

Youth and internationalism in the twentieth century: an introduction

Daniel Laqua and Nikolaos Papadogiannis

Author details:

Daniel Laqua, Northumbria University, daniel.laqua@northumbria.ac.uk

Nikolaos Papadogiannis, University of St Andrews, np39@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract: This essay introduces a special issue on the complex and contradictory ways in which young activists and youth organisations encountered and experienced internationalism. It argues for the need to pay greater attention to the ambiguous encounters – involving seemingly benevolent aims but also blind-spots and prejudices – that were created by transnational youth mobilities and by young people’s participation in international ventures. We first consider meanings of ‘youth’ within different twentieth-century contexts and comment on the transnational mobilities in which young people participated. We then outline how youth-based internationalism took different shapes, discussing its left-wing and Christian manifestations in particular, and noting how internationalism was articulated through different forms of collective action. The essay makes a case for combining perspectives from social and transnational history to demonstrate the complex character of internationalism, which different groups of young people experienced as both empowering and exclusionary.

Keywords: youth, internationalism, transnational history, mobility, activism

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In August 2019, the 16-year-old environmental activist Greta Thunberg embarked on a widely publicised transatlantic boat journey.¹ Setting sail from Plymouth in the United Kingdom, the Swedish campaigner ultimately reached New York, where she then addressed the United Nations Climate Action Summit. In the previous year, Thunberg had emerged as a figurehead for the school strikes through which young people urged international action against global warming. Thunberg's case offers an instructive example of the relationship between youth, internationalism, mobility and activism – subjects that the contributors explore in this themed issue of *Social History*. Thunberg and many of her fellow campaigners cast age as central to their activism, with concern for the livelihood of future generations tying into wider arguments about sustainability. At the same time, the case of the young environmentalists illustrates how youth could also be evoked *against* activists, with some coverage and social media commentary belittling them because of their age.²

At a time when the internet allows for rapid global communication, Thunberg's long boat journey was highly symbolic. The use of a sailing yacht was itself part of the message – eschewing air travel in favour of a carbon-neutral means of transport – while the image of the travelling campaigner could appear as the embodiment of activist connectivity. Travel was but

¹ See, for example, 'Climate activist, 16, prepares to set sail to America in yacht', *New York Times*, 14 August 2019, 7; 'Crowds welcome Thunberg to New York after Atlantic crossing', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2019, 3.

² This aspect was noted by some observers – see, for example, J. Nevett, 'Greta Thunberg: Why are young climate activists facing so much hate', *BBC News*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-49291464>, last accessed 25 April 2021. See also P.D. Murphy, 'Speaking for youth, speaking for the planet: Greta Thunberg and the representational politics of eco-celebrity', *Popular Communication*, 19, 3 (2021), 193–206.

one transnational feature of Thunberg's activism: 'Fridays for Future' – the movement associated with the school strikes – shows how ideas, strategies and slogans travel across national borders.³ It is also a manifestation of internationalism. The protagonists of this campaign affirm the value of international cooperation in the face of global challenges, both by forging links among activists from different countries and by appealing to international institutions as potential vehicles for a coordinated response to the climate emergency.

This special issue examines the extent and limitations of young people's relationship with internationalism. In this context, 'internationalism' is understood as an umbrella term for a broad array of efforts to forge links across national borders.⁴ We consider how internationalist visions, mobilities and associational structures connected young people across countries and continents. The contributors to this special issue explore the motivations, actions and experiences of different actors: young Christian women in India (Sneha Krishnan), supporters of humanitarian student ventures in Central and Eastern Europe (Isabella Löhr), young communists in the Soviet Union (Robert Hornsby), African students on the move (Daniel Laqua), West German youths in Israel (Nikolaos Papadogiannis), overseas students in Britain (Jodi Burkett) and young Salvadorean veterans in a Cuban rehabilitation camp (Heather Vrana).

Notwithstanding the political objects of some protagonists under consideration, our focus is less on young people's visions of a better world, which Thunberg's activism seems to exemplify. Instead, by assembling these seven research articles, we seek to offer a new perspective for a research field that has traditionally traced young people's engagement with

³ M. Sommer and S. Haunss (eds), *Fridays for Future – Die Jugend gegen den Klimawandel: Konturen der weltweiten Protestbewegung* (Bielefeld, 2020).

⁴ G. Sluga and P. Clavin (eds), *Internationalisms: A twentieth-century History* (Cambridge 2017); D. Brydan and J. Reinisch (eds), *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the twentieth century* (London, 2021); D. Laqua, 'Internationalism', in *European History Online (EGO)*, published by the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz, 4 May 2021, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/laquad-2021-en> [last accessed 6 May 2021].

internationalism through their involvement in ‘progressive’ causes, especially during the ‘long’ 1960s.⁵ In particular, we highlight the ambiguity of internationalist practices and the role of young people therein. By ‘ambiguity’, we mean the possibility of multiple, contradictory and sometimes conflictual encounters as well as the ways in which these were contingent upon differing perspectives and relationships. There are two major ways in which we pursue this research agenda.

