Abstract: This article aims to examine the possible current content of an internationalist thought and practice within a present belonging to Europe and to a world “globalized” by capitalism. The assumptions that led to the founding of the “Internationals” and their history will be examined from the perspective of this inquiry. Internationalist action, both past and present, outside these organizations will be included in the review. It is suggested that approaches that seek to formulate and establish the political principles that may be of value today for any situation, regardless of the country concerned, be identified and designated as “transnational.”

Keywords: Internationals – Laws of people’s lives – Globality – Workers – Migrants – Transnational – École des Actes

I am going to attempt to speak under the guiding principle that a present should be thought about and built right here, in Europe as it is.

Proposition 1
Capitalist organization today is global. This situation is not all that old: everyone agrees that the turning point of this generalized expansion occurred in the 1980s. There are some crucial reasons for this, completely unrelated to the strictly economic sphere and on which, by contrast, there is no consensus: the political failure of the Cultural Revolution in China paving the way for the full capitalist development of that country, the collapse of the socialist states in Europe, the failure of the innovative political efforts by young people in the 1960s and 1970s – such are the situations that gave it free rein.

Despite the recentness of this expansion, the fact that capitalism is global is not in itself something new. As far back as the mid-19th century Marx had analyzed and described this situation as being an intrinsic part of it. He had also identified its subjective consequences: the standardization of ways of life, the predominance of private interests and selfish calculation in every sphere of existence, the weakening of national differences, the so-called “developed” countries’ colonial plundering of the rest of the world, and so on. We are still dealing with all the same things.

The greater this expansion across the world, the more powerless it is to create a world that can accommodate all people's lives. Indeed, it divides them, through wars, the building of walls and fences, and statutory and police operations prohibiting people from moving freely, and, worse still, from remaining where they are.

Chamoiseau is right to note that “globalization” cannot be equated with, nor does it lead to, globality: it is even the opposite, if by globality is meant a world truly set up for those who live in it.

Proposition 2
There are an infinite variety of international organizations in the service of global capitalism: whether it is in the economic, financial, military, institutional, or state sphere, the world is literally teeming with inter- and supranational organizations. The ones that give today’s Europe its institutional consistency are only a small portion of them.

International organizations whose purpose is to bring together and defend a particular population group also exist, but there are an infinitely smaller number of them, perhaps even a smaller number today than of organizations dedicated to protecting the endangered species of animals and plants that inhabit the earth, the air, and the sea.

This suggests that capitalism has an extraordinary need to be organized, beyond the constraints of national spaces and contrary to what the ideologues of neo-liberalism say about the natural development of the international market. This kind of “nature” needs to be helped along! Meanwhile, in the current circumstances, the nations of the great powers rely on government figures who try to impose limits, prerogatives, and areas of intervention that will impede this or that aspect of the global expansion. With a growing risk of opposition and tension that could lead from already existing local conflicts to a war that would itself be rapidly globalized.

Proposition 3
Marx’s idea of an internationalism of workers probably developed as an echo or reflection of the international nature of capital: I think that is what can be read in these lines from the Communist Manifesto:

“National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.”

If capital has no country, then workers, even more so, cannot have one: “The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality. The workers have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.”

However, to be well-founded, this symmetry also requires a very strong asymmetry: the hypothesis that the proletariat, unlike all the other previous classes, will only be able to rule the world in its turn if it works toward ending all domination and oppression. Putting an end to its own situation, “freeing itself from its chains,” requires it to demonstrate an ability to free humanity as a whole. This hypothesis is that of an absolute singularity of the proletariat as a political subject.

We think we can rightfully object that that ability was not demonstrated, far from it, by the regimes that espoused Marxism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. But we need to take a closer look at this, because the proof can be reversed: indeed, having failed to work toward the liberation of humanity as a whole, the workers have nowhere freed themselves from their chains, and particularly not from those of the factory. If the question addressed to the Chinese socialist state by the working-class rebels, during what was rightly called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, concerned how the socialist factory differed from the capitalist factory, it is precisely because that was the red-hot political core of that revolution: the real test of the egalitarian (or not) organization of life, of the reduction (or not) of the main differences on which inequality had been based from time immemorial (cities/countryside; men/women; manual/intellectual labor).

It is no coincidence that, from the new Chinese factory-cities, the strongest, truest voices are now being heard of workers who, through the unprecedented means of their poetry, are raising the question again at the very point in politics where it had foundered: what should be done about the factory if the factory is a place incompatible with human life, a place where life is denied and withers away, leading young people to commit suicide rather than suffer such annihilation?

