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## Narrating the common good: Stories about and around the United Nations

Pierre-Yves Cadalen, Connor Mills and Karoline Postel-Vinay

Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations Organization's second secretary-general, was weary of great power politics. He welcomed decolonization and believed that the UN's General Assembly with its growing number of newly independent states should have a bigger say in international governance.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish diplomat was markedly at odds with Charles de Gaulle who firmly believed in the right of a few powerful nations to decide on war and peace – the five Second World War victors who were, and still are, sitting on the Security Council. Yet the French president did share with Hammarskjöld the idea that the world needed a place like the UN where 'all nations could meet on an equal footing and discuss together the matters of the universe.'<sup>2</sup> But whereas the former thought that ultimately the world's nations were indeed 'united' by a common narrative embedded in the UN's Charter, the latter envisioned the global organization as a site of anti-hegemonic contestation and formulation of counter-narratives. History proved Hammarskjöld right. With an ever-expanding mandate covering increasingly complex issues, coupled with the multiplication of players in international affairs, the UN has become a formidable production site of countless competing stories. The UN's Charter itself, rather than an unanimously agreed-on, clear-cut roadmap, has turned out to be a loose script that beckons for multiple dreams, visions and plots, sustaining a polymorphous definition of common good.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as the two cases discussed in this chapter underscore, it was unlikely that the UN could ever be as consensual as Charles de Gaulle believed it should be. From the start, the organization was built on a fundamental tension between an ambition to foster a singular narrative of global common good and the pledge to invite as many storytellers as there were sovereign states on the planet. If the peaceful coexistence of all nations and peoples was the ultimate goal, what that goal entailed has been deeply contested, reflecting a variety of needs, interests and beliefs, fed by different experiences of global connectedness. As Jeremy Adelman and Andreas Eckert point out in the introduction of this volume, the reality of global interconnectedness, the need to adjust or the drive to react to one's entanglement within a growing web of global interactions have fed peoples' narrative search and the construction of social categories, or 'world products', such as nation, empire or race. The UN, both as an

outcome of, and a reflection on global integration, is arguably a world product par excellence. Established on 24 October 1945, it materialized at long last, after the failure of the League of Nations, the old ambition of world governing for the sake of universal peace. It is a unique institution not just because it is the only international organization that aims at planetary representativeness, but also because of its retention power that echoes the very nature of global integration. Once in, never out.

Getting out of the UN is nearly impossible because the organization is much more than an association of states bound by treaties; it is an entity where realities of global integration are deeply intertwined, and whose existence provokes both hope and exasperation. Its grand aims locate it in the repertoire of the moral meta-narratives of international politics. This assemblage of aims is what we call here 'common good'. It is, more specifically, a layered assemblage that reflects the successive missions the UN has envisioned, with the help of commissions chaired by experienced policymakers, and as many endeavours to define the commonality of purpose of the world's nations. Willy Brandt's proposal, known as the Brandt Report, published in 1980, was about bridging the North-South divide and surviving together. It was followed in 1982 by Olof Palme's proposition, around disarmament and common security. Then in 1987 came Gro Harlem Brundtland's publication that introduced the notion of sustainable development as a new horizon for the UN's global call for action.

So the scenario for the implementation of world peace evolved. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the main storyline was the protection of the rights of nations and the global search for state sovereignty. Later on, the harsh socio-economic conditions of the newly independent nations came to the forefront, illuminating the relation between global development and global stability. The 1980s also witnessed the rising threat of nuclear weapons, pushing the focus of the UN's grand narrative back from North-South to East-West. By the end of the Cold War, the possibility of total annihilation inspired by military analysis such as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) concurrently highlighted our earthly condition and vulnerabilities. It transformed the common human-centric understandings of security. Nature became part and parcel of the world represented by the UN, and environmental protection was increasingly deemed as a core feature of global security.

But facts and events do not, as such, make narratives. Stories need storytellers. By the end of the Cold War, the number of raconteurs on the international scene had notably increased: national actors that did not have a voice before decolonization, transnational actors who found ways to talk across borders despite the rigidities of the bipolar order setting. That trend sharply increased after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The centrality of sovereign states in cooperation and regulation, which defined the UN's architecture, was challenged by the growing involvement of non-state actors since the early 1980s in a continuously expanding number of issues pertaining to global governance. In the beginning of the millennium, the rise of non-Western powers – exemplified by the creation of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) forum in 2009 – accompanied the diversification of both narrators and narratives of common good. Or rather it considerably improved the audibility of the latter. It also sheds a cruder light on the quaintness of institutional arrangements that were shaped by the post-1945 international balance of power, such as the composition of the UN's core body from which both Africa and Latin America are conspicuously absent.

