

Book Review Article

Powerhouse of Ideas: The United Nations Intellectual History Project

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UN Ideas that Changed the World. By Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas G. Weiss. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009. 310 pp. \$65.00 hb. \$24.95 pb.

This is the concluding volume of the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP). In his Foreword to the book, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed his gratitude to the project's directors 'for their unstinting efforts to document how UN ideas have been among the world organization's most important achievements. I am certain that the project will continue to inspire innovation and scholarship for many decades to come' (p. xv). Over the past decade (1999-2009), the project has sought to provide a history of the ideas and concepts for human progress formed and launched at the UN, which hitherto had been lacking. Directed by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss, all with long and distinguished academic and UN careers, whom Kofi Annan described as 'independent thinkers who have an inside knowledge but who write in their personal and professional capacities', it was also guided by an 'International Advisory Council' of 11 distinguished authorities, and financed by funds from eight governments and six foundations.

The UNHIP has been an ambitious undertaking. It has produced an impressive output, consisting of two parts. The first is a series of 15 volumes, all published by Indiana University Press. Of these, four overarching books have been produced by the directors themselves: *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges* (2001);[†] *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (with Dharam Ghai and Frederic Lapeyre) (2004);[†] *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (with Tatiana Carayannis) (2005)[†] and this concluding volume (2009). The remaining 11 were commissioned studies written by authorities in their respective fields and covering a wide array of subjects, including, in the order in which they were published: *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions* (2003);[†] *Quantifying the World: UN Contributions to Statistics* (2004);[†] *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance and Development* (2004);[†] *Women, Development and the United Nations* (2005);[†] *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History* (2006);[†] *Preventive Diplomacy at the UN* (2007); *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (2008); *The UN and Transnational Corporations: From Code of Conduct to Global Compact* (2008); *The UN and*

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Development: From Aid to Cooperation (2009);[†] *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (forthcoming); and *Development without Destruction: The UN and Global Resource Management* (forthcoming). A consolidated index of the topics treated in these volumes and further information on the UNIHP can be found at the project's website (www.unhistory.org). I reviewed the volumes marked with a dagger in previous issues of *DPR* (20 (2); 22 (6); 23 (5) and (6); 24 (3); 25 (4); and 28 (3)).

The second part is an oral history, consisting of interviews with 79 personalities who played a role in contributing to, or carrying forward, ideas within the UN. What are described as the 'most compelling extracts' of this oral history are contained in the volume *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice*. The complete interviews are available on a CD-ROM, *The Complete Oral History Transcripts from UN Voices* (New York: UNIHP, 2007).

In this concluding volume, the project directors draw on the other books in the series to assess the development and implementation of UN ideas regarding sustainable economic and social development and to apply lessons learned to suggest ways in which the UN can play a more complete role in confronting the challenges of human survival with dignity in the twenty-first century. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 presents a balance sheet of what the authors consider to be the credit and debit sides of the UN ledger. On the credit side, the directors list 8 items: promoting human rights for all; providing an international framework for national development policies; providing a statistical framework to measure and compare progress in many economic and social areas; changing the debate about trade and development; setting global targets; proposing development policies that combine economic growth with poverty reduction, employment creation and better income distribution; promoting the human development approach in the 1990s; and bringing issues that combine concerns about the environment and development to global attention, most recently the threat of global warming, along with gender and population issues. On the debit side, they list selectively: late reaction to the Washington Consensus; weak response to the special needs of least developed countries; too little done to introduce cultural aspects into the development equation; inadequate attention to international and national distribution of income and wealth; and tardy and weak reaction to HIV/AIDS, despite the World Health Organization initiating an early response, which was aborted.

