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The development of transnational business associations during the twentieth century

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the development of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and especially those relating to business, over the twentieth century. Using a variety of constructed datasets and drawing on population ecology approaches to interest groups, it is shown how business associations were numerically dominant for much of the twentieth century despite being largely excluded from accounts of the development of INGOs over this period. Growth in all such organisations was particularly prevalent in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, but transnational business associations grew most rapidly at this time. The trends indicate that both the environmental context and the different dynamics of particular associational sectors explain these developments and that further research is needed to pin down more precisely the different factors at work.

KEYWORDS

Business associations; transnational history; twentieth century; global civil society; interest groups; international business history; international cartels

Introduction

In a recent introduction to a special issue on trade associations, Lawton and Rajwani argue that there are ‘enduring gaps in our understanding of what trade associations are, how they work, and what impact they have on members, industries, markets and societies’ (Lawton & Rajwani, 2018, p. 3). This lack of knowledge has been called ‘lamentable’ (Barnett, 2013). The gaps are even greater when the focus is limited to transnational business associations (Ronit, 2018, p. ix). Despite a long history, analysis of these organisations remains limited. Indeed, much transnational history deliberately defines international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in such a way as to exclude transnational business associations, or business international non-governmental organisations (BINGOs) as some have called them, from consideration (e.g. Davies, 2013). Likewise, international business history concentrates almost exclusively on the development of multinational enterprise. The only two literatures where one finds extended consideration of transnational business associations are those on international cartels and on transnational interest groups and lobbying. In both cases, BINGOs themselves and their full range of activities are not the subject of analysis, rather it is just their cartelistic or lobbying behaviours.

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Other articles in this special issue elaborate on why particular business associations exist, such as solidary effects and identity building. Here the focus is more basic: it represents a first attempt to address the development of INGOs, in particular business ones, at a macro-level over the twentieth century. This not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also provides a contextual framework for more detailed qualitative case studies of individual associations. Counting the population of BINGOs over time gives one indication of their significance relative to other forms of transnational associational activity. Delineating the development of the population of transnational business associations over time provides a framework for qualitative research by posing questions about the nature of the changes in the population. For example, to what extent does the change in the population simply reflect wider transnational associational developments? Or, if the course of development of transnational business associations has unique features, should one be looking for explanations of these developments from within the business community? Thus, such a mapping exercise represents the starting point for a more precise framing of research into the motives and driving forces for such associational activities, especially when compared with developments in other types of INGOs.

In developing this approach, the article draws upon the field of population ecology (Beyers & Hanegraaff, 2015, p. 61). Drawing its inspiration from biological population ecology, this field has developed out of political science research on interest groups, mainly in the US, but also in the UK and the European Union (see Berkhout & Lowery, 2010; Lowery et al., 2015; Gray & Lowery, 1996b; Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Halpin & Jordan, 2012). It is particularly significant that this research has shown that at a national level and in the EU business associations are typically the most numerous form of associational organisation (see the contributions in Lowery et al., 2015). If this is also the case at the transnational level then serious questions are raised about the common representation of any transnational global society and its emergence over time. Excluding transnational business associations from this representation seems partial and potentially highly misleading.

Certainly, various authors across the twentieth century have highlighted the importance of business in the development of transnational trends. In 1916, Leonard Woolf, famed Cambridge Apostle, member of the Bloomsbury Set, husband of Virginia Woolf and member of the Fabian Society, remarked, 'If belief in social and political internationalism is the sign of the amiable crank, a belief in industrial and capitalist internationalism is the mark of a practical man of business' (Woolf, 1916, p. 334). Thirty five years later, another expert on international organisations reached a similar conclusion, describing business and finance international non-governmental organisations as 'some of the most powerful' (White, 1951, p. 19).¹ Werner Feld reached a similar conclusion in his studies in the 1970s and 1980s, and most recently, this has been reiterated by Karsten Ronit in his study of contemporary global business associations (Feld, 1972; Feld & Jordan, 1988, p. 22; Ronit, 2018, pp. 165–166). Given these views and that research typically emphasises the numerical dominance of business associations at the national level, there is a clear need to incorporate BINGOs into existing transnational organisational history.

In addition, literature on trade associations has tended to stress their connection with either cartels or lobbying (on cartels see Fear, 2008, pp. 268–292 and Grant, 2018 on lobbying). The latter aspect underpins much of the interest in the population ecology approach in political science. Mapping the changing population of transnational business associations also throws light on these established debates, a point developed further in the conclusion.

What is clear is that monocausal explanations for the creation and continued existence of these organisations are, at best, partial: the chronology of their development does not fit in any straightforward way on to the timeline of either lobbying or cartels. As Darren Halpin, one of the main contributors to the political science literature in this field, has noted, in criticising his fellow political scientists for their undue focus on politics, the need is to approach transnational business associations and other such bodies foremost as organisations, and as organisations with multiple purposes and multiple identities (Halpin, 2014, pp. 5–6).

Nevertheless, as explored in the conclusion, it is clear that there are clear limits to what a population ecology approach can offer. First, it is only a starting point, a different lens to qualitative case studies of individual associations. It cannot provide answers that explain the path of development. Nor does it explain the qualities of the business association, be it its goals, its organisational form, or its impact: greater numbers do not necessarily mean greater impact. Secondly, its focus on creation dates is potentially misleading. Associations often evolved out of existing associations, like a family tree, whereas population ecology, despite its biological roots, ignores any pre-history of a new association and just adds it to the population. There is, therefore, a false certainty to creation dates, emphasising change over continuity.

Acknowledging these limitations, it does still seem to be the case that a population ecology approach can help to increase our understanding of the development of transnational business associations and, with that, to help frame a research agenda for business historians and open up a dialogue with both transnational historians and those working on the population ecology of interest groups. The article begins with an elaboration of the existing key literatures before turning to a consideration of the population ecology approach. This is followed by sections on the data sources, analysis of the data trends, a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

Existing historiographies

The emergence and subsequent mainstreaming of transnational history has been one of the most significant developments in historical research in recent years. By moving the focus away from Europe and the West and from the nation-state it has provided a new lens with which to examine the past. One strand of that literature has been to research the development of non-state transnational organisations, be they international organisations like the League of Nations and the United Nations, or international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in the form of non-profit associations (Conrad, 2016, pp. 44–45; Saunier, 2013). At its heart lie notions of the development of a transnational, or global, civil society (e.g. Boli & Thomas, 1999; Davies, 2016; Stroup & Wong, 2017). However, following the transnational advocacy literature, the notion of a transnational civil society is envisaged as one centred upon grassroots activism: the focus has been on INGOs as a new form of bottom-up advocacy organisation, symptomatic of popular empowerment, and focussed on issues like environmentalism, human rights, and feminism (e.g. Willets, 1995).² Thus, Volker Heins defines NGOs as ‘post-traditional civil associations’ (Heins, 2008, p. 4). In the search to highlight novelty and the role of citizens in any putative global civil society, business actors are deliberately excluded from most accounts (for an exception, see Reinalda, 2009). This has been rationalised by some on the grounds that business associations do not operate in the public interest like

other transnational advocacy groups, but defining INGOs in terms of their aims in this way is normative and risks perverse findings (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019, p. 379).³ Suri argues that defining INGOs in this way is ‘an arbitrary move that reflects the idealistic ... biases of scholars working in the field’ (Suri, 2005, p. 242, fn 2; see also Kaiser, 2005, p. 21; Ronit, 2018, p. 9; Slobodian, 2018, p. 34). Certainly, Sikkink and Smith explicitly adjust data on INGOs to include only transnational social and political movements, although most of the data sources commonly used include transnational business associations in their definition of INGOs and hence in the data collected (Sikkink & Smith, 2002, pp. 24–44). Indeed, these sources are criticised by Stroup and Wong as ‘overly inclusive’ (Stroup & Wong, 2016, p. 139). INGOs, under their definition, in public discourse play the role of David in a “David versus Goliath” narrative, where principled powerless agents in discouraging conditions triumph over giant, rigid, and inhumane interests’ (Stroup & Wong, 2017, p. 2; see Lang, 2012, pp. 1–32). Goliath here often means business and, in particular, multinational corporations.

