

The United Nations and its role is a subject to make the blood run cold. Of the many changes the world has seen since the real end of the Second World War – I mean the collapse of the Berlin Wall and with it the Soviet Union – the rocking of the UN boat is surely among the most radical.

In a sense, that is only natural. The United Nations Organization was a typical fruit of what is often called Europe's second "Thirty Years' War": that is, a new alignment of world political order after two global wars and the age of the dictators. The very name "United Nations" speaks of an anti-Nazi alliance whose mission was largely peace-keeping (as inherited from the Wilson plan for the League of Nations).

This is a key point of departure if we are to understand the root of the present crisis, which involves not just the alleged failure of the formula to fulfil its original purpose, but above all the organizational structure which the UN has become: a system of over 50 specialized departments whose connection with "governing the world" needs at least spelling out all over again, if not justifying from scratch.

In the beginning the two facets – managing/solving disputes between countries, and promoting a particular "value system"- were deemed to be strictly connected. The notion of "perpetual peace" (of Kantian memory) was implicitly linked to civil progress under an Enlightenment mantel (the political philosophy which underlies western constitutional systems).

The widening gap between the two job descriptions was allegedly thrust on the world by its bi-polar axis, though on closer inspection this proved more of a power game than a real divide over value systems.

Such a remark may seem strange if one takes the "cold war" at face value; for it was, in many ways, a war of opposing ideologies. But things take on a different light if we use less impressionistic coordinates for our examination. The very existence of an "anti-fascist alliance" between "liberal-democrat" powers and one "communist" power bloc alerts us to the fact that both components might be variants on one and the same interpretation of historic progress. Already in the cultural melting pot of the late Twenties and Thirties there was some agreement as to the similarity of intent among those who sought international order based on *justice* in their stand against those preaching international order to be imposed by *force* (or even by "superiority of race"). Whether such justice was to be liberal or marxist was a secondary concern which by no means flawed the common point of departure, recognition of which held out some hope of dialogue. Basically Marxism was a reinterpretation of Hegel, in its turn rooted in the political background to liberal constitutionalism: Jacques Maritain, the Catholic philosopher, went so far as to call Marxism a "Christian heresy". Besides, the goal of the communist revolution was to set up a "truer" democracy than the liberal revolution could achieve – which all meant that the two universes might be competing for the helm of history, but the shore they steered for, in word at least, was similar if not identical.

Let me phrase the matter in still more drastic terms, which will serve to build the last step in my reasoning. The baseline lay in the common conviction that the end of politics was the "pursuit of happiness" – a goal found in the enlightenment thinking behind the American revolution but no less so in the marxist theory of regaining paradise lost in the form of a primitive community shorn of class and private ownership of the means of production.

An odd hybrid thus presided over the foundation of our "worldwide" conflict-averting headquarters. Its rationale had been widespread in "commercial society" from the 1780s to 1914, namely that war was nonsense compared with the unique opportunities for wealth afforded by an intense exchange system, the very essence of which was suspension of hostilities. Norman Angell's classic pronouncement on the brink of the Great War that conflict among great nations was unthinkable in view of the common commercial interests encompassing them has been quoted as an erratic prediction, but it actually testifies to a view that long outlived the war it declared "impossible". As it turned out, calling the episode an act of collective madness was enough to

validate the former theory: mankind reverted to reason, while the “League of Nations” restored the peaceful horizons that alone gave hope of progress.

Even the decision to use “economic sanctions” to rein in countries slow to conform to the principles of international order showed how the true vector of progress was seen as commerce (it makes no sense producing goods if you can’t exchange them).

Of course, the Twenties and Thirties seemed partly to contradict this trend, as mentioned before, but again it was all set down to madness (with hindsight): on the part of Hitler, the Japanese leaders, to a lesser extent Mussolini, people recklessly defying the system of international order, but eventually destroyed by it.

