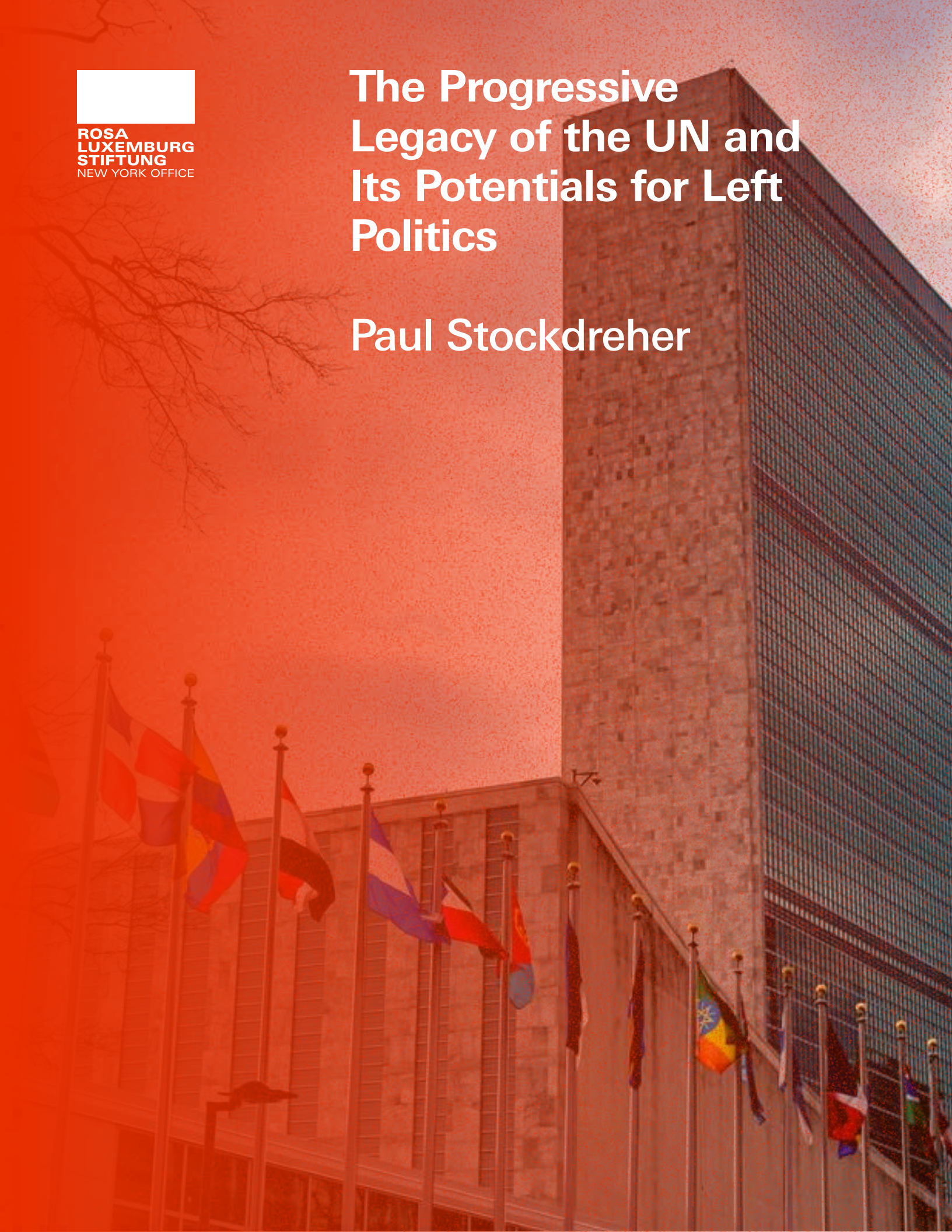


The Progressive Legacy of the UN and Its Potentials for Left Politics

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A view of the flags and the Secretariat building from the sidewalk in front of the UN Headquarters, March 10, 2023 UN photo by Rick Bajornas.

