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The United Nations ideology: from ideas to global policies

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Abstract Building on the observation that the UN is a key intellectual actor of world politics, I argue that the end of the cold war marked a turning point in the evolution of UN thinking. The first part of the article puts forward a conceptual framework centred on the notions of global governance, ideology and global public policy. It shows that these three notions are useful tools for an understanding of the production and diffusion of UN ideas. This conceptual framework is used in the second part to analyse the three issues that have dominated the UN agenda throughout the post-cold war period: security, development and human rights. The third part then explains how this agenda has recently been extended to include a new issue: global democracy. I contend that, in each of its areas of interest, the UN ideology helps to establish global public policies designed to transform global governance practices. The article demonstrates that even though the UN is perpetually constrained by states—especially the most powerful ones—it does exercise a distinctive form of political leadership in global affairs.

The position of the UN in world politics is altogether unique. It is the only international organization with an all-inclusive membership and a global mandate. Among international treaties, the UN Charter is the one that most resembles a global constitution. And, though it is a long way from acting as a world government, the UN embodies the closest approximation to that imaginary model of political architecture. In spite of the criticisms levelled against the UN by powers both great and small, not a single state has withdrawn from the organization thus far. Few would deny that the UN is the institutional heart of modern multilateralism or that its creation in 1945 was one of the most significant political innovations of the 20th century.

Because of the UN’s special status, its activities and problems are the subjects of a very abundant literature. It is hard to say whether any clear direction has emerged from the knowledge accumulated in this profusion of scholarship, but over the past two decades, a fruitful line of thought has developed around the analysis of UN ideas. The reason why this particular area of discussion has gradually come to the fore has a lot to do with the rise of constructivism in the field of international relations. By definition, the constructivist approach emphasizes the way
in which ideas construct international processes. The recent interest in UN ideas was especially well reflected in the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP), the most ambitious research project on the UN ever undertaken. The 15 monographs published as part of the UNIHP have provided convincing evidence that ‘ideas and concepts are arguably the most important legacy of the United Nations.’¹ Yet, as the UNIHP directors have maintained in the capstone volume of their series, UN ideas remain under-researched.²

This article contributes to the exploration of the UN’s intellectual role in two ways. First, it uses the notion of ideology to shed new light on the nature and political meaning of UN ideas. The concept of ideology, as will be shown here, offers a holistic perspective that renders UN principles and values more intelligible. In particular, the concept of ideology makes it easier to perceive the UN’s multifarious activities as interrelated parts of a coherent, albeit contested, political project. Second, the article furthers the investigation of UN ideas by focusing on the recent period, which has drawn comparatively less attention from scholars. The analysis suggests, in fact, that the end of the cold war marked a turning point in the evolution of UN thinking.

The rest of the article is divided into three parts. The first puts forward a conceptual framework centred on the notions of global governance, ideology and global public policy. It argues that these three notions provide a useful toolkit to better understand the production and diffusion of UN ideas. This conceptual framework is used in the second part to analyse the three issues that have dominated the UN agenda throughout the post-cold war period: security, development and human rights. The third part then explains the gradual emergence of the global democracy issue as a new pole star in the UN vision. According to the proposed narrative, in each of its areas of interest, the UN ideology advances global public policies designed to transform global governance practices. The article thus demonstrates that, even though the UN is above all an intergovernmental institution, it does exercise a distinctive form of political leadership in world politics.

**Conceptual issues**

The theoretical approach adopted here is grounded in three complementary propositions: (a) The UN is a key actor of global governance; (b) the UN has a distinct ideology, one based on explicit and relatively coherent principles; and (c) the UN systematically strives to embody its ideology in global public policies. These three propositions are expanded on below.

*The UN and global governance*

The starting point of this analysis is that the UN actively participates in global governance through its discourses and practices. According to two leading experts, global governance can be defined as ‘the totality of the ways, formal and informal, in which the world is governed.’³ Given this definition, one could certainly argue
about the extent of the UN’s contribution to global governance, but it can hardly be denied that the UN does participate in the process. It is revealing that, over the last two decades, the UN’s role in global governance has been the analytical focus of hundreds of books and specialized articles. The reason the global governance perspective has become so popular is because it crucially complements the notion of anarchy in describing the fundamental nature of the global order. It may be true that there is no ‘government over governments,’ yet it is equally true that the global order is increasingly organized, institutionalized and governed. This evolution is largely a result of the work of international organizations such as the UN. Therefore, global governance will be used here to describe the social context in which UN ideas are formed.

The UN’s involvement in global governance is undoubtedly shaped by political conflicts and systemic power relations. Beyond this truism, a number of writers have argued convincingly that, like other international organizations, the UN has ‘authority, autonomy, and agency.’ The UN’s agency can be observed, for example, when the Security Council sets up a peace-keeping mission or when the secretariat organizes a summit of world leaders. More fundamentally, the UN’s agency arises from its agenda-setting, socialization, norm creation, control and legitimation functions. What makes these functions politically significant is that they all reflect the UN’s ‘bureaucratic power’ and its ability to frame global problems and global solutions.

