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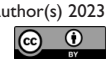
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The Meanings of Internationalism: A Collective Discussion on Pan-African, Early Soviet, Islamic Socialist and Kurdish Internationalisms Across the 20th Century

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Abstract

'Few political notions are at once so normative and so equivocal as internationalism', wrote Perry Anderson 20 years ago. Little has changed: today too, internationalism tends to take the form of a regular exhortation to think or act beyond the border or boundary, yet its political content remains underdetermined. What do we mean when we talk about internationalism? The following discussion sought to approach this question not by returning to first principles – to a definition of internationalism that could stand outside of a given historical context – but by reconstructing different concepts of internationalism developed by a series of lesser studied political movements spanning the 20th century. Musab Younis discusses anticolonial and pan-African internationalisms of the 1920s–40s; Maria Chehonadskih interrogates the interwar Soviet internationalism of Alexander Boganov; Layli Uddin excavates the Islamic socialist activities of Maulana Bhashani; and Dilar Dirik focuses on the meanings of internationalism in the history of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement. These movements bore witness to a fundamental set of shifts in the nature of the international system as empires collapsed and new nation-states were born, while global structures of exploitation

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and extraction recomposed themselves in the Cold War and post-Cold War landscape. In this context, all conceived of internationalism as a fundamentally revolutionary project.

Keywords
internationalism, anticolonialism, empire

'Few political notions are at once so normative and so equivocal as internationalism', wrote Perry Anderson 20 years ago.[2] Little has changed: today too, internationalism tends to take the form of a regular exhortation to think or act beyond the border or boundary, yet its political content remains underdetermined. What do we mean when we talk about internationalism? The following discussion sought to approach this question not by returning to first principles – to a definition of internationalism that could stand outside of a given historical context – but by reconstructing different concepts of internationalism developed by a series of lesser studied non-Western political movements spanning the 20th century. These movements bore witness to a fundamental set of shifts in the nature of the international system as empires collapsed and new nation-states came into existence, while global structures of exploitation and extraction recomposed themselves in the Cold War landscape. In such a context, the movements discussed below all conceived of internationalism not as a means of establishing cooperation between states to preserve the peace of the new order, but as a fundamentally *revolutionary* project: the goal of internationalism was to dismantle the economic, political, social and ideological foundations of this new system of nation-states. Internationalism was for them, as Musab Younis puts it, about transforming the world.

The revolutionary traditions of internationalism discussed here should thus be distinguished from two other meanings of internationalism in circulation today, which add to the confusion around the term's meaning. First, the internationalisms discussed below should be firmly distinguished from *cosmopolitanism*, an older tradition emerging out of 18th-century Enlightenment thought, which took universal reason as the foundation for peace between 'civilized nations' – a project articulated most famously in Kant's *For a Perpetual Peace.* This form of cosmopolitanism was not incompatible with an Enlightenment idea of the nation as a political community built on reason and natural rights, which, through the proper use of such reason, would align its interests with those of other rational nations.[3] Cosmopolitanism, understood in this sense, provides the framework for the liberal internationalism that still underpins what is known as the 'international community'. Second, the internationalisms discussed below are equally opposed to what Maria Chehonadskih below calls *capitalist transnationalism*, which can

1. All the authors have made an equal contribution to this piece. The order of names is randomised. This is an edited transcript of a discussion that took place at the event 'The Meanings of Internationalism', held in June 2022 at the London School of Economics, chaired by Miri Davidson and Lukas Slothuus and organised by Alexander Stoffel, Felix DelCampo, Timor Landherr, Miri Davidson and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, with the generous sponsorship of the Leverhulme Trust.
2. Perry Anderson, 'Internationalism: A Breviary', *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 5–25.
3. Ibid.

be understood as the extension of commodity relations across the world to secure the ongoing accumulation of capital. As Marx and Engels recognised in the *Communist Manifesto*, capitalist transnationalism has paradoxical effects: while it remakes the division of labour at a global scale, enabling ever more brutal forms of value extraction, it also brings workers into greater proximity and hence should, at least in principle, create the conditions for their solidarity across national borders.

In practice, things have unfolded differently. Classical Marxist concepts of internationalism, such as the paradigmatic anti-war version put forward by the Second International in the lead-up to the First World War (captured in Karl Liebknecht's slogan 'the main enemy is at home!'),[4] struggled to prevent the rise of fascism and chauvinistic nationalism in the first decades of the 20th century. All of the movements discussed below wrestled in some way with this same problem. While they all drew to some extent on classical Marxist concepts of internationalism, all also sought to challenge, deepen and rearticulate these concepts. They did so in a number of ways. First, all sought to re-examine the sources of national chauvinism and the motivations behind colonial domination, which required looking in places that an economistic framework could not access. Maria Chehonadskih illustrates, for example, how the Soviet philosopher and revolutionary Alexander Bogdanov located the sources of patriarchal nationalism in the psychic structures of labouring subjects, contorted as these were by hierarchical relations of agency and passivity. Dilar Dirik describes how the Kurdistan Freedom Movement saw the state apparatus itself as a source of patriarchal and authoritarian tendencies, and hence reformulated its decolonial project around the invention of fundamentally different concepts of sovereignty and political organisation. And Younis shows how Black anticolonial thinkers of the interwar period conceived of imperialism as above all a racial project, an analysis that went against the grain of Marxist theories of imperialism at the time.

Second, for the thinkers and movements discussed below, rethinking internationalism beyond the orthodox Marxist imaginary meant rethinking the way it was *practiced*, by cultivating new strategies for solidarity and original forms of political organisation. For example, Layli Uddi traces how the Islamic socialist leader Maulana Bhashani strove to engender the 'articulation' of otherwise oppositional (e.g. rural and urban, religious and secular) subjectivities, while Dirik discusses the theory of democratic confederalism developed by the Kurdistan Freedom Movement. Third, rethinking internationalism involved understanding that nationalism and internationalism were sometimes – indeed, *often* – mutually constitutive projects. This is one of the most important insights from the discussion below. Revolutionary internationalism often rested on a radical redefinition of the concept of the nation – women or any other oppressed group could constitute a 'nation', as could an entire continent – and often what started as a struggle for national self-determination became a project seeking to transform the world beyond nations.

