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Social Democracy and the Question of Labour Migration before World War I

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Abstract:

The split in the Second International in 1914 dramatically expressed the insurmountable limits of its proclaimed internationalism. Surprising though they were to many contemporary observers, the events of the summer of that year were the result of pre-existing tensions that were long hidden behind radically worded compromise resolutions in the congresses of the International. In general, these pre-existing tensions had been assessed with a focus on the question of militarism, the colonial question and even the problems of patriotism and nationalism. Less attention, in relative terms, has been paid to the question of migrations, even though it was an important debate of the first decade of the 20th century. Drawing upon a wide range of secondary literature, socialist newspapers from different countries and archive materials of the Second International, this paper will explore the debates of the Amsterdam (1904) and especially the Stuttgart (1907) congresses, against the background of the ideas and development of the different socialist parties, particularly those of countries and regions of immigration such as Argentina, the United States, Australia and South Africa. More generally, it seeks to draw some conclusions about the tensions that have crossed the global history of the working class in terms of nationalism and racism.

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, 20 August 1904, hundreds of delegates and militants filled the imposing *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam to participate in the last session of the sixth congress of the Second International. The atmosphere was cheerful and optimistic: after several days of discussion that reached a climax during the famous debate between August Bebel and Jean Jaurès, it was time to close the congress and celebrate the progress and fraternity of socialist parties of all countries. Shortly after beginning their plenary session, the delegates were asked to review some remaining items on the agenda: among them, a motion presented by the Argentine Socialist Party on the question of labour migration. Manuel Ugarte, a young Argentine writer who lived in Europe and acted as representative of his comrades who could not afford to make the trip, briefly presented the most significant arguments. His proposal did not find unanimous acceptance and, after a brief discussion, the Scottish labour leader James Keir Hardie successfully requested that the question be postponed. Three years later, indeed, the topic occupied a more prominent place on the agenda of the seventh congress of the International, held in Stuttgart. The debate in a special commission lasted for three days and several proposals were submitted, expressing dissimilar points of view, with leaders and activists from many socialist parties taking part in a sometimes unpleasant and acrimonious debate. Although the meeting finally approved a radically worded resolution, many voices expressed restrictive and racist perspectives regarding the flow of migrants across regions and national borders. Between Buenos Aires and Stuttgart, the issue had triggered a global discussion, prompting interventions and collecting experiences from places as distant as Sydney, Johannesburg, New York, Budapest, Warsaw, and Tokyo.

As it happens with other political traditions of the left, the history of the Second International was originally examined by scholars who were militants and sympathisers of the movement. The earliest and most classic example is Jean Longuet (1913), but also the monumental works of G. D. H. Cole (1953-1960) and Julius Braunthal (1961-1963) can be included in this category. Just like other somewhat shorter but important books that came out in these years, such as those by James Joll (1955) and Patricia Van der Esch (1957), this literature mostly focused on an ideological and institutional history of the movement. In any case, the 1960s and 1970s represented a ‘golden age’ for the historiography of socialism in general and the Second International in particular, as shown by syntheses such as Annie Kriegel’s (1964) and collective volumes such as those edited by Milorad Drachkovitch (1966), Jacques Droz (1972-1978) or a team led by Eric Hobsbawm and other colleagues for the Italian publishing house Einaudi (1978-1982). As it was pointed out in several historiographical accounts, however, most of this literature remained focused on the history of *national* cases. It was undoubtedly Georges Haupt’s learned studies which helped reorient the historiography of international social democracy of the pre-World War I period (Haupt, 1964, 1965, 1969, 1972, 1986, among others). Criticising purely institutional histories, he stressed the need to link the history of social democracy with the living history of the workers’ movement and the society in which these socialist groups were active. It was necessary, he argued, to move ‘from a history of the Socialist International to an international history of socialism.’

The suggestion was made, and the stakes were high, but things did not turn out well in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite the publication of some global works, for instance by Donald Sassoon (1996) or Geoff Eley (2002), the history of socialism lost momentum among historians of European countries. As Kevin Callahan pointed out in a recent historiographical survey (2020), the peak of interest in the Second International had coincided with the period of the Cold War, only to fade after its end — in an essay published just over a decade ago, Patrizia Dogliani (2009) did not hide her concern for what seemed to be an almost abandoned field. In the last decade, however, the topic has regained importance, albeit with a somewhat different perspective. Researchers seem now less focused on explaining everything related with the Second International with reference to what happened in 1914, and therefore the question of its ‘betrayal’, ‘failure’, or at least ‘collapse’ has lost centrality. Instead, new studies concentrate more on what the International *did* manage to achieve in its quarter-century of existence, such as a deep-rooted

'demonstration culture' (Callahan, 2010) or a significant capacity to create internationalist links and intervene in diplomatic crises (Marcobelli, 2019), for example.

Drawing upon some of Haupt's insights but also conversating with more recent trends that promote a 'global history of labour' (Van der Linden, 2008), this renewed interest in the Second International developed a much more transnational perspective and therefore brought to the fore different aspects of socialist *internationalism* (some examples, albeit heterogeneous, are Donald, 2008; Schickl, 2012; Meriggi, 2014; Dogliani, 2017; Lademacher, 2018; Delalande, 2019). There have also been novelties on a more methodological level: authors such as Callahan and more recently Alayrac (2018) and Marcobelli, for example, have examined international congresses from a new perspective, focusing more on cultural aspects and dynamics of sociability than on their resolutions or strictly institutional and ideological aspects. But also in this latter aspect there has been progress, as revealed by the recent publication of the resolutions of the Second International in English (Taber, 2021) and, more generally, the studies on the intellectual history of Marxism and socialism included in the prolific "Historical Materialism" series edited by Brill (see, for example, Gaido and Day, 2011). Likewise, many studies focusing on the transnational links of social democracy in the post-World War I period have appeared in recent years (Imlay, 2013, 2014, 2018; Shaev, 2016, 2018, 2020; De Graaf, 2019; Bellucci and Weiss, 2020; Fulla and Lazar, 2021). Although strongly focused on European experiences, they have contributed to renovate the interest for the history of socialism with a transnational perspective.

