

UNESCO History Project
Seminar: “Towards the Transnational History of International Organizations: Methodology/
Epistemology”
King’s College, University of Cambridge, 6-7 April 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iris Julia Bührle, 09 juin 2009

INTRODUCTION

The seminar “Towards the Transnational History of International Organizations: Methodology/Epistemology” (King’s College, University of Cambridge, 6-7 April 2009) forms part of the UNESCO history project launched in 2004 with the aim of stimulating high-quality research on the organization’s past activities. It is the first of three conferences on this subject whose results will be presented at the 2010 International Congress of Historical Science in Amsterdam. Unlike the other two seminars that are going to deal with concrete aspects of the history of UNESCO, its role in the process of decolonization (Dakar, October 2009) and during the Cold War (Heidelberg, March 2010), the first seminar was set up to define methodologies for writing the history of international organizations. It revolved around the term of “transnational history” which has only recently found its place among the more established notions of “international history”, “global history” and “world history”.

The seminar consisted of six sessions structured as follows: each session started with a short summary of the papers presented which had been distributed in advance to all the participants, followed by some remarks by the authors of the papers as well as a lengthy discussion. As more time was attributed to the debates than the presentation of the papers, the emphasis was put on exchange and the encounter of different points of view, in line with the overall objectives and strategy of the seminar.

SESSION 1: UNESCO AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Chair: Jean-François Sirinelli¹, Professor; Director of the Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po, France

Commentator: Sunil Amrith, Lecturer, Birkbeck College, United Kingdom

Papers presented:

- Patit Paban Mishra, Professor, Department of History, Sambalpur University, India:
“Historical Studies and UNESCO: From Local to Transnational”
- Poul Duedahl, Assistant Professor, Aalborg University, Denmark:
“Selling Mankind: UNESCO and the Invention of Global History, 1945-76”

The first session of the seminar introduced UNESCO not as an object of historical studies, but as an intellectual actor in its own right. The papers dealt with UNESCO’s attempts to write transnational or global history, especially the “History of the scientific and cultural development of mankind” (later called “History of Humanity”) project conceived in 1946 by Julian Huxley and Joseph Needham.

This ambitious work is innovative because it constitutes an endeavour to write the history of peaceful relations between civilisations by focusing on scientific and cultural exchanges and by abandoning all hierarchies between societies. With this initiative, UNESCO also tries to counter the danger of adopting a Western-centric perspective through the implication of historians from all over the world. Moreover, the project is conceived by people from different disciplinary backgrounds, which leads to further multiplication of perspectives. However, diplomatic problems soon arise, especially after the Soviet Union and several satellites join UNESCO in 1954. These result in numerous modifications and amendments of the text as well as considerable delay in its publication: the last volume appears in 1976, 30 years after the project was launched.

¹ Jean-François Sirinelli is the President of the International Scientific Committee for the UNESCO History Project which was established by the Director-General of UNESCO in 2006. This Committee of eleven independent historians meets once a year in order to guide and supervise the implementation of the project. The other members are: Robert Frank (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, France), Ilya V. Gaiduk (Academy of Sciences, Russia), Mohieddine Hadhri (University of Tunis, Tunisia), Akira Iriye (Harvard University, USA), José Paradiso (Salvador University, Buenos Aires, Argentina), Emma Rothschild (University of Cambridge, UK), Glenda Sluga (University of Sydney, Australia), Romila Thapar (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India), Ibrahima Thioub (Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal) et Thomas G. Weiss (City University of New York, USA).

The discussion mainly revolved around possible definitions of transnational and global history as well as the impact, difficulties and achievements of the “History of humanity”-project.

In fact, the latter is handicapped by the conflicting interests of states that try to influence the text. As a result of the delay in publication, the work which was conceived in an idealist post-war atmosphere where ideas of an essential unity of humankind sprang from the atrocious experience of World War II, is born into a period of Cold War and decolonization and receives a rather cool reaction from critics. Nations and regions remain important entities of analysis in the work; however, it is innovative in its concept of assuming a common history of humanity.

