



COMMENT

Activism across Borders: A Human Rights Perspective

Mark Hurst 

Lancaster University, History Department, Lancaster, United Kingdom
E-mail: mark.hurst@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract

Daniel Laqua's recent monograph *Activism across Borders Since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* raises a number of pertinent issues for historians of human rights to reflect upon. This article takes the four analytical lenses highlighted by Laqua for assessing transnational activism and applies them to cases of human rights activism in the Cold War and post-Cold War era. In doing so, this article argues that Laqua's framework offers much scope for historians to approach the history of human rights activism with a more critical edge. It also highlights the challenge of retaining an analytical focus on an issue as emotive and complex as human rights, and how Laqua's lenses may offer a practical methodology to do this.

One of the most impressive parts of Daniel Laqua's *Activism Across Borders Since 1870* is its distinct self-awareness. Maintaining focus on a topic as broad and complex as international activism over the course of 150 years demands a particular perspective on events. To do this, Laqua focuses on moments where activism crosses national boundaries, drawing on a variety of themes that have driven activist causes such as anti-colonialism, sexual equality, and anti-racism, to name a few. By shifting the focus away from a national framework, a more complex transnational landscape becomes the space for analysis, one that is more fluid in definition and challenging to assess without the neat analytical scaffolding of the nation state. This space necessitates a different way of thinking for historians, requiring a more subtle approach, looking for moments of exchange, discussion, and interaction rather than proclamation and protest. Instead of neatly fitting into discrete boxes of analysis, this transnational approach complicates our understanding of how activism functions historically, forcing us to think more critically about both state- and non-state actors. This is a history that cannot be definitively written given its sheer scope, something that Laqua embraces by recognizing that his book is not "encyclopaedic". Instead, the thematic approach offers the opportunity for broad

reflection on a transnational history of activism, whilst retaining the scholarly eye for detail in individual campaigning efforts.¹

Laqua has identified four lenses through which to consider the history of transnational activism: connectedness; ambivalence; transience; and marginality. This short article will utilize these lenses and apply them to human rights activism in the years after the so-called breakthrough of the 1970s.² In doing so, it will demonstrate how the analytical lenses of *Activism across Borders* can help us to make greater sense of transnational human rights activism, and how activists have transcended national boundaries. It is worth noting that Laqua applies these lenses to the human rights activism in Chapter Seven of his book. The intention of this piece is not to rewrite this chapter nor to dispute the argument it makes. Instead, it expands Laqua's analysis, offering another perspective on this complex transnational history. Like *Activism across Borders*, my comments do not aim to be "encyclopaedic", instead offering an example of how these themes can help scholars to approach the history of human rights activism.

Connectedness

Transnational activism relies on connections between individuals in different nations. For non-governmental organizations (NGOs), this often occurs through international meetings, the sharing of information across national borders, and through personal relationships built up between individuals. In considering these connections, it is all too easy to place activist causes into neat boxes, for example, considering the relationship between activists in Chile and London solely through the lens of human rights violations taking place in Santiago. In doing so, this overlooks other concerns that these individuals might share, which are likely to go beyond the immediate interest of the historian. Those involved in activism often have a wide palette of interests, which can be challenging for historians to effectively disaggregate. This complexity carries through to relationships between NGOs. Although these relationships are often focused on one activist cause, they can also draw upon a shared view of the world that involves other causes. As a result, assessing these interactions solely through the lens of one issue can overlook the importance of this wider palette of interests, and the myriad of other causes that these relationships can impact upon. Laqua's intervention on this issue is to highlight that this complexity brings together often unrelated activist causes through these personal relationships. In doing so, one can identify different activist causes being brought together through the individual connections in ways one might not initially expect. Approaching activist history not as a collection of distinct issues, but as a web of interrelated concerns operating in a symbiotic, fluid fashion offers a more realistic, albeit more complex, way of understanding how these networks functioned.³

¹Daniel Laqua, *Activism across Borders Since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023) pp. 6–7.

²Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014).

³Laqua, *Activism across Borders* pp. 13–14.

