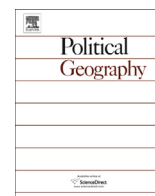




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Conferencing the international at the World Pacifist Meeting, 1949



Jake Hodder

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how the act of conferencing was central to imagining, negotiating and contesting post-war pacifism as an internationalist project. The paper contends that internationalism and the international conference are inexorably entwined. Through the study of conferencing geographers can explore the situated historical and political geographies of internationalism which belies its otherwise transcendent or universalist claims. A reading of the 1949 World Pacifist Meeting in India is used to make two key arguments. Firstly, it shows how conferences operate as stage-managed events through which to script and perform an alternative vision of internationalism. Half conference, half pilgrimage, the global composition of delegates was arranged to suggest a space 'singularly free from any sense of geographical limitation'. Yet total immersion in the rich cultural and historical context of India marked an uneven internationalist arena, where the 'Land of Gandhi' was held with unparalleled reverence. Secondly, whilst geographers and others have turned to conferencing in recent years, this has largely been contained to 'summitry' and high-end diplomacy. This paper calls for geographers to consider a wider range of conferencing spaces and practices, and argues that studying 'other conferences' by necessity opens up consideration of other forms of internationalism. The paper concludes that the World Pacifist Meeting's delegates imagined an alternative form of internationalism, exemplified by a alternative form of international conference, which challenged state-centric readings of global power relations.

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Introduction

On the first of December 1949 ninety-three pacifists, from thirty-one countries, met in the small town of Santiniketan, India, 160 km north of Calcutta. After a week the delegates split into small groups, travelled around India along prepared itineraries, and visited sites associated with the life and work of Mohandas Gandhi. They reconvened two weeks later, over 1000 km away, among the gently rolling hills of the Central Provinces at Gandhi's home village of Sevagram. It "was certainly an unusual gathering," wrote the organising committee chairman Horace Alexander (1949: 1), "I've attended a good many international conferences, Western variety. These usually consist of numbers of Europeans and Americans, with a small scattering of Westernized Indians, Chinese, Africans and others... international conferences are always influenced by their environment. If you meet in Washington or Paris or Geneva the world looks quite a different place from the picture you get in Santiniketan."

This essay considers how the practice of international conferencing was central to imagining, negotiating and contesting the broader construction of post-war internationalism. It shows how, like the conference, internationalism was also in Alexander's words 'always influenced by its environment'. It is a transformative and world-making pursuit whose universalist claims are invariably, "partial, multiple and fractured; they are never finished or fully formed, but rather can be generated or articulated in different ways." (Featherstone, 2012: 38) An examination of conferencing demonstrates that internationalism, and 'the international', was not a given category or scale, but a way of encasing different conceptions of the world which were tied to the places in which it was debated and sustained. It has therefore both a history and a geography which belies its otherwise transcendent claims, and requires greater interrogation by geographers. As Stephen Legg (2014) has questioned of India's princely geographies, in what follows I also ask, quite simply, for the pacifists meeting in Santiniketan where was the international?

The task of placing internationalism prompts the two key contributions of this paper. Firstly, whilst many accounts of internationalism draw explicitly on the role of international conferences, few examine the practice of conferencing itself. This paper shows

E-mail address: jake.hodder@gmail.com.

how the conference operated as a stage-managed event through which to negotiate, perform and project an alternative vision of internationalism. Half conference, half pilgrimage, total immersion in India was offered to delegates as an opportunity to absorb the Gandhian non-violent tradition. The paper uses the conference to (re)map the contours of the pacifist internationalist imagination. This was not supposedly embedded in the conventional sites of liberal internationalism (Washington, Paris or Geneva as Alexander put it), but linked to a reading of a so-called 'exotic' Eastern spiritualism. As such, far from inconsequential or trivial, the cultural and historical context of India was at the heart of the conference's enactment of global pacifist citizenship. Like the Soviet Union to world Communism, or more accurately Jerusalem to world Christianity, pacifists imagined an uneven geographical arena which, whilst ostensibly universal in scope, held India (or 'the Land of Gandhi') with unequalled reverence.

Secondly, the paper argues that whilst geographers have turned to considering conferences as geopolitical events, this has almost exclusively been reserved to 'summitry', or state-accredited spaces of 'high diplomacy', which is necessarily represented by Heads of State or formal diplomatic corps. This paper posits that an examination of the full-array of conferencing (of gatherings, assemblies, retreats and meetings) has tended to be neglected, along with the wider and rather different geographies that these entail. I contend that studying 'other conferences' by necessity opens up consideration of other forms of internationalism. Whilst not Versailles, the diffuse impacts and after-lives of these 'other conferences', often difficult to map, draw our attention to a struggling genealogy of counter-internationalisms. As historians and geographers alike show how conferencing is tied to elaborate displays of power and wealth (Craggs, 2014a; Shimazu, 2013), the World Pacifist Meeting was purposefully oppositional in every sense, reflecting instead an anti-statist internationalism staged in an austere pacifist minimalism.

