

Friends in Foreign Places: International Understanding in Post-War Civil Society

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Abstract

My project seeks to understand the changing practices and discourses of internationalism within post-war British and American civil society. The practices of international friendship—with their emphasis on people-to-people connections—form a crucial but understudied part of the picture of postwar internationalism. My aim with this project is to address the neglect of the “everyday” by using international friendship projects as a window onto discourses and practices of internationalism. In doing so, it will contribute to new and emerging research on the role of emotion and intimacy in shaping transnational relationships. This report explores these issues in relation to three initiatives that sought or received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in the mid- to late 1950s: the Experiment in International Living (a youth exchange program), the Asia Society for cultural and educational exchange, and Eisenhower’s expansive but poorly focused People to People Program.

My project seeks to understand the changing practices and discourses of internationalism within post-war British and American civil society. The practices of international friendship—with their emphasis on people-to-people connections—form a crucial but understudied part of the picture of postwar internationalism. The pursuit of international friendship was not a new idea in the post-war period. International organisations had actively promoted the development of personal connections since the end of the nineteenth century. For example, when the Rotary Club’s first international clubs were established in the 1910s, the movement was already committed to building international networks of “acquaintances”; by 1918, they had embraced Woodrow Wilson’s claim that “the only cement that will hold this world together will be the cement of friendship.”¹ But international friendship projects expanded significantly in the post-war period and were shaped, in particular, by the Cold War and by decolonisation. “Dramatically—suddenly—our world has been compressed into a neighbourhood,” explained the president of Rotary International in 1960, “but a neighbourhood in desperate need of wisdom and human warmth; in equally desperate need of more and ever more bridges of friendship so that good men can meet and become good neighbours.”² “The most important development of the age,” he concluded, was “to be found among the intangibles.”³

Although there is a rich scholarly literature on internationalism in the inter-war period—one that addresses the legacy of the First World War in intellectual discourses of international cooperation; the civic traditions that coalesced around the League of Nations;⁴ and the emergence of international humanitarian and ecumenical organisations⁵—we know considerably less about internationalism in the post-war period. Yet, as the Rotary example above illustrates, organisations took up internationalism with renewed interest in the 1950s and 1960s. In this project, I explore whether there was something new and distinct about the forms that civic internationalism and soft diplomacy took after 1945. And if so, why?

To date, research on internationalism in the post-war period has tended to focus on its explicitly political and diplomatic dimensions at the expense of its more

“everyday” and affective manifestations. Current research has three main areas of focus: first, the use of internationalist ideology in relation to aid and development, in particular its expression through the World Food Programme;⁶ second, the relationship between discourses of internationalism and politicised new social movements, particularly in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament;⁷ and third, the use of municipal internationalism as a means to address issues of urban development and city planning, with a focus on European town-twinning.⁸ The practices of international friendship—with their emphasis on people-to-people connections—form a crucial but understudied part of the picture of postwar internationalism.

My aim with this project is to address the neglect of the “everyday” by using international friendship projects as a window into discourses and practices of internationalism. In doing so, it will contribute to new and emerging research on the role of emotion and intimacy in shaping transnational relationships. In particular, I am interested in the instrumentalisation of friendship within associational life. Associations structured the bonds of friendship, shaping not only the practical possibilities of their members’ international friendships but also the wider meaning of these encounters in the context of the Cold War, decolonisation, and globalisation. While the organisations I have looked at in the Rockefeller Archive Center (and in the British context) recognized the emotional value of friendship for the individuals involved—describing personal relationships as warm, tender, exciting, and enjoyable—they also ascribed a broader public value to their members’ international friendships and, in doing so, instrumentalised affect in the pursuit of institutional and national objectives.

