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## Defining Asian Socialism: The Asian Socialist Conference, Asian Socialists, and the Limits of a Global Socialist Movement in 1953\*

TALBOT CHARLES IMLAY 

*Département des sciences historiques*  
*Pavillon Charles-De Koninck*  
*Université Laval, Québec, QC*  
*Canada G1V 0A6*

E-mail: [talbot.imlay@hst.ulaval.ca](mailto:talbot.imlay@hst.ulaval.ca)

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**ABSTRACT:** The article examines the debates at the Asian Socialist Conference's (ASC) inaugural gathering in Rangoon in January 1953, using a variety of sources, including the minutes of the conference meetings found in the Swedish Social Democratic Party archives. The focus is on the efforts of Asian socialists to define Asian socialism in terms of three broad subjects: international politics; domestic politics; and economic politics. Throughout, particular attention is accorded to the role played by understandings of European socialism. The argument is threefold: that socialism was central to the ASC project, prompting efforts to define Asian socialism; that these efforts invariably raised the fraught question of Asian socialism's relationship with European socialism; and that the stakes involved in Rangoon were not limited to Asian socialism, but also involved socialism's potential as a global movement.

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In the summer of 1951, delegates from some thirty socialist and social democratic parties gathered in Frankfurt am Main to found the Socialist International (SI) as a successor to the pre-war Labour and Socialist International and the pre-1914 Second International. Despite its universalist pretensions, the new organization was Western and especially European dominated.<sup>1</sup> Of the parties represented in Frankfurt am Main, twenty-three were

\* For their comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this article, I would like to thank Peter Carrol, Peter Jackson, Guy Laron, Lorenz Luthi, Paul Miller, Bernd Rother and Martin Thomas as well as the anonymous reviewers for the *International Review of Social History*.

1. Much of the scholarship on the International reflects its Western-centrism. See Brian Shaeve, "Nationalism, Transnationalism and European Socialism in the 1950s", *History of European Ideas*, 46 (2020), pp. 41–58; Ettore Costa, *The Labour Party, Denis Healey and the International Socialist Movement: Rebuilding the Socialist International during the Cold War*,

European while the others came largely from the British Commonwealth, particularly the “white” Dominions. Those present were well aware of this bias. In an address to the assembled delegates, Morgan Philips, the British Labour party secretary who served as the SI’s first secretary, admitted that “the great deficiency of our work so far has been its regional limitation. For practical reasons most of our activity has been confined to the European continent”. At the SI’s congress in Milan the following year, Phillips spoke of the need to build a “world-wide Socialist International”.<sup>2</sup> In a note circulated to member parties beforehand, he was blunter, warning that the SI “is in imminent danger of becoming a ‘Western’ or ‘white’ International”.<sup>3</sup>

In sounding the alarm, Phillips pointed to developments in Asia and especially to an upcoming conference of Asian socialists. In January 1953, three months after the SI’s Milan congress, almost 200 participants from ten political parties gathered in Rangoon (now Yangon) to found the Asian Socialist Conference (ASC) (Figure 1). If the majority of the countries represented were in East and Southeast Asia, principally India, Burma, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaya, and Japan, delegates also came from three Middle Eastern countries (Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt), a region designated as “West Asia”. The political circumstances of the different parties varied enormously. Whereas those of Burma and Israel participated in government coalitions, the other parties were in opposition, with many of them small, isolated, and dominated by urban elites as well as prone to schism.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this diversity notwithstanding, the parties all associated themselves with socialism, a self-consciously leftist and non-communist political affiliation whose origins as a movement and form of politics can be traced back to nineteenth-century Europe.

Although once overlooked, the ASC has benefited from several recent and overlapping historiographical currents. One current consists of the burgeoning interest in transnational Asian and Afro-Asian political contacts and networks, a visible product of which were international conferences bringing

1945–1951 (London, 2018); and Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914–1960* (Oxford, 2018). But also see Peter Van Kemseke, *Towards an Era of Development: The Globalization of Socialism and Christian Democracy* (Leuven, 2006); and Guillaume Devin, *L’Internationale Socialiste. Histoire et Sociologie du socialisme international (1945–1990)* (Paris, 1993).

2. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam [IISH], Socialist International Information, vol. I, 1951, “First Congress of the Socialist International. Frankfurt am Main, 30 June–3 July 1951”, Phillips, 19; and IISH, Socialist International Information, vol. II, 1952, “The Second Congress of the Socialist International, Milan, 17–21 October 1951”, Phillips, pp. 2–4.

3. National Museum of Labour History, Manchester [NMLH], Labour Party Archive [LPA], International Sub-Committee, 1952 file, “The Socialist International (Memorandum to the Bureau of the Socialist International on the Work and Functions of the Socialist International)”.

4. The best overview remains Saul Rose, *Socialism in Southern Asia* (New York, 1975).



Figure 1. "Asian Socialists Divided" at Rangoon over relations with the Socialist International, *The Singapore Free Press*, January 9, 1953, p. 8.

together state and non-state actors. Certainly, the best-known example is the 1955 Bandung conference, and Kyaw Zaw Win has proposed viewing the ASC as a precursor to Bandung.<sup>5</sup> Another current centres on efforts by governments and political movements to carve out an independent space for their countries between the two Cold War superpower blocs. Here, the best-known case is the Non-Aligned Movement, officially founded in Belgrade in 1961 but whose roots go back to the late 1940s, if not before, and to the thinking of Asian and especially Indian socialists, among others.<sup>6</sup> Still another current explores anti-colonial internationalism that proliferated during the interwar years, weaving together organized groups, political parties, and individuals from the colonizing and colonized worlds. Several of the Asian socialists present in Rangoon in January 1953 had been anti-colonial activists before and during World War II, and anti-colonialism infused the ASC from the beginning.<sup>7</sup>

Recent scholarly currents, then, have helped to rescue the ASC from obscurity, placing it in an expansive context of Asian, Afro-Asian, and anti-colonial politics. In many ways, integrating the ASC into this historiographical context makes sense. The Rangoon conference was one of several gatherings after 1945 at which Asian and African participants engaged in what Thomas Shillam describes as “detailed discussions about the postcolonial future”. Various Asian socialists, moreover, were often present at these gatherings: Roland Burke, for instance, has highlighted the prominent role of the Indian socialist, Jayaprakash Narayan, in the Bombay, Rangoon, and

5. Kyaw Zaw Win, “The 1953 Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon: Precursor to the Bandung Conference”, in Derek McDougall and Antonia Finnane (eds), *Bandung 1955: Little Histories* (Clayton, VIC, 2010). For recent work on Bandung, see Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah (eds), *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures* (Cambridge, 2017); and See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (eds), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore, 2008). For Afro-Asian networks, a good starting point is Tansen Sen, *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* (Lanham, MD, 2017).

6. Lorenz M. Luthi, “Non-Alignment, 1946–1965: Its Establishment and Struggle against Afro-Asianism”, *Humanity*, 7 (2016), pp. 201–223; Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tine, and Nada Boskovska (eds), *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi, Bandung, Belgrade* (New York, 2014); and Itty Abraham, “From Bandung to NAM: Non-Alignment and Indian Foreign Policy, 1947–65”, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 46 (2008), pp. 195–219.

7. For anti-colonial internationalism, see Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York, 2015); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 2015); and Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York, 2007). For the ASC, see Su Lin Lewis, “Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom, 1952–1956”, *Journal of World History*, 30:1–2 (2019), pp. 55–88; and Gerard McCann, “Where Was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa’s ‘Bandung Moment’ in 1950s Asia”, *Journal of World History*, 30:1–2 (2019), pp. 89–123.