Unlike much of the literature on non-Western internationalisms, the discussion below does not focus on an internationalism of elite figures, often educated in the West and able to travel widely and participate in established diplomatic networks. Internationalism is here, as Dirik put it with reference to the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, 'seen not as a

4. For a useful discussion of this slogan, see *Salvage Editorial Collective*, 'Did Somebody Say Imperialism? Ukraine Between Analogies', *Salvage*, 22 April 2022. Available at: https://salvage.zone/did-somebody-say-imperialism-ukraine-between-analogies/.

set of relations between states . . . but as relations between *communities* and *movements*'. Uddin describes how Bhashani envisaged a 'subaltern internationalism' located not in international conventions and conferences but in the village, led not by elites but by the 'have-nots', and exemplified by the popular peasant mobilisation in 1969–70 against the dictatorship of Ayub Khan. In a parallel way, Chehanodskih describes how for Bogdanov 'internationalism' in fact signified an elite project that reintroduced hierarchies of power; in his view it should be replaced by a notion of comradeship, capable of generating egalitarian and comradely relations at the workplace, family, ecological and epistemological levels. In these ways, the movements and thinkers discussed below conceptualised internationalism as a revolutionary project of alliance, connection and solidarity, but in addition as a *pre-emptive* project: to be internationalist was to counteract, at the *root*, the growth of reactionary nationalisms – ones which were by no means absent from the newly decolonised world.

Miri Davidson: **In your research, where does the term or idea of the international or internationalism arise? How is it understood in the period, region, or movement that you've studied? How does it change over time?**

Musab Younis: Rather than beginning with an abstract idea of nationalism or internationalism, I suggest we begin with a comprehension of the political projects that lie behind these strategies. My recent book *On the Scale of the World* looks at a range of Black anticolonial thinkers active in the interwar period. For these thinkers, the overarching political project was to rectify what the South African novelist and political activist Peter Abrahams called 'the problem between the lighter and the darker races of mankind'. This was a problem that existed on a world scale. In this view, imperialism was a racial project in which Europe had, over the course of centuries, come to dominate Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. The anti-imperial response needed, therefore, to try and reconfigure the world, to create a new world in which that domination was no longer in existence. As Adom Getachew has recently demonstrated, this world-spanning project remained a key ambition of many early independence leaders in Africa and the Caribbean. In the interwar period, things were more protean. Different forms of political strategy were proposed. But what interwar anticolonial thinkers shared – from Communist-affiliated figures, to liberals and even conservatives – was a critical response to the imperial order and a common desire for its radical transformation.

What differentiates these anticolonial thinkers from, say, the Communist International – which was also putting across radical anticolonial doctrines in this period – is that they saw imperialism as a fundamentally racial project. To

achieve this analysis, they paid very close attention to dominant imperial discourses. It was through a careful study of imperial discourse, exploiting the tools of imperial communication and making use of textual and literary strategies like citation and bricolage, that they developed a counter-understanding of imperialism. Edward Said has a term for this: writing about Fanon, he calls Fanon's alternative reading of reality – one that contradicts the colonial regime – a 'surreptitious counter-narrative'. The point is that this is a type of liberatory writing that comes from studying and subverting the dominant power, not simply evading it. In that sense we might think of Marx in the British Library as engaging in a similarly surreptitious project, condemning a powerful system through its own legitimating discourse.

To put it simply, I don't think it's possible to come up with an internationalism in any kind of abstract way or by starting with first principles, based on what we think we would do right in an ideal world. This is still a view that we find in nationalism studies, which typically defines nationalism as a doctrine of political legitimacy. Nationalists are those who believe in the nation as a unit of political legitimacy. And internationalists believe in the legitimacy of a nation-transcending unit. There is a kind of choice between scales of legitimacy. But the history of both colonial and anticolonial political thought disturbs that dichotomy. What the Black anticolonial thought shows us is a tradition of internationalism that derives from an analysis of how the world is currently structured and an analysis of what forms of politics, including *dominant* internationalisms, already exist. And from there it can become an oppositional strategy.

Maria Chehonadskih: I belong to an intellectual movement seeking to reassess Cold War narratives about the Soviet and socialist projects. This movement faces a number of obstacles today, the first of which is the tendency to equate the Soviet Union and the Soviet space with Russia. The Soviet Union was a federation of republics. In this way, it represented the principle of internationalism in its very definition. The Soviet refers to a council and a local assembly, which would then form republican assemblies and all-Soviet collective governance. We should be aware that in practice, the Soviet power became a hierarchical system where local, regional and republican assemblies were subordinated to the centralised party apparatus. Yet this awareness should not obscure the fact that this state-form radically differs from a classical imperialist and colonial power,

and therefore, it demands careful reassessment. We should analyse how actually existing socialism both undoes and reintegrates colonial and imperialist strategies. This is very important if we are to think about any future egalitarian project, which is unlikely to avoid the same problems. However, so far, the responses to this problem have either equated historical socialism with classical colonialism, or detached so-called 'real socialism' from the actually existing socialism of 'barbaric' and 'backward' Russia. As I see it, we need to work towards both the 'de-Russification' and the 'de-Westernisation' of our understanding of historical socialism.

My research focuses on the repressed and forgotten socialist legacies that fall outside the canon of the Bolshevik revolution. One particular figure that increasingly commands attention is Alexander Bogdanov, who was a Bolshevik and an ally of Lenin during the first Russian Revolution in the early 20th century. He then left the Bolshevik fraction and became independent. After the October Revolution of 1917, he established the Proletarian Cultural Enlightenment Organisation (known as the Proletkult). Bogdanov wrestled with the main drama of that period, namely, nationalist revival during the First World War, when most of the social democratic parties across Europe suddenly started to support their states in the war effort. This contributed to the extreme rise of nationalism across Europe. A small fraction of Russian revolutionaries, including Bogdanov, was against this kind of nationalisation of the social democratic parties and the revolutionary movement.

