

Internationalism: a culture and a commitment

By Gustave Massiah

Internationalism is a political movement and a current of thought. It is also part of some conceptions of the “alter-globalist” (in French, “altermondialiste”) movement, also known as the “global social justice movement”.

Alter-globalisation

This is a movement based on the idea that an alternative way of organising the world is possible. It promotes global cooperation and engagement, but it is opposed to many aspects of the global economy, insofar as they don't respect social values of respect for people and the planet.

The First International, created in 1864, played an essential role in defining and structuring the workers movement and in asserting it as a strategic social movement of the period that was opening up. Since the initial workers' Internationals, internationalism has opposed nationalism's claim to subordinate all forms of identity to national identity. It poses the common interests of peoples as opposed to confrontations between states, and it naturally extends to different forms of international solidarity.

Workers' or proletarian internationalism seeks primarily to build international solidarity among proletarians (workers, peasants, employees, waged and precarious workers, unemployed, etc). Today it is confronted by new issues that call for its reinvention. In the global justice movement, the culture of this new internationalism rejects the ideology of neoliberal globalisation. It is an intersectional movement, searching for a transition that is at the same time social, ecological and democratic. It seeks to reinvent sovereignty based on the universal rights of the peoples.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an understanding of the world which sees a variety of systems of power working together to oppress. These systems of power include [class](#), [race](#), gender, [sexual orientation](#), age and [disability](#).

The history of internationalism is marked by the merging of two major trends that developed in the late 18th century: the rise of nationalism and the development of the forms of organisation of the working class. Internationalism is defined in opposition to a conception of nationalism that exclusively links a national group, defined by its identity, with a nation-state. Since the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, the sovereign role of the state is the basis of the international system which is organised around relations between states. Working-class structures have undergone many

transformations as a result of the industrial revolutions that have weighed upon the history of the workers' Internationals and the global justice movement.

The Internationals

Very briefly, let us recall the history of the Internationals, although this does not exhaust the history of internationalism.

The First International was also known as the International Workingmens Association (IWA). It was founded in 1864 in London and included followers of Karl Marx, Auguste Blanqui, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, Ferdinand Lassalle, and Giuseppe Mazzini. The anarchist currents still maintain today a small International Workers Association.

The Second International, founded by Engels in 1889, was dissolved in 1920 in the wake of its divisions over the war of 1914 and the Russian revolution of 1917. The division over the war was precisely a division between those who accepted the nation state as the fundamental identity (and therefore supported the war) and those who saw class as the fundamental identity (and therefore opposed the war). These sharp divisions over war and revolution marked the end of a period and opened a crisis in internationalism and the workers' movement. The Socialist International, which succeeded the Second International, contained some left currents but it was also identified with the management of capitalism rather than its downfall, and with colonialism.

The Third International, founded in 1919, developed an anti-imperialist and revolutionary orientation. Then it was reoriented by Stalin to the "construction of socialism in a single country."

The Fourth International, founded by Trotsky in 1938, was never able to transform itself into a mass movement, although some of its members did play an important role in certain situations.

There are recurring debates on whether to found a fifth International. This has been discussed by some of the participants in the World Social Forums around two questions: what would be the relations with would-be progressive governments, and how does it differ from the forums between the social movements and the NGOs?

Internationalism and class

Internationalism is based on an analysis of social classes and aims to build the proletariat as a conscious and organised political actor. The class struggle is not reduced to the confrontation between the working class and the bourgeoisie. Proletarianisation and precariousness now affects all social layers that are not dominant. Internationalist class alliances put forward the idea that the proletariat, in the struggle for its emancipation, must seek the emancipation of all societies and of global society. Internationalism holds that the proletarian movement is the spontaneous movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority. All previous historical movements have been the work of minorities in the interests of minorities.

The Manifesto of the First International states: “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” In the extended form of internationalism, the Alter-globalisation movement is built around several principles:

- diversity and the legitimacy of all struggles against oppression
- a strategic orientation toward universal access to equal rights
- a new political culture linking individual and collective commitment.

The internationalist reference and culture extends to such movements as those of the peasants, with Via Campesina, women’s rights, climate justice, the indigenous peoples, etc.

Internationalism and globalisation

It is necessary to look again at the relationship between internationalism and globalisation. The globalisation we know has been capitalist since its beginning, and capitalism has been global since its beginning. Consider, for example, the Venetian Republic, one of the great trading city-states of Europe until the 18th century. “The real mission of bourgeois society is to create the world market,” Marx wrote to Engels in 1858. Even if some of those in the Internationals may have thought that capitalism was progressive, there was no idea in internationalism that capitalism would reduce tensions, inequality, or wars. That was why so much importance was given to world revolution.

Today, we find that neoliberalism, the new phase of capitalist globalisation, is faced with its social, ecological and geopolitical crisis. So it has turned to austerity combined with authoritarianism. This involves an enormous increase in violence and conflicts. Security-obsessed nationalist and xenophobic ideologies are mounting, with migrants as the scapegoats. Against this approach, Alter-globalisation is internationalist, offering a new stage in world history, a globalisation of solidarity that respects the universal rights of all citizens of all nations.