Rhodes conferences organized in the 1950s under the aegis of the liberal-oriented Congress for Cultural Freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, what sets the ASC in Rangoon apart from other gatherings is its self-consciously socialist dimension. The participants were all members of political parties that identified themselves as socialist – as Marxist-inspired and non-communist leftist entities. And it is precisely this dimension that is easily overlooked in placing the ASC solely in the context of larger post-war Asian, Afro-Asian, and anti-colonial politics. Equally, a principal purpose of the delegates in Rangoon was to define Asian socialism by identifying common and distinct (Asian socialist) positions on contemporary political issues. To this end, the conference produced lengthy resolutions on a range of subjects: agricultural policy; economic development; world peace; colonialism.<sup>9</sup> In a notable exception to the neglect of the ASC's socialist dimension, Su Lin Lewis argues that, taken together, these resolutions amounted to a clearly defined Asian socialist project offering a third way between American capitalism and Soviet communism – a project distinguished by “a collective and humanist vision for post-colonial society that was equitable to all men and women, regardless of religion or ethnicity”.<sup>10</sup>

A closer look at the proceedings in Rangoon, however, calls this assessment into question: the participants largely failed to forge a consensus on many issues and still less on a definition of Asian socialism, settling instead for catch-all resolutions that poorly papered over basic disagreements.<sup>11</sup> The elusiveness of a consensus on Asian socialism is hardly remarkable. After all, many political movements contain multiple and even competing viewpoints, and open-ended resolutions are a frequent product of international gatherings. That said, the lack of any consensus not only complicated efforts to define Asian socialism, but also hampered the corollary task of differentiating Asian socialism from other political movements in Asia, many of which claimed some relationship to socialism. “Everybody calls himself a Socialist [...]”, a Pakistani delegate in Rangoon complained in this regard. “It is difficult to distinguish the real Socialists. It is a great problem in India and it is the biggest problem in Pakistan and also in other countries.”<sup>12</sup> As the Pakistani speaker

8. Thomas William Shillam, “Shattering the ‘Looking-Glass World’: The Congress for Cultural Freedom in South Asia, 1951–55”, *Cold War History*, 20 (2020), p. 457; and Roland Burke, “‘Real Problems to Discuss’: The Congress for Cultural Freedom’s Asian and African Expeditions, 1951–1959”, *Journal of World History*, 27 (2016), pp. 53–85.

9. ASC, *Resolutions of the first Asian Socialist Conference* (Rangoon, May 1954).

10. Lewis, “Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom”, p. 87.

11. Reporting on the conference, a Yugoslav observer likened the proceedings to “a socialist parliament where disagreements were resolved diplomatically, that is, by postponing the discussion, creating subcommittees or working groups that found compromise solutions, which were then adopted by the plenum committee...”. See Aleksander V. Miletić, “The Role of Milovan Đilas at the Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon, 1953”, *Tokovi istorije*, 3 (2020), 128.

12. Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek, Stockholm [AABS], Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti [Ssa], F 02A: 06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee prepared by staff

understood, if everyone was a socialist then not only Pakistani and Indian, but also Asian socialism risked becoming meaningless. Hence the imperative in Rangoon to define a distinct Asian socialism.

The difficulty in Rangoon of defining a distinct Asian socialism undoubtedly had implications for politics within various Asian countries that are worth exploring.<sup>13</sup> This article, however, approaches the Rangoon conference's implications from another angle – that of Morgan Phillip's fears concerning the SI being a “‘white’ International”. For also on the agenda in Rangoon was a proposal to merge the SI and the ASC – a proposal personally delivered by a high-level European delegation led by Clement Attlee, the Labour Party leader and former British prime minister. For Attlee and his fellow European socialists, such a merger would serve to affirm the global potential of the International and, by extension, of socialism as a political movement.

Asian socialists, however, rejected a merger, preferring to keep the ASC separate from the SI. This decision might seem self-evident: after all, as Harry Verhoeven has remarked, the postwar and postcolonial worlds presented different challenges to Asian (and African) socialists than they did to their European counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Policy differences, moreover, contributed to the decision, particularly on the issue of decolonization, with Asian socialists accusing the SI of being lukewarm in its opposition to colonialism. Yet, the decision to create a separate organization was not a unanimous one: in Rangoon, several Asian socialists spoke in favour of a merger. More significantly, the deliberations in Rangoon revealed another and arguably more influential factor: the ambivalence of Asian socialists towards European socialism. While some Asian socialists looked to the latter as one source of inspiration, others insisted that Asian socialism must be distinct from, and even defined in opposition to, European socialism. Fuelling this ambivalence was a conundrum: how to distinguish Asian socialism from European socialism while at the same time integrating Asian socialism into a larger socialist

members of Committee ‘C’”. On the multiple meanings of socialism within Indian politics, see Taylor C. Sherman, “A New Type of Revolution?: Socialist Thought in India, 1940s–1960s”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 21 (2018), pp. 485–504.

13. On this subject, Lewis contends that “their [the ASC and Asian socialism] most lasting legacies came in their efforts to build a world free of exploitation, one that valued individual freedoms within egalitarian states”. See Lewis, “Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom”, p. 60. But such a vague claim is practically impossible to confirm or to disconfirm. Arguably more promising in terms of future research is Kevin W. Fogg's recent article. Looking at Indonesia, he argues that the failure of Indonesian socialists to define the political and economic contents of their socialism in any distinct sense left socialism vulnerable to appropriation by Sukarno at the end of the 1950s. See Fogg, “Indonesian Socialism of the 1950s: From Ideology to Rhetoric”, *Third World Quarterly*, 42 (2021), pp. 465–482.

14. Harry Verhoeven, “‘What is to be Done?’ Rethinking Socialism(s) and Socialist Legacies in a Postcolonial World”, *Third World Quarterly*, 42 (2021), pp. 450–451.

movement whose origins were (at least partly) European – and whose most visible and politically influential parties were also European. A similar conundrum, it is worth noting, did not beset European socialists who simply conflated European socialism with socialism, associating the SI's enlargement with socialism's globalization. One result is that Asian socialism emerged from Rangoon in limbo, situated somewhere between a regional version of a larger phenomenon and something *sui generis*.

The article re-examines the debates in Rangoon, using a variety of sources including the conference minutes found in the Swedish Social Democratic Party archives which, though incomplete, offer a much fuller record than the published proceedings. Its focus is on efforts to define Asian socialism in terms of three broad subjects: international politics; domestic politics; and economic politics. Throughout, particular attention is paid to the role played by understandings of European socialism. The profound ambivalence of Asian socialists towards European socialism effectively precluded a merger with the SI. More generally, this ambivalence directs attention to some of the conceptual barriers to the emergence of a more global socialist movement, one that extended beyond regional confines. The approach of European socialists, which was simply to enlarge SI membership, assumed the existence of a common socialist denominator across countries and continents. This assumption elided the reality of different understandings of socialism between regions (between European and Asian socialists), to say nothing of differences within the same region (between European or between Asian socialists). If Asian socialists were certainly more sensitive to inter-regional differences, the debates in Rangoon also indicated the strength of intra-regional differences, especially on the question of socialism's inter-regional potential. In the end, neither Asian, nor European socialists were able to conceive of global socialism as something greater than its regional parts.

What follows is divided into five sections. The first section traces the immediate origins of the ASC, while the next three sections examine the deliberations in Rangoon, highlighting the role played by European socialism in efforts to define Asian socialism. The final section briefly discusses socialism's global moment in 1953.

#### THE RUN-UP TO RANGOON

The ASC's immediate origins lie in the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in spring 1947. Hosted by India's provisional government, the conference brought together political leaders and activists from twenty-eight countries to herald Asia's re-emergence after two centuries of Western imperialism. "The Conference itself is significant", Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian government's *de facto* head, declared in his opening address, "as an expression of the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted in spite of the isolationism

which grew up during the years of European domination".<sup>15</sup> Nehru's comments reflected a widespread if diffuse notion of Asian unity whose development can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Fuelled by geo-political thinking, with its emphasis on regional blocs, and even more by civilizational discourses, many of them rooted in Western expansion and imperialism that encouraged essentialized visions of Asia as backward and even decadent, various Asian intellectuals in response imagined the region as a coherent whole.<sup>16</sup> Neither the defeat of Japan's imperial ambitions in 1945, which helped to discredit talk of "Asia for Asians", nor the creation of the United Nations, whose Charter consecrated the sovereign nation state as a cornerstone of international politics, put an end to Asianist sentiments. If anything, the gathering pace of decolonization, together with the emerging Cold War, gave renewed impetus to Asian unity. As Nehru confided in 1947, "[w]e are all Asian conscious at present".<sup>17</sup>

No obvious answer existed, however, to the questions of what constituted Asia or of what form Asian unity should take. Sidestepping these questions, the delegates at the Asian Relations Conference confined themselves to creating a non-political organization dedicated to the "study of Asian and international affairs".<sup>18</sup> Dissatisfied with such scanty fare and eager to stamp a socialist imprint on Asian unity, several delegates discussed the possibility of a separate gathering of socialists. Taking the lead, in August 1947 the national executive of India's Congress Socialist party (CSP), at the time attached to the larger and politically dominant Indian National Congress Party (Congress) led by Nehru, instructed two of its members to make "preliminary preparations for calling in India a world Socialist Conference".<sup>19</sup>

That Indian socialists were at the forefront of these developments is not fortuitous. The CSP's relations with Congress were increasingly tense, and in 1948 the socialists left to found a separate party: the Socialist Party of India (SPI). But despite its ambitions to become a mass organization, the SPI

15. D. Gopal (ed.), *Asian Relations: Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, March April 1947* (Delhi, 2003), Nehru, p. 26. Also see Vineet Thakur, "An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947", *International History Review*, 41 (2018), pp. 673–695.