Like the anticolonial thinkers Musab has spoken about, Bogdanov's critique challenged traditional Marxist approaches to internationalism. According to these approaches, the main figure of internationalism was that of the proletariat. The industrial labourer symbolised a universal and transnational worker by definition: immigrating and moving across national and regional borders, this labourer existed in concrete national contexts, which the abstract and universal logic of capitalist exploitation nonetheless transgressed. The rise of nationalism during the First World War posed a problem for this universalism. How can a worker from Germany fight a worker from France if their only enemy is capital? How can patriotic and nationalist resentment arise in the mind of the universal worker? To answer these questions, it was necessary to move away from simple economic determinism. This led Bogdanov to distinguish between capitalist transnationalism and the mental and psy-

chic structures which imposed a nationalist and patriarchal agenda onto society. He was one of the first to claim that a psychic structure is articulated by a set of techniques, where knowledge and power intersect with the mode of economic oppression – a claim that would be important for Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault, for example, in the 1960s. The psychic structures of authority impose on the worker a passive function of a mere task executer. The worker is dominated by the factory bosses and state authorities, who act as decision-makers. Enshrined in the very form of economic exploitation, the dualism of passivity and agency dissimilates through discourses and techniques of power. In this respect, even a philosophical proposition, such as 'the mind controls the body', is not innocent. This proposition assigns a subordinate position to a manual worker in the social hierarchy, where the 'mind' of the state apparatus thinks for the rest. The mobilisation of patriotic feelings thus is a result of imposed structures of authority and authoritarian thinking.

Bogdanov thought that the Marxist tradition needed to reorient from internationalism to what he called comradeship and comradely relations in the factory and the family, focusing on education, science and activism. Only when a worker embodied the alternative egalitarian epistemologies of science and political action, would their psychic structure organically change. After the October Revolution, such ideas gained a real opportunity to be put into practice. The socialisation of the factories, the abolition of private property, and many other huge changes encouraged utopian visions of Bogdanovian comradeship. Yet I have a fear that perhaps these early experiments were posing internationalism precisely in the way that Musab has suggested we cannot pose it, as a set of first principles – these principles being 'comradeship by means of education' instead of authoritarianism by means of subjugation. Bodganov and his circle speculated on the problems of the international movement, but they offered very abstract claims that they thought the movement could follow. Among these claims was the concept of proletarian science, which in practice corresponded to the purges of the middle-class members from Proletkult. Even if Bogdanov did not support these new forms of violence and exclusion, his followers often mistook the principles of comradeship for the idea of working-class purity. This is, nonetheless, a problem with any kind of universalist project, which always includes by excluding, and diverges as it enters the realm of actual practice.

Layli Uddin: I work on the politics of Third Worldist Islamic socialism through the figure of Maulana Bhashani, popularly known as the Red Maulana. Bhashani's rich and varied career of almost a century offers a unique lens on subaltern internationalism in 20th century South Asia. Bhashani's life pre-dated the nation-state; born in East Bengal in the 1880s, he actively contributed to the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and thereafter to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. He spent most of his career as a thorn in the side of governments, a nuisance to imperial powers, a Third World activist, a Sufi saint of unusual power, and a leader of peasants and workers in colonial Assam, Pakistan and then Bangladesh.

Bhashani's life can be divided into three major phases, each with a different relationship to internationalism. First, Bhashani's Muslim identity and training at Deoband, an international seminary, cultivated an embodied sense of Islamic internationalism. For example, the idea of Ummah, the universal Muslim community, was part of his daily interactions and religious practice. The second phase of his career draws Bhashani into anticolonial politics through his role as a militant and organiser in the Khilafat Movement in the 1920s, which aimed to destabilise British rule by calling for the restoration of the Ottoman caliphate, and independence. The third phase was more complicated, involving a range of anti-imperialist internationalist activities. In the 1950s, he attended the Labour Party conference in Scarborough, and participated in the World Peace movement, which included figures like Du Bois and Robeson, in the 1950s. In the 1960s, Bhashani circulated among more militant left internationalist networks. His trip to China was a transformative experience, where he met Indonesian Communists, Algerian Islamic Socialists and militant African American activists. He was one of the editors of the militant Afro-Asian journal *Revolution* and attended the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Cuba, described as the 'Conference of Combat'. Bhashani's internationalism both informed and drew upon his political relationship with subaltern constituencies.

Musab mentions how his interlocutors disrupt the binary between nationalism and internationalism, and a similar blurring of scales can be seen in my work. Bhashani is an unusual figure because he was both more *local* and more resolutely *international* than his contemporaries, icons of postcolonial South Asia like Jinnah, Nehru and Ambedkar, who were Western-educated and worked primarily within

the national scale. Bhashani and his followers celebrated the figure of the *adorsho krishak*, the ideal peasant. I use the figure of Bhashani as both an archive and a method of opening up different narratives of internationalism beyond conventional understandings of the term – which often focus on highly educated and mobile elite groups – by introducing subaltern internationalism, meaning an international political thought and practice grounded in the lifeworlds and everyday practices of groups such as peasants and industrial workers. Let me offer a story here by way of example. In 2013, I met 84-year-old Burhan [Uddin], a religious disciple of Bhashani for 50 years or so, and a peasant for far longer. He told me how Bhashani appeared to him in a vision prophesying the defeat of American imperialism in Syria and future struggles on energy. Bhashani's relationship with these subaltern constituencies as their religious and political leader expands our understanding of internationalism. The village becomes an important scale, the peasant an agent, rural life offers new aesthetics, dreams and affect are forms of communication, and the meaning of internationalism is forged through practice and movements of the marginalised.

Bhashani presents new narratives of internationalism in South Asia through his articulation of Islamic socialism. When I say 'articulation', I'm thinking of Stuart Hall – he introduces the concept of articulation to talk about the connection of two sets of ideas, like race and class, or religion and politics, possible under certain material and political conditions. Bhashani offers an enchanted left politics which is able to enfold contradictions. It goes beyond socialist or Muslim internationalism, producing a new way of thinking about both. Islamic socialism emerges as a practice of solidarity, which David Featherstone, in his work on internationalism from below, argued was transformative and inventive in its construction of new political relations and connections between spaces.[5] Bhashani's internationalism of course changes with time as we move from empire to nation-state and neo-imperialism. As the nation-state becomes more salient, Bhashani's politics transition from a peasant and worker populism to a more militantly conscious international Maoism.