The internationalism that originated from the sudden emergence of the working class has been transformed by its encounter with the second major transformation, that of decolonisation. Internationalism played a decisive role in decolonisation by building the alliance between national liberation and workers’ movements.

The class nature of the national liberation movements is complex and contradictory; there are significant differences among them. These differences cannot be reduced to the role of the respective national bourgeoisies. At the Baku Congress in 1920, the Third International implemented a strategic alliance between the national liberation and workers’ movements. This alliance did not suppress the contradictions, but it created a new situation. It coincided with a period of advances from 1905 to 1970, notwithstanding wars and fascisms. It aided decolonisation and practically encircled the colonial powers. It imposed some social concessions and a welfare state in the countries of the capitalist centre.

Neoliberalism regained the initiative

But beginning around 1977, with the debt crisis and the imposition of structural adjustment programs, neoliberalism began regaining the initiative. This has led to 40 years of defensive action by the social movement in the decolonised countries, in the post-revolutionary countries, and in the industrialised countries. This also included setbacks in the search for emancipation, the demise of the post-decolonisation regimes and of the soviet bloc.

Social, ecological and democratic transition

A new period has opened. The social movements are confronted by a conservative counter-revolution. They are opening up a new world through the major transformations under way, based on revolutions in women's rights and ecology, biotechnologies and digital communication in language and writing, a second wave of decolonisation after state independence, and a demographic revolution, in particular through migration and mass education. The social movements advocate an alternative, the social, ecological and democratic transition.

With the reinvention of internationalism, we need to take into account many issues. Some of these have been raised from the beginning. They reflect new ruptures and open new horizons. The relationship between the concepts of people, nation and state are still topics of lively debate, as they were in the strategic debates throughout the decolonisation period. In the time of the First International, there was much debate over the Irish question and the relation between national and class struggles. At Bandung, in 1955, Chou En-lai summed it up: states want independence, nations want liberation, the people want revolution. The notion of people combines the social and the national. The political independence of states showed their limits. A second phase of decolonisation — the liberation of the peoples — begins.

Internationalism opposes nationalism's claim to subordinate all forms of identity to national identity. From the outset it has emphasised the importance, even the primacy, of social classes. The national interest, brandished by states, is aimed primarily at erasing class conflicts in the interest of the ruling classes, the national or international bourgeoisies. Internationalism promotes the importance of the class struggle and its international dimension.

Intersectionalism and identity

It has also been necessary to acknowledge the importance of the issues raised by groups, communities, feelings of belonging, that cannot be reduced to the structuring of social classes, although class can be decisive. Substantial social changes alter the nature of the social classes and their relations. Intersectionality highlights the relation between social distinctions, sexism and racism. The forms of engagement demonstrate new relationships between the individual and the collective.

At the individual level, the perception of identity is complex, and cannot be reduced to national identity. As Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau have emphasised, we must recognise and accept the richness of multiple identities. In the history of internationalism, the difference between nationalism and patriotism has frequently been debated. When the Communist Manifesto says the workers have no fatherland, it means the proletariat has been deprived of that.

I am reminded of a quotation for which I can no longer find the source: “The bourgeoisie is cosmopolitan and nationalist, the working class is internationalist and patriotic.” The national question is not reducible to nationalism.

The global and the local

Thinking globally and acting locally is the complement of thinking locally and acting globally. Ecology has highlighted the change in perception of time and space and the importance of territories. The First International is inseparable from the Paris Commune of 1871, but also from the revolutionary municipalism of Petrograd in 1917, Hamburg in 1923, Barcelona in 1937. Resistance movements to capitalist globalisation refer to national spaces. They emphasise the contradiction of states that are both subordinated to financial capitalism and a means to oppose it. Globalisation and its contestation are reorganised through large geocultural regions.

Borders don't only fence off states. The very notion of border must be critically examined; it gains from being distanced from nationalism. Borders separate, but they are also places of exchange. Like the street in a neighborhood, a place of separation and encounter alike. The choice is political: wall the borders to make them impermeable, or knock down the walls in order to build bridges.

The culture of internationalism rejects the ideology of globalisation, particularly in its neoliberal version. That's why we call it “alter-globalisation”. This culture must reflect the new trends and build a social and democratic response to the surge of international religious ideologies such as evangelical Christianity, jihadist Islamisms, or Hinduism. It must also take into account the new geopolitical contradictions, and not retreat into a restrictive, campist vision of anti-imperialism in which all the enemies of our enemies become our friends.

Internationalism extends into international solidarity. International law may aspire to reinvent sovereignty on the basis of peoples' rights. International solidarity advances the notion of the people as defined by the history of their struggles, in the complex unity formed by classes, peoples, nations and states. International solidarity combines a number of approaches: solidarity between peoples oppressed by a situation imposed by the dominant powers; solidarity among all peoples in a project challenging the dominant system; solidarity in struggles and in the invention of a new internationalism in the era of globalisation.

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