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► **To cite this version:**

Federico Ferretti. ‘Historical Geographies of Internationalism’: Still a source of inspiration. *Political Geography*, 2023, 102, pp.102831. 10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102831 . hal-04046647

HAL Id: hal-04046647

<https://hal.science/hal-04046647v1>

Submitted on 26 Mar 2023

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‘Historical Geographies of Internationalism’: still a source of inspiration

This short commentary results from my enthusiastic reception of the call launched by the editors of *Political Geography (PG)* for the Virtual Forum ‘The Geographies of *Political Geography*’. I was especially intrigued by their reflection on the need to consider the contexts and positionalities from which scholars write, which matches concerns that are widely assumed in fields such as historical geography and intellectual history. To understand the ways in which knowledge is produced, it is indispensable to reflect on its places, contexts and mobilities. Reflecting on the *PG* papers that have played a special role in informing one’s research is a useful exercise for all of us to rethink our own research trajectories at certain moments in our careers in order to understand scholarship in-making. Indeed, the formal references that we usually make to the works and suggestions of other colleagues, such as citations and final acknowledgements, are not always sufficient to fully account for the multiple ways in which others can inspire our own scholarship.

For these reasons, while considering which could be the most representative *PG* article among my own inspirations, I immediately thought of a text that was not a stand-alone paper, but rather the introduction to a special issue. That is, ‘Introduction: Historical Geographies of Internationalism, 1900-1950’ by Jake Hodder, Steve Legg and Mike Heffernan, which introduced the homonymous 2015 special issue including contributions by David Featherstone, Mona Domosh, Arnaud Brennetot, Jake Hodder, David Nally, Stephen Taylor and Chay Brooks. I am discussing here the editors’ introduction precisely because this text successfully endeavoured to set a research agenda – one which is still ongoing. This agenda matches an important part of my research concerns,

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which I share with several other scholars working at the intersection of historical and political geographies by applying critical, radical and decolonial approaches. In this vein, I would stress another point raised by the editors of *PG*: the idea that political geography should be something more than a ‘subfield’ in the discipline, as political approaches to geography go well beyond disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries.

Resulting from a Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) 2013 session that I attended, ‘Historical Geographies of Internationalism’ deeply impacted my scholarship in a quite crucial period. In those years, after completing my postdoctoral research on early anarchist geographers (Ferretti 2014) in Switzerland, I was endeavouring to extend and disseminate my scholarship within English-speaking circuits in addition to Francophone ones. As I discuss below, this RGS-IBG session provided new arguments to put in practice two key principles that have guided my research philosophy since the beginning.

The first principle is that historical geography (broadly defined to include the field known as ‘history and philosophy of geography’) should be relevant for current political agendas. As Hodder, Legg and Heffernan (2015, 2) stress with reference to the refugee crisis that was then (and still is) animating EU political debates, ‘In addressing these questions a historical framing of the crisis is essential. Understanding the historical lineage of these crises... is both vital to understanding our contemporary moment, but also to understanding the formations of “the international” as a social and political idea’. On the one hand, this historical awareness implies questioning current definitions of internationality, which matches my own idea of understanding ‘the international’ as both a field of investigation and a method. On the other, the authors’ idea that historically-minded geographical scholarship should not be limited to dealing with the past is also a key point for my own work. In this vein, rediscovering ‘other geographical traditions’ should be intended as an indispensable contribution to present-day debates, especially for matters such as inclusion in the discipline, epistemic decolonization and the implementation of critical, radical and socially engaged research agendas (Ferretti 2019).

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The second principle is that scholars who work on historical matters considering present-day concerns should be careful to avoid anachronisms and readings of the past that are only filtered through the lenses of the present. This means that we should continue to firmly ground our findings in archival work and solid historical methodologies. To this end, the key is diversifying archives and methods to fully embrace the transnational turn in social sciences, much as current geographical scholarship on ‘the international’ is trying to do. Understanding ‘the international’ as a noun rather than merely an adjective means defining a field of both practice and study, whereas the term ‘internationalism’ indicates concrete endeavours to foster international political, militant or scientific cooperation. Some of these endeavours have been recently studied in a new book edited by the authors of ‘Introduction: Historical Geographies of Internationalism’, addressing international conferencing as a key place, as well as a performing actor, for internationalism (Heffernan, Hodder, Legg and Thorpe 2022).

What is international?

In discussing current meanings of ‘internationalism’, Hodder, Legg and Heffernan (2015) highlight the inadequacy of the definitions that have been provided in geography, as well as in disciplines such as international relations (IR), which remain ‘overly procedural and technocratic’ (p. 2), focusing on official records and organizations. Their arguments match my own concerns in demonstrating that the key task for geographers should be to investigate the roles that places, mobilities, materiality, networks and assemblages (of people and knowledge) play in the construction of events and discourses. Furthermore, the authors question nationalism intended both as political chauvinism and as a limiting methodology. As has been shown by other *PG* papers on post-statist geographies (Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016; Küçükkeleş 2022), national frameworks limit our understanding of the complexity and plurality of international scenarios. Constraining frameworks are not only nationalistic: they can also be cultural or linguistic. Indeed, Hodder, Legg and Heffernan question the assumption that, for many Anglophone scholars, Anglo-American scholarship and Anglophone publishing are synonymous with ‘international literature’.