Executive Summary

There is no doubt that the world finds itself mired in an intensifying and *multifaceted crisis situation* (Brand 2009). While some in the rich industrialized nations — primarily men — accumulate more and more wealth, hundreds of millions of people go hungry, particularly in the Global South, with poverty preventing them from being able to meet their basic needs (Oxfam 2022, 16; Welthungerhilfe 2022). Climate change continues to advance at a rapid pace, and its negative repercussions for both people and nature are becoming more apparent. It is predominantly the inhabitants of the Global South who increasingly experience the effects of climate change. Heatwaves, droughts, shortages of drinking water, and the destruction of natural resources in these countries are occurring with greater and greater

frequency (IPBES 2019, 10–). Global inequality is becoming ever more stark and is perpetually being reproduced. In a globalized world, the way that societies, politics, and economies are organized in wealthy countries is inseparably linked with the social and economic relations that exist in other parts of the world. The wealth of the countries of the Global North is only made possible through the structural disadvantaging of the countries of the Global South. Stephan Lessenich speaks of this in terms of “externalizing societies”, wherein the costs that enable the lifestyles enjoyed by those in countries of the Global North are borne by the countries of the Global South (Lessenich 2016). This is facilitated by *global power relations* that are institutionally structured to the detriment of the Global South. These global power relations are the foundation of the multifaceted crisis that the world faces. These unjust and destructive structures can be changed, however. On this subject, Ulrich Brand has written that “crises always manifest in open-ended situations in which apparent certainties and political, economic, cultural, and socio-ecological power relations can be called into question” (Brand 2009, 10).

In order to create a more just world order, it is thus essential to challenge and attempt to change these power relations. Since its founding in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has continuously sought to challenge existing power relations — playing a large role in facilitating the process of decolonization, for instance. The development and formulation of fundamental human rights has also taken place within forums provided by the UN. Following a brief outline of a theoretical framework, this study goes on to categorize previous progressive policy approaches and their significance in relation to both the Global South and the UN. Based on this historical overview, it then proposes potential starting points for sustainable and future-oriented policies that could be enacted through the UN. Given the current global political situation, one shaped by instability and struggles for power, organizations such as the UN that function on a global level are particularly vital. Because the UN is structured as an intergovernmental organization intended to foster harmony between countries and dedicated to establishing a just global economic order, it can thus help contribute to the goal of providing better living conditions for the entirety of the global population. The study’s appendix therefore provides an appraisal of some of the UN’s specialized agencies concerning their respective progressiveness. Throughout the study, perspectives from the countries of the Global South are utilized in order to understand their respective positions and approaches. This study seeks to provide impetus to a broad international discourse in aid of a future in which the world is shaped by principles of peace and justice.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter will formulate a theoretical framework by drawing on the terminology of materialist state theory. This critical framework will contribute to a better understanding of the subsequent discussions and provide an overarching structure for this study. The purpose of this chapter is not to engage in a theoretical debate, but rather to articulate an approach and mindset for addressing power structures at the political level. First, it must be noted that materialist state theory per se pertains to the form of nation-states. However, elaborations that expand on materialist theories are both available and necessary (Brand 2005: 53–) due to the ascent of international political institutions. Their rise is evident nearly everywhere, with the United Nations serving as a prime example of a large, well established intergovernmental organization. The thought patterns and approaches of materialist state theory are relevant to this study as they highlight possibilities for overcoming “seemingly unalterable relations” (Brand 2005: 25).

Within that framework, the state has been designated as “the form that a relationship of domination and exploitation takes under particular historical conditions” (Hirsch 2005: 19). The Greek-French political scientist Nicos Poulantzas further defines the state as “a relationship, or more precisely the material consolidation of a power relationship between classes and class fractions, which is expressed in increasingly specific forms within the state” (Poulantzas 2002: 159). What is relevant for this study is the idea that social relations shape existing power structures and have institutional implications. The power bloc is a key concept here. It consists of a conglomerate of different actors who shape power relations to such an extent that they structurally and continuously exercise power over other classes and class factions. These relations are not rigid, but rather are constantly reproduced and changed. Michael Jäger describes a power bloc as “the degree of unity that the ruling classes and class factions attain in a social formation” (Jäger 2010: 247). Why are these remarks important for this study? They show that we are dealing with changeable relations. They show that power structures are not set in stone, and can be challenged. This challenge to global power structures is crucial for the countries of the Global South to hasten the formation of more just conditions. Changes and processes of transformation can be achieved, for instance, by exploiting a power bloc’s vulnerabilities, which can arise due to different and opposing interests within it. Conflicts can break out as a result of divergent interests and thus favour the formation of cracks in an established power bloc. These conflicts and cracks offer the potential for significant shifts in social relations. For the present study, this means that power structures and potential conglomerates of diverse

interests within the UN reveal opportunities for transformative and progressive policies. Disagreement within and between previously dominant states creates spaces for previously less powerful states.