And here there is a parallel with the dominant discourse in business history’s depiction of the development of the global economy. As Clavin reminds us, the study of transnational connections is nothing new for business and economic historians (Clavin, 2011, p. 1). Yet, in practice this has typically meant the transnational activities of individual firms, most obviously, of multinationals, and there is little mention, if any, of BINGOs (for an overview, see Chandler & Mazlich, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2016; Jones, 2004). Likewise, a recent benchmark collection on the makers of global business by many leading business historians has a chapter on medieval guilds but no dedicated chapter on transnational business associations (da Silva Lopes et al., 2019). The only sub-field of business history that has extensively studied these organisations is that on international cartels (see Fear, 2008; Kudō & Hara, 1992). Yet even here, this is not studying transnational business associations themselves but how they facilitate collaboration between individual companies. For example, Levenstein and Suslow have argued, ‘Trade associations played important roles in organising or monitoring the activities of a large number of international cartels caught and fined by the EC [European Commission], while in other cases the trade association meetings merely acted as a cover for clandestine cartel meetings’ (Levenstein & Suslow, 2008, p. 1123). More specifically, they found trade association participation in a third of their cases (over a quarter with active participation and a further fifth as cover). However, this also means that in the majority of cartel cases trade associations played no discovered role and, as Levenstein and Suslow themselves point out, as the law has tightened against cartels so trade associations have withdrawn from facilitating such activities and that ‘more independent and professional trade associations are less likely to be captured by cartel interests’ (Levenstein & Suslow, 2006, pp. 61–64). As Richard Tedlow has noted, US business associations continued to flourish and grow in number despite the Sherman Act prohibiting most cartelistic activity (Tedlow, 1988, p. 140). In other words, while there may be a relationship between the existence of cartels and the numbers of transnational business associations, cartelisation, by itself, cannot explain the existence of these business associations.

One other group of scholars, that is the sub-field of political science studying interest groups, has perhaps spent the most time studying transnational business associations. However, mirroring those studying cartels, their interest is not the business associations but only their political activities, notably lobbying, and any resulting influence over the political system. Indeed, there is often an implicit assumption that the key, if not only purpose, of BINGOs is to lobby. Thus, their interest in INGOs focuses on their relationship with

international organisations or, a separate sub-field, on the relationship with the institutions of the European Union and its predecessors (e.g. see Berkhout et al., 2015; Hanegraaff, 2015). Yet again, the empirical evidence cautions against this: Halpin notes that survey evidence of representatives of business associations ‘shows that they spend a remarkable amount of time on organisational matters’ (Halpin, 2014, p. 178). It is only remarkable if one approaches business associations with an expectation that political advocacy is their primary role. Even those that recognise this issue still focus on the goal of political influence if in a softer and more diverse way than straightforward direct lobbying (Leech, 2010).

In other words, the transnational history literature largely deliberately excludes transnational business associations from consideration of INGOs on the grounds that their motives are different – private interests rather than public interests. The other two literatures only incorporate these organisations in a simplified manner by assuming they have a particular goal, though that goal differs depending on the literature – distortion of the market or distortion of the political process. It is not argued here that transnational business associations do not participate in these activities, simply that when one looks at the population ecology of transnational business associations over time there is no simple mapping on to a timeline associated with cartelisation nor on to one covering developments in international organisations (see Rollings, 2013, pp. 175–192).

Population ecology approaches

The key founding work in the application of population ecology to interest groups was Grey and Lowery's *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation* (1996). From this study of lobbying across US states a broad literature has emerged covering many different national and transnational organisations. A number of features of this literature and its key findings are relevant here. First, the approach is deliberately quantitative in the sense of counting the aggregate number of interest groups in a polity with the purpose of better understanding the density and diversity of the population of interest groups and how this changed over time. Second, as a quantitative approach it concentrates on the birth, death and survival of interest groups to describe the ecology of the interest group population. It is here that one finds the most systematic consideration of the issues raised in counting the number of private non-profit organisations, including business associations (see Lowery et al., 2015; Halpin & Jordan, 2012).⁴ Third, and building on this, there is the approach to counting. The preferred method for political scientists is to use a top-down approach, that is only to count those organisations that are recognised by the relevant political institution (see Berkhout et al., 2018). Such studies focus on those interest groups dedicated to political action (Halpin & Jordan, 2012; Jordan & Greenan, 2012; and see Tallberg, 2018). Given that the associations have registered to get access, it implies that they have a commitment to political action. This type of research is common in EU studies where at various times there has been registers of those with access to EU institutions (Greenwood, 2017; Berkhout & Lowery, 2008; Beyers et al., 2008; Wessels, 2004). Examples of this top-down approach can also be found for the US (e.g. Schlozman et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the original aim of those studying the population ecology of interest groups was not merely to be descriptive but to create a mid-level theory that bridged existing micro-level theories, like Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*, which theorised why individual interest groups were created, with macro-level studies of the activities and impact

of interest groups (Gray & Lowery, 1996b, pp. 13–36; Olson, 1965). Crucial here was an understanding of the density and the diversity of the population and the impact of this on interest group creation: the existing micro-level theories failed to incorporate the environmental context of other interest groups as a relevant factor in the creation of a particular interest group.

While studies in the field have perhaps moved away from such overarching theorisation, some theories have emerged as key contributions in the field and remain influential. A prime example here is niche theory. It is argued that because interest groups compete for policy space and/or resources that they try to develop unique identities and competencies in order to create individual niches for themselves (Halpin, 2014, pp. 122–143; Gray & Lowery, 1996a). This insight draws upon the ecological roots of the approach, with its emphasis on survival rather than political influence. As David Lowery has argued, ‘Virtually all studies of interest organisations begin with the simplifying assumption that they are motivated actors whose prime purpose is to influence public policy. This assumption is incorrect. Rather, interest organisations are motivated to survive’ (Lowery, 2007, pp. 29–30). Developing this point further, Halpin has rightly criticised his colleagues in the field for their focus on these organisations as interest groups whereas empirical research shows that they can have multiple identities – social, political, economic, etc.: survival as an organisation is not necessarily the same as survival as an interest group (Halpin, 2014, pp. 5–6). Thus, in exploring the developing population ecology of transnational business associations longevity may not be a sign of interest group success but the achievement of other goals. This cannot be answered directly by the population ecology approach but is an example of the way in which the approach can help develop a research agenda for case studies of business associations. What were their goals? Why did they survive? Did they develop niches for themselves? How much competition was there for resources? Again, this will be considered further in the discussion and conclusion.

Data sources

Reflecting the focus on transnational business associations and other INGOs as organisations rather than as interest groups also questions the top-down approach adopted in interest group studies. A top-down approach is symptomatic of a privileging of political activities over other activities by these organisations. Also, there is no guarantee that the listed organisations remain politically dedicated over time. A bottom-up approach is therefore more appropriate. Indeed, many population ecology studies of interest groups adopt a bottom-up approach in which they count the number of organisations that existed, on the basis that they may be or have the potential to be politically active (Halpin & Jordan, 2012). Mobilisation – creating an interest group – rather than political action is the key criterion for inclusion now. A second reason for adopting this approach when studying the population of business associations is that it has been shown that business associations are numerically less dominant in bottom-up studies than in top-down ones. Adopting a bottom-up approach, therefore, will not overstate the proportion of transnational business associations among the total population of INGOs.