5. David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed, 2012).

DD: I'm going to talk about a contemporary liberation movement that is still very much alive, the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, the social and political movement around the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which was founded in 1978, 2 years before a major military coup in Turkey. Almost all of its original co-founders are still alive. Those who died, did not die of old age.

The initial premise of this and other left groups at this time of upheaval in Turkey was that Kurdistan is a colony, an internal colony of four countries in the region – Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria – most of which themselves were previously colonised by the British and the French, following Ottoman collapse. Furthermore, it's an *international* colony. Kurdistan is located across 'camps' during the Cold War period – different Kurdish movements and parties were hence caught in regional or global power struggles. The division of Kurdistan into four thus required specific methods and tools for struggle. From the beginning, the PKK was a socialist movement, one that initially articulated itself in Marxist-Leninist terms.

Similar to the cases described by the others, while leading a national liberation struggle, this movement was in fact a deeply internationalist one, with world liberation on the horizon through the solidarity of peoples against imperialism. Some of the co-founders were in fact Turkish. In its literature, the party framed the liberation of Kurdistan as a launching pad for the wider liberation of the proletariat in the region and beyond. The proposed socialist Kurdish state was to merge with a wider democratic federation for the peoples of the Middle East. The idea of establishing an independent Kurdish state was not only the idea of the PKK, but also other Kurdish parties, including those involved with Communist Parties in the region. There was barely a plan for how to establish it. Rather, the state was at the time the main reference point for independence from colonialism and imperialism.

In 1984, when the armed struggle against the Turkish state was launched, the leadership of the movement was located in Lebanon and Syria. This was possible because of the Syrian state's alliance with the Soviet Union and its hostility towards NATO, of which Turkey is a member. There, the PKK initiated contact with other revolutionaries from Turkey, with the Palestinian liberation movement, and with different Communist Parties and Armenian revolutionaries organising there at the time. Guerilla warfare was learned with other revolutionaries and internationalists at the time in Lebanon, receiving training from the Palestinians. Among the first martyrs of the PKK were people who died fighting against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. At the same time, a prison struggle started in Turkey as many people on the left were arrested in the military coup regime. Some of the earliest references of the movement – its first publications and statements, and the letters left behind by 'martyred' political prisoners – explicitly referred to proletarian and anticolonial struggles around the world, from Vietnam to Angola.

The Kurdistan Freedom Movement became a mass movement in the 1990s, when the Turkish state was destroying Kurdish villages in response to the guerilla war. Hence, it gained strength only long after the anticolonial movements that we study today, but also after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It started to claim a project for self-determination after most of the borders were already settled in the region. In this sense, it was 'late' – it came at a time of defeat for many people on the left, both in the region and beyond.

Over time, the movement has shifted its focus from being a national question towards a question of the decolonisation of different spheres of life. Increasingly, the language of 'democracy without and against the state' was employed. In 1995, the claim to an independent state was dropped from the party programme. That was the first concrete organisational manifestation of the critique of the state. During the 2000s, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of this movement who has been imprisoned since 1999 after a NATO-led abduction, began to explicitly articulate a concept of freedom as a stance against the 5000-year-old state system, which he analyses as being deeply entangled with patriarchy. Not simply against the Turkish state or the Iraqi state and so on (although them too) – but against the *idea* of the state, because the state came to be seen as the embodiment of power and domination, and the enemy and coloniser of society. By criticising the past practices of revolutionaries and socialisms, the party started to articulate a confederal, bottom-up form of socialism and a new idea of non-state self-determination for the 21st century.

Today the wider movement's main principles are women's liberation, ecology and radical democracy, the three pillars of the freedom paradigm as articulated by Öcalan. 'Democratic confederalism' is not a project for Kurdish self-determination, but something that is proposed to the other peoples of the region as well. Internationalism is seen not as a set of relations between states, or as something negotiated through states or one centre, but as relations between *communities* and *movements* that ideally should organise outside of the capitalist, patriarchal and statist system. Because of the division of Kurdistan and the fact that millions of Kurdish people live in Europe, the movement has had to develop alternative ways of organising revolutionary struggle without any state infrastructure to support it. So, on the one hand, there is a project of democratic confederalism for the region, scaling up from there: in the villages you have communes, councils, cooperatives and assemblies, which have confederal relations to the others in the region, and then countrywide, in larger and larger umbrellas. On the other hand, the movement is trying to build global fronts of struggle by engaging with other social movements, especially with women's liberation struggles, other anti-system resistance movements, and also through more mainstream diplomatic means, such as by forging links with other left parties and movements in the region and in parts of the world in the Global North and trying

to expand to the Global South. To sum it up, this is a movement that claims past internationalist and anticolonial movements as part of its heritage, but it also says that in the 21st century we may need something else, and that we especially need to tackle patriarchy and the state.

MD: In the movements you study, does internationalism necessarily rely on a concept of imperialism? And if so, what is this concept?

MY: Yes, although the reasons maybe not as obvious as they might seem. One of the figures I've been interested in is Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese anticolonial militant who had been recruited by the French to fight in the First World War. He was gassed at Verdun and suffered health consequences for the rest of his life.[6] After the war, he stayed in Paris until his death in 1927. He had initially joined the French Communist Party (PCF) and become active in its Intercolonial Union, working with North African and South East Asian activists. But without ever rejecting the analysis of the Communist Party, he came to the conclusion that there needed to be a specifically Black organisation focused on the question of Africa. Communist organisations were not going to put Africa in the forefront of their analysis because they did not expect Africa to be the leader of the global revolution. Senghor went on to found several important organisations and newspapers that began to articulate a novel understanding of imperialism – one that combined the Communist understanding of an economic structure of exploitation with a pan-African understanding of imperialism as a racial project.

