

The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

—William Wordsworth, 1805

I hear a noise at the door, as of some immense slippery body
lumbering against it.

—H.P. Lovecraft, 1917

What, exactly, was the New International Economic Order (NIEO)? Promulgated as a United Nations declaration in 1974 (reprinted as the frontispiece to this special issue of *Humanity*), the NIEO was the most widely discussed transnational governance reform initiative of the 1970s. Its fundamental objective was to *transform the governance of the global economy to redirect more of the benefits of transnational integration toward “the developing nations”*—thus completing the geopolitical process of decolonization and creating a democratic global order of truly sovereign states.

It was, in short, a proposal for a radically different future than the one we actually inhabit.

Viewed from our present conjuncture, the NIEO seems like an apparition, an improbable political creature that surfaced out of the economic and geopolitical dislocations and uncertainties of the early to mid-1970s, only to sink away again just as quickly. Appearing today as the figment of a now all but lost political imaginary, the NIEO sprang forth during a narrow and specific window of geopolitical opportunity, a “moment of disjunction and openness,” when wildly divergent political possibilities appeared suddenly plausible.¹ What made the NIEO remarkable was not so much the content of its program as the fact that political and economic leaders throughout both the postcolonial world and the industrial core of the global economy took seriously the possibility—the former mainly with Wordsworthian hope, the latter often with Lovecraftian horror—that they might be witnessing the downfall of the centuries-long hegemony of what was coming to be known simply as “the north.” In contrast to the Thatcherite “There Is No Alternative” order that would soon emerge, the NIEO imagined and represented a dramatically “alternative” geopolitical future.²

Although the idea of a NIEO reverberated through the halls of power from Washington and New York to Algiers and Dar es Salaam throughout the late 1970s, it faded from view during the 1980s, replaced by discussions of structural adjustment programs, the Washington consensus, and the “end of history.”³ By the late 1990s, few (in the north, at least) would have disagreed with Jeffrey Cason’s hand-waving

dismissal that the proposals of the NIEO could only be regarded as “quaint.”⁴ Today, the NIEO is almost completely forgotten.

The South Demands

This special issue of *Humanity* is dedicated to disinterring the NIEO and its moment, to considering how diverse (and, often, contested) the proposals were that came together under the NIEO rubric in terms of origins, goals, and rhetoric. Focusing on different dimensions of the NIEO, our authors variously suggest that the NIEO was:

- a bid to empower the United Nations General Assembly as the legislative body for making binding international law
- a critique of legal formalism
- the genealogical starting point for “the right to development”
- an effort to create a global regulatory framework for transnational corporations
- an extension of the principle of sovereignty from the political to the economic realm
- an incrementalist approach to reforming global economic and political power arrangements
- an endeavor to redress historical grievances of newly independent states, thereby “completing” decolonization
- a call for global redistribution—including financial, resource, and technology transfer—from rich to poor countries
- an attempt to universalize and globalize the principles of “embedded liberalism”
- the high noon of “Third Worldism” and its vision of solidarity among the poorer nations
- a radical challenge to the historic hegemony of the North Atlantic industrial core
- a realistic program for global socialism
- a utopian political project, global and totalizing in its ambitions
- an alternative model for transnational economic integration—that is, of globalization
- a key catalyst (via backlash) for the formulation of the neoliberal paradigm in favor of limiting state power and augmenting private power

What this list makes clear is that the NIEO was not a single coherent entity; rather, it was more like a political brand holding together a set of loosely compatible agendas, which together formed something less than a coherent strategy. While everyone involved might have agreed that the goal of the NIEO was to improve the economic position of the global south in relation to the global north, there was no consensus about the ultimate political ends, much less about the best way to achieve those ends. This, as much as anything, helps to explain why the NIEO seemed unable to realize its proponents’ hopes. With this caveat in mind, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish three distinct but interconnected aspects to the NIEO: economic proposals, legal tactics, and political objectives.

The Economic Vision of the NIEO

At the core of the NIEO's agenda was a series of interrelated proposals for reforms to the structure, governance, and norms of the global economy designed to improve the relative position of the so-called developing states. In particular, the NIEO Declaration called for: (a) an absolute right of states to control the extraction and marketing of their domestic natural resources; (b) the establishment and recognition of state-managed resource cartels to stabilize (and raise) commodity prices; (c) the regulation of transnational corporations; (d) no-strings-attached technology transfers from north to south; (e) the granting of preferential (nonreciprocal) trade preferences to countries in the south; and (f) the forgiveness of certain debts that states in the south owed to the north. Together, all these proposals amounted to an assertion of the "economic sovereignty" of postcolonial states.