I would like to draw attention to one poem among hundreds of others that insistently raise this question as a matter of absolute urgency, that is, one that cannot be put off till later because we don’t put off living to later, we can’t; living is all we have, and it is soon gone:

September 17, 2013
I speak of blood, because I can’t help it
I’d love to talk about flowers in the breeze and the moon in the snow
I’d love to talk about imperial history, about poems in wine
But this reality only lets me speak of blood
blood from a rented room the size of a matchbox
narrow, cramped, with no sight of the sun all year
extruding working guys and girls
stray women in long-distance marriages
Sichuan chaps selling mala tang
old ladies from Henan manning stands
and me with eyes open all night to write a poem
after running about all day to make a living
I tell you about these people, about us
ants struggling through the swamp of life
drops of blood on the way to work
blood chased by cops or smashed by the machine
to speak of blood, of the sky crumbling
I speak of blood, my mouth all crimson

Proposition 4
“Proletarian” means someone who has no place in their own country, who is counted only as a force capable of work. That is what not just this poem but many other poems written by young Chinese workers also say. In France, other workers, from Africa, call themselves “world workers.”

That is why “proletarians” or “nomadic proletarians,” as Alain Badiou suggests, remains a possible name for all those whom the European countries, to varying degrees, reject, but also take in, under the inappropriate name of “refugees” or “migrants.” There are voices among the people concerned that say clearly and distinctly that such names are inappropriate and are even seriously obscene and offensive. There is, for example, this very young man from Guinea who gives us a lesson on vocabulary and firmness.5

He begins by wondering why they use that name rather than using the names that already exist. Why not call people simply by the name of their country? “[In our country, in Guinea,] people call him by the name of his country. They don’t say he is an ‘expatriate.’ They don’t say he is a ‘migrant.’ They don’t say he is a ‘refugee.’ Even if you are a political refugee, because many years ago, there were wars in the subregion of West Africa. All the people from those countries sought refuge in Guinea, but they were not called ‘refugees.’ [...] People say: ‘They’re Leonesans’ or ‘They’re Liberians,’ quite simply.” The word “foreigner” could also be used, he says, if need be. It is a neutral word, an objective word, that indicates that the person is no longer in their homeland, in their country of birth. It is also a word that defines a legal status, the one that distinguishes between “nationals” and “foreigners.”

He then points out that “migrant,” on the contrary, is a word for animals, which comes from what has been observed about them, namely, their seasonal migrations. And indeed, there is no connection between what controls animals’ movements and the arrival of men, women, and children who are seeking a place on earth where they can begin to build a better life. That is why that name — which, the same young man remarks, has never been said to a White person, which is reserved for “Black people who leave Africa to go to Europe” — is inappropriate for human beings and actually places them outside the human world.

Various segments of humanity leave the place on earth where they were born and become part of our existence, enlarging it. This constitutes our world, too, and we need to be able to approach it as the possibility of a new world rather than as a threat. In France, during the years 1997-2007, two slogans had emerged in the demonstrations of the Rassemblement des Collectifs des ouvriers sans papiers des foyers [Rally of the Collectives of Undocumented Workers of the Hostels] and the Organisation politique: “A country is everyone who lives there” and “We’re here, we’re from here, we’re not going anywhere.” They were clearly not the slogans of migratory birds!

That is why I think that, especially in Europe, even before forging country-to-country links, the first internationalist task for our present is to connect with the different groups of people who come to each of our countries, to learn from them, and to share with them the concern as to how life together could best be organized, by counting them and including them fully. We must do this knowing that today, as in the 1970s, if we want to get to know people, we have to accept to distance ourselves from the experts of all kinds who are supposed to tell us who we are, what we think and want. The only way to make this a reality is to meet the people themselves, to talk with them about how they think about their own situations, and to work together to develop the potential principles of a new life.