If you were interested in the question of Black and African liberation in the 1920s, you had to begin with the fact that you lived in a fundamentally imperial world. How would freedom be obtained in a world in which most people were the subjects of a European empire? In particular, what did it mean that the only sovereign areas of African or Black control were Ethiopia, Liberia and Haiti, and all of them were invaded, occupied or undermined in the 1920s and 1930s? These were very fragile sites of Black sovereignty that, rather than gaining in power, were actually being attacked and extinguished by the imperial order at that time. And this flatly contradicted the idea that the world had become more liberal and progressive after the First World War. The concept of imperialism that emerged for those like Lamine Senghor thus emphasised the racial and cultural underpinnings of the imperial order. It saw the global order as constitutively racial. The *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, for example, calls the League of Nations the 'League of White Brotherhood'. For a long time, this kind of analysis wasn't taken seriously outside of these circles.

In fact, more recent scholarly work shows that intra-cultural affinities were very significant in the shaping of our contemporary global political

6. See Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (London: Heinemann, 1999).

economy. Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's *Empire and Globalisation* suggests, for example, that there's overwhelming evidence that non-economic considerations played a major role in the way the British Empire was organised. This was something that African anticolonialists were pointing out all the time. Why is it that Australia and New Zealand are treated differently from Ghana and Nigeria? They are all in the empire, but they have a completely different economic system, and different kinds of economic privileges. Ultimately, that was racial in nature. Why is it that the British are so interested in trying to export populations that look a certain way, and not populations that look a different way? That lack of neutrality in the construction of the imperial order is particularly important to the internationalism that comes to be developed, which becomes known as Third Worldism. This is an internationalism that sees the structure of imperialism as creating a common interest amongst the racialised subjects of the European imperial order. There's a strong North–South dimension to the internationalism of these Black anticolonialists. They become very interested in connecting with movements and schools of thought in Asia and Latin America. This is what Hubert Harrison calls an 'international consciousness of the darker races'. So, this is a conception of internationalism that is inseparable from a conception of imperialism.

MC: The fact that I work in the same historical period as Musab is interesting. It is this period that marks the end of many empires and the beginning of radical ideas about global transformation. The Soviet project emerges as a result of the First World War and the collapse of the Russian Empire after the October Revolution. There are nations within the Russian Empire that declare independence after the Revolution, but they do not gain the status of nation states. Instead, they are offered the status of autonomous republics, on the condition that they joined the socialist project. The Soviet project thus has links with the Russian Empire, and the collapse of this empire. Yet it would be a simplification to treat the entire Soviet project as a monolithic continuation of the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union was a new project whose aim was to reclaim the world from capitalist modernity. This project would chase the shadow of reaction and capitalism in many forms of deviating behaviours and this would intensify under Stalinism. If we set this period aside, however, there are other periods: the experimental stage in the 1920s; the Second World War and the antifascist struggles against Nazi Germany; and the late Soviet Union. Each had a different internal and geopolitical agenda. Elements of imperialism survived under the Soviet project and articulated themselves in a complex way in each of these periods, but we cannot confuse this with imperialism in a Western context. This is because there are a number of elements that are not comparable. The Soviet Union, for example, provided everyone with citizenship status. On the contrary, the British Empire did not grant its subjects the universal status of citizens, but instead created hierarchical

types and forms of British nationality subjected to immigration control and policing. Capitalist imperialism also proliferates differences and marks bodies with accents, with ethnic, class and regional characteristics, to control populations. The Soviet project moved in the opposite direction. It wanted to create a new nationless state-form of working-class citizens. From East Siberia to Central Asia, the urban and rural population received the same standard education and, therefore, had no regional accent. The revolution erases their identities. The Soviet project sought to mask differences and to transform everyone into the average Soviet citizen. The danger of this project was related to the problem of how imperialism could be diffused within that very logic. The repression of national differences and the regional versions of socialism created a disproportionately centralised system that aimed to establish the same Soviet prototype everywhere. This was a socialist imperialism, if you will, based on a one-dimensional development towards socialist reason. This should be contrasted with the subjugated differentiation of capitalist imperialism, which hierarchically assigns a specific place and role to the articulated difference in the global system of economic exploitation and state control.

LU: Bhashani was a subject of the British Empire; he lived through the rule of West Pakistan over East Pakistan; and then through American neo-imperialism. His politics stemmed from a clear opposition to foreign rule. In the postcolonial period, this was most apparent in his resistance to bilateral and multilateral security agreements with the United States, and his opposition to nuclear weapons and foreign intervention. He argued that imperialism impinged on the dignity, self-respect and freedom of formerly colonised populations. They could not be the masters or the architects of their future if they were drawn into wars that were not of their making. The only way Bhashani thought imperialism could be countered was through Afro-Asian love and friendship. He breaks away from the Awami League, the party that he founded in 1947, that had revoked their policy of withdrawal from military alliances with America. This would be one of very few historical instances in which a domestic party which was not explicitly Communist fractured over non-domestic issues.

But Bhashani's politics were not simply oppositional. They built on a positive vision of anti-imperial futures. In 1957, he organised a festival in Kagmari, a small village north of Dhaka, to draw the prime minister of Pakistan out from the capital and into the village to debate with him on foreign policy. It was in this unlikely setting that the demand for anti-imperial friendship and solidarity with the Third World triumphed over the case for more arms spending. Bhashani curated a festival that blended popular culture, artistic practices and aesthetics with the intention of evoking specific emotions and creating new subjectivities beyond the local and national.

Kagmari's aesthetics offered a prefigurative politics of subaltern internationalist futures. The collective production of the Kagmari festival by

peasants and workers embodied the promise of an egalitarian world where everyone held value. The desired future was not to be achieved through some individual enterprise, but through collective effort. Labour created value, not capital. The future was also represented as an ongoing experimental and creative site, reflected in Kagmari's reworking of traditional cultural practices and forms. It was a rowdy and unruly space where the power and agency of ordinary people was very much in evidence. It was filled with noise; it featured local folk songs, stick fighting, wrestling and lectures by invited international guests. The physical transformation of the space by peasants and workers disrupted traditional arrangements of power and population.

In contrast to the traditional aesthetics of confrontations with imperial power, in which peasants and workers are either seen to be protesting or pleading, Bhashani used the positive laughter emanating from the festival to project new images of a demotic left future. Subaltern joy was perceived as an emotion that was particularly significant for left internationalism.

