

## REVIEWS

DANIEL LAQUA

***The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880-1930 : Peace, Progress and Prestige***

Manchester/New York, Manchester University Press, 2013, 256 p.

Laqua's book, based on his PhD in History at University College London (2009), contributes to the growing research field of transnational studies. As lecturer in Modern European History at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne, Laqua has pursued such research interests for several years, as testified by two other publications he has (co-)edited : D. Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured : Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London, I. B. Tauris, 2011) and D. Laqua, Christophe Verbruggen and Gita Deneckere (eds), *Beyond Belgium : Encounters, Exchanges and Entanglements, 1900-1925* (theme issue of the *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis*, 2012).

Referring to Belgium's self-understanding as the "crossroads of Europe", this monograph describes individual and collective efforts to strengthen the country's international role through congresses, associations, campaigns and gatherings. The main fields studied here refer to social, political and scientific (but not economic) life. Among the humanitarian or pacifist intellectuals, academics, politicians and activists discussed, prominent figures are Henri Lafontaine, Paul Otlet and Emile Vandervelde. Meanwhile, not only freethinkers and socialists but also Catholic politicians like Auguste Beernaert, Edouard Descamps and Cyrille Van Overbergh come to the fore. One of the key contentions of the study is that as part of a wider commitment to progress and

reform, internationalism led to collaboration between Catholics, Liberals and Socialists in Belgium, including in matters of arbitration and international law. Internationalism transcended cultural and social divisions which existed on such issues as school laws, universal suffrage, etc. Concerning the institutions which promoted internationalism, the book focuses on the following ones : *International Labor Organization*, *International Institute of Bibliography* (IIB), *International Peace Bureau* (IPB), *Inter-Parliamentary Union* (IPU), *Union of International Associations* (UIA), *International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation*, to name most of them. The period examined (1880-1930) begins with the rise of new international associations and forms of activism across national borders, which were not fully destroyed by the First World War. The Great War certainly did cause a hiatus; nevertheless, in its aftermath older international associations resumed their activities and new ones, such as the *League of Nations*, were established. By contrast, internationalism was drastically challenged by the economic crisis and the rise of anti-democratic policies and aggressive nationalisms in the 1930s.

Laqua not only traces back and narrates actors' decisions and institutional creations but also gives space to the beliefs of the internationalists, arguing that they understood history principally as marked by a development towards global interdependence, yet without losing sight of the importance of states as political forms of social collaboration. Another feature of the work lies in the many comparative insights on developments in neighboring countries. This is not only due to the similarities between small states (Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands), which hosted a large number



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of international organizations and events, and competed at that level. It also has to do with interconnectedness between agents and ideologies in the (mainly western) European sphere, be they from France, England and Germany or, after the War, from the United States.

As far as the term “internationalism” is concerned, the book reveals its multi-layered meaning: on the one hand, it refers to a source of national prestige and to representations of national progress and propaganda, as seen in the world exhibitions and the colonial expansion; on the other, in the hands of humanitarian, pacifist and socialist movements, it questions national sovereignty and colonial order.

In the book, six topics are scrutinized along the same chronological scheme: the situation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the wartime and its impact in the 1920s in terms of continuities and disruptions. The first chapter (*Nationhood*) deals with the idea of internationalism as a national characteristic of Belgium as a small country with different linguistic communities and powerful neighbors. It stresses the link between nationalism and internationalism, the second being an extension of the first. As shown by the many world exhibitions which took place in different Belgian cities (1894, 1897, 1905, 1910, 1911, 1913 inter alia), several levels were represented, not only national and international but also regional and colonial. Belgian colonization and Leopold II's imperialism as “hegemonic internationalism” are the topic of the chapter 2 (*Empire*). Firstly the international initiatives of the Belgian king (such as the Brussels anti-slavery conference in 1889–90) are discussed; secondly, Laqua

explains in greater detail the attacks on colonial practices (the Congo atrocities) articulated by several international congresses and associations. Particularly interesting is the narration of Belgian reactions, which highlights ideological disparities in the recognition of such accusations between conservative and progressive movements. The next chapter, devoted to *Church and State*, traces the development both of Catholic internationalism (including in the form of Christian trade unionism) and freethought internationalism, promoted by the Freethought Federation (1880). Under the concept of *Equality*, chapter 4 follows the Belgian labor movement (1885), which made a prominent contribution to international socialism. Brussels served as the headquarters of the *International Socialist Bureau* (1900). Here other leftist and reformist movements are also taken into account: the cooperative movement (as in the case of the *Vooruit* in Ghent) and the feminist one, headed amongst others by Marie Popelin, founder of the *Belgian League of Women's Rights* (1892). *Peace* is the title of chapter 5, which gives an insight into Belgium as an active place for international law with the creation of the *Institute of International Law* in Ghent in 1873, and the launching of the *Revue de droit international et de législation comparée*. This Institute was honored by the Nobel Peace Prize in 1904. Pacifism with its peace organizations – *Ligue internationale de la paix et de la liberté* (1867), *Société belge de l'arbitrage et de la paix* (1889) – and arbitration through the inter-parliamentary conferences form the other topics of this chapter. The last chapter on *Universalism* focuses on the relationship between internationalism and science. It recalls the main contributions of Henri Lafontaine and Paul Otlet, who considered internationalism at the intersection

between science and politics: the *International Institute of Bibliography* (1895), the *Union of International Associations* (1907/1910), the *Palais mondial* in Brussels (1919) and the campaign for the *Cité mondiale*, which remained a utopian vision. The optimism of these figures about scientific progress can further be seen as linking internationalism and European modernism. In the interwar period, Lafontaine and Otlet's involvement in the *League of Nations* and its associations (such as the *International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation*, 1922) was accompanied by mixed feelings since Brussels had not been selected as the headquarters of the *League of Nations*.

Altogether, Laqua's inquiry is a concise and precise analysis of a lesser-known aspect of Belgian studies: cultural, social and political internationalism. He deals with this subject in the perspective of the history of ideas and institutions. Beyond the emphasis on the international aspects of men, women and associations' activities, the author has a remarkable grasp on Belgian cultural and political peculiarities, referring to the main Belgian historians as appropriate for each topic. Laqua also gives numerous references in German, Dutch and English, and discusses historians' interpretations. Moreover, many of his arguments are based on an impressive number of archival sources gathered in several countries from institutional or personal collections. In a nutshell, this book is a succinct masterpiece on the subject of Belgian internationalism. There are only rare mistakes in French spelling, mostly in the footnotes, but sometimes in the text (see p. 185 : should be *milieux organisateurs*, not *milieux organisatrices*). Last but not least, Laqua's monograph offers a coherent and

systematic additional complement to another recent publication : *Henri Lafontaine, prix Nobel de la paix en 1913. Un Belge épris de justice* (Bruxelles, Racine, 2012); see *JBH*, XLIII, 2013, 2/3, p. 354-356.

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