A final consideration is that this method of bottom-up counting of all INGOs is the one most commonly found in transnational studies. In large part, this reflects the availability of data. The most popular source used for the macro-level study of transnational associations

has been the *Yearbook of International Associations*. This now consists of six-large volumes providing a range of information and statistics about each association (Union of International Associations [UIA], 2014, Appendix 1). The core information has been published in this format largely unchanged since 1983 by the Union of International Associations in agreement with the United Nations (UIA, 2014, p. ii). Given this, the *Yearbook* has been described as providing ‘consistent, comparable and high quality information about IGOs and INGOs for many years’ (Bloodgood, 2011b). Indeed, Sikkink and Smith note that these *Yearbooks* are ‘the only source of systematic annual data of INGOs’ and have been used by scholars for this purpose for many years (Sikkink & Smith, 2002, p. 26). They add

The data in the *Yearbook* is the most complete census of international organizations, which included information on organizations’ founding dates, goals, memberships, and interorganizational ties. The Union of International Associations [which publishes the *Yearbook*] uses UN records on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), self-reports, referrals and the media to identify organizations and compile organizational profiles for the *Yearbook*. Editors consistently check this reported information against other sources, such as periodicals, official documents, and the media. We have confidence in this data because it has been gathered by the same organization using the same methods over time (Sikkink & Smith, 2002, pp. 43–44; and see Boli & Thomas, 1999, pp. 20–21; Beckfield, 2003, p. 405).

In other words, the *Yearbooks* provide ‘an extremely rich setting’ for studying the development of transnational associations (Beyers & Hanegraaff, 2015, p. 61).

This is the case for longer chronological studies as well, but there are more qualifications and caveats. The most commonly used method has been to use a recent edition of the *Yearbook* and to compile a count of the founding dates given (e.g. Boli & Thomas, 1997, pp. 176; Boli & Thomas, 1999; Hussain & Ventresca, 2010). To examine the reliability of this approach a comparison of the founding dates of those associations listed under ‘Commerce and Industry’ was made between the 1957 *Yearbook*, the 6th edition, and the 1974 (15th) edition. The results are shown in [Chart 1](#). There are clear differences in the frequency for particular years: for example, for 1948 one has seven foundings, the other eleven. Of that

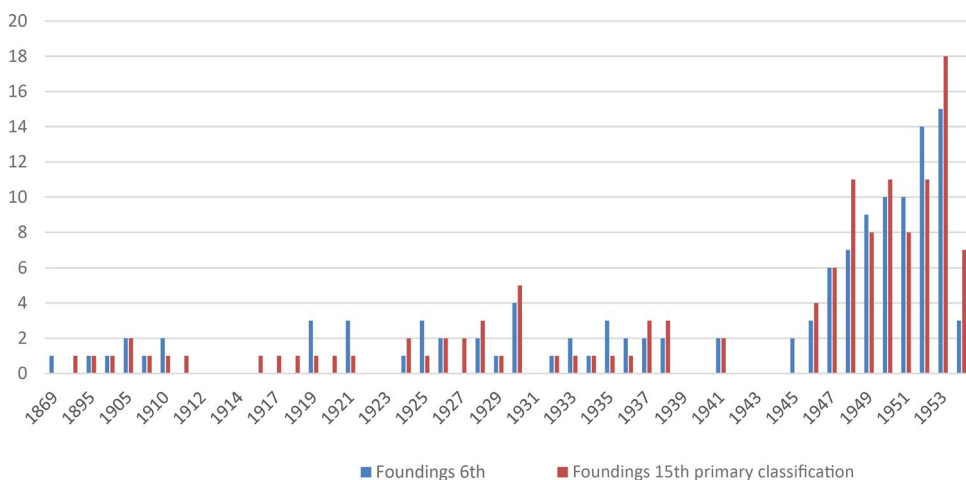


Chart 1. Commerce and industry foundings by year listed in the 6th and 15th editions of the *Yearbook of International Organizations*.

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (1957 and 1974).

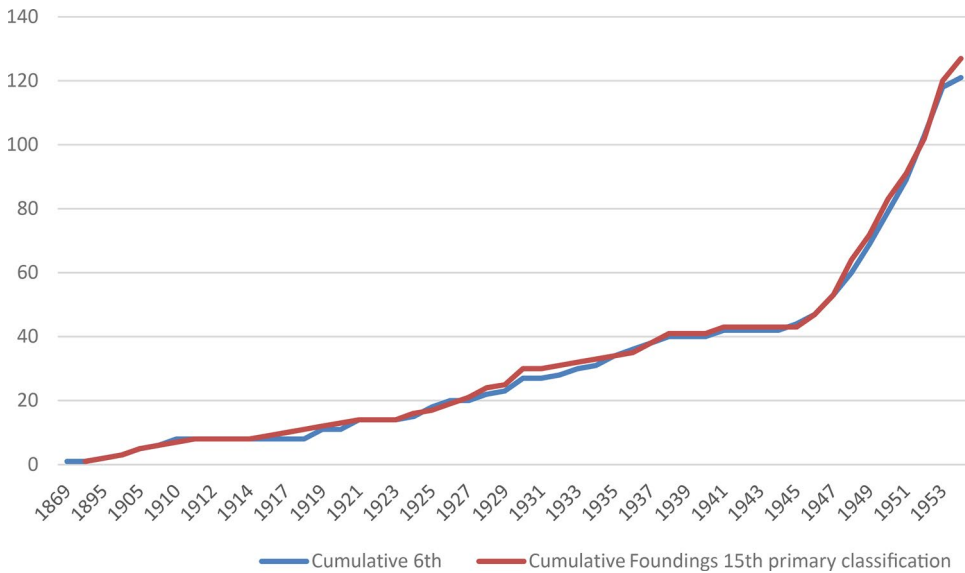


Chart 2. Commerce and industry cumulative findings by year listed in the 6th and 15th editions of the *Yearbook of International Organizations*.

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (1957 and 1974).

eleven, five are not listed in the earlier 6th edition. However, as [Chart 2](#) shows, in terms of the cumulative frequency over the period covered there is a broadly consistent story.

Also, founding dates can give a false degree of certainty. Errors do occur but, more importantly, it can hide earlier initiatives which led to the creation of the formal organisation and continuities between organisations. As Halpin has noted, the birth or creation of an organisation is perhaps better regarded as a process rather than a definitive event (Halpin, 2014). European business federations illustrate this point well. Many 'new' federations were merely offshoots of existing BINGOs. Nearly one in five of the organisations listed in the 1960 *Répertoire des organisme communs créés dans le cadre de la Communauté économique européenne par les associations industrielles, artisanales et commerciales des six pays* had 'international' in their title, often being 'working groups' or 'liaison committees' of wider business organisations which already existed prior to the creation of the EEC (Rollings & Moguen-Toursel, 2012). Owing to this issue, one of the earliest efforts to count INGOs deliberately excluded about 250 European/EFTA business associations: they were 'often merely subcommittees of larger European NGOs' (Skjelsbaek, 1971, p. 422). With enlargement of the EEC a number of the special common market committees were wound up (e.g. Paetzold, 2003; and see Rollings & Moguen-Toursel, 2012). Also, the focus in this article is on births, no effort is made to incorporate data on deaths.⁶ This all warns against using the founding dates data in overly microscopic ways – they should be used to provide a broad-brush account of the development of INGOs over time.

