

On Left Internationalism

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Abstract: This essay offers reflections on how contemporary left internationalism could think through—and beyond—both “humanity” and “nation” when positioning its struggles. With this aim, it first turns to philosophy and then to history to distinguish unsettled questions that animate dilemmas of left internationalism today. The essay is not, in a straightforward way, an attempt to draw the boundaries, offer the definitions, and determine the strategies of left internationalism. Ultimately, it is an invitation to a partisan “we” who claims sides within and beyond humanity and nation. This “we” is an open question and permanent problem of left internationalism.

Keywords internationalism, cosmopolitanism, humanity, nation-state form

In this essay, I would like to reflect on how contemporary left internationalism could think through—and beyond—both “humanity” and “nation” when positioning its struggles. With this aim, I first turn to philosophy and then to history to identify some of the unsettled questions that animate dilemmas of left internationalism today. The preliminary thoughts I present here are not, in a straightforward way, an attempt to draw the boundaries, offer the definitions, or determine the strategies of left internationalism. Instead, I take my task to be thinking carefully about philosophical and political difficulties that inflict such attempts. As postcolonial studies scholar Anna Bernard (forthcoming) demonstrates, internationalism has a complex history driven by struggles of interpretation over its diverse traditions and specific requirements in particular contexts (see also Antentas 2022; P. Anderson 2002). In fact, the multiplicity of its traditions and tendencies, its clashing forms of subjectification and appeal may render misguided any treatment of internationalism as a singular orientation.¹

Inseparable from this plurality, what I conceptualize as left internationalism involves intersecting and divergent histories, ideals, assumptions, priorities, and practices that articulate

different possibilities—even utopias—of internationalism. Compounded by the parallel, and at times overlapping, traditions of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism, moreover, internationalism as a distinct field of thought and action proves particularly difficult to observe and critique. The idea of *left* internationalism poses additional problems, especially with respect to the limits, politics, and agents of “the global left” today.² I thereby begin with a proposition regarding the “we” of left internationalism, with an invitation to a “we” that is open yet selective; to a “we” that remains to be imagined; to a “we” that is *not all*. To a partial we, to a partisan we, to a “we” who claims sides within and beyond humanity and nation. This “we” is an open question and permanent problem of what I address as left internationalism.

The Humanity of Left Internationalism

Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (2019) observes how “hostility to humanism and indeed to humanity” resonates loudly behind campus walls where the imperatives of identity politics and ethnic absolutism, he laments, “reign unchallenged.” In constituting a “we” through collective thought and action, however, left internationalists often rely on the language of humanity, whether imagined as a collection of nations or as a formation that transcends the nation. Before proceeding, later in this essay, to reflect on the historical standing of the nation and the nation-state form in relation to possibilities of left internationalism, I would first like to explore how left internationalists can reassess our detachment from and attachment to the idea of “humanity” in this vexing context.

With an analogous problem in mind, Étienne Balibar carefully distinguishes between internationalism and cosmopolitanism and locates their differences in the conflicting legacies of Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant within the tradition of German idealism.³ Drawing on his book *Cosmopolitique* (published in French), Balibar (2022: 1) conceptualizes *cosmopolitics* as the

name of a problem that emerges from the “confrontation” between the legacies of Marx’s internationalism and Kant’s cosmopolitanism. Along this confrontation, he finds, the political subject of cosmopolitics emerges as a “hybrid agent” who typically crosses borders—borders understood broadly as national, economic, social, geopolitical, racial, territorial, and juridical “divisions.”

For Balibar, the question of cosmopolitical agency reopens the classical problem of “the collective subject of history” (of which Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and Marx were all philosophers), *the* collective subject of history who is charged with the political mission of transforming the world. According to Balibar, cosmopolitics today calls for a politics of the human species, or more precisely, for a *biopolitics* of the human race (5). Quintessentially, the “we” of Balibar’s cosmopolitical agents conjure humanity as a singular “race” whose members share “the world” in common.⁴ In thought and action, Balibar asserts, cosmopolitical agency consists of “multiple political agencies whose differences and conflicts are involved in the *formation and the self-consciousness or the ‘spirit’ of the human species*” (5).

