

Can Institutional Reforms Be Made Meaningful?



HISTORIES AND FUTURES OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE REPORT NO. 1

A roundtable discussion with Adriana Abdenur,
Richard Kozul-Wright, Jamie Martin, and Quinn Slobodian.



Histories and Futures of Global Governance

An Initiative of the History and
Political Economy Project

IN JUNE OF 2024, Kenyan president William Ruto published a [piece](#) in the International Monetary Fund's flagship magazine headlined "A Consensus is Forming for IMF Reform." The essay argued in favor of several widely shared demands: changes to the Fund's lending protocols, more relief for debt distressed countries, and better Global South representation in IMF governance. Yet by the time Ruto's essay was published, Nairobi was engulfed in protest against an IMF-approved tax increase, with tens of thousands of Kenyans refusing the imposition of austerity programs. One could be forgiven a strong sense of déjà vu: more austerity measures, more street protests, more calls for reform. Haven't we been here before?

In fact, this is far from the first time that a "consensus" has called for the reform of the institutions that govern the global economy. But today, the world faces an unprecedented polycrisis, as economic shocks come not just from technological change, debt overhangs, and interstate conflict but also climate change and global pandemics. While these crises make reform all the more urgent, historians have shown that questions of redistribution and representation have animated debates over global economic governance from its earliest days. Seventy years after Bandung; more than fifty years after the introduction of Special Drawing Rights; nearly thirty years after a worldwide movement for a debt Jubilee; and amid today's renewed calls for a New International Economic Order—how should we understand the apparently perpetual push for reform? What were the technical, epistemological, and political forces that motivated, or impeded, reform efforts in the past? And how should we assess these many historical cycles of reformism and their results for the global governance system we have today?

In the spring of 2025, the History and Political Economy Project convened a series of discussions with experts in both historical and contemporary reform efforts. We were interested in what historians might learn from the concerns of today's policymakers and reform advocates, and what reformers might take away from longer-term historical analyses. Together, we have worked to assess how the lessons of past reform efforts can and should guide current campaigns, by: uncovering how past reforms were proposed, negotiated, implemented, and, often, defeated; evaluating the outcomes of prior reforms for both the institutions and their member countries; and drawing lessons for today's renewed calls for change. With IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva [calling](#) for a "21st century multilateralism," we have asked: how and why does history matter for the future of global governance reform? Are we doomed to repetition, or can an engagement with the past help us break the cycle of perpetual reformism?

Our conversations have brought together academics, policymakers, and reform advocates for focused discussion around topics like governance, multilateralism and international law; commodities, industry and international trade; finance, debt and the international monetary system; climate, energy and natural resources; and contention, democracy, and political legitimacy. This initiative has been graciously supported by the Open Society Foundation Education and Ideas Collaborative.

In partnership with Boston University's Global Development Policy Center, we organized a series of webinars during the spring of 2025:

1. **Can Institutional Reforms be Made Meaningful?** February 21, 2025
Adriana Abdenur, Richard Kozul-Wright, Jamie Martin, and Quinn Slobodian
2. **Reform Perspectives from the Global South**, April 18, 2025
Andrés Arauz, Anush Kapadia, Robert Wade, and Christy Thornton
3. **Activism and Advocacy: What Lessons?** May 30, 2025
Paul Adlerstein, Walden Bello, Bhumika Muchhala, and Christy Thornton

Can Institutional Reforms Be Made Meaningful?

Report No. 1

Adriana Abdenur
Richard Kozul-Wright
Jamie Martin
Quinn Slobodian

Calls for the reform of global governance institutions persist, some seventy years after Bandung; fifty years after the introduction of Special Drawing Rights; nearly thirty years after a worldwide movement for a debt Jubilee; and amid today's renewed calls for a New International Economic Order and reform to institutions like the International Monetary Fund. How should we understand the apparently perpetual push for reform within global governance institutions? What were the technical, epistemological, and political forces that motivated, or impeded, reform efforts in the past? And how should we assess these many historical cycles of reformism and their results for the global governance system we have today?

The following transcript is revised and condensed from a conversation exploring these questions and hosted virtually on February 21, 2025. A recording is available on the Boston University Global Development Policy Center's [YouTube channel](#).

- QS** Among historians — we at the History and Political Economy Project included — there is often a sense of amnesia or déjà vu when we consider attempts to reform multilateral institutions. With something like the New International Economic Order, for example, we find that many years after its initial failure we are still talking about the same things, and often using the exact same language. Is this a sense of people inside these policy circles actually knowing the history *too* well, suggesting we just have to keep going back to the same demands? Or are international organizations afflicted with an historical amnesia, one which leaves them unable to come

to terms with what it means to have asked and fought for the same things for so long, only to be repeatedly disappointed.

What role does history play in these kinds of policy discussions, which are so often about compromises, horse-trading, and immediate concerns? How does the past inform or complicate efforts at the policy level?

AA Based on my experience in the Brazilian Government, working in President Lula's office as a special advisor on international affairs, there was always a tension between the speed at which, as a policymaker, one must either take or shape decisions, including at the multilateral level, and the need to understand the historical trajectory — both the obstacles to reform and windows that have opened up in the past. I like your term "amnesia" very much because, while I do think there can be challenges in keeping up with the research and then immediately applying it to the decision-making space, I also think that there can be a manufactured amnesia of prior reforms.