The alternative approach to taking founding dates is to use the original *Yearbooks*. Normally, there would be issues about consistency but, while these are not removed, they are far less than might be expected. The first reason for this is that the *Yearbook* was first published in 1948 and soon adopted the 1950 UN Economic and Social Council definition of what should be included: 'any international [not-for-profit] organisation which is not established by inter-governmental agreement shall be considered as a non-governmental

organisation' (UIA, 1974, p. 15). The Union of International Associations (UIA), the compiler of the *Yearbook*, has also used a consistent definition of what constitutes international/transnational: the members, officers, voting and substantial budgetary contributions have to come from at least three countries for an organisation to be included (Sikkink & Smith, 2002, p. 26). Thus there is an emphasis on formal and bureaucratised INGOs. Sikkink and Smith do regard these criteria as 'quite stringent' and others have used looser criteria, but at least there is sustained consistency in the criteria for inclusion in the source.

Nevertheless, there have been changes in the listings – for example, the 1956–57 edition reduced the number of INGOs included from 1019 (in 1954–55) to 980 (UIA, 1957, pp. 19–21). In 1976 the criteria were broadened to include more borderline cases: the total number of INGOs leapt from 2502 in 1976 to 4263 in 1981, significantly out of line with trends before and after (Feld & Jordan, 1988, p. 24; UIA, 2014, p. 2407). Despite this, most of those who have used the *Yearbooks* to track the historical development of transnational organisations, whether it be by using founding dates or by using a series of *Yearbooks* over time, have been reasonably confident that their findings are robust (Boli & Thomas, 1999, p. 21). For example, Boli and Thomas were content when they compared their results from the 1988 *Yearbook* with that from the first publication of this sort by the UIA, the *Annuaire de la Vie Internationale*, published in 1909 (Boli & Thomas, 1999, p. 21).

When one turns to subject classifications, the most significant change came in the early 1980s. The subject breakdown of associations in the *Yearbook* was completely changed in 1981. Prior to this, INGOs were broken down into 19 subject classifications as shown in Table 1. These were exactly the same classifications as were used from the late 1950s, and only marginally different from those used in earlier *Yearbooks*. Indeed, the links go back further. The Union of International Associations was formally created in 1910 but its roots lie earlier in 1895. Covering the period 1905–07 the *Annuaire de la Vie Internationale* was published by the Institut International de la Paix, but the UIA was involved in the second series of the register, from 1908 (till 1911) (for historical analysis of the UIA, see Laqua et al., 2019). After the First World War, and in association with the League of Nations, a *Répertoire des Organisations internationales* or a *Handbook of International Organizations* was published by the UIA in 1921, 1923, 1925/26, 1929 and 1936/1938. This means we can construct the total number of INGOs for virtually the whole twentieth century and relatively consistent subject classifications back to the late 1920s through to the late seventies, though one needs to be aware that the subject classification of a single association could change.

Table 1. Listing of subject classifications in the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (1957-1978) .

Bibliography, documentation, press	Commerce, industry
Religion, ethics	Agriculture
Social sciences, humanistic studies	Transport, travel
International relations	Technology
Politics	Science
Law, administration	Health, medicine
Social welfare	Education, youth
Professions, employers	Arts, literature, radio, cinema, TV
Trade unions	Sport, recreation
Economics, finance	

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* 1974 (Brussels, UIA, 1974 15th ed), 749.

After 1981 the classification system becomes more complex and from 2001 a matrix structure with nearly 100 subjects is used. This means that while it is possible to construct relatively robust data by subjects directly from the subject classifications in the *Yearbooks* from the interwar period through to the late 1970s, it is impossible to extend it after this date without embarking on a new classification system of one's own from scratch to be applied to each *Yearbook* and earlier sources. Since this is beyond the scope of this article, the classifications used by the UIA are applied without amendment. BINGOs are taken as those in the subject classification 'Commerce and industry'. No attempt is made to add relevant associations which have been assigned to professions and employers, agriculture, finance and economics, travel and transport, or technology, despite what could easily be regarded as business organisations being listed under these subject classifications. For example, the European Inter-Union Committee for Dehydrated Foodstuffs is included under agriculture, the Caribbean Hotel Association under travel and transport, the European Computer Manufacturers Association under technology, and the European Federation of Finance House Associations under finance and economics, to which could be added numerous bodies under the classification of employers (as listed in UIA, 1974). In other words, we can be confident that the populations listed under commerce and industry are at best a minimum and that it is highly likely that the number of transnational business associations is actually significantly higher than those presented. With this likely significant underestimation of the number of business-related associations in mind, along with the caveats about the data in the *Yearbooks* and the earlier publications by the UIA, we can now turn to the analysis.

Analysis

The analysis will begin with the population density of all INGOs before focussing on commerce and industry as a proxy for transnational business associations, first in relation to the period since 1945 and then the first half of the twentieth century. Various estimates of the changing population of INGOs have been made over the years. The standard and simplest type of account just focuses on the growth in number over time. Thus, Jacobson suggests growth from 5 in 1850, to 330 in 1914, to about 730 in 1939, to 2300 in 1970 (Jacobson, 1979, p. 11). [Chart 2](#) presents a similar story of exponential growth if only covering commerce and industry, though the impact of the re-classification of INGOs at the start of the 1980s explains part of this: if this is removed the growth trend before and after looks more linear than exponential, a point returned to later.

A more sophisticated story appears when the focus is on founding dates. Thus, Davies refers to cycles of growth with considerable fluctuations compared to the story of continual growth implied in [Chart 3](#) (Davies, 2017, pp. 6–11; Davies, 2016, pp. 1–55). Boli and Thomas's work takes a similar line. [Chart 3](#) shows foundings of all types of associations both annually and cumulatively – the impact of the two world wars is visible but rather gets swamped by the growth in foundings since the Second World War.

One other feature of the total population of INGOs is worth highlighting: the extent to which Europe has dominated these organisations from the start and still does so today. [Table 2](#) shows that the vast proportion of INGOs have been headquartered in Europe, many in Paris, Brussels and London but also in provincial cities too, from the outset and that remained the case through the post-war decades into the 1970s. [Table 3](#) develops this

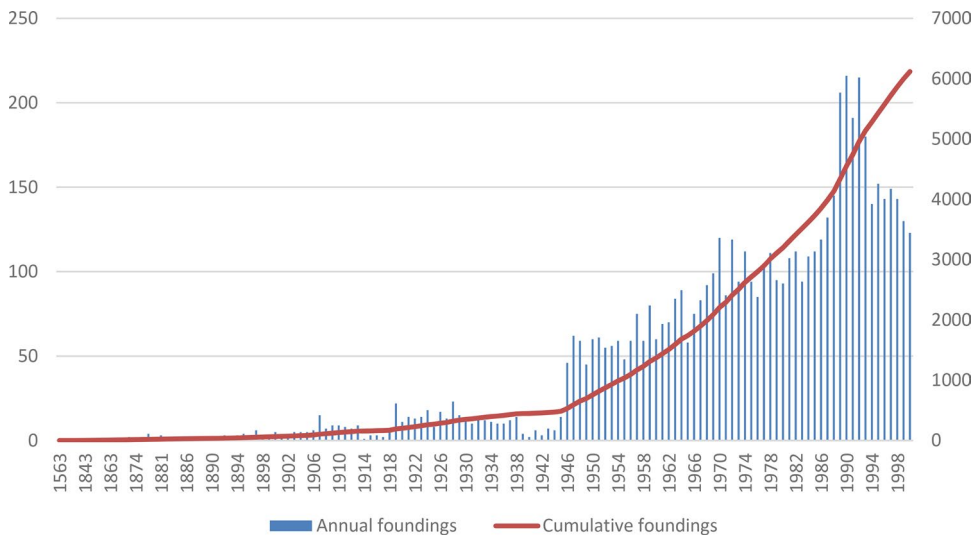


Chart 3. INGO foundings annually and cumulatively 1563–2000.

