

THE UNITED NATIONS TODAY:
PROBLEMS AND SOME PROPOSALS

And Some Remarks on the Role of
the Nordic Countries*

by Johan Galtung

Center of International Studies
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08544

November 1986

The first word that seems to come to the mind of people when they hear "the United Nations" is "crisis". I do not want to fall into that trap. To me the United Nations is more than a hope, it is already a terribly important factor in the world community of nations, and it is already, to a large extent, a success. Of course, there are problems. But it is not obvious that those problems are in or with the United Nations; they could also be with the nations, or with some nations, or with the system of nations as such. It is not obvious that where a problem shows up is also where the cause is located--cause and effect are certainly related to each other, but may also be at some distance from each other.

Hence, I shall start by celebrating the United Nations.¹ I shall start by drawing your attention to the fact that under the aegis of this organization it has been possible to expand the membership from 50 countries signing the Charter 24 October 1945 to 159 today, an expansion of more than 200%. What this means is that the United Nations provided a setting within which it became possible to give birth, and birth right, and world citizenship to more than 100 new countries, most of them former colonies of the countries in the center of the system, the western powers. Much more than one half of humanity lives in these new countries, much less than one half in the countries that are founding fathers, so to speak, of the United Nations. And many of these new countries had to fight for their freedom, a terrible sacrifice psychologically and physically, against odds, and made use of the

United Nations for lobbying, finding in its corridors more than on its platforms willing listeners, an audience that could carry their demands further in a forum where colonialism was out.

So, the United Nations has served the interests of universal-ity, of expanding the family of nations practically speaking to the whole world. Today it is essentially only the two Koreas and Switzerland that remain outside, the latter by a 74% against 26% vote of its own citizens². But Switzerland has its own logic, and it may even be useful to have a country not like the others. The Koreas will, of course, sooner or later join--as one country, as two countries or maybe preferably as something in between: as a (con) federation.

But what about the war and peace issue? Has the United Nations not been an outright failure along this rather important dimension? It looks like that: by 1982, during the Falkland/Malvinas War we were already up to 148 wars after the end of the Second World War--by now we are about 160 wars short of what might be referred to as "peace". The suffering is horrendous: it has been calculated as somewhere between the suffering in the First and the Second World Wars, all of them taken together. The major belligerents are, of course, the very same western powers since they have been challenged more than anybody else and had most interests to defend, extended as they are all over the world--with the United States as belligerent number one (and the Soviet Union as arms supplier, to belligerents, number one)³. So, these

are 160 failures--no doubt about that.

But this is only one side of the story. The other side is untold, partly also unknown: all the conflicts that have been successfully handled through dialogue, maybe compromise or other forms of conflict resolution short of war. They are countless. But it should be a major task of peace research to be able to count them, and to be able to assess the likelihood that in the absence of the United Nations and other organizations of multi-lateral diplomacy they would have escalated into war. My suspicion is that if we were able to do this job the number of successes of the United Nations would by far outrun the number of failures--and we would be able to obtain a much more optimistic view of how the organization functions than we do today by staring at the failures only.

But what about development? Don't we actually find an enormous amount of maldevelopment, underdevelopment in the poor countries and overdevelopment in the rich countries, all around the world? Yes, undoubtedly we do. And there are all reasons to be ashamed of ourselves for not having been able to handle the issues of food, clothes and shelter better. But even so one might say that a UN organization like UNICEF has at least been alleviating considerable amount of pain among the children of the world, by supplying basic ingredients for the satisfaction of their basic needs. And under the aegis of WHO an enormous number,

two billion human beings, most of them small human beings, children, have been inoculated, and diseases that used to be scourges of humanity have been for all practical purposes eradicated. An achievement so impressive that we should bow in humility and gratitude in front of such a miracle.

But what about human rights? That, for sure, is a failure! Let us first pay attention to one rather important factor: there are such things as human rights, they have been painstakingly codified by the United Nations. Norms have been produced linking in the particular way characteristic of human rights international and municipal law. And these are not only the first generation of human rights that we are celebrating 10 December every year in commemoration of what happened in 1948-- actually to a large extent derived from the revolutions of late eighteenth century, the American and French Revolutions. There is also the second generation of economic and social and cultural rights from 1966. And work is in progress on the third generation, the rights of individuals and collectivities to such elusive benefits as peace, development and a clean environment.

