MULTILATERALISM, SELF-DETERMINATION, AND INTERNATIONAL RIGHTS: EVOLVING INTERNATIONALISMS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Introduction: Layers and Varieties of Internationalism in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT
Any number of issues raise the question of internationalism today – from the Corona virus to the nationalist waves in contemporary politics to the general nature of the post-Cold War environment. However, in the face of meaningful election cycles, debates over Brexit, torsions of ‘nationalism’ versus ‘globalism’, and skepticism towards international institutions, it’s useful to perspectivize the issue in relation to not only intellectual history, but a diverse range of takes on the topic. Here, we provide an overview of a special issue dedicated to that task – thinking through layers and varieties of internationalism vis-a-vis figures, locales, and themsatics less-explored or asking to be rethought.

KEYWORDS
Internationalism; intellectual history; international thought

For a number of years, the consensus of the 1990s has been under challenge. In the wake of EU expansion, the growth of NATO, paens to UN values, and the proclaimed bonhomie of old adversaries, we’ve gotten used to watching not only parties sceptical of such trends gain footholds, but populist movements express flat-out opposition to phenomena like globalization and the tides of multiculturalism. ‘Make [fill in the blank country] great again’ has been a refrain not only in one country, but many places around the world. Still, at the time of writing – over the second half of March and first half of April 2020 – we may have seen how rapidly the bonds of internationalism can dissolve. Faced with a virus that knows no bounds – Corona’s journey from China through Europe and North America has been astoundingly fast – international institutions have wielded little power over the response and the primacy of citizens has quickly taken hold. The comments from director of the Danish Health Authority may be indicative: ‘we didn’t recommend closing the border [in response to the virus]’ Søren Brostrøm offered; it was a ‘political decision’. In the face of crisis, the question was who belongs where. Should viruses be stopped? Yes. Is the German-Danish border a good place to do so? Perhaps. As Daniele Archibugi has noted, however, one could imagine a ‘global commonwealth’ of citizens; one could imagine a scenario in which Denmark, Germany, and their neighbours shared a common policy against
pandemics and the idea wasn’t ‘this is what we’re going to do – now you do what you want’. The journalist Steven Erlanger has suggested that ‘cohesion, alliances and even democracy’ may now be under test. Unless one is going to argue that border closures have really concerned sparing the nations around one (one is hard-pressed to find declarations to that effect), the ‘broader horizon of humanity’ marking international ideals may be about to find out how durable it really is.

This raises questions. Firstly, is it clear what internationalism is, or what visions of internationalism ‘are’? In debates between globalists and their opponents – in arguments over institutions from the EU to the UN Human Rights Council to the International Criminal Court – are we sure that the concepts internationalists defend are so monolithic and that one is either solely ‘for’ or ‘against’? In *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History* (2017), Glenda Sluga and Patricia Calvin write that ‘historical interest in internationalism … is … becoming the norm’. Because of the challenge to global institutions, we’ve become aware of their presence and curious about from where belief in such institutions comes. ‘State-centered’ historiography, Miguel Jerónimo and José Monteiro have written, has its limits. Still, we might look not only beyond the confines of but also at a ‘mainstream of international organizations and ideas’. Phrased another way, whether one is talking about cultural internationalism, feminist internationalism, liberal-institutionalist internationalism, socialist internationalism, or internationalisms concerning sport or education, what one means might be up for debate.

Moreover, are we surprised at nationalism’s return? Does the revenge of ‘us and them’ mentalities perhaps not just come 2015 (the migration crisis), but over the course of the entire period should have seen the flowering of history’s ‘end’ (post-Cold War), strike us as strange? Are we surprised that humanity’s ‘wagon train’ didn’t just pull into ‘station liberalism’, and that some are suspicious of what universalism means?

One might have seen this coming. There may have been signs in post-communist disorientation, the confusions of globalization, and reactions to *Pax Americana*. One might have read the tea leaves in the occasional condescension from intellectuals that one could imagine internationalization and the principles of cosmopolitanism as anything but good. ‘Now we are all internationalists’, Ronald Steel wrote in 1995; ‘or so we are told.’ A degree of over-confidence might have papered over the trepidation towards thinking politics beyond national borders and the degree to which those beyond privileged classes wondered whether NAFTA and NATO represent the only path.

Finally, the precarity and risk contributing to migratory flows and the ripple effects in financial markets that led to Trump and Brexit might be part-in-parcel to the post-Cold War order. There is no longer a border between the ‘First’ and ‘Second’ worlds and intrastate conflict peaked after ’91. There are few impermeable ‘blocs’ anymore and the grounds for conflict seem to have multiplied. ‘Multi-polarity’ may have allowed non-traditional powers in. It may have created disorientation, however, wherein populaces fell back on the security of the nation-state.

