Human rights, development and decolonization
The International Labour Organization, 1940–70

Daniel Maul

Between 1945 and 1975 around 70 countries gained their independence and the era of European rule over a large proportion of the world’s population came to an end. Decolonization, however, was not a neat process whereby political power was transferred from the colonial rulers to the leaders of the colonial liberation movements. The attainment of national sovereignty was always accompanied in one way or another by extensive material and intellectual engagement with the economic, social and cultural legacy of the colonial era. Daniel Maul approaches decolonization from the interface between diplomatic and intellectual history, taking the ILO as both protagonist and seismograph in the process, foregrounding decolonization and the international human rights and development discourses it bred.

Human rights, development and emancipation
During the Second World War a human rights discourse gained momentum that gave anticolonial forces a means to challenge colonial rule by making the legitimacy of this rule conditional on the fulfilment of certain universal criteria such as trade union rights and minimum standards of social policy. The ILO became a forum in which demands for social and political reform were increasingly formulated in the language of human rights. As decolonization progressed, this language was increasingly accompanied and sometimes superseded by a second emancipatory discourse based on the concept of development. The further political decolonization advanced, however, the less governments in developing countries seemed to believe that the two concepts were fully compatible. The ILO became engaged in a controversy in which the proclamation of “third generation rights” such as the right to development and the simultaneous rejection of a western “human rights imperialism” became part of the call for decolonization.

International organizations and decolonization
Due in large part to the beginning of its activities in the field of technical assistance, the United Nations system played an important role in “decolonizing” development thinking.
The involvement of international organizations elevated the concept of development from a strategy pursued by the colonial bureaucracies from the late 1930s onwards to lend new legitimacy to their claims to political control in the face of economic and social crises, to a subject of discussion fit for the sphere of international politics. The UN system provided newly independent States that joined it in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s with a platform on which to articulate to the world community their demands for economic and social progress, and within which their problems in these areas could be discussed in a global context.

**The International Labour Organization as historical actor**

The ILO, like other parts of the UN system, constituted throughout the period a “world in miniature” in which many of the major factors influencing the process took on clear and comprehensible contours. As the UN’s “world social organization”, the ILO was concerned with issues of central importance to decolonization. In charting its activities Maul opens up a panorama of social debates connected with the dissolution of colonial empires, shedding light on how decolonization changed both discursive patterns and the political weight of issues on a global level. Examining the debates conducted within the ILO on matters such as human rights and development reveals the values on which the social architecture of the global post-war order was based.

**A people’s peace in the colonies, 1940–47**

Maul looks first at the period from 1940 to 1947 and focuses on the ILO’s efforts to integrate the colonial territories into a new general discourse of social rights. Part I examines the conditions under which the ILO’s programme of post-war colonial reform came into being, emphasizing the debates and influences affecting the Organization during its period in exile. The presentation of the draft colonial programme at the Philadelphia Conference of 1944 is charted in detail as one of the major turning points in the history of human rights in the twentieth century. Against this backdrop, the ILO’s plans for colonial reform are analysed in the context of Allied plans covering the social aspects of the post-war order. Maul investigates the actual form the documents on colonial social policy took and the way they were shaped by the human rights debates of the immediate post-war period, paying particular attention to the effects of decolonization in Asia on the debates and programme of the ILO.

**The tools of progress: The ILO, 1948–60**

The ILO’s shift towards new activities in the field of development assistance is examined in Part II. Maul focuses on the Organization’s attempt to combine the aspects of its programme directed at the developing countries with the principles and standards of the Organization on the one hand and a universally valid model of modernization on the other. Part II examines the reasons and motives that, with the Cold War looming and decolonization in full swing, caused the ILO and its new Director-General, David Morse, to initiate new activities for the Organization in the area of technical assistance. The difficulties the ILO faced in its attempts to involve colonial Africa in its new spectrum of activities as an agency of development are considered, and Maul charts the strategies the ILO developed in order to counter the colonial powers’ resistance to ILO “interference” in Africa. The meetings of the Committee of Experts on Social Policy in Non-Metropolitan Territories set up by the Office are used...
to explore the ILO’s position on colonial policy and also to generate inferences about the coordinates of late colonial social policy. Elsewhere, the human rights discourse evident in the ILO’s approach to modernization is analysed in the highly charged context of late colonial rule, decolonization and the East–West conflict that formed the backdrop to the debates surrounding the basic principles of the Declaration of Philadelphia, which in the course of the 1950s were transformed into international labour standards.

**A growing conflict: Development, human rights and decolonization, 1960–70**

In Part III Maul explores the new challenges facing the ILO as a result of the rapidity with which decolonization progressed after 1960, considering the immediate effects which the new majorities and balances of power within the ILO had on the life and structure of the Organization and its programme of work. The conflict which emerged on the issue of South Africa and its policy of apartheid serves as an example of the influence wielded by the new nations, the power of their actions and the extent to which the policy of the ILO began to change under their growing weight. Maul also examines the effect on the ILO’s technical activities of the ever more salient North–South divide, and the avenues the Organization explored in its efforts to take account of the development needs of its members. The ILO’s efforts to assert the value of its human rights principles took place in a world that had changed profoundly since the end of the war. Focusing on two issues, forced labour and freedom of association, Maul explores the controversies which saw the developing countries increasingly challenging the value of basic ILO principles on the grounds that they were obstacles to economic progress. His study of the discourse of global responsibility concludes by examining both the Office’s attempts to solve these problems and the limits placed by the new political maxims taking hold at the end of the process of decolonization on the universality it claimed for its human rights standards.