

The United Nations: before, during and after 1945

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Vivid imaginations and, for a while, geopolitical necessity offered fertile ground to plant with creative thoughts about how best to foster peace and prosperity after the Second World War. Ironically, but perhaps not illogically or paradoxically, the twentieth century's second instalment of worldwide armed conflict 'to end all wars' led key officials and policy analysts to revisit the desirability of intergovernmental organizations and multilateral cooperation. The onset of the Cold War thwarted but did not destroy the creative efforts to establish the second generation of universal organizations, the United Nations system.

Seven decades after the signature and entry into force of the UN Charter, we stand at an apt moment to revisit the rationale within governments that led to the establishment of the world organization in the first place. After drilling deeper into history than 1945 in order to answer that question, this article examines two key variables driving subsequent change that were not visible at that time and indeed remain underappreciated today: the UN's ideational and normative role; and essential inputs by non-state actors in the deliberations by member states and by international civil servants working in the intergovernmental organizations created by states. A conclusion suggests some avenues for future research to help lift the world organization from its current doldrums, in which it is becoming more and more marginal not only for scholars but also for pundits, policy-makers and the public.

Establishing the UN

One of the reasons for revisiting the decision to establish the United Nations is the decisive shift in mainstream thinking away from the former bread-and-butter study of international organization and law towards 'global governance', which has become entwined with that other meta-phenomenon of the past two decades, globalization. James Rosenau and Ernst Czempiel's theoretical *Governance without government* was published in 1992,¹ just about the same time that the Swedish

* The argument presented in this article draws on two research projects—the United Nations Intellectual History Project and the Wartime United Nations—co-directed by this postwar author, whose birth coincides with the UN's. I am grateful to my co-directors in these efforts: Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Dan Plesch. For details, see www.unhistory.org and <http://ralphbuncheinstitute.org/project/wartime-history-and-the-future-un/>.

¹ James N. Rosenau and Ernst Czempiel, eds, *Governance without government: order and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

government launched the policy-orientated Commission on Global Governance under the chairmanship of Sonny Ramphal and Ingmar Carlsson. The 1995 publication of the commission's report, *Our global neighbourhood*,² coincided with the first issue of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) journal *Global Governance*.

International organizations are, of course, not new. Their modern history properly begins with the nineteenth-century public international unions—for instance, the International Telegraph Union and Universal Postal Union—that reflected the requirements to adapt to technological innovations and market forces pushing for economic modernization of various sorts. Craig Murphy imaginatively included them under the rubric of 'global governance since 1850',³ although we have just seen that the term was coined in the 1990s.

Whatever the branding and vintage, in the 1930s and especially 1940s the 'functionalists' built a theory around this dynamic. They called for small steps in international cooperation that eventually would result in bigger ones: what David Mitrany in these pages and elsewhere called 'peace by pieces'.⁴ Such an emphasis was designed to build on technical or supposedly non-political and hence non-controversial measures to address concrete problems. Today in Washington, a common refrain is that 'we don't do social work'. However, that was precisely an essential US contribution in the Second World War, alongside its military muscle. 'It is not impossible that post-war organization will be the product not of one embracing covenant or constitution,' one commentator wrote as early as July 1942, but 'learning to work together on everything from ships and tanks to tea and quinine'.⁵

While some speculated that such cooperation would make war impossible, less sanguine observers argued that such an emphasis would certainly build competencies and confidence so that the thornier and tougher tasks of international peace and security could be tackled with greater likelihood of success. In fact, just such an approach—somewhat prematurely labelled 'beyond the nation-state' by Ernst Haas⁶—was key to thinking by Jean Monnet and others who saw institutions as pivotal to lasting peace in postwar Europe. They designed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and kept on the drawing boards what became the European Community and eventually the European Union.

At the same time, the actual establishment of the United Nations after the Second World War aimed, in the soaring words of the Charter's opening paragraph, 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'. This objective reaffirmed the logic that a generation earlier had grown out of the death, destruction and violent legacy of the First World War. A universal intergovernmental organization dealing with peace and security as well as economic cooperation would

² Commission on Global Governance, *Our global neighbourhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Craig Murphy, *International organization and industrial change: global governance since 1850* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

⁴ David Mitrany, 'The functional approach to world organization', *International Affairs* 24: 3, July 1948, pp. 350–63, and *A working peace system* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966).

⁵ Payson S. Wild, Jr, 'Machinery of collaboration between the United Nations', *Foreign Policy Reports* 18: 8, 1 July 1942, p. 94.

⁶ Ernst B. Haas, *Beyond the nation-state* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).

necessarily be at the centre of the new international (and European) order after the second worldwide conflagration within a half-century.