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As I had the occasion to discuss on several occasions (Ferretti 2019 and 2022a), recent geographical scholarship is exactly treading this transnational path, which includes constant exchanges across the traditional (although quite simplistic) divisions between Anglo and non-Anglo spheres or ‘the Global North’ and ‘the Global South’. Significantly, most authors working on these matters assume multilingualism as a key point for their international and transnational commitment. It is worth noting that in these debates, multilingualism does not merely mean the availability of translators for papers and conference panels, which appears to be a matter of money rather than of internationalist principles. Multilingualism entails the need for scholars to read more languages for their own formation and scholarship and to question what translation means in terms of the reinvention and re-appropriation of a text. As recently argued by Archie Davies (2022) on the occasion of his translation of Milton Santos’ *For a New Geography* ([1978] 2021), addressing these matters can render translation ‘a meeting ground for diverse, radical communities of knowledge’ (p. 2).

Reassessments and future directions

Hodder’s, Legg’s and Heffernan’s key question, ‘Where was [or is] the international?’ (Hodder, Legg and Heffernan 2015, 3) is inserted in the well-known ‘spatial turn’ in social sciences and intellectual history. In this vein, they suggest several future developments that have ongoing repercussions in most of the scholarly debates in which I am involved. These include diversifying places and objects of research in order to investigate informal scholarly and political networks that are not always captured by traditional sources. Such work implies the need to explore unconventional archives, discover scattered archival niches and even build our own archives (Hodder, Heffernan and Legg 2021). These resources might include non-official collections such as personal archives, libraries and archives built by activist groups (in both material and digital formats) and sources that may not have been previously considered, such as personal recollections and the periodical press, as recently discussed by scholarship on anarchism (Margarucci 2022). A deep renovation of our archives and archival methodologies is therefore indispensable to perform analyses of transnational scholarly and political networks that allow for tracing connections among a plurality of actors, including neglected and forgotten ones. Such works expose how

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internationalism can be deeply plural and heterogeneous and take place outside of official organizations, too.

Ideas of tracing international circulations and translations of critical knowledge through new archives are grounding the rediscovery of neglected figures of radical, critical and anticolonial geographers from various ‘Souths’ (Clayton 2020; Craggs and Neate 2019). For my own work on Milton Santos, Josué de Castro and other Latin American geographers who were exiled during the dictatorships of the second half of the twentieth century, finding non-institutional archives such as personal collections of correspondence has been paramount. These sources are indispensable for tracing transnational and multilingual connections taking place outside the traditional and institutional frameworks that inform official archives. Therefore, ‘the international’ is also part of a methodology that allows recognizing the importance in producing both activism and scholarship of individuals beyond ‘national schools’, of dissidences rather than norms and paradigms, and of non-state rather than institutional actors (Ferretti 2022b).

These developments are paralleled by a growing interest in geographies of decolonization with a special emphasis on international networking and conferencing. This has been reflected by later *PG* papers (Craggs 2018; Jones 2022) sharing a similar interest for the material places and scenarios in which various kinds of internationalism take place. It can be argued that these research lines accord with classical studies on assemblages and materiality in specific kinds of international engagement such as diplomacy (Dittmer 2017; McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer 2012). While it is impossible to exhaustively discuss here all the ‘further developments’ suggested by Hodder, Legg and Heffernan, I would finally stress the need to always consider the plurality and heterogeneity of internationalisms and of the methodologies used to study them.

Conclusion

Choosing to discuss a paper that is simultaneously the introduction to a special issue and a step in a longer research agenda is also a way to stress the importance of considering scholarship as a relational and always-in-progress endeavour. Our ongoing engagement with colleagues’ works

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may be better expressed by upholding multiple and entangled networks of direct and indirect relations than by formal referencing. These relations can take place directly through personal exchanges, face-to-face or online, or indirectly through implicit or explicit intertextualities. As for the paper with which I have chosen to engage for this Virtual Forum, the future directions that are suggested by ‘Historical Geographies of Internationalism’ go resolutely in the direction of taking the international as both an object and a method in geography. To this end, I especially stress two of its aspects: transnationalism and multilingualism.

Rescuing hidden connections between exiled and marginalised scholars and non-institutional actors such as political groups and scholarly networks through correspondence and non-institutional archives can significantly extend the reach of geographies of internationalism. I would argue that this is a key task for political geographers, as it allows seizing exceptions beyond rules and dissidence alongside officiality. In addition, questioning lingering positivist ideas of translation as ‘objective’ and unproblematic (Davies 2021) encourages reflection on our own positionalities in linguistic and cultural terms, fostering cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. These practices can play key roles in the widely displayed but not always effectively performed agendas for decolonising (political) geography.

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