This idea is comparable to the notion of a common heritage of humanity which UNESCO defended later with greater success (in both cases, there is a tension between state sovereignty and the idea of something that belongs to the whole of humanity), and it might be fruitful to analyse the links between these concepts in more detail. Maybe it would then become possible to write the history of what is common to all individuals in the world despite territories and national boundaries, and to overcome the concept of studying exchanges between civilisations. A transnational approach seems particularly valuable today because of the re-emergence of nationalisms which accompany the process of globalization. A focus on nation states is insufficient to understand many subjects, such as the history of indigenous peoples.

Questions were raised as to the teleology of international organizations (are they trying to tell a story of a constant intensification of international cooperation?) as well as to the mutual influence between the intellectual activities in international organisations and the politics of great powers.

SESSION 2: THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Chair: Thomas Weiss, Presidential Professor, The City University of New York (CUNY), United States

Commentator: Patricia Clavin, Lecturer, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Papers presented

- Pierre-Yves Saunier, Researcher, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France:
“Notes from a Novice: a Relational Approach to the History of International Organizations”
- Sandrine Kott, Professor, University of Geneva, Switzerland:

“The Study of International Organizations: Milestones for a Transnational History of the International Labour Office (1919-1939)”

The second session dealt with more concrete possibilities of writing transnational histories of international organisations, and furnished a case study on the International Labour Office (ILO). The study of international organisations can become crucial for the understanding even of subjects that seem to have little to do with them. Many historians are indeed attracted towards international organisations from the periphery as they find valuable sources for the subject they are working on in their archives.

The case study of the International Labour Office provides several examples of questions which are interesting in a transnational context, such as: who is active within an institution, where does their knowledge come from, what happens to the knowledge within the international organisation and after and where do individuals involved with an international organisation go later?

The focus on individuals allows researchers to ask further questions about the circulation of ideas and people between international organisations, between international organisations and other institutions, NGOs, national and local administrations etc. It is also useful when studying “generations” of international organisations, thus revealing continuities and changes (for instance from the League of Nations to the UN, from the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation [IICI] to UNESCO).

In the discussion, doubts were raised about the necessity of defining the term “transnational history” at all. However, in the many current uses of the expression, we should distinguish between transnational history as an approach and the transnational as an object of study.

Transnational history opens up many possibilities: it allows historians to contextualise and reveal links between societies, to analyse how entities incorporate external elements and to work on actors and processes.

Several participants pointed out the difference between international and inter-state relations: it was claimed that the former notion referred to exchanges between societies instead of governments and national administrations. It would be important to put more emphasis on the impact of international organisations’ activities on ordinary people. In fact, they are frequently surrounded by a heavy administrative apparatus which prevents them from communicating effectively with the outside world.

The danger was evoked of overemphasising the flux and connections and of writing a history against states. One should bear in mind that there is a constructive tension between states and international organisations, and that transnational flux are triggered by complex relations of power in which states continue to play a dominant role. The existence of international organisations, archives etc. are examples of attempts to create order within the movement. International organisations are not homogeneous actors pursuing well-defined aims, but consist of different entities: member states and international civil servants, headquarters and field offices etc. All these actors may be in conflict with each other and within themselves. International organisations are embedded in the world around and do not constitute spaces of disinterested interactions.

SESSION 3: DOES THE TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS HAVE A GEOGRAPHY?

Chair: Ilya Gaiduk, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of General History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia

Commentator: Andreas Eckert, Humboldt University, Germany

Papers presented:

- Madeleine Herren. University of Heidelberg, Germany
“From Multilaterality to Transculturality: an Asian History of International Organizations”
- Corinne Pernet, Senior Lecturer, University of Zurich, Switzerland
“Transnational Histories of International Organizations and Ideas of Latin America”

The third session analysed “geographies” of international organisations and their history, and it furnished two attempts to approach the histories of international organisations from non-Western perspectives. Like several other papers in this seminar, the session focussed on the interwar years, a crucial period for the understanding of the development of international organisations. During this period, the League of Nations functions as a beehive around which all sorts of international organisations gather, thus deriving their legitimacy from their association with the League. However, the League is still based on Western values.