It has been suggested that the UN’s agency is strictly formal, given that its actions are always subject to the interests of its most powerful member states. After all, the Security Council, which is the organization’s supreme body, has been dominated by the same five powers since 1945. It is said in this connection that the UN mirrors ‘the international distribution of power,’ but this explanation appears insufficient at best. In fact, if the international distribution of power could explain all UN’s actions, the UN would always lean to one side, like the Tower of Pisa. This, in fact, is not the case. Significantly, the US, Russia and China have each in turn vetoed Security Council decisions in recent years. It would be more plausible to argue that the UN’s agency is limited because the UN is an instrument at the service of a liberal hegemony. Yet this hypothesis, though less mechanical and more nuanced than the argument of the balance of power, is also incomplete and raises major questions. What version of liberalism does the UN promote? What compromises can the UN-supported hegemonic order tolerate? These are issues that only empirical research like that presented here can help to answer.

In keeping with a large body of scholarship, this article is premised on the view that the institutional structure and the bureaucratic culture of the UN are such that no one country or group of countries entirely controls the organization. Even though the UN is characterized by relations of domination, the workings of this domination are affected by many contradictions whose consequences are not known in advance. To better understand these contradictions and their impact on UN ideas, it should first be acknowledged that there are several ‘UNs’ and that the UN does not speak with only one voice. The UN ‘system’ is definitely less
unified in reality than on the official organization charts of the UN Department of Public Information. Following Inis Claude, many scholars find it useful to deal with the complexity of the UN identity by drawing a distinction between the UN of the member states and the UN of the international civil service. One of the advantages of this approach is to spotlight the particular role of the UN bureaucracy. Of course, the UN Secretariat is not totally independent of the member states, if only because its staff is not made up of extraterrestrials. However, the secretariat is distinct from the UN of the member states in that its 40,000 civil servants ‘present themselves as impersonal and neutral.’ And, thanks to the considerable material and symbolic resources that it is capable of mobilizing, the secretariat has ‘more room for manoeuvre and autonomy, particularly in the intellectual and advocacy realms, than is often supposed.’ Ultimately, every UN organ participates in its own way in shaping UN ideas. However, the secretariat plays a special role in this process, because as an international public service, its political authority is unique. Although the secretariat is not the only body to speak on behalf of the UN, it enjoys the greatest legitimacy to do so in an official and impartial manner.

One effective way to examine how the UN of the member states interacts with the UN of the civil service in the production of UN ideas is to study the foreign policies of the most powerful states. Whatever their penchant for multilateral diplomacy, states’ discourses and practices have a decisive impact on what the UN thinks. Today, UN intellectual leadership is consistently constrained by the views and actions of the major Western powers (the US, the UK and France, among others) and those of the emerging countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, a.k.a. BRICS, among others). Of course, the Western great powers and the emerging powers are not the only countries that influence UN decisions, but their combined political clout is undeniably greater than that of all the other member states. Furthermore, the major Western powers and the emerging countries cover a broad range of viewpoints inasmuch as their foreign policies reflect the chief divergences at work in every contemporary multilateral debate. By promoting their own conceptions of global governance, these countries play a large part in defining UN principles and values. Clearly, it is impossible within a single article to provide a detailed account of the UN policies of Western and emerging countries, yet it is important to take those policies into consideration when analysing UN ideas.

In short, global governance provides a useful device for an analysis of the UN and its ideas. It is a concept that stresses the agency of international organizations and that, at the same time, lends itself well to the study of the interstate power struggles taking place within those organizations. On the basis of Robert Cox’s work on historical structures, one can draw a distinction between the intersubjective and the material–institutional dimensions of global governance. In what follows, the concepts of ideology and global public policy will help to grasp properly each of those two dimensions.
Ideologies

Until now, the study of global governance has focused a great deal on the material and institutional aspects of the process, whereas the intersubjective dimension has received far less attention. The concept of ideology is an especially promising means to rectify this imbalance. Here, this concept will make it easier to apprehend the structure of the UN’s worldview.