Laqua's approach echoes Mark Granovetter's argument that social networks are held together through the "strength of weak ties".⁴ Although counterintuitive, Granovetter argues that broad social networks are not held together by "strong ties" between individuals working closely together, but instead by more happenchance relationships, often on the fringes of these networks. These "weak ties" have the effect of broadening these networks, creating relationships with a myriad of actors, rather than entrenching close relationships. Therefore, in order to understand how broader networks operate, we need to pay attention to those individuals and organizations that facilitate the broader interactions of these networks. Instead of the charismatic leading figures, we ought to focus on "dull and tweedy" journalists, activists, and academics. These characters often intentionally decide to stay out of the public limelight, acting as administrators behind the scenes rather than as public faces of their respective cause. Frustratingly, the activity of these figures is often where the historical record is at its thinnest, if it exists at all. The interactions that these individuals have are often unrecorded due to the way they take place, on the telephone or in person. Sometimes, the influential figure in question considers their efforts to be peripheral or unimportant in the grand scheme of the movement, a perceived "weakness", which, ironically, makes them all the more important.⁵

In the case of human rights, connectedness can clearly be seen in the case of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, a prominent figure in the Russian art collective and protest group Pussy Riot.⁶ Tolokonnikova came to international attention in February 2012 following her participation in Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer", performed in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. This controversial piece, which attacked the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian president Vladimir Putin, led to Tolokonnikova and two other members of Pussy Riot being put on trial for hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.⁷ Tolokonnikova was sentenced to a term of imprisonment in a labour camp, where she took part in hunger strikes against the conditions in which she was kept. This, in turn, had the impact of raising her interest in penal reform and engaging in efforts to change the Russian prison system.⁸

Tolokonnikova's activist credentials have blossomed in the period since the "punk prayer". Whilst Pussy Riot's focus in the early 2010s was on Putin's Russia, Tolokonnikova has since become involved in issues relating to penal reform, gender, sexuality, faith, US politics, and freedom of conscience, to name a few. As a

⁴Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties", *American Journal of Sociology*, 78:6 (1973), pp. 1360–1380.

⁵For an example of this, see the discussion of Peter Reddaway in Mark Hurst, "'Uncensored Russia': Peter Reddaway and Soviet Dissent", unpublished paper delivered at the 2014 British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies Annual Conference. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/6711388/Uncensored_Russia_Peter_Reddaway_and_Soviet_Dissent; last accessed 8 December 2023; and the discussion of Michael Sherbourne in Mark Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent, 1965–1985* (London, 2016), pp. 102–114.

⁶Nadezhda Tolokonnikova is often referred to in the short form "Nadya", and her surname is sometimes abbreviated to "Tolokno".

⁷Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (London, 2014).

⁸Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Jailed Pussy Riot Member Cites Abuse", 27 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/27/russia-jailed-pussy-riot-member-cites-abuse>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

result of this, the activist network that Tolokonnikova exists in has become wide and multifaceted. Not many activists have CVs containing appearances in popular Netflix programmes, a published collection of letters with the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, and an OnlyFans account selling sexually explicit material.⁹ Tolokonnikova's widespread activity, all of which relates to her activism, demonstrates the broad nature of activist concerns and the danger of approaching an activist through the prism of one interest alone. If one were to consider Tolokonnikova solely through the lens of her anti-Putin efforts, a substantial part of her politics would be lost. This position across several activist networks also allows Tolokonnikova to bring together causes that would traditionally be kept apart, such as her desire to reform the penal system and the sex-positive nature of her feminist activism.¹⁰ The challenge for historians is how to effectively capture her broad interests, whilst maintaining clear and focused analysis. This is no easy feat, but something that scholars need to be aware of, especially given the interwoven nature of transnational human rights activist networks that Tolokonnikova's case demonstrates.

Ambivalence

The self-evident nature of human rights, and its dominant position in contemporary international politics, means that a critical approach to this issue can often be challenging. Who would be categorically against the principle of human rights? Addressing this question can be revealing of the power of human rights, and the challenge historians face in critically assessing it. The same issue can be applied to activists striving for “good” causes, who are often idolized for their efforts. Should historians apply equal vigour to those individuals working for subjectively “bad” causes, or should we be more neutral in our approach to activism? There are instances where scholars have considered the potential societal benefits of those involved in “bad civil society”, an approach that somehow feels counterintuitive, reiterating the issue at hand.¹¹ Being frank about this can expose our prejudices towards activists working for causes we consider “good” and reiterates the need to remain critical about how these activists were considered in their own periods. “Activism” should not be directly translated as “good”, despite its associations with progressive political causes. It is therefore important to apply Laqua's lens of ambivalence to these individuals, attempting to approach activists in a critical sense without assuming that their efforts are inherently positive in either intent or outcome.¹² This is especially acute when considering human rights activism, which, by its nature, can be very emotive and difficult to take a neutral position on. This is

