Introduction

Scripts for a New Stage: United Nations' Observances and New Perspectives on Diplomatic History

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Abstract

This introduction to a special issue about the United Nations' observances (days, weeks, years, decades) explores how scholarly engagement with UN observances may provide fresh perspectives on diplomatic history. The introduction discusses the origins of these observances and the limited historiographical attention they have received. It argues that observances need to be conceptualized and historicized as “diplomatic scripts.” This approach helps to understand how the UN has functioned as a diplomatic platform and how the UN, especially since the 1970s, has been used by a broad range of diplomats in different locations and with different agendas. It highlights the diversity of diplomatic activity beyond the state-to-state model and uncovers actors and processes that have stood in the shadow of well-known diplomatic events and developments. The last part of the introduction provides a short overview of this special issue.

Keywords

United Nations – diplomacy – observances – internationalisms – non-state actors – performance

1 Introduction¹

For more than seventy years the United Nations (UN) has observed international days, weeks, years, and decades dedicated to a variety of causes and groups.

1 The author wishes to thank Monika Baár, Giles Scott-Smith, Ken Weisbrode, the anonymous reviewers, and participants in the panel “The Diplomacy of UN Global Observances” at the

Among them have been women, disabled people, anti-apartheid, drinking water, and more recently Kyrgyz statehood, the gorilla, microcredit, and quinoa. Typically, these events have sought to promote awareness of and encourage (inter)national action on fundamental issues related to human rights, social justice, cultural heritage, and environmental problems. In addition to the UN itself, its specialized agencies such as UNICEF, International Labour Organization (ILO), and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have also been involved in these activities. Numerous NGOs, churches, multinational corporations, and a myriad of international organizations, interest groups, celebrities, and activists have contributed. Member states have also been expected to become engaged, and they have often formed national and regional committees for that purpose. Over time these observances have become an integral part of the UN's institutional identity, a pillar of its advocacy of human rights, and an indication of how the organization tries to connect the role of the various stakeholders with public opinion.²

In spite of their pivotal role in presenting the UN's mission, the dynamics and impact of international days, weeks, years, and decades have not received comprehensive historical study.³ This special issue brings together the results of historical research on different observances and explores how scholarly engagement with UN observances may provide fresh perspectives on diplomatic history. As will be discussed in more detail below, this special issue tries to understand how the UN has functioned as a diplomatic platform and how the UN has been used by a broad range of diplomats in different locations and with different agendas. It highlights the diversity of diplomatic activity beyond the state-to-state model and uncovers actors and processes that have stood in the shadow of well-known diplomatic events and developments such as the Helsinki accord and the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect.

This introduction discusses the origins of these observances and the limited historiographical attention they have received. It then contextualizes the study of individual observances within recent historiographical developments in diplomatic, international, and global history. Finally, it argues that observances need to be conceptualized and historicized as "diplomatic scripts," and it shows how this approach can add a new dimension to the history of postwar

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2 For an overview of the UN observances: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/united-nations-observances> (22 November 2018).

3 For a report on the first conference about observances from a historical perspective: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7412> (accessed 18 November 2018).

diplomacy. The last part of the introduction provides a short overview of the articles.

2 History and Relevance of UN Observances

The first observance celebrated by the UN was the “United Nations Day” in 1948. But according to International Relations scholar Gili Drori the UN made only a few dedications in the period until 1959. Since the 1960s, however, the number of observances has been increasing, with peaks in the late 1970s and early 1990s. This significant increase in the number of observances since the late 1970s suggests that they came to be regarded by diplomats as relevant and useful. However, the procedure for organizing observances was formalized only in the 1980s. Drori discusses the observances or “dedications” as part of a “world culture” because “the international community has repeatedly expressed its commitment to certain values, marked their principles as universal and sanctified them in a formal manner.”⁴ Since 1949 this “principal agent of the international community” has expressed commitment to 127 issues and has developed “the procedure, as well as the habit, of declaring some issues as core to global being; in doing so, the UN promotes some issues and themes and takes a moral stand to revere them.”⁵ Drori considers the institutionalization of observances in the 1980s as the “development of a (global) cultural ritual” that “signals the imagining of the world as the social horizon.”⁶