The argument was not reinstated in all its rational completeness, naturally. Vestiges of the “concert of powers” remained, jeopardizing the restoration of international order. Yet if one peruses certain passages from one of the shrewdest commentators of this political phase, the American George Kennan, two strands of thinking will be seen to run parallel: on the one hand, the belief that such residues of “Empire virus” may be “contained” within the overall mechanism of a world system, rubbing in the message that movement is impossible outside the assigned spheres of action; on the other, the gamble that even the Soviet Empire cherished the notion of (internal) “development”, so that eventually resources would flow that way, once the primary need of defending the *status quo* was guaranteed.

The UN here took on the role of decompression chamber coping with imperialist hang-overs from the previous style of politics, but also, within limits, the promoter of development measures thought to underlie the gradual integration of all world “states” into a peace-ensuring political system. Since this presupposed that trade (and the economy) spelt “progress” – and also that the (economic) time was ripe for an exceptional surplus of resources which could be ploughed back to ensure social equilibrium (Galbraith’s theory on the mid-Fifties *Affluent Society*) - peace could hardly be envisaged without a drive towards more sophisticated economic systems.

That the world was divided in two blocs did not contradict this theory. Both empires’ leading countries claimed theirs was *the* way to attain widespread welfare. Which claim was right (or “righter”) is beside the point: what matters is to note how each side reasoned in similar terms, vying to attract all less developed areas (be it only in terms of political autonomy) into their own socio-economic model as a sure recipe for emancipation.

It is important to point out this reality. It strictly delimits the UN’s sphere of action which would vanish altogether once the political background changed. For welfare assistance, cultural exchange, economic cooperation and what have you were mostly conducted by the empire leaders (and eventually by Communist China too, in a new triangular line-up) as a form of integration/standardization of the subjects requiring aid.

An apparent digression is not out of place at this point. The first such operations did not target what would come to be called the “developing countries”, but the very European nations that had once produced the political theories now carving out the world’s future in other latitudes, but which had succumbed to “folly” and rocked the equilibrium of the politics of affluence. From this angle, the famous rhetorical question of the Nazis – do you want butter or cannons? – illustrates the logical *volte-face* of contemporary trends. For all empires would henceforth go on manufacturing cannons, not as an alternative to butter, but to prevent the lavish butter hand-out to the people from being effaced by some outside enemy.

The competition among “Marshall Plan”, Common Market (though not forgetting aid to the Far East and reconstruction of Japan) and COMECON, the Soviet bid to grant Eastern Europe self-sufficiency, falls within this description. Yet the success of the experiment in the West, in contrast to the failure of grandiose plans for modernizing the East, could not entirely be set down to intrinsic differences of economic power in the two leader countries. As we shall see when we come to examine one hapless attempt to ape a former success – I mean, the delusion of implanting a Marshall-type experiment in post-war Iraq -, the European and Japanese aid plans were not examples of grafting political solutions from outside onto systems hitherto unversed in them.

The jarring note in this phase is the attempt to export such systems to situations differing from the “modern” socio-economic framework. Both empires, remember, sought to impose their models on the new political realities emerging from the colonial débacle in Africa and Asia. But the outcome was unfortunate. If we think what has been achieved against poverty in Africa – perhaps the most striking case – we are forced to conclude that Galbraith’s optimism only applied to strongly developing countries. The “Third World” failed to enjoy the fruits of surplus resources and would end up poorer, rather than more prosperous.

The problem touched on here is no minor matter. It gives a foretaste of difficulties we will see in today’s United Nations operations: exporting investment funds, technology or political ideology will fail unless it finds the right terrain to take root in (and all the more so if, failing the terrain, the means are lacking to make one grow).

From a certain angle such dynamics favoured the system we now call “global”: competition between the empires enveloped the whole world, trying to standardize it one way or the other. Moreover, the spurt put on by communications – cutting passenger and goods travel times but also enabling TV to “cover” the world scene – gave such dynamics a “totalizing” effect that had never previously been experienced.

