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# Histories of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector

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## Abstract

Whereas traditional accounts of the evolution of the non-profit and philanthropic sector have tended to concentrate on developments in Western Europe and North America, this exploration of diverse histories of associationalism emphasises their multifarious roots around the world. Exploring the evolution of associationalism in three main aspects – ancient, modern, and transnational – this chapter elucidates the importance of communication across world regions to the historical development of voluntary associations. The chapter concludes with reflections on the contemporary state of associationalism in the light of historical experience.

## Introduction

Understandings of the scope of the non-profit sector in the post-Cold War era have tended to follow the criteria put forward by Salamon and Anheier (1992: 135, 130) encompassing non-governmental associationalism that is formally organized, self-governed, and involving voluntary participation on a not-for-profit basis, with philanthropy constituting one of the sources of resources for this sector.<sup>1</sup> As Morris (2000) noted, definitions following these criteria miss much of the rich diversity of non-profit sector activities from a broader historical perspective. In order to obtain a fuller historical overview of this sector, it is necessary to take into account activities that may fall short of the ideal-type of formal organization, independence from government and

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<sup>1</sup> It is common for academic literature on philanthropy also to follow Salamon, defining it as ‘the use of private resources – treasure, time and talent – for public purposes’ (Phillips and Jung, 2016: 7).

voluntary participation on a non-profit basis. Similarly, loosening these strict criteria enables better consideration of activities beyond the ‘Western’ context in which understandings of the constitution of the non-profit sector such as this originated.

Introductions to the history of the non-profit sector have often focused primarily on developments in Europe and North America (Soskis 2020), with the sector’s deep historical roots frequently being traced to Jewish and Christian religious practices (Robbins 2006) and to classical antiquity (Molnár 2020). There has also been a tendency in related historical literatures – such as in survey histories of humanitarianism – to provide a narrative emphasising the role of European imperialism in the global expansion of such activities (Barnett 2011). In this chapter – by contrast – the emphasis is on the multiple histories of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, aiming to give consideration not only to dominant narratives such as these but also a much more geographically and socially diverse array of activities that a broader conceptualization of the sector encompasses.

Besides this broader focus, this chapter aims to shed especial light on the transnational dimension of the evolution of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector. Much established scholarship has tended to be marred by methodological nationalism, with pioneering studies having tended to focus on single country cases (Salamon et al. 1999; Heinrich and Fioramonti 2007). This is hardly surprising, given the tendency for much of the data on the sector to be located at the national level (Anheier 2001). Yet the transnational communications and structures that have developed in this sector have an extensive history, with transnational civil society having developed over many centuries (Davies 2014).

Given the constraints of a short introductory chapter, a full account of the diverse multi-national and transnational histories of the philanthropic sector is impossible. However, it is hoped that this chapter at least offers some indication of the plurality of histories that deserve further investigation. Voluntary action history is an emerging discipline – with its own

professional societies such as the Voluntary Action History Society in the UK – but it is one that is in need of further nourishing and advancement.

### **Early associationalism**

While there has often been scepticism as to the extent of voluntary associationalism in ‘pre-literate’ societies (Anderson 1971), Harris et al (2016: 26) have noted that there have been efforts ‘to infer the extent of associational activity among preliterate societies in millennia long ago from more recent anthropological evidence.’ They have pointed, for example, to the formation by Tareumiut whale hunters of ‘voluntary associations under the leadership of an *umealiq*...who organises the labor necessary to acquire and maintain a large whaling boat’ (Johnson and Earle, 2000: 177) as ‘evidence for the existence of different types of association among members of hunter-gatherer-fisher societies’ (Harris et al., 2016: 25).

In subsequent periods where the historical evidence from the time is more extensive, histories of what might now be termed the non-profit and philanthropic sector can be identified in multiple world regions. In considering the evolution of the sector in India, Joshi, Panjani and Dwivedi (2001: 3) have asserted that ‘voluntarism is an integral part of Indian society, and dates back to 1500 BC when it has been mentioned in the *Rig Veda*’ including the statement ‘May the one who gives shine most’. Besides religiously-motivated philanthropy, they note the significance in pre-colonial India of caste groups, professional guilds, cultural associations, efforts towards conservation of nature, and ‘workmen’s co-operatives and guilds ... [that] were variously called *Nigama, Sangha, Sreni, Puga* and *Nikaya*’ (Joshi, Panjani and Dwivedi, 2001: 4-5).

