

The Transnational Turn in British Labour History

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‘The Transnational Turn in British Labour History’

Charlotte Alston, *Tolstoy and his Disciples: the History of a Radical International Movement*,

London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, pp. x + 309, h/b, £62.00, ISBN 978-1-78076-118-3

Gary R. Entz, *Llewellyn Castle: A Workers’ Cooperative on the Great Plains*, Lincoln:

University of Nebraska Press, 2013, pp. xvi + 279, h/b, \$50.00, ISBN: 978-0-8032-4539-6

Pietro Di Paola, *The Knights Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora*,

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp. ix + 244, h/b, £75.00, ISBN: 978-1-84631-969-3

Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015, pp. x +

412, p/b, £19.99, ISBN: 978-1-137-40982-9

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of studies labelled as ‘transnational’. The term is of comparatively recent vintage. Barely registering as a concept a decade ago, transnationalism, both as a category of explanation, and as an approach to the study of history is now mainstream. In the last decade, substantial claims have been made for transnationalism as a radical new departure and as an innovative avenue of exploration for existing areas of study. Across the discipline of history it has provoked enthusiasm and loathing in equal measure. Some historians have become evangelists for the concept, others see it as a flimsy and superficial idea.¹ Despite the prevalence of studies labelled explicitly as ‘transnational’, and the increased usage of the term within the social sciences, little has been

¹ Recent debates around transnationalism are summarised in Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London, 2009), especially chs. 1-2 and Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (London, 2013), ch. 1.

written about the heightened visibility of the concept in history, nor about its role in developing and refining approaches to labour history in particular. In one of the few recent studies of transnationalism and its impact on the work of labour historians, the term is enthusiastically embraced as an antidote to the malaise that has afflicted the profession, and as a perspective that builds on and enhances the strengths of labour history's approach to purely national pasts.² Leon Fink's recent edited collection, outlines the very real advantages to historians of labour and social movements in opening up this approach to popular politics, and in locating working-class and labour organisations more broadly within it. As contributors to this collection point out, transnationalism establishes new perspectives around approaches to race, gender and working-class identity.³ In many of the chapters in Fink's edited volume, transnationalism is depicted as the salvation to an area of study seen as problematic, jaded and troubled.

In strict historical terms there is little new about transnationalism. The interconnectedness of human populations has long provided an avenue for exploration, particularly by dissident historians questioning the status quo. In 1960s France, the search for the trivial everyday elements that brought communities together over long chronologies became the modus operandi of the Annales School and its adherents.⁴ For Medieval and Early Modern historians it can be argued that any set of organisations or relationships existing prior to the formation of the nation state might be regarded as transnational; historically, most major world religions have proved reliant on cross-border relationships

² Neville Kirk, 'Transnational labour history: Promise and perils' in Leon Fink (ed.), *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labour History* (Oxford, 2011), 18-22.

³ Gunther Peck, 'Feminising White slavery in the United States: Marcus Braun and the transnational traffic in White bodies, 1890-1910' in *ibid*, 221-244.

⁴ Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean: The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London, 1972).

through pilgrimage, missionary work and exchanges of dogma. The term transnational, however, has gained in significance in recent years, as an expression of the growth of globalised markets, in reaction to debates about the free movements of peoples, and as part of an increasing emphasis on the cross-border relationships of finance, political parties, technologies and communications systems. Transnationalism follows the shape of shifting and fluid identity politics across national boundaries.⁵ Debates around terrorism, itself intrinsically transnational in nature, and the cross-border agencies designed to deal with it, have also fuelled recent agendas relating to transnationalism. Moreover, the concept has relevance for crime, trafficking either of people or goods, and for the agencies set up to tackle such activity. Interpol might be regarded as a standard example of the transnational agency. For some historians the concept of transnationalism has created new agendas within social history, notably for understanding food, sport and mobile social capital. In the last decade the terminology of the transnational has gradually replaced an older emphasis on migration, diaspora studies, the local and the global and internationalism in all its forms. For historians of Britain and the empire, transnationalism has almost completely supplanted the recent interest in a 'British World' in relation to debates around emigration to the White settler colonies, the periphery and its connections to the metropole, as well as bringing new vigour to discussion about 'Whiteness' in an imperial context.⁶ In Lake and Reynolds's influential study, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, labour parties and trade unions in the White settler colonies and the United States, far from favouring open borders, are depicted as instrumental

⁵ Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra, 2005), see the introduction.

