

**The Liberal Moral Sensibility Writ Globally**  
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Rather than contesting the liberal tradition in U.S. foreign policy, I think that my research confirms the strength and vitality of that liberal tradition, which not only animated President Franklin D. Roosevelt's thinking about the postwar world—which in many ways looked like his New Deal writ globally—but also came to animate the specialized agencies of the United Nations that he helped to create during World War II. But perhaps what I would like to add to the historiography is an explicit moral dimension. One of my colleagues, who is a cultural and intellectual historian, is writing about the rise at mid-twentieth century of a liberal moral sensibility—"an intellectual and moral framework that led to a particular set of actions and way of thinking." This liberal moral sensibility—a descendant of the Progressive and Social Gospel movements that also had a formative fascination with science—sought to alleviate human suffering, embrace "personal autonomy and individual freedom as primary values," and promote compassionate relationships.<sup>1</sup> Shifted to the international sphere, this was what the specialized agencies were all about—using their expertise to alleviate suffering, promote a non-Communist agenda, and create a "new world" in which all countries felt a degree of responsibility for all other members of the community of nations. This is what I have termed the "birth of development," when these relatively well equipped agencies "began working to better the lives

of other human beings whom they had never met nor known, for no reason other than the desire to improve the fate of the human race”<sup>2</sup>—in other words, when they crafted a liberal moral agenda for their work in the world.

There is no way to miss the liberal moral sensibility that gave birth to the U.N. specialized agencies. After three weeks of negotiations in crafting the Articles of Agreement of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, British economist and Bretton Woods Conference delegate John Maynard Keynes in moving to accept the final act at the closing plenary session stated,

We have shown that a concourse of 44 nations are actually able to work together at a constructive task in amity and unbroken concord. . . . We have been learning to work together. If we can so continue, this nightmare, in which most of us here present have spent too much of our lives, will be over. The brotherhood of man will have become more than a phrase.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, John Boyd Orr, who became the first Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in addressing the Quebec Conference in October 1945, told the assembled delegates, “The visions we have of a new world which FAO can begin to build must inspire us with the faith, confidence and hope which will enable us to overcome, one by one, the difficulties which we find.” Thus inspired the staff members of the FAO would have to realize “that the Hottentots of Africa and the Aborigines of Australia are as dear to them as the peoples to whom they belong” and would have to be “prepared to give their lives to this great cause.”<sup>4</sup> The founders of the World Health Organization, gathered in New York City in 1946, believed the new agency could “help heal the wounds of war” and explore “new territory which the nations of the world can accept as added bases for lasting peace.”<sup>5</sup> These founders set the

agency's objective in its constitution as "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health."<sup>6</sup> In other words, these founders—scientists and social scientists all, and folks who had had clear national allegiances—began crafting a global agenda in an explicitly moral language of hope, healing, faith, constructive and compassionate relationships, and even martyrdom—not for a country or an ideology, but for the global common good, for health, healing, and peace to be attained through the application of science and expertise to the world through the specialized agencies of the United Nations.

So if the liberal moral sensibility was the parent of the U.N. specialized agencies, Progressivism was the grandparent. The turn-of-the-century effort to institute gradual, democratic, expert-guided reforms to remedy the worst ills and abuses of laissez-faire industrialization bore a distinct resemblance to the postwar effort to institute gradual but sweeping, expert-guided, global economic development to remedy the worst ills and abuses of nationalism and global capitalism. Postwar internationalism sprang from a loss of faith in the ability of the system of competing nation-states and traditional diplomacy to cope with modern problems. Two world wars, a global depression, the advent of the atomic bomb, and the reality of biological weapons had convinced many people of the need for new thinking and new institutions. Additionally, the development of commercial airlines, telephones, radios, and newsreels had fostered an increasing sense of belonging to a knowable, global community. Brock Chisholm, first Director-General of the World Health Organization, went so far as to declare that national sovereignty and loyalty were obsolete in such an age: "We shall survive as members of the human race or not at all."<sup>7</sup> This pervading sense of "one world or none" truly

shaped the period after the Second World War, but it was also accompanied by the hope that new, intergovernmental institutions could replace nationalist competition that led to war with international cooperation that led to peace—the hope that we could learn from our history and, chastened by our mistakes, move forward and fix the problems of humankind if we only studied them and worked hard enough.