Migration history, in turn, is experiencing significant expansion and development, in many cases in fruitful dialogue with (transnational) labour history. Guerin-Gonzales and Strikwerda (1998), Strikwerda (1999), Lucassen (1998, 2005) and Lucassen, Feldman and Oltmer (2006), among many others, provide valuable global perspectives to examine the link between labour movements and the question of immigration in the long term. With smaller geographical scales, there is abundant literature devoted to examining the way in which labour and socialist organisations approached the question of migration, as well as the intersections among class, race, ethnicity, and nation it sparked. I want to highlight works focused on non-European countries and regions where immigration played a key role in the making of labour movements. First and foremost, of course, the case of the United States, where the labour movement played a very active role in the campaigns for the prohibition of Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century (see, among many others, Black, 1963; Saxton, 1971; Collomp, 1988 and 1999; Weir, 2000; Chang, 2009; Heidemann, 2018) and where even socialist organisations implemented restrictive and anti-Asian positions, not without strong internal tensions (Leinenweber, 1968; Foner, 1977; Miller, 1976, 1996 and 2003; Costaguta, 2019). Secondly, areas belonging to the British Empire or its sphere of influence: see for example the wide and rich historiographical production on the role of the labour movement and early socialist groups around the restrictive policy of 'White Australia' (Curthoys and Markus, 1978; Burgmann, 1984; Markey, 1996; Martinez, 1999; Ryan, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2012; Byrne, 2015) and the literature devoted to the South African case, which has produced important contributions to global discussions about a strongly unionised and militant 'white labourism,' at the same time reluctant to the immigration of non-European population (Ticktin, 1973; Hyslop, 1999, 2001, 2010; Katz, 1999; Kenefick, 2010; Huynh, 2012; Visser, 2012). There are also important contributions devoted to the tensions arising because of migrations within the European continent: they explore, for instance, the reactions against Italian and Belgian immigrants in France (Barnabà, 2009; Noiriel, 2009; Cabot, 2017) or against workers from Southern and Eastern Europe in Germany (Del Fabbro, 1989; Kulczycki, 1989, 1994; Forberg, 1997). Donna Gabaccia (1994, 1997) wrote some excellent works on the role played by Italian emigration in the global history of the working class in this 'age of empire' and the question of emigration in the political configuration of the Jewish socialist movement in the period of the Second International has also received attention (Mendelsohn, 1964; Gechtman, 2011; Wolff, 2020).

In his chapter devoted to the history of the Second International on the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Socialism* edited by Marcel van der Linden, French historian Jean-Numa Ducange suggests that 'we

need a specific study of the nationalities and colonial question, and more generally, of the question of racism.' Moreover, he argues that 'if we want to properly understand the International's history, we have to decentre our approach, and avoid the idea that "everything happened in Europe." Just as labour history has taken to a global approach, we should do the same when we write the history of the Second International.' Following on these ideas, I want to argue that the renewed interest in the history of transnational socialism could profit from the insights of migration history to explore one of the least researched discussions of the experience of the Second International, namely the debate around the question of labour migrations. Classic works of the 1960s and 1970s (Haupt and Rebérioux, 1967; Haupt, Löwy and Weill, 1974), as well as a recent work by Ducange himself (2021), addressed the place of the 'national' and 'colonial' questions in the history of socialism, and showed the tensions that ran through the Second International even in the successful years of the first decade of the twentieth century. At the same time, it is noteworthy that, despite its obvious links with other discussions, the question of migration received relatively less attention, apart from the writings by Claudie Weill, who briefly examined the way in which the congresses of the Second International and its social democratic successor, the Labour and Socialist International, addressed the movement of migrant workers (Weill, 1987, 2001). More recently, it is also worth mentioning the contributions of Geli (2005), focused on the Argentine case, and Merkel and Müller (2021), focused on the discussion of the immigration of Asian 'coolies' in the socialist press of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Although it is certainly useful to move away from a perspective that reads everything that happened since 1889 with the lens of the events of 1914, it remains important to examine the complex dialectic between centrifugal and centripetal forces that ran through socialism internationalism during this period and the discussion around migration seems to be an interesting case in point. Drawing upon secondary literature, socialist newspapers from different countries and archival material of the Second International, this paper provides an overview of the debates of both congresses and places them against a broader context. What follows is divided in four sections: the first explores the arguments of socialists in several 'receiving' countries, in particular Argentina and the United States, that sparked the discussion at the Amsterdam congress in 1904; the second focuses on the contributions of Central and Eastern European socialists; the third section examines the debate that took place at the Stuttgart congress. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research.

SOCIALISTS AND IMMIGRATION IN 'RECEIVING' COUNTRIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

On February 13, 1902, delegates from different trade unions organised a meeting in downtown Buenos Aires 'to discuss the best way to counteract the interested propaganda made in European countries, and especially in Italy, to direct the immigration flow to Argentina.' *La Vanguardia*, official organ of the local Socialist Party, reported on the meeting and reminded its readers about the importance of the topic.¹ For the party, the issue was not new: its 'minimum program', approved in the founding congress of 1896, included an article calling for the 'suppression of all artificial encouragement of immigration.'² Throughout 1902, in any case, the matter gained ground and in September the party leadership decided to ask the International Socialist Bureau to include the issue in the agenda of the next congress of the International. The ISB approved the request in July 1903 (Haupt, 1969), which obliged Argentine socialists to prepare a larger and more detailed proposal. The National Council immediately appointed three of the main party leaders, Juan B. Justo, Alfredo Palacios and Enrique del Valle Iberlucea, to work

¹ *La Vanguardia* (Buenos Aires), 1 March 1902.

² Argentina experienced a substantial population growth in the last third of the 19th century, mostly due to the notorious surge in European immigration, which took a decisive leap in the 1880s. See Poy (2014).

on the topic. The report, presented in the local newspaper in December 1903 and later published by the International in different languages, would serve as the starting point of a broad debate.³

The main argument of Argentine socialists was that not all immigration had a positive effect for the local working class. ‘Whereas it is desirable’, they argued, ‘to receive a foreign contingent which really improves the situation of the working class, the schemes that promote artificial currents of migration, incited by capitalist and political greed, must be severely condemned.’ The assessment was followed by a line of action: the international proletariat must ‘create a movement tending to thwart the action of bourgeois governments in matters of emigration and immigration.’ In the countries receiving immigrants, socialist parties were called to reject ‘all public expenses meant to artificially favour immigration’, whereas in the ‘exporting’ European countries they had to strictly control agencies and middlemen. Moreover, working class parties needed to share ‘impartial and exact’ information in order to prevent workers from being fooled with false promises. The rest of the text was a contribution towards that goal, as it described the harsh situation of labourers in Argentina. In the end, the document also pointed out that most immigrants were reluctant to obtain the Argentine citizenship, one of the reasons being that they were interested in preserving their original nationality (Poy, 2015, 2020). The proposal thus called for a campaign to ‘ensure that the voluntary acquisition of citizenship in a country does not deprive the right to keep the citizenship of origin once the subject or citizen has returned to his or her homeland.’

In general terms, the Argentine proposal was a moderate one. Most local socialist leaders were recent European migrants themselves and this fact, combined with a clear racial bias toward the indigenous population, explains why they did not promote restrictive measures towards European migrants, coining instead the idea of ‘natural’ v. ‘artificial’ immigration (Geli, 2005). For Argentine socialists, European immigration was a good thing, even a factor of ‘development’ of the local, backward, working class, but it could backfire if it was too abundant.

