The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance and Development

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UN Intellectual History Project

• Aim: to provide a history of the economic and social ideas promoted by the UN
• To record the unwritten accounts of UN officials: 75 oral history interviews with former UN personnel
• To be a forward-looking history, deriving lessons for the future
• For more details, see www.unhistory.org
UN economic research: Not only why do it, but how to do it?

- Does the UN need to do more that collect international economic statistics?
- League of Nations moved on to economic research during the Depression, when academic economics was a tiny discipline with no obvious policy answers.
- Today the supply conditions for economic knowledge are completely different from the 1930s.
- Result: attention must be paid to the issue of comparative advantage in research.
International organisations as intellectual actors?

- Knowledge is a public good
- Private markets will under-supply it
- Public intervention is justified
- But intervention by public production of knowledge is not necessarily optimal
- Intervention by public subsidy of private production of knowledge may be superior
Should IOs do in-house research?

- **Advantages**
  - IO can keep the research agenda relevant
  - In-house champions will ensure that research results are noticed and used
  - Research will make IO function more efficiently

- **Disadvantages**
  - IO have their own doctrines to defend – “Washington consensus”
  - Managers can impose organisational goals
  - Hard to spark ideas, easy to repress them
  - IO research tends to lack originality; quotes itself
UN Secretariat and research

- In Cold War, UN in-house research justified because it was “objective”
- Anodyne publications demotivated staff, who sought other outlets
- Motivated staff had a radical agenda
- Management’s editorial control was lax
- Result was an unusual opportunity to create and transmit new ideas on behalf of poor countries
UN “wild men” and their ideas

- Hans Singer
- Raul Prebisch
- Michal Kalecki
- Nicholas Kaldor
- Juan Vasquez Noyola
- Sidney Dell

- Primary commodity terms of trade in secular decline
- Import substituting industrialisation and its limits
- The food supply as a constraint on growth
- International measures for full employment
- Structural inflation as a limit to devaluation
- Linking SDR creation and development aid
What have we learned?

- Beware of policy advocacy disguised as research – in the World Bank and the UN alike
- Developed countries will fund research only by organisations they control, World Bank or OECD
- Developing countries have tried to use UN research as a counterweight, but really need a separate research organisation of their own
- Within the UN, research should be carried out in agencies that are relatively protected from political pressures, such as UNRISD and UNU/WIDER