On the one hand, progressive people who promote positive reform — because not all reform is good, as we are seeing and experiencing at the moment — have capacity constraints. To address that, in government we would consult with individuals who straddle the divide between academia and policy, and who really had a good grasp of the historical trajectory of a particular discussion. For instance, someone I have worked with is Cedric de Koning, a South African expert on peacebuilding and peacekeeping. He's become a great reference for those of us who work on peace and security reform, including the Security Council, because he has this encyclopedic knowledge and a very good feel for how these spaces are built and the dynamics that operate them, even at the geopolitical level. Sometimes our capacity depends on having a pre-existing relationship with someone like Cedric, who is strategically placed and has a stock of knowledge that can feed into the process.

But not all decision-makers or policy people are interested or willing to take that route. And here is where amnesia plays a role. Several years ago, for instance, when it came to UN reform, one of the topics I worked on while I was in President Lula's office, we often heard terms like *reform fatigue*. I would ask myself, *who is fatigued?* Today, maybe, you can talk about a fear of the inevitable changes that will come. But then I felt as though there were efforts to constrain the conversation in temporal terms.

At the latest General Assembly of the UN, President Lula gave a speech in which he called openly for a review of the UN Charter. I worked with others to build that speech; our team and colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to go back and really dig through Article 109 and the different

sub-articles and clauses that, in the past, have been invoked. In doing so we actually found a paragraph in Article 109 that explicitly suggests a mandatory Charter Review conference after 10 years. In terms of amnesia — this review not only has never happened, it is seldom even discussed openly within the doors of the UN. So, yes, there are manufactured amnesias along with some capacity constraints.

QS If at certain critical moments it can be helpful to have scholars familiar with a given history, how does that work? Do you just get them on the phone, schedule a quick Zoom together, or commission them to write something? Do you involve them in more long-term projects? How do you tap into that knowledge?

AA In our office, my direct boss was Celso Amorim, the former Defense and Foreign Minister and now the Chief Special Advisor to President Lula. He had the foresight of putting together a team that wasn't just made up of diplomats. Of course, some of the diplomats have great historical knowledge too. But he made sure to include at least one or two of us with a research background, and that very small research-oriented team has since grown.

Among those I reached out to, some would be more flexible and willing to talk. But, when you are in government, it's very hard to even schedule something next week. Ours became a bit of a crisis management office; those who have worked in government know that you're constantly reacting to new contexts. My work involved the presidential vision for the G20, so I had more time, and I was able to defend that time a little bit better. But aside from messages and phone calls, sometimes I would ask for short papers — *please write me a two-pager and link to a longer paper if you have it* — because even though I'm a scholar by training, we just wouldn't have time to breathe, let alone read at length.

RKW I don't think it's just a problem of memory loss. I think there is a rewriting of history that goes along with it, and that has become more apparent in recent years. To take an obvious example, the notion of a "rules-based international order" — which trips off the tongue of most of the great and good in our spaces — assumes that there's a kind of continuity that begins at Dumbarton Oaks and ends sometime in the last decade with a more open and fair system — but which is now beginning to unravel. That's clearly a misread.

There are many gaps, breaks, and reversals in that history that tend to get written out by many who are part of the multilateral system, both the international civil servants and the Member States. It's always good to recognize that, as Adriana did, because I think there's an assumption that the multilateral world is a homogeneous mass. But there are very different players with very different aims and interests.

I think that there is a continuous rewriting of the history as much as an abandonment. Most of my experience was in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (**UNCTAD**), which clung onto "our" history a bit longer than other institutions. Essentially, we lost the fight in the late 1970s, early 1980s over what we understood the multilateral system to be about, and it shifted in a very different direction. Keeping to our history did serve the purpose of reminding people, including governments in the South, what they had previously been willing to fight for, and of exposing the hypocrisy of advanced-economy policymakers in this space.

There is also a real treasure trove of ideas and proposals that have been forgotten. The debate around special drawing rights, for example, surfaced again during **COVID-19**. That debate was something **UNCTAD** was involved with back in the late 1960s. So, history can serve as a powerful tool in those spaces.

QS I remember reading an **UNCTAD** report that referenced Eric Helleiner's book *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods*, which really shaped my understanding of how multilateralism works. The largest number of delegates at Bretton Woods were not from the richest countries but from regions like Latin America, North Africa, and China. The demands they made were largely suppressed at the time but re-emerged in different forms in the 1970s and through institutions like **UNCTAD**. It is surprising that a multilateral institution would find history useful in precisely this way. The question remains, though, of whether using history as a means of speaking truth to power has any tangible impact. Is there any policy traction gained in referencing history, or is this merely wishful thinking?

RKW I do think it has some impact. To give another example, perhaps slightly controversial, consider the use of the Marshall Plan as a model for a successful large-scale aid program. It was successful—I would argue, the most successful large-scale aid program of the post-war era. We can debate its relevance within a geopolitical context, as well as its double standards, but it was a success.

People often refer back to the Marshall Plan when a major global problem arises. For instance, Gordon Brown has made references to the Marshall Plan in various contexts. However, these references are often quite superficial. When I engage with developing-country diplomats and expose them to some of the ideas behind the Marshall Plan, it often provides them with inspiration or ammunition in their own economic negotiations. So while using history in this way may not transform the world, it can serve a very useful purpose.