Drori’s analysis is relevant for this special issue because she is the first to approach these observances as a broader phenomenon. Moreover, she provides the first systematic inventory and traces the main developments over time. Her interpretation is clearly influenced by the tradition of research that explores the contribution of the UN to global norms and order. In this type of research the UN is approached as a platform “for both formalizing and splintering political ideas and international norms.”⁷ By showing how the UN helped to shape

4 Drori, Gili S. “The United Nations’ Dedications: A World Culture in the Making?” *International Sociology* 20 (2) (2005), 175–199: 176.

5 Drori, “United Nations’ Dedications,” 176.

6 Ibid., 180 and 188.

7 Weiss, Thomas G., and Sam Daws, eds. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); quotation from Jackson, Simon, and Alanna O’Malley. “Rocking on the hinges? The League of Nations, the United Nations and the new history of internationalism in the twentieth century.” In *The Institution of International Order: from the League of Nations to the United Nations*, eds. S. Jackson, A. O’Malley (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–29: 9.

the imagined global community, Drori tends to emphasize the formalization and unity of ideas and norms. In some cases this special issue confirms this formalization and unity: the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990–1999), for instance, put the issue of disaster risk for the first time on the global agenda. More often, however, the articles attest to the UN as a platform for splintering ideas and norms: during the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP, 1981), for instance, we can see a clash between very different understandings of disability.

In doing so, this special issue differs from Drori's approach and follows the direction of recent studies which see the UN as a diplomatic platform "nourished by the contention and convergence of competing universalisms."⁸ The emphasis on contention and convergence instead of on a "world culture" could be seen to diminish the relevance of the observances and the UN. This might particularly seem the case in light of the body of literature that suggests that the UN has been losing its relevance in global governance since the 1970s because of the dead end of the New International Economic Order.⁹ Instead this special issue builds on the body of literature concerning individual observances which approaches the UN not as a single actor in world politics but as a relevant global platform for different diplomatic interests and types of diplomacy.

On the rare occasions when UN observances are mentioned or investigated, they are almost always approached as observances in their "individual" context and included in the longer history of internationalisms.¹⁰ In the

8 Amrith, Sunil, and Glenda Sluga. "New Histories of the United Nations." *Journal of World History* 19 (3) (2008), 251–274; O'Malley, Alanna. *The Diplomacy of Decolonization. America, Britain and United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). The role of international organizations like the UN is still not always made clear in academic handbooks about diplomacy: Karns, Margaret P. and Karen A. Mingst. "International Organizations and Diplomacy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142–159.

9 See in particular the chapter "The 1980s: Losing Control and Marginalizing the Poorest" in Jolly, Richard, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai and Frédéric Lapeyre. *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); cf. Mazower, Mark. *Governing the World. The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Gilman, Nils. "The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction." *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6 (1) (2015), 1–16.

10 See literature mentioned later in this article, and also Piccini, Jon. "Women are a colonised sex": Elizabeth Reid, Human Rights and International Women's Year 1975." *Australian Historical Studies* 49 (3) (2018), 307–323; Burke, Roland. "Competing for the Last Utopia?"

historiographical debate about human rights, for instance, Steven L.B. Jensen has made an essential intervention by pointing to the importance of Global South actors who set the human rights agenda at the UN during the 1960s. A closer examination of his argument demonstrates that his research on the International Human Rights Year (1968) was essential in revealing these actors. When another key player in this debate, Samuel Moyn, discusses the International Human Rights Year (1968) in his book *The Last Utopia*, he observes “the failure of the UN as a primary forum of human rights activism.”¹¹ According to him the first international human rights conference in Tehran that year was a “catastrophe” because it does not appear to have contributed anything positive for human rights advocacy. In his book *The Making of Human Rights*, Jensen at first sight seems to follow Moyn when he gives the title “So bitter a year for human rights” to a chapter about this year. However, in an extensive analysis Jensen shows how this year became pivotal in the process of transition from Global South human rights engagement to Western interest in international human rights.¹² In spite of failures, there were successes: for example, the first human rights treaty body was established by which human rights formally became international law. In this way Jensen shows how the investigation of observances can uncover the role of “unknown actors” in processes of human rights (law) diplomacy and also highlight the complexity of norm production in the international sphere.