Three crucial factors permeated the world organization's establishment and, in fact, remain pertinent today as we confront a litany of transboundary threats ranging from proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to terrorism, from pandemics to climate change, from mass atrocities to financial turmoil.⁷ The first is that, despite the abject failure of the League of Nations, political leaders and civil society actors struggling in the midst of the Second World War did not revert to balance-of-power thinking and nationalism as the foundation for the next world order. They thought otherwise.

The Atlantic Charter of August 1941 and the Declaration by United Nations of January 1942 committed the Allies to multilateralism not only to fight fascism in the short term, but also over the longer term to maintain international peace and security and to foster postwar economic growth and social stability. The commitment was evident not only on the battlefronts but also in a commitment to inter-governmental organizations and wide coordination of national policies among the 44 allied states. While 'multilateralism' by definition involves cooperation by three or more states, my emphasis is on governance by the many and not the few. While middle and smaller powers supposedly prefer multilateralism and major powers incline towards unilateralism, the wartime origins of the United Nations suggest a greater traction for wider multilateral cooperation by the most powerful as well when the political conditions are right.

Thus, although many analysts recount the Second World War story as a simple one of an Anglo-American military victory, the tale is considerably more complicated. Many commentators are unaware or have forgotten that the final outcome of the war effort was hardly a foregone conclusion. Yet from the blitz of London through the subsequent years of a three-front war in Europe, Asia and North Africa, a substantial effort went into thinking about what kinds of postwar institutions could make a difference.

Meanwhile the Allies experimented with some. The UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was the first operational agency: it dispensed 1 per cent of national income to liberated states from their more fortunate allies to replace industrial equipment, infrastructure and livestock as well as to stop epidemics and help survivors. The UN Information Office spread the ideas of foreigners to domestic audiences: the reverse of the idea that public diplomacy is about projecting national ideas abroad. The Food and Agriculture Organization planned a global strategy to eradicate hunger—a still elusive goal.

The revived International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1944 set out the objective of eliminating colonial exploitation. A few weeks before D-Day, with the war's outcome still in the balance, President Roosevelt sent an address to delegates gathered in Philadelphia to reaffirm the objectives of the ILO, founded in 1919

⁷ The argument here builds on Dan Plesch and Thomas G. Weiss, *Wartime origins and the future United Nations* (London: Routledge, 2015); '1945's lesson: "good enough" global governance ain't good enough', *Global Governance* 21: 2, April–June 2015, pp. 197–204; and '1945's forgotten insight: multilateralism as realist necessity', *International Studies Perspectives* 17: 1, Jan. 2016. See also Dan Plesch, *America, Hitler and the UN* (London: Tauris, 2011).

after the First World War. His reflections about building international organizations as a realist necessity have an eerie resonance: 'We know that the conditions of a lasting peace can be secured only through soundly-organized economic institutions, fortified by humane labor standards, regular employment and adequate income for all the people.'⁸

Long before and after the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, the UN War Crimes Commission supported the indictment of some 36,000 people in numerous trials for mass atrocities. It developed new international criminal law to foster the determination among states that law and not mob rule must prevail after liberation. The Bretton Woods Conference of 1944—formally the UN Monetary and Financial Conference—brought together a 'Group of 44' to rebuild global capitalism that even Josef Stalin helped craft. The resources of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank were intended to be far greater than they are today; and their purposes, to the dismay sometimes of more recent leaders, still include increasing employment and advancing labour standards—all in the cause of conflict prevention.

The United Nations resulted from the gathering in San Francisco from April to June 1945 that began even before the end of the war in Europe. That UN Conference on International Organization reflected all these initiatives and was not a stand-alone undertaking. These successful cooperative ventures had strengthened the political will of populations and reinforced the diplomatic bonds among their leaders. The United Nations was in evidence not only in the trenches and the air war but also in a commitment to multilateralism and robust intergovernmental organizations, which were viewed as realist necessities, not liberal window-dressing.

The second factor is history, which complicates our understanding; and it gets in the way of the parsimony of which International Relations specialists are so fond. The plea by historians to learn lessons from the past to address today's and tomorrow's problems has less resonance for social scientists.⁹ While Marxists have long emphasized the march of history, the ahistorical quality of much contemporary social science and International Relations is striking.¹⁰ The premium that attaches to the simplest of theoretical depictions of causal mechanisms makes an enemy of history, which definitely complicates matters but also can make fundamentals clearer.¹¹ Self-doubt and reflection flow naturally from historical analysis in a way that they do not from abstract theories. The lack of appreciation for what drives change in the way that our world is organized renders International Relations as a broad intellectual undertaking ahistorical.¹²

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'Message to the ILO Conference, 20 April 1944', International Labour Organization, 26th Session, Philadelphia, 1944, *Record of Proceedings*, p. 2, [http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09616/09616\(1944-26\).pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09616/09616(1944-26).pdf), accessed 15 Sept. 2015.