Although included in the agenda, the topic did not occupy an important place during the Amsterdam congress. Due to lack of time, it had not been discussed in a special commission, and therefore was included in the last day’s plenary session, among other pending business.⁴ The proposal presented by the commission was in line with the text sent by the Argentinians, although with some additions. It started by pointing out that migrants were ‘victims of the capitalist regime’ but it was also mentioned that they usually ‘had the prospect of replacing strikers.’ As for practical steps, the motion condemned ‘all legislative measures aimed at preventing migration’, something which was not included in the Argentine proposal, and declared that it was necessary to ‘enlighten the emigrants artificially attracted by capitalist promoters, and to counteract the false information.’ It also requested that socialist parliamentarians ask for a ‘control of abuses’ and, taking up the Argentine proposal, demanded that immigrants be granted political rights in the countries of destination without losing them in their lands of origin.

This draft was met with a counterproposal, drawn up during the session by American, Australian, and Dutch socialists.⁵ It started by warning about ‘the dangers to the working class which arise from the immigration of foreign workers’, namely ‘a lowering of wages, a ready supply of strike-breakers and sometimes bloody conflicts.’ It did formally reject ‘all laws which tend to exclude foreign workingmen who have been forced to emigrate through oppressive conditions’ and hoped that, under socialist influence, immigrants would eventually join the local trade unions and demand the same rate of wages.

³ We use here the original Spanish version, published in *La Vanguardia*, 19 December 1903. Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English in this paper are mine.

⁴ The reconstruction of the discussion is based on the German and French minutes (*Internationaler Sozialisten-Kongress zu Amsterdam: 14. bis 20. August 1904*, Berlin, Buchhandlung Vorwärts, 1904; *Congrès socialiste international, Amsterdam 14-20 août 1904*, republished in Geneva, Minkoff, 1985).

⁵ The counterproposal was signed by Henri van Kol and Piet Verdorst (the Netherlands), Morris Hillquit, H. Schlüter and Algernon Lee (United States) and Claude Thompson (Australia).

However, it went on to say that ‘workers of backward races (such as Asiatic and African *coolies*) are frequently imported by capitalists to keep down native labour by means of cheap competition, and that such imported workingmen, who very readily submit to exploitation, frequently live in a condition of thinly disguised slavery.’ The proposal, which summed up the arguments of socialists of countries and regions concerned with the migration of Asian workers, concluded that social democracy should ‘combat with all means at its command the application of this method to destroy labour organisations and lower the standard of living of the working class, whereby the progress and the ultimate realization of socialism would be retarded.’

During the short debate that followed, it became clear that the main issue at stake would be that of the ‘people of colour.’ The American Morris Hillquit argued that the labour movement must distinguish ‘between workers of civilised countries and those of uncivilised countries, between workers who are in the process of class struggle, or at least in the process of developing class consciousness, and those who do not yet have the slightest precondition for it.’ He recalled, of course, that American trade unions have been very vocal and active in the campaign for the prohibition of Chinese migration. ‘This may sound reactionary’, Hillquit argued, ‘but it is indispensable if we do not want to destroy the whole movement, for it is a vital interest of our labour movement to keep out *coolies* and negroes.’

To be sure, the arguments of Hillquit and his comrades put into question the celebratory and internationalist mood of the closing plenary session of the congress. An uncomfortable spirit spread through the room and several delegates from France, the United States and Japan took the floor to heavily criticise the motion, even recalling Marx’s call for proletarians of all lands to unite, rather than divide, themselves. Others, like Fritz Paepflow, from the German SPD, put forward a more moderate perspective and revealed that tensions and resentments also lingered on among European socialists: he argued that ‘Marx would never have demanded that the most backward workers be let in without any consideration for the concrete conditions of their own country, to demand, for example, that the German construction workers allow their situation to be made significantly worse by the unrestricted immigration of Italian workers.’ He admitted, however, that he could not side with Hillquit’s motion, as the trade unions of each country had the duty to educate the immigrant workers and to bring them into their organisations. In view of the lack of time and the complexity of the debate, James Keir Hardie asked to postpone the question until the next congress. The motion was accepted, and the debate finished with a general statement calling the unions to ‘make the acceptance of foreigners as easy as possible.’

The question remained open, indeed, and the participants made themselves ready for a more serious controversy. Three years later, in a report published in the *Official Bulletin of the Socialist Party of America* in January 1907, Hillquit mentioned that the question of migration was of ‘vital importance’ for American socialists. After summarizing the debate in Amsterdam, Hillquit openly asked his fellow comrades if they could ‘passively tolerate the capitalist practice of artificially stimulating emigration and importing cheap labor from foreign countries.’ He continued: ‘Do we favor or are we opposed to such legislative measures as the Chinese exclusion law or the prohibition of importation of contract labor? These are questions which our party can no longer evade.’⁶

Two months later, the National Executive Committee passed a resolution to be presented at Stuttgart, basically a more developed continuation of the text drafted in Amsterdam. Written by Hillquit, it argued that certain labour migration was unavoidable ‘under a highly developed system of capitalism’, and that in other cases migration was ‘artificially stimulated by steamship and railroad companies, land speculators and other capitalist promoters.’ In this latter case the migrants were considered victims of false accounts and lies, which led them to ‘abandon their work, homes and friends and exhaust their scanty savings in travel only to find themselves suffering untold hardships and privations.’ So far, the argument was pretty analogous to the one developed by the Argentinians. However, Hillquit moved on to argue that there was a *third* type of migration, namely ‘the deliberate importation of foreign labor by

⁶ *The Socialist Party Official Bulletin*, III, 5, January 1907.

the capitalist class for the purpose of increasing the competition between the workmen of the importing country, lowering their wages and breaking the power of their organizations.’ This type of imported labourers could be ‘individually hired by contract in other capitalist countries or imported in masses from countries yet hardly touched by the capitalist mode of production.’

In an editorial piece published in the *International Socialist Review*, Hillquit reminded the readers that organised labour in the United States strongly supported restrictions to migration. After quoting Gompers, he acknowledged that this perspective expressed ‘the pure and simple trade-union view on the subject.’ However, he admitted that ‘the unfriendly attitude of American labor towards immigration is not entirely without foundation, at least as far as the economic aspect of the question is concerned’. Even if socialists did not share this view, Hillquit argued, they could not ignore the problem altogether. Actually, he stressed that ‘the majority of the American socialists side with the trade unions in their demand for the exclusion of workmen of such races and nations.’⁷ By token of this argumentation, American socialists would claim that a clear differentiation should be made between the first two categories, which included what they labeled ‘bonafide immigrants’ and the third one, under which they included Chinese and other Asian workers. This proposal was complemented by a resolution of Algernon Lee, also adopted by the National Committee, which attempted to soften the racial bias of the main resolution by calling for common organisation of workers regardless their origin. It called to ‘procure and protect for all residents in the United States, regardless of race or nativity, full and equal civil and political rights’, as well as to ‘promote the enrollment of workers of alien race or nativity in the political and industrial organizations of the working class.’ Insofar as it referred to workers who were already living in the United States, however, it was not incompatible the restrictions on migration.