However, one thing is norm production, quite another is norm fulfillment. Not so good; if the fulfillment level were high we probably would not even have the norms and the norm production. But one thing we know: is human rights are setting a standard, all over the world. They set a standard for people fighting for

democracy. They may be the only hope for a prisoner in the numerous prison cells around the world where governments place individuals they are afraid of, waiting for torture, for the efforts by the system to kill his will for freedom and a decent life without the shackles of exploitation and social injustice. These norms set standards that governments may have a great difficulty to abide by of providing employment, livelihood and decency for all among their citizens. And they serve to channel and focus the debate, so significant, on the precise content of these big goals of humanity: peace development and environment capable of sustaining us all. The human rights provide us with a marvelous agenda, read to us by the UN system, again and again.

Judged by our goals and aspirations the United Nations has fallen short of what we had hoped for. But looking backward in time, judged by what has happened these last forty years it is a tremendous success. And looking forward in time we have all reasons to expect that great achievements will be made the next forty years.

In order to discuss and explore this further, let me try to state three axioms for the United Nations system as I see the system-- more based on my experience with ten of the agencies of the United Nations, as expert and consultant, less as seen from the headquarters here in New York.

Axiom No. 1: the basic task of the United Nations must be to articulate problems and conflicts rather than to solve them. Let

us keep in mind the total budget of the UN system: ~~one~~ dollar 5.4 billion. I could give this to you in Trident submarine equivalents and you would be shocked by how much money goes into a Trident or how little is spent on the United Nations, depending on what perspective you choose. Does that mean that the budget should be 54 billion or 540 billion? I am not so sure.

There are four dangers in a world government: a political bureaucracy so complicated and so centralized that it would dwarf anything we so far have seen in human history of bureaucratic excess; and economic empire because of the riches that would be at its disposal that would make a country like the Soviet Union look like a small state economy by comparison; a military might of enormous magnitude if the United Nations were to be able to handle even challenges from the biggest military power right now, the United States; and a cultural self-righteousness, a feeling of acting on behalf of humankind when policing expeditions are sent to all corners of the world to put down whatever kind of opposition there may be. In short, a vision that should make us very hesitant when we talk about world government.

The United Nations is above all the public forum of the world, where all major problems and conflicts can be articulated so that they become transparent, visible to all and where ideas can be formulated about their solution and resolution, ideas that can not necessarily be implemented by the United Nations although the UN family may always show examples of how to do it and in what direction the solution lies. Ultimately the implementation

rests with member states and other actors in the world system.

Axiom No. 2: the major task of the United Nations is to train member states in world citizenship, raising them as good world citizens just as the nation state has as one of its tasks to raise its members as good national citizens. What does this mean? Concretely that all nations in the world, from the biggest (China with 1048 million inhabitants) to the smallest (33 with less than one million inhabitants); from the richest (Kuwait with \$22,500 per capita) to the poorest (75 member states have less than \$1,000 per capita annual income) have to learn to live together, solve their problems in cooperation. And when conflict is unavoidable; either resolve the conflict peacefully or put them aside, forget about them until something happens that makes it possible to solve them peacefully. It means that no country, particularly no big and rich country, can pursue its own interests in the world wherever they are at the expense of others, down to the bottom of the ocean or up to outer space, invading and intervening, destabilizing and stabilizing other regimes as it deems fit. It means respect for the rights and duties of states, for the rights and duties of peoples and for the rights and duties of individuals everywhere--with all the complexities that this triple listing of rights and duties entails.

