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**Talbot C. Imlay. *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960*.** Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780199641048 (hardcover, \$110.50).

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*The Socialist Minimum*

Signs of a socialist renaissance have multiplied in many North American and European countries. The socioeconomic and political fallout of the 2007-2008 crisis contributed to a new uncertainty about capitalism's future. A remarkable number of young people have started to explore socialist alternatives. In the United States, where the Cold War put a taboo on the "s" word, millennials are now joining the Democratic Socialists of America, subscribing to *Jacobin*, and campaigning for the self-proclaimed socialist Senator Bernie Sanders. In Britain, a similar demographic has rallied behind Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and the party's left wing. Innovative socialist coalitions such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece nearly remade Europe a few years ago. Countless successes at the local level may even surpass these national examples. While recently the media's attention has wandered to far-right populism, the socialist renaissance represents the biggest challenge in decades to neoliberal globalization and rising social inequality.

Talbot C. Imlay's wide-ranging and deeply researched new book, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism*, appears at an auspicious moment. At the center of this study lies the question: How might socialists from different countries join together and devise collective solutions to problems that transcend national borders? Or in historical terms, how has socialist internationalism worked in the past?

Imlay finds his answer at the roots of the still-existent Socialist International (SI). That organization was formed in 1951 and grew to include over 150 member parties, but it had several important precedents in the first half of the twentieth century—all of which looked back to the heroic age of the Second International from 1889 to 1914. This book surveys the history of the multiple internationals that formed from World War I through the early Cold War, most notably the Labour and Socialist International (LSI), which was established in 1923. The organizations' inner workings, leading members, and responses to international issues such as disarmament, decolonization, and European integration, guide Imlay's inquiry.

His basic thesis is that socialist internationalism provided a framework of practical cooperation between mainstream center-left parties. An international socialist community formed out of “personal friendships, common understandings, mutual expectations, and responsibilities as well as shared experiences” (2). That community fostered a pragmatic unity of action but not of doctrine. Common practices rather than principles lay at the heart of midcentury socialist internationalism. When socialists’ commitment to working together faded—particularly in the 1930s and ’60s, Imlay argues—socialist politics withdrew into the national sphere.

The author begins by carefully defining his subject. By socialism he essentially means social democracy and not communism, revolutionary socialism, or any other leftist current. And while his coverage of European parties ranges widely, his big three are the British Labour Party, the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO), and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). He focuses on parties rather than other forms of workers’ organization because only electoral parties could enter government in parliamentary democracies. Unions, extraparliamentary oppositions, and grassroots social movements seldom appear in Imlay’s history. That said, he draws on material in half a dozen languages from an incredible number of archives across Europe and North America. The empirical research for this book is unrivaled.

Socialist internationalism functioned differently than communist internationalism, we learn, because it eschewed “top-down, centralized organization” in favor of “collective consultation and consensus” (308). Member parties of the LSI and later the SI retained full autonomy. Their participation in an international socialist community was “a matter of choice and not of imposition” (468). Socialist internationalism also differed from Christian democratic experiments because the latter were too decentralized. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, socialists situated themselves in between those who contended “on one side for too great Liberty, and on the other side for too much Authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Imlay differentiates socialist internationalism from its more famous liberal alternatives: the League of Nations, the United Nations, European communities, and humanitarian aid organizations. Socialist organizations functioned as “hybrid entities, incorporating aspects of both state and non-state actors” (15). They “straddled the government/non-government divide” and thus acquired a unique “insider-outsider status” (101). According to the author, diplomatic and international historians tend to ignore socialists because of that sui generis status. Historians of socialism such as Geoff Eley and Donald Sassoon, on the other hand, neglect the international side of socialist politics.<sup>2</sup> Both camps write off socialist internationalism because of its apparent failures: e.g. the breakdown of solidarity in August 1914 when socialist parties across Europe voted for war credits; the weak and ineffectual structure of the LSI; ditto the postwar SI. By focusing on the practice rather than the principles of socialist internationalism, Imlay hopes to move beyond such narratives of defeat. Domestic policy for the welfare state was not the only arena of socialist activity. Socialists had something to say about the era’s most pressing international issues, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), transcribed by Edward White and David Widger, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New Press, 1996).

The risk in emphasizing the practice of socialist internationalism—its procedures, conferences, committees, reports, etc.—is to reduce socialist principles to their barest minimum. What doctrinal compromises or losses did socialists accept when they turned toward pragmatism? Every renewed commitment by party leaders to the practice of socialist internationalism seemed to involve some retreat from principles. For example, when the chairman of the SPD, Otto Wels, refused to denounce Nazi rearmament plans in 1932, he “contended that it would be wrong ‘to pass a resolution and tie ourselves down to a definite form of words which might not be applicable in rapidly changing situations’” (197). Such flaccid responses by party leaders may reflect politics as usual. Or they may say something more serious about the center-left parties that were satisfied with such a socialist minimum.

This crisis of socialist principles came to a head in the 1950s, when most center-left parties abandoned Marxism. Imlay claims that opposing doctrines could coexist within a framework of practical cooperation. His historical cases do bear that out. But this proves simply that mainstream socialists had learned to behave like liberal democrats. When the SPD adopted its Godesberg Program in 1959 and the SFIO underwent a similar process of “modernization,” the only principles they retained were individual human liberty and moderation of capitalism’s excesses. The author notes that “these principles were often shared by many non-socialists” (464), which begs the question as to what socialists had left to offer.