The balance sheet is supplemented by a table of key events over the UN's lifetime, and a brief history of 'shifting preoccupations' (pp. 15-18: Table 1.1). This leads to a priority check-list of the intellectual challenges they consider the UN should be encouraged to do more creative work on, including: long-run issues regarding the environment and the eco-sustainability of the planet; international migration and linked problems of urbanisation and youth unemployment; the perceived growing divide between the Islamic world and the West; new actions to overcome unequal global development; incorporating culture and human rights into development strategies; balancing regionalism with globalisation; policies to harness the benefits and mitigate the downsides of the trend towards multipolarity and the rise of new economic giants; integrated approaches to human security that go beyond the traditional compass of territorial defence; actions to promote a greater sense of human solidarity and commitment to human rights, democracy and culture; and measures to counteract the declining quality of education worldwide (pp. 29-30).

The authors are at pains to point out that there are ‘three UNs’ from the point of view of ideas and policies: the member states, including the General Assembly and the Security Council; the staff members of the UN Secretariat; and the oft-forgotten ‘third UN’ of NGOs, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups of individuals ‘who routinely engaged with the first and second UNs and thereby influence UN thinking, policies, priorities and actions’ (p. 33).

Part 2 consists of what the directors call nine ‘United Nations Ideas that Changed the World’: human rights for all, from aspiration to implementation; gender equality, from eliminating discrimination to promoting women’s rights and empowerment; development goals, from national and regional policies to the Millennium Development Goals; fairer international economic relations, from aid and mutual interest to global solidarity; development strategies, from national planning to governing the market; social development, from sectoral to integrated perspectives; environmental sustainability, from environment and development to preserving the planet; peace and human security, from preventing state conflict to protecting individuals; and human development, from separate actions to an integrated approach. They stress that none of these ideas have been static and unchanging. Each has evolved over time in relation to a changing world context. But in their different ways, they consider that each has made a major impact.

In Part 3, ‘A Future for the UN and the Planet’, the project directors examine the challenges ahead, and give their views on strengthening global governance. They subject the nine ideas to four questions to determine the extent to which UN ideas have had a significant influence. What difference did they make in practice? Where, more broadly, would the world be without the UN and its ideas in the economic and social arenas and in certain aspects of peace and security? Could the UN have done better with follow-up or with the ideas themselves? And might it have done more – and where and why? (p. 201).

The directors give their collective judgement in an overview table (pp. 204-5: Table 12.1). They consider that the impact of each idea has varied considerably by issue area and over time but has also been affected by particular events and origins. They see the strongest points of international consensus, ‘at least in rhetoric’, as those in the areas of human rights, social development, women’s rights, and empowerment, where ‘the UN has had a major influence both in presenting these ideas and in promoting a positive international climate of opinion’, although they consider that this influence has often been considerably less in implementation and practice. They found that these areas had considerable interest and support from professionals and from civil society, to which growing resources have been allocated. In their view, too, there has been an increasingly positive response in the areas of environment and climate change.

The directors note, however, that the balance sheet is different with humanitarian affairs and human security. They see signs of increasing support for the notion that the UN should take a leading role in these areas, where its support is seen as necessary to gain international legitimacy, despite the tendency for the major powers to go ahead in certain areas with or without Security Council approval. In the economic arenas, they find that the UN has appeared to be more marginal in recent decades, less visible, with less clout, and accordingly with less impact. But it was able to contribute to setting goals for economic and social development for the new millennium, and major

questions were raised about the neoliberal approaches that had been followed over the preceding decades. The current major economic recession has put full-blooded free-market orthodoxy with a minimum of regulatory control out of favour, 'at least until another bubble of speculation dims memories' (p. 207), calling for demands for stronger regulation and more government overview and control.

In principle, the directors consider that these developments should increase interest in, and respect for, the UN's work on international economic matters. But this will depend on several factors, including: the policies and attitudes of China, India and other emerging powers; the extent of concern shown for poorer and weaker countries; whether institutional reform gives increasing weight to those countries and their issues; and the extent to which the major economic powers recognise the UN's value in giving legitimacy and support for broader global approaches.

