

**Laura Polexe: Netzwerke und Freundschaft. Sozialdemokraten in Rumänien, Russland und der Schweiz an der Schwelle zum 20. Jahrhundert, Göttingen, V&R Unipress, 2011. 270 p. – ISBN 978-3-899718-07-2.**

**Kevin J. Callahan,  
University of Saint Joseph, West Hartford/CT, United States**

Laura Polexe has written an interesting study on the political networks and friendships of socialists in the era of the Second International. The diverse relationships among Romanian, Russian and Swiss social democrats such as Hermann Greulich, Robert Grimm, Pavel Axelrod, Sergei Plekhanov, Leon Trotsky, Christian Rakovsky and Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea are specifically examined from the early 1880s until 1917. This piece of scholarship signals renewed interest in casting the world's largest international social and political movement of the long nineteenth century in a new light. With the centennials of World War I and the Russian Revolution on the horizon, it is important that scholars revisit the Second International and examine it with new questions, insights and research methodologies. Polexe provides a good example of how this can be done.

The heyday of research on the Second International was during the height of the Cold War. Political biographies, ideological traditions, national party and labor organizations – these topics dominated the research agenda from the 1940s through 1970s. The standard works of G.D.H. Cole, Julius Braunthal and James Joll provided synthetic overviews of the organization,<sup>1</sup> while other scholars unearthed ideological disputes, the idea of the nation in socialist thought, the role of individual leaders, and the struggle for peace and against imperialism in monographic studies. Much of this scholarship fixated on two issues: the ostensible “failure” of the International in August 1914 to prevent war, and the schism of the European Left. Consequently, these scholars interpreted the evidence at times in a teleological fashion in the attempt to explain the weaknesses and internal fissures of the International. Whilst they uncovered a diverse movement disunited by ideological, tactical, and national differences, they did not adequately explain why international socialism was able to flourish in the first place. Even Georges Haupt, whose erudite essays on varied topics of international socialism anticipated the cultural turn in history, focused mainly on the collapse of the Second International.<sup>2</sup>

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, interest in pre-World War I international socialism has waned, unlike the innovative scholarly work on European and Soviet communism. Studies in the 1990s investigated the intricate web of relationships between French and German socialists and their organizations and meticulously evaluated the International's unstable origins amid competing political groups. This fine scholarship moved beyond the preoccupations of “Cold War” historians.<sup>3</sup> And yet, there is still much about international socialism that remains unexplored and unexplained, particularly in the areas of gender and culture. Access to sources has never been greater such as the extensive personal papers of

---

<sup>1</sup> Julius Braunthal: *Geschichte der Internationale*. Vol. 1, Berlin-Bonn, Dietz Verlag, 1974; G.D.H. Cole: *A History of Socialist Thought*. Vol III: *The Second International*, London, MacMillan & Co, 1956; James Joll: *The Second International. 1889-1914*, London, Routledge & Kegan, 1974<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Haupt: *Socialism and the Great War. The Collapse of the Second International*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Louise Goergen: *Les relations entre socialistes allemands et français a l'époque de la Deuxième Internationale (1889-1914)*, Doctoral thesis, Saint-Denis, Paris, 1998; Markus Bürgi: *Die Anfänge der zweiten Internationale*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 1996.

International Socialist Bureau secretary Camille Huysmans or the holdings of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union, some of which are also available on microfilm in Western Europe socialist libraries. Combined with new historical methods in social movement theory, cultural studies and discourse analysis, our knowledge of international socialism is thus ripe for reassessment. Alongside a recent monograph on the Second International's "demonstration culture,"<sup>4</sup> the content of which in many ways reinforces the findings of Polexe, *Netzwerke und Freundschaft* marks another important interdisciplinary study on the Second International, furthering our understanding of how international socialism fostered cohesion among its members and functioned much like an "imagined community."