In the wake of the Second World War, the desire to alleviate suffering—the first key element of the liberal moral sensibility—found many outlets. The U.N. specialized agencies began the task of rebuilding in the wake of the work of the U.N. Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which provided immediate relief to war-devastated areas. The FAO scrambled at its founding to ensure that there would be sufficient food to prevent widespread famine and disease at the end of World War II. In 1946, the average European subsisted on 80% of his or her prewar diet, Asian rice production remained at one-third of prewar levels, and worldwide agricultural production was still down 10% over prewar levels, while global population had increased by 10% despite the massive loss of life in that conflict. As European rations dipped below wartime levels, malnutrition became prevalent in Asia, and both national and international food authorities sincerely worried whether global food supplies would last until the next crops could be harvested, the FAO called a Special Meeting on Urgent Food Problems, created the International Emergency Food Committee to take over the food-export distribution work of the war-time combined Food Board, and prevented a global “unrestricted scramble for foodstuffs” that would have been disastrous.<sup>8</sup> The World Health Organization’s Interim Commission also faced immediate and pressing problems in the immediate postwar period—an

Egyptian cholera epidemic in the fall of 1947, an upsurge in tuberculosis cases in Europe, and the task of rehabilitating the national health services in war-ravaged Ethiopia, Greece, and China.<sup>9</sup> The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD, better known as the World Bank) was less concerned with immediate postwar crises; the Marshall Plan largely took care of the “reconstruction” aspect of the bank’s mission. While dealing with global problems and the idea of economic development—which by its very nature is abstract—the U.N. specialized agencies at their founding clearly focused on the very human dimension of their work—alleviating human suffering and making the lives of individual people better, offering them—through economic development in its various guises—more freedom, more choices, and greater autonomy.

The U.N. agencies each dealt with the emerging Communist bloc in different ways, but all clearly believed that the global system they were helping to build would ultimately (if somewhat obscurely) contribute to a world in which individuals could better develop to their full potential—with greater individual freedom, autonomy, and choices. Some organization cultivated an explicitly anti-Communist agenda, while others tried to ignore the politics in order to focus on the people. The IBRD/World Bank was very much concerned with promoting a model of economic development that was in sharp contrast with the Communist model (although the Soviet Union was an initial signatory of the Bretton Woods Accords, it never joined the organizations) and also with the import-substitution model that Argentina under Juan Perón was promoting as an alternative to the capitalist model that promoted “dependency” in the southern sphere.<sup>10</sup> According to the World Bankers, development would increase Third World living

standards, decrease the possibility of desperation-fed revolutions, and ultimately provide the building blocks for the creation of liberal democracies. Bank President Eugene R. Black, lashing out at those American and European statesmen who believed that development aid was expendable with the outbreak of the Korean War, addressed the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce with these words in 1951:

Suppose that the processes of economic development . . . had been set vigorously underway in east Asia even a generation ago. Had that happened then it is not just hard to imagine, it is quite impossible to imagine, that China could have the government that it has today. Even more, it is absolutely inconceivable that Chinese troops should now be facing our soldier sons in Korea.<sup>11</sup>

For the World Health Organization, to best provide each individual with the greatest access to health care (and all the opportunities that good health provides) required a consistent and assiduous effort to avoid all appearance of being involved in political questions. As it was, international politics had led the Soviet-bloc nations to abandon the World Health Organization's membership in 1949 (though they began returning in 1957, after making a token payment of their membership dues from their "inactive" period), and led the Arab League to work against Israeli participation in the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office of the WHO, and had led WHO's membership to pretend (like the rest of the U.N. system) that Taiwan was China. So operating within the highly politicized atmosphere of the Cold War—overlaid with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the division of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan, and the McCarthy red scare in the United States—the World Health Organization strove to avoid politics in order to garner the high budgets and credibility needed to best aid the people in all nations to reach their highest health potential.<sup>12</sup>

