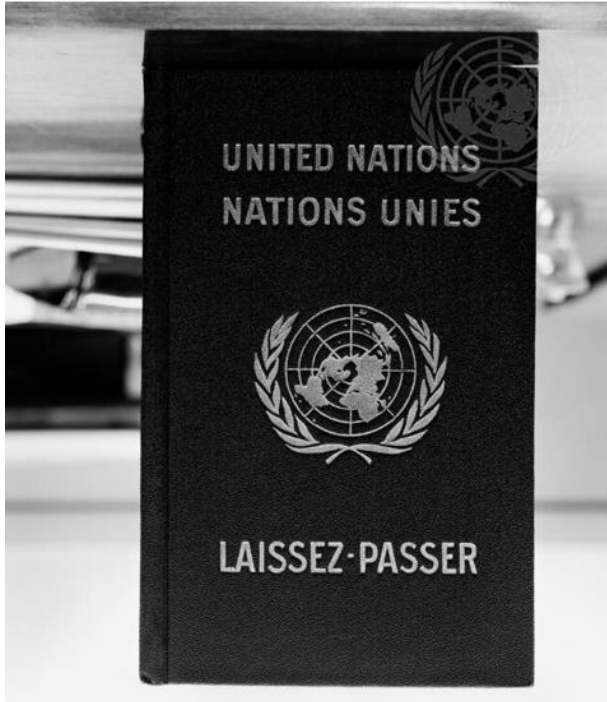


Laissez Passer: From BIRPI to WIPO



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In November 1959, a growing sense of dissatisfaction emerged over the functioning of the international intellectual property system. The Swiss government expressed disquiet with the institutional and financial arrangements underpinning the Berne and Paris Unions. It was not alone: others, like the British government shared a frustration with the ways in which the Bureau overseeing these unions had become slow, inefficient, and, to put it bluntly, chaotic. A decade later, the Bureau was transformed into a new agency (WIPO), a name that, according to Lord Hawke, sounded ‘like one of the companies floated in the era of the South Sea Bubble’.

This talk explores that institutional shift from Bureau to Office by examining the tensions, enthusiasm, and scepticism that accompanied the coming into being of a new international administrative agency. On the one hand, it addresses UNESCO’s concern about being ‘swallowed up’ by a new UN agency: WIPO. On the other, it considers several factors that facilitated the change, such as the introduction of special travel documents (‘laissez-passer’) for WIPO officials. More importantly, it considers the impact this change had on the way international intellectual property came to be thought about in the late twentieth century. In retrospect, it is sensible to believe that the move was rooted in a political and legal question that came to the surface in the 1960s, namely, how to confront the links between colonialism and intellectual property. This research is supported by the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (MCFSS25\250038).

Jose Bellido teaches law at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. He is particularly interested

in the history of intellectual property law and has additional research interests in legal theory, evidence, and legal history. His last publications are *Adventures in Childhood: Intellectual Property, Imagination and the Business of Play* (CUP, 2022) [co-authored with Kathy Bowrey] and *Intellectual Property and the Design of Nature* (OUP, 2023) [co-edited with Brad Sherman].