The book is organized into four parts: Introduction (1), International Social Democracy and Networks (2), Networks, Communication and Friendship (3), and Friendship and Acquaintance (4). The first part provides an overview of the study. Polexe's goal "is to describe and analyze the relations of social democrats from Romania, Russia and Switzerland from the perspective of the networks, in which they operated with specific consideration to friendship." (35). The research is based mainly on archival sources from Romania, Switzerland, the personal papers of socialists located at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the published private correspondence and memoirs of socialists like Karl Kautsky and Trotsky. After an exhaustive survey of the historical literature(s), Polexe discusses methodological issues and concepts. Drawing from "cultural history, network research, friendship as a relationship culture [Beziehungskultur] and socialism research," (37) the author seeks to illuminate the multiple relations within the Second International primarily from the perspective of individual actors. In order to accomplish this, Polexe persuasively argues that it is necessary to sketch out the historical "social space" that these individuals shaped and were shaped by: in particular, their networks. And this in turn requires attention to biographical information of the actors and their life circumstances, to their position within their respective national and international socialist movements, and to the socialist *intellectual community* (Denkkollektiv) that they inhabited. After another lengthy account of the meanings of friendship from antiquity through the nineteenth century, Polexe defines the central term of her book. Friendship is a "relationship that is fundamentally based on voluntariness and reciprocity." (65) For socialists of the era, this bond served as a source of support – social, economic, emotional and obviously political – or even that of an *ersatz* family, especially for those in exile. Moreover, the author contends that there was a "specific social democratic understanding of friendship as the ideal of ethical, political and social development." (66)

The second part of the book sketches the history of the Second International and short biographies on the key socialists, whose interactions form the content of the third and fourth part of the book. Polexe sums up well the contribution of her research to the historiography of the Second International with the astute observation: "The Second International is more than just the history of its congresses or the history of its failure in light of the First World War." (67). Emphasis is instead placed on Switzerland as a land for political refugees, who were free to carry out their political activities under the protection of a neutral country. Some, like the German-born Greulich, became central figures in Swiss socialism, while others – mainly Russian émigrés including female revolutionaries like Vera Zasulich – formed their own self-contained colonies in Zurich and Geneva and constantly struggled from financial hardship. The life of Racovsky fits the mold well of a cosmopolitan socialist intertwined in multiple

---

<sup>4</sup> Kevin J. Callahan: *Demonstration Culture. European Socialism and the Second International. 1889-1914*, Leicester, Troubadour, 2010.

transnational networks from the 1880s until his execution during the Stalinist purges, while the Russian Axelrod was the key conduit of information on the Balkans for German Kautsky. In her overview of Russian and Romanian socialists in Switzerland, Polexe reinforces her broader argument that the “networks of international social democracy knew no borders” (101). Thus, we are asked to put aside our national lens and appreciate the fact that the history of “Swiss” socialism is connected to that of “Romanian” socialism and vice versa.

Part three, which contains the most innovative material of the book, shifts our focus from personal biography to an examination of the social and culture spaces that socialists occupied and the values and language that underpinned those interactions and locations. Two types of encounters, virtual and real, are highlighted. Virtual sites refer to the print culture that socialists avidly participated in from newspapers and pamphlets to personal correspondence. The author correctly highlights that these “virtual sites” produced a proletarian “alternative public sphere.” (118) Analysis of the letter exchanges of socialists reveals that these individuals sustained friendships on varying levels through financial support, hospitality and information transfer. Because those friendships were both political and personal, many like Kautsky and Racovsky were unable to withstand the cleavages of international socialism during the Great War.