In my monograph, *British Civic Society at the End of Empire: Globalisation, Decolonisation and International Responsibility*, (2018), I discussed friendship-focused initiatives in a British context – focusing particularly on the Women’s Institute, the Rotary Club, and youth-focused fundraising and volunteering schemes.⁹ The Rockefeller Archive Center offers a number of rich case studies of American projects, illustrating the broader growth of these kinds

of schemes as well as the particular interest that the Rockefeller Foundation and Rockefeller family took in friendship-based soft diplomacy. The archival material makes clear that while British schemes were particularly preoccupied with the dynamics of decolonisation, American schemes were much more directly focused on the Cold War and the race to build American allegiances in areas where there was perceived Soviet influence.

During my time at the Archive Center, I consulted records relating to a number of relevant case studies that either received or were denied funding from the Rockefeller Foundation or members of the Rockefeller family. I discuss three in this report. Firstly, the Experiment in International Living was a student exchange program established in the inter-war period but which the Rockefeller Brothers Fund began to fund in the 1950s.¹⁰ Secondly, in 1956, John D. Rockefeller 3rd founded the Asia Society to support cultural and educational exchange. It was hoped that the Society would “bring cultural and spiritual leaders of the great Asian and Western traditions together in a friendly informal atmosphere where fundamental identities and values can be jointly explored and frankly discussed with mutual respect and confidence.”¹¹ Thirdly, in the mid-1950s, the Rockefeller Foundation declined funds to the Eisenhower People to People Program. Though it was government directed, People to People sought to invigorate non-state activity in this area. As was set out at a 1956 White House conference, it aimed “to coordinate the activities of those organized groups engaged in international relations and encourage them to expand their programs to put more emphasis on the importance of direct people-to-people communications.”¹² In practice, however, the range of initiatives it sought to support were uncoordinated, unfocused, and duplicated cultural-exchange work already being supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. John Oakes concluded that the People to People Program was “a political publicity stunt.”¹³

Collectively, these case studies indicate that people thought that international friendships could serve multiple distinct yet overlapping public functions. International friendships were used as a means to support internationalist objectives of knowledge-exchange, collaboration, and international

understanding. This was particularly true in the case of the Asia Society – and in the Rockefeller family’s longstanding interest in the Japan Society – which were primarily spaces for knowledge and cultural exchange with the hope that friendships would form organically from these interactions. But it was also evident in the way that Experiment in International Living celebrated the “authentic” American experiences it was able to offer its guests who were, it claimed, “introduced to American life as it is really lived, without distortion and without education.”¹⁴

But international friendships were also seen to serve national interests; they were used as a tool of soft diplomacy in order to improve America’s international reputation and with the aim of securing or maintaining the loyalty of foreign populations. For example, People to People directed funding in ways that specifically targeted “problem” groups. They make clear that diplomatic gains were not incidental to a wider project of internationalism, but at its very heart. “Operation Friendship,” for example, was a 1956 initiative that concentrated on military groups within the Soviet Union in order “to convince the Military Forces and Factions within the Soviet Union that their national interests are inevitably in conflict with the Communist-Bolshevik ideology.” In this scheme, the American public was mobilised in order to create cover for the state’s objectives and to “convince the Soviet Military of the sincerity of our approach.”¹⁵ Similar strategies appear in the countries that Experiment in International Living chose to work with. For example, a project targeting African participants intended that they would “develop a positive and sympathetic attitude toward the United States.”¹⁶ “When these students complete their education and return to Africa as teachers, doctors, politicians, engineers, and businessmen, they will bring with them a true image of America to present to their countrymen.”¹⁷ In documents requesting funding, Experiment in International Living explicitly set out the ways in which it could function as a tool in the Cold War: As the proposal pointed out:

There is no doubt that for the foreseeable future, Africa is destined to be an ideological battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union. There will be little abatement in the current African turbulence, and for the next few years we unquestionably

will be vying for the allegiance and respect of the hearts and minds of the citizens of these emerging nations.¹⁸

The case studies illustrate how soft diplomacy centered non-governmental organisations and, in particular, individuals, as key figures on the geopolitical stage. The American public and the organisations through which they operated took on new significance to diplomacy in the post-war era when apparent inadequacies of traditional diplomatic methods (in the lead up to the Second World War, in the escalating Cold War, and in relations with newly independent nations) encouraged the use of alternative strategies. By the 1950s, cultural diplomacy was recognised in Britain as an “indispensable weapon in the armoury of foreign policy.”¹⁹ In the United States, as Secretary of State Dulles explained in 1957,

peaceful world adjustment to the major problems created by the drive toward self-determination among former colonial peoples, the introduction of atomic power and the industrialization of nations under communist dictatorship would depend largely on the climate within which our nation and others must work.