⁹ See e.g. Edward Hallett Carr, *What is history?* (London: Pelican, 1961); Margaret Macmillan, *The uses and abuses of history* (New York: Random House, 2009).

¹⁰ There are exceptions, of course, including Barry Buzan and George Lawson, 'The global transformation: the nineteenth century and the making of modern International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 57: 3, Sept. 2013, pp. 620–34.

¹¹ Andrew J. Williams, Amelia Hadfield and Simon J. Rofe, *International history and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹² Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, 'Global governance to the rescue: saving International Relations?', *Global Governance* 20: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2014, pp. 19–36.

Andrew Hurrell chides us about the affliction of ‘relentless presentism’.¹³ ‘History’ might be something that we introduce to students in the opening lectures of an introductory International Relations class, but we tend to circumscribe it carefully, either treating history as an empirical treasure trove wherein we can find examples that fit or can be made to fit the way we choose to explain the world, or else concentrating so narrowly on concepts or particular issues that the lessons from studying historical developments are obscured. In contrast, the rediscovery of the UN’s wartime origins holds essential insights for today.

The third factor is a continuity that enables us now, by revisiting the 1942–5 period, to situate the so-called triumph of the dominant theory of realism. By conveniently ignoring the UN’s establishment as the pinnacle of multilateral cooperation during the war, realists quickly gained the upper theoretical hand and could point not only to the zero-sum calculations of the Cold War but also to the ‘I-told-you-so’ lessons from E. H. Carr’s interwar analysis.¹⁴

The eruption of the First World War had discredited the notion of a magical balancing of great and imperial powers, but it led to the failed experiment of the League of Nations. While its toxic brand was disavowed, the League’s staff and working methods were not. Planners sought to reassemble building blocks for the following generation of intergovernmental organizations. The overriding lesson from the Second World War was not to opt for muscular nationalism, Nazism on steroids, but rather to build on the League’s strengths—for instance, work on refugees, economic research, the international civil service—and avoid its weaknesses. Despite the demise of the League, neither governments nor analysts considered a return to the world order of 1913. Had that been the case, Allied governments might have insisted on Spartan educational methods to prepare their populations for the next war; or reciprocal mass atrocities perpetrated against the Germans; or bombing Moscow as an encore to Nagasaki. Something fundamental had changed.

At the final session of the League’s Assembly in 1946, one of its founders and ardent defenders, Lord Robert Cecil, uttered his memorable soundbite: ‘The League of Nations is dead; long live the United Nations.’ It is striking how many of the supposedly discredited ideas associated with the defunct League reappeared.¹⁵ Leland Goodrich, a member of the US delegation, explained: ‘Quite clearly there was a hesitancy in many quarters to call attention to the continuity of the old League and the new United Nations for fear of arousing latent hostilities or creating doubts which might seriously jeopardize the birth and early success of the new organization.’¹⁶

Ironically, at least in terms of the West’s general hostility towards Latin America’s insistence in San Francisco upon regional arrangements as part of the

¹³ Andrew Hurrell, ‘Foreword to the third edition’, in Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. xiii.

¹⁴ E. H. Carr, *The twenty years’ crisis, 1919–1939: an introduction to the study of international relations* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1939).

¹⁵ M. Patrick Cottrell, ‘Lost in transition? The League of Nations and the United Nations’, in Ian Shapiro and Joseph Lampert, eds, *Charter of the United Nations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 91–106.

¹⁶ Leland M. Goodrich, ‘From League of Nations to United Nations’, *International Organization* 1: 1, 1947, p. 3.

UN Charter, the earliest and most robust pursuit of regional intergovernmental organizations took place in Europe and the North Atlantic. Beginning in 1947, the vast funds devoted to the Marshall Plan, which could have been used to jump-start the United Nations, eventually led to the ECSC and then the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The combined national decisions to work together and to construct the next generation of intergovernmental organizations for peace and prosperity were not a reflection of what John Mearsheimer later famously dubbed the ‘false promise of international institutions’,¹⁷ but rather a genuine cooperative strategy that motivated peoples and kept states allied. Multilateralism and the rule of law, not going-it-alone and the law of the jungle, were the foundations for the post-Second World War order. Their desirability was the reason why governments established the United Nations. In fact, the bleak contrast was with the defeated Third Reich and Imperial Japan, the joint epitome of the right of might and of lawlessness.

The UN as idea-monger

Many of the debates about ‘reform’ of the world organization revolve around the UN’s purported ineptitude or ineffectiveness in its field activities, in domains as distinct as peace operations or disaster relief or capacity building for development. These concrete efforts were a natural and expected product of the UN’s establishment, and merit more nuanced appreciations; that need, however, can be set aside here in order to focus on the research and oral histories from the United Nations Intellectual History Project.