In Marxist parlance then, the cosmopolitical task involves transforming “the human race” in itself into a self-conscious collective subject for itself. Here, Balibar warns against presuming a transcendental or an a priori “unity” that defines humanity as a singular “race” in the first place (3). Nonetheless, he writes *as if* some sort of “unity” readily renders humanity as a species “in itself” (3). This move allows him to conceptualize racism, for instance, as one among several forms of *negating* “the world as the common home of the ‘Human race’ (in the singular)” (3). Further, Balibar proposes that an “originary” cosmopolitan order where the world was shared in common by humanity may never have existed (4). Yet typically, when in action, his

cosmopolitical agents combine elements of internationalism and cosmopolitanism as they negate the negation of the idea of a world shared in common by the human race.

If left internationalism may need to think and act *as if* an originary cosmopolitan order (once) existed, however, must it also presume that humanity is the proper “collective subject of history” today? If that were the case, philosophically and politically, while nurturing humanity’s subjectification as a “species-being,” left internationalism would primarily seek to cultivate the self-consciousness of “the human race” to activate its capacity to perform as the collective subject of history. These cosmopolitical propositions, however, raise major objections.⁵ First of all, I ask, can such species-consciousness avoid speciesism (if at all) and prevent the perpetuation of human supremacy over nonhuman forms of life that also inhabit the earth?⁶ This difficult question partly underwrites my proposition that left internationalism may need to think beyond humanity as a distinguished “species” and historical agent—if, that is, the borders of solidarity, care, and agency it draws can extend beyond humanity to include nonhuman forms of “life.”⁷

Second, proposing humanity as the collective subject of history charged with the political task or the ecological responsibility of transforming the world risks cultivating the idea of a *uniform* “humanity” devoid of the economic inequalities and political hierarchies, anthropological and ideological differences, and borderlines that characterize it.⁸ As one example, consider Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), which treats humanity as a singular geological and historical actor. Balibar (2022: 13) rightly suggests in his criticism of this book that by not attending carefully to “the qualitative borderlines that, in each and every place, *separate humankind from itself*,” Chakrabarty neglects “great anthropological differences that create, as it were, *several species within the species*, which become hierarchized, included and excluded, whose dignity and worth is recognized or

denied.” Balibar offers the global vaccine apartheid publicized by the World Health Organization as an illustration, perceptively describing the vast discrepancies in the global availability of the COVID vaccine as “a biopolitical *recreation of the racial divide of mankind*, based on differential vulnerability and differential care” (13–14). During the pandemic, in another parlance, members of “the human race” were treated differentially across what W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) conceptualized as “the global color line.”

In such a biopolitical scene, I suggest, while cosmopolitanism tends to appeal to the “objective unity” (say, of a biological or ontological kind) of a singular humanity or to humanity’s “empirical unification” (say, through processes of globalization), by contrast, left internationalism can stress humanity’s plurality, its uneven, differential, unequal constitution. While exercising cosmopolitical agency, then, rather than ignore or “neutralize” borderlines that order humanity hierarchically, left internationalism can mobilize *on* the borderlines of every sort, “following them and challenging them” (Balibar 2022: 11)—including economic, social, moral, and political borderlines that *cut across* humanity and nation—trespassing, as the case may be, their juridical articulation. It is in this thick web of contested borderlines that a partial “we” who claims sides within humanity and nation can assume form.

But that is not all. As a third challenge to a certain cosmopolitics of the human race (as embraced, for instance, by the liberal tradition), left internationalism can once again ask how, if at all, the very idea of humanity can be decolonized today.⁹ In the twenty-first century, “humanity” is variously imagined as a biological species, as a global moral community, as an essence shared by all human beings. Humanity can be preached as an ideal, designate a political and ecological actor, or imply an attitude of care and kindness. Humanity appears as the victim and the prosecutor of grave crimes, as a desire for equality, freedom, and justice, as “The

Collective Subject of History” with universal purchase. These senses of humanity—as species, community, essence, ideal, attitude, and actor—intersect with yet others, allowing humanity to be loved, hated, shocked, cultivated, injured, saved, destroyed, liberated, and defended (Çubukçu 2017, 2018; Graf 2021; Esmeir 2012; Li 2019).