16. Sugata Bose, "Different Universalisms, Colorful Cosmopolitans: The Global Imagination of the Colonized" in Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa (eds), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (London, 2010), pp. 97–111; Carolien Stolte, "Orienting India: Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917–1937", PhD, Leiden University, 2013; Harald Fischer-Tiné, "'The Cult of Asianism'. Asiendiskurse in Indien zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus (c.1885–1955)", *Comparativ*, 18 (2008), pp. 16–33; and Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007).

17. Nehru to Asaf Ali, 7 Apr. 1947, reproduced in S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 2nd series, vol. 2 (New Delhi, 1984), p. 517.

18. Gopal (ed.), *Asian Relations*, pp. 289–292.

19. Rose, *Socialism in Southern Asia*, pp. 4–5.



remained tiny and divided. The SPI's fusion in 1952 with another party to form the Praja Socialist party (PJP), did not improve matters. The 1951–1952 national elections proved a disaster, leaving the PJP with only twelve seats in Parliament compared to 364 for Congress.<sup>20</sup> It is in this bleak political context that Ram Manohar Lohia, a prominent Indian socialist and expert in international affairs, donned the mantle of Asian socialism. In doing so, Lohia hoped to regenerate Indian socialism by pursuing several related tasks: to bridge differences between Indian socialists; to isolate the communists; and to distinguish Indian socialism from European socialism, which he criticized as overly nationalist, reformist, and staid. From the beginning, moreover, Lohia presented his project in Asian terms. To persuade Indian socialists to unite around a regenerated socialism would presumably be easier if packaged as an Asian project. “Asian socialists, weak as they are, must learn to get together”, he insisted.<sup>21</sup>

During 1950, Lohia visited several Asian countries, urging local socialists to collaborate in the creation of a distinct Asian socialist movement. The following year the Indian party created a foreign affairs bureau to strengthen ties with socialist parties abroad. Although these efforts initially met with a tepid response, Lohia persisted and in March 1952 Burmese, Indian, Indonesian, and Japanese socialists met in Rangoon. Using European socialism as a foil, Lohia told the meeting that “Asian socialism must be drastic instead of being gradual, and unconstitutional, though peaceful, whenever necessary”. Apparently convinced, the participants drew up a joint statement on the “Principles and Objectives of Socialism” that firmly rejected “both Capitalism and Cominform Communism”. When it came to socialism, however, the statement equivocated: while affirming that “the Socialist movement started in the Western World as a logical consequence and opponent of capitalism”, it remained silent on the question of the relationship between Asian and European socialism. No doubt to Lohia's satisfaction, the participants agreed to establish a preparatory committee that met in July 1952 to organize a “plenary congress” in Rangoon of Asian socialists for January 1953.<sup>22</sup> As part of the conference preparations, Asian socialists created a newsletter, *Socialist Asia*, which expressed ambivalence towards European socialism.

20. Niclas-Tölle, *The Socialist Opposition in Nehruvian India*, pp. 73–130; and N.C. Mehrotra, *The Socialist Movement in India* (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 101–131.

21. “Foreign Policy Report”, reproduced in Ram Manohar Lohia, *The Third Camp in World Affairs* (Bombay, 1950), pp. 6 and 9. For Lohia, see also V.K. Arora, *Ram Manohar Lohia and Socialism in India* (New Delhi, 1984); and Hari Kishore Singh, *A History of the Praja Socialist Party [1934–59]* (Lucknow, 1959), pp. 234, 181–182.

22. “An Asian Policy”, Rangoon, Mar. 1952, reproduced in Ram Manohar Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism* (Hyderabad, 1963), p. 307; IISH, *Socialist International Archives* [SI], 65, “Preparatory Meeting for the Plenary Congress of the Asian Socialist Parties”, circular no. B.14/52, May 29, 1952; and “A Balance Sheet of Shortcomings. Organisational Report of Socialist Party”, *Janata*, 2 July 1950, pp. 8–9.

While Asian socialists “did not want to keep themselves aloof from their European friends”, the newsletter’s opening article read, they were acutely aware that they “had their own peculiar problems to face which were not present before European socialists”.<sup>23</sup>

From its offices in London, the Socialist International soon got wind of the project to form an Asian socialist grouping. Before then Asian socialism had aroused little interest. At an international socialist meeting in Zurich in June 1947, the delegates (all European) rejected a request from a group of Indian socialists to be admitted as “observers”, citing the confused situation of socialism in India and in Asia more generally – an assessment that reflected the general ignorance of European socialists on the subject. Although the Indian PJP would be granted associative status in the SI, the non-Western world remained alien for most European socialists.<sup>24</sup> A widely circulated report in May 1950 on non-European socialists thus provided the most rudimentary of information, before going on to lament that Asian parties, emerging from “backward peasant societies”, were “not organized on the lines of European parties”.<sup>25</sup> At the moment of the ASC gathering in Rangoon, only four Asian parties were regular members of the SI: the Israeli party (Mapai), the Malaysian party and two Japanese parties.

It was the British Labour party that took the lead in prodding the SI towards a more receptive attitude. Kept informed of developments through their long-standing contacts with Indian socialists, Labour officials viewed the embryonic Asian socialist movement as a potential threat and opportunity.<sup>26</sup> In a decolonizing world, only socialism could chart a safe course between American capitalism and Soviet communism. As Morgan Phillips explained in late 1952, the SI “must demonstrate that it offers the people of the world the only alternative and a better alternative, to the capitalist system which is in decline and the new totalitarianisms which are old-fashioned despotism in modern dress”.<sup>27</sup> If this belief co-existed with doubts about the suitability of socialism to “backward” regions, decolonization, and the Cold War together convinced Labour that socialism (and the SI) must globalize. Indeed, for Labour officials the future of socialism appeared increasingly intertwined with political developments on other continents: socialism could not thrive if limited to Europe alone, and without a thriving socialism

23. “Asian Socialist Conference. Background”, *Socialist Asia*, 1, 16 August 1952, pp. 1–3.

24. SSA, SPS, Ar.1. 260.17, “Intern sozialist. Konferenz v. 6/9 Juni 1947 in Zürich. Protokolle”.

25. Office universitaire de recherche socialiste, Paris [OURS], PS-SFIO, carton: I.S.C. 1949–1951, “Socialist Parties in Certain Countries Outside Europe”, Edward Farmer, 5 May 1950.

26. For contacts between British and Indian socialists, see Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 272–298.

27. IISH, Socialist International Information, vol. II, 1952, “The Second Congress of the Socialist International, Milan, 17–21 October 1951”, Phillips, pp. 2–4.

the non-European world would be compelled to choose between communism and capitalism, ultimately to socialism's cost.

