In a world rejecting globalisation in favour of popular nationalism, Jake Hodder asks what lessons we can learn from the past and how we might recover a more positive form of internationalism

Remaking Internationalism

Thousands of nationalists burn flares and wave Polish flags under the slogan ‘we want God’ at a march for Poland’s National Independence Day in November 2017
If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere

Theresa May

Globalisation that rewards only the privileged few.

Nowhere is the anti-internationalist mood better expressed than in Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency, pitched on a message of ‘America First!’ Speaking on a campaign stop in 2016, candidate Trump insisted: ‘Globalisation has made the financial elite who donate to politicians very wealthy. But it has left millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache.’ Since taking office, President Trump has embarked on global trade wars, withdrawn the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council.

The UK’s decision to leave the EU in 2016 shares features of these movements. Although many of its most developed proponents, frustrated by EU restrictions on the UK’s freedom to negotiate trade deals around the world, insist Brexit is an opportunity to make a new international deal, it is likely to be undermined by the history of internationalism, but of empire, and does little to alleviate the fears of those who viewed the European project in a more expansive cultural, political, scientific, and cosmopolitan way. This latter perspective was memorably rebuffed by Theresa May in the wake of the EU referendum: ‘If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what citizenship means.’
Cambridge historian Helen McCarthy has shown, for example, how the League inspired an extraordinary participatory culture in Britain. The League of Nations Union, one of the largest voluntary societies in the UK in the early 1930s, with more than 400,000 members in 3,000 branches, was the largest and most active of forty similar organisations in other countries. Popular support for the League of Nations suggests internationalism was not an abstract ideal but a practical programme with direct, emotional appeal for ordinary people. It was a distinctly geographical project that materially reshaped our towns, cities and regions. Larger capital cities, such as London or Paris, became key sites in a new industry of international organisations, conferences and societies by virtue of their size and conditions. Cities in smaller, self-consciously international countries, including Brussels and Geneva, became almost entirely synonymous with international organisations. Geneva, the home of internationalism was not an abstract ideal but a geographical imagination. The association between geography and interwar internationalism was exemplified by the centenary of the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1930, following a major expansion of the once private Kensington residence that former president Lord Curzon had acquired for the society in 1913. The centenary conferences, lectures and gala dinners reflected the Society’s familiar concerns with the mapping and management of empire but were also designed to reposition British geography as an international and European social and natural science.

**UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONALISM**

Interwar internationalism was sometimes misguided and often naive but historical geographers trained to understand the world as a complex, interdependent and evolving system, have a special responsibility to reconsider how earlier ideas might inform current debates about global solutions to environmental and geopolitical challenges, such as climate change, financial crises, mass population movement and endemic poverty.

Unlike most recent incarnations, earlier expressions of internationalism included overtly utopian appeals to the cosmopolitan spirit of intellectual, scientific, cultural and political cooperation dismissed so peremptorily by Theresa May. Although these ideals are easily mocked, they provide some important lessons. One is that ‘internationalism’ is always a hybrid of the many varieties that have emerged through history. There were, and are, endless experiments: radical republican, anarchistic, revolutionary, anti-colonial, communist, pan-Islamic, religious, socialist, feminist, capitalist, fascist and indigenous; the list goes on. When we hear criticisms of internationalism, or more recently of globalisation, we must ask which iteration is being criticized. Though denouncing the ‘ideology’ of globalisation and the ‘bureaucrats’ of internationalism, President Trump’s vision is not of an anti-international world. Rather, it is one in which American goods and capital move freely, but migrants and human rights do not. Similarly, those who push for a ‘hard Brexit’ are not seeking a withdrawal from global networks but rather what some have termed an ‘Empire 2.0’ form of (neo) liberal internationalism. A second lesson is that, as the example of the League of Nations Union makes clear, forms of internationalism can and do emerge from groundswells of popular politics. In the 1960s new social movements emerged that championed cross-border solidarity around issues such as civil rights, feminism and, especially, the environment. Despite recent challenges to institutional environmental agreements, the urgency and permanence of environmental risks remain, as does the potential for internationally coordinated efforts to mitigate those risks. As the late international relations scholar Fred Halliday noted, for all its many deficiencies, internationalism remains the best critique of ‘the world of states complacent in their sovereignty, inflated with pride and national conceit and prone to war and hatred’. As we survey our own world, we see the promise of internationalism wane and its organisations under threat. The past is a vital resource to recover internationalism for the future. Turning our backs on it might not be an option.

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