International organisations play a major role in shaping regional identities and they are used by certain individuals to push through visions of identity. UNESCO is particularly popular among nations that want to affirm their identity on the international stage as culture is considered to be an “entry port” into international life. Thus, for instance, UNESCO becomes a platform for the promotion of Latin American culture early on: Latin Americans are very active in intellectual cooperation during the interwar years and play a major role within UNESCO from the beginning, which leads to the election of Jaime Torres Bodet to the post of Director-General in 1948. It is also international organisations which contribute to the emergence of such notions as the “global South” or the concept of development. In turn, these categories influence the way certain regions perceive themselves and are perceived.

International organisations are used by state actors in various ways, for instance for political propaganda (Japan in the League of Nations) or to stake claims for recognition, independence (e.g. India) or assistance (e.g. China in the interwar years) on the world stage. In order to grasp the real scope of action of international organisations, it would be important to concentrate more on budgets and legal frameworks. This would shed light on the weak legal and financial position of international institutions and explain many of their difficulties in carrying out large-scale programmes and implementing their decisions. On the other hand, international organisations often achieve astonishing results by using their moral authority and it would be equally interesting to find out where their legitimacy and their power to act as international agencies comes from.

In the discussion, it was pointed out that a lot of transnational historiography is unconscious of geography and remains as focused on Europe and on the transatlantic as the “old” history (the question of the gender of transnational historiography could equally be raised). The clustering of the world into “regions” such as Europe, central Asia, North-South etc. was challenged because of the artificial character and changing definitions of such concepts. However, it seems difficult today to replace these categories that have played an important role in history and in the self-perception of certain actors. The same can be said about temporal divisions: notions such as “the interwar years” make little sense in an Asian context; Latin America tries to become a new cultural centre during World War II. There are also continuities in spite of radical cuts, for instance former staff members of the League that later work for the United Nations.

The problem of international organisations’ lack of funding, which limits their scope of action, also raises the question of the influence of donors of extra-budgetary funds on an institution’s programmes.

SESSION 4: TRANSNATIONAL ARCHIVES

Chair: Emma Rothschild, Director of the Centre for History and Economics, King's College, Cambridge University, United Kingdom

Commentator: Jens Boel, Chief Archivist, UNESCO; Chair of the Section of International Organizations within the International Council on Archives (ICA/SIO)

Papers presented:

- Darwin Stapleton, Executive Director, Rockefeller Archive Center, United States:
“From the Center and from the Periphery: Historians and their Uses of the Rockefeller Foundation Archives”
- Bénédicte Grailles, Maître de conférences, University of Angers, France:
“The ‘Archives’ Function at UNESCO, Paragon or Warning”
- Kalinka Dimitrova Antchova, Doctor, Bulgarian State Archives, Bulgaria:
“National Documentary Heritage concerning UNESCO: Case Study of Bulgaria”
- Dong Wang, Professor, Gordon College - Wenham, United States:
“The UNESCO World Heritage in China as seen from the Longmen Grottoes”

This session addressed the very important question of the sources for transnational historic research. These consist in archives (including photographic, cinematographic and oral archives) of states, international organisations, NGOs, National Commissions, multinational companies, banks etc., as well as the personal records of international actors. Furthermore, cultural goods such as World Heritage sites are also “archives” that can serve as historical sources.

Archives are an endangered species, not only because they risk destruction during wars and even in times of peace (the recent Cologne catastrophe is an example of the sudden and irrevocable disappearance of a treasure of memory), but also because every organisation and state is not convinced of the necessity of conserving their documents in expensive and extensive archives or does not have the means and know-how to do so.