MD: **In your research, what role did the nation, nationalism or national self-determination play in relation to internationalist struggles?**

DD: The struggle for national self-determination played an important role in the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, despite this also being a deeply internationalist struggle. Over time, however, the movement began to transcend some of its original objectives and approaches to self-determination, redefining terms like 'nation' altogether. The PKK began as a group of socialist students, some of whom only found out that they were Kurdish in university. There was a ban of the Kurdish language in Turkey, and there had been state massacres throughout the 20th century that few dared to talk about. While the last major massacre in Turkey (massacres which began following the Kurdish uprisings at the beginning of the early Turkish Republic) had taken place in Dêrsim in 1938, the first openly Kurdish organisations did not emerge until the 1960s. There was fear of state violence and revenge. People had lost their language, but they also weren't aware of the situation of Kurdish people in Syria, Iraq and Iran, although historically there had been rebellions and political mobilisations there too. So, at the beginning, the movement had to do some mapping: what is Kurdistan; what do we mean by it?

There had been early Kurdish nationalist movements that had, along the League of Nations model, tried to lobby internationally for a Kurdish state towards the end of the Ottoman Empire. But the movement I'm talking about was a break with that trajectory, as it emerged from out of the left in Turkey. Its founders opposed what they called 'primitive nationalism', referring to the conservative, often feudal, elite groups who saw the Kurdistan question as simply a national question, and not a revolutionary question. But they also opposed the dominant tendency on the left in Turkey to see the Kurdish question as simply a class question to be dealt with after-

wards. Of course, Kurdish areas were overwhelmingly poor areas in Turkey, and Kurdish people were disproportionately subject to exploitation, underdevelopment and so on. But there was a resistance to subsume the Kurdish struggle under a Turkish left umbrella, and at the same time a resistance to Kurdish conservative nationalism.

Over time, as the struggle grew and transformed into a popular and regionally relevant actor, the movement's idea of the nation changed through deep ideological paradigm shifts starting in the mid-1990s, especially in relation to the state. Early on, for example, women were also conceptualised as a nation – as the first colony – in a reference to Marxist feminist literature. In the 2000s, Öcalan in his prison writings presented his concept of the 'democratic nation'. What this means is not that people constitute nations and that these need to internally democratise, but rather that the formation of new identities or people that work together towards a common goal (such as coalitions of movements or progressive alliances, but also solidarities between neighbouring communities), can also create non-state nations, based on shared moral and political values which are articulated in revolutionary struggle. This involves internally dismantling specific oppression of individual groups of people, especially considering that this is in a region devastated by large-scale patriarchal, ethnic and sectarian violence. For example, within the movement there is an autonomous organisation for women, youth, and religious communities like Alevis and Êzidîs. There is an active encouragement to protect the rights and self-determination of people living within Kurdistan, not all of whom are Kurdish. Within Turkey, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) explicitly presents itself against the foundational logic of the Turkish state – which is one of 'one state, one nation, one flag, one language' and so on. More recently, as seen in the 'Revolution in Rojava', declared in 2012, new political communities, people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, began to merge into nations through the movement's concepts – at least in theory. Internationalists from around the world travelled to Kurdistan or joined the structures in Europe. So, the term nation is engaged in many different ways at different scales. All these ideas started out, of course, from the oppression of the Kurdish people. However, treating this struggle as a nationalist one, as has been conventionally done, is a misrepresentation of the complex debates inside and around the movement. The autonomous women's struggle, for instance, presents itself as being connected to a millennia-old universal tradition of women's resistance against oppression and exploitation. In this sense, the movement's notion of decolonisation references events and phenomena beyond its era and surrounding geography.

LU: Bhashani's politics of decolonisation involved more than independence as a simple substitution of power; he was interested in revolutionising what being a Pakistani meant. He challenged the incipient and parochial nationalism of urban bourgeois and elites, demanded the abolition of colonial

institutions and infrastructures and tried to change the balance and distribution of power irrevocably. His championing of peasants and workers, and his consistent internationalism and solidarity with the Third World, threatened and changed the content of national struggles.

Bhashani's domestic politics were influenced by his travels and interactions with Maoism. In 1963, he visited China, a trip he described as a 'defiant and incomparable experience'. He returns from there as a transformed man. During the trip, he meets a range of people. He meets Puyi, the last emperor, who transitioned into a repentant and humble botanical official. He meets Robert Franklin Williams, who writes the founding text for the Black Panther Party, 'Negroes with Guns'. He also meets the Indonesian Communists who were later murdered in 1965. Bhashani's time in China expands his ideas of the Ummah, the feeling and experience of Muslim connectedness across geographic space, to wider solidarities on grounds of radical equality and justice. The Sino-Soviet split fractured Third World politics. It split Bhashani's National Awami Party (NAP) into two camps, and Bhashani becomes allied with the Beijing camp. This gives an advantage to Awami League's politics of ethno-linguistic Bengali nationalism in the national-level conflict.

Bhashani's affiliation to Maoist internationalism led to a more militant stance in national liberation struggles. He advocated that the 'have-nots' – the peasants and workers – ought to lead instead of elite nationalists. We see this new direction in Bhashani's politics in the 1969–70 popular uprising in both wings of the country, which eventually toppled the decade-long dictatorship of Ayub Khan. Scholarly narratives of these events have focused on the centrality of students, intellectuals and artists in metropolitan cities. However, the more militant and destructive political actions came from Bhashani's mobilisation of peasants and workers. Bhashani's Islamic socialist project proposed land redistribution and the nationalisation of industries on the basis that God was the owner of everything in the world. Bhashani, quoting Allama Iqbal, the Muslim nationalist poet, told peasants and workers to burn the land that did not feed them, to seize mills and factories if a minimum liveable wage was not provided, and to boycott election if they did not receive a proportional share of seats in political assemblies.

In Bhashani's politics, we see the international repeatedly prevailing over the national. Bhashani sees his role at the national level as one of permanent opposition, working within a space that was in some ways a lot more conservative and regressive. Bhashani didn't want to take power at the national level, a space where he would be forced to make many compromises on his radical politics.

MY: As I've mentioned, anticolonialists across the Black Atlantic before the Second World War were mostly convinced of the importance of national self-determination as a route towards global reconfiguration. Yet their understanding of what that meant was often complex, ambivalent and internally

divided. Paying attention to that complexity helps us to think more carefully about the idea of the nation, and what it means for internationalism.