For this world situation to create a demand for global governance, however, imperialist jockeyings needed to fade out of the picture. Whether this ever actually happened leaves room for doubt, but I do feel that for a while at least, say from the late Eighties on, the “objective” conditions for imperialist rivalries being pursued may be deemed to have dropped. The USSR would first teeter and then wither away. China focused on its own internal development, slackening its bid for the leadership of the emerging countries in what was beginning to lose the name of Third World. The USA itself seemed to shift its sights from world leadership and concentrate on certain features of fairly traditional equilibrium (“space shield” protection typifies this new phase) as well as on technological challenges revived by various emergencies, from the 1973 oil crisis on.

Such a background brought a slight shift in UN perspective. The way it had grown from the late Sixties to the end of the Eighties would repay closer study than it has received, at least by public opinion at large. A bid to use the international tribunal as an “ethical superpower” wielding the norms of “international justice” to release emerging countries from the “cage of imperialism” had been in progress ever since the so-called “non-aligned countries” had tried to slacken the imperialist control over the process of decolonialization. The scheme had been curtailed politically since a “third” position vis-à-vis the contenders could hardly ever be reached (here the chapter of UN intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict might make instructive reading). Besides, the existence of the Security Council with its veto system made quite sure that the UN building never remotely resembled a seat of “world government”.

This stalemate itself led to the UN “functional agencies” being developed. “Development” plans for post-war continental Europe had been promoted by the victors, and now were shifting their terrain outside “western civilization”. The campaign was launched against “underdevelopment”: “*populorum progressio*”, the title of an encyclical by Pope Paul VIth, became an ethical precept across the world. The suspicion raised by the “non-aligned” that aid might have strings attached – indeed, the experience of postwar Europe, where aid had been deliberately channelled towards building “blocs” of a common ideology – only furthered the UN role as a world agency, *super partes*, tackling the “five Giants” (of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness) that Beveridge had listed in 1944 as crusades for a Europe struggling to rise again from the barbarism of the dictators.

The parallel need not be too far-fetched. Equating the (European, or at most Western) “welfare system” with what was called war on want or underdevelopment is, of course, somewhat forced, but the underlying logic was not all that different. Both cases recognized the need to delegate to a “government” the task of solving historic poverty and backwardness, which could hardly be dealt with by any free interplay of economic and social forces.

By analysing the results of, say, World Bank or FAO policies, one could no doubt quantify the vast resources spent on the operation – though today’s light shows that the expectations of that age have not been met. The “motor” of the Keynesian model failed to work, or worked but partially (with certain obvious exceptions). The battle against poverty was far from won. Backwardness, measured in comparison to developed areas, was only partly staved off.

A mature assessment would have to go into these failures in detail – which is clearly not my task. I want to assess the prospects for reforming the UN intervention system, not reconstruct its past, blow by blow. What *is* important to note is the “philosophy” governing intervention in those years: supporting “local governments” to become managers – with a modicum of outside assistance – of resources designed to activate the process of development.

From the “anti-imperialist” stance of the times, one could hardly have done otherwise. Policies going over the heads of local governments would have seemed unacceptable interference or manipulation. On the other hand, trusting governments set up (often as puppets) by the imperial designs one sought to combat – whose aims were far from humanitarian – meant squandering huge resources to no constructive end.

It was just such dynamics that began to reveal the UN’s lack of any “Corporate Culture”. Its philosophy of action was caught between two extremes: the need not to interfere with the primary goal of peace-keeping, which boiled down to saving the equilibrium reached and regionalizing conflict; and against this, the need to gear supporting action to the post-Keynesian welfare interpretation of the economy, which meant faith in the miracle cure of science and technological progress which would automatically trigger virtuous patterns of prosperity and productivity.

The background to this view was what we might call “western rationality”: faith in certain principles thought to be “universal” since founded on the individual as a rational being allegedly the same the world over, plus the firm conviction that “progress” was the world’s common destiny, once released from “superstition”. As a result there had been but a timid attempt to take stock of cultural idiosyncrasies or the weight of histories differing from the West’s – “tolerance” being the watchword. But that too was a category of western rationalism: diverse interpretations of a sole truth were tolerated (provided none claimed to “exclude” others), but not competition among diverse truths. Such tolerance was born, remember, to put paid to religious war among disputing Protestant creeds. For a long time Catholicism lay outside such tolerance since it claimed to be the sole truth. In due course political philosophy became laicized but it never lost its link with the original conceptual “universe” by which that specific notion of tolerance had been devised.

