European Internationalism

It is a time of pessimism, especially for Europeans. Rather than a crisis of confidence, it is a feeling of slow decline. Since the second half of the 20th century, Europe has no longer been the economic engine of the world. But above all, since the end of the last century, the major currents of thought and values once considered by Europeans as universal, those in whose name they founded their enterprises of conquest are now rejected as Euro-centrist, while their universality is contested. Some authors even question the validity of using the analytical tools of European social sciences to analyse the political, economic, and social logics that structure non-European societies. According to this logic, analytical categories such as secularisation, bureaucratisation or class struggle would only be valid in the space that gave birth to them, namely Europe.¹ In short, the universal would be a European illusion. In this short essay, I will bring some food for thought to this radical critique and to the melancholy it provokes by looking at internationalism, at the forms and modalities it has adopted. This question has been the subject of many rich works in recent years, which underline the complexity of the notion and the diversity of “internationalist” undertakings.² By following this historiography, I would like to provide answers to the following two questions. In what way is the expression “European internationalism” legitimate? To what extent are internationalisms signs or instruments of European imperialism?
European international projects

The first European international initiatives initially aimed to provide answers to specific questions that concerned several nations on the continent. The Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine originating in 1815, the Danube Commission beginning in 1856, the Telegraphic Union of 1865 and the Postal Union of 1871 all fall into this category. In this banal form, internationalism was first and foremost the search for an international solution (between nations) to a difficulty that required cooperation among different national players, not necessarily governments for that matter. The International Association for the Legal Protection of Workers, based in Berne between 1901 and 1919, brought together administrators and experts from social funds, social thinkers, employers and trade unionists. It fulfilled a dual function, combining documentation and the development of common standards to prevent competition among industrialists in different industrialised countries, both European and North American. Technical agencies of this type did not have a universal claim. They were based on the idea that specific problems required the establishment of stable coordinating bodies among the various national players. Their multiplication paralleled the generalisation of the nation-state model in Europe. They accompanied the establishment of tighter national borders and of stricter legislation as the authority of states was strengthened. Moreover, they were also important places of affirmation, and even constitution, of nationalisms. In this sense, they were indeed European.

Although they primarily fulfilled coordination functions, these associations were not limited to that. Their existence presupposed and reinforced networks of international actors linked by common knowledge and know-how, so-called epistemic communities. While the members of the Association for the Legal Protection of Workers first and foremost rallied around common skills and beliefs, they also helped to spread the idea that social protection is a condition for building a better and more stable society. This idea was taken up and amplified when the International Labour Organisation was created in 1919: social justice, seen as the condition for peace, then became a virtuous international cause.

This “internationalism of causes” developed during the 19th century. The struggle against slavery, for peace, human rights, women’s rights and, more recently, the environment are issues around which various actors were and are working together. They first met in congresses and then consolidated their commitment by creating movements and organisations. Although they worked “internationally”, these “entrepreneurs of causes” did not necessarily constitute international groups. This was
the case, for example, of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The humanitarian universalism it promotes was formulated by an exclusively Swiss group, inhabitants of a single district of Geneva. More generally, formulated in Europe by Europeans, these causes claim to speak to the whole world and yet are particularly addressed to suffering humans, who are not European.

### Internationalism as a European project

Internationalism as a project is, however, much more than advocacy. It has its roots in the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, in the Kantian ideal of universal peace and hospitality based on a belief in human brotherhood. Bentham, from whose pen the term international appeared, proposed to give legal reality to the Kantian cosmopolitan ideal. He suggested the elaboration of a code of laws and the creation of an international court of justice on the assumption that there can be a set of ideas, values and rules that are supposed to be valid for everyone at all times. As critics of Eurocentrism have pointed out, this liberal internationalism developed in a specific context: that of the development of capitalism, economic imperialism, and colonial conquest. Among the promoters of this international order were the defenders of free trade, including Richard Cobden, a member of the British parliament. They saw free trade and the spread of capitalism as the natural foundation for peace and wellbeing throughout the world. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels opposed this liberal internationalism with a revolutionary global project to break the dominance of capitalism. The International Workers’ Association founded in 1864, the Second International of 1889, and finally the Communist International in 1919 were characterised by a double objective. They aspired to spread the values of equality in order to establish a more just world, and to organise internationally workers’ solidarity and workers’ resistance to the oppression of world capitalism. Their internationalism included the promise of “liberation”. This eschatological connotation quickly generated confusion between the term “internationalism” and the revolutionary project that highly claimed it. In addition, apart from the fact that the world revolution was primarily a response to liberal internationalism, there were other variants of internationalism and in particular an ultra-nationalist version formulated by the fascists. Despite its self-proclaimed singularity, the Nazi movement, like its fascist predecessor, was in fact part of a broader wave of authoritarian far-right movements. The leaders of these different parties and movements met and maintained relations of mutual admiration and emulation that encouraged the circulation of models and laid the foundations for fascist internationalism. What these competing internationalisms had in common is that they all aimed to organise and change the world in the name of universal values and that they all came from the same European matrix. Have they
contributed to the Europeanisation of the world? Or have they, on the contrary, internationalised Europe?