The immediate result was the decision to send the high-level delegation headed by Attlee to the Rangoon conference. As a Labour Party official confided to the British Foreign Office, the delegation's task was "to persuade Asian Socialists to oppose separationist tendencies on the part of their parties regarding the West" and "to join the Socialist International rather than form a separate Asian Socialist organisation of their own".<sup>28</sup>

### INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

In Rangoon, the SI delegation found itself a witness to extensive debates about the meaning and contents of Asian socialism rather than a participant in negotiations for a merger. In the efforts to define Asian socialism, international issues appeared to offer promising possibilities. One such issue was anti-colonialism. Many of the delegates in Rangoon had first-hand experience with colonial rule, as their countries had earlier been incorporated into empires or menaced by imperial powers. Indeed, numerous Asian socialists had actively participated in anti-colonial struggles. That the Rangoon conference would adopt an uncompromising anti-colonial position was thus a foregone conclusion. No less pertinently, Asian socialists framed their anti-colonialism partly in opposition to European socialists, who were accused of being lukewarm on the subject.<sup>29</sup> Asian socialists, accordingly, made it clear that they would accept nothing less than the SI's explicit commitment to the speediest possible achievement of national independence for the colonial world. Reporting on the conference, André Bidet, a French socialist and member of the SI's delegation, remarked that it was difficult to exaggerate the "intensity of [anti-colonial] sentiment" encountered in Rangoon. Asian socialists "were suspicious towards European socialist parties because of the positions taken by these parties on so-called colonial problems".<sup>30</sup>

Following the conference, Asian socialists continued to campaign for the right to national self-determination for all peoples under foreign rule. To direct this campaign, the ASC created an Anti-Colonial Bureau whose mission was "to encourage, guide and help the freedom movements to speed the attainment of Independence in their own countries according to socialist lines as adopted

28. The National Archives, Kew Gardens, FO 371/101281, FZ 2191/10, "Conference of Asian Socialist Parties in Rangoon", minutes, T.S. Tull, 27 November 1952.

29. See the comments of Burmese and Indonesian socialists in IISH, SI, 65, "Preparatory Meeting for the Plenary Congress of the Asian Socialist Parties", circular no. B.14/52, 29 May 1952.

30. OURS, PS-SFIO, Conseil national, 24–25 Jan. 1953, Bidet, p. 158. Bidet elaborated on his comments in "Retour de Rangoon (1)", *Le Populaire de Paris*, 24–25 January 1953, p. 1.

by the Rangoon Conference”.<sup>31</sup> However salient anti-colonialism appeared, its definitional potential was limited. As a political movement, European socialists were arguably less attached to colonialism than the ASC’s rhetoric pretended, even if the SFIO’s support of French policy during the Algerian War would generate tensions not only with other European socialists but also with non-European and especially Asian socialists.<sup>32</sup> That said, the SI, partly under ASC pressure, soon moved towards recognizing the principle of political independence for all colonies, thus depriving Asian socialists of a self-defining foil.<sup>33</sup> It is also worth mentioning that practically all political movements in Asia were anti-colonialist, which added to the difficulties of articulating a distinctly Asian socialist position on the issue.

If anti-colonialism was insufficient to define Asian socialism, another possibility emerged in the realm of international policy: Asia as an independent third force in a bipolar world dominated by the two superpowers. The idea of a third force had been circulating among Asian socialists for some time. In a 1950 book entitled *The Third Camp in World Affairs*, Lohia argued for a “Third Force of Socialism” between the two superpower blocs capable of playing an active and independent role in world politics. Here, again, European socialism served as a foil. The initiative for a third force, Lohia insisted, could only come from Asian socialists because European socialists were too tied to the American bloc. Speaking at the SI’s founding congress in 1951, he criticized the decision of European socialists “to link up with America for reasons of defence”, countering that Asian socialists preferred to identify with a “Third World which is not satisfied with things as they are today, and which refuses to join either of the two antagonistic camps”.<sup>34</sup> At the preliminary meeting of Asian socialists in March 1952, the Indonesian and Burmese participants echoed Lohia. Criticizing the SI for being “too strongly tied up with the anti-Russian bloc”, they issued a statement promoting the “ideology and foreign policy of a ‘Third Force’, to be formed by an Asian bloc aligned neither to the Western bloc nor the Soviet bloc”.<sup>35</sup>

The stage was seemingly set for an agreement in Rangoon on a third force policy that could define Asian socialism. Yet, no consensus was reached.

31. IISH Collection, *Anti-Colonial Bureau News Letter*, 1, June 1954; and McCann, “Where is the *Afro* in Afro-Asian Solidarity?”, pp. 101–112.

32. See Brian Shaev, “The Algerian War, European Integration, and the Decolonization of French Socialism”, *French Historical Studies*, 41 (2018), pp. 63–94.

33. See Talbot C. Imlay, “International Socialism and Decolonization during the 1950s: Competing Rights and the Postcolonial Order”, *American Historical Review*, 118 (2013), pp. 1105–1132; and Van Kemseke, *Towards an Era of Development*, pp. 76–106.

34. Lohia, *The Third Camp in World Affairs*, p. 14; and IISH, Socialist International Information, vol. 1, pp. 31–32, August 4, 1951, “First Congress of the Socialist International. Socialist World Action in the Struggle for Peace”, pp. 23–26.

35. IISH, SI, 65, “Preparatory Meeting for the Plenary Congress of the Asian Socialist Parties”.

The final resolution on “Asia and World Peace” failed to mention a third force, merely expressing regret at the “tendency towards the division of the world into two power blocs”.<sup>36</sup> Disagreement between Asian socialists posed one obstacle to consensus. Japan was represented at the ASC by two parties, the Japanese Right party and the Japanese Left party, a dual representation that in itself boded ill for the efforts to define a consensus on Asian socialism in general. In any case, the two Japanese parties sharply disagreed on the issue of a third force. While delegates from the Japanese Right party resolutely opposed Lohia’s vision, citing their country’s dependence on the United States for security, those from the Japanese Left party, whose anti-Americanism was no secret, welcomed a third force policy. Interestingly, delegates from Mapai (Israeli party) supported their Japanese Left counterparts, even though Israel at the time was far less dependent on the United States than was Japan.<sup>37</sup>

But even among advocates of a third force considerable disagreement existed on its meaning. Some Asian socialists, such as the Pakistanis, viewed a regional third force in predominantly practical terms: its purpose was to mediate disputes between members and especially between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Others, such as Kyaw Nyein, the former Burmese deputy prime minister and foreign minister, envisaged a socialist Asia in more ambitious terms: it would foster peace between the superpowers by forming an expanding zone of harmony that operated outside of Cold War dynamics and tensions. If many delegates found this of vision of independence appealing, they disagreed on whether it implied disarmament or increased armaments. Equally confusing, several speakers sought to distinguish a third force from a position of “ideological neutralism”, defined as the refusal to take sides between Moscow and Washington. The final resolution expressly rejected this position without, however, indicating the difference between neutralism and independence. Meanwhile, not all Asian socialists were eager to isolate a third force from the Cold War. Pointing to their countries’ need for economic development, Indian and Malaysian socialists suggested that greater Asian unity could be useful as a means to obtain aid of various kinds from one or both of the superpowers.<sup>38</sup>

Lohia’s use of European socialists as a foil in promoting an Asian socialist third force can be seen as an attempt to sidestep differences among Asian socialists on the subject. As such, it arguably brushed over a more complex reality among European socialists.<sup>39</sup> But the more pertinent point is that Lohia’s manoeuvre backfired: the attempt to define an Asian socialist third way in

36. “Asia and World Peace” in ASC, *Resolutions of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, pp. 16–19.

37. AABS, Ssa, F 02A/06, “Asian Socialist Conference. Committee ‘A’...10th January 1953”.

38. *Ibid.*, and ASC, *Report of the First Asian Socialist Conference, Rangoon, 1953* (Rangoon, 1953), pp. 47–50.

39. Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918–1964* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 168–181; and Inmlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism*, pp. 359–408.

opposition to the SI aroused the opposition of Israeli and Japanese Right socialists who feared Asian socialism would assume an overly anti-Western/anti-American course. In Rangoon, they thus lobbied fiercely for the closest possible relations with European socialists (and even for affiliation with the SI), in order precisely to counter Lohia's vision of a third force. Although unable to impose their preferences, Japanese Right and Israeli socialists, exploiting the divisions among Asian delegates, did help to ensure not only that the Rangoon conference limited itself to an innocuous statement, but also that third force thinking would not define the ASC during the 1950s.