A decade of investigation demonstrates that one of the UN’s most distinctive contributions and legacies resides in its character as a purveyor of ideas and as a norm- and standard-setter, both of which draw on the strength of its universal membership.¹⁸ International organizations live or die by the quality and relevance of the policy ideas that they promote and support. Quite surprisingly, there was no intellectual history of the United Nations; meanwhile, the value of institutional memory was better understood by both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which have invested heavily in documenting their histories, including their policy ideas.¹⁹

¹⁷ John Mearsheimer, ‘The false promise of international institutions’, *International Security* 19: 3, Winter 1994–5, pp. 5–49.

¹⁸ The argument builds on Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN ideas that changed the world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Edward Mason and Robert Asher, *The World Bank since Bretton Woods* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1973); Devesh Kapur, John P. Lewis and Richard Webb, *The World Bank: its first half century*, vol. 1: *History* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1997), and Devesh Kapur, John P. Lewis and Richard Webb, eds, *The World Bank: its first half century*, vol. 2: *Perspectives*, especially Nicholas Stern with Francisco Ferreira, ‘The World Bank as “Intellectual Actor”’, pp. 523–609. For the IMF, see e.g. Margaret G. de Vries, *The International Monetary Fund, 1945–1965: the twenty years of international monetary cooperation* (Washington DC: IMF, 1969), *The International Monetary Fund, 1966–1971: the system under stress* (Washington DC: IMF, 1976), and *The International Monetary Fund, 1972–1978: cooperation on trial* (Washington DC: IMF, 1985); James M. Boughton, *Silent revolution: the International Monetary Fund, 1979–1989* (Washington DC: IMF, 2001). See also Norman K. Humphreys, ed., *Historical dictionary of the IMF* (Washington DC: IMF, 2000).

Although much has been written about the world organization and a few specialized agencies have undertaken histories,²⁰ no systematic intellectual history and evaluation has been made of the UN structure—which is especially puzzling given that ideas are one of the main means by which the UN can fulfil its Charter-based purposes. Nor, for that matter, have many other organizations of the UN system taken on the task of documenting the history of their intellectual products rather than describing institutional developments. This was a remarkable omission for an organization that gives policy advice on economic and social development issues, humanitarian aid, human rights and human security. Moreover, if the UN is to be the forerunner of a stronger and more coherent system of global governance for the twenty-first century and beyond, the lessons of these ideational contributions are of critical importance.

An intellectual history should do at least four things. First, it should attempt to trace the ideas that an organization has identified, albeit recognizing that most ideas have many and distant origins. Second, it should examine the quality, validity and timing of these ideas. Third, it should identify missing ideas and why they are absent. Fourth, it should specify which areas in the future require improved ideas, and how the organization should change in order to facilitate the emergence and fruition of relevant ideas in good time.

It is important not to overstate or understate the UN's contributions, which take the form of a value added at one or more of eight steps: providing a forum for debate; generating ideas and policies; giving them international legitimacy; promoting their adoption; implementing or testing them at country level; generating resources to pursue them; monitoring progress; and, admittedly too infrequently, acting to bury ideas that seem inconvenient or excessively controversial. For readers who like alliteration, Dame Margaret Joan Anstee described these eight roles as forum, fount, font, fanfare, framing, funding, following—and funeral. The essential point is that the UN operates and achieves influence in many ways, both in its headquarters and at country level.

The 17 books and 79 in-depth oral histories generated by the Intellectual History Project²¹ represent an important start. As indicated earlier, this particular output was largely unanticipated in 1945 and remains peripheral today for much thinking about the world organization. Nonetheless, the following summary captures the impact and potential of many UN ideas:

- *Promoting human rights for all.* An unusual part of the UN from its beginning and Charter principles, this area of human rights has been broadened and deepened decade by decade.²² Initially its operational side focused on civil rights and

²⁰ See e.g. D. John Shaw, *The UN World Food Programme and the development of food aid* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Craig N. Murphy, *The United Nations Development Programme: a better way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). More official histories are also under way within such institutions as the ILO, UNESCO and the WHO. Interested readers may also wish to consult over 110 titles currently in print in the Routledge 'Global Institutions' series, edited by Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson.

²¹ Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly, *UN voices: the struggle for development and social justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

²² The literature is massive; the notes here refer only to the volumes from the project: Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human rights at the UN: the political history of universal justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University

on concerns for children and women, especially the expansion of projects on education and reproductive health. With the world conferences of the 1970s and the 1990s, the UN's work served to raise awareness and mobilize action in countries around the world.