In considering the development of philanthropy in China, Friedrich Hirth (1912: 13) pointed out more than a century ago that ‘far from being introduced by Western missionaries, the spirit of charity to one’s neighbor has originated and developed on Chinese soil itself’. Yu-Yue Tsu (1912: 23-24) commenced his study of Chinese philanthropy in the era of ‘the Five Rulers (2255-2205 BC)’ when ‘the men of Yin’ were understood to have provided nourishment

to the elderly. In considering the evolution of associations in China, Ross (1976: 73-78) identified a range of activities including *she* and *hui* local-level mutual assistance and common concern associations, and the *tsu*, organized around common ancestors and with the name dating to the Shang Dynasty. Research into the 'long history of civil charity' in China has also noted 'the Sui Dynasty's public granaries and the Song Dynasty's public farmsteads and public lands' (Wang and Xu 2010: 25). The spread of Buddhism is understood to have been important in the development of voluntary associationalism in China from the fifth century onwards, while 'a loss of faith in state activism' and neo-Confucianism are claimed to have played a part in the advancement of local associationalism in the Southern Song Dynasty (von Glahn 1993: 221, 246).

The evolution of associations in the classical Mediterranean has attracted the greatest attention in traditional studies. Jones (1999) emphasises the context of democratic institutions for the development of associations or *koinonai* in classical Athens, as well as a law of Solon that provided for associational autonomy so long as they did not infringe on state regulations. Similarly in the early Roman republic, self-organized voluntary associations or *collegia* operated quite freely, but the revolutionary activities of some guilds led to a decree abolishing those against public interest in 64 BCE, leaving a 'shadow ... that was never really to lift' (Cotter 1996: 76), although voluntary associationalism was to persist. This was later to include early Christian associationalism (Kloppenborg 2019) which in the post-Constantinian era became increasingly bureaucratised and enmeshed with dominant institutions (Wilson 1996: 14).

Besides religious establishments such as confraternities, associationalism in medieval Europe was to include a variety of fraternal societies and guilds, but the extent to which these were voluntary was in some instances questionable, since as Harris et al. (2016: 32-33) note, commonly 'private and voluntary associations of the Middle Ages exercised powers ... over their members ... [that] in some settings were indistinguishable from other institutions of governance'.

While dominant narratives of the evolution of associationalism and charity have emphasised Euro-centric origins such as these, there is growing attention in English-language historical literature to the diverse roots of contemporary philanthropy and associationalism around the world. Singer (2008), for example, has aimed to elucidate the history of charity in Islamic societies over the last fourteen centuries. Besides *zakat* (obligatory almsgiving), this history encompasses the role of voluntary charity (*sadaqah*) and voluntary associations.

Long-established indigenous concepts and practices shape contemporary philanthropic and voluntary associational activities in multiple world regions. For example in South Africa the Bantu concept of *ubuntu* emphasising ‘the importance of community, solidarity, caring, and sharing’ and recognition that ‘true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others’ underpins an approach to philanthropy that is ‘more horizontal than vertical in nature’ (Mottiar and Ngcoya 2016: 151). Indigenous worldviews in South America include those that have extended recognition of mutual dependence beyond humanity to include the natural environment, with, for example, the worldview of the Ashaninka of the Peruvian Amazon emphasising that life as an *ashaninkasanori* entails caring not only for other people but also ‘following an ethos of conviviality in the relationship with the Earth, including respecting other-than-human beings [and] caring for the Earth through hard work’ (Caruso and Sarmiento Barletti 2019: 221).

### **Modern associationalism**

An approach emphasising responsibilities to life-forms beyond other humans is to be found in multiple regional histories of voluntary associationalism. One notable aspect of late Ming associationalism in China, for example, consisted of societies promoting the liberation of animals from distress (Handlin Smith 2009: 15). The Ming period of Chinese history exhibited a vast array of forms of associationalism, including charitable and welfare societies providing relief to the poor and those afflicted by disasters, micro-credit associations, and educational associations,

among many other varieties of voluntary societies (Zhou and Zeng 2006: 193-202; Levy and Pissler 2020: 54-56). Especially notable are the numerous life-saving and free ferry societies on the banks of rivers and lakes, which developed practices later emulated by European 'humane' societies (Evans 2003).