### ASIAN SOCIALISTS AND SOCIALIST POLITICS

If neither anti-colonialism, nor a third force provided a sufficient basis for defining Asian socialism, socialist politics offered other possibilities. In Rangoon, two themes helped to structure as well as to complicate discussions on this subject. Mirroring the interest in a third force in international politics, one theme focused on a political third way between communism and capitalism or between a Soviet and an American model. Two years earlier and after considerable debate, European socialists claimed to have forged just such a compromise under the label of "democratic socialism". Combining political freedoms with an element of collective economic purpose, this compromise aimed at promoting the welfare of all citizens.<sup>40</sup> Many Asian socialists appeared intrigued by "democratic socialism" as a promising third way. As an editorial in *Janata*, the Indian socialist newspaper, explained during the Rangoon conference:

Neither capitalism nor communism has any inherent strength to cope with the problems that Asia has to face. Capitalism is likely to work in the direction of keeping people ignorant and divided so that a small minority can exploit fully the resources available here. Communism with its centralised economic and political power is likely to prove much worse. Democratic socialism seems to be the only answer to the logic of the situation.<sup>41</sup>

The challenge in Rangoon was to work out an Asian version of this democratic socialist third way, and here the task was complicated by the second theme: the ambivalence towards European socialism. Indeed, numerous delegates evinced suspicion of European socialism as a model of politics. A memorandum submitted by Indian socialists, which provided the basis for the Rangoon conference's resolution on "Common Asian Problems", declared

40. "Aims and Tasks of Democratic Socialism", 1951, reproduced in Julius Braunthal, *History of the International, 1943-1968* (Boulder, CO, 1980), pp. 531-537.

41. "The Only Way", *Janata*, 26 January 1953, p. 1.

that “if Asia were to accept all that goes by the name in Europe as socialism, sterility will inevitably result”.<sup>42</sup>

Tensions between these two themes informed the debates in Rangoon on socialist politics. In looking at European socialism, Asian socialists generally saw a movement long committed to non-violent and parliamentary forms of politics. While some speakers accepted that this suited political realities in European democracies, others, such as Lohia, contended that it had debilitating effects on European socialism. But Asian socialists were animated above all by the question of whether this approach was pertinent to Asian conditions. Inspired by Gandhi’s example, several Indian delegates, unhappy with the emphasis of European socialists on parliamentary politics, lobbied for an endorsement of collective civil disobedience as a legitimate political tool. Their lobbying, in turn, prompted divergent reactions from Japanese socialists: while a delegate from the Japanese Right party hesitated to support civil disobedience, asserting that the “first principle of democracy is that we must be law-abiding”, his counterpart from the Japanese Left party responded that socialists should not confine themselves to “constitutional methods”. The secretary of the committee, the Indian socialist C.G.K. Reddy, sought to appease both sides by suggesting that civil disobedience could involve “constitutional or shall I say Parliamentary means” but need not be limited to them. Asian socialists, Reddy elaborated, must be prepared to adopt other methods if it proved impossible to “change the policy of the government by Parliamentary means” or if a “Government is pursuing a policy which is clearly reactionary and [...] detrimental to the people”.<sup>43</sup>

The exchange raised the difficult issue of violence as a political instrument. By and large, European socialists rejected recourse to political violence, which they associated with interwar extremism, both fascist and communist. Asian socialists, by comparison, were more divided on the subject. Someone like Reddy appeared close to the position of European socialists, warning in Rangoon that a political movement accepting violence as a legitimate means would “necessarily be undemocratic”. The “after effects of all violent revolution”, he continued, “is something that no one can control. It has a great tendency to become dictatorial in that particular country as it has happened almost everywhere where violent revolution has taken place [...]”.<sup>44</sup> Other Asian socialists, drawing on their anti-colonial experiences, balked at

42. ASC, *Report of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, Sharett, 33; and AABS, Ssa, F 02A: 06, “Draft Resolution on Common Asian Problems and Policies Submitted by Praja Socialist Party – India”, January 1953.

43. AABS, Ssa, F 02A: 06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee. Dated the 8th January ’53.”

44. That Reddy advocated this position is somewhat ironic, as he would later be involved in a violent plot against the government. For Reddy’s defence of his later position, see C.G.K. Reddy, *Baroda Dynamite Conspiracy: The Right to Rebel* (New Delhi, 1977).

endorsing the principle of non-violence. The Burmese socialist U Win, for example, responded that earlier anti-colonial struggles would not have succeeded if limited to “peaceful agitation and peaceful organisation”. Intriguingly, his fellow Burmese socialist, U Tun Win, added that the “armed method” must remain an option in order to oppose a government that denied “constitutional and civic rights” – even if that government were led by socialists (as was the case in Burma at the time). With Malaysian and Indonesian socialists also reluctant to rule out civil disobedience, whether violent or non-violent, the final resolution predictably equivocated: “We say that for Socialist [sic] we don’t swear by violent methods as Communist [sic] do and we don’t swear by constitutional methods as Liberals and capitalist [sic] and so-called democracies do.”<sup>45</sup>

If Asian socialists failed to work out a clear position on the question of violence, they were no more successful when it came to the nature of a socialist political regime. Jayaprakash Narayan, like Lohia a towering figure in Indian socialism, helped to set the terms of the discussion in a plenary lecture at the Rangoon conference. Narayan began by noting that Marx and his European followers had failed to describe “in detail the political characteristics of a socialist society”. In seeking to remedy this omission, Western socialists had focused on “formal parliamentary democracy”, an approach he criticized for ignoring the “problem of decentralisation of political power, so that the people themselves may participate in the management of their affairs”. Deeply suspicious of state authority, Narayan extolled a decentralized political regime as the best means to encourage popular participation. “It is not enough for a socialist parliament through a socialist cabinet to rule over a country, it must be supplemented by the peoples’ participation at the lower level of the administration also.” In thinking of alternatives to parliamentary democracy, Narayan rejected the Soviet system as too authoritarian – as an extreme version of the centralization he associated with European socialism. More promising, in terms of decentring power, was Tito’s Yugoslavia with its various “Peoples’ Committees, Workers’ Councils, and the representative institutions of peasants”. Not surprisingly, the Yugoslav delegates, present in Rangoon as observers, encouraged Narayan in this sense.<sup>46</sup>

This was not a plea for one European model over another. Instead, Narayan urged Asian socialists to adopt their own approach, and here his starting point was India’s dominant rural reality. A socialist political regime, Narayan insisted, must be built upwards from a village base. Asian socialists should

45. AABS, Ssa, F 02A: 06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee. Dated the 8th January ’53”; and “Common Asian Problems”, reproduced in ASC, *Resolutions of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, pp. 20–22.

46. Narayan, *Ideological Problems of Socialism*. For an earlier expression of Narayan’s suspicion of centralized state power, see Narayan to National Executive, Praja Socialist Party, 28 August 1951, reproduced in Prasad (ed.), *Jayaprakash Narayan*, vol. 6, pp. 182–183.



pursue the “villagisation of land”, which he described as a structure “suited to the rural community in which land is villagised, that is the ownership of the land is transferred to the village community, not to an abstract entity known as the state or the nation, but to the concrete entity with which he [the peasant] is acquainted and of which he is a part”. In issuing this appeal, Narayan could draw on the panchayat system – a re-worked tradition of self-government through local assemblies that the British Raj had experimented with and Gandhi had endorsed.<sup>47</sup> But for Narayan a more direct inspiration came from his Gandhi-inspired Sarvodaya Plan which, non- and even anti-statist in conception, called for the creation of a “non-violent, non-exploitative cooperative society” rooted in local (village) life. If implemented, he had written in *Janata* in June 1951, such a plan “would take us a very long way indeed towards Socialism”. Two years later, in Rangoon, Narayan claimed that this plan was appropriate not just for India but also for Asia (and Asian socialists) in general.<sup>48</sup>

Narayan’s lecture in Rangoon drew an immediate response from the Malaysian socialist Lee Moke Sang, who questioned whether decentralization constituted either “practical politics” or a “necessary cure for social political achievement”. Pointing to his own country, which comprised twelve different states, Moke Sang invoked the need for a strong centralized authority to carry out national projects that “effected people as a whole” in areas such as education and healthcare.<sup>49</sup> Underpinning Moke Sang’s comments was a widely shared enthusiasm among Asian socialists for a combination of nationalism and strong central government – an enthusiasm evident in a lecture given by Soetan Sjahrir, Indonesia’s prime minister and foreign minister from 1945 to 1947. Sjahrir extolled Asian nationalism and especially that of Asian socialists, which he compared unfavourably with the nationalism of European socialists. The latter, he asserted, amounted to a more moderate but not fundamentally different version of Western nationalism that “glorifies grandeur, strength and power” and that constituted “the main danger for world peace”. The nationalism of Asian socialists was “completely different”. Rooted in anti-colonialism, it “wages its struggle against the aggressive, expansive and imperialistic nationalism which regards the backward countries only as prey

47. Darren C. Zook, “Developing the Rural Citizen: Southern India, 1900–47”, *South Asia: Journal of Asian Studies*, 23 (2000), pp. 65–85.