Although the point of origin for some of these demands can be traced back to the Mexican revolutionary constitution of 1917 or even earlier, the more proximate intellectual origins for these ideas derived from pioneering work in development economics by the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, first as the head of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) from the late 1940s and then as the founding secretary general at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) from the early 1960s.⁵ Along with the German British economist Hans W. Singer, Prebisch postulated that, absent regulatory intervention, the terms of trade between primary (commodity) producers and manufacturers deteriorate over time. The Singer-Prebisch thesis not only offered a political critique of the subordinate economic position to which the imperial powers had historically consigned their colonies as primary producers; it also provided a clear path forward: international trade needed to be managed to prevent the deterioration of the terms of trade, and governments and corporations from the north had to be compelled to provide capital, technology, and expertise to enable the south to develop its own industrial base. The Singer-Prebisch thesis would not only form the cornerstone of dependency theory and later world systems theory; it also provided the underlying rationale for import-substitution industrialization strategies as well as the demands of the NIEO.⁶ Indeed, under Prebisch's leadership in the 1960s, UNCTAD became a prime site for the formulation and promotion of the NIEO's various economic claims.⁷

Examining the global economic context of the early 1970s is crucial for understanding both the demands and reception of the NIEO. Particularly critical were the dissolution of the Bretton Woods fixed exchange rate regime around 1968–73 and the Arab-led oil embargo and price spike of 1973.⁸ These events had many practical implications for the world economy; but as Hans Singer himself noted in 1978, their importance for the NIEO was as much psychological as material.⁹ On the one hand, the dissolution of the fixed-exchange rate system demonstrated that ostensibly unalterable structures underpinning the world economy could in fact shift abruptly. On the other hand, the success of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in raising and sustaining high oil prices not only offered the hope that solidarity among primary producers could succeed in upending the terms of global trade,

it also quelled fears among many in the south concerning military or financial reprisals from the north. Together these events made the economic ambitions of the NIEO, which both before had seemed (and would soon again seem) utterly unrealistic, appear suddenly and shockingly conceivable. Even oil-importing countries in the south, for whom the oil price spike was ruinous materially, could find political hope from the situation. At a February 1975 meeting in Algiers devoted to drawing up an “action plan” for the NIEO, the G-77 nations pledged to raise their share of the world economy from 7 percent to 25 percent, with attendees from oil-producing countries promising to offer financial aid as long as the West also “did its part.”¹⁰ For NIEO proponents, goals once considered impossible now appeared within reach.

Even at this heady moment, however, the NIEO’s economic vision encompassed a strange set of tensions. On the one hand, it embraced markets, albeit of a controlled sort, to be governed by cartels managed by states. Contrary to some claims about the NIEO, the proposals were not antitrade or prefiguratively antiglobalization; rather, the NIEO envisaged an alternative order of global economic integration in which countries in the south could catch up with the economic achievements of the north, thus creating a material foundation for political equality between states in the north and south.¹¹ In other words, the NIEO represented a call for *socialism among states*, what Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere called “a trade union of the poor.”¹² On the other hand, despite this interstate socialism, the NIEO remained studiously agnostic about the proper form of internal organization of national economies, being quite amenable to *capitalism within states*. This was in keeping with the principle of absolute respect for the economic sovereignty of nations, but it also lent credence to critics of the NIEO who asserted that its real agenda was to transfer resources “from the poor in rich countries to the rich in poor countries.”¹³ For the NIEO, however, the unit of poverty was the state, not the individual.

The NIEO as an Intervention in International Law

Just as important as the NIEO’s economic objectives were the novel means it sought to implement its objectives through new mechanisms of international law. Rather than accepting international law as a neutral device, NIEO legal theorists claimed that existing international law, unsuited to promoting structural reform, was biased toward economic incumbents and needed recasting in order to favor developing nations. More narrowly, NIEO proponents argued that states in the south should not be bound by legal agreements made under an illegitimate transnational legal regime, particularly if those agreements had been concluded by pre-independence administrations or with private corporations. Just as the economic goal of the NIEO was to enable the self-sufficiency and self-determination of countries in the south, the legal strategy was similarly predicated on the bedrock assertion of the absolute sovereign equality of every nation.

Proponents of the NIEO, especially those at UNCTAD, sought to use the UN General Assembly, with its more plausible claims to represent world interests, as a forum for developing new international legal structures that would promote the agenda of the south. Choosing the General Assembly as a vehicle for transnational legal change made political sense given the evolving composition of that body. When

the UN was founded in the mid-1940s, not only were “north” and “south” not yet operative concepts in the geopolitical imaginary but even the distinction between “industrialized” and “developing” countries (or economies) barely existed.¹⁴ Decolonization changed this rapidly, as the number of UN member states ballooned from the original 51 to 76 in 1955 and 110 by 1962—the large majority of which were “developing” states in the south.¹⁵ With the General Assembly operating under a one state—one vote principle, it seemed a fruitful site for legal claims-making that would benefit the south. At the second UNCTAD conference in 1968, 77 southern states had self-identified as a bloc, which came to be known as the Group of 77 (G-77). In principle, the G-77 was unified by its members’ shared subordinate position within the global economy. While the politics of the group would prove difficult to manage, they indubitably formed a voting majority within the General Assembly. Therefore, if the G-77 could at once enhance the power of the General Assembly and maintain political unity, all of them stood to gain in relation to the north.