JM It seems like there are a few different models of historical analysis that come to mind here. One is about correcting historical amnesia and exposing hypocrisy, which is self-evidently important. Another is about resurrecting useful ideas from the past that may or may not have been left behind. The Marshall Plan, which was enacted, now stands as this symbolic demonstration of American generosity. During the Eurozone crisis, people often referenced Keynes's International Clearing Union proposal from the Bretton Woods negotiations, which was abandoned at the time.

The rhetorical power of resurrecting these ideas — whether successful or not — is enormous. However, I think there's another equally important approach to historical analysis, which is less about retrieving usable models and more about understanding why the same problems keep recurring and why the same proposals for reform keep resurfacing.

This approach is almost like psychoanalysis — diagnosing a repetition compulsion. As historians, we keep seeing that the same problems are identified, excellent reform proposals are put forth, but they fail time and time again. The key question is: why does this keep happening? What are the choke points where reform consistently gets blocked, even when consensus exists?

Take the example of representation at the International Monetary Fund (**IMF**). Everyone acknowledges the massive representation problem — the United States and Western Europe hold disproportionate power that no longer reflects the distribution of global **GDP**. Even the **IMF** itself recognizes this problem. Yet the **U.S.**, with its veto power, blocks any significant reform that might empower a strategic rival like China. So, despite broad consensus, reform is repeatedly stymied.

This is where historians can play a critical role: not just in retrieving forgotten proposals but in diagnosing these structural choke points where meaningful reform is perpetually blocked. It's not just about ideas — it's about power.

QS I like the way you describe that as a corrective function of history. It also reminds me of something Richard said — that there's a way to tactically distort the past for productive purposes. This idea of a "useful past" is something historians often grapple with. The past is often flattened or selectively remembered to serve rhetorical or instrumental purposes.

For example, take Lula's invocation of the Marshall Plan in a recent high-profile speech. As Richard pointed out, the Marshall Plan wasn't as altruistic as it's often portrayed — it was deeply entangled in Cold War geopolitics. But Lula's use of it served a strategic purpose — it framed his call for global economic cooperation in a way that resonated symbolically.

This raises an interesting tension: is too much historical knowledge sometimes a liability in movement-building or coalition-building efforts? When trying to push for reform, it seems that a simplified, compelling historical narrative may sometimes be more effective than a complex, accurate one.

I've also heard that the outgoing U.S. Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, would meet regularly with historians to discuss previous moments of international cooperation, like the League of Nations or Bretton Woods, to find inspiration for contemporary trade policy. This seems like a fascinating feedback loop — using simplified versions of history to build momentum for modern reform.

RKW I think it's important to remember that these multilateral institutions are not democratic. The rules of the game are often set by the most powerful countries, and this shapes what is possible in terms of reform. The principle on which they work is so-called *consensus building*, which is hardwired into the narrative as the way to build up momentum and legitimacy for whatever it is you're trying to do.

In a consensus-building environment, nuance tends to go out of the window. In many respects, this is damaging. If you take an institution like **UNCTAD**, it was founded on voting principles. In the principles that set up **UNCTAD**, as it is for the **UN** in general, voting was meant to be the way to resolve problems. At some point in our history, that was put to the side, and consensus building became the way in which conflicts were resolved. One can understand why that is the case, but it's not necessarily a healthy environment for building institutions that get things done, because ultimately, the lowest common denominator that unites a disparate group of countries is where you tend to end up. Advanced economies can use that very skillfully in terms of the way in which they manipulate the system. So it's not just malfeasance; there's something systemic in the nature of these institutions that leads in that direction.

QS I've also been thinking about whether having a historical perspective can help one measure the severity of crises as they present themselves. Right now, we seem to be facing a kind of rupture in the conventions and norms around transatlantic cooperation, as well as international cooperation more broadly — a rupture unprecedented in my lifetime, at least. In moments of crisis, how much does it help us to reach back to previous moments of crisis as instructive of the present? Brazil and the world economy have been through their own cycles — is it helpful, when things are really bad, to refer to precedents, or does that simply distract from the singularity of every crisis?

AA Looking back on my time in government, you're right — we flatten history, especially in the case of presidential speeches, because they have to be very short. With President Lula's speeches, we had to learn to develop this muscular speech-writing style, where every single word and syllable counts, and that ends up collapsing things.

With respect to these historical comparisons, we often used them because President Lula himself is fond of them in informal settings. Early on, he said things along the lines of, "I'm coming back for the third time, after years out of power, and these conversations about Bretton Woods reform are the exact same conversation we were having years ago." He has a strong sense that, despite some cosmetic tweaks, we've seen continued inaction when it comes to effective reforms. Institutions that fail to reform themselves, or to be open to reform efforts that come from outside — and ultimately, I do think that deep reform has to come from outside — these institutions relegate themselves to the ash heaps of history.

We take Lula's personal recollection as a warning. Though international organizations seldom truly die — there's no big cemetery of international organizations, so maybe it's better to say they become like zombies — nevertheless, if those institutions were already losing relevance several years ago, the trend will only accelerate now. Of course, we didn't predict that Trump would win the elections and that there would be this whole accelerated attack on institutions. I agree that the pace is now unprecedented, but in other ways, all of this began years ago.