Axiom No. 3: if a member state cannot stand all this articulation and does not like being raised to world citizenship, as a

member in good standing of the world community. then let it leave. Of course, I am thinking of the United States. I am thinking of the country that was tremendously helpful in bringing the United Nations into being, but which evidently hoped, as Senator Dodd expressed it recently on the Op. Ed. page of The New York Times (8 October 1986) when he saw the United Nations as a way of spreading American values around the world. The problem is that not everybody agrees with those values, and even if they do they might not agree with the idea of America spreading American values. They might like to define those values themselves and fight for them in their own way; sometimes with, sometimes against the US. And the suspicion around the world right now is that the US conceives of itself as being the country closest to God that world history has ever seen. In fact, so close that there is space for absolutely nothing between the United States and God, no United Nations with its resolutions, not even international law, and certainly not the International Court of Justice. This does not mean that the US denies that there are supreme principles. It is only that the US feels-officially at least-that these principles are best realized in the United States itself and when the United States is in full command not only of the definition of these principles and their interpretation, but also their implementation.

One of the most dangerous, and I would say intellectually fallacious, myths is the idea that for anything to be realistic the big and the biggest member states have to be present. Of

course, if these big states are willing to share economic assets and forego some of the privileges of their enormous power, much of it illegitimately acquired, and in addition are willing to cut down on the enormous supply of means of destruction, the whole belligerent potential possessed by, for instance, the super powers--then fine. The experience is that they are not. Neither the North-South economic dialogue, nor the East-West dialogue about a new international economic order and disarmament/arms control respectively are moving forward at all. I think a major reason is precisely that the big and the wealthy and the powerful are taken too seriously as discussion partners. They might be playing a totally different game: procrastinating, giving in at some totally insignificant points in order to maintain their power and privilege in all essentials and above all gaining time, giving the others the illusion that something is going on and that next session (significantly numbered with Roman numerals) may be the stage for a breakthrough.

So, the South continues with this "dialogue" instead of organizing itself seriously, cooperating among themselves to some extent at the exclusion of those unwilling to understand that a new world order is in the coming. And the neutral/nonaligned countries and the smaller members of the two alliances continue senseless "dialogues" because some people hold these dialogues to be "realistic", instead of trying to come together as non-super powers or even non-powers, organizing their own security for instance by means of military doctrines more based on defensive than offensive military forces. Don't they see that the super powers have a joint interest in referring to this shameful game as "realistic"?

No, let those who want to go on with the job do so, unimpeded by the obstinate and recalcitrant, those who with one, maybe two or three votes against the rest of humanity try to hold up terribly important progress. Of course, that progress will not be universal if these countries are outside the world community. But if they are inside there is no progress anyhow so nothing is lost. And in the meantime the rest of humanity can move forward. Thus, when slavery was abolished humanity did not wait until all countries engaged in slavery could go in for abolition simultaneously; nor did humanity wait with decolonization until the last colonizers had given in.

Let them leave; they will come back again. A country that lets one of its major news networks produce a series about a fictitious Soviet invasion of the United States where the Soviet troops enter the US in United Nations uniforms, even to the point of raping an American woman under light blue colors and helmets, not understanding that in the eyes of the overwhelming part of humanity this is the worse than criminal, it is simply obscene:⁴ a country of that type might do better outside than inside. And the inside might do better having that country on the outside until the country through its own inner chemistry changes its mood. And it will change its mood, sooner or later, preferably sooner rather than later--for its own sake.

In the light of all of this permit me now to formulate eight relatively concrete proposals for the United Nations. In doing so let me first say that these proposals go beyond the very concrete and realistic document prepared by the committee of eighteen eminent persons, chaired, I am proud to say, by the excellent Norwegian ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Vraalsen. I find this a remarkable document, a real effort to trim the United Nations down to a size where the organization will be more, not less able to carry out its task by simply eliminating totally superfluous activities.

The document is realistic, starting from what we have. My position will be more idealistic, looking to the future. But in so doing let us remember that the United Nations was once itself a part of somebody's idealism, totally unrealistic. Realism and idealism are not each other's opposites; they complement each other and nothing could be so false as to see them as a dichotomy, with one standing in the way of the other.