For us, then, it’s timely to look at the genealogies, varieties, and critiques of the mind-sets today under challenge. It’s worth looking at the breadth and depth of internationalism, or examples of the locales from which the promotion of and reflection on international ideals came. Indeed, instead of considering the ups and downs of internationalism or but regarding internationalism as in dispute with nationalism, it may be relevant to look for the ways in which nationalism and internationalism intertwine even
while internationalist movements involved taking stands against exclusive assertions of national identity. Again, today is an example: pseudo-protectionism and cultural flag-waving may not have come from nowhere. What’s at stake with forces opposing such moves, however, and is the variety of internationalism we frequently feel compelled to defend – the internationalism of the ‘worldwide liberal revolution’ – the only game in town? This issue seeks to contribute to the diversity of histories of internationalism and our memory of international ideals from the First World War on.

A word on our time period. Taking our clue from not only Sluga and Calvin but collections like Gordon Martell’s *A Companion to International History 1900–2001* (2007), we recognize internationalisms before World War I. Internationalism fuelled ideas of federating European states and initiatives like Esperanto as a common language. Internationalism was present in attempts to standardize weights and measures and phenomena from the Olympic movement to the founding the Universal Postal Union. Internationalism lay at the heart of cross-border movements like socialism and the fight for women’s rights. Still, the disintegration of the Romanov, Hohenzollern, and Habsburg empires changed the idea’s prerequisites. Versailles’s concept was to build a new Europe based on national independences yet in collaboration with international law – a project launched with a mindset fusing nationalist sentiment with visions of something more. In the scholarship, important for many is a shift in focus from state actors to transnational initiatives, organizations, and ideas. Taking Sluga’s consideration of the League of Nations, e.g. we might note that she asserts that the institution ‘amounted to a reinforcement of the significance and objective existence of international mindedness’ yet also an impetus to take international mindedness forward and ask if it was thought about the right way. This is important: our interests derive from the fact that, during the Interbellum, international relations had to incorporate increases in European nation-states and we saw *global* increases in the same after World War II. Ian Thatcher writes that ‘the destruction of the former imperial powers of Central-East Europe … opened opportunities for the creation of a new world order’. This process repeated itself again and again: the unfolding of new possibilities born out of the ashes of the old.

Here, one can take no single approach. As Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori put it, the question might not be ‘compar[ing] intellectuals or intellectual practices’. Rather, the point might be doing such things vis-à-vis a ‘diversity’ of approaches to international problematics and in proximity to movements and figures seen in light of gestalt pictures of the past. The problem might be a range of insights into movements and figures, yet also institutions, contexts, and broader senses of the times. In this issue, we meet a Swedish journalist and social democrat who published extensively on multiple approaches to internationalism in the 1920 and ‘30s. We meet Nobel Prize winners from Hjalmar Branting to Willy Brandt as well as philosophers well-remembered like Bertrand Russell and Karl Jaspers, yet some less-remembered, like Denis de Rougemont. We meet socialist progressives and theorists of global change. We meet critics of such movements and conservatives like Carl Schmitt. We hear assessments of UNESCO’s approach to race. And we meet considerations about what issues such as nuclear arms, international education, and international solidarity meant in terms of how we might achieve international change. What does such diversity give us and how does it assist us in comprehending internationalism’s breadth and depth?

In the first piece, Katarina Leppännen focuses on social democratic activist and journalist Sven Backlund, whose career extended from working as something of a press
secretary for social democratic party leader Hjalmar Branting to holding foreign ministry positions in Europe and North America. Looking at texts Backlund produced for educational purposes for the Nordic School in Geneva in the 1930s, we see the promise of peace and international cooperation in which social democrats extensively invested themselves. However, Backlund did not necessarily seek to break down national borders. Rather, he saw configurations of small states as creating alternative formations to the dominance of the great powers. Addressing an intriguing set of writings on the international environment, Leppänen notes Backlund as suggesting that small states might lead in terms of demonstrating how societies could be organized in view of rights yet absent imperialistic tendencies. The mindset of small states was cooperation. However, it wasn’t marching in lockstep with institutions dominated by major nations – institutions that were but one tool among many on the path to a more peaceful and humane world.

Indeed, need internationalism be thought via unabashed support for LN and UN projects? In this issue, such themes are furthered through Hjalmar Falk’s address to Carl Schmitt. Engaging a thinker whose philosophy has been characterized as suggesting that ‘every association of men is necessarily a separation from other men,’ Falk argues that we should remember counter-histories to international thought posed as but the globalization of Enlightenment ideals and the rejection of conservative agendas. As with others in Schmitt studies, Falk acknowledges a Schmitt renaissance – renewed interest in the theorist in the face of crises in the global system. However, Falk addresses this by noting Schmitt as suggesting that not only might the jus publicum Europaeum be under collapse, but state sovereignty itself. In this context, internationalism encompasses conservative analyses of the failings of progressivism to the end of contemplating new political forms.