As a Malian worker in Paris put it, the contemporary form of the alliance between intellectuals and workers is the one that unites:

“someone who has traveled in a hundred countries” with “someone who has read all the books.” 6

Proposition 5
Anyone who speaks with the men and women who have come to Europe from Asia or Africa quickly discovers not just the heroic nature of the trajectories of most of these lives but also that leaving always begins with the refusal of an unacceptable situation. Such a refusal may have to do with the fact that continuing to farm the land, the way one’s parents did, has become more difficult because the climate is changing, because drought dramatically exacerbates the lack of water, but especially because it does not in itself constitute learning a trade or the promise of education or training, only the repetition of the harsh existing world. And what young person would not aspire to make a different life for themselves, even at the cost of facing great hardships? There may also be the desire to break free of stifling or appalling traditions: marriages arranged against the will of the young man or woman; children wrongfully deprived of the inheritance of their father when he dies and with no

recourse in the courts of the country; family pressure to continue the
profession of fetisher or female genital exciser. There are also situations
in which war leaves such devastation in its wake that civil society is
impossible, weapons and bandits are the only law, and, as a result, the
physical and moral integrity of an individual may be threatened. We often
image that it is the lack of work in a country that leads a young person to
leave it, but we may discover that, even more than the lack of work, it is
the conditions of such work that may be experienced as unacceptable.

I have in mind the remarkable story told by a man who came from
Mauritania, where he used to work as a woodworker on construction
sites. He had witnessed a terrible accident during which the concrete
formwork collapsed, killing three people and injuring seven, whom
no one bothered to take to the hospital, and then whom no one at the
hospital would bother to treat until the families arrived to pay. There
are deaths on construction sites all the time, he added, and the bosses
couldn’t care less and do nothing to help the people, to take them to
the hospital if they are injured. This man decided that it was impossible
for him to go on working under such conditions, and he got a job in a
carpentry workshop where he earned (as undeclared work) 20 or 30 euros a day, he manages to save and send
something to his family.

I told this story in detail because I think it shows us that a second
internationalist task today should be to work to identify the problems that
everywhere ruin people’s chance for a decent life and peace. In other
words, to seriously examine the problems facing humanity, wherever
these problems arise, and assuming that the answers to them are
probably essentially the same everywhere.

Proposition 6
Taking this approach, the declarations below, drafted over the course
of a long period of work by assemblies in the École des Actes in
Aubervilliers, state the absolute need for “rights,” which are completely
non-existent today but which clearly should exist and have value
everywhere, whatever the country. These declarations are part of a much
longer document written over the years 2017 and 2018 and made public in
May 2018 under the title Premier Manifeste (First Manifesto):

“We all need a right of the land where we live, a little humanity in the
place on earth where we are.”
That is why we are writing this manifesto, to make suggestions that are
good for everyone, for the collective organization of everyone’s life:
“Everyone needs a right to be here, to be able lay their head down
somewhere.”
“Everyone needs a right of fraternity because fraternity binds humans
together and fraternity is about what was great and good about
France.”
“Everyone needs a right to work because no one likes to live with
assistance. And work is the basis of life: it provides men and women
with food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Giving someone
something to do is what can be called a job. It means: ‘you are one of
us, you count.’”
“Everyone needs a right to shelter in any way possible, by building
their own home, by occupying an uninhabited house, because being
homeless is not normal, is not acceptable.”
“Everyone needs a right to move freely, because the world doesn’t
belong to anyone, and goods arrive on big ships now, while humans
are deprived of the freedom of movement and cross the water on
dinghies, the desert like packages, and the snow-covered mountains at
the risk of their lives.”
“Everyone needs a right to have people know who they are: because to
know someone is to be able to know what is good about them; anyone
who arrives somewhere should be able to say that they are there, and
what their background is and their plans are.”

These are the kinds of statements that I feel should be worked on
everywhere, and very urgently, today. It will only be possible to do so,
however, if what we in the École des Actes have identified as “laws of
people’s lives” are taken as a basis.

These laws pre-exist the laws of states. They have the power of the
real, which is why police forces around the world are powerless against
them. It is also because the laws of states are now as remote as can be from
these laws of people’s lives that there is widespread persecution of all kinds, which take a heavy toll on people, especially those who

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7 Assembly of the École des Actes, October 12, 2018 (see note 8).
8 The École des Actes was created in Aubervilliers on the initiative of Marie-José Malis, the Director
of the Théâtre de la Commune. This school is open to everyone without distinction of age or nationality
or administrative status. We work on French with the people who arrive, and we hold assemblies in
the belief that we have a vital need today for new hypotheses and ideas about a situation shared by all
the countries in the world: the movement of people who have no choice or desire other than to move
in order to live. We all need collective life to be organized in a fairer and better way for the greatest
number of people. We do not start from the assumption that people are here to help others. We propose
to share the situation created by the arrival of people who now live among us. We start from trust
in an ability that people themselves have, and our hypotheses and proposals develop from people’s
thinking about their own lives. Many workshops have been created within the School – on theater,
architecture, work, the problem of love – as well as an assembly of women and one of children. The
School is constantly evolving.