The chapter on the theoretical framework of this study concludes with the concept of *Frageraum* (question space). A question space reflects societal inscriptions and structures. Michael Jäger uses this term in reference to the questions posed by parties within states. What matters is which questions are being asked in which context. Consequently, answers can only be given within these question spaces (Jäger 2010: 248–). This line of thinking is relevant to this study as the UN also operates within certain question spaces. For progressive politics, this implies the need to set up alternative question spaces. In other words, the interests and needs of the countries in the Global South must first be articulated and understood. This can also involve thinking and acting outside capitalist growth logics. Progressive question spaces disrupt and challenge the reproduction of existing power structures. These compressed explanations about changeable social relations, a vulnerable power bloc, and alternative question spaces lay the conceptual foundations for the following chapters on the UN's potential for transformation.

Progressive Politics

The adjective *progressive*, which is often used in social and political circles, is also essential for this study. The origin of the word can be found in Latin *progressus* (progress). This can mean different ideas of change, depending on people's interests and historical circumstances. What is considered progress in a society depends on its goals and inner workings. In the context of this study, we understand progressive policies as those that are quality-oriented and seek to establish a just global economic order. Furthermore, we consider policies to be progressive if they are compatible with the values of international solidarity and self-determination. The establishment and reproduction of a rule-based international order are also key pillars of progressiveness in a globalizing world. For us, a general definition of progressive politics is the pursuit of just living conditions worldwide.

Implementing concrete policies is not the only way to achieve progressive change; introducing and discussing progressive ideas can also be a first step in that direction. This can be a way to establish new progressive norms within new question spaces, which can lead to more international justice over time. Improving people's living situations also plays a central role in this, for example by establishing various human rights.

Since its foundation, many progressive policies and norms have been advanced in the United Nations, which has 193 member states (representing

99.45 percent of the world's population): starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, followed by the decolonization processes of the 1950s and the adoption of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 1966, significant progressive developments have taken place within the UN. In particular, the successful struggle for the independence of formerly colonized countries is crucial in this regard. The UN served as a central platform for critiquing the colonial powers. In 1960, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 1514 (XV), which effectively made decolonization a legal obligation. Furthermore, in 1974, the General Assembly adopted the "Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order" (NIEO), which encompasses essential aspects of a just and solidary global society. The concept of collective rights, such as the right to peace and the right to a clean environment, is another progressive approach that has been implemented within the framework of the UN.

The United Nations has played a historically decisive role as a platform for shaping the political and economic future. However, the UN has never been and should not be seen as an organization in which all member states always agree on everything. The process of drafting the Declaration of Human Rights, for example, was marked by "ideological rivalries, practical disagreements, power politics and numerous compromises" (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 140). Countries from the Global South have been the main drivers behind the introduction and advancement of progressive policies (Jensen 2016: 2). Actual implementation of progressive policies and norm-setting depends on various contextual factors.

Contextual Conditions After World War II

This chapter looks at the various historical conditions that have contributed to the establishment of progressive policies and norms within the UN since its inception. The respective contexts are important for understanding why certain policies became possible.

Global Political Constellations

Historical global constellations represent key contextual conditions for progressive norm-setting approaches. In hindsight, the end of World War II appears as a favourable moment for significant political restructuring. In many respects, the tremendous upheavals caused by the war resulted in an urgent desire for change and innovation: "People expected and demanded change" (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 143). Furthermore, the East-West conflict can be seen as a crucial factor in enabling or disabling certain policies. For the

countries of the Global South, it offered both advantages and disadvantages. Developing countries could certainly count on support from the bloc powers, the US or the Soviet Union, however this support was highly dependent on the respective historical interests of those two countries. The goal of the bloc powers was to increase their spheres of influence and power (Christian 2020).

The process of decolonization, which was vigorously pushed forward by the colonized countries after World War II, was partly the result of its context and partly a progressive development. Self-determination and the establishment of progressive approaches initially posed a threat to powerful countries. There were extremely violent attempts to halt decolonization processes (Klose 2009: 63–). The eventual success of decolonization can be seen as a progressive process. The power bloc of colonial countries fractured in numerous places as a result of both World War II and the founding of the UN. In this context, World War II made the vulnerability of existing powers visible (Pabst 2015).

Contradictions and Conflicts within the Power Bloc

Existing power structures become more vulnerable when internal contradictions are exposed. This can happen within state structures as well as between different powerful countries. For instance, there were significant differences between the United Kingdom and the United States regarding the regional applicability of binding human rights treaties. The US argued that, in federal states, decisions about actually implementing human rights should be made by the states. The United Kingdom opposed this. In this context, a domestic conflict within the UK is also relevant: while the Foreign Office was focused on negotiating “the most effective treaties to use against the Soviet Union” within the global geopolitical framework (Ridder 2015: 3), the Colonial Office was focused on maintaining control over the colonies’ ambitions. Therefore, the Colonial Office sought to prevent colonized territories from implementing human rights as well. Thus, the diverging interests of the United States and the different ministries within the United Kingdom created lines of conflict. Such contrasting interests between and within states offered opportunities for success for colonized and disadvantaged states (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 224–; Ridder 2015: 2–).