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations 2007–2008 Volume 5* (Munich, K.G. Saur, 2007), Figure 5.1.1 Types of Organizations A–D.

point by showing which countries have been most represented in INGOs since 1960. Although the precise national rankings change over time, Western Europe dominated in 1960 and still did so in 2006, despite all the talk of the development of a *global civil society*.⁷ Given this dominance was both in terms of the location of headquarters and most common members, it seems reasonable to conclude that throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century that transnational associability remains a phenomenon that is especially European.

Transnational business associations

Few have gone beyond this overall picture to consider whether the story varies for different sectors. As already noted, Sikkink and Smith have done this in the sense of focussing on social and political movements and Hussain and Ventresca have produced an account focussed on the development of financial INGOs (Hussain & Ventresca, 2010; Sikkink & Smith, 2002). Here we extend the account to BINGOs, in the form of those organisations listed under ‘Commerce and industry’ in the *Yearbooks* and its antecedents. Doing this adds to that picture about the development of the overall population of INGOs. Table 4 (and as a graph of selected sectors in Chart 4) gives us some indication that over the golden age of the post-war period there were significant differences in the population ecology of various sectors and business (commerce and industry) INGOs stand out in this respect. In 1909 business (in the form of the commerce and industry classification) was one of the smallest sectors but throughout the post-war period until 1972 it was the largest. By 1988 it was apparently again the largest sector at nearly 18 per cent of all INGOs with medicine/health next at just under 15 per cent (Boli & Thomas, 1997, p. 183). As Boli and Thomas conclude, world culture, as evidenced by INGOs has been ‘heavily “economic”’, a useful reminder to those transnational historians who have ignored this aspect (Boli & Thomas, 1999, p. 41). Indeed, in this respect it is interesting to notice the contrast between the path of transnational business associations with that of

Table 2. Location of INGO headquarters 1850–1972.

	Europe	Total	%
1850	6	6	100.0
1870	32	34	94.1
1880	59	67	88.1
1890	104	117	88.9
1895	186	208	89.4
1905	270	294	91.8
1912	417	437	95.4
1921	297	321	92.5
1926	369	397	92.9
1930	669	705	94.9
1951	772	941	82.0
1954	971	1190	81.6
1958	1036	1255	82.5
1960	1203	1467	82.0
1962	1469	1768	83.1
1964	1627	1994	81.6
1966	1986	2452	81.0
1968	2320	2930	79.2
1970	2348	2977	78.9
1972	2523	3187	79.2

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA, 1974), Table 5, S34.

Table 3. Countries ranked by number of INGOs in which they had membership 1960–2006.

	1960	1966	1977	2002	2006
France	5	1	1	1	2
UK	6	6	2	3	3
W. Germany/Germany	2	2	3	2	1
Belgium	1	3	4	7	7
Italy	4	5	5	4	4
Netherlands	3	4	6	5	6
Switzerland	8	7	7	9	9
Sweden	7	9	8	8	8
Denmark	9	8	9	10	10
USA	10	10	10	11	11

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA, 1978) and UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations, Volume 5* (Munich, K.G. Saur, 2007).

transnational labour associations, a type of INGO which has received far more attention than its business equivalent (see [Chart 5](#)) (e.g. van der Linden, 2003). This is particularly relevant as some have argued that the creation of some national business associations was an employers' response to worker associability (Traxler & Huemer, 2007). Clearly, this does not seem to hold in any simple way at least for the post-Second World War development of their transnational equivalents.

This difference also highlights the diversity of experience between sectors hidden by the aggregate figures, and which has been found in studies of national associational populations (Jordan et al., 2012, p. 147). [Chart 6](#) provides further corroboration of this in terms of a cumulative count of founding dates across different sectors before 1954. Some sectors experienced a noticeable jump after the First World War, while others (including commerce and industry) did not. The same, in a more exaggerated form, occurred after the Second World War, this time with commerce and industry leading the way with the biggest growth spurt. Given this, diversity, in the context of general growth in all sectors over time, suggests that there is a need to explore the reasons for this. For example, why do we see different levels of fragmentation across sectors, something which seems particularly common in business

Table 4. Numbers of INGOs by sector 1909–1976.

	1909	1954	1956	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1976
Bibliography, documentation, press	19	29	26	33	34	41	54	58	69	63	72	77
Religion, ethics	21	79	70	79	87	86	87	93	103	109	112	129
Social sciences, humanistic studies	10	38	57	55	57	57	67	80	90	95	104	133
International relations	12	83	61	71	92	99	106	111	125	127	144	132
Politics	3	12	13	14	17	15	14	15	22	22	27	30
Law, administration	13	31	28	30	37	42	45	48	54	54	58	45
Social welfare	10	52	52	53	56	64	70	76	88	95	104	120
Professions, employers	2	56	67	67	73	76	78	93	105	112	119	132
Trade unions	1	49	48	49	54	54	59	63	70	70	70	67
Economics, finance	3	14	15	16	26	30	33	35	40	45	47	56
Commerce, industry	5	116	123	134	163	160	168	211	233	239	251	273
Agriculture	5	32	27	34	46	55	64	76	83	83	88	105
Transport, travel	5	28	40	43	57	57	63	72	76	82	89	93
Technology	8	34	36	50	60	63	70	83	102	113	133	147
Science	21	81	69	77	83	92	118	137	152	174	184	190
Health, medicine	16	101	100	104	123	133	150	173	214	225	256	306
Education, youth	10	54	56	62	68	71	83	91	105	106	116	134
Arts, literature, radio, cinema, TV	6	41	34	34	57	57	65	70	75	80	80	93
Sports, recreation	6	67	51	55	65	72	76	90	93	99	110	119
Total INGOs	176	997	973	1060	1253	1324	1570	1675	1899	1993	2173	2401

Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA various years).

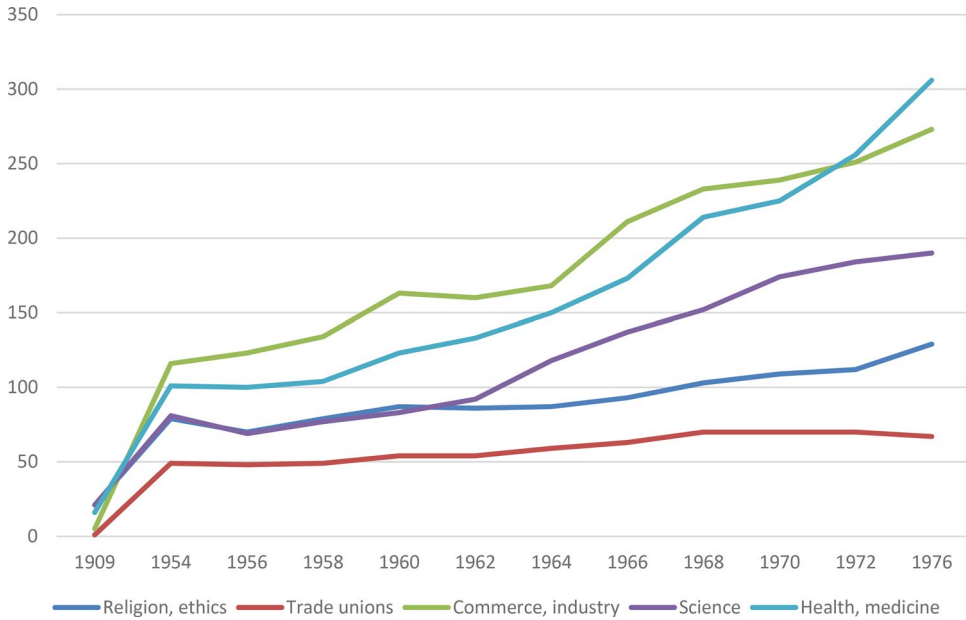


Chart 4. Numbers of INGOs by selected sectors from Table 3, 1909–1976.
 Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA various years).