Proposal No. 1: change the contribution structure to the United Nations. As is well known the United States contributes one quarter, 25% of their regular budget. Generous as this was, and probably indispensable at the very beginning when most countries were devastated by the war brought upon them by nazis and faacists in Germany, Italy and Japan the structure now stands in the way of further evolution of the system. It gives to the United States a de facto economic veto in addition to the political veto already

enjoyed in the Security Council. To take one example; as of 30 September 1986 contributions outstanding to the United Nations from member states totalled \$390 million (the annual budget of the UN system in the more limited sense of New York is \$800 million, of the headquarters \$372 million)--and out of this the United States alone accounted for \$247 million, in other words 63%. After that the US has paid \$100 million, which is positive but not more than what they should do--in fact, considerably less. The situation is intolerable because it means that the whole organization is kept on its toes, anxiously counting signs of pleasure and displeasure from the major contributor; and this is, of course, exactly what Washington wants. So, as it now stands the US contribution is down to 12%. Let it stay at that point, about where the Soviet Union is. Even this is too high, but more realistic as a transition formula.

A transition formula to where? Difficult to say as there are many ways of measuring a country's contribution. If instead of percentage of the UN budget we use contribution per capita of the population⁵ then the four Nordic countries come up very high with Norway, Sweden and Denmark (in that order) as the top three, and Finland as number seven. The United States does not show on a list of that type. And if instead of this we look at the contribution as percentage of the national income of a country, in other words relative to the country's ability to contribute, there are five less developed countries on top. However, on all three lists the

Nordic countries are among the top twenty--in a sense as is to be expected from countries small enough to need the United Nations as access to the world community, rich enough to support the United Nations financially, and at the same time sufficiently educated as world citizens to see that this also serves their own interests. But we are still in a situation where 78 of the member states are not able to pay more than 0.01% of the total budget, meaning that the other half of the membership will have to pay considerably more. Of course this introduces a tension between the less and the more developed countries, between LDC and MDC. But this is no argument for accepting a situation where one country, from WDC, Washington, can add one type of veto to the other.

Proposal No. 2: cut the UN salary budget with 30%! Of course, the saying goes that by paying high salaries one attracts good people. My long experience with different parts of the UN system does not testify to this. On the contrary, the only absolute truth in this connection is probably a tautology: by offering high salaries one attracts the type of people who are interested in high salaries. The amount of per diem counting, savings calculations and so on that goes on in the UN offices is hard to calculate-- in some cases it is probably close to half of office time when the sums of money accumulated shall be compared to mortgages on quite expensive houses. Cut it down, and people motivated by other things than money would be more attracted to the system. One way of

doing this would be to cut the salaries across the whole range from P₁ to SG. Another approach, and probably a better one, would be to change the structure of the positions in the UN system, eliminating a high amount of positions from D₁ upwards⁶, expanding at the bottom, meaning from P₁ to P₃, thereby attracting more young, energetic and idealistic, yet hopefully competent people.

Proposal No. 3: stop using the United Nations as a dumping grounds for failed politicians in member states! It is well known to everybody who knows the system that this is being done. And it is being done from all kinds of member states. Democracies might have a tendency to dump opposition politicians who no longer see any chance of getting that important position they had been struggling for all their political life; dictatorships may dump position politicians who are no longer in favor or who have had their time--politicians in opposition presumably being disposed of in other and less pleasant ways. As a consequence the whole system becomes top heavy with people with no professional background at all. They are masters at politicking, with a career behind them and the United Nations job as a transition phase to real retirement, but then blessed with the rather generous retirement emoluments of the system, enjoying in the meantime free education for their children, at this stage in life they would presumably already be at their university level. Of course, the system works according to the old rule: I protect you today on the assumption that you would protect me tomorrow, something similar to the carousel for Politicians in South America, escaping the dominos of the military coups.

Proposal No. 4: dewaldheimization of the UN system! I take it that what Kurt Waldheim did during his two periods as Secretary General of the UN system was to see to it that the system became even more obedient to governments than ever before. Of course, there is never any guarantee that delegates do not say nasty things against governments not their own, but that belongs to the hazards of the system. What can be controlled is the working of the secretariat by seeing to it that no documents emerge where a government is maligned. And the best way of doing this is to see to it that everybody in responsible positions in the secretariat, roughly meaning from D₁ and upwards, is already indoctrinated in the sacredness of governments in general and the United Nations as a trade union of governments in particular. Governments are sacrosanct, they should be followed rather than criticized. Of course, recently Waldheim's particular expertise in following rather than criticizing governments in general and the nazi government of Germany (which during the Second World War included his own country, Austria, of which he is now a president) is well known, and remarkable. A master at this art he wanted to extend his mastery to others and, in my view, to the great detriment of the United Nations system which in this way has been exposed to what could be called politization from above.