At odds with the thesis of the end of ideologies, many scholars consider ideologies to be at the core of political life.13 In the words of Michael Freeden, ‘Every form of political thinking […] contains an ideological dimension, an attempt at a semantic “solution” to the messiness and the indeterminacy of perceptions and comprehensions of the political world.’14 To appreciate the analytical value of the concept of ideology, it is essential, first, to adopt a neutral rather than a polemical acceptation of ideology. In daily news reports, when politicians take their adversaries to task for using ‘ideological’ rhetoric, ‘ideology’ often denotes a distorted view of reality. Yet, it should be recalled that social science proposes a less pejorative, more heuristic conception of ideology. Manfred Steger, for example, has defined ideologies as ‘comprehensive belief systems composed of patterned ideas and claims to truth.’15 Similarly, John Schwarzmantel has asserted that ideologies provide ‘overall views of how society should be organised.’16 Hence, ‘it is hard to see how [ideologies] could be seen as dispensable.’17

The notion of ideology has two significant advantages for the study of political processes. First, in comparison with the notion of idea, the concept of ideology is based on a more holistic approach to human thought.18 It draws attention to the fact that ideas are not free-floating entities but, instead, are formulated and developed within a given intellectual context. For its full meaning to be retrieved, an idea must be situated within its environment, that is, in relation to the other ideas with which it combines to form a system of ideas. Therefore, the notion of ideology allows one to better grasp how ideas are constructed and ordered. Second, the notion of ideology also spotlights the fact that political ideas are geared towards practice. As Freeden explains, ‘ideologies provide resources that nourish the crucial capacity of political agents and agencies to offer policy options, without which society, debarred of the routes to making decisions for collectivities, would collapse.’19 In other words, ideologies connect intersubjective understandings to actual policies. When political actors defend an ideology in their public discourse, their motives are neither purely intellectual nor disinterested. Rather, their goal is to reshape the real world in accordance with their beliefs. Arguably, this is as true of the UN as it is of any local politician.

It comes as no surprise, then, that ideologies are a classical topic of political science, most notably of political theory and comparative politics. What is surprising, however, is that so little is said about ideologies in international relations. Granted, the discipline of international relations has partly corrected this deficiency through the development of adjacent concepts such as knowledge and culture.20 Yet notwithstanding certain pioneering studies, the notion of ideology has not been systematically used in the analysis of world politics and global governance.21 Today,
this omission appears more than ever incongruous for at least two reasons. On one hand, it seems strange that the development of constructivism—a theory centred on the role of ideas—has not led international scholars to consider ideologies more closely. On the other, it is remarkable that, in spite of all the attention devoted to globalization, so few researchers should be interested in the globalization of ideologies and the ‘global competition of ideas’.  

The lens of ideology is appropriate for an examination of the UN because the UN was established as a political response to ‘the battle of ideologies’ that raged across the world during the first part of the 20th century. Hence, the UN quite naturally has been associated from its very beginnings with a form of ideology. Decades ago, this point was made very explicit by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. While Hammarskjöld considered the term ideology ‘a little dangerous,’ he still maintained that

there is something that can be called United Nations ideology, a United Nations ideology that is very much alive for everybody who is working in and for the Organization, and I can say, very much alive also for that famous ‘man in the street’.  

As the UN has come to include all the world’s countries and has become involved in every field of social activity, its ideological function has increasingly focused on two main objectives: to promote universal values and to foster a holistic social imaginary.

During the cold war, the UN’s participation in the construction of a global intersubjectivity took shape, in particular, through the East–West and North–South divisions. In the East–West conflict, the UN advocated peaceful coexistence between the capitalist and communist systems. In the North–South divide, it put forward a compromise between the need for a new international economic order and the maintenance of a global market economy. Some believed that the end of the cold war signalled the end of history and that henceforth the UN would become a purely technical institution. But, this outlook was soon made irrelevant by events that obliged the UN to take official positions on globalization, the increase of civil wars, climate change and the clash of civilizations.

Whether or not the coherence of the ideology upheld by the UN over the years is strong or weak is still an open question. What is certain is that one of the central responsibilities of the secretariat is precisely to create political coherence among the multitude of ideas being expressed throughout the organization. In the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, it is incumbent on the UN Secretariat ‘to keep alive and to broaden whatever may be the common denominator in the foreign policies of the nations.’ And, if it were possible to encapsulate this common denominator in a label, ‘global social-democratic’ would surely be a serious contender for the job. This is so because the UN is fundamentally convinced that peace and social justice are compatible with the development of a capitalist world economy.

UN efforts to delineate a ‘general will’ of international society have rarely succeeded in producing a consensus. The ideological splits generated within the
The United Nations ideology

Organization have recently been most visible in the contrasted attitudes of the major Western powers and the emerging countries. The Western powers—the historical pillars of the UN system and the world order—constantly insist on the need to preserve the liberal internationalism that presided over the UN’s creation. They place the individual at the centre of political and economic action and favour homogeneous, non-discriminatory norms.26 In contrast, the emerging countries—which all belong to the South or the East—position themselves as a group of challengers to the contemporary international order. They defend the idea of a multipolar world, one more attuned to the principle of sovereignty and decidedly more favourable to a diversity of development models.27 Clearly, the UN has always been closer to the liberal values of the Western bloc. But, UN ideology is not static, and since the end of the cold war the organization has had to be increasingly accommodating towards the emerging countries. Debates between the major Western powers and the emerging countries therefore provide an important key to a better understanding of the recent evolution of UN ideology.