48. See Narayan, “Socialism and Gandhism”, 10 June 1951, reproduced in Prasad (ed.), *Jayaprakash Narayan*, pp. 137–142. For helpful recent discussions of Narayan’s thinking, see Lydia Walker, “Jayaprakash Narayan and the Politics of Reconciliation for the Postcolonial State and its Imperial Fragments”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 56 (2019), pp. 147–169; and Taylor C. Sherman, “A Gandhian Answer to the Threat of Communism: Sarvodaya and Postcolonial Nationalism in India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53 (2016), pp. 249–270.

49. AABS, Ssa, F 02A: 06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee. Dated the 8th January ’53”.

and booty to be possessed or at the most to be divided up among themselves". But this Asian socialist nationalism did not express itself only in resistance; it was also a constructive force. As Sjahrir declared:

The nationalism is a source of new life and strength for the backward peoples. It is capable of instilling in them greater energies. It arouses in them enthusiasm and faith in their ability to create a better life, and in their ability to catch up with the more advanced countries. This nationalism is able to strengthen the will for the progress of mankind. It stands under the sign of progress and justice.<sup>50</sup>

Back in Paris, André Bidet reacted with irritation at Sjahrir's claim that Asian socialists held a monopoly on positive nationalism.<sup>51</sup> Yet, such a reaction overlooked the fact that, generally, European socialists were suspicious of nationalism, which they blamed for Europe's recent history of blood-soaked interstate rivalry and war. This suspicion helps to explain not only their reservations concerning a hasty dissolution of empire into multiple nation states, but also their support for the project of European political and economic union – a project that would strengthen the regionalist orientation of continental European socialists in particular.<sup>52</sup> Such suspicions were alien to Asian socialists such as Sjahrir, who believed that nationalism had to be harnessed to strong centralized state authority if socialism were to attain its full potential. Somewhat ironically, Narayan echoed the suspicions of European socialists in warning that centralized authority risked encouraging authoritarianism and even dictatorship, key factors in fuelling interstate tensions.<sup>53</sup>

If Narayan shared with European socialists a concern about the risks of nationalism, he did not seek safeguards above the nation state in the form of regional supranational groupings (European Union) but rather below, within, and even beyond the nation state. As with numerous Indian socialists inspired by Gandhi, Narayan envisaged politics more through a local and communitarian lens than through a national one. Tellingly, he rarely mentioned the nation, preferring instead to talk of community or, more rarely, of the "peoples of Asia". True to form, soon after the Rangoon conference he openly questioned whether national politics – as well as national political parties such as his own Praja Socialist Party – were "capable of providing an adequate framework for

50. IISH collection, Soetan Sjahrir, *Nationalism and Internationalism* (Rangoon, September 1953), pp. 11–13.

51. André Bidet, "Après la Conférence de Rangoon (I)", *Populaire de Paris*, February 3, 1951, p. 1.

52. The British Labour Party, of course, was an important exception to the growing support among European socialists for some form of European integration. See Michael Newman, *Socialism and European Unity: The Dilemma of the Left in Britain and France* (London, 1983).

53. Narayan, *Ideological Problems of Socialism*.

the democratic requirements of the masses”.<sup>54</sup> That Narayan admitted to having “no alternative to offer for the party system” is less important than the disinterest in nationalism that his proposal evinced.

All told, Asian socialists in Rangoon appeared divided between the champions of a decentralized political regime that would guarantee popular democratic participation, and the advocates of centralized state authority conceived of as a necessary instrument of national aspirations. This division overlapped with another one between the supporters of peaceful political methods, whether parliamentary or extra-parliamentary, and those who refused to exclude violence. Given these divisions, the final resolution could offer only vaguely worded compromises. But no less significant is the fact that both Narayan and Sjahrir, who in many ways embodied these overlapping differences, mobilized Western (European) socialism as a foil for Asian socialism: for Narayan European socialism was too enamoured of parliamentary politics and centralized authority, while for Sjahrir it remained a prisoner of a conflict-prone nationalism. If their different understandings of European socialism undoubtedly stemmed from contending visions for Asian socialism, there was also perhaps a problem with the method. Attempts to define Asian socialism against European socialism presumed that a consensus existed on the latter; yet, because an understanding of the latter depended in no small part on one’s thinking about Asian socialism, the inevitable result was to reproduce division.

#### ASIAN SOCIALISTS AND SOCIALIST ECONOMICS

In attempting to define Asian socialism, the delegates in Rangoon also discussed the nature of socialist economics. As with politics, tensions existed between an interest in a socialist third way and a marked ambivalence towards European socialism. More fundamentally, perhaps, Asian socialists manifested considerable doubts about the value of Western modernity, defined in terms of an urbanized and productivist oriented society – a model that European socialists seemingly embraced after 1945.

Asian socialists generally agreed that Asian economic conditions differed markedly from those in the West and that Asian socialism must, therefore, propose different policies. “Asian socialists”, Sjahrir asserted in Rangoon, “have to face problems unknown to socialists living under different circumstances”. Speaking at a preparatory meeting of Asian socialists in July 1952, the Burmese socialist Nyein spoke of Asian countries as “backward and undeveloped economically” and of Asian peoples as “groaning under the weight of

54. “Intervention in the Debate on General Secretary’s Report, Betul, 16 June 1953”, reproduced in Prasad (ed.), *Jayaprakash Narayan*, p. 350. See also, Madhu Limaye, “Democracy and the Party System” (1953), reproduced in Mehrotra (ed.), Madhu Limaye, *The Age of Hope*, pp. 97–101.

poverty".<sup>55</sup> At the Rangoon conference, much of the emphasis was on the rural world. Most Asian countries, noted Djoier Moehamed, an Indonesian socialist, are "preponderantly agricultural communities" and "[t]his aspect of Asian social and economic life is bound to affect and modify the basic principles and application of socialism".<sup>56</sup> The delegates readily concurred, and the resulting resolution on "agrarian policy" called for major reforms, including land redistribution and the abolition of "feudalism" and "landlordism". In an editorial in *Janata*, Asoka Mehta, a former mayor of Bombay and a founder of the Praja Socialist Party, expressed the hope that this programme could provide the basis for defining Asian socialism, describing the ASC's agrarian policies as "new notes introduced to the traditional score of socialism".<sup>57</sup>

The ASC's resolution, however, hedged when it came to indicating the overall direction of reform. One path, incorporating a modernist industrial vision best represented by the Indian government's first five-year economic plan adopted in 1951, favoured rural mechanization, electrification, and the creation of collective farms; the other path envisaged small-scale artisanal production, self-governing village committees, and local cooperatives for marketing and financing. If this hedging betrayed a tactical calculation, seeking to appeal to the proponents of both centralized and decentralized authority, as a compromise it papered over rather than reconciled differences. Recognizing the resolution's inadequacy, Madhu Limaye, a leading Indian socialist, commented after the conference that it remained for Asian socialists to "develop a theory of economic and social development for the backward two-thirds of the globe".<sup>58</sup>

As Limaye's comment suggests, agrarian policies could not easily be separated from the issues of economic development and growth. In principle, Asian socialists all favoured economic development as the means to reduce poverty within nations as well as to close the gaping wealth gap between the developed and under-developed worlds. "Asian countries", read the conference resolution on economic development, "live in poverty, are under-developed and suffer from the impact and vestiges of colonial rule, feudalism and plural economy [...] These countries can recover and develop only through bold policies of social and economic reconstruction and the full use

55. ASC, *Report of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, p. 10; and IISH Collection, Nyein, "Common Ties that Bind", *Socialist Asia*, 1, 16 September 1952, pp. 1–3.

56. ASC, *Report of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, Moehamed, p. 41.

57. "Agrarian Policy for Asia", in ASC, *Resolutions of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, pp. 8–10; and Mehta, "Asian Socialist Conference", *Janata*, 1 February 1953, pp. 3–5.