- *Providing an international economic framework for national development policies.* This began as early as 1950 when several groups of UN-appointed experts—including W. Arthur Lewis, a later Nobel laureate in economics—tackled the issues of economic stability and growth within a global framework.²³ This work has continued apace.
- *Quantifying the world by providing a statistical framework to measure and compare progress in many economic and social areas.* An early and remarkable illustration is the national accounts framework pioneered by the UN,²⁴ which was implemented worldwide.
- *Changing the debate about trade and development.* Towards the end of the 1940s, the Singer–Prebisch thesis made its appearance, both at the UN in New York and in the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA, later ECLAC when the Caribbean was added). It demonstrated that the long-term trend of the terms of trade was negative for developing countries. In other words, the latter could import less and less from industrial countries for the same unit of exports. Hans Singer was the first to publish on this issue, but Raúl Prebisch put it in a broader (global) framework by introducing the concept of centre and periphery.²⁵
- *Setting global goals.* The UN system of organizations has set more than 50 specific, quantified and time-targeted goals throughout its existence, of which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the most recent. Although received with scepticism in certain quarters, many objectives have been met, or nearly so. A striking example is the eradication of smallpox within eleven years. Others range from the acceleration of economic growth over the 1960s to reductions of infant and child mortality in the 1980s and 1990s. A striking negative example is the unwillingness and failure of most industrial countries to meet the 0.7 per cent aid target.
- *Proposing development policies that combine economic growth with poverty reduction, productive employment creation and better income distribution.* This was particularly evident in the 1970s with the concept of 'basic needs', and the trend was pushed further by promoting human development and human security in the 1990s.²⁶

Press, 2007); Devaki Jain, *Women, development, and the UN: a sixty-year quest for equality and justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

²³ Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai and Frédéric Lapeyre, *UN contributions to development thinking and practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Michael Ward, *Quantifying the world: UN ideas and statistics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁵ John Toye and Richard Toye, *The UN and global political economy: trade, finance, and development* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁶ S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong-Khong, *Human security and the UN: a critical history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Olav Stokke, *The UN and development: from aid to cooperation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

This expansion beyond basic needs integrated economic and social development, human rights and elements of human security.

- *Bringing issues of environment and development to global attention, most recently the threat of global warming, along with gender and population issues.* Until well into the 1960s, these were virtually unknown except to specialists. The series of world conferences organized by the UN in the 1970s—sometimes harshly criticized as ‘gab-fests’—put these issues squarely on government policy agendas. Combined with the series of global conferences and summits during the 1990s and in the new millennium, these issues as well as many others have received constant attention. Both public awareness and discourse around these issues have changed beyond recognition compared to the situation of three to four decades ago.²⁷

There were debits as well—including a late reaction to the Washington Consensus, weak responses to the problems of the poorest countries and to HIV/AIDS, too little attention to the importance of culture in development efforts and inadequate consideration of inequality. However, the balance sheet shows a definite surplus. While this cursory summary fails to do justice to the details of the history, and while other observers might formulate a different ledger, the general point is that establishment of the United Nations has resulted in value added to the world of policy ideas, normative priorities and standard-setting.²⁸ I would even go so far as to argue that this arena is *the* comparative advantage of the universal United Nations and its greatest legacy.

What would the world have been without the United Nations? One undoubtedly can imagine a world without many of the concerns elaborated above, or in which such concerns came to the fore much later than they did. But it would be a much poorer world and, at its core, much less human and humane than the one to which the present world organization aspires—and, at its best, contributes to and achieves. There were also ideas that were ignored or could have been pursued more vigorously or with less political correctness. At the same time, the UN’s intellectual work could have been much worse. It could have been smothered by caution, controlled by secretaries general who allowed little scope for creativity within the secretariat, lacked any vision and were dominated by dogma. This could have happened so early in the world organization’s life as to lead to many non-state actors becoming disillusioned and discouraged about the UN’s potential.

Instead, from the very outset, the UN has managed to attract many individuals with outstanding intellectual and leadership capabilities. The Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the continuing attractiveness of the humanitarian values and peace missions in many parts of the UN system certainly remain central to the world body’s work. At each stage of its life, individuals and some governments have argued passionately for maintaining this vision and for

²⁷ Nico Schrijver, *Development without destruction: the UN and global resource management* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

²⁸ Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur, *Global governance and the UN: an unfinished journey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

applying its values to the contemporary international system. The UN could have gone the way of the League of Nations. It has not.

In brief, the world organization has played a pioneering role in the world of ideas. Many have achieved their impact remarkably quickly, but even those ideas that have been rejected, sidelined or adopted only rhetorically have emerged, often ahead of the curve. Politically unacceptable to many countries at first, many later became part of mainstream international discourse—everything from climate change to gender equality, from special measures for least developed countries to putting people at the centre of development, from human security to removing the licence to kill from the attributes of sovereign states.

