

An Intellectual History of the United Nations

Author(s): Louis Emmerij

Source: *Development in Practice*, Nov., 2002, Vol. 12, No. 5 (Nov., 2002), pp. 653-655

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Oxfam GB

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4029411>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Development in Practice*

JSTOR

Research Round-up

An intellectual history of the United Nations

Louis Emmerij

It may come as a surprise to many to learn that there is no comprehensive history of the UN family of Organisations, institutional or intellectual. True, several specialised agencies have written or are in the process of writing their institutional history and this is indeed what all organisations must do. As the co-directors of the UN Intellectual History Project, Richard Jolly, Tom Weiss, and I decided, therefore, to undertake the task of writing an *intellectual* history, that is, a history of the ideas launched or nurtured by the UN. As lifelong participants and observers of multilateral development work and diplomacy, it struck us some time ago that the UN story deserves to be better documented if it is to be better understood and appreciated. The Bretton Woods institutions in this respect are far ahead. The World Bank published two massive histories—one on the occasion of its 25th and the other (two volumes and more than 2000 pages) of its 50th anniversary (Mason and Asher 1973; Kapur et al. 1997). The IMF has an in-house historian who ensures the capture of its place in history with regular publications.¹

Most observers think primarily about the political and security institutions and individuals when mention is made of the UN. Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to the UN for these activities come to mind, including Ralph Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld, the

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Peacekeepers, and recently Kofi Annan and the United Nations Organisation.

But the UN economic and social institutions have quietly been making an impact, often with more success than in the political and peacekeeping arenas. Indeed, two development agencies—the ILO and UNICEF—have also been awarded Nobel Peace Prize. More importantly from the point of view of this intellectual history, nine Nobel Prize laureates in economics (Jan Tinbergen, Gunnar Myrdal, Wassily Leontief, James E. Meade, Arthur W. Lewis, Richard Stone, Lawrence Klein, Theodore W. Schultz, and Amartya Sen) have spent a substantial part of their professional lives working as UN staff members and consultants contributing to UN ideas and activities.

The United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) is an independent activity located at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. It also has an office in Geneva headed by Yves Berthelot, the former Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. It has, however, the full support of the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and is supported financially by several foundations and governments.

UNIHP concentrates on the economic and social arena. However, recently the UN Secretary General asked us to extend our coverage to include also the peace and security activities of the UN, meaning that we would thus cover the entire spectrum of UN activities. We are actively considering this proposal, but its implementation depends, of course, on attracting additional funding.

UNIHP has two components. The first is a series of books on specific topics that have been identified by the co-directors in consultation with the members of the International Advisory Council of the Project. Eleven topics have thus been chosen that range from international trade and finance to global governance via gender and global resource management (see www.unhistory.org/ for full details). Under each of these topics the history of ideas launched by the UN family will be traced. Did they come from within the Secretariat, or from outside the UN through governments, NGOs, or experts, etc? What happened to these ideas? Were they discarded without discussion or after deliberation? Were they discussed, adapted (or distorted), and then implemented? What happened afterwards?

We have identified 11 topics that, together with two synthesis volumes and the already published 'appetiser' *Ahead of the Curve?* (Emmerij et al. 2001), will make for a series of 14 volumes, ten of which will be written by colleagues and four by the three co-directors. The whole series will be published by Indiana University Press. If peace and security issues are also included, the series will expand to 17 books.

The second component of UNIHP consists of an oral history. In-depth interviews are being conducted with some 75 personalities who have played an important role in developing, transmitting, or destroying ideas. There is a tragic urgency here, given the age of many of these individuals.

We have made good progress during the two years the Project has been underway. At the time of writing (end of April 2002), more than 60 interviews have been concluded and we hope to start writing the synthesis volume presenting the main results during the summer of 2002. Obviously the individual tapes and transcripts will in due course be made available to libraries and researchers. In addition, UNIHP is encouraging the establishment of international networks among archivists and researchers who use UN documents, including staff career records.