Global public policies

Many observers would argue that, although UN ideology might form a relatively coherent belief system, it only has a weak impact on global governance. In fact, UN secretaries-general themselves have often emphasized the gap between UN values and states’ behaviour. To be sure, it will always be difficult to assess the influence of UN ideology with precision, but that influence is nonetheless very real. In a very material sense, UN ideology helps design and implement global policies. The notion of global policy thus constitutes a useful instrument to clarify how global actors such as the UN translate their ideologies into political action, and it offers an innovative approach to the exploration of UN ideas.

Traditionally, the study of public policy was developed from the standpoint of the nation-state. This outlook is changing, however, because the framing and implementation of public policies are affected to a growing extent by foreign variables. The change has found two distinct forms of expression: (1) The internationalization of public policies, which refers to the fact that ‘policy choices of one country are shaped by the choices of others;’28 and (2) The globalization—or transnationalization—of public policies, which denotes the process whereby the mechanisms that control public policies become less state-centric. It is this second form that will be highlighted here. In global—or transnational—public policies, ‘national public institutions no longer serve as the sole organizing center for policy.’29 Global policy can therefore be described as multiagential or multiscalar. While the globalization of public policies varies greatly according to the issue areas involved, the fact is that over the past half-century this tendency has grown more pronounced, largely because of international organizations.30 Indeed, the production of public policies has sometimes been identified as the core mission of international organizations. Given the UN’s status as primus inter pares, the
world organization has quite naturally played a major role in the globalization of policies.

The many differences that exist between national and global public policies should not obscure their similarities. It is helpful in this connection to underscore the weight of ideas in the construction of public policy. Policy-making is always a normative process that is based on values and a certain interpretation of the world.\(^{31}\) As Peter Hall points out,

\begin{quote}

customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instrument that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing.\(^{32}\)
\end{quote}

Writing in the same vein, Edward Page has stressed the importance of ‘policy intentions,’ which are associated with ‘principles’—general views about how public affairs should be arranged or conducted.\(^{33}\) A number of analysts have also noted that policy ideas do not float in a void, but are coherently structured. The structure is variously referred to as policy paradigm, assumptive world or mental model.\(^{34}\) Actually, all these terms refer more or less directly to ideology as defined in this article. Whether they are national or global, public policies simply cannot exist without ideological underpinnings.

Ideologies shape public policies through the interaction of positive, normative and causal ideas. Positive ideas deal with \textit{what is} and define the nature of the problems to be addressed. Normative ideas involve \textit{what should be} and set the political objectives to be achieved. Lastly, causal ideas establish an action programme specifying how to move from the problems identified to the desired objectives.\(^{35}\) The hard core of public policies is located in causal ideas but these become meaningful only in relation to positive and normative ideas. And, all indications are that this operative logic is equally applicable to both national and global policy-making. Global actors such as the UN systematically try to implement political strategies designed to resolve the problems that have been diagnosed.

To say that the UN is actively involved in framing global policies does not imply that it wields any supranational power independent of its member states. Yet, one can reasonably assume that the power of the UN civil service is greater than zero, and that it has tended to expand since 1945. As two experts have observed, ‘the staff of certain international organizations have a substantial degree of discretion in formulating and implementing policies, and thus should be regarded as distinct actors in global governance.’\(^{36}\) It is just as reasonable to suggest that the power of the two UNs is tied to the policy cycle.\(^{37}\) The role of the international public service appears to be greater when it comes to agenda setting, policy formulation and policy evaluation. Meanwhile, the intergovernmental UN is more powerful with regard to the decision-making and implementation stages. Ultimately, it is impossible to draw a neat distinction between the UN as site and actor.\(^{38}\) The UN is immersed in an interstate context from which it cannot escape. At the same
time, its bureaucracy’s leadership in global policy-making gives it an indisputable capacity to act beyond nation-states.

Because they reflect an ideology, UN global policies give rise to intense political debates. The Western great powers and the emerging countries are almost always at the centre of those debates. These are powerful states and they have the wherewithal to support policies that coincide with their preferences, and to oppose policies that do not. According to this logic, the US, the UK and France have systematically backed policies promoting civil and political rights, and those fostering greater market liberalization. The BRICS, by contrast, have defended policies promoting economic and social rights, and those safeguarding sovereignty. The divide between the Western powers and the emerging countries does not, of course, account for all the ideological conflicts brought about by UN policies, but it does make visible the tensions having the greatest impact on global governance.

