

## Historians Without Borders – Writing Histories of International Organizations

**Veranstalter:** Monika Baár / Anna Derksen / Anais van Ertvelde / Sam de Schutter / Paul van Trigt, Research Group „Rethinking Disability: The Global Impact of the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) in Historical Perspective“, History Department, Leiden University

**Datum, Ort:** 22.03.2018–23.03.2018, Leiden

**Bericht von:** Yoram Carboex, Institute for History, Leiden University

Ever since the spread of „globalization“ has found its way into the field of history, ways of writing history beyond borders have proliferated. To discuss methodological challenges arising from the vast toolbox of geographical scales and transnational, international, global or comparative approaches and see what specific advantages these different approaches have to offer, the research team „Rethinking Disability“ has organized a workshop that brought together researchers from various fields working in the history of international organizations. A combination of a master class, keynote lectures, and roundtable discussions was set up to provide an informal and interactive setting for the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

In the first roundtable OTTO SPIJKERS (Utrecht University) and GILES SCOTT-SMITH (Leiden University) engaged in an interdisciplinary discussion on the study of international organizations. Spijkers' background in international law and philosophy led him to view the United Nations mainly as a value community and a stage for a constant global dialogue to discuss where the world should be heading. In this context, Spijkers contended to see legal regimes as these negotiated values and norms put into practice. This focus on abstract ideas and their emergence and transformation as concrete laws, without explicitly looking at the motivations of the particular actors involved, contrasted sharply with Scott-Smith's emphasis of international organizations as spaces of actor-driven transcultural exchange. He argued that it was especially important to highlight the agency of all kinds of people and social

groups that move within these international organizations, as ideas do not float freely but originate in the (diplomatic as well as unofficial) interactions of particular actors and stakeholders.

This discussion on interdisciplinary perspectives on international organizations was then followed by a roundtable on the methodological challenges of setting up a research project on international organizations. The panellists were JESSICA REINISCH (Birkbeck College, London), BOGDAN IACOB (Exeter University), DORA VARGHA (Exeter University), STEFFEN RIMNER (Utrecht University) and MONIKA BAÁR (Leiden University). This discussion brought forth the importance of flexibility in historical research. The consensus among the discussants was that methodologies of studying international organizations must be suitable for the specific types of 'historical problems' addressed in the research. Although it was argued that to simply follow what the source material may reveal can occasionally provide a suitable entry point, it was nonetheless emphasised that this flexibility should not stand in the way of clearly justifying the chosen methodology eventually. Another issue raised was the importance of going beyond the self-referentiality of international organizations. Rather than taking these organizations as contained units of analysis, we should focus on what the different actors moving within the transnational space of an international organization bring to the table. Studying so-called 'outsiders' – individuals or groups that do not have an official role within the international organizations, but nonetheless exercise influence on its operating procedures – will allow us to gain new, valuable perspectives on the workings of these organizations.

In the afternoon, the workshop continued with a masterclass by DAVIDE RODOGNO (The Graduate Institute, Geneva) in cooperation with the Huizinga Institute. By making use of Geneva as an established arena for international organizations and their archives, Rodogno invited participants to reflect not only on possible historiographical chances and approaches to study these organizations, but also on the limits such a centralized view can contain. Calling on „healthy scept-

---

ticism and constructive attitudes“ in conducting such research, the masterclass continued with the usefulness and pitfalls of different labels and turns in contemporary historiography by the examples of refugee history and Geneva as a site of multilateral governance – two foci explicitly questioning the universalism of the nation, but also of global governance as the telos of history. Finally, the recent emergence of the history of Western humanitarianism prompted participants to engage in stimulating discussion about possible approaches, methods, source material, analytical units and actors when engaging in the setting up or contributing to a new research field that remains elusive of either geographical borders and conceptual boundaries.

The first day closed with a keynote lecture by CORINNE PERNET (University of Geneva), in which she explored international organizations from the perspective of a kaleidoscope: A colourful set of different shapes, patterns and structures that changes with the thematic and methodological approach of the historian. By binding together the manifold research topics of the roundtable participants through their shared linkages to international organizations, Pernet challenged the traditional, at times seemingly rigid classification of global, transnational or comparative history approaches. Illustrating this by means of her own experiences of publishing a paper about the inter- and transnational entanglements of a national, Global South case like Guatemala, Pernet ended by arguing for a more flexible and open-minded approach towards these categories which are still far from consolidated.