This line of argument was complemented by Dutch socialists, who had already supported the American resolution in the previous congress. In a long article published in the Dutch socialist newspaper *Het Volk* in August 1907, Henri van Kol set out to provide a thorough examination on the topic.⁸ Not surprisingly, he also stressed the necessity of distinguishing between migrants of different types. Although he acknowledged the tensions created by migrations inside Europe, he argued that no restrictions were necessary in this case, as ‘in civilized countries there can be no lack of assimilation and fraternization between workers of different nationalities.’ Things were different when it came to migrants from other origins, and Van Kol was even more explicit than the Americans about the need to impose restrictions based on race and culture. ‘The problem is quite different’, he argued, ‘when faced with peoples whose civilization differs from the European, whose standard of living is much lower; when the gradual integration of workers, standing on a different stage of development, in the trade union organisation is not yet conceivable in a long future.’ When it came to ‘the Negroes of Africa, the Chinese of Asia and the natives of the islands of the South’, Van Kol pointed out, it was necessary to ‘consider the real situation, however reluctantly, if the whole future of socialism is not to be jeopardized.’

Van Kol developed an argument that would become crucial in the debate: it was not a matter of race, he argued, but a matter of culture and education, of course ‘determined’ by the economic situation. ‘The decisive factor’, he would say, ‘is neither skin colour nor place of residence, but only the stage of economic evolution reached by different groups of workers.’ These workers, according to him, were incapable of organisation and would become ‘wilful tools in the hands of our opponents.’ Asking for restrictions against them was therefore a duty of self-preservation and even a favour to the ‘backward’ workers themselves, because excluding them would serve the interests of international social democracy and the social movement in general.

⁷ Hillquit, “Immigration in the United States”, *International Socialist Review*, VIII, 2, August 1907.

⁸ “De Landverhuizing en de Internationale Sociaal-demokratie”, *Het Volk* (Amsterdam), 6 August 1907.

In his argumentation, Van Kol certainly went further than Hillquit, who not only had to counterbalance different tendencies inside his party but also had sent his text for publication in the more radical *Die neue Zeit*.⁹

Where today's Chinese are invading, belonging to one of the toughest and fastest multiplying races in the world, a people without needs (...), alien to any sense of class solidarity, slavishly subject to his breadwinner, the working class will soon be powerless in the face of the capitalists and at the mercy of the patronage. Their immigration can and will become fatal for all workers of higher civilization, a danger to socialism.

He allowed himself a note of condescension, arguing that Western socialists should 'support and protect these backward peoples and make them susceptible to higher development' but stressed again that until this level of development was reached, it was a matter of survival to keep these workers away from the labour market.

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN SOCIALISTS ARGUE AGAINST RESTRICTIONS

Whereas the contributions of Hillquit and Van Kol helped define the more restrictive and racist positions in this debate, on the opposite side of the political spectrum several texts appeared in the months immediately preceding the Stuttgart congress with a number of counterarguments. The most important one was a report signed by 'B. Gornberg' (Boris Markovich Frumkin), a leader of the Jewish Bund.¹⁰ As it had become customary in the debate, Frumkin started by noting that labour migration was inseparable from the development of capitalism on a world scale. He soon moved on to argue that this movement of peoples was not just driven by the forces of supply and demand, for capitalists also played an active role trying to maximize their profits and reduce wages by attracting 'workers from less developed countries, workers who demand less, are less organised, and will make do with little due to hunger, need and persecution.'

So far, his reflections were not so different to the ones examined above. However, Frumkin soon made clear that 'in the final analysis this abnormal situation, too, arises from capitalist production', and moved on to claim that it could not be solved under this regime. He also stressed several political problems laying ahead: apart from creating a large reserve work force, migration helped capitalists develop 'antagonistic feelings between native and immigrant workers', thus endangering socialist internationalism. Moreover, in the second part of his report Frumkin criticised the politics of reformist trade unions, arguing that it called forth 'the most blatant chauvinism, stirs up national and racial antagonisms, and awakens class-egotism in its most naked form.' In the third section, the Bund's report considered the position that should be taken by socialist parties. According to Frumkin, there were two alternatives. One was shaped 'by principles of solidarity and unity of proletarian interests in all lands; in the belief that the more cultured, aware and secure workers should not reject, much less persecute, their less informed brothers, victims of economic anarchy, political repression, and national hatred.' This perspective reinforced the idea that restrictions were powerless against the laws of capitalist economy. The second tactic, rejected by the author, implied yielding to the popular opinion prevailing among many workers, out of which the possible results were to take no position on the matter or assume a position that was inconsistent in terms of the general interest of the international proletariat.

Frumkin pointed out that the Amsterdam congress had shown that these opposing policies could not be reconciled and were indeed 'mutually exclusive.' He criticised the resolution proposed by the commission because it established a 'thoroughly correct principle' but then moved on to demand

⁹ "Das Einwanderungsproblem in den Vereinigten Staaten", *Die neue Zeit*, 1907, 40, 444-455.

¹⁰ "Emigration and Immigration. A Report to the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, 1907", translation from Yiddish included in Herscher and Chyet (1980). For a recent account of the history of the Bund, see Wolff (2020).

government control over immigration of certain workers. He was, of course, even more critical of the proposal of the American, Dutch, and Australian delegations, which ‘nonchalantly ignores the principal aspect of the question and the harm which socialism suffers through the fight against immigration [and] pours oil on the fire by dividing humanity into advanced and backward races.’ Frumkin added that the Argentine solution was also inconsistent, as it accepted the idea of a division between natural and artificial immigration which he condemned as useless and absurd: ‘How can one differentiate between those who have come naturally and those who have come unnaturally? Why are those who have come “unnaturally” considered *a priori* to be harmful strikebreakers who will retard the growth of the labour movement, etc.? Who can determine for certain which workers can be organised and which can never be organised?’. It was clear, according to Frumkin, that these arguments followed the line of ‘conservative labour unions’ and moved away from the principles of socialism.