With respect to crises, I do think even flattened comparisons can be useful, especially to those who have lived through previous eras. It's not that youth do not know history, but when President Lula talks about the contemporary debt crisis in Africa, and he harkens back to Brazil and Latin America having gone through their own sovereign debt crises, it taps into his audience's experiences. It can help construct a feeling of, "Okay, we should be in solidarity with the calls from African states, because I remember what it was like living in a country that was under a seemingly eternal debt crisis."

I remember as a child in Brazil how this permeated discussions around the kitchen table. So flattened comparisons can be made useful.

QS Right, because they can create emotionally powerful analogies or equivalences. But something Adriana said just now struck me as interesting: that deep reforms must, in the end, come from the outside. Can you expand on that?

AA That's my hypothesis. I am a sociologist by training, and I've observed what many sociologists of organization have long noted, that building an institution involves solidifying norms and practices, a process of establishing bureaucratic structures, incentive systems, and a professional body in the Weberian sense, and that this leads to a certain rigidity. Such rigidity creates vested interests, sometimes among powerful constituencies within the organization.

For example, in the Bretton Woods institutions, while top leadership figures like Kristalina Georgieva at the World Bank may make progressive statements, there's often a layer of senior management that remains resistant to change. This resistance stems not only from institutional rigidity but also from a dominant worldview rooted in the Washington Consensus, with occasional acknowledgments of issues like the climate crisis.

This environment makes effective reform challenging, especially when it comes to decision-making structures. Reforms that don't address these core structures tend to be cosmetic or merely tweaks. Has the United Nations ever undergone significant reform? No. The Security Council debate is even more stagnant than discussions about Bretton Woods, due to the entrenched interests of those who secured power in the post-war period, who are unwilling to relinquish it. As Noam Chomsky noted, one way to prevent meaningful debate is to limit its parameters while allowing lively discussion within those confines. That is a perfect description of these organizations.

So change must come from external forces, whether through coalitions like **BRICS+** or alliances of countries with leadership committed to further rupture. Though I remain optimistic that we don't need a third world war to create a new **UN**.

QS This is a familiar problem: incumbents have no incentive to transform existing structures. Without war, and short of an upheaval like the current situation in the United States, where there's a call from the top to bombard the headquarters and to dismantle institutions, do we have a precedent where reform

from the outside ends up producing a better-functioning organization on the inside?

JM I agree completely with Adriana's framing of the problem here. Institutions like the **IMF**, for example, especially under Georgieva, can allow for lively debate, demonstrate commitment to long-term reforms, and reconsider doctrines like conditionality and austerity. But in terms of real-world operations, the institution exhibits an enormous amount of inertia and resistance to change. This characteristic has persisted throughout its history — it will demonstrate some plasticity and some amenability to reform yet remains hidebound and resistant to fundamental change.

One obvious reason for this is the dominance of powerful member states, particularly the United States, within these institutions. In this way I would slightly recharacterize the idea of change having to come from the outside. While on the one hand I think that's correct, at the end of the day change often requires action from within, as it were, entities like the U.S. Treasury. Without those internal shifts, efforts for reform are ultimately limited.

Regarding crises, while world wars have historically opened avenues for institutional changes due to the sheer scale of crisis — and there is a rhetorical force to this kind of reference — we shouldn't conclude that only war can lead to real change. I am thinking of a different, more recent crisis, the **COVID-19** pandemic, which prompted the **IMF** to allocate \$650 billion in Special Drawing Rights (**SDRs**) in 2021 — the largest issuance in its history. This extraordinary measure, despite challenges in distribution and political opposition, demonstrates that substantial change can occur in response to various kinds of crises. But we need to understand the specific conditions and coalitions that enabled the particular allocation of **SDRs** that came out of the **COVID** crisis. This, I think, is crucial for informing future reform efforts.

RKW One example of internal and external pressure leading to change was the creation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (**UNCTAD**) in 1964. Admittedly I am defending institutional turf, here, but this was a significant reform within the **UN** system, really the only serious reform to the Secretariat that has happened, and it was driven by the frustration of developing countries with existing structures that marginalized their voices.

I was struck by the recent film *Soundtrack to a Coup d'état*, where one can see how in the run up to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in Congo in 1961, the **UN**'s role in Congo was not particularly benign. In some respects it clearly laid the groundwork for his assassination. In the film you can get a sense of how Dag Hammarskjöld, the **UN** Secretary General – who is still

vaunted in the **UN**, following his assassination in Congo — he really marginalized the emergent generation of developing countries, as well as Khrushchev. And this produced a really palpable sense of frustration.

UNCTAD provided a platform where these nations could actively participate in shaping economic policies, with their own Secretary General and a Board that made decisions independently of, though reporting to, the General Assembly. It was a kind of parallel institution where serious action on economic issues, though not security issues, could actually take place. It's a complicated history, but it led to some good things, including **SDRs**.

AA I partially agree with Richard. I think it depends on what we mean by reform. I was talking about the relative incapacity of major institutions to reform themselves, especially regarding key decision-making structures. It's very hard to find counterexamples. Maybe, you know, a seat for Africa, which is super important, but it doesn't alter the mathematics of decision-making all that much.