The UN's ideas are then subjected to two 'counterfactual' scenarios: a world without the UN and its ideas, and a more creative UN. Regarding the first, the directors conclude that 'a world without the UN would be a much poorer place and much less human and humane'. Under the second, they reason that there could be a more efficient and effective UN if there were less interference from governments in the process of recruitment and promotion, including to the most senior positions, leading to what Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld called 'a truly dedicated and international public service' (p. 211); if more creative work were done on issues of political economy in areas where coalitions of interest could help solve the problem; if more sustained attention were given to the steps required to achieve a more egalitarian international system, and to pursue national policies that combine redistribution with growth, as formulated by Hans Singer in 1972; if far more work were done on the conditions needed to create stability in weak and failing states; and if there were a better promotion of UN ideas to help in all its areas of work.

The UNIHP directors identify ten 'top issues' for the UN in the next decade: tackling global warming and climate change; strengthening global governance in a multipolar world; supporting fragile states; balancing regionalism and globalisation; moderating inequalities in global development; responding to population growth and international migration; bridging international divides of culture and identities; shifting the focus of security from states to individuals; incorporating culture and human rights into development; and improving the quality of education worldwide (p. 216). They argue that these ten global challenges can be translated into five broad themes for the agenda on which the UN system should work in the years ahead: promoting global human solidarity; enhancing opportunities for people throughout the world; preventing conflict, building peace, and fostering human security; sustaining the planet's ecosystem; and strengthening global governance (p. 220).

The book's final chapter on this last theme deals with issues of: enhancing UN decision-making; bringing social justice into global governance; strengthening the UN's intellectual work; narrowing the gaps between rhetoric and reality; and mobilising the three UNs. At the end of a decade of work on the UNIHP, the directors 'feel compelled' to return to their starting point, the UN's intellectual contributions since its establishment in 1945. These they summarise as: ideas embodied in analysis, policies, and action, often among the UN's most important achievements; intellectual contributions, embodied in its leadership and operations in the economic and social

arenas, which have had more impact and success than is often acknowledged or realised, including setting paths that others have followed; ideas and innovations in the arenas of preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping; its leadership in the arenas of peace, sovereignty, development and human rights that have been brought together, especially within the concepts of human security and human development; and UN reform and the importance of strengthening the institution's capacities for the twenty-first century (p. 255).

When the UN and its Secretary-General were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, the citation read: 'Today the Organization is at the forefront of efforts to achieve peace and security in the world, and of the international mobilization aimed at meeting the world's economic, social and environmental challenges ... The only negotiable route to global peace and cooperation goes by way of the United Nations' (p. 255). Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961, put it more succinctly: 'The UN was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save it from hell' (p. 348).

With such a large canvas to cover, there will no doubt be critics of the project's coverage and the directors' conclusions. The books in the UNIHP series are of uneven quality. One suspects a hidden agenda has been to strengthen confidence in the UN by documenting evidence of its pioneering role in the creation and implementation of sound ideas for development. This reviewer would like to have seen a clearer distinction between the UN and the UN system, an amorphous collection of some 50 bodies, consisting of funds and programmes, specialised agencies, research and training institutes, functioning and regional commissions, and other entities, of which the UN is part. One of the volumes in the series might have been devoted to the interplay of ideas, concepts and policies between these bodies and the UN. It is also unfortunate that the volumes originally planned for the series on collective security and peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and humanitarian interventions were eventually not included. It is also surprising that the directors' ten top issues for the next decade do not include a significant reduction in world poverty and hunger, the first Millennium Development Goal. The reader might also have liked more on their views on the need for reform within the UN, between the three UNs, and between the UN and the UN system, which would help in pursuing the future agenda that they propose.

Despite these criticisms, completion of the UNIHP has been a considerable achievement. Its directors should be congratulated for undertaking a project that was long overdue. If it succeeds in stimulating UN bodies to write their own histories and put their archives in order, and in instigating a general debate on the future role of the UN, the UNIHP will have rewarded its directors and supporters.