Drawing upon these considerations, the Bund concluded that immigration and emigration were so intricately linked with the nature of capitalist economy that ‘every battle against the fact of emigration itself is as fruitless and as detrimental to the development of class-consciousness, as was the fight against the machine led by workers at the beginning of the last century.’ Frumkin conceived all types of restrictive legislation as ‘essentially reactionary’ and called for socialists to reject them altogether. Instead, they should focus on campaigning against restrictive laws, exposing their true nature, and fighting against the ‘feelings of demoralization which anti-immigration agitation breeds in the labouring masses.’ Consequently, the Bund’s draft resolution was clearly worded: restrictive legislation ‘obscures the class-consciousness of the workers, draws the proletariat away from the class struggle, introduces dissension among the workers, and creates an atmosphere for the development of national and racial enmities.’ Therefore, the Congress must reject every kind of law which forbids or limits immigration or emigration. Other, more practical campaigns were proposed, such as fighting for a ‘normal working day’ and a minimum wage, but also against middlemen and shipping companies. Moreover, immigrants should always enjoy political rights and trade unions needed to be reorganised, ‘to fight against their closed guild character, to assure that newly arrived workers will have entrée to them.’

Although shorter and more specific about the situation in his own country, an article published in *Die neue Zeit* by the Hungarian socialist József Diner-Denes developed similar arguments.¹¹ Like Frumkin, Diner-Denes examined the question from the point of view of a land of emigration, and focused on the situation of emigrants. After a first section that presented a brief survey of the history of Hungary, Diner-Denes moved on to assess the ‘economic causes of migration.’ Referring to the big numbers of emigrants coming from Hungary, not only to the United States but also to neighbouring countries and regions, he tried to explain that it was a legitimate endeavour of a working class in need:

Even if in some cases it is the addiction to get rich quickly or the pretension of the unscrupulous agents of the even more unscrupulous shipping companies that cause emigration, it must be clear that such mass emigration is only justified by economic and social conditions. In fact, the conditions described above have developed in a direction that favours emigration.

Diner-Denes stressed that workers emigrated for economic and social reasons, and that even the Hungarian ruling class opposed such emigration, fearing a shortage of labour. The aim of his text, ultimately, was to question the interpretation developed by foreign trade unions that considered Hungarian immigrants as ‘backward’ and unable to organise. Like Frumkin, however, he did so without completely questioning the notion that immigrants from different countries had different ‘cultural’ levels. Indeed, he concluded that:

... despite all the noise of the American opponents of emigration, it can be said that it is becoming less and less dangerous for American workers from year to year. First, because the ratio of qualified workers who emigrate, who were either already organised or are easy to organise, is improving steadily.

¹¹ “Auswanderung und Einwanderung in Ungarn: Bericht, verfaßt im Auftrag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Ungarns”, *Die neue Zeit*, 1907, 45, 621-634.

Furthermore, the percentage of Slovak and Ruthenian emigrants is also declining sharply in comparison with the more culturally advanced Hungarian and German emigrants, among whom there are far fewer illiterate people, and finally, the field workers who are now emigrating are also much harder to recruit as strike breakers and much easier to organise than those who emigrated a decade ago, because most of them either already have a socialist orientation or are already close to it.

If the stances of Hillquit and Van Kol represent the most restrictive position, and those of Frumkin and Diner-Denes outline the opposite perspective, a lengthy article published by the Austrian Otto Bauer in *Die neue Zeit* would develop an intermediate position. His analysis was especially important not only due to his significance as a theoretical leader of the International, but also because his ideas would form the basis of the resolution adopted at the Stuttgart congress.¹²

Bauer also tried to make sense of the problem by making a typology. In the first place, he mentioned emigration ‘from economically backward countries’, those with an agriculture ‘frozen in the old economic forms which cannot feed the growing number of people.’ The second case was the migration of ‘the industrial worker, who is far more mobile than the farmer’s son, whose eyes are much wider than those of the agricultural worker, [and] decides to migrate to foreign countries if higher wages beckon him there.’ Bauer also acknowledged a third type of migration not driven by economic, but political, reasons, using the example of Eastern European Jews.

Having established this typology, Bauer moved on to assess its consequences for the labour movement. In his view, the level of salaries was determined not only by ‘the size of the supply and demand on the labour market’, but also by the cultural qualities of the workers. Introducing a criterion not quite different from the one put forward by Van Kol, Bauer went on to argue that

...the more backward the cultural circles the immigrants come from, the easier they bear the arbitrariness of the entrepreneur — hence the preference of Prussian Junkers for Slavic farm labourers —, the more likely they are to accept the most oppressive working conditions, such as those Russian and Polish Jews who immigrate to England, where they form a docile material for the development of a shameful sweat system (...) The more backward the immigrants are, the more difficult it is for them to fit into the trade union organisations.

By means of this argumentation, Bauer provided an approach that combined ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ elements in a vision that could fit the views of the readership of *Die neue Zeit*. Going back to his previous typology, Bauer reasoned that ‘immigration from industrial-capitalist economic areas is far less dangerous than immigration from agricultural countries.’ The danger of the former was ‘insignificant’, because of its small numbers and because of this ‘cultural’ development.

This ‘cultural’ criteria to sort out different types of migrants occupied a pivotal role in Bauer’s argument, and in the approach that he proposed for international social democracy. While acknowledging that the development of capitalism would ‘gradually’ help workers of different countries ‘acquire the psychology of the modern industrial worker’, Bauer stressed that this was a long historical process, with phases that could not be ‘arbitrarily shortened.’

The greater the cultural distance between the immigration area and the emigration country, the longer it will take for immigrants to rise from the cultural level of the native workers, the harder it will be to win them over to the class struggle of the native workers, the more dangerous immigration will be for the native proletariat.

Moreover, Bauer was adamant in pointing out the contradictions of working-class internationalism:

From the community of proletarian interests and the interdependence of the proletarian struggle follows, therefore, the mutual support of the proletarians in class struggle, the common international policy of the

¹² “Proletarische Wanderungen”, *Die neue Zeit*, 1907, 41, 476-494. *Die neue Zeit* published other articles about this question during these months, that I cannot address here due to lack of space.

proletariat, as well as the strive to keep foreign workers away from their own labour market. The antagonism of proletarian politics is rooted in the fact that the proletarians of all countries have common interests as class comrades and yet must fight each other as competitors in the labour market.

In the last chapter, he put forward more practical measures. Of course, socialists were called to promote different approaches towards each type of migration. In the first case, ‘immigration from industrial-capitalist economic areas’, Bauer strongly argued that it represented no risk — on the contrary, it might have beneficial effects, and therefore socialists should ‘demand full freedom of movement for the workers of the modern industrialized countries.’ The situation was different for other type of migrants. Contract labour, organised consciously by employers to lower wages and break strikes, needed to be rejected outright, and fought against in the countries of emigration. The most complicated case, Bauer acknowledged, was ‘immigration from agricultural regions.’ With regards to this group, he admitted that pure restriction was not possible and should be rejected. Instead, the labour movement should ‘seek to combat its dangers through its planned political and trade union action.’