All 11 monographs on individual topics are underway and we hope to start soon, as mentioned, on one of the two synthesis volumes. The volume summarising the main outcomes of the monographs will be written at the end of the Project. As mentioned, one book has already been published (Emmerij et al. 2001) and four more will follow in early 2003. *Ahead of the Curve?* is essentially a synthesis *avant la lettre*. In it, we took a number of global and/or regional challenges the world has faced and examined how the UN system has stood up to them. Was the UN ahead of the curve in facing these challenges, just in sight of the curve, or frankly behind it—these were the questions we tried to answer in this publication. It was fascinating, and often amazing—even for us—to realise how many times the UN system has been ahead of the curve. This is true with respect to the early ideas on development, on international aspects of environmental policies, population and technology, gender issues, international and national development policies, national accounting issues, and trade and finance. The problem of the transition economies in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after 1989 constitutes a special but not unique case where the United Nations Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva advocated a gradual approach that most probably was the better policy advice. We believe this to be the case also in light of the fact that the UNECE was the only arena during the Cold War where East and West met and worked together on concrete problems. As we know, however, the other approach—the 'big bang' approach advocated by: international financial institutions and several very audible international consultants—won the day. We do not want to go as far as to say that money won over ideas, but it was certainly a missed opportunity.²

The League of Nations had discussed employment problems during the 1920s and 1930s, and the post-war contributions were pioneering. The inclusion of human rights in the Charter and the adoption of the Universal

Declaration in 1948 appear, in retrospect, mind-boggling, or in the words of Stephane Hessel, an early UN recruit, who sat at Eleanor Roosevelt's side in 1948 and later became Ambassador to France, 'what makes the second half of the 20th century such an important moment of world history'.³

There have also been many instances when the UN has been behind the curve. This is true, for instance, in the case of HIV/AIDS, global income gaps, or Brian Urquhart's candidate for the worst idea ever, Julian Huxley's 'sex at high altitudes'.⁴

The four books that are now in the very final stages of completion and that will be published in early 2003 are: *Trade, Finance, and Development*, by John Toye and Richard Toye; *Quantifying the World: Ideas and Statistics*, by Michael Ward; *The Contribution of the United Nations to Development Thinking and Practice*, by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frederic Lapeyre; and *Perspectives on Development: Views from the Regional Commissions*, by Yves Berthelot (ed.), with chapters by Yves Berthelot, Adebayo Adejeji, Leelanda de Silva, Gert Rosenthal, and Blandine Destrebeau.

We would welcome any comments, observations, and contributions that readers may have.

Notes

- 1 The fourth volume in the IMF series appeared recently: James M. Boughton, *Silent Revolution: The International Monetary Fund 1979–1989*, Washington, DC: IMF, 2001.
- 2 For further information on this most important issue, see Emmerij et al. (2001) Chapter 6:146–165.
- 3 Oral history transcript of the interview with Stephane Hessel.
- 4 Oral history transcript of interview with Brian Urquhart. Of course, since space exploration is now established, Huxley's ideas could appear very much as ahead of the curve!

References

- Mason, Edward and Robert Asher** (1973) *The World Bank since Bretton Woods*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Kapur, Devesh, John P. Lewis and Richard Webb** (1997) *The World Bank: Its First Half Century*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Emmerij, Louis, Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss** (2001) *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

The author

Professor Louis Emmerij is Senior Research Fellow at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York and Co-director of the UN Intellectual History Project. He is also a consultant for the IDB and other international organisations. Contact details: UN Intellectual History Project, Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, Suite 5203, New York, NY 10016–4309, USA. <UNHistory@gc.cuny.edu>; <www.unhistory.org>.

Is 'Development Studies' a discipline or a pig's ear? Some thoughts on the 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise

Anne Coles and Judy El-Bushra

Introduction

Development Studies goes by many names and is managed and supported in various ways. In different countries and contexts, it