As with so many other features of European modernity (Hobson 2004), modern associationalism in Europe owed much to precedents in other continents. Besides Chinese influence on modern European humanitarianism, there was for example the influence of activities in the Ottoman empire on political revolutionary associationalism in late eighteenth century Europe, with rebellions in the Ottoman empire being perceived as providing models to emulate in Europe (Davies 2014: 25).

The expansion of voluntary associations the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also needs to be understood in the context of processes of industrialization, urbanization and the expansion of the middle class (Morris 1983). One British commentator noted in 1843 that there were by that time 'many institutions and associations ... for the dispensing of every kind of good, which have arisen within the present or last generation and which have flourished most in the manufacturing towns and villages - such as mechanics institutes, literary societies, circulating libraries, youth's guardian societies, friendly societies, temperance societies, medical charities, clothing societies, benevolent and district visiting societies' (Edward Baines, quoted in Morris 1983: 95). At the same time, Tocqueville (1838) observed the vitality of associational life as a feature of democracy in the United States. Even in heavily regulated European states such as Russia, a diverse array of associational life was to develop by the late nineteenth century (Tumanova 2011).

One of the most extensively studied aspects of European associationalism in the nineteenth century is its role in imperialist expansionism (Barnett 2011). Purportedly 'civilising missions' characterised the objectives of voluntary organizations such as the Holy Childhood Association, which was founded in 1843 and sought to counter infanticide in China, but which

itself faced numerous accusations of infanticide leading to the cessation of its activities in China in 1951 (Harrison 2008).

Whereas some have viewed missionary and colonial institutions as providing part of the basis for associational activities in post-colonial states (Woodberry 2012), far more significant were anti-imperialist associations that sought to combat these institutions. Perhaps the best-known example is Gandhian anti-imperialist associationalism and Gandhian principles such as *swaraj* (self-reliance), which in post-independence India influenced both the development of government institutions supportive of voluntary associationalism, and the creation of a wide range of non-governmental organizations explicitly drawing on Gandhian values (Sahoo 2013: 44).

The historical development of modern civil society in different states exhibits significant variations depending on local context. In the case of Kenya, for example, Nasong'o (2007: 28-29) observes a significant contrast between urban-based social organizations that merely sought 'to ameliorate the externalities of colonialism' and rural-based associations that 'rejected out of hand colonial hegemony' and 'sought to reconstruct alternative institutions or a return to African traditionalism', with the more radical approach playing a greater role in the post-imperial transition.

According to one widely-circulated estimate, by 2015 there were thought to be more than ten million non-governmental organizations around the world (Khoo 2018: 198). However, the traditional model of voluntary associationalism mediated by a hierarchical non-governmental organizational structure has become less relevant in recent decades, especially since the development of new technologies of electronic communication. Whereas in the past, a hierarchical organizational structure may have been necessary to facilitate co-ordination of resources, increasingly these can be mobilized more horizontally and on an ad hoc basis through digitally mediated networks (Castells 2015).

## **Transnational associationalism**

One of the consequences of global digital communications has been expansion in the scope for associationalism across national borders (Frangonikolopoulos 2012). However, transnational associationalism long precedes the technologies that facilitate its contemporary dynamics. The longest-established transnational associations are largely understood to consist of transnational religious establishments such as Roman Catholic hospitaller orders, Sufi tariqahs, and missionary societies of various faiths (Trinningham 1998; Robert 2009). However, cross-border performing arts societies, scientific associations, and fraternal secret societies also predate the principal waves of expansion of transnational associations from the late eighteenth century onwards (Davies 2014: 20).

Besides the role of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, accelerated international communications, the growth of the middle class, and urbanization, the expansion of transnational civil society in the nineteenth century was facilitated through learning processes between continents. For example, one of the earliest associations to describe itself as international – the International Shipwreck Society which coordinated an international network of lifesaving establishments from Paris in the 1830s and 1840s – made explicit reference to the influence of Chinese precedent (Davies 2018).

Cosmopolitan cities served as major hubs for the development of transnational associations, notably Paris in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, London in the late nineteenth century, and Brussels and Geneva in the early twentieth century. Today, hubs of transnational associations also include Penang, birthplace of the Third World Network and many other ‘Global South’ transnational associations in the 1980s (Hilton 2009), Bangkok, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires, to name just a few examples (Taylor 2004). The significance of cities such as Geneva and Nairobi for transnational associations reflects the presence of intergovernmental lobbying opportunities in these cities, notably the

historical legacy of the establishment of the League of Nations in Geneva (White 1968), and the opportunities provided by the UN Environment Programme in Nairobi (Livernash 1992).