The most important legal theorist for the NIEO was the Algerian jurist Mohammed Bedjaoui, who provided the most elaborate legal-theoretical articulation of how to accomplish the NIEO’s economic objectives. Bedjaoui criticized the existing formal structure of international law, which he claimed was organized to systematically favor former imperial powers, which in turn reflected and enabled the structural inequality of the global economy. Unlike legal localists, who argued that different communal situations necessitated different sorts of legal regimes, Bedjaoui advocated legal universalism. He argued, however, that the power dynamics embedded within the structure of international law required that certain key terms of international law be undone. For example, he rejected the notion that postcolonial and postrevolutionary states had to meet treaty and contractual obligations joined under previous regimes. In short, Bedjaoui presented Algeria’s own postindependence international legal positions toward France as a model for what an alternative global, transnational legal order might look like.¹⁶

The central problem for NIEO jurists like Bedjaoui was how to assert the absolute national sovereignty of southern states without at the same time empowering northern states to ignore, in the name of their own national sovereignty, the supranational legal injunctions proposed by the NIEO.¹⁷ This tension within the legal doctrine of the NIEO mirrored the one in the economic sphere: claims of absolute economic sovereignty flew in the face of transnational economic interdependence. At the end of the day, NIEO success required leveling power disparities between states, but for that to happen, its legal strategy had to be embedded in a political strategy.

The NIEO as Political Project

As the foregoing suggests, the NIEO was more than just a set of technical economic-legal proposals; it was also an explicitly political initiative, an attempt to extend the realignment of international power that the process of decolonization had begun. At the level of political identity, the G-77 and the NIEO claimed to embody the idea that the “developing nations” formed a coherent political group, one whose common political identity rested on a shared history of resistance to colonialism and imperialism.¹⁸ As such, the NIEO may be seen as a continuation of what Erez Manela

has referred to as the “Wilsonian moment” for the peoples of the south or of the “Bandung era” which had opened with the Afro-Asian Conference in 1955, itself often characterized as the start of the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁹ The economic proposals of the NIEO and the legal ideas for their implementation were, in the end, merely instruments in the service of the political goal of creating true global democracy of equal (and equally) sovereign states, thereby completing the process of decolonization. In this sense, the NIEO represented arguably the most direct and sustained political challenge of the postcolonial era to the ongoing authority and legitimacy of the incumbent industrial powers.

Implicit in the NIEO Declaration was the assumption that a shared interest in rearranging global economic governance provided a sufficient basis for political solidarity. Sharp divisions existed within the G-77 about political tactics, however. For the more radically inclined proponents of the NIEO, the fulfillment of a new order meant rolling back Western power and augmenting the power of local elites who ruled in the name of their own peoples. Typical of this stance was Algerian president Houari Boumediene, who would emerge as perhaps the single most prominent political proponent of the NIEO. The site of a particularly vicious colonial war of independence, Algeria’s ultimate victory represented the promise and efficacy of simultaneous confrontation with the north across diplomatic, economic, political, and legal channels: for Boumediene there was a direct line from the Battle of Algiers to the NIEO.²⁰ Speaking of a “dialectic of domination and plundering on the one hand, and the dialectic of emancipation and recovery on the other,” he warned of an “uncontrollable conflagration” should the north refuse to cede “control and use of the fruits of resources belonging to the countries of the Third World.”²¹

Not all members of the G-77 coalition adopted such confrontational rhetoric, however. Others, such as Haile Selassie in Ethiopia or the leaders of Ghana after independence under Kwame Nkrumah, viewed the politics of the NIEO as a framework for achieving a more harmonious and mutually beneficial model of global economic and political integration. Yes, the NIEO’s aims might have been about redressing historical wrongs and challenging ongoing power inequities, but the goal was to forge a dialogue that would bind wounds. To reread all the speeches delivered on behalf of the NIEO is to be struck by the hopeful idea that the north could be reasoned into accepting the moral necessity of abandoning its privileged position in the geopolitical hierarchy.

In addition to the division over political tactics and rhetoric, the sheer economic diversity of the G-77 represented a political paradox. As mentioned earlier, a key source of inspiration to the NIEO was the sustained success of the OPEC oil embargo that had begun in the fall of 1973, less than a year before the NIEO Declaration in May 1974. OPEC’s success in altering the terms of trade of a key global commodity appeared to represent a model that might be extended to other commodities, and to geopolitics as a whole. But this was based on two critical misapprehensions. First, oil was not a commodity like any other: unlike copper or coffee, oil was the energetic foundation of the entire global economy, which meant that the north was necessarily going to adopt a unique strategy to address its production and marketing.²² Second, what few anticipated before the oil embargo began was that the success of the embargo

would open an enormous fissure within the G-77 between oil importers, for whom the price spikes were an economic disaster, and oil producers, whose sudden windfalls made the idea of global redistribution much less attractive. The fact that the south would split over the material consequences of the very act that had brought them such collective political hope was hardly foreordained, however, and instead was exacerbated by a deliberate strategy embarked upon by certain leaders in the north.

The North Demurs

While NIEO proponents were pushing for a future of global sovereign equality, the leaders of the capitalist economies in Frankfurt, London, and New York were making other plans. Reactions in the north to the NIEO ranged from incremental accommodation (led by social democrats like Willy Brandt, Jan Tinbergen, Olaf Palme, Bruno Kreisky, and Jan Pronk), to Machiavellian inversion (led by conservative geopolitical realists like Henry Kissinger), to unrelenting and direct opposition (led by an emergent cadre of American neoconservatives like William Simon, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Irving Kristol, the last of whom characterized the NIEO as “mau-mauing” the north²³).

