

Davies: NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society

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NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society, by Thomas Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, ix, 301 p. Notes. Further reading. Index.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a resurgence in academic and policy practitioner interest in nongovernmental organizations and civil society more broadly. In particular, “global” civil society, comprised of networks of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), were identified as powerful new actors capable of bringing about critical transnational agreements on land mines, debt relief, and human rights norms. Thomas Davies’ book *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* explores the development of INGOs from the 1700s to the present, and his findings correct much of the conventional wisdom of what we thought to be true about the evolution of INGOs and transnational civil society. In surveying several hundred years of INGO growth and retreat, his work transforms the post-Cold War civil society euphoria into something more enduring—a systematic and wide-ranging analysis of the ebb and flow of transnational civil society.

Davies dispels several conventional wisdoms about civil society. Many have portrayed the growth of INGOs as a post-Cold War phenomenon. More farsighted analyses have traced the genesis of transnational networks to the antislavery campaigns of the nineteenth century. In contrast, Davies traces the development of transnational civil society back to the late eighteenth century, with the proliferation of religious associations and orders, as well as secret societies, such as the freemasons (p. 4). In uncovering this longer historical timeline, Davies demonstrates how transnational civil society has evolved in waves that have tended to cohere to similar life cycles of birth, expansion, peak years, followed by overextension, decline, and contraction. Thus, the first wave peaked at the turn of the twentieth century, the second between the two World Wars, and the third followed on the heels of the end of the Cold War (p. 6). Finally, Davies highlights both the Eastern and Western origins of INGOs, uncovering a much richer and culturally diverse historical lineage than originally assumed.

Davies also provides a framework for understanding this pattern of ebb and flow in the size, scope, and impact of transnational civil society. Larger economic and political trends, such as the industrial revolution, the evolution of the nation state, increased levels of economic interdependence, and the intensity of global conflict and/or cooperation all shaped the emergence and evolution of transnational civil society (p. 10–11). But these external developments can work in positive as well as negative ways with regard to transnational civil society. Factors that facilitated INGO emergence in the short term also facilitated its long-term decline. For example, the evolution of the nation-state and imperialist expansion at first opened up the opportunity structure for INGO mobilization in the nineteenth century, but later were key factors that facilitated NGO fragmentation in the twentieth (p. 76). Likewise, what were impediments to growth in the short term, in the long term facilitated INGO renewal. In this guise, World War I brought about a steep decline in INGO activity but also helped to facilitate a new generation of INGOs focused on a wider range of issues (p. 85). However, though influenced by larger political and economic contexts, Davies also demonstrates how the internal dynamics of transnational civil society networks also contributed to their own decline; repeatedly, as

INGOs' size and influence grew, so did their hubris over what they could realistically accomplish. The result was a growing disconnect from the populations they claimed to represent, as well as the fragmentation of various advocacy networks and an overall decline of global civil society (p. 181). Davies ends on a cautionary note: Despite claims that INGOs are at the apogee of scope, scale, and influence, in fact, previous transnational efforts, such as the abolition of the slave trade, the extension of women's suffrage, or earlier peace movements, were far more successful and engaged greater portions of the population (p. 175). He suggests that studying previous INGO failures, rather than lingering on successes, will in the end produce more valuable lessons (p. 182). If history truly repeats itself, earlier experiences highlighted in the book indicate that currently INGOs are overextended, overly ambitious, and in a period of decline. This book serves as a timely reminder that INGO activity and influence does not victoriously progress in a linear fashion.

This book is comprehensive in scope, substantive in its analysis, and thought provoking in its conclusions. It is meticulously researched (over eighty pages of the book are bibliographic notes, followed by over twenty pages listing suggested further readings). Davies has amassed an impressive array of detailed factual research and wrestled the information into a clear timeline spanning the last two and a half centuries of INGO developments in all hemispheres of the world. Providing a clear narrative to this messy, sprawling history is a monumental task. Davies also successfully manages a delicate intellectual balancing act on several fronts. Collectively, the chapters highlight broad trends, which unfold in each wave, while also delineating some of the factors that make each wave of activism unique. He also teased out critical themes and trends without imposing unwieldy theoretical structure. As a whole, establishing order over informational chaos involves a significant amount of intellectual heavy lifting, and the research of this book blazes a new trail in the larger terrain of global civil society studies.

At times, the quantity of information Davies is trying to distill into a coherent narrative overwhelms the reader, and the bones of the argument occasionally get buried under the sheer weight of the content. Occasionally, a reader might be grateful for a case study or two as opposed to a detailed list of newly emergent NGOs. However, the value of a richly detailed narrative is that one stumbles across some real gems of scholarly observation. Further, the widened focus on the under-researched topic of the Eastern origins of INGOs is long overdue; however, given the structure of the book, the nonWestern origins of transnational civil society is dealt with relatively briefly across chapters. Nonetheless, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* serves as a critical touchstone from which to pursue more specialized research agendas regarding the scope and significance of transnational civil society.