First, we set the agency of youth (and thus the view from ‘below’) in relation to the impact of initiatives and structures launched from ‘above’. This line of enquiry involves discussions of young people’s encounters with different forms of state-based internationalism, from the Soviet leadership’s policies of international solidarity and independent Ghana’s embrace of Pan-Africanism to Cuba’s medical internationalism. Our authors also discuss the role of Christian organisations which, whilst aimed at young people, had older leaderships and were engaged in wider associational networks.

Second, we draw attention to young people’s experiences of marginality, including discrimination according to caste, class, gender, disability, race or ‘foreign-ness’. Our adoption of a transnational perspective enables us to explore contradictory effects. On the one hand, the transfer of ideas and the spatial mobilities of marginal groups and individuals gave shape to their political agency. On the other hand, however, their actions reflected and sometimes reinforced power asymmetries – both among young people themselves, and between the participants and organisers of internationalist initiatives.

Through these two strands, we combine important research directions from separate fields, notably the historical study of internationalism on the one side and histories of youth on

⁵ For examples of the rich historiography in this field, see M. Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student protest in West Germany and the United States in the global Sixties* (Princeton, NJ, 2011), Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC, 2012); R. Gildea, J. Mark and A. Waring (eds), *Europe’s 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford, 2013); G.R. Horn, *The Spirit of ’68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford, 2007),

the other. Recent research has emphasised that internationalism was never intrinsically ‘progressive’ but could also serve oppressive practices and agendas.⁶ Likewise, the appeal of aggressive nationalisms among some young people shows that we must not assume that, collectively, they were more open or progressive than older generations.⁷ The distinct contribution of this special issue is that it draws attention to the intersecting ambiguities of internationalism and youth.

This essay serves as an introduction to the special issue and sets up the main parameters of our enquiry. We start by explaining how (and why) we focus on youth and then discuss the phenomenon of youth mobilities. These considerations enable us to outline our multi-layered approach to youth-based internationalism and to the way in which it informed different forms of activism. As a whole, we highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory understandings of internationalism embraced by young activists and youth organisations.

Youth as an object, subject and category

As Luisa Passerini has argued, ‘youth’ served as a metaphor for social change in twentieth-century Europe.⁸ In this vein, young people have often been regarded, or cast themselves, as cultural ambassadors promoting benevolent aims, such as peace or social equality.⁹ However, as our reference to ‘ambiguous encounters’ suggests, cultural misunderstandings and

⁶ J. Reinisch, ‘Agents of internationalism’, *Contemporary European History* 25, 2 (2016), 195–205; P. Hetherington and G. Sluga, ‘Liberal and illiberal internationalisms’, *Journal of World History*, 31, 1 (2020), 1–9. For fascists’ use of internationalism and transnationalism, see M. Herren, ‘Fascist internationalism’, in Sluga and Clavin, eds, *op. cit.*, 191–212; K. K. Patel and S. Reichardt, ‘The dark side of transnationalism: Social engineering and Nazism, 1930s–40s’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, 1 (2016), 3–21; A. Bauerkämper and G. Rossoliński-Liebe (eds), *Fascism Without Borders: Transnational connections and cooperation between movements and regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York, 2017).

⁷ C. Miller-Idriss, ‘Youth and the radical right’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford, 2018), 348–65. For examples of how the far right mobilized youths in an era that is mostly associated with left-wing activism, see C. Gerteis, *Mobilizing Japanese Youth: The Cold War and the making of the Sixties generation* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).

⁸ L. Passerini, ‘Youth as a metaphor for social change: Fascist Italy and America in the 1950s’, in G. Levi and J.-C. Schmitt (eds), *A History of Young People in the West*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 281–340.

⁹ On young people as ‘cultural ambassadors’, see, for example: R. I. Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors: How youth travel integrated Europe* (Chicago, 2017).

prejudices often manifested themselves in such transnational exchanges. Moreover, young people could also mobilise across borders to pursue aspirations that were far from benign, such as fascist or neo-fascist ideas about social and political transformation.¹⁰

The agency of young people operated alongside the efforts of different political actors to mobilise them for specific ideological ends. The emphasis of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany on the mobilisation of children and youth is a well-known example.¹¹ At the same time, many left-wing movements also sought to appeal to, and organise, young people – which, in its turn, led to the creation of state-sanctioned youth organisations in countries under communist rule. The present special issue explores this aspect through Hornsby’s article, which focuses on the Young Communist League (Komsomol), which had been founded in Soviet Russia in 1918.¹² During the Cold War, the Komsomol provided a model for similar youth organisations in other parts of the Eastern bloc.

In the twentieth century, youth was closely entwined with different state-building projects, and a variety of examples could be cited to illustrate this point.¹³ In China, this dimension was exemplified by the respective roles of the China Youth Corps in the Republic of China and the Communist Youth League in the People’s Republic.¹⁴ In Israel, the Fighting Pioneer Youth (also known as Nahal) programme combined military service with agricultural

¹⁰ See, for instance, P. del Hierro, “‘From Brest to Bucharest’: neofascist transnational networks during the long 1970s”, *European Review of History*, 29, 3 (2022), 520–47.

¹¹ T.H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political socialization of youth in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985); M. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, 2009); A. Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth training regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Madison, WI, 2015). See also for other movements on the far right, e. g. R. Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist activism in interwar Romania* (Ithaca, NY, 2015).