As already mentioned, the predominance of “western rationalism” was upheld by a system that equated maintaining international order with rivalry between two “superpowers”, both offshoots of that rationality: liberal-democrat constitutionalism and marxist communism. But notice one thing: competition/rivalry needs an umpire to contain and manage, if not settle, disputes. With the new grounding of the system in “rationality” following rejection of the “balance of power” – since this became ungovernable as soon as one power grew top heavy without the others being spurred to react – the situation should logically have developed into one where “international law” prevailed, not to speak of “international morality”, as the beacon guiding action. “Threats to international order”, which the United Nations could theoretically respond to by economic sanctions (article 41 of the Charter) or military action (art. 42) could only be registered within a climate of “rationalism” assuming two conditions: a) that a certain system of law/moral code could be drawn up and accepted by everyone (so that whoever stepped outside the rules was a “scoundrel”); b) that the law/code thus accepted should also be developed and integrated in a framework of dialectical *process* (capitalism *versus* communism, developed *versus* “developing” countries) since western rationalism assumes that a dialectic is the only way of ensuring fair and balanced solutions (as in constitutional regimes with their dialectic of majority/opposition).

Clearly the situation lost this grounding the moment the “bipolar” system underpinning rationality dissolved. The collapse of the Soviet Union has had an effect on the world that is often overlooked. It is not simply the victory of capitalism over communist utopia, as we often hear in the

west. On the contrary, if one takes communism as the extreme (some say most consistent) form of western rationalism – following Marx’s famous dictum that his own philosophy set rationality upright when it had been walking on its hands -, the collapse of communism lays bare the failure of such rationalism. An acute observer of the Arab world, Bernard Lewis, brought up this point in a lecture to the Italian Senate: Islam, or a large part of it, saw the collapse of the USSR as proof that western mechanisms offered no guarantee of historical superiority.

The crisis placed the United Nations Organization in a quite new position. Ensuring peace, previously seen as warding off atomic apocalypse, had become too “easy”. There was no “balance of terror” any more; atomic showdown was no longer a “rational” option for competing states. So the task of ensuring law and a moral code on earth shifted to other fields but also lost the anchor of dialectical confrontation between different trustees of legitimacy within “world government”.

Could such a position hold up? The novelty for the UN in squaring up to the changes brought by a collapsing USSR was to stop being the decompression chamber maintaining a balance between “empires”, and go over to humanitarian work and peace-keeping which were outside its charter (what inside experts came to call “chapter six and a half”). This manifestly owed much to the old philosophy (enforcing law and the moral code in the world order), but was fraught with problems of legitimacy concerning the proposed new field of action. First of all, applying such order proved complex and at times unfeasible. We all remember – and there are many critics to remind us – how violation of “human rights” met with sanctions in ex-Yugoslavia but was ignored in China. Secondly, the absence of a dialectic within the UN raised suspicions that its policy might suit the strategies of the strongest (a new form of imperialism) rather than any requirement of law or morals.

Now the problem which really concerns us here today – as we seek some “bottom up” reorganization of the United Nations – is that even in our new situation the call for action on UN governance has been sounded almost side by side with the (temporary) curbing of the UN mandate to manage international relations and keep the peace.

If peace is seen as prevention of “world wars” such as we have known, it is almost guaranteed by our present historical situation. From another angle, however, some might see an “atypical world war” in progress, caused by a combination of terrorism and the interest of fringe elements of the international community (though it could also be some actual member state) in exploiting the turmoil to win a better position than was assigned them by consolidated international equilibria.

