

## 1.30-3pm Panel 4: Observances compared

1. The International Women's Year (1975), The International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) and their follow-up: from failures in time to rhythmic normalization (Anaïs van Ertvelde)
2. 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing' A Comparison between the World Population Year and the International Year of Disabled Persons (Paul van Trigt)
3. Visualizing the UN's Observances – Visualizing Human Rights (Monika Baar)

Discussant: Salvador Regilme

Discussion Paper

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Thanks so much for the opportunity to act as the discussant of this ground-breaking and intellectually exciting research program on “international – years” celebration of human rights. As a political scientist who focuses on the international politics of human rights norms and global governance, I must say that political scientists have so much to learn from comparative historians working on the transnational emergence, development, and sustenance of global norms such as human rights. The title of this panel is “observances compared”, which implies that papers herein aim to compare one UN-instituted international-year celebration to another. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to read these papers and works-in-progress as human rights and the comparative method (or what I call as “natural experiments of history”) constitute my current and core scholarly interests.

My short discussion of the three papers is structured as follows. First, I provide a quick summary of the individual papers and provide two or three substantive points that interrogate, at least at the preliminary stage, some of the underlying assumptions, core arguments, and main puzzles discussed in those individual papers. The second part,

meanwhile, focuses on three overarching themes, which in my view, represent the common denominator of the three papers: namely, the ontological-substantive issues pertaining to the ideologies of the international years celebrations, the UN's methods of communicative action, and the practical outcomes of such UN celebratory rituals.

The first paper from Payl van Trigt compares the World Population Year of 1974 with that of the 1981 IY of the Disabled Person. The paper aims to show the contractions inherent in the underlying logics and ethical predispositions of the UN: namely, preventing disabilities in the context of population control while affirming the reproductive as well as other rights of disabled persons. In my reading the paper, the main argument states that the two observances apparently were inspired by a utopian vision of equality between and within countries. The paper argues that the two observances suggests a historical pattern of desire for utopia of equality amongst and within countries, and not a human rights utopia as the human rights historian Samuel Moyn suggests. This working paper is indeed very promising, and I look forward to reading the final paper.

For the moment, this paper raises several issues. First, in conceptual-theoretical terms, how do we differentiate a utopia of equality within and between countries as compared to a human rights utopia? Is it not the case that while Western discourses on human rights tend to highlight on individual-centered notions of civil and political rights while Global South notions of human rights tend to focus on linking structural concerns with agential issues, thereby focusing on socio-economic rights and other collective rights and identity rights (second and third generation)? If that is the case, then the conceptual differentiation between two utopias, as suggested in the paper, becomes unnecessary. To be sure, in a seminal article on disability rights in the leading International Relations journal *Third World Quarterly*, Helen Meekosha and Karen Soldatic (2011, 1383) contend the following: “While Northern discourses promote an examination of disabled bodies in social dynamics, we (they) argue that the politics of impairment in the global South must understand social dynamics in bodies.” Second, perhaps the project could also explore the underlying ideological and normative motivations of the two observances and trace the processes of how such motivations changed over time as they eventually permeated contemporary global governance agenda. In my view, a controversial issue here that needs further

analytic scrutiny would be the contradictory teleology of the two observances: namely, population control and management is a form of social engineering that could be a form of constraining individual liberties through institutionalized control, whereas recognizing people with some forms of disabilities as full human individuals with equal guarantees of human rights would be a form of emancipatory politics. In other words, the observance on population, one may argue, is antithetical the core principles of emancipatory politics for which the observance on disability rights seeks to uphold. Third, another path for investigation is on the differences in terms of how the two observances gained traction in contemporary global governance agenda. Whereas population control seems to be part and parcel of mainstream global political discourses, the disability rights agenda took some time to gain traction. In fact, it was only in 2006 that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Disabled Persons was formed, and it was Mexico that initiated the UNCRDP in 2001 with the strong support from Global South countries in Africa and South America.

On the other hand, Monika Baar's paper focuses on the visual politics of the UN observances. The paper argues that the UN years demonstrate a new form of public diplomacy activity at the global level, and that their emergence and proliferation suggest the shift to representational politics. This is a fascinating paper, and it makes an important argument that appeals to a variety of scholarly audiences beyond human rights history. The paper's claim is that the shift to representational politics indicate that the target has shifted as well to the "global demos", that includes ordinary individuals within countries and even those at the grassroots level. Analyzing on artwork and works of photojournalism, the paper analyzes four cases of UN observances: : IY women in 1975; IY child 1979; and, IY disabled persons in 1981. I am excited to read more about this project, and this paper has the potential of becoming a full-blown book that would appeal to art historians, human rights scholars, global governance experts, and scholars of international politics, among others. In this talk, I focus only on four salient puzzles relevant to Monika Baar's paper. First, the paper suggests a form of "electronic colonialism", to the extent that the artwork and photojournalism are only accessible by affluent countries' public, at least in practice, which is demonstrative of the elite orientation in global governance institutions such as the UN. If that is the case, then is it not fair to say that such artworks and the quite revolutionary visual politics spearheaded by the UN might be revolutionary only to the extent that it

