, and the League of Nations Archives in Geneva, which has particular strengths in peace movement history. Beyond that, transnational actor archives are commonly to be found in University archives such as the Library of Contemporary International Documentation in Nanterre.

Given the greatly variable comprehensiveness and accessibility of transnational actors' archives, the transnational historian needs to look far beyond these sources. The private correspondence of prominent individuals involved in transnational activities is amongst the richest sources available to the transnational historian. In my research on transnational disarmament activism between the two world wars, for instance, this included the papers of activists such as Jules Prudhommeaux and Kathleen Courtney, as well as of individuals whose activities straddled the governmental and non-governmental domains, such as Robert Cecil and Joseph Paul-Boncour.

Where neither organizational nor personal records remain, the publications of transnational actors can be very helpful. In the nineteenth century, for instance, early INGOs commonly published detailed transcripts of their conference proceedings, as well as detailed reports and journals of their activities, often including notable correspondence. In more recent years, the internet has become an invaluable resource, with organizations such as Amnesty International publishing online considerable historical as well as contemporary documentation of their activities.

Given that transnational actors and governmental bodies commonly

interact with one another, national, subnational, and intergovernmental archives are also of considerable interest to the transnational historian. National archives commonly contain reports of transnational non-governmental activities at home and abroad deemed significant enough to merit attention. Some of the most useful sources on the early twentieth century history of the pan-Islamic movement, for instance, are contained in reports transmitted by British diplomats. Intergovernmental bodies such as the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations also maintained considerable documentation on the INGOs with which they interacted. The League of Nations, for instance, published regular reports of INGO activities and sent representatives as observers at INGO meetings.

Beyond archival sources, there is growing availability of statistical information of interest to the transnational historian. Surveys such as the World Values Survey can provide information on aspects of transnational civil society not fully captured by exclusive attention to the records of INGOs, for instance by helping to monitor patterns in ‘civility’ across countries over time. Beyond possible methodological issues with respect to the parameters of such surveys, a considerable problem with such surveys is their relative novelty, and inability to shed light on earlier periods. In contrast, some other statistical sources extend to the early twentieth century, such as the data on INGOs held by the Union of International Associations, which has been collating information on all INGOs known to it for more than a hundred years.

Despite the wide array of sources available to the transnational historian,

each source poses significant interpretational questions. In any historical research archival sources require considerable attention to the aims of those who produced the documents, as well as to the selectivity of the repository in deciding which items to make available. Particular care has to be taken in transnational historical research since in the case of some transnational actors, very few records may survive beyond those of third parties or the organization itself, making balanced judgment of the subject difficult. There is very little documentation, for instance, on what may be the earliest recorded organization to call itself ‘international’, the International Association that operated in Scotland in the early 1830s.

The preferences of data-holding institutions need to be taken into account with respect to statistical as well as archival material. The Union of International Associations was established with the aim of uniting all international organizations in Brussels, and its data tend to be more comprehensive with respect to Brussels-based INGOs than those based in other cities. This points towards a key problem with much of the source material available to the transnational historian, which is that it is commonly more comprehensive and readily available with respect to wealthy formally-organized actors in Western Europe and North America than it is with respect to other regions, and with respect to informal activities with limited resources.

The transnational historian also needs to take into account the limitations that a transnational lens imposes on the researcher. By focusing on transnational phenomena, the significance of boundaries may be overlooked.



The variations that exist between countries and regions may be neglected if the transnational lens is over-zealously applied. Although there are notable exceptions, there is a frequent tendency for transnational historical work to adopt the same perspective as that of the transnational actors under observation, or to focus only on purported ‘success stories’. In my work, I aim to subject transnational phenomena to similar scrutiny to that to which national governmental institutions are subjected, and to explore failures as well as successes.

