
CD ROM Review

The complete oral history transcripts from *UN Voices*

Produced by the United Nations Intellectual History Project, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York.

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It is unusual to review a CD-rom rather than a book,¹ but I believe it is important to draw the attention of development researchers to the unique source of primary data that this one provides. Many people who undertake quantitative research are accustomed to using CD-roms with publicly available statistical data. Those who do more qualitative research are accustomed to collecting their own primary data from interviews, but do not usually make this available to others. What this CD-rom offers is the full texts of interviews lasting an average of over 4 hours, with 79 individuals who played a key role in the United Nations, including four Secretaries-General. Historians will certainly find this a goldmine. But I believe that many other researchers also will, like myself, find very rich material for enhancing and modifying their understanding not only of international agencies but also of major conferences, of specific events and, most especially, of the people involved and the key role that individual personalities play in international development. They will gain a sense of history as experienced; development seen through the eyes of central actors, with widely different backgrounds – many of them sharing a sense of moral purpose, but also, often, expressing a regret for the decline of the spirit of idealism and a frustration with bureaucracy.

Many of the interviews are quite outspoken, and certainly straightforward in tone. This, I suggest, is largely thanks to the skill of Thomas Weiss and the other interviewers; not only because they prepared themselves well – getting to know the background and selected publications of their interviewees – but also because they invited them to start their accounts from the early days of their careers, so that the stories told are generally frank and often quite personal.

To give just a flavour:

Margaret Anstee (UNDP): ‘Nearly every morning, Brad Morse – he was terribly enthusiastic – used to come dashing in and say ‘Joan, I want the UNDP to become the world authority on – whatever the buzz theory of the month happened to be at the moment, integrated rural development, public administration, renewable sources of energy’. I would reply ‘Brad, we can’t become the world authority on that because we don’t have the resources. It is not our field. What we should become the world authority on is how to deliver effective technical cooperation.’

Dharam Ghai (ILO, UNRISD): ‘When I first went to the English school, before going to Oxford, the first time we had a break, I went and bought buns for my group. Subsequently, I noticed that everybody bought their own. This was for me a great shock. It is a small thing, but it left a very strong impression on me. I came from a place where patterns of behavior were very different. I got used to it subsequently, but it took me some time because we were used to sharing things.’

Lourdes Arizpe (UNESCO): ‘Someone once said that the United Nations is a dream managed by bureaucrats. I would correct that by saying that it has become a bureaucracy managed by dreamers. Certainly you have to be a dreamer to work in the United Nations with conviction. It is only if you have this sense of mission that you can withstand the constant battering by governments who are afraid that the United Nations will become a world government...’

Robert Cox (ILO and academia): ‘... I do remember the sort of ambience of those years, which were that, with the end of the war, we were going to rebuild the world. There was that tremendous sense of something new and something good that was going to happen, and a great deal of optimism.’

I.G. Patel (UNDP): ‘Some were really extreme, like Samir Amin. And we really had to keep away from that kind of thing because it did no good to us in that sense. But there were very sensible people.’ And: ‘We were not, if you are honest, in India too much impressed by the dependency thesis...’

Each reader may select their own topic of interest; the CD can be searched by any keyword you choose. For me, some of the most interesting quotes relate to my own research on the disconnect between research and policy in the practical world of international organizations.

Robert Cox on consensus: ‘Every meeting has to end with a statement that everybody will agree with and the only way you can do that is to have the statements partially meaningless but with a good sound to them.’

John Ruggie (UN secretariat and academia) on concepts: ‘Anything that means everything means nothing in particular. My worry about some of the more elastic definitions is that they don’t mean anything. There have been valiant attempts to define an environmental definition of human security, for instance, but I am not sure how satisfactory they are. ...’

Jacques Polak (IMF) on the agreement reached following the Argentina financial crisis: ‘They finally got a concordat, which is so vague that nobody knows what it means on the most important issues. What was successful, I think, is that the bank realized that they got themselves into a horrible box by having done this. They got so much egg on their face that at least for quite a long time – and I think it’s still holding – they were not going to do it again, so they retreated.’

Ruggie on academics and the UN: ‘And no matter how attached I was to an idea, it wasn’t a good idea if it was going to seriously divide the summit. It had to get into the declaration if it was going to mean anything in practice. ... That’s what you do with ideas, you try to persuade. But in the first instance, as an academic, you can live with just persuading yourself. You can convince yourself that sooner or later others will catch on to how smart this really is. But you can’t do that here. If you don’t persuade others right away there isn’t any tomorrow. So it has to be much more of a dialogical than a monological process. That isn’t as easy as one might think for an academic. You think to yourself ‘Hey, I’m right on this. What do they know?’ It doesn’t matter what they know. They count. They have to be persuaded.’

Paul Streeten (UK Ministry of Overseas Development, World Bank and academia): ‘Perhaps lack of clarity and sharpness is the price you have to pay for getting agreement on action. Practical men reach agreement by blurring distinctions, academics by sharpening them. If you spell out your meaning too clearly, there will be some interests that will object. The academic reaches agreement by clarifying his meaning, by heightening distinctions, so that he knows what the difference is about. It is partly the lack of clarity, the lack of sharpness, that the UN documents suffer from that has the virtue that they can lead to action.’

There are also some revealing comments on economics:

Gerald Helleiner (UNCTAD, North-South Institute): ‘In North America, in the professional circles of my own department, these activities [working in Tanzania] do not earn high marks. What earns high marks is being elected to the Econometric Society, making contributions to theory, and publishing in the *American Economic Review* or the *Journal of Political Economy*, which is not a political economy journal.’

Polak: ‘I am a fellow of the econometric society, but I have stopped reading, in fact, subscribing to the *Econometrica* because I can’t read it anymore.’

Clearly there is no way I can summarize the huge mass of material, but this at least gives some sense of what the reader can find here. I hope that many of those who use this CD do not assume that it is only of historical interest. Some things change, but many things do not. You may not be in a position to take a beer or a coffee with the powerful people (still mostly men) that dominate international development today; but if you could, they would probably be saying many of the same things that are revealed here.

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Note

1. The CD is available from the Ralph Bunche Institute. A book written by the project team – Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Caryannis, Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly – *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005) gives a useful overview of the material, but is not a substitute for the primary material itself.