⁶ Stuart Ward, 'The "new nationalism" in Australia, Canada and New Zealand: Civic culture in the wake of the British world' in Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures* (Melbourne, 2007), 231-63.

in retarding the emergence of ‘transnational solidarities’ through campaigns to impose restraints on migration and the free movement of non-White peoples around the empire.⁷

The study of transnationalism is not the exclusive preserve of historians of radicalism and popular politics. Significant possibilities are opened up by the notion of evaluating transnational influences outside the conventional sphere of emancipatory and left/radical causes. Red scares, in particular, often have a strong transnational dimension.⁸ In addition, transnationalism poses challenges to an approach that traditionally draws heavily on local history and regional case studies. Nevertheless, labour historians might be regarded as displaying natural advantages in their relationship to the transnational currents sweeping the discipline. Rooted in the concept of internationalism, frequently dealing with cross-border networks of power and control, and students of organisations including trade unions and co-operative associations that transcend national borders, historians of labour are well-placed to address these agendas. Recent analysis has focussed, for example, on notions of ‘transnationalism from below’, positing ‘high’ and ‘low’ variants in the historical manifestations of the transnational, that plays to labour history’s interest in the working or subaltern classes.⁹ Moreover, studies of mobile and itinerant workers have an established place in the history of labour studies. Refugee clusters have long fascinated labour historians, both for their political role in host communities and for the position they occupy as the

⁷ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, 2008), 137-165.

⁸ Jeffrey H. Michaels, ‘The heyday of Britain’s cold war think tank: Brian Crozier and the Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1970-79’ in Luc van Dongen, Stephanie Roulin and Giles Scott-Smith (eds), *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities and Networks* (London, 2014), 146-160.

⁹ S. Mahler, ‘Theoretical and empirical contributions towards a research agenda for transnationalism’ in M.P. Smith and Lee Guarnizo (eds), *Transnationalism from Below* (New York, 1998), 64-100.

architects of governments in exile. Jewish, Irish, Polish, Italian and German exiles have received significant attention from labour historians in recent years. In addition, labour historians have proved influential in pioneering the concept of ‘comparative’ history. Werner Sombart’s influential discussion about the absence of a labour party in the United States established the parameters for a broader debate about American exceptionalism, and the impact the absence of a labour tradition has had on the evolution of political formations in the US.¹⁰ Subsequently this has remained a significant line of inquiry, and has paved the way for the discussion of similarities and overlaps between allied or analogous national labour traditions, notably Anglophone communities in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, and in Britain and the United States in particular.¹¹ In some cases this work has extended to comparisons between the situations in Germany, Britain and Sweden.¹² In its emphasis on the

¹⁰ Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton, 2007), chs 6 and 8, and Shelton Stromquist, ‘Rethinking working class politics in comparative transnational context’ in Donna T. Haverty-Stacke and Daniel T. Walkowitz (eds) *Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756-2009* (London: Continuum, 2009), 82-110.

¹¹ Neville Kirk, *Comrades and Cousins Globalisation, Workers and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (London, 2003), introduction and ch. 2, Kirk, *Labour and the Politics of Empire: Britain and Australia, 1900 to the Present* (Manchester, 2011), chs 3-4, Raymond Markey, ‘An antipodean phenomenon: comparing the Labo(u)r Party in New Zealand and Australia’, *Labour History*, 95 (2008), 69-95, and Andrew Scott, *Running on Empty: Modernising the British and Australian Labour Parties* (Annandale, 2000), ch. 1.