Community and Majority Formations

History has shown that it takes community and majority coalitions to effectively challenge existing power structures. The countries of the Global South have implemented this in many ways to advance progressive policies.

The African-Asian Conference held in Bandung in 1955 can be regarded as the starting point for subsequent cooperation between the countries of the Global South (Fiebrig 2020: 138–). The Belgrade Conference in 1961 also contributed to further South-South alliances. It is considered the starting point for the Non-Aligned Movement, where states outside the major blocs sought to cooperatively assert their interests (Dinkel 2015: 5). Another crucial community is the Group of 77 (G77), which is a coalition of Global South countries within the UN. Most countries of the Global South considered the UN an important organization because it was supposed to serve as “a forum for global justice” (Fiebrig 2020: 140).

Despite existing political and economic differences, these alliances made it possible to coordinate common demands and back them with political weight. This articulation of interests allowed issues pertaining to the concerns and needs of previously disadvantaged states to be discussed in the global public sphere (Dinkel 2015: 225–; Fiebrig 2020: 154–; Plath 2018: 1–). For example, “the institutions and ... rules of the global economy created by the Western industrialized nations” (Dinkel 2015: 124) were criticized. Furthermore, these alliances were able to drive institutional changes, such as reforms within the UN: formerly colonized states gained influence there and were able to raise their issues in existing and newly established bodies. A key aspect here is that it was possible to address these issues and conflicts in the UN. The large number of states organized in the communities of the Global South facilitated the establishment of voting majorities in the UN General Assembly. Democratically organized structures offer participatory advantages, even for financially weak states (Dinkel 2015: 124–, 225–). Apart from a coordinated and compromise-oriented approach by states, non-state actors such as NGOs, experts, and other civil society actors were also instrumental in advancing progressive norm-setting. They were able to make an important contribution through persistent advocacy, public outreach and, not least, by placing individuals in important positions and organizations within the UN (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 144, 243–; Fiebrig 2020: 135–).

Events

The capacity to challenge existing power relations becomes particularly apparent in so-called crisis situations and extraordinary events. One example of this is the 1973 oil shock. Global political events and the joint action of the OPEC countries led to a rapid and massive increase in oil prices. For the first time, it revealed wealthy industrialized countries’ institutional dependence on some countries in the Global South for natural resources. The system based on growth through the burning of fossil fuels revealed its

disadvantages for the industrialized nations. At the same time, it demonstrated the power of countries rich in natural resources. The visibility of these dependency relationships facilitated the advancement of progressive norms, such as the NIEO (New International Economic Order) (Dietrich 2017: 263–). These events also led to discussions within the UN. For example, the Sixth Special Session of the General Assembly on Raw Materials and Development was held in the spring of 1974, allowing various interests of the resource-rich countries to be discussed. However, disagreements within the G77 led to problems and provided opportunities for the US to pursue its own interests (Fiebrig 2020: 166–). Once again, this shows the importance of unity and functioning alliances at the international level in order to achieve goals.

Interim conclusion 1: An analysis of the contextual conditions after World War II shows that power relations can be changed. For countries of the Global South, it has proven crucial to analyze global political developments and constellations and build cooperative alliances based on such analysis. This allows them to identify and tactically exploit cracks and contradictions within the power blocs in order to advance progressive policies and ideas.

Impact of Progressive Processes

The progressive processes advanced in the UN have had and continue to have varying effects at different levels. This chapter traces their impacts.

Norm-Setting Initiatives

One effect of progressive developments that should not be underestimated is the establishment of new norms within the UN. The emergence of human rights, the decolonization processes, and the UN Decade for Women are examples of issues and processes that have been newly established. They indicate new frameworks in which all individuals of all genders have the same rights. Furthermore, colonial structures no longer have any legitimacy. The way that individuals, organizations, and states are thought of and constituted is shaped by human rights. Regarding the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its effects on state norms, former UN Human Rights Committee member Christian Tomuschat states, “When today anywhere in the world a national constitution is framed, the [UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] serves as the natural yardstick for the drafting of a section on fundamental rights”. (Tomuschat 2008: 3). Human rights have developed into internationally recognized and enforceable legal norms. However, agreements ratified by a large number of states are not the only way that

norms are changed. The mere emergence of new ideas, interests, and collaborations leads to a new reality in which all actors must reorganize themselves (Rehling 2020: 404).