The triangle of UN ideology

The ideology of the UN is made concrete through its activities aimed at transforming the rules of global governance. Since the end of the cold war, these activities have often been illustrated through the metaphor of a triangle. Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, for one, explicitly framed the UN’s overarching objective in terms of ‘perfect[ing] the triangle of development, freedom and peace.’ In fact, the triangle image has become so prevalent in UN discourse that it is now considered almost a matter of common sense. After all, the UN’s focus on what Ban Ki-moon called ‘the three inter-connected pillars’ of security, development and human rights seems to stem directly from the organization’s charter. It should be noted, however, that the triangle metaphor is a relatively recent construct. At the outset, UN action was centred predominantly on peace and international security. Only as of the 1960s, under growing pressure from the emerging Third World, did development find its ways into UN priorities. As for human rights, their importance was not fully acknowledged until the 1990s, when communism lost the cold war against capitalism.

For the last generation, UN ideology has been dominated by a triad of clearly defined normative projects: human security, human development and the establishment of a universal and indivisible human rights regime. While some may dismiss these projects as utopian, they nonetheless have led to a series of public policies designed to alter the current practices of global governance (Table 1).
Until the 1980s, the UN approach to security was closely tied up with the concept of national security. Accordingly, the UN was concerned almost exclusively with interstate conflict, based on the view that international peace was threatened only when a state’s territorial sovereignty was violated. In the early 1990s, however, that paradigm was seriously weakened because of the reduced risk of conflict between the two superpowers and the sharp increase in the number of civil wars.  

The shifting geopolitics of the post-cold war era gave rise to an unprecedented international debate over the concept of security. In 1994, this debate found expression in a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report entitled *New Dimensions of Human Security*. The UNDP document, whose purpose was to replace the old conception of national security with a new one based on human security, had a lasting effect on the UN ideas. More specifically, the UNDP helped to articulate the UN ideology of human security around three main propositions. First, individuals rather than states should be the referent of security. Second, threats to security are not just military but multidimensional. Third, security should aim both to protect and empower populations.

The UN has implemented its new approach through two types of global policies: those resulting from a narrow perspective on human security and those emanating from a broad perspective. The narrow perspective is associated with the traditional view of security centred on ‘freedom from fear.’ In the wake of the tragedies of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, that perspective has been at the heart of numerous multilateral initiatives concerning peace building and the protection

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**Table 1. Post-cold war UN ideology.**

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<td>Development</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
<td>Human development</td>
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<td>Democratic governance</td>
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<td>Fight against climate change</td>
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of civilians during armed conflicts.\textsuperscript{44} In spite of their selective application—as very clearly demonstrated in the implementation of the ‘responsibility to protect’—these initiatives marked a turning point in the UN’s attitude towards international security. Meanwhile, policies based on the broad view of human security have sought to deal with threats other than armed violence. This highly innovative approach has been far more difficult to put into practice than the narrow interpretation of human security. Nevertheless, it did manage to find expression within UN bureaucracy through the establishment of a Human Security Unit as well as the development of a global strategy for food security.\textsuperscript{45}

Predictably, the redefinition of security has given rise to bitter controversy among the UN’s member states. At issue have been both the referent of security and the nature of security threats.\textsuperscript{46} Regarding the referent of security, the major Western powers have tended to support the new UN approach centred on the individual, which they regard as an extension of their own liberal values. For their part, emerging countries have generally interpreted that approach as a potential danger for their sovereignty. Concerning the nature of threats, Western powers by and large have defended the traditional, military vision of security, whereas emerging countries have been far more favourable to a more comprehensive vision of security, which could include new issues such as global economic inequalities.

These interstate cleavages explain why the notion of human security has had until now only a limited impact on global governance. Still, it must be recognized that over the last 25 years, the UN has helped transform the epistemic framework in which international discussions on security occur.

\textit{Human development}

The UN ideology on development has also undergone significant changes since the end of the cold war. For decades, the UN concentrated on \textit{national} development. Development was considered an economic process whose objective was for poor countries to catch up with the rich. GDP growth was held to be the best indicator of the success of development policies. From north to south and from east to west, a solid consensus around the national approach to development persisted until the 1980s, when the growing influence of the Bretton Woods institutions paved the way for the ‘lost decade’ in developing countries.

As of the late 1980s, the UN began to openly challenge the neoliberal policies of the IMF and the World Bank, and to call for development with a ‘human face.’\textsuperscript{47} The failure of the planned economies provided additional grist for the UN critique, which was refined and formalized by the UNDP. Here again, the UNDP showed remarkable intellectual leadership with the publication in 1990 of its first \textit{Human Development Report}.\textsuperscript{48} Largely inspired by the work of economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, the human development perspective proposed a conception of development less centred on the state and less concerned with economic growth. Defined in terms of expanding freedoms, human development was presented as a multidimensional undertaking that must take into account ‘the full range of human
Grounded in the belief that global capitalism and social inclusion can be reconciled, human development gradually emerged as the UN alternative to the development model fostered by the Bretton Woods institutions.