¹² For example, Stefan Berger, ‘Labour in comparative perspective’ in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour’s First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), 309-340, John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Manchester, 1992), chs 4 and 5 and Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden, 1880-1920* (Lund, 2006), 194-5.

‘exceptional’, the ‘unusual’ or the ‘distinct’, however, this comparative agenda might be seen as a prelude, rather than as a direct contribution, to debates about the transnational.

The works referred to here might be described as ‘quiet’ transnational studies. Only Pietro di Paola alludes directly to transnationalism in his study of the Italian exile community in London. The term is never addressed in Alston’s study of the circulation of Tolstoyan ideas in Britain and Europe in the nineteenth-century, although she has analysed it elsewhere, nor is it opened up to scrutiny in Entz’s analysis of the forgotten co-operative colony established by the followers of Bronterre O’ Brien in Kansas in the late 1860s.¹³ Nevertheless, in both these volumes, which deal with the free flow of ideas, resources, people, and social capital across national borders, the transnational is always implicitly present. Andrew Thorpe’s revised and updated general history of the Labour Party in Britain provides a control in this respect, demonstrating the limitations of the single case study approach to the emergence of labour parties when divorced from broader transnational currents.

Di Paola, however, makes an important point when he advocates the significance of transnationalism for the understanding of movements hitherto exclusively portrayed in terms of the impact of their ideas on national governments. In his study of Italian anarchism, he highlights the informal, flexible and unconventional networks that enabled anarchists to further relationships in different countries, maintain the vigour of the agitation at home during periods of state repression, and influence radical domestic politics in London. As a grassroots and devolved agitation, embracing fiercely regional and anti-statist agendas, nineteenth-century anarchism uniquely lays itself open to this kind of analysis. In Di Paola’s

¹³ There is consideration of transnationalism in Charlotte Alston, ‘Introduction’ in ‘Transnational Solidarities and the Identities of the Left, 1890-1990’, *European Review of History*, 21 (2014), 447-450.

treatment, anarchism was not, as portrayed by a number of historians, simply an intermittent, opportunistic, or, even, millenarian, agitation. Rather, he depicts it as inherently transnational in nature and as a perpetual presence within a broad arc of related émigré contexts stretching from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Rooted in decentralised communities, subject to state scrutiny, and with key individuals often living as fugitives in transient circumstances, anarchism showed a remarkable resilience arising from its ability to renew itself from scattered offshoots of the core organisation abroad, whilst at the same time demonstrating the ability to sustain its efforts from contributions made by sympathisers in the host communities.¹⁴ Here a broader transnational agenda breaks away from images of romantic, passive and declining exile communities, gently descending into decadence, and pining for lost certainties, and an unlikely change of government at home. Alston's Tolstoyans operate in a similar manner to the Italian anarchist groups charted by Di Paola. As Alston points out, a movement like Tolstoyanism makes little sense divorced from its international/transnational context. Implicitly trans-border, diffuse in its interests and enthusiasms, and dependent on small groups of highly mobile evangelists, Tolstoyans were an active presence in publishing, in the translation of Tolstoy's works, in discussion groups and at intellectual retreats for the study of Tolstoyan ideas throughout Europe and North America. There is a crossover in this regard with the followers of Bronterre O'Brien who left London at the end of the 1860s to establish a new life in Kansas. Sharing with the Tolstoyans the commitment to a prominent ideologue, and displaying an almost messianic zealotry in defence of his ideas, the émigré O'Brienites chose a similar path to Tolstoy's disciples, establishing discussion groups, setting up campaigning organisations and distributing small-circulation newspapers to their adherents. Entz describes the survivors of O'Brien's followers swearing on his grave at

¹⁴ A similar pattern emerges with regard to French émigré anarchists in London in Constance Bantman, *The French Anarchists in London, 1880-1914: Exile and Transnationalism in the First Globalisation* (Liverpool, 2013), chs 2-3.