“Humanity is an invention of modernity,” writes Costas Douzinas (2007: 51). In the sense of the species, Talal Asad (2015: 398) reminds us, humanity was born and nurtured during early modern conquest and settler colonialism. As Sylvia Wynter (2015) observes, European empires arrogated to themselves the authority to decide who belongs to humanity and who, for one reason or another, does not—not yet, no longer, ever. According to Walter Mignolo (2018: 153), the critical period for “the invention of humanity” as a concept central to European modernity commenced after 1492 when European empires first confronted indigenous people in what they named the Americas and “discovered” ways of life radically different from their own during their genocidal march. In her seminal work *On Being Human as Praxis*, Sylvia Wynter (2015) argues further that the colonial “overrepresentation” of Christian-rational Man (whom she calls Man1) as humanity-at-large during the European Renaissance was achieved through sexist and racist logics that persist to this day. Wynter demonstrates, too, that a secularized Man2 displaced Man1 around the nineteenth century as the colonial overrepresentation of humanity. Man2, the secular version of the human, came to be understood in terms of biology and inheritance instead of Christianity, turning into an “economic man” racialized as white, who was “evolved so as to be able to meet his needs and satisfy his interests through the capitalist market” (Shilliam 2021: 45). According to Wynter, Man2 continues to characterize the proper human—male, white, and capitalist—of our times. Notably, while Man1 and Man2 reveal different visions of humanity, they both articulate colonial, sexist, and racist logics.

I submit that the historical persistence and power of such hierarchical visions of humanity raise the troubling possibility that the very idea of the human is partial and discriminatory (Çubukçu 2017; see also Shilliam 2021: 39). Nevertheless, like Frantz Fanon and many radical thinkers before and since, both Wynter and Balibar wish to revolutionize our ideas and ideals of humanity. Wynter in particular makes a case for the *necessity* of decolonizing humanity. There have been different versions of this attempt in the past, which would require several books to survey (Steyn and Mpofu 2021; see also Mignolo 2018). Instead, I formulate two questions that the task of decolonizing humanity raises for left internationalism today.

First, if the emergence of humanity as a “modern” moral and political concept, like its sense as a species, was coeval with the violent expansion of European empires, how should we evaluate this historical coincidence?¹⁰ After all, if James Baldwin (1985) is correct, “history does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.” Nonetheless, the present force of history in our lives cannot foreclose the possibility that we can change course in a “now-time” (*jetztzeit*) that, in the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, signifies “a conception of time in which every moment [is] alive with radical possibilities that could fracture the present and liberate it from an otherwise recursive and hollowed-out continuum of time” (Raza 2020: 15). As recursively tragic as modern history can appear, our “fate” may *not* be tragic—its vagaries cannot be divined with certainty, as anthropologist David Scott (2004: 207–8) seems to imply: “And we have never ceased—and perhaps it is our fate to never cease—rehearsing the paradoxical journeys of that tragic encounter,” Scott writes, “with the enlightenments of colonial

modernity.” As an integral part of that enlightened modernity, humanity’s racist, sexist, and colonial history can nevertheless *fail* to determine fully its potential as an animating idea in the hands of anticipated and unanticipated agents acting within and against traditions of “theory” and “practice,” “epistemology” and “ontology” given by European modernity.¹¹ We may not be fated, in other words, to rehearse the *same* paradoxes.

The second question I would like to pose also begins from the past. If the idea of humanity has been elaborated to propose, to preserve, *and* to combat hierarchies among different groupings (sexes, classes, races, cultures, nations, civilizations, species), how can left internationalism rethink the authority of humanity over our political imagination today? For one, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (2019) issues a stirring call for “salvaging the human” as he conjures a new humanism animated by “minor universalisms” and a “hydrophobic ethics” that manifest a different humanist ethos, “one that is *not* congruent with the racial nomos and has been conditioned by emergency conditions” (emphasis added; see also Gilroy 2014). According to Gilroy (2019),

Trumpeting the abandonment of humanism and spurning the strategic challenges of minor universalism are redundant gestures. Rehearsing them takes us further away from the mentality we need to cultivate in order to respond to the emergencies that await us. . . . Paranoid, parochial hostility to humanism and indeed to humanity, resonates most loudly behind fortified campus walls where the hip imperatives of identity politics, docile nihilism, resignation and complacent ethnic absolutism reign unchallenged while seductions of the alt-right—to which they are kin—present a growing danger.