### **New Insights**

My earliest work on transnational civil society aimed to address the paucity of research into failed transnational activism through its exploration of the transnational campaign for disarmament between the two World Wars.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the scale and diversity of transnational civil society mobilization between the two World Wars was considerable. Many of the most influential INGOs of the present day were founded in this period, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Chamber of Commerce, the Muslim Brotherhood, Save the Children, and the International Council for Science, to name just a few. Peace societies have been given some of the credit for helping to make the League of Nations a reality, and in the aftermath of the First World War the League of Nations developed extensive consultative relations with INGOs, in some ways exceeding those now in place in the United Nations system. The League of

Nations secretariat provided summaries of INGO resolutions to the League of Nations Council, worked with non-governmental ‘assessors’ that were appointed to numerous committees on specialist sectoral activities, and facilitated presentation of INGO demands at intergovernmental congresses.

Leading thinkers at the time such as Alfred Zimmern therefore felt that a form of ‘democratic’ decision-making was being facilitated at the international level on account of the League’s relationship with INGOs, perceived to be representative of ‘world public opinion’.<sup>6</sup>

Claims that the League’s relationship with INGOs was making the world more democratic had significant flaws, however. Crucial among these was the limited extent to which INGOs represented united ‘world public opinion’, despite impressive claims made at the time with respect to INGO membership. This issue is illustrated by the interwar disarmament campaign, which in the early 1930s brought together transnational committees of peace, women’s, religious and students’ INGOs that together claimed a combined membership as high as 100 million people. Together they pushed for the success of the World Disarmament Conference organized by the League of Nations in 1932-34, but despite their claim to represent the unified voice of world public opinion on the matter, these committees only ever represented a sector of transnational civil society. Furthermore, even within these committees very different perspectives on the disarmament issue were promoted in different countries, so when governments responded to the public pressure

---

<sup>6</sup> On these ideas, see Thomas Richard Davies, 'International Non-Governmental Organizations, Global Governance and Democracy beyond the State: The "Great Experiment" of the League of Nations Era', *Global Governance*, 18(4), 2012.

within their respective countries on the issue, they found that they were unable to come to agreement. This led leaders such as British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to complain that activists should ‘take the trouble just to think out what are the problems of negotiation as well as the joys of declaration’.<sup>7</sup>

In my more recent work on the evolution of INGOs and transnational civil society, I have delineated their history from much earlier periods. That there were precursors to modern INGOs in the form of religious orders, missionary organizations, and secret societies that have transcended geopolitical borders for hundreds of years is well-known. Far less familiar, however, is the transition that took place from the late eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth centuries, during which ancient forms of INGO were to be superseded by modern INGOs, which subsequently multiplied greatly in number from the 1870s onwards. In my soon-to-be-published book, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society*, I explore this transition.

Prior to the 1760s, INGOs consisted overwhelmingly of religious orders, charities, and missionary societies, and a limited range of other forms of cross-border association such as freemasonry, groups of performing artists, and scientific societies. Over the subsequent hundred years, on the other hand, INGOs were to be established in a wide range of issue areas, with greater specialization of focus, and increasingly commonly secular objectives. In the late eighteenth century these included new revolutionary societies proclaiming ‘universal’ objectives such as the ‘Society of Universal Revolution’ and the

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Thomas Richard Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2007), p. 171.

‘Universal Society of the Friends of the People’ that appealed to ‘citizens, soldiers and sailors of all nations ... you are united to civil society by the bonds of nature ... we invite you, therefore, to participate in the glorious cause of freedom’. They also included highly ambitious humanitarian assistance organizations such as the ‘Society of Universal Goodwill’ that aimed to help ‘every fellow-creature in distress, who is not provided for by law, any government or other charity’ and Humane Societies that aimed to assist the apparently drowned from any nationality. And, as is better known, they also included anti-slavery societies such as the ‘Society for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage’, which permitted election as corresponding members of ‘foreigners or persons who [do] not reside in this state’.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the early nineteenth century new INGOs expanded to include organizations in the areas of art, communication, communism, cooperation, education, indigenous rights, prison reform, self-determination, standardization, vaccination, and women’s emancipation, amongst others.