The research cases presented here are located at the two temporal extremes of the trajectory of the UN as we know it today. Together they involve a remarkable diversity of actors and sites – from the military base towns of Japan in the 1950s to the forests of the Andes in the 2000s – and hence give an idea of the complexity of factors and processes implicated in the making of the UN's narrative space. The first one takes place during the very early days of the organization: less than a decade after its establishment, and only two years after the launching of its first Security Council-authorized military action, on the Korean peninsula. It follows events that occurred in the city of Kobe when Japan had just recovered its sovereignty after more than six years of Allied occupation. The UN was then an abstract presence – the weird abstraction to which Dag Hammarskjöld referred to – but its dominant narrative of common good, which was the quest for national dignity, and therefore the enforcement of state sovereignty, had a very concrete resonance on the ground. The second research case takes us to the beginning of our new millennium and to Evo Morales's Bolivia. It looks at the reinvention of environmental politics at a time when, more generally, new national actors in Latin America – such as Morales and other indigenous leaders – were redefining domestic and international political practices. Now the UN was a familiar figure, with its blue apparel of doves, helmets and flags. It was, and is, an institution that had been acknowledged, called upon, hailed, loved and hated, and might have even turned into the 'drawing made by the people themselves' that Hammarskjöld hoped for, albeit not necessarily a coherent one. The ownership of the UN's narrative of common good has considerably widened since the years of the Korean War, and that narrative has become thicker, made of a complex fabric of ideas and ambitions. But, as we will see, what has not changed is the strength of the national narrative framework. As yet the UN is fundamentally a gathering of nations and not a union of peoples, and national interests have a decisive shaping power on the formulation of narratives of common good.

## National sovereignty as a narrative of the common good

### **The Kobe incident and national sovereignty in Korean War-Era East Asia**

The Korean War was the result of a particular interaction across a particular border, in this case the invasion of the North Korean military across the thirty-eighth parallel. The UN war effort subsequently required many more cross-border interactions, including the stationing of hundreds of thousands of US and British Commonwealth personnel on bases in Japan. These various interactions produced narratives from the moment the conflict began. At the broadest level, a narrative put forward by the UN itself placed territorial justice squarely at the centre of a conception of the common good in international relations. Indeed, Security Council Resolution 82, which laid the groundwork for the eventual decision to commit military forces to the Korean Peninsula, began by framing the invasion as a violation of Korean sovereignty. The resolution noted that 'the Government of the Republic of Korea is a lawfully established government having effective control and jurisdiction over' the territory of Korea below the thirty-eighth parallel, an authority that was 'based on elections which were a valid

expression of the free will of the electorate of that part of Korea.' It was the violation of this lawful sovereignty by armed attack that led the council to determine that the North Korean invasion was a 'breach of the peace'.<sup>4</sup>

Such a narrative of the common good may initially appear internally consistent when articulated at the abstract level of a Security Council resolution. A number of inconsistencies begin to crop up, however, when one examines the international politics behind the conflict, much less the practical realities of prosecuting a war that required the coordination of more than two dozen ally nations and the deployment of millions of military personnel. At the level of international politics, a number of historians have pointed out how the impetus behind the UN intervention in Korea had far more to do with the national interests of the United States than any universalist conception of the common good.<sup>5</sup> A voluminous body of scholarship underlines the fact that the Korean War was a contradictory moment in a number of interlinked histories, from that of the nascent United Nations to that of the burgeoning Cold War.<sup>6</sup> While keeping these high-level debates in mind, this section sets its sights lower to the ground. It argues that the abstract gears of the aforementioned narrative of the common good were often seized up by the concrete sand of a thousand particularities and details.

Specifically, this section will examine one of these grains of sand: the 'Kobe incident', a 1952 diplomatic crisis between Great Britain and Japan that was a direct result of the stationing of soldiers in Japan for the UN war effort. On 29 June 1952, the HMS *Belfast*, taking a break from active duty around the Korean peninsula, steamed into Kobe on a 'goodwill mission'. Two sailors aboard the *Belfast*, Able Seamen Derek Smith and Peter Stinner, took the opportunity to go ashore for a night of bar hopping. Unfortunately, as a newspaper later put it, 'one beer led to another, and then came the incident'.<sup>7</sup> The pair were apprehended late that night by the local Japanese police, arrested for stealing a taxicab after they had assaulted its driver and robbed him of around 1,700 yen. At the time, it was common practice for local Japanese authorities to turn detained military personnel over to British authorities for punishment. In this case, however, the Japanese officials refused. Instead, the two sailors remained in Japanese custody until they were tried, convicted and sentenced to thirty months in prison on August 5. The sentencing in turn prompted a formal request for the release of the men by British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden on August 6, launching the diplomatic crisis proper.<sup>8</sup>

Much like the war in Korea, this was a fight over a question of jurisdiction. With the promulgation of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in April 1952, Japan had regained its full sovereignty after more than six years of occupation by Allied troops. The transition from occupation to independence raised new questions about the legal position of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who lived in or passed through Japan during the Korean War. The United States largely resolved these issues by effectively negotiating a Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Japan in 1951, as part of the broader negotiations surrounding the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Great Britain, meanwhile, was left scrambling to nail down a new legal position for its military personnel in Japan. Ongoing negotiations centred on two alternatives: Japan wished to implement a NATO-style SOFA, in which off-duty troops who committed crimes would be prosecuted by their host country rather than their home country; Great Britain, on the other hand, insisted that they should have full jurisdiction over their own personnel, as the United

States did under the terms of the agreement it had signed in 1951. Here we can already see the beginnings of new narratives that challenged the universalist story of the UN. If the UN claimed that Korea's 'jurisdiction' was inviolate in Security Council Resolution 82, Great Britain saw Japan's jurisdiction as a subject for negotiation.