58. Limaye, "Une conférence historique", *Correspondance socialiste internationale*, February 1953, p. 12. For approaches to Indian agricultural policy at the time, see Benjamin Siegel, "Modernizing Peasants and 'Master Farmers': Progressive Agriculture in Early Independent India", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 37 (2107), pp. 64–85.

of science”.<sup>59</sup> One aspect of this reconstruction would be foreign development aid, which offered terrain for cooperation with European socialists who, through the International, had formulated proposals for a comprehensive development effort.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, beneath the seeming consensus on economic development lurked significant disagreement among Asian socialists on the value of “productivism” – a vision of progress that underpinned development and promoted increases in general welfare through economic growth and particularly increased production. Significantly, this vision was one that European socialists broadly supported. Charles Maier famously outlined a post-war political consensus in the West (what he called the “politics of productivity”) in which general affluence would help to temper class tensions.<sup>61</sup> Although European socialists would have been loath to endorse such instrumentalist reasoning, they framed development in terms of increases in economic activity, productivity, and prosperity. As the SI’s statement on the subject asserted, the task for socialism in underdeveloped countries was to foster the conditions that “will assure a sufficient share of his [the “toiler”] labour to induce him to invest in new ventures, to adopt improved techniques, to put forth intensive effort to increase production, and to raise his standard of living”.<sup>62</sup>

Some Asian socialists accepted that increasing production (and productivity) was a pressing necessity for the continent. The 1952 programme of the Indonesian Socialist party, for example, declared that: “Socialism in Asia, especially in our country, is faced with the task of increasing the means of production through mutual effort.” This task was judged more urgent than that of transferring “property rights from the hands of that small group which, at present, owns the existing means of production, into the hands and control of the community”.<sup>63</sup> Speaking to a gathering of Asian socialists in March of the same year, Lohia, depicting Asia as “prostrate with the common disease of poverty”, insisted that the priority must be on production rather than distribution. In a speech to Indian socialists soon afterwards, he contrasted the situation of Asian and European socialists, arguing that the latter had the luxury of

59. “Economic Development of Asia”, reproduced in ASC, *Resolutions of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, pp. 11–15.

60. See Van Kemseke, *Towards an Era of Development*; and Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930–50* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 51–59, 226–235.

61. Charles Maier, “The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II”, *International Organization*, 3 (1977), pp. 607–633; and *idem*, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp. 191–228.

62. “Socialist Policy for the Underdeveloped Territories”, October 1952, reproduced in Braunthal, *History of the International, 1943–1968*, pp. 538–543.

63. “Principles and Policy of the Socialist Party of Indonesia”, reproduced in Sjahrir, *Indonesian Socialism*, pp. 12–13.

focusing on welfare (distributive) issues because Europe already possessed a productive economy:

The great achievements of European socialism in the field of general welfare must remain an inspiration and a model, but European socialism has reserves of mass productive forces built up by capitalism, and it has to deal only with fairer distribution. But in the rest of the world the task is to build productive forces and to make investments before thinking about the goal of general well-being [...]<sup>64</sup>

Echoing Lohia, several Indian delegates at the Rangoon conference argued that Asian socialists must emphasize “the tasks of production which in Europe were accomplished to a large extent by the capitalists”.<sup>65</sup>

Other Asian socialists, however, expressed reservations about the emphasis on development and, by extension, on productivism. Some pointed out that many Asian countries lacked the necessary resources, which, in turn, raised the issue of foreign aid. In Rangoon, Asian socialists reiterated their call to European counterparts to push their governments regarding “the sacrifices demanded of the peoples in the developed countries”.<sup>66</sup> Yet, doubts persisted concerning the willingness of the West to provide foreign aid on the scale required. Writing in *Socialist Asia* in November 1952, Mehta questioned whether Western countries or the Soviet Union were ready to offer sufficient resources for meaningful development. In Rangoon, European socialists did nothing to quell Mehta’s doubts when, in a much-publicized seminar, Attlee delineated the difficulties involved in furnishing aid, including that of convincing Western taxpayers to finance “an investment in which they have no immediate hope of a return for their money”.<sup>67</sup>

The British Labour leader’s presentation drew heated responses from several attendees, but the conclusion was hard to avoid: “[o]ur efforts”, as Mehta had argued earlier, “have mainly to come from ourselves”. For Mehta, this meant tailoring development to India and Asia’s limited resources, emphasizing “small-scale efforts” employing “local labour and resources” with some supplementary help from the government. But if this vision appealed to Asian socialists interested in forms of decentralized political and economic authority, it held little attraction for those with a more centralized and activist understanding of state power.<sup>68</sup>

64. Lohia, “An Asian Policy”, p. 293; and Lohia, “Les voies et les moyens du socialisme démocratique. (suite)”, *Correspondance socialiste internationale*, November 1952, pp. 6–8.

65. AABS, Ssa, F 02 :06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee. Dated the 8th January ’53.”

66. IISH, SI, 22, 8 November 1952, “The Second Congress of the Socialist International ... Milan, October 17–21, 1951”, Gokhale, pp. 12–13.

67. Mehta, “Alien Aid Cannot Feed Us”, *Socialist Asia*, 1, 1 November 1952, pp. 5–9; and SSAZ, SPS, Ar. 1.260, “Attlee on Labour Policy in Under-Developed Areas. Political Harangues Mar Socialist Seminar”, *The Nation* (Rangoon), 4 January 1953, pp. 1, 4, and 8.

68. Mehta, “Alien Aid Cannot Feed Us”, pp. 5–9.

Reservations did not concern the question of available resources alone. Digging deeper, some Asian socialists queried the emphasis on productivism, championing the value of a slower life as opposed to the frenetic, production and productivity obsessed West – a life whose rhythms supposedly conformed to the more spiritual bent of Asians. Narayan’s repeated references to Gandhi as a model clearly reflected this position. But it was Lohia, notwithstanding his productivist utterings, who sketched the outlines of a more systematic critique in equating economic development in a productivist framework with capitalist modes of production. Capitalism, he contended in a 1952 article, fostered not only class struggle within nations, but also imperialism between the regions of the world, an imperialism manifest in the underdevelopment and exploitation of two thirds of humanity by the other one third:

Capitalist development has denied means of production to Asia, Africa and elsewhere and has thus caused not alone the conflict between forces of production and relations of production within a single economy as Marx said, but also the much bigger conflict on a world scale between expanding forces of production in the west and reducing forces of production elsewhere. Capitalism is not only an abstract principle it is also a historical entity. Means of production are abundant in one-third of the world while the remaining two-thirds are in want of them [...] Capitalism has never been nor ever shall be progressive to two-thirds of the world.

In another article, Lohia argued that it was an “absurdity” to pretend that capitalist methods could raise production levels and living standards in the non-Western world to anything approaching those attained in the West because the “huge disparity” between the two constituted a “fundamental phenomenon of capital development of the past 300 years”.<sup>69</sup> Although not framed in these terms, Lohia’s systematic critique paralleled in some ways dependency theory, increasingly popular at the time, which argued that the global economy, and especially the terms of trade, were structurally skewed against the non-Western regions.<sup>70</sup> But Lohia’s critique centred above all on the ills of productivism. And in Rangoon this critique easily fused with an image of European socialism as the champions of unbridled and one-sided capitalist economic development. As another Indian delegate intoned, European socialists “have been motivated by [...] their desire for an ever and ever-increasing standard of living”, before adding that “it has been clearly stated that that cannot be the goal of [...] [Asian] Socialists”.<sup>71</sup>

69. Lohia, “The Principles and Objectives of Socialism”, *Socialist Asia*, 1, 16 November 1952, p. 17; and Lohia, “Marxism and Socialism” (Aug. 1952), in Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, pp. 98–99.

70. For a useful discussion of dependency theory, see Young Namkoong, “Dependency Theory: Concepts, Classifications, and Criticisms”, *International Area Studies Review*, 2 (1999), pp. 121–150.