Moving beyond the ‘two’ UNs

Gaining a better appreciation of the UN’s substantial contributions to international society involves expanding the analytical framework about what actually constitutes ‘the UN’. Constructing a less monolithic and more accurate picture requires moving beyond Inis Claude’s classic twofold distinction between the world organization as an intergovernmental arena (‘first UN’) and a secretariat (‘second UN’),²⁹ to include the concept of a ‘third UN’.³⁰

This ‘additional’ United Nations consists of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), external experts, scholars, consultants, transnational corporations (TNCs), the media and committed citizens who work closely with the UN’s intergovernmental machinery and secretariats. The third UN’s roles include advocacy, research and policy analysis as well as field operations. Its elements often combine forces to put forward new information and ideas, push for new policies, and mobilize public opinion around UN deliberations and operations. Critics might disagree and regard their perspectives and projects as predictable and orthodox,³¹ but informed scholars, practitioners and activists have a value-added and comparative advantage within intergovernmental contexts to push the intellectual and policy envelopes within which governments and international civil servants prefer to remain. These circles—the third UN—are independent of and provide essential inputs into the other two UNs. Such ‘outside-insiders’ are an integral part of today’s United Nations. What once seemed marginal for international relations now is central to multilateralism.

From the outset, non-state actors have been active in UN corridors and field projects. The Charter’s 1945 Preamble opened with a clarion call from ‘We the Peoples of the United Nations’, when one might have expected ‘We the Representatives of Sovereign Member States’. Charter Article 71 explicitly made room

²⁹ Inis L. Claude Jr, *Swords into plowshares: the problems and prospects of international organization* (New York: Random House, 1956); ‘Peace and security: prospective roles for the two United Nations’, *Global Governance* 2: 3, Sept.–Dec. 1996, pp. 289–98.

³⁰ Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis and Richard Jolly, ‘The “third” United Nations’, *Global Governance* 15: 1, Jan.–March 2009, pp. 123–42.

³¹ Susan Strange, *The retreat of the state: the diffusion of power in the world economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert C. Cox, *The new realism: perspectives on multilateralism and world order* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997).

for NGOs in UN debates. Nonetheless, the extent to which non-state actors are now routinely part of what passes for 'international' relations as conducted by 'intergovernmental' organizations is striking.

The notion of a three-faceted UN is a contribution to the challenge of theorizing contemporary global governance. It builds on a growing body of work that calls for a conception of 'multiple multilateralisms'.³² It is essential because it dovetails with efforts to conceptualize the phenomenon of non-state actors as they intersect with the more recognized UN of member states and secretariats.³³ The number of non-official groups involved has grown dramatically, while the density of globalization has meant that communications and technological developments have increased the reach of their voices as well as their decibel levels along with resources for assistance. Adopting the notion of the third UN is a sharper way to depict interactions in and around the world organization than employing the usual threefold vocabulary of state, market and civil society. This terminology resonates for students of international organization who were raised on Claude's framework, and for most scholars of global governance as well. Moreover, beyond the UN there are also a third EU and a third Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Most social scientists—development economists, students of comparative politics, sociologists and anthropologists—have long recognized the empirical and theoretical importance of non-state actors. However, this insight largely eluded International Relations specialists, who were preoccupied with issues of sovereignty and the UN's composition of member states. They tended to minimize or even ignore interactions with non-state actors and their influence on decision-making. However, beginning in the 1970s with Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye,³⁴ the growing presence and activities of actors other than states have gradually forced many mainstream IR theorists to prise open the lid on the black box of state-centric theories of international organization. Realists remain unreconstructed in this regard. But with issues as varied as gender and climate change central on the international agenda—largely as a result of efforts by non-state actors and despite the recalcitrance of many states and international civil servants—it is imperative to better reflect the impact of the third UN.

³² Barry Carin, Richard Higgott, Jan Aart Scholte, Gordon Smith and Diane Stone, 'Global governance: looking ahead', *Global Governance* 12: 1, Jan.–March 2006, pp. 1–6. Other authors speak of 'new multilateralism': Michael G. Schechter, ed., *Innovation in multilateralism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); 'complex multilateralism': Robert O'Brien, Anne Marie Goetz, Jan Aart Scholte and Marc Williams, *Contesting global governance: multilateral economic institutions and global social movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); 'polylateralism': Geoffrey Wiseman, "Polylateralism" and new modes of global dialogue', discussion paper no. 59 (Leicester: Leicester Diplomatic Studies Programme, 1999); and 'plurilateralism': Philip G. Cerny, 'Plurilateralism: structural differentiation and functional conflict in the post-Cold War world order', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 22: 1, March 1993, pp. 27–51.