When the crisis came, the universal narrative of the common good quickly collided with national narratives articulated by officials in Great Britain and Japan. The UN narrative held that Great Britain and Japan were equals, united in an effort to uphold global peace. British officials, meanwhile, had their own story. In February 1952, a few months before the crisis in Kobe, British Ambassador to Japan Esler Denning had written of Japan:

[T]he Sleeping Princess who, after six years in her glass case, was restored to life by the kiss of peace of forty-eight nations at San Francisco, differs very largely from the lady of the fairy tale. She has a number of aches and pains, her limbs are stiff and uncertain from lack of use and she is certainly a little bedraggled and bewildered.

Great Britain, on the other hand, was 'Prince Charming ... rich, handsome and strong'. Denning admitted that the road ahead did not look entirely smooth; Japan remained somewhat sceptical that the prince was 'as charming as his name'. Still, there was good reason to hope that Japan would see reason; all that remained was to negotiate a new 'marriage settlement'.<sup>9</sup> If the UN narrative emphasized unity and equality, this British fairy tale insisted that Japan was in a distinctly subordinate position at the beginning of 1952. A few months later, the Kobe incident confronted British officials with a choice between international cooperation and national pride, a choice between the narratives of the United Nations and those of the UK. When put to the test, they seemed to have little difficulty choosing which storyline to follow.

### Competing narratives of the Kobe incident

The Kobe incident quickly generated new and competing narratives in Japan and Great Britain. National interest in Japan was particularly intense; the *Mainichi shinbun*, *Yomiuri shinbun* and *Asahi shinbun* all published editorials on the sailors, and the incident was front-page news for at least one – and often all three – of the major national papers every day for the rest of August.<sup>10</sup> Japanese media members and politicians produced narratives about the crisis that drew directly on the history of imperialism in East Asia, as well as the regime of extraterritoriality that had existed in Japan under the so-called 'unequal treaties' of the late nineteenth century. One opposition Diet member warned that, without prompt action, Japan might 'become like Korea or Manchuria', a target of encroachment by external powers.<sup>11</sup> A representative for the Yoshida administration later admitted that memories of extraterritoriality were 'still fresh' in Japan and that granting extraterritorial rights to a foreign army was 'totally unacceptable' in the minds of many Japanese.<sup>12</sup> An editorial in the *Yomiuri shinbun* argued that a sense of national consciousness, which had 'withered [*ishuku*]' during the Occupation, was reawakened by the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The

paper warned that international insults like the Kobe incident could have very easily caused a more extreme form of nationalism to 'flare up [*moeagaru*]' in postwar Japan.<sup>13</sup>

This was precisely what British narrators of the Kobe incident argued had already happened. Although the case received far less attention in British media, a number of articles claimed that the Japanese actions were motivated by bigotry and anti-British feeling. The *Times* wrote that the 'savage sentence ... betokens a degree of anti-foreign feeling which westerners had hoped had been eradicated from Japanese nationalist sentiment'.<sup>14</sup> The *Daily Express* informed its readers that the Japanese press had 'started a hate campaign against British troops in Japan', and the *Manchester Guardian* ran a column under a headline that claimed that Japan was 'Feeding the Flames of Xenophobia'.<sup>15</sup> Ambassador Esler Dening and his colleagues at the embassy were equally outraged by what they saw as the mistreatment of their countrymen. After the sailors were sentenced, Dening wrote that the sentence was 'savage, wholly unjustified and animated by anti-foreign sentiment'.<sup>16</sup> Even as Japan placed the Kobe incident in a longer narrative of imperialism and foreign encroachment, Great Britain located the crisis in a narrative about the lasting legacies of Japanese criminality and xenophobia during the Second World War.

These narratives competed directly with the story of formal equality and international cooperation simultaneously being put forward by the UN. Perhaps nothing better symbolizes this fact than one of the stratagems that Dening suggested to secure the release of Smith and Stinner. In early August, during what was perhaps the most intense phase of the crisis, Dening argued that Great Britain should threaten to block Japan's bid to join the UN. If Great Britain hinted that it might veto Japan's request for membership, Dening proposed, Japanese officials might be convinced to release the two sailors. To test the waters, he suggested, the threat could first be put to the Japanese ambassador to Britain; on 9 August, Dening asked (somewhat strangely), 'Might it not be possible discreetly to make his flesh creep?'<sup>17</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the British Foreign Office's reaction to this suggestion was decidedly negative. One of Dening's colleagues wrote that the plan was 'ill-advised', and a British official stationed in Washington wrote that his 'blood rather curdled' at the very suggestion.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the proposal is suggestive of just how little weight Dening assigned to Britain's status in Japan specifically as it pertained to the UN war effort. To prevent any damage to Great Britain's national status in Japan, Dening was willing to undermine an ally's attempt to join the very international body that was ostensibly responsible for keeping the peace in Korea.

