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The lost worlds of the Cold War

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The Cold War is often interpreted as a moment when international cooperation was paralyzed due to the rivalry between the western and eastern blocs. Against this view, Sandrine Kott shows how the Cold War in fact stimulated multilateralism.

Reviewed: Sandrine Kott, *Organiser le monde, une autre histoire de la Guerre froide* [Organizing the World: A Different History of the Cold War], Seuil, 2021. 328 p., 23, 50 €.

The Cold War was a period marked by conflict and confrontation between the blocs: the West, comprising western Europe and North America, and the East, consisting of the USSR and the people's democracies. The East-West confrontation has been analyzed as an obstacle to the functioning of international organizations and the United Nations. The new book by Sandrine Kott, a history professor at the University of Geneva, turns this narrative on its head. Instead, she presents the Cold War as a moment of clarification for multilateralism and affirmation for international organizations and the United Nations system. Far from being a period when these organizations were overshadowed, the period's confrontations and standoffs reveal how the Cold War produced its own forms of international cooperation. Kott goes so far as to claim that the Cold War was the multilateral age par excellence. This bold argument is the result of the original angle from which she approaches the topic: her interest in considering how international organizations operate from the perspective of actors in secondary positions (such as the non-aligned movement and the East bloc) and actors seeking to challenge these organizations (like NGOs and unions). In this respect, the book should be read as a study of multilateralism from the standpoint of

its political margins and unfinished reforms, such as the UN's declaration of a "new international economic order," which was embraced by developing countries in 1974. The richness of the book's source material--drawing on the archives of specialized UN agencies, international unions, and private American foundations, like the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations--allows it to incorporate many subtle case studies even as its overall argument remains clear.

A global perspective on the Cold War

To present the Cold War from the standpoint of "internationalism expressed in a singular and pluralistic way" (p. 13), the book focuses on several international intergovernmental organizations, like the Economic Commission for Europe, the International Labor Organization (ITO), and the World Health Organization (WHO). These organizations were discussion forums for representatives of member countries that rendered visible disagreement and cooperation between states, as well as changes in the international political equilibrium (such as the self-assertion of the non-aligned movement). International organizations were also spaces in which different worldviews manifested themselves, due to international civil servants and the mobilization of a wide range of actors, notably private international actors--including non-commercial actors, in the case of philanthropic foundations and NGOs, or commercial ones, like major corporations. In this way, the book describes international organizations that, while shaped by the Cold War and its clashes, established themselves as spaces in which conflicts could be mediated and orchestrated. Kott explains: "the Cold War contributed to heightening the visibility of international organizations which, in return, 'organized' and orchestrated, in a sense, the Cold War" (p. 49).

Unbalanced multilateralism (1945-1949)

The organization of these Cold War worlds began after the Second World War. The years between 1945 and 1949 gave rise to an internationalism driven by the United States. Kott explores the example of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRAA), established in 1943 to assist war victims. UNRRA pursued

multilateral activities in several world regions, including Central Europe. It was both the first UN agency and the last New Deal initiative. 34% of its international staff was British and 37% American, suggesting that international cooperation had yet to be internationalized. Despite major financial and personal ties with the United States, UNRAA became a space for inventing new international practices. This was due in part to its employees, who were primarily social workers trained in anthropology and attentive to realities on the ground and respectful of the politics of the governments they assisted. UNRAA also participated in the development of forms of international cooperation, as its staff promoted an approach that blended a Keynesian conception of economics with respect for national sovereignty.

The same period also saw the rise of a project for a pan-European market that would connect central and western Europe. The project was led notably by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), founded in 1947, as the United Nations' first regional agency. Promoting economic exchange in Europe was intended as a way of combatting unequal development. While the West received about 25% of its imports from Eastern Europe in 1938, this rate fell to 7% in 1949. The ECE's general secretary was the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, who believed that it was possible to overcome Europe's political divisions through a common technical language. Like UNRAA, ECE's actions sought to make multilateralism concrete by mobilizing "advocates of an active multilateralism" (p. 45). The backgrounds of these advocates varied: they included former New Deal experts, UNRRA employees trained in anthropology and the social sciences, and western European social democrats. If their actions laid the groundwork for more inclusive multilateralism, they struggled to make this goal a reality.

The pan-European market was undermined by the launching of the Marshall Plan in 1948, which polarized Europe between East and West. Similarly, in December 1948, UNRRA, which was accused of being under communist control, was suspended. Despite the efforts of their promoters, plans for cooperation became caught up in Cold War dynamics. These failures illustrate the gradual failure of global space at a time when international agencies were few and far between and their staff lacked international diversity.