Proposal No. 5: reduce the significance of the Director General of the UN agencies! As it stands today the Director General (and correspondingly the heads of other parts of the UN system) has tremendous power. Whatever happens happens in principle in his name, with his knowledge and authorization, mean-

ing that he can stop whatever initiative he wants, and is only accountable to a general conference every second year or so. More internal democracy in the organizations, more freedom of expression among the many excellent international civil servants would contribute to a higher morale. In short, it is high time that these agencies are modernized, brought into the twentieth century. As it is today they are made according to the organizational pattern of ministries of rather conservative countries such as France. I myself once thought the pattern was napoleonic but was corrected by an expert in the field: United Nations' organizations are more patterned after pre-napoleonic models with Louis XIV as the archetypical model. L'organization, c'est moi!

Proposal No. 6: move the United Nations out of the United States! To have the United Nations in its very center gives the United States a third and more subtle power: countless influences on personnel and delegates from what is essentially a very hostile public opinion, and even more hostile mass media, the latter presumably being responsible for the former. At the same time as New York City makes \$700 million annually on the UN with its 35,000 diplomats with families, as rent, groceries and occasional traffic fines when they manage to collect-the organization is embedded in a hostile environment. And not only that, essentially in an environment refusing to learn, refusing to benefit from that tremendous organization in their midst.

Thus, there are both negative and positive arguments in favor of moving the organization. Negatively a setting could be found where pressures from a major political actor on the world scene could be much decreased simply by placing the organization on the territory of a small actor. Positively, that small actor could benefit by taking part in the fascinating and highly important problems and conflicts the organization tries to come to grips

My favorite location would be in Berlin, both West and East, with architects constructing the headquarters in such a way that it would bridge the infamous wall, that shame of mankind both East and West cutting that marvelous city in two parts. Functionaries from West Berlin could enter on one side and from East Berlin on the other and the organization would literally be a bridge over a major conflict. Added to this could come heavy contingents of UN troops stationed in Berlin East and West, reducing some of the danger that the Berlin situation might one day explode in a war.

One argument against Berlin as a headquarters for the United Nations would be: having already two UN cities in Europe, Geneva and Vienna, three making the organization very Europe centered. For that reason another idea might be a Third World location, perhaps in Southeast Asia, giving more prominence to this extremely dynamic part of the world. But location for the

next phase in human history is less important than simply getting out of the United States and into a less hostile, more positive environment.

Proposal No. 7: abolish the Security Council! Of the three sources of the UN system, the European concert from 1815, the intergovernmental organizations that started growing last century, and international law as developed by the Hague system 1899 to 1907 the first source is least felicitous. The big powers with permanent membership in the Security Council seem to enjoy their privilege, and very few others. The Security Council is one of the last specimens of the more general genus: the Upper House in parliaments, the House of Lords, and so on. The history of democracy shows what we can do without, even very well.

But at this point it should be noted that one way of abolishing it would be to continue the course of action already taken by adding more and more non-permanent members, thereby diluting the influence of the big five. The argument of "realistic" people would be that this would force the super powers in particular, and the bigger powers in general, outside the United Nations to make their deals in splendid isolation. But that they do anyhow as evident by summit diplomacy so it is very difficult to see that anything is lost.

Proposal No. 8: make articulation in the United Nations less of a government monopoly! Today there is one chamber in the United Nations, the General Assembly, where "members are states", states in practice meaning governments. But the world as a whole contributes so much more than governments: there are international organizations, and there are people. In a more developed world system both of these would be given more of a chance of articulating their grievances, whether of a problem or the conflict types.

More particularly, there are the intergovernmental organizations, right now 376 of them, with an upper class being the organization set apart of the United Nations family. That family meets every year in July to coordinate their activities, a very important linch-pin in the UN system. But there is no good reason why the others could not also join, making the articulation of the world problems from each of their functional angles more complete.