³³ Thomas G. Weiss and Leon Gordenker, eds, *NGOs, the UN, and global governance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Peter Willetts, *Non-governmental organizations in world politics* (London: Routledge, 2011); Bob Deacon, *Global social policy and governance* (London: Sage, 2007); Jan Aart Scholte, *Civil society voices and the International Monetary Fund* (Ottawa: North–South Institute, 2002); William E. DeMars and Dennis Dijkzeul, eds, *The NGO challenge for International Relations theory* (London: Routledge, 2014).

³⁴ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, eds, *Transnational relations and world politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

Although the terminology may sound odd, it is not only appropriate but also increasingly common to refer to such networks as the ‘third United Nations’. Many individuals who have played an essential role in the world organization’s intellectual and operational activities were neither government officials nor international civil servants. Moreover, many key contributors from the first and second UNs had significant prior associations with a university, a policy think-tank or an NGO—or joined one after leaving government or UN service. Many individuals have served as members or chairs of independent panels and commissions that have examined emerging problems not yet on the international radar screen. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a prominent example. Many also served as staff or board members of NGOs, and most have attended ad hoc global conferences that pull together a range of actors on the international stage. Many UN humanitarian operations and development projects would not function without NGO inputs. The role of the for-profit private sector is recognized not only in such efforts as the Global Compact but as a generator of revenues dwarfing the old standby of aid. The media report and influence decisions within governments and international forums. Inputs from such independent groups as the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty or the IPCC have altered conversations and policies about halting mass atrocities and climate change.

This is not the place to enumerate further examples. It will suffice here to indicate the extent to which understanding the interactions among the three UNs is crucial to the accurate analysis of global policy processes as well as concrete efforts to solve problems. It is a difficult task, in view of the increasing ease of movement by talented people who contribute to UN deliberations and actions from several vantage points during their careers. In the contemporary world, it is common for leading figures to have significant exposure to all three UNs. Moreover, in many instances, various constellations of the first, second and third UNs come into being to move ahead in partnership on both normative issues and operational solutions.

The value of the third UN, in practice as well as in theory, is clear because states and intergovernmental organizations cannot adequately address threats to human security. Whether the UN is seen as a convener, a norm entrepreneur or an operator, we the peoples require all the helping hands we can get—and many of those are toiling in the third United Nations. This striking reality was barely in evidence at the outset, but it is unmistakably present now.

Conclusion

This article has examined the reasons why states established the UN system in the aftermath of the Second World War, along with two substantial but largely unanticipated subsequent factors that were largely absent from that decision: to formulate ideas, norms, principles and standards; and to draw upon the energy and resources of a diverse array of non-state participants in the work of the world

organization. There is no shortage of intriguing future research topics, but three stand out.

One, it is hard to ignore the glum conclusion that the driving force behind the establishment of the United Nations was worldwide armed conflict. Do we need another cataclysm to rekindle the imagination, energy and cooperation that were in the air in the 1940s, or are we smart enough to adapt in anticipation? Are catastrophes the only currency for institutional transformation?

International order has been built and rebuilt on numerous occasions; and yesterday's institutions are often ill-equipped to tackle today's problems. The question is whether a new generation of multilateral organizations will arise as a result of unnecessary and unspeakable tragedies—as such crisis innovations as the League of Nations or the United Nations arose phoenix-like from the ashes of the twentieth century's world wars and the Congress of Vienna from the Napoleonic wars—or more deliberately on the basis of more modest functional grounds.

As an inveterate optimist, I am betting on the human capacity for learning and adapting to prevent suffering on a scale that could well dwarf the twentieth century's world wars. The possible good news is that the rediscovery of the wartime United Nations contradicts the conventional wisdom that liberalism was abandoned to confront the German Nazis and Imperial Japanese; it asserts that the ideals of Immanuel Kant were found to be essential to the Hobbesian objective of state survival. In a manner redolent of Samuel Johnson's reflection on the prospect of being hanged, the Second World War created conditions under which governments were wise enough to overcome their traditional reluctance to cooperate and focus on multilateralism as both a strategy and a tactic. Liberal institutionalism helped ensure the classic realist objective of state survival.

Indeed, a host of Allied efforts—including international criminal justice, postwar reconstruction, international development, regulated world economic activity, public diplomacy, and agricultural and educational policy—provided the foundations for postwar stability in addition to sustaining the wartime military enterprise. No one sought a return to the chaotic pre-1914 world, despite the abject failure of the League of Nations. Unilateral military might was not regarded as a viable option; nor was going it alone viewed as a sensible procedure.

Two, identifying the precise national policy areas that were developed under and influenced significantly by the UN system as well as their eventual impact on citizens is obviously where the constructivist rubber hits the road. It is also the proposition for which in-depth national case-studies are required that lie quite beyond even my most ambitious yearnings. Whether in respect of security, human rights or sustainable development, I am tempted to repeat what Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and I wrote in *UN ideas that changed the world*: virtually all of the most crucial items on the agenda for governments by the end of the 1970s (and after) reflected a mixture of UN research and conferences: peacekeeping, the environment, women's rights—the list goes on. To give specific meaning to the constructivist claim that such ideational efforts matter to states and individuals, to local and national authorities, to civil society and to the private sector, we need

to establish the extent to which particular governments and their legislatures and courts set up new ministries and organizations or passed new laws (or, alternatively, failed to do so) as a result of specific UN calls to action.