After months of backchannel negotiations, the Kobe incident was finally resolved on 5 November, when a Japanese appeals court upheld the conviction of the sailors but suspended their sentence for three years. The court maintained that Japan did in fact have proper jurisdiction, but Smith and Stinner were allowed to board a British vessel to return home. Dening was pleased that the crisis was over but did not feel that Japan had done Great Britain any great favour, writing that he saw 'no reason to encourage the Japanese in the belief that they have behaved with any particular generosity'.<sup>19</sup> No one seemed entirely pleased, as British officials continued to grouse privately and the Diet's opposition parties continued to criticize the Yoshida administration for several more months. Meanwhile, the wider SOFA negotiations ground on. It was not until



more than a year later, in February 1954, that Japanese and British negotiators once and for all cemented the formal legal status for UN personnel in Japan. In the end, Japanese officials got their way, as the new SOFA was based almost entirely on the NATO model.

### **National sovereignty for whom?**

Though now little more than a historical footnote in the larger history of the Korean War, the Kobe incident offers an interesting perspective on the various narratives produced when UN soldiers crossed territorial borders for that conflict in the early 1950s. For one, the incident shows how shallow the roots of international cooperation could sometimes be in the early postwar years. Even as the UN was attempting to put forward a narrative based on equality among nations, the old colonial, racial and international hierarchies appeared to linger. Once the crisis began, British officials quickly accused their Japanese counterparts of anti-foreign bias and demanded that the sailors be released. The cooperative rhetoric embodied in Security Council Resolution 82 was nowhere to be found in Ambassador Denning's suggestion that Great Britain block Japan from UN membership even as Japan was lending active support to the UN's war effort in Korea. Media members in both countries articulated the crisis in terms that appealed to nationalist sentiments. Thus, the fledgling UN narrative found itself struggling to compete with national narratives that drew on already-existing histories of imperial projects and international relations in East Asia. As the following section will show, this conflict between the universal and the particular was not a problem solely for the narrative around territorial justice. When it came to environmental justice, too, actors on the ground sometimes took the UN's narratives into their own hands.

## Environmental justice and the Bolivian forest as an empowerment narrative

### **Reframing the global narrative of environmental justice**

We will indeed see that national narratives are still, several decades after the Kobe incident, decisive in the process that leads to the definition of the global common good. The global common good, as an idea, is constantly reinterpreted before eventually being projected internationally. In other words, global common good narratives are always going bidirectionally, from the local to the global and from the global to the local. In contemporary Bolivia, presided by Evo Morales from 2006 to 2019,<sup>20</sup> the ever-growing international importance of environmental issues, and the resulting powerful idea of environmental justice, gave the government in La Paz an opportunity to produce a new national narrative – a counter-narrative to previous ones – designed to have a global reach. But what the Bolivian President Evo Morales' narrative strategy has revealed, either at the United Nations General Assembly or in other multilateral fora, is precisely a difference in directionality. Whereas the Kobe incident offered a

clear direction from the local to the global, where national narratives confronted an international one, the Bolivian example exposed another, almost reversed, trajectory. Here, the narration of the common good goes from the global to the local, and more specifically, the national. It borrows from and reshapes a global narrative of common good – the narrative of environmental justice – to produce a national narrative, aiming at international projection.

Common good is fundamentally attached to peace at the UN level, and the actual links between peace and the ecological issue<sup>21</sup> are the very basis for the Bolivian national counter-narrative to achieve a global dimension. One apparently universal notion served this diplomatic purpose: the Forest, as a part of ‘Nature’, or ‘Mother Earth’, the Andean ‘*Pachamama*’.<sup>22</sup> This universal notion is a useful tool to build a ‘political fiction’, which is, as stated by Patrick Boucheron in his Collège de France’s lectures, ‘not necessarily feigned: it does not always create a possible world, but it produces a thought experiment’. And the historian adds: ‘This dual definition – fiction imitates the world, but it is its own world – allows for the pragmatic description of a variety of practices and conducts.’<sup>23</sup>

We will try to explain now the reason why forests are an effective world and subject to build an international counter-narrative precisely articulated to the common good. Why can forests be useful to imagine an alternative narrative received within the general frame of the UN’s common good?

### **The Bolivian forest: A globalized national counter-narrative**

First and foremost, the particularity of forests is to be found in their materiality. Even if ‘the Forest’ can lend to the production of many narratives, one cannot ignore that each forest forms a local ecosystem of its own while belonging to a much larger ecosystem. The UN has always been a site of contested narratives where, since the 1970s, ‘nature’ has progressively become a crucial battlefield for international politics.<sup>24</sup> Nature, therefore, turned both into a global common and an increasingly decisive political stake in world affairs, leading to an evermore intense competition of narratives. Bolivia experienced, with Evo Morales’ election, an important political shift regarding the rights of ‘Mother Nature’ – ‘la Pachamama.’ This notion then became an international asset in order to produce an ecological counter-narrative that provided Bolivia with international recognition. Although what looked like a new emplotment created by one of the poorest countries in Latin America has always been and continues to be a way for the Bolivian government to gain global legitimacy as both a state actor and the producer/promoter of a transnational vision.