Nonetheless, whether authorized by the UN (Kuwait, ex-Yugoslavia) or unilaterally undertaken by the US superpower taking the law into its own hands where it judged the UN incapable of acting (Iraq), intervention to contain or neutralize such manoeuvring has always implied a “second phase” legitimizing the action, of a humanitarian and “reconstructive” kind.

Although such intervention has modelled itself on the scenario at the end of World War Two and (in the American invasion of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) on the pattern of (West) Germany and Japan, these are quite inappropriate bases for any real action. In the first place, it was no “international” entity that acted in those two instances, but one of the winning powers, so that reconstruction formed part of alliance-building, not to say imperialism. This “truth” was widely and critically employed by Soviet propaganda, which the West countered by accusing Moscow of similar designs not just in Eastern Europe but in the Third World. My view is that one should not underestimate how far such disputes have fuelled a widespread climate of “protest” which scoffs at all attempts to “restore international order” and then “rebuild” as so much cant by imperialist politics. Immoral, in short, unacceptable.

There is a second side to the question, however. The success of such intervention seems not to depend on the intrinsic merit of the strategy applied, or any fundamental “reasonableness”, but on factors that cannot be assumed to exist in other historical instances. The theory that pre-1945 Germany was simply a “Prussian barracks” affording the flimsiest of bases for democracy proves, on historical analysis, to be a hostile reading, not true to the facts. From the late eighteenth century on, the country had been fully involved in the European debate over liberalizing the constitution;

the constant tug-of-war between supporters of that development and those averse to losing the traditional power structure had entailed continuous compromise leading to the famous *Sonderweg* (or special way) to constitutionalism, but not outright rejection of it. Though the “liberal” forces had never gained any definitive victory, even in the strife-torn first republic (1919-1933), a German form of liberal-constitutionalism was nonetheless broadly felt, as was the presence of a political class schooled in the parties that upheld it. In this sense the twelve years of Nazi rule were an interlude (though none the less dire for that), rather than the true final flowering of historic difference from Europe. (Obviously such a conclusion will not be reached by any reader of history in thrall to the rational paradigm whereby all is logical consequence and no folly or irrational deviance exists.)

Something similar, though not strictly analogous, can be said of Japan, which had been independently engaged ever since the mid-1880s in “translating” the western political system into its own cultural framework. In this case too, therefore, the sequel to 1945 was more a question of mending the damage done by a rearguard rebellion against an inevitable historical development, than of implanting western-style politics out of the blue.

It was only post-war propaganda that believed otherwise, namely that some deep-seated anti-constitutionalism in the two countries’ DNA had been expunged and that a wholesale work of education *from scratch* had imported a radically different political and social system.

Here, I think, we have the crux of all intervention supporting what used to be called the “civil evolution” of societies and political systems. The question is whether that evolution may be taken as achieved once and for all the first time (or times) it is successfully brought to birth, so that subsequently it may be applied quite simply and more rapidly to any other context. This is one of the assumptions of “western rationalism”, deriving as so often from the logic and procedure of science. However long the route to finding a solution to a problem, once discovered it is available to all and rapidly replicable *ad infinitum* with success assured.

History shows this outcome to be unlikely in politics, if not impossible. The “process” is an ambiguous quantity, but an essential one. *Ambiguous*, since it would be mistaken to think that results achieved in one area do not influence others: there is undoubtedly an acceleration following the success of certain developments, but a stubborn reaction may also be triggered (people know, or think they know, what they are in for). *Essential*, since in any case attaining a certain result means travelling the same weary road all over again (not so in science: repeating the stages leading to discovery is child’s play, once the route is known).

In short, history never ends, whatever a Francis Fukuyama may say. He acknowledges, by the way, that in some parts of the world the path of “progress” towards advanced capitalistic stability is still a long one. Besides, even where the goal may be assumed, the whole concept of stability is constantly jeopardized by its inability to extend worldwide.