This is also accompanied by paradigm shifts in the field of international relations. For example, the concept of development and the right to development gained enormous importance through progressive processes. Development as progress for countries of the Global South in particular became a key topic in UN institutions (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 246; Plath 2018: 3–). The topics and contents formulated in the NIEO have also been and continue to be crucial drivers for “discourses ... of international relations” (ibid.: 14) and within the UN. These drivers become practically relevant and visible, for example, “in concepts such as ‘fair trade’ and critical approaches to globalization” (Fiebrig 2020: 168). With regard to the theoretical remarks at the beginning of the study, it is apparent that progressive policy approaches and norm-setting create new and alternative question spaces. Establishing such question spaces enables action that challenges existing and unjust power structures.

Institutional Changes

Furthermore, progressive processes led to significant institutional changes within the UN. First, it established itself as an actual platform for global political discussions. From the perspective of the countries of the Global South, expectations of the UN as a platform for global justice grew (ibid.: 145). In particular, the UN General Assembly emerged as a place where the countries of the Global South could voice their interests and demands. As formerly colonized states entered the UN, they soon gained a majority of votes and were able to adopt important resolutions through simple majorities (ibid.: 161–)

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) can be regarded as a central forum for debates on just, post-colonial, and progressive global economic structures. It was founded as an organ of the UN in 1964 with the support of socialist countries and despite opposition from some Western industrialized states. The Group of 77 was formed during this conference (Dinkel 2015: 126–). UNCTAD’s political agenda has been and continues to be shaped by the countries of the Global South and still provides opportunities for civil society representatives to make their voices heard (Fiebrig 2020). This was clearly illustrated by the contested appointment of the UNCTAD secretary-general. Despite resistance from Western governments, Raúl Prebisch prevailed. In this strategic position, he articulated the structural injustices of the global trade system of the time, giving

a voice to countries of the Global South. UNCTAD altered the organizational structure of the UN and serves as a “counter-organization to the Western-dominated World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)” (Dinkel 2015: 127).

Another institution where progressive approaches have been discussed and advanced is the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), established in 1966. Within the framework of UNIDO, extensive research was carried out on the implementation of progressive (trade) policies (Christian 2020: 179–). UNIDO became a full-fledged UN specialized agency in 1986. Specialized agencies generally play an important role in the implementation of progressive policies. UNESCO also made valuable contributions to the establishment of international communication networks, which help to integrate countries of the Global South. After years of controversy between North and South regarding a global information infrastructure, UNESCO strengthened the interests of the Global South (Homberg 2020).¹ UNCTAD, UNIDO, and UNESCO were thus extremely important platforms for the development of new world economic orders in which the perspectives of the countries of the Global South could be taken into account. The General Assembly, in turn, served as a supporting institution by providing these organizations with mandates through resolutions (Christian 2020). One last but significant aspect of the conditions and effects of progressive processes is personnel. Staffing “central ... nodes ... in the circulation of knowledge” (Homberg 2020: 277) with people from the Global South has proven crucial. This means that companies, scientists, politicians, and journalists from the Global South must be actively involved in all organizations and institutions. This is the only way that new question spaces and changes in power dynamics can be brought about in favour of the disadvantaged.

One might now ask why, despite these progressive reforms, a multifaceted crisis situation with severe global injustices was permitted to emerge. In the first place, due to the prioritization of the sovereignty of UN member states, UNIDO and UNCTAD lacked sufficient authority to actually implement a new world economic order (Fiebrig 2020: 179–). However, there are two other aspects that were and continue to be more decisive. On the one hand, a process of neoliberalization since the 1980s has caused massive power shifts in favour of the Global North. Market logics and multinational corporations took precedence over global political measures, resulting in financial difficulties for many countries in the Global South. The policies of the Washington Consensus, driven by the IMF and the World Bank, exacerbated these problems. On the other hand, Western industrialized countries were

¹ In the annex, we provide an overview of those UN specialized agencies that are considered progressive.

not interested in conducting negotiations and discussions in institutions that tended to be progressive, such as UNCTAD or UNIDO. Rather, they shifted toward increasingly powerful institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, or straight to the G7, which excluded countries from the Global South (Christian 2020: 191–; Sackel 2020: 406–). Despite some gains, the power of the poorer states remained limited as a result. The power bloc skilfully managed to maintain and expand its power.