The porous boundaries between public and private, personal and political, found in letter correspondence was also evident at real “encounter sites” like international socialist congresses. At these events, internationalism was experienced and displayed through social activities, processions, and symbolism. Delegates exchanged views and information, while collectively these events, Polexe rightly stresses, could serve to perform and publicize internationalism not only to cement bonds among delegates but to advance “socialist marketing” and propaganda (132). The author briefly discusses how such international socialist events were communicated via the socialist press to national and local readers in Rumania, whose socialist party in turn expressed its internationalism through small acts of solidarity. Using the examples of Zurich 1893 and Basel 1912 the author provides good insights on how organization committees sought to achieve the goal of fraternity and solidarity. Here and elsewhere, the author could tell us a bit more on the extent to which those ambitions met with success and how the main personalities of the study – Plekhanov, Greulich, Racovsky and so forth – might have played a role in them. Whilst Basel was an impressive socialist spectacle and commanded media attention (145), it was less the case with the congress in Zurich, because ideological discord among delegates often marred public display of socialist solidarity.

The rest of part three is devoted to a discussion of socialist rituals, social democratic identity, the values of trust and solidarity, and the semantics of the terms “brother,” “friend,” and “comrade”. Ritualistic activity functioned to confirm and stoke the emotional energy of the movement, whereas social democratic identity demarcated a distinct socialist social space, typified by the values of solidarity and fraternity, a Marxian historical worldview and a common vernacular. The author explains well the significance of these cultural practices, drawing deftly on cultural theory, and argues many of them were derivative of bourgeois norms. Solid evidence is provided when comparing ritualistic forms like May Day in Switzerland, Romania and Russia. Likewise the pronouncements of leaders illustrate the idealistic ethos of socialism as a secular religion. More developed examples showing how varied rites and beliefs manifested themselves in praxis and networks would yield further insight into the creation of international socialist identity and community.

The final part takes up the themes of “friendship” and “acquaintance” through a careful analysis of the letter exchanges of social democrats. The goal of the author is to demonstrate with specific examples how socialist actors related to each other within the broader realm of the socialist social space, the focus of part three. Polexe distinguishes between “proletarian” and personal friendship. The former is based on common socialist ideals and open to members of the movement, while the latter involves intimate and close connections. In reality, the two types of friendship usually overlapped among socialists. With a brief informative overview on the personal experiences and networks of revolutionary Russian women, Polexe suggests that gender is a useful category to analyze distinct types of socialist friendship and points to the need of a broader study on gender and international socialism.<sup>5</sup> Careful analysis of the acquaintances and friendships of Trotsky, Kautsky, Racovsky, Axelrod, Plekhanov and other socialists is provided. We learn that these individuals supported each other financially through patronage and took a personal interest in each other’s personal and familial wellbeing. The evaluation of the Kautsky-Axelrod relationship is particularly noteworthy. Through their letters, Axelrod expressed his self-doubts as a socialist theorist and relied on Kautsky’s responses as a vehicle for self-affirmation; “Axelrod saw Kautsky as his alter-ego.” (207). There were, of course, barriers to socialist friendship. Personal differences or rivalry, ideological disputes and historical events and circumstances put a strain on or even severed the multilayered networks, upon which socialists relied in their relationships to each other.

In a short conclusion, Polexe reiterates some of the distinctive traits of the social democratic notion of friendship in the era of the Second International. It included the political values of solidarity and equality and developed its own language and rituals, through which friendship was forged and renewed. Social democratic friendship served as an identity marker against other societal actors, even if some of its forms, according to the author, contained bourgeois elements. For those individuals in her study – Plekhanov, Racovsky, Greulich, Trotsky and others –, friendship was a transnational bond, although one should also be mindful of the strong pull of national identity to the socialists of the Second International.

Overall, Polexe has made a vital contribution toward explaining how the international socialist community was created, experienced and sustained. The book helps correct the traditional historiography with its emphasis on ideological discord and collapse. Polexe shows us convincingly that the “networks were of fundamental importance for the development, promotion and existence of the Second International.” (237)

---

<sup>5</sup> A good model here is Leila J. Rupp: *Worlds of Women. The Making of an International Women’s Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997. If there are enough sources for a larger study beyond biographies of leading socialist women like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai is another matter.