71. AABS, Ssa, F 02A: 06, “Reports of the Proceedings of the ‘C’ Committee. Dated the 8th January ’53.”

Asian socialists in Rangoon discussed alternatives to capitalist forms of production. For some political activists in Asia and elsewhere, the Soviet model of development appeared attractive in a Cold War context.<sup>72</sup> But the majority of Asian socialists rejected Soviet economic planning either as incompatible with democracy or because its productivist bent mirrored capitalism. “The essential thing to note”, Lohia affirmed in this regard, “is that capitalist, as well as communist, rationalization makes use of identical technology and that it is totally useless for Asia in view of its too many people, too little land and too few forces of production”.<sup>73</sup> Rather than an American or Soviet model of development, many Asian socialists were drawn towards a compromise or third way, one often framed in terms of socialist planning. “Socialism”, declared a joint statement by Burmese, Indian and Indonesian socialists in 1952, “believes in planned production for the use of society and not for the profit of the few [...] Socialist planning is opposed to totalitarian planning as it provides no guarantee for popular controls of production and adequate and just distribution of proceeds”. Reflecting this appeal, the Rangoon conference’s resolution on economic development urged Asian countries to implement a “system of planned economy” aimed at increasing the general material and social well-being while also ensuring “democratic control of [the] national economy”.<sup>74</sup>

As a guiding concept, planning possessed several strengths: it readily lent itself to third-force aspirations and it could tap into deeper veins of political-economic thinking flowing out of the interwar crisis of capitalism. At the same time, planning was an elusive concept. After 1945, an array of governments, ranging from those in Western Europe to the Soviet Union and including India, proclaimed adherence to economic planning, all the while pursuing disparate policies. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the Rangoon conference had difficulty in identifying an Asian socialist version of planning. Asian socialists might criticize European socialists for being too productivist and even too capitalist, but such criticism provided little help in defining an alternative approach. In an attempt to forge a consensus on planning, the ASC in 1954 created an economic experts committee whose participants not only failed to produce a policy programme, but could not decide whether Asian socialists could “learn from [sic] experience not only of oneself but also of others”. In a report two years later, the committee tacitly abandoned the goal of forging a distinct Asian socialist approach to planning, urging Asian socialists instead to endorse the economic recommendations of

72. A good starting point for the sizeable literature on development during the Cold War is Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).

73. Lohia, “The Principles and Objectives of Socialism”, pp. 18–19.

74. IISH, SI, 65, “Preparatory Meeting of the Asian Socialist Parties. Report of the Debates on the Socialist International and the Principles and Objectives of Socialism”, no. B. 16/52, 19 June 1952; and “Economic Development of Asia”, reproduced in ASC, *Resolutions of the First Asian Socialist Conference*, pp. 11–15.



the 1955 Bandung conference – a conference of Asian and African leaders and not of socialist parties.<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The previous sections examined the deliberations at the Rangoon conference on Asian socialism, focusing on three subjects: international politics; domestic politics; and economic politics. Each subject stirred important disagreements between Asian socialists. In international politics, no consensus existed on the meaning of a third force policy; in domestic politics on the virtues of centralization versus decentralization, on those of parliamentary versus non-parliamentary methods, or on those of violence versus non-violence; and in economic politics, on the nature of development or on the wisdom of productivism. In the efforts to define Asian socialism across each of these three subjects, a recurring theme concerned the relationship with European socialism. Here, the dominant note was ambivalence: Asian participants were unsure whether to define Asian socialism in opposition to, or in connection with, European socialism; or whether Asian socialism was best viewed as something *sui generis* or as a regional version of a larger phenomenon and movement.

In the end, Asian socialists in Rangoon agreed on little aside from anti-colonialism. Not surprisingly, perhaps, anti-colonialism would characterize the ASC for most of its brief existence. The organization's second and last congress, held in Bombay in November 1956, reaffirmed anti-colonialism as the priority.<sup>76</sup> "As long as the struggle for independence continued and continues", explained Un Ba Swe, the ASC's chairman, "socialists and nationalists are comrades in arms", adding that "the struggle [...] to supersede capitalism and feudalism by democratic socialism" must await the overall defeat of colonialism.<sup>77</sup> There is no doubt that this commitment to anti-colonialism was sincerely felt. At the same time, anti-colonialism provided little help in distinguishing Asian socialism from other political forces in Asia, all of which were anti-colonialist. No less pertinently, as Mehta pointed out at the 1956 congress, anti-colonialism allowed Asian socialists to side-step other issues. "Socialism was still a vague and undefined movement", he complained to the assembled delegates. "In India, everybody claimed to be a Socialist.

75. "Problems of Economic Development of Asia", *Janata*, 27 February 1955, pp. 13–15; and "Report of the Economic Committee", *Janata*, 18 November 1956, pp. 13–14.

76. There was a brief attempt to revive the ASC in 1965 with a meeting in Bombay. See *Socialist Solution for Asia: A Report on the 1965 Asian Socialist Conference in Bombay* (n.p. 1965).

77. U Ba Swe, "Asian Socialists in Vanguard of Struggle" in *2nd Congress of the Asian Socialist Conference, Bombay 1956: A Souvenir* (Bombay, 1956), pp. 51–52, 62–64.

It was the duty of the Conference to give a precise meaning, content and definition to the term.”<sup>78</sup>

In citing Mehta, the purpose is not to criticize Asian socialists for failing to forge a consensus on Asian socialism that went beyond anti-colonialism, and still less to compare Asian socialists unfavourably (or favourably, for that matter) with European socialists.<sup>79</sup> The latter certainly experienced their fair share of disputes on various subjects, even if European socialists could fall back on a well-established tradition and practice of consultation and cooperation going back to the nineteenth century and that arguably fostered what social scientists refer to as a sense of “we-ness”.<sup>80</sup> Instead, what this article has sought to do is to make a case for placing the ASC in the context of twentieth-century socialist politics and especially of post-war efforts to create a global socialist movement. This context is by no means offered as an alternative to that of post-war Asian, Afro-Asian, and anti-colonial politics, one that denies the pertinence of the latter. Rather, the goal is simply to emphasize the socialist dimension of the ASC’s history – a dimension that has been neglected.

Finally, an emphasis on the ASC’s socialist dimension raises interesting historiographical issues. In recent years, prominent scholars of international history have advocated the adoption of a global perspective for the post-1945 period. As the editor of a prestigious collective study of the period affirms, its history “must be understood in the global context, not just in terms of separate national or regional histories”.<sup>81</sup> In the case of socialism, the 1950s appears to have been a propitious moment for such a perspective. Asian socialists who gathered in Rangoon were aware of the globalizing political forces at work and interested in integrating Asia into them. For example, in a keynote lecture at the gathering, Soetan Sjahrir described an ongoing process of internationalism encompassing multiple spheres of activity that together fostered cross-national and cross-regional cooperation. As Sjahrir made clear, Asia and Asians could not stand aside from the larger and globe-spanning dynamics at work.<sup>82</sup> European socialists, for their part, were eager to create a more global socialist movement by expanding the SI into Asia and beyond.

78. “Asian Socialists Resolve to Meet the Challenges of Our Times”, *Janata*, 11 November 1956, pp. 2–3.

79. Harry Verhoeven has criticized the tendency to measure the socialism of Asian and African socialists against a Eurocentric norm. See Verhoeven, “What is to be Done?”, pp. 451–452.

80. For example, see Thomas Risse, “Let’s Argue!?: Communicative Action in World Politics”, *International Organization*, 54 (2000), pp. 1–39.

81. Akira Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), p. 3. See also, Mark Mazower, *Governing The World: The History of an Idea* (New York, 2012), pp. 244–304.

82. IISH collection, Soetan Sjahrir, *Nationalism and Internationalism* (Rangoon, September 1953), p. 15. For Sjahrir’s politics more generally, see Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 402–458.

Yet, what might appear to be socialism's global moment went unrealized. The ambivalence of Asian socialists towards European socialism not only precluded a merger of the ASC and the SI, helping to ensure that the latter remained a predominantly Western institution, but also functioned as a conceptual barrier to visions of socialism that stretched beyond Asia (and the decolonized world more generally). Meanwhile, European socialists would court the ASC throughout the 1950s, but found themselves handicapped by the inability to imagine alternatives to their own European model of socialist internationalism – a handicap that would undermine attempts in later decades to cooperate with Latin American socialists. In the end, both Asian and European socialists had difficulty imaging socialism outside of their respective regional frameworks. This being so, the history of twentieth century socialism is perhaps best approached in regional (and national) rather than in global terms.