changed its medium but not its substance? More precisely, did the representational politics herein suggests not emancipatory politics but only a superficial politics of redemption of the white man's burden to the extent actors' voices from the Global South are muted in such representational visual politics? The second issue, meanwhile, pertains to the underlying motivations and effects of abstraction of art. First, did the decision of the UN to use abstract art undermine the salience and complexity of the issue to the extent that the structural causes of the problems and the rich empirical details that undergird the human rights issue were somehow muted in these abstract forms of art? Second, is it not fair to say that the UN's turn to abstract art somehow indicate an extrication of the West from ethical guilt and responsibility from the long historical pattern from colonial oppression to contemporary rules of global governance to the extent that abstract art was somehow silent about that? To be precise, one may argue that the majority of the artworks portrayed the "life-world" of the vulnerable individuals in the Global South, but such artworks did not reveal the underlying causal stories that undergird those problems, lest to say the transnational and historical underpinnings of such complex problems. The third issue pertains to the UN itself. It would be interesting hear more about the decision-making processes and the contending discourses that led the UN to eventually use abstract art as a primary instrument to celebrate the international-year events. Was there contentious politics of diverging perspectives that eventually led to this mode of celebration? If so, what does this say about the purported legitimacy and effectiveness of the UN's shift to representational politics?

The third paper comes from Anais van Ervelde, who aims to compare the IY Women's Year in 1975 and the IY disabled persons (1981) based on their successes and failures. This is a very promising paper because it provides preliminary evidence that the politics of the international observances is much more contentious than one can initially imagine. Moreover, it shows the intricate links and disagreements between transnational actors such as UN officials and domestic actors including Belgian non-state actors (women's organizations). Also, it exhibits a laudable aim of providing a balanced analysis of the successes and failures of IYs in the context of Belgium. There are three issues that I'd like to highlight in my discussion of this paper, particularly on IY for women. In general, the paper can be framed based on three overarching themes. First, the paper can highlight if

the IY for women reconstitutes the global political agency of women and the conditions of such reconstitution and from which perspectives. To what extent did the UN actors shape the global imagination at that time when dealing with the agency of women in global governance? What sort of divergent or peripheral perspectives of women did such image or paradigm from the UN potentially marginalized? Second, the paper can also highlight the causal mechanisms by coalition-building amongst women's organizations were inspired by the IY celebrations. Third, the paper can also highlight its contribution by zooming into the role of national state and non-state actors in the contributing to the IY celebrations. This is a unique perspective to highlight because much of the literature in the social science/pol sci literature on international human rights characterize states as aggressors and abusers of rights claims.

In sum, the papers display a promising analytical path in understanding the historical origins and the socio-political consequences of the IY celebrations through the comparative method. To move forward, I propose the four key suggestions. First, in terms of method, it is important to highlight in the papers the logic of comparing observances. What sort of theoretical insights or empirical patterns can we derive from the suggestive similarities and differences demonstrated by the cases under investigation? Is the goal to illustrate a new concept or paradigm shift in transnational human rights agenda? Or, is the goal to falsify some conventional theoretical insights in the relevant human rights/historical literature? Second, in terms of ontological-substantive issues, the papers can also highlight the political tensions, diverging perspectives, and the contentious politics, as well as the rival global governance and human rights ideologies demonstrated in staging the IY celebrations. Third, in terms of the methods of communicative action used in an IY celebration, it might be interesting to highlight the shifts and the ways various observances differ in their strategies for public diplomacy and means of reaching out to their intended audience. Under which agenda of the UN does each observance can be considered? Fourth, in terms of practical outcomes, how do we assess successes and failures of the IY celebration? Under which conditions or benchmarks? From which perspective? By whose standards? In my view, one promising and intellectually exciting way of approaching UN human rights observances is to view it through the lens of contentious politics — in particular, how such observances, in its appeal to universalize and standardize the human

rights language-game, also inspired highly politicized and diverging perspectives of what really constitutes human dignity. Perhaps by empirically focusing on IY celebrations we may answer some of the puzzles such as: Do the IY observances represent the early, subtle, yet ambitious ways of a key global governance institution to universalize human rights?