¹² A. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington, IN, 2000); M. Neumann, *The Communist Youth League and the Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1917–1932* (Abingdon, 2011); J. Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford, 2010). *Social History* has provided a forum for research in this field: A. Gorsuch, ‘Soviet youth and the politics of popular culture during the NEP’, *Social History*, 17, 2 (1992), 189–201; M. Neumann, ‘Revolutionizing mind and soul? Soviet youth and cultural campaigns during the New Economic Policy (1921–8)’, *Social History*, 33, 3 (2008), 243–67.

¹³ For an example from Yugoslavia, see D. Popović, ‘Youth Labor Action (*Omladinska radna akcija*, ORA) as ideological holiday-making’, in H. Grandits and K. Taylor (eds), *Yugoslavia’s Sunny Side: A history of tourism in socialism (1950s–1980s)* (Budapest, 2010), 279–302.

¹⁴ K. Mulready-Stone, *Mobilizing Shanghai Youth: CCP internationalism, GMD nationalism and Japanese collaboration* (Abingdon, 2015).

labour, in a way that fostered a sense of the ‘nation-in-arms’.¹⁵ Postcolonial nations developed their own efforts in the realm of youth, as exemplified by ventures such as the Young Pioneers and Builders Brigade in independent Ghana.¹⁶

Rather than focusing on the national realm, this special issue traces multiple ways in which young people became the subjects of efforts at the *international* level. In some of these contexts, youth functioned as a synonym of progress and was cast in terms of its capacity to promote peace and understanding. We critically interrogate such claims. Moreover, we also note that such international initiatives and the aforementioned state-building projects were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Laqua discusses Ghanaian scholarship schemes within the context of both the Nkrumahist state and Pan-Africanism which, in turn, to some might appear as a case of ‘black internationalism’.¹⁷

Mischa Honeck and Gabriel Rosenberg have argued that one must not treat young people as ‘empty vessels for the ambitions of adult organizers’ as they were ‘complex players with their own agendas, interests, and desires’.¹⁸ Accordingly, we consider youth not only as objects of internationalist ventures but as subjects whose aspirations and actions require close inspection. In many instances, young participants in transnational encounters did not act in the ways that political leaders or university officials expected them to. Our contributors draw attention to the experiences of the participants in transnational encounters, for instance by discussing young West Germans who travelled to Israel (Papadogiannis) or overseas students

¹⁵ U. Ben-Eliezer, ‘A nation-in-arms: state, nation, and militarism in Israel’s first years’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37, 2 (1995) 264–85.

¹⁶ C. Nicolas, ‘Des corps connectés: les Ghana Young Pioneers et la mondialisation du nkrumahisme (1960–1966)’, *Politique Africaine*, 147 (2017), 87–107; J. S. Ahlman, ‘A new type of citizen: Youth, gender, and generation in the Ghanaian Builders Brigade’, *Journal of African History*, 53, 1 (2012), 87–105; J. S. Ahlman. *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, state, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana* (Athens, OH, 2017).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the concept of ‘black internationalism’ as an analytical framework, see M. Bedasse, K. D. Butler, C. Fernandes, D. Laumann, T. Nagaraja, B. Talton and K. Thurman, ‘AHR conversation: Black internationalism’, *The American Historical Review*, 125, 5 (2020), 1699–739.

¹⁸ M. Honeck and G. Rosenberg, ‘Transnational generations: organizing youth in the Cold War’, *Diplomatic History*, 38, 2 (2014), 233–9, here 239. On young people and their agency as manifest in transnational encounters, see also W. Walton, *Internationalism, National Identities, and Study Abroad. France and the United States, 1890–1970* (Stanford, 2010).

in the UK context of Sheffield in the 1970s (Burkett). We draw on a variety of sources that capture young people's perspectives – from youth magazines to letters and filmed testimony.

We have deliberately confined this special issue to discussing examples from the twentieth century and, in so doing, concur with the predominant chronological approach in histories of youth. Most work in this field tends to tackle phenomena since the late nineteenth century – in contrast to histories of childhood, which involve a substantial body of work that ranges back much further in time.¹⁹ This difference between histories of youth and of childhood can partly be ascribed to interpretations regarding the period when 'youth' emerged as a distinct and increasingly prominent category. The extension of secondary education and the expansion of higher education were key factors in this regard: they created a growing number of people who were at an intermediate stage between childhood dependency and wage-earning adulthood. Melanie Tebutt has seen the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as 'significant in the history of modern youth because young people of all classes were delineated more clearly by age as adolescence was "universalised" and "institutionalised" in Europe and the United States'.²⁰

This is not to deny the possibility of tracing youth in other contexts and periods – from the early modern period to the role of youth in a neoliberal age.²¹ It does, however, mean that our examination of young people as both objects and subjects focuses on a period in which youth became a prominent category. During the interwar years, distinct youth subcultures and

¹⁹ For examples of such chronological breadth in the history of childhood, see e.g. C. Heywood, *A History of Childhood* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2017) and P.S. Fass (ed.), *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (Abingdon, 2013). Such approaches contrast with Philip Ariès's influential but much contested argument that conceptions of childhood only emerged in the early modern period: P. Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960).

²⁰ M. Tebutt, *Making Youth: A history of youth in Britain* (London, 2016), 9. For a discussion of (male) youth as an area of concern in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see H. Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, class, and the male youth problem, 1880–1920* (Oxford, 1990).