⁹Nadya Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Žižek, *Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj* (London, 2014); *House of Cards*, Series 3, Episode 3, “Chapter 29” (2015). Available on Netflix: <https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/70178217>; and Pussy Riot OnlyFans. Available at: <https://onlyfans.com/pussyriot>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

¹⁰Hakim Bishara, “Talking Sex Work With Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova”, *Hyperallergic*, 23 November 2022. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/778856/talking-sex-work-with-pussy-riot-nadya-tolokonnikova/>; last accessed 9 December 2023.

¹¹Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, “Bad Civil Society”, *Political Theory*, 29:6 (2001), pp. 837–865.

¹²Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 14.

made even more complex by the challenge of defining what human rights are, where they are derived from, and how they should be applied – immensely difficult tasks with little consensus amongst scholars and practitioners alike.¹³

Nelson Mandela is a fascinating example of the complexity of applying the lens of ambivalence. Mandela is best known for his anti-apartheid campaigning, spending decades in imprisonment for his cause, and going on to become the South African president in the years following his release, leading a period of national reconciliation.¹⁴ However, Mandela's support for the use of violence in his early years of political efforts meant that many around the world considered him as a terrorist.¹⁵ This positions Mandela in a more complex position than his political legacy sometimes suggests. Although often held up as a human rights icon by organizations such as Amnesty International, Mandela's support for the use of violence in the anti-apartheid struggle meant that Amnesty refused to formally adopt him as one of their prisoners of conscience.¹⁶ A similar issue has occurred in recent years with the Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny. Despite being adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty in the wake of his persecution by the Russian state, this status was revoked after concerns were raised about Navalny's association with those who advocated the use of violence. Amnesty's position on Navalny was again reversed following an internal review on the matter, with Navalny suffering increased levels of persecution during this interim period.¹⁷ Amnesty's fluctuating position in these instances is linked to its insistence that it is politically neutral in its campaigns for human rights, and that it relies on this neutral position to maintain its credibility.¹⁸ At face value, this seems appropriate, but, on closer inspection, this is a flawed argument. Campaigning for human rights is a political action that draws its power claiming to be self-evidently above and beyond politics.¹⁹ Questioning this self-evidence is exceptionally difficult in a landscape where human rights is an international lingua franca, but it is essential to do so to retain a critical perspective. Retaining a subjective ambivalence about activist causes may be an effective way to do this, and something that historians should aspire to, whilst being aware of the great difficulties in fully achieving this.

¹³Marie-Benedicte Dembour, "What Are Human Rights? Four Schools of Thought", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32:1 (2010), pp. 1–20.

¹⁴Nelson Mandela, *A Long Walk to Freedom* (London, 1994).

¹⁵Olivia Waxman, "The U.S. Government Had Nelson Mandela on Terrorist Watch Lists Until 2008. Here's Why", *Time*, 18 July 2018. Available at: <https://time.com/5338569/nelson-mandela-terror-list/>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

¹⁶Amnesty International UK, "Nelson Mandela and Amnesty International", 18 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/nelson-mandela-and-amnesty-international>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

¹⁷Mark Hurst, "Crossing the Curtain: British Activists and the Echoes of Soviet Dissent in Contemporary Russian Human Rights Activism", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 36:3 (2023), pp. 513–531, 517.

¹⁸Michelle Carmody, "Making Human Rights Effective? Amnesty International, 'Aid and Trade', and the Shaping of Professional Human Rights Activism, 1961–1983", *Humanity*, 11:3 (2020), pp. 280–297; and Christie Miedema, "Impartial in the Cold War? The Challenges of Détente, Dissidence, and Eastern European Membership to Amnesty International's Policy of Impartiality", *Humanity*, 10:2 (2019), pp. 179–205.

¹⁹Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (London, 2010).