Interim conclusion 2: This chapter has made it clear that the demands of the countries of the Global South have in many ways driven sustainable transformations within the UN and the field of international relations. They opposed a broad and strong power bloc that resisted their legitimate interests. The decades of power struggles within the UN, which persist to this day, highlight the different interests of the various regions of the world. New norms continue to shape discourses, our social coexistence, and the UN itself. Within the UN, democratically organized institutions were created which, due to their orientation and composition, have offered and will continue to offer opportunities for countries in the Global South.

Entry Points for the Current UN Reform Agenda

Progressive policy approaches since World War II raise hopes that the UN can continue to contribute to greater democratic and social participation by countries in the Global South in the future. Building on the retrospective analysis so far, we will now discuss potential starting points for future democratization processes within the UN. The relevance of global problem-solving is particularly evident today due to the multifaceted crisis situation and, above all, rapidly advancing climate change. In this respect, Christian (2020) sees parallels between today and the issues that led to the advancement of the NIEO in the 1970s. As climate change affects the whole world, it is important to create a global and binding framework.

Change of Perspective

First of all, adopting the perspective of the countries in the Global South is crucial. They have various sources of power at their disposal, particularly in a multifaceted crisis situation. For example, the climate crisis can trigger enormous migration flows, which in turn can pose complex problems for the industrialized countries. For instance, countries in the Global North rely on various raw materials and essential resources that are available in countries

of the Global South. These dependency structures can create opportunities for countries of the Global South. This is illustrated, for example, by the oil shock mentioned above (Fiebrig 2020: 161–).

As mentioned earlier, the countries of the Global South have tended to be more successful when they have proceeded collectively. For example, the idea of linking UNIDO with an internationally equitable division of labour originated among African ministers of industry in 1973. This subsequently led to corresponding responsibilities for UNIDO (Christian 2020: 178–). On the other hand, disagreements among disadvantaged states often weakened all of them in terms of global power dynamics (Fiebrig 2020). In the context of this study, this means that formulating common goals among the Global South is a basic requirement for changing global power relations. It also means putting aside potential internal differences for the sake of a larger goal. In terms of possible UN reforms, this implies that challenging existing power structures should be the main priority. Adopting a collective and solidarity-based method instead of pursuing solely national interests leads to progressive approaches, as exemplified by the NIEO.

From the perspective of the countries of the Global South, future action should not only consist of criticism of existing conditions, but also involve developing further progressive approaches. If no alternative questions are posed, no alternative answers can be given. In this regard, consideration of the right to development offers particularly significant entry points. One key proponent of this perspective was the Senegalese lawyer Kéba M'Baye, who was active in the UN Commission on Human Rights and several NGOs. In the 1970s, he introduced the idea of the right to development and established connections between individual and collective rights, emphasizing that individuals can only move within their respective systemic contexts. The disadvantages faced by the countries of the Global South were directly and causally linked to the global structures created by industrialized countries. Development is therefore not solely the duty of people from the Global South, but should rather be seen as a “matter for all humanity” (Plath 2018: 8). This perspective needs to be taken into account in the formulation of current reforms: achieving global justice requires the participation of the entire world. M'Baye further defines development as a comprehensive term that encompasses more than just economic growth. This lesson from the UN Development Decade, in which economic growth was the priority objective, is more relevant than ever. The planetary boundaries necessitate global political action that will overcome the growth paradigm that has prevailed for decades.

New Objectives

The NIEO, as well as historical progressive policies and discussions, offer many thematic starting points for possible new objectives. Globally and within the UN, values such as international responsibility and solidarity should be given greater importance. For example, the relevance and necessity of collective rights could be emphasized. They require the global community to act in solidarity (Normand and Zaidi 2008: 300 & Plath 2018: 6). Creative solutions in response to the climate crisis and the extensive suffering in the countries of the Global South may also play a role. For example, in Ecuador, the rights of nature are enshrined in the constitution and legally enforceable. There must be a discussion on how to achieve a good life for all while being in harmony with nature. As mentioned, it is particularly important to question the role of economic growth as a guiding principle.

A shift of responsibilities away from private and multinational companies towards states seems essential. This would also give more power back to the UN member states within the democratic bodies of the UN. As developments since the 1980s have shown, processes of neoliberalization and privatization weaken democratically legitimate international cooperation (Christian 2020: 191–). However, the multifaceted crisis situation described at the beginning requires democratic and international processes. Therefore, processes should be initiated within the UN that strengthen the power and influence of democratically legitimate actors.