The second day of the workshop started with a roundtable by AGNÈS VOLLMER (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen), DAVID BRYDAN (Birkbeck College, London) and ANAÏS VAN ERTVELDE (Leiden University), who presented their ongoing research and the problems they encountered while investigating conservative, Catholic and disability internationalisms in the context of Cold War research. One of the issues the participants struggled with was the demonstrable impact of the studied actors and policies: how to find suitable records and accounts for measuring effects within

qualitative research? At first glance, investigating historical impact seems more feasible in regard to small, local case studies than it does when analysing organizations operating on an inter- or transnational level. This also resonated with one of the topics discussed during the masterclass given by Davide Rodogno: Is the historical investigation of international organizations really different from other, more national oriented research? Even if this question could not be solved with a definite answer, one possible way of dealing with impact could be – as Anaïs van Ertvelde suggested in her paper – to trace the mobility and usage of a particular object or other non-human actor, like a poster, and use it as a focal point from which to gain insight into inter- and transnational relations between different actors.

In the second roundtable BASTIAAN BOUWMAN (London School of Economics), ANNE-ISABELLE RICHARD (Leiden University) and SILKE ZOLLER (Temple University) discussed the importance of viewing the workings of international organizations through a multi-actor and multi-level lens. Without losing sight of the fact that international organizations, or the people working within them, can be vehicles of globally articulated values, it was highlighted that we should nonetheless realize that these entities often become a stage for the articulation of certain, distinctly national or local interests and values. These interactions between different actors and various geographical levels thus deserve our special attention. It was further emphasized that more importance should be given to the fact that particular historical actors often occupy several different roles at once and that restrictively labelling them as, for example, ‘state-employed bureaucrat’ or ‘international organization employee’ often fails to capture the complexity of their particular connections.

The participants of the third roundtable, SARA COSEMANS (KU Leuven), JAKOB SCHÖNHAGEN (Freiburg University) and BENNETT G. SHERRY (University of Pittsburgh), provided a special focus on the topic of refugees. Therefore, the discussion partly revolved around more specific questions, for example what does it mean to speak about a

global refugee policy, what is special about the ways international organizations – both governmental and non-governmental – have approached refugees, and how can we formulate and visualize periodization of refugee policies in the twentieth century? The presentations also invoked discussions about issues of a more general nature, related to agency and sources. The participants agreed that it remains important to ask about the presence and activities of actors on a regular basis, as the investigation of geopolitical shifts and legislations can easily camouflage more distinct human agency. Moreover, reflections on the selection of source material is of lasting relevance as new insights can bring new significance to material that at first sight was deemed useless. Creating source databases and engaging in forms of network analysis can show previously hidden structures of how and by whom documents were used.

The fourth roundtable on cultural concerns and manifestations allowed WILLIAM CARRUTHERS (German Historical Institute, London), STEFAN ESSELBORN (Technical University Munich) and ELIFE BIÇER-DEVECI (St Anthony's College, Oxford) to examine the anxiety of self-definition that often engulfs international organizations. Although these organizations generally try to create and project an image of themselves as an ordered entity, scratching under the surface can often unearth a different picture of uncertainty and anxiety. The discussants highlighted various ways in which these organizations continuously attempt to define and legitimize their place in the world. Beyond the images they themselves produce, more complex and unordered stories seem to be at work that bring to light the ways in which they can fulfil different functions for different people at different moments in time. This self-description of international organizations as more or less unitary actors with specific goals can be called into doubt, as for example the role of particular organizations in the period of decolonization shows. As Carruthers and Esselborn demonstrated, it remains rare to see diametrical oppositions between colonial powers and anti-colonial actors in these self-produced imageries. Instead, international organizations rather seem to have become networks along

which multiple actors, their motives and ideas could move.

International organizations and their relations to the Global South were discussed in the fifth roundtable by ALANNA O'MALLEY (Leiden University), EVA-MARIA MUSCHIK (Free University Berlin) and SAM DE SCHUTTER (Leiden University). Although the geographical focus of the presenters differed, varying from national representatives meeting at the UN to experts of international organizations working in local contexts, they all had in common the articulation of the contingent agency of Global South actors. This agency was shaped by the interaction and relation with other actors, often giving it a very particular nature far removed from overarching and generic concepts like the distinction between a Global North and a Global South, West and East, developed and developing, et cetera. The main challenge the panellists faced during their research seems therefore to be a classical one: How to articulate individual agency without neglecting political and administrative structures.