Three dimensions are particularly salient in the Bolivian attempt at reconfiguring environmental narratives within the UN, along the lines of common good principle. Firstly, a forest is a territory, and cannot consequently escape from the principle of sovereignty. Secondly, the forest as a narrative is an empowerment tool, through which the Bolivian state has taken ownership of academic and civil society ideological movements. From there, and thirdly, the Bolivian projection of its forest narrative means building an imaginary that can be used for what could be called a new government of the empowered.

### The sovereign defence of the forest

The Amazonian forest is the bearer of a fundamental tension. On the one hand, the Amazonian forest has been constructed as a single entity, ecologically relevant and crucial for the survival of indigenous ways of life. On the other hand, the unique legitimacy of sovereignty was reinserting Amazonia in the normal and current process of state territorial appropriation<sup>25</sup>; it was a way to guarantee the development policies. The *proceso de cambio*<sup>26</sup> or 'process of change' in Bolivia gave a central position to the indigenous culture and politics, modifying substantially the Bolivian international position regarding the classical territorial narrative. Indeed in 2009 Bolivia self-proclaimed itself an indigenous multinational state, making the indigenous rhetoric a central feature of the international projection of its new regime.

The interaction between a singular Bolivian configuration and the global counter-narrative articulated by the Bolivian diplomacy gave birth to the International Day of Mother Earth adopted by the General Assembly (resolution 63/278) in 2009: this negotiation was led by Pablo Solón, a quite well-known environmentalist in Bolivia, and he considered this international step as an important diplomatic victory for Bolivia.<sup>27</sup> This is a typical example of 'political reconfiguration' through narrative invention, following a process described by Paul Ricoeur.<sup>28</sup>

This narrative based on the *Andean* worldview meets the issue of forests in the context of UN negotiations. What could appear as a paradox here is the relative absence of Amazonian communities within this narrative. The unifying factor between different communities is then to be found in another narrative, which could be described as a powerful metanarrative: the common good. At the intersection of Christianity, environmentalism, socialism and indigenism, this notion constitutes a useful punctuation for this new narrative. Any traditions can be reconfigured through the ambiguous notion of community. At this point, forest became for the Bolivian diplomacy a narrative that could conveniently evolve upon the basis of the common good metanarrative, convenient for Bolivian diplomacy and relevant to the UN sphere.

### Common good and the Pachamama as narrative partners

Then, the narrative construction of Bolivia within the UN aims at building a counter-narrative that would nevertheless respect the metanarrative structure of the UN: even more, it would offer a new interpretation of what the common objectives of World Nations could be.

From the Bolivian perspective, the counter-narrative on climate change constituted a window of opportunity. The political agenda of the Bolivian diplomacy was limpid, and implied that the ecological issue was both giving this peripheral country a global echo, and allowed the singularization of their position.<sup>29</sup>

It is also essential to analyse the specificity of the ecological issue. The paradox of the articulation between the Bolivian counter-narrative, the UN metanarrative and their very definition is lying in the current and permanent possibility of their annihilation. In other words, if no one cooperates in order to maintain the forest – and

other environmental commons – as an ecosystem which mitigates climate change, the political and material basis of the political narrative coming from the new Bolivian government would vanish. The main feature of both the Bolivian counter-narrative and the metanarrative of the UN is without any doubt a strong instability.

However, this instability does not prevent both the Bolivian counter-narrative and the metanarrative to meet at the UN and then to be a source of legitimization each one for the other: the UN needs national counter-narratives to justify its metanarrative, based on the free expression of equal Nations. The vastness of the notion of Common Good, even if it is culturally rooted and partly Eurocentric, allows the metanarrative to work quite efficiently as a potential gathering of different worldviews.

### **Forest as an empowerment narrative**

One striking example of such a process is the integration of the indigenous perspective within the Forest narrative. Indeed, the narrative of the Forest is not the same whether one integrates or not the indigenous communities within the story. For the most conservative environmentalists, there is no positive human impact on the forests,<sup>30</sup> which have then to be emptied.<sup>31</sup>

For instance, the Tipnis, a Bolivian national park and indigenous territory, was a place of many struggles against the liberal governments during the 1990s. Those struggles were mainly led by the *cocaleros*, the coca growers. At the head of their union was Evo Morales. The international support of the UN and the EU was crucial in their political formation and capacity for later political events.<sup>32</sup> Their relations to the Amazonian communities living inside the very park were quite weak though. Their link to the territory was relying on their work as peasants. It was and still is an economical one. The ground is considered by the *cocaleros* as a potential source of wealth.

In order to understand the difference between the Amazonian communities and the indigenous peasants, it is possible to analyse the conflictual situation linked to the construction of roads within the park: the Amazonian communities considered it as an assault on their living space. In their view the *cocaleros* were ‘men of roads’ whereas they were ‘men of rivers’.<sup>33</sup>

The main narrative evoked in the first part, defining now the interaction between the Bolivian government and the UN, has almost erased the narrative of those *hombres de los ríos* (men of rivers), which explained the *a priori* paradox of their absence from the Bolivian counter-narrative about the Forest.

Even if a nuanced and synthetic version of the Amazonian communities’ narratives has been integrated to the governmental narrative, some material processes are going on, which erode their middle-run capacity to live in the forest.