²¹ E. Storr Cohen and M. Reeves (eds), *The Youth of Early Modern Women* (Amsterdam, 2018); P. Griffiths, *Youth and Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford, 1996); M. Sukarieh and S. Tannock, *Youth Rising? The politics of youth in the global economy* (Abingdon, 2014).

movements gained prominence in both Europe and North America.²² In 1930s Germany, youth subcultures such the Edelweiss Pirates ended up in direct conflict with the Nazi regime.²³ In the 1950s and 1960s, youth culture was a prominent feature of political and cultural debate; at the same time, it served as driving force for a diversifying consumer culture.²⁴ This transnational youth culture transcended East and West.²⁵ As a global phenomenon, its manifestations could be traced from Buenos Aires to Tokyo.²⁶

As a whole, we adopt a broad perspective on youth, dealing with diverse constituencies that were defined (or defined themselves) in terms of class, race, ethnicity, disability, gender and place. Simultaneously, we acknowledge that the age range and characteristics of youth may vary according to the context in which it is being discussed. After all, as Andy Furlong has pointed out, ‘youth is constructed differently across time and between different societies’.²⁷ Several contributions highlight the importance of an intersectional approach, as is the case with Krishnan’s discussion of Indian girlhood in terms of its relationship with colonialism and internationalism, and also in Vrana’s consideration of Salvadoran youth through a focus on disability and revolutionary politics. Such examples illustrate the need for considering how

²² D. Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The lifestyle of young wage-earners in interwar Britain* (London, 1995); D. Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain: From ivory tower to global movement – a new history* (Basingstoke, 2008), esp. 30–61; M. Tebutt, *Being Boys: Youth, leisure and identity in the inter-war years* (Manchester, 2012); S. Todd, ‘Flappers and factory lads: youth and youth culture in interwar Britain’, *History Compass*, 4, 4 (2006), 715–30. See also the prominent focus on the interwar period in Jon Savage, *Teenage: The creation of youth 1875–1945* (London, 2007).

²³ D. J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London, 1987), 145–74.

²⁴ See e. g. A. Schildt and D. Siegfried (eds), *Between Marx and Coca Cola: Youth cultures in changing European societies, 1960–1980* (London, 2008).

²⁵ U.G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War politics and American culture in a divided Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 2000); M. Fenemore, *Sex, Thugs and Rock’n’Roll: Teenage rebels in Cold-War East Germany* (New York, 2009); F. Pospíšil, ‘Youth cultures and the disciplining of Czechoslovak youth in the 1960s’, *Social History*, 37, 4 (2012), 477–500. For an example of how political ideology affected perspectives on youth, see S. Horváth, ‘Patchwork identities and folk devils: youth subcultures and gangs in socialist Hungary’, *Social History*, 34, 2 (2009), 163–83.

²⁶ Valeria Manzano, ‘The blue jean generation: youth, gender and sexuality in Buenos Aires, 1958–1975’, *Journal of Social History*, 42, 3 (2009), 657–76.

²⁷ A. Furlong, *Youth Studies: An introduction* (Abingdon, 2013), 3.

social class, gender, disability and/or racism affected group dynamics and internationalist perceptions within different youth-based ventures.

While acknowledging the diversity of youth as a category, several contributions to this special issue deal with higher education settings. Of course, university students were but one segment of youth. Until at least the 1960s, access to higher education was confined to a small fraction of young people – and, in global terms, university attendance continues to be a minority experience to this day.²⁸ As such, the circumstances and actions of university students were hardly representative of their age cohort. At the same time, university students were a particularly visible part of youth – partly because officials and activists viewed them as future leaders.²⁹ As a result, university-based youth was the subject of specific initiatives, as noted by several contributors to this special issue (Krishnan, Löhr, Hornsby, Laqua, Burkett).

Youth mobilities

This special issue treats mobility as a core component of transnational and transregional connections among young internationalists. Richard Ivan Jobs's *Backpack Ambassadors* has drawn attention to the political dimensions and sub-texts of youth travel in the decades after the Second World War, which helped overcome national differences and facilitated a European community, but within limits: seen from this angle, '[a]ccess to mobility acted as a stratifying factor of inclusion and exclusion'.³⁰ Moreover, together with David Pomfret, Jobs has edited a volume that sheds further light on youth mobilities, suggesting that they could, on the one hand,

²⁸ See the data by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, as available via <http://data.uis.unesco.org>.

²⁹ D. Laqua, 'Student activists and international cooperation in a changing world, 1919–60', in Brydan and Reinisch (eds), *op. cit.*, 161–81.