By recognizing the constructive role of UN observances within the stream of post-war internationalism, we are able to see that their specific diplomatic

The NIEO, Human Rights, and the World Conference for the International Women's Year, Mexico City, June 1975.” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6 (1) (2015), 47–61; McCarthy, Helen. “The Diplomatic History of Global Women's Rights: The British Foreign Office and International Women's Year, 1975.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50 (2015), 833–853; Donert, Celia. “Whose Utopia? Gender, Ideology, and Human Rights at the 1975 World Congress of Women in East Berlin.” In *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, eds. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 68–87; Hadley, Ruth. *A Year to Tolerate Tolerance? An Analysis of the UN ‘Year of Tolerance’ in the Context of the Theoretical Debate on Tolerance, 1945–2010*, PhD Thesis (Faculty of Humanities, University of Manchester, 2012); Ghodsee, Kristen. “Revisiting the United Nations decade for women: Brief reflections on feminism, capitalism and Cold War politics in the early years of the international women's movement.” *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010), 3–12.

11 Moyn, Samuel. *Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 126.

12 Jensen, Steven L.B. *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

histories have a multi-layered significance, both contextual and causal. They were important events, both symbolically and practically, in the progress of many different forms of internationalism, and allow us to deepen our understanding of how these internationalisms developed. The necessary decision-making and planning of the observances involved a range of state and non-state actors that illustrates the complexities of the diplomatic processes involved. They enabled otherwise marginalized groups and social movements to claim a diplomatic voice, and they allowed interest groups to advocate and gain special status for specific causes. Observances were often the result of bottom-up processes that managed temporarily to attract attention at the UN, so scholars need to combine local and global histories. The purposes of these observances were also different depending on the objectives of the contributing parties, time and place, and their longevity. Accordingly, their utility as diplomatic tools or triggers varied greatly. The observances also highlight the problem with taking the UN as a single unitary actor with a clear agenda, in contrast revealing it to be a fragmented institution through which and around which a range of political and ethical interests coalesce, mobilize, and perform.

3 Scripts for New Groups: a New Stage?

In order properly to assess the relevance of the UN observances, it may be helpful to interpret diplomacy as (at least partly) performance. The articles in this special issue show that there are almost always several elements without which an observance could not exist.¹³ It starts with an idea, which could be brought forward by a diplomat, a scientist, a self-advocate, or even an individual who is a complete outsider from the UN. This idea needs to be explained further, worked out, and negotiated in the bureaucracy of the UN, and to be adopted by the General Assembly. From there the member states and specialized agencies need to be informed and asked to take action, a process that is coordinated by members of the bureaucracy of the UN and the Economic and Social Council in particular. Afterwards and sometimes already during the relevant year or decade the goals undergo evaluation and the UN decides what follow-up is appropriate. These different elements or actions form together what could be called a formal script, with certain variations depending on the type of observance.

In everyday language a script is usually understood to mean a written text for a play, film, or broadcast; but it is also used in computing to mean “an

¹³ Cf. Drori, “United Nations’ Dedications.”

automated series of instructions carried out in a specific order.”¹⁴ What observances have in common with a script is that they have to be negotiated and that they have to be performed. An observance, however, is not a text but a format or a way in which something has to be undertaken. This better fits the computing definition, which is less concerned with the content and the precise performance of the text and is focused more on the form and the instructions that need to be carried out in a specific order. The content and actual practice of the UN observances are of course very different, but the way in which they are carried out contains a number of elements which justify speaking of them as following a specific format or script. Understanding observances as scripts allows us to see how the script is negotiated differently each time and put into practice, but also to investigate what has been learnt (or not) from earlier performances.