Few of the novel INGOs of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries were to endure for significant periods of time. Some consisted of little more than collections of individuals from multiple countries within a single or a few cities, or were international primarily in terms of their objectives rather than in respect of their composition. Nevertheless, some endure to the present day, such as the Society of Friends of Foreigners in Distress and the organization now known as Anti-Slavery International. Furthermore, some of

---

<sup>8</sup> Quotations from Thomas Davies, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* (London: Hurst, 2013 forthcoming), p. 26. All page references provided here are from the first proofs of the manuscript.

the novel INGOs of this era provided precedents for organizations founded on a more enduring basis in the later nineteenth century, such as international federal structures.

INGOs of the early nineteenth century were not without their faults, as the following story illustrates: ‘In the context of the proliferating associations of the 1830s, a young ... man introducing himself as “the Count of Liancourt,” Caliste-Auguste Godde, decided to set up an “International Shipwreck Society” in 1835, modeled on ... earlier Humane Societies and established “with a view to uniting the benevolent of all countries.” It proved hugely successful in collecting large subscriptions from members, and was run from Place Vendôme 16, next door to what is now the Paris Ritz. The society potentially contributed to the spread of more than 150 lifesaving societies across every continent, and published a journal, *The International*, marketed as “the intelligent organ of all civilized people.” Its activities were not to last long, however: in 1842 it was revealed that Godde ... had been using the society to line his own pockets.’<sup>9</sup> I am currently conducting further investigations into this intriguing organization. That transnational civil society actors may not always match initial appearances is a theme I have extended up to the present day, for instance in a recent article co-authored with my former doctoral student Alejandro Peña, we reveal the role of the corporate movement for social responsibility in Brazil in

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Davies, 'NGOs: A Long and Turbulent History', *Global: The Global Journal*, 15, 2013, p. 32.

the origins of the World Social Forum.<sup>10</sup>

A key aspect of the history of INGOs that is commonly overlooked in existing literature is the role of developments beyond the Western context in their origins. If consideration is made of the transition from ancient to modern INGOs between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, on the other hand, it is evident that developments beyond the ‘West’ were of crucial importance. Take, for instance, the establishment of ‘humane societies’ concerned with saving the apparently dead from drowning in Europe and beyond from the late eighteenth century: not only did these organizations use resuscitation techniques learned from Asia, they were also preceded by Chinese associations concerned with the drowned which may date back to the 1300s and the earliest for which records survive may be the Chinkiang Association for Saving Life that appears to date to 1708. Or take the wave of revolutionary associationalism that developed on a transnational basis in the late eighteenth century: here the inspiration of uprisings in Muslim territories appears to have been important to a number of transnational activists in Europe, such as John Oswald, who believed that ‘the moment that the tyrant begins to lay a heavy hand upon the many, the Mussulmans run instantly to arms’.<sup>11</sup>

In my forthcoming book, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society*, I argue that the history of many of the most significant developments in international relations over the last two centuries is incomplete without

---

<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Milcíades Peña and Thomas Richard Davies, 'Globalisation from Above? Corporate Social Responsibility, the Workers' Party and the Origins of the World Social Forum', *New Political Economy*, 2013 (DOI 10.1080/13563467.2013.779651).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Davies, *NGOs*, p. 25.

consideration of the role of transnational civil society, ‘from specific developments such as the French and American Revolutions, the formation of the League of Nations and United Nations, decolonization and the ending of the Cold War, to wider phenomena such as democratization and the reduced conceivability of direct great power war’.<sup>12</sup> I argue also that aspects of transnational civil society mobilization in the past may have exceeded the scale of that seen in the contemporary era, especially if mobilization as a proportion of the world’s population is taken into account: for instance, the transnational petition for disarmament circulated in the early 1930s by international women’s organizations greatly exceeded the number of signatories as a proportion of the world’s population of the Jubilee 2000 petition circulated just over a decade ago. I further argue that ‘accounts of the origins of the two World Wars and the Cold War and perceptions of a supposed “clash of civilizations” [more recently] are also incomplete without reference to transnational civil society actors.’<sup>13</sup> I will be pleased to elaborate on these points and any other aspect of this presentation in the Q&A element of today’s proceedings.