³⁰ Jobs, *op. cit.*, 6.

empower young people and, on the other, reproduce inequalities in terms of nation, social class, gender or conceptions of ‘race’.³¹

In our consideration of youth mobilities, educational dimensions form one prominent strand of enquiry. As noted by several authors in this special issue, educational mobility was often informed by the interplay between student agency and state action, with governments supporting the movement of students through scholarship provision. In doing so, the phenomenon illustrates a development noted by Akira Iriye with regard to the 1930s, namely that in its ‘[o]fficially sanctioned and promoted’ guises, ‘cultural internationalism would become an aspect, an agent, of foreign policy’.³² State-led scholarship efforts intensified during the Cold War, as the rival blocs sought to attract students from the developing world as part of a broader attempt to project ‘soft power’.³³

Another dimension of educational mobility was its connection to the structures and legacies of empire. The circulation of students within imperial contexts has been the subject of various scholarly accounts.³⁴ This special issue takes the imperial dimensions of such mobility seriously but approaches them from somewhat different perspectives. For instance, rather than looking at Indian students in Britain, Krishnan’s article in this issue considers how protagonists of Christian internationalism conveyed Western notions of ‘girlhood’ and ‘womanhood’ to young Indian women, some of whom resided in hostels in the Indian cities to which they had moved for educational or professional reasons. Other contributions consider mobility within postcolonial settings. As discussed by Laqua, the Ghanaian case highlights the role of outward

³¹ R. I. Jobs and D. M. Pomfret (eds), *Transnational Histories of Youth in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2015). On mobilities and hierarchies from the perspective of gender, see T. P. Uteng and T. Cresswell (eds), *Gendered Mobilities* (Abingdon, 2016).

³² A. Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, MD, 1997), 114

³³ G. Scott-Smith and L. Tournès (eds), *Global Exchanges: Scholarships and transnational circulations in the modern world* (New York, 2017); H. Perraton, *International Students 1860–2010: Policy and practice round the world* (Cham, 2020), 195–224.

³⁴ To cite but some examples: T. Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars: Universities, networks and the British academic world, 1850–1939* (Manchester, 2013); Perraton, *International Students*, esp. 139–68; E. Burton, ‘Decolonization, the Cold War and Africans’ routes to higher education overseas, 1957–65’, *Journal of Global History*, 15, 1 (2020), 169–91.

mobility of students but also efforts to attract students from different parts of Africa – partly cast as a form of state solidarity with liberation struggles in the first half of the 1960s. Further articles in this special issue note educational links between former colonies and metropolises, as highlighted by Burkett’s discussion of Commonwealth students in Britain.

Alongside students on the move, the special issue notes another form of mobility involving young people – namely the impact of war and conflict. The First World War and its aftermath caused large-scale displacement, forming part of a wider humanitarian crisis. This situation gave rise to European Student Relief. Löhr discusses this Christian venture, which launched a variety of aid efforts before it was transformed into a more permanent organisation, the International Student Service.³⁵ Initiatives such as European Student Relief were cast as active contributions to post-war reconciliation. Visions of young people as agents of reconciliation are further tackled in a contribution that deals with the legacies of the Second World War: as Papadogiannis shows, the travels of young West Germans to Israel from the late 1950s onwards raised wider questions about the ways in which the post-war generation dealt with the German Nazi past. In this instance, organised youth mobility was an explicitly political project. A final example of war-related mobility is connected to the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992), which caused significant displacement.³⁶ Vrana’s contribution highlights the perspectives of young disabled veterans in a Cuban refugee camp.

We are conscious that mobility did not necessarily signify openness: travel did not always broaden the mind, and the encounters generated by people on the move could generate personal benefits as well as disillusionment.³⁷ Several contributors note how the experiences

³⁵ On these ventures, see also G. Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and beyond, 1880–1980* (Basingstoke, 2014), 51–65; B. L. Hartley, ‘Saving students: European Student Relief in the aftermath of World War I’, *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 42, 4 (2018), 295–315.

³⁶ On displacement in the context of the civil war in El Salvador, see M. Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, refugees, and collective action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison, WI, 2010); S. Bibler Coutin, *Exiled Home: Salvadoran transnational youth in the aftermath of violence* (Durham, NC, 2016).

³⁷ The way in which mobility could sometimes reinforce existing preconceptions is acknowledged in Whitney Walton, *Internationalism, National Identity and Study Abroad: France and the United States, 1870–1970*

generated by transnational mobility contrasted with the official discourse of friendship and fraternity: for example, they discuss the racism foreign students experienced during their sojourns in the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain. Such tensions allow us to acknowledge the contradictory dimensions of transnational processes and internationalist initiatives.

Left-wing and Christian internationalisms

Internationalism could be placed at a wide range of political and social agendas. Seen from this angle, the term ‘internationalism’ can justifiably be placed in the plural.³⁸ This heterogeneity also becomes evident when observing the internationalism(s) of young people, for instance in the case of student activism.³⁹ While being cognisant of the diversity of internationalisms, the special issue places particular emphasis on two of its manifestations: left-wing and Christian internationalist projects. Both claimed to promote benevolence, such as peace and/or equality, but, in practice, often reinforced power asymmetries and contained manifold blind spots. Moreover, advocates of both left-wing and Christian internationalism claimed that their ideas were universally applicable. As such, their efforts allow us to trace practices across different cultural, political and regional contexts.

As far as left-wing internationalism is concerned, it is well known that many socialists and communists cast internationalism as intrinsic to their political beliefs and practice, based on the conviction that class solidarity would transcend national differences.⁴⁰ Such internationalism also manifested itself in left-wing youth movements and official ventures

(Stanford, CA, 2009). For a recent discussion on the social and economic agendas connected to internationalism, see S. Kott, *Organiser le monde: Une autre histoire de la guerre froide* (Paris, 2021).

³⁸ See also Sluga and Clavin, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Laqua, ‘Student activists and international cooperation’.

