

# 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](http://www.unhistory.org)

# UN economic research: Not only why do it, but how to do it?

- Does the UN need to do more than 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 de-motivated 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