

Davies, Thomas Richard: *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism. The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2007. ISBN: 978-90-04-16258-7; xii, 284 pp.

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In this book, based on a prize-winning dissertation from the University of Oxford, Thomas Richard Davies seeks to probe the opportunities and limits of transnational activism. His case study is the transnational campaign for disarmament between the two world wars, and he pays special attention to the resonance of the campaigns in Britain, France, and the United States. Instead of accepting the rather grand assumptions about the straightforward impact of transnational activism and about the importance of transnational activism for world politics, Davies is sceptical and seeks to test the relevance of transnational campaigning more carefully. The aim of his study is twofold: to provide one of the first thorough empirical accounts of the transnational disarmament campaign between the wars, and to contribute to our conceptual understanding of the workings of transnational activism. Unfortunately, the book's rather stiff price tag will make it difficult even for many university libraries to purchase the volume.

Davies's account is based on an impressively vast array of source material from Britain, the United States and France. He has produced an extremely lucid account. Throughout the book, Davies is an author who remains in remarkable control of the vast material he covers, stands as an exemplar of analytical clarity. Rather than studying the disarmament movement in individual countries, Davies directs our attention to transnational activism beyond borders and its resonance within national politics. Although his focus is on the activism around the world disarmament conference in the early 1930s, one of his important empirical contributions is to show the importance of the 1920s as a period of incubation and to highlight the links to pre-First World War and nineteenth-century campaigns.

Following a very detailed and diligent elab-

oration on his methodological assumptions and aims across two chapters that takes up 25 pages of the 172 pages of text, the following two chapters discuss roots, precursors and precedents of the interwar disarmament campaign as well as its membership. Chapters 5 and 6 give a detailed account of the emergence and institutionalisation of a transnational disarmament movement. The book's main section offers a detailed and empirically dense account of the preparation, running and collapse of the world disarmament conference from 1931 to October 1933. The last three chapters offer an assiduous assessment of the influence of the interwar disarmament campaigns. The account is rounded off by a series of useful appendices, foremost among them brief prosopographies of principal associations and activists (Appendix I and II).

The editors at Brill did the author a disservice by not encouraging him more strongly to move away from the thesis manuscript towards a less mechanical narrative: by the end of chapter 3, the reader's head is already a bit dizzy from references to previous passages and chapters still to come, and at the end, in chapter 12 entitled „Summary of conclusions“, one is gripped by an eerie feeling of déjà-vu. This is a pity because the author's prose is exact and refreshingly free of jargon, and the book's structure is so clear as to make such cross references entirely unnecessary.

Despite the book's considerable achievements, one closes this volume with a somewhat ambivalent impression. It is, on the one hand, an extremely well argued and clearly written assessment that makes an important contribution to our empirical understanding of transnational disarmament activism in the period between the two world wars. On the other hand, the book fails to convince entirely on a conceptual level and reads a bit like the account of a science experiment that failed: a battery of instruments is assembled to test an assumption (here: the importance of transnational activism for government policy making), and the rather depressing conclusion is that the assumption is wrong – a conclusion that others might have expected from the very beginning even without the experiment. To be sure, the author adds some differentiation:

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he argues that the principal response to activist pressure was a series of governmental disarmament plans (such as the Tardieu Plan of February 1932, the Hoover Plan of June 1932, the Paul Boncour Plan of November 1932 and the MacDonald Plan of 1933). The key impact of activism, he points out, lay in the ways in which it encouraged governments to change the presentation of their policy (p. 153). But one would have liked to hear much more about how exactly the semantics and images of governmental disarmament policies changed beyond the realm of policy making in the narrow sense.

There is no doubt that many accounts of the impact of transnational activism in international politics have been overblown and that they need to be empirically tested, and Davies provides an extremely important corrective to these interpretations. But the author is rather quick in assuming a rather Newtonian billiard-ball model of politics, in which influence can be gauged by measuring policy outcomes. He thus remains within the contemporary framework of a debate between Realists vs. Idealists. His nominalist methodology that assumes that 'the claims [...] about activism's influence are derived from the reasons cited by senior policymakers for their decisions in official and private correspondence' (p. 18) would also have deserved far more than the author's pragmatic justification.

A more thorough conceptual engagement with Cecilia Lynch's brilliant book on interwar peace movements in world politics that aims to shift the focus of debates away from determining impact towards establishing the importance of 'normative meaning' and the ways in which the disarmament movements developed security norms that fundamentally and substantially differed from official pronouncements on disarmament might have been more helpful.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, a more detailed discussion of more recent developments in transnational history, especially Patricia Clavin's pioneering work, might have led to a less mechanical and more historical understanding of this important topic.<sup>2</sup> Hence, Davies's ultimate conclusion that 'activism will be inhibited from achieving its goals if propaganda is inconsistent' and that, faced with 'the problem of incompatible

views held by public opinion in different countries', 'must make it their duty to educate public opinion' (p. 172) remains remarkably close to the liberal assumptions of his protagonists.

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<sup>1</sup> Cecilia Lynch, *Beyond Appeasement. Interpreting Interwar Peace Movements in World Politics*, Ithaca, NY 1999, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Clavin, *Defining Transnationalism*, in: *Contemporary European History* 14 (2005) 4, pp. 421-439.