9 École des Actes, in Premier Manifeste, May 2018; publication of the École des Actes
Proposition 7
When we talk about “internationalism” we inevitably think about the “Internationals” that represented that category and project. When Engels and Marx wrote The Manifesto of the Communist Party, they did not have any particular national attribution of that “party” in mind. They sought to define the specificity of what it would be more accurate to call the “party of the communists” inside the then-existing workers movement. In every situation, working in the overall interests of the proletariat was its basic task. Even before the foundation of the First International, also known as the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA), in London in 1864, the Communist League founded by Marx and Engels in 1847 had brought together intellectuals and workers from several European countries. Even though it was closely monitored and repressed, that International soon had sections in Switzerland, Belgium, France, Germany, and later in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, and the United States. What destroyed its existence was the bloody crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the endless disputes over the assessment of the disaster between supporters of Marx (who argued that the Commune had been unable to complete the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus) and supporters (in the majority) of anarchism according to Bakunin (who argued that only a revolutionary global strike would be able to destroy state power). This organization self-dissolved in 1876, while the anarchist, splinterist current, continued to maintain its existence for a while on the basis of the tactic of “propaganda by the deed” inspired by the practice of political assassinations carried out by the Russian nihilists.

What can be given credit for are its positions in favor of the reduction of working time and for the 8-hour workday, against child labor, and for the establishment of universal suffrage. A Second International was re-established in 1889 on the initiative of Engels and some European socialist and workers’ parties. About twenty countries were represented in it. It quickly split between a current that was faithful to the First International’s injunction according to which “workers’ emancipation is the task of workers themselves” and “reformist” currents according to which such emancipation could only be achieved gradually and through participation in the parliamentary system.

The outbreak of World War I sounded the death knell for this organization since all its sections (with the exception of the Russians and Serbians), after pacifist campaigns against war in general, went along with their governments when they entered the war, voting in favor of war credits and calling the conflict a “war of aggression” against their respective countries. At conferences in Zimmerwald in 1915 and Kienthal in 1916, Lenin denounced the “social-chauvinism” of this betrayal and called for pursuing a policy that rejected any subjective enlistment in the war, which he in turn called a war between imperialisms for dividing up the world. This contributed to the victory of the October 17 Revolution. Marx, who had repeatedly shown how the division among workers is re-established again and again on account of the competition that capitalism imposes on them, had anticipated that it would not be very easy at the country level, either, to unite the workers of the world: “Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.”

The experience of World War I and many other experiences since then, including the German workers’ overwhelming support for Nazism, have demonstrated the potential power of “the Nation.” Following the victory of the revolutionaries in Russia in October 1917, the Bolsheviks called for the creation in 1919 of a new and Third International that would include, among others, the Spartacists regrouped around Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, who had refused to comply with their party’s (the SPD) support for the war. Lenin had high hopes for a potential revolution in Germany, convinced as he was that it would be very difficult to maintain a communist government in Russia if the proletariat of other European countries did not take power in their turn. The terrible defeat of the Spartacists was a very serious setback in that respect. The Third International took the name of “Communist International,” or “Comintern,” an abbreviation of its name in Russian. Under Stalin’s leadership, this organization set up active, often clandestine, sections in almost every country in the world. Its “agents” brought with them everywhere a political line developed within the Communist Party of the USSR and often cut off from the reality of the countries involved. One of the most striking cases is that of China, where the Comintern representatives supported a policy of insurrection in the cities, leading to repeated defeats and massacres, whereas, contrary to that policy, Mao Zedong would construct and develop an approach of patient encircling of the cities by the countryside and the creation of a Red Army capable of carrying out this long war, with the success we are all aware of.

I am certainly not saying that the history of these Internationals was insignificant. But Brecht, in these words reported by Walter Benjamin, pointed out, not without humor, their major defect:

23 July. Yesterday a visit from Karin Michaelis, who has just returned from a trip to Russia and is full of enthusiasm. Brecht remembers

10 The Communist Manifesto, p. 67.
being shown around by Sergei Tretiakov, who gave him a tour of Moscow and was proud of everything his visitor saw, no matter what. “That’s not a bad thing,” Brecht said. “It shows that what he showed me belongs to him. No one is proud of what belongs to someone else.” After a while, he added: “But in the end, I did become a bit tired of it all. I couldn’t admire everything, nor did I want to. After all, they are his soldiers and his trucks. Unfortunately, they are not mine.”