Three, many of the debates in the United Nations beginning in the 1970s revolved around two topics—interdependence and the proliferation of actors—which profoundly affected what since the 1990s we have come to call ‘global governance’. On the plus side, these preoccupations helped us move towards a better understanding of a very complex world. On the downside, ironically they also tend to celebrate unduly the ability of non-state actors and ignore the crucial role of intergovernmental organizations.

This article has made clear that the move away from states and their creations, intergovernmental organizations, was a welcome reflection of complex global realities; but the analytical pendulum has swung too far. On the one hand, more research is required to understand the precise roles and impact of the third UN and to better map networks, trace movements of individuals, and measure their relative influence and impact in specific normative and operational settings. On the other hand, the United Nations is now almost always viewed at best as a marginal contributor to filling gaps in global governance; its role as far more peripheral than that played by the wartime UN or imagined for the postwar world organization. This has to change.

When governments decide to use intergovernmental organizations, they work. The wartime actions by the UN’s founders suggest that contemporary global governance is often a second-best surrogate for what they foresaw as a more robust multilateralism and its institutional manifestations. If global problems require global solutions, they also require strengthened intergovernmental organizations, especially those of the UN system. This proposition flies in the face of an infatuation with problem-solving by anything other than intergovernmental organizations. A decade ago, Anne-Marie Slaughter viewed networks of various types rather than actual organizations as the key variable in problem-solving.³⁵ Dan Drezner and Stewart Patrick have proposed living with the sum of alternative arrangements and dismissed the universal membership United Nations largely as hopeless and hapless. Apparently, we can aspire to only a variegated institutional sprawl—or ‘good-enough global governance’.³⁶

Alas, what amounts to Scott Barrett’s ‘organized volunteerism’³⁷ is not and will not be adequate without a revitalized United Nations as an integral component of international society. Scepticism about UN capacity is justified, but we are kidding ourselves about the potential of plurilateralisms and minilateralisms for global problem-solving, kidding ourselves if we believe that somehow a lattice of

³⁵ Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A new world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Daniel W. Drezner, “‘Good enough’ global governance and international finance”, *Foreign Policy Blogs*, 30 Jan. 2013, http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/30/good_enough_global_governance_and_international_finance, accessed 15 Sept. 2015; Stewart Patrick, “The unruly world: the case for good enough global governance”, *Foreign Affairs* 93: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2014, pp. 58–73.

³⁷ Scott Barrett, *Why cooperate? The incentive to supply global public goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 19.

what the United Nations Development Programme called ‘coherent pluralism’³⁸ will halt mass atrocities, stop pandemics, slow down proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, restore financial stability or impede terrorism.

Political leaders and civil society actors struggling in the midst of the Second World War thought otherwise. The Atlantic Charter of August 1941 and the Declaration by United Nations of January 1942 committed the Allies to multilateralism not only to fight fascism in the short term, but also over the longer term to maintain international peace and security and to foster postwar economic and social stability.

The most basic building block for a better world order in the twenty-first century is the universal United Nations; and states must reinvest in the UN system. It is worth quoting Winston Churchill, who in 1946, and despite the organization’s already problematic beginnings, sombrely advised: ‘We must make sure that the UN work is fruitful, that it is a reality and not a sham, that it is a force for action and not merely a frothing of words, that it is a true temple of peace in which the shields of nations can someday be hung, and not merely a cockpit in the Tower of Babel.’³⁹

A few years ago I explored ‘what happened to the idea of world government?’⁴⁰ If Bill Gates has now decided that elements of overarching central authority are required for the planet to address such problems as climate change,⁴¹ will the rest of us be far behind?

³⁸ UN Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2013. The rise of the South: human progress in a diverse world* (New York: UNDP, 2013), p. 112.

³⁹ Winston Churchill, speech delivered at Fulton, Missouri, 1946, in David Cannadine, ed., *Blood, toil, tears, and sweat: the speeches of Winston Churchill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 298.

⁴⁰ Thomas G. Weiss, ‘What happened to the idea of world government?’, *International Studies Quarterly* 53: 2, June 2009, pp. 253–71.

⁴¹ Bill Gates, ‘Den täglichen Tod nehmen wir nicht wahr’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 Jan. 2015, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/bill-gates-im-interview-den-taeglichen-tod-nehmen-wir-nicht-wahr-1.2324164>, accessed 15 Sept. 2015.