Now, when it comes to addition and subtraction, yes, I think things can happen. But again, it depends on external pressure. So, in addition to **UNCTAD**, I can think here of the Peacebuilding Commission, for which developing countries fought very hard, including Brazil. It was created; it exists, but it was subsumed under the Security Council. So again, you have an addition, and it's still subject to the same type of dominant decision-making structure.

On subtraction, as **UNCTAD** was created, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (**ECOSOC**), which should have been also a very important space for thinking about development and economic and social issues, was gradually emptied out. There are wonderful people there who do very brave work, and I had a lot of contact with them through the Committee on Development Policy. But where did those discussions on development and economic issues end up? They ended up at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (**OECD**).

The **ECOSOC** was emptied, and its functions were turned over to an organization that remains very much dominated not only by advanced economies but by the managerial turn, and that has been incredibly, until now at least, successful in pushing for very neoliberal prescriptions, even as the advanced economies themselves moved away from that — at least until the recent elections in the United States.

So, you can add or take away an ornament from the Christmas tree, but changing the shape of that tree is much more difficult, because whoever is locked in power will fight tooth and nail against that, even if it means a

massive loss in credibility, legitimacy, fitness for purpose — whatever it may be called in **UN**-speak.

We would not be panicking as much about international organizations if their decision-making structures had actually been reformed such that the **U.S.** did not have such dominance. Now with the withdrawal of the **U.S.**, or perhaps greater attacks by the **U.S.** on international organizations, global power arrangements may be reconfigured in interesting ways. At some point others will step in to fill the void of leadership; multilateralism is also an opportunity. And that's missing in the current thinking coming from Washington.

QS This extends our conversation about this idea of reform from outside and the unexpected consequences of external shocks. No one would have welcomed **COVID**, but as Jamie was saying, the possibilities it afforded were quite notable in retrospect. The abnegation of a commitment to internationalism by the current American administration could likewise be seen as a kind of opening into which non-**U.S.** actors could move and perhaps begin to rethink international governance in a more fundamental way.

Does it seem like the current far-right governments in the **U.S.** and elsewhere are actually attempting to break institutions, or are they just trying to subordinate and remake them? I think also about the way someone like Giorgio Meloni has gone from trying to break the **EU** to just making it *her* **EU**. Is that vacuum really going to emerge, or will the international forum simply become a venue for an even more naked expression of American realpolitik? Are there historical precedents here too that are worth considering?

AA I think it depends on the space. With respect, for instance, to the international climate regime — in some ways, we've been there before, twice. There are precedents for the **U.S.** withdrawing or refusing full participation during the Kyoto Protocol and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (**UNFCCC**).

We can criticize the global climate regime, but it still stands as an expression of multilateralism. The world has weathered the **U.S.**'s absence, and here I think Brazil is now stepping up again to assume a leadership role. Others, like Colombia, are doing really important things. Even smaller countries in Africa and small island states like Barbados are offering punchy proposals. So even if one actor can cause substantial damage, they can't just torpedo the whole thing.

There are other spaces where it's a bit of a wait and see — and not just in terms of the United States. Take the World Trade Organization (**WTO**), for

example. That paralysis goes back at least to the Obama administration, particularly around the dispute resolution mechanism. The current U.S. administration has a very different view of international trade and its relationship to national interests.

The question is whether there will be counterproposals. Right now, we see things like carbon border adjustments or unilateral anti-deforestation legislation, which end up being punitive toward developing countries rather than targeting hard-to-abate sectors in Europe. There is space for creative proposals, but not everyone will be on board — both the U.S. and others who join its bandwagon. The other day, a high-level Indonesian official asked, “If the U.S. is leaving the climate regime, why should Indonesia care?” I like to think that was a rhetorical device, but it still reveals the ripple effect of U.S. disengagement.

Some actors, like Javier Milei in Argentina, will join any bandwagon the U.S. creates. So again, it’s a wait and see. But it’s very hard to sink the ship of an international organization. Sometimes organizations lie dormant. In our region, for example, we revived an organization called the Amazon Treaty Cooperation Organization. It’s decades-old and had become stagnant. We recently held a big summit in the Amazon, and while it’s a regional effort, not a global one, it could have a significant global impact if it accelerates the fight against deforestation.

So yes, there are other spaces — regional and even global — where progress can still be made, but it requires patience and a clear understanding of how power shifts are playing out.

QS I appreciate the way you’ve expanded the scope, Adriana, by bringing in actors outside of the United Nations — like the **OECD** or the Amazon Treaty Cooperation Organization. To what degree have **UN** partnerships — or even bilateral partnerships with large philanthropies — changed the shape of the tree in your metaphor? I’m also thinking about bilateral trade arrangements, which in practice may have a much larger impact on trade than the **WTO**, which has often been of limited practical importance.

Another related question is whether there have been previous moments of major divisions among Northern countries — for example, when Nixon abruptly left the gold standard without consulting European allies. Can we learn from those moments in terms of potential North-South alliances or shifts in power structures? What kinds of alternative geometries have existed in the past that could help us understand this moment?

RKW Quinn, you've pointed to the different factions within the Trump coalition, and while there may be a new trend with the anarcho-capitalist strain, the rest are familiar. It's possible that altogether they may not be as destructive as the anarcho-capitalist wing would have it.