Human development ideology has served to legitimize a series of public policies geared towards transforming the social, political and environmental dynamics of global governance. Established at the Millennium Summit in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) put forward the most ambitious poverty reduction programme in the history of North–South relations. Although their success has only been partial, the MDGs have profoundly affected national and international development policies for the whole 2000–2015 period. And, although global support for human development values sometimes appears ambiguous, these values have definitely infused the negotiations of the post-2015 development agenda. The UN has also become an active advocate for democracy, a subject that remained taboo throughout the cold war. Going well beyond electoral assistance, UN programmes have sought to reinforce the transparency and the accountability of governance in developing countries. Finally, the UN has coordinated efforts in support of the international regulation of climate change. The organization has exercised leadership in major scientific and legal initiatives such as the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the establishment of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The topic of human development has been hotly debated among UN member states. Discussions have revolved around divergent approaches to the causes of maldevelopment. To no one’s surprise, the major Western powers on one hand and the emerging countries on the other have supported only those aspects of the new UN perspective that have best served their respective interests. Both groups have continued in many ways to think in terms of national development. For example, though recognizing the urgent need to fight poverty, the Western powers have stuck to their position that each state is ultimately responsible for its own economic progress. Consequently, they have rejected all structural reforms of the international economic order. Meanwhile, the emerging countries, united by a ‘sense of historical grievances,’ have fought to make developed nations acknowledge their responsibility in maintaining the systemic inequalities that impede human development. In addition, by promoting the diversity of development models, emerging countries have remained strong supporters of national autonomy.

Human development has no normative monopoly either inside or outside the UN. In any case, the UN lacks the resources and, hence, power to impose its human development ideology. Nevertheless, over the last two decades human development has provided an intellectual basis for a certain renewal of global policies.

**Human rights**

Although the UN Charter proclaims the objective of ‘promoting and encouraging respect for human rights,’ for a long time human rights stayed on the periphery of the organization’s work. Because they considered sovereignty to be the supernorm
of global governance, the UN member states viewed human rights primarily as a domestic political issue. This belief was at the root of East–West and North–South cleavages that hindered UN initiatives on human rights during the cold war. While the US and its allies promoted civil and political rights, socialist countries emphasized the importance of economic, social and cultural rights. One consequence of this dialogue of the deaf was to split the post-war human rights regime into two covenants, each covering distinct ‘generations’ of rights. As for the developing countries, they remained aloof from the whole debate, arguing that human rights issues were a luxury that only rich countries could afford.56

The end of the cold war brought a significant shift in UN attitudes towards human rights. Endorsed by the 1993 Vienna Conference, this shift was summed up by the UN in a mantra-like phrase: ‘all human rights for all.’57 The new UN ideology on human rights has three characteristics that distinguish it from its predecessor. First, human rights have been redefined as a cross-cutting issue that is associated with all other fundamental missions of the UN. This change in perspective has significantly raised the position of human rights on the organization’s agenda.58 Second, the UN increasingly upholds the principle of the indivisibility of human rights. Depicting human rights as a package of interdependent elements, the UN now strives to place civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights on an equal footing.59 Third, the organization insists more than ever on the universal character of human rights. Not only has the UN rejected all forms of cultural relativism when it comes to human rights, but it has also focused unprecedented attention on vulnerable social groups.

While UN aspirations are still far ahead of the realities of international politics, since the end of the cold war the organization has set up a coherent framework of public policies aimed at shrinking the gap between its ambitious discourse and the actual respect for human rights. Three initiatives have been particularly decisive. First, the UN was able in the post-cold war context to establish a policy aimed at mainstreaming human rights. In the field of cooperation, this policy has led to a specifically human rights-based approach to development; in the field of security, it has catalysed the transformation of both humanitarian law and peacekeeping operations.60 Second, in 1993, the UN established the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Boasting much greater resources than those devoted to human rights during the cold war, this new agency has considerably enlarged the UN’s stake in the promotion of human rights.61 Finally, UN efforts to embody the ideology of ‘all human rights for all’ in global policy culminated with the creation of the Human Rights Council in 2006. Owing to the introduction of new procedures, such as the Universal Periodic Review, the Human Rights Council has given an unparalleled momentum to human rights diplomacy.62

Despite its appeal to unity, the ideology of ‘all human rights for all’ was met with criticism by both the major Western powers and the emerging countries. While the former have balked at the indivisibility of human rights, the latter have remained suspicious of the universality principle. Western countries have consistently argued that the idea of human rights—a Western invention—should know
no cultural or national boundaries. At the same time, they have always given priority to civil and political rights to the detriment of economic, social and cultural rights, which they consider an aspiration rather than an international obligation. As for the emerging countries, even if their views are far from homogenous, they have often interpreted the principle of universality as an instrument of neocolonial interference in their internal affairs. Rather than sanctioning states accused of human rights violations, emerging countries have generally preferred to engage in ‘positive dialogue.’ Moreover, they have consistently repeated that civil and political rights have little meaning in the absence of economic and social rights such as the right to development.