Transience

Activism is a fleeting and momentary activity. Indeed, many campaigns can claim success when their existence is no longer required. Activist networks are temporary and fluid, existing when they need to and evaporating when this need disappears. Considering activist history through Laqua's lens of transience encourages historians to recognize the arbitrary nature of activism, and how important happenstance and randomness can be in this history. This is especially the case when activism occurs across national borders, as political and social causes in different nations often occur at different paces, meaning transnational interactions can be all the more fleeting.²⁰

For human rights, one can add another layer of transience – moral temporality. Some human rights activists can be considered as moral titans in one era, only to be swiftly displaced and later considered repulsive for their views. Their status as a human rights icon is contingent on maintaining a position in line with international understandings of human rights, rather than bestowed upon them indefinitely because of their actions. This highlights the fluid nature of human rights, not just in terms of practical efforts to campaign for their protection, but also their moral justification. Aung San Suu Kyi is a good example of this transience, shifting from an international human rights icon to pariah. Her 1991 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her struggle against the military dictatorship in Burma²¹ cemented her international status.²² However, her refusal to speak out against reports of the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine region in the 2010s decimated this reputation.²³ Amnesty International were one of many organizations to strip Aung San Suu Kyi of human rights awards, with its secretary general Kumi Naidoo stating that “our expectation was that you would continue to use your moral authority to speak out against injustice wherever you saw it, not least within Myanmar itself”.²⁴ This neatly highlights the transient nature of her status, demonstrating this award was conditional on her following what Amnesty considered to be immoral, rather than her own interpretation. Objectively, this raises interesting questions about the rationale behind Amnesty's decision to confer

²⁰Laqua, *Activism across Borders*, p. 14.

²¹Burma is officially known as Myanmar. See Kim Tong-Hyung and Hyung-Jim Kim, “Myanmar, Burma and Why the Different Names Matter”, *AP*, 2 February (2021). Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-burma-different-names-explained-8af64e33cf89c565b074eec9cbe22b72>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

²²Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Lecture (2012). Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1991/kyi/26193-aung-san-suu-kyi-nobel-lecture-english/>; last accessed 8 December 2023. Although Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, she could not formally deliver her Nobel Lecture until 2012.

²³“Aung San Suu Kyi: From Human Rights Heroine to Alienated Icon”, *BBC News*, 6 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39513089>; last accessed 8 December 2023. See also Ronan Lee, “A Politician, Not an Icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25:3 (2014), pp. 321–333.

²⁴Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Aung San Suu Kyi Stripped of Amnesty's Highest Honour over ‘shameful betrayal’”, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/nov/12/aung-san-suu-kyi-amnesty-highest-honour-shameful-betrayal>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

awards on Aung San Suu Kyi, and their desire to protect their reputation once those it had previously supported were seen in a different light.

Understanding the rationale behind Aung San Suu Kyi's relative silence on the reports of genocide in the region is more challenging than it may initially appear, owing to the complexities of her nationalist politics, her precarious political position in Burma, and the persistent threat to her personal safety from the military government, a concern raised publicly during the writing of this article.²⁵ This is not to justify her approach to reports of genocide in her country, nor her defence of the military's activity in these events.²⁶ Instead, it highlights the need to be aware that our perspective on these matters may change over time. The transient nature of Aung San Suu Kyi's status demonstrates the way in which reputations built on defending human rights are not as concrete as they may sometimes appear. This is something worth keeping in mind with contemporary human rights icons, who may be venerated today but chastised tomorrow. For example, Amnesty has offered its support for the climate activist Greta Thunberg, making her an Ambassador for Conscience in 2019 – the same award it stripped from Aung San Suu Kyi.²⁷ Whether its support for Thunberg and other climate protestors will be challenged by their participation in activities that breach public order is yet to be seen. These actions are clearly non-violent in intent, and do not clash with Amnesty's unwillingness to support those who advocate the use of violence at the time of writing.²⁸ However, this position could change over time, and historians in the future may reflect on these events in a markedly different fashion. This awareness should help us to both critically reflect on those that society currently promotes as moral leaders, and to objectively sympathise with those in the past who promoted individuals who were later discredited.