UNESCO, today the organization in charge of archives within the UN system, soon became interested in the conservation of its documents and those of its predecessor, the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IICI). UNESCO’s archivists were observed with respect and envy by their French colleagues; there were rivalries related to the use of different systems of classification. From the late 1940s on, UNESCO made great efforts of conservation by

producing microfilms of security and by helping several countries to establish archives. UNESCO also recently launched the “Memory of the World”-project, a list of the most important archives in the world whose protection is the responsibility of the whole of humanity. Thus, they obtain the same status as World Heritage sites.

World Heritage sites are therefore only one kind of global “archives” protected by UNESCO, and they are a sort which attracts the attention of a broad spectrum of people. The inscription of a site on UNESCO’s World Heritage list often has considerable impact on the perception of that site by the population. In some cases, it is only when sites are inscribed on the World Heritage list that they become part of the shared heritage of the communities where they are placed and thus reinforce or create the community’s sense of a common identity. The inscription has effects on the national and regional level and can become a factor for development, for instance through an increase in cultural tourism.

The discussion focused on the difficulties of finding strategies of conservation and of granting accessibility to researchers. The travel costs faced by historians doing “transnational” research are particularly high as they often have to consult archives situated in different countries. Grants and digitalization are two possibilities of facing this problem, but they are limited: not everybody can be funded, and digitalization is a slow and expensive process. Considering the enormous amount of documents produced by international organisations, it becomes more and more important to make choices which documents should be conserved and eventually made accessible on the internet. In order to take these crucial decisions, archivists have to collaborate with historians. In fact, accessibility of archives is a key factor in the shaping of an organisation’s image. The documents that can be consulted determine the information researchers obtain, the questions they can ask and the answers they may find. Thus, archives become instruments of power and publicity. It was pointed out, for instance, that some archives are even too accessible and too well kept, thus attracting a disproportionate interest of researchers, whereas other organisations are hardly or not at all known.

A Special Session on the International Council on Archives (ICA), animated by Charles Kecskemeti, former Secretary-General of the ICA, David Leitch, Secretary-General of the ICA, Emma Rothschild and Jens Boel, also focused on current problems of conservation and challenges for archivists, such as huge increases in the number of documents, the necessity of establishing priorities for digitalisation or the limited diffusion among populations. In order to

tackle these issues, archivists have to reach out to civil societies instead of being “passive warehousemen”. They must take needs of public users into account and make even more efforts of communication and collaboration, for instance with regional organisations. ICA is currently preparing a universal declaration on the importance of archives. International guidelines such as these will hopefully alert governments to the importance of protecting their own archives.

SESSION 5: INDIVIDUALS, CULTURES, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Chair: Glenda Sluga, Professor, University of Sydney, Australia

Commentator: Erez Manela, Associate Professor, Harvard University, United States

Papers presented:

- Staffan Mueller-Wille, Research Fellow, Centre for Genomics in Society, University of Exeter, United Kingdom:
“The International History of International Organizations, Subjectivities and Subjects”
- David Webster, Kiriyaama research fellow, University of San Francisco, United States
“Modern Missionaries? Technical Assistance Advisors in a Time of Cold War and Decolonization”
- Todd Shepard, Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University, United States
“How Ethnographic Research in 1930s Mexico shaped French Efforts to fight Algerian Nationalism in 1955.”

This session revolved around attempts of international organisations to deal with competing concepts of human unity and diversity and the role of individuals in the transmission of ideas. Before the recent paradigmatic shift within international organisations from unity to cultural diversity took place, development programmes frequently tried to apply Western models to so-called “developing countries”, thus bringing “progress” and “modernity” to countries which often subscribed to these schemes by presenting themselves as developing and in need of assistance. The example of Canadian technical assistance advisors in Southeast Asia demonstrates that many actors providing technical assistance had economic and political motivations: they expected a “hundredfold return” of their efforts and/ or tried to prevent the expansion of international communism.

