

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



The official opening of the League of Nations, Geneva, 15 November 1920

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e live in uncertain times. In Europe, populism has been making striking electoral gains through parties such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, Italy's Lega Nord, Hungary's Jobbik and France's Rassemblement National (previously Front National). These successes seem to be part of a global renaissance in popular nationalism, promoted by figures such as Putin in Russia, Erdoğan in Turkey, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, Abe in Japan, and Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Each of these movements reflect specific national circumstances but they share a common hostility towards globalisation and draw sustenance from a deep pool of resentment and frustration that a globalised world economy has failed to deliver tangible benefits for the majority. For many, international organisations such as the UN, NATO and the EU, previously viewed as defenders of liberal democracy and the precursors of enlightened global governance, are part of the problem because they seem to have been co-opted by corporate and political elites intent on promoting a version of

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 Since taking office, President Trump has embarked on global trade wars, withdrawn the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council.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 determined proponents, frustrated by EU restrictions on the UK's freedom to negotiate trade deals around the world, insist Brexit is an opportunity for a new self-titled age of internationalism, this is often meant in narrowly economic and nationalistic terms. This argument draws its strength not from 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.'



A remain campaigner at the People's Vote March in London on 20 October 2018. Protesters demanded a vote on the final Brexit deal

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

As we approach the 2020 centenary of the creation of the League of Nations, the great international forum born from the wreckage of the First World War, we might reasonably ask what insights history offers us in our current predicament. How might we recover a more positive form of internationalism?

The League of Nations was a symbol of post-1918 determination to prevent another war. Internationalism, expressed through collective security, arbitration and disarmament, was seen by many as the only way to secure permanent peace. This ambition, fostered by President Woodrow Wilson at the peace negotiations in Paris only to be undermined by the US refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, has recently been reappraised. Although often dismissed as ineffective, the League's programmes – on international labour conditions, human and drug trafficking, global health initiatives and the rights of refugees, stateless citizens and minority groups – enjoyed far greater levels of popular support than previously recognised.

HOMES OF INTERNATIONALISM

■ Many of the sites of interwar internationalism remain with us today as visible reminders of the power of these ideas. The sprawling modernist complex of the Palais des Nations, constructed in Geneva between 1929 and 1938, is still one of the four main headquarters of the United Nations, host to more than 10,000 intergovernmental meetings each year, some of which use its vast 2,700 seat assembly hall.

Hundreds of halls, hotels, clubs, bars and restaurants in cities across the globe were also rebranded for international events and clientele after 1918, served by an entirely new labour force of translators, conference organisers and tour operators. In Paris, hotels such as the Majestic – offered to the British delegation to the peace conferences in 1919 and used ever since for international conferences – and the Grand – site of the first meeting of the Pan-African Congress in 1919 – are inextricably interwoven with the city's international history.

Churches played their part as well. Religious assembly halls such as Methodist Central Hall in Westminster, host of the first meeting of the UN General Assembly in 1946 and still the largest conference centre in central London, was an important international venue, as were the more than 100 similar halls built by the Methodist Church in British cities between 1886 and 1945. More than spaces for elite pronouncements of internationalism, these were arenas in which citizens collectively cultivated their own 'international mind'.

Private residences were also refashioned for international events. Chequers, the Buckinghamshire retreat used by British prime ministers for informal domestic and international meetings, was bequeathed to the nation by Viscount Lee of Fareham in 1917, mindful that middle-class prime ministers were unlikely to own property that could be used for this purpose. An English country house, venue for a secret conference convened in the late 1930s by a British aristocrat seeking to avoid another war by appeasing the Nazis, is the setting of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Remains of the Day*, later a critically acclaimed 1993 film by James Ivory. This beautifully crafted story reminds us that interwar internationalism was not always informed by liberal ideals.

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 connections. Cities in smaller, self-consciously international countries, including Brussels and Geneva, became almost entirely synonymous with international organisations. Geneva, the home of multilateral diplomacy, even gave its name to the new spirit: *l'esprit de Genève*.

At discussions in Paris, during the 1919 peace negotiations, it was agreed that a new Anglo-American institute to study world problems and promote international understanding should be founded. The Royal Institute of International Affairs, better known as Chatham House, was thus established in 1920. Since 1922 it has occupied the same grand London residence in St James's Square.

Its American equivalent, the Council on Foreign Relations, welcomed American geographer Isaiah Bowman, director of the American Geographical Society, as a member. As geographer Neil Smith has demonstrated, Bowman's role in sustaining American internationalism after 1918, by no means

always for progressive reasons, demonstrates how such ideals are always shaped by 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 naïve 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,



A group of migrants wait to leave the 'Jungle' camp in Calais in 2016. For many nationalists, the crux of the new order is the curbing of freedom of movement



A Syrian man carries his daughter as refugees abandon the makeshift camp of Idomeni, Greece, following a police evacuation in 2016

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



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 criticised. 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 support. 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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