Yet another provocative reading of geopolitics comes in Mats Andrén’s reading of the thought of Karl Jaspers, Denis de Rougemont, and Bertrand Russell. While the end of World War II has been identified by some as a utopian moment, it was also a moment of ‘atomic fear’ – worry about global society in the shadow of nuclear power. Andrén’s contention is that the history of internationalism should not forget the impact of the atomic bomb and nuclear technology on advancing ideas of cooperation’s necessity. Jaspers, de Rougement, and Russell responded to the bomb by rejecting the notion of nation-state sovereignty. Deploying anti-communist standpoints, their approach was to plead for international law and increased limitations on national sovereignty.

Of course, internationalism concerns not only the thought of specific intellectuals, but atmospheres of the twentieth century. It concerns visions for international institutions, and historical memory vis-à-vis today’s politics. What of organizations like UNESCO and the UN, seeking goodwill and oft-taken as internationalism’s heart? What of the effect of internationalism today on senses of internationalism past? What have international organizations accomplished and can we recall when internationalism involved players beyond liberals, free traders, and security under the American umbrella? In Sluga’s words, what are the forms of ‘social and political modernity’, and how can we theorize the ‘world understandings’ advanced by significant movements in the wake of the two world wars?

Poul Duedahl addresses such issues by discussing UNESCO in relation to questions of race. Tracking the organization’s statements on the problem from the late ‘40s through
the 1960s, Duedahl reminds us of the force of the social sciences in relation to issues with play on the international stage as well as in the politics of countries like the U.S. Using archival research, the argument is that in the context of work like UNESCO’s, social scientists became ‘mental and social engineers’. The academics who played roles in developing UN positions on social issues didn’t just lay out positions for that organization; they contributed to paradigm shifts at moments where civil rights and equality were under significant debate. Through its scientific and cultural organization, the UN became a bearer of change.

In the concluding piece, Ben Dorfman asks us to remember that the twentieth century involved alternative internationalisms to the liberal internationalism around which it’s often posited we need rally today. Beginning with the tongue-in-cheek question of whether there are ‘communists today’, Dorfman ranges over twentieth century socialisms, emphasizing ‘red lefts’ which questioned capitalism and sought international sister- and brotherhood. Communism and social democracy took different paths – and, in communism’s case, universalism justified violence. Still, the root of both approaches was an ethics of labour’s the equal value and scepticism over whether liberal political-economics offered equality as anything but de jure. In an age where social democrats recoil at identification with more stringent socialisms, we might remember that ‘in the … public arena, the term ‘internationalism’ long-implied … socialism’ as much as anything else.19

Wither internationalism? A difficult question. The concept has been challenged by everything from viruses to Brexit and, from Washington to Warsaw, the spirit of internationalism can be hard to find. Beyond the efforts of ‘globalists’, one might find internationalism in new social movements and attempts to defend human rights.20 Still, those who seek to take up internationalism’s mantle might do so in view of its multiplicity; forgotten traditions, less-remembered issues, and entwinements with more ideas than we think. And for those who look for internationalism to fade away, they might consider the commitment the idea involved, from mass political movements to philosophers, jurists, and movements from nations large and small. Quoting Brezhnev, many ‘adopted internationalism … as their … conviction and standard of behaviour’ over the twentieth century.21 Quoting Schmitt, ‘the normative order of the earth’ remains nonetheless in question – a question whose answer it will be up to us to provide.22

Notes
1. Wang, “Sundhedsstyrelsen.”
2. Archibugi, The Global Commonwealth.
3. Erlanger, “Corona Virus Tests Europe’s Cohesion.”
4. Sluga, Internationalism, 3.
5. Sluga and Calvin, “Rethinking the History of Internationalism,” 4.
6. Jerónimo and Monteiro, “Past to Be Unveiled,” 9.
7. Sluga and Calvin, “Rethinking the History of Internationalism,” 4.
8. Fukuyama, The End of History, 338.
9. Steel, “After Internationalism,” 49.
10. Dupuy and Rustad, “Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2017,” 2. This is in terms of total conflicts as opposed to the size of conflicts.
11. See Meyer, Marques and Teló, Cultures, Nationalism, and Populism.
12. See Fukuyama, The End of History, 339.
13. Sluga, *Internationalism*, 56.
14. Thatcher, “Envisioning a New World Order,” 143.
15. Moyn and Sartori, “Approaches to Global Intellectual History,” 7.
16. In Heinrich Meir, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 125.
17. See, e.g., Odysseos and Petito, *International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt*.
18. Sluga, *Internationalism*, 1-2.
19. Dogliani, “The Fate of Socialist Internationalism,” 38.
20. See Chadoin, Milner and Tingley, “Down but Not Out.”
21. Brezhnev, *Socialism, Democracy and Human Rights*, 34.
22. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 39.

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