Individuals and international organisations often play a crucial role in the process of transmission of ideas and methods. In 1948, the UN launched an important programme for technical assistance, sending experts to member states that asked for them in order to foster their economic and technical development. But international organisations can also play more unexpected roles as “transmission belts” of ideas, as the example of French colonial policies towards Algeria just before the country’s independence demonstrates. During the 1950s, the French government pursued a policy of integration towards Algerians whom it considered to be French citizens suffering from racism in France. It was inspired by similar strategies of the Mexican government in the 1920s and 1930s which France became closely acquainted with through UNESCO programmes and publications as well as encounters between French and Mexican anthropologists at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

The example of UNESCO’s and WHO’s different approaches to questions of racial difference in genetic research not only demonstrates a persistent unease in the attempts to navigate between notions of unity and diversity, but also the difficulties of international organisations to define and delineate their subjects; in fact, fields of action often overlap (such as in the case of UNESCO and WHO), which can lead to both collaboration and rivalries.

In the discussion, the distinction between “technical” and “political” work was questioned. Although the WHO does more fieldwork and UNESCO is more eager to produce normative instruments such as its seven declarations on race, UNESCO also fulfils numerous “technical” tasks (such as alphabetization or technical assistance programmes) and the so-called “technical” specialized agencies are not unaffected by politics. Any technical assistance programme is essentially political as the choice of programmes, regions and methods always supposes priorities. Furthermore, some technical tasks can create serious political problems, especially when force is employed, such as might be the case when an organisation tries to eradicate a disease or with population control. One should not forget to ask what happens to those who refuse to accept the “forced modernization of the mind” based on Western ideas of progress.

Questions were also raised as to the role of international organisations (especially UNESCO) in the process of decolonization and UNESCO’s role in the development of concepts of race. In fact, UNESCO was the first organisation to define race as a sociological concept, thus denying all assumed biological foundations. UNESCO and other international organisations were of paramount importance in bringing about the paradigmatic shift from relationships between states to human collectives, from unity to cultural diversity which is compared to biodiversity. At WHO, for instance, experts now take into account complex relationships between the genetics of

human populations, their way of life, migrations, the hosts of germs and numerous other factors as well as their changes.

SESSION 6: WHAT KINDS OF SOCIETIES HAVE INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS SHAPED?

Chair: Robert Frank, Professor, University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, France

Commentator: Glenda Sluga, Professor, University of Sydney, Australia

Papers presented:

- Daniel Laqua, Teaching Fellow, University College London (UCL), United Kingdom:
“Intellectual Cooperation and the Organisation of Intellectual Labour in Interwar Europe
- Daniel Gorman, Assistant Professor, University of Waterloo, Canada:
“Servants of the World: Interwar Experiments in Transnational Public Diplomacy and the Emergence of the International Community”

The last session of the seminar aimed at reflecting on changing conceptions of internationalism that underlie transnational networks as it focused both on societies that are shaped by and societies that shape international organisations. The examples were taken from the interwar period, a time of emergence of an international society and of institutionalisation of international processes. After World War I, there is a paradigmatic change from 19th-century nationalism to the birth of the (chiefly paneuropean) “Geneva dream” of international cooperation whose impact continues after World War II.

An analysis of internationalism during the interwar years shows that it is not only shaped by well-meaning, peaceful societies. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy both created international institutions (for instance the Deutsche Kongresszentrale and the International Institute for Educational Cinema founded by Mussolini) and Japan participated actively in the League of Nations which it used for cultural propaganda.