Given these political frictions, the new UN ideology on human rights has obviously been unsuccessful in preventing the human rights violations occurring on all continents as a matter of course. That said, the idea of ‘all human rights for all’ has definitely contributed to a degree of rapprochement among UN member states. The Western countries have acknowledged more openly the economic and social needs of poor countries, and emerging countries have given greater priority to the respect of civil and political rights. However limited they may be, these changes are altogether in line with the UN’s objective to promote human rights in global governance.

The triangular logic

The metaphor of the triangle helps identify the ideas at the top of the UN agenda in the post-cold war era. In addition, it illustrates how the organization promotes a system of ideas. Naturally, UN officials do not use the discourse of political theory to describe their work, but the image of the triangle that they frequently employ does indeed correspond to what political theorists would call an ideology.

In order to understand how UN ideology forms a coherent political programme, it is important to note that the organization’s three normative projects share important features: a holistic approach, a focus on individuals, an emphasis on political participation and common values of freedom and universality. Even more important, however, is how the three UN normative projects are related to one another. In fact, each of the organization’s priorities is defined by its relationship to the whole UN system of ideas. The organic links between security, development and human rights have been explicitly articulated in the UN’s official discourse: ‘We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights. Unless all these causes are advanced, none will succeed.’

The UN ideology connects the dots between security, development and human rights by referring to a sophisticated set of political beliefs. First, there is no security without development because, according to the UN, poverty is a major cause of international and national conflicts. Insecurity is not the product of armed violence alone; it also results from several forms of social and economic marginalization. At the same time, there is no security without human rights, since security
is meaningless if not based on rights. Freedom from fear is not possible without legal safeguards to protect individuals from arbitrary oppression and social and economic exclusion.

Second, for the UN, there is no development without security because social and economic progress cannot be sustained without political stability. Social and economic policies are bound to fail in an environment where individuals feel threatened, be it by violence, poverty or cultural repression. In addition, development is based on respect for human rights, particularly the right to development. Defined as a human right ‘by virtue of which (…) all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized,’ the right to development establishes an ontological convergence between development and human rights.66

Finally, the UN argues that human rights cannot be consolidated in the absence of security and development. For the UN, conflicts are a direct threat to all human rights. When infrastructures are destroyed, when social and political institutions collapse and when power becomes militarized, the most fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are inevitably undermined. Moreover, underdevelopment constitutes another great obstacle to the implementation of human rights. Because poverty is always associated with inequality and social exclusion, it constitutes a denial of the principle of the universality of human rights. Above all, poverty prevents people from effectively using their rights to transform their living conditions.

The open-ended story of UN ideology

Under the influence of the global changes of the last 25 years, the UN has developed a coherent ideology whereby the notions of security, development and human rights are highly interdependent. Today’s UN worldview is institutionalized to such an extent that it may appear immutable. But, UN ideology was never static in the past and that holds true today. It is noteworthy in this regard that the UN has been paying increasing attention to a new issue in recent years: democracy.67 In fact, the UN ideology is arguably on the verge of internalizing a fourth normative utopia: global democracy.68 Clearly, the idea of global democracy is still embryonic and even more controversial than the other UN normative projects. Yet, global democracy seems more and more like the golden thread of UN ideology. Metaphorically speaking, the triangle of UN ideology has the potential to turn into a pyramid (Figure 1).69

The inclusion of democracy in UN ideology did not occur spontaneously. Already in 1945, the Charter’s opening phrase, ‘We the peoples,’ suggested the power of attraction of global democracy. Throughout the cold war, however, this cosmopolitan utopia was marginalized by power politics. At the time, the UN interpreted the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention narrowly, and saw democracy as an essentially domestic issue, outside its jurisdiction. Of course there have been instances when the UN strayed from its basic stance, notably in its active fight against apartheid. Also, the UN supported the democratization
of the international order by encouraging decolonization in accordance with the principles of equality and self-determination. On the whole, however, the idea of democracy long remained a covert norm in the UN’s work. Significantly, until the 1990s the UN seemed quite satisfied with its status as an intergovernmental organization to which civil society had only limited access.

With the end of the East–West conflict, the intensification of globalization, the third wave of democratization and the rise of transnational actors, UN leaders have gradually come to see democracy as a new legitimizing principle of global governance.\(^7\) They have drawn the conclusion that ‘[d]emocratization must take place at all levels of human society—local, national, regional and global.’\(^7\) The organization’s interest in democracy has been concretized in the above-mentioned establishment of national programmes for the promotion of democracy. But, it is the introduction of the concept of global democracy that has best demonstrated the UN’s intellectual leadership and creative thinking.

Global democracy blends well with the three acknowledged priorities of UN post-cold war ideology. For the UN, democratization of the global order is essential to the long-term security of states and their populations. Inequality and under-development cannot be corrected without greater participation of citizens in all decisions affecting them. Finally, the UN has defined democracy as a universal right: ‘[E]veryone is entitled to a democratic and equitable international order.’\(^7\) In sum, global democracy is a modern extension of the security-development-human rights nexus.