Whereas it is conventional to assume that the evolution of INGOs and transnational civil society has taken place along a linear trajectory, I suggest an alternative, cyclical, pattern of evolution, with peaks of mobilization shortly before the two world wars and at the ending of the Cold War. At each of these points in time large transnational coalitions of organizations with bold

---

<sup>12</sup> Davies, *NGOs*, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *NGOs*, p. 178.

ambitions of uniting INGOs around the world were developed, such as the Union of International Associations (in the 1900s), the International Consultative Group (in the 1930s), and CIVICUS (in the 1990s), shortly before a contraction in transnational civil society activities took place. I argue that the environmental, technological, economic, social and political factors that in the short term may contribute towards the expansion of transnational civil society in the long term may contribute towards its contraction. The political factors include the role of transnational civil society actors themselves in helping to bring about their own decline: for instance ‘the creation of large transnational coalitions of INGOs claiming to speak for “the most representative forces of the different countries” (in the period before the First World War), the “public opinion of the world” (in the period preceding the Second World War) or “global civil society” (in the period preceding the 11 September 2001 attacks) ... revealed detachment from the developing divisions in transnational civil society and the world’s population more generally in each of these phases, which were ultimately to overwhelm transnational civil society on each occasion’.<sup>14</sup> Again, I will be pleased to elaborate further on these points in the Q&A.

---

<sup>14</sup> Davies, *NGOs*, p. 183. For a synopsis of the cyclicity argument, see Thomas Richard Davies, 'The Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society: The Evolution of International Non-Governmental Organizations since 1839', in Luc Reydam's (ed.), *The Global Activism Reader* (New York: Continuum, 2011).



## Select Bibliography

For further elaboration on the material discussed in this paper, including detailed references, please see the following:

*NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* (London: Hurst, 2013 forthcoming).

*The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2007).

(with A. M. Peña), 'Globalisation from Above? Corporate Social Responsibility, the Workers' Party and the Origins of the World Social Forum', *New Political Economy*, 2013 (DOI 10.1080/13563467.2013.779651).

'Educational Internationalism, Universal Human Rights, and International Organization: International Relations in the Thought and Practice of Robert Owen', *Review of International Studies*, forthcoming.

'NGOs: A Long and Turbulent History', *Global: The Global Journal*, 15, 2013.

'International Veterans' Organizations and the Promotion of Disarmament between the Two World Wars', in Julia Eichenberg & John Paul Newman (eds), *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013 forthcoming).

'Governing Communications', in Sophie Harman and David Williams (eds), *Governing the World? Cases in Global Governance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

'International Non-Governmental Organizations, Global Governance and Democracy beyond the State: The "Great Experiment" of the League of Nations Era', *Global Governance*, 18(4), 2012.

'Internationalism in a Divided World: The Experience of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, 1919-1939', *Peace & Change*, 37(2), 2012.

'The Transformation of International NGOs and Their Impact on Development Aid', *International Development Policy*, 3, 2012.

'La transformation des ONG internationales et leurs effets sur l'aide au développement', *Revue internationale de politique de développement*, 3, 2012.

'Researching Transnational History: The Example of Peace Activism', in Bob Reinalda (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Non-State Actors* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

'The Rise and Fall of Transnational Civil Society: The Evolution of International Non-Governmental Organizations since 1839', in Luc Reydam's (ed.), *The Global Activism Reader* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

'Civil Society: Early and Mid Twentieth Century,' in H. Anheier and S. Toepler (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society* (New York: Springer, 2010).

'Transnational Civil Society: Past, Present, Future,' in Dmitry V. Katsy & Houman A. Sadri (eds.), *Trends, Prospects and Challenges of Globalization* (Saint Petersburg State University Press, 2009).

'New Directions in Transnational Activism: Non-Governmental Organizations and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights', *International Studies Review*, 11(3), 2009.

'Nonviolence', in Akira Iriya and Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

'France and the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-34', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 15(4), 2004.