Although diplomatic performance is increasingly understood in terms of theatre the concept of script has so far hardly been explored in the literature. International historian Naoko Shimazu, for instance, focuses in her work about the Bandung conference (1955) mainly on concepts such as performance, audience, and stage. She considers the Indonesian political context as an underlying script of the conference which helps to “illuminate symbolic meanings in the performative dimensions of international diplomacy.”¹⁵ This special issue takes the concept of script more literally, as it is used in theatre, than she does: script is not the context for a play, but the instruction (of the director and/or playwright) for a play, which can be used repeatedly in different contexts. Therefore observances may be compared to anniversaries and conferences, which are often instrumentalized by diplomats and studied as such by historians.¹⁶ The similarities, however, may not hide the fact that the script of observances was and is confined to a particular period of time.

14 Definitions from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/script> (accessed 17 October 2018).

15 Shimazu, Naoko. “Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955.” *Modern Asian Studies* 48 (1) (2014), 225–252: 248; see also Shimazu, Naoko. “What is sociability in diplomacy?” *Diplomatica* 1 (1) (2019), 56–72. The theatre metaphor more generally is already used by a whole range of diplomatic historians such as Daum, Andreas W. *Kennedy in Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Vick, Brian E. *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

16 For anniversaries the (religious) concept of rituals is useful, although it is also used for observances by Hadley. A Year and Burke, Roland. “The Rites of Human Rights at the United Nations.” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 9 (1) (2018), 127–142.

In order to be fully appreciated, observances need not only to be conceptualized but also historicized: we need to ask how and why observances have become such a popular script since the 1970s. It is striking to realize that very few observances were initiated before this decade, that they were proposed and effected mainly by state actors and UN agencies and only very rarely by non-state actors, and that they were addressing “traditional” UN topics such as human rights. The turning point appears to have been the International Women’s Year (IWY) in 1975. Jocelyn Olcott, who referred to it as the “greatest consciousness-raising event in history,” investigated the international conference during this year that is usually interpreted as a clash between Western feminists and Third World women. According to Olcott “issues of racial discrimination, economic marginality, and geopolitical inequalities” were not ignored as is generally suggested in the literature, but debated intensely during the observance of the year in Mexico City. Interestingly, Olcott observes that “throughout the planning and execution of IWY events, an inverse correlation became evident: the less controlled, managed, and scripted a gathering, the more likely it was to become memorable and generative – of new friendships and networks, of new policies and practices, and of new institutions and structures.”¹⁷ Olcott not only complicates the existing representations of women in the international arena by pointing to unexpected diplomatic relations, but also shows how the “script” was creatively formed: “the IWY conference’s structure and agenda also reflected the changing nature and understanding of civil society as UN conferences grew from technical meetings of specialists into more action-oriented meetings intended to draw media attention and galvanize policymakers.”¹⁸

The potential of the “observances script” to shape the UN as a platform in novel ways and with new actors became clear during the IWY and developed further in subsequent years and decades. While the UN was an important platform for the Global South in the 1950s and 1960s, since the 1970s it has increasingly become a platform for a broad range of marginalized groups beyond the Cold War divisions, a process in which the IWY served as a catalyst. If we take into account the performative character of the UN and approach the observances as a script, the lasting relevance of the UN as a central platform is revealed – without of course suggesting that the UN has to be reduced to its performative dimension. It was particularly vulnerable groups and populations and their representatives who were successful in appreciating the value and potential of the observances. The UN bureaucracy (rather than national

17 Olcott, Jocelyn. *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–5.

18 Ibid., 8.

diplomats) often helped to give a voice to these groups and their representatives, but also tried to fit the observances into its existing policies and its own agenda – most clearly in the case of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

In spite of the influence of the UN bureaucracy and member states, the increasing popularity of the observances shows the growth and diversification of the “Third UN.”¹⁹ Only by appreciating the observances can we understand the current composition and importance of this heterogeneous group of non-governmental organizations, academics, experts, self-advocates, and other individuals. Therefore the approach which underpins this special issue frames the UN not only as a diplomatic platform, but also as a multi-layered, organic organization in which almost everyone can have a voice.