Global democracy as promoted by the UN has an international as well as a transnational dimension. On one hand, the organization supports the construction of a more egalitarian and more plural interstate order. On the other, the UN calls for greater engagement of non-states actors in global governance. The UN may be less assertive when advocating global democracy in comparison with its other normative projects, but a growing number of public policies have tangibly expressed the global democracy ideal. For instance, in the 2000s, convinced that the most
powerful international institutions suffered from a democratic deficit, UN officials proposed a reform of the Security Council based on democratic considerations of geographical representation and inclusion of developing countries. To be sure, the current stagnation of discussions about Council reform must not overshadow the fact that the UN Secretariat did adopt a clear position on the issue.73 Another significant initiative was the establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2006. The Alliance has put forward an innovative programme of action that ‘seeks to address widening rifts between societies by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among people of different cultural and religious traditions.’74 Interestingly, the alliance chief recently emphasized the particular importance of this action programme in the face of the ‘emerging ideological threats of the 21st century.’75

On the transnational level, the UN has set up a range of procedures to increase the participation of NGOs and other non-state actors in the decisions of all UN bodies, including the Security Council. These procedures have often been criticized for their selectivity, as they have created a distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ largely along the North–South divide. In addition, it should be mentioned that the new openness of the UN towards non-state actors has paved the way for an increase in UN-business partnerships that tends to blur the line of demarcation between public and private interests.76 Overall, however, it seems fair to say that the various consultation mechanisms institutionalized by the UN have allowed civil society to increase the transparency and accountability of the world organization.77 And in doing so, these mechanisms have sparked a transformation of the Westphalian order and contributed to the advancement of the idea of global democracy.

Since the global democracy project clashes with a complex constellation of interests, states’ reactions to UN policies have been both reserved and divided.78 Once again, the major Western countries and the emerging nations have often found themselves at loggerheads. In general, the Western powers have been quite open to greater participation of civil society in UN affairs. Their attitude goes hand in hand with their liberal political culture, but it is probably related as well to the predominance of Northern NGOs in transnational networks. By contrast, Western countries have been averse to the idea of democratizing the Security Council and other centres of international power. Meanwhile, despite their internal divisions, emerging countries have been more favourable to an expansion of the Security Council. That some of them would directly benefit from such a reform no doubt goes some way to explaining their stance. Still, that stance is remarkably consistent with the position of most countries in the global south. At the same time, compared to their northern counterparts, emerging countries have been more wary of civil society participation in UN decisions. A number of them believe that civil society tends to defend a Western point of view at the UN. Ultimately, this highly polarized intergovernmental context explains why the UN global democracy project remains underdeveloped.
Conclusion

This article began with the assumption that the analysis of world politics and global governance can benefit from the insight enabled by the concept of ideology. It is hoped that this exploration of UN ideas will convince students of ideology that the role played by international organizations in the globalization of ideological debates is a promising avenue for future research. According to the argument that was developed, the UN is a global governor that promotes a coherent ideology through a multitude of public policies. This ideology, which is different from that of the most powerful members of the organization, attests to the UN’s relative intellectual and political autonomy. Moreover, the last two decades have shown that UN ideology is far from static and is constantly evolving. The end of the cold war brought substantial changes to the organization’s vision during the 1990s. More recently, the notion of democracy has introduced a new dimension to the normative security-development-human rights triangle constructed by UN officials over the years. And there is nothing to suggest that the evolution of UN ideology is about to stop.

Situating UN ideology within the global competition of ideas is no easy task, mainly because the competition is a poorly organized and often cacophonous process. Still, even though political discussions in the global arena are not as coherent as those in the domestic sphere, UN ideology can usefully be regarded as a global version of social-democracy insofar as global social-democracy can be conceived as a political current “that expands the social democratic model by proposing its extension on a world scale.” Indeed, in keeping with the social-democratic tradition, the UN values social justice and public interventionism. Following that same tradition, the UN also firmly believes that global capitalism is the system best able to ensure human progress. The ideological preferences of the UN can definitely be qualified as Eurocentric and liberal because they are imbued with Western culture and the ideal of freedom. Yet it must be acknowledged that Western culture and liberalism have always been subject to contradictory forces. Hence, the question of whether the UN will contribute to the maintenance of the current world order or, on the contrary, serve to construct a truly alternative model of global governance, remains open to debate.

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Notes


45. MacFarlane and Khong, Human Security and the UN, op. cit., Ref. 41.
65. UN Secretary-General, In Larger Freedom, op. cit., Ref. 39, para. 17. Ban Ki-moon used very similar terms in UN Secretary-General, Human Security, op. cit., Ref. 39.
69. The image of the pyramid was first suggested to me by Philippe Joly.
71. UN Secretary-General, An Agenda for Democratization, op. cit., Ref. 67, para. 128.