According to Diego Pacheco, one of the Bolivian negotiators for COP, other parties in the negotiations of the COP17 at Durban were surprised to hear the critics from Bolivia against the material conceptualization of a forest: what is a forest to you all, indeed, was their interrogation.<sup>34</sup> Is this a part of our consciousness and lives as human beings integrated to a greater natural entity or an element of nature subjugated to our possibilities of action? In this very opposition lies the political importance of narratives.

### **The government of the empowered: A global and political counter-narrative**

History as a discipline is at the core of any narrative formation. For there is no narrative without references to the past, an effective narrative contains the ambiguities of this very past. Despite its novelty, the reconfiguration cannot be based on any *tabula rasa*. It is thus interesting to observe the continuity between the national development narrative from the 1970s and the forest narrative from the last decade. The former was mainly based on the dependency theory<sup>35</sup> that linked the economic situation in Latin America to the wealth of Northern capitalist countries.<sup>36</sup> As for the latter, the notion of ecological debt is essential and largely based on the same theoretical ground<sup>37</sup>: the contribution to climate change is almost neutral for a country such as Bolivia, implying that the main contributors to its mitigation have to be the Northern nations. Forest is at the core of such an argument: the vice-president of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, argued that there were 5,400 trees per habitant in Bolivia, whereas there were 140 trees per habitant in Germany<sup>38</sup>: efforts are already made by Bolivia, and the international community have to take this fact into account, given their economic predominance.

This global narrative of the forests is thus to be considered as a unifying one, addressed to the UN and the international community in order to globalize the stakes and draw a straight global line between the empowered and the powerful: in other words, the political use of this narrative is to displace the conflict from a national or local perspective to a global one, involving all the social forces and determining actors in the analysis. In a nutshell, this new plotment is meant to search unity where conflict is the dominant and persistent reality. It evolves on the edge, between the indigenous *cosmovisión* or worldview and a more euro-centric perspective, that would consider, with Élisée Reclus, that 'mankind is nature becoming conscious of itself'.<sup>39</sup>

### **The paradoxes of a counter-hegemonic sovereignty**

The counter-narrative that Bolivia defended is based on a paradox that can enlighten more generally the analysis of counter-narratives held at the General Assembly of the UN. As it is built on the international status of Bolivia, that of a peripheral country, this counter-narrative works to be closer to the transnational and social movements at a global scale. However, even if Bolivia is a peripheral state, it is still a state. And the international claim for an anti-capitalist protection of the environment is also a claim for sovereignty and international recognition. Here lies the paradox between the forest as a core element of the Bolivian counter-narrative and the forest as a global space that is structured by a transnational dimension and a global militancy.

Sovereignty is both a condition for the projection of a counter-narrative and an inner limitation of the counter-narrative. In the eventuality of a direct conflict upon a forest, the counter-narrative's integrity would suffer from the priority given to sovereignty over the global protection of the Amazonia. The identity of the narrators is then particularly interesting, because they have various stories to tell. At the UN, the Pachamama's protection is a powerful counter-narrative, but Evo Morales, his vice-president and the entire government have another imperative: they have to tell simultaneously another story, that of a state strengthening itself nationally and

internationally. This paradoxical position leads to inevitable tensions that, in turn, reveal a deeper reality: national interests, strictly defined, are inescapable as is the framework of the UN's metanarrative.

## Conclusion

A global organization such as the United Nations relies on a fundamental hypothesis: the possibility of a narrative that can be shared on a planetary scale. Which brings about a fundamental question: whose narrative is it? Who owns it? At the moment of its creation, the UN belonged to the history of institutions described by Craig Murphy,<sup>40</sup> that is, an institution imagined and conceived by a small Western governmental elite, and eventually established by a few big national powers. The Charter, that delineated its original narrative, was very much the product of a handful of persons even if it was discussed within the larger circle of the Allied representatives at Dumbarton Oaks. Yet the Charter, and the institution it sustained, was a call for a much wider conversation and became a *de facto* invitation to define and redefine the 'common good' that the fundamental text was supposed to enshrine. The UN offered a framework, and soon became an actual site for the production of multiple narratives. It also became a major node for the formation and dissemination of ideas, and for the global projection of norms.<sup>41</sup> In that sense the organization is as much an assembly as it is a laboratory-cum-workshop.

As the two research cases presented in this chapter illustrate, the narrative production triggered by the establishment of the UN has been far from homogeneous, both temporally and spatially. The numerous narrations occurred within a variety of scales and units, at different moments in the history of international politics. The Kobe incident, a multi-scalar event in itself, led to the expression of a counter-narrative of territorial justice to the Charter-sponsored narrative about the rights of nations and world peace. It revealed, however, not just a disjunction of narratives – the national versus the global – but also a circulation: how the initial world peace narrative could be re-interpreted, destabilized, re-adjusted by the voices from the ground. Half a century later, this circulation was fully at play in the domestic politics and foreign policy of Bolivia. But the international scene had changed in the meantime: it was considerably more democratic, following decolonization and, later on, the rise of non-state actors. The indigenous president Evo Morales is, among many others, one metaphoric figure of that change. It gives a measure of a transformation that was hardly thinkable a few decades before, when frail states, whether Japan or others, were struggling to be heard, whereas from the perspective of some dominant actors and their representatives – like the British diplomats encountered in the Kobe story – the former were not really supposed to be heard at all.