⁴⁰ For some examples of the vast literature on socialist and communist internationalisms, see N. Delalande, *La lutte et l'entraide: l'âge des solidarités ouvrières* (Paris, 2019); O. Dachewyh and I. McKay, *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the national, colonial, and racial questions* (Montreal, 2019); P. Babiracki and A. Jersild, *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (Basingstoke, 2016).

aimed at youth.⁴¹ In the Khrushchev era, the Soviet Union embarked on the project to reaffirm its commitment to internationalism, as noted in Hornsby's contribution.⁴² Moreover, moving into the 1980s, the consideration of young veterans of the civil war in El Salvador is connected to the internationalist vision of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) on the one side and the Cuban state, which hosted rehabilitation camps for left-wing Salvadoran veterans, on the other. This example is also notable because both El Salvadoran fighters and communist Cuba were subject to solidarity movements in both East and West.⁴³ In its turn, the Cuban state proclaimed its solidarity with international 'liberation' struggles, as exemplified by the country's involvement in the Tricontinental Movement.⁴⁴ Cuba's role in providing medical aid in different parts of the Global South constituted a form of 'medical internationalism' and can be seen as an alternative form of foreign policy.⁴⁵

Such activities draw attention to the extent to which internationalism could be cast in anti-imperialist terms. Other contributions to this special issue also develop this thematic strand. For instance, Laqua highlights how, in the early 1960s, the postcolonial state of Ghana established a scholarship scheme for 'Freedom Fighters' from other African countries, resonating with Kwame Nkrumah's wider ambition to establish his country as a hub for Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialist liberation movements. Through the example of student activism in Sheffield during the 1970s, Burkett shows how overseas students were involved in discussing a variety of liberation causes. Seen from this angle, both Third-Worldism in the

⁴¹ See e. g. M. Neumann, 'Youthful internationalism in the age of 'Socialism in One Country': Komsomol'tsy, Pioneers and "world revolution" in the interwar period', *Revolutionary Russia*, 31, 2 (2018), 279–303; Muleady-Stone, *Mobilizing Shanghai Youth*, 14–36.

⁴² E. Gilburd, 'The revival of Soviet internationalism in the mid to late 1950s', in E. Gilburd and D. Kozlov (eds), *The Thaw: Soviet society and culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto, 2013), 362–401.

⁴³ For examples involving campaigners in the US, see M. Todd, "'We were part of the revolutionary movement there': Wisconsin peace progressives and solidarity with El Salvador in the Reagan era', *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, 3, 1 (2017), 1–56; S. Striffler, *Solidarity: Latin America and the US left in the era of human rights* (London, 2019).

⁴⁴ M. Barcia, 'Locking horns with the Northern Empire': anti-American imperialism at the Tricontinental Conference of 1966 in Havana', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 7, 3 (2009), 208–17.

⁴⁵ J. M. Kirk, *Healthcare Without Borders: Understanding Cuban medical internationalism* (Gainesville, FL, 2015).

1960s and new repertoires of humanitarianism in the 1970s borrowed some of the mechanisms of internationalism.⁴⁶

Besides left-wing internationalism, the special issue also explores Christian internationalist endeavours.⁴⁷ Christian internationalist initiatives used the tools that were common to many international ventures by creating a structure that involved national branches coming together to form a broader international organisation. For instance, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA, founded in 1844), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA, founded in 1855) and the World's Student Christian Federation (WSCF, founded in 1895) all sought to organise youth on an international basis.⁴⁸ While casting themselves as ecumenical, these bodies mostly attracted Protestant currents; at the international level, Catholic youth movements gathered momentum in the interwar period, reflecting a growing emphasis on Catholic lay action in this period.⁴⁹ There is further potential to explore inter-religious dimensions, and the tensions inherent in them. For instance, founded in Egypt in 1927, the Young Men's Muslim Association took inspiration from some features of the YMCA while – as a protagonist of Arab nationalism – it 'was opposed to its sister organisation, and in particular the Christian missionary activity the YMCA countenanced'.⁵⁰

In the present special issue, Christian youth activism figures in Sneha Krishnan's article on the YWCA in India, in Löhr's discussion of the humanitarian efforts launched by WSCF

⁴⁶ E. Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French revolutionary left and the rise of humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁴⁷ Christian and left-wing internationalist initiatives were not, necessarily, mutually exclusive. See, for instance: G.-R. Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European progressive Catholicism in the long Sixties* (Oxford, 2015).

⁴⁸ For an example of early transnational YMCA ventures, see J. T. Davidann, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan, 1890–1930* (Bethlehem, PA, 1998). Transnational features of the early student Christian movement are discussed in Brewis, *op. cit.*, 35–50 and R. Howe, 'The Australian student Christian movement and women's activism in the Asia-Pacific region, 1890s–1920s', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 16, 36 (2001), 311–23.

⁴⁹ S.B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in interwar France* (Durham, NC, 2009); P. Selten, 'The religious formation of youth: Catholic youth movements in the Netherlands from 1900 to 1941', *Paedagogica Historica*, 29, 1 (1993), 165–87.

