

## Editorial

Two parallel and somehow interwoven trends can be observed in contemporary societies, which appear to be moving in opposite directions: On the one hand, the role of government agencies is growing and expanding into more and more areas of collective action and individual life. On the other hand, voluntary action are becoming increasingly important in order to contain societal dysfunctionalities and address global challenges such as poverty and homelessness or the catastrophic effects of climate change and biodiversity loss, or inadequate medical care to mention only a few areas where voluntary action has become indispensable. The number of organizations that provide a framework for this voluntary work and attempt to guarantee the flow of resources needed despite all the free commitment is growing exponentially. Is this a specifically Western connection that expanded in the period since the 18th century due to the normative and material power of European societies (and is based on concepts that only developed their full, though by no means universal, impact with the Enlightenment), Or is a global history of voluntariness not necessarily Eurocentric and based on very different sources of inspiration that have been overlooked for too long due to Eurocentric hubris? At first glance, this seems to be an empirical question, and this issue provides case-by-case answers without claiming to offer a comprehensive interpretation covering the entire planet. However, the question also touches on the core of a more general concern, which some immediately label a crisis of global history.

We can therefore also feel invited, on the occasion of this thematic focus, to reflect on the historicity of our concepts and to ask whether an understanding of, for example, voluntariness, which is derived from the concrete conditions of Western societies, can be meaningfully universalized at all. This very contemporary concept of voluntariness is, on the one hand, linked to a formal separation of (relatively limited) working time, which must be performed as a duty to an employer, and, on the other hand, clearly situated in relation to tasks that the state takes on or at least promises to take on. Both conditions are quite obviously historically specific and cannot be easily extended to periods before the dominance of wage labor, nor can they be easily extended geographically to all parts of the world due to different socioeconomic and cultural conditions. A global history of voluntariness is therefore far removed from the idea of homogeneity in its conditions,

forms, and justifications. And yet, such a global history seems possible in a completely different sense, and perhaps even necessary, because many volunteers respond to the inadequacy of their respective states (whether national or imperial) in overcoming cross-border challenges by networking and inspiring each other across these very borders. The global history of voluntariness is easier and at the same time more comprehensive to understand if we use a transimperial or transnational or transregional lens.

As the editors of this thematic issue emphasize, voluntary work has both a disruptive side that challenges existing power relations and a stabilizing side supporting the existing power structures by its problem-solving approach. Which part of the planet it targets depends on the actors involved. Its reach can range from the local to the planetary. Very often, ambition does not coincide with the material possibilities for implementing it. This often results in a universal language in which the claim is expressed that voluntary work can eliminate a global malaise, even if the concrete sphere of influence is significantly more limited. Consequently, there is a tendency to seek alliances and a willingness to join forces with other volunteers who follow the same or similar inspiration and, at the same time, to overlook the diversity of contexts.

Numerous global stories of voluntariness can therefore be imagined: one of projects corresponding to global aspirations; one of networking across different contexts; and one of transregional and sometimes even global organization. The case studies in this thematic issue and the diverse approaches from different disciplines brought together here show how far we have come and are at the same time an invitation to take the next steps in a fascinating field of global history which clearly demonstrates how much scope there is to explore beyond the boundaries of state intervention in global processes.

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