The promise of empowerment made by the UN at its inception has in some measure materialized. Taking ownership of the 'sovereignty as common good' narrative was, in the 1950s, a difficult fight, if not a bloody one, as many decolonization processes have shown. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the tropes of narratives of common

good have multiplied, and the possibility for owning and using them for oneself has expanded. All international actors – states and non-state actors – can claim access to the ‘environment as common good’ narrative; this global access is almost a given. Hence was the opportunity for the Bolivian government of using the global narrative of environmental justice to create a novel national plot, for both international and domestic purposes. Such opportunity is, furthermore, not limited to ecology. It is more generally the global narrative of the ‘common good’ and its many tropes (territorial justice, human security, sustainable development, etc.) that can be mobilized by local, national or transnational narrators for their own benefit. In that sense, we could tentatively conclude that the very notion of a global narrative has become a common good.

So, coming back to Hammarskjöld’s prophecy, one could indeed argue that the people, ‘just the people’, have finally made the UN’s narrative their own. This larger and more diverse ownership might obscure but does not, however, erase the paramount characteristic of the institutional functioning of the UN. It has never ceased to be an organization where, ultimately, decisions are taken by nations with sovereign rights. And this makes the UN an increasingly paradoxical narrative stage. It still belongs to the realm of *Realpolitik*, allowing for the expression of diversely narrow national visions, and it is at the same time an expanding central public space, something of a mammoth Greek *agora*, where a multifarious mix of communities and individuals deploys their worldviews. It has grown, almost organically, out of the stories of Japanese military base towns and of those of the Andean forests, and of thousands of other ones. It is narratively a powerful place, and its narrative power generates high expectations as well as deep frustrations. Once the UN appears, like the naked king, without its discursive glory, it suddenly looks like an organization with limited capacity and in dire need of reform, a reality that even its most fervent supporters acknowledge.<sup>42</sup> The Syrian poet Racha Lotfi, contemplating the deadly chaos of Aleppo in 2016, wished that the UN would talk less and act more. The management of the Covid-19 pandemic by the international organization was, again, a source of disappointment. The gap between the tediousness of decision-making processes and the sense of urgency triggered by global problems such as large-scale food insecurity leads to frustration and distrust. But however shaky the future of multilateralism might look, and however feeble the institution actually is, the global stage it created over several decades will probably not be dismantled anytime soon.

## Notes

- 1 Henning Melber, *Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations and the Decolonisation of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2019).
- 2 Charles de Gaulle, press conference given at Elysée Palace, 4 February 1965.
- 3 The historiography of the UN reflects this polymorphousness, from the classic accounts of Evan David Luard’s *History of the United Nations* (London: Macmillan, 1982 and 1989) to the more critical one of Sunil Amrith and Glenda Suga, ‘New Histories of the United Nations’, *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (September 2008).

- 4 United Nations Security Council, 'Resolution 82: Complaint of Aggression upon the Republic of Korea', *UNSCR: Search Engine for the United Nations Security Council Resolutions*, 25 June 1950, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/82>
- 5 See, for example, William Stueck's discussion of how the United States initially 'used the United Nations largely as an instrument of its own policies in Korea' but was eventually constrained by other nations who used the UN as a forum to influence US policy during the war: William Stueck, 'The United Nations, the Security Council, and the Korean War', in *The United Nations Security Council and War*, ed. Vaughan Lowe, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 265–79.
- 6 See, for example: Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950–1953* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Aaron Forsberg, *America and the Japanese Miracle: The Cold War Context of Japan's Postwar Economic Revival, 1950–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 83–112; Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Stueck, 'The United Nations'.
- 7 'Why We Are in Kobe Jail', *News Chronicle*, 12 August 1952, in Great Britain Foreign Office, *Foreign Office Files for Japan and the Far East, Series Two: British Foreign Office Files for Post-War Japan*, Part 1. (Adam Matthew Publications, Marlborough, England, 2005) [hereafter, FOFJ], Reel 13, FJ1192/620 (FO371/99462).
- 8 This narrative is based on Foreign Office documents and Japanese- and English-language media sources from the time. The Kobe incident itself has received remarkably little attention from historians in either Japan or Great Britain. For one exception, see Uchiyama Masakuma, 'Dai ni Kōbe suihei jiken', *Keiō gijuku sōritsu nijūgo-nen kinen ronbunshū: hōgakubu seijigaku kankei* 10 (1983): 395–421. The term 'Kobe incident' comes from British documents. The term '*suihei jiken*' [sailors incident] or '*Eisuihei jiken*' [English sailors incident] was more common in Japanese newspapers at the time.
- 9 Esler Denning to Anthony Eden, Memorandum on 'Japan: Annual Review for 1951', 4 February 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 2, FJ1011/1 (FO371/99388).
- 10 See, for example: 'Reisei ni hōteki kaiketsu o nozomu', *Asahi shinbun*, 9 August 1952, 1; and 'Eisuihei saiban to warera no shuchō', *Mainichi shinbun*, 8 August 1952, 1.
- 11 'Foreign Affairs Committee, Meeting 36, Session 13', *National Diet Proceedings Retrieval System*, National Diet of Japan, 18 June 1952.
- 12 'Judicial Affairs Committee, Meeting 3, Session 15', *National Diet Proceedings Retrieval System*, National Diet of Japan, 13 November 1952.
- 13 'Minzoku ishiki to suihei jiken', *Yomiuri shinbun*, 12 August 1952, 1.
- 14 'British Sailors' Sentence: Reticence in Tokyo', *The Times*, 7 August 1952, 4.
- 15 'Sailors: New Flare-Up', *Daily Express*, 9 August 1952, 1; Tiltman, Hessell. 'Japan's Orgy of Emotion: The Kobe Case: Feeding the Flames of Xenophobia', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1952.
- 16 Esler Denning to Robert Scott, Telegram No. 1319 on 'Detained Seamen', 5 August 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 12, FJ1192/415 (FO371/99456).
- 17 Esler Denning to Robert Scott, Telegram No. 1353 on 'Detained Seamen', 9 August 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 13, FJ1192/512 (FO371/99459).
- 18 John Pilcher to Esler Denning, Memorandum on 'Detained Seamen', 12 August 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 13, FJ1192/512 (FO371/99459); J. E. Coulson to Michael