For the governing powers of the north, the emergence of the NIEO reinforced the sense of global crisis that had been building for years across several fronts. Not only had the Bretton Woods financial order collapsed but rioting and domestic terrorism seemed to have become endemic in much of the north.²⁴ Many leaders in the north felt they were facing a fundamental, multifaceted systemic revolt, characterized by some as a “crisis of governability.”²⁵ While for most leaders in the north the crisis was perceived as primarily domestic in nature, the linkages between the revolt of subalterns in their own home states and the revolt of global subalterns seemed linked.²⁶ The fact that some domestic “radical” groups linked their political goals and language to the emergent language of transnational racial and economic emancipation did little to allay the concern.²⁷

Many leaders and intellectuals in the north saw the NIEO as an element in this wider systemic crisis, and their responses to the NIEO typically mirrored their respective reactions to domestic unrest. For example, the American political scientist Stephen Krasner, who would go on to serve as director of policy planning in the U.S. State Department under George W. Bush, claimed that the goal of the NIEO was to “capture the structure of international organizations created by the United States at the conclusion of World War II.”²⁸ Krasner recommended simply saying “no.” By contrast, former West German chancellor Willy Brandt took a much more conciliatory stance, which he realized by managing a two-year-long series of workshops around the world to discuss various elements of the NIEO proposal. The result of this listening tour would be the landmark *North-South: A Program for Survival*, a book whose mere existence testifies to the willingness of serious northern leaders to countenance the proposals of the NIEO.²⁹ The most common reaction, however, was neither uncompromising naysaying nor sympathetic accommodation but rather playing for time and accentuating divisions among the members of the G-77.³⁰

In stalling any decisions that might empower the states of the south, the north was also reflecting an epochal shift in views of the efficacy and probity of government

more generally. Partly as a result of various governments' inability to overcome domestic crises, a deep cynicism was setting in about government, especially in the United States, where Ronald Reagan would be elected president in 1980 on a platform that declared that government was the problem rather than the solution. As James Buchanan put it, "romantic and illusory notions about the workings of governments and the behavior of persons who govern" were being "replaced by a set of notions that embody more skepticism about what governments can do."³¹ While the "public choice theory" literature that purported to prove this point was mainly directed at exposing the corruptions and malfeasances of governments in the north, the rejection of the state as a positive force could not help but affect the way that the NIEO would be evaluated. Even those in the north sympathetic to the NIEO's call for a more just global order were inclined to promote solutions at odds with southern leaders' insistence that such an order could only be realized through the empowerment and affirmation of the sovereignty of the southern states.³² Whether it was religious charities like Oxfam that were attempting to provide food aid to famine-endangered communities, or the World Bank taking on "basic needs," or human rights organizations like Amnesty International trying to protect political dissidents, nowhere in the north was there much support for the NIEO's ambition to rearrange global power or legal structures in favor of postcolonial states.³³ Indeed, with hindsight it is apparent that what succeeded the NIEO was not more state power in the south but rather the emergence of new centers of private authority.³⁴

In the end, the dissipation of the NIEO's energies took place as rapidly as its emergence. Already by 1977 it was clear to people like Nyerere that the north was unwilling to respond with any major concessions, and Boumediene's untimely death in 1978 deprived the NIEO of its most forceful leader. Margaret Thatcher's election as prime minister of Britain in 1979, as well as the economic downturn in the United States that same year created by Federal Reserve chair Paul Volcker's interest rate hike, meant that the political leadership of the major powers of the north was unified in its disdain for the NIEO, with only smaller industrialized countries like Austria and the Netherlands still expressing sympathy.³⁵ It was left to Reagan to deliver the final word at the Cancún Economic Summit in October 1981 that the United States would no longer discuss any changes to the global economic governance architecture, no matter the discord this generated.³⁶

The final dagger would be the Latin American debt crisis in 1982: bailing out indebted southern states was not done in charity but conditionally dependent on structural adjustments designed explicitly to weaken the reach of the state.³⁷ The result was a "lost decade" in Latin America, and then another in Africa when the same policies were applied there.³⁸ The new "post-historical" consensus in favor of "free trade" that consolidated by the late 1980s among mainstream economists in the north asserted that the proponents of the NIEO had been fundamentally misguided in their view of history and development.³⁹ Political determinism gave way to technological determinism.⁴⁰ "Hitherto existing politico-economic approaches or even the analytical approaches employed by these perspectives will not be able to find answers to the global problems," explained one former supporter of the NIEO: "The coming technocratic age will give its own answers."⁴¹ In the end, all that was left of the NIEO were

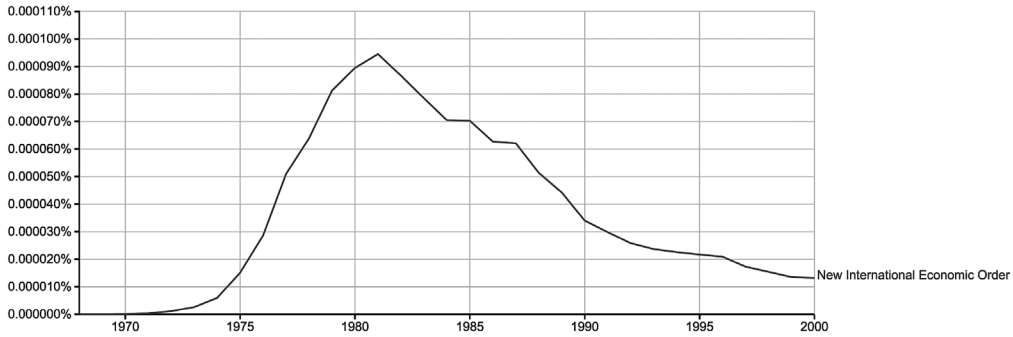


Figure 1. The salience of “New International Economic Order” in language. Google Ngram for “New International Economic Order,” 1969–2000. Source: <http://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed October 19, 2014).

a few twitches, as of a phantom political limb, such as discussions concerning the regulation of transnational corporations, which themselves would die in early 1990s. It would seem the NIEO failed ignominiously.