Abney Park Cemetery after his death in 1864 to continue his work and to devote their lives to his ideals. In a hard frontier life, the obscure details of which are resurrected through Entz's researches, the relatively unknown O'Brienite colonists of the Mutual Land Emigration and Cooperative Colonisation Company in Kansas, emerge as advocates of an emigrant radical tradition that sought an uncluttered and uncomplicated ruralism in the traditional destination of the American West.

What emerges strongly from an analysis is of all three of these inter-related groupings, is the degree to which they thrived during a period in which borders were porous, and international travel was relatively unconstrained. In all three of these cases, exile and emigration were conducive to the sharing of ideas, the pooling of experience, and the transmission of different ideologies across national boundaries. Prior to the introduction of border agencies, customs barriers, language tests and restrictive immigration legislation in the years after the Great War, the itinerant radical, versed in many languages and political contexts was a constant presence, agitating, moving from situation to situation, and evoking admiration and loathing in equal measure. During the inter-war years, in their different ways, the anarchists Emma Goldman and Augustin Sorchy, and the left-wing thriller writer Eric Ambler reflected on this lost world of free movement and carefree mobility in the wake of the new strictures and constraints placed on travel in a Europe and North America defined by closed-off economic autarky and state borders behind which suspicions of the outsider flourished. The anarchist Emma Goldman, herself a victim of these new pressures and international tensions, lamented in a landmark piece for *The Nation* magazine: 'Who cared about passports or visas? Who worried about one particular spot on earth? The whole world

was one's country'.¹⁵ For Eric Ambler, the borderless world incubated stateless, ambulant, career criminals, whose worlds overlapped with circles of exiled political radicals and the agencies that conducted international espionage. His criminal mastermind, Dimitrios, who acquired multiple and shifting identities to further his nefarious schemes, typified this trend, representing: 'the dangerous class, the political hangers-on, the grafters and the undercover men, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of an old society'.¹⁶

Viewed through a transnational lens, movements like anarchism, O'Brienism and the Tolstoyans appear less marginal and peripheral than their local offshoots when they are appraised in a solely national context. In the sphere of domestic radical politics, where their departure from the mainstream is often emphasised, they are frequently relegated to the status of sects, or cults, rather than movements per se. By removing this local dimension, they may be regarded as part of larger, trans-European, sometimes, transatlantic, movements of people and ideas. The Tolstoyans, in particular, in their emphasis on vegetarian diets, dress reform, unconventional gender relationships, exercise and manual toil on the land, appear far more mainstream when set alongside the vibrant physical health, fitness and 'life reform' movements that flourished across Europe and Scandinavia in response to concerns about the declining health of urban and rural populations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.¹⁷ Even Beatrice Webb, often depicted as the embodiment of new

¹⁵ Emma Goldman, 'The tragedy of the political exiles', in *The Nation: 150th Anniversary Issue*, 1 April 2015, 88. Also see on this theme, Augustin Souchy, *Beware! Anarchist! A Life for Freedom: The Autobiography of Augustin Souchy* (Chicago, 1992 [1977]), 10.

¹⁶ Eric Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios* (London, 2009 [1939]), 65.