- Williams, Personal Correspondence, 12 August 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 13, FJ1192/513 (FO371/99459).
- 19 Esler Dening to Foreign Office, 'Detained Seamen', 5 November 1952, in FOFJ, Reel 14 FJ1192/711 (FO371/99466).
  - 20 On Bolivian politics and the Amazon forest during this period see *inter alia*: John Crabtree, 'From the MNR to the MAS: Populism, Parties, the State and Social Movements in Bolivia since 1952', in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Carlos de. La Torre and Cynthia Arnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 269–94; David Recondo, 'Participatory Decentralization in Bolivia: The Genealogy of an Institutional Transplant', in *Democracy at Large. NGOs, Political Foundations, Think Tanks and International Organizations*, ed. Boris Petric (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 125–45; Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest. Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Pierre-Yves Cadalen, 'When Populists Govern: Bolivia, Ecuador and Populism', in *Discursive Approaches to Populism Across Disciplines. The Return of Populists and the People*, ed. Michael Kranert (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, 313–37); Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson, *Revolutionary Horizons: Past and Present in Bolivian Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007).
  - 21 Harald Welzer, *Les guerres du climat. Pourquoi on tue au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
  - 22 Franck Poupeau, 'La Bolivie entre Pachamama et modèle extractiviste', *Ecologie & politique*, no. 46 (2013): 109–19.
  - 23 Patrick Boucheron, 'Fictions politiques. Chaque époque rêve la suivante', lecture given at the Collège de France, January 2017.
  - 24 Razmig Keucheyan, *La nature est un champ de bataille. Essai d'écologie politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).
  - 25 Bertrand Badie, *La fin des territoires. Essai sur le désordre international et l'utilité sociale du respect* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).
  - 26 The *proceso de cambio*, literally 'process of change', is the name given by the government to the political phase following Evo Morales' election in 2006.
  - 27 Interview with Pablo Solón, head of Fundación Solón, La Paz, 15 July 2016.
  - 28 Paul Ricœur, *Le temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 12.
  - 29 Personal interview with Diego Pacheco, Vice-Minister for development planning, La Paz, 14 July 2016.
  - 30 keucheyan, *La nature est un champ de bataille*.
  - 31 Guillaume Blanc, *L'invention du colonialisme vert* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020).
  - 32 Personal interview with Magdalena Medrano, ex-Secretary of the Mother Earth department in Cochabamba, Cochabamba, 3 August 2016.
  - 33 Personal interview with Sarela Paz, anthropologist, Cochabamba, 9 August 2016.
  - 34 Personal interview with Diego Pacheco, vice-minister for development planning, La Paz, 14 July 2016.
  - 35 Elaborated by Raúl Prebisch and further developed by Samir Amin and André Gunder-Franck, the dependency theory was mainly based on the idea of an international division of labour between the South that produced low-value goods and the North that produced most of the high-value goods.
  - 36 Andre Gunder-Frank, *Le développement du sous-développement en Amérique latine* (Paris: Maspéro, 1970).

- 37 Esperanza Martínez, *Yasuní. El tortuoso camino de Kioto a Quito* (Quito: Abya Yala, 2009); Grupo de Trabajo sobre Deuda Externa y Desarrollo, *Deuda externa, desarrollo y ecología* (Quito: Ecuador, FONDAD, 1992).
- 38 Interview with Alvaro García Linera, vice-president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, La Paz, 21 August 2016.
- 39 Élisée Reclus, *L'homme et la terre* (Paris: Librairie universelle, 1905), 1. Despite the fact that both statements could appear different, the political implications of both can be the same. This possibility is also what gave existence to the Bolivian narrative which articulated the indigenous traditions with a Marxist perspective.
- 40 Craig Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).
- 41 See *inter alia*, Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) and Kirsten Haack, *The United Nations Democracy Agenda: A Conceptual History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).
- 42 Sumihiro Kuyama and Michael Fowler (eds.), *Envisioning Reform. Enhancing UN Accountability in the Twenty-First Century* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2009).