The difficulty in making sense of what's happening now is the sheer level of uncertainty and unpredictability. But one historical parallel that comes to mind is the fracturing of the North during the emergence of the New International Economic Order (**NIEO**). That fracturing — particularly between the **U.S.** and Europe — played a critical role in facilitating discussions around reforming the international economic architecture.

At that time, the **UNCTAD** Secretariat facilitated **NIEO** discussions, and there were European allies — the Dutch were somewhat sympathetic, the Italians and French occasionally supportive. Michael Franczak's book captures that dynamic well. Figures like Olof Palme and even Henry Kissinger recognized the importance of engaging with the South. In fact, Kissinger attended **UNCTAD** conferences, which is still the only time a **U.S.** Secretary of State has done so. He saw engaging with developing countries as a strategic way to counter the Soviet Union.

There were also divisions within the **U.S.** itself — neoliberals in the Treasury versus Kissinger, who was more open to dialogue with the Global South. This internal **U.S.** division, coupled with the geopolitical context of the Vietnam War, created an opening for **NIEO** discussions. Ultimately, the effort failed, but that moment of geopolitical fragmentation was significant in framing reform debates.

What I don't see today is that same fracturing within the Global North. If anything, Europe appears more obstructionist in international negotiations than the **U.S.** In recent **UNCTAD** negotiations, for example, the Europeans were more difficult than the Americans on some critical issues. I suspect we'll see similar dynamics in climate negotiations and financing for development discussions this year. It's a difficult moment, and I don't see clear openings in the Global North like we did in the 1970s.

JM I think there's a clear theoretical point to make here. In the case of development lending, a proliferation of alternative creditors — regional banks, development banks like the **BRICS** Bank, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank — could, in theory, offer borrowers better terms and reduce dependency on the **IMF**.

Institutions like the **BRICS** Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank emerged precisely because of the failure of the Bretton Woods institutions to accommodate countries like China. There's real capital

behind these initiatives — especially with China-backed institutions — unlike some regional banks that remain underfunded.

But the jury is still out on whether these institutions will fundamentally shift the power dynamics or simply reinforce existing structures. One of the challenges is that many of these alternative institutions still operate within the same ideological framework as the **IMF** — meaning that neoclassical economic principles and austerity-driven policy recommendations still dominate their decision-making. Additionally, certain geopolitical constraints, like Russia's involvement in **BRICS**, further complicate the credibility and effectiveness of these alternatives.

China's Belt and Road Initiative, for example, initially generated a lot of enthusiasm but has since faced significant setbacks. Now, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank seems to be stepping in with a different model. But I'm not yet convinced that these alternatives will fundamentally shift the global financial order. Ultimately, it still comes down to who controls the capital and who sets the terms of lending.

QS That's interesting — it reminds me of something you once said to me, Jamie, about neoliberalism essentially being "the way bankers think." And that seems to be the case here, where regardless of the institution, the same economic logic prevails.

This connects to a question of whether the resistance to reform within the Bretton Woods institutions — and even among some emerging alternatives — stems from an entrenched neoclassical economic framework. This framework is often weaponized as a technocratic, neutral approach to policy, but it fundamentally shapes economic outcomes. So how do you challenge and engage with these prevailing economic narratives, especially when they seem to persist even in alternative financial institutions?

In other words, we've talked a lot about coalitions, shocks, and external shifts — but is there a deeper challenge here regarding the entrenched economic ideology that shapes decision-making in these institutions?

AA The dominant economic paradigm is deeply entrenched, not only within Bretton Woods institutions but also among economic elites in the Global South, who often defend it even more zealously. This holds true even in relatively progressive governments like President Lula's current administration. Despite Lula's progressive orientation, his broad coalition government and a difficult congress impose serious political constraints on how far economic shifts can go.

For example, within the **G20**, pushing progressive ideas often requires navigating around internal barriers. One instance was the proposal for taxing the super-rich. This idea didn't originate from the **G20** working groups—which are generally conservative—but from coalitions of academics, civil society, and progressive actors within the government. These working groups have entrenched structures with fixed co-chairs, often France, the **OECD**, South Korea, etc., and no one dares to change that. So, the **G20** itself needs reform to act as a reform body.

When the super-rich tax proposal gained momentum, it took considerable internal effort to sidestep conservative barriers and eventually place the idea in the mouth of the Finance Minister—and subsequently in President Lula's messaging. Once Lula heard it, he immediately aligned with it, recognizing how it fit his broader vision of addressing inequality. But the process highlighted how difficult it is to push through transformative economic ideas, even within progressive spaces.

I've recently joined the Global Fund for a New Economy, where we're thinking collectively about how to break these entrenched paradigms. Part of that is about normalizing policy ideas that don't fit the neoliberal mold—like government procurement linked to green industrial policy—and ensuring they gain traction despite institutional resistance and opposition from vested interests. History is also key. There's a manufactured amnesia around the fact that several Asian countries achieved development through state planning and public finance, not through neoliberal prescriptions. Yet these alternative pathways are dismissed in forums like **IMF** Spring and Annual Meetings. Breaking these taboos is essential to expanding the policy space.