¹⁷ For an example of this early physical improvement literature, see the physical health manuals by the Danish physical health guru, ex-Lieutenant J. P. Muller, particularly J.P. Muller, *My System: Fifteen Minutes Work a Day for Health's Sake* (London, 1912), 37-8.

agendas for statist socialism in Britain, was an enthusiast for faddist diets and fasting regimes whilst recent research shows that the revolutionary generation that brought about the 1916 rising in Ireland shared similar concerns for sexual experimentation and utopian levelling with European and British radicals.¹⁸ For all these agitations, their primary objectives were supra-national, not to say, explicitly, anti-national, in nature. The Tolstoyans were staunch pacifists, anti-imperialists, and opponents of militarism in all its forms. Anarchists more broadly campaigned against the state as an expression of coercion, primarily over defence and conscription. In London, the Italian anarchist community in particular was significant in dissuading young men from Italian émigré families from joining the war effort and enlisting in the Italian army following Italy's entry into the Great War in 1915. For committed O'Brienites like John Radford, the moving force behind the O'Brienite community in Kansas, the alternative co-operative colony he pioneered held out the prospect of a regenerated commonweal, drawing in migrants attracted by the abolition of poverty, the blunting of landlords' power and the curbing of the usury practiced by banks that deprived workers of hard-won wages. All three movements were inspired by what might be termed 'transnational' personalities. Radford, a displaced London engraver, was a typical transnational: mobile, liberated from purely local constraints, happy to operate in a number of different contexts, and capable of applying the lessons learned in different countries. Jane Addams, the social reformer who worked amongst the poor in the slums of Chicago, was an avid Tolstoyan who made the pilgrimage to visit Tolstoy in his home in Russia and learnt her craft at Toynbee Hall in London. The Italian anarchist, Francesco Saverio Merlino followed a similar personal trajectory. Arriving in London in 1885 as a penniless political refugee, his experience of exile had considerable influence on his ideas, affording him the opportunity to begin a project of

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (London, 1951), 97-8 and Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London, 2013), ch. 4.

reconciling the differences between collectivist and individualist anarchism, and elevating him to an important influence in Charlotte Wilson's anarchist *Freedom* group.

Wherever they congregated, these agents of transnationalism brought with them different approaches, imported precedents, and models for lifestyles that rejected the conventions of industrial and urban living. For both Di Paola and Alston, this provides the opportunity to reconsider the rich communal and associational life that characterised many of these groups. Usually seen as backward-looking, and symptomatic of the introverted lifestyles of such associations, in the work of Alston and Entz, the utopian communities established by the Tolstoyans and the O'Brienites appear less as places for isolated reclusives, and more as clusters of creative energy and centres for the dissemination of new ideas. In this they match Robert S. Fogarty's description of alternative communities in North America in the 1890s as underestimated 'enclaves of difference' that provided a new experimental environment for the implementation of radical social ideas around gender, class, diet, and broader life reform issues.¹⁹ Neither Alston nor Entz make exaggerated claims for the legacies of the Tolstoyans on the one hand, and of the O'Brienities on the other. Nevertheless, the new emphasis on communitarianism advocated by the Tolstoyans and others in Britain fed through into a vigorous dialogic exchange between exponents of communal social values, statist and localists within the British labour tradition that helped shape the Labour Party's later attitudes to the relationship between voluntary agencies, and the state.²⁰ In the American West, John Radford took O'Brien's ideas into the emergent populist movement and the Knights of Labor, introducing a new generation to Bronterre

¹⁹ Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 1.

²⁰ Nicholas Deakin and Justin Davis Smith, 'Labour, charity and voluntary action: The myth of hostility' in Matthew Hilton and James McKay (eds) *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (Oxford, 2011), 69-93.

O'Brien's writings and publications, and demonstrating continuing currents of overlap between the British and North American labour traditions.