Then, there are the international "nongovernmental" organizations, so called by governments--a term we should not necessarily accept. International people's organization may be more accurate, not by that necessarily implying that government are non-people organizations. Right now there simply are 4676 of them, the biggest ones being the International Co-operative Alliance with a total membership of 500 million in 72 countries, followed by the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with 230 million member in 137 countries, major actors in the world that should certainly not be deprived of a forum to articulate their perspective.

But there are problems, and these problems are very much recognized by the people in the UN system who are dealing with granting or not granting consultative status to these organizations, thereby creating an upper class also in their midst. More particularly, I think one is entitled to ask to what extent an international organization is really internationally representative, having members in various parts of the world; to what extent it is able to articulate problems in a world context and not from the vantage point of some particular nation or region; correspondingly, to what extent it is able to represent the human interest in general, and not only some very specific, exotic functional angle; to what extent it is reasonably democratic in the sense that the leadership is accountable to the membership and not, for instance, leadership "for life" and finally, to what extent the organization is reasonably stable, not due to expire at any moment.

We have to request something of these organizations, the nature of the request of course being not only up for debate, but also something to be devised as we gain more experience. It should, however, be pointed out that in laying down such principles we would exclude quite a lot of member states of the United Nations if these are applied to states, not only to non-states. Does this mean that we should be stricter with non-states than with states? Yes, I think so, in a certain sense: the non-states are newcomers on the world scene, more should be demanded of them so as to set standards that the old timers, meaning the states themselves, might start living up to.

In addition to this there are the transnational corporations, some of them extremely powerful and much more so than even most of the states in the world system. Why not an international chamber for transnational corporations? Some place where they could articulate concerns and their ideas, in the open, with observers of all kinds present, able to challenge them and also to learn from them? These are immensely imaginative foci of human activity, we leave them out of sight at our own considerable risk.

I am not so that I would advocate that these three chambers for articulation so far suggested also should have decision-making power in the sense of participating in the resolution making and other activities in the UN system. Rather, it could be argued that in so doing certain states would have their power multiplied since they are the ones that also are very strong in these organizations: first world countries in general.

However, these are problems for the future. The problem right now is to project visions of the United Nations that are much more optimistic than what we can get out of the current debate, all this defining United Nations as in a state of crisis. Of course, problems there are, they are realistic, not just products of imagination. But they can be solved, and we are capable of solving them.

Concluding, I must confess a certain Nordic chauvinism. Not that our countries are that great, but we have a relatively decent international system. It is neither Nordic government, nor anarchy;

it is a very cooperative, very coordinated, yet heterogenous, diverse system. And if people said that is not strange because we are so peaceful let me remind you that it took us 800 years of warfare to arrive at that point. The world as a whole had had its full share of warfare already so that condition is at least satisfied. In short: let us move forward, with the United Nations as our major instrument, towards Nordic conditions for the world as a whole!

N O T E S

* Talk given at the symposium on "The Nordic Countries and the Political and Financial Crisis of the United Nations", at the Center for European Studies of The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, November 3, 1986. The author is at present Senior Special Fellow of UNITAR, but is, of course, alone responsible for the views expressed in this paper.

(1) Some of the points made in this connection, in the paper, are taken from an excellent paper by Chadwick Alger, "The United Nations in a Historical Perspective: What Have We Learned About Peacebuilding?" UNU, Tokyo, 1985

(2) The Swiss referendum was held March 1986.

(3) See István Kende's research on wars after 1945, eg as published in Journal of Peace Research,

(4) See New York Times 26 October 1986 ("TV Miniseries Gets a Chorus of Objections") and Newsweek, 10 November 1986 (A Storm over 'Amerika')

(5) The figures are taken from Hufvudstadsbladet, 23 October 1986

(6) United Nations seems now to be moving in this direction, see "U.N. Cutting Back on Top Staff Positions", New York Times, November 4 1986: "As part of a cost cutting reorganization, Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuellar has told 11 high-level staff members that he will not renew their contracts at the end of the year -".