⁵⁰ S. Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution* (Syracuse, NY, 1991), 116.

members, and in Papadogiannis's examination of how the West German YMCA and the Protestant *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Reconciliation Service) coordinated youth travel to Israel. Papadogiannis's article also notes inter-religious dimensions in commenting on the encounters between Christian German and Muslim Arabs living in Israel. One way or another, left-wing and/or Christian internationalist projects spanned many countries and indeed regions of the globe.

Youth and activism in transnational contexts

In the twentieth century, internationalism dovetailed with various forms of activism. In exploring such linkages, we approach activism in a way that encompasses contentious collective action but also non-contentious voluntary action.⁵¹ In this context, the international activism of young people involved a wide spectrum of attitudes and actions. The vast literature on 1968 has dominated perceptions of young people as agents of global change – and many historians have acknowledged the extent to which '1968' was in itself a transnational and global phenomenon.⁵² In this special issue, the political radicalism of the late 1960s figures in Burkett's article on student activism at Sheffield University. Yet, as a whole, our special issue adopts a deliberately broad chronological approach. Our authors set activism in relation to wider historical contexts: imperialism (Krishnan), the aftermath of the First World War (Löhr), Cold War internationalism (Hornsby), decolonisation (Laqua), the legacies of the Holocaust (Papadogiannis), multiculturalism (Burkett) and ideological struggle in Latin America (Vrana). Our enquiry ends in the 1980s. Future work might extend the time frame and consider how two developments affected young people's activism in the international realm. One is the collapse

⁵¹ On contentious collective action, see, for instance: S. G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (Cambridge, 2011), 9.

⁵² See for example Klimke, *op. cit.*; Horn, *op. cit.*; Gildea et al.; *op. cit.*; T. S. Brown, *Sixties Europe* (Cambridge, 2020); Q. Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC, 2012); V. Markarian, *Uruguay, 1968: Student activism from global counterculture to Molotov Cocktails* (Oakland, CA, 2017).

of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, which dealt a severe blow to several manifestations of left-wing internationalism. The second is the popularisation of the internet from the late 1990s, offering new opportunities for young activists while also posing threats to their data. The impact of these developments on internationalist endeavours merits detailed analysis that cannot be accommodated here.

All in all, our focus on youth allows us to approach historical patterns and processes from below: we are dealing with people whose economic power and political leverage was often limited – and who could seek empowerment through their involvement in internationalist initiatives. As research on Asian examples has shown, student activism could contest marginalisation in the global realm.⁵³ This special issue highlights agency in the face of dominant structures and discourses. For instance, our authors show that the experience of everyday discrimination led students from the Global South to become involved in different forms of protest and grassroots activism while attending educational institutions in the First or Second Worlds (Burkett, Laqua). In a different context, the example of young members of the Salvadoran FMNL shows how activism related to other forms of marginalisation, namely those connected to disability (Vrana).

In seeking to offer a broader understanding of youth-based internationalism, this special issue looks beyond barricades, demonstrations and other forms of protest. While radical impulses and repertoires certainly feature in some of the articles, we also trace alternative ways in which young people tried to make a difference, for instance by offering material support including voluntary work, by organising cultural activities, by attending educational sessions or by articulating a feeling of common belonging to a transnational community. Our authors consider very localised forms of activism, including grassroots efforts within specific

⁵³ M. L. Weiss and E. Aspinall, eds, *Student Activism in Asia: Between protest and powerlessness* (Minneapolis, MN, 2012).

communities (on this aspect, see especially Burkett's contribution). Others raise the question of whether travel may be construed as a form of activism (Papadogiannis). This aspect also allows us to analyse the role of the 'transnational activist' as a historical agent – a figure that has recently been the subject of closer scholarly scrutiny.⁵⁴

The articles in this special issue also shed light on the organisational settings in which young people's activism could unfold. At a local level, this involved bodies such as the Overseas Student Bureau in Sheffield, which sought to navigate the politics of race in its interactions with the university authorities, the students' union and local communities (Burkett). At a national level, we consider groups such as the Komsomol, which was subject to concrete expectations by the Soviet authorities (Hornsby); and the National Union of Ghana Students, whose leaders ended up clashing with the government (Laqua). At the international level, we consider ventures such as European Student Relief and the YWCA – bodies in which religion intersected with ideas about humanitarian aid and gender (Löhr, Krishnan). In exploring these contexts, we investigate how the aims of those institutions matched or were challenged by the young people they sought to mobilise.

'Time, manner, place'

The articles in this special issue approach social history from a transnational perspective. Such a conjoined approach allows for the interrogation of internationalist initiatives along the three axes that Patricia Clavin has identified as central when reconsidering modern European history – namely 'time, manner, place'.⁵⁵ In terms of 'time', and the 'potential' that Clavin has identified for transnational history 'to reshape or at least blur chronological boundaries and

⁵⁴ S. Berger and S. Scalmer (eds), *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and comparisons from the Anglo-World since the nineteenth century* (Cham, 2018).

⁵⁵ P. Clavin, 'Time, manner, place: writing modern European history in global, transnational and international contexts', *European History Quarterly* 40, 4 (2010), 624–40.

approaches', the special issue adopts a consciously broad chronological perspective.⁵⁶ In so doing, we emphasise the importance of not letting 1968 overshadow the youth-based activism of other generations. Moreover, Löhr's contribution makes an explicit argument about periodisation, suggesting that Christian internationalist endeavours of the early 1920s should be treated as a watershed movement in which several historical threads converged, including pre- and post-war internationalist visions. Such a careful approach helps us to acknowledge the range of possibilities and limitations provided by initiatives such as European Student Relief.