Enter once more, at this point, the crying need for coordinated worldwide governance of the tensions arising from this peculiar stage of transition (or transformation?) in our history. The latest chapter of globalization (since various forms of globalization have been seen over the centuries), dominated as it is by the media revolution with its “network” of communications systems, causes two conflicting patterns. On the one hand, *comparisons are made between welfare standards*: these are no longer thought to depend on the “superiority” of those who have achieved them, but all too often on an alleged or real *ability to monopolize* resources that might be available for everyone and are being “hogged” by a few (but then, if progress depends on rationality and all men are rational, what else can one conclude?). The second pattern stems from the discovery that *identities* are political resources: their ability to spread and embrace generates a power system. On this point, the global diffusion of consumer goods has shown once again how strong the language/communications factor is, which the analysts tend to gloss over. The rise of English as the *lingua franca* of trade and consumption has played no minor part in exporting and strengthening the western political model. Spanish played a similar role in spreading Castro-style revolution across Latin America. Arabic has helped internationalize Islamic terrorism. (In this case language merges with religion, as Greek first, and then Latin, did with expanding Christianity.)

The new chapter of the United Nations coincides with this revolution, to use the only proper word for it. But a revolution cries out for “disciplining” to prevent it sweeping away equilibria that the last two centuries have toiled to achieve. A return to “anarchy” in international relations would not benefit development. The world’s economy does not seem poised for an expansion with surplus wealth from rapid growth bringing margins enough to redistribute the resources.

For the reasons I have set out, the system of world governance seems unlikely to revert rapidly to the state of balance and dialectic it “enjoyed” under the superpower system (multipolarism), while it seems questionable whether one great power, the USA, can really shoulder single-handed the responsibility mapped out in 1945. Apart from anything else, that would imply their attaining total internal security. After September 11<sup>th</sup> that is no longer thinkable, as all the analysts agree.

We thus turn once more to a “bottom up” process, beginning with the UN agencies, to spearhead a new culture (or common conception) of globalization. They will need to reconcile the demand to adapt to development trends now firmly launched across the globe with a system of identities presiding over the formation of political communities. Such identities may vary in kind, but are all ultimately “inventions”. Of a natural formation, except for the family and perhaps the clan, there is nothing. A famous formula of Max Weber’s defines the political community as the *awareness of having a shared destiny*. It is thus future-oriented, even if it builds its expectations on a reworking of the past. It is in this “cultural” creation of a link between one’s own reading of a chunk of past and one’s picture of a future role that the “community of destinies” gets *invented*.

The search for ways of handling these energies and spreading the resultant culture about the world is the mission awaiting the UN functional agencies in the near future. By being “sectorial” and not having “political” duties as such, these may enjoy more room for manoeuvre than states proper and, if supplied with a “corporate culture”, may manage to sow the seeds of a culture accepting mutually-binding rules, reference parameters and responsibility for its own history. Such a culture is essential if we are to defeat the model at work behind today’s widespread terrorist anarchy. (I use “anarchy” in a strictly technical sense: the kamikaze symbol now denoting this phenomenon has no rational common goal in mind but the promise of a “straight ticket to heaven” for the executant – away, that is, from the realms of concrete rationality.)

There are precedents for trusting in the virtue and feasibility of such a mission. European unification has much to teach about conditioning and historic difficulties: it itself grew out of functional agencies devoted to specific sectors (coal and steel), then developed plans regulating integration of markets before tackling the still far from complete task of integrating politically. To a certain extent it has been the *politicizing of functions* that has actually pushed us to settle the political issue as something necessary and timely now that the functional networks have been set in place.

The United Nations already has considerable “functional tentacles” in the form of its agencies. Inside these it is breeding a “culture of officials” (or functionaries). Many of these come from what, for brevity’s sake, we might call “crisis areas” of the world. Their efforts are enjoying great prestige for the very reason that they stand outside the logic of *power*. If we could coordinate them by active policies rooted in a solid grasp of the present historical crisis and, above all, geared to triggering the mechanisms that produce “communities of destinies” – which in turn will expand in concentric ripples, since local community means interdependency on other surrounding destinies -, we will have built a sturdy foundation for a new age of peaceful “international order”; and that was the original hope of those launching the United Nations experiment.

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