In his conclusion, Bauer returned once again to the argument of the ‘cultural backwardness’ and developed the idea that real international solidarity actually meant supporting foreign workers in their countries of origin to prevent them from migrating:

When workers in highly developed capitalist countries support the young labour movement in the still predominantly agrarian economies, they block the sources from which the most dangerous stream of immigrants flows into their own labour market. The international congress will therefore remind the workers of the advanced states of their duty to support the struggles of the workers of economically backward countries by providing them with material and moral support.

STUTTGART: THREE DAYS OF DEBATE AND A RADICALLY WORDED RESOLUTION

‘Unlike what happened in Amsterdam (...), this time the subject of labour migration interested a large number of delegates’, emphasized an Italian reporter present at the Stuttgart congress.¹³ Indeed, the commission that discussed the problem met for three days and the debate included many more interventions and proposals than three years earlier. The delegates came up with several proposals for resolutions, which to a large extent took up the arguments put forward in the articles reviewed in the previous sections.¹⁴

During the debate, it soon became clear that the motion put forward by the Americans would become the centre of the debate, insofar as the main question at stake was the restriction of migration from non-European regions. After a brief intervention of Manuel Ugarte, who did not add much to what had been said in the Amsterdam congress, the French Jules Uhry took the floor to criticise the American proposal, which he considered to be contrary to the fundamental principles of socialism. He argued that ‘workers only emigrate because they are forced to do so by economic conditions’ and once again revealed the existing tensions caused by migration within Europe as he reminded the delegates about ‘the Belgians, the Germans, the Italians, and the Spaniards who emigrate to France [and] do not have any sort of class consciousness’ — the task of the socialists, he concluded, was to organise them through education and propaganda.

A clear distinct perspective came from one of the youngest delegates in the room, the Australian Victor Eugene Kroemer. He stressed that the question of migration was more important in Australia than in the

¹³ *Avanti* (Roma), 25 August 1907.

¹⁴ The reconstruction of the discussion is based on the German and French minutes (*Internationaler Sozialisten Kongress zu Stuttgart 18.-24. August 1907*, Berlin, Buchhandlung Vorwärts, 1907; *Congrès socialiste international: Stuttgart 6-24 août 1907*, republished in Geneva, Minkoff, 1985), as well as different socialist periodicals: *L’Humanité* (Paris), 21 and 22 August 1907, *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Vienna), 22 August 1907, *Vorwärts* (Berlin), 22 and 23 August 1907.

rest of the world, because capitalists there promoted 'yellow labour' to weaken the position of Australian workers, who enjoyed a higher 'standard of life.' Without any euphemism, Kroemer claimed that 'white immigrant workers organise themselves swiftly', while 'coloured workers reject organisation.' The Australian labour movement was therefore eager 'to keep out all those workers who cannot be expected to adopt the white way of life.' The flamboyant young delegate did not miss the opportunity to mention that Australian workers did not have 'any hostility in principle against the Chinese and the Japanese', but stressed that they were 'obliged to fight against an immigration that is nothing but a capitalist manoeuvre.' He concluded by saying that Australian workers must protect themselves against the immigration of Asian workers 'in the interests of the progress of socialism.'

Kroemer's intervention made a deep impression. Straightforward as it was, it did not help to promote the case that Americans and Dutch delegates had put forward in a more nuanced way. Many delegates quickly took the floor to distance themselves from this perspective. It was again a French delegate, Adéodat Compère-Morel, who voiced his criticism and, not without a tone of condescension, argued that it was the task of socialists 'to educate, organise and illuminate' these migrant workers: 'We must educate the Chinese and Japanese to socialism through enlightenment and make them our brothers through organisation.'

Morris Hillquit made his best effort to defend the American proposal. 'We do not have any race prejudice', he started, 'but we are realistic.' Once again, he argued that there were different types of immigration: the Americans demanded complete freedom for the 'natural emigration' which was a consequence of the 'essence of the capitalist system itself.' However, stressed Hillquit, there was another sort of immigration, 'nothing more than an importation of foreign workforce done by capitalists.' This kind of migrants were 'involuntary strike-breakers' and put forward a disastrous competition against local workers. The discussion was too heated up, however, to keep ignoring the racial question behind these general argumentations: Hillquit moved on to explain that 'the Chinese and the Japanese, the yellow race in general, currently represent this type of migrants.' He tried to convince his fellow delegates by arguing that the backwardness of these migrants revealed itself in terms of organisation. Unlike the Belgians or the Italians who migrated to France, Hillquit argued, the Chinese were 'too backward to be organised.' He concluded that the American proposal was the most revolutionary one, for 'it was the only one who ensure the development of the labour movement.'

The pendulum continued to move between the two opposite extremes of the debate in this first day of discussion. Jozsef Diner-Denes stood up to argue against Hillquit, reminding him that also several years ago the Hungarian immigrants in the United States had been considered 'impossible to organise.' As in his article in *Die neue Zeit*, he countered Hillquit's argument but without disregarding the idea of cultural backwardness: 'the countries that are *unorganisable* today', he pointed out, 'will not be tomorrow. In backward countries, development no longer takes as long as it does in those countries that were the first to develop, such as England and Germany.' Diner-Denes called for a policy that went beyond the narrow trade union interest, that in his view were dominant in the American delegation. The abuses made by capitalists through the 'importation' of workers were to be fought by means of 'education, organisation, legal protection of workers, establishment of a minimum salary.' He submitted a resolution phrasing these ideas very clearly:

The Congress, recognising that the cultural level of the proletariat of each country depends on the economic conditions of that country, further declares that it protests most vigorously against any stigmatization of the proletariat of a race or nation as inferior. The Congress, on the other hand, makes it the duty of the social democrats in each country to educate, raise the class consciousness and organise the immigrant proletariat at the lower levels of culture.

Mark Lucas, from South Africa, took the floor to defend Hillquit, arguing that it was necessary to 'prevent the importation of cheap labour, otherwise our trade unions will be broken.' For the third time it was a French delegate, in this case Charles Rappoport — as Hillquit, a migrant Jew born in the Russian

Empire. He tried to distinguish the Australian stance, which he considered 'nationalistic', and the American one, which he defined as 'intermediate, and based on the idea of the predestined strike-breakers.' According to Rappoport, however, both ideas needed to be rejected, in defence of an internationalist approach.

