

Paper by Sarah Nelson, *Postdoc*

“INVISIHIST & ECOINT: a Meeting of Minds in Florence”

In June 2023, the INVISIHIST team took off for Florence, where they participated in a two-day workshop with another ERC-funded research group based at the European University Institute (EUI). The EUI group, led by Glenda Sluga, is pursuing a research project called [“Twentieth Century International Economic Thinking, and the Complex History of Globalization”](#) (ECOINT) and is composed of Senior Research Fellow [Sabine Selchow](#), and postdoctoral fellows [Elizabeth Banks](#), [Johanna Gautier Morin](#), and [Guilherme Sampaio](#). The ECOINT team investigates how struggles over economic ideas “have fashioned the paths of globalization,” focusing on the history of less-studied “international economic thinkers,” including both bureaucrats and administrators from international organizations (like UN Regional Economic Commissions), as well as private sector bureaucrats—and particularly the women within and beyond these spaces. There is, therefore, plenty of productive resonance between the ECOINT and INVISIHIST projects, which we aimed to explore with our two-day visit.

The workshop began with Sarah’s most recent research project, an article-length piece with the working title “Telegraphing Sovereignty: the Global South & the Origins of Telecom Development in the United Nations, 1947-1960.” Drawing from early research in the archives of the International Telecommunication Union in Geneva, the UN archive in New York, and the World Bank, the article explores the little-known history of telecommunications development projects undertaken in cooperation between several UN agencies (including the ITU, the UN Technical Assistance Administration, the Regional Economic Commissions of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, as well as Unesco and the World Bank) and dozens of Global South states from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. Sarah’s paper analyzed how decolonizing states attempted to “telegraph sovereignty” within the international system. Through these telecom development projects, decolonizing states attempted to reclaim and retool colonial telecom infrastructures and bolster their political, economic, and cultural sovereignty, within and despite a global telecom order that remained deeply enmeshed with the imperial political economy of the late 19th to mid 20th centuries.

In his insightful response, Guilherme Sampaio identified some of the common threads between this project and ECOINT’s own major themes: its focus on mid-level experts, the tension and processes of boundary-making between the “political” and “technical” within the work of international organizations, and how knowledge and economic information is collected, transformed, circulated, and reproduced. He also suggested additional archival traces that might better contextualize the catalysts for telecom development within the decolonizing world, such as the papers of chambers of commerce or business associations within South Asia and/or north and east Africa.

Next, the group discussed Maha Ali’s ongoing research on the history of human rights and anticolonial feminist organizations in South and Southeast Asia. Maha pre-circulated her most recent chapter draft, “Asian Feminist Chronicles and the Struggle for Human Rights,” on Pakistani, Indian, Philippine, and Indonesian feminist groups. The chapter explores how these women confronted not only the blind spots and hypocrisies of Western feminism, but also postcolonial administrations and the (often deeply masculinist and misogynist) projects of nation-building that often extended or innovated new axes of oppression against women. By analyzing the ideological tensions and transnational political connections between these groups, the piece provided a more

holistic picture of what Maha describes as the gendered dynamics of “rights-making” in postcolonial states.

Responding to the piece, Elizabeth Banks observed that the piece had tremendous potential to link the history of Asian women’s movements with the global history of human rights. In the ensuing conversation, Elizabeth and Maha discussed the category of “Asian” women’s movements, and whether the geographic or analytical category of “Asia” did more to identify connective tissues between these transnational movements, or indeed diminish the particularity and distinctions between these organizations, whose interest in and access to transnational political networks and to international organizations varied widely. This further prompted a wider discussion on the problem of internationalization, and how to think and write about where to “place” postcolonial claims on human rights as women’s liberation movements sought recognition and structural change at local, regional, and international levels.

Yusra Abdullahi also pre-circulated one of her most recent chapters, on the history of the Rwenzururu Movement in 1960s Uganda, and its struggle to obtain formal recognition of sovereignty for the Rwenzururian Kingdom. Her paper traces the long history of the Rwenzururian struggle for self-determination, first from the Toro Kingdom (established under the direction of British colonial officials at the turn of the 20th century), and subsequently from the independent Ugandan state in 1962. Her research traces the movement’s main political leaders—particularly Isaya Mukirane, Petero Mupalya, and Jeremiah Kawamara—as they negotiated amongst themselves precisely what shape sovereignty should take, how to justify and mobilize claims of ethnic uniqueness and belonging to cultivate political solidarity, and how to engage the international community to bolster Rwenzururian sovereignty and safeguard it from the Amin regime.

In her spirited remarks on the chapter, Sabine Selchow reflected on the modes of solidarity and political organization in the Rwenzururian case. Where Yusra had used the term “movement” to describe the coalition and collaboration of Rwenzururian activists—in part because that is how Rwenzururian activists described themselves and their political organization—Sabine suggested that the internal conflicts within the group, and its members’ competing end-goals, may undermine the proposition of any “one” Rwenzururian “movement.”

Finally, Alanna O’Malley briefly sketched the contours of her upcoming book project, with the working title “Tracing the Humanity of the Expropriated: the Invisible History of the United Nations and the Global South.” Following initial comments by Johanna, the discussion explored the difficulty of organizing and synthesizing any one “Global South” experience of, or engagement with, an organization as vast as the United Nations. We further discussed the challenge of striking a balance, narratively and methodologically, between what can become insular organizational histories of elites while attempting to capture not only how the UN intervened in processes of decolonization, but also how decolonization transformed the United Nations.

The workshop proved extremely productive, thanks to the deep engagement and generosity of our ECOINT hosts. We return to Leiden with new ideas and approaches for each of our projects, individually, and as a team, and look forward to continued exchanges with the EUI team.