With regard to 'place', we note Clavin's argument that global and transnational approaches have allowed us to 're-map Europe's relationship with the world'.⁵⁷ We also take up Jessica Reinisch's argument for more research on 'non-Western' internationalism, going beyond a literature that adopts 'the perspective of Western, usually Anglo-American, actors and members of the liberal international elite, or has used them as a yardstick for studying transnational phenomena in the rest of the world'.⁵⁸ As a whole, this special issue therefore enables us to trace connections among young subjects in Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Central America and Africa. Krishnan highlights how the YWCA promoted Western constructions of 'girlhood' in India. She notes the ambivalent nature of such ventures while also raising questions about the contexts in which these transmission processes could be empowering or limiting. Meanwhile, Hornsby and Laqua discuss schemes that enabled students from the Global South to attend educational institutions in the Soviet Union, the United States and other countries in the two Cold War blocs. In such discussions, 'place' matters in various ways, as exemplified by Laqua's consideration of multidirectional mobilities that also involved inbound student mobility to Ghana. Moreover, the articles by Hornsby, Laqua and Burkett article show how experiences of racism and isolation were common to

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 627.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 632.

⁵⁸ Reinisch, *op. cit.* 196.

foreign students regardless of whether they moved to the East or West. Thus, the special issue suggests there were broad commonalities of experience for students moving to a ‘Global North’ – that is, to countries that had no recent experience of colonisation and that, by and large, seemed to enjoy a higher level of industrial development. That said, we are conscious that the concept of a Global North is far from unproblematic, as it covers – and potentially lumps together – very different systems (communist regimes, liberal democracies and right-wing dictatorships).⁵⁹

Regarding the axis of ‘manner’, Clavin has encouraged historical research to explore how and whether phenomena happening in Europe were, in fact, distinctive and how subjects from Europe connected to people from other parts of the globe. In different ways, our authors cover these dimensions of ‘connecting and comparing’.⁶⁰ For example, Papadogiannis demonstrates how Orientalist bias warped internationalist visions of West German groups running youth mobility programmes to Israel. Such prejudice was one of the parameters that obstructed the contact between West German visitors and Arabs living in Israel. Meanwhile, Burkett nuances research on the significance of Third-Worldism in the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe.⁶¹ She argues that during the late 1960s, Sheffield University’s Overseas Student Bureau endorsed a soft multiculturalism that did not tackle political issues in the Global South but instead sought to promote cultural contacts among students at Sheffield University. However, its approach then shifted to an activist embrace of ‘political blackness’ in the 1970s. While not challenging the significance of Global South contexts and activists for left-wing internationalist visions in Western Europe, both Papadogiannis and Burkett show how its reception varied. Finally, Vrana challenges a Eurocentric focus in disability history to show the significance of hitherto underexplored internationalist bonds that linked young people from

⁵⁹ On the notion of the ‘Global North’, see: S. Mohandesi, B. Skaerlund Risager and L. Cox (eds), *Voices of 1968: Documents from the Global North* (London, 2018).

⁶⁰ Clavin, *op. cit.*, 629.

⁶¹ See e. g. Slobodian, *op. cit.*; Davey, *op. cit.*

El Salvador with health practitioners such as Francisco Metz from Belgium and Christa Baatz from East Germany. Similar to the other contributors, Vrana refrains from offering a rose-tinted conceptualisation of such ties. She argues that the internationalist collaboration in the 1980s did not yield long-lasting results in terms of reconfiguring disability politics in El Salvador in the 1990s.

Obviously, this special issue does not exhaust all manifestations of youth-based internationalism. While it focuses on left-wing and Christian internationalist initiatives, it does not suggest that these were the only or the more genuine forms of internationalism. Young people from across the political spectrum and from diverse religions have developed internationalist aims and contacts. Moreover, while religion, ideology and identity have been central themes of our discussion here, the relationship between language and internationalism would be a very fruitful further line of enquiry.⁶² Nevertheless, we hope that the notion of ‘ambiguous encounters’ – involving seemingly benevolent aims as well as blind-spots and prejudices – may be useful for the study of other internationalist initiatives that this special issue has not had space to explore here.

⁶² See, for instance, current work on internationalism and international languages: V. Huber, ‘An international language for all: Basic English and the limits of a global education experiment’, in Brydan and Reinisch (eds), *op. cit.*, 51–67; and the project on ‘Esperanto and Internationalism c. 1880s-1930’, at the University of St Andrews, <https://standrewstransnational.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/esperanto-and-internationalism-c-1880s-1930/> (last accessed: 13 July 2022). On the use of particular languages in international higher education, see e.g. P. Altbach, ‘The imperial tongue: English as the dominating academic language’, *International Higher Education*, 49 (2007), 2–4; S. Montgomery, *Does Science Need a Global Language* (Chicago, 2013); V. Lasanowski, ‘Can speak, will travel: the influence of language on global student mobility’, in R. Bhandari and P. Blumenthal (eds), *International Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National Trends and New Directions* (New York, 2011), 193–209.