Failure—or Unfailure?

The NIEO today is almost entirely forgotten, at least when referred to by its proper name (see fig. 1). Already in the early 1980s, the conventional wisdom among mainstream analysts in the Anglophone academy was that NIEO had always been doomed to failure.⁴² The explanations for this inevitability were legion: the political solidarity of the Third World was bound to unravel; the logic of collective action meant that commodity cartels were destined to defection and failure; the attempt to use international law to rein in the sovereign prerogatives of powerful countries was fated to succumb to jurisdictional fragmentation and forum shopping; and the north was always going to have been willing and able to flex its vastly greater economic, political, and (if ultimately necessary) military might to restrain the rise of the south.⁴³

This *Humanity* special issue, dedicated to the NIEO, began as an effort to make sense of this paradox: how an entity that today has been nearly universally represented (insofar as it is represented at all) as an abject and inevitable failure had in its own moment seemed so entirely plausible to so many of both its proponents and enemies.⁴⁴ Most of the essays published here were presented at a conference sponsored by New York University’s Remarque Institute in April–May 2014, where a lively exchange of views helped to clarify just how sprawling and contradictory the NIEO was, even at its zenith of optimism, forty years earlier. What emerged from the conversation was something of a surprise: despite the fact that there was broad consensus in the north that the NIEO failed, in important ways this is not quite right.

First, the matter of inevitability. As historians, we should always be wary of ascribing inevitability to outcomes that seemed deeply uncertain to the actors at the time.⁴⁵ Were Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others in the Nixon and Ford administrations simply being alarmists when they declared that the United States must attack the NIEO frontally? Was the Brandt Commission merely a Machiavellian scheme to

divert attention? In fact, as several essays in this dossier demonstrate, the failure of the NIEO was the result of a deliberate and concerted strategy on the part of leaders in the north, compounded by strategic choices on the part of the south.

Second, a key underlying economic objective of the NIEO, namely, to improve the south's economic position in the global economy, has in fact been realized, albeit unevenly. Whereas the advanced economies produced 80 percent of global GDP at the time of the NIEO Declaration, by 2009 that share had fallen to 57 percent, while the leading economies of the south (now rebranded by mainstream economists in the north as "emerging markets") had increased their share to nearly 40 percent of total world GDP.⁴⁶ While it is true that the states of the south are no more economically sovereign than they were in the 1970s, this is arguably part of a larger trend whereby all states, including those of "advanced" economies, have become more deeply integrated into, and thus dependent on, the overall world economy interconnected by global supply chains. While many have lamented the deindustrialization of the old industrial core states, the silver lining has been a huge growth in industrial jobs in poorer countries. And while it is true that it is mostly corporations based in rich countries that control these globalized supply chains, even this is changing rapidly.⁴⁷

Indeed, rather than see the NIEO as a failure, it might be more helpful to see it as an example of what Jennifer Wenzel has called "unfailure."⁴⁸ *Unfailure* refers to the paradox that many seemingly failed political and social movements, even though they did not realize their ambitions in their own moment, often live on as prophetic visions, available as an idiom for future generations to articulate their own hopes and dreams. In other words, although the historically specific institutional demands of the NIEO during the 1970s went unrealized, one can make a credible case that the undead spirit of the NIEO continues to haunt international relations.

The unfailed afterlife of the NIEO is perhaps most evident today in global climate change negotiations. For many key poor countries, the north/south geographic imaginary that gave life to the NIEO remains the dominant framing of the question of climate justice.⁴⁹ Just as it was in the 1970s, the G-77 remains the south's main organizing agent for collective climate bargaining with the north.⁵⁰ In addition, in its negotiating positions with respect to climate change, the G-77 has pursued a line of economic reasoning that strongly echoes the NIEO Declaration, arguing that because the north bears a historic responsibility for producing the vast majority of anthropogenic greenhouse gases currently in the atmosphere, and the south still has a "right to development," any fair climate treaty should be "nonreciprocal," with binding responsibilities (in this case, concerning emissions reduction mandates) applying only the north. Likewise, just as it did in the 1970s, the G-77 insists that the north should transfer technology and provide aid as reparations for the damage caused by historic wrongs—now referring to historic greenhouse gas emissions. In sum, the NIEO's unfailed political imaginary of a more just and egalitarian global order lives on in contemporary climate negotiations.⁵¹

Historians, who for many years ignored the historiographic no man's land between the charismatic upheavals of the 1960s and the world historical events of the 1980s, have come to recognize the 1970s as the foundry of our current world order.⁵² But crucial to understanding how that current order took shape is to appreciate the contingency of the

events and decisions that took place in those years: key actors had highly divergent visions and hopes for the future and, had different choices been exercised, we might have gotten a strikingly different future. Embedded liberalism and planned modernization were in deep crisis but still deeply institutionalized in the West; communism was rotting from within in its Eastern European and Asian heartlands but remained a source of inspiration to many radicals elsewhere; and Third Worldism seemed to offer a dramatic break from centuries of North Atlantic domination of the world economy.