4 Contributions to the Special Issue

All the articles in this special issue demonstrate in their own way how investigation of the UN observances can add new dimensions to diplomatic history, and each highlights one or more aspects of their historical relevance. In the article about the World Refugee Year (1959–60) and the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), Veronika Flegar examines how disabled refugees were perceived by the UNHCR and how this perception affected the international protection activities undertaken on their behalf. This allows us to see how much UNHCR’s “norm entrepreneurship” was determined by specific circumstances rather than by preconceived approaches.

In his article about the International Year for Human Rights (1968) in the Eastern Bloc, Ned Richardson-Little shows how the year was instrumentalized for the purpose of human rights diplomacy. The political leaders of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) used the year to support their case for admission into the United Nations. Ultimately, the effort to break their diplomatic isolation had little success. Nevertheless, the International Year for Human Rights was important within the GDR itself since the UN Covenants of 1966 were publicly affirmed by the Socialist Unity Party, and a legal concept of “socialist human rights” was incorporated into official ideology. According to Richardson-Little, the Year for Human Rights was significant for state socialist Eastern Europe as a bridge to the Helsinki Accord: “not just the result of

19 Weiss, Thomas G., Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly, “The ‘Third’ United Nations.” *Global Governance* 15 (2009), 123–142. The “First UN” refers to the national representatives and the UN bureaucracy, and the “Second UN” to the agencies.

Western pressure” but also “a positive embrace of the UN human rights system in the late 1960s.” Another innovative contribution to the historiography of human rights diplomacy is offered by Linde Lindkvist in his article about the International Year of the Child (1979). As Lindkvist shows, this year cannot be regarded as the starting point for the decade-long negotiations on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). During 1979 the UN functioned as a platform for “clashes and amalgamations of competing concepts and projects” concerning children’s wellbeing, with a minimal role for human rights.

Development, as becomes clear from Sam de Schutter’s article, constituted one of the most significant underlying themes of the observances. In his article about the International Year of Disabled Persons in Kenya he delves further into development projects carried out by the UN’s specialized agencies, and ILO in particular. Although at first sight De Schutter appears to tackle the “local” manifestation of a “global” observance, he in fact deconstructs the global-local dichotomy by showing how these two aspects are always intertwined. This ultimately leads to a reconsideration of the activities of the UN’s specialized agencies and the diplomatic nature of development as practice. The approach for which De Schutter argues reveals the wide range of actors involved beyond the “First UN” and the “Second UN.”²⁰ This can be seen also in Lukas Schemper’s article about the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990–99). The idea for the Decade came neither from the United Nations nor from governments or ministries; in fact it was an initiative led by scientists. Schemper shows how diplomats were initially sceptical about the prospect of yet another UN Decade, yet a majority of governments supported it in the end. This shows the effective role that scientists and other epistemic communities were able to play in international diplomacy and governance, although the appropriation of the proposal by the UN bureaucracy resulted in a change in thematic orientation.

The last article of the special issue is, like Schemper’s contribution on an international decade, not dedicated to an international year, but to international days. In her article Monika Baár explores the potential of these annually reoccurring observances to inform new diplomatic histories and new histories of the United Nations. She first provides a taxonomy of these years by examining their major themes and the main agents behind them, and by showing how they differed from other types of observance. Baár demonstrates the ever-increasing role of “digital diplomacy” in the communication of these events, by drawing attention to the role of social media and celebrity diplomacy. Finally, she not only supports recent calls for more attention to be paid to non-state

20 Ibid.

actors and the “Third UN,” but also argues that we need to consider the role of complete outsiders in these observances, a group that could be identified as the “Fourth UN.” With this she explores the promise lying in a more thorough scholarly engagement with United Nations’ observances: the potential to write more inclusive diplomatic histories that not only help to revise, but on various grounds also to supplant existing accounts by introducing new actors and perspectives.