With these disquieting observations in mind, left internationalism must reassess its detachment from and attachment to “humanity” and the universalisms that attend it.¹³

In this reassessment, while both the desirability and the necessity of the universal and universalism remain open questions, the different types of universalism that agents of left internationalism propose and enact—“insurgent,” “alternative,” “decolonial,” “conjugated,” “rooted,” “translated,” “concrete,” “ecological”—have proliferated.¹⁴ This proliferation demonstrates how, in constituting a “we” through collective thought and action, left internationalism can devise new languages and create new grounds for acting together across the earth. The questions I have outlined above underwrite my proposition, in any event, that twenty-first-century left internationalism must settle accounts with the colonial, sexist, racist, and speciesist trajectories of humanity when positioning its struggles. If it is possible in the first place to break free from humanity’s “modern” history, left internationalism needs to understand what it takes to realize that task today.¹⁵

The Nation of Left Internationalism

In his book *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (2022), anthropologist Gary Wilder distinguishes certain critics of “actually existing liberal internationalism”—namely, Talal Asad, Samuel Moyn, Partha Chatterjee, and me—and applauds them for developing “valuable critiques of existing forms of internationalism and corresponding cosmopolitan ideologies” (39). Wilder nonetheless suggests these scholars develop “one-sided” critiques that simply challenge internationalism from the standpoint of state sovereignty or state sovereignty from the standpoint of internationalism (39). In Wilder’s interpretation, the only radical alternative for these scholars is “a realist acceptance of state sovereignty as a quasi-natural fact and territory-ethnicity-force as the inevitable truth of world politics” (39). Despite the inaccuracy of this projection (or because of it), Wilder succeeds in provocatively pursuing

contrasting forms of “critical internationalism” that envision postnational political forms to address “the dual imperatives of popular sovereignty (or autonomy) and international solidarity (or interdependence)” (39).

Wilder observes with Carl Schmitt that when the United Nations created a novel international legal order in the aftermath of World War II and institutionalized a new “nomos of the earth”¹⁶ where territory, nationality, and state were expected to align, most colonized people around the world were pursuing decolonization through struggles for national independence and state sovereignty and doing so in accordance with this particular nomos (42). Even earlier, in the years following World War I, Partha Chatterjee (2016: 320) observes, from Woodrow Wilson to Vladimir Lenin, “a wide spectrum of opinion now came to accept the nation-state as the universally normal and legitimate form of the modern state.”¹⁷ By the end of World War II, during formal decolonization, in any case, *One Nation, One State, One Sovereignty* (most often with “minorities”) became the desired norm and the preferred form of independence, autonomy, and self-determination worldwide.¹⁸ At this juncture, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948 as the “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” whereby everyone had “the right to a nationality,” and humanity came to be understood as “a family of nations” expected to act with a “spirit of brotherhood” toward one another (United Nations General Assembly 1948).

Searching for *postnational* visions of internationalism or cosmopolitics, however, Wilder revisits two anti-colonial thinkers from imperial France, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire who, in the 1950s, challenged this emergent national nomos.¹⁹ Wilder (2022: 43) explores why, at this time, “many anticolonial thinkers, especially across the Black Atlantic, wondered whether the sovereign national state was the best form in which to realize substantive

self-determination.” These anti-colonial thinkers were able to foresee accurately how “there is no necessary relation between state sovereignty and self-determination” (45) because they predicted that “formal political liberty would not adequately protect them from the depredations of uneven development and Great Power geopolitics” (43).²⁰ In fact, Wilder thinks alongside—as does Adom Getachew (2019) in her groundbreaking book *Worldmaking after Empire*—anti-colonial thinkers who insisted that “much of the West’s wealth and power had been founded upon the exploitation of enslaved and colonial labor, the expropriation of overseas natural resources, and the relations of intercontinental inequality that imperial capitalism had instituted worldwide” (Wilder 2022: 43). In their search for “substantive decolonization” then, the anti-colonial thinkers Wilder and Getachew study stressed the problem of *substantive inequality* among nation-states enjoying *formal equality*.²¹