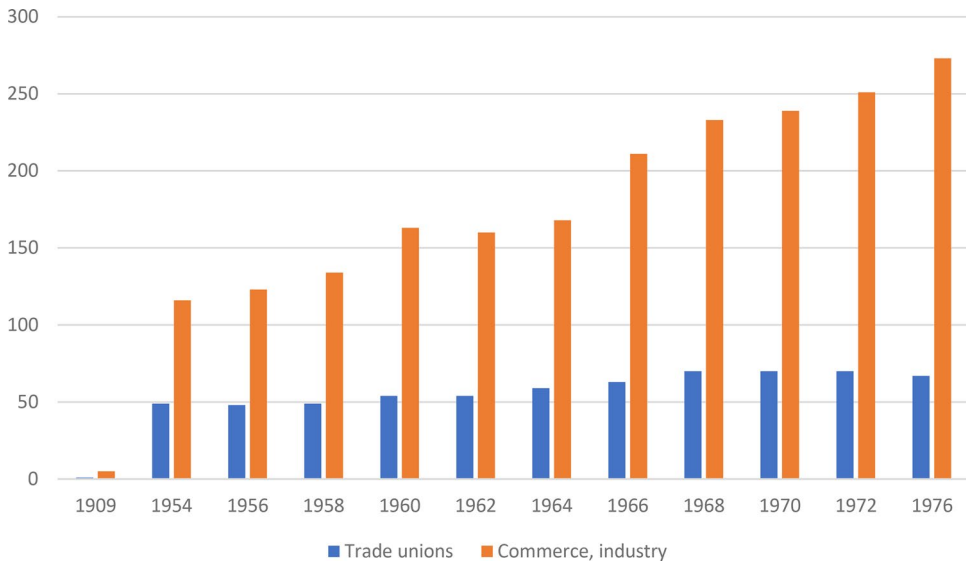


Chart 5. Industry and commerce INGOs compared to Labour INGOs 1909–1976.
 Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA various years).

associations? In contrast, transnational labour association aggregate numbers were characterised by stasis, with any new organisations being matched by mergers or deaths of others. How does this relate to niche theory? To what extent is this pattern driven by different resource pools? Currently, accounts of INGOs either adopt an aggregate-level account of

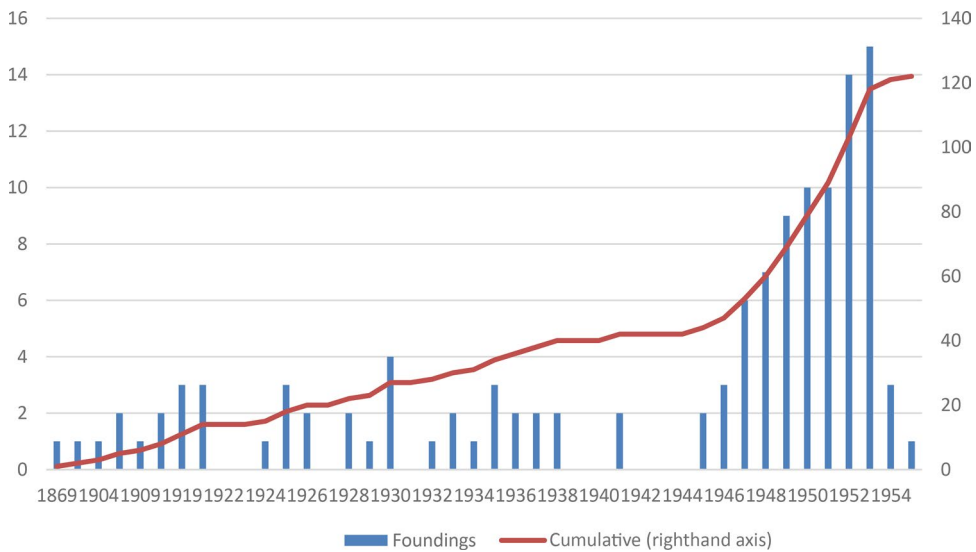


Chart 6. Annual foundings and cumulative foundings of Commerce and Industry INGOs 1869–1955. Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA, 6th ed., 1957)

Table 5. Number of entries under each category in the subject index, *Handbook of International Organisations*, 1929 and 1936.

Subject ^a	1929	1936
Pacifism (and international relations in 1936 – from miscellaneous)	14	36
Law and administration	33	42
Labour	58	67
Education	28	38
Feminism	4	9
Sport and tourism	30	33
Humanitarianism, religion and morals	77	102
Economics and finance	9	11
Agriculture	16	23
Commerce and industry	26	54
Communications and transit	33	49
Arts and sciences	74	107
Medicine and hygiene	31	40
Miscellaneous	41	33
Press		11

^aThere is some duplication of entries across subjects.

Source: *Handbook of International Organisations* 1929 and 1936 (Geneva, League of Nations, 1929 and 1936).

the growth in numbers or focus on a particular type of INGO. There have been limited attempts to construct a comparative sector-based account.

Turning to the period before the Second World War, we can explore the population ecology either through the contemporary *Handbook of International Organisations* published by the League of Nations and UIA at various dates in the interwar periods or through the use of founding dates given in the *Yearbook of International Organisations*. Table 5 gives the breakdown by sectors of the INGOs listed in 1929 and 1936. Commerce and industry did not stand out in either year. Indeed, in 1929 it was one of the smaller categories. By 1936 it had grown but was still nowhere near the largest as it had become by the 1950s. Yet, the commerce and industry sector was also the classification that grew most rapidly between 1929

and 1936, more than doubling in number. So, there may be signs of the situation changing in the 1930s, just as the Great Depression was taking grip and nationalism was on the rise. In contrast, labour by 1929 was at a numerical scale similar to the post-war period, implying that this type of association had already just about reached its numerical peak.

We can now turn to the founding date figures to see if this provides further substantiation of this situation. There are some significant differences in the listing of BINGOS between the founding dates found in the *Yearbooks* and the contemporary information in the *Handbook*. Using the sixth edition of the *Yearbook*, published in 1957, results in 36 business INGOs formed by 1936 compared to 50 in the *Handbook*. Comparing the two sources directly provides some insights. Nineteen of those listed in the 1936 *Handbook* reappear in the *Yearbook* as having been established in or before 1936. Eleven more classified as ‘Commerce and Industry’ in 1936 have been re-assigned to other sectors and three others look to have been replaced by other BINGOs created after 1936. This leaves seventeen which do not appear in the *Yearbook*. They may have been wound up as a result of the Second World War. Equally, there are a different seventeen BINGOs which appear in the 1957 *Yearbook* in the category ‘Commerce and Industry’ and have founding dates of 1936 or earlier which do not feature in the 1936 *Handbook*. In other words, we need to be careful in regarding either the 1936 *Handbook* or the *Yearbook*, using founding dates, as a complete and accurate list of transnational business associations that existed in 1936. Nor can we simply move from one to the other with any degree of certainty. Nevertheless, both sources do indicate growth in the BINGO population in the 1930s. Indeed, [Chart 7](#) shows that of the main classifications,