Institutional Changes

It is crucial for the UN to respond to rapidly changing developments. The UN must address the decreasing importance of nation states with the necessary reforms. This means that non-state actors should also have institutionalized access to UN institutions: Horn speaks of “international intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and private sector organizations” (2007: 17) that should be more involved in decision-making processes. However, including companies is also associated with potential drawbacks, as profit interests could stand in the way of progressive policy approaches. It is crucial to remember that access should not be tied to financial considerations. This means that financially powerful organizations should not receive preferential treatment. Rather, the widest possible range of actors shaping social and economic life should be heard. If financial power is considered a less important factor, it also opens opportunities for potentially financially weak actors from the Global South to raise their voices on the international stage. Overall, democratically organized institutions within the UN need to be strengthened. For example, the level of

democratization can be assessed in the areas of financing, decision-making processes, and opportunities for participation. Creating transparent organizational structures is also important in this regard.

Although the ideas of the NIEO found their way into the world through new norm-setting and institutional changes, they have hardly been legally codified. Therefore, there is a need to establish mechanisms and build up the UN to establish legal obligations for progressive norms and policies. This includes, for example, upgrading the democratically organized UN General Assembly. As the only organ in which all member states can participate, its importance for the diplomatic activities of poorer states should not be underestimated. Greater involvement of the aforementioned civil society actors in the General Assembly can also be part of a UN reform agenda (Plath 2018: 2; Volger 2007: 567–). With the increased complexity of international relations, forming cooperative alliances has become more challenging. However, as power struggles within the UN have demonstrated, compromise and collective action are essential, especially for countries of the Global South. It is therefore crucial to set and pursue common goals within the UN bodies and institutions.

Another way to advance progressive policies in the UN is through targeted and diverse collaboration with all UN bodies and organizations. Progressive forces should increase their influence in these institutions to actively advance progressive research, policies, and action. All kinds of activities can be undertaken in this regard. For example, the Flagship Report 2022 from the UN Research Institute for Social Development represents a step in this direction. It recognizes the global multifaceted crisis situation and addresses the need for a new socio-ecological social contract (UNRISD 2022). The interests and needs of the countries of the Global South must be put on the agenda in all UN channels. Past progressive approaches show that greater participation by these states can drive left-wing reform agendas forward. The emergence of institutions such as UNCTAD or UNIDO further demonstrates that the UN is an organization that is constantly evolving. A left-wing reform agenda for the UN would therefore have to consider establishing new bodies that address issues relevant to the Global South. Creating new institutions in which countries of the Global South can discuss and formulate their interests is crucial. Such institutions could also pose a challenge to informal Western groupings, such as the G7.

Conclusion and Outlook

This study highlights the significant role that the United Nations has played

and will continue to play as a platform for political interests since the end of World War II. Progressive ideas and approaches from the Global South have played a decisive role in setting new norms and standards within the UN. The establishment of an NIEO has shaped the norms, goals, and composition of the UN. By leveraging geopolitical disagreements between more powerful actors, the Global South has been able to make progressive policies possible. Several points of reference can be drawn from history in order to strengthen the role of the countries of the Global South in the UN today. Conflicts and rifts within existing power blocs must be identified and exploited. The interests and needs of the Global South must be actively represented in all UN bodies. Strengthening existing progressive institutions is just as necessary as creating new alliances and organizations that allow the Global South to discuss and express its views. The UN should strive to maintain its power in world politics and not cede it to multinational corporations or informal groups such as the G7. Reforms are in order, such as opening up and strengthening the UN General Assembly to other actors. These processes will be fraught with conflicts, but the global crises urgently call for collective and democratic action at the international level. The dreadful war in Ukraine is causing constant changes in international relations and shattering existing global structures of power and order. New power configurations could represent opportunities for the countries of the Global South and thus for a stronger and more democratic multilateralism.

Summary of the Main Theses

The present study focuses on the UN's progressive legacy and its potential for left-wing politics. The analyses are based on a systematic review of existing research and literature on this topic.

The rapidly advancing multifaceted crisis reveals issues with systemic and international ramifications. Climate change, social inequality, and hunger are interconnected across national borders. In particular, the Global South suffers from these negative effects of the Global North's way of life. These challenges can only be successfully tackled through global cooperation. The study argues that existing power relations can be changed and that crisis situations are particularly conducive to this. By employing the concepts of the power bloc and discursive space, which are rooted in the tradition of materialist state theory, it provides a framework that allows existing power structures to be challenged. Progressive policies and norm-setting have been successfully advanced within the UN since the end of World War II. Examples include achievements in decolonization, human rights, the NIEO, and collective rights. These achievements continue to shape discourses, our social life, and the UN itself. Particularly noteworthy are the representatives

from the Global South who have emerged as protagonists and driving forces behind progressive approaches. They opposed a broad and strong power bloc that was resistant to their legitimate interests.