Wilder admits that Senghor’s and Césaire’s shared vision of “self-determination without state sovereignty” may have been problematic in seeking to overcome the unitary national state under the umbrella of an imperial France to be reconstituted as a “translocal federation” among the colonizer and the colonized (45). Nonetheless, he maintains that these anti-colonial thinkers correctly attempted to “preempt the very *national internationalist* world that was in fact established in the postwar period” (44–45; emphasis added). In contrast to this “very national internationalist world,” Wilder’s own critical internationalism is decidedly postnational. It conjures “translocal anticapitalist and anti-imperialist thinking and movements” that transcend or displace the nation as the primary moral, economic, and political community in an effort to reconcile the triple imperatives of “self-government, translocal interdependence, and human solidarity” (44–45). According to Wilder, Senghor and Césaire struggled for this reconciliation in utopian and proleptic ways with the aim of “democratizing unavoidable interdependence

between former colonies and former metropolises” on a planetary scale (45). Their efforts point to an unrealized goal, in Wilder’s eyes, that “continues to haunt our world-historical moment” (45).

Here, serious disagreements arise between Wilder and Chatterjee (2016: 326) over the possibility of an internationalism that is simultaneously anti-imperialist and postnational. Chatterjee recognizes in figures such as Senghor and Césaire inventors of “fantastic imaginings [that] testify to the continued attraction of empire for privileged minorities among the colonized.” To think of their proposals, like Wilder does, as “potential alternative forms of the modern state,” Chatterjee maintains, “seems to deny not merely the overwhelming structural logic of the new global order as it was unfolding in [the 1950s and 1960s] . . . but also the most powerful ideas of collective justice sweeping through the colonial world” that demanded *national* sovereignty to end colonial rule (326).

Chatterjee argues that in the case of modern Indian history, the problem of nationalism, internationalism, and cosmopolitanism as “an interconnected set of ideas, concepts, processes or movements” can only be posed from the beginning of the twentieth century (320). He finds that in colonial India, this triad—nationalism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism—became “thinkable” for the first time in the 1880s when political forms of modern nationalism appeared initially with the political associations of a new liberal Indian elite and took the collective form of the Indian National Congress (320). Whereas the moderate, liberal nationalists of the Indian National Congress demanded greater inclusion of Indian elites in the colonial government, the “decisive break” came at the turn of the twentieth century with the emergence of a new group of nationalist agitators, called the Extremists or Democratic Nationalists, who “demanded independence from British rule, that is, full national sovereignty” (321). It is also at this historical conjuncture, at the turn of the twentieth century, that Indian nationalism was coupled

for the first time with a form of internationalism predicated on “the collective right of a nation to freedom and equality with other nations, grounded in popular sovereignty,” which was, Chatterjee stresses, “the *opposite* of the internationalism of empire” (322; emphasis added).

As the “radical nationalists of India began to look outward for examples of anticolonial movements in other parts of the world,” their internationalist imagination (and access to arms to fight the British) expanded through encounters with radical political groups in European, American, Canadian, British, and Mexican cities (2016: 322).²⁴ These encounters were closely monitored by intelligence services internationally, as when revolutionaries like M. N. Roy, the legendary Indian communist, traveled from the United States to Mexico City and then to Berlin in 1920 to meet with various radical groups (322). Nonetheless, what Chatterjee finds significant about these international connections is *the centrality of the nationalist cause*. He concludes that “radical nationalists of the time became aware of and made productive use of allied political movements in other countries of the world primarily to further their anticolonial nationalist struggle” (323). Thus, when Subhas Bose, the renowned figure of Indian nationalism, relocated from Berlin to Singapore in 1941 to raise an Indian National Army with Japanese military assistance, he was being, in Chatterjee’s eyes, “*an internationalist with national liberation as his ultimate goal*” (323). In contrast, Chatterjee cannot but perceive “the internationalism of empire” in Senghor and Césaire’s proposal to reconstitute the French imperial state to make it a translocal federation among the colonizer and the colonized.