The FAO was less successful in its effort to aid all people to reach their potential by ensuring adequate nutrition, because it was unable to navigate the political currents of the new Cold War. FAO Director-General Orr proposed a World Food Board that would guarantee minimum prices for all food commodities (thereby raising the income of most of the people of the world and contributing to an upward spiral of economic prosperity) and would distribute surplus food to the hungry of the world, because “Food is more than a trade commodity; it is an essential of life.”<sup>13</sup> At the opening of the Copenhagen Conference that considered the proposals, Orr went further:

I believe that the proposals we are making will take the nations a long way toward . . . freeing mankind from hunger and the fear of hunger, and ensuring that consumption shall keep pace with the increased production made possible by modern science, so that the produce of our farms, forests, and fisheries may find markets at prices fair to producers and consumers. By cooperating to do these things, the nations will . . . be taking . . . the most fundamental step toward maintaining peace and bringing about world prosperity.<sup>14</sup>

But the world’s largest food exporter—the United States—and the world’s largest food importer—Great Britain—were entirely unwilling to hand over global food prices to the care of a new U.N. specialized agency. The U.S. State Department found the proposals “disturbing” and not only “impracticable” but “inimical to [America’s] international trade policy,” and the British embassy in Washington mocked the proposed World Food Board as “Sir John Boyd Orr’s plan for an agricultural Paradise.”<sup>15</sup> So the plans went nowhere and in fact hurt the FAO throughout the early Cold War. At the end of Orr’s term as FAO Director-General in Washington, DC, just before he boarded the ship that carried him back to Scotland, he wiped “the dust of America” from his shoes with a handkerchief, which he promptly threw into the harbor. The United States,

he believed, “had missed a great opportunity for taking up the leadership of a prosperous and peaceful world.” To Orr, it seemed that the United States had learned nothing from the Wilsonian era and the failure to join the League of Nations, for it had again reneged on “its own great plan,” this time of ensuring freedom from want through the FAO.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the fascinating thing I discovered in my study of the U.N. specialized agencies was that they were consistently critical of the United States for fighting the Cold War with old-fashioned half measures when it was being offered more imaginative and effective alternatives from the United Nations.

Flowing throughout the discourse of the U.N. specialized agencies was a clear agenda to create a “new world” in which all countries felt a degree of responsibility for all other members of the community of nations. The World Bankers believed that their institution was uniquely structured to act on behalf of the global economy, which they equated with the common good. Since all member countries contributed to the bank’s coffers and its decision-making, bank staffers believed that members would come “to consider their obligations towards the Bank as obligations towards themselves as a community and not as obligations toward a ‘third party.’” They also believed that this sense of common cause would create an atmosphere of “mutual trust and respect” that would give the World Bank “an opportunity to establish a broader and more intimate kind of partnership” with members than was possible in commercial or bilateral lending relationships.<sup>17</sup> However, when the bank tried to put this notion of partnership into practice in mediating the Anglo-Iranian Oil Crisis, it encountered a number of problems. Because the bank saw itself as a neutral, third-party mediator in a dispute that had grave implications for the global economy, its staff and negotiators were unprepared when asked to pick between Iranian



nationalism and British “imperialism.” Instead, the bank retreated, and MI6 and the CIA “resolved” the crisis.<sup>18</sup>

The World Health Organization staff believed, as Rockefeller Foundation President Dr. R. B. Fosdick so eloquently stated, that health was “something that all men desire,” something that could “bind the human race together regardless of ideologies or boundary lines,” because disease was not a respecter of ideology nor lines on a map.<sup>19</sup> To make this a functional reality, the WHO pushed to ensure representation at its meetings of all the peoples of the world, including those in colonial areas. At its first World Health Assembly (WHA), the Credentials Committee had to employ some parliamentary sleight of hand to include the United States (the only country that had made its ratification of the WHO Constitution conditional) and 14 other delegations that had not yet ratified the organization’s constitution.<sup>20</sup> The WHO also created a category of “associate membership,” which granted colonial areas independent representation at WHA meetings and in the WHO regional organizations. Representatives of associate members, who were to be chosen from the “native population,” could suggest items for inclusion in the assembly’s agenda, take part in all WHA proceedings, and submit proposals to the executive board, although they could not vote, hold office, nor select members for the executive board.<sup>21</sup> Requiring health statistics on the populations in colonies as well as the FAO’s solicitation of nutritional statistics echoed the idea first employed in the League of Nations’ mandate colonies of providing some level of international accountability and scrutiny of colonial powers.

