

Book Review

Nicolas Delalande (2019) *La lutte et l'entraide: L'âge des solidarités ouvrières*.¹ Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
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With this work, Delalande presents a history of workers' internationalism which moves the focus away from the activity of those few key figures with which historiography has been mostly concerned. Internationalism is instead understood, and vividly illustrated, as a project animated by a variety of mostly male and white workers who took part in the effort to "enlarge the perimeter of their solidarity" (p. 15).² There are, for example, the machine workers who in 1871 send a representative from Newcastle to Brussels to ask local workers not to break their strike. There are the Belgian glove makers who in 1893 welcome their Danish colleagues in need of work to make up for the wages they are losing by striking at home. We read of the German unions which in the 1910s lend money to Southern and Eastern European unions, and after the Balkan Wars donate large sums for Bulgarian and Serbian reconstruction. We find French-speaking workers disappointed because the representative of the International can only speak English, and workers who are reluctant to pay extra membership fees to the organisation ("It doesn't amount to more than a glass of beer...", insists a member of the General Council) (p. 44). As light is cast on the details of transnational organising, we learn with this book to "recognise the magnitude of the [internationalist] task" (p. 35), a task which Delalande invites us to read as nothing less than an "alter-globalisation ante litteram" (p. 13).

Starting its account in the 1860s, with Western European unions reacting to the "first globalisation" of capital, the book divides the history of workers' internationalism into two parts. In the first, we read about the relationships formed between Western European trade unions in a context influenced but not monopolised by the activity of the First International. The author closes this first period with the thwarted organisation of solidarity for the refugees of the Paris Commune. The second part begins in the 1880s. In this phase, marked by the mass trade unionism of the second industrialisation, parties and trade unions extend their ties from Western Europe to Russia, where aid is sent for the 1905 revolution, as well as to migration destinations such as the United States and Latin America. The author identifies the Second International's failure to organise an anti-militarist alliance in the years leading up to World War 1 as the end of this second phase. A final chapter briefly assesses the legacy of these years for transnational workers' cooperation up to the 1970s. Considering the development of the internationalist project over this *moyenne durée* means following its stronger as well as its weaker phases of institutionalisation. Similarly, it allows the reader to appreciate the overall shift from "trans-local" relations (p. 252), with old trades and their occupational solidarity maintaining a strong relevance,

¹ *Struggle and Mutual Aid: The Age of Workers' Solidarity*

² All quotations from Delalande's book are the reviewer's translations.

to relations between national organisations, as national arenas become increasingly salient for workers' demands.

Throughout these developments, following the global turn in labour history, emphasis is placed less on the comparison between national units and more on the links and circulations between sites. In this way, the object of analysis of this research becomes twofold. On the one hand, we read about the evolution of the internationalist repertoire of action itself: most of all, the cross-border circulation of money between unions and their attempts to exert control over the movement of workers. On the other, we learn about the impact that these transnational relations have on the repertoire of action of trade unions at the local or national scale. This means, for example, noticing how local strikes can last longer because of the money lent by foreign unions, as is the case with the general strike in Sweden in 1909. Or it might mean recognising how struggles can become more effective through simultaneous actions, like those resulting from the coordination of tailors in London, Brussels and Paris in 1867. Moreover, it means noticing how local repertoires are impacted by the transnational circulation of ideas about what a "good strike" is supposed to look like, be it because of the comparisons emerging from the rise of unions' statistics or because of the influence of one union over those it lends money to. Although the book effectively develops each of these topics, for reasons of space I will only discuss one here, namely the circulation of money between unions as a key component of the internationalist repertoire of action.

Monetary exchanges, meticulously traced through documents such as letters, meeting reports and subscriptions published in unions' newspapers reveal solidarity as a network of ties connecting unions to one another. In this sense, the concerns of the research are reminiscent at times of issues addressed by sociologists studying social networks – and indeed, a section of the book carries the title of a seminal work of this discipline, Granovetter's *The Strength of Weak Ties*. Delalande identifies groups of trade unions among which exchanges are more frequent: at the beginning, for example, those belonging to the old artisanal occupations, such as the cigar makers, and later those based in sites linked by migration flows. Conversely, it identifies those left out of this network, above all African and Asian unions in the 1900s, when solidarity between white workers within the British Empire becomes stronger. Similarly, the book explores the asymmetries created by the fact that some unions lend significantly more than they borrow.

It is precisely in the illustration of unions striving to create peer relations despite the different resources available to each of them that the book is at its best. The effort to maintain this balance, we read, translates into the choice of credit over gift as a privileged instrument for solidarity between unions, who establish the equivalences of debt = parity and gift = asymmetry. However, the author describes how unions often struggle to follow this principle. On the one hand, unions fear that a debt not repaid might slip into charity, and thus bourgeois philanthropy, not to mention that it might discourage other unions from lending in the future. On the other, they find denying credit to poorer unions to be against principles of solidarity, detrimental to the overall cause and equally reproducing a bourgeois moral. Here, it would have been interesting if the author had dwelt further on these contradictions. In fact, many social scientists, from Marcel Mauss to David Graeber, have explored how gifts can trigger reciprocity and how, conversely, debts can structure hierarchies. Engaging with this literature could have helped the book gain more critical distance from the unions' point of view and highlight the culturally constructed character of the aforementioned equivalences.

Conflict also arises within the First International between the need for membership fees and the refusal to engage in the coercive, state-like measures necessary to secure them. And indeed

the author, who dedicated his *Les batailles de l'impôt*³ (Delalande, 2014) to the history of resistance to and legitimation of taxation in France, draws a convincing parallel between unions' and states' centralising instances of money collection. The negotiation of all these contradictions, which speaks movingly of the challenges and the aspirations of those involved in the internationalist project, is also a source of irony which is not lost on these people. We read their observations about the wealth that states and the police imagine the International is gathering, about the organisation cutting the salary of its secretary, or repaying its debts, "which is more than what certain middle-class movements do" (p. 37), and we can rejoice in the fact that this irony does not get lost in this historical account either.

As is evident from the examination of credit, the research makes an original contribution to our understanding of the history of the workers' movement by analysing at the same time its institutions, practices and ideas, as well as by applying a framework sensitive to transnational circulations. At the same time, this work is also a precious read for social scientists engaged in the analysis of current transnational collective action. Of particular interest is the historicising of workers' struggles to correct "labour's delay in respect to capital in the globalisation race" (p. 237), which the literature often presents as a recent challenge. To be sure, this long-term perspective could also lead one to consider current instances of transnational solidarity to be, after all, negligible efforts. Both the introduction and the conclusion indeed identify the 1970s as the end of a strong internationalist project, and deplore its absence from the current political landscape, described as saturated by liberal cosmopolitanism and nationalist protectionism. On the other hand, it is also true that this research reports carefully on all phases of the first half century of workers' internationalism, even the ones in which unions remain only loosely tied to one another through old credits and personal contacts. In so doing, this book also makes the case for studying cross-border workers' relations regardless of their immediate success.

REFERENCE

Delalande, N. (2014) *Les Batailles de l'impôt: Consentement et résistances de 1789 à nos jours*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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³ *The Tax Battles*