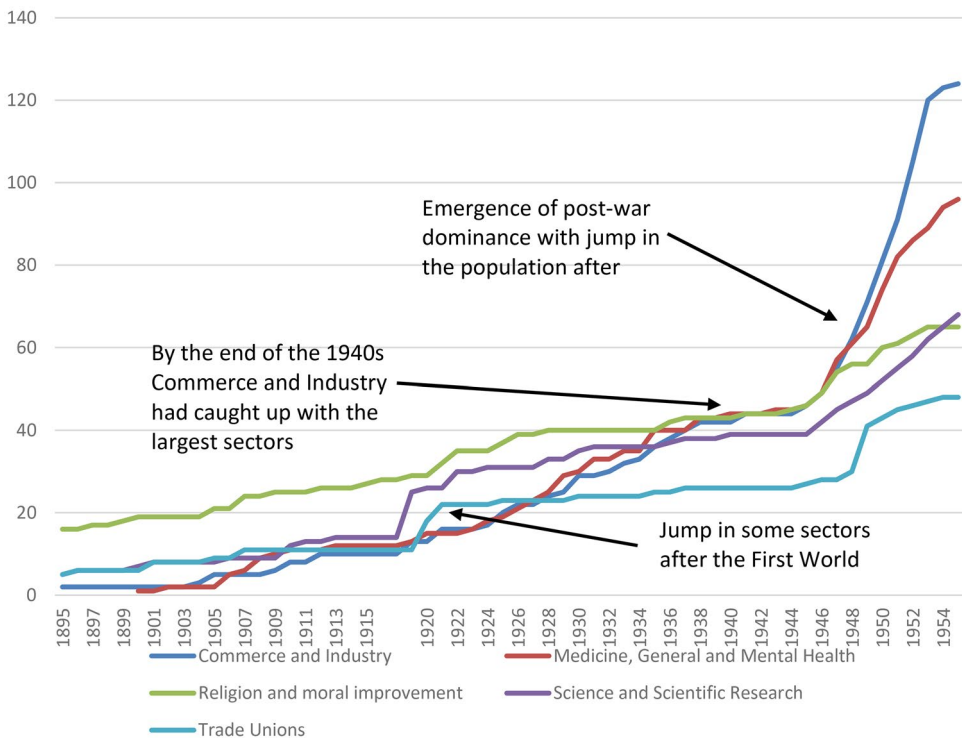


Chart 7. Cumulative foundings of selected sectors of INGOs 1895–1955.
 Source: UIA, *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Brussels, UIA, 6th ed., 1957).

commerce and industry grew fastest such that by the outbreak of the Second World War it was now on a par with the largest other sections. In this respect, that this sector experienced the fastest population growth after the Second World War was really a continuation of a trend from the 1930s.

Discussion

While much more detailed analysis of the population ecology of INGOs and BINGOs is feasible given the richness of the data and its broad level of consistency for much of the twentieth century, a number of substantive findings can be presented on the basis of the analysis here and which also helps to suggest potentially fruitful areas for further research on INGOs, and transnational business associations in particular. These can be broken down into contributions to three fields: to transnational studies and transnational history, to business history and to the population ecology approach to the study of interest group representation.

Starting with transnational studies and transnational history:

1. There was continued growth in the number of INGOs over the twentieth century. On first sight this looks like, and has been described as, exponential growth. However, once the consequences of the re-classification of the Yearbooks in the early 1980s is taken into account, after the explosion of the late forties and early 1950s, much of the rest of the post-war period looks more like linear growth. This provides a longer chronological context for those that argue that there has been a 'global associational revolution' since the 1990s (Salamon, 2010, p. 168). In other words, in a quantitative sense at least, this cautions against depictions of a revolutionary development from the 1990s in INGOs and is perhaps another example of the tendency in social science to exaggerate novelty and the extent of change in contemporary events.
2. Again, highlighting that there may have been some overstatement of the nature of change, the global nature of INGOs needs also to be addressed with caution. Contrary to the conventional understanding in the transnational advocacy literature and in many studies of transnational history, with their emphasis on the growth in INGOs as representative of the emergence of a global civil society, Western Europe has been from the outset and remains today at the heart of this process both in terms of membership and where the organisations are headquartered. Foundings may have become more prevalent in the Americas and Asia over the course of the twentieth century, as argued by some, but this has had limited impact on the dominance of Europe as the centre of transnational associational activities (Bloodgood, 2011a, pp. 113–114; though for a more confirmatory analysis see Beckfield, 2003, p. 411).
3. For much of the twentieth century, and certainly during the period of rapid growth in numbers after the Second World War, BINGOs have been the most numerous type of INGO. Given the exclusion of many business associations from the commerce and industry classification in the *Yearbooks*, this dominance has been even greater than that presented here. This group was also the most rapidly growing type of transnational association from the interwar period onward. This warns against regarding transnational associational trends as being different from national trends, where business predominates.

4. There have been significant differences in sectoral growth patterns over time, shown most notably in the comparison between business and trade union transnational organisational development. In other words, while there are some common environmental influences on INGO development, such as the creation of international organisations, like the League of Nations and the International Labour Office, after the First World War, and the United Nations and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (originally as the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation) after the Second World War, their precise impact on different types of INGO varied. This prompts the need for more comparative studies of the development of transnational associational activities in different parts of the transnational associational world.
5. This also suggests that there have been different motives and incentives to organise at the transnational level. For labour, it may well be about merger and forming fewer, larger associations. In contrast, with regard to business associations this does match findings at national level of fragmentation and differentiation. Back in 1951 Truman pointed to fragmentation as the explanation for the growth of interest groups in the US political system and others have made similar findings (Truman, 1951; Jordan et al., 2012, pp. 145–146; McKean-Edwards & Porter, 2013, p. 23). This trend of fragmentation among associations is now explained in terms of differentiation and avoidance of competition by creating interest-niches (Gray & Lowery, 1996b); Gray & Lowery, 1996a; and see Holyoke, 2015). As Ronit has recently put it, ‘Associations may experience some overlap and compete in certain dimensions but rarely in their core functions. Indeed, major efforts will be made to avoid competition and establish a division of labour wherever possible, and associations will find and actively carve out their niches and roles’ (Ronit, 2018, p. 12). This functional differentiation and specialisation seems to be particularly strong amongst business associations: Greenwood has noted that in the glass industry there are separate European associations for flat glass, container glass, building and automotive glass, crystal glass, domestic glass and special glass, as well as an umbrella association (Greenwood, 2017, p. 16; and see McKean-Edwards & Porter, 2013). However, it has also been common for individual companies to be members of multiple associations at the same time. Put differently, this might suggest that firms, in being members of diverse associations are able to see themselves as having multiple identities. This drive does not seem to be present, by contrast, among transnational associations of workers where there is no evidence of fragmentation. Qualitative case studies of individual associations will help us to understand more fully the reasons for these different paths of development.
6. One possible explanation for why transnational business associations grew in number more rapidly than other types of transnational association in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War may well have been driven by its response to post-war uncertainty. Such associations provided arenas for information exchange as a way of finding out what business in other countries were thinking and doing (Rollings & Kipping, 2008). As Bauer, Pool and Dexter noted of US business associations over fifty years ago, ‘These associations became nodes in the communication process. What they knew or failed to learn, what they heard or did not hear, what they said or failed to say, had a profound effect on what other people learned, heard, or said. These other people were not merely the general public, but more importantly, their own members, the press, the administration, and congressmen’ (Bauer et al., 1963, p. 325).