In many cases, international organisations are born from a desire to create order even in naturally “unregulated” domains such as intellectual cooperation; other transnational flux, such as the trafficking of humans, are being restrained. This is a reason why many important organisations such as the League of Nations or the United Nations are created after periods of great disorder – the two world wars – out of an idealistic desire to avoid such conflicts in the future through the

intensification of transnational networks. International organisations are shaped according to the problems of their time – thus, for instance, technical developments demand new regulations on intellectual property. International organisations try to create universally recognized rules for transnational interactions, but also for national matters such as the protection of world heritage sites which are considered to be of universal interest and value.

In the discussion, the participants reflected on the issue of an international public opinion by asking such questions as: how is it shaped (for instance through the media, world fairs, international conferences...)? Who has access to it and who can influence it (international organisations are important platforms for bringing subjects on the international agenda)? How can it be monopolized by certain actors or issues? During the interwar years, the League of Nations disposes of a very limited budget especially for communication, which is one explanation for its failure to cope with the visions diffused by the efficient and highly funded propaganda apparatus of nation states, particularly totalitarian states. This problem of communication does not end with World War II: international organisations remain obscure to the general public and they often lack a clear strategy of communication as well as the means to implement one. During the Cold War, for instance, the budget for the cultural cold war is also significantly higher than contributions to bodies like UNESCO. The influence of donors on international organisations was again evoked: in the case of the IICI, for instance, France (that faces much criticism for its alleged attempts to play the dominant role in intellectual cooperation) is eventually replaced by the Rockefeller foundation as principal contributor to the budget; as a result, the USA are very present, if only indirectly, in the League through philanthropic organisations.

It was pointed out that individuals are important in the shaping of internationalism, but that they are creatures of their time and influenced by topical issues and atmospheres. It seems crucial to focus more on interactions between international organisations, NGOs and voluntary organisations as well as on the actors that move from one type of institution to another; in addition, one should take popular mentalities and the responses of ordinary people to international institutions into account. It would be useful to analyse continuities between an organisation and its predecessor, even if the latter is often perceived as a failure and bad example. It was stressed that we cannot assume a cumulative history of internationalism as there are also steps in the opposite direction, transnational flux that dry up and the return of nationalisms. During the interwar period, internationalism is chiefly an attempt to fight world communism, and its centre of gravity remains clearly Europe. It would be interesting to take into account how this pan-european universalism is perceived from the periphery; there are, for instance, studies by

early 20th-century Tunisian sociologists on the issue. Finally, the discussion also revolved around different conceptions of internationalism between the affirmation of unity and the overcoming of diversity, which has led UNESCO to promoting unity in diversity.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the history project is to stimulate research and debates on UNESCO and its relations and interactions with the world around. It is often by working on subjects that seem to have little to do with international organisations that historians are attracted to these institutions; the international can be found in the national and vice versa. In writing “transnational” history (term which is currently used in various ways and which demands further clarification), it is important to be conscious of the adopted perspectives as no historian can write objectively - every study is influenced by values and systems of reference. However, one could reflect on possibilities of writing new histories which would reconcile unity and diversity by starting from what is common to humankind.

For those who are interested in writing the history of international organisations, it is crucial to study the available sources carefully. Archives, which are very fragile and form part of humanity’s common heritage, have to be protected and new strategies of conservation in the age of digitalisation have to be found.

There are numerous questions which seem to deserve more attention and which are likely to reveal interesting aspects about transnational networks, such as: how does the circulation of knowledge/ ideas/ models/ people function? What impact do the activities of international organisations have on ordinary people? Who works within them and what happens to staff before and after their involvement with an international organisation? How do international organisations interact among each other and with other actors? How do they find rules for the world and shape an international public opinion? What is their budget and legal framework and how do they influence their scope of action? What can we learn from certain international endeavours that are considered as failures, such as the League and the IICI?

There cannot be a single answer to any of these questions; that is why the UNESCO History project aims at encouraging researchers from all over the world to approach the organisation’s history from as many different perspectives as possible, raise new questions and shed light on unknown or neglected connections. Several examples of such analyses will be presented during the next conferences in Dakar and Heidelberg (2009/ 2010).