The standard history of the Labour Party presented in the fourth edition of Andrew Thorpe's history of its development, demonstrates the ways in which the established history of the party has suffered through the lack of consideration devoted to these transnational themes. Still an indispensable study of the Labour Party in a domestic context, Thorpe's volume lacks the recent transnational perspectives that increasingly inform writing on the British radical tradition. Usually presented as pragmatic, free from ideology, and very British in its determination to preserve consensus in government, the monographs examined here cast a very different light on the forces that contributed to the emergence of organised labour in the United Kingdom. In their different ways they question the notion of a unique path of development for British labourism that has proved influential to the understanding of the historical trajectory of the party, and of other labour parties in Europe and beyond. Ross McKibbin's view of an 'English road to socialism' is echoed in Thorpe's study. Here the British Labour Party emerges as an insular party that eschewed international contacts, ignored ideology and distanced itself from gatherings of international socialists in the inter-war years and after 1945.²¹ Nevertheless, as David Clark's recent study of the lives of early Labour Party activists demonstrates, many early grass-roots members of the party entered local politics to pursue international/transnational causes, notably opposition to conscription, pacifism, and in support of the platform of the League of Nations.²² Furthermore, the works considered here demonstrate the existence of a broader penumbra of ideas and cultures, with their origins in transnational circumstances that, in different ways, provided a bridge from the

²¹ Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), ch. 5.

²² David Clark, *Voices from Labour's Past: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (Kendal, 2015), 35, 89-90, 113-13 and 166.

eclectic and ethical socialist movements of the 1880s and 1890s, through into the pioneer labour tradition that created the Labour Party. Missing from the standard account presented by Thorpe is the imperial context of the early Labour Party, which brought many of its founder members into contact with emergent labour organisations in the White settler colonies. Keir Hardie believed that the precocious development of the Australian Labor Party in particular blazed a trail for other labor parties and social democrats in Europe and the empire to follow.²³ Nor is there much consideration in Thorpe's volume of the Labour Party's romance with Scandinavia from the early 1930s, when Sweden in particular, offered a model for action and future development taken up enthusiastically by Margaret and G.D.H. Cole and refined by Hugh Dalton and Anthony Crosland into the post-war years. In 1937 the Fabian Research Bureau sent a delegation to Sweden that included Hugh Gaitskell, the future leader of the Labour Party. During the 1960s, Harold Wilson declared that he wanted the British Labour Party to dominate government in Britain in the same way that the Swedish Social Democrats had dominated Sweden since the 1930s. The most effective early leaders of the British Labour Party were those that managed to navigate these overlapping domestic and international currents and agendas. The first generation of Labour Party leaders were obsessive globe-trotters, learning enthusiastically from analogous or related contexts. Keir Hardie visited Australia, Canada, Japan, India, New Zealand, and South Africa, and campaigned for Eugene W. Debs in the presidential elections in the United States in 1912; Ramsay MacDonald visited Australia and New Zealand; Ellen Wilkinson spent time in India. In addition, more recent research has brought home exiled traditions of popular radicalism, through the exploration of the intersections between European Catholic social doctrines,

²³ *Labour Leader*, 10 Apr. 1908, 228.

Christian Democrat ideas, and the mid-twentieth century radical programme of the Labour Party in Britain.²⁴

In different ways all four of the studies examined here demonstrate the potential and opportunities (as well as limitations) afforded by the recent interest in transnational perspectives. Moving beyond conventional studies of refugees and political exiles, Di Paola and Alston in particular illuminate the potential for understanding the different currents that influenced the outlook of later nineteenth-century radicals, and the first generation of activists that established the Labour Party. Transnationalism breaks down the boundaries between different labourist and radical traditions, highlighting the affinities, rather than the departures, and accentuating the overlaps, rather than the differences. This provides opportunities to reconsider population transfers and migrant and refugee contributions to the radical past, overturning conventional views of distinctive and unique radical traditions and national ‘special pathways’. When divorced from this rich context of integrated influences introduced by outsiders, British radicalism appears shrunken and diminished. In a Europe of increasingly interconnected relations, population movements and transferable capital, the interest and enthusiasm for transnational labour studies shows little sign of abating.

Notes on Contributor

²⁴ Maurice Glasman, ‘The good society: Catholic social thought and the politics of the common good’, in Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (eds), *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics* (London, 2015), 13-26 and Henry Canon Parkinson (ed.), *The Workers’ Charter: Condition of the Working Classes* (Oxford, 1941), 11-16.

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