One way into this complexity is to look at how people responded to the undermining of Haitian, Liberian and Ethiopian sovereignty in that period. We see different kinds of responses. For example, Western states in the League of Nations accused Liberia of practices of modern slavery. Some argued that Liberia should come under some form of neo-imperial control, that it should be a trustee territory of the League of Nations. Many Africans rose up in defence of Liberia, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, who later became the first President of Nigeria. Azikiwe argued that Liberia had a right to undertake state-building practices that might seem oppressive from the outside, but that were no worse than what other states had done and were still doing. Similarly, in relation to Ethiopia, many defended it on similar grounds: while Ethiopia might have had problems, they weren't worse than you saw elsewhere. According to this argument, Liberia and Ethiopia weren't uniquely problematic – they were just easy targets. The invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in 1935, and the acquiescence to that invasion by the rest of the League of Nations, was for many across Africa and Asia the moment at which the League of Nations showed its true colours. It proved that the states in the League were not really equal.

But we also see other responses that while pointing out the hypocrisy of international rules, and particularly the way in which Black states face much more stringent rules than others, also saw the existence of these states as a tragedy: as unable to realise the hopes and ambitions of the people who live within them. For example, George Brown, an African American economist, wrote an exceptional analysis of Liberia in 1941 titled *An Economic History of Liberia*. This was based on his PhD research at the LSE.[7] Rather than simply seeking to defend the Liberian state, Brown tried to analyse the ways in which it had become a kind of neocolonial vessel on the African continent. Brown explored how, because of its particular history, Liberia had been pushed to create a structure of horrifying repression of the Indigenous population in the service of international capital.

So, saying that there was a general conviction for some form of national self-determination isn't to say that there was a general naivety in terms of what states are and what they do. If you look more carefully at the kind of work that was being produced in this period, you find what you might call proto-postcolonial understandings of the issue. These were at once supportive of forms of nationalism and very attentive to the inherent insufficiencies of national projects.

MD: How have the movements you've studied conceptualised other modes of political community, connection or solidarity above and below the nation – for example, along regional, federal or religious lines? How did these frameworks come up against or clash with their internationalism?

7. George W. Brown, *The Economic History of Liberia* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1941).

MC: It seems to me that we've been using two concepts interchangeably in this discussion: universalism and internationalism. I wonder if we're talking more about universalism than internationalism. Each of these projects relies on some kind of universalist idea – whether this articulates itself through religion, the nation-state, or the notion of self-determination. To realise such a project you need to rely on international support, but these projects could also imply homogenisation. Internationalism and universalism, thus, mutually articulate one other. In the Marxist tradition, an ideal of internationalism is based on the universal figure of the worker. There are exclusions and inclusions along the lines of who is considered to be a worker and how a specific national context determines that. Practices of international solidarity and geopolitical blocs then emerge along these lines.

In many of the discussions that I've encountered in the 1920s, which was one of the most interesting periods in Soviet history, there was an idea of going below and beyond relations between states and nations. Bogdanov's idea of universal comradeship is a good example of this. He understands comradeship as a new culture of solidarity based on mutual cooperation and collectivism. Artists, activists, theorists and philosophers took this idea to then suggest that we also needed a comradely relationship to gender, to the family and also to the earth. We usually associate the Soviet Union with aggressive industrialisation and ecological catastrophes, but if you dig deeper into the archives from the 1920s, you find quite a different attitude towards environment and agriculture. In this archive we can find a concept of renewable energy based on the principles of universal comradeship. The idea is very simple: if capitalism extracts materials from the earth and returns them as waste, communist economy should be based on renewable energy, which is cheap and minimises extraction. Moreover, the energy of wind and sun is proletarian by definition: you can circulate and share it through the globally distributed and socialised networks of electricity and other communist technologies. Unlike coal or gas, which only some countries have, the sun and wind are the commonwealth, we only need communist infrastructure to distribute them freely.

So, in the early Soviet period the universalist idea was a very powerful means of forging not just international solidarity, but planetary solidarity. Discussing all these different projects is very important because today we lack any strong form of internationalism, and this in turn is because we lack any kind of universal idea. Efforts to reconstruct such a universal idea have reemerged in the idea of Europe, or in forms of liberal democracy. Yet these ideas are universal only in a regional, exclusionary and imperialist sense. The idea of post-Brexit Britain is just a variation of them, even if it narrows down the ambition of Western hegemony. With the climate crisis and ongoing wars, we need planetary ideas, which would critique the geopolitical exceptionalism of Europe, but would also effectively oppose all other forms of aggressive imperialism elsewhere, such as in Russia or China. Historically, this was the agenda of the non-aligned movement. To revive

such an agenda today, we unavoidably need to rethink the complicated relationship between universalism and internationalism – without simply rejecting universalism altogether.

LU: The politics of Islamic socialism demands the forging of a new political community. We see Bhashani invested in constructing links between groups whose politics and lifeworlds were removed from each other. He introduced new relationships and linkages between his religious disciples and Marxist workers of the NAP, which was the left opposition party of Pakistan in the late 1950s up to the 1970s, and of which he was also the president. He innovates with the *bay'ah*, the oath of allegiance pledged by his disciples, in a way that is unprecedented. He introduces a written pledge to abolish feudalism, capitalism and imperialism alongside the confirmation of usual articles of belief in God and the Prophet. The *bay'ah* gives the Marxist workers and the peasant religious disciples an equal standing, and the right to enter into the same spaces and to use the language of the other.

Bhashani also creates a new political subject during this period. He calls the peasants and workers the *sarbahara*, the have-nots. Though regularly used in the Marxist literature to refer to the proletarian class, Bhashani opens it up to incorporate wider and different histories, futures and icons, both sacred and profane. For Bhashani, the *sarbahara* constituted a class that was not defined by what they lacked but by their ubiquitous presence across different times, geographies and civilisations, with the power to change the course of history. At a peasant rally, Bhashani traced the lineage of the *sarbahara* to prophets who fought big landlords, slaves who revolted against empires, and European and Asian peasants and workers who resisted modern nation-states. He closed his telling of history by saying: 'You are not as weak as you think you are. Actually, you're not weak at all. In the face of your united strength, any government, however powerful it is, is obliged to bow its head.'