He went on to explain that this climate “above all is determined under our form of society not by government but by you and others like you who are working in a private capacity.”²⁰ Government-produced promotional material for People to People encouraged people “to leap governments’ and ‘if necessary, to evade governments,”²¹ highlighting the irony of government-directed voluntary action. The many organisations seeking funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund illustrate how non-state organisations sought to position themselves in order to capitalize on these developing discourses.

The case studies also support a range of further conclusions about the ideology and practice of international friendship. First, they show that friendship work was not always straightforward. Not all relationships went smoothly, and the objectives of organisations and institutions did not always align with those participating in the schemes. Writing to JDR 3rd about the Asia Society, I.H. Gordon explained how *difficult* this work was. “It is my very firm belief that

there is no substitute for genuine, fraternal relations on a people-to-people level with other nations. [...] Now that I reflect upon those I feel somewhat surprised that what should, and undoubtedly is so common an idea is so uncommonly rare in practice.” Gordon went on to explain the significance of individuals to this work:

international friendships may be planted by governments but they are brought to fruition only by people. [...] I might be so bold as to ask whether you have shaken hands with a Vietnamese, or met one face to face [...] if you have not, and yet being in such an enviable position to have done so, how many Americans have?”²²

More controversially, the People to People Program found that new groups “some with questionable motives, have sprung up in the confusion. In one case a small but active religious-oriented group has been reported as detouring students by meeting planes and boats at points of entry, taking the foreign students in tow and dropping out of sight to proselytize for several days before sending them on their way.”²³

Furthermore, correspondence from participants makes it possible to consider how the ideological preoccupations of national and international NGOs, including Rockefeller philanthropies, interacted with the highly personal realities of international friendship as it was actually practiced by members of the American public. In particular, correspondence often highlights the emotional significance exchange schemes might have for their participants. One host for the Experiment in International Living wrote to the organisation to say “It is almost literally with “tears in my eyes” that I write to try to thank you and the “Experiment” for the priceless opportunity afforded us for friendship with our Mexican son. Guillermo (Bill) was all any parents, and especially perhaps a mother, would want in a son.”²⁴

Finally, these schemes offer clear examples of the power relationships inherent within international friendship initiatives. When looking at these case studies, we need to be attentive to how foreign friends and guests could become what Sara Ahmed describes as “a commodity fetish,” which “circulated and

exchanged in order to determine the borders and boundaries of given communities.”²⁵ In these circumstances, the celebration of difference and the performance of cosmopolitanism often the effect of reinforcing rather than breaking down boundaries. The lines between international friendship and a more hierarchical philanthropic relationship were easily blurred. This is evident in the frequent deployment of family metaphors to describe them. As Lynn Hunt has discussed in relation to the discourse of the French Revolution, family models reflect how “people collectively imagine—that is, think unconsciously about—the operation of power.”²⁶ These familial and philanthropic discourses are an example of what Ruth Glass characterised in 1960 as “benevolent prejudice.”²⁷

Hospitality, friendship, and cultural-exchange projects highlight the tensions and interplay between diplomacy and internationalism in the post-war period. Each of the schemes discussed in this report emphasised a romantic vision of internationalism that was grounded in equality, while simultaneously justifying their expense based on their benefit to the United States’ international reputation and strength. According to those involved in these case studies, it was possible to win at internationalism. That being the case, organisers argued, all steps needed to be taken to ensure that the United States was the winner. This vision of internationalism, and this faith in the global strategic benefit that could be gained through fostering international friendships, is indicative of a particular post-war climate. It was shaped by America’s ascendancy, the Cold War, and a wider global discourse about the significance of individuals to within global civil society.