Dominant narratives of the evolution of transnational associations tend to consider their roots in late nineteenth century Europe, with the Red Cross and International Workingmen's Association being established in Geneva and London respectively in the 1860s, and a wide range of transnational women's, labour, humanitarian, educational, professional and peace societies, among other sectoral associations being established across Europe from the 1870s (Lyons 1963; Boli and Thomas 1999). However, similar cross-border associationalism was also to be found in other continents, notably in South America, where 'republican internationalist' ideals played a significant role (Long and Schulz 2021).

Moreover, anti-imperial and pan-regional mobilizations were to constitute significant features of transnational associationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examples of pan-regional associations include the Pan-African Association launched by Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams in 1897 (Geiss 1974: 176-77), and the East Asian Common Culture Association formed in Japan in 1898 (Saaler 2007: 4). Anti-imperialist and Islamic revivalist objectives were advanced by transnational associations including the Society of the Muslim Brothers, established in Egypt in 1928 and which quickly expanded to other national contexts (Lia 2006).

After former colonies gained independence, cross-regional associations to advance their common objectives were established including the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, the creation of which in 1958 was described as 'a striking manifestation of the fundamental changes in the world, which consist in that the peoples of Asia and Africa, who but recently were oppressed, enslaved and deprived of elementary human rights, have now emerged in the world arena, have become an irresistible force that must be reckoned with' (Rashidov 1958: 12).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> AAPSO was among many 'front' organizations supported by the Soviet Union in the Cold War period.

Besides exhibiting greater regional diversity, transnational associationalism in the second half of the twentieth century expanded in respect of the range of issue-area foci of mobilization, for instance accompanying the development of ‘new social movements’ in the late 1960s that encompassed peace, feminist, environmentalist and many other forms of activism which were thought to be ‘a product of a shift to a postindustrial economy’ (Pichardo 1997: 412). The same period also witnessed growing professionalization of transnational associations, especially in the development aid sector (Chabbott 1999: 243).

After the end of the Cold War, and accompanying the proliferation of intergovernmental conferences in the 1990s, there was thought to be a ‘global associational revolution’ as transnational voluntary organizations greatly expanded in number, reflecting the seizing of newly expanded political opportunities in this era (Salamon 1993). For some authors this development reflected the emergence of a ‘global civil society’ transcending the national boundaries of the past (Kaldor 2003).

Large scale transnational reformist advocacy campaigns such as against landmines and for the creation of an International Criminal Court claimed significant successes in the immediate post-Cold War period (Price 1997; Glasius 2006), while more radical transnational associationalism mobilized on a remarkable scale at meetings such as those of the World Social Forum (Smith et al 2006). At the end of the twentieth century, pan-associations such as CIVICUS were established to advance the common interests of associations around the world (CIVICUS 1999).

Efforts to unite in coordinated action transnational associations from across the world were not without precedent. However, on each occasion they were established shortly before a period of significant associational contraction. For instance, shortly before the First World War the Union of International Associations based in Belgium sought to unify in a single organization all the world’s transnational associations at the time (Union of International Associations 1914), while in the early 1930s the International Consultative Group based in Geneva claimed to speak

on behalf of transnational associations with a combined membership exceeding 100 million people (Davies 2012: 415). In both cases, bold objectives of uniting transnational civil society quickly had to be abandoned.

### **Contemporary associationalism in historical perspective**

Global associationalism has been confronted by numerous challenges in the twenty-first century, leading some to retract the optimistic assessments of the late twentieth century. Economic challenges have included the contraction of funds following the global financial crisis (Khanna and Irvine 2018), while political challenges have included the problems of global insecurity (Irrera 2019) and the expansion of authoritarian governance regimes (Heiss 2019). Pressures such as these have been compounded by the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis, with 40% respondents to one CIVICUS survey claiming to have been ‘affected so severely that they expect to close down or stop activities in the near future’ (CIVICUS 2020: 2).

Although some have argued that recent developments may mark the reversal of the associational revolution of the late twentieth century, a longer term historical perspective may lead to a less pessimistic assessment. Global associationalism has seen many previous periods of retrenchment such as those accompanying the two World Wars and the Great Depression, and yet on each occasion it has adapted and recovered. Moreover, consideration of the extensive voluntary associational activities even further back in human history reveals the great scope of such activities even in contexts that are extremely remote from contemporary understandings of liberal democracy.

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