Beyond these major ideologies lurked others: environmentalists calling for ruralization, techno-utopians predicting undersea and extraterrestrial colonization, and wine-dark visions of various demographic apocalypses. The conditions making possible this pluralization of political imaginaries were historically specific: détente had terminated the binary geopolitical logic of the early Cold War; revolutions had overturned governments in more than fifty states in the previous two decades; the Vietnam War confirmed that small nations of the south could defeat even the determined military might of a traditional great power; the collapse of the Bretton Woods exchange rate system had shown the tenuousness of existing global governance institutions; and OPEC showed that political solidarity among primary producers could drastically reshape global trade relations in favor of historically poor regions. From this cauldron of contingencies, among the least anticipated prospects was that corporate powers would assert control over the commanding heights of economies worldwide, with their casuists retroactively declaring that this had always already been the only real alternative.⁵³

It is no coincidence that the idea to reconsider the history of NIEO first occurred to the editorial collective of *Humanity* in the wake of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, as the “no alternative” draperies of the post–Cold War decades seemed suddenly threadbare. Once-conceivable alternatives to our current global order are of more than passing interest to those who seek historical bases for alternative political economies.⁵⁴ The political economy of antistatist, structurally adjusted, labor-disciplined, financialized globalization—though it produced much growth in the 1990s—has been increasingly questioned in the wake of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. The secular stagnations (and worse) that have followed, in conjunction with amplifying economic inequalities, have made more urgent the need to identify alternatives to the “actually-existing” world order that emerged in the wake of the NIEO.⁵⁵ Revisiting the NIEO is part of that process: a chance to revisit an abandoned road—not because it remains available but because seeing it as an unfailure helps denaturalize the inegalitarian global political economy which for three decades global authorities like the *Economist* magazine or the World Economic Forum have insisted is the only reasonably available historical possibility. Reappreciating the seriousness with which the NIEO was regarded in its time, not least by its fervent opponents, can help us to reopen the possibility space of contemporary geopolitics.

NOTES

1. Bob Jessop, “What Follows Fordism? On the Periodization of Capitalism and its Regulation,” in *Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises and Globalizations*, ed. Robert Albritton et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 282–99.

2. Bradley W. Bateman, "There Are Many Alternatives: Margaret Thatcher in the History of Economic Thought," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 24, no. 3 (September 2002): 307–11.
3. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, "Neoliberalizing Space," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (July 2002): 380–404; Branko Milanovic, "The Two Faces of Globalization: Against Globalization as We Know It," *World Development* 31, no. 4 (April 2003): 667–83.
4. Jeffrey Cason, "Whatever Happened to the New International Economic Order?" in *Ethics in International Affairs*, ed. Andrew Valls (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 201–13.
5. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Oil Settlement with Mexico," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1927; John Gledhill, "The Persistent Imaginary of 'the People's Oil': Nationalism, Globalisation and the Possibility of Another Country in Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela," in *Crude Domination: An Anthropology of Oil*, ed. Andrea Behrends, Stephen P. Reyna, and Günther Schlee (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).
6. Thomas Ziesemer, "A History of Economic Theorizing on the Prebisch-Singer-Thesis," in *Zur Kontinentalen Geschichte des Ökonomischen Denkens*, ed. Jörg Glombowski, Anka Gronert, and Henk W. Plasmeijer (Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag, 1998), 337–65; J.F.J. Toye and Richard Toye, "The Origins and Interpretation of the Prebisch-Singer Thesis," *History of Political Economy* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 437–67.
7. Whether Prebisch's leadership was wise or effective is deeply contested. For harsh assessments, see Frederick F. Clairmonte, "Prebisch and UNCTAD: The Banality of Compromise," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 16, no. 4 (1986): 427–55, and also John White's comment in footnote 45. For a relatively even-handed biography of Prebisch, see Edgar Dosman, *The Life and Times of Raúl Prebisch, 1901–1986* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2008).
8. On the end of Bretton Woods, see Peter M. Garber, "The Collapse of the Bretton Woods Fixed Exchange Rate System," in *A Retrospective on the Bretton Woods System: Lessons for International Monetary Reform*, ed. Michael D. Bordo and Barry Eichengreen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 461–94. For a broader context, see Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On the geopolitical context of the oil embargo, see David S. Painter, "Oil and the American Century," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 2012): 24–39; Christopher R.W. Dietrich, "'Arab Oil Belongs to the Arabs': Raw Material Sovereignty, Cold War Boundaries, and the Nationalisation of the Iraq Petroleum Company, 1967–1973," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, no. 3 (2011): 450–79.
9. Hans W. Singer, "The New International Economic Order: An Overview," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 16, no. 4 (December 1978): 539–48.
10. United Press International (UPI): "Developing Nations Finish Plan to Raise Share of Economy," *New York Times*, February 19, 1975.
11. Jagdish Bhagwati, ed., *The New International Economic Order: The North-South Debate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), chap. 1.
12. Julius K. Nyerere, "Unity for a New Order," speech in Arusha, Tanzania, February 12, 1979.
13. H.W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 142–45.
14. Though the literature contains scattered references to "developing countries" prior to the

mid-1940s, the key texts that popularized the term were Eugene Staley, *World Economic Development: Effects on Advanced Industrial Countries* (Montreal: International Labor Office, 1944), and Kurt Mandelbaum, *The Industrialization of Backward Areas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945).