Key historical factors that have contributed to progressive approaches within the UN include:

- Community and alliance formation within the Global South; South-South cooperation.
- New question spaces for addressing the issues and needs of the Global South
- The possibility of introducing these demands in democratic structures, such as the UN General Assembly
- The establishment and support of progressive institutions such as UNCTAD, UNIDO, and UNESCO
- Broad participation opportunities for the Global South
- The inclusion of non-state actors who occupy important positions and “central ... nodes ... in the circulation of knowledge” (Homberg 2020: 277).

These processes and procedures offer many points of entry for current left-wing policies within the framework of the UN that would:

- Restructure power and dominance relations at the expense of private and multinational corporations and in favour of the UN
- Reduce neoliberalism and privatization to create opportunities for progressive policies within the UN
- Enhance the role of the UN General Assembly
- Open UN institutions to civil society actors
- Provide inclusive and financially independent participation opportunities for the Global South
- Strengthen existing democratic UN institutions
- Establish new progressive forums and collaborations
- Structure and staff UN institutions fairly
- Increase transparency within the UN
- Expand legally binding agreements within the UN

Promoting a shift in perspective towards the interests and needs of the Global South is a necessary task for society as a whole. The countries there have various means of leverage. As demonstrated by the oil shock in the early 1970s and current energy price developments, natural resources can be used to alter power structures. Such leverage must be skilfully brought to the negotiating table in the UN. Furthermore, South-South cooperation must expand in order to form and revitalize communities and alliances. The NIEO provides a number of ideas for developing new progressive approaches, such as in discussing the extent to which it is still relevant to regard economic growth as a political goal.

Considering the planetary boundaries, the deep crisis of the capitalist system, and changing power constellations resulting from the war in Ukraine, there may be enough momentum for a new, stronger, and more democratic multilateralism.

Appendix: Progressive UN Specialized Agencies

Lastly, a brief overview is provided focusing on the specialized agencies of the UN. In many respects, the valuable work of the specialized agencies forms the basis for our capacity to live together efficiently. According to the UN Charter, they are tasked with developing and promoting “solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation” (UN 1945: Art. 55b). In the context of this study, it is relevant to examine which of the 17 specialized agencies have offered and could continue to offer opportunities for establishing progressive norms and policies. Organizations operating in the field of trade and finance policy can be considered less progressive. Other specialized agencies enable greater opportunities for actors from the Global South to institutionally advance progressive policies by involving NGOs. Colonial views were overcome largely due to the efforts of the UN’s specialized agencies (Pabst 2015: 208–). The following table briefly illustrates the specialized agencies that can be considered most progressive based on their objectives, compositions, influence capabilities, and actions.

	ILO International Labour Organization	UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Orga- nization	UNIDO United Nations Industrial Devel- opment Organization
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the working and living conditions of all people • Eliminating forced labour, compulsory labour, and child labour • Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining • Equal pay for male and female workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting education, science, culture, communication, and information • Strengthening respect for law, justice, human rights, and fundamental freedoms for all peoples of the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting industrial development in “developing countries and economies in transition” • Investment and technology transfer • Promoting collaboration at the global, regional, and national levels, as well as in specialized fields

<p>Composition and influence of civil society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 187 member states. • The two main bodies are staffed with a unique structural principle of tripartism: governments, employers, and workers in a 2:1:1 ratio (“multi-stakeholder system”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 193 member states • General Conference: “One State, One Vote” • Unique institutional feature: Establishing UNESCO National Commissions as a link between UNESCO and national, private, and civil institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 171 member states • General Conference: “One State, One Vote” • Divided into four geographical groups • Knowledge transfer through the civil society participation in events. • Various forms of institutional cooperation with civil society organizations (135 organizations with consultative status)
<p>Other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1969 Progressive World Employment Program: Linking economic growth and social progress → Influence on research, policy, ideas • 1999 Ratification of the prohibition of child labour by all member states • The groundbreaking Global Compact initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of cultural diversity • UNESCO as an intellectual hub and forum for progressive norm-setting (e.g., arguing against the absurdity of racism in the 1950s) • 1974 Resolution 12.11 aligning UNESCO’s activities with the principles of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) • 1973–1978 Development of the New World Information and Communication Order • 1977 Concept of solidarity rights introduced by Karel Vasak, director of UNESCO’s Division of Human Rights and Peace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDG 9 Accelerator Platform for fostering South-South collaborations

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