According to Chatterjee, “the internationalism of empire” characterizes as well contemporary proposals for a cosmopolitan world order developed by David Held, Ulrich Beck, Jürgen Habermas, and (even) Antonio Negri (322). These cosmopolitan proposals, he asserts, “all go against—indeed negate—what I think is the principal achievement of anti-imperialism in

the twentieth century, namely, the establishment of a universal civic constitution based on the formal equality of sovereign nation-states” (322). Chatterjee acknowledges how “formal equality” among nation-states is only exercised in the United Nations General Assembly, where every nation-state has one vote, and that this formal equality is undermined by the veto power of the UN Security Council. He nevertheless defends *formal equality among sovereign nation-states* as the joint achievement of anti-imperialism, nationalism, and internationalism as they emerged together in modern Indian history. By contrast, Wilder (2022: 44) appreciates Senghor and Césaire as anti-colonial thinkers who emphasized problems of “substantive equality” and “substantive emancipation” that would require internationalists, according to these thinkers, “to revolutionize metropolitan social relations and reconfigure the *very* nomos of the world” in a post—or even—*anti*-national direction.

If the contemporary “anticolonial impulse” described by Sharad Chari and Samera Esmeir (2021) is felt indeed by left internationalists today, the debate between Wilder and Chatterjee can prove useful in better understanding its inherited dilemmas. Historically, these dilemmas were underwritten by disputes over the centrality, the necessity, and the desirability of the nation and the nation-state form in various traditions of left internationalism.²⁵ Further, “because decolonization quickly became a project of state capture and institutional alternatives to the state were defeated and dismissed,” as Getachew and Karuna Mantena (2021: 382) find, “scholars have not thoroughly considered the role of antistatism and wider debates about the state within anticolonial thought and politics” (see also Fejzula 2020). It is instructive to return to these debates today, not least because contemporary anti-statist proposals for decolonization and left internationalism—from the Zapatistas to the Kurdish liberation struggle—are situated,

interpreted, revised, and practiced in the context of older disputes over the proper place of the state in anti-colonial thought and action.²⁶

As we assess these disputes, Chatterjee's ([1993] 2001: 13) own critique of state-centered ideas of nationhood and his plea for moving beyond "the old forms of the modern state" can prove valuable in thinking through the reasons and the consequences of "the limited and partial achievement of decolonization" (Getachew and Mantena 2021: 382) and the neoliberal authoritarianism of many, if not most, postcolonial nation-states today.²⁷ While a critical engagement with this postcolonial predicament may indeed require us "to think of new forms of the state," as Chatterjee ([1993] 2001: 13) urges, left internationalists have in the past and can also in the future imagine forms of self-government that do *not* presume "the state."²⁸

"The project then is to claim, for us, the once-colonized," Chatterjee memorably writes in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, "our freedom of imagination" (13). If, however, the "us" and the "we" of left internationalism must include fragments of the once-colonized and the once-colonizer nations, we must also conjure ecological, social, cultural, political, and material arrangements that exceed the nation and the nation-state as "the normal institutional form of the political" (Chatterjee 2016: 332). Contemporary internationalist visions enacted by Latin American and Kurdish feminist movements—as theorized by Verónica Gago (2021) and Dilar Dirik (2022), for instance—can offer insight and inspiration in undertaking that task and place us in a better position to address problems of "substantive equality" and "substantive freedom" that cut unevenly across humanity and nation. The current absence of a blueprint that outlines the institutional shape left internationalism can take—an absence that Chatterjee emphasizes—does not foreclose the possibility of its emergence in the future. But more important, pointing to the *lack* of such a blueprint—whether desirable or not—fails to make a convincing case against left

internationalist aspirations that must appear only too “utopian” to “realist” eyes. As anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow (2021: 22) insist, in any case, “lack of imagination is not in itself an argument,” especially when, I would add, that lack is ours.