15. The term “decolonization” was almost unknown until the mid-1950s and appears to have become popular in the wake of the Bandung Conference. The term “developing countries” emerged only in the early 1960s.

16. James Thuo Gathii, “Neoliberalism, Colonialism and International Governance: Decentering the International Law of Governmental Legitimacy,” *Michigan Law Review* 98, no. 6 (May 2000): 1996.

17. William L. Scully of the Heritage Foundation made this argument in a policy briefing titled “The Brandt Commission: Deluding the Third World” (April 30, 1982) in which he condemned “international redistributive schemes” as entailing “a degree of coercion, the abrogation of sovereignty, and the denial that man has a fundamental right to the fruits of his labor” http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/1982/pdf/bgr182.pdf (accessed October 14, 2014).

18. With virtually all of G-77 nations being located in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, the political project also carried an antiracist overtone, though this was mainly discussed *sotto voce*. See C. Clyde Ferguson Jr., “The Politics of the New International Economic Order,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 32, no. 4 (1977): 142–58.

19. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

20. Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 283–86.

21. Houari Boumediene, “The Problems of Third World Development,” *Black Scholar* 6, no. 8 (May 1975): 2–10.

22. On the foundational importance of oil (and fossil fuels more generally) to the global economy, see Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003), and from the opposite end of the political spectrum, Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991). Telling of the NIEO’s historical oblivion is that neither of these books so much as mentions the NIEO.

23. Irving Kristol, “The ‘New Cold War,’” *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 1975, 18, cited in Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 34.

24. Robert Moss, “International Terrorism and Western Societies,” *International Journal* 28, no. 3 (1973): 418–30; Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

25. The Trilateral Commission popularized the term “governability,” but mainly with respect to the internal governance of nation-states, particularly in the industrial core, rather than for the international system as such: Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). For recent reflections on the rhetoric and reality of ungovernability, see Rosa Ehrenreich Brooks, “Failed States, or the State as Failure?,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 72, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 1159–96; and Claus Offe, “Ungovernability,” in *Fragile Stabilität—Stabile Fragilität*, ed. Stephen A. Jansen et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2013), 77–87.

26. Karl W. Deutsch, "On Inequality and Limited Growth: Some World Political Effects," *International Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (November 1975): 381–98.
27. Sean L. Malloy, "Uptight in Babylon: Eldridge Cleaver's Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 3 (June 2013): 538–71.
28. Stephen D. Krasner, "Transforming International Regimes: What the Third World Wants and Why," *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (March 1981): 119. Krasner would elaborate his perspective at length in *Structural Conflict: The Third World against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
29. Willy Brandt, *North-South: A Programme for Survival—Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues* (London: Pan, 1980).
30. Mark T. Berger, "The Nation-State and the Challenge of Global Capitalism," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (December 2001): 889–907.
31. James M. Buchanan, "Politics without Romance: A Sketch of Positive Public Choice Theory and Its Normative Implications" [1979], repr. in *The Collected Works of James Buchanan*, vol. 1, *The Logical Foundations of Constitutional Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999).
32. S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 3. As Amadae remarks, this literature generated, "a growing skepticism over the inherent meaningfulness of 'the public,' 'public interest' or 'general welfare'" —all key terms for the NIEO (4).
33. This same goes for the World Bank's current "Zero Poverty 2030" campaign, which asserts that "eradicating extreme poverty" is possible under current international institutional arrangements, thus implying that there is no need to rework these arrangements. For an acute contemporary assessment of how the Bank's turn to Basic Needs was deeply at odds with NIEO's ambition to remake international power, see Ajit Singh, "The 'Basic Needs' Approach to Development vs. the New International Economic Order: The Significance of Third World Industrialization," *World Development* 7, no. 6 (June 1979): 585–606; and Johan Galtung, "The New International Economic Order and the Basic Needs Approach," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 4, no. 4 (March 1979): 455–76.
34. On the lineaments of this trend, see Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J. Biersteker, eds., *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For example, even as the NIEO was proposed a new global legal-regulatory framework for transnational corporations, a competing framework was emerging in the 1970s in the form of a private "legal marketplace" of transnational legal arbitration; see Yves Dezalay and Bryant G. Garth, *Dealing in Virtue: International Commercial Arbitration and the Construction of a Transnational Legal Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
35. Vanessa Ogle, "State Rights against Private Capital: The 'New International Economic Order' and the Struggle over Aid, Trade, and Foreign Investment, 1962–1981," *Humanity* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 211–34.
36. Walter Goldstein, "Redistributing the World's Wealth: Cancun 'Summit' Discord," *Resources Policy* 8, no. 1 (March 1982): 25–40.
37. Robert E. Wood, *From Marshall Plan to Debt Crisis: Foreign Aid and Development Choices in the World Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
38. Merilee Serrill Grindle, *Challenging the State: Crisis and Innovation in Latin America and Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christopher G. Locke and Fredoun Z. Ahmadi-Esfahani, "The Origins of the International Debt Crisis," *Comparative Studies in Society*

and History 40, no. 2 (April 1998): 223–46; Enrique R. Carrasco, “The 1980’s: The Debt Crisis and the Lost Decade of Development,” *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems* 9, no. 1 (1999): 119.