7. Nevertheless, just as these points suggest the need for a more detailed examination of the development of the INGO population and its business element over time in order to acquire a richer understanding of their histories and hence better inform attempts to explain those histories, so there are also limits as to how far this can go. Founding dates provide a false degree of certainty and preciseness which ignores antecedents and links to other business associations. Also, it was found that the contemporary listings for the interwar period did contain differences. Exploring these issues in detail through qualitative case studies could illuminate how much of a problem this is (Rollings, 2013).

Some of these findings are also relevant to business history, most notably in exploring the motives for the creation of transnational business associations, which can then be compared with other types of transnational non-governmental organisations. For example, was the problem of uncertainty more of an issue for business than for equivalent types of transnational activity? In addition, there are the following points offered as a starting point for the development of research here:

1. The growth in transnational business associations over the twentieth century cautions against straightforward accounts of the move from an associational state at a national level (often associated with the US in the interwar period) to an economy dominated by big business and multinational enterprise (Hawley, 1974). The growth in the number of multinational enterprises was a key development in the transnational world but, just as it has been shown that multinational enterprise has a long history, so, it would appear, we do not see the demise of transnational business associations with the rise of multinationals. In this sense they are not competing forms of organisation but would appear to be complementary. Nevertheless, this provokes the need for further research into the precise nature of the relationship between multinationals and transnational business associations and how this has changed over time.
2. It was not until the interwar period that transnational business associations were growing numerically faster than other transnational associations. If transnational business associations thereafter were the dominant type and it has been found that they were dominant at the national and EU level, why were they relatively slow to emerge compared to other sectors before the 1930s?
3. Similarly, and as already noted, while there is growth in transnational business associations in the 1930s this continues post-1945. This poses questions for the relationship between international cartels and transnational business associations. The continued growth in the number of transnational business associations after 1945, just as legislation against international cartels became more widespread and such cartelistic activities became more secretive has already been noted in the work of Levenstein and Suslow. Hence a monocausal explanation of the existence of business associations related to cartels does not work. Nevertheless, it might still be worth exploring the links between international cartels and transnational business associations in the period before 1945 when anti-cartel legislation was less common and cartel activities were carried out more openly, sometimes with government support. Such explorations could be carried out by further detailed qualitative case studies of individual cases but also quantitatively. Contemporary estimates from the 1930s of the number of international cartels vary from about 130 to over 1200 (Jacobson, 1979; see also White, 1951, p. 41). To date, historians have not taken this much further. Hara and Kudō suggested, 'There

are no conclusive figures available on the number of international cartels in the interwar period' (Kudō & Hara, 1992, p. 2). More recently, Fear concurred: 'The exact scale and scope of cartels is still surprisingly fuzzy' (Fear, 2008, p. 275). By comparing datasets of cartels with listings of transnational business associations it should be possible to see the extent to which they operated in the same or different sectors of business.

4. Another potential dimension to the relationship with cartels concerns their overlapping geographical location. Europe has often been described as the heart of the cartel movement and it has been shown here that this is also where engagement with transnational business associations has been greatest over the twentieth century. One strand of the cartel literature argues that these organisations should be seen as more than simply anti-competitive and so there still may be some (more complex) relationship between international cartels and transnational business associations in terms of organisational associability as an element of European business (Schröter, 2013). Again, detailed qualitative case studies could explore this possibility.
5. Niche theory has been developed in relation to explaining interest representation but, as Halpin has pointed out, INGOs can have multiple identities and he has tried to reframe niche theory (Halpin, 2014, pp. 122–143). Detailed case studies by business historians of individual transnational business associations and their development over time could both draw on niche theory and test its explanatory power in a context where resources are relatively plentiful since membership costs are often low and indirect (as they are paid by national associations rather than firms directly).⁸

And, finally, building on the last point, there may also be ways in which business history can contribute to the study of the population ecology of interest groups. Attempts have been made to link population ecology studies with research on transnational movements but not, to date, with historical studies (Beyers & Hanegraaff, 2015).

1. One obvious area relates to survival and group maintenance. Such notions of organisational survival are familiar to business historians.⁹ Indeed, their understanding of longevity may well be more sophisticated than simple notions of survival.
2. Related to this, histories of transnational business historians may help to illuminate the different types of organisations, notably whether there is a difference between associations (typically national) made up of individual firms and transnational federations of national federations. The latter form of membership, the norm at the transnational level, may alter the resource implications of membership. This may also be relevant to the application of niche theory to transnational associations.
3. Finally, qualitative case studies can examine the extent to which transnational business associations compete, as suggested in the population ecology approach, or co-operate because of networks of linkages that tie different transnational business associations together either through their parentage or other links.

Conclusion

To sum up, counting INGO and BINGO populations over time will only ever be a first step in their analysis. Many key features of transnational associations are discounted in this approach. For example, it gives equal weight to associations of fundamentally different importance:

the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (founded in 1918) is given the same weight as the International Chamber of Commerce founded the following year. Similarly, no consideration is given to qualitative changes in the associations, which case studies in this special issue help to elaborate (Beyers & Hanegraaff, 2015, p. 71). Nevertheless, the points above make clear that this approach can provide important insights into the development of transnational associations and suggest questions where further research would be informative. This research will provide a much deeper understanding of the multiple roles carried out by transnational business associations but, in that context, help us understand their complex relationship with cartelisation and lobbying.

In this respect, studies like this and those it may prompt contribute to transnational history, business history and political science. Transnational history has tended to ignore transnational business associations with its focus on other types of INGOs and their contribution to the emergence of a global civil society and mechanisms of global governance. These developments have opened many new realms of historical research, but this article has shown that in terms of transnational associability in the twentieth century, European business was dominant and this cannot be forgotten: 'Organised business is not just another group that deserves scholarly attention but should be ascribed a major role' (Ronit, 2018, p. 166). Likewise, business history has also contributed relatively little to our understanding of the role of transnational business associations. Instead, business historians concentrate on the role of multinationals. This ignores the extent to which global business has been organised (Ronit, 2018, p. 165). And this does not simply mean international cartels. While some BINGOs clearly have links to cartels, the growth in their number in the *Yearbooks*, while cartels have faced ever more stringent penalties and been forced underground, points to other functions and purposes. For political scientists these other functions are political representation (Greenwood, 2017, p. 16). However, again this seems at best a partial explanation. As Ronit has argued recently, it is 'problematic to see industry associations as invariably putting the political dimension first' (Ronit, 2018, p. 62). There are other purposes – socialisation and community identity, boundary-drawing and its subsequent reinforcement, trust building, as well as private governance – which are important in their own rights in constructing communities of business (McKean-Edwards & Porter, 2013, p. 83; and see Greenwood et al., 2002, pp. 58–80; Clark & Wilson, 1961; Spillman, 2012; Lawton et al., 2018, pp. 5–9). This is as true, and possible even more true, of transnational business communities as of national ones.

Notes

1. Business and finance were the first type of INGO that White discussed in the book, further evidence of the priority he accorded this form of INGO.
2. See also various works by David Horton Smith on grassroots associations.
3. For criticism of such a definition see Halpin (2019, pp. 482–484).
4. Business associations are, in themselves, non-profit organisations and, hence, their inclusion.
5. The *Yearbooks* do include information on which organisations are believed to no longer be active but is difficult to analyse at a subject level and like birth is also complicated by the transformation of one organisation into another.
6. The data covers all countries.
7. Barnett (2013) is one of few critics of the population ecology approach because of the low cost of membership for business associations.
8. For a recent example see the special issue of this journal on business longevity: *Business History* 57(7) (2015).

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