Creating two visions of the world (1949-1955)

If the period between 1945 and 1949 is characterized by the promotion of an active multilateralism, the years 1949-1955 witnessed the implementation of an international world order structured by and for the Cold War. Eastern European countries gradually withdrew from the UN's specialized agencies. Soviet leaders declared their suspicion of the international organizations belonging to the UN system. Meanwhile, American political leaders suspected international organizations of being bankrolled by the USSR. The activities of the United States' major philanthropic organizations--even the Rockefeller Foundation, despite its longstanding relationship with Eastern Europe--were increasingly controlled. Though they did not completely disappear, international programs became subject to greater limitations. International organizations became spaces for affirming power asymmetries as well as conflicts. In 1955, 75% of the positions in the international civil service were held by citizens of western countries, which contributed 70% of the UN's total budget. International organizations mirrored both the West's dominance and the creation of the East bloc as a "second world", on the western camp's periphery (p. 78).

The East bloc countries did not constitute a parallel space in which globalization could occur: the second world they formed remained caught in a center-periphery relationship with the liberal West. Even so, in Kott's view, their second world status conferred legitimacy on communist countries to formulate demands for justice and equality, in addition to proposing an alternative to the conception of progress promoted by most international organizations. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the international communist movement brought together ever larger groups and managed to internationalize a number of communist issues, such as women's rights, peace, and support for anticolonialism. The Cold War context allowed for the internationalization of several causes, which were simultaneously the result of particular forms of cooperation occurring at the time and a means for promoting other visions of global organization. Yet the way in which these causes spread needs to be better understood, particularly since the internationalization of the discourse of actors on the periphery is far from self-evident. Second world causes could have remained in the second world, rather than circulating between different Cold War worlds. A partial answer can be found in Kristen Ghodsee's *Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, which seeks to clarify the definition and goals of

the UN's gender-related programs between 1975 and 1989[1]. Ghodsee identifies several spaces in which discourses developed in the East circulated, such as the three global conferences organized during the Cold War, as well as training programs, as evidenced in the first generation of African feminist activist trained by East bloc international organizations. These discourses did indeed circulate, particularly in the direction of the Third World.

Shaping a third world (1955-1991)

The book assigns an important place to the shaping of a "third" world within international organizations. The Cold War period saw the emergence of *the* Third World, which demanded its own name. In 1955, the UN comprised 76 member countries; twenty years later, 144. The arrival of these new countries altered power dynamics in UN intergovernmental organizations. Thanks notably to the initiative of the non-aligned movement, the UN General Assembly adopted, in 1974, a call for a New International Economic Order, emphasizing the need for better distribution of global wealth and the ability of Third World countries to protect their economic sovereignty. Despite its failure, the New International Economic Order marked the entry of new states into the work of international organizations. And the creation of *a* third world also points to the limited convergence between these countries and those of the East bloc.

Other actors whose self-assertion the book examines are multinational corporations. The United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations, created in 1974 to organize the activity of multinational companies, notably in the Third World, suggests how large companies became an international concern. Leaders of multinational corporations mobilized to restrict the center's actions. In particular, they helped reinterpret its actions according to a binary Cold War logic, despite the fact that the center's goal was to find a middle way between aspirations for a New International Economic Order and major corporations. The latter gradually asserted themselves not only as East-West actors engaged in economic cooperation, but also as international actors. One of the book's key contributions is to remind us that even when they fail, plans for concurrent internationalisms help to organize the world, make cooperation

[1] Kristen Ghodsee. *Second World, Second Sex. Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, Duke University Press, 2019, 306 p.

happen, promote commitment to international organizations, and legitimize new public and private actors.

Globalism and the Cold War's lost illusions

By giving particular attention to movements peripheral or opposed to the dominant international order, the book proposes a new perspective on how multilateralism functions while observing that it has effectively disappeared. Kott maintains that the current period is characterized by "globalism," that is, an international system encouraging competing rather than cooperation between states. She explains: "the values of multilateralism [during the Cold War] appeared all the more clearly to me as they are deeply challenged in today's world, where competition has become the rule" (p. 10). Contemporary globalism is, in a sense, anti-multilateralism. Though the book identifies several modalities of international cooperation, it might seem surprising to single out globalism as a hard break with earlier practices. Globalism builds on dynamics initiated during the Cold War, which the book studies: the emphasis on multinational corporations and NGOs as international actors, the inclusion of new countries in international organizations, and the reexamination of Keynesianism within international organizations[2]. Similarly, current international organizations also participate in orchestrating conflict between different regional powers, in ways that resonate with some of the book's analyses. Rather than presenting the end of the Cold War as a clear break with the multilateral system and logic, the current period could be conceived, at least partially, as a product of earlier periods. Given the richness of the book's perspective on the competition between public and private actors in the international arena, it is a shame not to extend this analysis to the current period.

Kott's book is indispensable reading for understanding the worlds that have been lost with the end of the Cold War--stable international alliances between states that used international organizations as spaces of discussion and confrontation in which they could assert concurrent forms of internationalism. It demonstrates the utility of global social history that is attentive both to processes of transnationalization and the power dynamics that shape them.

[2] "Que devient le multilatéralisme ? Entretien avec Guillaume Devin".

Published in laviedesidees.fr, June 2, 2021.

Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info

Published in bookandideas.net, April 11, 2023.