Bhashani's formulation of a new political community and subject emerges from the different experiences he had at the international level. Bhashani mirrors what he sees at the international level – where he worked with Mao, Robert Franklin Williams and Du Bois – and trying to replicate that locally. Bhashani sees the international as a space not just for acting, but for *learning*. The international scale gives him access to a diverse body of knowledge and practice that he otherwise wouldn't encounter. What fascinated Bhashani about internationalism and drove his domestic politics – in fact all his politics – was seeing these contradictions being overwhelmed by a superior demand for radical justice and equality.

MY: It is interesting to think about what the word 'nation' actually meant for people who used it in earlier periods. Marcus Garvey is a figure with whom many might be familiar as a 20th-century progenitor of Black nationalism. Although he referred to himself as a nationalist, and sometimes talked about the necessity of a Black or African nation, this was in some ways a

strange kind of nation. It didn't have any borders and it included African diasporic peoples who lived in many different countries of the world. I suggest that we see Garvey as issuing a provocation to the existing international order, which was predicated on the denial of sovereignty to Black and African people. By asserting the existence of an African nation (here he addressed himself to 'Africans at home and abroad'), he saw himself as undermining a key principle of that order. It's true that Garvey did have plans to try and create a territorial base in Africa and that he sent some people from his organisation to Liberia to try and obtain land there. But the failure of that project meant that, in effect, Garvey's nationalism was actually always deterritorial. It was disconnected from the control of territory. In that sense, it was much more a discursive nationalism, involving language, clothes, flags and so on – there was a whole imagery involved. But it didn't fulfil the criteria of nationalism if you think about nationalism in terms of a state controlling territory.

Many West African nationalists were inspired by Garvey. You read a lot of stories of people surreptitiously reading him at school, like Azikiwe and Nkrumah, both of whom, as children, read Garvey's writing, even though it was banned in British-occupied West Africa. West African conceptions of nationalism are also interesting in this respect. If you said in 1910 in West Africa that you were a nationalist, the nation that you were referring to typically meant all of West Africa, or at least what was then called British West Africa. It took some time for the nation to refer to a narrower political unit. What we had in the earlier period was in fact two coexisting forms of nationalism. One was a pan-West African, pan-African and global project, and the other was a much more specific Samuel Johnson-style Yoruba nationalism or an Igbo nationalism, which had more to do with recovering forms of cultural history and community that were seen as disappearing or being suppressed under the colonial order. It is interesting to think about the point at which those boundaries and borders come to be defined. But what is clear is that the 'nation' as it appears in interwar writing is referring to something different – in some ways a lot hazier – than that which we find after the Second World War.

MD: **What challenges and limits did these movements encounter, and what legacies and problems did they leave us with today?**

DD: It is challenging to speak about movements that are currently in resistance, because of how deeply past failures and successes shape the landscape of knowledge production. Moreover, ongoing repression, wars and the criminalisation of movements make it difficult to have free and critical intellectual discussion with both historical and political awareness. So, I want to leave you with a few challenges from the current context in Kurdistan that relate to wider issues around internationalism in the present.

The Kurdistan Freedom Movement continues to be one of the last remaining guerrilla movements with a claim to anti-capitalist revolution, and it has become a reference point for radicals and internationalists from

around the world especially over the past decade. However, it also has many internal contradictions and paradoxes, from its internal hierarchies to its current geopolitical behaviours in the region.

One important thing that the movement is trying to communicate to other struggles is to try as much as possible to stay outside of the state system and its economy to retain revolutionary quality. We know that liberal theories of change today are developed in offices of state power. States actively sponsor revolutions in other countries. Terms like decolonisation and solidarity are being emptied of their meaning. Being an activist has come to be seen as a hobby or a paid part-time job; it is a skill that can be learned in mainstream spaces, and there is money for all kinds of activities as long as they don't fundamentally shake the foundations of the capitalist and statist system in which Western institutions are hegemonic. The Kurdistan Freedom Movement has to face up to this issue too. After all, it is currently one of the key partners of US imperialism in the Middle East region, implicated in the illegal extraction of Syrian oil, and therefore part of the apparatus that imposes sanctions on ordinary Syrians. So, we have to face up to such contradictions in asking ourselves: what are the economic and political means and ethics of resistance today?

Second, the movement emphasises the importance of ideology (another very stigmatised word today). The claim is to create ideological, spiritual self-defense mechanisms to divorce oneself from capitalist hegemony. This is a critique of liberal approaches to the environment, to feminism and so on. It is meaningful to ask what it means to be a radical in the 21st century. Anti-imperialism in the 21st century may have to look anti-patriarchal, non-state and ecological, for example, but not just rhetorically – especially when progressive language today gets used to advance capitalist and state interests. But because movements' claims and visions are often far beyond their capacity, they often get compromised or co-opted by hegemonic forces. This applies to the Kurdish movement as well – its slogans and aesthetics are increasingly being fetishised and turned into cliché commodities. Third, the movement insists that it is not as meaningful to articulate critique without also developing the organisational capacity needed to produce that desired change. In academia, for example, we are taught to be critical, radical, to dismantle, to unpack and so on. But what will people have to do to materially organise change?

Perhaps, to end, I can briefly turn to this question. While academics may not be morally obliged to be internationalist activists themselves, they can and do engage in intellectual resistance against the politically motivated repression of knowledge, which in turn closely informs action. Many people in university spaces research and thereby challenge the criminalisation of protest, and of solidarity with migrants, refugees and oppressed peoples, for example. To be able to think clearly about the possibilities of internationalism today, there is a need for a powerful understanding of what drives war, conflict and fascism in the 21st century. But can we do that when our

universities and our research funding are implicated in an economy entangled with state interests, with few opportunities for radical interventions? How does this arrangement affect how we think about what constitutes political resistance? About what resistance is tolerated, and what is stigmatised? I believe that these are the kinds of questions that intellectuals need to grapple with if we are to rethink our concepts of internationalism today.

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