The first Asian to head a U.N. specialized agency, B. R. Sen of India, became the FAO’s Director-General in 1955 and decided on the need to re-energize the FAO around its core

mission—freedom from want. In launching his Freedom From Hunger Campaign (FFHC), he sought to bring additional resources to the FAO, to bring more nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into the fight as FAO allies, and to rally both nations and peoples around the central and unifying theme of combating hunger. Arguing that unless “scientific knowledge, modern techniques and comprehensive agricultural development plans” were carried “to the farmers, herdsmen and fishermen, to the housewives, to the village merchants, to the local cooperative, the campaign is in danger of evaporating into bitter disappointment for the hungry and into pious hopes for the well-fed,” the FAO launched the FFHC as a rural development program that provided industry, churches, civic organizations, and other NGOs with a list of approved development projects that required an educational component as well as local buy-in. Projects ranged from the simple—introduction of elementary cheese-making methods as a means of improving farmers’ incomes and local nutrition—to the complex—a United Arab Republic month-long seminar on modern farm broadcasting techniques funded by the New Zealand Freedom From Hunger Campaign national committee. This cornucopia of projects was the centerpiece of the 1963 World Food Congress, meant to launch the FFHC from its initial stage into an institutionalized global program and philosophy of promoting development. At the close of that congress, Sen placed a declaration before the assembly. It began by asserting that “the persistence of hunger and malnutrition is unacceptable morally and socially, is incompatible with the dignity of human beings and the equality of opportunity to which they are entitled, and is a threat to social and international peace.” Then it called for a new ideology of development based on the “fullest and most effective use of all human and natural resources.”<sup>22</sup> But Sen’s vision for

a meaningful, coordinated, bottom-up development effort focused on rural and human development was cut short by U.S. machinations within the FAO bureaucracy that led to the adoption of Green Revolution ideas rather than those developed during the FFHC.<sup>23</sup> The “new world” that seemed so tantalizingly near to the international civil servants working on economic development remained out of their reach, because the nature of nation-states and their commitment to internationalism had not in fact changed significantly from the time of the First World War and the League of Nations.

The liberal moral sensibility so evident in the Progressive era of Woodrow Wilson and then in Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression clearly determined the birth and mission of the United Nations’ specialized agencies. Their desire to alleviate suffering, foster environments that could cultivate individual freedom, and create a community of nations shaped almost everything that they did in the twenty years that followed their founding. But we should well ask how successful these organizations were in translating this liberal moral sensibility into the actual alleviation of suffering, the actual fostering of individual freedom, and the actual creation of a community of nations. The gap between the rich and poor countries of the world continues to grow, a key indicator of failure—at least to date. Although the end of the Cold War brought some increase in individual freedom on the global scene, I have not yet run across either a historian or a commentator who has attributed the end of the Cold War to economic development efforts. Instead, critics of and commentators on the U.N. specialized agencies have consistently emphasized the ways in which these development efforts by and large have created development bureaucrats and enriched the economic elite in the “developing” world; in other words, economic

development has done more to help the rich than to bring the poor out of poverty. Others have pointed out how these development efforts have consistently disadvantages native peoples and women as well as irreparably damaged the environment with unsustainable development efforts. And any contemporary consideration of international public health efforts would struggle to point to progress—though there have been notable successes, such as the eradication of smallpox—in the face of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>24</sup> So, in the end, are we left with the conclusion that the liberal moral sensibility on the international stage was just a lot of high-sounding rhetoric that did little good and potentially much harm?