The sixth roundtable gave QUINCY CLOET (Aberystwyth University), SARA HAGMANN (University of Basel) and ANNA DERKSEN (Leiden University) the opportunity to discuss manifestations of international organizations at the local, regional and international levels. At the centre of the subsequent conversations emerged the predicament of linking specific developments and entanglements to the connections between these different levels of analysis. While all participants acknowledged the significance of the interactions existing between these analytical levels, being able to show these connections within a smooth narrative remained a challenge nonetheless. Following particular historical actors across these different levels could allow to show instances in which certain individuals move along – and interact – with organizations, social groups or individuals on various geographical and political scales. To critically discuss more abstract topics like the shaping of perceptions or certain norms and their transregional, international or global diffusion, however, remains a difficult endeavour. A certain degree of contingency and serendipity thus

---

seems inevitable.

After the engaged discussion of these varieties of methodological challenges historians of international organizations might encounter, the workshop concluded with a keynote lecture by KIRAN PATEL (Maastricht University) on the inter-organizational dynamics of international organizations. Expanding from the research-focused debates of the past two days, Patel convincingly argued for a recognized need of historians to move beyond the focus on singular international organizations and instead of daring to explore the ways in which many different international organizations cooperate and interact. Although he acknowledged the difficulties connected to such an approach – the enormous amount of sources that need to be consulted or the challenge of providing a clear and consistent narration – , Patel contended that the focus on singular international organizations easily leads us to overemphasize their importance. Historians, he cautioned, tend to overestimate the narratives international organizations themselves produced which could possibly result in a failure to see their actual significance as well as their many limits. Paying closer attention to these inter-organizational dynamics carries with it a special potential, as it allows to show an otherwise hidden, more nuanced picture of the practices of internationalism – by shedding light on the actual disarray of these processes that affected the studied historical actors as well as they affect ourselves, as integral parts of the international community, in manifold ways.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Roundtable 1: Interdisciplinary perspectives*

Chair: Paul van Trigt (Leiden)

Participants: Otto Spijkers (Utrecht), Giles Scott-Smith (Leiden)

##### *Roundtable 2: Challenges in historical research beyond borders*

Chair: Giles Scott-Smith (Leiden)

Participants: Jessica Reinisch (London), Bogdan Iacob (Exeter), Dora Vargha (Exeter), Steffen Rimner (Utrecht), Monika Baar (Leiden)

##### *Master Class*

Davide Rodogno (Geneva): Possible Approaches to the History of International Organizations: Chances and Limitations of a View from Genova

##### *Keynote 1*

Chair: Alanna O'Malley (Leiden)

Corrine Pernet (Geneva): International Organizations and their Historians: Dealing with the Kaleidoscope

##### *Roundtable 3: Cold War*

Moderator: Bogdan Iacob (Exeter)

Participants: Agnès Vollmer (Tübingen), David Brydan (London), Anais Van Ertvelde (Leiden)

##### *Roundtable 4: Multi-actor, Multi-level*

Moderator: Brian Shaev (Leiden)

Participants: Bastiaan Bouwman (London), Anne-Isabelle Richard (Leiden), Silke Zoller (Philadelphia)

##### *Roundtable 5. Refugees*

Moderator: Jessica Reinisch (London)

Participants: Sara Cosemans (Leuven), Jakob Schönhagen (Freiburg), Bennett G. Sherry (Pittsburgh)

##### *Roundtable 6. Culture*

Moderator: Carolien Stolte (Leiden)

Participants: William Carruthers (London), Stefan Esselborn (Munich), Elife Biçer-Deveci (Oxford)

##### *Roundtable 7: The UN & the Global South*

Moderator: Corinne Pernet (Geneva)

Participants: Alanna O'Malley (Leiden), Eva-Maria Muschik (Berlin), Sam De Schutter (Leiden)

##### *Roundtable 8. Local, Regional, International*

Moderator: Dora Vargha (Exeter)

Participants: Quincy Cloet (Aberystwyth), Sarah Hagmann (Basel), Anna Derksen (Leiden)

*Keynote*

Kiran Patel (Maastricht): Organizations without Borders: A Future Agenda for International History

Tagungsbericht *Historians Without Borders – Writing Histories of International Organizations*. 22.03.2018–23.03.2018, Leiden, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.06.2018.