The debate continued the next day, when the chair of the commission, the Austrian Wilhelm Ellenbogen, tried to set the tone of a possible compromise resolution. According to him, there were two different tendencies in the discussion: one coming from 'immigration countries' and the other from 'emigration countries.' It was possible, he thought, to reach a satisfactory compromise for both groups if the question was 'thoroughly studied.' Following a line of compromise quite common in Second International congresses (Callahan, 2010), he claimed that it was the task of the commission to 'take the best of both views', something that could be achieved if 'we proceed negatively and exclude everything from the outset that is unacceptable to socialists, like for example all exclusion laws and corporative measures.' He recommended to focus instead on several 'positive measures', mostly in the hands of the trade unions, such as organising and educating migrant workers and campaigning for a few legal measures, as the minimum wage, the control of the shipping companies, etc.

A much more sensational intervention, which made a big contribution to closing any options still open for the American resolution, came from the Japanese Kato Tokijiro. Speaking in German, he went to the core of the question when he asked why the Japanese were depicted as the main enemy, and deported from the United States, while 'the Italians, the Slovaks, the Jews, etc., who made an identical competition to American workers' were not. 'It seems to me', he continued, 'that race plays a significant role and that the Americans are being influenced by the famous fear of the yellow peril.' He reminded his fellow delegates that Japanese workers were 'just as much under the thumb of capitalism as other peoples, and only bitter necessity drives them out of their homeland to seek their bread in a foreign land.' Socialists had the duty of 'taking in these poor brothers, to protect them and to fight capitalism together with them.' Japanese workers, Kato concluded, were no different to workers of any other nationality — recalling Marx, he claimed that it would be contrary to the principles of socialism to exclude them from working-class organisations.

Immediately thereafter, this position was strengthened by Julius Hammer, from the American Socialist Labor Party, rival of Hillquit's Socialist Party of America. Hammer claimed that it was impossible to find a middle ground, for 'either one is for controls on immigration, or one struggles actively against them.' Considering Hillquit's proposal a failed attempt for a compromise, inspired by the corporative egotism of American trade unions, he argued that it was possible to organise the Chinese and Japanese workers, and rejected any kind of restriction of immigration whatsoever. Hammer submitted a very brief draft resolution, which ended by stating that 'all laws tending to restrict, impede or otherwise hamper emigration or immigration are in violation of Socialist principle and in the interest of the capitalist policy to divide and keep divided the working class as much as possible.'

The current of opinion was so much against the Americans that even Willem Vliegen, from the Dutch delegation, had to differentiate himself from their position. His argumentation included a big deal of racism and condescension, but with a different approach: he claimed that the American socialists showed an 'exaggerated pessimism', for the workers from 'inferior peoples' performed 'inferior work' and therefore were not a serious competition. Moreover, the United States, South Africa or Australia were regions with scarce populations, so the pressure on wages could not be so significant. He also mentioned that emigration could improve the condition and wages of the workers who remained in the home country. The ideas set forth by Van Kol in *Het Volk* some weeks before the congress, however, were still clear in the wording of the resolution presented by the Dutch delegation. Even though it argued that the congress 'declares itself opposed to any legislation that would obstruct or prohibit free emigration, both temporary and permanent', it moved on to argue that 'some categories of workers from backward countries (e.g. from Central Africa, China, the South Sea Islands) are often imported by capitalist entrepreneurs in order to reduce wages, smash the trade union, or lower the standard of living of the

workers' and therefore it was urgent to exclude workers 'on contract', to set limits to the working day and to reform the transport system. The Dutch socialists, in any case, concluded by stressing that

as long as these measures have not yet been implemented, and as long as these emigrants are still at a lower stage of development, i.e. completely unfit to participate in the trade union and political battles, they must be banned — even in their own interest — because they would be an obstacle to all progress, and they would delay the victory of socialism for a long time to come.

As in Amsterdam, three years before, the German Paepow acknowledged some of the points made by the Americans and other supporters of a restrictive resolution. He claimed that 'it was impossible to accept that, in the countries where the labour movement is more developed, where political and trade-union organisations have worked for many years to achieve tangible results, the fruit of all these efforts will be enjoyed by a mass import of workers with no needs, instruments of the dominant capitalist class.' He moved on to put pressure on the French delegates, reminding them that in France 'a certain percentage of public works must be carried out by native workers, and the French comrades, who here so eloquently represent the complete freedom of immigration, have most probably voted for these stipulations.' In Germany, he continued, the situation was different, for the government was eager to promote the import of lower-paid foreign workers for construction work. Paepow even pointed out that 'the mass importation of Italian and Slave workers makes it exceedingly difficult to improve the condition of German agricultural workers.' He concluded saying that he was against the restrictive measures taken by the American trade unions, but made clear that 'we, Germans, cannot accept a resolution opposed to any limitation.'

The last intervention was by Yevgeni Gieser of the Bund, who mostly followed the arguments of the text presented by his organisation. He also criticized the American trade unions' 'egotistic corporatism' and claimed that controlling emigration agencies and fighting for a minimum wage was better than 'building cardboard barriers against immigration.' The commission then decided to cast a vote between the American resolution, on the one hand, and the three other proposals (by Ellenbogen, Vliegen and the Bund) on the other. The American proposal was easily rejected, and a sub commission was then appointed to draft a final resolution, based on the other three. According to Gieser's report, Ellenbogen himself took it upon himself to appoint the members and did not include any representative of the Bund.¹⁵

The lengthy resolution finally approved by the commission and the congress was based on a draft prepared by Ellenbogen which mostly followed the arguments presented by Bauer in *Die neue Zeit*.¹⁶ It started with a remark almost unanimously stressed by delegates of all tendencies: that 'immigration and emigration of workingmen are phenomena as inseparable from the substance of capitalism as unemployment, overproduction and underconsumption of the workingmen', all of them means that were frequently used to 'reduce the share of the workingmen in the product of labour.' It moved on to tackle the main issue that had been at stake, by saying that the congress did not 'consider exceptional measures of any kind, economic or political, as the means for removing any danger which may arise to the working class from immigration and emigration, since such measures are fruitless and reactionary; especially not the restriction of the freedom of migration and the exclusion of foreign nations and races.'¹⁷

After this, the resolution moved the pendulum in the opposite direction. 'On the other hand', it continued, the congress declared 'it to be the duty of organised workingmen to protect themselves against the lowering of their standard of life which frequently results from the mass import of unorganised workingmen' and considered it was a duty to 'prevent the import and export of strike-

¹⁵ The commission was formed by Ellenbogen, Vliegen, Schippel, Diner-Denes and Balabanoff.

¹⁶ The final resolution and all the drafts are available in the archive of the Second International at the International Institute of Social History (ARCH01299).