Marginality

The final analytical lens identified by Laqua is that of marginality. This issue is acute for victims of human rights violations, who, by their nature, exist on the margins of the society in which they live, and are often persecuted for this position. This marginal status means that they are unable to utilize conventional routes for change, such as running for political office, and rely instead on utilizing transnational connections to exert pressure on their governments. This has been deftly defined as a

²⁵Emma Graham-Harrison, "Powerless' Son Says Aung San Suu Kyi's Life May Be at Risk due to Serious Health Problems", *The Guardian*, 8 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/08/aung-san-suu-kyi-serious-health-problems-says-son>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

²⁶Owen Bowcott, "Aung San Suu Kyi Pleas with Court to Dismiss Genocide Claims", *The Guardian*, 12 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/12/myanmar-military-incapable-of-looking-into-abuses-court-told>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

²⁷"Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future Receive Amnesty International's Top Honour", *Amnesty International*, 17 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/greta-thunberg-and-fridays-for-future-receive-amnesty-internationals-top-honour/>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

²⁸Damian Gayle, "Greta Thunberg Arrested at London Oil Summit Protest", *The Guardian*, 17 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/oct/17/greta-thunberg-arrested-at-london-oil-summit-protest>; last accessed 8 December 2023.

“boomerang effect” by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, with information “thrown” out of the impacted nation to a transnational network of activists, who can, in turn, use this material in their campaigns.²⁹ The work of NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch neatly demonstrates this boomerang effect in action. For these organizations, empirical information about human rights violations forms the foundations of their campaigning efforts, which is then used to exert political pressure on abusive governments. Without this, their efforts would be little more than political rhetoric, and unlikely to have any sustained impact. This information does not miraculously appear at these organizations. Instead, it is reliant on the effort of people on the ground, often those who are subjected to human rights violations themselves.

Numerous individuals have marshalled the international community as a weapon against the abusers of human rights. In the Soviet Union, Vladimir Bukovsky used this approach in an exceptionally effective manner, allowing him to punch substantially above his weight. Bukovsky was marginalized from Soviet society for his politics, for which he was incarcerated in prison, labour camps and interned in a psychiatric institution on suspicious medical grounds.³⁰ Despite his imprisonment, Bukovsky obtained detailed medical reports of six political dissidents that had been detained in psychiatric institutions and sent them to activists in the West. This material offered empirical evidence on which to challenge the Soviet authorities, who could previously dismiss accusations of abuse as hearsay or propaganda. The information allowed a more focused approach, forcing the Soviet authorities to respond to specific details about instances of abuse.³¹ It was this information, bolstered by other material smuggled across the iron curtain and the professional perspective of medical professionals around the world, that allowed an international campaign against the political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union to effectively function. This campaign reached its peak in 1983, when the All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists, the central Soviet body of psychiatrists, withdrew from the World Psychiatric Association, shortly before it was widely expected they would be expelled.³² This dramatic political moment is something that Bukovsky could not have achieved from his marginalized position in the Soviet Union alone. His interaction with other activists across national borders facilitated this development, demonstrating how a transnational approach allowed him to be effective in his efforts, and overcome his marginalized status.

Conclusion

The analytical lenses identified in *Activism across Borders* resonate strongly with the history of human rights activism. They offer a distinct approach that complicates the way in which we understand this history, challenging us to think deeper about

²⁹Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY, 1998).

³⁰Philip Boobbyer, “Vladimir Bukovskii and Soviet Communism”, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 87:3 (2009), pp. 452–487; Vladimir Bukovsky, *To Build A Castle: My Life as a Dissenter* (London, 1978).

³¹Hurst, *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent*, pp. 26–32.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 43–78.

the nature of these campaigns, what they seek to achieve, and their status. Instead of being uncritically held up as self-evident in their importance and unquestionably “good”, these lenses remind us to think carefully about human rights, and the individuals active in promoting them. They also highlight the value that transnational activism offers to human rights campaigners, especially those who are persecuted domestically for their efforts. More broadly, these lenses offer a critical framework through which the study of activism can be fruitfully conducted, reminding scholars of the need to be as objective as we can be when assessing transnational activism – no easy feat when these activists are concerned with moral issues such as the protection of human rights. Whilst it is all but impossible to be completely objective about an issue as complex as human rights activism, Laqua’s lenses offer a model through which historians can approach this topic with a critical edge, one that will doubtless help us develop a more nuanced understanding of this history.