¹ Brendan Goff, ‘The Heartland Abroad: The Rotary Club’s Mission of Civic Internationalism’, (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008), p. 30.

² Harold Thomas, cited in *Rotarian* (June 1980), p. 27.

³ Thomas, *Rotarian* (January 1960), p. 10.

⁴ See, for example, Helen McCarthy, ‘The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain, c.1919-56.’ *History Workshop Journal* 70 (2010): 109-132.

⁵ See, for example, Daniel Gorman, ‘Ecumenical Internationalism: Willoughby Dickinson, the League of Nations and the World Alliance for Promoting International

Friendship through the Churches.’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 45 (2010): 51-73.

⁶ See, for example Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (London: University of London Press, 2002).

⁷ See, for example, Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁸ See, for example, Wilbur Zelinsky, ‘The twinning of the world: sister cities in geographic and historical perspective’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81:1 (1991), 1-31.

⁹ See also: Anna Bocking-Welch, Youth Against Hunger: Service, Activism and the Mobilisation of Young Humanitarians in 1960s Britain,’ *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 23, 1-2 (2016): 154-170.

¹⁰ Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Box 60, Folder 598 Experiment in International Living 1953-1961.

¹¹ General Statement on an Approach toward Bridging the Mutual Misunderstandings Between Asia and the West through Joint Examination of Cultural and Spiritual Fundamentals, 10 Feb 1959; Rockefeller Family Archives, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, RG 5, Series 1, Box 36 Folder 335: Asian Interests, General 1959.

¹² White House Conference on ‘A Program for People-to-People Partnership’ Sept 11-12, 1956, Rockefeller Family Archives, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, RG 4, Series L Box 196, Folder 1965 People to People Programs 1955-1968.

¹³ Memo June 10, 1957 JBO (John Oakes), Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RG 2 1957, Series 200, Box 29, Folder 233.

¹⁴ Press release from Experiment in International Living, January 26, 1962, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RG 3.1, Box 326, Folder 2016, EIL 1957-62.

¹⁵ Operation Friendship outline, sent by R.L Johnson (president, Temple University) to President, cc. Commander G.S. Scherbatoff, June 15, 1956, Rockefeller Family Archives, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, RG 4, Series L Box 196, Folder 1965 People to People Programs 1955-1968.

¹⁶ Proposal for Homestay Scholarship, Orientation program for African students, teachers and specialists from EIL, March 26, 1962, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RG 3.1, Box 326, Folder 2016, EIL 1957-62.

¹⁷ Press release from EIL Jan 26, 1962, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RG 3.1, Box 326, Folder 2016, EIL 1957-62.

¹⁸ Proposal for Financial Assistance Homestay Orientation Program for African Students, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RG 3.1, Box 326, Folder 2016, EIL 1957-62.

¹⁹ TNA, CAB/129/80, Memorandum by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, “The permanent establishment of the British Council,” 23 March 1956.

²⁰ Preliminary Report P2P Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RG 2 1957, Series 200, Box 29, Folder 233.

²¹ Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2, Series Q (World Affairs), Box 38, Folder 324 People to People program 1957-1961.

²² Letter I.H. Gordon to JDR Nov. 11, 1954, Rockefeller Family Archives, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, RG 5, Series 1, Box 36 Folder 339 Asia Society, General, 1955.

²³ Women’s Group Committee

²⁴ Elizabeth Tyack (NJ) to Mrs. Lascher, Sept 17, 1959, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RG 6.13, Series 1.1, Box 19, Folder 211, Experiment in International Living June 1959-May 1962.

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 150.

²⁶ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 199, 8.

²⁷ Ruth Glass, *Newcomers: The West-Indians in London* (London: Centre for Urban Studies, 1960), p. 218.