¹⁷ The phrase 'since such measures are fruitless and reactionary' was not in the original draft but was added in the last debate.

breakers.’¹⁸ The approved resolution went on to acknowledge ‘the difficulties which in many cases confront the workers of the countries of a more advanced stage of capitalist development through the mass immigration of unorganised workingmen accustomed to a lower standard of life and coming from countries of prevalently agricultural and domestic civilization.’¹⁹ Only after these long paragraphs (two of which were deleted), did the resolution move back the pendulum again, to indicate that ‘the Congress sees no proper solution of these difficulties in the exclusion of definite nations or races from immigration, a policy which is in conflict with the principle of proletarian solidarity.’

Having struggled to set this compromise considerations, the resolution moved to the section of practical measures. The first one referred to the countries of immigration, and included the prohibition of the export and import of workers ‘who have entered into a contract which deprives them of the liberty to dispose of their labour power and wages’, the promotion of legislation to shorten the working day, as well as campaigns for a minimum wage, to regulate the sweating system, to control hygienic conditions, and to abolish restrictions ‘which exclude definite nationalities or races from the right to sojourn in the country and from the political and economic rights of the natives’. It also included a series of demands for trade unions, in order to make sure that they integrate immigrant workers. The second part referred to the countries of emigration. The measures included ‘active propaganda for trade unionism’, ‘enlightenment of the workingmen and the public at large of the true conditions of labour in the countries of immigration’, and a call for concerted action of trade unions of all countries in matters of migration. The last part demanded strict control of steamship agencies and emigration bureaus, and a thorough regulation of the transportation system.

CONCLUSION

Following an initiative of the Argentine Socialist Party, the Second International discussed the question of migration during its congress in Amsterdam, in 1904, and much more extensively three years later in Stuttgart. To be sure, the topic was not new: the transnational movement of workers inside Europe — for instance, Italian workers in Switzerland and France, or Belgian labourers in the north of France — had already created tensions and discussions among socialist parties in the previous decade and within the International Socialist Bureau. What was new in 1903-1904 was that different proposals came from socialist groups from the ‘peripheries’, therefore sparking a debate much less European-centred than was the norm in socialist congresses. As it was accounted in most classical studies of the Second International, the Stuttgart congress tackled the issue and adopted a lengthy resolution. The text took an internationalist line, questioning attempts to put limits on workers’ mobility and calling for the joint organisation of the native and immigrant working class, but it did not entirely hide the tensions that had arisen during the debate and included several remarks about the limits that should be imposed on labour import strategies promoted by the capitalist class.

These complex international discussions revealed a peculiar interaction between the global and the local. This paper showed that the proposal that Argentine socialists sent to the International Socialist Bureau responded to several difficulties they encountered in their local action: on the one hand, trade union activists sympathetic to the party were worried because the arrival of new immigrants depressed the wages of local workers; on the other hand, the Socialist Party faced the problem that many European immigrants were not naturalised and therefore could not participate in elections, and sought a change in legislation in European countries so that immigrants who acquired the Argentine citizenship would not lose that of their countries of origin. Their motion, however, opened an international debate that went

¹⁸ A paragraph arguing that ‘The Congress therefore welcomes the efforts of the proletariat of each country to maintain its standard of living at the highest possible level’ was finally deleted.

¹⁹ Another paragraph was deleted here, stating that ‘the Congress recognizes the need to address these difficulties and combat these threats.’

far beyond these local concerns. As it quickly became clear, the ‘question of migration’ was intertwined with very fundamental political problems regarding which socialist parties of different countries had divergent positions, because the situations and contexts they faced at the local level were quite different.

This paper, itself a work-in-progress, provided an overview of the discussions that took place at Amsterdam and Stuttgart, and also in various social democratic periodicals in the years 1903-1907. Despite its complexity and its many different aspects, the discussion soon gave rise to a polarisation of opinions on the racial problem and the immigration of Asian workers. It was above all the American socialists who took the debate out of the first formulations — that simply distinguished between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ immigration — to state openly that the problem was where the migrants came from, as well as the colour of their skin. In so doing, they were supported by delegates from British colonies, such as Australia and South Africa, where the question of restricting Asian — and African — immigrants played a central role in shaping local labour movements, and by a section of Dutch socialist leaders, led by Henri van Kol, who in these very same years was developing a strongly paternalistic and racist stance with regards to the colonial question.

The restrictive motions put forward by the Americans and the Dutch galvanised the debate and push their adversaries towards a unity that concealed many tensions and divergences, for instance regarding resentments among Western European socialists. By reconstructing the debate and paying attention not only to the arguments but also to the forms, tones and certain argumentative rituals, this paper showed that the most clearly restrictive proposals had little chance in a venue that mostly celebrated internationalist appeals to the unity of the proletariat. At the same time, it revealed that even those who were unwilling to go along with the more extreme approaches of Hillquit or Van Kol developed condescending positions, at best, towards non-European populations. All the participants in the debate linked capitalist development with ‘cultural advancement’ and the latter with a greater willingness to organise politically and in trade unions. This interpretation made it possible to develop arguments with a strong racist basis but to present them as if they were a question of ‘cultural’ backwardness. To a certain extent, the distance adopted with respect to these ‘others’ actually fostered internationalist unity among socialists of European origin.

Moreover, the resolution passed seemed to leave both sides dissatisfied. The more right-wing section of the American party, led by Victor Berger, harshly criticised the Stuttgart resolution and Hillquit for voting for it. Interestingly, however, in a post-congress assessment of the congress, the Bund leader Yevgeni Gieser considered that the Ellenbogen text, the basis for the resolution that was finally passed, ‘leaned substantially towards the American resolution.’ Gieser saw the entire characterisation of immigration as a ‘danger’ as a concession to the American position and concluded that it had therefore been accepted with satisfaction by the ‘representatives of the colonial countries.’

Classic accounts of the history of the Second International explored the deep tensions hidden behind compromise and radically worded resolutions, for instance with regards to topics such as militarism and colonialism. Developing arguments presented by Weill and, more recently, Geli and Merkel and Muller, this paper brought together both edited articles and minutes of congresses to show that the question of migration provides another example of this pattern, further complicated by discussions about race and colonialism. Moreover, the paper engaged with more recent historiographical trends that examine how the congresses of the Second International displayed and performed an ‘inter-national’ sociability and symbolism among socialists of different countries. The discussions around migration not only expressed the potential and the limits of this inter-national solidarity among European socialism — more importantly, they revealed to what extent the very framework of this international solidarity encountered serious tensions when confronted with the presence of non-white workers from the peripheries. Further exploring the subject of migration and racism within the ranks of the Second International (and its heirs after the Great War), going beyond its European core and incorporating the experiences of colonial and semicolonial countries, will allow to complicate and enrich this very welcomed renovated interest in the history of international socialism.

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