Questions, for Now

Today, left internationalism is confronted anew with the problems of colonialism and imperialism, autonomy and self-determination, freedom and equality across the world. A principal difficulty at this juncture is the fact that left internationalists cannot agree on what imperialism means, how imperialism works, and who can and cannot be an imperial actor.²⁹ Simultaneously, there is little agreement on the criteria for deciding who is entitled to autonomy or self-determination, in what form, and under which conditions. *What* is autonomy, what can it entail in a capitalist world? Similar questions pertain to equality: equality among whom (individuals, sexes, classes, races, nations, states, peoples, cultures, civilizations, species?), equality through which social and political arrangements? Divergent answers offered to such questions underpin major dilemmas left internationalism faces today in spaces marked as “peace” (such as the United States and the European Union) and “war”—such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Ukraine, and Palestine.

Given the scale, speed, and direction of the historical transformations we are witnessing, moreover, we need new questions to address new problems. Ours is a period when nations once categorized as oppressed are oppressing other nations (say, India in Kashmir and Turkey in Kurdistan) and themselves turning into imperial powers (say, Russia and China). At this “multipolar” juncture, neither differences between center and periphery, North and South, East and West, nor the articulation of cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and nationalism with

imperialism is self-evident.³⁰ Many left internationalists today also appear undecided about distinguishing—as Lenin did at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920 (Chatterjee 2016: 337)—between the nationalism of the oppressed and the nationalism of the oppressor, precisely when it proves increasingly inadequate to characterize nationalism in this splitting way. Why is it so difficult for some left internationalists to think of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China as imperial powers? The persistent hold of Lenin’s categorical distinctions formulated at a historical conjuncture radically different than our own partly accounts for this difficulty, if not stubborn refusal, to evaluate anew contemporary conditions.

While the state of Israel accelerates its genocidal campaign in Palestine, I conclude by observing how Israel’s chief financial, military, and political sponsor, the United States, remains the most destructive state on earth and the only one to have ever used nuclear weapons (which it houses in military bases across Germany, Turkey, Japan, and elsewhere). Claiming to defend the American nation and its allies by “deterring” their enemies (often conceptualized as “enemies of humanity”), the United States continues to exercise *military internationalism* through NATO and the United Nations. In 2022, the United States reasserted its right to *strike first* with nuclear weapons to prevent “existential threats” through a nuclear policy tellingly titled “calculated ambiguity” (Bender, McLeary, and Banco 2022). In response to such state-sanctioned internationalisms and their militarist, humanitarian, and legal calculations, we need a left internationalism that does not reflexively wave the flag of *any* existing nation-state as the primary form of demonstrating solidarity. If the transcontinental wave of protests for a free Palestine demonstrate the anti-colonial impulse of left internationalism today, its expansive desire for freedom can, in deed and dream, trespass walled sovereignties of the nation-state. We need to think beyond the nation-state in situating “our” side in war and peace alike. The partial

and partisan “we” of left internationalism, in any case, *can* claim sides within humanity and nation to better understand, sustain, and create forms of ecological, social, cultural, and political struggle that must exceed them both.

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Notes

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¹ What we face at the outset is a variety of internationalisms, including feminist internationalism (Gago 2021), socialist internationalism, fascist internationalism (Herren 2017), indigenous internationalism (Hagtvedt Vik 2017), liberal internationalism, anti-colonial internationalism (Chatterjee 2016), theological internationalism (Li 2019), Black internationalism (Makalani 2011), anarchist internationalism (B. Anderson 2006), Third Worldism (Mahler 2018), queer internationalisms, and ecological internationalism (Gallo Lassere 2023).

² I follow here Butler 2020, who conjures a “global left” in their reflections on nonviolence. Other contemporary thinkers simply speak of “the Left.” See, for one example, A. Raza 2020: 14.

³ I thank Professor Balibar for sharing with me the text of his lecture that I will be citing from. The lecture is publicly available via Columbia Maison Francaise: YouTube video, 1:08:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDNSw6NuvFY>.

⁴ On the postcolonial geography of “the world” and the concept of “worlding,” see Jazeel 2019: chap. 3.

⁵ To begin with, as Balibar himself recognizes, such propositions are underwritten by a particular teleological philosophy of history that may now be obsolete.

⁶ See Viveiros de Castro 2014 for a thoughtful engagement with this question.

⁷ On the multifarious meanings, history, and significance of the idea of “life,” see Anidjar 2011. For a philosophical engagement with the concept of “species,” see Balibar 2021.