RKW I remember warning Adriana that working within the **G20** would feel like navigating bureaucratic sclerosis—and I think that's exactly what she's describing! The **G20** did start as a reform body, especially around the time of the global financial crisis when Gordon Brown pushed for more ambitious reforms. But since then, it's been downhill. The structure is rigid, and the finance tracks are dominated by actors who maintain the status quo.

The finance space, in particular, is incredibly conservative and incestuous. Anyone who's attended **IMF** Spring or Fall Meetings has seen it—it's a closed circle of people speaking a common language and reinforcing their own worldview. Any disruption is quickly isolated. I remember when Yanis Varoufakis briefly served as Greece's Finance Minister—he was treated like a virus in the room. No one engaged with him seriously. That's emblematic of how resistant these spaces are to change.

This resistance is rooted in the ideological shift that happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the **IMF** transformed from an institution designed

to promote financial stability — which required controlling capital flows — into a handmaiden for the free flow of global capital. Originally, the **IMF**'s mandate included giving governments space to control capital flows in the interest of financial stability. But somewhere along the line, the institution inverted its mission, aligning itself with the interests of highly mobile global capital. That's why it's so difficult now to push progressive reforms through these institutions — the financial system itself is structured to resist them.

Without addressing that underlying power dynamic, it's hard to see how the **IMF** or similar institutions could fundamentally shift their approach. There are some promising developments in trade policy, but that's a separate conversation.

QS That's a critical point. What I'm hearing — and what we know from history — is that the **IMF** was always a political institution, not purely an economic one. It was originally designed with a political aim — stabilizing international finance by controlling capital flows. The idea that the **IMF** has now become a neutral, depoliticized actor is a complete inversion of its original function.

This connects to a question of whether there's any potential for reformist action from within institutions like the **IMF**, World Bank, or **UNCTAD** — especially from their staff or managerial levels. Jamie alluded to this earlier, pointing out that the **IMF** research division often sounds more progressive than its lending wing.

But I want to sharpen the question: Is the real problem here that economists themselves — through their adherence to neoclassical frameworks — are blocking reform? And if so, do we need to fundamentally re-politicize these debates, perhaps moving away from the language of economics and more toward a legal or political framing to open up space for change?

JM I think economic doctrine can sometimes be a red herring when analyzing these institutions — especially the **IMF**. The institutional behavior we often criticize, like conditional lending based on fiscal and monetary constraints, has persisted across vastly different economic paradigms. It happened during the Keynesian era, during the height of neoliberalism, and now again, even as some at the **IMF** itself suggest we're in a "post-neoliberal" era.

Take the demand for fiscal and monetary constraints in exchange for loans — this has been a core practice regardless of prevailing economic thought. So while the research division may now publish pieces questioning neoliberalism, the way lending is done remains remarkably consistent. In fact, my own book, which is critical of the **IMF**, was reviewed positively in

the **IMF**'s own official journal. There's a vibrant intellectual space there — someone once jokingly told me the **IMF** is now full of young Marxists. That's obviously an exaggeration, but there are smart, critical thinkers within the institution.

So, I sometimes wonder if the focus on shifting economic doctrine is missing the point. The real power lies in the institutional structure — who makes the decisions and what structural incentives they face. Disrupting the intellectual paradigm within economics may not fundamentally change the outcomes if those institutional structures stay intact.

RKW I agree. The problem isn't simply economic thought — it's the structural capture of these institutions. Unlike at Bretton Woods, where economists like Keynes and Dexter White were deliberately trying to keep private financial interests at bay, today the opposite is true.

At Bretton Woods, bankers were largely absent from the negotiating table. Now, the world of **IMF** spring and fall meetings is filled with people constantly moving between the private financial sector and policymaking roles. It's a classic revolving door. That revolving door has created a profound shift — the institution that was designed to control financial capital is now largely controlled by it.

This transformation fundamentally shapes the **IMF**'s behavior. It's not just economic ideology driving conditional lending — it's the dominance of finance in the decision-making process. The structural power of private financial actors has increasingly shaped how the global economy is governed. So, unless we directly address that power dynamic, it's hard to see how transformative change could emerge from within these institutions.

QS That's a really important distinction. What you're both saying is that the issue isn't just economic paradigms but the structural entrenchment of financial interests in these institutions.

This leads to another question related to credit rating agencies. Even if international financial institutions slightly reduce their coercive conditionality, you still have major credit rating agencies acting as self-appointed arbiters of financial flows. They wield immense power in shaping where investment goes and under what conditions. So, even if we were to reform **IMF** decision-making or shift its guiding economic ideology, wouldn't these external private actors still impose the same financial discipline?

Is there any viable path to regulating these credit rating agencies or otherwise diminishing their power to gatekeep financial flows? Because if those external forces remain as powerful as they are now, it seems like institutional reform within the **IMF** or World Bank would still hit a hard ceiling. Is there any realistic way to break that power dynamic?

AA On the role of credit rating agencies — there are a range of conversations happening. The more conservative discussions, which are marginally acceptable to the epistemic community Richard mentioned, focus on revising stress-test methodologies to incorporate climate and biodiversity risks.