39. Charles Gore, “The Rise and Fall of the Washington Consensus as a Paradigm for Developing Countries,” *World development* 28, no. 5 (May 2000): 789–804.

40. John Williamson, who coined the phrase “the Washington Consensus,” explicitly stated that development was a technical rather than political problem: “In Search of a Manual for Technopolis,” in *The Political Economy of Policy Reform*, ed. John Williamson (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1994), 11–28.

41. K. Ravi, “North-South Conflict: Global Problems in Search of Solutions,” in *The New International Economic Order Perspectives: The NIEO Perspectives, Towards a Global Concern*, ed. K.C. Reddy, M. Jagdeswara Rao, and S. Chandrasekhar (New Delhi: Ashish Publication House, 1991).

42. Craig N. Murphy, *Global Institutions, Marginalization, and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2005), esp. 103–6.

43. John Ravenhill, “The North-South Balance of Power,” *International Affairs* 66, no. 4 (October 1990): 731–48; David A. Lake, “Review Essay: Power and the Third World: Toward a Realist Political Economy of North-South Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1987): 217–34; Jack L. Goldsmith and Eric A. Posner, *The Limits of International Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Eyal Benvenisti and George W. Downs, “The Empire’s New Clothes: Political Economy and the Fragmentation of International Law,” *Stanford Law Review* 60, no. 2 (November 2007): 595–631; Robert L. Rothstein, “Epitaph for a Monument to a Failed Protest? A North-South Retrospective,” *International Organization* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 725–48.

44. As of October 2014, a search on Google Scholar of “NIEO failed” yields 41 results, whereas a search of “NIEO succeeded” yields exactly 1 result.

45. Even a skeptic of the NIEO like John White emphasized that there was nothing inevitable about the NIEO’s failure, but that it resulted rather from a poor strategic choices: “What was particularly unclear, and to some extent remains so still, was whether the call for a new order was a call addressed primarily to the *developing* countries, asserting, in the euphoria of ‘commodity power,’ a new-found capacity for independent action, or whether it was merely a somewhat angrier reassertion of the old appeal to the developed countries for unilateral concessions and preferential treatment. It could not be both. This was the point that had consistently been missed by the strategists of UNCTAD, with their commitment to a posture of confrontation from which it was hoped that a consensus would emerge. That strategy, stemming from a deep-seated and wrong belief in the ineluctable superiority of the developed countries’ negotiating hand, was akin to the behaviour of a general who, observing the superior disposition of his enemy’s forces, demands that the opposing commander should move off the high ground before the battle begins, to give him a ‘fairer’ chance of winning. It was this absurd strategy that render the ‘unity of the 77’ so ineffectual. There was nothing inevitable about the failure of the Group of 77. Nor was the failure attributable, as some have argued, to the Group’s commitment to the appearance of unity, even at the cost of substance. It was a failure peculiar to the extraordinary strategy devised for the developing countries in the UNCTAD framework, which was not abandoned until the fourth UNCTAD in 1976.” White, “The New International Economic Order: What Is It?” *International Affairs* 54, no. 4 (October 1978): 630.

46. M. Ayhan Kose, *Emerging Markets: Resilience and Growth amid Turmoil* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2010), 30.
47. Richard E. Baldwin, "Global Supply Chains: Why They Emerged, Why They Matter, and Where They Are Going," Fung Global Institute Working Paper FGI-2012-1 (2012); reprinted in Deborah K. Elms and Patrick Low, eds., *Global Value Chains in a Changing World* (Geneva: WTO Publications, 2013), 13–60.
48. Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
49. Shangrila Joshi, "Understanding India's Representation of North–South Climate Politics," *Global Environmental Politics* 13, no. 2 (May 2013): 128–47.
50. Robert O. Keohane and David G. Victor, "The Regime Complex for Climate Change," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2011): 7–23.
51. Sjur Kasa, Anne T. Gullberg, and Gørild Heggelund, "The Group of 77 in the International Climate Negotiations: Recent Developments and Future Directions," *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 8, no. 2 (June 2008): 113–27; Antto Vihma, Yacob Mulugetta, and Sylvia Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, "Negotiating Solidarity? The G77 through the Prism of Climate Change Negotiations," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 3 (2011): 315–34.
52. The 1970s are presented as the "beginning of the present era" in many widely cited but otherwise very different works. For a social history that makes this claim, see Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); for an economic history, see Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); for an intellectual history, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011); for an international history, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); for a political history, see Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
53. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw. *The Commanding Heights: The Battle between Government and the Marketplace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).
54. See, for example, Goran Therborn, "New Masses? Social Bases of Resistance," *New Left Review* 85 (January–February 2014); and Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
55. Tony Aspromourgos, "There Is No Alternative? The Financial Crisis and the Problem of Bail-outs," *AQ: Australian Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (January–February 2009): 4–9; Miguel A. Centeno and Joseph N. Cohen, "The Arc of Neoliberalism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 317–40; Wolfgang Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End," *New Left Review* 87 (May–June 2014); Klein, *This Changes Everything*.