To his credit, Imlay includes dissenting voices. A real strength of the book is its reconstruction of the internal debates between party leaders and their left-wing rivals. For example, Marceau Pivert was a radical schoolteacher and syndicalist whose charisma attracted young French socialists who were dissatisfied with the reformism of the SFIO. He and other European left socialists such as Paul Levi and Fenner Brockway remained true to their principles and resisted compromise with bourgeois parties. Their politics were antiwar and anti-imperialist. They criticized what they perceived as authoritarian tendencies within the mainstream socialist parties, and they viewed the practice of socialist internationalism as a bureaucratic enterprise that privileged party ‘experts’ over the rank and file. Against pragmatism, Pivert and company called for a genuine socialist renewal from below. That grassroots process could never be accomplished by international conferences alone.

But the milestones of Imlay’s narrative are conferences, one after another. In between conferences, committees and special bureaus carried on administrative work. Socialists’ penchant for committees verged on the ridiculous with the establishment of the International Committee for Socialist Conferences, or Comisco, in 1947. The author senses the absurdity of this “proliferation of commissions,” but he chooses to interpret it as part of a “process of familiarization” in the practice of socialist internationalism (297).

His chief protagonists form a group of twenty or so leading men. They break down into roughly two generations. The first generation, which included people like the internationalist Friedrich Adler and the statesmen Ramsay MacDonald and Léon Blum, tried to rebuild the shattered Second International in the wake of the Great War. Their greatest achievement was the founding of the Labour and Socialist International, but even that involved considerable compromise and frustrated hopes. The second generation included the party leaders Erich Ollenhauer, Hugh Gaitskell, and Guy Mollet, and it dealt with the many challenges of post-1945 reconstruction.

Only two women receive more than a passing mention in Imlay’s account: Barbara Castle, a Labour MP, journalist, and “fervent advocate of nuclear disarmament” (389); and Rita Hinden, a South African economist, editor, founder of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, and critic of global inequality. It would be easy to

blame this gender imbalance on the predominantly male quality of European socialism at that time. Without excusing this authorial choice entirely, one could also blame the genre of diplomatic and international history, which has always had a woman problem.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the sources and archives that Imlay consulted for this book are heavily gendered. Some relevant women from whom we do not hear are, for example, the founder of Workers' Welfare (AWO) and SPD émigré leader Marie Juchacz; the SPD member, international trade unionist, and United Nations delegate Toni Sender; the French writer, left socialist, and antiwar feminist Colette Audry; and the Labour MP, journalist during the Spanish Civil War, and education minister Ellen Wilkinson.

Imlay organizes his chapters thematically, which has its advantages. For example, the final chapter offers a masterful analysis of debates over decolonization, the Algerian War, and the decision by some socialists to defend colonial trusteeship as an alternative to national independence. Such thematic chapters also provide space for non-European voices, such as the Indian socialists Ram Manohar Lohia and Asoka Mehta. They and other Asian socialists were critical of the Eurocentrism and Cold War politics of the Socialist International. Even before the famous Bandung Conference in 1955, which raised consciousness of a non-aligned world among postcolonial states, they formed a rival international, the Asian Socialist Conference.

But the disadvantage of thematic chapters is that they tend to repeat the same chronology. Individual sections cycle through the perspectives of Labour, the SFIO, and the SPD, so the chronology gets repeated yet again. This is especially true of the last three chapters on the 1950s.

The most questionable part of the book is the short "entr'acte" on socialism in the 1930s. Imlay presents this era as "the nadir of socialist internationalism" (16 and 252), and thus one of failure and defeat. Unlike other sections of the text, he does not analyze the generative side of that defeat. Given the book's preference for the party form, it is perhaps understandable why Imlay would not devote much space to antifascism, since its most militant and innovative expressions did not occur through mainstream socialist parties. The LSI was an inconvenient vehicle for antifascism because its member parties could embarrass their neutralist home governments. But that fact should qualify the 1930s as an important crisis period for the practice of socialist internationalism, one that demands more extended analysis than a brief entr'acte.

An important consequence of short-changing antifascism is that Imlay does not mention the peculiar origins of some of his later protagonists: the non-party or non-aligned small groups of the 1930s. Among postwar SPD leaders, for example, Willi Eichler had belonged to the International Socialist *Kampfbund* (ISK), Willy Brandt to the Socialist Workers' Party (SAP), and Fritz Erler to New Beginning. Eichler's recommendation in 1948 that socialists create an "international socialist *Kampfgemeinschaft*" (295) only makes sense given his past membership in ISK. The antifascist small groups had also intensely debated whether to pursue a united front between socialists and communists or a popular front between all democratic parties. Those debates concerned the future of socialist internationalism.

The book nevertheless contains a trove of socialist opinions on and responses to almost every international issue of the mid-twentieth century. While it will serve as an invaluable resource to scholars of that period, its

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James, eds., *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), and Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

argument about the practice of socialist internationalism is not always convincing. There was nothing necessarily socialist about an “ongoing negotiation between parties” (102) or “a persistent commitment to working together on pressing international issues” (149). Imlay concludes that socialism’s “international dimension was never all-important: it rarely, if ever, trumped the domestic political and intra-party dimensions of policymaking” (463). The book also ends abruptly at the start of the 1960s. The author might have explained in more detail why the practice of socialist internationalism stalled in that decade, especially when general consciousness of the Third World and global entanglements only seemed to increase. And of course, much more work needs to be done in order to bring this history up to the present.

Marxist internationalism was based on working-class solidarity. The practice of socialist internationalism, as defined by this book, was not. As such, it marked a sad departure from the heroic age of nineteenth-century socialism. If the socialist renaissance of the early twenty-first century will discover new means of international cooperation, it might look to Imlay’s history for lessons in what not to do.

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