Then there are more radical conversations, particularly in African think tank spaces, where people are questioning the political bias embedded in these agencies — the “black boxes of capitalism.” The question is: what do you do about it? There’s been talk about creating alternative credit rating agencies, but the problem runs deeper. These agencies operate on a strange trust mechanism — a combination of expertise and dogma — and as long as that remains central to the system, any serious attempt to change it will be viewed as deeply threatening by those most invested in maintaining the status quo.

QS Is there any potential for more political participation from below to exert pressure on these institutions? And, to go back to Richard’s point, if the consensus-driven culture within these organizations inhibits meaningful change, would a more straightforward voting mechanism produce better outcomes. There’s also the role of philanthropy. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, has become deeply embedded in international institutions. Does their growing role offer a potential pressure point for change, or does it simply reinforce existing power structures?

RKW The trading system hasn’t received much attention in this discussion. Trade is arguably the most neoliberalized part of the international economic system — it’s the one area with genuinely enforceable rules and disciplinary mechanisms, such as investor-state dispute settlement (**ISDS**).

Interestingly, though, trade now seems to be the most vulnerable part of the system. You can see this in the breakdown of the **WTO**’s effectiveness; nearly a quarter of a century after its launch, the Doha Round remains unconcluded. Bilateral and regional trade agreements, which were once seen as attractive alternatives by developing countries, often turned out to be even more restrictive. Yet those same countries have been pushing back against efforts to reduce their policy space for decades, dating back

to protests in Seattle in 1999 and even earlier with resistance against a multilateral investment agreement.

What's striking is that civil society pressure played a significant role in highlighting the biases and asymmetries of these trade agreements. And now, you're seeing some structural cracks appear — countries are withdrawing from **ISDS** mechanisms, the Energy Charter Treaty is collapsing, and the **WTO's** dispute resolution function is essentially defunct.

This creates a potential opening. Developing countries haven't yet fully figured out what they want to do with this emerging void, but the collapse of the most rigid part of the system could open space for rethinking global economic governance more broadly. That's an opportunity — but only if it's seized.

AA On philanthropy, I've just stepped into a new role which will offer new perspectives here, but I've engaged previously with philanthropy from a government perspective. There are situations where it makes a big difference, partly because of the extreme global inequality that enables individuals and families to amass vast wealth — some of whom are willing to fund progressive causes.

For example, Bloomberg recently offered to cover the expenses of the **UNFCCC** after the **U.S.** pulled back support. In Brazil, during the **G20** presidency, we also saw how philanthropy played a critical role in making certain meetings happen and fostering connections. Of course, like any actor, philanthropic organizations have their own interests, divisions, and preferences. The Gates Foundation may have one vision, Bloomberg another, and yet another foundation something entirely different.

Another under-explored space is the regional level. In Latin America, we are experts at forum shopping — redefining our region based on the interlocutor. It can be South America, Latin America, or Latin America and the Caribbean, depending on what's strategic. This flexibility has advantages, especially when one space is politically blocked — for example, if Argentina's government won't approve something, you take it to another forum.

But the downside is a lack of continuity, and many regional spaces have been so politicized that sustaining progress is difficult. I think we need civil society and academics to push governments to prioritize regional integration. There's potential to redefine integration around new pillars — renewable energy, just transition, or green industrial policy — but there's a huge gap that needs to be filled.

I just came back from Cape Town, and our African counterparts often express frustration about the African Union's slow pace and structural

challenges. But honestly, their regional arrangements are far more sophisticated than ours in Latin America. We have so much to learn from them.

JM I'd conclude on a cautiously optimistic note. While we've spent most of this discussion emphasizing the significant obstacles to reform, it's worth acknowledging that some reforms have happened — and they matter.

Civil society groups, Global South governments, policy experts like Richard, Kevin Gallagher at the **GDP** Center, and **U.S.** Congress members have collectively pressured the **IMF** to amend its policy on surcharges. These surcharges were essentially penalizing already struggling countries — robbing Peter to pay Paul, with little sound economic rationale. While surcharges haven't been entirely eliminated, their scope has been reduced, which is a tangible win.

This change didn't happen by accident — it was the result of massive global mobilization and sustained advocacy by diverse groups and individuals worldwide. So while I've highlighted how difficult systemic reform is, moments like this show that it is possible — and those efforts should be recognized and celebrated.

QS That's a perfect place to end — a glimmer of hope in challenging times.

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The History & Political Economy Project brings together a network of scholars whose research examines how neoliberalism has been developed, implemented, and contested around the world. With the goal of producing historical scholarship that is strategically useful for addressing the challenges of social-political transformation in the present, we seek to use the tools of historical inquiry to counter rising inequality, economic dislocation, and political alienation. HPE therefore supports new research, fosters connections among scholars working in different temporal and geographic contexts, and draws lessons for contemporary efforts to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal ideas and modes of governance.

HPE undertakes a range of activities, including hosting workshops, sponsoring fellowships and research grants, and making existing research that is published in languages other than English or hidden behind paywalls more accessible. You can learn more about our activities on our website at hpeproject.org/activities. Our work is led by co-directors Christy Thornton and Quinn Slobodian, with the support of Postdoctoral Fellow Andrew Anastasi and Graduate Fellow Conrad Jacober. You can learn more about our leadership team and our advisory board on our website at hpeproject.org/people.

This pamphlet was designed by Lauren Traugott-Campbell

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