I shy away from such a conclusion as premature at best and defeatist at worst. I believe that the combined efforts of the U.N. specialized agencies created a sense of obligation to contribute to the economic development of other nations and peoples, and the work of those organizations—especially the FAO—to bring NGOs actively into the work of human development is everywhere evident today. The most promising current models of economic development—still based, I would argue, in a liberal moral sensibility—are currently coming not from the United Nations but from the Grameen Bank’s philosophy of microlending, the Gates’ Foundation efforts to impact malaria mortality, the One Campaign’s efforts to eliminate extreme poverty, and a myriad of other NGO efforts. And ultimately, this is the positive claim I would make for the U.N. specialized agencies—a moral claim that they have reshaped the basic way we view our responsibilities to the rest of the world, and that is no mean feat. Nor, hopefully, is this the end of the story. We would indeed fail in our job as historians if we took such a short view—just sixty years—of a major shift in human history. For as WHO Director-General Chisholm

reminded us almost half a century ago, the United Nations and its agencies had no “brave new magic” that could solve the world’s problems effortlessly.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the human race must continuously learn from its trails and errors while keeping its eyes firmly fixed on the goal of universal human development. This indeed is the job of historians.

## ENDNOTES

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  2. Amy L. S. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945-1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 1.
  3. Keynes speech in moving to accept the final act at the closing plenary session, 22 July 1944, in Donald Moggridge, ed., *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, vol. 26, *Activities, 1941-1946: Shaping the Post-War World, Bretton Woods and Reparations* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 101, 103.
  4. Orr comments, proceedings of the eighth plenary meeting, 27 October 1945, Record Group [hereafter RG] 59, Decimal Files 1945-49, 501.SA, box 2293, U.S. National Archive, College Park, Maryland [hereafter NACP].
  5. "Remarks by Surgeon General Thomas Parran," 20 June 1946, RG 59, Decimal File 1945-49, 501.NA, box 2222, NACP.
  6. Article 1 of the WHO Constitution; World Health Organization Interim Commission, *Summary Report on Proceedings, Minutes and Final Acts of the International Health Conference, held in New York from 19 June to 22 July 1946*, Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2 (New York and Geneva: WHOIC, June 1948), 16.
  7. "Identity through Commitment and Involvement," George Brock Chisholm address to the Child Study Association of America, 2 March 1965, George Brock Chisholm papers, vol. 5, folders 407-20, Canadian National Archives, Ottawa, Canada [hereafter CNA].
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11. Black address to the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, 7 November 1951, Black papers, box 3, folder 3, UGA.

12. Staples, *Birth of Development*, ch. 9.

13. “Proposals for a World Food Board,” FAO memorandum to member nations, 2 September 1946, Treasury File [hereafter T with folder designation] 236/92, British Public Record Office, Kew, England, UK [hereafter PRO].

14. “Reply by Sir John Boyd Orr,” *Conference of the FAO Journal* 2 (3 September 1946), microfilm 253, Food and Agriculture Organization Archive, Rome, Italy [hereafter FAOA].

15. Washington embassy telegrams to Foreign Office, 25 July and 1 August 1946, both T 236/92, PRO.

16. Lord Boyd Orr, *As I Recall* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), 203.

17. Beyen memorandum to executive directors and alternates, 22 December 1948, Thomas Basyn files, box 11, folder 5, WBGA; Richard Demuth statement to the Third Latin American Conference, 18 June 1951, ASF, box 8, folder 2, WBGA; “What Answer to the Challenge of International Poverty?” Black address to the Economic Club of Detroit, 20 April 1959, Black papers, box 4, folder 1, UGA.

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20. "Ratifications," *Chronicle of the WHO* 2 (June 1948): 131; off-the-record meeting between van Zile Hyde and NGOs, 21 October 1948, attached to letter from Williams to Carter, 29 October 1948, RG 59, Decimal File 1945-49, 501.NA, box 2229, NACP; *Journal of the First World Health Assembly*, no. 9 (3 July 1948), RG 59, Decimal File 1945-49, 501.NA, box 2228, NACP; Javed Siddiqi, *World Health and World Politics: The World Health Organization and the UN System* (Columbus: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 103-4; confidential telegram from U.S. delegation to WHA to Secretary of State George C. Marshall, 25 June 1948, confidential Marshall telegram to U.S. delegation to WHA, 28 June 1948, and Parran telegram to Marshall, 2 July 1948, all RG 59, Decimal File 1945-49, 501.NA, box 2227, NACP.

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