⁸ Incidentally, the presumption that humanity corresponds to a biologically defined “human species” neutralizes such borderlines particularly well. It is also worth emphasizing that “scientific” definitions of the human race themselves have sexist and racist histories, but that is not my main point here. Hannah Arendt (1958) is among the most convincing philosophers of the twentieth century to place plurality (instead of uniformity) at the center of her reflections on “the human condition.”

⁹ Arguably, during formal decolonization, this was among the most important questions posed by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Frantz Fanon as anti-colonial thinkers.

¹⁰ For a groundbreaking formulation of and response to this question, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot 1995.

¹¹ For an elaboration on this theme, see the conceptually rich Call for Papers for the “Radical Humanism” conference: <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2023/04/17/deadline-extended-radical-humanism>. See also Gallo Lassere, forthcoming, for a plea for a new ontology and epistemology in the age of the anthropocene.

¹³ For recent anthropological engagements with universalism, see Li 2021 and S. Raza 2023.

¹⁴ “Insurgent” (Tomba 2019); “conjugated” (S. Raza 2023); “decolonized” (Khader 2018); “minor” (Gilroy 2019); “alternative” (Getachew 2016); “translated” (Wilder 2022; Mezzadra 2023; Antentas 2022); “concrete” (Getachew and Mantena 2021); “ecologist” (Gallo Lassere 2023).

¹⁵ David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) reject the division of human history into modern and premodern periods when reconstructing it since the Ice Age. They emphasize how human beings have always exercised basic forms of freedom until humanity became “stuck” (503). For an analysis of the concepts of humanity and freedom in their work, see Çubukçu, forthcoming.

¹⁶ See Schmitt 2006.

¹⁷ Chatterjee (2016: 324) finds that “the recognition by the League of Nations of national sovereignty as the goal of what was in effect colonial trusteeship was a major step in the global normalization of the nation-state.”

¹⁸ For a critical appraisal of the historical itinerary of self-determination, see Massad 2018 and Weitz 2008; and see Mitchell 2013: 65–68 and Mamdani 2020 on the production of “minorities” by the modern state.

¹⁹ For a detailed treatment of these thinkers, see Wilder 2015.

²⁰ See also the world-making efforts of other anti-colonial thinkers addressed in Getachew 2019.

²¹ Wilder (2022: 295n) distills with precision vexing questions left internationalism must “still” address today: “How could the West be compelled to pay its historical debt rather than re-subordinate postcolonial national states through financial debt for development projects? What mechanisms for international economic solidarity, political accountability, and justice could help repair the harms of imperialism, prevent its reemergence in a different form, and ground substantive decolonization?”

²⁴ For the importance of Mexico to revolutionary internationalism in this period, see Heatherton 2022.

²⁵ Following philosopher Frederic Lordon, Antentas (2022) identifies “Weak” and “Strong” forms of internationalism. Whereas the former “emphasizes the ‘national’ dimension of political and social struggle,” and underlines “the role of the national in internationalism,” the “strong” conception of internationalism “attempts to articulate a dialectical relationship between different spatial scales (local-national-international)” (426).

²⁶ For a provocative engagement with these debates centering Palestine, see Massad 2018. See also Dirik’s (2022) analysis of the Kurdish women’s movement for an elaboration of a “militant, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist feminist internationalism” that has emerged from its evolving history, theory, and practice. For a critique of Nyerere’s anti-colonial experiment with “seeing” and organizing social and political life through the postcolonial state, see J. Scott 1998 (2020) and my critique of it (Çubukçu 2021).

²⁷ This observation does not require one to succumb to the categorical distinction between “liberal-democratic” and “authoritarian” regimes. For a powerful deconstruction of this distinction, see Asad (forthcoming).

²⁸ After all, if Graeber and Wengrow are correct, at least since the Ice Age, humans have been creative beings capable of experimenting with different social and political arrangements to

govern themselves in forms that do not resemble a state. See Graeber and Wengrow 2021, especially chap. 10.

²⁹ In the early twenty-first century, heated debates occasioned by Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009) series evidenced this situation.

³⁰ See Gallo Lassere, forthcoming; Mezzadra 2023.