I mention these facts briefly to show that the none of these organizations of proletarian internationalism had a compelling record. The first was powerless to explain the bloody defeat of the Communards. The second lapsed into chauvinism in the face of a war that would lead to the killing of tens of millions of soldiers and civilians. The third dogmatically propagated the repetition of the insurrectional figure as the absolute model for the action of the other communist parties.

So I don’t think the contemporary keys to an internationalism are to be found in the Internationals but rather in the political episodes in which real international ties existed. I am thinking of at least two sequences: the insurgent Parisian workers’ relationship to Poland in 1848 and, of course, the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, to which I will add a contemporary example.

May 15, 1848 is a little-known day, even though what happened on it is crucial for understanding the revolution’s bloody outcome in June. On that day, a massive workers and popular demonstration took place to demand that the National Assembly offer French assistance to the Polish Republicans, to help them achieve victory. A large number of workers barged into the Assembly’s proceedings to demand that this issue be discussed immediately and that the decision be made by a public vote by acclamation. This present segment of the people represented a whole new political capacity, which forced a separation between electoral representation and presentation of a demand. This capacity came not out of nowhere but from a long development of the concepts in the clubs that had been organized between 1830 and 1848. Its sudden emergence literally petrified national representation because it went beyond parties and political affiliations. Its demand gave a precise content to “Republic” in both the national context and the international context of assistance to Poland. From then on, there was a clear division with respect to the true political contents of the category of “Republic.” This is what was so remarkably perceived by Aloysius Huber, who instigated the action and who, when he saw the Assembly engaging in all sorts of dilatory speeches so as to refuse to decide, declared “The Assembly is dissolved.” This was also something for which the “Republicans” would not forgive the insurgent workers. The dominant historical interpretation of 1848 holds that after the insurrection, worker action was concerned with the social field, with labor demands. But the day of May 15 reveals a different possible interpretative framework: the expression of a republican political capacity in the sphere of internationalism and the division of the category “republic” by an international issue that was crucial for the freedom of peoples, which the republican government tried to eliminate by the June massacres. From then on, “Republic” became the name of an inequitable and repressive state, which, as is known, the workers would not rise up to defend during Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup d’état.

The episode of the International Brigades is far better known, but it has not been sufficiently emphasized that it concerned a movement that was based on ordinary workers, intellectuals, and artists, whose decision to go to Spain and fight alongside the Republican combatants was often a decision people made alone, or at least as individuals, and at a distance from the governments of their countries, most of which were opposed to any intervention in that war. Sometimes entering Spain had to be done clandestinely, and leaving Spain after the defeat was just as difficult for those who had survived. What seems essential to me is that, here, too, it is above all people, activists but also isolated individuals, who courageously bore the consequences of the inertia that surrounded and criminally weakened Spain when it was confronted with the powers of fascism.

A third situation, about which I don’t have sufficient knowledge, deserves to be examined, it seems to me, in this connection: the Kurdish district of Kobanî in Syrian territory draws its strength, despite its formidable isolation, from the fact that it has rejected the Kurdish national framework as the framework for its politics of liberation. What is proposed is proposed as well to all the national and religious actors in the region.

What conclusion can be drawn for today from these three episodes? I note, first of all, that internationalists are still often ordinary people – fishermen, mountain guides, or inhabitants of border areas – who take in people in danger when they arrive where these other people live. People who are themselves very poor, such as the people of Greece, Tunisia, and Jordan, are the most welcoming. At times, activists are also involved, such as the ones who supply boats to mitigate the murderous indifference of governments, or such as that female captain who defied the Italian state by unloading without authorization people picked up at sea. I also conclude that there is no Republic or true democracy in any states that, by the most devious administrative, juridical, and legal means (such as the Dublin agreement), shirk their duty to make room for the people who come to Europe wanting to build a better life there and contribute to the development of the country in which they can live.


In conclusion, I think that deploying a “transnational” political strategy more accurately identifies both what has already been done and the additional tasks, for it is less a question of establishing ties between people of different nations than of ensuring that, from country to country, in Europe and around the world, similar convictions and new principles circulate and gain influence, demonstrating that the keys to a just politics are not nationality and especially not national identity.

Judith Balso, September 2019
English translation by Susan Spitzer

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