Internationalising Europe?

The answer to this question has recently been the subject of debate. Madeleine Herren sees, for example, the Japanese experience in Manchuria and the creation of Manchukuo as a starting point for fascist internationalism. In this perspective, recent works point out that the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis was more than a war alliance. It was rooted in a fascist internationalism in which the Japanese played a full role.

Similarly, recent historiography has shown that it is difficult to reduce revolutionary internationalism to a European invention. It is true that Europeans dominated both socialist internationalism and communist internationalism. Latin American socialists were poorly represented in the International Workers’ Association, whose discussions and conflicts remained foreign to the debates in Latin America. In return, the Latin American socialists seem to have had little influence on what was discussed in London. The Marxism, that formed theoretical basis for the internationals, was primarily a critical analysis of capitalism in the industrialised countries and seemed to speak mainly to Europeans. However, Marx himself had been in conversation with Indian and especially Russian intellectuals, and had to revise his positions gradually to take account of the specific situations of these countries. The question of whether he had envisaged that the world revolution could have originated in the countries of the European periphery, and in particular Russia, is still debated, the fact remains that after the Bolshevik revolution’s communist internationalism was deported to a less industrialised “East”. Lenin had to take the peasant question seriously and to develop strategies for a rapid exit from economic underdevelopment. These economic and social concerns resonated with the one of elites in the colonised countries. The Congress of the Peoples of the East brought together in 1920 in Baku representatives of national liberation movements of countries that were still colonised, where the revolutionary message was clearly adapted to the situations of the different peoples. In 1921, the Commissariat of Nationalities of the future Soviet Union founded the Communist University of the Workers of the East, which became a school for the cadres of national liberation movements. From this melting pot emerged several leaders of the decolonisation struggles, who closely associated national emancipation and anti-capitalism. This history helps to understand the influence that the communist model exerted on the elites of the newly independent countries until the 1970s. For its part, the World Federation of Trade Unions, very active in the field of the anti-colonial
struggle, managed to develop its relations with the trade unions in the colonised countries that largely rejoined it after independence. The leaders of its social-democratic rival: the international confederation of free trade unions had to acknowledge that the dependence of social-democratic trade unionism in most of the European countries on traditional colonial channels made it less attractive than its Communist counterpart to the newly independent countries.

Liberal internationalism is indeed heavily burdened by the imperialist pasts of those who have claimed it and it is difficult to give a clear answer to the question whether it has contributed to a Europeanisation of the world or rather furthered an internationalisation of Europe. The debates on the nature of international organisations bear witness to this difficulty. Created after the two world wars, they were directly inscribed in the liberal tradition and moreover conceived as instruments to fight against the competing internationalisms of Bolshevism for the League of Nations and Nazi imperialism for the United Nations. For Mark Mazower, the founding of the League of Nations and then of the UN was, first of all, a means of ensuring the dominance of the imperial powers, in particular the French and British. Akira Iriye, on the contrary, sees it as the place where a truly global community was formed and flourished. In Geneva, the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation were clearly dominated by European players, while at the UN, until the 1970s, the North Atlantic powers were in the majority and set the organisation’s agenda among themselves. Yet this does not necessarily mean that international organisations have exclusively been instruments of European domination. Susan Pedersen showed that while the Commission on Mandates of the League of Nations had been founded to ensure the control of European colonial powers over the territories of the former Ottoman or German Empire, it also was a place where colonialism could and was challenged. Recent works reveal that these same powers developed inter-imperial organisations competing with certain UN agencies in order to influence or hinder the projects formulated there. The UN Security Council was certainly dominated by the major powers, but its General Assembly quickly became a place where the recently decolonised countries could organise themselves and challenge European and US hegemony. This contestation went as far as the adoption, in 1974, of a project for a new international economic order that called for a better distribution of world wealth. In reality, the liberal international organisations were so profoundly transformed by the new entrants that the European powers gradually started to create and invest in alternative regional organisations. The European Community, then the European Union, and also the OECD, became the new places where European were among themselves. In a way, Europeans have thus abandoned the international project to which they gave birth. This can be interpreted as a way of renouncing a universal that has now been stamped with the seal of infamy. But it can also be understood as a strategic retreat in favour of a protective self. The growing affirmation
of a specific European identity and culture as well as of the existence of a common economic and social model provide further evidence for this trend. Might we not see in the closure of European borders and the affirmation of a “Fortress Europe” a correlate of this withdrawal?

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3. For this and the following see also Madeleine Herren, Geschichte der internationalen Organisation, Darmstadt 2009; Bob Reinalda, Routledge History of International Organizations: From 1815 to the Present Day, London 2009: 3-177.
7. For the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) see Irène Herrmann, L'humanitaire en questions: réflexion autour de l’histoire du Comité international de la Croix Rouge, Paris 2018.