The first part of the paper explores how conferences can be examined, metaphorically, as theatrical events understood "through a closer look at the particular stages, scripts, casts and audiences they produced." (Death, 2011a: 8) This is followed by an introduction to the case study of the 1949 World Pacifist Meeting. By examining the choice of conference delegates and location, the paper argues that the event's staging was inexorably tied to its wider internationalist claims. Delegates imagined a post-war world in which warring nations would be displaced by international authority, world community and global citizenship; ostensibly a form of internationalism which did not foretell greater collaboration between borders, but dismantling them entirely. Yet internationalism sits within a context. The terms of the conference were paradoxically arranged as both 'singularly free from any sense of geographical limitation', and yet almost mythically 'scattered over the earth of India'. The conference's Indian (and specifically Gandhian) symbolism was not only figurative however, but shaped the delegates' own politics of reconciling pacifism with state-craft; of violent nationalisms and non-violent internationalisms. Ultimately the paper examines how the organisers' attempts to conceptualise a different kind of internationalism, exemplified by a different kind of international conference, had to confront the everyday challenges of organising and paying for a large, credible, international, political event.

Internationalism, stage-managed

In recent years, increasing academic attention has been given to both conferencing and internationalism. Work has shown how, from the start of the twentieth century, internationalism became a core objective across a wide range of political perspectives. These

extended from building an international apparatus of leagues and institutions for cultural, intellectual and scientific collaboration (Iriye, 1997, 2002; Laqua, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Neumann, 2012; Weindling, 1995) to radical political programmes associated with anti-colonialism and the rights of oppressed groups (Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Makalani, 2011; Singh, 2004).

Whilst the durability and versatility of internationalism testifies to the transcendent power of what Denis Cosgrove (2001: 6) termed the "poetics of global space", research on the conferences in which internationalism was a central concern has worked to ground them in rich cultural, historical and political contexts. In particular, academics have shown how international conferences operate as stage-managed events by drawing on a growing literature of how both conferences (Craggs, 2014a; Craggs & Mahony, 2014) and international systems more widely (Ringmar, 2012) are presented, scripted and performed, and the role that techniques of theatricality play in the conduct of global affairs. Carl Death has shown, for example, how analysing conferences as moments of political theatre is critical to understanding how international legitimacy is enacted (2011a), and how modern forms of governmentality are exercised (2011b). By re-centring spaces of hospitality and association as key sites in the making of political geographies (Craggs, 2012, 2014b; also see Baker, 2013), work has examined the culturally varied spaces in which diplomacy happens and 'the international' is brought into being (McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012; Neumann, 2012). Specific attention, for example, has focussed on the way in which events are scripted and cities staged for performing certain kinds of internationalist claims whilst silencing others (see Burton, 2010; Shimazu, 2013 on the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung).

Conferences are thereby rich analytical examples of what Paul Routledge (2003) terms 'convergence space', enmeshed in wider geographies of travel, mobility and circulation which sustain 'the international' as a political and social construction. They provide intermediate spaces for intellectual encounter and exchange between those whose political trajectories may otherwise be vastly dissimilar. Conferencing the international, therefore, refocuses our frame onto the "concrete sphere of the local milieu in which the performance takes place." (Shimazu, 2012: 335) It encourages a reading of internationalism which is sensitive to moments of meeting and interchange which are fractured by power; at times making borders as much as transcending them.

Yet whilst methodologically the study of conferencing has been reassessed, there has not been a comparable empirical broadening of the range of conferences under consideration. An emphasis on conferences as political theatre, whilst valuable in situating events within wider circuits of privilege and resistance, also risks resigning internationalism to traditional diplomatic networks or nationalistic 'high politics'. To date, the study of conferences has remained largely contained to those of the highest order, exemplified by the term 'summitry' (Constantinou, 1998; Reynolds, 2009). Recent attention has addressed how our modern globalised world is shaped by the likes of G20 meetings (Cooper, 2010), Climate Change Summits (Death, 2011a; Giorgetti, 1999; Mintzer & Leonard, 1994) and World Economic Forums (Graz, 2003), with places like Davos and Kyoto holding widespread register. Similarly, work on counter-globalisation movements has been equally informed by elite conferencing as a target of protest against the vision of (neo-)liberal internationalism which these events are seen to encapsulate (Bunnell, 2007; Death, 2011b; Featherstone, 2008; see "summit hopping" in Wood, 2012: 84). This has tended to preclude analysis of how alternative conferencing spaces and practices have been forged, by whom and for what purposes (Mueller, 2001).

Consequently, much of the focus of twentieth century internationalism has been shaped by the discussions held in places like

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